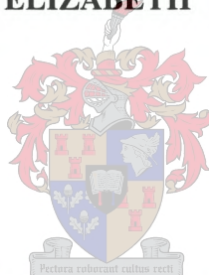


EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANITY:
AN HISTORICAL EXAMINATION
OF THE
BELIEF SYSTEMS PREVALENT IN ALEXANDRIA
C.100 B.C.E. - 400 C.E.
AND
THEIR ROLE IN THE SHAPING OF
EARLY CHRISTIANITY

By

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy (Ancient Near Eastern Studies)
at the
University of Stellenbosch

APRIL 2004

SUPERVISOR:
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DECLARATION

I, Margaret Elizabeth Fogarty, 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

This thesis sets out to examine, as far as possible within the constraints of a limited study, the nature of the Christianity professed in the first centuries of the Common Era, by means of an historical examination of Egyptian Christianity. The thesis contends that the believers in Christ's teachings, in the first century, were predominantly Jewish, that "Christianity" did not exist as a developed separate religion until its first formal systematizations commenced in the second century, through the prolific writings of the Alexandrians, Clement and Origen. It is noted that the name "Christianity" itself was coined for the first time in the second century by Ignatius of Antioch; and that until the fourth century it is more accurate to speak of many Christianities in view of regional-cultural and interpretative differences where the religion took root. The study examines the main religions of the world in which the new religion began to establish itself, and against which it had to contend for its very survival. Many elements of these religions influenced the rituals and formulation of the new religion and are traced through ancient Egyptian religion, the Isis and Serapis cults, Judaism, Gnosticism and Hermeticism. Alexandria, as the intellectual matrix of the Graeco-Roman world, was the key centre in which the new religion was formally developed. The thesis argues, therefore, that despite the obscurity of earliest Christianity in view of the dearth of extant sources, the emergent religion was significantly Egyptian in formulation, legacy and influence in the world of Late Antiquity. It is argued, in conclusion, that the politics of the West in making Christianity the official religion of the empire, thus centring it henceforth in Rome, effectively effaced the Egyptian roots. In line with current major research into the earliest centuries of Christianity, the thesis contends that while Jerusalem was the spring of the new religion Alexandria, and Egypt as a whole, formed a vital tributary of the river of Christianity which was to flow through the whole world. It is argued that without the Egyptian branch, Christianity would have been a different phenomenon to what it later became. The legacy of Egyptian Christianity is not only of singular importance in the development of Christianity but, attracting as it does the continued interest of current researchers in the historical, papyrological and archaeological fields, it holds also considerable significance for the study of the history of religions in general, and Christianity in particular.

OPSOMMING

Die proefskrif poog om, insover moontlik binne beperkte skopus, die aard van die vroeë Christendom gedurende die eerste eeu V.C. te ondersoek, deur middel van 'n historiese ondersoek van die Egiptiese Christendom. Die tesis voer aan dat die vroegste Christelike gelowiges in die eerste eeu N.C. grootendeels Joods was, en dat die Christendom as afsonderlike godsdiens nie ontstaan het nie voor die formele sistematiseringe wat deur die Aleksandryne Clemens en Origenes aangebring is nie. Selfs die term Christendom is vir die eerste keer in die tweede eeu n.C. deur Ignatius van Antiochië versin; daar word verder opgemerk dat voor die vierde eeu dit meer akkuraat is om van veelvuldige Christelike groepe te praat. Die studie ondersoek die vernaamste godsdiens van die milieu waarin die nuwe godsdiens wortel geskied het, en waarteen dit om sy oorlewing moes stry. Baie invloede van die godsdiens is uitgeoefen op die rites en die daarstelling van die nuwe godsdiens, en kan herlei word na die antieke Egiptiese godsdiens, die kultusse van Isis en Serapis, Judaïsme, Gnostisisme en Hermetisme. Aleksandrië, die intellektuele matriks van die Grieks-Romeinse wêreld, was die hoof-sentrum waarin die nuwe godsdiens formeel ontwikkel het. Die tesis toon daarom aan dat ten spyte van die onbekendheid van die vroegste Christendom, wat te wyte is aan die tekort aan bronne, die opkomende godsdiens in die Laat Antieke wêreld opvallend Egipties van aard was in formulering, invloed en erfenis. Ten slotte word daar aangevoer dat die politiek van die Weste wat die Christendom as amptelike godsdiens van die ryk gemaak het, en wat dit vervolgens dus in Rome laat konsentreer het, die Egiptiese oorsprong van die godsdiens feitlik uitgewis het. In samehang met kontemporêre belangrike navorsing op die gebied van die Christendom se vroegste eeue, argumenteer die tesis dat terwyl Jerusalem wel die bron van die nuwe godsdiens was, Aleksandrië, en Egipte as geheel, 'n deurslaggewende sytak was van die rivier van die Christendom wat uiteindelik deur die ganse wêreld sou vloei. Daar word aangetoon dat sonder die Egiptiese tak, die Christendom 'n heel ander verskynsel sou gewees het in vergelyking met sy latere formaat. Die erfenis van die Egiptiese Christendom is nie alleen van die grootste belang vir die ontwikkeling van die Christendom nie, maar 'n nalatenskap wat die voortgesette aandag van navorsers op historiese, papirologiese en argeologiese gebiede vra, en is daarom van groot belang vir die studie van die geskiedenis van godsdiens in die algemeen, en die Christendom in die besonder.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Behind the writer of every thesis stands an array of people who provide crucial assistance. I am indebted to the following for their invaluable support during the preparation of this thesis, from inception to conclusion:

My mother, Daphne Elizabeth Fogarty (nee Eales), 1920-2003, whose support from the beginning was unstinting, but who sadly died mere months before the completion of the work. The thesis is lovingly dedicated to her memory.

My family and friends for their encouragement, and not a little amusement, throughout the long haul.

The Department of Ancient Cultures at the University of Stellenbosch, for the enthralling and enriching programme provided in the M. Phil. degree, and for the interest, enthusiasm and scholarship of the lecturing staff.

The University of Stellenbosch for awarding a Bursary enabling me to complete my final year of study.

Last, but not least, Professor Johann Cook, my Supervisor. A more generous, supportive and constructive Supervisor would be hard to find; his patient and scholarly assistance went far beyond the bounds of duty. I am especially indebted to him.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of the thesis is to investigate, as far as possible in a limited study, the nature of early Christianity in Egypt - that is, that branch of Christianity which evolved in Alexandria in particular, forging in the process a character distinct from the branches elsewhere, such as in Antioch or Rome. The study will engage with the historical contexts in which the new religion emerged, showing how the influences both of ancient Egyptian culture and religion, as well as Jewish belief and the rapidly-spreading Gnostic and Hermetic beliefs, all played their part in forming the religious thought of early Christianity. The study will include an analysis of the polemics launched against perceived heresies of the day, by early Christian teachers such as Clement of Alexandria, the Alexandrian philosopher Origen, and Augustine, bishop of Hippo. The analysis will show the extent and depth of the disputes among religious thinkers of the time, and the manner in which they militated against other belief systems because of the latter's perceived threat to Christianity. A brief chapter will be devoted as well to the role of Roman imperialism in stamping a wholly other character on early Christianity, thereby effectively obscuring the Egyptian dimensions in the development of the new religion.

The proposed thesis may appear to cover ground already dealt with by scholars such as Birger A. Pearson, the papyrologist Colin H. Roberts, and the historian W.H.C. Frend. The intention is not to reproduce their work, however; rather, the thesis will attempt to provide a different approach, one incorporating their findings but linking them retrospectively with ancient Egyptian religious belief - with its distinctive myths and symbols - and prospectively with the polemics unleashed by the earliest Christian apologists against competing religious systems such as Gnosticism and Hermeticism. According to Pearson (1992a: xix), this is an area of future studies which "...will deal with other religions in Greco-Roman Egypt, particularly as they impinge upon Judaism and Christianity, such as the 'Egyptian' religions of Isis, Serapis and Hermes Trismegistus". The thesis will attempt to enter the realm of such projected study, in this way offering a contribution, however modest, to significant contemporary research. This

approach, it is believed, will be not only quite different to current research - thus in no way a reproduction of earlier research - but offer original commentary in the coupling of a view of the ancient Egyptian religion infusing the new religion, with an analysis of writings by Christian authors (c. 100 C.E. - 400 C.E.) anxiously refuting the “heresies” they believed uttered by competing religious systems of the time.

1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

With its billions of adherents worldwide, Christianity would seem to be a monolith among the world’s religions. It is, however, a house divided against itself, with its myriad breakaway groups and its doctrines often at variance with one another. Core beliefs may be common to all, but vast discrepancies are apparent in theological expression, practice, and daily religious life. Common to most is also their “Westernised” Christianity. The exceptions are the Orthodox churches, the Ethiopian, Coptic and Armenian churches. In recent years, too, there has been a growing interest in the rise of new churches adopting uniquely indigenous forms of expression - as may be observed in African indigenous churches, for example. If nothing else, this spread and continuing popularity of Christianity as the religion of choice, is a social phenomenon. But increasingly scholarship and archaeological discoveries call into question the *nature* of this Christianity. Ever since the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls and, in 1927, the Nag Hammadi library, the re-visiting of the origins of early Christianity has taken on major proportions. In the process, greater understanding is arising concerning the cultures and contentions against which fledgling Christianity took root.

Yet in the process of this re-discovery, many questions appear more begged than answered, while the very nature of early Christianity becomes paradoxically almost more obscure the more it is investigated. The archaeological discoveries have initiated a rich vein of translations and scholarly interpretations of the Qumran Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices; and the Corpus Novi Testamenti international project has produced a substantial body of research papers. Likewise, the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in California, formerly under the directorship of James M. Robinson, is responsible for a host of projects, including the Coptic Gnostic Library project, and the Roots of Egyptian Christianity project, initially directed by Birger A. Pearson.

Increasingly it becomes evident that early Christianity was not only a branch of Judaism, but that the distinctly Egyptian branch played a major role in the systematization of the early religion. Indeed, Christianity *qua* Christianity (i.e. as a fully formed religion) cannot be said to exist before approximately the 2nd century C.E. Prior to that it is more accurate, perhaps, to speak of a Judaeo-Christian sect, its adherents living in small scattered communities in urban centres such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Carthage, Rome and Alexandria. As the intellectual centre of the ancient world, and a place where Hellenistic religions, indigenous Egyptian religious practices, Judaism, Gnosticism and Hermeticism jostled with one another, Alexandria was one of the most significant centres in which Christianity as a systematized religion was slowly forged.

It is unlikely that much of embryonic Christianity would be recognized by to-day's Christians - with the exception of the Copts and possibly the Armenian Christians. This poses a number of questions:

What did early Jewish Christians believe?

What did they call themselves, since the term Christianity comes into being only in the second century?

Was early Christianity but an Egyptian Judaism with Christian overtones?

Or was early Christianity an Egyptian religion with Judaic and Christian components?

If it were the latter, what was it about the new religion that led to the vehement polemics by various churchmen against the "heresies" of other contemporary religions? And in view of the presence and influence of those religions, not least the indigenous Egyptian ones - such as the Isis cult, and the importance of the Serapis in Alexandria - how much influence did they wield over the early Judaeo-Christians? These are some of the questions this thesis will attempt to answer, demonstrating in the process that early Egyptian Christianity held considerable sway (through the training afforded in its renowned catechetical school in Alexandria), but becoming largely effaced (with the exception of the breakaway Coptic Church) by the Westernised form some centuries later under the sway of the Roman Empire in general, and Constantine in particular.

For most Christians the history of their religion begins in the "Holy Land", travelling thence

around the world through the proselytizing of the apostles and early Christian communities. Thanks to their endeavours - coloured by intermittent persecution and martyrdom - the Christian faith spread inexorably, eventually becoming the dominant religion of the West. Along the way, countless “heresies” had to be overcome - not least those promulgated by various branches of Gnosticism. That these, too, were finally overcome, persuades Christians even more of the supremacy of their faith before which all false gods must give way. Histories of Christianity have traditionally commenced their narrative in Jerusalem and followed Christ’s life and teachings there. Such histories have then recounted the journeys of the Apostles to Syria, Greece and Rome, describing the establishment of “churches” in these centres. Only occasionally are there glances in the direction of Africa, in references to Augustine, or to Clement or Origen of Alexandria. The existence of Christianity in Egypt is passed over silently, or given merely cursory notice. Thus, as recently as 1977, Birger A. Pearson (1992b:132) notes, Walter Bauer was commenting that “the earliest type of Christianity in Egypt was ‘heretical’, specifically ‘gnostic’ ”. As eminent a scholar as Helmut Koester (1982:219-220) endorses Bauer’s viewpoint, though with the qualification that there were “several competing Christian groups” in Alexandria in the early centuries of the Common Era. Less diplomatically, but more precisely, Roger Bagnall (1993:303) asserts that “Egypt occupies a privileged place in the history of heresy and schism”. Small wonder, then, that histories of Christianity have tended to bypass Egypt in their haste to display the perceived triumph of Christianity in the West.

This approach, however, has served to occlude perhaps *the* most significant stage in the development of Christianity, namely the role of Egypt in its formalization, and in Alexandria in particular. This study aims to expand on this claim by demonstrating as far as possible in a limited study, what Christianity’s Egyptian legacy is.

1.3 CURRENT RESEARCH : NEW DIRECTIONS

It is to a number of German Egyptologists, shaken by the nightmare unleashed by Nazism during World War II, that Jan Assmann (1997:22) attributes the ascendancy of Egyptology as a discipline in its own right. Scholars like Joachim Spiegel, Eberhard Otto, Hellmut Brunner, Sigfried Morenz and Walther Wolf, Assmann claims (*ibid.*), embarked on a

..project of entering into a dialogue with ancient Egypt instead of making it the mere object of decipherment and discovery, and of integrating it again into the cultural memory of Europe instead of closing the “canon” with the Biblical and Classical traditions, [a project which] aims at colonizing the no man’s land between Egyptomania and Egyptology and reconnecting Egyptology with its mnemohistory.

Assmann’s objective is quite different to that of the present study, which lays no claim to such a vast agenda. Yet the purpose here is also to travel behind the “Biblical and Classical traditions” in order to examine early Christianity in Egypt, for it is precisely the “Biblical and Classical tradition”, as promulgated by Western powers, which have occluded the earliest, Egyptian formations of Christianity. The Constantinian era saw the early church not only, as Bosch (1980:102) maintains, increasingly distanced from its biblical roots, and its “Hebrew mentality”, but becoming a power in its own right, identified with state apparatus, intolerant of indigenous religions, and dominated by “the static Greek philosophical mind”. Broadly speaking therefore, Christianity as known and practised today bears little resemblance to its original forms. Modern Christianity, in its numerous forms, has been built on a mountain of assumptions (such as those concerning the actual sites and dates of Jesus’s birth and death), historical accretions, myths and symbols whose origins have often been hidden behind a veil of unknowing.

As recently as 1998 Vivian Green was arguing (3) - in *A New History of Christianity* - that “Christianity’s roots were to be found in the Judaic rather than the Roman or Hellenic world”. His stance, in an otherwise scholarly account, is at best misleading; but it is rather typical of the over-simplifications to which historians of Christianity are prone, precisely because of the hitherto veiled origins of the religion. To demonstrate this point, it is necessary to deconstruct Green’s claim briefly. First of all, Judaism itself does not possess an unchanging nature or history, but in fact also struggled with many competing groups in its own ranks. Remarks prefaced by the descriptor “Judaic” need therefore to be defined. (It could be argued, perhaps, that the most famous - and radical - attempt at defining Judaic belief and praxis was that of the Essenes. Chapter 3 of the thesis will return to and expand upon this point.) Secondly, Judaism both in Alexandria in particular, and in Egypt in general, existed in a Hellenized environment, one of its major influences being to prompt the translation of the *Septuagint* into Greek. This was

to have major repercussions for the early Christians as well, since the non-Jews among them were able to access these major books of scripture for the first time. Thirdly, Rome had long been a thorn in the side of the Jews, and its shadow was to follow them to Egypt as well, as Hellenism eventually succumbed to Roman rule. Green might have chosen to speak of Judaic belief rather than a “Judaic world”, therefore. Yet, as this study will demonstrate, while Christianity’s starting point is inexorably linked to Judaism through the Jewishness of Christ, and the shared Scriptures, the development of Christianity had little to do with Judaism *per se* and everything to do with the Hellenic world, in the first place, and the Roman world in the second. Both of these worlds, furthermore, took up residence in Egypt. Recent and current archaeological discoveries, including those of the Qumran Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library, have turned scholars’ eyes again to the originating past, in an attempt to see behind the veil of that Graeco-Roman Egypt..

It was especially the archaeologists, scholars and scientists of the 20th century who were, often in multi-disciplinary collaborations, to raise the curtain on Egypt’s remote past through astounding new discoveries. Mention has already been made of the unearthing of the Nag Hammadi library, and before that the Qumran Scrolls. Nor have discoveries abated. If anything, in the past couple of years, and up to the present, extraordinary new finds are being made with seemingly great rapidity, in the Valley of the Kings and around the Great Pyramid at Giza. Each discovery adds more insight into the customs and beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. More and more thus begins to be known about ancient Egyptian religion, both before and after the Ptolemies. We now know that monotheism was practised at Amarna; that the principle of resurrection into life everlasting after death was a firm belief of the ancient Egyptians; that this life everlasting was symbolized by the *ankh* (to which the Christian cross bears an uncanny resemblance); that a form of baptism was practised during a pharaoh’s initiation in the temple; that depictions of the (Christian) Virgin and Child bear unmistakable resemblance to Egyptian statues and friezes of the goddess Isis with her son Horus; that at the moment of death the soul had to face judgment, only after which it was despatched by Anubis to the dark underworld, or given licence to travel on to union with the great god Osiris. The Christian parallels with these ancient Egyptian practices, it could be argued, are too strong to be mere coincidences, yet Christian teachings are silent on these points. Such parallels provide intriguing examples of the

syncretism at work in the early church, however: the specific array of Egyptian synchronistic elements is mentioned here as illustration of the influences on early Egyptian Christianity, and which have persisted up to contemporary Christianity (in Roman Catholicism in particular).

Under the auspices of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in Claremont, California, the Roots of Egyptian Christianity Project, already referred to, has produced a considerable number of publications borne of the research undertaken by the Project's scholars. Pearson (1997:xvii) stipulates the purpose of the Project as seeking "... to understand not only the inception of Christianity in Egypt but the various forces within Egypt that helped to shape Egyptian Christianity in the period prior to the Arab conquest. By studying the development of Egyptian Christianity as *an expression of Egyptian culture*, one is better able to understand what makes Egyptian Christianity Egyptian". (My emphasis.) Pearson does not specify at this point what he means by "various forces within Egypt", but it is safe to assume that, aside from the socio-political forces at work in Hellenized Egypt, an overriding force must surely have been that of the intellectual life in Alexandria, where Jews, Egyptians, Greeks and foreign scholars mingled freely. Whereas pharaonic Egypt had been a relatively secluded world, the cosmopolitanism of Ptolemaic Egypt (at least in its main Hellenized cities such as Alexandria, and Ptolemais in the Thebaid region) created the ideal environment in which the exchange of ideas could flourish. Ideas concerning belief were no less interchangeable.

In creating his new capital of Alexandria, one of Alexander the Great's wisest approaches to his new realm was religious tolerance, permitting the indigenous religion of Egypt to remain intact, introducing Greek gods to the society, and permitting freedom of worship to the Jews. His successors, the Ptolemies, were to perpetuate this policy. One reason for such seeming open-mindedness in matters religious, is to be found in the fact that the Greeks "viewed Egypt as a possible source of their own culture" (Chaveau, 2000:101), thus adopted an interest in Egyptian beliefs and mythology rather than the prejudiced aversion which is more customary among colonisers. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., considerable numbers of exiled Jews settled in Alexandria, thus further enriching the city's life through their scholars, merchants, and skilled artisans. The stage was set, in such an environment, for the meeting of ideas in all spheres of life, not least the religious sphere. It is likely that many of the Jews escaping upheavals in

Jerusalem were followers of Christ's teachings, and this fact would have added an extra dimension to the interchange of ideas. Alexandria in the late 1st century C.E. would have been the site, thus, of numerous belief systems: Egyptian, Greek, Jewish and primitive Christian. But there were also Gnostics and Hermeticists disseminating their teachings in Alexandria, and their influence cannot be underestimated, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

This thesis sets out from the premise, therefore, that a Christianity in its infancy began to take root in Alexandria where several other faiths already existed, and that the new religion cannot have escaped a certain amount of influence from the older, surrounding religions. Furthermore, very early Christianity would have adopted existing symbols and practices from those religions, to serve its new form of belief. What is of interest is that, despite the older, entrenched religions, Christianity began not only to arouse interest among Greek-speaking peoples in Alexandria, but was later to become the religion of choice among native Egyptian people to such an extent that it became, eventually, "the national religion of Egypt" (Pearson 1997: xvii), a position upheld until the Arab conquest in the 7th century C.E. dismantled the status quo. The remnants of those earliest Egyptian Christians are to be found in their descendants, the Copts, who form some ten percent of the population of Egypt today. Much scholarship over the past twenty years has been devoted to examining this Coptic Christianity. Thus, for example, I. El Masri Habib published *The Story of the Copts - the True Story of Christianity in Egypt*, in 1987 (its title a clear indication of the author's forthright stance concerning the place of the Copts in the history of Christianity). The following year saw the publication of B. Watterson's *Coptic Egypt* (1988). A decade later there appeared G. Jurriaans-Helle's *Kopten Christelijke Cultuur in Egypte* (1998).

If this sample is added to the intensive work being done on ancient religion and early Christianity by the likes of scholars such as James Robinson, Birger A. Pearson, Jan Assmann and David Frankfurter, it becomes readily apparent that the issue of early Christianity in Egypt is a complex and extensive matter, one whose story is far from told. This thesis is an attempt to join in the telling of the tale.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

1.4.1 History of Religions

The historical contexts in which the new religion arose will inform the content of the thesis,

coupled with an analysis of selected texts from various credal systems of the times. At the outset it needs to be stipulated that the thesis is in no way intended as a theological study, although relevant theological writings and observations may at times be cited by way of illustration, or as part of the wider, different concerns of the study.

The methodology to be employed in this thesis belongs in the domain of **history of religions**, that is, the discipline in which the historian investigates the types of religions practised by various societies throughout history. Before proceeding, the very terms “religion” and “history” need to be defined however, current usage often ranging between the colloquial and rudimentary, and assumed understandings of the terms, when used in advanced scholarly debates. At the latter level, indeed, divergences of opinion in the use and application of the terms among scholars themselves are readily apparent. It is therefore important to establish the manner in which these terms will be employed throughout this study.

1.4.1.1 The Term “Religion”

For Robert D. Baird (1991b:13), the term “religion” “...has indeed been a nebulous term, which, if the scholar is to proceed with credibility, must be given a functional definition prior to the investigation rather than at the end of the study”. Baird (*ibid.*) favours Paul Tillich’s definition, namely that “religion is ultimate concern... Such a definition is serviceable [for the historian of religions] since it defines... *the goal* of understanding the beliefs, rites, temples, and entire life patterns of individuals or communities in the light of their ultimate concerns”. (My emphasis.)

The term “religion” is a vexed one, however, one good definition soon raising disagreement in other quarters. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962) argued in his *The Meaning and End of Religion* that the term is misleading, imprecise, even wholly unusable - and thus not serviceable for the historian of religions - because it does not adequately treat of the nature of belief itself. Numerous scholars have entered the debate, further illustrating the disagreements among themselves about the application(s) of the term “religion”. These discussions are beyond the scope of this study; they are mentioned here merely in order to situate the problems surrounding the term. Nevertheless, a serviceable definition is necessary. Birger A. Pearson (1997:10)

suggests a way out of the dilemma. He is impressed by Ninian Smart's (1989:10-21; and 1996) attempted solution in identifying "dimensions" within the field of religion, which thus sidestep the limitations imposed by sole use of the word "religion". Pearson (1997:10) summarises Smart's "dimensions" as: "... the practical and ritual dimension, the experiential and emotional dimension, the narrative or mythic dimension, the doctrinal and philosophical dimension, the ethical and legal dimension, the social and institutional dimension, and the material dimension". This method of engaging in a study of religions from an historical perspective, catering as it does for the various planes on which religions manifest themselves throughout history, will serve as a helpful tool in the present study, and will in general underpin the manner in which the religions being surveyed will be approached.

In attempting to trace the Egyptian lineage of early Christianity, the thesis will - however briefly - survey the various religions prominent in Alexandria before 400 C.E. Such an historical overview will highlight the formations, principles and influences of the "ultimate concerns" in the religions of the time, from Judaism to the Serapis. It will be argued that in order to trace the origins of Christianity, it is necessary to consider the swirling influences, on early believers, of the disparate belief systems at work in the Alexandria of the day. Throughout, the task will be one of piecing together *histories* of belief and their influence, both as seen in actual historical events and movements, and in extant texts expressing what adherents of such systems upheld. Qualitative assessments of their "ultimate concerns" (in theological terms) are not only beyond the scope of this study, but also outside its objective, which is a tracing of those religio-historical movements which influenced the rise of Christianity in the period under review.

1.4.1.2 The Term "History"

It is necessary, also, to arrive at a definition of the term "history" as employed in this study. For Baird (1991b:32), history is "the descriptive study of the human past. History is not the study of God or Ultimate Reality. That must remain the task of theology". But, it may be argued, if one wishes to engage with the history of religion(s), and religion is defined as "ultimate concern" in Tillich's phrase, or as a phenomenon to be viewed from several dimensions, including the doctrinal and philosophical, as Smart believes, then surely one ventures into the realm of "God", the "divine", and thus theology? To this the rebuttal is clear: the theologian would naturally

progress to the latter, but the *historian* of religion would remain engaged with religion(s) as *human activities* occurring in time, in earthly locales, within specific cultures. The historian of religions, thus, engages with descriptions of the *temporal milieu* of religion, and, as Baird (1991 b:33) notes, does not “pronounce” about religious views being “true or false”: “[The history of religions] does not pass moral judgment on the actions of men; it merely gives an accurate description of what they were”. It is this stance which will inform the methodology underpinning the thesis, namely one which is “non-normative” (Smart, 1986:550) and non-judgmental. Nothing that is written is ever value-free; but the method to be utilised in this study will be one of examining the materials generated by the religions - as especially in their texts and rites - not of engaging with their metaphysics (the realm of systematic theology) other than in a purely descriptive fashion.

1.4.1.3 The Term “Text”

A brief statement is also required concerning the use of the term “text” in this study. A text is to be seen as both a literal, written text whether religious or secular, literary or documentary, and as a theoretical term used to describe a particular process, such as history itself. In the hands of 20th-century theorists such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Clifford Geertz, the constructs “history” and “text” have undergone considerable *re-viewing*. Common to most is the notion that history is a discourse (thus subject to, and a product of, constant socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic fluctuations). History, like a text itself, is therefore not an inflexible formation; or as Abrams (1993:249) puts it:

This historical mode is grounded on the concepts that history itself is not a set of fixed, objective facts but, like the literature with which it interacts [or, more precisely, like the literature which interacts with *it*], a text which needs to be interpreted; that a text, whether literary or historical, is a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality, in fact consists of what are called **representations** - that is, verbal formations which are the “ideological products” or “cultural constructs” of a particular era; and that these cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the power-structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society.

Since “history” is a discourse, and “text” is a discourse within that history, the intersection of the two - their intertextuality - creates fertile grounds for study. Because history-as-discourse

is a field of diversities, the study lays no claim to be a history of Graeco-Roman Egypt in the period under review, but addresses, instead, historical *contexts*, thus seeking to reflect something of the myriad contending voices assembling the interwoven histories of turn-of-the-millennium religions in Alexandria.

1.4.2 Source Materials : the Texts

Having established the manner in which the terms “history”, “religion” and “text” will be understood in this study, brief mention needs to be made of the nature of the primary texts which will be referred to in relevant sections of the thesis. The texts for discussion in the thesis will be of two kinds : a) those expressing specific belief systems of the time (e.g. Gnostic and Hermetic texts), and b) those written by Christian apologists refuting the tenets of non-Christian treatises. All texts will be viewed primarily as *historical, literary* documents. The treatment of such texts will therefore be of a literary-critical and comparative nature, the overall intention being to demonstrate the credal, ideological and socio-cultural underpinnings of such texts. This approach excludes any attempt at theological evaluation. As Abrams (1993:249) declares : “.. A literary text is simply one of many kinds of texts - religious, philosophical, legal, scientific, and so on - all of which are subject to the particular conditions of a time and place, and among which the literary text has *neither unique status nor special privilege*”. (My emphasis.) The texts are *historical* documents (albeit of a religious nature), written in a variety of literary styles. As such, the texts are viewed as the products of historical events and times. Furthermore, because they are *literary* products, a measure of literary analysis is necessary in order to foreground the nature of the issues presented within each text, and in this manner to determine the nature of the influence, on its audience, of each of the texts examined. Comparison of some texts may also show how belief systems not only influenced one another, but had wider historical and cultural significance as well, especially where their systems begin to compete, as is evident in the formation of early Christianity.

In a sense, all historical investigations are relative - in view of current knowledge of antiquity, the impact on received knowledge of major new discoveries in archaeological excavations, and the significant contributions by papyrologists’ and philologists’ work in the translations of ancient manuscripts. As knowledge changes, so in a sense does the past. In both “history” and

“text”, therefore, as in “religion” and certainly the history of religions, there are discourses not closures. That is the view this thesis will espouse.

The thesis will argue that the syncretism inevitably prevalent in Graeco-Roman Alexandria is precisely a contributory factor in the rise of early Christianity in Egypt during the period under consideration. It is for this reason that the methodology according to which the study will proceed will be that of the history of religions, with its specific capacity to describe the histories, religions and texts of the period under review.

That period begins with the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, the successor to pharaonic Egypt, and the predecessor of the Roman occupation of Egypt. It is to these foreigners, their works and influences, that Chapter 2 devotes its attention.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

2.1 EGYPT UNDER THE PTOLEMIES

In order to situate the formations of early Christianity in Egypt, it is necessary first of all to survey the historical and political world that was its broad context. It was the unique convergences of political shifts in the ancient world which made the birth of the new religion not only possible, but also influenced its content. That world was a predominantly Graeco-Roman one. Since this study aims to demonstrate the specifically Egyptian origins of Christianity, and since Alexandria was the intellectual centre of the world for the several hundred years spanning the Hellenic and Roman periods of occupation in Egypt, it is reasonable to commence investigation with an account, first of all, of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, and secondly of the Roman Egypt which succeeded it. The Ptolemies' legacy was vital in establishing a world in which ideas, at least, could flourish; even the later Roman Empire bestrode a Hellenized world.

As a political phenomenon, conquest of one nation by another is as old as history itself. Invariably such conquest follows invasion, brutal subjugation, looting, pillaging and enslavement of the native people. Many ancient civilizations succumbed to such invasions during which temples and palaces were often razed, monuments defaced and annals destroyed. Even more destructive was, often, the vanquishing of whole cultures. In modern history the destruction of the Incan civilization by the Spanish Conquistadors is one of the most well-documented examples of the treacherous brutality of conquest, and the extent to which subjugation of indigenous peoples could go. In ancient history the conquests by Alexander the Great were thus all the more remarkable. Where locals resisted his might, he was merciless in suppressing them; where they submitted, he took over the land without destruction and carnage, merely taking control of the territory, establishing Hellenistic codes of administration, and introducing Greek religions to the vassal state. His conquest of Egypt in 323 B.C.E. was no different, except that here he ousted the Persian conquerors whom the Egyptians had hated. Alexander, therefore, was welcomed as indeed a conquering hero. Furthermore, Alexander made

no attempt to overthrow Egyptian culture and customs. On the contrary, by having himself installed, at the temple of Ptah in Memphis, as Pharaoh of Egypt, his statement was paradoxically an affirmation of the continuity of pharaonic rule, albeit now by a Hellenistic king.

Yet that implicit presentation of Egyptian continuity, as Hornung (1999:147) observes, also heralded “a new period of radical change” as the old Egypt, in many respects implacably the same, now jostled with the new Greek customs, administration, laws, currency and religion, and of course Greek language. As Lloyd (2000:395) succinctly puts it, “Ptolemaic Egypt is a tale of two cultures”, the one Egyptian, the other Greek. Hornung (*ibid.*) adds that “this juxtaposition of old and new was to determine the character of Egypt during the five centuries that ensued”. The drivers of this new dispensation were the Ptolemies, successors to Alexander after his untimely death in Babylon in 323 B.C.E., as the Lagide and final dynasty, before Roman occupation swept away most of the last traces of pharaonic Egypt.

It is not possible to do the Ptolemies justice in this brief account, especially when seen against Fraser’s impressive three-volume *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (1972). Ptolemaic Egypt as a whole needs brief description, however, in order to provide the historical background to the emergence of early Christianity. In turn, in order to do that, it is necessary to indicate who the Ptolemies were and what their legacy was.

In the vacuum left by Alexandria’s demise, an inevitable struggle - the Wars of the Successors between 321-306 B.C.E. - for leadership ensued, placing his empire at risk. The upshot of the wars was at last a resolution of conflict in the settlement of what Lloyd (2000: 396-397) calls “... three great kingdoms: Macedon ...; the Seleucid empire based on Syria and Mesopotamia; and the empire of the Ptolemies, the core of which was Egypt and Cyrenaica”. It is important to realise, therefore, that the Ptolemies were inexorably part of the larger Hellenistic world - with its obvious cosmopolitan overtones - and thus not merely a dynasty locked into Egypt (at least not until the end of the 3rd century B.C.E., by which time the Macedonian and Seleucid supremacy and the Ptolemies’ frequent conflicts among themselves put the Ptolemies rather at the edge of the greater Hellenistic world). As these remarks indicate, military activities were characteristic of the Ptolemies’ rule, and these held considerable economic implications for

Egypt as a whole, in the form of increasing tax burdens not only on the Greek elite, but also on the indigenous Egyptians.

Concomitant with the militarism of the Ptolemies - on land and sea - was their enormous expenditure on, and development of, Alexandria into the leading city of the Hellenistic world. This point will be expanded on later in this chapter. Clearly, in order to engage in both conflict and construction, on enormous scale, administrative systems and infrastructure were essential. Largely, the Ptolemies inherited the stable and effective systems of administration of the Egyptians and had, in a sense, merely to refine this system with an eye to maximum economic returns (Lloyd 2000:407). Always at the centre of the system, and arguably the most important element in terms of ensuring cohesion of the state, was the role played by kingship. The Ptolemies, following Alexander's lead, were quick to entrench their position as rulers by ensuring dynastic succession by fair means or foul, sometimes engaging in brother-sister marriages in order to strengthen political power. The famous Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Arsinoe II marriage was a striking example, Ptolemy putting aside his first wife in favour of Arsinoe because of the latter's political astuteness. They went further by declaring themselves gods - a practice with which the native Egyptians were familiar, the pharaohs of old having been seen as gods. Lloyd (2000:406) remarks, further, that "... the Ptolemies were not simply pharaohs but also Macedonian kings ruling a Graeco-Macedonian elite" within Egypt, as well as the Egyptians themselves. This fact personified the two cultures the Ptolemies were overseers of - a balancing act that they sustained over several hundred years with varying degrees of success, depending on whether one was Greek, thus of the privileged classes (who were educated at all-Greek gymnasiums established in the main cities, and who held all the key offices in the land); or one was Egyptian, thus a member of the subject classes. But the Egyptians themselves were sometimes able to rise to relatively high office in the militia, in the administration of the *chora* (the country districts beyond the cities), and especially in the priestly classes.

The role of religion in the status and sway of the Ptolemies cannot be over-estimated. Pharaohs and Priests had always been inextricably intertwined in Egypt, the pharaoh undergoing special temple initiations, the priests instructing and conducting such rituals, from coronations to the vastly elaborate funerary rites. In more expedient terms, the priestly classes and scribes

depended for their existence on this close connection between palace and temple - as did the countless builders, artisans, artists, sculptors, weavers, craftsmen and labourers engaged in constructing and maintaining the massive temples of pharaonic Egypt. Traders, too, benefited, because their supplies of goods from the west, as well as surrounding African lands, were much sought-after. It is in the temples and their peripheral activities that the Ptolemies contributed steadily and sometimes lavishly to religion in Egypt. Not only did they rebuild some temples, but renovated others, while the temple of Horus the Behdetite at Edfu is almost wholly Ptolemaic. Remarkably, building on this temple continued from 237 to 57 B.C.E., so the expense of the work was sustained over several generations of Ptolemies. Significantly, according to Lloyd (2000:414), the shrine of Nectanebo II was regarded as one of the most sacred sites, "... thus affirming [the Ptolemies'] continuity with Egypt's past".

At face value the priests seemed to be inordinately privileged and to enjoy special patronage from the Ptolemies. The status of the priests was not only a matter of clever politics and of appeasing the Egyptians, however. For the Ptolemies religion was a core part of life, as much as it was for the ancient Egyptians. For the Ptolemies, however, as Fraser (1972:192) notes, religion at first principally concerned the Olympian deities observed in Greece. Wisely, however, the Ptolemies made no attempt to obstruct the Egyptian cults. In fact, as Mysliwiec (2000:179) observes, the Ptolemies were "... filled with respect" for Egyptian culture and religion. So, as Lloyd (2000:413) points out, all the temples in Egypt "... continued to perform their ancient function as the power houses of Egypt, the interface between the human and divine in which pharaoh, through his proxy, the local high priest, conducted the critical rituals of maintenance for the gods, and the gods, in their turn, channelled their life-giving power through pharaoh into Egypt". This was the key: the centrality of divinity vested in the king, the belief in the afterlife (preceded by the judgment of the dead) and in life, the necessity of leading a virtuous life. Such beliefs required priests to administer the rites, instruct initiates and oversee the elaborate funerary arrangements for the dead pharaoh. The Ptolemies saw the political importance, too, of the priests. Lloyd (2000:414-415) records this fact as follows:

The priests enjoyed considerable political power, not least because their good will was evidently seen by the Ptolemies as the key to the acquiescence of the Egyptian population, and some of them, like Manetho of Sebennyus, played a

major role in Ptolemaic cultural politics. The High Priests of Memphis were particularly important from this point of view, both because they were the most significant figures in the second city in the kingdom and because they were the supreme pontiffs of Egypt at the time, with wide-ranging contacts and influence in the country as a whole. The Ptolemies did everything they could to ensure this support.... Indeed, a sensitive reading of.. [the Canopus and Rosetta decrees] reveals an even greater care on the part of the Ptolemies to keep the priests on the side of the government as the political and military power of the state declined.

From the Egyptian perspective as well, the priests' role was of great importance, for "... the priests and scribes were the pre-eminent repositories and exponents of traditional Egyptian culture, a role in which they were clearly spectacularly successful in Ptolemaic times" (Lloyd 2000:415). It is thus in religious terms that the Ptolemies' legacy was arguably the wisest by ensuring the continuity of the old in the present, thereby maintaining political stability in the land.

Yet for all the positive religious and cultural aspects of Ptolemaic rule, discontent among the native population frequently simmered below the surface. Chaveau (1998:87) describes "the misery of the peasants" who formed the bulk of the labouring classes, both in agriculture and construction work. While they were recompensed for their labour, their landlessness and tax burdens provided scant prospects for a better quality of life, and it rankled deeply that the profits from the fruits of their labour went not to the Egyptians but to maintaining the luxurious, often opulent lifestyle of the pharaoh and his entourage, as well as the wealthy Greek elite. Incessant wars also drained state coffers. The second source of discontent was the rather shameless manner in which all Greeks were afforded a specially privileged social and educational status, while the Egyptians (excluding the priests, scribes and a few individuals skilled enough to hold reasonably high office) were subjected to the status of inferior beings, denied access to all Greek institutions of learning, for example. Ironically, it was not the peasantry which caused the fatal decline of the Ptolemies, but dynastic schism, a steadily declining economy and bickering, "murderous bouts of internecine strife" (Lloyd 2000 : 418), that undermined the Ptolemies. Civil unrest began to unravel the Ptolemies' control even further, especially outside Alexandria, during the reign of the last Ptolemies - particularly Ptolemy VII and Ptolemy VIII: there was "... disaffection among the Egyptian population - strikes, flight (sometimes to the point where whole settlements were abandoned), brigandage, attacks by desperadoes on villages, despoliation

of temples, and frequent recourse to the temples' right of asylum. These are indisputably the reactions of people pushed beyond the limits of endurance by famine, rampant inflation, and an oppressive and vicious administrative system operated by officials who were all too often corrupt and beyond the effective control of central government" (Lloyd 2000 : 419-420).

Ironically, the last phase of Ptolemaic rule was played out during the reign of the most famous Ptolemy of all, Cleopatra VII, and the growing intervention in Egypt by Roman Caesars, culminating in Roman conquest and occupation of Egypt in 30 B.C.E., thus at once effectively closing the chapter on the Ptolemaic dynasty, and the Hellenistic world-in-microcosm there. Henceforth the Roman Empire would hold supremacy over the world, and "ancient Egypt", as conceived in the popular imagination, was never to be seen again, until scholars' painstaking re-discoveries in recent modern history.

Before taking a closer look at the Ptolemies' primary glory, the city of Alexandria and all it represented in the ancient world (and in religious terms for the purposes of this study), it is necessary to look next at the legacy of Roman Egypt, the other half, as it were, of the vast socio-political background against which early Christianity took root.

2.2 ROMAN EGYPT

The death of Cleopatra VII marked not only the end of Ptolemaic rule, but also of pharaonic rule. But Roman occupation did not mean the end of Hellenistic influences on Egypt - nor did Roman rule signal the end of Egyptian customs and religious practices among the bulk of the people. As David Peacock (2000 : 427) comments:

Here, pharaonic culture thrived and a visitor to Roman Egypt would have found himself in a time capsule, for the sights, sounds, and customs of Roman Egypt would have had more in common with pharaonic civilization than with contemporary Rome. Temples were still built in traditional style. The hieroglyphic script continued to be used, and Egyptian was spoken by the common people, although the lingua franca was Greek.... Further indications of the depth of the all-pervading pharaonic culture is the persistence of mummification as a burial rite and *continuing reverence for Egyptian gods*. [My emphasis. This point will be pursued in later chapters.]

Roman attitude to Egypt differed markedly from the Ptolemies'. Whereas the Ptolemies undoubtedly enriched themselves at the expense of the native Egyptians, and staunchly maintained their sense of superiority by virtue of being Greek, they also contributed substantially to building, restoration of temples - especially at Dendera, though the work was completed by the Romans, according to Hornung (1999 :147) - and of course Alexandria was their undoubted triumph. The Romans, on the other hand, took more from Egypt than they contributed to it. In fact, according to Peacock (2000 :423), "... Rome adopted a somewhat hostile and suspicious attitude to Egypt. Roman senators were forbidden to enter the country and native Egyptians were excluded from the administration". The Romans saw Egypt as the outpost of the empire, but an asset in terms of the grain and stone (especially porphyry), and other resources needed to boost the power and fortunes of the Emperor. Not surprisingly, therefore, Rome was not interested in grand construction in the Ptolemaic sense, and built only one Roman town, namely Antinoopolis, on the Nile. Augustus seemingly regarded Alexandria as merely a Greek city. In fact, as Fraser (1972:795-796) notes, a Prefect was placed in charge of the city which was thereby relegated to the lower status of a provincial capital, much to the chagrin of the citizens.

Yet the relationship between Rome and Egypt was not only ambivalent, but paradoxical. As under the Ptolemies, the Egyptian peasants' labour in agriculture, irrigation and quarrying contributed the material resources for the Emperor; Egyptians were also subject to taxation and reaped little or no benefit for the improvement of their harsh living conditions. According to Frankfurter (1998:14), Rome had "an insatiable hunger for the land's produce", but also "... a disgust for the indigenous people, their piety and habits". What is paradoxical about the latter attitude is the fact that both Roman emperors and authors were at once fascinated by Egyptian religion and kingship, but also fearful of the "popular power" (Frankfurter, 1998:14) of the priests as intermediaries between the gods and the people. The sheer antiquity of Egyptian religion and its monolithic entrenchment in the entire fabric of Egyptian society meant that local gods could not to be summarily toppled and replaced by the Roman panoply (Juno, Minerva and Cybele in particular), as perhaps was the case in other Roman-conquered territories. Egypt was unique among Rome's acquisitions, therefore: "... Egypt and Egyptian culture were in fact quite uncharacteristic of the Roman world... . Egypt in almost every way stands apart from the rest of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds" (Frankfurter, 1998:14).

Also paradoxical about Roman rule was the fact that Greek as the *lingua franca* of the Hellenistic world was pervasive, and was the language of the Egyptian elite as well, so the Latin of the emperors did not obtain a foothold in Egypt. Bagnall (1993:231) refers to the “marginal position” of Latin in Egypt under the Romans: it was the language of officialdom, never the language of the people. Hellenistic influence therefore, with its emphasis at once on individualism and universality, remained widespread throughout the Mediterranean, and in Egypt, so that Roman conquest did not change people’s perceptions and outlook overnight. Yet two changes in Egypt did have a direct bearing on Egypt’s future in terms of culture and religion. First of all, the changeover from Ptolemaic to Roman rule was relatively smooth, since as the Egyptians had accepted Ptolemaic rulers as supreme rulers, even divine ones, in continuity with the role of the pharaohs, so the Roman emperors were in a sense figures cast in the same mould. As already pointed out, Greek continued to be used by the intelligentsia while the Egyptian labouring classes, having never had access to Greek education to begin with, sustained their own Egyptian language, customs and religious practices and beliefs. Nevertheless, as Bagnall (1993:259-260) meticulously argues, a certain level of spoken bilingualism was probable in both social groupings, born out of practical necessity. Perhaps the single biggest change, and potentially the most damaging, was the emperor’s appointment of a Roman official as the “High Priest of Alexandria and all Egypt” (Chaveau, 2000:194)), and thus the person in charge of cult and temple organization. In its entire history no foreigner had held such a position. With the best will in the world he could have had little or no understanding of the depth and complexities of Egyptian religion; he was doubtless an administrative head, there to ensure the taxes derived from the temples and to act as overseer over both the priests and the religion the Romans feared. It is reasonable to assume that this imposition must also have caused ill-feeling among the Egyptian priests.

Despite the power of the Empire, it made no attempt to subjugate the Egyptians in real terms, though the peasants, and even the priestly classes, may have viewed the heavy and pervasive Roman taxes as penal enough. Unlike other Roman conquests - where the indigenous culture tended to be absorbed into Roman ways - Egypt stood implacably apart, the period of Roman rule, as Peacock (2000 : 445) describes it, “... an essay in continuity with what went before”. Peacock is probably right in ascribing this fact at least in part to the fact that Egyptian

architecture, so monolithic and so widespread, was not the kind that could be torn down in battle, with the conquerors' own buildings erected in their stead. Indeed, Peacock (2000:445) observes, "they served exactly their intended purpose: to remind people of the greatness of pharaonic civilization and to be a constant witness to the beliefs and values of that period of Egyptian greatness".

The single most dominant feature of Egyptian life in antiquity was religion and its magnetic connection with the Nile, the life-giver, and the sun and stars, symbols of the great gods Amun-Re and Osiris. Without the pervasiveness of Egyptian religion, the extraordinary temples and pyramids, the vast funerary culture and burial tombs, it is inconceivable that Egypt would have held anything more than passing interest for Rome, except for its usefulness as a military post and lucrative trading centre. Curiously, it was religion that, in turn, was to play pivotal roles in Egypt, as early as the middle of the 1st century C.E., when the new religion of Christianity arrived in Alexandria, and again in 642 C.E. when the Arab conquest led to the near-total demise of that religion in Egypt, being supplanted by yet another new religion, that of Islam.

So long as the Romans were in power, however, the parallels with Ptolemaic rule in terms of religious tolerance were marked. While the Ptolemies "Hellenized" the Egyptian gods - seeing Horus as Apollo, Thoth as Hermes, Amun as Zeus and Hathor as Aphrodite, for example - the Romans in general appear to have accepted the *status quo* in Egypt, being indeed particularly drawn to the cult of Serapis, whose popularity eventually travelled, with the legionaries, to other Roman provinces and to Rome itself. Like Serapis, Isis readily drew countless devotees across the Empire. The gods of Roman Egypt, as Peacock (2000:435) affirms, were not Roman but Egyptian. That the vast military machinery of the Roman Empire should have been awed by Egyptian religion speaks of the extraordinary power of that religion; small wonder then that the emperors were also wary of it. Whereas, therefore, Egypt was ruled politically by foreigners, the Romans became invaded, as it were, by foreign religion. Paradoxically, though, a certain equilibrium was thus maintained between ruler and ruled. It was the arrival of the new religion of Christianity that threatened that stability in coming centuries, a point that will be expanded upon in Chapter 5. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at Alexandria, the Ptolemies' glorious city, inherited and sustained by Rome after the conquest, but the nexus

of religious ferment in Egypt in the centuries before and after the millennium. Alexandria under the Romans was only marking time, however. As Rome grew and prospered into the indomitable capital of the world, intellectuals began to leave for Rome. According to Fraser (1972:809), “this movement to Rome marks the conclusion of the culture of Ptolemaic Alexandria ...”. In due course Christianity would follow suit, on the path to Rome.

2.3 ALEXANDRIA : CENTRE OF THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

After Fraser’s (1972) *magnum opus*, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, little purpose would seem to be served by a brief overview of the most famed city of antiquity, in such a limited study. Yet it is precisely because of its centrality to the ancient world, in terms of learning, cultural and religious intermingling, that it acquires special coverage here. Lewis (1986:9) talks of the “lasting significance [of Alexander’s city] in the history of the Western world”. Today, thanks to the endeavours of archaeologists, both on land and underwater, and those involved in the recent inauguration of the new Great Library and Mouseion at Alexandria, increasing attempts are being made to resuscitate the importance of the city, more than two thousand years since its inception. Since it is in this city that fledgling Christianity began to assume systematized form, some consideration of its former greatness needs to be made here. For it is the contention of this study that Alexandria is the key to understanding the origins and nature of early Christianity, both as a religious and a cultural phenomenon.

While the foundation of Alexandria as a new city, a port city, was the brainchild of Alexander himself - choosing to move the capital of Egypt from Memphis to Alexandria - it was the Ptolemy successors, and in particular Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who saw that the vision was realized. More than that, Fraser (1972:305) notes: “Much of the intellectual production of Alexandria [over several generations] derives directly from Ptolemaic patronage”. In this the Ptolemies were perpetuating the ancient Greek tradition of patronage of literature (Fraser, *ibid.*). Ptolemy Philadelphus was perhaps the most far-seeing of all, and it was his particular endeavours which saw the development of Alexandria with its world-renowned library and Musaion, his own considerable scholarship ensuring the extensive stocking of the library from sources across the known world.

Alexandria is unique in ancient history, though, not just because of its status as a powerhouse of learning, but because there, according to Mokhtar (1993:21), “the civilizations of Pharaonic Egypt and of Greece blended for three centuries...[332 B.C.E. to 30 B.C.E.]”. After 30 B.C.E. Roman civilization was a third ingredient in the admixture, lasting for another three or four centuries. This point is significant because it is the commingling of these civilizations, though with the Egyptian pharaonic and religious culture the common denominator throughout, that provided the unique context in which the intensity of religious exchanges could occur in ensuing centuries.

In all respects Alexandria was a symbol of the new, whether in political or religious terms. The new capital inaugurated the Ptolemies’ rule in Egypt and was to become, as already noted, the seed ground for the new religion of Christianity. The Romans, later, were to keep the Alexandrian capital, which now became the pivot not only of learning and education in the ancient world, but also Egypt’s direct link with Rome, the seat of the Empire. Geographically as well as symbolically, it could be argued, Alexandria stood on the sea looking away from Egypt, a link, to the outside world, between antiquity and the burgeoning new millennium. Yet, as Mokhtar (1993:30-31) notes, the Egyptians still saw Memphis as their capital, especially in spiritual terms, regarding it as “the holy city of Ptah”, the god of creation. The Greeks understood well this Egyptian sense of the sacred at Memphis, and the Ptolemies significantly - and perhaps wisely - accepted the city as Egypt’s second capital. Moreover, Alexander had had himself crowned emperor in Memphis, thereby signalling his continuation of the pharaonic tradition of being crowned son of the god Ammon. This shrewd political move prevented resentment from the Egyptians, while also allowing for the transfer of the administrative capital to the “thousand-year capital of Egypt”, as El-Abbadi (1993a:35) calls it.

At face value the decision to create a new capital at Alexandria, at great expense, must have been puzzling to the Egyptians. But the Greeks saw the major potential of the project. The entire coastline, as well as the island of Pharos, had been familiar to Greek seafarers since the 8th century B.C.E. (El-Abbadi, 1993a:36). Greeks, furthermore, had been loosely and intermittently merchants and mercenaries operative in Egypt since the end of the 7th century B.C.E. (Lewis, 1986:8). Navigation, as well as some familiarity with inland terrain around the new venue, was

therefore no problem. Furthermore, there was already a small Egyptian town, Rhakotis, on the mainland. A causeway linking the two sites, and major development of the Rhakotis settlement, would therefore provide the one crucial feature lacking in Egypt, *viz.* a harbour. The implications for smooth, accessible trade routes with the Mediterranean were immediately apparent, and no longer would the tidal features of the Nile be the restraint on seasonal trading that it had always been, for now it could be bypassed. Upon the establishment of Alexandria - designed by Deinokratis the architect on a grid pattern with a wide, sweeping colonnaded central avenue - and the lighthouse, under Ptolemy I, designed by Sostratus of Cnidus (El-Abbadi, 1993a:38) - Egypt was set on a course of openness to the world that, arguably, was to change its history forever, and inadvertently lay the foundations for the Christian religion which, in coming centuries was to eclipse all other religions in the West. The foundation of Alexandria was the key to this radical change, the precipitator of the demise of “paganism”.

At the same time as the construction of the city, Greeks already based in Naukratis and Memphis moved to Alexandria, while Macedonians from Alexander’s armies formed the core of the original population. The Egyptians of Rhakotis, nearby Canopus and local villages, added to the early population of the city. But Alexander’s instruction was clear, according to Justin, that it should be “a Macedonian colony” (El-Abbadi, 1993a:38-42). The Ptolemies took him at his word; throughout their dynastic rule Alexandria remained implacably Greek. A new city also meant new monuments. Ptolemy I built two temples in Alexandria - perhaps an attempt to declare this city to be sacred too, in parallel to Memphis - one temple dedicated to the new cult of Serapis, and the other to Alexander (which necessitated the removal of his remains from their burial site in Memphis, to a new mausoleum in Alexandria). The Serapeum was later to be rebuilt in the Egyptian quarter by the third Ptolemy, Euergetes (246-221 B.C.E.). The new temple was to incorporate a branch of the Great Library within it.

The cosmopolitan nature of Alexandria cannot be understood, however, if the notion of Alexandria as a Greek city is taken at face value only. In effect, the construction of the new city, and the expansion and enhancement of the city during the reign of several Ptolemies, provided considerable opportunities for employment and thus attracted not only Egyptians but people from all across the Hellenized world. Enlistment in the army was always an option as well. According

to El-Abbadi (1993a:43), the Ptolemaic army, far from consisting of Macedonian soldiers only, began to include, as Julius Caesar scathingly observed,

... men collected from among the freebooters and brigands of Syria and the province of Cilicia and the neighbouring regions; also many condemned criminals and exiles had joined them. All our own fugitive slaves had a sure place of refuge at Alexandria, and assurance of their lives as long as they registered themselves among their soldiers.

Part of the reason for the influx of both the lettered and the unlettered to Alexandria under Greek as well as Roman overlordship, was, according to Fraser (1972:79ff), the decline of the arts and science in the Hellenistic world. The advent of large numbers of Jews to Alexandria (already mentioned in this chapter) - made especially welcome by first Alexander himself, and later by subsequent Ptolemies - was notable and was to have significant impact on the convergence of religions in the city. The Jews' Hellenization advanced to the point of translating scriptures into Greek, and even using the Greek *Septuagint* in the synagogues. For the first time, therefore, the scriptures hitherto written only in Aramaic and Hebrew, could now be read across the Hellenistic world, thus spreading the concept of monotheism to a far wider audience than Judaism. This could be seen as significant, in religious terms, because by the time Christianity began to spread across the Mediterranean, the notion of monotheism would already have been a familiar one. Immigrants to Alexandria also reputedly came from Syria, Asia Minor, Italy, Syracuse, Libya, Carthagina and Massillia in the Mediterranean. El-Abbadi (1993a:43) indicates the possibility of some coming even from India, because of the embassy in Egypt of King Asoka of India. Asoka became a Buddhist and soon there were Buddhist monks in Alexandria, as well as Indian civilians. In a population of less than a million, such a wide diversity of cultures, customs, languages and religions could have been the recipe not only for a chaotic dispensation, but, potentially, for a conflicted one. Indeed, much strife did occur. But thanks to the enlightened policy of toleration and understanding espoused by Ptolemy I, and continued under his successors, general harmony appears to have been achieved, doubtless as a result of the ongoing Hellenization process, and in particular the unifying factor of Greek as the prevailing *lingua franca*. Fraser (1972:82), however, sees the Alexandrian population as becoming increasingly Egyptianized, as seen for example in the waning of interest in the Greek gods, and the ascendancy of the Egyptian gods, especially Isis. Fraser (1972:82-83) goes further, suggesting that not only Greeks and

Egyptians were influenced by this process, but all the foreigners in the city, including the Jews.

Central to his policy of achieving co-operation between the Greek and Egyptian sections of the Alexandrian population, Ptolemy I sought a tutelary deity that would be acceptable to both. After consultation with the Egyptian priest Manethon, and the Athenian priest Timotheus, the tutelary deity of Serapis was devised - a combination of the Osiris-Apis Memphis cult. Chapter 3 will consider the new cult of Serapis. Here it will suffice to indicate that the specially-built Serapeum in Alexandria became, eventually, a religious centre of great significance not only in Egypt but in the Roman world in ensuing centuries. But the inception of the new does not necessarily eliminate the old. Egyptians continued to worship the "old" gods, especially the goddess Isis. Yet trouble was pending for the Jews of the city. Under the Ptolemies they had been granted significant freedoms, not least the administration of their own affairs, something not granted to the Egyptians. Under the Emperor Augustus the Egyptians did not fare any better, and were denied, as were all Alexandrians, even the senate they had had under the Ptolemies. Deep resentment flared among the Egyptians who, aware they could never successfully revolt against the Romans with their massive military superiority, took out their anger on the Jews (whom they considered unfairly advantaged). But the rebellion was short-lived, though the grievances persisted. With hindsight it is easy to see in this event a portent of the instability that was to shake Alexandria intermittently, its cosmopolitanism bedevilled by the inequalities engendered by politics, prejudice and religion.

But another feature of the prevalence of Greek, and one germane to this study, was that as the language of the Mediterranean it created a linguistic vehicle for the import and export of ideas, knowledge, *Weltanschauung* and, besides, information about religions, cults and beliefs. It is interesting to speculate that had Egypt not been Hellenized (under the Ptolemies), and had the Egyptian language remained intact, the intensity and spread of religious matters, and of Christianity especially, might never have reached anything other than local consideration. Alexandria and Greek, it could therefore be argued, were the combined force which ultimately made possible the dissemination of the new religious doctrines. That spread, of course, occurred during the centuries of Roman rule in Egypt, but the Greeks had laid the platform for the internationalism which was to follow. Another feature of Alexandrian life was the inculturation

of its Egyptian population which gradually learned Greek and adopted Greek names and attire (El-Abbadi, 1993:46). This intermingling of Hellenistic and Egyptian culture, as well as Judaism, was not restricted to Alexandria, but occurred elsewhere too, as in Ptolemaic Athribis on the eastern side of the Delta, north of Heliopolis. Here, as in Alexandria, Myśliwiec (2000:198) observes, “various native traditions now thrived in a symbiosis with Greek culture, and the language and mythology of the Greeks became the common denominator of communication for the many nationalities”.

Alexandria in antiquity was clearly an extraordinary city, not only for its cosmopolitanism and religious freedom, but also for its wealth-creating industries and trading opportunities. Linen, papyrus paper, gold, ebony, woven textiles, perfumes, and glass, were much sought-after in the ancient world, especially in Rome, and merchants became wealthy on the proceeds. Likewise businessmen from elsewhere began to invest in Alexandria’s various projects, while lucrative trade routes opened to India, engendering the importation of exotic products such as spices, Indian silks and jewellery. Small wonder then that, in Strabo’s much-quoted phrase, Alexandria has been called “... the greatest emporium in the inhabited world”. But the focus of this study is on the religious activities of Alexandria, not its materialistic successes, and to the former attention must now turn. Before doing so, however, two features of that materialistic success need to be mentioned, since they both influence the new Christianity, though in wholly different ways. First of all, its phenomenal economic and educational development, with the consequent spread of ideas as well as commodities, ensured the flow of evangelizers across the Near East, thus assisting in the spread of the new religion. Secondly, aspects of the new materialism of Alexandria angered Clement of Alexandria, in later years and to such an extent, that he delivered a veritable tirade against the Alexandrian women’s predilection for self-adornment, singling out among other things, “their gold-wrought fabrics, their Indian silk and over-wrought silken stuffs” (in El-Abbadi, 1993:58). This outburst inadvertently confirms historians’ views on the strength of trade between Egypt and India; but the tone was disturbingly portentous of the later puritannical intolerance of the Alexandrian Christians under Theodosius.

It is not until the middle of the 1st century C.E. that Christianity is heard of in Alexandria - through the agency, reputedly, of St. Mark who came from Rome - although it remains a

misnomer to refer to “Christianity” at this stage, since there was no religion as such yet, nor systematized theology, and no distinctive Christian community. As El-Abbadi (1993b:70) remarks, “the birth and rise of Christianity during the 1st century passed almost unnoticed in Alexandria and Egypt”. Clearly there was some growing Christian activity in the city, however, because extant papyri dating from the 2nd century C.E. consist of *The Sayings of Jesus*, a text from St. John, an epistle of Barnabas and fragments of uncanonical gospels (El-Abbadi, *ibid.*). At this stage the followers of Jesus’s teachings were Jews; perhaps in part because of this - not wishing to arouse animosity from other Jews - the earliest Christians kept largely to themselves. Yet by the middle of the 2nd century matters appear to have changed considerably, the numbers of adherents of the new faith having grown, and a catechetical school having been established in opposition to the pagan philosophical schools. In a move typical of the intellectual skills of the day - a sort of free market of ideas in parallel with the free market in trade - the Judaeo-Christians of Alexandria advertised their catechetical school abroad, thereby attracting large numbers of students from the Mediterranean world, where Alexandria was famed for its seat of learning at the Musaion. The teachers at the school were Greek-trained and the educational principles of the school were thus firmly grounded in Hellenism. One of the early teachers was Pantaenus, a converted Stoic, who taught Clement of Alexandria. The Greek philosophical training of proselytes was thus a feature from the start, in itself opening the window on gradual departure from the Jewish customs the early believers would still have engaged in. Furthermore, converts arriving from other countries would not, perhaps, have been Jews at all. St. Peter in Acts 10, following instruction received during a vision, reportedly baptized uncircumcised men and their households, thus opening the way for full acceptance of Gentile converts. St. Paul, likewise, during his missionary journeys c.45-64 C.E., encouraged the conversion and acceptance of Gentiles into the ranks of believers. It is feasible, therefore, that Gentile Christians would also have travelled to Alexandria. Yet pagans, too, attended the catechetical school, not the least of them being Clement, who came from Athens, originally to study philosophy. Pantaenus’s lectures so inspired him, apparently, that he converted to Christianity and became eventually one of the great teachers at the school himself. Perhaps his most famous pupil was Origen, who joined the school in 200 C.E. (A closer inspection of the works of the two important and transitional Christian teachers, Clement and Origen, will be made in Chapter 6 of the thesis).

Christian activities were not of course restricted to Egypt; their practices in other centres - such as Jerusalem, Rome and Lyons - were sufficiently well-known for them to have been subjected to persecution for their beliefs since the 1st century. By the beginning of the 3rd century, Emperor Severus had become alarmed by the increasing numbers of believers. In 202 C.E. he authorised persecution of the Christians, who were rounded up from all over Egypt, taken to Alexandria and martyred there. Clement and a number of teachers fled to Palestine. Origen somehow survived - even though his father, also a Christian, was beheaded - and Bishop Demetrius appointed him head of the school in 203. The persecution was brief, however, and school and students resumed their activities for another fifty years before the next wave of persecutions began, this time under the Emperor Decius, and this time far more brutal and intensive, with a view to stamping out the new religion completely. In despite, Christianity continued to grow and expand. El-Abbadi (1993b:70-71) mentions a letter from a well-connected Roman Christian to Christians in Alexandria indicating the role played by the Alexandrian school as a link between the Egyptian Christians and those elsewhere in the world. The same letter refers to "Papa Maximus", the bishop of Alexandria, and this, El-Abbadi (*ibid.*) contends, signifies the recognition by Christians elsewhere of the bishop's status as head of Egypt's Christians.

As always, though, serious trouble was not far away. Strife among Roman generals compelled Diocletian in the 3rd century C.E. to settle the score by ousting them and becoming emperor himself. He changed the status of Alexandria from major city to merely another administrative city, thereby adversely affecting the city's trading in the process, because merchants, previously enjoying considerable prestige in the city, left for settlement on their lands outside the city. Diocletian clearly believed in order achieved by total control, and this policy inevitably led to ruthless clampdowns on any suspect grouping or activity. As a believer in the old gods of Rome, he took particular exception to the spreading Christianity and decided to crush it as inimical to paganism as well as empire. His persecutions of 303 were so vicious that, according to El-Abbadi (1993b:72), the Coptic Christians in later years referred to this period as "the Era of the Martyrs", with the bishop of Alexandria and other Egyptian bishops being beheaded in 312. Yet already the troops of Constantine were marshalling, "... their shields marked with Christian cross" (El-Abbadi, 1993: *ibid.*). The face of the world was about to change - a point to which Chapter 7 will return in considering the growing frictions among various Christian groups in Alexandria, and

Egypt as a whole. The bitter arguments among church leaders, on doctrinal grounds as well as contests for leadership, were to have far-seeing consequences for the spread of Christianity as well as the very nature of that religion. The Christians saw, under Constantine, the shift of the church's centre from Alexandria to Constantinople, the church and city second only to Rome, which remained the centre of Empire. By deft political manoeuvring, Constantine thus shifted the centre of Christianity, and Alexandria as a Christian centre was never to recover from this fatal consequence of the internal arguments among the church leaders. The final assault on reason occurred when the fanatical bishop Theophilus stirred the Alexandrian mob to sack, loot and destroy the Serapeum and all other pagan temples in the city. In the process, the libraries were destroyed and scholars murdered, not least Hypatia, the pagan philosopher and professor, who was murdered in 415 C.E. in a seeming frenzy by the maddened mob, incited to action by Bishop Cyril, Theophilus's successor.

Roman administration of Alexandria appears to have been of little direct benefit to the city, while the Roman legionaries apparently did nothing to stop the savage destruction and murder by the Alexandrian Christians of their fellow citizens who happened to be pagan. It is reasonable to suggest that these pogroms ended *early* Christianity, its essences to linger on in the Coptic Church alone, while the next phase, the Roman phase of Christianity, got under way. This phase of Roman Christianity (as opposed to Egyptian Christianity), grew stronger, institutionally, in Alexandria than hitherto, an organized church by now owning considerable wealth from trading both in the city and abroad, using its own fleet of ships on the high seas. Paradoxically, the Alexandrian church grew stronger, while the Roman Empire slipped further from its dominance. But Alexandria's stability and Christianity were to be rocked one more time, by the Arab invasion in 642 C.E., when the golden age of Alexandria ended (Ramadan, 1993:109).

If ever there were a case to be made for the notion that history repeats itself, it is upheld in the example of Alexandria: waves of occupiers and destroyers have come and gone, yet as if to confirm the vision of its great founder, Alexandria remains, an implacable testament to one of the most fecund periods in ancient history, whether socio-politically, or culturally and religiously. Its losses to humanity have been incalculable, however, in the destruction of books and buildings, monuments and temples, making it necessary to attempt reconstruction of the glories, the

knowledge and the religions of old. In the following chapter, those religions will be examined in a bid to gain a clearer understanding of the contesting beliefs of ancient Alexandria, where paganism, Judaism and Christianity once jostled with each other in a free, if fractious society.

CHAPTER 3

CREED AND CULT IN EGYPT

C.100 B.C.E.- 200 C.E.

During the period under review in this study, many cults were active throughout Egypt, most of them those of “old” Egypt; but gradually new cults and creeds arose out of the convergences of the successive occupations of Egypt by the Ptolemies first of all, and then the Romans. Since it is the view of this thesis that Christianity (*qua* Christianity) had its origins in Egypt, and in Alexandria in particular, and that the surrounding cults and religious activities would have influenced the systematizers of the fledgling Christianity to some degree at least, it is necessary to inspect the chief creeds and cults among which the early Christians found themselves, thereby to determine what their influences may have been on the development of the new religion. Many cults operated in Egypt in the period under review - especially those in domestic households, the citizenry having scant access to the temples which were the exclusive domains of priests and sometimes the elite - and it is the main religious groupings of such cults which form the focus of this Chapter as well as the next. Such cults held the greatest sway over popular belief, and as in the Serapis, were sometimes incorporated in state rituals and customs. The exception to this was Judaism which was neither cultic nor secular, and never a state religion (except for its early history under the Kings of Israel). Nevertheless, enjoying special status as it did, especially under the Ptolemies, and being the undoubted font of essential (early) Christian belief, in terms of monotheism and the Scriptures, the role of Judaism cannot be over-estimated. Yet Judaism, too, had to contend with the myriad political, cultural and intellectual currents of the Graeco-Roman Egyptian world in which it found itself, so its place in this Chapter (in 3.3) is of particular importance. Taken together, consideration in this Chapter and in the next of the core beliefs of the main religions of the period will provide a comparative understanding of the many voices being heard in the forging of the new religion of Christianity.

3.1 THE ISIS CULT

Isis awakes, pregnant with the seed of her brother Osiris.
 The woman gets up quickly,
 her heart joyful because of the seed of her brother Osiris.
 She says, "O gods,
 I am Isis, the sister of Osiris,
 who mourns over the father of the gods;
 Osiris, who mediated the slaughter of the Two Lands,
 his seed is in my body.

.....
 "I am Isis, who is more effective
 and more illustrious than all the gods!
 It is a god in my womb,
 he is the seed of Osiris."

These extracts from one of the Coffin texts of ancient Egypt (Assmann, 2001:130-131), encapsulate the fundamentals of the myth surrounding the Isis cult, and are given dramatic form in the voice of Isis herself. Here she enunciates her unequivocal divine power, while awaiting the birth of her son, Horus. Post-partum, the image of mother and child - Isis with the infant Horus nurtured on her lap - is one of the oldest iconic motifs, and one so influential in its time, that it appears to have been appropriated in its entirety by Christianity, in its universal depiction of the Madonna and Child. Indeed, Catholics still refer to the Madonna, the mother of Jesus, as "Queen of Heaven", and "Our Lady", and these titles, too, appear to have their roots in the Isis cult. In Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* XI, the following invocation to Isis provides grounds for this claim:

Thou that art sandalled on immortal feet with leaves of palm, the prize of Victory;
 Thou that art crowned with snakes and blossoms sweet, Queen of the silver dews
 and shadowy sky, I pray thee by all names men name thee by! ... By all thy names
 and rites I summon thee; By all thy rites and names, Our Lady, hear!

A famous old Catholic hymn, "Hail, Queen of Heaven", refers to Mary also as "Star of the sea", and she is invoked to "pray for the wanderer". The resonance here of Isis as "Lady of the Lighthouse" and "Lady of the Seas", in her capacity as protector of seafarers and even the oppressed (Corrington Streete, 2000:378-379) is too strong to be mere coincidence. It needs to be asked, therefore, who Isis was, where, why and how her cult arose, and what the reasons were

for the exceptional popularity of this goddess whose influence, as the few examples above illustrate, has lasted for about 2500 years, in varying forms, despite attempts by Roman senators, and emperor Tiberius in 19 C.E. and by Christian leaders in the West even as late as the fifth century C.E., to suppress the cult. In Egypt itself the cult was only finally suppressed in the sixth century. Nevertheless, in recent decades (of the 20th century) there has been a resurgence of interest in the cult of Isis, with temples to her honour in various centres in the United States of America, and one in Ireland.

According to Gail Corrington Streete (*ibid.*), Isis "... was first worshipped in Egypt as 'Aset, the personification of the throne that was believed to 'give birth' to the pharaoh, the incarnation of Osiris (later known as Sarapis), god of vegetation and the afterlife". Because, it was believed, Isis's son Horus was born anew in each Egyptian pharaoh, so "... beginning in Egypt and eventually throughout the Graeco-Roman world in which she was widely worshipped, Isis was considered the goddess who had supreme control over the powers of the cosmos, including life and death, and most especially fate" (*ibid.*). Remarkably, the spread of the cult began long before Ptolemaic and subsequently Roman rule of Egypt. The strongest reasons for this are probably to be found in the realm of economics: Egyptians had long traded with outlying countries, thus bringing Egyptian sailors, merchants and even slaves into contact with Mediterranean lands, especially Greece, where the foreigners would have come to know about Isis through the Egyptians' devotional practices to Isis, in port. Another reason may be found in overt proselytization. At least as early as the 5th century B.C.E. Herodotus describes her worship in Egypt at Cyrene, Bubastis, Sais and Memphis: "In his *Histories* Herodotus claims that 'Isis is Demeter in the Greek language (2.59.156)', and that the 'mysteries' known as the Thesmophoria in Greece, which celebrated the goddess Demeter, had their origin in the worship of Isis at Sais (2.171). In mainland Greece, Isis was also being worshipped in Piraeus, the port of Athens, by Egyptian merchants as early as the fifth century B.C.E. (Turcan, 1996: 81). By the beginning of the second century B.C.E., the worship of Isis, with or without her associated deities - Sarapis, Horus, and her assistant, the jackal-headed god Anubis - was known throughout the Hellenistic world, from Sicily to the shores of the Black Sea" (Corrington Streete, 2000:369). From Greece, the cult spread reputedly to the "Greek-speaking colonies of southern Italy" (370), and thence to Rome (c. 88 B.C.E.), during the consulship of the Roman general Sulla.. Initial Roman resistance

to the recognition of the cult may have been attributable to the fact that many of its adherents were slaves, members of lower classes, or women of all classes, and this did not sit comfortably with senatorial notions of class supremacy. Eventually even the upperclasses were drawn to the cult and it became popular under "... Caligula, the Flavian emperors, the Antonine Commodus, and the Severan Caracalla" (*ibid.*) Perhaps for the first time in an ancient religion, therefore, class was eroded amongst worshippers, and this feature alone could explain the popularity and thus continuous spread of the religion. Interestingly, a parallel scenario was to unfold in early Christianity, the requirement for membership being belief not class or ethnicity.

The popularity of Isis is attested to in the records of Isis festivals - the *Navigium Isidis* celebrated in Italy as late as 416 C.E. (Heyob, 1975:35) - and the numerous extant writings, hymns, artefacts, and temple ruins, from Alexandria to Rome. According to Corrington Streete (2000:370), "... the most complete witnesses of the formal practice of the religion are the hymns to Isis in manuscript and on stone and an entire chapter of a second-century novel, the *Metamorphoses*, by Apuleius of Madauros, who relates an initiation into the cult of Isis and Sarapis at the Greek seaport town of Cenchreae in the eleventh and final chapter of his novel". But other writers, too, record aspects of the religion: Plutarch in his *On Isis and Osiris*; the Christian writer Firmicus Maternus in *The Error of Profane Religions*; while the Roman elegists Tibullus (1.3.23-32) and Propertius 2.33.1-4 and the satirists Juvenal (*Satires* 6.522-41) and Martial (*Epigrams* 10.48.1) point to "the requirements of chastity and periods of sexual abstinence (cf. Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.19)" (Corrington Streete, 2000:370-371). A further, general emphasis in the ritual practices associated with the worship of Isis was on the notion of purity, symbolized by the colour white. Apuleius (in *Metamorphoses* 11.20) and Tibullus (*ibid.*) attest to the white curtains of the inner shrine of the goddess's temple, the often white attire of the goddess's statue, and the linen clothing of her worshippers.

The rituals of worship contain many ingredients common to world religions today, not least Christianity. First of all, daily worship was open to all, even non-believers. Devotions began at dawn with the exposing of the goddess's statue to the congregants, prayers and incantations were chanted with musical accompaniment, and the priest poured holy water in libation. Milk was also sprinkled during the rituals, doubtless because Isis is sometimes merged with the Egyptian god

Hathor, the cow-god (Assmann, 2001:134). Here milk signifies healing from illness; but the mother-goddess Isis also suckles the future king, Horus, thus she is the “kingmaker”, while the king himself is to be “the legitimate, salvation-bringing king”, who was not the “anointed one” but the “suckled one”. This prophesied saviour-king is mentioned in the “Potter’s Oracle” of the Ptolemaic Period, where it is said that he will “come from the sun and be enthroned by the great goddess Isis” (*ibid.*).

In view of these points, it is interesting to note the findings of an excavation, in 1991, of the Main Temple complex in the Dakhleh Oasis at Ismant-el-Kharab, the ancient Kellis. This temple, according to Colin A. Hope (1994:37), was “... dedicated to the god Tutu, his mother Neith and consort Tapsais, the latter an unknown member of the Egyptian pantheon”. Significant in the excavation, for purposes of this study, was the discovery of “... a finely executed painting in Classical style of the goddess Isis upon a small wooden panel. Such paintings, which are not particularly common, are the precursors of Christian icons” (*ibid.*). It is the description of the physical appearance of the goddess which is relevant here. The icon “... depicts Isis wearing a shawl, tied at the right breast, over an undergarment and crowned with her usual headdress, the basileion, and a diadem(?)[sic.]. In addition to the normal elements of the basileion, namely the solar disc, two ears of wheat emerge from the base of the horns. The goddess’ hair falls in long tresses over her shoulders and there is a row of curls on the forehead; around her neck is a small necklace. The eyes are wide, the nose thin and the mouth slightly pursed. A date with the second century or early third is tentatively proposed” (*ibid.*).

Other findings at the temple include an array of plaster statues of Isis, many mere fragments, others more complete. A lifesize bust, in particular, is of note for Hope (1994:37.), for it “... depicts a special form of the goddess, namely Isis-Demeter, a syncretistic form which merges Isis with the Greek goddess of agriculture. This appears to have resulted from the identification of Isis with the dog-star Sothis, which was believed by the Egyptians to herald the inundation, thus linking Isis with the fertility of the land. The ears of wheat which form a part of the headdress in the painting are symbols of this also. In contrast to the other representations of Isis, here she is shown wearing the distinctive attire of Demeter: the *polos* crown, from which a veil drapes on either side of the head onto the shoulders, and, over the left shoulder, a *himation*

shawl.... Egyptian elements are identifiable in the solar disc attached to the front of the crown and the hairstyle”. Here we see a perfect example of syncretism in practice, “proving” the manner in which religions influence one another, and in ancient times, sometimes readily borrowed from one another, or incorporated strands of one into another. Furthermore, from the detailed descriptions of both the painted icon, and of the sculpted bust, it is possible to see many similarities with depictions of Mary in later Christian art, where she is often sandalled, is always draped in robes with one over the shoulder, sometimes has hair in curls on the forehead, and is often to be seen wearing a crown (though not a *basileion*), a raised ring of stars above her head, or a simple halo. Under her feet are sometimes images of a snake (the tempter of the Garden of Eden), or even a crescent moon and stars, symbols of her supremacy over evil and of the heavens. Again, it is difficult to see these as mere coincidences; they provide, at least, circumstantial evidence of the syncretistic nature of Christian appropriation of pagan symbols. In itself the phenomenon is indicative of the singular hold of the Isis figure over public sentiment and belief.

Concerning ritual acts entailed in the daily worship of Isis, Corrington Streete (2000:371) draws on a number of writers for evidence:

According to Chaeremon, the Stoic writer of the first century C.E., the priests of Egyptian gods recited hymns of praise three or four times daily, at dawn, midday, sunset, and evening, the exact time of which was regulated by water-clocks (Chaeremon *fr.*10; Porphyry *Abstinence* 4.6,8; cf Fowden 1986,55; Turcan 1996,113). The ritually animated statue was adored by the goddess’s worshippers (*Metamorphoses* 11.17), until “she” retired for the night. On the days of festivals, according to Apuleius, the temple ritual would include a reading by a scribe, perhaps from a sacred text in hieroglyphics, in front of the assembly of the minor clergy (*pastophoroi*) and the other faithful. Some hymns and chants seem to have been especially composed for festivals. Apuleius mentions songs sung in the procession of the *Navigium Isidis*, including a “charming hymn...by a talented poet”, preludes to a part of the ritual known as “the Great Vows”, and a tune to “the great Sarapis” played on pipes (*Metamorphoses* 11.8-12). The *sistrum*, a wire-rattle, was apparently also an important instrument used during Isis rituals. In his *Aeneid* VIII, Virgil describes Cleopatra calling up her troops with the *sistrum* - a pointed action, for she was known to be worshipped as Isis (cf. A.D. Smelik & E.A. Hemelrijk, 1984:1854).

What the commentators above implicitly confirm is not only the popular and very prominent role Isis enjoyed in the society of Late Antiquity, but also the evolved, even elaborate organization of the cult in ceremonial as well as ritualistic terms. So extensive did knowledge of, and homage to, Isis become in the Graeco-Roman world, that the 3rd-century *Corpus Hermeticum* incorporates the *Kore Kosmou*, “a revelation dialogue between Isis and her son Horus” (Corrington Streete, 2000:373). In this we see how the influence of Isis had filtered into Hermeticism as well.

In a New Kingdom hymn to Osiris (H. Frankfort, 1975:130), the goddess is referred to as “Beneficent Isis” because she protected her brother. Perhaps it was essentially that beneficence, coupled with her maternity and (thus) fecundity, her protectiveness of the needy and travellers, and finally her link to everlasting life, that appealed to the human needs and emotions of her devotees everywhere - far more, say, than the remote power of Osiris or Horus - and that have ensured her hold over public imagination even to the present day. Luther H. Martin (1987:72) notes that “The Hellenistic Mysteries of Isis eventually became a universal cult, recognizing no racial or geographic distinctions, and were witnessed by ‘practically the entire inhabited world’ (*Diod. Sic. I,25,4*)”. In Mary the mother of Jesus, the Christians found the ideal figure (albeit not as a goddess) in whom to transpose, as it were, the prime characteristics of the universally-acclaimed Isis. As already noted, only Roman prohibition of paganism at the end of the fourth century C.E. suppressed the worship of Isis in the West (and in the 6th century in Coptic Egypt). Martin (*ibid.*) comments that “In one sense, however, Isis survived even Christian dominance, for together with her divine son Horus, she is remembered in the sentiment and iconography of Roman Catholic Mariology”. It survives, also, as one of the most striking examples of the influence of Egypt on the formation of early Christianity.

3.2 THE SERAPIS

The Serapis is, in a sense, a curiosity of Ptolemaic Egypt. It was certainly not an indigenous Egyptian religious practice, in itself, but a Hellenistic composite of two Egyptian gods, worshipped in the cult of Osiris and Apis. The Serapis, a “politically inspired Egypto-Hellenic cult” (Lewis, 1986:69) was the brainchild of Ptolemy I in 286 B.C.E. Memphis had long been the centre of the powerful cult of Apis (the bull). Recognizing the importance of the location in

popular belief, Alexander had had himself installed there as pharaoh, only thereafter moving to his newly-created capital of Alexandria, that most Hellenistic of cities, and with its diverse society of Greeks, Jews, foreigners of all persuasions, as well as Egyptian workers. Ptolemy I doubtless saw the need for a focal religious movement that would unite the disparate strands of the volatile Alexandrian populace. But, as Lewis (*ibid.*) implies, an even more earthly motive would have been that the Memphis shrine, which “had been growing in importance for some time”, had the dangerous potential of challenging the Ptolemies’ position in Lower Egypt. To validate the establishment of his new cult, Ptolemy I claimed to have been commanded in a dream to do so. Martin (1987:73) records that “According to one tradition reported in the late first century C.E. by both Plutarch (*De Is. et Os.*28) and Tacitus (*Hist.* 4,83-84), Ptolemy dreamed of a colossal statue of Pluto that was at Sinope in Pontus. In the dream, the statue commanded Ptolemy to bring it immediately to Alexandria. When Ptolemy had installed the statue there, ‘not without the help of divine providence’, it was revealed to be that of ‘none other of the gods but Sarapis’. As Plutarch concluded his report:

It is better to identify Osiris with Dionysus and Sarapis with Osiris, who received this appellation at the time when he changed his nature. For this reason Sarapis is a god of all peoples in common, even as Osiris is; and this they who have participated in the holy rites well know. (*De Is. et Os.* 28)

This description still does not explain the combination-god of Serapis. Lewis (1986:69) provides a likely answer. He claims that the cult of Apis the bull, at Memphis, “became associated with the cult of Osiris, and the godhead became known as Osiris-Apis, or Oserapis. This was the obvious source of the name Serapis - or Sarapis, both spellings were common”. (Both spellings are still in use: Lewis uses Serapis, for example, as does David Frankfurter (1998), while Martin (1987) and Myśliwiec (2000) prefer Sarapis. Yet most refer to the Serapeion. For purposes of consistency, this study employs the spelling Serapis.)

At the same time as Ptolemy needed to assert (Greek) authority from Alexandria, on a reluctant, conquered and largely excluded Egyptian population, he needed a striking method of subverting Egyptian restiveness. The Serapeion could provide just such a means. He thus “... rebuilt and expanded the sanctuary [which became known as ‘The Great Serapeion’] at Memphis on a lavish scale” (Lewis, 1986:70). According to Lewis (*ibid.*), “... the god Serapis was an instant and enduring success, one that lasted all through antiquity until the triumph of Christianity, even

though the Egyptians never came even close to the status of equality with the Greeks that Serapis was supposed to symbolize". As a further example of this inequality, and of the seemingly intractable differences between the ruling Greeks and the indigenous Egyptians, Lewis (*ibid.*) states that, "In fact, there were really two separate cults of Serapis: the Greeks worshipped him with the rituals of a Greek god, often portraying him in one of the guises of Zeus, while the Egyptians treated him entirely as one of their own".

Either way, the reasons for the god's popularity need to be found. In common with devotees of Isis, worshippers of Serapis saw him as a "rescuer from dangers, and dispenser of justice"; as "ruler of the universe, 'greatest of the gods'"; as a "protector from troubles"; as a source of guidance as an oracular presence; and, for the ruling classes, as a source of " 'health, victory, power, might, and rule over all the lands under the universe' "(Lewis, *ibid.*). In Serapis, therefore, there was the chance for all, rulers or peasants, of gain in the form of practical help in daily travail. If we add to this idea the fact that Isis was an associate of Serapis, the notion that all could be succoured at the Serapeion - whether by Isis or Serapis - was considerably strengthened. Indeed, it could be argued that the extraordinary popularity in Late Antiquity of the two major cults, was boosted by the associated deities: in a sense, to worship one was to worship the other, while both appealed to commoners as well as the elite, in Egyptian as well as Hellenistic societies. Common to both cases, too, was the syncretistic natures of the cults, and of their associated gods: "Isis with Demeter, Imhotep with Asklepios, Hathor with Aphrodite, and so on" (Lewis, 1986:84). Imhotep, regarded as a god by the Egyptians, is included here because of the considerable numbers of pilgrims and supplicants approaching him at the centre; invalids, in particular, hoped for a cure from him of their diverse illnesses. Curiously, despite the obvious intermingling of Egyptian and Greek religious elements, the cultic practices persisted for centuries, despite the enduring and increasing animosity of the Egyptians towards the many Greeks involved in temple activities, foreigners whom the Egyptians never ceased to view as anything other than "interlopers in their sacred presence" (Lewis, 1986:85). Ptolemy I's vision, while it sought to unite and failed ultimately to do so - Koester (1982:187) maintains that the Egyptians "did not accept Sarapis" - nevertheless kept overt strife contained.

In the Serapeion at Alexandria, built as a copy of the one at Memphis, Ptolemy achieved more

success, unsurprisingly, in view of the cosmopolitan nature of Alexandrian society. The locale would also have assisted greatly in spreading knowledge and fame of the cult, since travellers and traders, soldiers and sailors alike, would have carried word of the cult to many foreign parts. Thus it is also unsurprising that the cult persisted during Roman occupation of Egypt, but also became popular in Rome itself. Over time, the cult became established in other centres, not least at Kysis in the Karga oasis, where, as David Frankfurter (1998:167) notes, the “Hellenized deities Serapis and Isis [were venerated]...despite the traditional association of oasis culture with the god Amun”. According to Frankfurter (*ibid.*), the temple to Isis and Osiris-Serapis commenced during the reign of Domitian, and was completed under Trajan. This in itself was evidence of Roman favour of the cult. Activity at Kysis persisted until “well into the fourth century (during which time Christian inscriptions and ostraca also begin to appear” (Frankfurter, *ibid.*).

A closer look needs to be taken at the figure of Apis itself, in the Serapis, because of the prominence of the bull in the cult, since this may also be a key to understanding the spread of the Serapis, the bull, for example, playing a central role in the later (2nd -century) cult of Mithras, in which some see parallels with certain Christian rites. In Mithraic ritual practices, the slaying of the bull was a key mythological image, since the blood of the bull was regarded as the source of all life. According to Starr (1991:606), there were about 60 Mithraea in Rome. The most famous of these (today) is the one excavated under the Catholic Dominican Basilica of San Clemente in Rome.

In ancient Egypt, however, the bull was sacred as an incarnation of the god Osiris, and thus was never harmed, much less slaughtered. Myśliwiec (2001:59) observes that the cult of Apis “quickly spread throughout Egypt and became one of the most important in the religion of the land. Decisive in this development was the royal aspect of the bull as symbol. The Pyramid Texts identify the phallus of Apis with that of the king so as to assure the latter continued potency in the afterlife. Pharaoh was traditionally called Mighty Bull”. There were a number of other cults of sacred bulls in Egypt, such as that of Mnevis at Heliopolis, and the Buchtis bull at Hermonthis, but Apis was always the most popular of the bulls (Myśliwiec, *ibid.*). Whether in Egyptian religion or Iranian-Roman, the bull was clearly a figure of life and potency, and in Egypt thus also a symbol of fertility. Interestingly, while the cults have long disappeared, remnants of

popular devotion to the bull - despite the strength of Islam and Christianity in the modern world - are still in evidence. Myśliwiec (2001:60) records an extraordinary occasion when archaeologist Mariette excavated a statuette of a bull, and “Egyptian women from a nearby village came and sat on the statue to assure themselves of fertility”. By contrast, many who have attended contemporary Spanish bullfights report the near-mystical experience of witnessing the end of the drama in the death of the bull in the ring. Hindus in India, we also know, treat cattle as sacred. Taken together, these disparate examples illustrate the enduring fascination by many peoples for the bull, and this must have assisted in the spread of the cult of Serapis well into Late Antiquity.

In the somewhat evangelistic style of the early 20th-century church historian, F.J. Foakes Jackson (1947:183) describes how the Serapis at Alexandria was worshipped “with the most frantic devotion”. He ascribes his point of view to Dill (*Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, n.d.:563ff), who sees the popularity of Serapis in Rome as the result of the waning of the “old religion” and what he calls “the religious excitement in the beginning of the second century B.C., and the immense popular craving for a more emotional form of worship..... . Already in Nero’s reign Lucan could speak of Isis and Osiris as not only welcomed in the shrines of Rome, but as deities of all the world”. For purposes of this study, one other piece of valuable information is provided by Foakes Jackson (*ibid.*), who cites the emperor Hadrian’s remarks in a letter that, “Those who worship Serapis are likewise Christians; even those who style themselves the bishops of Christ are devoted to Serapis. The very Patriarch (the Jewish *nasi* of Tiberias) is forced by some to adore Serapis, by others to worship Christ. There is but one God for them all. Him do the Christians, Him do the Jews, Him do the Gentiles all alike worship”. Foakes Jackson acknowledges Dean Milman’s commentary on this (in *History of Christianity*, vol. 11, n.d.), that Hadrian was perhaps speaking satirically here of the universal worship of wealth. This is no doubt possible, yet Hadrian’s comments do belie, as well, the vying around Serapis, amongst religious groupings at the time, and that is significant for the present study, because it is another pointer to the strong awareness of Serapis, and even its covert influences on such groupings. Koester (1982:191) remarks that with the spreading of the Serapis cult many sanctuaries were built in cities across the Roman Empire. One of these, the “Red Basilica” in Pergamum, could accommodate over a thousand people, while all sanctuaries were large enough to suggest services were conducted there which may have “...closely resembled the service of a Jewish synagogue

or a Christian church". One last piece of information from Foakes Jackson (*ibid.*) is potentially significant:

It has even been suggested that the face of the image of this divinity, so full of grave and pensive majesty, gave Christian artists the model for the conventional representation of our Lord, and it is not altogether impossible that some of the semi-pagan Gnostic philosophers saw in Serapis a prototype of Christ, the Lord and Maker of all...

It may be that Foakes Jackson is reaching a bit here; nevertheless it is interesting to note how even without today's more advanced scholarship, based on recent major archaeological discoveries, as well as extensive papyrological research, older historians with a clearly Christian bias have observed the undoubted influences of the two ancient cults of Isis and Osiris-Apis, the Serapis. Foakes Jackson's opinion might even find surprising implicit support from David Peacock (2000:438), who describes Serapis's statue as depicting "...a bearded man, not unlike Zeus: of all the Egyptian gods, he is the most similar to a Graeco-Roman god". The Plate accompanying Peacock's article (439), bears out the description, the marble bust showing a man of enormous, far-seeing sensitivity and humanity. This point will be returned to in the concluding Chapter of the thesis. Now it is necessary to turn attention to the great monotheistic religion of Judaism, which, for all the talk of the worldwide thirst for the one God (as some devotional Christian church historians have explained the popularity of Serapis), had been there all along.

3.3 JUDAISM

It may be considered the height of temerity to refer to this oldest great monotheistic religion, in a mere segment of a chapter. It is not the intention, however, to discuss Judaism in detail, for a number of reasons. First of all, unlike the many ancient religions about which knowledge is scant or at best incomplete because of the absence of written texts and, or, the destruction of so much material through wars of conquest, internecine strife and religious zealotry, Judaism has been thoroughly recorded and sustained throughout the millennia. Secondly, there is a vast amount of specialist scholarship available in rabbinical studies, in biblical studies and in all aspects of the (mediaeval) Kabbalah. It would be both pointless and highly simplistic to attempt any worthwhile discussion of Judaism in the limited space available here. The intention, rather, is to take cognisance of the status of Judaism, and of developments within Judaism, primarily in Egypt, in

the periods before and after the arrival of Christianity. In this way, it is hoped, the influence of Judaism on the emergence of Christianity might be better gauged. As Benedikt Otzen (1998:3) observes, “The importance of the period will be evident to all, for it is here that Jewish and European history meet, so to speak: Christianity arises out of the Jewish milieu in Palestine and becomes a decisive factor in European culture and spiritual life for centuries to come”.

It is necessary to determine what is understood by the term “Judaism”, before proceeding. H.L. Ellison (1978:670) declares that “Judaism is the religion of the Jews in contrast to that of the Old Testament. While in any full study of it, it would be natural to start with the call of Abraham, this would be solely as an indispensable introduction. Judaism should be regarded as beginning with the Babylonian Exile [after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E.], but for the period up to A.D. 70 [the Roman destruction of the second Temple and dispersal of the Jews into the *Diaspora*] the term is best used only for those elements which are either modifications or extensions of Old Testament concepts”. Benedikt Otzen’s (1990:8-9) assessment of the term Judaism echoes Ellison’s distinction between the early Israelites, ruled by the Patriarchs and great biblical kings like David and Solomon, and united only by belief in the Supreme God Yahweh as well as their identity as the Chosen People, and the later, formalized religion of the people of Judah, a formalization henceforth called Judaism. Yet Rudolph (1991:11) argues that “The Jewish heritage too has become so differentiated [especially as a result of Hellenistic influences] that one can no longer speak of Judaism as a clearly defined and unitary entity at the time of the New Testament and the early church; one can only point out various definite phenomena that influenced Christianity. The discoveries at the Dead Sea (Qumran and others) have not only disclosed previously unknown sides of the Judaism of New Testament times (and other stages of Jewish esoteric thought) but have also supplied new material for the analysis of primitive Christian literature - even if through a stronger emphasis on the contrasts”. All of this was to occur later, however. In order to understand Rudolph’s remarks, it is necessary first of all to survey briefly the socio-political scenario against which the foundation of “Judaism” took place in antiquity.

Whereas the original state of Israel, “classical Israel”, endured for only a short while as an integrated unit (and then largely due to Solomon’s strength as King), it collapsed after his death

c.930 B.C.E. (Otzen, 1990:8). This was largely due to political instability in the northern kingdom, wracked by internal conflicts and also experiencing difficulty with Aramean states in Syria. It was in religious terms that the greatest differences between the northern and southern kingdoms were evidenced. In the north, with its capital city of Samaria, considerable influence from Canaanite-Phoenician culture meant that the ancient Israelite worship of Yahweh was at times "... only weakly represented in important circles in the northern kingdom" (Otzen, 1990:9). In the southern kingdom of Judah, by contrast, the Judaeans enjoyed a stable political, cultural and religious regime for about 400 years, governed by descendants of David in Jerusalem, the capital city (Otzen, *ibid.*). According to Otzen (*ibid.*), "It was here that the version of Yahwism was developed which became determinative for the later Jewish understanding of what belief in Israel's god, Yahweh, entailed".

The status quo was not to last, however - either in the north or south. The north was taken over by Assyria in 722 B.C.E.; and Babylon was to capture the south, and destroy the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. In both instances these were body-blows, the leading figures being deported, by Assyria in the north, and later by Babylon in the south, thus minimising any chance of re-grouping in resistance movements against their respective conquerors. Yet the blows against those of Israelite heritage were not terminal. While numbers were eventually assimilated into their new (pagan) environments, the main group of Judaeans staunchly adhered to Yahwism and yearned to return to Jerusalem. The Babylonians having conquered all before them were in turn conquered by the Persians, and the exiled Judaeans were then - c 540 B.C.E. - free to remain in Babylon or return to Palestine. Otzen (1998:11) speculates that the majority probably remained, in due course forming the Eastern Jewish Diaspora from which "... renewing and reforming currents emanated towards Jerusalem, embodied in such figures as Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century B.C.E.". A core group returned to Judah, where they rebuilt the Temple, completing it in 516 B.C.E. From this point on, the Judaeans enjoyed the protection of the Persian monarch, and were left in peace for the ensuing centuries of Persian rule, thus allowing for consolidation of the community, and of their religious beliefs.

In the 4th century B.C.E., the political climate was to change once again with the establishment of Alexander's great empire, followed by the Ptolemies in Egypt and Palestine, and the Seleucids

in the Mediterranean. Again the Judaeans enjoyed religious freedom under the Ptolemies, and were welcome in Alexandria. Those under the Seleucids in Syria were less happy, however. Lester L. Grabbe (1992: 610) indicates that “Underneath the calm surface..changes were taking place. Slowly, quietly, but inexorably, the developing Hellenistic culture was making its impact felt in even the remote and mainly rural province of Judaea.”. A successful rebellion - the Maccabean revolt - was staged by the Syrian Jews against the Seleucids in the early 160s B.C.E. Their success was later to inspire Jewish zealots chafing under Roman rule in Jerusalem - though then with catastrophic results including the Roman destruction of the Temple. Many Jews reportedly fled Jerusalem after this, the Jewish state clearly no longer in existence, and settled in Alexandria, where a new chapter in Judaism was to develop through overt Hellenization.

The centuries between, however, had been times of concentration on essential aspects of faith, and consolidation of how Judaism viewed its core traditions. “For this reason”, Otzen (1998:18) maintains, “the Jewish religion did not collapse when the Jewish state fell”. The Jews’ next challenges were to be even greater, arguably, than during successive imperial conquests, for they were next to be faced, especially in Alexandria, with the far more testing influences of Hellenism, and along with them, the new competing voices of Christ-followers, Greek philosophers, and Gnostic and Hermetic followers. Of course, that Hellenization had already been taking place for a considerable time in Alexandria, and even, according to Lester L. Grabbe (1992: II,610), in remote rural parts of Judaea. Grabbe (1992: II, 611-616) stresses the impact of Hellenism as a watershed in the development of Judaism, with the light of new ideas and new cultures against which the ancient religion could measure itself. A new Judaism began to emerge, not least rabbinic Judaism, in the period 70 -130 C.E. Thereafter, the Judaism which then found form “... was new and different in many essential ways from that before 70. However much the temple and cult may have formed the basis of theoretical discussion in the emerging rabbinic Judaism, the Jewish temple state had ceased forever. Jewish identity was ethnic and religious. A Jewish state of any kind would have to wait another nineteen hundred years” (Grabbe, 1992:II,616). What this brief overview indicates is the massive influence of Hellenism on surrounding cultures and religions of the period under review in this study. That its impact on Judaism was so far-reaching may be seen as a measure of the extent to which the early Christians were also susceptible to Hellenizing forces.

The confrontation with Hellenism in Alexandria was particularly ironic since it was what had sparked the Maccabean revolt in earlier times, and King Herod (the Great), whom orthodox Jews despised (regarding him as serving his foreign masters too well), favoured Hellenism. As Otzen (1998:37) comments, “Like earlier hellenists [sic.], Herod probably saw his mission as the unification of Judaism with the new spiritual movements emerging out of the West, in order to fit his kingdom organically into the Roman Empire”. The sentiment might actually have been noble, but the objective was utopian, for certainly at Alexandria, that most Hellenistic city, the conflicting creeds jostled with one another, sometimes vociferously, but never gave ground. We know that a Jewish Gnosticism arose here, but Judaism itself continued as before. Judaism remained implacably separate, a situation perhaps assisted by the Ptolemies’ protection, and later by the Romans as well. Pearson (1991:145) notes that “The Jews were constituted as a *politeuma*, with their own political and legal structures, and they were encouraged by official Roman policy to live according to their own ancestral customs” - a particularly enlightened policy, it could be argued, in view of the previously hostile relations between the Jerusalem Jews and the Romans. Once again, we see the special favours granted to the Jews who enjoyed more civil rights than native Egyptians. By all accounts, “hundreds of thousands” of Jews lived in Alexandria (Pearson, 1991:145), Philo estimating (*Flacc.* 43) a million Jews were resident in Egypt as a whole. As in Jerusalem, so in Alexandria their religious life centred on the synagogues of which there were many in the city, one in particular, according to Philo (*Flacc.* 55-56) being a vast basilica referred to in rabbinic sermons as “the glory of Israel” (Pearson, 1991:147). What is of interest about this 1st-century Alexandrian Jewish population, and of direct relevance to the present study, is as Pearson (*ibid.*, 148) notes, the “considerable degree of religious and cultural diversity” found among these Jews. Such diversity was to be seen in the differing attitudes towards the Law, for example. Some upheld “a strict literalist interpretation” of the Law, while others favoured and “allegorical interpretation”. Yet others varied between “...a total rejection of the Scriptures and their ‘myths’ to a spiritual reading of the Scriptures leading to a rational abandonment of the observances of ritual law” (Pearson, 1991:148). If we add to this variety the presence of apocalyptic and Gnostic groups in Alexandria, as well as those who, while ethnically Jewish, lived effectively atheistic, or at least non-observant lives, we begin to see a picture of a population more diversified than at first imagined. Finally, there were also a number of Gentile affiliates, according to Philo (*Virt.* 182), and among whom Pearson (1991:149) places the earliest Christians

of Alexandria. As a result, and also unsurprisingly, as Pearson (*ibid.*) notes, “We should surmise that a variety of beliefs and practices were represented in Alexandrian Christianity almost from the beginning”.

Another dynamic assisted in Jewish religious “separateness”. Otzen (1998:63) points out that Jews in the *diaspora* who were not assimilated into the foreign cultures they were exposed to, actually became more entrenched in their Jewishness because of their awareness of being different, unique. Ironically, thus, cosmopolitanism served to accentuate and strengthen their Jewish identity. A point of great significance, for the future Christians as well, was the fact that young Jews growing up outside of Palestine and away from Jerusalem could not speak Hebrew. That being so, they could read neither the *Torah* nor the *Talmud*. The translation of the *Torah* into Greek was thus a milestone of great significance, both for the Jews themselves, and also for the early Gentile Christians who could now read the scriptures which had previously been inaccessible to them. And so, armed with Greek Old and New Testaments (although these were not, at first, the canonical versions), they were in a far better position to consider the teachings of the new religion. This held true for pagans as well, of course. A final reason for the stability of Jewish religion at this time of great flux in the Hellenistic world, must be sought in its development, over preceding centuries, of codification, commentary (interpretations of the Law) and, of course, observance. Christianity itself, as will be seen in Chapter 5, gained its eventual strong footing precisely because of its own systematization of sacred texts, commentaries, and theological tracts expounding on matters of faith and observance of Christ’s teachings in practice.

It is necessary, now, to turn attention to the components of Jewish belief. The foundation of that belief resides in the *Torah*, the Old Testament, containing not only the Creation account (Genesis) and the history of the Covenant of Yahweh with His people, but also the laws (Leviticus and Deuteronomy), and especially the Psalms and prophetic writings, the mainspring of Jewish piety. The *Talmud*, a vital part of Jewish theology, consists of two kinds of writing: the *Mishnah* (a rabbinical collection of oral traditions committed to written form c.200 C.E.), and covering different aspects of life such as agriculture, festival days, marriages and divorce, the law, Temple sacrifice and ritual purification; and the *Gemara*, a collection of commentaries by generations of rabbis, on the elements of the *Mishnah*. These writings, like those of the *Torah*, ensured their

preservation for posterity. Karen Farrington (2000:51) points out that there are actually two *Talmuds*, one from Palestine, and one from Babylonia, which is “three times longer than the Palestine one [and] is generally regarded as more authoritative”. Over the centuries and well into the Common Era, other written works appeared in connection with the *Talmud*, such as the *Responsa* - a set of theological replies to questions on the Bible by Jewish scholars between the 6th and 11th centuries; and the *Midrash*, a compilation of centuries of homilies. One of the most intriguing of Jewish texts is the famed *Kabbalah*, a complex mystical text, but this was a mediaeval development and is thus outside the line of enquiry of the present study.

What is apparent from this extremely brief overview of Jewish sacred and theological texts, is the fact that Judaism, with its emphasis on fidelity to Yahweh, on personal piety encompassing the whole of life (thus not confined to synagogue and ceremony) and, later on mysticism, was, and remains, substantially more than a “sterile religion” obsessed with law and legalisms as Paul denigrated it (Otzen, 1998:66). In arguing against this Pauline distortion - as Otzen sees it - of Jewish belief, Otzen (1998: 67) explains that, “To a Jew the Law is more than mere injunction and prohibition. It is revelation. To an orthodox Jew the Pentateuch contains everything that it has pleased the Lord to reveal to his chosen people Israel and about his nature and will, neither more nor less. In principle the *entire* revelation is contained in the Law, that is, in the Pentateuch. The rest of the Old Testament contains nothing which goes beyond the Law - and certainly nothing which contradicts it”. He goes further (69):

The Law is then no longer simply the many commandments and prohibitions in the Pentateuch. Rather, it becomes in the widest sense the basis of Jewish existence, the source from which Jews derive their understanding of God, and from which comes their faith in God as the god of the world and of Israel. The many commandments and possibilities remain, but they are not to be seen in isolation from the account of the God who is the Creator and Lord of the world - the God who chose Abraham to be Israel’s ancestral father, who led the Israelites through the desert away from Egypt, who entered into a covenant with them in Sinai, and who finally gave them the land of Canaan to possess. It is within this salvation-historical framework that the Law, narrowly considered, with all its 613 commandments and prohibitions, is to be understood. The Law is indissolubly wedded to the concept of Israel’s election.

Already it is possible to see the point of divergence for the early Christians, for whom Christ

became the fulfilment of the Law, thus taking salvation-history into a new direction entirely, that of Messianism. Furthermore, that Messiah was claimed to be the Son of God; this was completely unacceptable to the Jews. Christianity was eventually the single greatest breakaway group from Judaism. But within Judaism itself there were also movements away from its age-old definition of itself and its praxis. Just as in modern times there have been departures from orthodoxy to the Liberal Judaism of the 18th century, and the more recent Reform or Progressive Judaism, so there is the far older, exclusivist Hassidic movement, with its emphasis on “ecstatic prayer”, and the Samaritans’ “cult community” (Farrington, 2000:51). But the most famous, and unique breakaway, in the period covered by this study, was the extremist Essene movement, the sect at Qumran now famous since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This group sought arch-purification in total seclusion from others and away from urban centres, and rigid observance of the Law. It is perhaps their very exclusivity that contributed to their demise. Unique to the Essenes was the fact that they broke away not just from the Temple and Temple worship - a reaction stemming from disagreement with the rabbis’ interpretation of the Law and insistence on synagogue-centred religion - but also from society, thus being precursors of later Christian monasticism in the emphasis on asceticism communal sharing, celibacy, a strictly regulated life of prayer, scripture study, and seclusion from the world. Again, adequate discussion of the Essenes is beyond the scope of the present study; they are mentioned here, along with other revolutionary movements, as an example of the fact that Judaism has not been a rigid, immovable force in the history of religion, but has itself undergone notable upheavals, invariably caused by socio-political and socio-cultural changes over the millennia.

It is those very upheavals which doubtless contributed to the formation of the Apocalyptic literature of Judaism, a literature concerned with revelation (not chaos and anarchy as current popular usage of the term might mislead), such as the books of Enoch, and book of Daniel. Here revelation encompasses the notion of heavenly visions. Again, it is not possible to pursue the matter here, except to note that it is another element of Judaism quite readily absorbed by later Christianity. Indeed, as Otzen observes (1998:221), “The groups which broke off from Judaism, that is, the community of Qumran and the early Church, lived in the universe of apocalyptic. The Qumran community disappeared, but it would be impossible to over-estimate the importance of Jewish apocalyptic for the formation of the conceptual world of the first Christians. Like the

Qumran community, the earliest Christianity was an apocalyptic-eschatological phenomenon. And Christianity would not have become a world religion, had it not been borne along by Jewish apocalyptic". This is not the place to argue the validity or otherwise of so strong a claim, but it does seem to coincide with Pearson's (1991:149) claim about early Alexandrian Christians, as already mentioned. It is also true that visions have an entrenched position in the New Testament: for one, Joseph is informed "in a dream" that he is to be the husband of Mary, though not the father of her child, and is to flee Herod's wrath into Egypt; for another, Paul on the road to Damascus is struck down by a vision of God berating him for persecuting the Christians; and Peter is led out of a locked prison by the appearance of an angel to assist him. Either way, the Jewish roots of Christianity are emphatic, but it is the unique assembly of orthodox Jews and their breakaway Christian groups in Alexandria which, by virtue of their juxtaposition in so small and so diverse a community, was to have much influence on the emergence of the new religion. Indeed, this thesis argues, it was the juxtaposition of the early Christians with Judaism, but also the surrounding pagan cults and Egyptian religion; the influences of the Hellenistic outlook; and the new religions of Gnosticism and Hermeticism, *in Alexandria*, that created a powerful world of crosscurrents forming the new religion. Before turning to consideration of the new religion, it is first of all necessary to examine the two major developments in religious thought in the Ancient Near East, Gnosticism and Hermeticism, since they were to impact on both Judaism and Christianity.

CHAPTER 4

GNOSTICISM AND HERMETICISM

4.1 GNOSTICISM

As with the coverage of Judaism in the previous chapter, the discussion of Gnosticism which follows must be severely circumscribed in view of the scope of this study. This presents problems because Gnosticism is a vast study in its own right. Nevertheless, it must be at least broached here in view of its influence on early Christianity which, the thesis argues, evolved amidst, and was often formulated in opposition to, the contending religious systems of the day, especially in Alexandria. Bearing these points in mind, the following procedure will be adopted in surveying this complex field: first of all, a determination will be made of what Gnosticism and Gnostic mythology entailed; secondly a brief overview will be provided of key Gnostic schools active in Alexandria; and thirdly, a comment will be made on certain Gnostic texts. In this way it will be possible to detect key Gnostic strands against which early Christians fought. The emphasis, however, will be on Egyptian Gnosticism in particular.

While the term Gnosticism - derived from the Greek *gnōsis* meaning knowledge - refers to a system of beliefs focussed on the revelation of divinity, such revelation open only to the Gnostic, the “knower” or believer, and to be kept secret therefore - the term Gnosticism was not used by its adherents but coined by modern critics. A number of problems surround the designation “Gnosticism” therefore, but it is current usage and thus will be employed here. Concerning the records of Gnosticism, a dearth of extant manuscripts hampers researchers. Much Gnostic literature was undermined and destroyed by early heresiologists, and perhaps through the pillaging always associated with wars and rebellions. Paradoxically it was the vehement attacks on the Gnostics by some Christian leaders, which, albeit in secondary fashion, provide much evidence of the doctrines espoused by Gnostics, for in order to refute such doctrines, Church Fathers and philosophers such as Plotinus had to outline the tenets of the Gnostic beliefs. In this manner, even where the original texts have been lost, we are able to piece together, to some extent, the content of Gnostic teaching. Such reliance on secondary sources has been overcome to a large extent in

recent times by the discovery of collections of papyri, especially those of the Nag Hammadi library - a collection of 42 codices written in Coptic (the successor to Egypt's ancient demotic language, and the language of Christian Egypt).

The second problem surrounding the tenets of Gnosticism is the fact that there is no single Gnosticism, but rather several schools of Gnosticism, each with its own variants. This problem is compounded by the fact that, apart from some vestiges of Gnostic belief still present in small sects such as the Baptist sect of the Mandeans in Iraq, and the Cathars in France, it is no longer a visible religious force. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the term Gnosticism, for Hans Jonas (1958:32), came to serve as "a collective heading for a manifoldness of sectarian doctrines appearing within and around Christianity during its critical first centuries"; while Birger A. Pearson (1990:8-9) refers to the "parasitical" character of Gnosticism. A closer understanding of Gnosticism is acquired in Giovanni Filoramo's *A History of Gnosticism* (1990), where he distinguishes between the Classical Greek understanding of *gnosis* - as referring to knowledge of what is, in contrast to mere sense perception; a "knowledge obtained by discourse and dialectic, beginning with visual, direct observation" (38-39) - and the manner in which it becomes transformed in Gnosticism:

Gnōsis is now also used in an absolute way to indicate a form of meta-rational knowledge, which is the gift of the divinity and has in it the power to save the one who achieves it. It enables one to take possession of the keys to the cosmic mystery, to solve the enigma of the universe by absorbing the *axis mundi*...of archaic cosmogonies into the very essence of one's being. The sacred strength of *gnōsis* reveals 'who we are, what we have become, where we have been cast out of, where we are bound for, what we have been purified of, what generation and regeneration are'.... *Gnosis* is the 'redemption of the interior man', that is, the purification of the spiritual being and at the same time knowledge of the whole...
(*Ibid.*)

Filoramo thus shows the distinction between the original Greek meaning of *gnōsis* - an abstract, philosophical term - and the Gnostic's use of the word to express another, more intuitive, spiritual manner of knowing divinity. The "ontological self", as Filoramo explains, is not one's everyday, empirical (material) self, but a higher self - one's true self - "which is the intermediary of revelation and at the same time its ultimate object and purpose" (40). This is divine reality for the Gnostic, something which "...cannot be known through the ordinary faculties of the mind"

(*ibid.*). In order to receive such “revelation”, however, the Gnostic needed to be someone of a certain predisposition (presumably someone particularly attuned to the kind of knowledge being sought). It is immediately obvious, therefore, how much such *gnōsis* was the preserve of a select (educated) group only; furthermore, the *gnōsis* acquired had to be preserved in secrecy. One can also infer that Gnosticism was not open to the masses.

Filoramo’s treatment of Gnosticism, in showing the spiritual underpinning and objective of the religion, takes the reader far beyond the bland definition of *gnōsis* as knowing. As he demonstrates, the nature of that knowing, the how and why of that knowing, are a complex theology in themselves. Indeed, for all the Christian hostility to Gnosticism through the past two millennia, the parallels between Gnostic beliefs and praxis - the notion of rebirth into spiritual life and the promise of salvation, for example - and Christian doctrines of soteriology and eschatology are most marked. Moreover, if “‘to know’ now means ‘to become that same reality that is known’, to be transformed through enlightenment into the actual object of knowledge, overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object” (41), one straddles Platonism and Mysticism (especially of the Christian kind) by a single leap. Since these elements, then - of saving knowledge, of the life-long quest for enlightenment (union with the Divine as the mystics phrased it), and of restoration of the self, the soul to its divine origins (after “exile” here on earth) - are, loosely, common to both Christianity and Gnosticism, the reason for the heresiologists’ (sometimes vitriolic) attacks on Gnosticism must be sought elsewhere. The problem, it may be argued, lies in the domain less of doctrine than of mythology, and it is to that that attention must now be turned.

Once more it is Filoramo (1990:38) who provides the most succinct depiction of the nature of Gnostic mythology:

Anyone who embarks on a description of the Gnostic *fabula* or story, inevitably does so with a growing sense of unease. And this is understandable. To one familiar with the plastic figures of classical mythology or to an inquisitive reader of the mythical stories of preliterate peoples, the mythological Gnostic structure is surrounded by a quite different atmosphere with its galleries of divine ancestors with pallid, metaphysical faces; its rooms thronged with lifeless, monotonous shapes of aeons, entities and hpostases; its Underworld peopled with monstrous archons and demons.... But, like every labyrinth, the Gnostic one too has a centre

from which flow the vast streams of mythical narrations, thence to mingle and intertwine. This heart of the mythological body is a reality less remote and strange than may appear at first sight. What the myths all record is: the fate of the divine spark present in humanity and its fall into a hostile world of shadows, where it forgets its true home, while unconsciously longing to return there; its wanderings and hopes, and the eventual arrival of a Saviour who will reveal its true origin and thus enable it to regain consciousness of its essential alienation from this world of shadows.

Discussion of myth, and the vast array of myths evolved by humanity around the earth, since the dawn of time, is a project for a lifetime. Here, therefore, it must suffice to acknowledge myth as story, as narrative by which all cultures have sought to explain their origins, the origins of the world, the nature of the gods which rule the world, and the fate or destiny awaiting earthly mortals and even the gods themselves. Religion is the natural home for the production of myth, as well as its perpetuation. Judaeo-Christianity, for example, is established on a primary creation myth (in *Genesis*), a resurrection myth and a Virgin-birth myth (both in the New Testament), and even the ancient (blood) sacrifice of the son by the father. Common to all myths is their power to influence, bind together, and instruct the (cultural/religious) group upholding them. Abrams (1993:121-122) sees myth as "...hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals - set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies - but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals". Following this definition, what is unique about the Gnostics is that they *consciously created* their own myths out of a known experience (adorned no doubt by received notions from other religions of the Hellenistic period). Furthermore, Filoramo (1990:51-53) claims that such content in Gnostic tracts that has its origins in other religious thought, is not merely "borrowed", but actually transformed, "endowing them with *new meanings*" (my emphasis).

In examination of the content of Gnostic mythology, then, we find that in general it is based on the belief that a crisis in the Godhead led to a separation of lesser beings from absolute divinity: the Angel of Creation, in revenge, created matter and humankind, and is often referred to as the

demiurge. In this separation from divine origins, human beings became mired in darkness, and in evil ways. It is only through divine revelation, and that available only to those who know, that the self can be redeemed and restored to union with its origins. This simplistic rendition of the fate of humanity accounts for the characteristic dualism of Gnosticism: the good of the divine/the evil of matter; the light of the knowers/the darkness of the unknowing. In order to impart the Gnostic beliefs, and to explain the manner of the heavenly crisis, a complex cosmology was evolved. On the one hand there was the absolute, unknowable God, "...incorporating a 'fullness' - *Pleroma* - of angels and other heavenly beings, be they personified ideas (abstractions) or hypostases" (Rudolph, 1983:58). This realm has its own graduated worlds, referred to as aeons. On the other hand, there is the material world to take stock of, and this is done by the myth of the creation of the world "which is intended to offer an explanation for the present condition of man, remote from God, and therefore occupies a considerable space in the texts" (*ibid.*). This material world is "inhabited by 'demons', gods or spirits, who often bear the name 'rulers' or commanders' (archons)", with the chief archon being synonymous with the demiurge, the creator of the world (*ibid.*) Since the material world is dominated by such inimical beings who influence all the affairs and fates of earthly mortals, the battle of the enlightened ones to escape this thralldom of creation becomes clear. Hence the necessity for the Gnostic of steadily clawing his way out of earthly (material) constraints, in the quest for return to his spiritual origins. Though Gnostics' overall view of the cosmos was general currency at the time, their interpretation of it was unique. It was their belief in a good God - the absolute, unknowable, distant God - and an evil one, the Demiurge, the Creator of the world, which set them on a collision course with Jews and Christians alike, both groups insisting there was but *one* God: omnipotent, infinite, Creator, pure good, and absolute ruler of the cosmos and everything in it. This God, furthermore, communicated with, and led His people, rewarding the just and punishing only those unfaithful to Him. Judaeo-Christian monotheism, whether in its infancy or its more evolved form in later centuries, was thus pitted against the "heresies" of Gnosticism which taught of a dualist divinity.

Exactly when Gnosticism arose is a matter of conjecture. Taking a cue from early writings about, or against the religion, however, we know that various schools of Gnosticism were active from at least the first century C.E. Yet it was probably developing long before, since no religion is born, fully developed, on a single date. We know that many Gnostic leaders despatched

missionaries to Ptolemaic Alexandria which, with its advanced intellectual and cosmopolitan environment, was fertile territory in which to disseminate Gnostic teachings. Gnosticism indeed became particularly concentrated in Egypt. This explains, too, why so many varieties of Gnosticism were at work in Alexandria: Judaic and Christian varieties, Valentinianism, Basilidean and Sethian, even Manichaeism in later centuries. Because of the jostling religious voices in the city, contestation among them was bound to occur, as was a certain amount of assimilation. So strong was the potential for such assimilation, that in his *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (1990:194) Birger A. Pearson declares that in a sense his entire book "...has been about 'Gnosticism in early Egyptian Christianity' ". Small wonder then, as Gnosticism grew in popularity, that it posed a singular threat to the early Christians. But another reason for such interest in Gnosticism, in the period under review, was the need for belief. Chester G. Starr (1991:605) notes that "By the second century most men were seeking to believe; the only question was, in what?" Gnosticism, with its claim to offer meaning through special knowledge, must have intrigued, even appealed, through its "...many elaborate and mystic explanations of life, a potpourri of paganism, Oriental cults, and philosophy which revolved about the redemption of a heavenly spark within mankind" (Starr, 1991:621). Christianity also offered meaning, though on a different doctrinal basis, and this was the *entree* to conflict for, as Starr (*ibid.*) comments, "Some gnostics found themselves attracted to Jesus as a savior, but were forced to deny His humanity as an affront to the pureness of divinity; nor could they accept bodily resurrection. Leading Christian gnostics were Basilides and Valentinus of the first half of the second century. The views of such men, if accepted, would have crippled basic Christian beliefs both about the nature of Christ and about the equality of all believers; for gnostics constructed levels of knowledge through which men could rise to the ultimate contemplation of reality. Some of the earliest apocryphal, or 'secret', writings were produced by gnostics who claimed arcane wisdom.... The treatise *Against the Heresies* by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was a refutation from Scripture of the gnostic separation of human and supernatural in Christ, a task which led him to the first systematic exposition of orthodox belief on the point".

It is important to consider, briefly, who the Gnostic leaders were. Simon Magus was a particular thorn in the side of Christianity, for he obtains notoriety as a fraud in the Acts of the Apostles, while Justin the Martyr (d.167) "...alleges that Simon was worshipped by his followers as "the

first god”(Rudolph, 1983:294). Menander was a disciple of his, as was Saturnilos, a Syrian, who introduced new concepts such as asceticism, the figure of Christ as Gnostic redeemer, and a strict differentiation between good men and evil ones. Saturnilos apparently lived until about the mid-2nd century, thus was contemporary with Basilides. Also contemporary were Cerinthus, Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes, the latter seemingly having a strong following between 130 and 160 C.E. This group of Gnostics held up Jesus as an ideal on the path to redemption, but one who could even be surpassed (in other words, Jesus was “human” and not perfect). A female disciple of Carpocrates, Marcellina, spread his teachings to Rome, where followers were referred to as the Marcellian Gnostics and seemed to foster “a cult of images, even owning statues of gods such as those found among archaeological remains of mystery cults” (Rudolph, 1983:225). This fragment is a good example of the syncretism at work in Gnosticism.

Of greater relevance to the present study is Basilides who, according to Pearson (1990:202), was “active in Alexandria during the reigns of the emperors Hadrian (117-138) and Antoninus Pius (138-161). Basilides wrote a great deal, including 24 books of an *Exegetica* on a gospel he wrote, and composed psalms and odes for his congregation, but only the titles and some fragments of his works remain. Some extracts have fortunately been preserved by Clement of Alexandria. The irony of Basilides’s position as Gnostic - therefore “heretic” in Christian eyes - was that he viewed himself as a Christian Gnostic and “...wanted to be a Christian theologian” (Rudolph, 1983:310). Pearson (1990:204) sees Basilides as a Christian Gnostic heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and Stoicism. In Basilides’s work, thus, we see the ongoing influences of syncretistic thinking, which may have contributed to the success of his school, for there was in his work something for everyone, pagan or Christian. Nevertheless, the Basilidean school did not spread much beyond Egypt, and while Epiphanius mentions it as still known in the 4th century, that seems to be the end of the line for the sect.

Contemporary with Basilides was Marcion (who died c. 160), an interesting figure because he stood between two worlds: the Gnostic and the Christian, especially a Christian-Pauline one. He also founded a church, perhaps in reaction to his failure to gain recognition for his views in Rome, in July 144. Uniquely, though, he tried to combine the best of two religious systems, by drawing on Gnostic material - but excluding for the most part the complexities of Gnostic mythology,

except for the concepts of the demiurge, and the fallen soul - and basing his thinking on the Bible. While it lasted, full-fledged Marcionism was a considerable threat to the 2nd-century Christian Church, spreading to Italy, Egypt, the Orient, East Syria (Mesopotamia) and Armenia. In the West its advance was halted only by the 4th-century legislation of Christian emperors against heresies, though it is thought to have persisted, however faintly, in East Syria into the 5th and 6th centuries.

The last great manifestation of Gnosticism in the 2nd century was the school of Valentinus which had a particularly strong influence in Egypt. Valentinus, the founder, Egyptian-born and educated at Alexandria, was also a Christian teacher, the reason perhaps for so much attention being paid to him by the Church Fathers and others: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Epiphanius all offer accounts of his teaching, and all from an anti-Valentinian point of view. In Rome he was rebuffed as a heretic. Effectively there were two Valentinian schools, one the Anatolian (the Oriental), the other the Italian - thus indicating their considerable geographical distribution. The Anatolians, including figures like Marcus, and Theodotus, were active in Egypt. They favoured an emphasis on a pneumatic body of Jesus from birth on (in contradistinction to the Italian school which claimed a psychic body for Jesus only from the time when the Spirit (i.e. the logos of the Sophia) entered him at baptism). Anatolians in both schools made important contributions to the Valentinian system of thought, though each with individual additions. Marcus, for example, introduced ceremonies reminiscent of ancient mystery cults, while Herakleon, one of the Italian school members, absorbed elements of Christian rites. What is apparent, therefore, is the scope of the syncretism at work in Valentinianism and, again, one of the possible reasons for its popularity. Early Christianity itself was syncretistic, as this study points out, and the Christians had good reason, therefore, to fear the inroads Gnosticism was making, especially when it even absorbed Christian elements into its teachings.

Birger A. Pearson (1990:195) asks the burning question: "Was Egyptian Christianity originally a Gnostic and thus, from a later perspective heretical, form of the religion?" He acknowledges the acute difficulty of formulating an answer to the question, in view of the dearth of sources:

These questions are not at all easy to decide; for, as is widely acknowledged, the origins of Egyptian Christianity are shrouded in obscurity, owing to a dearth of

reliable evidence. As a result, scholarly opinion has varied greatly as to the sources and origins of Egyptian Christianity, and the nature and makeup of the Egyptian church in its earliest stages. It is nevertheless the case that Gnosticism and Gnostic influences play a large role in the discussion. (*Ibid.*)

Following Pearson's line of enquiry here, it is apposite to consider the two Egyptian texts of the Nag Hammadi library, namely *Eugnostos the Blessed* and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*. The two texts provide an interesting comparison because, while *Eugnostos* is plainly Gnostic, without Christian content, the *Sophia* is an overtly Christian document incorporating much of the *Eugnostos* text, at times almost *verbatim*, thus demonstrating the degree to which some early Christians borrowed Gnostic material, re-fashioning it to serve specifically Christian purposes. The comparison may also serve to illustrate the manner in which Pearson (1990:195) arrives at his observation that "...Gnosticism played an important role in the development of Christianity in Egypt".

4.1.1 *Eugnostos the Blessed*

It is indicative of the obscurity surrounding the origins of both Egyptian Gnosticism and Egyptian Christianity, that those fragments of *Eugnostos* which have survived are of unknown authorship. Even its dating is unsure. Douglas M. Parrott, who translated and introduces the text in the *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Robinson, ed., 1996:220-221), suggests only that a) because of an apparent influence of Egyptian religious thought - in its "picture of the supercelestial realm" - its place of origin is probably Egypt; and b) "A very early date is suggested by the fact that Stoics, Epicureans and astrologers are called 'all the philosophers'. That characterization would have been appropriate in the first century B.C.E., but not later." Pearson (1990:201) points out that the "... speculations on Anthropos and Sophia [in *Eugnostos*] seem to have been utilized by Valentinus in developing his doctrine of the Pleroma", while *Eugnostos* itself was "probably written in Alexandria by a Jewish Gnostic with considerable knowledge of Greek philosophy, especially Platonism". This seems to confirm the fact that *Eugnostos* is an Egyptian text. Despite not knowing the author of *Eugnostos*, it is clear from its introductory greetings that it is an epistle, directed by some teacher, or authoritative leader, to a Gnostic community: "Rejoice in this, that you know...I want [you to know]...". The emphasis on "knowing" is thus placed from the outset, while *what* is to be known is addressed next: a) that despite all men's searchings for the identity of God, "they have not found him" because "the speculation has not reached the truth", and b)

that the underlying problem is that “all men born from the foundation of the world until now are dust”. Immediately, thus, we are confronted by essential Gnostic dualism: the infinite, unknowable God, the corruptible, mortal nothingness of man. The writer stresses that no matter the efforts of human beings to explain human events in terms of “Providence” (which is “foolish” - presumably because it smacks of superstition while it in no way grasps what God is) or “Fate” (which is “an undiscerning thing”, that is, a mere category in which to deposit the inexplicable), they are no nearer to understanding human predicament, least of all finding a route to transcendence of this human condition. The first step towards *gnosis*, then, is freedom from mundane understandings, and the recognition of the absolute unknowability of God: “He Who Is”, for He is “...ineffable. No principle knew him, no authority, no subjection, nor any creature from the foundation of the world, except he alone [71:15]”.

The author then nevertheless sets out the doctrinal basis for this assertion in a veritable hymn to the immortality and infinity of God: “For he is immortal and eternal, having no birth; for everyone who has birth will perish. He is unbegotten, having no beginning; for everyone who has a beginning has an end... [71:19]. He is infinite; he is incomprehensible. He is ever imperishable (and) has no likeness (to anything). He is unchanging good. He is faultless. He is everlasting. He is blessed. He is unknowable, while he (nonetheless) knows himself. He is immeasurable. He is untraceable. He is perfect, having no defect. He is imperishably blessed. He is called ‘Father of the Universe’ [72-73]”. (It is hard not to wonder at the possibility of influence from this quarter on the later Nicene Creed, where God is hailed as “The Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen”.) After this hymnic depiction of God as Absolute Being, there is a short passage, almost a transition, in which further attributes of God are delineated: “For he is all mind, thought and reflecting, considering, rationality and power. They are all equal powers [73:9-10]”. These are intriguing remarks for they indicate a Supreme Being who is not a merely passive Being-ness, but an active Being and one, furthermore, who is powerful (in reasoning). This is surely significant for it is only through higher mind/soul that the Gnostic is able to receive necessary illumination (revelation) and thus become a “knower”. Moving on from this short passage, the author next describes how, surrounding the supreme being were, also, many “imperishable aeons” - spheres of various divine beings: “Ruling that region is a hierarchy of five principal divine beings: Unbegotten Father; his reflection, called Self-Father;

Self-Father's hypostatized power, Immortal Man, who is androgynous; Immortal Man's androgynous son, Son of Man; and Son of Man's androgynous son, The Saviour" (Parrott, 1996:220). The last three names have female aspects, one of whom is Sophia. From here the author launches into further description of the spiritual hierarchies' constitution of the world beyond the (this) visible one. Parrott (1996:220-221) summarises this section as follows:

These divine beings each have their own sphere or aeon, and numerous attendant and subordinate beings. A special group, called 'the generation over whom there is no kingdom among the kingdoms that exist', has its origin and true home with Unbegotten Father (75, 12-19). A seconde group of six divine beings spring from the first five. These are said to resemble the first. Ineffable joy and unutterable jubilation characterize existence in the supercelestial region; and from there come patterns or types for subsequent creations.

The author of the tractate then seems to take stock of his own effusions and observe, almost wryly: "But this much is enough, lest we go on endlessly"[100:11]. Yet his story of supra-celestial rankings is far from complete, for he then recounts the story of the Saviour, the "Begetter of all things [whose] feminine name...is designated 'Sophia. All-Begettress' - some call her 'Pistis' " [82:4-7], following on which comes the list of all lesser spiritual beings - the twelve powers - all begetting more powers, to the number of three hundred and sixty. Powers and angels all required aeons, and aeons required heavens, and heavens required firmaments. Inevitably, such domains necessitated levels of organization, and these the author ranks as "Unity and Rest" and "Assembly", within which gods, lords, archangels, and angels were hierarchically ranged. In conclusion, the author reiterates, "But this much is enough", in the hope that what he has related might be acceptable to his disciples until such time as "the one who need not be taught appears among you, and he will speak all these things to you joyously and in pure knowledge" [90:9-10]. This latter is remarkably reminiscent of the Gospel narrative concerning the promised return of the Messiah (*John* 17:22), but any direct or deliberate connection on the part of the Evangelist cannot be proven at this stage.

Thus the tractate concludes as it began, on the theme of knowledge - or the knowingness of the Supreme Being with whom the enlightened ones, the Gnostics, might eventually become re-united as it were (through their entry into *gnōsis*). The lyrical, hymnic quality of sections of the tractate, and the graduated descriptions of celestial hierarchies, in the other sections, impart withal a sense

of joy in the telling, as much as (as claimed) in the heavenly realities themselves. The modern, sceptical mind has to ask, though, *how* these ideas and rankings were arrived at: how, after all, did even the Gnostics know of such supercelestial verities which were invisible? And “knowing” of them, what relevance could they have for mortal beings? One could speculate that the account was a fable, a myth, whose “moral” was to remind the Gnostic of his destination, or the point of his return (to union with the Great Soul) to which he aspired. Yet precisely because the tractate *Eugnostos* is benign (i.e. containing no word of the darkness in which ordinary men exist, and no emphasis on the chaos so dominant in Gnostic mythology in general) Parrott (1996:221) declares that it cannot be regarded as Gnostic “in any classic sense”. Perhaps that is why *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* could so readily be built up on the foundations of *Eugnostos*; and so an examination of the *Sophia* is appropriate at this point.

4.1.2 *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*

Parrot (1996:220) speculates that “*Soph.Jes.Chr.* was directed to an audience for whom Christianity was an added element in their religious environment. The audience may have been made up of non-Christian Gnostics who already knew the tractate *Eugnostos*. By connecting Christ, in *Soph.Jes.Chris.* with the prediction at the end of *Eugnostos* (90,6-11), the editor may have hoped to persuade them that Christ was the latest incarnation of the Gnostic saviour. Or the audience may have consisted of non-gnostic Christians, and the editor may have wanted to persuade them that the religion revealed by Christ was gnostic Christianity. Perhaps the editor had both groups in mind” (220). This kind of commentary is frustratingly non-committal; its usefulness, though, is that it raises and emphasises the many inconclusive aspects of Gnostic research, given so many missing links in the puzzle. At the same time, inconclusive aspects also suggest possible solutions, and in that sense may be constructive. At this level, Parrott’s speculations may also sound plausible; but without “proof” they remain merely interesting notions. Comparison of *Eugnostos* and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* does, however, reveal a number of tangible elements from which reasonable inferences can be drawn. The most obvious of these is the point made above, namely that the author of *Sophia* appears to have unblushingly superimposed a Christian tale onto *Eugnostos*, the latter serving as a kind of grid on which to erect a fuller, more extensive, and clearly Christian narrative. One might almost claim that this literary technique is a veritable prototype of the manner in which so much of Christian doctrine

has subsumed ancient myth, re-figuring it into Christian format. We know that *Eugnostos* preceded the writing of *Sophia*, Parrott (1996:221) reckoning it was probably “composed soon after the advent of Christianity in Egypt in the latter half of the first century C.E.”. This being the case, and Christianity being such a recent arrival in Egypt, may explain why *Eugnostos* is so heavily copied, rather than being re-worked to some extent at least. James M. Robinson (1996:8) comments that in the *Sophia* one has an example of “the Christianizing process taking place almost before one’s eyes”, which is why comparison of the *Sophia* with *Eugnostos* is so significant.

Looking then at the *Sophia*, the long introductory section [90-92] appears to be original (i.e. it has no connection with *Eugnostos*), and describes the early events following Christ’s resurrection. One is immediately struck by the terminology employed, since it is distinctively Gnostic. For example, the twelve disciples and seven women “were perplexed about the underlying reality of the universe and the plan and the holy providence and about the power of the authorities and about everything the saviour is doing with them in the secret of the holy plan [90:3-10]”. New Testament renditions, by contrast, speak only of the brethren’s fear, anxiety and bewilderment; there is certainly no reference to “underlying reality”, “the plan”, and “the secret of the holy plan”. Furthermore, in the *Sophia* the saviour appeared to them “not in his previous form, but in the invisible spirit. And his likeness resembles a great angel of light”. New Testament descriptions of the resurrected Jesus refer to him as not recognizable at first (*cf.* the women at the open tomb; the disciples on the road to Emmaus; Thomas denying his identity at first; and so on). Only at his transfiguration on the mountain is there direct mention of the light, that which constituted the transfiguration and the “proof” of Christ’s divinity. Even the author of *Sophia* is constrained to say, about the light, “But his resemblance I must not describe. No mortal flesh could endure it...[91:14]”. The saviour of Gnosticism, transmuted into the Christ of the New Testament, is still, quintessentially, “invisible spirit”. Yet he communicates in human terms, greeting the assembly with “Peace be to you! My peace I give to you!” [91:21-22]. It is interesting to ponder the possibility of this greeting having been taken from one of the synoptic gospels which date from c.70-80. If so, the dating Parrott (1996) offers for the *Sophia*, as being of the latter half of the 1st century, could be correct.

What *Sophia*'s author then says is something surprising, vivid, and entirely lacking in the New Testament, viz. "The Saviour *laughed*...[92]" (my emphasis) - a marvellously human reaction. It seems unlikely that the writer inserts this as mere poetic licence, the entire tractate being so carefully constructed. Perhaps it is reasonable to speculate that he is at pains to emphasise the dual world in which both Saviour and (Gnostic) followers fulfil their respective destinies, the Saviour the light incarnate (thus manifesting human qualities which make his divinity accessible), the followers on the path towards the light of knowledge. Perhaps this is also the significance of the emphasis on the notion of "the plan" in the tractate. For the Saviour then explains [92-93] the nature of that plan - the text very closely following *Eugnostos*. Again, significantly, the Saviour dispenses with notions of "Providence" and "Fate", declaring *knowledge* the way of truth: "But to you it is given to know; and whoever is worthy of knowledge will receive (it)...[93:17-19]". The Saviour also goes on to explain that the truth is that he is "The Great Saviour [94:14]" (my emphasis), and again *Eugnostos* is copied almost verbatim in the description of his immortality and ineffability. Perhaps by the insertion of the name "Great", the author of *Sophia* attempts to emphasise the fact that this Saviour has superseded the saviour of ordinary (non-Christian) Gnostic mythology. Later on, moreover, he is "the perfect Saviour [95:22]", through whom revelation is made possible, since he is now "the interpreter who was sent, who is with you until the end of the poverty of the robbers [101:13-16]". The latter is a curious phrase, not in *Eugnostos*, but presumably a reference to those - whether in the supercelestial realm or in the earthly one - who would (attempt to) seduce the knowers from their chosen path. There follows, again, a close correlation with *Eugnostos*, in the description of heavenly rankings, but with the crucial difference that now the First-Begotten is called "Christ", who is also a creator (of "a multitude of angels without number for retinue from Spirit and Light [105]").

A major difference between Gnosticism and the Christian Gnosticism of the *Sophia*, is the presentation of Christ as mediator, as the one through whom his followers may find revelation. In [106:5-7] he says: "I came from Self-begotten and First Infinite Light that I might reveal everything to you". In so doing he has "cut off the work of the robbers [107:15-17]". There follows a fairly lengthy exposition of the aeons, almost entirely the *Eugnostos* text, except for requests from the apostles punctuating the flow - a nice literary device introducing different aspects of the instruction. So, for example, Mary asks [114]: "Holy Lord, where did your

disciples come from and where are they going and (what) should they do here?" The Saviour's response constitutes a lengthy, last section to the tractate, and this is quite distinct from *Eugnostos*, that is, appears as new material. Nevertheless, the content continues the theme of *Eugnostos* - in laying out the dynamics of the supercelestial realm - and is unmistakably Gnostic in conception, with its reference, e.g. to the aeons, to Yaldabaoth, the Arch-Begetter, to Mother Sophia and Immortal Man; though now the Saviour has "loosed the bonds of the robbers [122]" from him. Drawing his instruction towards a conclusion, the Saviour summarises: "Whoever [then] knows [the Father in pure] knowledge [will depart] to the Father [and repose in] Unbegotten [Father] [III 117:9-12]". By contrast, those without this knowledge will be consigned to "the Eighth", a seemingly lesser place. Finally, the Saviour reiterates the purpose of his mission, to "tell everyone about the God who is above the universe [118:25-27], and reaffirms the status of the disciples as "Sons of Light [119:6]", thus true Gnostics. The Saviour then disappears, leaving the disciples no longer perplexed but full of "[great, ineffable joy] in [the spirit] from that day on [119:12-15]". What further distinguishes the *Sophia* from *Eugnostos* is the former's presentation of two classes of persons who will be saved: "those who know the Father in pure knowledge ... who will go to him; and those who know the Father defectively, who will go to the Eighth" (Parrott, 1986:221). While *Eugnostos* ends on a mild note of promise, the *Sophia* concludes on a note of heightened reassurance and a veritable delight in the joy experienced by the disciples. In this the *Sophia* author has certainly gone far beyond the discourse of *Eugnostos*.

Comparison of these two texts has provided interesting insights into the mythological framework of Gnosticism on the one hand, and on the other, the influence it had on early Christian teaching and writing. Indeed, the progression of early Christianity - as in this specific example - out of the clearly-pervasive Gnostic doctrines is especially enthralling, but also evidence of the syncretism at work in the emerging religion. This point will be returned to in Chapter 5. At this point in the overview of the significant creeds and cults operative in Egypt in the period under review, it is important to consider next the influences of Hermeticism in the world of Late Antiquity.

4.2 HERMETICISM

One of the many problems encountered in discussion of Gnosticism, was that of determining the

origins of the religion: in Judaism, in Iranian religious thought, in Judaeo-Christianity, or even elsewhere. A further problem was that of the manifold varieties of Gnosticism, as evidenced by the many schools established by leading Gnostic teachers. At every point, definitive remarks became bedevilled by the dearth of extant sources, so much having been destroyed or lost over the intervening millennia. In many respects, a parallel scenario unfolds in the exploration of Hermeticism. Where did it originate? What gave it impetus? What is the reason for its enduring fascination?

From such writings as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, found among the codices in the Nag Hammadi library, it is possible to derive significant insights into the mind of the Hermeticist. Simultaneously, however, another problem arises: was Hermeticism a by-product of Gnosticism, a tributary of Gnosticism, or a belief wholly separate from Gnosticism? In his work on *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Walter Burkert (1987:66) refers to “Gnostic/Hermetic literature”, the slash implying the terms may be used interchangeably. Yet paragraphs later (67) he talks of “Gnostic and Hermetic literature”, suggesting two separate kinds of literature, though ones that hold some form of kinship: “There is, in fact, a downright inflation of terms such as *mysteria* and *mystikos* in Gnostic and Hermetic texts, which causes a corresponding devaluation of meaning” (*ibid.*). Debate about the *Hermetica* has raged since the 19th century, some seeing them as purely Greek works, others like Reitzenstein claiming them to be Egyptian. In his case, the controversy is even more convoluted since, under attack by scholars decrying his “Egyptomania”, and after re-examination of the writings, he came to believe along with some scholars that, after all, the works were Iranian in origin.

While the problems surrounding the origins of the *Hermetica* are one thing, the other problems are perhaps more intricate and certainly more far-reaching. Such problems surround the *nature of the Hermetica* (i.e. are they pagan or Christian, Judaeo-Christian, or originally pagan and, as with so many pre-Christian religious rituals and writings, adopted and adapted for Christian theology?) and their *purpose*. These two problems will form the basis of the following discussion, while a number of Hermetic texts will be examined in order to demonstrate the nature and purpose of the Hermetic writings, as well as, where possible, to determine the kinds of influence on them. This three-pronged investigation will focus on the *Egyptian* Hermetic texts,

in particular the theological-philosophical or “theoretical” texts. The Greek magical papyri are excluded from consideration here chiefly because they are more “practical” in their specific details concerning spells, medical potions, and alchemical recipes. In order to understand the belief system which forms the foundation of Hermeticism, an examination of (some of) the tractates in the *Corpus Hermeticum* seems to be the primary task.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to make a final preliminary remark concerning the texts and their translations. The texts referred to here are those as translated in the *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (ed. by James M. Robinson, 1996) and in Brian P. Copenhaver’s (1995) *Hermetica. Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*. Copenhaver’s translations are from the Greek, while he has translated the *Asclepius* from Latin. As with all work in translation, there are many problems attendant upon working with texts not in their original language. Interpretations rendered by translators can sometimes prejudice understanding of the original author’s intent, and even subtle modifications can alter one’s grasp of such ancient theological-philosophical texts as the *Hermetica*. Copenhaver’s prolific Notes to his translation attest repeatedly to the gradations in meanings created by scholars such as A.-J. Festugiere, Garth Fowden and Jean-Pierre Mahé. Despite the potential handicaps of working with translations, however, their existence has made the ancient texts accessible to a substantial worldwide readership which would otherwise have been restricted to a handful of philologists. The present study is indebted to the work of Copenhaver (*ibid.*)

4.2.1 The Term “Hermeticism”

The controversy raging amongst scholars of the *Hermetica* in the early decades of the 20th century, as touched on earlier, indicates the difficulty of establishing the origins of Hermeticism - as indeed of so many belief systems, in the early centuries of the 1st millennium. One can only speculate on how much priceless material was lost in the fateful sacking of Alexandria and its famed library, by Theophilus and his Christian zealots in the 4th century C.E. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1927 was therefore all the more momentous, for included among its codices was the *Corpus Hermeticum* which provided texts at least, if not commentaries and histories. Increasing philological and archaeological discoveries since then have slowly but steadily added to scholarly understanding of the historical world which gave rise to such

remarkable writings, and understanding, also, of the meaning of the texts themselves. Much remains obscure, but piece by piece the jigsaw of understanding is being completed. In this limited study it is impossible to detail all the pieces; but the important ones, at least, can be sketched.

First of all, the very name *Hermetica* needs to be addressed, and in a sense that already declares the origins of the credal phenomenon. Philip Sellew (in M. Kiley, *et al.*, 1997:166) states:

The term Hermeticism refers to a popular, if now obscure religious movement in Egypt during the periods of Greek and Roman domination. Though ultimately derived from ancient Egyptian thought and practice in significant ways, Hermetic doctrines are expressed in the language and concepts of Hellenistic syncretism.

It appears to be agreed by all that the term is derived from two sources, one Egyptian, the other Greek. One of the great Egyptian gods was Thoth, believed to be the scribe of the Egyptian gods, indeed the inventor of writing itself, and who was thus also the patron of all arts which depended on writing. Many ancient Egyptians believed Thoth to embody wisdom itself, while authorship of many of the sacred Egyptian texts was attributed to him. It was believed, furthermore, that the soul of Thoth resided in the sacred ibis, around which a powerful cult was built. One of its devotees, Hor of Sebennytyos, wrote in 172 C.E.:

No man shall be able to lapse from a matter which concerns Thoth, the god in person who holds sway in the temple in Memphis, and likewise Harthoth within it. The benefit which is performed for the ibis, the soul of Thoth, the three times great, is made for the hawk also, the soul of Ptah..., the soul of Horus. (Copenhaver, 1995:xiv)

Copenhaver (1995:xiv-xv) comments that “Hor’s title for Thoth is the Demotic equivalent of *megistou kai megistou theou megalou Hermou*, the Greek that he scratched on another ostrakon - two superlative forms of ‘great’ followed by a positive form of the same word - and this phrase is the earliest surviving instance, whether in Egyptian or in Greek, of the triple form of the god’s title. Thus, Hor’s words foreshadow the later Greek title *Trismegistos*, the name given to Hermes as author of the treatises translated [in Copenhaver’s *Corpus Hermeticum*], the name that would signify a new way of sanctifying the heathen past for Christian scholars of the Renaissance, a

name that still charms the learned in our own time”.

It is to be observed, therefore, that the Egyptian god was Hermes to the Greeks: both were the guide of dead souls. Under the Ptolemies the Egyptian influence gradually receded, partly perhaps because demotic writing was understood by few, while Greek writings were read and studied throughout the Hellenic, and later Roman world. Hermes Trismegistos became thus the recognized figure, while that of Thoth waned. Since Hermes was also a Greek god, it is unclear, however, on what Copenhaver (1995:xv-xvi) bases his claim that the name Hermes “would signify a new way of sanctifying the heathen past for Christian scholars of the Renaissance”. He offers an explanation but while it is only partial, it must suffice for the present (in this brief study). A Byzantine monk, George Syncellus, after reading some of the works of Manetho of Sebennetos (c.3rd century C.E.) - apparently a high priest and scribe of the sacred shrines of Egypt - deduced that there were *two* gods named Hermes: the first was Thoth, the second Trismegistus, the son of Agathodaimon and the father of Tat. Syncellus’s interpretation of Manetho was that Thoth’s carvings of sacred writings on stelae in hieroglyphics, were transferred to books after the flood, and now translated from Egyptian into Greek. It was, Copenhaver (1995:xvi) avers, “The mention of the flood by Syncellus [which provided] the sort of clue that would eventually permit Christians to fit the Hermetic ancient theology into their own doxographies and genealogies”.

The etymology of the term is simpler, however, than what it came to represent over ensuing centuries, even millennia. Thus for example, *The New Bible Dictionary* (2000:482) distinguishes three categories of Hermeticism:

1. Hermetic Literature
2. Hermeticism: New Testament and Early Christianity
3. Hermetic and Jewish Literature.

From this there emerges a sense of the variety within the categories. On the other hand, Birger Pearson (1990:136) seems to consider Hermeticism as important in the history of Gnosticism: “Tractate 1 of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is a document of considerable importance for the history of Greco-Egyptian religious syncretism, and *the history of Gnosticism* in general” (my emphasis). Pearson argues further (136-147), in a comparison between *Poimandres* and *2 Enoch* of the Old Testament, the case for Jewish elements in *Corpus Hermeticum* 1, then poses the question:

How do we account for the curious mixture of Jewish piety, Gnosticism and Hermetic paganism found here in *Poimandres*? To be sure, such a reconstruction would be, at best, tentative and incapable of proof. But I would like to suggest the following scenario:

An individual who has been closely associated, perhaps as a proselyte or “god-fearer”, with a Jewish community somewhere in Egypt (Alexandria? Hermapolis?) forms a new group devoted to the Egyptian god Hermes-Thoth, the “thrice greatest”, attracting like-minded followers to the new cult. In the formation of the group, familiar Jewish traditions and worship patterns are remodeled and recast, with the aid of further study of eclectic Greek philosophy and assorted other religious revelations readily available in Roman Egypt. The writing of an apocalypse credited to Hermes in such a context is no more problematical than the writing of an apocalypse credited to Enoch in a sectarian Jewish context.

Such a process would most likely occur in a historical situation in which Judaism is on the wane, and other religions and philosophies, including native Egyptian ones, are on the rise. A specific point in time and space can be suggested for this development: in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt in Egypt against the Emperor Trajan, 115-117 (or 118) C.E. After this revolt Judaism ceased to represent an important religious force in Egypt, and *other religions and philosophies filled the breach*. [My emphasis.]

In the case of the *Poimandres*, as once the lore of the god Hermes-Thoth had served the cause of the religion of Moses (Artapanus is an obvious case in point!), so now Mosaic religion is utilized to serve the cause of “Thrice Greatest Hermes”. Of course, in the further development of the Hermetic tradition the Jewish elements gradually diminish. This diminution is quite noticeable in the later documents of the Hermetic corpus.

Pearson’s arguments, whether plausible or not, are beguiling. What they underline is the syncretistic nature of so many religious texts of the times: no doubt the concentration of so many credal, cultic and scholarly communities in Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era played no small part in the syncretistic practices of the time. Seeking the defining moment, the pure definition, in the midst of such spiritual and literary cosmopolitanism, may dissipate finally into a mere fencing with shadows, albeit in strictly scholarly terms. The point is that without more historical and textual evidence to hand, such “definitions” as are arrived at must, for the present, remain essentially descriptive rather than ironclad. Augustine, in his *Civitate Dei* XIX.1, cites Varro’s claim of hundreds of different “philosophical” sects - all espousing belief in a supreme good - operating in his time: “... Marcus Varro, in his book *De Philosophia*, has drawn so large a variety of opinions that, by a subtle and minute analysis of distinctions, he numbers without difficulty as many as 288 sects - not that these have actually existed, but sects which are possible”. Thus, even if the number is inflated, or even halved, one is persuaded of the existence

of a proliferation of competing trends, movements, belief systems, “theologies” and cosmologies - a scenario echoed in our own times by the *pot pourri* of styles and theories we slackly refer to as postmodernism.

Returning specifically to Hermeticism, the best *The New Bible Dictionary* (2000:482) can offer by way of actual definition of the phenomenon is (quoting from Fowden, 1986:213), that its doctrine “...‘typified and combined the Roman world’s literary and religious orientalism, and its yearning for revealed knowledge’ ”; while “the content of this literature is diverse, and its mythological origins complex”, Fowden (1986:68) points out that “...we are dealing with a syncretistic culture whose elements...were not easily separable”.

It is clear, therefore, that any limited study can make no claim to provide any more specific “definition”, since such either eludes the specialist, or prompts numerous feuds - such as the notorious one of Reitzenstein’s (probably correct) view of the *Hermetica* as being Egyptian in origin and content, but as “Egyptomania” by those scholars who insisted on the Greek origins of the *Hermetica*. The discovery of the Coptic *Hermetica* at Nag Hammadi rather silenced the latter apologists, while now, as Pearson observes (in *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2000:483): “... much like religion-historical work on early Christianity, this swing from one extreme to the other seems poised at a middle position” - i.e. one in which a *variety* of influences (Egyptian, Greek, Roman) are acknowledged. Part of the reason for the disputes may have to do with the variety of texts as well: texts hailing from different centuries and written in different languages (Coptic, Greek and Latin).

4.2.2 Historical Background

In *The New Bible Dictionary* (2000:483) a convenient and informative list of texts and their probable dates of origin is provided:

The Hermetic literature is available to us today in seven different places: (1) the seventeen Greek treatises of the *Corpus Hermetica* (which, in the individual treatises’ current forms, probably date roughly to the second to fourth centuries A.D., but whose origins may be somewhat earlier, cf. Mahe); (2) the probably fourth-century A.D. Latin *Asclepius*; (3) the, at the earliest, fourth-century A.D. Coptic *Hermetica* of Nag Hammadi Codex VI (*The Discourse on the*

Eighth and Ninth, VI.6; *The Prayer of Thanksgiving*, VI.7; *The Scribal Note*, VI.7a; and *Asclepius* 21-29, VI.8); (4) the probably sixth-century Armenian *Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius: Definitions* (though cf. Mahé, who assigns them an early, even first-century B.C. date); (5) the forty early-sixth-century A.D. Hermetic texts and fragments found in the *Anthology of John of Stobi* (or Stobaeus); (6) many of the Greek and demotic magical papyri; and (7) the papyrus fragments of the Vienna collection (P^{Vindob} Graecae 29456 recto and 29828 recto, dated at the earliest to the late second century A.D.).

What is interesting about this list is the spread of the dates (from *circa* 1st century C.E. to as late as the 6th century). From this can be deduced, for one thing, the obviously enduring fascination for Hermetic belief systems among its adherents, being forged over some five hundred years. The resurgence of interest in the Renaissance, and again in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, reflects an ongoing interest which has amazingly survived wars, political upheavals, inquisitions, and even current technocratic society - though much popular interest in *Hermetica* today is pursued in fringe “New Age” groups which appear to be more interested in “technical” Hermeticism than the original, theoretical Hermeticism. Explaining the distinction, *The New Bible Dictionary* (2000:483) notes: “One of the chief elements of controversy in the discussion of the *Hermetica* is the division between so-called theoretical, or philosophical, and technical, or popular Hermeticism”.

The first category is self-evident, its broad thematic unity - in theological, philosophical issues - generating the idea of *theoretical* Hermeticism. The second category embraces astrology, alchemy and magic; such tools and techniques as of necessity incorporated in these sciences, gave rise to the notion of *technical* Hermeticism (and is perhaps the area most popularly delved into by today’s devotees). Technical Hermeticism would have included “practical” Hermetic texts, such as those for rituals enacted by the Egyptian priests, the magical papyri containing hymns and medicinal potions, and so on, while the astrological texts explained the zodiacal system, and provided application of astrological theory to “special circumstances”, as Copenhaver (1995:xxxiii) explains. He provides some examples:

Around 200 CE the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria knew of “forty-two books of Hermes”, considered indispensable for the rituals of Egyptian priests; the list, four of whose items he calls “the astrological books of Hermes”, somewhat resembles a description of sacred writings inscribed in the second century BCE

on the wall of an Egyptian temple in Edfu... The most important of the astrological Hermetica known to us is the *Liber Hermetis*, a Latin text whose Greek original contained elements traceable to the third century BCE. This *Book of Hermes* describes the decans, a peculiarly Egyptian way of dividing the zodiacal circle into thirty-six compartments, each with its own complex of astrological attributes. Some Hermetic texts were tight in their focus, applying astrological theory to special circumstances: a *Brontologion* analyzed the significance of thunder as it was heard in various months, and a treatise *Peri seismon* related earthquakes to astrological signs. Of broader use were the *Iatromathematika* or tracts on astrological medicine, such as the *Book of Asclepius Called the Myriogenesis* which discussed medical consequences of the theory of correspondence between human microcosm and universal macrocosm. Astrological botany and mineralogy were also favored topics. The *Holy Book of Hermes to Asclepius* based its botanical prescriptions on relations between plants and decans, while the *Fifteen Stars, Stones, Plants and Images* singled out particular stars as determinants of pharmaceutical power.

But Hermetic writings also dealt with more mundane matters, such as the Greek texts in the *Kuranides* which, according to Copenhaver (1995:xxxv) offered information on plants, birds, fish, animals and even stones, particularly with reference to “their medical properties”. He goes further:

Healing and magic were also prominent aims of another large body of texts that often refer to Hermes and his retinue, the Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri. The documents that scholars have included in this category cover a considerable span of time, from the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, and their contents are mainly spells of practical intent, meant to conjure a god or demon, bring a vision or dream, foretell the future, attain invisibility, compel a lover, thwart an enemy, catch a thief, ease the pain of gout or drive insects from a house. The people who wrote the papyri had hundreds of reasons for needing a magic spell and scores of gods and spirits to call upon. Hermes, naturally, was one of them...

Significantly, Copenhaver (*ibid.*) points out that the *Hermetica* themselves “never once mention the word ‘magic’”. The term “Magical Papyri”, it must be assumed, is thus an appendage assigned by scholars many centuries later. Following on this nomenclature Copenhaver (*ibid.*) comments:

Like the astrological, alchemical and natural-historical *Hermetica* [as translated in his text], the Magical Papyri promised their readers an occult technology, a way to manipulate the divine and natural worlds for more or less concrete and immediate purposes. Since specific instructions of this sort are rare in the philosophical *Hermetica*, visible only in a few isolated directions for ritual and prayer, Fowden’s term “technical” describes the more pragmatic texts better than

Festugiere's adjective "popular". There is no reason to suppose that either variety of *Hermetica* was more popular, in any sense, than the other.

In fact, Copenhaver (1995:xxxvii) argues that magic was not the primary concern: *salvation*, and the means to its attainment, were:

Instead of a theory of magic, the theoretical *Hermetica* present a theory of *salvation through knowledge* or *gnosis*, yet this theory was the product of a culture that made no clear, rigid distinction between *religion* as the province of such lofty concerns as the fate of the soul and *magic* as a merely instrumental device of humbler intent... Salvation in the largest sense - the resolution of man's fate wherever it finds him - was a common concern of theoretical and technical *Hermetica* alike, though the latter texts generally advertised a quotidian deliverance from banal misfortunes of disease, poverty and social strife, while the former offered a grander view of salvation through knowledge of God, the other and the self. [My emphasis.]

Copenhaver (1995:xxxviii) also sensibly points out that texts cannot be rigidly separated into "philosophical" and "magical"; that ingredients of the one are invariably present in the other. The *Anthology* of Stobaeus provides a good example of this:

The longest and most interesting of the Stobaeian excerpts, the *Kore Kosmou* or "Daughter of the Cosmos", forthrightly declares that "no prophet about to raise his hands to the gods has ever ignored any of the things that are, so that philosophy and magic (*philosophia men kai mageia*) may nourish the soul and medicine heal the body"; this suggests that all knowledge - medical, magical and any other - bears on the quest for gnostic salvation. Magic comes closest to philosophy, perhaps, in the famous "god-making" passages of the *Asclepius* (23-4, 37-8) which show that material objects can be manipulated to draw a god down into a statue and thus ensoul it.

The dependence on Copenhaver thus far in the argument has been necessary in order to indicate the complex nature and variety of the Hermetic texts, as well as the intricate scholarship behind contemporary research into the extant texts. (Copenhaver himself draws readily on the work done on *Hermetica* by scholars such as Fowden and Festugiere.) What is at least clear from this brief overview of the rise of the Hermetic texts, is that they appeared in Coptic, Greek and Latin, while the earliest, from about 300 B.C.E., were in demotic script, thus indicating their clear Egyptian origins. Copenhaver (1995:xvi) is untroubled about influences and origins concerning the *Hermetica*, stating quite unequivocally: "It was in ancient Egypt that the *Hermetica* emerged, evolved and reached the state now visible in the individual treatises". Since, in the Introduction

to his *Corpus Hermeticum* (1995), Copenhagen discusses at some length the chief findings of Fowden and Mahé in their researches into Hermeticism, and finds that each asserts the Egyptian roots of the creed, he clearly feels justified in his stance. It was Mahé after all who, according to Copenhagen (1995:lvii), re-established "... an Egyptian ancestry for the *Hermetica*, three quarters of a century after Reitzenstein's 'Egyptomania' ". Garth Fowden's work, *The Egyptian Hermes* (1986) in particular seems to have impressed Copenhagen (1995:lviii) with its analysis of "the Greco-Egyptian setting" of the *Hermetica*. It seems feasible to concur: the history of the Hermetic writings is inextricably intertwined with the history of Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the Romans, all of which holds implications for the syncretism of early Christianity in Egypt. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine some of the representative Hermetic writings in order to illustrate the points made so far.

4.2.3 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED HERMETIC TEXTS

The following texts will be discussed: The Latin *Asclepius*, followed by a brief comparison with the Coptic *Asclepius*; and *A Secret Dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus on the Mountain* (XIII of C.H.). Thereafter, brief analytical comments will be made about the extant piece from *Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius, health of mind* (XIV of C.H.), and *Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon on god, matter, vice, fate, the sun, intellectual essence, divine essence, mankind, the arrangement of the plenitude, the seven stars, and mankind according to the image* (XVI of C.H.).

Although the *Asclepius* is the longest of the texts, and the last in *Corpus Hermeticum*, it is the first to be examined here. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, *Asclepius* appears to contain the most comprehensive outline of Hermetic thought of all the texts in this collection. It seems therefore appropriate to commence with it, for in analysing its components, an image presents itself of the broad thrust of Hermetic thought and belief systems. Upon such a platform it ought to be easier to raise a convincing portrait of the parameters of Hermeticism, one which will test the "definitions" attempted in 4.2.1 above. The second reason for starting with *Asclepius* is that, of all the texts, it appears to have had the most wide-ranging, and the most enduring influence on, and fascination for, devotees and scholars alike, throughout nearly two millennia. Any text with such a pedigree raises intense curiosity, if nothing else, but as even a cursory first reading indicates, there are complex reasons for its perpetuity, not least perhaps the

Gnostic qualities of the text as the initiate is guided to the hidden recesses of knowledge of the divine. There seems to be little justification necessary, then, to engage with the contents of such a document. A third reason must be that *Asclepius*, although written in Latin, was also found in Greek, while versions of the prayer exist in Coptic as well. This latter fact, coupled with its indubitable Egyptian religious content, appears to locate it as an intrinsically Egyptian tractate (and not a Roman one, for example). Given these facts, *Asclepius* is placed in primary position here for purposes of the argument pursued in this study.

A Secret Dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus on the Mountain is the next text to be studied, chiefly because it seems - again in terms of theological as well as Egyptian content - to be a natural accompaniment to *Asclepius*. Moreover, the doctrine on re-incarnation, as expressed in this text, is a valuable extension of the theological thrust of unity with God in *Asclepius*. In a way, therefore, *A Secret Dialogue* seems to complement *Asclepius* in the revelation of the secrets of re-birth, and the necessary prayer and ritual meals surrounding such revelations. Of the remaining two texts included for reference here - the extract from *Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius, health of mind*, seems a natural complement to any engagement with *Asclepius*; while *Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon* seems not only complementary, but an illustrative list of instructions and religious injunctions which may cast further light on the nature of Hermetic thought and belief. Lastly, since the text is addressed to King Ammon (Amon-Re), the Egyptian core seems, again, indubitable. These texts have been selected, in particular, because they appear to indicate an unmistakably Egyptian *origin* (thus not Greek or Roman, even though certain Greek literary conventions may be discernible in their construction). This is significant for purposes of the argument here which, while attempting a purview of Hermeticism as a whole, seeks especially to examine Egyptian Hermeticism (rather than, e.g., the later c.7th-century Arab Hermeticism drawn into the fledgling Islam).

4.2.3.1 *Asclepius. To me this Asclepius is like the sun. A Holy Book of Hermes Trismegistus addressed to Asclepius.*

In his Notes to *Asclepius*, Copenhaver (1995:214) comments: “Many editors and other scholars have believed that the *Asclepius* is a composite of previously existing materials; in any event, it is quite long and covers a great many topics”. This remark is opaque and unhelpful, yet paradoxically may also inadvertently provide a clue to the nature of the text as a whole. Firstly,

that it may be a composite speaks of far earlier origins than the current dating of *Asclepius* to around the 4th century C.E. Secondly, if the text is indeed a composite, the contents are not diminished by this, but in fact strengthened, for they are then a wonderful mirror of the many streams of religious thought circulating in Alexandrian intellectual circles at the time. As it is, we know that writers as disparate in creed, philosophy and culture as Plotinus, Porphyry, Stobaeus, Aristotle, and the North African Christians Augustine of Hippo, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, all refer to *Asclepius* in their works. The question arises, then, as to whether the text itself was so influential, or whether it acquired such influence because it drew together far older beliefs and writings in one unit, thereby creating a single lasting impact. Or was it a brand-new piece which, in the way of such events in literary history, simply had a remarkable impact on the readership of the Graeco-Roman world of the time, an impact that was to be revived in the Renaissance and even the Romantic era in Europe, with their artistic sourcing of inspiration in ancient mythology? These questions must remain rhetorical in view of the inestimable loss of the Alexandrian library. The speculation, nevertheless, remains tantalizing, and not unfeasible.

Turning now to the *Asclepius* itself: in the discussion which follows, Copenhaver's (1995) noting system is employed (e.g. [1], [2], etc.) merely as a guide to the location of quotations from the text and not for any editorial reasons.

The first striking feature of the text is its clear structuring into a series of ordered teachings. The author's method is thus entirely systematic, marking it as a good teaching document, as the sequence of instructions indicates. The author of the text sees the whole as [1] "a divine discourse", full of "reverent fidelity" - a "reverent discourse on so great a subject", a "treatise so very full of the majesty of divinity", that Hermes instructs Asclepius to invite Tat (Hermes' "dearest and most loving son") and Hammon alone to attend the imparting of the discourse. The opening phase of the treatise, thus, is staged as a discourse between master (Hermes) and students (Asclepius, Tat and Hammon), but the godliness of Hermes is asserted at once, when, as the disciples "waited respectfully for a word from Hermes", not the man but "divine love began to speak".

Having established the parameters of his discourse, Hermes commences his instructions: [2]

“Every human soul is immortal, Asclepius, but not all in the same way; some differ in manner and time from others”. This remark prompts a question from Asclepius: “Is it not true, Trismegistus, that every soul is of the same quality?” This question-and-answer method establishes the pattern for the entire text - a method much favoured by Plato in his philosophical works and perhaps, therefore, to be seen as a popular didactic method of the time. In [3] Hermes notes that all matter is composed of the four elements: “fire, water, earth, air”, adding that there is “one matter, one soul, and one god”. These concepts - except for the notion of one soul - are still fundamental in later Renaissance thought, and very much in evidence in the arts, especially in Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. Particle physics has vastly increased our knowledge of matter today, yet it may be safe to say that the four elements are still seen as the basis of earthly life. Ancient wisdom is often ageless.

From this point on, Hermes braces his audience for a theoretical exposition of the hierarchy of the universe in all its ordering, by exhorting the disciples to give him: “Your whole attention, all your strength of mind, all your clever ingenuity”. This is needed, he believes, for, “Giving an account of divinity, whose knowing needs a godlike concentration of consciousness, is most like a river running in torrent from a height, sweeping, plunging, so that its rapid rush outraces our concentration, not only as we listen but even as we teach”. This is as intensely perceptive an interpolation as it is literary - a powerful metaphor of the activity of mind and consciousness subsumed in the activity of revelation and knowing.

Thus the opening paragraphs of the text. Before proceeding to examine the text any further, an outline of the entire text will serve as a guideline for its analysis. There is an overall plan to this theological-philosophical discourse, though occasionally it seems to contain digressions and shifts in emphasis causing a relative dislocation of the argument. This may suggest missing elements in the text, though no available confirmation of this appears in Copenhaver’s (1995) Notes. All the same, it is possible to follow an underlying plan of argument: starting with the soul and consciousness, a description of the Chain of Being (to use the Elizabethan concept), the need for service, reverence and fidelity among believers, and the great prize of immortality for them, the discourse moves on to probe issues such as spirit and matter, the problem of evil and free will, the nature of God and His followers, and the uses to which people put statues in daily life.

There follows a poignant description - a prophecy - of the demise of Egypt as a result of foreign invasions and their concomitant destruction of Egyptian religion and social order. This bleak picture is offset, however, by Hermes' second prophecy, *viz.* that God will eventually restore the world to its former beauty and bounty. Perhaps in view of the lingering shadow of the doom facing Egypt, Hermes next discusses the nature of death and judgment day, when wrongdoers are condemned while the good move on into divine life - this point giving rise to a teaching at some length on the nature of Eternity. A few seemingly disparate last remarks are made about concepts like the void, place, the uniqueness of all species of life, and order in the universe and on earth. The treatise then arrives at a grand coda in an elegant, lyrical prayer, a hymn of thanks for the beneficence of God, and a plea for persistence in the pursuit of union with God. This sketch of the text is merely an overview; a more detailed inspection of the aspects highlighted thus far must next be undertaken.

Returning to the beginning of the text: in [4], [5] and [6] we find an exposition of the Chain of Being referred to earlier, namely the hierarchy of God, the heavens and heavenly beings, man, the animals and lesser living creatures, minerals and the earth. The significant figure in the Chain (apart from God as the Supreme Being), was humankind, the unique form who [5] "... has joined himself to the gods in divine reverence, using the mind that joins him to the gods, [and thereby] almost attains divinity... [6] Because of this, Asclepius, a human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honoured: for when he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god... [He is] conjoined to the gods by a kindred divinity..... And in humans consciousness is added to understanding... Of all living things, consciousness equips only the human, exalts it, raises it up to understand the divine plan". One can begin to see why for Augustine of Hippo Hermes seemingly extols man's capacity for divinity too highly, making man himself seem godlike. Yet Hermes is at pains to stress to Asclepius that not all men "... have gained true understanding. They are deceived, pursuing, on rash impulse and without due consideration of reason, an image that begets malice in their minds and transforms the best of living things into a beastly spirit". The point Hermes appears to be emphasising is that humans have a dual nature, the part which was made in the image of God, the other part earthly; free will is at one's disposal in choosing to develop the divine or the earthly side of one's nature. Indeed, much of [5] seems reminiscent of Genesis in this distinction, and appears quite compatible with Judaeo-Christian

teachings.

In [9] Hermes outlines what, by any other terms, must be considered a path to salvation, through cherishing heaven and earth. The message is simple, uncompromising, direct: the way lies in “constant assiduous service” - of heaven, through attentiveness to the divine will, of earth, through tending it. One is compelled to marvel at the balance and breadth of this commonsense teaching; in so doing, perhaps one begins to understand why the treatise has been so popular over two millennia (even if scholars like Festugiere, according to Copenhaver (*ibid.*), have seen it as but a series of pious utterances). The ultimate standard of such service is reverence from which flows goodness: in these three states mankind fulfils its purpose - God’s purpose - on earth; for this purpose humans have been created. In [11] and [12] Hermes deals with the prize, the reward, “... the payment for those who live faithfully under god”, *viz.* release from the earth (“worldly custody”), and restoration of the “... pure and holy to the nature of our higher part, to the divine”. By contrast, the unfaithful are denied return to this heaven, and instead “migrate to other bodies”, because such unfaithful ones have been seduced by the pleasures of the flesh and material things, which are “a noose round the soul’s neck”. This implicit warning is reminiscent of Christ’s earlier parable about the difficulty of a rich man entering heaven being commensurate with a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

The theme of death and the unfaithful is taken up again in [27], [28] and [29], where Hermes first defines death, then outlines events on judgment day. First of all, death [27] is “... the body’s disintegration and the extinction of bodily consciousness...when soul withdraws from the body”. Once this has happened, judgment awaits: the faithful are restored to the divine part of their nature, while the unfaithful, the wrongdoers, are sent tumbling down to the depths below, consigned to “endless punishment” and “... eternal torment”. This picture of doomsday is very close to the New Testament rendition of hell as a similar place of torment where there shall be “weeping and gnashing of teeth”, and was also a scenario beloved of mediaeval and Renaissance painters, indeed even for the 18th-century cartoons of Van Breughel. Once again, therefore, one has to ask how original these passages in *Asclepius* are: did they come first, or did the canonical scriptures’ version? Yet for ancient Egyptians there was also a notion of being judged after death: tomb-paintings show the god Anubis weighing up the quality of the deceased’s life on a scale; and

in later ancient Greece, Hades was the site of the doomed soul, as was the Underworld, guarded by Pluto, for the Romans. Whether, therefore, this teaching in the *Asclepius* is part of received wisdom in the world of the time, or an original wisdom from ancient Egypt and adopted by later Christianity, is unclear at this point. As in all literature, the problem of derivativeness, in the absence of clear, countermanding evidence, is always a vexed one.

Offsetting the implicitly cautionary tale about death - real and metaphorical for the unfaithful - is Hermes' beautiful, lyrical picture of divine life in Eternity [30], [31], [32], whose "... lifegiving power stirs the world". Eternity is perceived here, therefore, not as some merely passive site of rest and peace, but as an energy, a vitality actually informing the world. This is a vividness not perhaps recounted elsewhere. For all its force, however, eternity, like God himself, is immobile, just as God "... is his own steadfast stability". This emphasis on the paradox of potent force *and* stability inhering in God/eternity is surely also unique.

In between the lengthy teachings on life and death in the terms discussed above, there are several other topics, almost secondary in nature, yet doubtless seen as important for the whole of the (Hermeticist's) theology. These consist of reflections on the harm done to the integrity of philosophy - "the true, pure and holy philosophy" - by the fragmentation and compartmentalization of knowledge [13] (which, from the Hermeticist's perspective, of course, is viewed as a unity, since ultimately philosophy is the study of things divine, of spirit).

There follows, then, a fairly obtuse account of spirit and matter in [15], and a brief consideration [16] of the age-old question: Why does God allow evil to exist? Why does he not end it? Hermes' answer is wise, but also entirely tenable from a Christian perspective: "god took care to provide against evil when he deigned to endow human minds with consciousness, learning and understanding, for it is these gifts alone by which we surpass other living things, that enable us to avoid the tricks, snares and vices of evil". In other words, humans are endowed with free will, have the capacity for a trained mind and enhanced consciousness, and so while man is responsible for evil, so too man has the responsibility both to resist it and to end it. Those choosing the good (over evil) are the "reverent" ones, but they are in the minority; evil thrives therefore, because humans debase themselves in sensual pleasures and worldly delights, instead of turning to

learning and understanding. The worst aspect of the debased ones' lives, is that they ignore God's plan, which is "a plan for unity" [22].

From [24] through to [27] another key moment arrives in the text. After briefly despatching with statues and the way in which people invoke spirit into them in various ritual practices, Hermes prophesies the calamitous demise of Egypt - "Egypt will be abandoned" - because of foreign invasions. Asclepius is distraught, not surprisingly, since Hermes had just before that declared Egypt to be "an image of heaven... If truth were told, our land is the temple of the whole world", because godliness, reverence, fidelity to God, resided there. All of this would be overthrown, he explains to Asclepius, because the barbarians would sow the seeds of irreverence, disorder and disregard for everything good". And so it would come to pass that Egypt, "A land once holy, most loving of divinity, by reason of her reverence the only land on earth where the gods settled, she who taught holiness and fidelity", would experience anarchy and its fruits: irreverence, faithlessness, wars, looting, trickery, failed crops and infertile soil. This, in fact, would be [26] "the old age of the world".

After this potent description of imminent darkness over Egypt, Hermes' attempt to prophesy, next, that God would eventually "restore the world to its beauty of old", seems to cast little light to alleviate the shock felt by Asclepius. As though to soothe the bruising truth, Hermes in [26] and [27] tries to stress, as palliative indeed, the fact that God is the good, the benefactor of all good on earth, who "distributes his bounty - consciousness, soul and life". For the time being, however, Asclepius has ringing in his ears Hermes' heart-rending lamentation:

"O Egypt, Egypt, of your reverent deeds only stories will survive, and they will be incredible to your children! Only words cut in stone will survive to tell your faithful works, and the Scythian or Indian or some such neighbor barbarian will dwell in Egypt. For divinity goes back to heaven, and all the people will die, deserted, as Egypt will be widowed and deserted by god and human. I call to you, most holy river, and I tell your future: a torrent of blood will fill you to the banks, and you will burst over them; not only will blood pollute your divine waters, it will also make them break out everywhere, and the number of the entombed will be much larger than the living. Whoever survives will be recognized as Egyptian only by his language; in his actions he will seem a foreigner."

(The echo here of similar biblical prophecy and lamentation concerning Jerusalem is to be

observed in the the book of *Lamentations* 1; and in the *Gospel of Matthew* 23:27-29, where Christ admonishes Jerusalem for its rejection of the prophets, in consequence of which “Your house will be left to you desolate...”.)

After this great, arguably defining moment in the *Asclepius*, Hermes refers to a few more topics - such as the uniqueness of all species [35], the man-made gods, which are a source of internecine wars between (Egyptian) cities, and a comment on the order in the universe despite all, because God Himself “...governs the world by his own law and divine plan” [40] - to round off his teachings. These conclude in what is effectively a grand coda, the highlight to which the teachings have been building. This coda is a prayer of thanks for the beneficence of God, an act of homage to the Creator, an expression of total adoration, with its emphasis on knowledge of God and love of this knowledge, for in these are the seeds of life itself. This great prayer [41], “this entire prayer” as Hermes calls it (meaning a prayer embracing all that is necessary for complete/total worship), is quoted here in full as an exemplum of the veritable poetry and mysticism of its cadences, and which, interestingly, reflects Gnostic qualities:

“We thank you, supreme and most high god, by whose grace alone we have attained the light of your knowledge; holy name that must be honored, the one name by which our ancestral faith blesses god alone, we thank you who deign to grant to all a father’s fidelity, reverence and love, along with any power that is sweeter, by giving us the gift of consciousness, reason and understanding:

consciousness, by which we may know you;
reason, by which we may seek you in our dim suppositions;
knowledge, by which we may rejoice in knowing you.

And we who are saved by your power do indeed rejoice because you have shown yourself to us wholly. We rejoice that you have deigned to make us gods for eternity even while we depend on the body. For this is mankind’s only means of giving thanks: knowledge of your majesty.

We have known you, the vast light perceived only reason.
We have understood you, true life of life, the womb pregnant with all coming-to-be.
We have known you, who persist eternally by conceiving all coming-to-be in its perfect fullness.

Worshipping with this entire prayer the good of your goodness, we ask only this, that you wish us to persist in the love of your knowledge and that we never be cut

off from such a life as this.”

4.2.3.2 Comparison of *The Prayers of Thanksgiving*

In the *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1996), *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (VI,7) has been translated from the Coptic. In comparison of this version with the one in *Asclepius*, it soon becomes clear that while they are very similar, there are also a number of differences. James Brashler, Peter A. Dirkse, and Douglas M. Parrott (in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1996:328-329) point out that the prayer in the Nag Hammadi codices “...is one of three versions of the Hermetic *Prayer of Thanksgiving*. The context of the prayer is different in each case. In the Greek text called Papyrus Mimaut, it is part of a long prayer embedded in a magical composition. In the Latin *Asclepius*, it forms the conclusion of the tractate. And here [in the Nag Hammadi Library] it is appended to another Hermetic tractate. This suggests that it was originally an independent piece of tradition”.

Further points made about the *Prayer of Thanksgiving* (VI,7) have relevance for the Prayer in the *Asclepius*, for example that it

... expresses in carefully constructed liturgical language the gratitude of one who has received deifying knowledge..... *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* is especially significant for the clear evidence it presents of the existence of Hermetic cultic practices. The prayer itself reflects liturgical usage, as its balanced language attests. Moreover, the concluding statement mentions a ritual embrace or kiss ... after the prayer, and a cultic meal. These references to cultic practices suggest that the primary *Sitz im Leben* of *Pr. Thanks.* was a Hermetic community dedicated to the encouragement of the visionary experience alluded to in 64,16-17 and the preservation of the mystical knowledge communicated in that experience. While it is not possible to assign a date to such communities, it is reasonable to assume that they flourished in the second and third centuries C.E. and possibly even earlier.

In the *Asclepius* there is no mention of an embrace after the Prayer, only the concluding remark, “With such hopes we turn to a pure meal that includes no living thing”. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two Prayers are marked, and it is therefore safe to assume that the remarks made above concerning the Coptic version are applicable to the Latin *Asclepius*. There can certainly be no doubt that the strongest likenesses are to be found in the emphasis on

“deifying knowledge”, the “vast light perceived only by reason”, and the fact that the Hermeticists are made “gods for eternity”. Common to both versions is also the signal emphasis on rejoicing in this knowledge. The Nag Hammadi copy proclaims:

“We rejoice, having been illuminated by Your knowledge. We rejoice because You have shown us Yourself. We rejoice because while we were in (the) body, You have made us divine through Your knowledge”.

In the Latin *Asclepius*, this is rendered as follows:

“And we who are saved by your power do indeed rejoice because you have shown yourself to us wholly. We rejoice that you have deigned to make us gods for eternity even while we depend on the body. For this is mankind’s only means of giving thanks: knowledge of your majesty”.

What is readily apparent in the two versions, however, is that the Nag Hammadi version is more effusive, almost emotional, and personal. In the Latin *Asclepius*, however, the tenor is more restrained, the prayer personal, yet formal. This perception may arise from the work of the translator, of course: in the case of the *Asclepius*, the rendition in Latin would have been inevitably more restrained by the very nature of the structure and controls of the Roman language. In turn, Copenhaver’s translation into English is smooth, elegant, and in a fairly elevated mode of English, probably a reflection of his own linguistic sophistication. Interestingly, the Nag Hammadi translators capitalise all references to the divine (as in God and Your when addressing Him directly), whereas Copenhaver uses lower case throughout. He does not indicate whether this is only because the Latin text itself uses lower case (Latin manuscripts of the time not distinguishing between upper and lower case letters), or whether it is a personal (ideological) preference of his own.

Returning to the Latin *Asclepius*, and looking back over the text as a whole, its key themes are noticeably those of mind, consciousness, fidelity to God’s plan, reverence and goodness, reason and understanding - all focused on the God of gods, the beneficent essence of being-ness, Creator of life and of humans who are designed to fulfil God’s plan on earth. Strife, it is argued in the text, is the consequence of aberrant activities by unfaithful humans who have chosen not to fulfil their divine purpose on earth, being seduced instead by worldly enticements of all kinds. Against

this backdrop, the Prayer is one of thanksgiving not only for the grace of knowledge of God, but also for salvation through God's power. In acknowledgement of this gratitude, Hermes breaks into a hymn of praise in the thrice-echoing "We have known you.../we have understood you.../we have known you...", thereby sealing the disciple's commitment and fealty, while also clearly rejoicing in the heights of such unequivocal revelation and worship. This powerful prayer is thus both coda and consummation of Hermes' long teaching in this remarkable document.

The *Asclepius* text was selected for analysis here because of its apparently indubitable Egyptian origins (following Mahe's and Fowden's observations, as noted in Copenhaver, 1995:lv-lviii). Latin may be the language of the text translated in Copenhaver's edition, but the Coptic version discovered in the Nag Hammadi collection almost invites belief that the *Asclepius* was originally Egyptian - although the counter-argument is that the Coptic as well as the Latin versions were translations from Greek. Perhaps most importantly of all, the characters themselves, and the eulogy for Egypt, plus the references to the Libyan mountain, *situate* the text in Egypt, and hark back to Egypt's former status as, made in the image of heaven, the natural home of divinity. These factors surely stamp the text as Egyptian, and not Greek or Roman. It is easily arguable, of course, that the hymns adopt Greek literary conventions, and that the Greeks, seeing in Egyptian gods complete parallels with their own, simply adopted the Egyptian characters for these Hermetic texts. Furthermore, philosophical strands in the text may well be Hellenistic accretions. But it is difficult to see how the text could be regarded *therefore* as Greek or Roman: despite their admiration for Egypt, Greek or Roman authors would arguably still have situated their text on Olympus, or in Rome, and not in Egypt. Yet it needs to be acknowledged, also, that because of their fascination with the "exotic" in foreign cultures, especially Egypt, Graeco-Roman authors were known sometimes to adopt Egyptian themes in their works, as may be seen for example in Iamblichus's *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, or the *Chaldaean Oracles*. Perhaps comparison with the other selected texts will "settle" the question. For now, though, perhaps the following commentary from Copenhaver's Notes (1995:93-94) on *Poimandres* will indirectly strengthen the case for the *Asclepius* being an Egyptian text:

The Greek name "Hermes" corresponds to the Egyptian "Thoth", a god known through the whole history of Egyptian religion but remarkably popular in the Ptolemaic period, from which era - around 168-163 BCE - come the first known

records in the Egyptian language of an epithet of the type “three times greatest” applied to Thoth. A title of this kind occurs on a demotic ostrakon from an “archive” that also contains a few sherds preserving Greek versions of the same phrase in the form *megistou kai megistou theou megalou*, two superlative forms of “great” followed by a positive, a construction perhaps meant to reflect the pattern of the Egyptian expression. An Egyptian translation of the Greek *trismegistos* (“thrice greatest”) has been identified from around 200 CE, but the single Greek word itself occurs only in the second century CE and after... . In hieroglyphics the usual representation for “Thoth”, pronounced approximately *Te-how-ti*, were either an ibis on a perch or an ibis-headed man. Greek transliteration varied: *theuth, thoth, thouth*, etc. “Tat” is a variant of “Thoth” in the *Hermetica*. The god’s most prominent manifestations were the ibis and the ape - actually the baboon or *kunokephalos*. He was also a moon god and as such a reflection or representative of Re, the sun. Egyptians traced the origin of law and social order to Thoth, as well as ritual and its sacred language. He was also associated with medicine, magic, messages, death and the afterlife... . Herodotus claimed that many religious usages “were borrowed by the Greeks from the Egyptians [whereas] ... Hippolytus...reporting a Gnostic interpretation of Hermes of Cyllene - the guide of dead souls who opens the last book of the *Odyssey* - says that “the Greeks took this mystery from the Egyptians”. [My emphases.]

While this commentary is directed specifically at *Poimandres* (the first text in the *Corpus Hermeticum*), its ingredients are surely as apposite to any discussion of the *Asclepius*. The intriguing aspects raised here, additionally, are twofold. Firstly, why are the Greeks, with their own vast array of gods and goddesses, so absorbed by the Egyptian religion and its gods? Was the allure the emphasis on knowledge? This point may have some substance if one considers the second intriguing aspect alluded to above, *viz.* that of a “Gnostic interpretation of Hermes”. Once again, thus, there is a whisper of the closeness between Hermeticism and Gnosticism - though this point cannot be pursued here in depth. It is interesting, however, to note that according to Copenhaver (1995:lvii), Mahe “argued that Hermetic sentences derived from similar elements in ancient Egyptian wisdom literature, especially the genre called ‘Instructions’ that reached back to the Old Kingdom”. Furthermore, “Mahé decided that the Gnostic content of the *Hermetica* is a secondary feature associated with commentary, a later overgrowth distinguishable from a primary core of Greco-Egyptian sentences formulated before Gnostic ideas had developed”. Either way, the profound influence of Egyptian religion on the sophisticated Hellenistic world is extraordinary by any standards.

4.2.3.3 Comparison of the Latin *Asclepius* and the Coptic *Asclepius*

Before turning to other examples of Hermetic texts, some comparison at least must be made between the Latin *Asclepius* and the extant Coptic translation of a middle portion of the original Greek version. In the *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1996), the tractate is referred to as *Asclepius* 21-29 (VI,8) - though, as James Brashler, *et al.* point out in their introduction (330-331) to the *Asclepius* extract, “VI,8 has no title, either at the beginning or the end, which makes it unique in the codex”. It bears comparison with the Latin *Asclepius* in its coverage of many similar themes - the dual nature of man, the fall of Egypt, death and judgment, etc. - and is a distinctly ordered presentation, as is the Latin *Asclepius*. Concerning its detail, the outline provided by Brashler, *et al.* (*ibid.*:330-331) can scarcely be improved on:

The contents are arranged in five general areas.

- 1) 65,15-37. The mystery experience (here underscribed) is likened to sexual intercourse, in that it requires an intimate interaction between two parties in which (according to Trismegistus' view) each receives something from the other.
- 2) 65,37-68,19. Discussion of the separation between the pious and the impious, with the former being distinguished by having learning and knowledge, and the latter, ignorance. Man needs learning and knowledge to restrain harmful passions and to become good and immortal. Indeed, with learning and knowledge man becomes better than the gods, since then he is both mortal and immortal.
- 3) 68,20-70,2. Trismegistus argues that men create gods according to human likenesses.
- 4) 70,3. This marks the beginning of the apocalyptic section. It seems to extend only to 74,6 in contrast to the Latin *Asclepius*, where it clearly continues through 331,11 (in parallel to 74,11). Here are described the woes that will come upon Egypt and the final action of the creator god to end them and bring the universe to birth. This section was probably originally independent. There are a significant number of parallels to Egyptian conceptions, which can be traced back to the Ptolemaic period and before. But parallels are also found to Plato, Stoicism, the Sibylline Oracles, and the New Testament. Some have held that the apocalypse was originally a Jewish writing, while *others suggest that it was originally Egyptian* because of the greater number and antiquity of these parallels. [My emphasis.] The two concepts need not be mutually exclusive in view of the large, ancient, and literarily active Jewish community in Egypt.
- 5) 74,7-78,42. Discussion of the ultimate fate of the individual. The restoration of the nature of the pious ones is founded upon the eternal will of God, which expresses itself in the design of the good universe. The plan of the universe is then described. The “heights of heaven” are controlled by God. Other areas, including the earth, are controlled by other gods. Every person must go to the city in the west (place of the dead?). The soul separates from the body and goes to “the middle of the air” to be judged by the great daimon, who determines reward

or punishment.

Scrutiny of the text reveals marked stylistic differences, however: whereas the Latin version is, as Brashler *et al.* (*ibid.*) comment, “more expansive and rhetorical”, the Greek version is more restrained, almost technical, in its description and reporting. Examples of two extracts concerning Egypt’s apocalyptic days may serve to illustrate the point:

Nag Hammadi (Coptic) *Asclepius*:

And as for you, *River*, there will be a day when you will flow with blood more than water. And *dead bodies will be (stacked) higher than the dams*. And he who is dead will not be mourned as much as he who is alive. Indeed the latter will be known as an Egyptian on account of his language in the second period (of time). (71,17-25; my emphases.)

Latin *Asclepius*:

I call to you, *most holy river*, and I tell your future: a torrent of blood will fill you to the banks, and you will burst over them; not only blood will pollute your divine waters, it will also make them break out everywhere, and *the number of the entombed will be much larger than the living*. Whoever survives will be recognized as Egyptian only by his language: in his actions he will seem a foreigner. (Copenhaver, 1995:81; my emphases.)

The emphasised phrases show the crispness, the sharp reporting of the Nag Hammadi text *vis-à-vis* the more lyrical, even more literary, account in the Latin version. Neither of these extracts confirms the Egyptian origins of the texts, but their inclusion here serves to illustrate the substantial differences translation and re-telling of the same narrative entail.

Turning now to three very different texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* - XIII, XIV and XVI - we confront a variety of theological-philosophical instructions, addressed to different personages, and covering rather specific matters in each text. Yet they have in common an invocation of the one, supreme God, Creator of the universe and Father of all, yet knowable (by the faithful) through initiation into the secret mysteries.

4.2.3.4 Text XIII in *Corpus Hermeticum*: “A secret dialogue...”

Text XIII in the *Corpus Hermeticum* is entitled: *A secret dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus on the*

mountain to his son Tat: On being born again, and on the promise to be silent. The rather long title perfectly summarises the discourse of this text which sets out, ostensibly, to initiate Tat into the secret mystery of rebirth (spiritual regeneration), yet succeeds only in confusing Tat, at first: he accuses his father of talking in riddles, of maddening Tat with talk that makes no sense. What, after all, is this “rebirth”? In reply, Hermes points out that to know the divine, the senses must be denied (be left “idle”) so that “...divinity will begin”[7]. This is because the twelve besetting sins of the senses ensnare humans, using “...the prison of the body to torture the inward person with the sufferings of sense” (i.e. sensibilities, emotions, desires - ignorance, in fact). Knowledge of God [8] is the great dispeller of such “sense”; so too are joy, continence, perseverance, justice, liberality, truth, the good: all cardinal virtues in Hermes’ eyes, and, collectively, the key to rebirth. “The arrival of the decad sets in order a birth of mind that expels the twelve; we have been divinized by this birth...this godly birth”[10]. This birth is effectively a birth into “Poimandres, the mind of sovereignty”[15]. Hermes then instructs Tat to “hear a well-tuned hymn of praise, the hymn of rebirth”, cautioning that its essence “cannot be taught”[16], and even once known, must be “...a secret kept in silence”.

The secret hymn, Formula IV, has excited much scholarly commentary - according to Copenhaver (1995:193-196) - in view of perceived likenesses to biblical passages, such as LXX *Judith* 9-12, III *Macc.*2:3 and LXX *Job* 38:26. Such distinctly Jewish influences would be scarcely surprising, considering the syncretistic world of Alexandria at the time the Hermetic texts were being composed. Of more interest, in view of the focus of this study, is Mahé’s observation (in Copenhaver, 1995:193) that the Formula IV has parallels to Egyptian hymns of the XVIIIth and XIXth dynasties. Once again, therefore, there seems to be evidence confirming the Egyptian nature and origins of this text. Certainly, the structure of the hymn appears ritualistic: an invocation to all of heaven and nature, and “god’s immortal circle” to attend upon the singing of the hymn - which is thereby given a cosmic context. The singer’s own virtues are then also invoked to join in singing the hymn of the universe, as also are all living things, life itself, light and God/mind. The song of rebirth, then, is a hymn to the vividness of life, the glory of creation, the power of the good, and the supremacy of the known God (known in mind). The text concludes with another caution to Tat to uphold the secret of the mystery of rebirth - the secrecy a puzzling notion at first, but one which is better grasped when it is understood that such

information might simply be scorned by non-believers.

4.2.3.5 Texts XIV and XVI in *Corpus Hermeticum*: “Health of mind” and “Definitions”

Texts XIV and XVI are quite different to XIII in form. Both are epistolary items, Hermes in XIV wishing Asclepius “health of mind”, i.e. an ever stronger mind for knowing God. Hermes’ “letter” concerns information about God as Creator, He who “...makes, in order to be seen” - a charming image, though expressed theologically, of God’s revelation of himself in the works of his hands. Once again, the goodness of this God is stressed: none of the wrathful Yahweh of the Old Testament here! The text concludes with a light, pastoral image of the Creator as a farmer broadcasting seed over his lands. Even for Hermes, this is “a lovely image that is very like him...” [10]: as the farmer sows his seeds, so the Creator creates. For Hermes, then, this Creator is, for all His omnipotence, a tender nurturer.

Finally, the title of XVI also encompasses the essence of the text: *Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon on god, matter, vice, fate, the sun, intellectual essence, mankind, the arrangement of the plenitude, the seven stars, and mankind according to the image*. Addressed as this “letter” is to King Ammon, the Egyptian nature of the text is surely not in doubt. If it were, one needs only to consider Asclepius’s request that the King not translate the letter into Greek, but rather leave it in the Egyptian language, for “The very quality of the speech and the (sound) of Egyptian words have in themselves the energy of the objects they speak of”[1]. But there is another reason for Asclepius’s request: he does not want “the mysteries of such greatness” (as expressed in the letter) to fall into the hands of the Greeks, “...lest the extravagant, flaccid and (as it were) dandified Greek idiom extinguish something stately and concise, the energetic idiom of (Egyptian) usage”. Furthermore, Asclepius - who clearly held a dim view of Greek philosophy - belittles Greek philosophy as “an inane foolosophy of speeches”: a barbed piece of ancient satire if ever there were one! Perhaps Asclepius felt that the Greeks’ philosophy was to no *purpose*, whereas the mysteries he wished to impart to King Ammon concerned the truths about the one, true God, Creator of the world (thus far beyond the niceties of “philosophies”). Against the foregoing observations, i.e. about the Egyptian nature of the *Asclepius*, many scholars argue that it was a convention of some Greek authors to adopt Egyptian *personae* in their works, as in Iamblichus’s *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* (where, it is pointed out, Abammon refers to Iamblichus himself, and

Anebo to his teacher Porphyrius).

Much scholarly work has been done on this text. Copenhaver (1995:200-201) names two of them: Nock, who "...argues that it is not a collection of 'definitions' but a continuous presentation of Hermetic teachings on God's relation to the world"; and Mahé, who "...places this treatise in the context of Greek gnomologies and Egyptian wisdom literature". Copenhaver (*ibid.*) comments on the name Ammon as "a Greek version of Amun or Amon-Ra...the name 'Amun' means 'hidden' or 'invisible' ". This is the same king as pharaoh Amon-Re, he of the Amarna cult at Thebes, where he was to his followers a king of gods. Copenhaver (1995:201) comments further:

Greeks connected Amun's royal characteristics with Zeus...Amun's cult-centre in the Libyan oasis at Siwa became known to Greeks by the early fifth century (BCE), and its oracle was important enough for Alexander to journey there to consult Zeus Ammon. Both Plato and Iamblichus treat of Ammon as an important channel for the dissemination of the wisdom of Thoth/Hermes to the Egyptians.

In reading through these texts - analysis of them in detail is impossible in this brief study - it is easy to see how some scholars regard them as Greek, while others, because of the texts' contents and sense of place, even their characters, see them as entirely Egyptian (*cf.* Brashler, *et al.* in the *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1996:330-331). That there are doubtless Hellenistic influences, Gnostic strands, biblical resonances, even perhaps some Platonic concepts in evidence, in no way necessarily indicates that the *Hermetica* are *not* Egyptian, hence the disagreements among the scholars.

What all of these texts reveal is, at least, the effect(s) of syncretistic religious thought, but that even within such a world of vying ideas, each of the literatures is predominantly Jewish, or Christian, or Gnostic, or Hermetic. In the case of the *Hermetica* discussed here, they are not only Hermetic writings, but specifically *Egyptian Hermetica*. They are also unique because, while Hermeticism is usually pantheistic, and indeed the texts examined here allude to many gods, ultimately they are monotheistic in their assertion, repeatedly, of the one, true, Creator-God. In this, at least, the *Hermetica* meet the Gnostic writings in their teaching of one God - though with a dual nature, typical of the dualism characterizing Gnosticism - and the knowing of the divine by the initiated ones. It is appropriate therefore at this juncture to examine briefly the uses to

which the *Hermetica* were put, that is, whether they existed but as the outflowing of generalised religious thought, or emanated from any specific community or communities.

4.2.3.6 The Purpose of The *Hermetica*

In 4.2.3.2 above, reference was made to Brashler, *et al.*'s (1996:328) remarks about the likelihood of Hermetic communities flourishing in the second to third centuries C.E. All the same, such remarks are speculative: there is seemingly no hard evidence of their actual existence. Yet the speculation is eminently plausible in view of the textual features (such as ritualistic meals) highlighted in the same Brashler, *et al.* reference alluded to above, and in view of the fact that various worship-centred communities had sprung up in the Ancient Near East over several hundred years. The idea of communities recording their prayers and practices in written form, for their own use, is entirely feasible. Perhaps the most famous community of all, the Essenes, kept copious writings as we know from the recovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The flourishing Jewish community in Alexandria (prior to their disintegration by the Christian pogroms around the 4th century C.E.) would have had copies of the scriptures, the Talmudic writings and, much evidence seems to suggest, a copious amount of Gnostic writings. Birger A. Pearson (1990) devotes his notable book to *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* in a remarkable illustration of the confluence of religious ideas and writings in the period before and after the dawn of the first millennium. Furthermore, a myriad Gnostic communities sprang up all over the Ancient Near East, spreading even as far as India and China, and these communities all produced a substantial number of tractates concerning Gnostic tenets and the means to the attainment of knowledge of the divine. The earliest Christians were also, according to New Testament references, banded together in communities, both for religious reasons and for purposes of political expediency at times. They relied heavily on oral communication of Jesus' teachings, but had also copies of Old Testament scriptures, with copies of the later Gospels and Epistles to draw on as well. All communities employed scribes to copy their scriptures in order to make them more accessible to wider use. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library are superb examples of the industry required of such scribes; it is thanks to the zeal of those who so carefully hid these collections from ransacking armies that we are able to access them today and attest to the vast amount of work undertaken by the scribes.

In view of these facts, it is surely reasonable to believe that Hermetic communities also existed, and produced writings for the purpose of disseminating their beliefs amongst themselves. The primary purpose of the *Hermetica*, however, was presumably - as in all communities - one of instruction in the tenets of Hermetic belief. In the texts discussed in this paper, such overt instruction has been seen repeatedly. But there was doubtless a broader purpose to the *Hermetica* as well. Copenhaver (1995:lviii) quotes Fowden's and Mahé's observations on the spread of Hermeticism throughout the Greek-speaking world and the Roman Empire, precisely because of the wide diffusion of religious thought of all kinds in the world of Late Antiquity. Thus Copenhaver (*ibid.*) quotes Fowden as concluding that "Hermeticism was a characteristic product of the Greek-speaking milieu in Egypt... And yet...[it] was part of a wider Mediterranean whole...enjoy[ing] wide dissemination in the Roman empire". Copenhaver (*ibid.*) adds:

... Fowden's analysis [leads to a] restoring [of] the *Hermetica* to a Greco-Egyptian setting and moving them beyond the catechetical formulas of the school-room to wider conversations open in late antiquity to those seeking salvation in myriad ways - theoretical and technical, contemplative and pragmatic, religious and magical, literary and cultic, Gnostic, Greek and Egyptian.

Indeed, just how widespread these "conversations" were, may be seen from the entry on Hermeticism in *The New Bible Dictionary* (2000:482) which declares: "Some scholars think that some of this [Hermetic] material may clarify the background of certain themes and writings in the NT". The entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (24,1986:706) provides another perspective:

The Hermetic writings were attempts to provide a theology for a particular community. Although no authorized interpretation could exist for a doctrine that was in constant fluctuation and although none of the Hermetic treatises could claim to be the correct interpretation of the pagan mysteries, nevertheless the texts give an instructive picture of spiritual life in mystery communities.

A final word on this point could go to Richard Valentasis (in Mark Kiley, *et al.*, eds.,1997:201) who, commenting on Hermetic communities, observes:

Hermetic religion thrived in the Greco-Roman and Late Antique period among a group of elite, well-educated men. The combination of liturgical and philosophical material indicates that the society of such men not only satisfied their intellectual yearnings, but also addressed their need for male religious

association. Hermetic literature survived as the province of male philosophical speculation and religious practice into the Renaissance and following: in 1462, the Greek Byzantine text [a copy of the Nag Hammadi *Prayer of Thanksgiving*] was given by Cosimo di Medici to Marsilio Ficino for translation into Latin. It became an essential part not only of the Renaissance rediscovery of classical texts, but also of the Renaissance and early modern interest in alchemy and early scientific chemistry. The impact of this Hermetic literature on the western European intellectual tradition has just begun to be appreciated.

4.2.3.7 Conclusion

This Chapter has ranged fairly widely over the nature and origins of Hermeticism as a religious phenomenon of Late Antiquity. It has provided a comparative analysis of a number of representative Hermetic texts, in order to illustrate both the kinds of documents the *Hermetica* are, and their instructional, theological-philosophical content. Throughout, an attempt has been made to explore Hermeticism as an *Egyptian* phenomenon in the Hellenistic world, while readily acknowledging the possibility, even the likelihood, of influences from the maelstrom of religious and cultural matters converging in, especially, the Alexandria of the day. The final section above briefly examined the purpose of the *Hermetica* as instructional texts for distribution within the mystery communities of Hermeticists. This produced the surprising realization that Hermeticism was a lot more widespread than hitherto believed, and thus, it seems safe to assume, also more influential on other religions, perhaps especially Judaism and Christianity (though to what degree this was so is unclear).

Testimony to the fact that Hermeticism was at least a phenomenon to be reckoned with, is indirectly acknowledged by the fact that renowned thinkers of the time such as Augustine of Hippo, Iamblichus, Stobaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Porphyry and Plotinus, all quote from the *Hermetica*, arguing for and against their tenets. Augustine, in particular, spends much time in his *City of God* despatching Hermetic beliefs one by one, seeing them as quite heretical from his Christian perspective. Yet the depth and extent of his vituperative outbursts against Hermetic principles suggest that they were very influential indeed - possibly even threatening to Christian teachings - so that those with understanding “may see what great abominations have been handed down to memory, not by poets, but by the mystic writings of the Egyptians, concerning the goddess Isis, the wife of Osiris, and the parents of both” (*The City of God*, VIII.27). This attack was in part directed at Hermes’ remark in the *Asclepius* about “how many

good things Isis, the wife of Osiris, bestows when she is propitious, and what great opposition she can offer when outraged” (as quoted by Augustine in *City of God*, VIII.26).

Indeed the probability of Hermetic influence on early Christianity is explored by William Grese in his *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature* (1979). While this study is hardly recent, the lines along which Grese argues appear among more recent scholarly works, not least those by Pearson (1990), and Copenhaver (1995), and in *The New Bible Dictionary* (2000). The value of Grese’s work is that he compares, and sometimes takes issue with, most of the leading scholars of his day - Nock, Dodd, Festugiere, Reitzenstein, Bauer, etc. - and following this veritable compendium of argument is of considerable convenience to the student wishing to pick up on any of the leads thus presented, and to follow them independently. One of the valuable sections of Grese’s book (1979:40-45) is devoted to “The Hermetic Community”. The case the present study tentatively makes for the existence of Hermetic communities seems inadvertently endorsed by the views expressed by Grese. That there was a Hermetic community is for Grese (*ibid.*) not a point of contention: after all, “since these tractates were written by a variety of individuals over a period of time, there must be some explanation for the collection and preservation of the literature. Reitzenstein...assumed the existence of some sort of community, and so have most scholars”. The real point at issue was what kind of community the Hermeticists had, and whether or not the community had a cult, i.e. “...liturgy, rituals and sacraments. The Hermetic literature itself seems to take two different positions. Some passages look as if they have come from cultic materials, while on the other hand, other passages in the Hermetica polemicize against such cultic worship”. Hermes’ abhorring of the burning of incense may be such an example. It is beyond the scope of the present study to debate the community-plus-cult issue; it is raised merely in order to confirm the apparently general agreement that Hermetic communities must have existed, and that their literatures served both to instruct such groups and, presumably, to enhance their beliefs.

A word needs to be said about the value of studying such esoteric works at all, given so many unanswerable questions concerning exact dating, authorship, lost texts, and the inestimable loss of a host of writings from the time, especially when the Alexandrian library was torched. In an age as utilitarian and technological as ours, the question, why study these archaic works at all?

will arise with monotonous frequency. Yet those posing the question may themselves belong to one of the world's recognized religions, all of which have their own authorized scriptures which are constantly being studied. Showing how those scriptures have been influenced by Gnostic and Hermetic influences - how indeed even the dualism of much Western thinking is rooted not only in Greek philosophy *per se*, but the Hellenistic religious writings of the first centuries of the Common Era - may serve to illuminate much of what is currently held as intractable revelation to an exclusive group (e.g. Jews or Christians or Muslims). In the 1970's thus, the Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti international research project was established, "...collecting religious and literary parallels to the New Testament", as Grese (1979:vii) points out, "from the literature of the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman world in order to increase our understanding of the New Testament writings themselves". For his part, Birger A. Pearson (1990:136-147) has written a fascinating essay on "Jewish elements in *Corpus Hermeticum I (Poimandres)*". While tracing the Jewish elements, Pearson is at pains to emphasise the fact that *Poimandres* is not, thereby, a Jewish document: it is, and remains, a Hermetic one, in particular because

... the Hermetic 'creed' differs radically from the Jewish. This 'creed' is best summarized in those places in the text in which are found examples of a Hellenistic, gnosticizing reinterpretation of the ancient Delphic maxim...: 'Let the man who has mind recognize himself as immortal' (Ch. 18); 'He who recognizes himself departs into him (God)' (Ch.21). The whole burden of the *Poimandres*, from beginning to end, is that knowledge of God is really knowledge of one's inner divine self. This is the essence of the Hermetic preacher's message of repentance (Ch.27-28); this is the 'wisdom' that is imparted - complete with revelatory cosmogony, anthropogony, ethical system, and eschatology - to the one who accepts the message of the Hermetic preacher.

While Pearson's synthesis here is particular to his reading of *Poimandres*, it is readily applicable, as well, to those texts selected for discussion in this Chapter.

Finally, it has been the intention to explore the nature and purpose of the *Hermetica*, placing emphasis on their Egyptian features in particular. Within the constraints of a limited study, this has been achieved to some extent. The conclusions of this overview may be summarized as confirming the existence of Hermetic communities, acknowledging likely influences to and from the *Hermetica* on other religious communities and writings of the time, and the distinctly Egyptian nature of those texts selected from the *Corpus Hermeticum* for discussion here. All

along the way there have been hints of Gnostic qualities in what has been read and written, but at the end it has to be acknowledged that, even allowing for much syncretistic thought at the time, the *Hermetica* constitute a viable, independent and different collection of texts, ones that have continued to exert influence on the thinking of others, through a resurgence of interest during the Renaissance, in the 19th and 20th centuries, and down to the present day. The real mystery, it seems, is not so much the mysteries dealt with in the texts themselves, as the durability of the texts despite all attempts to suppress them. If one needed another mystery, this would be as good as any place to start. If, as Walter Burkert (1987:11) asserts in his *Ancient Mystery Cults*, “Mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred”, then the *Hermetica* were writings not only in service of the sacred, but instructions on how to be eternally transfigured. There cannot be many who would decline such an offer, such a revelation.

CHAPTER 5

THE EGYPTIAN ROOTS OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

5.1 THE NEW RELIGION “CHRISTIANITY”

The thrust of Chapter 3 - Creed and Cult in Egypt, c.100B.C.E.-200 C.E. - and of Chapter 4 on Gnosticism and Hermeticism, has been to illustrate, by means of overview, the most powerful, popular and significant of religious belief systems in Egypt, particularly in Alexandria, at this critical period of Graeco-Roman history. Throughout the depictions of Isis, the Serapis, Judaism, Gnosticism and Hermeticism, there has been an undertow of references to Christian responses to the pagan world of Late Antiquity. It is now time to examine this emerging new religion of the ancient world. Here it will suffice to say that “Christianity”, for at least the 1st century C.E., and possibly into the 2nd century, is a misnomer, for the early followers of Jesus did not call themselves “Christians”. Acts 11:26 records that “...it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ ”, but the text is in the passive tense, suggesting the term was attributed *to* the disciples (by others); it does not indicate that they used the term amongst themselves. Robert Eisenman (1996:11) comments that even “if the testimony of Luke in Acts is to be credited”, the “Christians” in Palestine could not have enjoyed the same name, for Epiphanius writes in *Adversus Haereses* 29.1 and 29.4 that in Palestine Jesus’s followers were referred to as “Jessaeanes, because their teaching arises from Jesus and they became his disciples...”. Eisenman (1996:11) observes that Epiphanius here clearly intends “Essenes” . From this it becomes even more apparent that there was no universal usage of the term “Christians” in the first century. The majority were Jews in all respects, ethnically as well as religiously, and observant of Jewish customs and traditions. They happened, however, to believe that Christ was the Messiah, and thus accepted his teachings. For the first century, moreover, there was no written theology, copies of the Gospels would have been few and far between, and so teachings were spread largely by oral exchange, such as at gatherings for prayer. It took Ignatius of Antioch to inculcate the beginnings of change from this early symbiotic form of the emerging religion. According to Birger A. Pearson (1997:11), “...the very first recorded instances of the word *Christianismos*

("Christianity")...occur in the letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (d.ca.110), in *Magnesians* 10.1,3; *Philadelphians* 6.1; and *Romans* 3.3".

Thus, it is safe to construe that while in the 1st century "Christians" were being perceived as a formally identified, separate branch of Jews, Ignatius himself, in the early 2nd century, preferred to see the "Christians" as different to, indeed superior to, the Jews, whom he regarded as belonging to the "old" religion. Pearson (*ibid.*:13-14) states that the sources in Ignatius "...can certainly be taken as evidence that, at least for the bishop who penned them, Christianismos is a distinct way of life centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, separate from Judaism from which it sprang. Christianismos, in Ignatius's usage, can be construed in history-of-religions terms as 'a religion' [following Ninian Smart's "dimensions": see Chapter 1 of the thesis], or 'the Christian religion', a distinct complex of religious beliefs and practices....a doctrinal dimension focused on a Christocentric creed; a ritual dimension involving baptism and the eucharist; a narrative-mythic dimension including biblical narratives and narratives circulating in the early church of Jesus' words and deeds...; an ethical dimension featuring patterns of Christian behavior; an experiential dimension reflecting Christian experience of the Spirit; a social/institutional dimension centering largely on leadership exercised by the bishop and supported by the presbyters and deacons; and a material dimension of a rudimentary sort [involving] the ordering of space and furnishings for Christ's worship". But these components take us too far ahead, too quickly. It is first necessary to go back a few paces and examine the roots of this new religion, with its particular impetus in Egypt.

5.2 THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW RELIGION

The term "emergence" here is borrowed from Birger A. Pearson (1997:15) who claims it to be historically more accurate to talk of the emergence of Christianity than to speak of a "single 'origin' or 'founding' " of the new religion. The reasoning for this stance is straightforward: whereas Mani is the founder of Manichaeism, or Mohammed of Islam, "...Jesus of Nazareth ... was and remained a Jew, both in terms of ethnicity and religion" (*ibid.*). He did not found the new religion, nor did He make any (recorded) attempt to do so. Likewise, early Apostles could not be regarded as the founders of Christianity because they too were Jews, living in a new community of believers in Jesus, certainly, but still regarded as a community of Jews. For Pearson (1997:16)

these earliest of believers, and even Paul himself with his later, more radical views, such as declaring Gentiles could be followers of Jesus equally with Jews, were more properly "...a sectarian variety of Second Temple Judaism". In an earlier piece, Pearson (1991:145) states that "It was probably not until the early second century that Christians emerged as a group, or groups, distinct from the Jewish community".

A further problem concerning the establishment of Christianity surrounds the various places where groups of Christ-followers came together - Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria - their different leaders, and the point at which they collectively separated from Judaism, or, as Pearson (1997:15) puts it, at what point the Christian religion, as a separate religion, " 'emerged' out of its Jewish matrix". Rather than the establishment of the new religion as an event, or a singular occurrence, Christianity grew out of "...a process that unfolded in different ways and at different times with different groups of people" (*ibid.*; my emphasis). Following the notion of the new religion evolving through a process is not only plausible but substantiated by historical facts. In the new religion, unlike the drama of Israel's Covenant with Yahweh, henceforth committing all Jews to a single and collective obedience to the one and only God and His laws, Christians stumbled in the footsteps of a crucified Messiah rejected by most Jews (though many approved of His teachings), and were led by a miscellany of early leaders who, no matter how charismatic - as in the case of Paul - or scholarly as in the case of the later Ignatius of Antioch - were all developing interpretations of Christ's teachings as they went along. In the first century, indeed, it is even more difficult to describe the new religion as a religion, there being as yet no systematic doctrine. Arguably, it began to evolve into a religion more precisely-speaking only in the second century, with the advent of written commentaries by such as Ignatius, Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria. Of course the New Testament writers had been committing their accounts of Jesus' earthly mission to written tracts throughout the first century, but these were editorialized narratives (in the case of the Synoptic Gospels), the mystic-Gnostic Gospel of John, the letters of Paul, the apocalyptic of *Revelation*, and so on, while almost alongside them Gnostic authors were also writing their own gospels. Discursive treatment of Christian issues, in dialogue with the world around them, and in particular with the surrounding religions of Judaism and Gnosticism, were the product of 2nd-century developments and beyond. It is the first century that is the focus of scholars' particular research at present, for it is there that the haze surrounding the formations

of early Christianity is most dense, because of two factors in chief: one, the absence of adequate documentation, and two, the many displacements caused to the Jews, and others, by not only the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., but by the increasing power of the Roman Empire. While societies are in flux there is of necessity a period of re-locating and re-grouping, and this factor in itself contributes to the sketchy knowledge of early Christianity.

In order to understand this dynamic, and its consequences for emerging Christianity, it is necessary to examine for a moment the radii across which the various groups of early Christians moved in search of both settlement and mission. The latter two elements were inseparable if the new religion was to take effective root, as well as enable the adherents to proselytize in line with the Gospel injunction to “Go out and preach to all nations”. By ‘settlement’ here should be understood the necessity of a stable living environment in which the communities could cohere in peace with their neighbours, be free of persecution, and have the liberty and means to live out that which they believed in. A life always in flight, or forcibly nomadic, would have vitiated against adequate development of the content of the faith, or of a theology as we now call it. It is thus, this study would argue, for this reason of movement of groups seeking such stable settlement where their new identity could be not only forged but expanded and deepened, that there is no theology in the first century: communities had first to settle. Records of “churches” being in one centre or another, in the first century, are therefore conceivably references to such communities who gathered, where they settled, for worship in one another’s homes - “house-churches” as they are sometimes referred to. In examining early Christianity, it is thus necessary to note where such communities were situated, and in what manner they evolved in their new environment.

Concomitant with the notion of settlement would have been the simple fact that the early Christians, especially those in Jerusalem, being Jews nurtured on *Torah* and *Talmud*, would not initially have seen any need to systematize their beliefs beyond the existing written sources of their core religion. In fact, the movement of groups away from Jerusalem, after the calamitous destruction of the Temple, was potentially the death-knell for early “Christianity”. The early believers, after all, were still practising Jews who remained Temple- and tradition-centred Jews, as well as observers of the Law, as already noted. Paradoxically, it was their flight, along with so many other Jews, that was the initial impetus to the concerted spread of Christianity, for they

took their beliefs, old and new, with them into the secularistic, Hellenized world where word of them would spread rapidly because, precisely, of the infrastructures of the day - such as trading and military movements, and general tolerance of all religions by paganism - and thus begin attracting others, even if only on the basis of simple curiosity at first. This movement of groups of early Christians is what Pearson (1997:17) calls “trajectories”. The first group, he argues, was the one led by Stephen and other Hellenist leaders in Jerusalem, “...a group banished from Jerusalem on the grounds of their rejection of Temple worship and their views concerning the Torah (Acts 6:1-8:4)”. This group travelled to Antioch which was to become a particularly important centre for the development of early Christianity, with leaders like Paul later playing a pivotal role there in the formation of doctrine. Pearson (*ibid.*) elaborates:

We can thus trace a “trajectory” that leads from a Greek-speaking group of Jewish believers in Jesus in Jerusalem (Acts 6-8) to a Greek-speaking group of Jewish and gentile believers in Antioch who are given the name “Christian” by outsiders (Acts 11); to a gentile mission led first from Antioch by Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13-14); to the independent activity of the apostle Paul, resulting in a network of churches influenced by Paul’s teachings (Acts 15-28 plus the *Corpus Paulinum*); to Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, who embraces *Christianismos* as a religion distinct from Judaism and who also provides us with the first instance of the term “the catholic church” (*Smyrn.8.2*). Ignatius thus represents a pivotal point for the future direction of this “catholic church” and the Christian religion in general.

Yet this new group was not characterized by unanimity. There were those who disagreed with Ignatius, and who clung to their Judaic legacy, not seeing, as Ignatius so passionately did (in *Magn.10.3*), that Judaism and Christianity were completely distinct from one another (Pearson, 1997:16). The disagreements were important, though, because they prompted men like Ignatius to refute opposing arguments, and this was the necessary trigger to the beginnings of formalized religious writings and, by extension, of theology.

But there were other “trajectories” taking place. Separated from the centre (Jerusalem), it was not surprising that some of these groups evolved in ways away from, say, the more dogmatic line being pursued in Antioch. Pearson (1997:18) points to groups leaving Jerusalem for Transjordan and Syria, for example. One group remains in Jerusalem, headed first by Peter, and then (after his departure for Rome), headed by James, Jesus’ brother, as attested to by Josephus (in *Ant.20.200*). Tradition has it that this earliest group is broken during the Jewish War of 16-70, with groups leaving for different parts. The history of these movements is, Pearson notes (*ibid.*),

“obscure”, but it is known, he claims, that one group actually returns to Jerusalem where it was active until the Second Revolt of 132-135. This group was denigrated by Ignatius, however, as being “Ebionites”, a group favouring the Christian Gnostic teachings of Carpocrates and Cerinthus (Grant, 1997:11). Nevertheless, they were Jewish Christians, “Torah-faithful Jewish believers in Jesus (and despisers of Paul)” (Pearson, 1997:18). They were later branded as heretics by other church leaders, but remained active until the fourth century or later, after which they seem to have disappeared from the scene of historical Christianity.

What is clear thus far, is that different groups were led by different leaders in different centres, and had different traditions one from another. Three apostolic leaders are illustrative of this: Peter, John and Judas Thomas. Pearson (*ibid.*) argues that “The Petrine and Johannine traditions flow into that of the ‘catholic church’”, whereas that of Judas Thomas seems to die out.

One group that Pearson does not deal with here is the one which moved to Alexandria, yet the city was to be one of the most fecund areas of early Christian development because, no doubt, of its unique location in the intellectual centre of the ancient world. It is that centre with which this study most concerns itself, in that here a branch of Christianity rooted itself surrounded not only by all the influences of intellectual Hellenism, but also by the power and majesty of Egyptian religion, rituals and iconography. These elements were in many ways abrogated to the newly emerging Christianity, as will be argued later in this chapter, thus pointing to the considerable influence of Egypt in shaping the new religion. Before turning to these aspects, it is necessary to note one more feature of the new religion. By the end of the first century, and certainly into the second century, there are references to bishops in the various groups. Ignatius of Antioch was a bishop, so too was the later Clement of Alexandria. Yet it is unclear how such leaders were ordained as bishops, i.e. what processes were followed before such high office was attained. It is unlikely, in view of the still-primitive structures of early Christianity, that any very elaborate system was adhered to. Presumably they had to be educated men - thus automatically had to be of a privileged class - and this in itself was a radical development away from the simplicity of the apostolic origins, where the early Apostles, Peter in particular, were neither wealthy nor educated. The question of priestly accession, therefore, is as obscure to begin with, as the nature of early Christianity itself. The absence of written records, once again, remains a frustrating element in

the exploration of its origins.

5.3 THE BELIEFS OF THE NEW RELIGION

In view of the dearth of written records in the first century, it is just as difficult to assemble a coherent picture of the beliefs of early believers. Moreover, as already indicated in the survey of different groups' settlement in different countries, different traditions and shades of belief were already apparent from those scant records we do have. The Ebionites, for example, differed from the Antioch line in their insistence on upholding their Judaism and Christian Gnosticism. In Jerusalem, the original group persisted in the Petrine/Johannine line of Jesus's teachings, while in Antioch first Paul and later Ignatius were developing a far more dogmatic line, one which, in the case of Paul, was effectively to dominate, indeed become, Western Christianity's theological basis henceforth. In Alexandria it is unclear what tradition was being pursued, though arguably there it was more in keeping with the Jerusalem community, at least initially, in view of Mark's travelling between the two cities. What we do know is that Alexandrian Christianity was to flower into what became known as Coptic Christianity - and ultimately a church out of union with the church in the West.

So what did the early Christians believe? Primarily, all groups were at first Jewish, thus held firmly to the monotheistic belief in one true God, Yahweh. As Jews they also followed the customs of Judaism such as circumcision, upholding of the belief in Yahweh's Covenant with Israel, and observing the dictates of the *Torah*, as much as the Jewish festivals. Saint John's Gospel provides evidence for this in his numerous references to Jewish festivals. The early Jewish Christians also believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the prophesied Messiah, and thus took on board, as well, his teachings of having all things in common, of leading a prayerful life, of seeking the Kingdom of God within, and of loving their neighbour. In many respects, Jesus's teachings were not that different from Judaism's own; but Jesus made new and startling claims such as that He was not only not the designer of the Law, but its fulfilment, and that instead of Pharisaical separation, Jews who followed Him needed to embrace all others as well, such as the despised Samaritans. Crucial to observance of Jesus's new teachings was the elevation of new ritualistic observances in baptism and Eucharistic meals. Baptism was not new, of course: Jews of the time knew of the purification rites practised by the Essenes, and knew of John the Baptist's

baptising of people in the Jordan. Jesus' endorsement of the practices when he submitted to John's baptism lent particular emphasis to this act as the primary one of the initiate (or the 'convert'). The second major event was the inauguration of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Henceforth, the breaking of bread together would be not only symbolic of the community, but a memorial forever to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet this act too - of breaking bread memorially - was a Jewish custom, observed each year at *Pesach* and weekly at the commencement of the Sabbath. Jesus's insistence on the sanctity and permanence of marriage, and His appointment of the twelve Apostles as His successors, may have been departures from Jewish practices, but were perhaps not radical enough to disturb the Jews at the time. Jesus's most astounding claim, however, concerned his Resurrection from the dead: that He would die and rise again three days later, thus proving first of all His divinity, and secondly that death was not a termination of life, but a passage to another, eternal life with the Father. However difficult it might have been for Jews to accept this, Jesus's re-appearance on earth after His Crucifixion would have confirmed for many that He was indeed the Messiah - but a *Jewish* Messiah, as foretold by the Prophets. It is therefore not difficult to see how early Christians maintained their adherence to Judaism, but accepted *as well* the teachings of Jesus. Arguably, therefore, in the first century and possibly well into the second century, most early believers remained predominantly Jewish. It was at Antioch, in particular, in Paul's Greek Letters, and in the 2nd-century affirmations by Ignatius, that the distinctions between Judaism and *Christianismos* started to emerge and thus began the logic of overtures to the Gentiles. Thus it appears safe to conclude that from this point on, the direction, the trajectory, of the new religion, moved unerringly away from formalized Judaism, to the formulation of a new and separate religion, henceforth known as Christianity.

However, simple in essence as the above overview of Christ's teachings may have been, as with all groups of human beings discordant voices were bound to be heard at times, sometimes vociferously so. In Chapter 4 the sources of some of the dissension were located in Gnosticism and Hermeticism, as also among the Judaeo-Christians themselves. In all cases the single cause of dissension, arguably, was dogma: what was held by one group to be unswerving truth, was rejected by another. Vivian Green (1998:13) refers to the "bitter controversy" such differences not only led to, but which in fact threatened the future of the new religion, and its unity. Not only

did it face dissension from within - on the grounds of interpretation of what they believed - but also from without:

The Christian faith was as yet in many respects theologically under constant siege both from its more eccentric interpreters whether Montanists, Gnostics, or Manicheans, as well as from its pagan critics. Some of the latter wrote forcefully. In 165 Lucian of Samosata wrote of his disillusionment as he discovered that his Christian comrades seemed both credulous and fanatical. In a penetrating survey another pagan, Celsus, dismissed the Christians as superstitious, silly and disloyal. The Christian God, Celsus urged, was like an angry old man, and the Christian revelation unpersuasive. 'If Jesus really wished to display his divine power, he would have appeared to the actual men who had reviled him'. The Christians were like 'frogs holding a symposium round a swamp or worms in a conventicle in a corner of the mud, debating which of them were the most sinful and saying "God reveals all things to us beforehand and gives us warning [that] He forsakes the whole universe and the course of the heavenly spheres to dwell with us alone" '. To Celsus the existence of many gods seemed to accord more with the natural order of the universe than belief in monotheism.

What Green's comments demonstrate is not only the extent of disputation among the varied early Christian groupings, but also the often carping criticism to which they were subjected. Clearly such arguments, no matter their source, had to be tackled, and this gave rise to the many apologetic writings from the 2nd century onwards. This aspect of early Christianity will be dealt with in some detail in Chapter 6 when three of the strongest apologists, Augustine, Clement and Origen will be discussed.

In Chapter 3, discussion of Judaism revealed a slow but steady evolution towards rabbinical Judaism. In the waning decades of the old millennium there were some breakaway groups, the extreme form being the Essenes. Yet the core of Judaism as a *Torah*-centred religion, remained intact. Fledgling Christianity, by contrast, became split into groups across the Ancient Near East before it could solidify into a stable, unified religion in the manner of rabbinical Judaism. It was therefore infinitely more susceptible to different world views and different religions. It has to be remembered, furthermore, that pagan religions were still far and away the dominant religious systems in that world. Rudimentary Christianity, therefore, had to compete for survival by justifying itself to itself, but also to others. This fact, and the zeal of its early leaders, it can be argued, actually contributed to its survival. First of all, pagan religions survived largely through oral traditions, the vast majority of peoples around the world being illiterate. Early Christians

were not at a singular disadvantage in this respect. Secondly, there was for hundreds of years “...no official creed nor a recognized rota of sacred writings and no agreed or uniform text” (Green, 1998:7). Educated Christians, being largely Greek-speaking, had recourse to the Jewish Septuagint, thanks to the momentous work done by Jewish scholars - brought from Jerusalem to Alexandria (Pharos to be exact) - on the translation of the Septuagint into Greek in Ptolemaic times. This was to give the wide world access to the sacred writings. Nevertheless, universal access to Christian scriptures was still a long way off, various copies of the gospels and epistles were in limited circulation, as also various apocryphal gospels and religious tracts. It was not until 382, according to Green (1998:8), that “...Pope Damasus authorized a complete text of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments”. By so doing, he simply legitimized what Christians had widely accepted - as early as the 2nd century - though unofficially, as being the authentic scriptures. Clearly, in order to have arrived at the point of an official canon, a great deal of preparatory work had been going on in editorializing, correcting and copying sacred texts, as well as in selecting those regarded as properly divinely inspired. Much study and discussion among the presbyters, bishops and laity must have surrounded the selection process. From this, in turn, one can deduce a high level of focussed Christian activity in the main centres. Christianity, although not yet in its final form, but rather in a transitional state, progressed because “...its fundamentals were already sufficiently clear to separate it off from pagan faiths and mystery religions, even if *in some of its ceremonies and notions there was a superficial resemblance*” (Green, 1998:8; my emphasis). Green (*ibid.*) in fact attributes to the lack of an *official* creed and authorized canon of scripture in the first centuries the fact that the religion was in those times “dogged by an explosion of ideas and beliefs that threatened the integrity of what was ultimately recognized as orthodoxy”. It is a measure of the persuasiveness of core Christian beliefs at the time, no matter how rudimentary their doctrinal content may have been in early decades, and also the ability of early presbyters to impart those beliefs, that they persisted, almost in despite, against a world of so many conflicting views about gods. Perhaps what eventually gained the upper hand for converts was the core belief that Christ died so that all who believed in Him might also attain to everlasting life after death. This was a religion without an underworld of macabre spirits, but one preaching hope for all, not just the elite, and unlike the temples of antiquity which were closed to all but the priests and the elite, the churches of the new religion were accessible to all, and once baptised into the faith, participation in the rituals and sacraments

was, again, a universal privilege. In the world of Late Antiquity this must have had considerable impact on rulers and the ruled alike. Pearson (1997:186-213) attributes the spread of Christianity also to its philanthropy, its organized networks of people caring for all those in need, regardless of social status.

5.4 THE MYTHS AND SYMBOLS OF THE NEW RELIGION

The myths of early Christianity derive from two sources in chief: Judaism and ancient Egyptian religion. From Judaism is derived the primary Creation-myth as recounted in *Genesis*, and along with that the belief in a single Creator-God. The ancient blood sacrifice of the son by the father, transformed into the Christian liturgical Eucharistic rites and theology of the Saviour Son-God, can be traced back through Judaism to its earliest beginnings in Abraham. To Egypt, however, must be ascribed the myth of the Virgin Mother of Jesus (through Isis), and the resurrection myth. In the foregoing section mention was made of the reported resurrection of Christ from the dead. This myth of resurrection was not new to the ancient world, for it was the core of pharaonic religion. The vast trappings of Egyptian tombs, and their elaborate design, murals and arrangements of artefacts designed to accompany the deceased en route to the afterlife, were an extraordinary testament to the Egyptians' unshakeable belief in the resurrection of the body after death. The elaborate science of mummification of the dead, and the written records of beliefs surrounding death, in the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts for example, lend further credence to the latter fact. Jesus's use of the same concept then - of the resurrection of the body - is significant, however shocking to his Jewish audiences at the time. They would have been familiar with the concept of resurrection, but would not have encountered a living person brazen enough to forecast his own death and resurrection; and not only did He announce His own resurrection, but claimed that He *Himself* was "the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25-26). Small wonder that His audiences were astounded. There were mythological resurrections in antiquity, but these were associated with seasonal fluctuations: the death of winter, the miracle of re-birth in spring, and so on. The Greeks saw the body as an encumbrance and looked forward to the immortality of the soul freed of its limitations. Yet they discredited any idea of resurrection. Acts 17:32 recounts the manner in which Paul is jeered at for his views on resurrection. For the Jews, by contrast, there was a desire for resurrection of the body, but the same one they had been born

with. Christians believed that the body would be raised from the dead, but it would be a transformed body, one now equal to its tasks in the afterlife.

There are a number of scriptural references to resurrection. Sometimes, as in *Ezekiel XXXVII*, there is reference to the hope of a re-birth of the nation (of Israel). In *Deuteronomy XII.2* there is the closer meaning of resurrection: "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt". This implies that all are resurrected, but that the wicked are forced to awesome accountability - penance - for their unholy lives. Some of the Psalms also speak of resurrection (e.g. Psalm XVI .10f, and Psalm XLIX.14f). There are also suggestions of the notion of resurrection in the books of *Job* (XIX.25-27) and *Isaiah XXVI.19*. In *2 Maccabees 7:9-11* there is explicit reference to resurrection: "...but the King of the world will raise us up, who die for his laws, in the resurrection of eternal life". L.L. Morris (in *New Bible Dictionary*, 1978:1086) states that because the Babylonians and Egyptians also held to beliefs in resurrection, and at a time when syncretism was a danger to Judaism, that therefore Old Testament authors do not devote much attention to it. Nevertheless, as the example from *2 Maccabees* shows, it was quite unequivocally present. It is Jesus Who brings belief in resurrection to full prominence. Why He did so is a matter for theology; that He did so attests to two historical factors: first of all, as an educated Jew He would have known the Jewish scriptures and their references to resurrection; secondly, He would have been more than familiar with the centuries the Israelites spent in bondage in Egypt, where they would have been well acquainted with the pharaonic burial customs and belief in resurrection. Either way, He gives the belief, whether from the Egyptian or solely Judaic perspective, His total endorsement. Yet in New Testament times the Sadducees denied there was any resurrection, even though it had become accepted among most Jews. What is wholly different for Christians was that Paul drove the religion on the basis of resurrection as a *sine qua non* for faith: "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain... And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, you are yet in your sins" (1 Cor.XV.14,17). The extent of the resurrection motif in pharaonic Egypt, however, was not a question only of rising from the dead into the afterlife. The point of the resurrection - assuming the person was adjudged fit to do so by Anubis - was union with the god Osiris. So for Christians the resurrection meant, likewise, a passage through judgment at death, to union with God. The parallels are too marked to be thought coincidental.

One of the most powerful - if controversial - of Christian myths surrounded the mother of Jesus. Mary could not be held as merely an ordinary mortal if she was to bear God's son. She had to be virginal, sinless, the "perfect" mother. Her power as mother of Jesus, furthermore, could be invoked for assistance in earthly tribulations, for she would intercede with her Son on the supplicant's behalf. She was not a goddess, yet the parallels with Isis are significant, down to the physical depictions in statues and paintings (as already commented on in Chapter 3). It is axiomatic that Christianity appropriated many pagan customs, transforming them into Christian practices; this seems particularly so in the case of Mariology: as devotion to Isis had swept the Mediterranean world, so veneration of Mary would "replace" her in Christian observance and veneration. Unlike Isis, though, who required the seed of the divine Osiris in order to become pregnant with Horus, Mary had to be elevated above the notion of carnal intercourse; her impregnation had to be equally divine, but now by the power of the Holy Spirit. This union in turn led to the birth of a son, the Son of God. This narrative having been recorded in the Gospels, it is possible to assume that it was part of the beliefs held by early Christians, although the extent of Mariology would have been far less in early centuries, than in later stages of church history. Certainly, Mary was being held up as a model of consummate morality and standing in Christendom at least as early as the 3rd century, with Jerome seeing her, along with Christ, as consecrating in his words, "...the pattern of virginity for both sexes" (Green, 1998:34). In the 4th century Mary became the focus of controversy when Nestorius, prelate of Constantinople, argued that she was the mother not of God, but only of Christ. According to Green (*ibid.*), Nestorius's argument was heatedly denounced because, by implication, it not only minimized Christ's divinity, but also lowered "...the status of the Virgin Mary". (My emphasis.) For the early Christians, thus, Mary was a figure held in high esteem, even veneration. In Chapter 3 mention was made of the discovery of an icon of Isis, which Colin A. Hope (1994:37) described as one of many such "precursors of Christian icons" of Mary. In the same Chapter of this study, Luther H. Martin (1987:72) was quoted as pointing out that devotion to Mary supplanted that to Isis, Isis being subsequently "...remembered in the sentiment and iconography of Roman Catholic Mariology". The Egyptian source for the Marian myth seems to be upheld by a number of scholars. This fact does not, of course, prove that Christianity originated in Egypt: it does, however, provide another example of the powerful influences of Egyptian cult and creed on the formation of early Christianity.

Where there are myths there must also be symbols. This fact leads to interesting examples of Christian deployment of ancient symbols for the new, transformed meaning(s) attached to them. Such symbols were borrowed from Judaism, but also from ancient Egypt. Four of the most important symbols in the history of Christianity are water, bread, wine and fish. Water, as the essential element in the rite of baptism, symbolizes purification as much as life, both physical and spiritual. For John the Baptist, the baptismal waters signified a cleansing of the old, and an inauguration of new life following repentance. Christians have tended to see in John's practice a pre-figuring of Christ's own redemptive mission. This may be so: John *recognizes* Jesus before anyone else does. But the water has far older symbolism than with John or Jesus. According to Erwin R. Goodenough (1956:V,2:32), water was, for Jews, symbolic of the *Torah*, their source of life. Linked with water was always the symbol of fish, which could not live outside of the water (just as Jews could not live up to the Covenant with Yahweh without living according to the *Torah*). Thus, when Tertullian refers (in *De Baptismo*) to himself and other Christians as "we little fishes, [who] according to our *Ichthys* Jesus Christ are born in the water, nor are we saved in any other way than by remaining in the water", he employs, perhaps deliberately, a direct parallel with Jewish symbolism. (Goodenough, *ibid.*) explains that Tertullian had used the metaphor when denouncing "...the heretical teachings of a woman of the Canaanite sect, who, because she denied the validity of baptism with water", was, in Tertullian's eyes, "a viper of the dry land in contrast to 'us little fish' ". Thus the symbol of the fish, freely used today by "born-again" Christians as a symbol of their Christianity, was originally a Jewish symbol.

Like water, wine was always a symbol, for the Jews, of immortality or divine life. Yet Goodenough (1956:V,2,142) points out that the symbolism of wine reaches back to at least the IVth Dynasty in ancient Egypt with: "...the painting in the *mastaba* tombs of Sakkara, where the workmen first trample and then squeeze the grapes". Many Egyptian tombs are decorated with vines, wine-pressing, and flagons of wine, showing the earthly activity involved in the manufacture of the liquid regarded as divine. Here then a line can be traced from pharaonic veneration for wine, through Jewish symbolic use of wine at festivals, marriages and *seders*, to Christian use of wine in Eucharistic rites, but now symbolizing Christ's blood poured out for the remission of sins and thus opening the way to eternal life.

Where there is wine there is bread, the most universal and timeless symbol of human sustenance. In Judaism as in later Christianity, bread becomes the symbol of God's bounty, the breaking of bread the symbol of sharing and of community. Christ's declaration that He is "...the bread of life" (John 6:35) becomes doubly significant. Goodenough (1956: V,2.94-95) remarks: "Certainly it now sounds very Jewish that at the last supper Jesus took the bread and cup, blessed them, 'eucharistized' them, and after breaking the bread gave them to his disciples as a means of mystical and eschatological fulfilment. The bread, may I finally repeat, was carried over with the fish and wine in Jewish synagogues and Jewish tombs. The interpretation of one of the three must be incomplete without the other". Small wonder then that water and wine, fish and bread, are given such prominence in the Gospels.

Aside from scriptural and ritualistic use of these symbols - to the present day - the other most commonly used symbol of Christianity is of course the cross. Its origins as a symbol are somewhat obscure, however. It was certainly not in use in the first century. The Christians of the time, being Jewish, would have had neither reason nor purpose for the use of a cross as a means of identification. Moreover, death by crucifixion, a Roman means of executing criminals and dissidents, was a shame and humiliation for those involved. It could thus not be imagined as a symbol of belief in the Messiah. In the second century, as the church began to absorb non-Jews into its ranks, the separation from Judaism began its slow but steady march, new outlooks and customs were to start jostling with those once exclusive to Judaism. Yet we still do not hear of the cross serving as a symbol in this century. What *is* known is that Egyptian Christians, still infused with indigenous customs, carried the *ankh*, the pharaonic symbol of the afterlife. Its resemblance to a cross is uncanny - so much so that Edith L. Butcher, who worked with Flinders Petrie in his ground-breaking archaeological work in the 19th century, detected different forms of crosses in Egypt, and Petrie himself did the same in Italy. According to Osman (1998:293), both came to the conclusion that the cross as universal symbol of Christ the Redeemer came into use only at the time of Constantine (this no doubt as a result of his reputed vision of Christ crucified). In Italy, Petrie locates the XP monogram 'Chi Rho = CHR' on Roman coinage from Constantine onwards. While the use of the cross does not appear until a century later, Butcher's findings in Egypt were more telling. She claimed that Egyptian Christians used the *ankh* quite early on, "...as a link between the old faith and the new. When the great temple of Serapis was solemnly

destroyed by the order of the Emperor Theodosius, there were laid bare certain characters...hieroglyphics, having the form of crosses. The Christians claimed these as evidence that the great building had once belonged to their faith. But some of the heathen converts to Christianity who read the ancient writing, interpreted the inscription. They said that the character resembling the Cross signified in ancient days 'the life to come' (Osman, 1998:293). It is conceivable, thus, that the cross symbol first arose in Egypt as a natural adaptation of the *ankh*, and became common currency among native Egyptian Christians. This fact seems to be confirmed when observing that the *ankh* is inscribed on the leather covers of some volumes in the Nag Hammadi library. As the Jewish Christ-followers adhered to Jewish customs and symbols for hundreds of years, it is entirely probable that Egyptian converts would have continued to employ Egyptian insignia for some considerable time.

What is interesting on the Italian side is that once Constantine used the sign of the cross as his standard (after his legendary "vision"), and it became universalized across the Empire, the XP monogram persisted: it is still much in use in the Catholic Church on priests' vestments. The claimed discovery of "the true Cross" by Constantine's mother, Helena, during a visit to Jerusalem in 325, henceforth assured the centrality of the symbol of the cross in Christian ranks. However, Osman (1998:290-291) points to a parallel case about two centuries earlier when, according to Eusebius in his 3rd-century history of the church, Petronica, a woman convert and wife of Claudius, had travelled to Jerusalem from Rome and allegedly found the cross at Golgotha. Her daughter who had accompanied her died suddenly and, legend has it, after her body was placed on the cross, she was miraculously restored to life. While these apocryphal tales are possibly some of the ways the cross, as symbol, crept into usage, there seems little doubt that its official adoption is due chiefly to Constantine. As a result, however, the Egyptian adaptations of the *ankh* became superseded by Roman versions of the cross, just one of many ways in which Christianity was to proceed along Roman lines in ensuing centuries, thus largely excluding the Egyptian developments. Politics, rather than theology, was to be the determinant. Chapter 7 will pursue this point.

5.5 THE SYNCRETISM OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

As argued in 5.4 above, some Christian symbols and iconic representations were absorbed from

the Judaic and pagan worlds, and as argued throughout this study, many elements of Christian doctrines, tenets of faith, were appropriated from Judaism, ancient Egyptian religion, Gnosticism and Hermeticism. It has been argued in these pages that such syncretistic practices were hardly surprising, given the dynamics of inculturation. Converts do not simply shed all vestiges of their former knowledge, customs, traditions and cultural artefacts. They bring these with them, even though they subsequently become re-focussed, as it were, towards different implementation. As already seen, early Egyptian Christians began to adapt the *ankh* to serve their new belief. Yet the absorption of certain older religious beliefs and practices into Christianity was not only in the domain of theory and symbols. It also took more concrete form, especially in Egypt, and later in Italy, by the imposition of Christian shrines and churches on top of, or next to, ancient pagan sites. As David Frankfurter (1998:266) observes: “Clearly something powerful, something axial, was being maintained in putting churches in temples, the Christians in a way grafting themselves to what was already long-sacred in the Egyptian world. These scenes of ancient temples turned into churches capture, perhaps more than any other single phenomenon, the tenacity of tradition in the ongoing religious life of an area. To be sure, they involved more than a simple transfer of authority. But the turning of a temple into a church does point to the mode in which Christian authority and institution presented itself and, even more, placed itself in the Egyptian landscape”. Not only did the Christians undertake this kind of usurpation of ancient religious buildings, but they chose the most famous centres: “Karnak, Philae, Dendara, and the great Amun temple of Luxor with no less than five churches built into or beside it” (Frankfurter, 1998:265-266). One has to ask why their actions were tolerated by Egyptians, why their presumptive tactics of declaring their religion as superior to pharaonic religion, were not met with revolution, or at least profound resentment on the part of the Egyptians. We have seen, after all, how the Amarna revolution was so despised by the Egyptians that, after the death of Akhenaten, almost all traces of his heretical religion - as the Egyptians saw it - were defaced and destroyed. It was seen, too, how the Ptolemies’ presence at the great Memphis temple led to Greek religious ceremonies in parallel with the Egyptian rituals, the Memphite priests and peoples in no mood to forsake their sacred religion and holiest of sites to Ptah, in favour of some foreign entrant. Yet when the Christians acted, there was no formal demurring of the populace; on the contrary, many converted to the new religion. Frankfurter (1998:265) recounts the story of the 5th-century Abbot Shenoute of Atripe re-dedicating a local temple to Christ, claiming that whereas in the past “the likeness

of snakes and scorpions, the dogs and cats, the crocodiles and frogs...the likeness of the sun and moon” were in the temple, henceforth “it is the soul-saving scriptures of life...and His Son Jesus Christ and all His angels, righteous men and saints” who would be portrayed there.

Frankfurter attributes the extent of popular acceptance of these drastic moves by Christians, as well as the extent of conversion of the Egyptian people, to two factors in the main. The first was the extent of organization in the church, which “...presented more efficient, or integrated, or coherent fonts of supernatural power than could at that time be negotiated through most village temples” (Frankfurter, 1998:267). The second aspect was that of the charisma of certain Christian holy men, the desert monks like Antony, Paul of Thebes, John of Lycopolis, and Elias of Antinoe, but also a clairvoyant virgin, Piamoun. People turned to these figures for advice and assistance in much the way that they had to the temple oracles in Egyptian religion. Yet the kind of “holiness” hagiographers ascribe to such figures was of a very different kind to that of the Western view of sanctity. Thus, for example, while Antony railed against demons, Elias and John reportedly had healing powers bestowed by “prophetic spirits” and “...transmitted through such media as oil and dust” (Frankfurter, *ibid.*). Another “holy” man reportedly handed out fox claws as amulets, a practice as ancient as Egypt itself. None of these practices was “orthodox” Christian in nature, but their practitioners clearly drew people to them. Frankfurter (1998:268) observes that while the desert holy men were Christian, “...they must have represented a far more autochthonous phenomenon, born of regional as opposed to Christian tendencies”. These Christians, therefore, while perhaps not in total accord with the bishops’ concepts of orthodox faith, held powerful appeal for the villagers far and wide, and this may have “...provided a major *entree* for the Christian institution during the fourth century. As such they show that people had found a dramatic new source for the supernatural power required for daily living” (*ibid.*).

One other potent reason for the hold of Christianity over the Egyptians, Frankfurter (1998:268-270) argues, was the centrality of the scriptures, significantly not in the sense of oral recounting thereof, but in their written form on papyri. This had a potent effect on the Egyptians, even on the countless illiterate people. This was also easily explicable. For millennia the written word was held to be sacred, invented by the great god Thoth. Secondly, even though peasant Egyptians could not read what they saw, they recognized the holiness of words inscribed on temple walls.

They would touch them, pour water on them as a direct means of contact with, and appeal to, the sacred power of the god or gods. The *word itself*, therefore, was seen as sacred. Written scriptures therefore, no matter their language (of no relevance to illiterates), were words, visible signs of the sacred presence of the god. Early Christian (Coptic) priests in Egypt, therefore, Frankfurter points out (1998:270), would have held particular authority over the people, because of their powers as copiers of texts, interpreters of the texts, the writers of prayers and “magical texts” (those used in various rites, e.g. for healing), and the makers of amulets. Frankfurter (*ibid.*) comments:

It would be easy to say that this accretion of “magic” in official Egyptian Christianity was a natural part of the steady departure any regional Christianity is said to make from its allegedly pure scriptural origins. This is the nineteenth-century Protestant perspective, that an originally pure message of Jesus was gradually distorted, paganized, transformed into the whitewashed heathenism of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is a view that reeks of sectarian bias, but tends still to influence discussion of late antique religion. In the case of these Coptic grimoires and amulets, however, we can take a more sympathetic approach to the phenomenon. Monks and clerics were evidently continuing the same attention to local needs for supernatural power and authority that had allowed the Christian institution first to present itself in minimally attractive terms. They fulfilled that necessary role of traditional ritual expert, preparing amulets and uttering spells and invoking the “official” language of Christian liturgy as the new authority over the supernatural.

Other examples of the accretion of pagan practices into Christianity are evident in the conversion of the Menouthis shrine of Isis into a shrine of Saints John and Cyrus, in 484. Also, many pilgrimages were undertaken to tombs and shrines, where pilgrims would sleep in the precincts, according to Shenoute, in order “...to receive dreams and .. question the dead about the living” (Frankfurter, 1998:271). Frankfurter notes (*ibid.*) that, “Both supplicants and monks were putting great store in the instructions and revelations of dreams. In this major context for religious pilgrimage, healing, we can see the *Christian institution itself assuming native practice in a fairly wholesale manner*” (my emphasis). Thus, while Christianity itself was new, it was “...laid upon an indigenous, archaic, and surprisingly deterministic framework” (Frankfurter, 1998:272). In the end, the syncretism of this early Egyptian Christianity was unmistakable, but also the reason *par excellence* for the smooth transition for the populace from pagan to Christian religion. Frankfurter (*ibid.*) sums it up thus:

Nor could Christianization be absolute in this dimension of power. It is in this context of Christian idiom that all the “crossovers”, the syncretisms, between Christian and native idioms occurred: the Horus-Christ, the Christ-Re’s, the Ankh-crosses, the saints and angels and Mary images, modeled explicitly upon local images of power that still dominated the sensibilities of craftspeople, consumers, and supplicants, participants in that endless search for effective cures and protections.

Syncretism is a vast phenomenon, adequate treatment of which is well beyond the scope of this study. What has been merely highlighted here are some of the components of syncretism in the early Egyptian church. There were other syncretistic practices at work in the Roman world, not least in Rome itself. But what is unequivocally true is that Christianity did not flow seamlessly as a unique, new, totally distinct religion, from Jerusalem to the whole world. Rather, as this brief coverage has revealed, Christianity is an extraordinarily hybrid religion, or, more exactly, one that has forged itself out of centuries of assimilation of symbols, myths, rituals, practices and even temples. The Coptic Church in Egypt is arguably the truest reflection still with us of what original Christianity looked like, whereas, at the other extreme, Roman Catholicism is probably the most powerful example of two millennia of accretions both pagan and political. Protestantism, for its part, in seeking radical reform, succeeded only in stripping away a mass of accretions, in striving for a “pure” Christianity. Historically, this thesis would argue, there is no such thing: all of history militates against such an over-simplistic assumption.

5.6 FROM “CONVERSATIONS [WITH] LATE ANTIQUITY” TO DISPUTES

In Chapter Four, in the discussion of Hermeticism, Copenhaver (1995:lviii) was cited with reference to the *Hermetica*, as pointing out that in his view Fowden’s analysis of the *Hermetica* confirmed “their Graeco-Egyptian setting”, and as being illustrative not of formulaic traditions (in religious instruction), but of the “wider conversations open in late antiquity to those seeking salvation in myriad ways”. Copenhaver’s metaphor of “conversations” richly describes the processes involved in the formulation not only of Gnostic and Hermetic thought, but also in the development of Christian thinking and writing. At first, as in Alexandria, the nexus of scholarship in the Ancient Near East, there was not only the Greek Gymnasium extending studies in the philosophical and scientific disciplines, but the Jewish synagogues where Jews were grappling with their own studies of the *Torah* and the newly-translated Greek *Septuagint*. Gnostics and Hermeticists were likewise establishing “schools” under various teachers such as

Valentinus. The groups of Jewish “Christians”, too, were engrossed in studies and discussions of their own, in catechetical schools. Some early Christians, as already seen, first studied at the Gymnasium, where they were trained in “pagan” discourses, but later converted to Christianity, thus bringing their wider, secular education to bear on the formulation of the new religion. All of this was occurring against a backdrop of a radically changing world: first from the Ptolemaic dynasties’ legacy of Greek culture, then from the influences of Roman rule and Empire. Last but not least, there was always the pedal point of Egypt’s own indigenous religion, manifest for all the world to see, never proselytizing yet implacably present in its monumental temple structures and pyramids, its obelisks and statues. Furthermore, the establishment of the Serapeum in Alexandria gave rise to one of the most popular of late pagan religious cults.

With all of these contending voices at play, Copenhaver might perhaps have been better served with the analogy of a noisy marketplace, different religious merchants selling different religious messages to the most eager buyers. Yet his term “conversations” indicates the crucial fact that a myriad different voices were being heard, that influences of one on the other must have been strong, or at least grounds for serious consideration. Even within the same credal system, it has been seen (in Chapters 3 and 4), there were differences of opinion, for example in the existence of “pagan” Gnostics as well as Jewish and “Christian” Gnostics; Torah-centred Jews, and Jewish “Christians”. Yet human nature being what it is, conversations soon began to turn into arguments, and the way was inevitably opened to more serious disputes which, while perhaps initially mild, soon began to become heated and sometimes vitriolic. The destruction of the Serapeum at Alexandria by rabid mobs under the fanatical bishop Theophilus, and the later brutal slaughter of Hypatia by mobs led by Theophilus’s successor, Cyril, were two of the most extreme examples of those concerned only with silencing conversation and enforcing (literally) the supremacy of one religion over all others.

The reasons for this degeneration into bigotry need to be ascertained. Such reasons may also explain the emergence of the many apologetic writings which appeared from the second century and on into the fourth and fifth centuries. Examination of some of those writings will form the basis of Chapter 6. Here it is necessary first to engage with the probable causes of the backlash against “conversations”, by the early Christians.

Perhaps the first cause is to be located in anxiety: the fear of being overwhelmed by other religious beliefs circulating in the first century. Coupled with this must be zealotry: that unique energy imbuing some men with such passion for their cause that they become veritably obsessed with the conviction of their righteousness, or at least the righteousness of their cause. Linked to this notion, though more rational in its impetus, could have been simply the conviction on the part of the apologists that the Christian form of religion *was* unassailably correct, even on the intellectual plane, but certainly on a scriptural basis, so that it was incumbent upon them to fight hard for the preservation of the faith. One way to do battle was to write strong polemics against the “heretics”. Thus Robert M. Grant (1997:21) points out that in the second century “Irenaeus [of Lyons] was alarmed by the various Gnostic teachers who had come to infest Rome”; and since there was “...severe doctrinal trouble in the church at Rome”, Irenaeus, even though far away in Lyons, “...could not simply devote his talents to *moral outrage* .. but *had to explain why the Gnostics were wrong*”(my emphasis).

Here we see at once the two-pronged characteristics of the apologists: the sense of outrage at what they perceived was the distortion of Christianity by the Gnostics; and secondly, the determination to act against the heretics, in elaborate tracts that would show, unequivocally in their view, the wrongness of the heretics’ stance, and the truth of the Christian teachings, since Christ was their initiator. Ironically, the apologist sometimes fell into error himself. Irenaeus’s arguments, for example, were often based on ignorance (e.g. that the Old Testament was a Christian text and was “miraculously translated into Greek” (Grant, 1997:29-31)). He parodied a number of Valentinus’s works, or simply resorted to harsh criticism of them. In fact, as Grant (1997:26) relates, “Irenaeus was sure that Gnostics could not think straight because they themselves were mentally ill. ‘When sick people fall into delirium, the more they laugh and believe themselves healthy and do everything as if they were well or even more than well, the sicker they really are’”. Between parody and ignorance, thus, one can observe something of the manner in which the apologist’s arguments could degenerate into a childish, veritable name-calling. What such disputes also reveal is the often ascerbic and bitter nature of the quarrels. Ironically, the disputes were probably at times not unlike those kinds of legalistic arguments of the Pharisees denounced by Jesus. If such was the nature of written refutations of the heretics, it is not surprising that those church leaders more inclined to the verbal than the scribal should have led clamouring mobs in

the infamy of book-burning (as at Alexandria), temple desecration and even assassinations.

Frankfurter (1997:282-283) explains these descents into mob anarchy as the complex “drama” of exorcising the perceived demons all about, by entering into the radical acts of exposing what was held sacred by others, the very exposure causing the presence of the represented gods/truths to be removed and destroyed, so that then, cleaned thereof, the new ideology (and icons) could move in. Frankfurter (1998:282) notes that “Christian leaders were evidently highly skilled at such negative dramaturgy. And immediately behind them stood not random passersby but Christian confraternities devoted to the leader’s authority and primed to respond to his charismatic displays, who would gather, serve, chant, and riot by avocation. Whether in Alexandria or Panopolis, popular iconoclasm meant joining a pre-set mob”. Of course Frankfurter’s remarks concern the particular incidents of violence in Egypt, but it is probable that they are applicable to all other centres as well, wherever the heresiologists and the radical teachers were active. In the next Chapter, some of the strongest voices in early Christendom will be examined, in order to grasp more fully the power of their arguments in the formation of early Christianity.

CHAPTER 6

THE EGYPTIAN CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS

As indicated in the previous Chapter, a wave of Christian voices antagonistic to surrounding pagan religions, was to be heard from the second century onwards, until at least the fifth century. The Apologists are of significance for a number of reasons. First of all, they hold up a mirror to the conflicts surrounding various systems of belief in the period under examination. Secondly, their disputations began the first real attempts at systematization of the Christian religion and in this way contributed substantially to the development of a theology. Thirdly, their writings provided converts, as well as existing believers, with material that could supplement their readings of the scriptures. In this way, finally, they would have contributed to the spread of the Christian religion, for non-believers, too, could read the Bishops' arguments against paganism. One important reason propelling the Apologists towards written refutations was the sharp criticism the Christians themselves were being intermittently subjected to - from sporadic persecution, to quite spurious claims by pagans that the Christians engaged in immoral acts such as promiscuity, and even cannibalism, at their secret meetings. The reasons for such base accusations may be found in the Christians' separateness, in religious terms, from the pagans. (Interestingly, in later centuries anti-Semites were to spread similarly odious untruths about the Jews who, too, kept themselves separate from others in their beliefs and customs.) Certainly, the Churchmen needed to countermand the unwarranted vilifications against them, hence the beginning of the unique outpourings of texts, from the 2nd to the 4th centuries especially, by those we call the Apologists. Perhaps it is worth noting at this point that the hostility of the pagan criticisms levelled against the Christians is the likely cause of the sometimes heated and sarcastic remarks contained in the writings of some of the early Apologists, Tertullian not least. This answers, as well, the questions posed at intervals in this study as to the reason for the scathing outbursts in the polemical works of the period.

For the purpose of the present study, two of the most prominent of the Apologists - Clement of

Alexandria and Origen - have been selected because of their Egyptian sphere of influence, and because their 2nd-century contributions to the formulation of early Christianity were of a scope and depth seldom, if ever, matched by any of their successors. Their writings are particularly germane to the arguments on which this thesis is based, and reflect the climate of opinion in Alexandria where the Egyptian church was becoming so deeply entrenched. Augustine of Hippo, by contrast, appears on the scene a century after Origen, and is North African, not Egyptian, so is in a sense the odd man out. He is included, however, because not only was he a pivotal figure in the Church of his day, and in the history of Christianity as a whole, but in his work we see the changing emphasis in arguments which now are directed more towards Roman audiences and concerns and thus are already far removed from the distinctly Hellenistic philosophical world in which the Egyptians had worked. In a real sense, therefore, Augustine can be seen as epitomizing in his work, quite coincidentally, the transition occurring in Christianity away from Egypt and Africa towards the Roman and Western world.

6.1 CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (150 - 211/215 C.E.)

Little is known of the early life of Clement other than that he was born to Athenian pagan parents, and was converted to Christianity by Pantaenus, the first head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, a position Clement himself was to occupy in c.180. Thereafter, for about twenty years, Clement became the leading intellectual voice of the Christian community in Alexandria. Clement appears to have been a man of singular ability, combining intellectual skill with a certain missionary and pastoral concern for the welfare of the Christians. The tone struck in his writings is reasoned, instructive, and conciliatory, and therefore, unlike the later Augustine, or Clement's contemporary Irenaeus in Lyons, moderate rather than denunciatory. Yet despite this, many of his contemporary Alexandrian Christians were suspicious of Clement's views and teachings, because they were suspicious of intellectuals generally, especially the Gnostics. One can see how Clement's arguments for what was good in Gnosticism would have raised the ire of uneducated, more legalistically-inclined Christians who, at the time, would still have been not far removed from their Jewish roots, or were Gentile converts imbued with a desire more for salvation than *scientia*. Such Christians, according to Linwood Fredericksen (1986:375), "Led by Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria [from 189] ... taught a legalistic doctrine of salvation and preached that the Christian was saved by faith (*pistis*)". Clement countered this approach by arguing in his

Stromateis (*Miscellanies*) that *gnosis* was not so much esoteric as an aspect of witnessing to that God in exemplary moral living. He went further, declaring that the faith was the font of true knowledge, and that therefore the believer who was baptized and based his life on the scriptures was the true Gnostic (thus implying that pagan Gnostics could never attain the ultimate *gnōsis* they sought). In this we see an example of Clement's rational but also relatively conciliatory stance towards non-believers. Small wonder then that John D. Kelly (1986:330) dubs Clement a "Christian humanist". The *Stromateis* is the third part of an important and extant trilogy, which consisted also of the *Protreptikos* (*Exhortation*) and the *Paidagogos* (*The Instructor*).

Clement's single-handed contribution to the formation of early Christian theology is undisputed. Of particular significance is the fact that his work derives from a broad secular (Hellenistic) education, as well as the focussed study implicit in his work as head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria. Thus, he drew on Platonic and Stoic principles in expounding his Christian teachings. He was also impressed by the interpretative work done on the scriptures by the great Jewish philosopher Philo, and in his own biblical commentaries, Clement adopted Philo's method of interpretation in the construction of specifically Christian understandings of the Scriptures. In such ways, by using available knowledges of the time, Clement's rebuttal of pagan beliefs as well as the heretical views of some Christian groups, never acquired the baser swiping of Tertullian, for example, or the sometimes more florid and fanciful opinions of Irenaeus. Clement presented, rather, an informed, rational discourse that must have been more amenable to his pagan contemporaries, even if they were not in agreement with his conclusions. Some detractors inevitably accused Clement of Hellenizing Christianity; for them it must have seemed that Clement's teachings sailed too close to the winds of pagan thought. Tertullian, for example, deeply distrusted Hellenism and asked, rhetorically but also ignorantly, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?", thereby indicating an almost fundamentalist notion of Christianity as evidenced in his *Apology* in particular. Clement, by contrast, realizing that the surrounding pagans and ethos of the times could not be wished away, and that Christianity could not survive without some sort of *rapprochement* with that world, preferred to generate a wealth of thought serviceable to both the pagan and the Christian, hoping that this could be exploited for the illumination, especially, of the Christian believer. Thus, instead of haranguing the pagans and heretics, he used their methods to show how Christian belief provided far more plausible substance than their beliefs

did. As Kelly (1986:330) comments: “All his reasoning is dominated by the idea of the Logos who created the universe and who manifests the ineffable Father alike in the Old Testament Law, the philosophy of the Greeks, and finally the incarnation of Christ. Clement is also a mystic for whom the higher life of the soul is a continuous moral and spiritual ascent”.

Clement’s brilliant, comprehensive work lay a vital, sophisticated foundation for the development of Christian theology, and arguably was a key reason for the continued development of the significant theological work carried on by his successors - until at least the 5th century - at the Alexandria Catechetical School. Those Christians who disliked his Hellenistic leanings, his obvious intellectualism and “conversations” with the pagans, were often uneducated Alexandrians who preferred a more legalistic and simplistic mode of Christian belief, as already indicated. For them, faith was the primary, even sole requirement for the Christian. Clement’s social critique (as in his *A Discourse Concerning the Salvation of Rich Men*) that, for example, Christians needed to witness to Christ in their lives - thus introducing the notion of ethical obligation in the spheres of economic activity, slavery, almsgiving to the deserving poor - may also have been a bone of contention among his detractors. Nevertheless, Clement headed the Catechetical School for two decades, only leaving Alexandria for sanctuary in Palestine, when persecution of the Christians broke out under the Emperor Severus in 201-202. The Greek church was later to discredit his teachings, seeing them as not unlike those of his successor Origen, whom the Greeks also disapproved of as being, in their view, sometimes heretical. The Latin Church, however, fully endorsed Clement’s works - even though the much later Pope Sixtus V questioned its orthodoxy in part - and thus the theology of this Egyptian intellectual became assimilated into the Western Church.

Not only was Clement responsible for initiating a Christian theology through his scholarly works, but his legacy is noted in several areas. His insistence on a spiritual life based on self-discipline and Gospel values laid the foundation for monastic living which was to develop in future decades. He appealed to Christians to become well-educated, in order the better to witness to believers and non-believers alike, as also, on a personal level, the better to know and practise the faith, which was the path to salvation and thus real *gnōsis*. In two areas of his thinking he seems to have set the stage for Augustine in the next century, by arguing that the kingdom of heaven was not to be

equated with the institutional church (Fredericksen, 1986:375); while he argued that citizens were entitled to rebel against rulers who oppressed or enslaved their people, thereby opening the way for Augustine's later "just war" argument. As the forerunner of Christian intellectuals, Clement's place in the history of Christianity cannot be emphasised enough. There is a case to be made for declaring him the founder of formalized Christianity, a role in which he was to be most ably succeeded by Origen.

6.2 ORIGEN (c.185 - c.254)

As important a figure as Clement was in the Alexandrian church, many claim Origen to have been even more brilliant as a theologian and scripture scholar. Born in Alexandria, he was a student of Clement and, after Clement's flight from the city, became his successor as head of the Catechetical School. Unusually for his time, when scholars worked in Greek, Origen also studied Hebrew, and this would have benefited his scriptural interpretations considerably. Origen was a prolific writer, a preacher much in demand in foreign countries, and reputedly led a very ascetic life. On one of his travels abroad he was ordained a priest - in c.229 - in Caesarea, much to the chagrin of his bishop, Demetrius, in Alexandria, who was already intensely displeased at the numerous foreign journeys Origen was undertaking. Demetrius attempted, though unsuccessfully, to have Origen denounced, but churches in Greece and Palestine refused to endorse the move. One upshot of Demetrius's hostility towards Origen was that the new priest did not return to Alexandria, continuing his travels and writings, instead, from his base in Caesarea. One sees in this episode another example of the tensions within Christian communities, especially in Alexandria, notorious as it was for the tendency of its citizens to sedition. But the portrait also serves to reveal the lack of cohesion among early Christians. Matters came to a head, as far as Origen was concerned, when in 250 the Emperor Decius initiated a wave of persecutions against the Christians. Origen was arrested and tortured, but somehow survived, dying a few years later in Tyre. At face value, Origen led a colourful, varied life as a citizen of the world and a peripatetic scholar and preacher, with no cause other than the intellectual pursuit of the tenets of his faith. Such a sketch belies the power and extent of his written works, however, the rigour of his intellectual debates, and the enormous influence he wielded over the development of Christianity. To some of these aspects attention must now be turned.

While still resident in Alexandria, Origen wrote his own *Stomateis (Miscellanies)*, a treatise on the Resurrection, and another called *On First Principles (De Principiis)*, a systematic presentation of the principles of Christian doctrine. He also commenced work on an extensive 32-volume commentary on the Gospel of St. John. Like his predecessor Clement, Origen devoted much energy to refuting the claims of Gnostics. The most interesting feature of Origen's work, in a sense, was that unlike other Apologists who expended themselves in refutation of paganism and heresies in general, Origen also engaged in serious debate with Jewish rabbis. His knowledge of Hebrew would have been an invaluable tool in these interchanges about the scriptures. His *Hexapla* - a vast scholarly work devoted to various expositions of the different parts of the whole Bible - was the foundation of his debates with the rabbis. It was in his *Contra Celsum* (c.248) that Origen particularly becomes classified as an Apologist, since in the work he vindicates Christianity against heated attacks by Celsus, an anti-Christian philosopher. While many of Origen's works have been lost in whole or in part, the *Contra Celsum* has survived intact in a single manuscript held by the Vatican (Chadwick,1986:998).

What is immediately apparent from this brief survey of Origen's key works is that he was not only a prolific writer, but a rigorous, wide-ranging scholar, a man of singular intellectual brilliance. Taking Clement's works together with Origen's - and aside from the works of lesser-known authors of the time - a view is fashioned of the extraordinary, penetrative, and highly sophisticated academic nature of their writings, making 2nd to 3rd- century contributions to the formation of early Christian theology not only of inestimable importance in the development of the religion, but also of a profoundly influential quality which in many ways, it could be argued, established the basis for the future of the religion throughout the world, albeit chiefly in the West. Like his predecessor Clement, Origen did not descend to hostile denunciation of the pagans, but engaged them, instead, in intense scholarly debate, thus compelling a properly intellectual response from which position, it is probable, the pagans would have found it far more difficult to sustain their attacks. Indeed, Rowan Greer (1979:2) argues that Origen's theology was "...an attempt to translate the Gospel into a language intelligible to the pagan, especially the thoughtful and educated pagan". But also like Clement, some of Origen's greatest attackers, ironically, were fellow Christians for some of whom, it would appear, the whiff of heresy was never far away. Greer (*ibid.*) points to "the contrast between the serenity of Origen's writings and the anarchy of

his times...". Such accusations levelled against Origen were based on the view, for example, that his teachings presented God's Son as not of equal status with the Father; that Hell did not exist; that souls were pre-existent (a view that would fly in the face of those who preached that the soul exists only from the moment of conception); and his view that because Satan fell by choice, he could also gain redemption using the same choice (free will), also appeared to horrify Origen's strongest critics. Nevertheless, the great Church Father Jerome, unperturbed by the disputes surrounding some of Origen's theology, declared him to be "...the greatest teacher of the Early Church after the Apostles" (Chadwick, 1986:999). Precisely because of the philosophical complexity of much of Origen's work, and the fact that some of his detractors either mis-translated some of his works, or misquoted him, Jerome's generous estimate was not shared by all, Origen's critics seeing his work, inevitably, as heretical. Origen has therefore never enjoyed deserved recognition in the ranks of approved theologians. Greer (1979:5) points out that much of the debate about Origen since the third century, has concerned the question, "...was he a philosopher or a churchman"? Nevertheless, his staunchest defenders in later years were a diverse group ranging from Eusebius of Caesarea, to a number, unsurprisingly, of Alexandrians, including Didymus the Blind, Head of the Catechetical School in the 4th century, and the later Cappadocian Fathers including renowned figures such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyassa (Chadwick, 1986:999).

Origen's role in the formulation of Christian theology was clearly immeasurable. Since there was no systematized body of Christian thought during the first century, the explosion within a few decades of the second century of scholarly works of exegesis, catechesis and disputation by Clement and Origen, was a phenomenon by any standards. That Origen's work was so influential not only in his own lifetime - notwithstanding his detractors - and for hundreds of years after his death, especially on the monastic movement, is an extraordinary reflection of the power of his thought, backed reputedly also by his most ascetic, even saintly life. As late as the 9th century the Irish theologian John Scotus Erigena was still strongly influenced by him (Chadwick, 1986:999), while in yet later centuries controversy continued to dog aspects of his theology. Nevertheless, as Greer (1979:34) remarks, "...the themes Origen uses in giving definition to the Christian life persist to this day in the classical exposition of Christian spirituality". What is predominantly obvious, thus, is that two Alexandrians were responsible for the theological foundations -

tempered or not - of the vast worldwide religion Christianity was to become. *Egypt* was the birthplace of this systematized religion, thus, not Rome, and certainly not Jerusalem as Tertullian would have wanted it. This is not to say that theology was being developed only in Egypt. We know, for example, of numerous 1st - and 2nd -century Christian writers elsewhere - men such as Clement of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, Theophilus and Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons - who wielded considerable influence in the early church. Indeed, it may be argued by some that their influence was greater than that of Clement and Origen. It is beyond the scope of the present study to engage this point in any detail, except to indicate that Egyptian Christianity is the focus of this study (rather than early Christianity in general), and to suggest that none of the early writers in other centres quite equalled the prolific output, the brilliance of argument, and the sophistication of the theology formulated by Clement and Origen. While an Egyptian Christianity initially made its mark in the world (through the outreach of the Catechetical School in Alexandria), it was indubitably the unique qualities of the Hellenistic world that made the spread and reception of the religion both possible and such an attractive proposition. At the same time, pagan dissenters were not going to cede ground easily; and one more representative Apologist needs to be considered in this regard, namely Augustine of Hippo. Greer (1979:2) comments that in studying Origen "...we are witnesses to the death of the old Roman world and the birth pangs of a Christian and transformed Rome". This view may be a trifle premature with reference to Origen; but it is certainly applicable to any consideration of the role played by Augustine, as the following section will argue.

6.3 AUGUSTINE (354 - 430; BISHOP OF HIPPO FROM 396 - 430)

Augustine's situation within early Church history is at least as significant as that of Clement and Origen, while some would claim him to be of even greater significance as the theologian *par excellence* of the Western Church. His formative years provide a very different set of circumstances to those of Clement and Origen. The latter two were cultured, educated men of the Alexandrian wealthy classes, and steeped in classical education, while Augustine, born to a pagan father and a piously Christian mother, Monica, grew up in a modest home at the small town of Tagaste where he received a basic schooling. His famed *Confessions* describe his early life in considerable detail. He later studied at Carthage, where he became interested in the pursuit of truth. This brought him into contact with Manichaeism which he found far preferable to the

Christian church which, he believed, stood for authority more than the intellectual life he found in Manichaeism. Significantly, thus, his early life was that of a “heretic”, giving him a unique insight into the very systems he was later to denounce in his writings. Manichaeism - a dualist system seeing creation as a persistent conflict between darkness and light - presented itself as the true Christianity, with Christ the Redeemer as the saviour of light from darkness, and thus presumably of the enlightened believers from the unenlightened ones. Augustine became disillusioned with the group after a time, however, finding its leaders to be of limited intellectual ability. He left Carthage and travelled to Rome, eventually obtaining a teaching position in Milan. This was to have great repercussions for the rest of his life, for in Milan he heard Ambrose preach and the man’s intellectual strength not only impressed Augustine, but allowed him to see that, contrary to his erstwhile prejudice that Christianity lacked credibility, Ambrose’s teachings needed to be reckoned with. What attracted Augustine’s attention, in particular, were the Neoplatonic concepts employed by Ambrose. Neoplatonism, especially in the work of Plotinus, the 3rd-century philosopher and mystic, taught that ultimately all of existence was a series of emanations - or indeed degradations - from a transcendent One, the quintessential reality. A hierarchy of orders existed within this scheme, from the highest to the lowest, the material plane, which is at the furthest remove from the absolute One, and therefore also the locus, potentially, of evil. Since man was matter, he had to strive to ascend to a higher plane; and to do that, he needed to travel within, to encounter his spirit which was his link to the One. In the *Confessions* Augustine recounts his discovery of God by this very means: “And being thence admonished to return to myself, I entered even unto my inward self, Thou being my Guide: and able I was, for Thou were become my Helper. And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable” (*Confessions* VII.X.16). His conversion, born out of this clearly mystical experience, led to his baptism by Ambrose in 387. On returning to Africa, and a visit to Hippo, he was ordained a priest in 391 and five years later elevated to the episcopate upon the death of the old bishop there, Valerius. From this point until his death, his life was filled with the numerous responsibilities of his bishopric, while he also wrote copiously - aided by stenographers and his unique ability to dictate sound arguments without prior drafting. Thus he authored countless letters - often of considerable length - in answer to problems raised with him. As his reputation spread he also wrote scriptural homilies and commentaries, being particularly impressed by Pauline Christianity.

As with the brief examinations of Clement and Origen above, this is not the place to debate the niceties of Augustine's theological works. Rather, the intention is to look at his engagements with the heretics of his day, and these had become several, from the Manichaeists to the Donatists and the Pelagians. For Augustine, the presence of these dissident groups was symptomatic of the fragmentary Christianity in evidence in Africa. At first he attempted to win over the schismatic Donatists by the art of persuasion; when that failed, Donatists and Christians met for arbitration at Carthage in 411. The Donatists lost and thereafter Donatism gradually waned. Pelagianism was likewise also eventually overcome, though more by dint of Honorius's imperial decree of 418 banishing the heretics, than by the art of persuasion. Pelagius himself, a British cleric, was excommunicated.

While these theological disputes were raging, Augustine was working on his substantial 22-volume *De Civitate Dei*. Unsurprisingly, the very first Book begins to take issue with the pagans - not, it would appear, because they were believers in many gods, but because of their calumnious accusations against the Christians. His argument at this stage is powerful, but rational and without invective:

But as our present concern is with those Christians who were taken prisoners [after the Goths' attack on Rome, a calamity blamed on the Christians], let those who take occasion from this calamity to revile our most wholesome religion in a fashion not less imprudent than impudent, consider this and hold their peace; for if it was no reproach to their gods that a most punctilious worshipper of theirs [Marcus Attilius Regulus, a pagan Roman general who, imprisoned by the Carthaginians, was tortured to death by them] should, for the sake of keeping his oath to them... be put to death by a long-drawn and exquisite torture, much less ought the Christian name be charged with the captivity of those who believe in its power, since they, in confident expectation of a heavenly country, know that they are pilgrims even in their own homes. (*De Civitate Dei*, I.15)

Yet by Chapter 29 of the same Book I his tone is becoming more impassioned. In answer to the jeers of pagans who, upon seeing certain Christians enduring misfortunes, ask "Where is thy God?", Augustine counters that they should ask the same question of themselves when their gods are absent from their misfortunes. He then retorts, "But who are you, that we should deign to speak with you even about your own gods, much less about our God, who is to be 'feared above all gods'? For all the gods of the nations are idols; but the Lord made the heavens". In Book II

he continues his attacks on the pagans, denouncing their religions for never inculcating holiness of life as Christianity did, and by Chapter 15, accusing them of the fact that mere vanity, not reason, led to the creation of some of the Roman gods, such as Romulus, whom they "...preferred to Neptune and Pluto, Jupiter's brothers, and to Saturn himself, their father".

In Chapter after Chapter, Book after Book, thus, Augustine dismantles the pagans' array of gods, their selective worship, the shallowness of Rome's civil theology and, in short, the assumed authority of pagan belief, all the time countering with arguments that Christians in no way participated in debauched festivals in honour of such gods (as the pagans were known to do), did not engage in licentious acts in the temples, and did not invent gods as they went along. The sheer scope of *De Civitate Dei* may be taken as an example of the extent and power of the paganism against which Augustine believed Christianity was pitted. Certainly, the pagans must have been astonished by his learned, reasoned and forthright rebuttal of both their beliefs and their accusations. While it may be argued that Augustine, imbued as he was by Pauline, and thus somewhat authoritarian Christianity, expended too much of his energy on refuting the pagans instead of extending Christian theology itself, nevertheless, as a man prompted by circumstances to retaliate against the perceived pressures of the pagan world against the Christians, Augustine clearly felt impelled to destroy the pagans' baseless scapegoating of Christians, as well as to demonstrate the true divinity behind Christianity. Certainly, Augustine's work would have been of sufficient power to have given any pagan readers pause for thought, if it did not in fact unleash further attacks on the Christians. One thing would have been clear to the pagans: Augustine was sophisticated in the art of rhetoric, had himself not always been a Christian, and spoke with all-encompassing knowledge of their gods, festivals, and cultic practices. He was clearly a man to be taken seriously. How far his impact on paganism in the Roman Empire might have gone is a moot point, for the Empire, not unlike Augustine's own life, was nearing its end. More than his influence on the pagans, the legacy of his thought to Christianity itself has been considerable - from his stamp, overall, on Christian theology, to his influence on monasticism, especially in the person of Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercians, and even 20th-century theologians such as Jacques Maritain, Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. (Burnaby, 1986:389). While he was hailed as a Doctor of the Church in the Middle Ages, he also fell out of favour with many later Catholic theologians because of his views on predestination, a doctrine to which the Catholic

Church has never subscribed. But Augustine was to be a persuasive factor in the teaching of Martin Luther and John Calvin, the Protestant Reformers (Green, 1998:40).

Taking stock of the three great early Christian teachers surveyed in this Chapter, one feature is held in common by all of them: the zeal, industry, intensity and intellectual brilliance with which they tackled the paganism and “heresies” of their times. All spoke with pronounced conviction out of an unswerving belief in Christ as the Son of God. All spoke out of Africa as well, and all were highly educated men whose written output was prolific by any standards, and whose influence was not only considerable in their own times, but has endured, however unevenly, to the present day. For the purposes of this study, their greatest achievement was in the construction of systematized works about the Christian religion, which enabled the originally uncertain, unformulated, culturally diverse versions of first-century Christianity to develop in ensuing centuries with extraordinary pace and finesse into a theologically sophisticated religion within the space of a few hundred years. This was all the more remarkable given the intense pressures from surrounding religions during the Hellenistic era, and the Roman era. Ironically, it could be argued, it was precisely the competing voices of those very pagans, both in the attractiveness of some of their creeds, such as Gnosticism and Hermeticism, and in the spurious attacks against the Christians, that really gave the impetus needed to concentrate Christians’ minds and endeavours in the formulation of their identity and belief and so meld into the beginnings of the world religion it was to become. This did not mean a single, unified religion emerged. Disputes and doctrinal differences led to heated confrontations, schisms ensued, and West and East tended to set each other apart. Yet either way, paganism was to decline as assuredly as the Empires that had fostered it.

There is one major difference among the three Apologists, however, and this must be touched on in conclusion. Clement and Origen were both schooled in Alexandria, both in time heading the Catechetical School there, and both bringing a philosophical refinement uniquely Hellenistic, to bear on their theology. Augustine, on the other hand, was North African, not Egyptian as was Origen, and a product of Roman civilization in Africa. His writing was therefore, like the man himself, more imbued with Roman cultural correlatives than his famous Egyptian predecessors with their Greek education. In the power of his later works, arguably, Augustine introduced a

“Roman” dimension to theology - along with the works of his famous contemporaries, Ambrose and Jerome - that was to have no small significance in coming times, when world politics was to change dramatically, with the West overrun by barbarians, Goths, Visigoths and others, and the religion of the world eventually to become, officially, Christian (in the West; the Ottomans were to dominate the East for some considerable time). The die was being cast for the “Romanization” of Christianity, and with it, the relegation of Egyptian Christianity. To this, attention is turned in the next Chapter.

CHAPTER 7

THE ROMAN DIMENSION

7.1 ALEXANDRIA'S DEMISE, ROME'S ASCENDANCY

The notion of Alexandria being on the wane as a most important Egyptian city while the Roman Empire was expanding, may inadvertently be implied by the above heading. Historically, of course, this would be false. The Roman Empire in fact came to an end in the early 5th century, with the barbarians, Goths, Visigoths and Franks invading Roman territories across the formerly impenetrable Empire. Alexandria's golden age, on the other hand, persisted until 642 C.E. when it was invaded by the Arabs (Ramadan, 1993:109). The title above is therefore not a reflection of historical chronology, but rather a metaphor for the shift of emphasis (in the systematization of Christianity) from the pivotal work done by key exegetes, teachers and commentators working in Alexandria, to the future seat of Christendom in Rome. In the previous Chapter it was seen how two developments in the 5th century effectively led to this transposition. One was the impact on the Christian world of three great churchmen, namely Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, all skilled in rhetoric and Roman culture. The second decisive event was the changed political world as Rome subsided under invading forces, bringing with them not only paganism but also Arian heretics. As the political dramas across (today's) continental Europe waxed and waned, and the nominal Christianity of many of the invaders revealed a far-from-united world religion, so Egypt, the original powerhouse of serious Christian thought, became completely overshadowed, its own variety of Christianity persisting solely within its own territory, both in the Coptic Church and in the ever-expanding monastic movement. Only the one element of Egyptian Christianity continued to make any measureable impact on the Western world, and that was its ascetic monastic traditions, taken up in particular by the Celtic monks in Ireland and filtering from there across the Irish Sea to Scotland and England. But even monasticism was, in later foundations, to follow Augustine's line of thinking, even adopting his famous *Rule* for monastic living, and thus gradually even the Egyptian face of monasticism receded from both perception and praxis

in Europe (though it remained a constant feature of Egyptian Christian life, and does so to this day. Celtic Christianity, meanwhile, eventually succumbed to the pressures of waves of colonizers in Ireland, from the Vikings and Normans to the English).

It has to be asked, notwithstanding the politics of Rome and its demise, why Roman Christianity, in particular, swept the world as rapidly as it did. Emperor Theodosius's 4th-century declaration of Christianity as henceforth the official religion of the Empire cannot in itself be sufficient reason. Throughout imperial times Rome's official panoply of pagan gods, the declared divinity of the Emperor himself, and the civil theology Augustine took issue with in such measured detail (as described in the previous Chapter) never succeeded in bedding itself in all the far-flung territories occupied by Rome, and Egypt least of all. Borkowski (1990:26) points out that "...the Roman empire, which since the *Constitutio Antoniniana* was unified in the Roman citizenship, lacked any unifying cult which, at the same time, corresponded to the religious needs of the individual. The cult of the emperor could not fill this gap any better than the State cults in the former poleis. This fact rendered the State vulnerable to Christianity, a religion which, at the same time, was a movement of cosmopolitan dimensions and geared toward the individual... . Local patriotism had to fulfil the function of national patriotism, and therefore local cults had to supply the strength of religion. It was hardly a match for Christian universalism. Egypt became quickly one of the most widely Christianized provinces of the Roman empire, reputed for its innovations in the religious life, particularly its spreading monasticism". Borkowski's argument seems plausible, but once again it begs the reason for Egypt's Christianity, if so noted by foreigners, being later so overcome by Roman Christianity.

The reasons may be quite simple after all. First of all, Egypt was not only at the furthest remove from the West, but had always been the most fractious of the Roman provinces, and the one most troublesome in Roman eyes. Meyer Reinhold (1980:103) remarks that, "The attitude of the Romans towards the Egyptians was a circular phenomenon: for centuries they treated the masses of the Egyptians as 'the rubbish of society', and were in turn repelled by their lack of 'civilized' behavior. Egypt was in the Empire, but not of it". If one adds to this the strength of the 5th-century churchmen, Ambrose (in Milan), Jerome and Augustine, all speaking to the Empire outside of Egypt, it becomes more understandable that Christian attention should swing from its

Egyptian promptings, to the wider world outside, even of a crumbling and then largely-defunct Empire. Besides, in a way Egypt was its own worst enemy. Frankfurter (2000a:156) reports on “a violent conflict in Egypt between native religion and Christian monks” as late as the fifth century, just at the time that the churchmen mentioned above were making their mark abroad. At the same time, also, Frankfurter (2000c:473) notes that “The popular Christianity of the fourth and subsequent centuries was a synthesis of Christian and local materials and involved the creative contributions of local monks, minor ecclesiastical authorities, and ritual experts and healers unaffiliated with the Church”, thus indicating the ongoing assimilation of elements of indigenous Egyptian religion into the Christian replacement. Yet another element, perhaps, militating against Egyptian Christianity being in the ascendant globally, was what Frankfurter (1994:38) refers to as “the *Christianities* of Alexandria” (my emphasis), not to mention the rural variety. Frankfurter notes (*ibid.*) that “...the third century in Egypt saw the diversification of Christianity into many sects, from the Alexandrian “orthodoxy” of Dionysius and Peter, to their urban gnostic competitors, to the various Syrian and Manichaean missions in the *chora*, to the amorphous rural millennialist culture [of Christian martyrdom]”. In and of itself, this description is possibly little different to what pertained in other regions of the world. The difference, crucially, may well be that, as throughout its ancient and stirring history, Egypt was always self-contained: rulers, colonizers, oppressors, cultural influences, all came and went while Egypt, seemingly implacably, made of it all what *it* wished. Moreover, no other land in the West had anything comparable to Egypt in the mystery and monumentalism of its ancient religion which, even though a religion ultimately of the elite, was a massive unifying dimension throughout its extraordinary history. Egypt, clearly, and Egyptian Christianity in particular, had far more voices to contend with, than the other regions of the Empire. Finally, the rise and eventual breakaway in the sixth century of the Coptic Church, on doctrinal grounds, was probably the last event of major importance to set Egyptian Christianity, even of an “orthodox” kind, aside forever, while the Roman variety ran ahead unchecked.

7.2 THE OBSCURING OF CHRISTIANITY’S EGYPTIAN ROOTS

In real terms, this item has already been dealt with under 7.1 above. Here it may serve a practical purpose, then, to delineate some of the Egyptian features of early Christianity which persist to the present day, albeit masked now by the overriding sway of Western Christianity, and especially

Roman Catholicism. These remnants may be seen in terms of theology, ritual practices including the veneration of the Virgin and Saints, and artefacts and, or, icons. A brief comment is necessary about each of these components of contemporary Christianity.

In the eighteen hundred years since Clement and Origen in Alexandria, and Irenaeus in Lyons, made their respective marks on the history of Christianity through their exegetical and apologetical writings, vast developments have taken place in Christian theology, not least in the twentieth century. Significantly, though, most students of theology - in the recognized faculties and seminaries at least - would still engage with the fundamentals of the early Apologists' writings in terms of doctrine on God the Father, God the Son and Redeemer, and the Logos, the lodestar of Clement's and Origen's teachings. In this way, though in however diluted a form, concepts born out of the Egyptian formulation of Christian doctrine remain with us. In the Middle Ages Augustine, as has been seen, while North African and not Egyptian, again came to prominence when the popularity of Aristotelian thought, with its emphasis on the supremacy of rational thought, began to cause problems for Christian theologians versed in Augustine's teaching with its Platonic lines of reasoning. At the same time, the spread of monasticism across Europe had also, in many instances, been inspired by Augustine. However, the origins of monasticism were quintessentially Egyptian, even though the movement adopted many forms in later centuries, no longer expressing the more extreme Egyptian modes. Nevertheless, most monastic orders retained a rigorous emphasis on asceticism, strict observance of celibacy, regular fasting, study of the scriptures, communal living, and, of course, the core function of prayer and fixed hours of liturgical prayer. Such monasticism persists to the present day, both in Roman Catholicism and in the Orthodox Churches of the East, as well as in the Coptic Church. Indeed, the Coptic Church stands as the strongest living connection with early Egyptian Christianity, as has already been noted.

Examination of ritual practices in Christian liturgies, and the veneration of the Saints - the latter especially belonging to Roman Catholicism - may provide many examples of ancient Egyptian practice, where there is scope for such research. Certainly the presence of shrines dotting the landscape in all Catholic countries to this day may be as much an export from Egypt as a permutation of ancient Greek and Roman shrines to their respective deities. It is certainly

acknowledged by scholars that the prominence afforded Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Roman Catholicism, is a mutation of the Isis myth under different nomenclature (as already commented on in Chapters 3 and 5). Likewise, some see the earliest depictions of the face of Jesus Himself as deriving from the earliest representations of Serapis. As far as the Saints are concerned, with their statues erected not only in local shrines, but in churches and cathedrals around the world, while these are venerated (not worshipped), it cannot escape the historian of religions that the devotion expressed by many in their prayers to such saints and before their statue-likenesses, is not far off the sense in which the ancient Egyptians believed that the spirit of the god could be in-spirited, as it were, into its likeness. While this notion had been debated by the Greek philosophers, it was a widespread *practised* belief among the elite as well as the peasants in many ancient cultures, especially in ancient Egypt. In popular minds in later times the statue of the Virgin or the Saint is in similar (though not articulated) fashion a veritable, albeit static, depiction of the presence of the represented figure, before the devotees. The popularity of healing services in many churches today is arguably also rooted in ancient Egyptian practices of healing sought at shrines, of medical potions and amulets dispensed by the Egyptian priests and monks in early Christianity. The amulets of the past have become the medals and crosses of the present. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 5, the cross itself, as formal symbol of Christianity, while clearly deriving officially from Constantine, evolved a lot earlier, in Egypt, from the pharaonic *ankh*, the early Coptic Christians assuming it as a formal symbol long before the West did so, although they later modified this to the Coptic Cross of today.

More generalised symbols within Christianity also have Egyptian roots. Christianity seems to have accommodated Egyptian concepts of the judgment of souls at the moment of death, the resurrection of the body after death and the union with the great god in the afterlife, for those judged worthy. It is also likely that the Christians would have been influenced in these matters by Judaic scriptural traditions. Despite all these syncretistic features, the Egyptian legacy is never acknowledged, perhaps in part because most have forgotten their origins. Besides, the politics of Europe over the millennia becoming so contorted, and the countless historical accretions acquired by Christianity from European rulers, popes and princes, easily overwhelmed any thought of distant Egypt and its share in the making of the very beliefs for which European Crusaders set out on their nefarious travels to the Holy Land. The Arab conquest of Egypt, and

the reduction of the Christians to a mere ten percent of the population, was the last cause of the veritable effacement from Christian consciousness of the extraordinary role played by Egypt in the formation and formulation of the very creed Christians profess. It is unlikely that this situation will change except in academic circles where, ever since the chance discovery in 1927 of the Nag Hammadi codices, an entire world of new scholarship has awoken, in the re-discovery of Egyptian Christianity and its origins, even to a re-visiting of canonical works of Scripture, and thus of theology itself. As Kurt Rudolph (1991:15-16) observes: “Morenz [a former teacher of Rudolph] has also made reference to another hardly investigated share of the orient in the formation of Christian theology. It has to do with the effect, albeit ‘unconscious’, of ancient Egyptian theology on the problem of the Trinity and the Incarnation. This involves *‘traditional modes of thought’ deriving from Egyptian speculation on trinities and identities of the gods* (not simply groups of gods), *which noticeably affected Christian thinkers, particularly in Alexandria.* Surely there are many other oriental contributions to developing Christianity that could be listed or that still remain to be discovered”. (My emphases.) That, more or less, is the point at which the present study commenced.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In a paper entitled simply “Epilogue”, Helmut Koester (1991:472) observes: “History can no longer be treated as battles and conquests and dates of imperial reigns. To understand the history of religions, it is necessary to study all materials relating to the life of a society, including nonliterary data - not as the ‘background’ of early Christianity but as *the world of the early Christians*” (my emphasis). To some extent this has been a motivation for the present study which, essentially, set out from the point of view that modern Christianity, while an intensely variegated phenomenon, and bearing no resemblance to the unity its single title as *a religion* would suggest, bears little resemblance, either, to early Christianity. In order to address the question, then, of what early Christianity might have looked like, it became necessary to return to origins as far as these can be established. This study has claimed throughout to be an engagement with “the world of the early Christians”, seen historically in terms of political dispensations, socio-cultural environments, and religious phenomena within the latter two dimensions. What has been clear at all times has been the way in which each of these two dimensions has influenced the manner in which religious phenomena have been expressed. This is both self-evident and a natural consequence of the interchange of ideas, goods, creeds and politics in Graeco-Roman Egypt, and indeed in the Graeco-Roman world at large. Chapter 2 of the thesis outlined the role of the Ptolemies as facilitators *par excellence* for this process, with their construction of an Alexandria that was to become the centre and apex of intellectual life in the world of Late Antiquity, and with their enlightened policy of religious tolerance. As a result of that tolerance, as Chapters 3 and 4 outlined, numerous important religions jostled with one another in the same area: the Isis and Serapis cults, Judaism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and the new religion of Christianity, while beyond Alexandria’s perimeters, ancient Egyptian religion continued to be observed unabated by indigenous Egyptians. The point was also made in these Chapters that varying degrees of syncretistic influences from one religion to another were almost inescapable. Certainly, it was also observed in Chapters 5 and 6, there was much discussion

between and among representatives of the various faiths, sometimes peaceably as in Origen's dialogues with rabbis on points of exegesis on the Hebrew Scriptures, and sometimes heatedly, as in Clement's increasingly energized responses to the surrounding Gnostics and pagans in general, especially when the Gnostics, from his perspective, distorted the Scriptures' revealed truth, or when pagans made spurious allegations against the Christians.

Throughout these Chapters, also, the inexorable influences of politics were highlighted, whether simply in terms of older, pagan and sanctioned religions continuing as before, or in terms of sporadic Jewish revolts (against the Romans) on the one hand, or persecution of the Christians on the other hand. Focus in Chapter 6 on three of the main Apologists from the 2nd to 5th centuries, in the persons of Clement, Origen and Augustine, however, pointed up the most critically formative years in the evolution of Christianity, in the systematization of what Christian faith consisted of, what its doctrinal tenets were, what its canonical texts were, and what, in fact, constituted heresy. Numerous Church Councils were held over these centuries, such as the famed Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., but their theological deliberations being beyond the scope of this study, have not been included for discussion here. Suffice it to say, the upshot of such Councils was invariably the parting of ways for a number of Christian groups, who either subsequently faded from history, or, as in the case of the Copts, remained intact but out of communion with "orthodox" Christianity. As the thesis has attempted to show, after the disparate groupings of Judaeo-Christians in the first century, both in Egypt and in various world regions, the almost-sudden acceleration of Christianity as a formulated religion from the 2nd century onwards, was a remarkable phenomenon. In part, it was argued in Chapter 6, this spurt of growth arose, ironically, out of pagan criticism of the new religion. But it occurred as well because of superb historical timing and good fortune, with the appearance on the scene of brilliant minds of the calibre of Clement and Origen in Alexandria. It is to these two religious giants, this study would argue, that the future of Christianity was maximally indebted, for without their singular achievements in systematizing Christian thought and belief, it is easy to speculate that Christianity might have meandered on as just another religion among many. At best, formalized Christian religion would have been delayed by several hundred years until the arrival - again fortuitously - of Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome in the dying days of Rome. In Chapter 7, finally, taking stock of the influence of the latter three great churchmen, brief indications were

given of the historical-political reasons for the ascendancy of a Roman, Western Christianity, while the Egyptian Christianity which had been the most important formative influence on the evolution of the religion, became steadily and ultimately eclipsed.

In summary, the thesis has exposed through these examinations a number of significant points.

1. As a religion, Christianity was neither born nor founded, but *evolved*. There was until at least the 3rd century no unified Christian religion. Indeed, and especially in the 1st century - thus the period after Christ's death and resurrection, and while the Gospels were being written - there was not only no formal Christianity at all, but a number of different expressions of Christianity operating in the Graeco-Roman world. Christianity *qua* Christianity emerged, indeed developed, in a *process* of defining doctrine, settling disputes, formalizing mission and ritual. That process took several centuries during which groups such as the Coptic and Orthodox Churches broke away over irreconcilable doctrinal differences. All the rest of Christendom was united in terms of doctrine and mission. More than a thousand years later the Protestant Reformation was to have massive impact on this unity, resulting, ironically though inadvertently, in the emergence once again and to this day of a myriad variations of Christianity in the world.
2. A severe dearth of extant sources from the first century, many of these probably irretrievably lost, hampers definitive claims about early Christianity. But more sources may yet be recovered in the ongoing and extensive archaeological excavations occurring in, for example, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Greece and Italy. Moreover, the book is not yet closed on papyrologists' work on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library, which may yet reveal important clues about the monotheistic religious practices of the ancient millennial world.
3. David Frankfurter's *Religion in Roman Egypt* (1998) provides a striking example of the kind of meticulous research that, given adequate resources, funding and opportunity, is possible and desirable for the extensive new evidence provided, despite lost sources. His work shows that there is still a great deal to be extrapolated from what *is* available to us. Along with Frankfurter's work as an individual scholar, there is the continuing project work commenced under James M. Robinson and Birger A. Pearson, where collaboration amongst groups of scholars is also providing more and more valuable knowledge about earliest Christianity. Again, the narrative has not been concluded.
4. The re-visiting of Egypt's singular contribution to the evolution of Christianity is not only of

great importance, but potentially the most significant source - paradoxically - of new contemporary understanding of the ancient faith so many millions profess. The challenge, however, is not merely in re-visiting ancient texts, in researching the mechanisms by which the new religion spread across the known world, and the reasons for its attraction to so many people regardless of cultural and ethnic differences, but also in re-visiting the contentious issue of the canon, the exclusion of apocryphal texts, and the Gnostic qualities of St. John's Gospel. This task is unlikely to be undertaken by mainstream theologians who prefer the safety of approved territory in matters of faith. For the historian of religions, however, there can be no such qualms, for history, not faith, is the criterion of research. Egypt holds the key, this study has argued, while echoing Hermes' claim to Asclepius that their land of Egypt "...is the temple of the whole world".

5. Critics of those who would highlight the syncretisms out of which Christianity has been so largely and so anciently composed, may with justification argue that Christianity makes no secret of, say, its usurpation of pagan festivals, even pagan temples, for Christian purposes: these have always been taken over and transformed into service of Christ the Saviour, instead of whatever pagan deity they originally honoured. Some have argued that the early depictions of Christ in art bear an acute resemblance to the famed surviving bust of Serapis; and there is no longer dissension about the virtual replication of Isis with her son Horus in later Christian art works showing Mary and the infant Jesus in the same pose. What, therefore, is to be gained from re-visiting ancient Egyptian icons and influences in particular? To this the rebuttal is clear on at least two levels. First of all, without the Egyptian formulations of early Christianity, the form of present-day Christianity may well have been very different indeed. Secondly, as Chapter 7 attempted to show, Egyptian elements of belief are still intrinsic in several spheres of Christian *doctrine*, and this goes to the heart of the faith itself in far more telling ways than the superficial appurtenances of festival days and buildings, or even iconic representations. To these a third point might be added, namely that Christ Himself spent His early years in Egypt. According to Matthew 2:14-15, the child Jesus remained in Egypt until the death of Herod, "that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, 'Out of Egypt I called my son' ". On what the child learned in Egypt, the Gospels are silent. As Egypt had been the country of His ancestors' bondage, so by inversion it had become a place of refuge for Mary, Joseph and their infant son, while Herod lived. It seems fitting that out of Egypt, too, in subsequent centuries, should come some of the most important developments in early Christianity, and that those

developments continue to be researched.

6. Finally, there was another branch of Christianity, currently being re-discovered in Ireland and the United Kingdom, and that was Celtic Christianity. For a brief period the Celts - converted to Christianity in the 5th century - formulated their own, Christocentric and nature-centred Christianity, adopted Egyptian monasticism and learning in various centres in Ireland, established notable scriptoria attached to monasteries, and later exported both their monasticism and learning to Europe during the Dark Ages. Their influence, vital though it was, was in ensuing centuries also to succumb to political forces, and British colonization of Ireland and Roman Catholicism in particular, so that Celtic Christianity, too, faded after its brief, glorious florescence.

One crucial aspect of the history of Christianity has been excluded from this study, and that is the Reformations, the Catholic Reformation but especially the Protestant Reformation which, arguably, was responsible not just for shaking up the Catholic world, but effectively of introducing, once again, a world of many different Christianities. In a generalized and paradoxical sense, therefore, Christianity resembles today, in its multifarious contemporary forms, something of the kind of 1st-century world in which different Christianities were the norm. Luther H. Martin (1987:162) may travel a journey too far when he claims that it was "...the Protestant Reformation, which was grounded in Pauline theology which finally expunged Christianity of its central feminine symbolism: its spiritual reorientation toward a transcendental godhead replaced the sacramental immanence mediated by Mother Church; the centrality of the pulpit with its intellectual icon of book as word replaced the sacrificial altar, the center of the Catholic transformatory cult; and Mariology was renounced altogether". What the Reformation accomplished, rather, seen from an historical rather than religious point of view, was to strip away the last identifiable Egyptian elements in Protestant Christianity, aside from certain core doctrinal features. Martin's claim also does not take cognisance of the fact that Roman Catholicism with its Mariology persists despite the Reformation, as do the Greek and Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Coptic and Armenian Churches, not to mention the little-known Lebanese Maronite tradition (which is in union with Rome). More balanced, perhaps, is Knapp's (1988:278) general remark about the legacy of the Greeks: "New, Greek outlooks on the universe took their place beside old, mythical, Near Eastern concepts. Supplementing old with new, myth with logic, the Greeks achieved a novel philosophical genius. 'The Wonder that was Greece' can

be fully appreciated only by recognizing that it was built on the cultures of ancient western Asia and Egypt” (my emphasis). If this is true of cultural legacy, it is surely as valid for the deep religious, Egyptian legacy embedded in Christianity.

Instead of attempting a resounding affirmation of the old having been vanquished by the Protestant Reformation, as in Martin’s (1987) somewhat over-simplified portrait, it might be more salutary, and more faithful indeed to original Christianity no matter its early variety of forms, to follow Helmut Koester’s (1991:473) plea: “To achieve a better understanding of the New Testament and of early Christian history efforts have to be made to educate ourselves better in order to achieve the necessary scholarly tools for the investigation of the religions of the late Hellenistic and Roman periods and of early Christianity and Judaism as part of that history of religion and culture”. This study has attempted, however modestly, to pursue just such an undertaking.

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