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Alexandrian Christianity

By Jim Myers

The heart of the Jesus Movement was Jerusalem until a few years before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Once the Temple was destroyed its anchor to the Jewish culture severed and it began its transition from a Jewish movement to a new universal religion anchored not to a culture, but to a doctrinal system.

It appears that the first stop for the leadership of the Jesus Movement after it left Jerusalem was Pella; and from there it shifted to Antioch. Within a few years significant groups also existed in Rome and Alexandria. In the 4th century Rome would become the dominant center with the help of the Constantine, emperor of the Roman Empire. However, from the second through third centuries tremendous power struggles took place between the different groups that were all being lumped under the name "Christian."

It must be clearly understood that even though a common name was being applied to all of the groups, there was no uniform belief system which they all shared. This was the period from which most of the doctrines that would become the foundational beliefs for the Roman Catholic Church would be framed through deadly power struggles and conflict. Two of the primary rivals were Antioch and Alexandria.

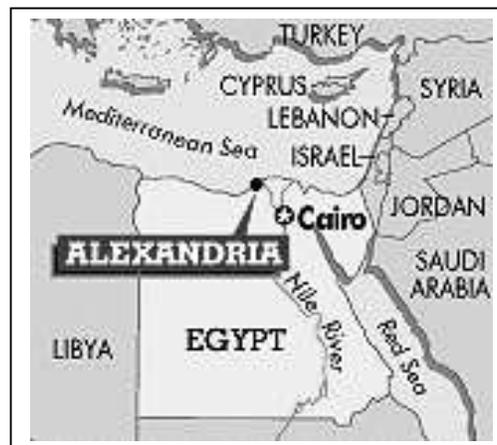
Alexandria, Egypt was an important religious center for Judaism long before the birth of Jesus. It was the location of Jewish mystery schools from which Alexandrian Christianity would be greatly influenced. One of the most famous Alexandrian Jewish teachers was Philo, who was known for his use of allegorisms. The word

"allegory," is derived from the Greek "*alla*," meaning "other," and "*agoreuo*," meaning "proclaim." It originally referred to a figure of speech that Cicero defined as a "continuous stream of metaphors."

According to the fourth-century Christian theologian Augustine, allegory is a mode of speech in which one thing

is understood by another. Allegory differs from the parable in its more systematic presentation of the different features of the idea which it illustrates, as well as in its content which is concerned with the exposition of theoretical truths rather than practical exhortation.

Philo made a systematic use of it to bridge the chasm between the Torah revelation and Platonic philosophy. He compared the *literal sense of Scripture* to the shadow which the body casts, finding its authentic, profounder truth in the spiritual meaning which it symbolizes.



Clement of Alexandria is considered the first Christian theologian (writer) to use allegorical interpretation. He said that the Bible has hidden meanings to incite us to search and discover the words of salvation, which are hidden from those who despise them. He taught that the truth is in the pearls which must not be offered to the swine.

One of his most famous disciples, **Origen**, expanded Clement's justifications for using allegorical interpretation to the Scriptures. A vigorous reaction against the Alexandrian allegorism came in the fourth and fifth centuries. Its center was

Antioch, which concentrated on the literal sense of the Scriptures.

Around **100 CE** the *Epistle of Barnabas* was written, according to some scholars, in Alexandria. It was later cited as authoritative scripture by **Clement of Alexandria**. **It claims that a new law supplants the old Law** -- The Lord abolished the sacrifices of the Law "*in order that a new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is free from the yoke of necessity, might have its offering not made by man*" (2:6). **Barnabas 9** substitutes circumcision of the heart for physical circumcision.

In **Barnabas 15** the **Jewish Sabbath** is replaced by **Sunday** as the Christian day of worship. Barnabas also discards the Jewish food laws by quoting the commandment against eating swine (Lev. 11:7) and then reinterpreting it allegorically.

Barnabas 16:1 contains an idea that will find its way into later Christianity concerning the Jews:

"Wretched Jews went astray and set their hope on a building, as being the house of God, instead of on God who made them."

The disfavor of the Jews was further increased as a result of the revolts in **Alexandria** and **Cyrene**

by the Jews (115-117 CE). Jews in Egypt and Cyrene (on North African coast in present-day Libya) took advantage of Trajan's absence to attack their Greek neighbors. The devastation in both Greek and Jewish communities was enormous; the Jews gained the upper hand in rural areas of Egypt, but they were defeated in

Alexandria. As late as 199-200 an annual festival was celebrated in the Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchus to commemorate the victory over the Jews. Dio says 220,000 people were massacred by the Jews in Cyrene.



Philo



Clement

Cyprus was another area of violence involving Jews. Some 240,000 inhabitants were said to have been killed. Jews were banned from the island. The Jews of Alexandria, the Egyptian countryside, Cyprus, and Cyrenaica (part of modern-day Libya) fought the Romans.

Basilides of Alexandria (117 CE), who, with his son **Isadore**, led one of the Christian groups in Alexandria. His first principle is a Being so abstract that thought cannot give him a name. The world is continuously enlarged from a "pansperma" or "seed of the world," in which all things were originally potentially contained. It is ruled by two great **Archons**, who yet subserve the designs of the Supreme. The highest "light" descends through the successive spheres till it rests in **Jesus of Nazareth**. The process is complete when the divine element ("sonship") is all drawn out and restored to God, oblivion then falls on lower intelligences.

Basilides was conversant with both Hebrew scriptures and Christian writings. He was also steeped in Egyptian and Hellenistic thought. This can be seen by the fact that he taught that Jesus was baptized on January 6, a date which had been celebrated for centuries in Egypt as "the Day of Osiris." This is one of the early examples of how Christianity adopted a pagan belief, celebration or ritual and modified it to reflect the beliefs of a specific Christian group. **BHR**

The Biblical Heritage Center Guiding Principle

Our respective systems of beliefs serve as the foundation for our security, the basis for our values and way of life, and the standard to which we turn when faced with important decisions. Such beliefs are primary factors in forming the way we see the world – our reality.

Living in a post September 11th era, we are now facing a challenge that hits at the very heart of our spiritual foundation – the potential deadly consequences of religious belief systems. History reveals that people who blindly follow dogmatic religious belief systems represent a threat to civilized society and the quality of life of their fellow man. Religious beliefs have been at the heart of countless conflicts ranging from interfamily fights to bloody wars between nations. This cycle of conflict has been repeated countless times throughout the history of mankind.

The Biblical Heritage Center has concluded that the only healthy solution to this situation is the voluntary incorporation of factual information by individuals who sincerely desire and search for spiritual truth. The result of the inclusion of factual information is that the belief system is expanded and the person becomes more open to examining their personal beliefs, as well as becoming more willing to change when error or incomplete information is discovered. Those who follow this principle become more compassionate and tolerant, thereby making our world a safer and happier place.

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