



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about the Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events and people of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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The Christians of Alexandria, Egypt

By Jim Myers



It is the 4th century. Imagine a city of **one million people** spread out for about ten miles along the Mediterranean coast. When you look over at the harbor you see one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the **Pharos**, a four-hundred-foot lighthouse. It was said that from the top of the Pharos one could look through a transparent stone and see ships far out at sea, invisible to the naked eye.

For centuries Alexandria served as not only the Mediterranean world's busiest port, it was also the premier center of science and learning.¹

Alexandria was founded by **Alexander the Great** in April of 331 BCE. In a century, Alexandria had become the largest city in the world and, for some centuries more, was second only to Rome. It became Egypt's main Greek city, with Greek people from diverse backgrounds. Alexandria was not only a center of Hellenism, but was also home to the largest urban Jewish community in the world. The **Septuagint**, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, was produced there. The city passed formally under Roman jurisdiction in 80 BCE, according to the will of Ptolemy Alexander, but only after it had been under Roman influence for more than a hundred years.²



SOURCE³

The library at Alexandria, begun under Ptolemy I (305-285 BCE) was completed by Ptolemy II (285-246 BCE) who sent invitations to rulers and scholars asking them to contribute books. According to historians Oakes and Gahlin, *There was room for up to 70,000 papyrus scrolls. Most of the items were bought, but other means were sometimes used acquire what was desired. In order to procure coveted works, all ships entering the harbor were searched. Every book found was taken to the Library where it was decided whether to give it back or confiscate it and replace it with a copy.*⁴

It was a waterfront city that brought a variety of visitors with their cultures and religions from distant places. Of Alexandria's million inhabitants, it is estimated that 250,000 were Jews whose ancestors had begun settling there long before the Judean rebellion with Rome in the first century CE. The diverse cultures mixed, clashed, and recombined to form new ideas and sects.⁵

Alexandria had long attracted people of many different faiths who competed for dominance in the city. Religious scholars were said to frequent the library for research. Under Augustus's reign there were disputes between Jews, pagans and, as Christianity grew in popularity, Christians. Alexandria soon became an arena of religious contention as the new faith of the Christians conflicted with the old faith of the pagan majority and that of the Jews. As the Christians increased in number and power, they felt bold enough to strike at the symbols of the old faith in an attempt to topple it.⁶

Alexandria produced a special type of Judaism called *Hellenism*. Keep in mind that for many years the new Christians were seen as part of Judaism and they were heavily influenced by the Alexandrian flavor of Judaism and one of the most important Hellenist Jewish teachers -- **Philo Judaeus**. He was a Jewish philosopher, born about 20 BCE at Alexandria and died shortly after 40 CE.

Philo read the Jewish Scriptures chiefly from the Septuagint, the Greek translation made in Alexandria over two-hundred years before his birth. It is clear that he understood Hebrew and used the Hebrew text by his numerous etymologies of Hebrew names. He combined Greek philosophy with his Hebrew religion and sought to fuse and harmonize them by means of the art of allegory that he learned from the **Stoics**. Philo quotes the Greek poets frequently and often alludes to their works.⁷

Philo's concept of God clearly shows the influence of Greek philosophy. He shares with **Neo-Pythagorism** *the dualistic contrast between God and the world, between the finite and the infinite*. He adds to these the ideas of **Stoicism** -- *God is the only efficient cause and divine reason emanates in the world*.

Philo's doctrine of dead -- *as inert, non-existent matter* -- harmonizes in its essentials with the **Platonic** and **Stoic** doctrine.

His account of the Creation is almost identical with that of **Plato**.

Philo's doctrine of the body -- *as the source of all evil* -- corresponds entirely with the **Neo-Pythagorean** doctrine.

His doctrine of the soul -- *as a divine emanation* -- is very similar to Plato's.⁸

For Christianity, it will be Philo's teachings about God that will have far-reaching consequences:

God is not similar to heaven, the world or man.

God exists neither in time nor space.

God has no human attributes or emotions.

God has no attributes whatever.

God has no name.

God cannot be perceived by man.

God cannot change.

God is always the same.

God needs no other being.

God is self-sufficient.

God can never perish.

God is simply existent.

*God has no relations with any other being.*⁹

A problem Philo faced was how to connect his doctrines of God to humans who could perceive him and who did exist in a world of time and space. Philo borrowed another Greek doctrine and used it to bridge this huge chasm.

God was obliged to separate from Itself the activity displayed in the world.

The activity displayed in the world was done by a Being that received divine powers from God.

*This was a single independent Being, which he called the **Logos**.*¹⁰

He refers to the Logos in a number of ways:

The Logos is the "archangel of many names."

The Logos is the "taxiarch" (corps-commander).

The Logos is the "name of God."

The Logos is the "heavenly Adam."

The Logos is the "word of the eternal God."

The Logos is designated as "high priest."

The Logos is the expiator of sins.

*The Logos is the mediator and advocate for men.*¹¹

It must be noted that the **Church Fathers**, not Judaism, preserved Philo's works that are now extant.¹² Alexandria's Christian leaders also drew on the latest Alexandrian trends in Greek philosophy, which included Philo's view, to formulate their doctrines about Jesus and their religion. From a Greek philosophical perspective, they were often brilliant and produced repeated innovations. Christian philosophers had their own schools and their innovations were often in conflict with other Christian

schools. This created constant tension among Christian groups, as well as between them and Hellenist Jews. These disputes were not mere verbal debates between intellectuals -- *they became Alexandria's favorite sport*. The conflicts became a popular activity of ordinary laypeople who transformed them into passionate events that sometimes became as bloody as gladiatorial contests in Rome.¹³ They also ignited a conflict between Hellenist Jews and Greek thinking Christians. Inspired by anti-Semitic teachings in the second century, Alexandrian Christians launched one of the earliest riots against the city's Jewish community.¹⁴

A very important Christian leader, **Origen**, was born in Alexandria (c. 184) to Christian parents and educated by his father, **Leonides of Alexandria**. Origen received a standard Hellenistic education, but he also studied Christian writings. In 202, Origen's father was martyred in the outbreak of the persecution during the reign of Septimius Severus. It appears that Origen became a teacher of Greek philosophy by the time he was eighteen. He visited imprisoned Christians, attended the courts, and comforted the condemned. He was probably preserved from persecution because the persecution appears to have been limited only to converts to Christianity. As his fame spread the number of his pupils increased rapidly. He drew the attention of Demetrius, the Bishop of Alexandria, who instructed Origen to restrict himself to instruction in Christian doctrine alone.¹⁵ Origen's travels exposed him to a broad range of ideas and influential people.

Around 211 Origen paid a brief visit to Rome where he became dismayed by the relative theological laxity of the Roman church and returned to Alexandria.

His own interests became more and more centered in exegesis, which led him to study Hebrew. We do not know anything about his instructor.

Around 213 Origen visited Arabia at the request of the prefect, who wished to have an interview with him. He spent a brief time in Petra.

In 214, a popular uprising at Alexandria caused soldiers to plunder the city, shut the schools, and expel all foreigners. Origen left Egypt and went to Caesarea, where he spent some time.

While in Caesarea, in conformity with local usage based on Jewish custom, Origen, though not ordained, preached and interpreted the scriptures at the request of Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem and Theoctistus, Bishop of Caesarea.

Around 216 Demetrius recalled Origen to Alexandria after the confusion had subsided. At first Demetrius supported him, but later the bishop turned against him.

Origen left Alexandria c. 231 and made his permanent home in Caesarea in Palestine, where his friend Theoctistus was bishop.

Little is known of the last twenty years of Origen's life. He founded a school where Gregory Thaumaturgus, later bishop of Pontus, was one of the pupils. He preached regularly on Wednesdays and Fridays, and later daily. He taught dialectics, physics, ethics, and metaphysics.¹⁶

According to **Epiphanius**, Origen wrote about 6,000 works (*i.e.*, rolls or chapters). By far the most important work of Origen on textual criticism was the *Hexapla*, a comparative study of various translations of the Hebrew Scriptures. The full text of the *Hexapla* is no longer extant. Some portions were discovered in Milan indicating that at least some individual parts existed much longer than was previously thought. The *Hexapla* has been referred to by later manuscripts and authors, and represents the precursor to the parallel bible.¹⁷ Origen created a number of doctrines -- *some have endured and others were later rejected.*

Souls existed before the world was created by God.

God created a great number of spiritual intelligences, which at first were devoted to the contemplation and love of their creator but later grew bored: those whose love diminished the least became angels; those whose love diminished moderately became human; and, those whose love diminished the most became demons.

One spiritual intelligence remained perfectly devoted to God through love and one with the Word of God – the Logos. The Logos eventually took flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary, becoming the God-man Jesus Christ.

The empirical Church, representing "a double church of men and angels", or, in Platonic phraseology, the lower church and its celestial ideal. The ideal Church alone was the Church of Christ, scattered over all the earth; the other provided also a shelter for sinners. This Church was in possession of the mysteries through which were the only means of salvation. This was not the earthly church.

God the Father is a perfect unity, invisible and incorporeal, transcending all things material, and therefore inconceivable and incomprehensible.

God is unchangeable, and transcends space and time.

God's power is limited by his goodness, justice, and wisdom.

God is entirely free from necessity.

God's goodness and omnipotence constrained him to reveal himself.

The Logos is the rational creative principle that permeates the universe.

God eternally manifests himself through the Logos which is likewise eternal.

The Logos forms a bridge between the created and uncreated, and only through him, as the visible representative of divine wisdom, can the inconceivable and incorporeal God be known.

Creation came into existence only through the Logos.

The mortal body of Jesus was transformed by God into an ethereal and divine body.

Origen's concept of the soul of Jesus was uncertain and wavering.

In the final reconciliation of all creatures, including perhaps even the devil will be reconciled with God.

Athanasius was the twentieth bishop of Alexandria (b. 296 ó d. 373). When he was a boy playing like he was baptizing other boys, Bishop Alexander saw him and invited him and his playmates to prepare for clerical careers. His episcopate lasted 45 years (c. 8 June 328 ó 2 May 373). A few of Athanasius' doctrines are:

The Father and Son are distinct yet also co-equal, co-eternal, and con-substantial Persons.

One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life.

Anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds.

United to the saints and sacred writers in the fellowship of life, a man will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.

*The Son of God became man so that we might become God.*¹⁸

During his 45 years as a bishop, Athanasius spent over 17 years in five exiles ordered by four different Roman emperors.

(1) *Emperor Constantine the Great from July 11, 335 until 22 November 22, 337*

(2) *Emperor Constantius from April 16, 339 until October 21, 346*

(3) *Emperor Constantius from February 9, 356 until February 21, 362*

(4) *Emperor Julian from October 24, 362 until June 26, 363*

(5) *Emperor Valens from October 5, 364 until January 31, 366*¹⁹

Athanasius is credited with creating the New Testament with the same 27 books that use today. Up until his Easter letter, various New Testaments with other books were in use. His list of books became the one that was eventually ratified by a series of synods and came to be universally recognized as the New Testament canon.²⁰ Keep in mind that by the time Athanasius' New Testament was created, over 300 years had passed since Jesus was crucified and Christianity existed without it.

Athanasius is also incorrectly linked to the famous *Athanasian Creed*. It was a medieval account that credited Athanasius of Alexandria, the famous defender of Nicene theology, as being the author of the Creed. According to the account, Athanasius composed it during his exile in Rome and presented it to Pope Julius I as a witness to his orthodoxy. This tradition was first called into question in 1642 by

Dutch Protestant theologian G.J. Voss, and his position has been widely accepted by modern scholars who also conclude that the creed was not authored by Athanasius and that it was not originally called a creed at all. Athanasius' name seems to have become attached to the creed to make it appear to be a stronger declaration of Trinitarian faith, when the doctrine of the Trinity was being challenged. The reasoning for rejecting Athanasius as the author is based on a combination of the following:

- (1) *The creed originally was most likely written in Latin, while Athanasius composed in Greek.*
- (2) *Neither Athanasius nor his contemporaries ever mention the Creed.*
- (3) *It is not mentioned in any records of the ecumenical councils.*
- (4) *It appears to address theological concerns that developed after Athanasius died.*
- (5) *It was most widely circulated among Western Christians.*²¹

The Greek-speaking Eastern Roman Empire had three great cities ó **Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople**. They became the major centers of Christianity, along with one city in the West, **Rome**. No city contributed more to the formulation of doctrines concerning the relationship of God and Jesus than Alexandria. *It has been said that even though the Roman Catholic Church recorded the doctrines of Christianity in Latin, the thoughts behind many of those words was Greek. Remember, Jesus was a Jew and the thoughts behind his words were Jewish, not Hellenist or Greek.* **BHC**

¹ *When Jesus Became God: The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome* by Richard E. Rubenstein © 1999; Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, NY; p. 4.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria>

³ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/etc/tl/img/00300.jpg>

⁴ <http://www.ancient.eu/alexandria/>

⁵ *When Jesus Became God*; p. 5.

⁶ <http://www.ancient.eu/alexandria/>

⁷ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12116-phil-judaeus>

⁸ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12116-phil-judaeus>

⁹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12116-phil-judaeus>

¹⁰ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12116-phil-judaeus>

¹¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12116-phil-judaeus>

¹² <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12116-phil-judaeus>

¹³ *When Jesus Became God*; p. 5.

¹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen>

¹⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen>

¹⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen>

¹⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen>

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius_of_Alexandria

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius_of_Alexandria

²⁰ <http://www.theopedia.com/Athanasius>

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasian_Creed

February Memorials

In Loving Memory

**PHYLLIS
WYRE**

d. February 8, 1998

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

In Loving Memory

**ALBERTA
HARLESS
MYERS**

b. August 18, 1887
d. February 5, 1979

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

In Loving Memory

**GLORY ANN
HODGES
ROSS**

b. January 25, 1978
d. February 19, 2008

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to seek
those qualities of mind and heart which
they shared when we walked life's
journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our loyalty
to those things which we valued and
shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion and our
biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will live; for
they are now a part of us, as we
remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send their information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you in the **BHC Memorial Garden**.

In Loving Memory

**MARIA
ESTELLA
RUIZ**

d. February 22, 1996

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

In Loving Memory

**JAMES
HENRY
MYERS**

b. September 6, 1881
d. February 13, 1953

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*



SHALOM

*Totality, Wholeness &
Peace.*

Cherish the memories of those who touched & blessed our lives!