

## Chapter Three

### Early Christianity in North Africa

Kenneth Sawyer & Youhana Youssef

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1866, Edward Wilmot Blyden visited Egypt. As he gazed at the pyramids, a stirring feeling overwhelmed him about the achievements of his ancestors. He decided on a vocation to urge the descendants of these creative Africans to retake their fame. Was Blyden's hope only a romantic dream? Egypt has continued to loom large in African quest for identity. The story of Christianity in North Africa is part of a golden period of African cultural prominence in the world stage, including the role of Africans in the formation of Christianity as it emerged from the Jesus movement, a sect within Judaism. The story of Christianity is linked to but distinct from the peoples and cultures that surround it. While Egyptians, for instance, considered themselves to be living at the very center of the world, and while they were quite adept at defining themselves over against outsiders, they also proved adept at adapting, absorbing, and resisting other cultures. Those historians who have sought to study northern Africa apart from its geographical and cultural context, those who promote the virtual excision of Egypt from Africa, have greatly distorted its history by describing it in isolation from its intercultural and international contacts. The study of Egypt somehow segregated from Nubian, Libyan, Semitic, Hellenic and Asian influence has greatly distorted the rich interactive complexities of Egyptian civilization, reflecting and reinforcing a most unhelpful segmentation of studies, as if Egyptologists, Africanists, Classicists and Semiticists were incapable of a shared subject or a common perspective. A simple test remains useful: look at the map to answer whether Egypt or any part of northern Africa could be recognized as part of Africa. Once this question is answered responsibly, then the distinctiveness

and internal dynamics of its cultures and histories can be more readily recognized against a broader African and Mediterranean backdrop. The history of the Maghrib *is* African history. The current controversies regarding various forms of Afrocentrism have helped challenge its undue separation from broader African and Mediterranean themes, and have prompted review and revision of interpretative categories rooted in nineteenth century prejudices.<sup>39</sup> Many Westerners find it difficult to believe that the early church fathers were Africans. It would be easier for some to regard Augustine as an Italian! The central task remains to be sufficiently attentive to the particularities of Maghrib cultures without abstracting the region from its context. This chapter is itself a contribution offered to this ongoing discussion.

The rhythms and particularities of Nile culture are well known: a thin ribbon of fertile land unencumbered by forest or animal predators; the stability of protective deserts to the east and west, and forbidding river cataracts to the south. With regular flooding, and the introduction of effective irrigation techniques, Egypt became the breadbasket to the ancient world through migration, trade, and conquest. The allures of Egypt led to a series of interventions by regional and “world” powers, each seeking to secure the wealth and products of Nilotic culture and agriculture. For example, in the Third Intermediate Period (1069-664BC), Egypt was ruled by Libyans, Assyrians, Kushites and Nubians. Likewise, 664-332BC were years of struggle against Persian control in successive periods of independence and subjugation, yet in these years Egypt extended military and commercial presence well beyond historic borders, throughout the Mediterranean world, including armed interventions into Judah, and as far east as the Euphrates River. Throughout these centuries, military action and trade brought the world to Egypt. Most importantly for the subject of this chapter, colonies of Greeks and of Jews are found in Egypt from these years forward, as evidenced in the works of Herodotus. From the sixth century BC, Jews were found in the south of Egypt in service to Persian interests, and by the time of Alexander’s triumphs in Egypt in the last third of the fourth century BC, Jews were living along the Nile, with growing settlements subsequent in Lower Egypt. While the stories of Joseph, Moses, and the Exodus substantially predate the focus of this chapter, the Jewish presence in Egypt is crucial to discussions of the history of

<sup>39</sup> As shown by the lengthy bibliographies by and in response to Martin BERNAL, *Black Athena* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987). See also Stephen HOWE, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (New York: Verso, 1998).

Christianity in Egypt, since the identity of Egyptian Christianity would be formed in engagement with the fullness of Egyptian culture.

The conquests of Alexander of Macedon clearly began a new and important phase in Egyptian history, especially in cultural relations. Alexander's complete mastery of Egypt was shown by his welcome there—he was hailed as liberator of Egypt from Persian domination, and was named Pharaoh in November of 332BC. Alexander set in place governance structures characteristically attentive to local cultural traditions, while privileging Greek traditions like the gymnasium and the athletic games. The Greeks neither suppressed nor encouraged traditional Egyptian religious and cultural forms, thus co-opting opposition without provoking a reactive rejection. While some Egyptians sought to maintain a clear distance from Greek forms, others found the lure of Hellenism irresistible. Hellenism thus facilitated a hybridity among Egyptians, Greeks, and Jews, especially in the increasingly cosmopolitan cities of the lower Nile. With the death of Alexander, his general Ptolemy established control of Egypt, and gave the name to the ruling dynasty that reigned until its end with the death of Cleopatra VII. The three hundred years of Ptolemaic Egypt saw a slow but clear decline toward the status of Roman client state, with Rome blending its interests with the pliant Ptolemies against the Syrian Seleucids. Crucial signs of this process are shown in Rome forbidding Antiochus III to advance into Egypt in 205BC, or the justly famous scene of 168BC, described by Polybius, when Gaius Popillius Laenas presented to the invading Antiochus IV a decree of the Roman Senate instructing him to abandon his Egypt campaign and release his prisoner (Ptolemy VI). When Antiochus IV delayed answering, the Roman legate drew a circle around the Seleucid king, telling him to answer before stepping out of the circle.

The ability of the Romans to intervene effectively in Egypt marked the lengths to which they would go to protect their grain interests. During the second and first centuries BC, Roman political and commercial presence increased dramatically in Egypt, with Egypt developing its share in the broader Greco-Roman cultural and trade world under the protection of Roman arms. Roman intervention in the dynastic disputes of the Ptolemies, whether by Sulla, or Pompey, or Gabinius, anticipated a time of direct Roman rule. The end of the House of Ptolemy was tied to civil war in both Egypt and in Rome. Ptolemy Auletes' death in 51BC brought two of his children to reign: daughter Cleopatra VII and son Ptolemy XII. Julius Caesar's alliance with Cleopatra brought a temporary peace to Egypt, and took Cleopatra to Rome in 46BC. The death of Caesar sent Cleopatra back to Egypt and into alliance with Antony. After a dozen years of intrigue, Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Octavian at the Battle of Actium in

31BC, with their suicides following in 30BC. Thus began under Octavian Augustus centuries of direct Roman rule in Egypt. Though the Egyptian traditions would continue, seeking to accommodate and incorporate new realities and rulers by listing and depicting the new Roman rulers as Pharaoh in various temples, the Roman reign showed a casual disregard for the claims of Egyptian traditions.<sup>40</sup>

These matters are significant for this chapter for several reasons: Rome came in power to rule Egypt with a different spirit and intent than the earlier Greeks. The Egyptian engagement with Hellenism did not end with the last Ptolemy, but rather continued through the next centuries as an essential component of Egyptian cultural and religious life, now joined with the new realities as a Roman province. The blending of traditional Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, and Roman culture became a characteristic of Egyptian urban culture, especially in Alexandria and its cultural orbit, with each now contesting distinct privileges under a Roman regime uninterested in political accommodation or cultural assimilation. The Romans imposed a set of governance codes with severe biases against the native Egyptians, with lesser but still quite onerous burdens for Greeks and Jews. Rome conducted official business in Latin and Greek, excluding the Egyptian Demotic. The Romans were interested in Egypt only insofar as preventing a break in the grain supply or in pre-empting political intrigue. Though some emperors (Domitian, Trajan, and others) showed interest in traditional Egypt, even importing Egyptian religious iconography and practice to Rome and elsewhere in the empire, the overall pattern showed the Romans to be preoccupied by challenges on other borders and other regions, and thus often inattentive masters who were content with the often brutal exploitation of Egypt and its peoples. Rome considered Egypt a province best suited for the placement of legions and the raising of tax revenues.

After Rome, Alexandria was the great second city of the Empire, and under Rome, Egypt was sufficiently secure as to be strategically marginal among the provinces of Rome, while the steady decline of agricultural productivity under Roman management rendered Egypt increasingly marginal economically and sociologically. The severe Roman military response to the Jewish rebellions of the 60s, AD, and again from 112 to 117AD, were but steps toward the temporary eclipse of Egyptian Judaism. The oppressive burdens of Roman taxation prompted revolt by some and

<sup>40</sup> See Robert K. RITTER, "Egypt under Roman rule: the legacy of Ancient Egypt," in Carl F. PETRY (ed), *The Cambridge History of Egypt* (vol. I, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-15.

disengagement by many in Egypt, while the slow atrophy of traditional Egyptian religion was shown through displacement by a variety of challengers, especially Christianity, leading eventually to the expression of Christian identity in the formation of a national Church that blended monastic with episcopal aspects, rural with urban cohorts, and overall compliance with a strong narrative of faithful and costly dissent.

## I. CHRISTIAN ORIGINS IN EGYPT

Current debates regarding the origins of Christianity in Egypt have several foci: the references to Egypt and the Cyrene in the New Testament; the absence of accepted archeological and textual evidence prior to the later second century; the complex identity of Jewish Christianity in the first and second centuries; the place of literacy in the formation of Christian identity in Egypt; the nature of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” in the early churches of Egypt; and the relative importance of the gnostic traditions in explaining the diversity of voices in early Egyptian Christianity.

While Egypt, Egyptians, and other Africans are mentioned in the New Testament, specific details of the introduction of Christianity into Egypt remain a textured interweaving of mysteries and myths often more compelling for believers than historians. While respectful of the place of honor given to later narratives and gospels purporting to tell of first-century conversions and miracles in Egypt, we must recognize a sizable evidentiary gap between the New Testament documents and the time of Alexandria’s Bishop Demetrius and teacher Pantaenus towards the end of the second century AD. The various second century documents purporting to tell of first century events remain valuable reflections of later Christian interests, and they do not prevent abiding with several reasonable conjectures, given the connections of Egypt with the broader Hellenistic and Roman world, the documented pattern of evangelism within diasporic Judaism, the range of Biblical and extra Biblical references, the significance of the biblical literary expression in the formation of Christian identity, and the subsequent appearance of Christian communities throughout Egypt.

### 1. Biblical Texts

Among those listed in Acts 2.10 are those from “Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene”, though no names are mentioned and no details are given. The flow of faithful Jews throughout the diaspora provides one likely route of diffusion of information regarding the work of John the Baptist, the life and work of Jesus, and the events from Passover to Pentecost. Given the prevalent use of Greek within the Jewish communities

of Egypt, especially Alexandria, some consider likely a rapid spread of the news from Palestine. Acts 18.24 refers to “a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria ... instructed in the Way of the Lord....” Though later texts speak of Apollos having received his teaching in his native land, commentators note it remains unclear when and what forms of the Gospel were brought to Egypt. If Apollos taught in Ephesus and Corinth what he had learned in Alexandria, then Apollos had learned of Jesus, but knew only of the baptism associated with John. Some view Apollos as indicative of the diversity of early Christianity, possibly even in Egypt itself. If Apollos was presenting accurately the Christianity he knew in Egypt, then we must note the significance of differences shown in the continuing conversations with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18), and Paul’s rebaptisms of some who had been taught by Apollos (Acts 19). Beyond the Book of Acts, some have cited 1 Peter 5.13 as referring to a Egyptian Babylon near contemporary Cairo, linking Peter with Mark to an Egyptian location, but this reading does not enjoy scholarly acceptance.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of the flight into Egypt (2.13 ff), with Joseph, Mary and Jesus remaining there until the death of Herod. The significance of this narrative, its use of dreams and angels, and the strong parallels with the infancy of Moses are part of the larger theological purposes of the author. No details are included in this narrative regarding events in Egypt, though in the second and subsequent centuries, a host of non-canonical works sought to provide rich and abundant detail without historical referent or evidence. These apocryphal sources, like the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, or the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, purport to tell stories of the passage of the Holy Family through many sites in Egypt, of miracles performed by Jesus and of miraculous responses to Jesus by Egyptians. These apocryphal works are yet without historical foundation.

## 2. Tradition and Traditions

Beyond the apocryphal stories regarding the Holy Family in Egypt, Christian tradition associates Mark with Egypt. A late second century fragment from Clement refers to Mark as the founder of churches in Egypt, and the fourth century historian Eusebius reports the accepted traditions regarding Mark:<sup>41</sup>

“And they say that this Mark was the first that was sent to Egypt and that he proclaimed the Gospel which he had written, and first

<sup>41</sup> Eusebius, *Church History* II.16.1.

established churches in Alexandria.”

Other sources repeat this Markan connection, but historians have been unable to move from report to endorsing or discrediting this connection. Scholars agree that Christianity may have appeared in Egypt as early as the middle decades of the first century, but no one can write with confidence of its characteristics or content.<sup>42</sup> Continuing investigation of extra-canonical, tradition, and papyri offer hope of providing greater detail regarding Christianity in the first and early second centuries. Pending other evidence, are the patterns observed in Luke-Acts applicable to Egypt? Current assessments of the Book of Acts recognize a distinction between theological and historical components of that work. While the theological mandate of the text claims all the world, whether in “whole world” lists (Acts 2) or in universal mandates (evangelism *into all the world*), the focus of the Book of Acts is oriented to the work of Peter, then of Paul, ever toward Rome and the expected consummation of Paul’s journeys there. Given these purposes, the spread of the gospel towards Rome is privileged in Acts, while the spread of the gospel elsewhere, carried by others, is marginal and incidental. As we have seen the response to Apollos, and note the place of those other evangelists mentioned in Acts 11, scholars ask whether the Palestinian pattern of evangelism should be assumed as *the* pattern of Christian implantation and expansion in Egypt, or whether we should assume multiple points of Christian contact with Egypt, along the Red Sea, overland routes, and in the Delta, and multiple forms of Christianity carried by individuals and groups—whether Jewish or Gentile. Some look to Arabian sources of evangelism into Egypt, suggesting Paul’s three year desert sojourn was spent in preaching and organizing for evangelism throughout those regions, with possible contact with Egyptians. Others look to the rich matrix of Egyptian Judaism as the best model to explain the movement of the Gospel through Egypt.

## II. JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN EGYPT

By the first century of the Common Era (AD), Alexandria held perhaps as many as a half million in population, with about one-fifth Jews. Egyptian Jews relied on the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint) and were less directly linked than Palestinian Jews to Jerusalem Temple activities. Hellenic openness to lay-oriented temple

<sup>42</sup> See Birger A. PEARSON & James E. GOEHRING (eds), *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

culture contrasted with the formal clericalism of traditional Egyptian temple religion, having more in common with the dynamics of diasporic synagogue life. Platonic speculative traditions sometimes mingled with Persian and Egyptian counterparts, and found adherents among Jews and pagans in Egypt. This emergent religious diversity influenced but did not displace the inherited forms of religion, as some continued the traditional Egyptian temple religion, others overtly imitated Greek traditions, some (for example, the Therapeutae) pursued ascetic ways, and yet more developed varieties of syncretic perspectives blending Hermeticism with Hebrew wisdom, ever seeking some adapted combinative rapport between/among worldviews.

The learned Alexandrian Jew Philo (c.20BC-c.50AD) did best what many attempted: the reconciliation of Judaism and Greek philosophy, and the explanation of the Biblical mysteries to the broader world. Some find in Philo aspects of what would later become an Alexandrian Christian interpretive tradition. Scholars attentive to sociological contexts note the downward mobility and general social dislocation of Jews in Egypt under the Romans, contributing to a receptivity to Christianity. The rich diversity of Egyptian Judaism, with its biblical base, its political contests and its openness to speculative philosophical traditions, is compatible with a view of an encounter with and adaptation of the Jesus movement in the first century AD, whether in its literate forms among the cultural elite, in its esoteric forms, or as a movement of popular assent among illiterate Egyptians whose use of the “sacred name” may suggest an oral, rather than textual, proliferation of the Gospel.

## 1. Gnosticism

These issues are significant because of the continuing discussions regarding the form and content of teaching in the early church. While second and third century authors like Irenaeus taught that true teaching had always *preceded* heresy, this view is unhelpful in assessing the sheer diversity of groups and views found in the early church prior to the emergence of ecclesial authority associated with the bishops of Alexandria. Discerning a line dividing “orthodoxy” from “heresy” is a very difficult task before the last third of the second century, when bishops like Irenaeus and Alexandria’s Demetrius spoke on behalf of the apostolic traditions and interpretations.<sup>43</sup> While acknowledging the emergence of this line of

<sup>43</sup> See W. BAUER, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (R. KRAFT & G. KRODEL eds, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971 [1934]). See also H.E.W. TURNER, *The*



“orthodox” ecclesial teaching, we must also recognize the prominence in the second century of other contemporary forms of Egyptian Christianity, especially speculative, ascetic, apocalyptic, and “gnostic” forms, well into the third century. Difficulties abound in assessing the place of the various forms of gnosticism found in Egypt, but several gnostic “schools” or groups attracted followers. Derived from the Greek word “gnosis”, and rooted in widely eclectic sources, gnosticism is associated with many religious traditions, is part of the Pauline polemic found in the New Testament canon, but found more broadly in a rich array of non-canonical sources.<sup>44</sup>

While the forms of Christian gnosticism were as varied as its adherents, all were rooted in central dualism that questioned the goodness of material creation and the redemption of the material realm. This dualism viewed material existence as an unfortunate reality or mistake; that humanity had fallen from a spiritual realm into an existence of bondage to the material realm; that humanity could escape and return to the spiritual realm by receiving a secret, esoteric knowledge; and that the true interpretation of human identity and destiny was hidden from everyone except the gnostics. Most gnostic groups rejected outright the Hebrew scriptures as too earthy, too fleshly, and rejected or radically revised/reinterpreted texts associated with Jesus, eliminating the infancy narratives, the suggestion of bodily suffering or bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the folly of honoring “the body” of flesh, since the flesh was unworthy of redemption. These views are rooted in a series of dualisms between God and the subordinate deity or Demiurge who or by whom the created order came into being; between the good spiritual realm and the evil material realm; and between the spiritual people who have the saving knowledge (gnosis) and all those who either did not or *could not* receive that knowledge. While some gnostic groups are reported to have indulged the flesh in libertine ways, most pursued some form of asceticism. Some groups repudiated marriage and procreation as inappropriate in the realm of the spirit, while the Valentinians held marriage in very high regard.

The opponents of gnosticism like Irenaeus and Hippolytus preserved much of what was known of gnostic groups until recent discoveries of ancient texts. The *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*,

*Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations Between Orthodoxy & Heresy in the Early Church* (London: Mowbray, 1954).

<sup>44</sup> See K. KING, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003). See also B. PEARSON, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

indicate aspects of gnostic Egyptian Christianity, linked with better known texts like the *Epistle of Barnabas*, with its sharp critique of aspects of Judaism. Current scholars speak of thinkers like Basilides (ca. 120AD) and Valentinus (ca. 150AD) as persons who appropriated and “Christianized” aspects of various gnostic traditions, blending Biblical, esoteric, and individual experience that affirmed the salvific role of Jesus, but as a gnostic redeemer, one who was less the revelation than the *revealer* of knowledge. For gnostic Christians, Paul, the Apostles and Mary were more interesting because Jesus revealed himself to them and revealed to them a secret message, rather than that they constituted a coherent tradition or line of doctrine or succession. The presentation of this cosmic and spiritual redemption rendered history less important than cosmology, as shown in the *Apocryphon of John*, or in the schemes of reincarnation found in Basilides and others.

Discussions of the relationship of gnostic groups within Christianity are among the liveliest in the current academic world, with the debates shifting decade by decade. Some stress the openness of gnostic groups to continuing revelation, others the prominence of apocalyptic perspectives, while others note the prominent roles played by women within the gnostic groups as prophets and teachers and leaders, with the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Mary* presenting challenges to male apostolic authority. Is this diverse literature evidence of simultaneous strains of Gentile Christianity and Jewish Christianity in Egypt during the second century? With the continuing discussion of the various theological categories of creation and redemption, all note the central mandate to recognize gnostic voices as constituent parts of the early church. The discovery of a collection of Coptic texts, including gnostic materials, at Nag Hammadi in 1945, only reinforced the mandate to incorporate gnostic views in the emerging portrait of Egyptian Christianity.

While these fourth-century gnostic texts tell nothing of first and early second century life, they testify to the continuing competition among gnostic groups and between the gnostics and the orthodox ecclesial church, centered in Alexandria and connected with others throughout Egypt and the emerging Christian world. As the investigation and discussion of the gnostic texts continues, the portrait of Egyptian Christianity has necessarily broadened to include these important gnostic sources, slowly reconstructing a very diverse religious culture in the second-century. Clearly, various forms of Christianity coexisted and competed before and after the formation of distinctions and divisions into “orthodoxy” and “heresy”, and may indicate themes that run through the first centuries of Egyptian Christianity. This competition is shown in the denunciations of the

Gnostics by Catholic polemicists, and in later gnostic critiques of the ecclesiastical Catholic leadership in Alexandria. For example, the gnostic *Apocalypse of Peter* refers to those called “deacons” and “bishops” as debased and deceived “dry canals”.<sup>45</sup> While the Great Church drew lines by which gnostic perspectives were to be evaluated and, if need be, excluded, we must continue to listen for gnostic (and later Manichean) voices and debates in the early church, whether among the heretics espousing reincarnation, or among the orthodox teachers in Clement’s use of gnosis, or in the capacious cosmology of Origen.

### III. THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURY EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANITY

#### 1. Catholic Ecclesial Leadership in Alexandria

To begin with Catholic ecclesial leadership in Alexandria: by the last decades of the second century, the church in Alexandria was led by those who had joined the line of theological perspective and episcopal leadership seen elsewhere around the Mediterranean; shown in the power of a community of bishops in conversation with one another and with increasing control over their local population. With Demetrius, bishop from 189-231AD and his successors, Alexandrian Christianity took up a prominent role in broadly Catholic Christianity, extending its reach southward along the Nile, and extending its influence in the larger church as a center of learning and leadership.

The significance of these developments must neither be underestimated nor overestimated: under Demetrius and his successors, Egyptian bishops joined the community of bishops; suffered along with the other churches in periods of persecution; began to influence the rest of the church through the appointment of Alexandrians to other bishoprics; followed a line of development away from gnostic and apocalyptic sources and traditions; and developed a distinctive line of biblical and theological interpretation that favored allegory and began with the language of the inherent unity of the Godhead. At the same time, competing voices continually challenged the Alexandrian leadership with its Greek orientation. Until the break with Catholic Christianity, following the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon of 451AD, Alexandria was the complex but formidable power of Catholic Christianity, competing with Rome, then also with Constantinople—in forming theological opinion, fomenting political

<sup>45</sup> See C.W. GRIGGS, *Early Egyptian Christianity from its Origins to 451 CE* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), ch.4.

opposition, and fostering Christian identity throughout the church. The Alexandrian traditions in speculative and biblical theology took on a decidedly orthodox hue under the leadership of a series of bishops and teachers of the Great Church. The voice and identity of Christianity in Egypt retained ascetic, speculative, and apocalyptic components, adapted to orthodox purposes. As African Christianity took form within the larger Roman world, distinctive voices of leadership and dissent could be heard across the Mahgrib.

## 2. The Catechetical School and its Prominent Teachers

While those preparing for baptism were certainly trained by the Christian teachers in Alexandria in specific programs of instruction, the “Catechetical School of Alexandria” is a term applied more broadly than referring to one place or one specific curriculum; it is more an interpretive tradition, an idea and a series of influential teachers in positive relation with Catholic Christianity. The series of teachers distinct from the ecclesiastical leadership of the city, indicates a creative distinction between clergy and laity, with interests and perspectives (and constituencies?) overlapping but not identical. Given the likely lengthy preparation for baptism among the Catholic Christians, and with the philosophical traditions of Alexandria and other cosmopolitan cities (as in Justin Martyr’s “school” in Rome), a school (or schools) for catechumens and auditors emerged in the second half of the second century. Pantaneus was associated with the teaching tradition from about the year 180AD. Detail of the life of Pantaneus is scant, but intriguing. He was called the “Sicilian Bee” by Clement, trained in Stoic philosophy, had traveled and perhaps preached as far as India, and some believe him a possible author of the apologetic work *Letter to Diognetus*. While he may have left written works, none are known to have survived. He taught in Alexandria until his death in 200AD.

A slightly younger contemporary, Clement (Titus Flavius Clemens Alexandrinus, ca. 150-215AD), taught in Alexandria during the same years, leaving an important group of writings that blends speculative and Biblical traditions. Clement was not ordained until rather late in his life, after he had left Alexandria for Palestine. His writings show a deep engagement with the contemplative life, and a profound commitment to the exposition of the relation between theology and philosophy. He condemned Valentinian and Basilidian forms of gnosticism as exceeding the Biblical warrants, while he retained the term *gnostic*, properly used, to describe the Christian seeking knowledge of God in service of the people of God. For Clement, philosophy necessarily testified to the same truths as revealed theology,

since all truth is one. In critiquing pagans and gnostics, Clement proclaimed the gospel as the fulfillment of philosophy and serious speculation, available to all, but known by comparatively few. Like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, Clement made use of *logos theology* to commend Christ to the broadest cultural audience.

Clement's views stand in sharp contrast with his contemporary based in Carthage, the Latin Christian Tertullian (c.155-c.225AD), who considered philosophy, poetry and literature so well known and quoted by Clement to be anathema to believers. When Tertullian asked, "What has Athens [philosophy] to do with Jerusalem [theology]?" he answered, "Nothing!"—whereas Clement answered emphatically, "Everything!" While Clement disapproved of excessive speculation or excessive self-denial, he considered all in life was a gift to be used by a freed humanity in praise of a loving God. Clement suggested that high social standing (including riches) was not (necessarily) an impediment to Christian calling. He encouraged the permeation of the Christian movement into the higher echelons of society. As we will note later in this chapter, interesting similarities appear between later Coptic Christianity and the Latin Christianity of Tertullian, Cyprian, and some of the Donatists, linking the types of Christianity in North Africa across the Maghrib.

Clement is best known for three works, each properly considered an admixture of apologetics and letters of instruction for those seeking wisdom: *The Exhortation to the Greeks* (the *Protreptikos*); *The Teacher* (the *Paidagogos*); and the *Miscellanies* (the *Stromateis*). These works are not systematic treatises, they cover a great many topics, seeking above all to provide adequate evidence that literature, philosophy, mythology and poetry all point to the truths revealed in the scriptures. His *Who is the Rich Man to be Saved* sought to teach the pursuit of a moral and contemplative life without a hairshirt. Clement's sifting of the Greco-Roman-Egyptian cultural heritage would be in service of a larger evangelization of the empire, which, for succeeding generations, would know nothing of the sources Clement quoted.

Origen (185-253) came to prominence in Alexandria at a very tender age. His love for the Scriptures, his mastery of the text and his exuberant proclamation of God's loving good news, set him as one of the greatest teachers of the Christian tradition, though not recognized among the "doctors" of the early Church because of some doctrinal shortcomings of his Christology and his decidedly neo-Platonic perspective. Nevertheless, his influence, so great in the century following his death, continues down to our own era. The vastness of his learning renders him a great wonder and an ornament of the Church. It is understood that several personal scribes

were provided him just to keep up with his literary production. His father, Leonides, died in the Severan persecution of 203AD and he was supported and promoted by a patroness who recognized his promise.<sup>46</sup> Following Clement's departure, Origen was appointed leader of the "catechetical school" in his native Alexandria at the age of eighteen. He continued to learn from the best teachers of his time, including the neo-Platonist Ammonius Saccas, under whom the great Plotinus (205-270) himself would study. Origen also steeped himself in the Hebrew text and its traditions, in service to his apologetics with contemporary Jews. His *Hexapla*, a remarkable accomplishment, gathered and collated the text of the Old Testament in six variants. His *On First Principles*, completed before 220AD, presents a cosmic apologetic, seeking to present to a Platonic world a compatible reading of the Gospel. For Origen, the loving plan of God promises nothing less than the restoration, the redemption of all things (even Satan), even if through the means of a seemingly limitless series of incarnations. Crafting a language to describe the relation of the Son to the Father, Origen makes use of emanationist images and a hierarchy of Divinity, subordinating the Son to the Father, and the Spirit to the Son.<sup>47</sup>

Origen was dazzled by the rich gift of the Scriptures and was shocked by what he considered crude and crassly material interpretations that demeaned the glory and defamed the character of God. To those portions of the Scripture for which a literal reading would offend an understanding of the character and ways of God, he pressed the literal text toward its various levels of true meanings, appropriate to a Platonic three-fold division of existence into body (the literal/historical meaning), soul (the moral meaning), and spirit. When explaining the spiritual meaning of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Origen writes:<sup>48</sup>

"... the man *who went down* is Adam; *Jerusalem* means Paradise; *Jericho*, the world; the *robbers*, the enemy powers; the *Priest* stands for the Law; the *Levite* for the Prophets; the *Samaritan* for Christ. The *wounds* stand for our disobedience; the *beast*, the body of the Lord. The common house, that is the *inn*, which receives all who wish to enter it, is interpreted as the Church. Furthermore, the *two denarii* are understood to mean the Father and the Son; the *innkeeper*, the Head of the Church, to whom the plan of

<sup>46</sup> See Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VI.

<sup>47</sup> See Joseph Wilson TRIGG, *Origen* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> Origen, *Homily* 34.

redemption and its means have been entrusted. And concerning that which the Samaritan promises at his return, this was a figure of the Second Coming of the Saviour.”

Origen was steeped in the Scriptures, committed to the message of the Gospel entrusted to the Church, and disciplined by a practiced asceticism joined to a skilled philosophical perspective. As he moved from Alexandria to Caesarea, his influence grew throughout the Greek speaking eastern Church. In addition to his commentaries, letters of exhortation, and disputations, Origen wrote apologetic works, including the *Against Celsus* (ca. 248), less a response to the work by Celsus—*The True Doctrine*—of seventy years earlier, than a summary of the struggle between Christianity and the classical traditions, written now by a man of equal intellectual and cultural facility as his earlier opponent, Celsus. Origen’s work shows the resources and stature now belonging to Christianity, and the enhanced social standing of Christians in the middle of the third century. No longer the tiny minority voice of the “Greek Apologists” of the second century, addressing the majority Greco-Roman world claiming more than it knew, now Christianity was an increasingly powerful voice contesting control of the empire itself, with much at stake in considering power, resistance, and martyrdom. Though a broadening cultural, social, and theological chasm was opening between the Latin speaking western churches and the Greek speaking churches of the east (including Egypt), “Christianity”, in all its various forms, was being attacked in new ways in waves of persecutions during the third century.

### 3. Martyrs

Neither scholarship nor ignorance protected Christians from persecution for being members of the still officially illegal cult. Origen lost his father in the Severan persecution, Clement also fled Alexandria in those years, and Origen himself perished from injuries suffered under the Valerian persecution. The advance of Christianity within the Roman Empire depended upon the support, or at least the inattention, of local and regional authorities. Peter Brown has written of the “equipoise” of paganism and Christianity in the late second and into the third century, with a defacto toleration of Christianity punctuated by periods of intense and extensive persecution.<sup>49</sup> The nature of persecution within the Roman

<sup>49</sup> Peter BROWN, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978).

Empire changed from being sporadic and inter-personal during the first and second centuries, to forming a systematic aspect of state policy, meeting the expectations of the emperors Septimus Severus, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, with a final struggle in the “Great Persecution” under Diocletian. By the middle of the third century, authorities accepted *libellum pacis*, a document by which individuals bought their peace by swearing that they had met the requirements of the law. Many, including Christians, obtained these *libelli* through fraud in an effort to avoid the increasingly demanding imperial cult. Church discipline broke down. In Carthage bishop Cyprian declared that Christians trampled each other to obtain *libelli*. Both Decian and Valerian persecutions confiscated books, buildings, and belongings of Christians, and began a round up of higher clergy, then moved along a broadening line of terror and intimidation against common lay Christians unwilling to bow before the increasingly imperious imperium. The reach of the Severan persecution indicates that by 200AD Christianity had spread throughout Egyptian society, along the Nile, and in each of the four main urban centers, and across the linguistic divide into the Latin speaking western territories. In Egypt, the Coptic Church begins its calendar from the time of these martyrs, recognizing that a true cost of discipleship is measured in suffering.

#### 4. Monasticism

The ascetic impulse ran deep throughout the ancient world. The emergence of monasticism in Egypt must be seen as part of a larger process of identity and spirituality as Christianity gained prominence in the Mediterranean world, so that Egyptian monasticism is connected with Syrian and Asian forms of asceticism, and is also linked with similar forms of resistance and renunciation in other parts of North Africa. Nevertheless, the Egyptian context had its own particular dynamics as ascetic forms of Christianity were reinforced by two opposing processes: social dislocation *and* social advancement. The social crises of the third century, in which the agricultural and economic decline of Egypt was intensified by Roman oppression, encouraged strategies of resistance throughout Egyptian society. Disengagement *from* the world followed disenchantment *with* the world. In the same years, however, some Christians took increasingly prominent positions and cultural advancement throughout Egypt and the Roman world.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See J. GOEHRING, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999).



The rise of a Christianity less interested in eschatology, more attentive to the opportunities of evangelism and faithfulness with the removal of the stigma of illegality and the threat of persecution, provoked a reaction moved by the absolute demands of the Gospel more than by the prospect of preferment and advancement. It is a measure of the skill of the bishops of Alexandria that they were able to forge alliances within the monastic traditions, many of which were distinctly non-ecclesial or explicitly anti-ecclesial in outlook and organization. It is a measure of the inevitable tension of individual piety and institutional policy that sent thousands into desolate places to seek God. The ascetic impulse reached rich and poor alike, and ranged from elite to popular forms. In spite of its popular social foundation, the stories of the saints of the desert would be unknown had they not been mediated by the ecclesial elite of bishops and teachers in translations and distributed throughout the Christian world.

The story of the unordained, unlettered, unsophisticated Antony (c.251-356AD) came to speak to generations of Egyptian Christians and all those who yearned for holiness. It is important to note that virtually all we know about Antony is told by Athanasius, a bishop centered in the bumptious ecclesial culture of Alexandria and the broader Catholic traditions. His *Life of Antony* reflects on and formed spiritual expectations of the era. Antony was raised in comfort by Christian parents, was left an orphan in his teens, and was unable to spiritualize the message of Matthew 19.21 when he heard it being preached. After attending to the needs of a younger sister, placing her with a group of pious women, he sold his possessions and devoted himself to a life of spiritual disciple and an escalating series of disengagements with society, eventually seeking to live alone in desolate places, pursuing the life of the spirit along the Nile south of Memphis at Pispir, then later near the Red Sea. While his piety was individual and non-ecclesial, many sought him out, and countless others were prompted by the same impulse to seek spiritual truth apart from common towns, family, or Church.

Numbers are impossible to establish, but in Antony's lifetime the model of the holy man or holy woman spread, with women and men forging new arrangements, new communities, new families devoted to new forms of holiness. Antony's eremite (hermit) existence was one pattern of what would become the monastic way. Communal monasticism is associated with Pachomius (c. 290-346AD) called Coenobitic (from *koinos bios*). After his conversion and baptism, Pachomius learned of the ascetic tradition from an older holy man, Palamon, and by 320AD he had begun to organize communities regimented in accordance to his own earlier years in army service. While Antony prized solitude as preparation for the struggle

of the soul with the forces of the Devil, Pachomius saw unregulated life as liable to fraud, self-delusion, and dissipation.

The monastic traditions made room for visions, angelic visitations, and a lively apocalyptic expectation. The Pachomian community at Tabenese, in the Thebaid, founded no later than 329AD, provided the pattern for women and men organized (in separate communities) according to his “Rule” or instructions, to seek God and to serve and monitor one another in that search. Small cottage industry and lives were ordered according to the needs of holiness, creating “a city in the desert” of regimented lives, with regular access to priests, the sacraments and the discipline of the Church.

Many fled from towns to the desert, or lived for a season away from family and friends, or sequestered themselves within family compounds, or gathered in unregistered and unregulated communities, seeking holiness. Families and friends and pilgrims came to see and supply these communities and individuals, and soon the stories of the holy men and holy women circulated in oral, then written form, and pilgrims came from Rome, Spain, Asia Minor, and Syria.<sup>51</sup> Antony and others were willing to be enlisted in the theological disputes of their times, and quickly the monastic communities themselves became powers to reckon with in the many complex theological debates that divided Egyptian Christians. The hermit Macarius (d. ca. 405AD), an imitator of Antony, and the shadowy figure Macarius the Egyptian (c.300-390AD), a disciple of Antony, were forced into exile during periods of theological dispute. By the beginning of the fourth century, monastic groups were under the influence but not the control of bishops.

For example, the schism associated with Melitius, the bishop of Lycopolis, centered on disagreements regarding those who had lapsed during the Diocletian persecution. Bishop Peter of Alexandria faced a rebellion, as Melitius disputed Peter’s rulings, and ordained those with whom he agreed. When comparing Pachomian monastic communities with those associated with Melitius, the Melitian communities were run along more hierarchical lines, with less range of freedom for local leadership or members. Similarly, the fifth-century communities associated with Shenoute (d. ca. 450) were strictly run organizations, with vertically integrated leadership and discipline. In light of the mixed group of material found at Nag Hammadi, scholars continue to ponder the probable contacts

<sup>51</sup> See Benedicta WARD, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London: A.R. Mowbray: Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1975). See also P. MILLER, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

between gnostic and orthodox monastic communities, and the probable use of some gnostic materials within some orthodox monastic communities.

These main components of Egyptian Christianity formed and reformed over the centuries: leadership under a series of powerful bishops; the broader and broadening influence of the Alexandrian “school” of theology and biblical interpretation; the image of the martyrs; the voluntary martyrdom of those pursuing holiness through monastic spirituality; the remarkable leaders of monastic communities; the ongoing competition between the monastic and episcopal forms of Christianity; and the fractious debates within and among these groups. While the leaders of the Church moved and lived in the Greek world, some bishops, most monastic communities, and nearly all the rural faithful from the third century onward, used Coptic—the language of the people, the language of the countryside, disdained in the corridors of power, but sustained among the powerless. The four dialects of Coptic, Bohairic, Sahidic, Akhmimic, and Fayumic, all enjoyed early translations of the New Testament, and a great wealth of papyri generated in service of the Church. The study of these Coptic papyri continues to re-frame the received portrait of Egyptian Christianity, especially in its monastic forms.

## 5. From the Council of Nicaea to Chalcedon

The conversion of Constantine brought great changes to the legal and social status of Christians within the Roman Empire, but since Christianity had spread widely throughout Egypt during the third century, the coming of Constantine was less significant for Egyptian Christians than the passing of Diocletian and the end of state-sponsored persecution. Of greater consequence were Constantine’s efforts to achieve religious unity in the Empire by direct intervention in local disputes. The doctrinal differences within Christianity prompted Constantine to seek unity through uniformity, and rendered Christian theology a central aspect of imperial policy throughout the empire. Constantine’s attempt to resolve the Donatist conflict proved a failure, while his intervention in Egypt provided its own challenges. The First Ecumenical Council was convened at Nicaea in 325 by Constantine to address a cluster of Egyptian controversies. At issue were matters of theology, discipline and authority, and practice. All the components of the Egyptian Church were to be found in these controversies, but all of Christianity had a stake in the outcome of the conflicts. The Council of Nicaea showed new realities for Christianity in the Constantinian world: the empire would be deeply involved in ecclesial affairs, though the doctrinal substance of that involvement could shift with

each emperor and his preferences. The significance of the Council of Nicaea is found both in doctrinal formulation and institutional formation, since the unity of the empire was predicated on doctrinal uniformity, bringing together “church” and “state”. For our purposes we will note the central role of some of the Alexandrians in debates related to the doctrine, method, and language of the Trinity and Christology and how the response to the debates determined the character of African Christianity.<sup>52</sup>

Arius (c.250-336AD) was a presbyter serving a working class section of Alexandria in the opening decades of the fourth century. He had ties to the schismatic Melitians, and he was an effective preacher quite capable of popularizing his message. His preaching presented a sharply subordinationist Christology, probably reflective of his own training by Lucian of Antioch (d. 312AD). For Arius, Christ was worthy of great honor, but only as the first born of all creation, for “there was when he was not.” According to Arius, Christ was, by his nature as a creature (however that nature was defined) distinct from God the Father by essence, status, and being. No later than 320AD, Bishop Alexander of Alexandria condemned the teachings of Arius, and sought to stop him from appealing to allies in Palestine and beyond. Efforts to still the controversy failed in local councils and much correspondence, and the Emperor himself intervened by sending his trusted theological advisor Hosius of Cordova. Hosius secured the condemnation of Arius at a local council in 324, and prepared for the broader council at Nicaea in 325, convened and controlled by the Emperor. The argument of the Nicene Creed, that Jesus is *homoousios*—of the same substance—with the Father, defined basic structure and language of Trinitarian formulations of Christian orthodoxy. The specific wording of this Trinitarian formulation was debated for a half-century and finally secured at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Nicene Creed found its most able and persistent defender in Athanasius of Alexandria (c.296-c.373AD), Alexander’s successor after 328AD. No one individual is more closely associated with the advocacy of the Nicene position than Athanasius, though his success was based on his efforts to strengthen links between the Alexandrian Church and the Coptic monastic leaders.

Less known than his older ally, Athanasius, or his own younger students, Didymus the Blind (c.313-398AD) stood in the broadly Origenist tradition, combining a practiced asceticism with a rich knowledge of the

<sup>52</sup> See Frances YOUNG, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

Scriptures. While Athanasius was thoroughly immersed in the politics of the day, Didymus was a scholar who shunned the public fights. His defense of Origen would later bring about his own condemnation at Constantinople in 553AD, but his reputation was secured through his advocacy of Nicene orthodoxy, and his work as teacher to Gregory of Nazianzus, Rufinus, and even Jerome. In addition to his Biblical commentaries, his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* disputed with the “Macedonians”, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit, consistent with their Arian denial of the divinity of Christ. His treatise *On the Trinity* joined with the powerful essays of the Cappadocians leading up to the triumph and subsequent defense of Nicaean orthodoxy at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Didymus also contributed to the terminology of the Christology debates, in his critique of all those who suggested that Christ’s human soul was somehow displaced by the divine *logos*. Didymus wrote against Arians and Manichaeans, but in later generations his arguments were applied to the anti-Arian Apollinarius of Antioch, a defender of traditionally Alexandrian perspectives. It is part of the remarkable character of Athanasius that he was able to be effective in so complex a field of competing interests and perspectives. His alliance with Didymus, his successful interpretation (co-optation?) of Antony, and his efforts to secure the support of the monastic communities, all testify to his abilities in Egypt, apart from his better known efforts among the Latin and Greek Christians beyond Egypt.

The eventual triumph of Nicaean Orthodoxy secured a general formula specifically excluding an Arian reading, but prompted the discussion regarding the relation of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. As Frances Young writes:<sup>53</sup>

“The problems of Christology were a direct result of the Arian controversy and its outcome at Nicaea. Two different ways of meeting the Arian position produced two different Christological traditions which came into conflict. The tensions between these two types of Christology have left a continuing mark on subsequent church history, for Monophysite and Nestorian churches survive in the Middle East to this day, and in the West, Chalcedon has proved less a solution than the classic definition of a problem which constantly demands further elucidation.”

<sup>53</sup> YOUNG, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 178.

The Alexandrian Church was deeply involved in the politics and theology of the Christology debates, with political/personal grudges blending with theological concerns, as Alexandrians viewed Rome a rival and Constantinople a threat. Doctrinal formulation and character defamation often proved a useful combination. For Alexandrians, several issues rankled. The third canon of the Council of Constantinople (381AD) elevated Constantinople as “second in honor to Rome.” This was seen as both an insult and a provocation, with redress most often sought in the defeat of Alexandria’s rival cities and their supporters. Thus, in addition to differences in theology, the advancement even of qualified men from other sees, was deemed harmful to Alexandrian interests, and the leadership of the great Church of Alexandria often joined in campaigns to remove or defame challengers.

The leadership of the Church in Alexandria made use of threats of force and some violence. For instance, Patriarch Theophilus fomented the mobs that sacked the pagan temple, the Alexandrian Serapeum, in 391AD, and encouraged pagan priests to flee Alexandria. Monks were encouraged to take pagan temples throughout Egypt, converting them to Christian use.<sup>54</sup> Theophilus also gathered the voices that undermined John Chrysostom (c.347-407AD), and drove him from Constantinople. Similarly, his nephew Cyril managed the campaign against Nestorius, enlisted the support of Shanoute and the monastic communities of Egypt, and ensured that Nestorius was deposed. Cyril led the Alexandrian Church from 412AD until his death in 444AD. An agile theologian and politician, he showed himself as astute in character defamation as in doctrinal formulation. In addition to his alliance with the sometimes violent visionary Shanoute, mobs in Alexandria did his bidding, or acted without his censure, as when in 415 a mob seized Hypatia, the foremost pagan philosopher of the era, and tore her to pieces.

Cyril was successful politically and astute theologically, and he triumphed in forming alliances by which Nestorius was deposed, but the triumph of Alexandria in the Latin and Greek speaking Catholic Church was temporary. Cyril’s prominence masked deepening divisions within the Egyptian Church that would destroy Cyril’s less agile successor, Dioscurus (Patriarch from 444-454AD), and would lead to a break with the Catholic Church over the Chalcedonian formula. The emergence of a nationalist Coptic Church, distinct from and defensive toward the broader Catholic Church, is a testimony to the distance of the Coptic Egyptian Church from

<sup>54</sup> RITNER, “Egypt under Roman rule”, p. 29.

the Greek-oriented Catholic leadership in Alexandria, echoed along the length of the Nile, and across the northern coast of Africa. Though the intention of the Council of Chalcedon was to secure a formula sufficiently encompassing to unite the various factions in the Christology debates, Chalcedon instead resulted in a fragmenting of the Catholic Church into three main traditions: the Monophysite churches of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Syria including the Jacobites; the Nestorian churches centered in Persia; and the Chalcedonian churches associated with Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Both the Monophysite and Nestorian traditions rejected Chalcedon, but for opposing Christological reasons. Though some supporters of Chalcedon were found in Alexandria and among a few Pachomian monastic communities, the greater majority of the Egyptian Church could not accept the Chalcedonian Christological formulation, and remained opposed to those of the “Melchite” (imperial) group who accepted Chalcedon and cooperated with Rome or Constantinople. These divisions spread as the Gospel spread through North African communities. In 457AD rival bishops sought control of Alexandria, one Monophysite, the other Melchite. When imperial soldiers arrested the Monophysite leader, an angry crowd found the unfortunate Melchite, Proterius, and killed him. The death of Proterius signaled a growing crisis in the imposition of imperial command and control in Egypt in the aftermath of Chalcedon. As the Roman governance of the Empire unraveled, and the eastern (Byzantine) governance endured civil war and Persian attacks, North Africans felt the impact of the disintegration of the empire. As in other parts of the empire, the Christian Church remained when the empire faltered, but often with internal divisions. In Egypt the resilient Church was Coptic in character, theology, art, and culture. Like other forms of African Christianity, the Coptic Church found its identity in worship and cultural resilience and resistance, whether under Persian, Byzantine, or Muslim domination. Chalcedon marked a significant break with the broader history of Catholic Christianity, but as the Coptic tradition predates Chalcedon, so Coptic Church history incorporates all that came before it, and shares some characteristics with other components of African Christianity.

## 6. From Carthage to Cyrene: Christianity in the Roman Province

Much space has been devoted to Egyptian Christianity because less is known about the origins of the Jesus movement as it moved west of Egypt, the Roman Province of Africa. This is as much a problem of sources (artifacts and texts) as of lenses and interpretation. The less the fragments of evidence the less the possibility of reconstructing what happened before

the last decades of the second century. The region was rich in agriculture and had been occupied by a variety of power adventurers such as the Punic before the Romans. Thus, many languages and racial groups lived there with the indigenous people whom the Arabs deprecated with the name, Berbers or barbarians. Grain merchants and other ex-service men, who had been granted land in the colony, inhabited the cities such as Carthage. However, there is evidence of Christian presence by the second century because persecutions drew attention to some people who suffered martyrdom in 180AD. The story of Perpetua and Felicitas, whose bravery in facing the lions in 203AD inspired many, indicates that the church was growing in this region among the indigenous population, encompassing lower and upper classes. The narrative of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas lays emphasis on the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, the role of visions and prophecy, indicating a likely Montanist connection. By the turn of the third century, AD, Tertullian spoke in a mature Latin voice for so young a tradition. His treatises contrasted the stark mandate of the Church with the blandishments of Roman society and culture. His *Apology* contended ably with the historic opponents of Christianity. His *Prescription Against Heretics* drew lines within the Christian community. His *Letter to His Wife* describes a real marriage enlivened by an ascetic ideal. His many treatises against the complacent society of his day sound a note of disdain in favor of the beauty of holiness. By the middle of the third century, the Bishop of Carthage, Cyprian (c.200-258AD), spoke confidently to Rome and the wider ecclesial world on matters ranging from the sacraments to pastoral responses on persecution to the foundations of ecclesiology. Cyprian was but one of hundreds of North African bishops mentioned in various documents; for instance over ninety bishops attended a synod at Carthage in 240AD. Perhaps the Church grew more in the urban than rural areas, as should be expected, especially as the gospel was not translated into indigenous languages and Latin was the prominent language of liturgy and theological debate.

Martyrdom was a source of great strength and firm identity for the North African Church, with Tertullian famously saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." But with each wave of persecution, an internal debate would start about the fate of those who compromised, whether through partial compliance or occasional conformity. Some called all such people *traditores* who should lose their membership in the Church; others differentiated between those whose who faked compliance to imperial worship by signing the little book of peace and those who actually handed over books or church property to the officials. A further distinction drew a boundary over church officials and lay people and argued that any



bishop or priest who compromised had forfeited the integrity to lead the Church or to offer the sacraments. These were very practical matters to the Christians of the third century. While Tertullian urged rigor in the face of persecution, spoke with disdain of the empire and the Roman control, and joined the sectarian Montanists in the last third of his life, he himself apparently did not die as a martyr. Cyprian crafted a pastoral response to the lapsed, making ways for the lapsed to rejoin the Church, yet he himself died as a martyr in the persecutions of 258AD. The conflict, gathered under the name of “Donatism”, continued to express these tensions regarding the nature of the Church and the norms of behavior. Rooted in a disputed episcopal election, the deeper tensions of North African Christianity bloomed in a rancorous division of the Church into the “rigorous” Donatists and the Catholics. Behind the divisions were competing ecclesiologies, biblical hermeneutics, and social doctrines. The Catholics urged an inclusive view of the Church as a mixed assembly, excluding only the unrepentant and scandalous, while the Donatists advanced a vision of the Church as a gathered community of those whose lives reflected a holiness not found in the broader society.<sup>55</sup> The difficulties of the Donatist position were quickly revealed in various schisms and scandals, and the inability to formulate and maintain a standard of purity sufficiently demanding and rigorous, yet attainable within the community of the faithful.

Though Augustine (d. 430AD) was perhaps the greatest gift of African Christianity to the larger church, he is often abstracted from his African context. Born into a home divided between a Christian mother and a pagan father, he was raised to chase after the blandishments of Roman preferment and promotion. His *Confessions*, written in 395AD after his elevation as bishop, tell his story through an overtly theological lens, of his ambition, of his loves, of his sorrows, of his years among the Manichaeans, of his repeated conversions from inferior loves to something much greater than himself or his preferences. Through his later conflicts with the Manichaeans, with the Donatists, with Pelagius and his disciples, and in reflecting on the meanings of the sacking of Rome, Augustine crafted the terms of arguments that would reverberate down to our own time.<sup>56</sup> Augustine was drawn into the Donatist conflict upon his return to Africa from his years in Italy, and he confronted the intolerance of the Donatists

<sup>55</sup> See W.H.C. FREND, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: a Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965). See also Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 212-225.

<sup>56</sup> See BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo*.

with an increasingly intolerant policy of his own. Though pursuing the Donatists in the interests of a more inclusive Church, the contradictions of Augustine's increasingly coercive policies were not lost on the Donatists. Augustine accused the Donatists of a lack of charity in their refusal to join with their Catholic brothers and sisters, but came to employ an uncharitable strategy of enclosure and opposition when the Donatists proved resistant to his invitations.

The remarkable growth of Christianity within the Roman Empire may cloak the tensions between the "normative Christianity" associated with Constantine, and the various competitors to the imperial forms of Christianity favored by the Emperors. The Church in Africa reflected these tensions, even in the period of great prominence of Alexandrian bishops from the last decades of the second century down to Chalcedon in 451AD. Through these prominent Alexandrians, but also through others in the Latin western regions, the southern Nubian areas, and in Ethiopia, the Church struggled to define its identity in relation to and in dissent from the imperial models. The varieties of rigorism extended throughout the Maghrib: asceticism, monasticism, Montanism, Donatism, divided by Christology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology, but united by an uneasiness with power and preferment, suggesting that the faithful may have more pressing callings than to provide comfort to those who rule the kingdoms of this world.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars accept a general population figure for Egypt in the year 600AD of approximately three million persons, a decline from the peak of five million under the Romans.<sup>57</sup> The once cosmopolitan and connected larger world of affairs had yielded in Egypt to the rural, the agricultural and the local. Likewise the pagan had yielded to the Christian, with the leader of the Coptic Church in Alexandria in alliance with the Coptic monasteries and Nile communities. Egypt continued to contribute grain to Constantinople, even in the years of the Phocan rebellion, down to a dozen years of disruption by Persian control of Egypt from 617AD until 629AD. Byzantine Heraclius regained control of Egypt in 629AD, but the costs of disruption and dislocation showed in the privatization of many formerly

<sup>57</sup> Walter E. KAEGI, "Egypt on the eve of the Muslim conquest," in Carl F. PETRY (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt* (vol. I, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 34-40.

public civic tasks. As in other portions around the Mediterranean, Church authorities took on tasks once carried out by local governments.

What was happening to the churches in these years? Egypt continued to attract Christian pilgrims, Egyptians continued to travel to other parts of the Christian world, and Alexandria authorized the leadership of the Church of Ethiopia. It is useful to note the transition of governments, included more negotiation than military engagement, with the Persians and the Byzantines concerned more with events in Mesopotamia than the unfolding drama in Arabia under the Prophet and the Caliphate. A conflict between the Coptic Patriarch, Benjamin, and a rival, Cyrus, divided the Church on the eve of the Muslim advance into Egypt. Both factions sought some delay through negotiation with the forces of Amr ibn al-As, the Muslim invader. The eventual Muslim capture of Egypt still raises many questions regarding strategies of resistance. The successful advance of Muslim forces in Palestine and Syria made it seem inevitable that Egypt would be next. After initial successes in 640, Muslim advances slowed, but after the death of Heraclius in 641, the leadership of Byzantium fell to a regency government, resulting in confusion in military plans. It is clear that the fall of Egypt to Islam was due neither to complicity nor capitulation, but rather to a complexity of factors involving leadership, exhaustion, and an entirely mistaken hope that Arab control might, like a tide, recede as readily as it had surged into Egypt. Throughout these centuries the Coptic Church has remained, honored by its special service to the Holy Family, rooted in the earliest days of the gospel in Egypt, rightfully proud of its contributions to Church doctrine from Nicaea to Chalcedon, encouraged by the faithfulness of its early martyrs, and steadfast in its witness into our own time, a new age of martyrs.

However, there remain debates about the fate of Christianity in North Africa after the Islamic insurgence. Some have argued that Islam won an easy victory because of its disciplined army comprised of good horsemen, imbued with a muscular religious belief that they were engaged in a victory for Allah. The discipline was maintained even after victory because, in these years before the emergence of Damascus as a command center, the Muslim forces usually quarantined themselves outside the city walls to avoid mixing with infidels and to remain highly mobile. The expansion of Arab Islam, and the range and speed of the conquest of former Christian states was staggering. How best to explain this rapid expansion and conquest? Some explanations focus on the occupied peoples: the oppressive taxation by the Byzantines had created a deep resentment among its client states, and a receptivity to Islam. Similarly, the contests between Persia and Byzantium were at the expense of the Egyptians.

Moreover, the effort of Islamic forces was less the engagement of cultures than the expansion of territories. Muslim victories were consolidated by the three options given to captured peoples: to surrender and pay a tribute; to convert to Islam; or face a continued jihadist attack. While the category of *dhimma* evolved over time, the strategies of Christian (and Jewish) survival emerged much faster. Nubia successfully resisted the forces of Islam, thanks to the archers of Dongola, leading to a negotiated treaty, the *Baqt*, which protected Christian Nubia for several centuries.<sup>58</sup>

African resistance was already evident in Carthage, elsewhere among the Donatists, shown in the raids by the Circumcellions on the agricultural merchant elite in urban areas, who exploited the Maghrib as the bread basket of Europe, bred a resistance in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. It is alleged that Carthage fell easily because an African commander preferred the Arab incursion to the rule by the Byzantine or Romans, while Alexandria held up for three months because a Greek commanded the defense. But Berber nationalism was equally uncomfortable with Roman, Byzantine, or Arab rule. A striking feature of North African Christianity is a prominent strain of hostility toward institutions and imperial governance.<sup>59</sup> The storied prophetess, Cuhna (Damia al-Kahena) Queen of the Aures from the hill country near Tunis, illustrates this point. Regardless of its historical accuracy, African memory gloried in her bravery shown in her victory against an initial Arab attack on Carthage. When the Arabs regrouped, she applied a scorch-earth policy to deny them the wealth of Africa; she lost the war but refused to convert to Islam. As long as the Moslems did not insist on forced conversion, their expeditions could be interpreted as liberation.

These realities challenge the simplistic verdict that Christianity in North Africa sat lightly and was easily overawed because it lacked roots among the indigenous Tuaregs and Kwororaffa; lacking a vernacular Bible; mired in arid doctrinal disputes and consequently, vulnerable. A defense has been canvassed in the introduction to this book. A first step is to establish timelines and distinctive strategies among distinct groups, freed from an uncritical acceptance of special pleadings of Islamic or Christian narratives. One danger is to read later coherence back into the first half-

<sup>58</sup> See Roland WERNER, William ANDERSON & Andrew WHEELER, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church across 2000 Years* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 40-45.

<sup>59</sup> See W.H.C. FREND, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 102-105. See also Maureen A. TILLEY, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

century of the Islamic expansion. Another danger is to read later rationalizations back into the first half-century of Christian resistance. It is also important to note changes in strategies: the Islamic forces did not immediately lash out against Christians. As soon as the Coptic Christians adopted a neutral stance and did not oppose them, the Arabs conciliated by even recalling the Patriarch, Benjamin. Similarly, the strategies useful in conquering territories yielded to strategies of governance. Because Arab conquerors did not have the manpower to govern the large territories, they used bishops as advisers, ambassadors, governors and tax collectors. Naturally less concerned with doctrinal differences among Jacobites, Melchites, Copts, and Nestorians, they pursued pragmatic co-operation, with restrictions against Christian public proselytism, marriage boundaries and other burdens increasing through time, providing increasing incentives to conversion, and increasing costs to resistance.

Contemporary students must resist the temptation to oversimplify the first century of Islam. A concern for periodisation is important because of early Islamic sensitivity to the Prophet's toleration of the "People of the Book" than later Caliphs. The process of migration, Arabization and new trading patterns took time to emerge. By the end of the first Muslim century, Arabs were found throughout northern Africa, and new caravan trade routes were challenging the ancient river commerce system along the Nile. Internal squabbles among the Moslems had consolidated different regimes and lineages that governed different parts of the new Islamic Empire. Thus, the Umayyad who consolidated their rule over North Africa by 661AD were more tolerant towards Christians than the Abbassids who overthrew the Umayyad in 750AD. Similarly, the Fatimids, who were themselves North Africans and not Arab Moslems, showed greater toleration than their successor the Mamlukes from the 990s. Besides, the Bible was translated into a number of Coptic dialects and the rural Copts deployed Christianity as a cultural signifier. However, there is no gainsaying the gradual decline of Christian presence in the Maghrib.

If one were to combine the data from Rodney Stark and Phillip Jenkins, a certain statistical image would read as follows:<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Rodney STARK, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Phillip JENKINS, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

YEAR	% OF XTIAN IN EMPIRE	% OF XTIAN IN EGYPT
239	1.4	0
274	4.2	2.4
278	5.0	10.5
280	5.4	13.5
313	16.2	18.0
315	14.4	18.0

Clearly, Africa was an important center of early Christianity and remained so much longer than the four-volume study on the planting of Christianity in Africa by C.P. Groves would lead us to believe.<sup>61</sup> By 500AD, argues Jenkins, there were about 8 million Christians in North Africa, this declined to 5 million by 1000, 2.5 million by 1200 and 1.5 million by 1500. The argument is that Christianity grew at certain points in time under Islamic rule and that the decline accelerated during and after the Crusades. Nonetheless, Christian presence down the Nile continued to be important till the fifteenth century in Nubia and much later in Ethiopia. This is the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>61</sup> Charles P. GROVES. *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (4 vols, London: Lutterworth Press, 1948-1958).

## 2. Early Christianity in Egypt

