

Earliest Christianity in Egypt

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The standard work on Christian origins in Egypt during my time in graduate school in the early 1960's was that of Walter Bauer, whose treatment of early Christian diversity in *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* was first published in 1934. That work was widely accepted among scholars of Christian origins, particularly when it was translated into English in 1971.¹ Bauer cited Adolf von Harnack to the effect that we are almost totally ignorant of the history of Christianity in Egypt until the time of bishop Demetrius around 180. Bauer argued that there certainly must have been sources attesting to ancient Egyptian Christianity, but these had been suppressed by churchmen because the earliest Christians in Egypt were Gnostic heretics. Bauer cites Basilides, Valentinus, and other second-century Gnostics as evidence. According to Bauer ecclesiastical Christianity in Egypt emerged only with the episcopate of Demetrius.²

Bauer's position was effectively challenged by the noted papyrologist Colin Roberts in 1977 in his Schweich lectures of the British Academy for that year, published two years later.³ In that work Roberts turns his attention to the earliest Christian papyri. A survey of the extant Christian manuscripts or fragments dating to the second century include ten biblical manuscripts (7 OT and 3 NT, John, Matthew, and Titus) and four nonbiblical (Egerton gospel, Shepherd of Hermas, P. Oxy. 1=Gos. Thomas 26-28, and Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*). Roberts' discussion of the *nomina sacra* in early Christian manuscripts is especially important. He argues that the use of *nomina sacra* is a Christian, not Jewish, invention, though it is obviously influenced by the Jewish reverence for the name of God. Roberts argues persuasively that this scribal practice arose already in the first century in the Jerusalem church. He concludes that the preponderance of evidence points to Jerusalem as the source of Egyptian Christianity.

¹ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. R. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

² *Ibid.*, 44-60.

³ Roberts, *Manuscript Society, and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).

The earliest Christians would have been part of the Jewish community of Alexandria, the largest community of the Jewish diaspora in the first century.

Meanwhile, the Nag Hammadi codices were in the process of publication during that time, and the entire collection, together with the tractates in the Berlin Gnostic codex, was published in a complete English edition in 1977.⁴ My teacher, Helmut Koester, was able to make good use of the Nag Hammadi material in his treatment of early Christianity in Egypt.⁵

In 1983, with the help of my student James Goehring, I organized an international conference at the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity of the Claremont Graduate School on “The Roots of Egyptian Christianity.” That conference marked the beginning of the “Roots of Egyptian Christianity” project at Claremont, which I directed for a number of years. The papers from that conference were published in 1986 as the first volume in the new series “Studies in Antiquity and Christianity,”⁶ and several volumes were published in the ensuing years in the “Roots” subseries. My own contribution to that first volume was entitled “Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations.”⁷

Since then I have published a number of books and articles devoted to early Christian Egypt. I have drawn largely from those works in the preparation of this paper.

As already noted, our evidence for the earliest stage of Christianity in Egypt is sparse. The New Testament provides some hints of a Christian mission to Egypt. The Pentecost account in Acts numbers among the devout Jews in Jerusalem in attendance at Peter’s sermon people from “Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” (Acts 2:10). The disputants in the controversy with the “Hellenist” proto-martyr Stephen included Jews with Greek names (Acts 6:5), some of whom could have come from Alexandria. In any case, the traffic between Jerusalem and Alexandria was extensive in both directions. It’s possible that some of the Hellenist Christians hounded out of Jerusalem (Acts 8:1) included Alexandrian Jews who returned home to spread their new

⁴ James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

⁵ Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982, 2nd ed. 2000). See pp. 225-45 in the 2nd ed.

⁶ Pearson and Goehring eds., *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

⁷ *Roots*, 132-59.

faith. A hint of the existence of a Christian community in Egypt in the early first century is found in the story in Acts of Apollos, one of Paul's co-workers in Ephesus and Corinth. He is said to have been "a Jew ... a native of Alexandria ... an eloquent man, powerfully trained in the scriptures" (18:24). A variant reading at Acts 18:25 asserts that this Apollos "had been instructed in the word in his home country," implying the existence of a Christian community in Alexandria.

Some tantalizing evidence is provided in extra-canonical Christian literature. An interesting account is provided by the pseudo-Clementine literature. In *Homily 1* the young Clement tells of his journey from Rome to Judea to find out about the Son of God, about whom he had heard some reports in Rome. His ship is blown off course and comes to Alexandria, where he meets a Hebrew from Judea named Barnabas. This Barnabas instructs Clement in the Christian faith and then sets out for Judea to observe "the festival." Clement follows Barnabas to Judea and comes to Caesarea, where Barnabas introduces him to the apostle Peter (*Hom.* 1.8.3-15.9).

Whether this reference to Barnabas' activity in Egypt was invented by the author of the Clementine romance or was based on independent tradition is hard to say. It is not found in Eusebius nor in any other document datable to before the fourth century. That the earliest Christian missionaries came to Alexandria from Judea is most probable, as stressed by Roberts, but we cannot be certain that they included the apostle Barnabas.

Egyptian tradition credits the evangelist Mark with the introduction of Christianity to Egypt. This tradition is first attested by Eusebius in the fourth century, but its origins may be earlier. In what follows I shall discuss the Mark legend in some detail. I shall then discuss what this legend tells us about first-century Alexandria. In subsequent sections I shall deal with the varieties of Judaism (including "Christianity") in first-century Alexandria, and Gnosticism in Alexandria.

1. The Mark legend.

The Egyptian tradition relating to Mark's role in the introduction of Christianity to Alexandria has recently been treated extensively by Thomas Oden in his book, *The*

African Memory of Mark.⁸ He uses such sources as the Coptic and Arabic synaxaries, the “primitive text” of the *Acts of Mark*, Severus’ Arabic history of the Alexandrian patriarchs (10th cent.), and more recent sources to reconstruct the biography of Mark.⁹ The story of Mark begins with his birth in Cyrene of Jewish parents, the family’s move to Palestine, Mark’s family relationships with Peter and Barnabas, his time in his mother’s home in Jerusalem and the various events related in the New Testament that transpired there, his visit to Babylon in Egypt¹⁰ with Peter, and other events mentioned in the New Testament. The story culminates in Mark being commissioned by Peter to evangelize North Africa, including Alexandria. Mark goes first to the Pentapolis and then to Alexandria, back to the Pentapolis after the founding of the church in Alexandria, and then back to Alexandria, where he is martyred. Oden goes to considerable lengths in defending the authenticity of this “African memory” against the skepticism of Western scholars. I’ll have to admit that this group includes me, although Oden does cite some of my work with approval.

Eusebius is probably our earliest source for the tradition placing Mark in Egypt. I used to cite the letter to Theodore attributed to Clement of Alexandria published by Morton Smith, which refers to a “secret gospel of Mark.”¹¹ In that letter it is said that Mark wrote his gospel in Rome, and after Peter’s martyrdom there he came to Alexandria where he expanded his earlier gospel with his own and Peter’s notes, producing a “more spiritual gospel.” I am now convinced that that letter is a modern forgery.¹² So we are left with Eusebius in the fourth century as our earliest source for the Mark legend.

⁸ Oden, *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

⁹ For his discussion of these sources see *African Memory*, 60-76.

¹⁰ That Peter and Mark visited the Roman colony of Babylon in what is now Old Cairo is based on 1 Peter 5:13, which Oden regards as authentic.

¹¹ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

¹² This has been shown conclusively, in my opinion, by Stephen Carlson and Peter Jeffrey. See Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2005); Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007). Oden regards the letter as authentic, and relies quite heavily upon it: Oden, *African Memory*, 198-207.

Eusebius' account of Mark's activity in Alexandria follows upon that of the activity of Mark and Peter in Rome, and reads as follows;

They say that this Mark was the first to be sent to preach in Egypt the Gospel which he had also put into writing, and was the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself. The number of men and women who were there converted at the first attempt was so great, and their asceticism was so extraordinarily philosophic, that Philo thought it right to describe their conduct and assemblies and meals and all the rest of their manner of life.¹³

This information is supplemented by Eusebius in his *Chronicle*, according to which Mark arrived in Alexandria in the third year of Claudius, i.e. 43 CE.¹⁴ It's clear that the time of arrival of Mark in Alexandria in the two works do not agree. Eusebius is basing his information on different sources in the two. It would appear to me that Mark's time of arrival in Alexandria as early as 43 is problematical.

Though Eusebius says nothing of Mark's role as a bishop, he later reports the accession of Annianus in 62 in the following terms: "In the eighth year of the reign of Nero Annianus was the first after Mark the Evangelist to receive charge of the diocese of Alexandria."¹⁵ As to the death of Mark, Eusebius says nothing about it. It's obvious that Eusebius knows nothing of the martyrdom of Mark.

This brings us to the *Acts of Mark*, which is our earliest source for the story of Mark's martyrdom. The *Acts* exists in two Greek recensions, represented by manuscripts in Paris and the Vatican. It was translated into several other languages, with various expansions and additions. The narrative can be summarized as follows, using the Paris recension as a basis (*PG* 115.164-69):

When the apostles were sent out to evangelize the world Mark received as his lot the country of Egypt and the surrounding territory. After a sojourn in Cyrene of the Pentapolis he received a vision that he should go by sea to Pharos in Alexandria. Disembarking in Alexandria he came to a place called Mendion. As he was entering the gate of the city the strap of his sandal broke and he went to a cobbler to have it repaired.

¹³ *H.E.* 2.16, Lake's trans. in the LCL edition.

¹⁴ On the *Chronicle* of Eusebius see A. A. Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979).

¹⁵ *H.E.* 2.24. On the Alexandrian episcopate see below.

The cobbler injured his left hand while working on the sandal and Mark healed it in the name of Jesus Christ. The cobbler, whose name was Ananias, invited Mark to his home. As a result of Mark's preaching, Ananias was converted, together with his household and many others in Alexandria.

Eventually the city's pagan populace sought to kill Mark. Mark ordained Ananias as bishop and also ordained some presbyters and deacons; he then returned to the Pentapolis. He came back to Alexandria two years later and found the community flourishing, a church having been built in a place called Boukolou near the seashore. But the pagan people were angry at Mark for his mighty works and the threat that he posed to their idolatry. On the occasion of a paschal celebration, which coincided with a festival honoring the god Sarapis, the pagans seized Mark, dragged him through the streets with a rope around his neck, and threw him into prison. During the night he was visited by Christ, who strengthened him with words of encouragement.

The next morning the pagan crowd dragged Mark again in the same fashion, and Mark died. The mob built a fire in the place called *Angeloi*, and put Mark's body on it. But a storm arose and the pagans fled in terror. Pious men came and brought Mark's remains to where the Christians were worshiping. They prepared the body and placed it in a stone tomb located in the eastern part of the city. Mark's martyrdom took place on Pharmouthi 30 (=April 25), when Gaius Tiberius Caesar was emperor.¹⁶

There are some basic obstacles in treating this story as straight history. It is the martyrdom of Mark that is most problematical, in view of the lateness of its attestation. Apart from the *Acts* itself, the earliest testimonies are accounts relating to the *martyrium* of St. Mark. In the story of the martyrdom of Peter, Archbishop of Alexandria (d. 25 Nov. 311),¹⁷ it is reported that soldiers took Peter to Boukolou, where he prayed at the tomb of St. Mark, evangelist and proto-martyr, after which he was beheaded. The story of Peter's praying at the tomb of Mark, together with other features of the text, has been

¹⁶ The Latin version published in *PG* has, more plausibly, "Claudius Nero Caesar" (=Nero Claudius Caesar, emperor 54-68 CE).

¹⁷ On Peter of Alexandria see Tim Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria: Bishop and Martyr* (Studies in Antiquity & Christianity; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

shown by several scholars to be a later addition to the original fourth-century account of the death of Peter.¹⁸

That the added material in the *Passio* of Peter pertaining to St. Mark the proto-martyr is closely related to the *Acts of Mark* is clear, but how is this relationship to be explained? I suggest that the legend surrounding the death of Bishop Peter, the “Last Martyr”¹⁹ of Egypt, led to the development of a story according to which Mark, the first bishop of Alexandria, also suffered a martyr’s death. The mode of Mark’s death could have been suggested by an actual event involving the Arian bishop of Alexandria during the time of Julian the Apostate, who was dragged through the streets of Alexandria by an enraged mob and put to death.²⁰ The account of Mark’s martyrdom would have emerged as an addition to an earlier tradition that Mark died and was buried in Alexandria.²¹

As to Mark’s association with the Alexandrian church, I have no reason to doubt that the evangelist Mark came to Alexandria from Rome after Peter’s death and soon became a prominent leader in the Alexandrian church, probably because of his association with the apostle Peter in Rome. His place of activity in Alexandria would probably have been in the area of the city that was later called Boukolou. But Mark was certainly not the first Christian leader active in Alexandria during the first century. There were others before him.

One interesting feature about the *Acts of Mark* is what it tells us of the topography of ancient Alexandria. To that we now turn.²²

2. Ancient Alexandria in the *Acts of Mark*

The places mentioned in the *Acts* are located in the northwestern and northeastern parts of Alexandria, areas that were predominantly Jewish in population in the first

¹⁸ See esp. William Telfer, “St. Peter of Alexandria and Arius,” *AnBoll* 67 (1949) 117-30.

¹⁹ This is a very common term for Peter in Egyptian sources.

²⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus 20.11.8-10. Cf. Philo, *Leg. Gai.*, for similar attacks on Jews during the time of Caligula.

²¹ It may be that the relics of St. Mark, including the head in the Cathedral of Saint Mark in Alexandria, are actually those of Peter. See Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt Ancient and Modern* (2nd ed., Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1977) 37-38

²² For a more complete account of the Mark legend, with full documentation, see my “Earliest Christianity in Egypt” (cit. n. 7), 137-45.

century (see the map appended to this paper). One would expect the topographical references in a fourth-century text to reflect a fourth-century situation. And so they do, but it is important to point out here that, by the third century the center of Alexandrian Christianity, dominated by the episcopate, was located in the main Greek area of the city, then called Bruchium. In the fourth century the most important churches –the cathedral church Caesarea (built on the site of the *Caesareum*) and the church of Alexander dedicated to St. Michael (a converted temple of Saturn) –were in the same general vicinity, i.e. in Bruchium.²³ This situation is not reflected at all in the *Acts*.

The first place mentioned in the *Acts* is Pharos, the site of the famous lighthouse. Pharos was the traditional site of the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Septuagint). Philo reports that the Alexandrian Jews celebrated an annual festival on Pharos in commemoration of the translators' achievement (*Vit. Mos.* 2.35-42).

The next place mentioned in the text is Mendion (Bennidion), where Mark is said to have met the cobbler Ananias. The place in question was named after a temple to the Thracian goddess Bendis.²⁴ During the fourth century, it was converted into a church by St. Athanasius. After the Arab conquest, the church was rebuilt as the Mosque of the Souq al Attarin (demolished in 1830). It was located in the northwestern sector of the city not far from the Heptastadion, which connected the island of Pharos to the mainland. The text can be construed to indicate that the meeting took place between the gate of the city leading from the Heptastadion and the Bendideion, probably in the western agora, located near the entrance to the Heptastadion. The area in question was located near the Delta quarter in the first century.²⁵

The next site mentioned in the text is the most important of all, the church in Boukolou and the site of Mark's memorial. This church was also the one in which Arius

²³ On the churches of Alexandria see H. Leclercq, "Alexandrie (Archéologie)," in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (ed. F. Cabrol, Paris: Letouzey & Anee, 1907), 1.1098-1182, esp. 1107-25; A. Calderini, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici dell'Egitto greco-romano, vol. 1.1.*; *ALEXANDREIA* (Milan: Cisalpino-Goliardica, 1935); and A. Adriani, *Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto Greco-romano*; series C (Palermo: Fondazione "Ignazio Mormino" del Banco di Sicilia, 1966).

²⁴ Adriani, *Repertorio*, 1.220.

²⁵ On the Delta quarter see below.

served as a presbyter before he was declared a heretic.²⁶ There is no doubt as to its location in the *Acts*: “in the eastern district (ch. 10),” “beside the sea, beneath the cliffs” (5). By the fourth century, after massive destructions suffered by the city in the second and third centuries, this area was a suburb, located well outside the city. It could very well have been used for “cow pastures” (ta Boukolou). The cliffs referred to in the text are probably the hillocks that rose inland from the seacoast east of the city in the area around modern Shatby, long since obliterated by the cutting and filling associated with construction projects in the modern city of Alexandria.

The church associated with the tomb of Mark was probably abandoned in the fifth century and replaced by another church dedicated to St. Mark that was closer to the center of the city.²⁷ No trace of the church in Boukolou remains, but it was probably located near the site of the present College of St. Mark, built in the 1920s by the Christian Brothers order of the Roman Catholic Church.

One other site is mentioned in the *Acts of Mark*, “the so-called *Angeloi*” (ch. 9), where the mob tried to burn Mark’s body. The Bollandist editors of the *Acts* are likely correct in their suggestion that the Greek text is corrupt. The correct reading suggested by the editors is *eis ton aigiolon*, “to the seashore.” I suggest *eis tous aigialous*, the plural form, which means essentially the same thing. The corruption in the transmission of the text would have taken place under the influence of the name given to a sixth-century church in Alexandria, the *Angelion*, and probably under the influence of the reference in the text to the worship of the god Sarapis. The mistake would have been made by someone who was ignorant of the geography of fourth-century Alexandria. The *Angelion* church, dedicated to St. John the Baptist, was built on the site of the great Serapeum in the southwest part of the city, sacked by a mob led by Bishop Theophilus in 391.

The place-name *Angeloi* having disappeared from our text, we read instead that the mob ignited a fire “on the beaches” near Boukolou and there attempted to burn the martyr’s body. By coincidence, the same phrase, *eis (tous) aigialous*, occurs in an important passage in Philo’s treatise *Against Flaccus*, in the context of a vicious pogrom

²⁶ Epiphanius, 69.1-2; cf. 68.4. The list of churches given by Epiphanius (69.2) does not specify any related to Mark.

²⁷ M. Chaine, “L’église de Saint-Marc à Alexandrie construite par le patriarche Jean de Samanoud,” *Revue de l’orient chrétien* 24 (1924), 372-86, esp. 378.

perpetrated by Alexandrian Greeks against the Jews of Alexandria in 37-38 CE. The passage in Philo is also of interest because it gives us information on the centers of Jewish population in the city during the first century:

The city has five quarters named after the first letters of the alphabet, two of these are called Jewish because most of the Jews inhabit them, though in the rest also there are not a few Jews scattered about. So then what did they do? From the four letters they ejected the Jews and drove them to herd in a very small part of one. The Jews were so numerous that they poured out over the beaches (eis aigialous), dunghills and tombs, robbed of their belongings (*Flacc.* 55-56, LCL)

The quarter in which the Alexandrian Jews were gathered was in the eastern part of the city, i.e. the main Jewish quarter in antiquity where the Jews first settled during the Ptolemaic period. This area is described by Josephus as follows: “by a sea without a harbor, close beside the spot where the waves break on the beach,” Alexandria’s “finest residential quarter,” located “near the palaces” (*Against Apion* 2.33-36, LCL trans.). The beach in question corresponds to the modern Shatby beach, just east of the promontory Silsileh (ancient Lochias).

So the beaches referred to by Philo and the author of the *Acts of Mark* are the very same location. The place referred to in the fourth century as Boukolou, then situated outside the city, was in the first century the very heart of the most prominent Jewish neighborhood in Alexandria. The topographical reference in the *Acts* reflects a continuity of tradition between the first century and the fourth of Christian activity there.

In effect, this topographical reference corroborates the observation of Eusebius regarding the “apostolic men” of the earliest Christian presence in Alexandria. They “were, it appears of Hebrew origin, and thus still preserved most of the ancient customs in a strictly Jewish manner” (H.E. 2.17.2). The earliest Christians of Alexandria were thus an integral part of the larger Jewish community there.

As to the five letters referred to by Philo, the only information we have as to which letters corresponded to the two Jewish quarters is found in a passage in Josephus, where he reports on actions taken against the Jews in 66 by Roman troops let loose by the Prefect, Tiberius Alexander (Philo’s apostate nephew!), against rioting Jews. The soldiers are said to have “rushed to the quarter of the city called ‘Delta,’ where the Jews were concentrated, and executed their orders” (*Jewish War* 2.495). It is often assumed

that this Delta quarter was the residential area mentioned by Josephus in *Against Apion* 2, i.e. the northeastern quarter of the city. But evidence of a papyrus dated to 13 BCE situates the Kibotos harbor “in Delta (en tw D).”²⁸ The Kibotos harbor was an inner harbor within the large *western* harbor, Eunostos. Ongoing Christian activity in this Delta quarter is also reflected in the location of the very earliest church of which we have recorded evidence, the church of St. Theonas (bishop 282-300). It was located near the western wall and was replaced by the Mosque of the 1000 Pillars in the ninth century and demolished at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

So we can conclude that authentic topographical information on first-century Alexandrian Christianity is reflected in the fourth-century *Acts of Mark*.²⁹

3. Jews and “Christians” in First-Century Alexandria

The life of Jews in the largest Jewish community in the diaspora in the first and second centuries is bound up with political, social, and economic factors. Several events powerfully affected Jewish life in Alexandria during the period of our interest: the introduction by Caesar Augustus of the *laographia* (poll tax) in 24/23 BCE; the pogrom against the Jews under Flaccus in 38 CE; the disturbances and massacre of Jews under Philo’s apostate nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, in 66; the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 and its aftermath; and the Jewish revolt under Trajan in 115-117, in which the Jewish community was virtually wiped out.

Philo claims that “no less than a million Jews” lived in Egypt (Flacc. 43),³⁰ most of them in Alexandria, especially in the two quarters mentioned above. In such a large community of Jews, considerable diversity would be expected among them, both in terms of social status and in terms of religious beliefs and practices. Victor Tcherikover characterizes the divisions in the Alexandrian Jewish community in sociocultural terms, distinguishing between the educated Jews who favored a synthesis of Hellenism and

²⁸ *BGU* 1151, lines 40-41.

²⁹ For a more extensive discussion of the topography of ancient Alexandria see my article, “Ancient Alexandria in the *Acts of Mark*,” ch. 3 in *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 100-111.

³⁰ Josephus (*Bell.* 2.385) reports that the entire population of Egypt, including Alexandria, numbered 7.5 million.

Judaism, and the lower strata of the population whose ideology, more open to influences from Palestine, was stamped by messianism and a fighting spirit.³¹ Philo obviously belonged to the first group, and from his writings one can get a good picture of the religious diversity among his fellow Jews. Attitudes toward the Law included two groups of “literalist” interpreters, consisting of faithful “primitivists” on the one hand and unfaithful scoffers on the other; and two groups of “allegorizers,” consisting of those who, like Philo himself, interpreted the Scriptures allegorically but observed the practices, and those whose spiritual interpretation of the law led them to abandon the practices altogether. We know from him, too, that a considerable number of Gentiles affiliated with the Jewish religious community as proselytes.³²

Although Philo was no messianist, he does tell us something about Alexandrian messianism in his treatise *On Rewards and Punishments*, where he goes into considerable detail on the messianic scenario involving the coming of “a man” from God whose advent involves the divine restoration of Israel and the nations, and peace in nature.³³ Of course, Philo interprets this scenario allegorically, interiorizing the vision in terms of the growth of virtue in the human soul.

As already noted Jesus believers arrived early in Alexandria, propagating their teachings in the Jewish community there. Unfortunately, we don’t know the names of these people, though Mark seems to have assumed a prominent role in Alexandria upon his arrival there. By his time there were probably a number of groups of Jesus believers. As already noted, a textual variant in Acts 18:25 indicates that the learned Apollos whom Paul met in Ephesus had already been instructed in “the Way” in his home country, i.e. Alexandria.

As to what varieties of beliefs and practices existed among the Jesus believers in first-century Alexandria, we are left to engage in historical inference, for we have no first-century sources at all, at least not any complete texts. It is possible that the non-

³¹ Tcherikover, “The Decline of the Jewish Diaspora in Egypt in the Roman Period,” *JJS* 14 (1963), 1-32, esp. 22-27.

³² For the relevant texts see esp. P. Borgen, “the Early Church and the Hellenistic Synagogue,” *ST* 37 (1983), 55-78.

³³ *Praem.* 85-168. On this “messianic scenario” see F. Dexinger, “Ein ‘Messianisches Szenarium’ als Gemeingut des Judentums in nachherodianischer Zeit,” *Kairos* 17 (1975), 249-78, esp. 250-55.

canonical *Gospel of the Hebrews* and *Gospel of the Egyptians*, attested by Clement of Alexandria and other church fathers, are products of first century Alexandrian Christianity.³⁴ *Gos. Heb.*, containing both narrative and sayings material, has a distinctly Semitic flavor, though it was written in Greek. As its name suggests, it probably circulated among Jesus-believing Jews for whom the symbolic authority of James, brother of Jesus, was an important feature. *Gos. Eg.*, of which only sayings material is preserved, shows a strong encratic flavor and contains tradition that overlaps with the *Gospel of Thomas*. Also written in Greek, it may have circulated among native Egyptian Christians living in the Rhakotis district of Alexandria. If that is so, it would imply mission activity among Gentiles in Alexandria, presumably carried out by Jesus-believing Jews there.

As already noted, Walter Bauer posited that the original and most dominant form of Christianity in Alexandria was heretical, specifically Gnostic. In making that judgment Bauer was extrapolating backward from the time of Hadrian, when such Gnostic teachers as Basilides, Valentinus, and others were active. While it is probable that Gnostics could be found in first-century Alexandria, it is more likely to suppose that other, more dominant, varieties of “Christianity” existed there, more reflective of the Jerusalem origins of the Christian mission and of the dominant varieties of Judaism in Alexandria at that time.³⁵

If one must extrapolate backward from second-century sources to reconstruct aspects of first-century Alexandrian Christianity, one should at least use such sources as are clearly bearers of older tradition and reflect an ongoing school activity. Two such documents are the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII,4). The *Epistle of Barnabas* is the oldest complete writing from Alexandria in existence, probably dating from the beginning of the reign of Hadrian (117 CE). The *Teachings of Silvanus* is considerably later, certainly no earlier than the end of the second century, but it preserves some very ancient material.

³⁴ See P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker in *NTApoc* 1.172-78, and W. Schneemelcher in *NTApoc* 1.209-15.

³⁵ See my article, “Pre-Valentinian Gnosticism in Alexandria,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 455-66. On Gnosticism in Alexandria see also below.

Bauer includes the *Epistle of Barnabas* in the Gnostic camp, referring to its “grotesque allegorization” of the Old Testament and the emphasis in the text on gnosis.³⁶ In fact, the exegetical and halakic gnosis of Barnabas bears no relationship at all to the gnosis of Gnosticism. Rather, it can be seen as a precursor to the “gnostic” teaching of Clement of Alexandria and is implicitly anti-Gnostic. *Silvanus* is explicitly so: “My son, ... do not allow yourself to be defiled by strange kinds of knowledge (gnosis).”³⁷

Both *Barnabas* and *Silvanus* reflect Jewish school activity in Alexandria which is given a “Christian” stamp. Indeed, it has been argued that the author of *Barnabas* was “a converted Rabbi who brought into Christianity the exegetical and homiletical traditions of the Alexandrian synagogue.”³⁸ A distinctive characteristic of *Barnabas* is its eschatology, its consciousness of living in the last stages of the present age. *Silvanus*, on the other hand, is more akin to the religiosity exemplified by Philo. I have commented elsewhere on the relationship between *Silvanus* and 1 Corinthians 1-4, and have suggested that the kind of “wisdom” brought to Corinth by Apollos shows a good deal of the speculative wisdom found in *Silvanus* and exemplified by Philo.³⁹ Indeed, it could very well be that Apollos had been a student of Philo before his appearance in Ephesus.

By the time of the final redaction of *Barnabas* the political situation in Alexandria reached a critical point when the messianist Jews there sparked the revolt against Rome under Trajan that led to the virtual annihilation of the Jewish community. We do not know what role Jesus believers might have played in that conflict, but it appears that by that time Christians had become alienated from Judaism, and had come to represent a “third race,” as the author of the *Kerygma Petri* puts it.⁴⁰ The Philo-like Christianity of *Silvanus*, rather than the primitive apocalypticism of *Barnabas* or the acosmic radicalism of the Gnostics eventually came to carry the day in the development of Alexandrian Christian theology in the patristic age until the end of the fourth century.

³⁶ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 47-48.

³⁷ *Silvanus* 94,29-33, trans. Peel in *NHL* [cit. n. 4], 385)

³⁸ L. W. Barnard, *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and Their Background* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 1-22.

³⁹ See “Philo, Gnosis, and the New Testament,” ch. 11 in Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 165-82.

⁴⁰ See W. Schneemelcher in *NTApoc* 2.39. On the *Kerygma Petri* see below.

One other early second-century writing remains to be considered here, the *Kerygma Petri*. Unfortunately only fragments remain, preserved in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. The importance of this work has been underscored by Attila Jakab. Its attribution to Peter and its reference to “the Twelve” situate the text in the tradition of the apostles, originally based in Jerusalem (frg. 3). It certainly reflects a Logos Christology (frg. 1). At the same time it maintains a credo centered upon one God, who created the world and can bring an end to it, a credo that can also be expressed in a “negative theology” (frg. 2). It is the first Alexandrian writing to use the term “Christian,” defining Christians as a “third race” (frg. 2). The *Kerygma Petri* clearly represents a variety of Christianity that lies on a trajectory leading to the mainline Christianity of Clement, who quotes it. It is the type of Christianity that Irenaeus had in mind, writing later in the same century, when he claims that the true church has one and the same faith throughout the world (*Against Heresies* 1.10.3).⁴¹

This brief look at Judaism and “Christianity” in ancient Alexandria shows that variety is a characteristic of both Judaism and Christianity there during the first century. In the beginning, the varieties of Christianity in Alexandria were, in fact, varieties of that great city’s Judaism, for no “Christianity” was yet identifiable as such. The figure of Philo is a towering presence in that amalgam. While we do not know what Philo thought of such Jesus-believing Jews as he might have encountered,⁴² he probably engaged them in open dialogue. In any case, it is certainly through the mediation of early Alexandrian Christians that his writings came to be preserved.⁴³

Included in the variety of early Judaism and “Christianity” in Alexandria was Gnosticism of various kinds. To that we now turn.

4. Gnosticism in Alexandria

⁴¹ See Jakab, *Ecclesia alexandrina: Evolution sociale et institutionnelle du christianisme alexandrine (IIe et IIIe siècles)* (Bern: Lang, 2001), 45-49.

⁴² Eusebius erroneously claims that the Therapeutae described by Philo in *Vit. Cont.* were the first Christians in Alexandria (*H.E.* 2.16-17).

⁴³ For a much more extensive discussion of Jews and “Christians” in ancient Alexandria, with full documentation, see my article, “Christians and Jews in First-Century Alexandria,” ch. 2 in *Gnosticism and Christianity* (cit. n. 29), where I concentrate particularly on *Barnabas* and *Silvanus*.

“Basilides the heresiarch was living in Alexandria; from him derive the Gnostics.” This is one of the items listed in Eusebius’ *Chronicle* for the sixteenth year of Emperor Hadrian’s reign. Basilides is here credited with being the founder of the Gnostic heresy, but that is certainly not correct. He was a Gnostic, to be sure, but there were certainly Gnostics before him in Alexandria and elsewhere.⁴⁴

Basilides was a Gnostic, but he was also a Christian. Indeed, he is the earliest second-century Christian teacher in Alexandria known to us by name. He is credited in our meager sources with being a prolific author. Unfortunately, none of his writings remain, except for a few quotations preserved by church fathers. The earliest account we have of Basilides’ teachings is that of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.24.3-7), who lumps him together with Saturninus of Antioch as a successor to Simon and Menander, with Saturninus active in Antioch and Basilides in Alexandria. Basilides’ teachings are certainly typically Alexandrian, but it is possible that he spent some time in Antioch, for his mythological system has some features in common with that of Saturninus. Hippolytus has a completely different account of Basilides’ mythological system (*Refutation of All Heresies* 7.20-27), but I am convinced that that system reflects a later stage of Basilidian gnosis.⁴⁵

Basilides’ mythological and philosophical system includes a theogony, i.e. an account of the divine transcendent world; cosmogony and cosmology, i.e. how the world came into being through the actions of a creator-god and his angels; an anthropogony and anthropology, i.e. the origin and nature of humankind; a Christology and Soteriology, i.e., the actions of Christ and how humankind is saved from the material world; and ethical theory and a doctrine of providence.⁴⁶

Irenaeus accuses Basilides’ followers of sorcery and denying their Christian identity in times of persecution, but this is nothing more than baseless polemics.

⁴⁴ For a complete survey of the available sources for ancient Gnosticism see my *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

⁴⁵ On Basilides see my “Basilides the Gnostic,” in A. Marjanen and P. Luomanen, *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heresies”* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), 1-31; W. A. Lohr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (WUNT 83; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996); B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 417-34.

⁴⁶ For a complete account, with documentation, see my “Basilides the Gnostic,” 8-27.

In a fragment quoted by Clement of Alexandria Basilides is said to teach that it is the will of God to “love everything,” including punishment for sin (Layton frg. D). In other fragments Basilides asserts that Christian martyrs suffer for undetected sins, and that a child suffers because of innate sinfulness; he also likens Jesus’ suffering to that of a child. Basilides, under strong influence from Stoic and Platonic philosophy, asserts his faith in divine providence and the educational value of human suffering. For Basilides only God is wholly good.

Very little known of Basilides’ life and career. An Alexandrian context for his work is certain, but there is also a connection to Antioch, where he might have spent some time after the Jewish revolt of 115-117. It might be there that Basilides encountered an early form of classic Gnosticism, such as is reflected in the teachings of Saturninus. But there are features in his system that reflect the influence of the Alexandrian Jewish Gnostic tractate *Eugnostos* (on which see below). Early Christian writings, including some that would become part of the canonical New Testament, were certainly known to him. Indeed, he was the first Christian teacher to write commentaries on early Christian writings, set forth in his *Exegetica*, unfortunately lost.

Basilides had a number of pupils in his school, the most prominent of whom was his son Isidore. Three of his works are quoted by Clement. Teachings of unknown Basilidians are cited by Clement on a number of topics. The authority of Basilides is bolstered by his followers with the claim that he was taught by one Glaukias (otherwise unknown), who is said to have been the “interpreter” of the apostle Peter. Reflected here may be a counter-claim to the apostolic connection made by others between Mark and Peter. One of the most interesting of the Basilidian fragments deals with the Christian calendar. Clement reports that the Basilidians observe the day of Jesus’ baptism, spending the previous night in a vigil of scripture readings. The date of the festival is Tybi 11, equivalent to January 6 in the Julian calendar, the date of the Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord observed until today in the Christian liturgical year.

Probably the most prominent of the Gnostic Christians in second-century Alexandria was Valentinus.⁴⁷ The earliest attestations of Valentinus and the Valentinians are found in the writings of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. According to Irenaeus Valentinus appeared in Rome sometime before 140 and was active there until about 160. He had come there from Alexandria, where he had begun his teaching activity before his move to Rome. Clement of Alexandria reports that the Valentinians claimed apostolic succession for Valentinus through one Theodas (otherwise unknown), supposedly a disciple of Paul. That is hardly likely, although Paul was clearly the most important apostolic authority for Valentinus and his followers.

Valentinus' teachings were very influential and attracted a number of prominent individuals who became teachers in their own right, the most prominent of whom were Ptolemy, Heracleon, and Theodotus. Already in the second century the movement split into an eastern and a western branch. The eastern branch remained closer to the doctrine of Valentinus himself, while the western branch, probably founded by Ptolemy, developed doctrines that differed from those of the eastern branch in terms of protology (doctrine of primal beings), soteriology, and Christology. A number of second-century Valentinian teachers are mentioned by church fathers, some of whom are known to us only by name since their writings have disappeared. These include Alexander, Secundus, Theotimus, and Florinus of the western branch. Florinus was a presbyter of the Roman church until he was finally deposed by Bishop Victor. Axionicus of Antioch is reported to have been the only one of Valentinus' disciples to remain faithful to the master's teachings.

Valentinus was a prolific writer, but much of his work is irretrievably lost. Six fragments from lost homilies and epistles are preserved by Clement of Alexandria. Hippolytus preserves a short psalm composed by him and a brief notice of a vision experienced by Valentinus. A complete homily preserved in Coptic, the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3), can safely be attributed to him, though this is disputed.

⁴⁷ On Valentinus and Valentinian Gnosis see ch. 6 in my *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp.145-89. The best full-scale treatment of Valentinian gnosis is Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'* (NHMS 60; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006).

According to Irenaeus “Valentinus adapted the fundamental principles of the so-called Gnostic school of thought to his own kind of system” (*Against Heresies* 1.11.1). The school of thought referred to by Irenaeus is what scholars now refer to as “Classic” or “Sethian” Gnosticism (on which see below). This variety of Gnosticism is somewhat akin to the system of Saturninus of Antioch, and was probably known also to Basilides. The Valentinian mythological system described by Irenaeus is clearly related to the basic myth of Classic Gnosticism.

Clement of Alexandria presents quotations from three of Valentinus’ letters and two of his homilies; Hippolytus preserves one of Valentinus’ psalms and gives an account of a vision supposedly experienced by Valentinus. What we can learn from these few precious fragments is that Valentinus was not only a learned Gnostic teacher, but also a devout pastor of souls, a mystic visionary, and a gifted poet.

Other Gnostic teachers active in Alexandria during the second century include Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes, and Julius Cassianus. According to what little we know of the Carpocratians from church fathers they advocated a libertine variety of Gnostic Christianity. Reference has already been made to a “Secret Gospel of Mark” mentioned in a letter attributed to one Theodore and said to have been in use among the Carpocratians, but that letter is probably spurious.⁴⁸ According to Clement, Julius Cassianus advocated an extreme form of asceticism. I have argued elsewhere that he was the probable author of one of the Nag Hammadi tractates, the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3).⁴⁹

Reference has already been made to the use made by Basilides of the “Classic” or “Sethian” Gnostic myth as well as the Gnostic tractate *Eugnostos*, and the adaptation of the “Classic Gnostic” myth by Valentinus in creating his own system. I have argued that *Eugnostos* (NHC III,3; V,1) can be regarded as a product of a variety of Jewish Gnosticism that existed in first-century Alexandria. It shows no Christian features at all. A “Christianized” version of *Eugnostos* is found in another tractate preserved in Coptic, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4; BG,3).⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See above, p. 4 and nn. 11-12.

⁴⁹ Pearson, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X* (NHS 15: Leiden: Brill, 1981), 118-20.

⁵⁰ On these two tractates see my *Ancient Gnosticism*, 210-18.

As for “Classic” or “Sethian” Gnosticism, what Irenaeus refers to as “the so-called Gnostic school of thought,” this variety of Gnosticism was a very prominent part of early Christianity from the second century on. It occupies a prominent place in patristic discussions of the Gnostic heresy, and is represented by several of the Gnostic tractates preserved in Coptic, the most important of which is the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1).⁵¹ The core myth found in that tractate shows no Christian features at all. That myth is certainly of Jewish origin, as I have shown in my previous work.

We can conclude this discussion of Gnosticism in Alexandria with the observation that Gnostic forms of Christianity were probably the most prominent forms of Christianity in Alexandria until toward the end of the second century, when Demetrius was bishop there from 189 to 232. Alexandrian Gnosticism can be said to have originated among Alexandrian Jews already in the first century.

In the four main sections of this paper we have treated the Mark legend found in the fourth-century *Acts of Mark*, what that document tells us about the topography of ancient Alexandria, the varieties of Judaism and “Christianity” in Alexandria in the first and second centuries, and the varieties of Gnosticism in Alexandria. But more could have been said here. For example, I have treated elsewhere the early development of the Alexandrian Christian hierarchy, the famous “Catechetical School” in Alexandria, the expansion of the church outside of Alexandria, and the origins of Egyptian monasticism.⁵² The earliest churches were headed by presbyters, a form of leadership inherited from the synagogue. Until the time of Demetrius he was the only bishop in Egypt. As for the “Catechetical School,” that institution only came under ecclesiastical control with Demetrius. The papyrological evidence shows that Christianity expanded into the *chora* already in the second century. And the origins of monasticism can be

⁵¹ On “Classic” or “Sethian” Gnosticism see chs. 3 and 4 in my *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 51-133; also several chapters in my book, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (cit. n. 39).

⁵² See “Current Issues in the Study of Early Christianity in Egypt,” ch. 1 in *Gnosticism and Christianity* (cit. n. 29), 11-81, esp. 18-21, 26-32, 32-37, 37-42.

found in the “solitaries” (monachoi) who existed in Alexandrian congregations already in the second century.

We can conclude this paper with the observation that the greatest “extent of theological diversity in earliest Christianity” can be found in first- and second-century Alexandria.

Appendix: Map of Ancient Alexandria

This map was first published in “Earliest Christianity in Egypt,” in Pearson-Goehring, *Roots of Egyptian Christianity*. It was adapted from a map published by Adriani in his *Repertorio d’arte dell’Egitto Greco-romano*.

Key: 1. Pharos Lighthouse. 2. *Martyrium* of St. Mark in Boukolou. 3. Caesarium. 4. Kibotos harbor. 5. Western agora. 6. Bendideion, St. Athanasius Church. 7. Alabaster Tomb. 8. St. Theonas Church. 9. Gymnasium. 10. Arab Wall. 11. Serapeum.

