

THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT ACCORDING TO THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA

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Introduction

Studying the thoughts of the School of Alexandria, especially during the period of the first five centuries helps us to attain the divine grace of the Holy Trinity and practice the unity with the Father in the Son through the work of the Holy Spirit. It reveals how the early Church understands the Holy Scriptures, Christianizes the Hellenic culture, and faces heresies.

Schools of Alexandria

Long before the establishment of Christianity in Alexandria, the city was famous for its many schools. By far, the largest school was the "*Museum*," which was founded by Ptolemy and became the most famous school in the East. In addition, there were the "*Serapeum*" and the "*Sebastion*." Each of these three schools had its own huge library¹. Justo L. Gonzalez states that the *Museum's* library, whose directors were among the most remarkable scholars of the world, grew to the point where it housed 700,000 volumes, making it an arsenal of knowledge that was astounding for its time. The *Museum*, as its name proclaims, was dedicated to the Muses, and was a sort of university in which the most distinguished writers, scientists, and philosophers gathered and worked. Largely because of these institutions, Alexandria soon became famous as a rich center of knowledge². Numerous Jewish schools were also scattered everywhere³.

The geographical position of Alexandria gave a special flavor to the thought that developed in the city. Also, the intellectual work produced in Alexandria was precisely of the type for which the world was athirst.

The ancient Greeks, who saw in it a mysterious land, pregnant with hidden wisdom, had admired Egypt. Moreover, all the various doctrines emanating from the East converged in Alexandria where they formed an eclectic mass... Jews with their Scriptures were not the only ones who had come to Alexandria, but Babylonians had also come with their astrology, as well as Persians with their dualism, and many others with different and often confused religions⁴.

In brief, Alexandria, the cosmopolitan city, was chosen as a home for learning⁵, and a unique center of a brilliant intellectual life⁶, where Egyptian, Greek

¹ C. Bigg: *Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, Oxford, 1913, p. 26.

² Justo L. Gonzalez: *A History of Christian Thought*, Abingdon Nashville, Parthenon Press 1970, p. 186-7.

³ Philo claims that there were at his time at least one million Jews (Flac. 43). *The Jewish community of Alexandria in the Hellenistic-Roman period was the largest and most important of the Greek-speaking Diaspora.* (Birger A. Pearson: *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity [Studies in Antiquity & Christianity]*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1992, p. 145.

⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez: *A History of Christian Thought*, , Abingdon Nashville, , Parthenon Press 1970, p. 186-7.

⁵ H. M. Gwatkin: *Early Church History*, London 1909, vol. 2, p.155.

⁶ J. Lebreton : *Hist. of the Primitive Church*, London, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1949, vol. 3, p. 731.

and Jewish cultures together with eastern mystic thoughts were nourished and gave rise to a new civilization.

In such an environment, there was no alternative but to establish a Christian institution⁷ to enable the church to face the battle, which was waged by these powerful schools. It is highly probable that there were well educated Christians in Alexandria in the apostolic times. In the Acts of the Apostles (18:24 ff.), St. Luke tells of Apollos who was a learned Jew of Alexandria and mighty in the scriptures; he may well have learnt there the knowledge of Jesus that he possessed before he met Aquilla and Priscilla.

The Christian School And Its Development

St. Jerome records that St. Mark himself founded the Christian School of Alexandria. He was inspired by the Holy Spirit to establish it to teach Christianity, as this was the only way to give the new religion a solid foundation in the city⁸. The School became the oldest center for sacred sciences in the history of Christianity⁹. In it, the first system of Christian theology was formed and the allegorical method of biblical exegesis was devised. In this context, Dom. D. Rees states, "The most renowned intellectual institution in the early Christian world was undoubtedly the Catechetical School (*Didascaleion*) of Alexandria, and its primary concern was the study of the Bible, giving its name to an influential tradition of scriptural interpretation. The preoccupation of this school of exegesis was to discover everywhere the spiritual sense underlying the written word of the Scripture¹⁰."

Origen describes the catechist's functions in more than one of his books. He had both to teach doctrine¹¹ and to give instructions on the Christian life. "*If you want to receive Baptism,*" Origen says¹², "*you must first learn about God's Word, cut away the roots of your vices, and correct your barbarous wild lives and practice meekness and humility. Then you will be fit to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit.*"

Bardy has suggested that we are dealing with a philosophical school rather than a catechetical school. But, as Mehat has pointed out, *catechesis* is not merely a simple matter of baptismal instruction. J. Ferguson states that he does not find the two (catechetical and philosophical) incompatible¹³.

By the second century it became quite influential on church life as can be seen from the following:

1. It was able to satisfy the thirst of the Alexandrian Christians for religious knowledge, encourage higher studies and create research work in a variety of fields.

Joseph Wilson Trigg says, [Alexandria was thus easily the greatest intellectual center of the Roman Empire when Origen lived there. We have Alexandria to thank for Origen's compelling intellectual drive and his astonishingly wide interests.] Origen, SCM Press, 1985, p. 7.

⁷ *De Viris Illustribus* 36.

⁸ *Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate: St. Mark and the Coptic Church, Cairo, 1968, p. 61.*

⁹ *Johannes Quasten: Patrology, Spectrum Publishers, 1966, vol. 2.*

¹⁰ *Nelson : A New Catholic Comm. on the Holy Scripture, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1969, p. 15.*

¹¹ *Against Celsus 3:15; Jean Daniélou: Origen, NY, 1955, p. 10.*

¹² *In Leirt. hom 11:3.*

¹³ *John Ferguson : Clement of Alexandria, Twayne Publishers, NY 1974, p. 15.*

2. It gave birth to numerous spiritual and well-known church leaders along the years. Many of which deserved to sit on the throne of St. Mark.

3. Through its missionary zeal, it was able to win many souls to Christianity from Egypt and abroad.

4. In a true ecumenical spirit, it attracted students from other nations, many of who became leaders and bishops in their own churches.

5. It established a common awareness of the importance of education as a basic element in religious structure.

6. It offered the world the first systematic theological studies. Its deans did not interfere in the administration of the Church.

7. It used philosophy as a weapon in dealing with pagan philosophers, and thus beating them by their own game¹⁴.

Its Program

It would have been a grave error to have confined the School's activities to theology¹⁵. Its teaching was encyclopedic; first presenting the whole series of profane sciences, and then rising to moral and religious philosophy, and finally to Christian theology, as set forth in the form of commentaries on the sacred books. This encyclopedic conception of teaching was an Alexandrian tradition, for it was also found in Alexandrian pagan and Jewish schools. From St. Clement's trilogy, consisting of his chief three works: *Protrepticus (An Exhortation to the Heathen)*, *Paidagogos (the Educator)*, and *Stromata (Miscellanies)*, which broadly outlined the School's program at his time, we may conclude that three courses were available:

1. A special course for non-Christians, which introduced candidates to principles of Christianity.

2. A course on Christian morals.

3. An advanced course on divine wisdom and sufficient knowledge for the spiritual Christian.

Worship went side by side with study in the School¹⁶. Teachers and students practiced prayer, fasting and diverse ways of asceticism. In addition to continence in food and drink, they were also continent in earthly possessions¹⁷. In purity and integrity their lives were exemplary. Celibacy was a recommended ideal, and was observed by many.

The Characteristics of Alexandrian Theology

Besides the main Alexandrian views on allegorism, philosophy, and knowledge (*gnosis*), of which I prefer to speak in separate chapters, the School of Alexandria had the following characteristics.

I. Deification (The Grace Of Renewal)¹⁸

¹⁴ Douglas: *Dict. of the Christian Churches*, p. 26;

¹⁵ Atiya: *Hist. of Eastern Church*, p. 33; Mourad Kamel: *Coptic Church*, p. 36.

¹⁶ J. Lebreton, p. 732.

¹⁷ *Coptic Patriarchate: St. Mark*, p 63.

¹⁸ Fr. T. Malaty: *The Divine Grace, Alexandria, 1992*, 30 ff.

Many scholars see the core of Alexandrian theology as *Deification or the grace of renewal*. By deification the Alexandrians mean the renewal of human nature as a whole, to attain sharing in the characteristics of our Lord Jesus Christ in place of the corrupt human nature, or as the apostles state that the believer may enjoy "the partaking in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), or the new man in the image of His Creator (Col. 3:10). Alexandrian theology can be summarized by these words: "God took our humanity, that man may share His life." St. Clement of Alexandria says, "*The Word of God, became man just that you may learn from a Man how it may be that man should become god*¹⁹."

Joseph Sittler stated that the East and West have different ways of speaking about the work of Christ. In the West, that work is centered upon redemption from sin; in the East, it is centered upon the divinization of man. The doctrine of atonement is central to that work in the West. In contrast, in the East the central doctrine is participation, illumination, re-enactment, and transformation. In the West, the work is reunification. The Western Savior is the Eastern Pantocrator²⁰.

Ii. Oneness Of Life

The School of Alexandria reveals to us the **oneness of life in Christ**. The dean and his students did not isolate the study of religion, philosophy and science from their church life nor from their daily life. They believed in **one (integral) life in Christ**. This was revealed in their study, worship, behavior, preaching and witnessing to Christ.

The deans and students were mostly virgins who devoted their lives to Christ. They lived as scholars and at the same time as true worshippers, ascetics and preachers. They were eager to devote their lives, contemplating on God through their study of the Bible, without ignoring their role in witnessing to Christ and serving Him..

Iii. Soteriological Theology

St. Mark who used the healing of Arianus' wound - when a needle pierced his hand while repairing St. Mark's shoe - in the name of Jesus Christ as a starting point to preach the Gospel, did not reveal God as a mere idea he believed in, but as the Savior who redeems mankind. This is the basic principle of the Alexandrian theology until today. We know God, not through theoretical discussions, but through His redeeming deeds. God grants us new knowledge, new glorious life and immortality.

This is clear in the theology of **St. Clement of Alexandria** who usually introduces Jesus Christ as the "*Educator*." He wrote a book called *Paidagogos* "The Educator." He speaks of this Divine *Paidagogue* as the "All-healing physician of mankind²¹." In other words, divine knowledge, to **St. Clement**, cannot be separated from our salvation. He clearly believes "*It is the will of God that we should attain the knowledge of God, which is the communication of immortality*²²." "*The Word ... became Man so that you might learn from Man how man may become god*²³."

¹⁹ *Protrepicus* 1:8:4.

²⁰ *Essays on Nature and Grace*, Philadelphia 1972, p.52.

²¹ *St. Clement: Paidagogos*, Book 1, Ch. 2. Section 6.

²² *Stromata*: 4:6:27.

²³ *Protrep.* 1:8:4.

IV. Penance And Repentance

In a papyrus fragment on repentance, St. Dionysius argues against severity toward apostates: "*Let us then not repel those who return, but gladly welcome them and number them with those who have not strayed, and thus supply that which is wanting in them*²⁴."

V. Theological Terms

Many modern scholars look to Origen as the first theologian. His work *De Principiis* ("On First Principles") is perhaps the greatest of Origen works and marks a long step towards the formation of Christian theology. Concerning theological terms, the Alexandrian School uses Greek philosophical terms to explain Christian doctrines, because of the existing worldwide Greek culture, and in order to deal with the philosophers and heretics. But the Alexandrians were not enslaved to these terms. This is what St. Athanasius explains when he states that *disputes merely about words must not be suffered to divide those who think alike*²⁵.

VI. Definitions Of Theological Terminology

The Alexandrian Fathers did not give definitions to any theological terminology, because they were interested only in the practice of theology in their worship and daily life. Benjamin Drewery could not find a direct definition to the grace of God through the numerous works of Origen. He deduced it stating, "We may suggest that if Origen had been required to offer a formal definition of grace, he would have responded somewhat as follows: 'Grace is the power of God freely, but not unconditionally, placed at man's disposal, whereby He appropriates through the Holy Spirit the offer of salvation to a new and ultimate life, revealed and enacted in the Scriptures, by the Incarnate Jesus Christ, and made available by Him to the world'²⁶."

VII. Ecumenical Spirit

Ecumenicism is a spirit that the School of Alexandria spread not by speaking about the unity of churches all over the world but by practicing it in many ways:

a. The School attracted many foreign students to study theology, especially the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Those students later became leaders in their churches. This created a kind of inner unity based on the word of God.

b. The deans of the School were very active outside Egypt, because of their love towards the universal church; they were not looking for any personal prestige nor gaining any political power for their church. For example Origen traveled to Rome, Caesarea, Arabia, Tyre, etc.

c. The Alexandrian theologians were leaders and pioneers in the ecumenical councils.

²⁴ Vivian, p. 165; Feltoe: *St. Dionysius*, p. 62; *St. Dionysius: Letters*, p. p. 62-64.

²⁵ *Quod non sint tres de* (*That They are not three Gods*).

²⁶ Fr. T. Malaty: *The Terms: Physis & Hypostasis in the early church, Alexandria, 1987*, p. 4.

d. The Coptic manuscripts witness that the Copts translated almost all the Christian literature existing in the world at that time.

The Allegorical Interpretation Of The Scriptures

Allegorism was well established in Alexandrian Judaism, especially by **Philo**²⁷, who made a systematic use of it to bridge the chasm between the Old Testament revelation and the Platonic philosophy. Philo compares the literal sense of Scripture to the shadow, which the body casts, finding its authentic, profounder truth in the spiritual meaning which it symbolizes²⁸. He does not want to depreciate or abolish the literal or the historical meaning, but looks to it as man's body which merits the fullest respect²⁹, although the soul is more precious than the body.

St. Clement of Alexandria is considered the first Christian theologian (writer) who uses allegorical interpretation, giving a cause of using it in a practical way. He says that the Bible has hidden meanings to incite us to search and discover the words of salvation, which are hidden from those who despise them.

ALLEGORY AND TYPOLOGY

The word "allegory," is derived from the Greek "*alla*," meaning "other," and "*agoreuo*," meaning, "proclaim." It originally referred to a figure of speech that Cicero defined as a "continuous stream of metaphors³⁰." The word "*type*," τυποι in Greek has its basic meaning, 'something struck out; a print, impression of a seal.' The seal is the New Testament event, which has struck out a prophetic impression of itself in the pages of the Old Testament³¹.

Allegory And Typology In The New Testament

Jean Daniélou also says, "The typology of the Fathers is based on the continuity which exists between the Old and New Testaments³²."

The term "allegory" is used by St. Paul in Gal. 4:24, "which things contain an allegory." Some scholars believe that he introduces the allegorical interpretation of the Law by the question "Is it for the oxen that God cares, or says He altogether for our sake?" (1 Cor. 9:10) does not necessarily mean that Paul, besides abolishing this particular law with his advocacy of the abrogation of the Law as a whole, also denies that this law was ever meant to be taken literally³³.

In the New Testament, we have four kinds of non-literal interpretations of Old Testament texts:

²⁷ Philo (c. 20 BC.- c. AD. 50), the Jewish thinker and exegete in whom that literature flourished also lived in Alexandria. He belonged to a prosperous priestly family of Alexandria, and was firmly convinced that the teaching of the Old Testament could be combined with Greek speculation. His philosophy of religion embodies such a synthesis. (Esmat Gabriel: *St. Clement of Alexandria, Coptic Church Review, Spring 1980, v.1, No. 1, p. 22.*)

²⁸ *De confus. ling.* 190.

²⁹ *De. migrat. Abrah.* 89-93; J.N.D. Kelly: *Early Christian Doctrines*, 1978, p. 9.

³⁰ *Orator* 27.94; Everett Ferguson: *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, N.Y, 990, p. 23.

³¹ John MacQueen: *Allegory*, Methuen & Co, 1970, p. 20.

³² Jean Daniélou: *From Shadows to Reality, Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, p. 69.

³³ Cf. M. Guttman, *Das Judentum und seine Umwelt*, I, p. 252; Harry Austryn Wolfson: *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, Harvard University Press, 1976, p.42.

1. Interpretations dealing with predictions of the first coming of Christ.
2. Interpretations dealing with predictions of the second coming of Christ.
3. Interpretations dealing with the pre-existence of Christ.
4. Interpretations dealing with legal or moral matters.

Allegory And Typology In The Early Church³⁴

J. Daniélou³⁵ states that primitive Christian tradition recognized two senses of Scripture, namely the literal and the typological. The latter is in reality a "Charistic," or "Christological" sense, having Christ in His totality as its object. He also states that there have been at least five kinds of **typological** sense in early Christian literature³⁶:

1. Typology that aims at discovering the circumstances of Christ's earthly life in the Old Testament. This type of exegesis serves to characterize the Western tradition.

2. Typology, common to all the Fathers, which does not therefore bear distinctive marks of any particular current, scrutinizes the Old Testament with a view to discovering Christ there, not in the exterior circumstances of His earthly life, but in the mysteries which He came to accomplish.

3. Typology that concentrates on those features of the Old Testament which are figures of the Church's sacramental life; it is found in the sacramental catches and is particularly dear to the School of Antioch.

4. Typology which searches in the Old Testament for figures of the role that Christ plays in the souls of believers; it is in Alexandria that this typology is cultivated with special predilection. For this reason some scholars call the School of Alexandria, "the School of the Souls³⁷." This does not mean that the Alexandrian school ignored the sanctification of the body, but it concentrates on the ascent of the souls by the Holy Spirit to the heavenly life while the believer still lives in this world, through the study of the Bible and worshipping God in his daily life.

5. Eschatological typology aims at discovering the traits of the Old Testament in realizing the vestiges of Christ's glorious manifestation at the end of time. Daniélou notes that writers of Jewish apocalyptic literature favor this form of interpretation, without giving to it a Christological signification.

Allegory And Typology According to St. Clement of Alexandria

St. Clement of Alexandria believes that the Bible resembles the Virgin Mary who brought forth Jesus Christ and her virginity was preserved. Thus we discover the spiritual meanings of the Bible verses, while keeping its meaning, for it still encloses many other spiritual meanings. However, one must be careful not to exaggerate St. Clement's proneness to allegorism, for he tries not to abandon the historical sense of

³⁴ Everett Ferguson: *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, N.Y., Garland Publishing Inc., 990, p. 24.

³⁵ J. Daniélou: *L'Unité des deux testaments dans l'oeuvre d'Origène* (*Revue de Sciences religieuses*, 22 - 1948-p. 45); Alexander Kerrigan: *St. Cyril of Alexandria, Interpreter of the Old Testament*, Rome, 1952, p.26 ff.

³⁶ Cf. J. Daniélou: *Les vivres sens de l'écriture dans la tradition chrétienne primitive* (*Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses*, 24), p. 120-125.

³⁷ Brian E. Daley: *The Hope of the Early Church*, Cambridge University, 1991, p. 44.

Scripture, as has often been done by some allegorical interpreters. St. Clement says once and again that the Scriptures do have a literal historical sense³⁸.

St. Clement of Alexandria distinguishes between literal, mystical, moral, and prophetic interpretations. C. Mondésert states that meditating on the text of the Scripture, St. Clement discovers at least five senses:

- a historical sense;
- a doctrinal sense;
- a prophetic signification;
- a philosophical sense;
- and a mystical sense³⁹.

Allegory And Typology According to Origen

Allegory is developed and carried to excess by **Origen**. He believes that the Logos, the heavenly Groom, is re-presented in the incidents of the Scriptures as Food, Educator and Groom for the soul. According to him⁴⁰, the words of the Scriptures should be printed in the soul in one of three ways:

1- Simple people or the uneducated should be taught directly by the letter itself, which we call the obvious meaning or the straightforward historical sense. Origen himself is the foremost biblical scholar of antiquity and *by no means ignores the literal meaning or the importance of history*⁴¹, while he thinks that one existed, he considers it inferior to the spiritual. Nearly all would have agreed with the fourth-century Didymus the Blind, who was influenced by Origen, namely that it is impossible to understand the spiritual or elevated thought without the shadow, which is the letter, or without the preliminary *propaedeutic* sciences⁴²."

2- People at the higher level should find edification for their souls through the moral meaning, or the lessons they profit from the text. In the *Homilies on Leviticus*, there are several instances of where this moral meaning is emphasized⁴³. The moral sense of Scripture speaks to the reason of a person. Reason is the ability to distinguish between good and evil⁴⁴.

3- The perfect should be edified by the mystical or spiritual sense in relation to Christ, or the spiritual Law, as it contains the shadow of the blessings to come.

He recognizes that, as man is composed of body, soul and spirit, in the same way the structure of the Scripture has been planned by God for man's salvation, i.e., the literal, moral, and spiritual senses.

According to Origen the understanding of the Scripture is "the art of arts," and "the science⁴⁵." The words of the Scripture are its body, or the visible element that hides its spirit or the invisible element. The spirit is the treasure hidden in a field:

³⁸ *Stromat* 1:21; 2:19; 3:6; 6:3,8; 7:3.

³⁹ *Clement d' Alexandria, Paris 1944, p. 154; Alexander Kerrigan: St. Cyril of Alexandria, Roma 1952, p.29.*

⁴⁰ *De Princip.* 4:2:4.

⁴¹ *H. de Lubac: Histoire et esprit, Paris 1950, p. 94.*

⁴² *In EsaiamII:3:7; Boniface Ramsey: Beginning to Read the Fathers, Paulist Press, 1985, p. 36-7.*

⁴³ *In Lev. hom.* 1:5; 2:4.

⁴⁴ *In Lev.* 9:6.

⁴⁵ *Comm. John* 23:46.

hidden behind every word⁴⁶, every letter but even behind every iota used in the written word of God⁴⁷. Thus “every thing in the Scripture is mystery⁴⁸.”

This spiritual understanding of the Scripture is a grace given to the perfect believers by Christ. For only those who have the Spirit of Jesus can understand their spiritual meaning⁴⁹, i.e., to enter this chamber of eternal marriage between Christ and the soul.

The Alexandrians' Justifications Of Allegorical Interpretation

As we have already said, St. Clement believes that allegory incites believers to discover the hidden meanings of the Scripture.

Origen discusses two problems, which the early Church faced, concerning the Old Testament:

1. The Jews, who stick to the letter of the prophecies of the Old Testament, were expecting that the Messiah would fulfill them literally; such as He must be their King who reigns over the whole world. Therefore, they refused Jesus as the true Messiah⁵⁰. “*Both Jews and Christians,*” Origen says, “*believe that the Bible was written by the Holy Spirit, but we disagree about the interpretation of what is contained in it. Nor do we live like the Jews, since we consider that it is not the literal interpretation of the law which contains the spirit of the legislation*⁵¹.”

2. The Gnostics rejected the Old Testament, for they were scandalized by some verses, which refer to God as being angry, or that He regretted or changed His mind. They were scandalized because they interpreted them literally and not spiritually⁵². Origen suggests that allusions to *anthropomorphism*, such as God's anger, are not to be understood literally.

The Gnostics And The School Of Alexandria

The most important center of *Gnosticism* was Alexandria, which had, became the heir of Jewish traditions, classical thought, and the old mysticism of oriental religions⁵³. It was in Alexandria that the greatest doctors of *Gnosticism* - Basilides, Carpocrates and Valentinus - flourished. St. Athanasius frequently refers to them, as well as to Marcion, warning of their danger to Christian doctrine. St. Clement of Alexandria provides us with a systematic analysis of the various sects.

⁴⁶ Hom. Levit. 4:8.

⁴⁷ Hom. Jerm. 39.

⁴⁸ Hom. Gen. 10:1.

⁴⁹ In Ezk. Hom 11:2.

⁵⁰ De Principals 4:2:1.

⁵¹ Contra Celsus 5:60.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ B. Walker, *Gnosticism*, p.11-12; G.W. MacRae, "Nag Hammadi and the New Testament" in *Gnosis: Festschrift fur Hans Jonas*. In *Verbindung mit Ugo Bianchi*, Gottingen, 1978, p. 150; R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 13; id., *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period*, New York, Harper, 1961, p. 16.

Gnostic Teachings

1. Most of the *Gnostic* schools were thoroughly **dualistic**, setting an infinite chasm between the spiritual world and the world of matter.

2. In some systems the creation of the material universe is believed to result from **the fall of Sophia** (wisdom); this creation is viewed as evil. From the Divine Being, the Demiurge was derived by a longer or shorter series of emanations or "*aeons*." He, through some mischance or fall among the higher aeons, was the immediate source of creation and ruled the world, which was therefore imperfect and antagonistic to what was truly spiritual.

3. Usually Gnostics **divided men into two or three classes**: The "spiritual" (*pneumatics*) are those who have illuminated souls; the "fleshy" (*hylics*) or "material," are slaves of matter, and are earthbound. Some Gnostics add a *psychic*, intermediate class.

4. The secret knowledge that the Gnostics claimed to possess was acquired, not by perseverance in moral rectitude, but by a sudden illumination that enabled them to understand the ways of God, the universe, and themselves. It was knowledge that freed them and revealed the mysteries of truth.

5. Despite their reliance on the methods and attitudes of current philosophy, they claimed to have succeeded contemptuously as not "having the possibility" of **understanding reality**. "We alone know the unutterable mysteries of the spirit," the *Nassene* (Snake) sect claimed (c. 200).

6. Many of the Nag-Hammadi writings are **Christ-centered**. Their understanding of Christ, the Scriptures and man differed fundamentally from that of members of the Church. The function of Christ was to come as the emissary of the supreme God, bringing "*gnosis*." As a Divine Being, He neither assumed a properly human body nor died but either temporarily inhabited a human being (Jesus) or **assumed a merely phantasmal human appearance**⁵⁴.

7. The Gnostics had their order in secret sects. The leaders were teachers, both men and women, not ecclesiastics.

8. The Gnostics and their orthodox opponents hotly debated the **relationship between the Old and New Testaments**. The teaching of the Gnostics concerning the antagonism that exists between the Law and the Gospel called forth a vigorous reaction on the part of ecclesiastical writers, especially the Alexandrian Fathers. The Alexandrian Fathers **emphatically stressed the fundamental unity of both phases of revelation**.

9. Fr. Matthias F. Wahba in his thesis, "The doctrine of Sanctification in relation to Marriage according to St. Athanasius," dealt with the Gnostics' view of marriage⁵⁵. He states that **St. Clement** explained that the *Gnostic's* dualist view of creation led to **two opposing attitudes toward marriage and sexuality**: the extreme of a rigorous and negative asceticism on the one hand, and a licentious antinomianism on the other. Both repudiate nature; the one through abstention and the other through excess⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1990, p. 573.

⁵⁵ *Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Ottawa*, 1933, p. 35-45.

⁵⁶ *Stromata*, III. 1-5.

The Alexandrian Fathers And *Gnosticism*

St. Clement's objection to *Gnosticism* is that it lay outside the church and is offensive to human freedom of will and common sense. In his own optimistic outlook, St. Clement believes that humans are reasonable beings. Christianity had to be interpreted in terms of the ultimate harmony between Scripture and philosophy. ***Therefore, Gnostic dualism, libertinism, and fatalism could not be the true Christian revelation***⁵⁷.

W.H.C. Frend writes that the differences between Clement and the Alexandrian Gnostics were, however, equally important. Clement's religion was monotheist as well as being church-oriented. He could be known, however, through his Son, or Word (Logos), not a Demiurge or lesser creator-god, but his image, mind, and reason, inseparable from himself⁵⁸.

In addition, Clement had an optimistic view of human beings and their relation to God. The world was created by God and therefore was good. Man and woman had been made in the image of God, and had the means within themselves to progress toward God. There was no "natural evil" and no impassable categories of Spiritual Men, Psychics, and Hylics as in the *Gnostic* systems. Christ was Teacher (*paidagogos*) of humankind.

St. Clement loathed the Gnostics, not least the Carpocratians, for their fatalism and libertinism⁵⁹.

St. Clement's View Of *Gnosis* Or "*Knowledge*"

St. Clement was the courageous and successful pioneer of a school that purposed to protect faith by making use of philosophy. St. Clement did not remain merely negative against the false *gnosis*; he set up a true and Christian *Gnosis*⁶⁰. Before St. Clement, the word "*Gnostic*" was identified as a heretic, for throughout the first two centuries, some heresies appeared under the title "*Gnostics*" in various forms. They believed - that knowledge (*gnosis*) is the main way of salvation. The reaction of many church leaders (such as Tertullian) was to attack "knowledge" and "philosophy" as enemies of "faith." The School of Alexandria faced the *Gnostic* heresies, which were spread in the East, not by attacking "knowledge" (*gnosis*), but by giving a new concept of "knowledge" that helps believers even in their faith. The Alexandrian School adopted philosophy as a way that leads to faith, and looked to knowledge as a divine gift.

St. Clement of Alexandria emphasizes the following:

I. The title "*Gnostic*" does not refer to a heretic but to the orthodox Christian who attains the divine *gnosis* (knowledge) from the Holy Spirit, by illumination through Christ (the Logos) in the light of the tradition of the church.

⁵⁷ W.H.C. Frend: *The Rise of Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1984, p.370.

⁵⁸ *Stromata* 4:25:156.

⁵⁹ W.H.C. Frend: *The Rise of Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1984, p.372.

⁶⁰ Esmat Gabriel: *St. Clement of Alexandria*, *Coptic Church Review*, Spring 1980, v.1, No. 1, p. 25.

II. The *Gnostic* is called to know God (*ginoskein*) or *epignonai*⁶¹, to see God⁶², and to possess Him⁶³.

III. It is to the extent that the *Gnostic* attains this state that he becomes the equal of the angels⁶⁴.

IV The grace of *gnosis* comes from the Father through the Son⁶⁵.

V. Christ is the source of knowledge (*gnosis*), He grants us His knowledge through baptism, by making God known to us from the fact that the eyes of our souls are purified⁶⁶.

VI. Christ gives us *gnosis* also through reading the Scriptures⁶⁷.

VII. The true *Gnostic* desires knowledge, struggles to practice goodness not in fear but in love. He is full of love towards God and men, fulfills the will of God, a man of prayer, witnessing to God daily (as a martyr), and never fears death⁶⁸.

VIII. Those who know (the Son) are called sons and gods⁶⁹. The Logos of God was made man so that you might learn how man can become god⁷⁰.

The School Of Alexandria And Philosophy

Alexandria And Hellenic Culture

In Alexandria, Greek thought exercised its strongest influence on the Hebrew mind. It came in the Jewish tradition that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) was realized in Alexandria, by 72 elder Jews, by the order of Ptolemy Philadelphus (B.C 285-246) for his famous library. This work constitutes the beginning of Jewish-Hellenistic literature. Philo (c. B.C 20 - c. 50 A.D), the Jewish thinker and exegete in whom that literature flourished, also lived in Alexandria. He belonged to a prosperous priestly family of Alexandria, and was firmly convinced that the teaching of the Old Testament could be combined with Greek speculation. His philosophy of religion embodies such a synthesis⁷¹.

The School Of Alexandria And Philosophy

Many scholars believe that Hellenic philosophy, especially Platonism, had its effect on the Alexandrians, and consider some leaders of the Alexandrian Christians as Platonist or Neo-platonist. F. L. Cross states that beginnings of the interweaving Platonism with Christian thought go back to St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen⁷².

⁶¹ *Ibid* 2: 47: 4 ; 7: 47:3.

⁶² *Ibid* 7: 68: 4.

⁶³ *Protrep* 106: 3; 113:3.

⁶⁴ *Strom* 7: 57: 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid* 5: 71: 5.

⁶⁶ *Paed.* 1: 28: 1.

⁶⁷ *Stromata.* 7: 103: 5.

⁶⁸ See *the Early Fathers of the School of Alexandria*, p. 77ff.

⁶⁹ *Strom.* 6: 16: 146.

⁷⁰ *Protrep.* 11.

⁷¹ *Esmat Gabriel: St. Clement of Alexandria, Coptic Church Review, Spring 1980, v.1, No. 1, p. 22.*

⁷² *F. L. Cross, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 1102.*

Origen himself states that the use of philosophy by Christian leaders dates back to St. Pantaenus, the teacher of St. Clement. Even before St. Pantaenus, Athenagoras was a philosopher whose strong perseverance, in the School qualified him to become the dean of the theological School of Alexandria without undressing the pallium of philosophers. **Athenagoras** is considered the first known Christian who with his faith carried a tendency towards philosophy.

***Why did the School of Alexandria use Philosophy?
And to what extent?***

The School of Alexandria did not aim to separate believers, especially the leaders of the church, from contemporary cultures, as long as these cultures helped them progress in all or some aspects of life. Its interest in science and philosophy is very clear from its encyclopedic teachings.

1. Philip Schaff⁷³ states that the Alexandrians as well-educated persons made much freer use of the Greek philosophy. For **Origen** philosophy is the jewel that Israelites took with them from Egypt and turned into ornaments for their sanctuary, though they also wrought them into the golden calf. Philosophy is not necessarily an enemy to truth, but it goes together with it, supports it, and neutralize the attacks against it.

2. The School of Alexandria undertook the task of reconciling the Bible to Hellenism, particularly the philosophy of Plato. However the Platonist considered the Bible as not worthy of serious consideration, because it was written in highly unliterary Greek and none of its books conformed to accepted genus⁷⁴. The Alexandrian leaders adopted philosophy, perhaps as a positive answer against those who criticized the Christian faith as if it prevented men from philosophical education.

3. The Alexandrians adopted some philosophers, such as Plato to their Christian needs. They used some philosophical terms, statements and ideas that are in harmony with the biblical concepts, but they did not depend on their philosophical basis and concepts. They almost use philosophical language to express their faith and Christian doctrines and concepts.

Examples:

a. The **Platonic dual world**: Some scholars see the Alexandrian eschatological attitude as an effect of the Platonic dual world: the world of senses and that of "**Ideas**." The Alexandrians concentrated on the world to come, or heavenly life, and looked to the present life as a temporary one. St. Clement states⁷⁵ that the earthly Church is a copy of the heavenly one.

b. Paul Tillich states, "Also in Plato the **inner aim of human existence** is described - somewhere in the *Philebus*, but also practically everywhere in Plato - as becoming similar to God as much as possible. God is the spiritual sphere. The inner *telos* of human existence is participation in the spiritual, divine sphere as much as possible..."⁷⁶

⁷³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Grand Rapids, 1980, Eerdmans Publishing Co., vol. 2, p. 353.*

⁷⁴ Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen, SCM Press Ltd, 1985, p. 52.*

⁷⁵ *Stromata* 4:8:66.

⁷⁶ Paul Tillich: *A History of Christian Thought, NY, 1968, p.6.*

c. It has been said, "When the church Fathers 'think' their **mysticism**, they Platonize⁷⁷." Christian mysticism has a biblical basis, as our Lord directs our sight towards our inner man (Luke 17:12). The Alexandrians always strongly emphasized that biblical mysticism is closely related to **the work of the Holy Spirit**, especially the illumination, purification and perfection of the believers' souls.

d. Paul Tillich states that Alexandria had been affected by the Platonic idea in its view of **providence**. J.W. Trigg adds, "Another area where Origen found Platonism and Christianity singularly compatible was in their simultaneous insistence on *the activity of divine providence and human freedom and moral responsibility*⁷⁸."

e. Paul Tillich sees the fifth element that was added to the Platonic tradition as coming from Aristotle: The divine is a form without matter, perfect in itself. This is the profoundest idea in Aristotle. This highest form, called "God," is moving the world, not causally by pushing it from the outside, **but by driving everything finite toward him by means of love...** He said that God... moves everything by being loved by everything. Everything has the desire to unite itself with the highest form, to get rid of the lower forms in which it lives, where it is in the bondage of matter⁷⁹.

Christianity offers The Incarnate Logos, who manifests Himself as true love. He loved us firstly, and grants us Himself as the source of love.

f. For the Stoics, *logos* means man's ability to recognize reality; we could call it "theoretical reason." It is man's ability to reason. **Because man has the logos in himself, he can discover it in nature and history.** From this it follows for Stoicism that the man who is determined by the natural law, the Logos, is the *logikos*, the wise Man. Originally the Stoics were Greeks; later they were Romans. Some of the most famous Stoics were Roman emperors, for example, Marcus Aurelius. The Stoics did not have the concept of sin. They had the concept of foolishness, but not sin. Therefore, salvation in Stoicism is a salvation through reaching wisdom. In Christianity salvation is brought about by divine grace. These two approaches are in conflict with each other to the present day⁸⁰.

g. Some scholars believe that the **allegorical interpretation** of the Holy Scriptures, which the Alexandrians adopted, is one of the principal effects of the Hellenic culture on some Jews and Christians, especially, Philo of Alexandria, and the early Alexandrian Fathers. In fact the Alexandrian Fathers used the allegorical interpretation on a Christian basis.

h. Athenagoras' technique in developing argument is manifestly Platonic: there is the analogy from agriculture and the manual arts.

i. Paul Tillich believes that Greek philosophy and Christianity do agree in revealing **the need of a savior**: What was said about the character of the founders of these philosophical schools was very similar to what the Christians also said about the founder of their church. It is interesting that a man like Epicurus - who later was so much attacked by the Christians that only some of his fragments remain - was called *soter* by his pupils. This is the Greek word which the New Testament uses and which we translate as "savior." Epicurus the philosopher was called a savior. He was called

⁷⁷ Joseph Wilson Trigg: *Origen*, SCM Press, 1985, p. 67.

⁷⁸ Joseph Wilson Trigg: *Origen*, SCM Press, 1985, p. 72.

⁷⁹ Paul Tillich: *A History of Christian Thought*, NY, 1968, p. 7.

⁸⁰ Paul Tillich: *A History of Christian Thought*, NY, 1968, p 8, 9.

soter because he liberated them from anxiety, and from the fear of demons which permeated the whole life of the ancient world⁸¹.

j. Paul Tillich also sees that Greek philosophy and Christianity agree in revealing **the need for wisdom**. The Alexandrians in a biblical concept reveal the divine Logos Himself as the Wisdom, who offers Himself to His believers that they may receive Him.

k. Some scholars see that Origen, like Plato, distinguishes between simple believers who accept the Christian faith on authority and the tiny elite group of spiritual Christians who seek to know the deep things of God. For Plato and Origen, the intellectual elite is the spiritual elite because the intellect is the faculty of the soul which alone can attain to the vision of true being⁸².

4. The Alexandrians found in some philosophical statements great usefulness as an immunization or an antidote against the heresy of Gnosticism. The Gnostics had done what St. Paul said he was not going to do (Gal. 1:11, 12; 1 Cor. 1:17); they adorned the faith of the New Testament with "persuasive words of wisdom." St. Clement undertook to set up a new Christian philosophy in opposition to that of the Gnostics, a philosophy based at once upon what they considered the true principles of the Greek philosophers and upon the traditional beliefs of the Church⁸³. He confronted the heretical Gnostics with Plato's belief that we must look after the needs of the body for the sake of the harmony of the soul, citing Plato *Republic*⁸⁴. St. Clement also clarified that in asceticism, the genuine Gnostic does not neglect the body's legitimate needs since he considers the body a part of God's good creation.

5. Alexandria, with its scientific tradition and the interest generally shown by its educated upper classes in religious and philosophical questions, was to prove the most favorable soil for the development of a Christian theology utilizing a learned intellectual basis⁸⁵.

6. Lastly, the Alexandrians adopted philosophy, perhaps because they acknowledged that some well-educated people who accepted philosophy were free of pagan mythology and despised pagan worship. Plotinus' reply to a student who invited him to a famous festival ; "It is for these beings to come to me, not for me to go to them⁸⁶."

⁸¹ Paul Tillich: *A History of Christian Thought*, NY, 1968, p 5.

⁸² Plato: *Phaedrus* 247c; Joseph Wilson Trigg: *Origen*, SCM Press, 1985, p. 74.

⁸³ Harry Austryn Wolfson: *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 14.

⁸⁴ *Stromata* 4:5:18.

⁸⁵ Karl Baus: *From Apostolic Community to Constantine*, NY, 1965, p. 210.

⁸⁶ Joseph Wilson Trigg: *Origen*, SCM Press, 1985, p. 66.