



Twilight Of The Old Gods

How political suppression gave birth to nationalism and the birth of Coptic Christianity in Egypt

By [Anya Martin](#)
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Author's Note:

As the crowds gathered in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria over the last few weeks, I remembered a graduate paper that I wrote back in 1989 about the transition from the old gods of ancient Egypt to Christianity, which preceded Islam in that nation. Those transitional years when Egypt was dominated first by Greece, and then by the Roman Empire, were also ones of great stress, tyrannical government, and nascent nationalism. At the time, I was fascinated with the question of how a religion that predominated for thousands of years gives way to a new belief system. The answer not unexpectedly lies in that turmoil, and many old beliefs endure, albeit in new trappings. Because ancient Egyptian scholars often dismissed the Greco-Roman period as a time of decline, at the time I wrote the original draft, few scholars had explored this topic. Since then there has been more interest, driven notably by The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont Graduate University in California. In order to keep this publication timely unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to explore that new literature in depth. Nevertheless, because of the comprehensive research I pursued at the time, often from primary sources, I feel confident that the basic tenets and history remain unchanged.

"Oh, Egypt, Egypt, only tales will remain of your religion and they will be incredible to posterity; only words engraved in stone will remain, which will give voice to your acts of piety, and in the land of Egypt there will live Scythians or Indians."

– From an Unknown Classical Author

For over 2,500 years, the Egyptians worshipped a pantheon of gods. Archaeological evidence reveals a religion of great complexity and emotional fervor characterized by magnificent temples and tombs.

Egypt today, though, is almost totally committed to Islam and with the exception of some New Age inspired rediscoveries, the old religion has no surviving adherents. How could a religion so far reaching in its influence—from peasant to pharaoh—over such a long period of time break down? The answer, deeply imbedded in the dynamics behind cultural transformation cannot lie in the Arab conquest of 641 A.D. By then, the old religion had been largely dead across most of Egypt for three centuries. But the Islamic dominated Egypt of today, subtitled the "United Arab Republic," was once a Christian nation.

The problem can be approached in two ways. The first is to examine both belief systems for points of intersection. Certain ideas in Christianity were compatible with older beliefs widely held by Egyptians, such as the concept of resurrection, human accountability in the afterlife for bad actions committed during life, and the identification of qualities of the goddess Isis with those of the Virgin Mary—both are mothers of prime deities, sons of God. Taking such issues into account certainly makes Christianity a less alien force to the Egyptians than one might think it would be. As in Dark Age Europe, many native magical beliefs also survived well into Christianity (people simply substituted Christ or one of the saints where before they had invoked the old gods).

Such an approach, however, fails to address why people converted on a mass level over such a brief period of time. Their ancestors, after all, had been satisfied with the old religion for centuries, even millennia. What social, political, economic forces were at work in Egypt during the first few centuries BC? Max Weber supported that people turn to new religions in times of evolving social circumstances. When a society is under stress and no longer fits the old definition, its members will seek a new definition to give meaning to the new situation. These times are when revitalization, or millenarian, movements arise, promising a way out, a rise or return to glory.

Egypt Under the Greeks

Egypt in 31 BC when Octavian won the Battle of Actium was already a conquered country with centuries past since an Egyptian pharaoh had been "Lord of the Two Lands." First, the Nubians, then the Persians, then the Greeks had dominated Egypt. But what separated the Greeks from earlier conquerors was their efforts to Hellenize Egyptian culture. On one hand, they accepted the old gods as their own, interpreting Isis as their harvest goddess Demeter, sun - God Horus as Apollo, the Egyptian head - God Ammon as Zeus, Thoth, god of wisdom and scribes, as Hermes. While the Persians had looted the temples, taking sacred icons and vessels out of Egypt, Alexander, arriving in newly - conquered Memphis, offered a sacrifice to the Egyptian gods and to the Apis Bull. Alexander, and his successors, restored and enlarged the old temples and financed the building of new ones, such as the magnificent temple of Horus at Edfu, one of the best preserved in Egypt today. Alexander and his successors also accepted the mantle of divinity extended by the Egyptians to the pharaohs as living Gods.

Why should Alexander and his successors support local religion so strenuously? The Greeks shared a belief that the Gods of one land were strongest nearest that land, meaning their own deities had less power in Egypt. On the other hand, it was good politics, given the priests' influence on the general populace. Keep your enemies close, because an angered priesthood could provide a rallying force for rebellion, especially in the Thebaid in Upper Egypt.



Thus, Ptolemy I, successor to Alexander, fused Osiris, the Egyptian god of the Underworld, with the Apis bull, to create a new deity, Serapis, to "symbolize the unity and equality of the two cultures," that is, Greek and Egyptian. The cult, centered around a huge temple called the Serapeum, was a substantial movement in Alexandria by the time of the Roman invasion. Papyrologist Naphtali Lewis suggested that the Serapis cult appealed to both Egyptians and Greeks because of its "promise of a better life." However, the Greek attitude, he maintained, was hypocritical—they liked the ideal of cultural equality in spirit, but in practice supported a rigidly stratified status quo that always placed Greeks above Egyptians.



In the Greek cities such as Alexandria, by the time the Romans took over, the Greek and Egyptian gods had merged in a bizarre syncretistic identification, for example, the Greek God Pan invoked but coupled with a stele of the Egyptian god Min. Temples were "multiservice," dedicated both to the Greek and Egyptian gods, but the Olympian deities steadily were shedding their separate identity even as their names survived in written documents. Cleopatra spoke not just Greek but Egyptian, identified herself strongly as Isis, and killed herself with the "sacred snake whose image was worn on the crown of Lower Egypt...its bite gave her immortality and a place among the gods," as historian Harold Idris Bell describes in his comprehensive book, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (1953).

Still, while Greeks strongly assimilated Egyptian beliefs and perpetuated the old religion, they did so with a uniquely Greek perspective. They applied their philosophy to the Egyptian religion, giving it, in Bell's words, an "order and coherence" it had never had before. Reading Plutarch's version of the Isis - Osiris myth is a vastly different experience.

Still, no substantial Greek temples were constructed outside of Alexandria and the two Greek - established cities of Naucratis and Ptolemais. Instead, temples in other parts of Egypt continued to be designed and constructed in the old architectural schemes, with the wisdom of the elders inscribed on their walls remaining as passed down over the eons. Greek writing did not replace hieroglyphics in religious texts, and when texts did reference the Greek names of the old gods, Lewis suggested the villagers were merely "namedropping, using the Greek appellatives of the privileged classes for their local native Gods." The old gods still reigned thus in much of the country, though a few subtle changes were emerging. One was an increasing tendency to support one god above the others—to single out one deity such as Isis or Serapis, resulting in the division of the religion into a series of cults. Also on the rise was the revival and spread of animal worship, which may have been a conscious return by priests to an early form of the religion.

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Hellenizing of Egyptian religion did not, however, succeed in ingratiating the trespassers with the indigenous population. That Ptolemy IX felt it necessary to withdraw taxation for temple lands, dole out state monies for the burial of sacred bulls, and grant asylum for the priesthood suggests an effort to placate resentment from the priesthood in the late Ptolemaic period. For some 19 years during the rule of Ptolemy IV, the priesthood even had placed a native Egyptian pharaoh on the throne, ruling Upper Egypt. In other words, the old religion, while it had undergone some changes remained a powerful rallying force in periods of crisis. Egyptians still believed they could achieve a return to the old, better ways not through transformation, but through invoking their old gods.

Glorious Colony of a Divine Empire

To the Romans, their right to rule other peoples was even more than divinely sanctioned; they were the chosen ones of the Gods. In the *Aeneid*, which traced the Romans back to descendants of Troy, Virgil writes:

*"Roman, remember by your strength to rule
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud."*
(Fitzgerald, 1983: bk VI, l. 854856)

And:

*"Caesar Augustus, son of the deified
Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold
To Latium, to the land where Saturn reigned...
At that man's coming even now the realms
Of Caspia and Maeotia tremble, warned
By oracles, and the seven mouths of Nile
Go dark with fear."
(bk VI, l. 792794, l. 800804)*

These words are not ones associated with crosscultural tolerance.

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Actually though, the general imperial policy, like that of the Greeks, was religious tolerance. As long as the natives included the Emperor in their pantheon of Gods, they could go on believing in any Gods they wanted to. Polytheistic religions always had room for another god, and in Egypt, emperor - worship was merely the newest extension of pharaoh - worship. Papyrus records support that Egyptians enthusiastically extended emperor - worship to the worship of members of the Imperial family, celebrating with great fervor not just the emperor's birthday and the anniversary of his ascension to the throne, but also birthdays of his wife, sister, nephew, etc. Thus, Germanicus, nephew to Emperor Tiberius, lamented that he would have to limit his public appearances to avoid excessive adoration.

However, while the Romans did not suppress the old Egyptian religion and its newer related cults by law, even more than the Greeks, they refused to embrace native Egyptians as equal and tried to suppress all means by which they could get ahead economically and politically. A key reason why was they viewed Egypt as the breadbasket for the Imperial capital and for the vast legions carrying out their sacred mission of expansion.

In Greek society, Egyptian aristocrats could still hold high class status. Now only Romans and Greeks could become citizens. The Romans withdrew all the hereditary privileges established under the Ptolemies. Even marriage to a Greek or Roman woman did not guarantee a grant of citizenship without having a special petition signed by the Emperor's especially appointed Privy Purse. A lengthy papyrus roll now displayed in Berlin's Egyptian Museum includes the following stipulations:

"38. Those born of an Egyptian remain Egyptian but inherit from both parents.

39. If a Roman man or woman is joined in marriage with an urban Greek or an Egyptian, their children follow the inferior status.

43. If Egyptians after a father's death record their father as a Roman, a fourth is confiscated."

And Egyptians, but not Greeks, were excluded from the standard entrance into citizenship offered to all other non - Romans in the empire, 26 years of military service.

Non-access to citizenship meant being barred from desirable jobs in the civil service, your children could not be educated in the Greek gymnasiums, and that you were not exempt from the *laographia*, a hefty new poll tax started by Emperor Augustus in 24 BC. Egyptians were not eligible for Roman citizenship until AD 212, over 200 years after the takeover, when an imperial edict granted citizenship to everyone in the empire. And even then, other restrictions remained.

Under the Ptolemies, as had been traditionally under the pharaohs, a large quantity of land was state-owned. The Romans decided to place much of it on the open market. In theory, such land could be purchased by anyone, even Egyptian and Semitic elites, but Roman economic and political policies handicapped the ability of everyone except Romans and Greeks to draw profits from their new investment. With privatization of land ownership, state revenues had to be supplemented by among other things, greater taxation, one form of which was the poll tax. This policy hurt both the native landowner and the peasant, as well as being seen as a humiliation. Additional economic strain came from the Roman introduction of the "liturgy" in the first century, which basically amounted to requirements of public work. Included was the stipulation that any "losses or deficiencies" accrued while holding the job must be reimbursed from one's own pocket, all of which was especially problematic for the person assigned as tax - gatherer.

Two legions, nearly 18,000 soldiers, plus a substantial naval faction, were stationed in Egypt to enforce the new Roman laws. What all this meant was the creation of a group of people, both Egyptians and urban Jews (who made up as much as 10 - 15 percent of the population of Alexandria in the first century) who could be classified high social status but not high social class.

That resentment culminated in the Jewish Revolt in Alexandria, A.D. 115 - 117, and the almost total massacre of the Jews in the city. The "Alexandrian mob" had already taken its aggression out on the Jews in a series of riots, jealous of the preferential treatment they perceived the Jews were receiving from the Romans. After the Jewish revolt, other nationalistic uprisings by native Egyptians followed. One particularly large revolt around AD 152 lasted over a year and is reported to have endangered Rome's food supply. A priest of the old religion led another revolt in the Boukolia marshes of the Nile Delta, around AD 172 - 173.

At the time of this latter uprising, one of the two legions normally stationed in Egypt had been reassigned to the Danube frontier. Allegedly, the peasants defeated units of the remaining legion and almost took Alexandria before the insurrection was suppressed.

Concurrently, an apocalyptic literature began to rise among the Egyptian population, prophesying a new Golden Age based on the old beliefs after the vile, "pitiless and immoral masters" have come to a gruesome end. These Egyptian writings can be contrasted to the Greek authored "Acts of the Pagan Masters," which merely massaged the wounds of the Greek intellectual, flagrantly insulting the Emperors but never suggesting any violent action to overthrow the oppressors. In the Egyptian "Narrative of the Potter" (the version circulating in Roman Egypt of an ancient document derived from the premise that the ram god Khnum sculpted men on his potter's wheel), the Potter prophesizes:

"...and many a death will [strike] in the high places, and the city of the belt weavers will be deserted, the slaves will be freed, their masters deprived of life, their virgin daughters will perish, men will castrate their daughters' husbands and practice incest with their mothers, they will perforce violently sacrifice their male children and themselves...and [justice] will return, transferred back to Egypt, and the city by the sea will be but a place for fisherman to dry their catch, because Knephis, the Tutelary Divinity, will have gone to Memphis, so that passersby will say, 'This is the all-nurturing city in which live all the races of mankind.' Then will Egypt be increased when...the dispenser of boons, coming from the Sun, is established there by the goddess [Isis] most great, so that those then alive will pray and those previously deceased will arise in order to partake the boons at the end of our woes."

(Lewis, 1983: 206207)

This passage is reminiscent of the prophetic predictions made by the Navaho Indians, justifying the Ghost Dance of 1890 and glorifying the removal of the oppressor by violent means and restoration of the old, good ways, including the resurrection of those who have died under the oppressors. The city by the sea, of course, is Alexandria.

The Old Gods and Priests Under Attack

Thus, Egyptians first turned to the old religion, as Native Americans relied on their traditional belief system, for a solution to their problems. Remember, when the Romans took over, the priests, having taken numerous concessions from the insecure Ptolemies, were in a relatively strong political position. High on the list for the new Caesar Augustus attempting to consolidate his new province was the need to reduce the substantial wealth and political power accrued by the priesthood.

Sacred land was confiscated. The whole Egyptian temple system was placed under the jurisdiction of a Roman - appointed "High Priest of Alexandria and all Egypt." Temples were required to produce an annual report of their property - holdings and lists of names and duties of priests associated with the temple, the accuracy of which was subject to surprise government inspections and state fines. A temple was forbidden to employ more than a certain number of priests. All priests were required to mold their appearance to a public code, requiring them to wear priestly linen instead of wool and shave their heads to be easily identifiable, as well as being circumcised—an operation only performed by Jews at the time.

The Egyptian deities were further sublimated to superior Greek and Roman deities by exclusion from Diocletian's order for refurbishing of old temples at Roman expense. After all, in the Roman mind, as declared by Octavian visiting his newly conquered Egypt, Romans were used to worshipping gods, not cattle, referring to the Apis Bull. Cicero, Juvenal and Plutarch all expressed their disdain for Egyptian religion. According to Juvenal:

"Who knows not what monsters demented Egypt worships. One part reveres the crocodile, another stands in awe of the Ibis, devourer of snakes...Here they venerate cats, there fish, and there a whole town venerates a dog."

(Lewis, 1983: 90)

Roman xenophobia justified treating the Egyptians more harshly than other conquered peoples, and also only added to Egyptian inducement to bite the hand who claimed to feed them.

However, Roman policy also weakened the chances for the priesthood to organize an effective resistance movement. When the revolts led by priests failed, when the apocalyptic prophesies ceased to come true, where could the Egyptian turn in desperation but to another belief system?

The Birth of Christianity in Egypt

The founder of the Christian Church in Egypt was Saint Mark the Evangelist, who arrived in Alexandria in AD 43, according to the fourth century scholar Eusebius. The Bible references Apollos, "a native of Alexandria" who worked with Paul in Ephesus and Corinth (Acts 18:25)—and who in one version of the story was said to have "been instructed in the word in his home city," suggesting a Christian community in Alexandria already by the late AD 40s. However, the earliest fragments classifiable as definitely Christian found in Egypt date back only to the early second century. Eusebius's listing of bishops following Mark is unsupported until Demetrius who took the office in AD 189.

Alexandrian Jews in the first century might have been receptive to Christian missionaries, who added a more apocalyptic dimension to their already monotheistic belief system, because of their loss in social status thanks to Roman rule. Christianity could impart spiritual solace and renewed hope, especially after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. The lack of early data on Christians in Alexandria might be due to its followers not having yet categorized themselves as distinct from the large Jewish population. Jews coming to Egypt from Palestine might have included Christian missionaries, and they would most likely come to Alexandria because it boasted the largest (and most intellectually minded) Jewish community in the country.

Jews leaning towards Christianity might have influenced other people dissatisfied with Roman rule, such as native Egyptians, other Semites, even Greeks, but the general resentment against Jews exhibited by Alexandrian mob riots throws this hypothesis into question. Conversion to Judaism was socially supported by the Romans, according to reporters as diverse as Matthew, Juvenal, Dio, Philo, and Seneca, but Egyptian resentment against advantages perceived to be given to the Jews by the Romans must surely have limited their persuasive power. And after the Jewish revolt ended in AD 117, few Jews remained in Egypt. It seems more likely that Egyptians became more interested in Christianity after it was disassociated with and even rejected by mainstream Judaism.

The first evidence that with certainty indicates the emergence of Egyptian Christians (rather than merely Jewish converts) dates to the second half of the third century AD after a series of failed nationalist uprisings. Texts and gospels dating back to AD 260 support that Egyptians are now preaching Christian beliefs in Coptic rather than Hebrew or Greek.

The word "Coptic" associated with Egyptian Christianity comes from the demotic word for Egyptian. Coptic as a written language employs Greek letters rather than hieroglyphics to communicate the Egyptian language. By this point, most writing was done in Greek or demotic script, the forerunner of Coptic. Hieroglyphic writing had long been relegated to ritual purposes, the decoration of temples, the copying of the proper protective scriptures from the Book of the Dead and cartouches (one's name in hieroglyphic imbued with great symbolic significance) on mummy sarcophagi and the like.

These early Biblical texts (dating from the late third, early fourth century) in Coptic were somewhat crude renditions of Greek manuscripts, significant simply for their existence. Also about this time, around AD 300, the first Coptic Christian scholar and teacher, Hieracas appeared, educated in both Greek and Egyptian. Even more significant were the first reports of Christians in Middle and Upper Egypt, the traditional stronghold of the old belief system. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria in the mid - third century, is quoted by Eusebius, as having traveled to Christian communities in the Fayyum. Eusebius had previously counted among victims of the Christian persecution by Severus (AD 201), people taken to trial in Alexandria from all over the country, including the Thebaid, suggesting pockets of Christianity in Upper Egypt in the early third century. Evidence for Christianity in these regions by the late third century is further confirmed by archaeological evidence—Christian manuscripts and letters, communications between Christians from these areas and Alexandrian Christians. More support can be made from the shape of tombs, mummy - decorations, and other Christian sacred objects.

The big conversion took place in the relatively brief period of 30 years, between 300 and 330, according to archaeological and textual evidence. Certainly Constantine's Edict of Milan (AD 311), declaring toleration of Christianity, and the ascension to the Imperial throne in 312 of the first Christian emperor, must have inspired new converts, but it also allowed closet Christians to worship openly. Still, to explain earlier conversions, it seems more convincing to examine Christianity as a religious movement in opposition to the Romans.

Christianity: The Archetypal Millenarian Movement

Bryan Wilson and Norman Cohn provide numerous illustrations of sects arising out of the mainstream of Christianity and setting the date for the return of Christ and the impending Golden Age within the lifespans of those who adhere to the sect. For the early Christians, the Second Coming was not some distant event, but at hand. Numerous scholars have supported that the Book of Revelations, composed during the reign of Domitian (AD 81 - 96) was written with the Romans in mind. Such a statement may seem blasphemy to the modern Christian, but all the aspects of the Beast match up to Rome. Thus, one can imagine the Egyptian finding comfort that the oppressors soon will be overthrown. The glorious future is no longer a return to the same good old days, but still very much to an Egyptian Egypt.

The native Egyptian would be further attracted to Christianity because the Romans were so fervently opposed to it for so many years. Tertullian (AD 200) speaks of the persecution of Christians as a reaction to various stresses: "If the Tiber reaches the walls; if the Nile fails to reach the fields, if the heaven withholds its rain, if the earth quakes, if there is famine, if there is pestilence, at once the cry is raised 'The Christians to the lion!'"

While in other parts of the empire, local populations were recorded as taking out their private grievances on the convenient scapegoat of the Christians, in Egypt, persecution was initiated mostly by the Roman military during periods of Imperial edicts ordering mass persecution. The most significant was ordered by Diocletian in 303, literally on the eve of the Christian conversion of the entire empire. Diocletian ordered all churches demolished and all Christian manuscripts destroyed, another possible reason for lack of surviving data from the early Coptic period..

Contemporary accounts held that 144,000 Christians were killed in Egypt during the persecutions of Diocletian and Decius, who launched an earlier edict lasting from 249 - 251. Decius had required that all Imperial residents be witnessed by a Roman official when making sacrifice to any old pagan deities; everyone was required to obtain a "certificate of sacrifice" and those who refused were put to death. While active persecution in Decius's rampage continued only about a year, it took 10 years before his successor Emperor Gallienus officially withdrew the edict. Ironically the last emperor's name to appear in a hieroglyphic cartouche on an Egyptian temple wall was that of Decius on the temple of Khnum at Esna. One of the last known hieroglyphic inscriptions was on a stela, dated 295, from Erment (now in the British Museum) in which Emperor Diocletian is portrayed offering a sacrifice to the sacred bull, Buchis, in the garb and traditional profile stance of the old pharaohs.

Roman persecution of Christianity also is notable because of the aforementioned Imperial policy of religious tolerance, but several factors separated Christianity from other faiths. First, Christians refused to acknowledge the emperor as a living God. The Roman emperors were less concerned, however, with loss of respect than with the practical consideration of Christian flagrant disloyalty. Decius, for example, worried about Christians creating converts among the military. Roman suspicions about the treasonous nature of Christianity were further fueled by the Christian belief that worship should be private, suggesting a secret society, but the persecutions necessitated even greater secrecy for Christian gatherings.

In sum, in addition to the hope of salvation, Christianity would free the Egyptian from having to give hypocritical homage to a distasteful, tyrannical leader who did not even rule Egypt on her native soil. Christianity furthermore might have been attractive because of its thesis of non - universality of divine grace. Only those who repent and believe in Jesus will be saved, thus excluding the Romans. Christ also favored the poor and meek, providing added encouragement for the lower classes to dump their old gods. In this context, the rise of monasticism in Egypt—and Egypt was where the monastic ideal originated—can be seen as a reaction to Greco - Roman hedonism. The root of the word "anchorite" comes from "anachoresis" meaning "flight" to the ancient Egyptians.

Thus, St. Jerome related how the first monk, St. Paul of Thebes (whose existence is as yet unsupported) lived 113 years in the desert near Thebes, garbed only in palm leaves, receiving his only nourishment from loaves of bread brought to him by a crow. When he died, allegedly in 347, his grave was dug by two lions who remained to greet his successor St. Anthony, a confirmed historical figure and definitely a native Egyptian, who renounced all possessions and never washed his face. While the monk's move to the desert might be considered a cowardly escape from religious persecution, when one examines Egyptian traditions dating back into ancient times, the desert had been conceived as the realm of evil spirits, ruled by Seth, the Egyptian God of Evil and the enemy of Osiris. So, instead of being the coward's path, the Egyptian monk would view himself as alone with only God to turn to for strength against the forces of Hell.

The inability to make ends meet in the secular world can be symbolically translated into a symbolic choice of poverty, further convincing the hermit that he is close to God and will be one of the Chosen Ones when salvation comes. In any case, the rise of monastic communities outside of the cities in late third century Egypt provided a further indication that Christianity was gaining ground in the rural population, not simply the urban context of Greek cities such as Alexandria. Historian Robin Lane Fox's argument that Christianity won out in the Roman world because it "at its best it practiced love in a world of widespread brutality" may be overly romantic, but on an ideological level, such a notion may have appealed to the Egyptian during a period of severe stress.



The Last Stand of the Old Religion and the Unique Nature of Coptic Christianity

The preceding discussion could suggest that little opposition existed in Egyptian society to the rise of Christianity as a replacement for the old religion, but this was not so. Not all Egyptians saw a religious shift as the answer to their political, ideological, and economic difficulties as late as the end of the fourth century. "Exposito totius mundi et gentium" composed in Egypt circa 350 supported the "excellent worship of the gods" in Alexandria and saluted the Serapeum as "the only wonder of the world" at the same time that Eusebius was claiming all Egyptians to have followed the example of the Emperor to Christianity. The only way for the Roman governor to break up the cult of Isis at Menuthis was by moving the relics of Cyrus and Paul there, replacing one set of religious symbols with another.

That the conflict between Christians and adherents of the old religion was not yet resolved at the end of the fourth century is further supported by violent riots in the streets of Alexandria between Christians and pagans, using the Serapeum as a sanctuary. While Emperor Theodosius pardoned the pagans and proclaimed as martyrs all the Christians killed in those encounters, the local authorities used the incidents as an excuse to demolish the Serapeum in 391.

Meanwhile, in severe upper Egypt, on the edges of the ancient kingdom of Nubia, the Isis cult continued to worship at the temple of Philae until the mid sixth - century protected by the Blemmyes. The Blemmyes, strong believers in Isis, after a series of invasions into Egypt, signed a treaty in 451 with the Romans guaranteeing their priests access to the island temple and their right to bring sacrifices there. In AD 543, the temple was finally recaptured and closed by order of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, its priests were imprisoned, and the statues (the "holy of holies") of the gods taken to Constantinople. One part of the temple was converted to the Church of St. Stephen. Etched on the walls one can still see the ominous declaration of victory: "The cross has conquered and will ever conquer."

If the Egyptians were known for their religious tolerance before Christianity became the dominant religion in their country, now that Christianity had taken over, Christians seemed bound and determined to wipe out all possibility of opposition. It's hard for modern scholars to understand and sympathize with the religious fervor that led to the mob destruction of the famous library of Alexandria, renowned throughout the classical world. Visiting Egypt, one is struck by the immense destruction that took place in the name of the true faith. On numerous temples, the faces and torsos of the old gods have been chipped away. Precedents for such destruction can be seen in the practice of pharaohs to chip away a hated predecessor's cartouches and demolition of structures ordered by him. But the only time a pharaoh sought to eradicate all evidence of a competing religion was when successors leveled an entire city erected by the "Heretic King" Akhenaton, who tried to convert Egypt to monotheistic sun worship around 1300 BC.

On the other hand, churches sprung up on the sites of demolished temples and inside many that were left to stand. The Copts painted pictures of Christ and the Apostles directly over the images of the pharaohs and old gods. Thus, taking off from Mircea Eliade's conception of "sacred" (as opposed to profane) land, the same locations conceived as sacred for generations under the new religions became the sacred sites of the new religion. Instead of coming to worship Ammon at Luxor or Karnak or Khnum at Esna or Isis at Philae, one now came to worship Christ. Considering the widespread identifications of Isis with the Virgin Mary, a sense of continuity was further emphasized. In the temple at Wadi Sebua in Nubia, Ammon was painted over with the Apostle Paul so that it appears that Rameses II is worshipping him. The Serapeum was replaced by the Angelion, a cathedral built in the sixth century to honor John the Baptist.

As Christians continued to worship the new God on the same holy sites where they had offered sacrifices to the old Gods, traditional folk magic also remained an intrinsic part of household, everyday life. Egyptians continued to consult oracles for advice, though the wisdom was now sought from Christian saints. They still performed traditional healing spells, simply substituting the name of the old God invoked with that of Christ or one of the saints. For example, a Christian mage exorcised sickness from a child using the old formula, substituting Jesus for Isis: "Let every sickness, suffering and pain cease at once. It is, who speak, the Lord Jesus, giver of healing."

Obeisances were made in the presence, not of Serapis, but the Christian God. Protective amulets, dating from as late as the sixth century and which previously would have invoked the pot-bellied dwarf god Bes, contained invocations of, for example, "Christ, his mother and all the saints" to protect "Joanna whom Anastasia bore" from a "hateful spirit" and "to chase away from her all fevers and every kind of chill, quotidian, tertian, quartan, and every evil." Dating well into the Christian period were long papyrus rolls, containing directions for performing love spells.

The continuance of magic into Christian times supports the commonsense concession that the transition between worldviews is never a complete and utter revolution. In this context, Weber's observation that Jesus was "a magician whose magical charisma was an ineluctable source of his unique feeling of individuality" seems especially apt. Further support for continuity between the old and new can be seen in pictorial representations of Christian figures. Early representations of Christ often had him clutching an ankh, the traditional Egyptian fertility symbol which bears a striking resemblance to the Christian crucifix. The saints, especially the four Evangelists, were often depicted by Egyptians as animals or with animal heads. Joseph was portrayed in Egypt wearing the insignia of Serapis on the chair of St. Maximian at Ravenna, providing support that Egyptian identification of Joseph with Serapis and the Virgin Mary with Isis extended out into the Mediterranean world.

As additional support that "plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose," the practical life of the Egyptian peasant continued to be centered around the Nile's regular pattern of flooding. The Nile remained correspondingly a central part of the religious life of Coptic Christians as it had been under the old religion. For example, the Coptic Church today celebrates June 19, the start of one set of flooding, as the feast day of St. Michael, patron saint of the Nile, and the flooding now is attributed to the power of Christ.

Erik Hornung, through an examination of Egyptian texts across a wide range of history, supported that the Copts continued to employ "enter"—the plural version of the Egyptian word for "god," as opposed to the singular "noute"—in a variety of contexts, including spells and personal names. He observed that only Akhenaton tried to erase this plural usage. But then Christianity itself looks less monotheistic when one adds into the picture the Virgin Mary, and countless saints, angels, and demons, not so radically different from Egyptian practice to elevate a local god over the pantheon as a whole, a tendency exacerbated by the growth of cults focusing on single gods in the Greco - Roman period.

Coptic Christianity shared some other similarities in doctrine with the old Egyptian religion which undoubtedly facilitated conversion. Joseph Campbell, among others, remarked that "the antique model for the Madonna, actually is Isis with Horus at her breast." The characters in the Isis - Osiris - Horus myth, which dates back to at least the third millennium BC, did not directly correspond with the Biblical account of the resurrection of Christ, but they did embody a strikingly similar concept. Osiris was murdered by his evil brother Set but resurrected by the love of Isis, forming the justification for the intricate mummification process and Egyptian burial with a wide range of earthly belongings. The spirit, or "ka," was reborn after death in a mystical afterlife which the resurrection of Osiris made possible. Osiris, who appeared bound like a mummy, oversaw the weighing of the heart of the deceased in an effort to assess the extent of his wrongdoings in life. Thus, Egyptian religion, like Christianity, supported that exemplary behavior was necessary before one could unite with God in the afterlife and that good behavior was the path to ultimate happiness. Furthermore, the Isis - Osiris myth included a divine birth because Isis conceived baby Horus while Osiris was still dead.

Such similarities between Christianity and the old religion could be expected because new religions do not rise up out of an ideological void. Both belief systems had their source in the Middle East, and these basic ideas also were present in other religions that had sprung up in the region. Many scholars have suggested that the inspiration for resurrection myths may be found in ancient observations of the annual cycle of the seasons. Numerous studies have confirmed that aspects of the Old and New Testaments and Christian wisdom literature were derived from Egyptian beliefs.

A more intellectually minded Christian might support that these linkages were more apparent than actual, but on a practical level, the Egyptian peasant would not make such distinctions. He would only recognize that the general concepts were not radical departures from his already established view of the world.

Finally, as noted previously, Christianity offered to the Egyptian what his old religion did not: imminent salvation from the cruel masters. This point of departure may explain, for example, the breakdown of mummification after Christianity became predominant. The replacement of a material view of the afterlife, which necessitated that the body be preserved and be buried accompanied by objects needed for the afterlife (which was not all that conceptually different from the primary life), with a more "spiritual" one meant that mummification was no longer needed. While archaeological findings support that mummification died out only gradually, the extent of accompanying burial goods rapidly decreased. Interestingly, some people were buried along with baskets and jars containing consecrated bread and wine from the Eucharist perhaps to succor the soul as food and drink literally had been needed for the nourishment of the resurrected dead in the past. But with the imminent Golden Age on the threshold, what need was there to waste energy preparing for the afterlife



What actually happened next was not the overthrow of the Roman dictator—the Byzantine (Eastern) Roman Empire continued to rule Egypt until the Arab Conquest—but the routinization of Christianity. Also interesting was the predominance in Egypt of Gnosticism, a form of Christianity which mainstream, orthodox Christianity labeled as heretical, but that merits another discussion. Ultimately, the transition from the old Gods to Christianity cleared the path for the rapid conversion of Egypt to another salvation religion just a few centuries later. Unlike Christianity, Islam promised a final and total rejection of Greco - Roman domination and worldview and would become the predominant religion in Egypt for nearly 1,500 years and counting.



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