

## **Tale of Three Cities: Alexandria**

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### **History of Alexandria**

Located on the Mediterranean Sea in the country of Egypt on the continent of Africa, Alexandria is still an active city today. This great seaport is in the area known scripturally as the “land of Ham” (Psalm 105:23). Alexander the Great founded the city in 332 BC during his conquest of the world. It rapidly developed into the greatest metropolis of the ancient world, reaching an estimated population of one million by the first century BC. At the time of Christ, the city was superseded only by Rome.

Under the rule of the Egyptian Ptolemies, Alexandria became the literary and scientific center of the world. Its university molded much of the philosophical thought of the time. The famous library of Alexandria contained half a million or more books and rolls. Vigorously pursued were the studies of mathematics, astronomy, poetry, and medicine. Alexandria was a Greek city by founding and thought; but because of the city’s open-mindedness, it became a city known for its cosmopolitan collection of the religions and philosophies from the known world. It was in this environment that the Jewish theologian Philo first combined Judaism with Platonism to establish the allegorical approach to the Old Testament.

### **School of Alexandria**

In practice, Philo (b. 20 BC) was more of a Greek philosopher than a Jewish theologian; hence his greatest influence was not in the Jewish realm. He desired to use the Old Testament to support his Greek philosophy. Therefore, he established a system of allegorical interpretation (spiritualizing of scripture) in order to make the scripture mean anything he desired. He taught that the hidden, deeper meaning of a passage of scripture was far superior to the plain, literal meaning. His allegorical interpretation became a wealth of ideas for the Alexandrian school of Christian thought of the second and third centuries.

This theological school was established in Alexandria in the second century after Christ by a man named Pantaenus and was continued by Clement of Alexandria. The School elevated Greek philosophy and emphasized the allegorical interpretation of scripture. The school became known for its scholarship and philosophy and was later brought into great prominence by a man named Origen (lived 185-254 AD).

### **Influence of Origen**

In most church histories, Origen is praised as one of the greatest Bible scholars of all time. In this book, Origen’s mental genius and religious fervor are not questioned, only his knowledge of

Biblical truth and his spiritual relationship with God. Origen possessed only one coat and no shoes, rarely ate flesh, never drank wine, devoted much of the night to study and prayer, and slept on the bare floor. This certainly demonstrates religious fervor and devotion. On the other hand, because of his doctrine, Origen is certainly unworthy of his reputation as a great Bible scholar. He taught that the Father is the originating cause of the Son, and that the Holy Spirit was subordinate to and created by the Son. He believed in the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins and approved of the baptism of little children. He taught that even the damned and devils would be brought into voluntary subjection to Christ after they were sufficiently punished. Origen developed a formal method of interpreting the New Testament scriptures by applying Philo's allegorical interpretation. In this way, he was able to support all of the above doctrines and more.

Theologians and scholars who reject Origen's method of allegorical interpretation and doctrinal conclusions often claim that his abiding merit lies in his work in textual criticism. He is famous for his labors to produce a correct text of the Greek Bible. Is it possible, however, that Origen's false doctrines affected his Biblical criticism? Two examples should suffice. While editing the New Testament text, Origen removed the word carpenter from Mark 6:3 because he did not think it should be there. He also removed the command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," from the passage of Matthew 19:16-22 because he could not logically explain its presence and said it therefore must have been added. How many times Origen applied this method of Bible correction only God Himself knows.

The Greek text which was being formed at Alexandria during the time of Origen came to be known as the Alexandrian Text. This text is represented mainly by two Greek manuscripts: the Sinaiticus (found by Tischendorf in 1844 in a Greek Orthodox monastery at the base of Mt. Sinai) and the Vaticanus (discovered in the Vatican library in 1481). These manuscripts are the basis for the majority of the subtractions made in the English bibles since 1611. Because Origen supported the readings which make up the Alexandrian text, scholars look to him as one of the most important witnesses to the corrupted text which is used for modern translations of the Bible. After Origen's death, Alexandria continued to have great influence on the text of the New Testament. Even today, the Alexandrian Text is accepted by the majority of scholars as that which is closest to the originals.

### **Alexandria in Scripture**

Alexandria is very rarely mentioned in the Bible, but these references tell the Bible student much about the direction the city would take. Its commerce and shipping trade are evident in the fact that the ships which took Paul from Caesarea to Rome for trial were ships of Alexandria (Acts 27:6; 28:11). Alexandria's opposition to true doctrine is demonstrated by the Alexandrian Jews which were found in the temple disputing with Stephen (Acts 6:9). But the most revealing passage about Alexandria is found in Acts 18:24 where, "a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus." Here was a man who was eloquent in speech and very

knowledgeable in the scriptures, but who knew, “only the baptism of John” (v.25). For this reason, Aquilla and Priscilla, converts of the apostle Paul, “took him unto then, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (v.26). The high degree of training and superior knowledge of Apollos confirms the emphasis on scholarship in his home town. However, his gaps in Biblical knowledge and errors in Biblical doctrine also point to the characteristic problems of Alexandria. These problems were to continue in Alexandria through the early church history period. The old copies of manuscripts of the New Testament which were influenced by the Alexandrian scholars are characterized by their omitting of important doctrinal phrases and verses. These omissions are not mistakes--scholarship always subtracts from the Word of God.

For an example of their subtractions, let us examine the passage of Mark 16:9-20. This passage is missing in both the Sinaitic and the Vatican manuscripts. Therefore, in most recent versions, it is either omitted, or marginal notes question its place in the divine text. However, these verses are found in all the Greek manuscripts except the two noted above and in all the Latin manuscripts but one. The Sinaitic and Vatican manuscripts were written between 325-350 AD. But approximately 150 years before Mark 16:9-20 was deleted by these manuscripts, the passage was quoted as scripture by several writers: Justin Martyr (c. 150), Tatian (c. 175), Iraneaus (c. 180) and Hippolytus (c. 200). Thus the evidence of the majority of witnesses and the evidence of greatest antiquity both overwhelmingly support the passage. Why then do the scholars still prefer to omit the verses? Evidently because they still desire to follow Alexandrian scholarship.

## **Conclusion**

Alexandria became the world center of education and scholarship. Here both Judaism and Christianity tried to merge their thought with Grecian Platonism. Soon, human wisdom took place over the words of the Bible, and scholars leaned upon allegorical interpretations to derive from the Bible what they already accepted as truth. However, this was not enough. The science of textual criticism had to be developed to remove from the scriptures phrases which were offensive to their own doctrine. Hence, Alexandria became the place known for her subtraction from the Word of God.

## Tale of Three Cities: Rome

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### Background Information

Rome is located in the country of Italy on the continent of Europe. The date of the founding of the city of Rome is unknown. In the ancient world and in the Christian world, Rome's greatest influence was in the areas of form and organization. This influence was already increasing eight centuries before the time of Christ. Rome gained control of the Italian peninsula about 275 BC. By 133 BC, Rome governed a world empire stretching from Syria to Spain. At the time of Christ, Rome was the largest city in the world (population: 1.2 million) and was capital of the Roman Empire. It eventually became the center of the Roman Catholic Church and since 1871 has been the capital of the country of Italy.

### Biblical Mention

The city of Rome is mentioned by name nine times in the Bible. Of these nine references, special attention needs to be given to the one in II Timothy 1:17. The Apostle Paul wrote II Timothy while in a Roman prison, and in this epistle he praises a man named Onesiphorus because he refreshed Paul and, "was not ashamed of my chain: But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me" (II Tim 1:16-17). Rome was therefore known as a place which persecuted Christians. When Constantine declared Christianity to be the state religion, this persecution did not cease. Those who stood for their beliefs still suffered at the hands of the developing church-state.

Attention also needs to be given to an indirect reference to the city of Rome in the prophetic book of Revelation. The seventeenth chapter of Revelation speaks of the mother of harlots who will be drunk with the blood of the saints. She is clearly the one world religion which will deceive multitudes during the great tribulation. The woman is said to be, "that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth" (Rev 17:18). The identification of the city is made in verse nine which states, "The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth." Over and over again, ancient historians identify Rome as the city of seven hills or seven mountains. Therefore, Rome will be the center of the future one world religion.

### Doctrinal Development

The doctrinal development of Rome can most easily be understood by the study of three men. Although these three men were not born in Rome, they greatly influenced the city by advancing the position of Roman supremacy, by translating the Roman Catholic bible, and by establishing the Roman method of Bible interpretation.

The first man, Cyprian (195-258 AD), did much to develop the doctrine of Roman supremacy. During the first centuries after Christ, the churches of several large cities were elevated to high positions of respect and authority. Rome was only one of these important cities. However, Cyprian taught the doctrine of the primacy of the Roman church over the other churches. He further claimed that anyone outside the Catholic Church was lost and therefore made way for the Roman Catholic monopoly of salvation. The teachings of Cyprian were later used by Roman Catholicism to establish its tremendous political strength over the majority of Christians during the Middle Ages.

The second man, Jerome (340-420 AD), is important because of his influence on the Bible. He lived as a hermit for several years. Later (with the help of several lady benefactors) he started a monastery in Bethlehem. He strongly promoted self-denial, the celibacy of the clergy, and the worship of Mary. Around 382 AD Pope Damasus commissioned him to retranslate the New Testament into Latin. He used the work of Origen to help in his translation which was later accepted as the official Roman Catholic bible. Copies of the already existing Old Latin Vulgate, which agreed more closely with the true text, were discarded and often destroyed. Jerome's Latin Vulgate triumphed at the expense of pure copies of the Word.

The third man, Augustine (354-430 AD), was bishop of Hippo, North Africa, for many years. Although there is not space to discuss his doctrine, his method of interpretation needs to be considered. He established what came to be known as the western type of interpretation which teaches that the scripture must conform to the interpretation of the church. Thus he led the way for the Roman Catholic requirement that bible interpretation must adapt itself to the tradition of the church.

In some ways the Romans could be compared to the Pharisees of whom Christ said, "Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition" (Matt 15:9). And again, "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt 15:9). Some of the unscriptural ideas of the Roman Catholic Church (such as monasticism and infant baptism) may have developed in Alexandria, but they were established as lasting traditions by Rome.

### **Biblical Corruption**

Although Alexandrian scholarship subtracted from the Word, Roman tradition added to the Word. However opposite these approaches may seem, the two movements joined in the development of the Roman Catholic bibles. Rome took Alexandria's diluted bible and added to it according to its traditions. This resulted in the corrupted bibles which we still have with us today.

The unchanging practice of Roman Catholicism has been to place tradition above the Word. However, this practice was made a dogma at the Council of Trent in 1546. This council declared that the apocryphal books together with unwritten tradition are to be received and

venerated as the Word of God. In elevating tradition, God's Word has been lowered. In truth, this makes the Word of God of none effect.

The tendency to add to the Word of God can be seen in the two most influential manuscripts of the last century, the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus. The Vatican manuscript was discovered in the Vatican library in 1481. It was discounted by early Greek scholars but was elevated by Westcott and Hort in the translation of the Revised Version in 1881, four hundred years after its discovery. This manuscript adds the Epistle of Barnabas as well as the apocryphal books to the text of its New Testament. The Sinaitic manuscript was found in St. Catherine's Monastery at the base of Mt. Sinai in 1844. It contains the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas in its New Testament text. This tendency to add to the Word of God can also be found in the New American Standard Version of the English bible. Located at the end of Mark in large capital letters is the word ADDITION after which follows a short paragraph. A marginal note explains that a few later manuscripts and versions contain this paragraph. Absolutely no indication is given as to whether this is the Word of God or not.

## Conclusion

Men who claimed to be correcting the New Testament were corrupting it even before all of the New Testament books were written (II Cor 2:17). There have always been and will always be those who handle, "the word of God deceitfully" (II Cor 4:2). The two major motives for changing the word of God are Scholarship and tradition. Scholarship, as found in Alexandria, usually subtracts from the Word while tradition, as found in Rome, usually adds to the Word. These two influences explain the corrupted bibles of today. Bible study, therefore, becomes a process of multiple choice. If you like it, leave it in. If you do not like it, take it out. If you want it, but it's not there, put it in. Why allow the Bible to change us when we can so easily change the Bible?

But what of God's pure Word? Is there not a preserved Bible in existence? The answer is yes! God has not left Himself without an absolute witness of truth. He has preserved His Word! In the next chapter we will consider the power of preservation and God's use of Antioch of Syria as well as the surrounding areas of Syria and Asia Minor to keep His Word pure from the corrupting influence of man.



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**From "The Tale of Three Cities, by David F. Reagan," Learn the Bible Publications**