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THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS AND  
EPIPHANY, AND THE POSITION OF  
THE FEASTS IN THE CHRISTIAN  
CALENDAR

For the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

by thesis

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University of Durham

1996



- 6 OCT 1997

## Abstract

# THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY, AND THE POSITION OF THE FEASTS IN THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

For the degree of Master of Arts

Mark Roberts

*St Chad's College  
University of Durham  
1996*

This thesis primarily seeks to discuss the arguments concerning the origins of Christmas and Epiphany and the dates on which the feasts came to be celebrated in the liturgical year. This study is not concerned with what form the liturgy of the feasts took in the Early Church, nor what this liturgy might have contained, rather the objective is to assess the evidence and arguments concerning when, where and why the feasts were first celebrated.

As the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany, feasts of birth and baptism respectively, sprang from Christian communities in the last days of hellenism, an epoch when polytheism was giving way to monotheism, the nature of the Graeco-Roman world in relation to the Christian Church is examined, considering the culture and religion of the pagan society in which primitive Christianity existed. Judaism also had great influence upon the formation of the primitive Church and its influence upon the origins of the Christian calendar is examined.

In the preface to *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, Thomas J Talley considers his work to be an updated replacement for A Allan McArthur's *The Evolution of the Christian Year*. This thesis does not pretend to be a further development of the work of these noted scholars, rather, it seeks to develop and discuss further certain questions raised by Talley and McArthur concerning not only the historic origins of Christmas and Epiphany, but also how pagan religion and culture coloured and influenced the feasts as Christianity developed.

To my Mother

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## Introduction

It was originally intended that this study should be made up of two parts, the first part a general history of the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany, and the second a study of the liturgy of the feasts as celebrated in the Church today. The result is something very different. As my research progressed I became so enwrapped in my desire to know the origins of the feasts that that is precisely how my thesis has ended up.

My research has been greatly helped by the fact that beside me, within easy reach while I worked, was a copy of *'The Origins of the Liturgical Year'* by Professor Thomas J Talley. Without this marvellous work of scholarship as a point of reference, the very first that I read on the subject, I am sure that my enthusiasm for the subject would not have been so great.

I am aware that there are a number of avenues of study in this thesis which I have not been able to research in as great a detail as I would have liked. Maybe at some point in the future I will return to this fascinating area of liturgical history.

I would like to offer my thanks to The Revd Gordon P. Jeanes, sometime Chaplain, St Chad's College, Durham for the original idea for this thesis, even though it did not turn out the way I had intended; to The Revd Dr Anthony Gelston whose careful and thorough supervision encouraged me greatly, and to my mother to whom I owe the most.

St Chad's College, Durham  
3rd August, Feast of St Oswald, 1996

Mark Roberts

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Pre-Christian Cults in the Ancient Near East**

## The Sun and the Religion of the Hebrews

In his book *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*<sup>1</sup>, which now has become almost a standard reference volume for those who wish to understand more fully how the Christian year developed, Thomas Talley begins his treatment of the origins of Christmas and Epiphany, 'The day of his coming' with the Second Century dispute between two Rabbis in the *Rosh Hashanah* tractate of the Babylonian Talmud. R. Joshua asserted that in the month of Nisan the world was created and the Patriarchs were born and died, while R. Eliezer in contrast taught that these same events occurred during the month of Tishri.<sup>2</sup> Moreover the tradition of completeness meant that not only were the Patriarchs presumed to have died in the same month that they were born, but that they actually died and were born on the same calendrical day, thus the life span of these great eponymous heroes is exact; only great men like these deserving a life with such wholeness<sup>3</sup>. A possible modern example of this tradition, it could be said, may be seen in the presumed birth and death days of William Shakespeare. This idea of calendrical wholeness can also be found in a similar form in the Palestinian Targum. The *Poem of the Four Nights* asserts that at Passover the world was created, at Passover Isaac was bound, the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, (Pueblo 1986) p81.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p155 n3,4. Tal. bab., *Rosh Hashanah* 10b-11a.

<sup>3</sup> This idea is important when considering the so called 'computation theory', most notably expressed in a work called *De Pascha Computus* ascribed to Cyrprian issued in 243 which places the nativity of Christ on the same day that the sun (see Mal. 4.2) came into being in the Creation story, four days after the first day of creation. The *Poem of the four Nights* places the creation on the same day as the Passover, and therefore on the same day as the Passion of Christ. Christ is therefore ascribed with an 'exact' life span.

Hebrews were delivered from Egypt and on that same day the Messiah would come.<sup>4</sup>

The dispute between the Rabbis was due to the change of calendar after the Exile, from the old Palestinian system to the Babylonian. From the entry into Canaan up to the exile, the Hebrews had adhered to the Palestinian reckoning which placed the New Year in the Autumn in the month which became known as Tishri, but the new Babylonian reckoning placed the turning of the year in the Spring in Nisan. It is interesting to note that Pentateuchal references to the date of the New Year also exhibit the same variance. The Elohist tradition of Exodus 23:16 and the Yahwistic tradition of Exodus 34:22 place the turning of the year, the Feast of Ingathering later to be known as the Feast of Tabernacles, in the Autumn in the month of Tishri, while the Priestly writer of Leviticus 23:34 and Numbers 29:12 places the Feast of Ingathering in the seventh month clearly putting the turning of the year in Nisan. With this in mind Talley makes the point that even though the Babylonian calendar was adopted in the Seventh Century, the traditional importance of the autumnal Ingathering festival of Tabernacles as the turning of the year seems to have continued in Jewish custom as we shall see. This importance, according to Talley, was exhibited in the writing of R. Eliezer who at variance with both R. Joshua and the *Poem of the Four Nights* sees Tishri not only as the end of the agricultural year, but also as the month in which redemption will come to Israel, even though this traditional belief had been superseded by seven

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<sup>4</sup> Tg.Nf. 1 on Ex. 12. Talley p70 n3.

centuries of a spring New Year. It is clear then that according to these two traditions we have two possible points in the year when the Messiah was expected to appear, at Passover or at Tabernacles.

Scholarship is now agreed that the most ancient feasts of Israel<sup>5</sup>, namely Passover and Unleavened bread, Weeks and Sukkôth were all originally purely agricultural feasts and were adopted by the Israelites on their entry into Canaan after their wanderings in the desert. It seems also that this adoption of an agricultural lifestyle by a previously nomadic people resulted as one would expect, in the mixing of the two cultures, the Israelites adopting the indigenous feasts but applying to them new meanings concerning the great acts of deliverance. Consequently the Feast of Ingathering, which had the old Canaanite name of *Asiph*, whilst retaining its agricultural overtone, became a feast remembering the sojourn of the Israelites in the desert, becoming known as *Sukkôth*. From the entry of the Israelites into the 'Promised Land' up until the exile, it is presumed that the year ended after all had been gathered in, as one would expect for an agricultural people, with the 'harvest-home' festival of Ingathering marking the climax of the year at its natural end. After the Exile, however, the old calendar was superseded and the New Year was changed to the spring in the month of Nisan following Babylonian custom. Snaith points to the theory of S.H. Hooke<sup>6</sup> concerning the link between the *akitu* festival, a Babylonian cultic festival of New Year held in Spring and the feast of Passover,

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<sup>5</sup> see for example R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, (DLT 1961) p484 seq.

<sup>6</sup> Snaith p18 n17, Professor S.H. Hooke, *The Origin of Early Semitic Ritual*, Schweich Lectures 1935.

but as he stresses, the *akitu* festival was not confined to use in the spring and cites examples of its use at other places in the sixth month. Because of this and other discrepancies he concludes that Passover cannot be described as a festival of New Year. The Babylonian month names add more confusion to this whole problem. If Nisan was the first month of the year, then why was the seventh month called Tishri which is derived from a word meaning 'to begin'?<sup>7</sup>

Of the three great festivals of the Jewish year the greatest was considered to be the Feast of Tabernacles, Sukkôth or Booths, and as a feast of Ingathering, harvest and vintage, was celebrated with much joy. On a number of occasions in the Old Testament Tabernacles is referred to as '*the feast*'<sup>8</sup>, its proper name being unnecessary as its pre-eminence above Passover and Pentecost was a popular convention. The traditional appellation of Tabernacles as '*the feast*' seems to have remained down to the first century of the Christian Era, John 7:2 referring to '*the feast of the Jews*'. It is therefore clear that in post-exilic times and up until the Common Era, even though the year officially began in Nisan, by far the greatest importance was given to Tabernacles. Evidence from Josephus and Pliny also attests this. Josephus<sup>9</sup>, although his estimation cannot be trusted, gave the number of those who went up to Jerusalem to keep the Passover in 64AD as three million. This large number was probably owed to the growing disquiet about the Roman occupation and the Jews' growing

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p18 n19,20.

<sup>8</sup> see for example 1Kings 8:2.

<sup>9</sup> *Bell. Iud.* II,xiv,3.

expectation of the coming of the Messiah an event which they expected to take place at the Feast of Tabernacles, but it is interesting to note that Josephus still insists that the Feast of Sukkôth was "*by far the greatest and holiest feast*".<sup>10</sup> Philo is less emphatic but does consider the month of Tishri to be a 'holy month'.<sup>11</sup> All this seems to point to a continued cultic tradition amongst Jews (in varying degrees) of Tishri being the month of the New Year celebrations, and the Feast of Sukkôth the culmination of the one yearly cycle and the beginning of another amidst much popular merry-making.

Leaving aside the origins of the feast we must now move on to assess the liturgy of the Tabernacles celebrations at the beginning of the Common Era.

Both Snaith and especially J. van Goudoever<sup>12</sup> stress the overriding agricultural bias of the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles, pointing out that the commemoration of the sojourn in the wilderness was largely peripheral to the feast itself. De Vaux<sup>13</sup> considers the etymology of the word Sukkôth, pointing out that this term is also agricultural in origin. He uses the English word 'tents' as a translation of Sukkôth but even so considers it misleading as the feast was never concerned with the erection of tents as such. He regards the word 'huts' to be a far more accurate translation but thinks this meaningless to the English reader. The text of Nehemiah chapter 8 is useful here as an example of the post-Exilic celebration of the Feast. Here Ezra is reading from Leviticus 23:33-

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<sup>10</sup> *Bell. Iud.* VIII, iv, 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Hieromenia (de spec. leg.* II,41).

<sup>12</sup> J. van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, (Leiden 1959) p30-35.

<sup>13</sup> *op. cit.* p495ff.

41 and prescribes, as Leviticus instructs, the gathering of choice "*branches of olive, pine, myrtle, palm and other leafy trees to make shelters as it says in the book*"<sup>14</sup>

The living in huts, however, cannot be a commemoration of the time in the wilderness primarily as the Israelites lived in tents, and we must be specific here as the Hebrew words are different. Also the huts were to be made from the lush vegetation of the harvest and van Goudoever raises the point that if this festival was a commemoration of the sojourn, then where would the Israelites find such materials in the desert? Therefore it seems that the feast could not have been celebrated before the entry into Canaan and neither does it seem that the commemoration of the wanderings in the desert gives any great motivation for the celebration of the festival itself. So why booths? De Vaux mentions a hypothesis based upon an supposed ancient superstition concerning the invasion of evil spirits into the home at the turning of the year<sup>15</sup>, so the occupants resorted to living in make-shift shelters to escape. As de Vaux points out, this rather shaky hypothesis cannot be backed up by biblical literature. A more favourable hypothesis is based upon the harvest itself, the suggestion being that at the time of the harvest the workers would erect temporary huts made from the branches of trees in the vineyard while the harvesting was in process. The change of the celebrations from the local area around local altars, as was the indigenous *asiph* custom, to a pilgrimage festival centred on Jerusalem meant that in the final step of the development,

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<sup>14</sup> Neh. 8:15. Exodus 23:14-19 makes no mention of living in shelters at all, the festival as described here seems to be a purely agricultural celebration.

<sup>15</sup> *op. cit.* p500.

as De Vaux points out, "*shelters were.....erected in Jerusalem itself, and so the 'huts' became an essential part of the feast*"<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect of the Sukkôth celebrations seems to be the rededication of the Temple and the Altar of God. The Temple of Solomon was dedicated at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles<sup>17</sup> and van Goudoever points to the Mishnah *Sukkah* tractate, 4:5 as the description of an annual commemoration of this with a foliage carrying procession around the altar. The branches of willow again reiterate the agricultural nature of the celebrations.

The last two aspects of the Ingathering celebrations, aspects that Snaith regards as the essential features of the feast,<sup>18</sup> are water-pouring and all-night illuminations, both obviously primitive features which most probably originated in the practices of the indigenous agricultural culture of Palestine. The rite of water-pouring is an ancient rite of rain-making and the details of the prescribed liturgy can be found in the Mishnah.<sup>19</sup> Early in the morning during the Feast the priest would descend to the Pool of Siloam and draw water in a golden flagon, attended by the worshippers. The water was then brought back to the altar and, with wine, placed in the bowls either side of it. It is probably this rite that John is referring to in his gospel<sup>20</sup> where, during the festival, Jesus proclaims that those who are thirsty should come to him. The

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p501.

<sup>17</sup> 1Kings 8:2.

<sup>18</sup> *op.cit.* p86.

<sup>19</sup> *Sukkah* 4:9.

<sup>20</sup> John 7:37-39.

link here is obviously with the water drawn from the Pool of Siloam, but the specific use of the term '*living water*' also refers to the water Moses produced from the stone<sup>21</sup> in the desert, and in the New Testament the water of baptism.

The all-night illuminations seem to be another ancient ritual, again agricultural but more so a marking of the Autumnal equinox. I shall rehearse in turn the theories of Snaith and van Goudoever on this aspect of the Sukkôth ceremonies.

Van Goudoever sees Tabernacles as a balance to Passover, both festivals being celebrated when the moon is full at opposite ends of the year. He suggests that the Mishnah relates a 'light festival' which must not be explained as a kind of sun worship but an affirmation that the light was an attribute of God himself. No longer did the faithful worship the light of the sun as their fathers had done, physically and literally turning their backs to the Temple to greet the rising sun. As the Mishnah states "*we are the Lord's , and our eyes are turned to the Lord*".<sup>22</sup> Snaith's explanation examines in greater depth the significance of the Full Moon. He points out that although all full moons give light at night, the size and colour of the 'Harvest Moon' does this in its own distinctive way, setting when the sun rises and rising when the sun sets, giving continuous light. Added to this light, further light symbolism took place in the Temple itself, candlesticks burned in the Court of Women and the faithful

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<sup>21</sup> Ex. 17:1-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Sukkah* 5:4.

danced around with torches singing hymns to God.<sup>23</sup> Snaith suggests that this light symbolism was specific to this one night in the year when the harvest moon was full; the night of the turning of the year. He also suggests that this ceremonial was intended specifically to be a denial of earlier sun worship. It is for this reason, suggests Snaith, that the ceremonial ended after the sun had risen the following morning, the priests going out to the east of the Temple, and turning their backs to the sun pledging their allegiance to God. It is only on the night of the Autumn Equinox moon that it was astronomically possible for this liturgy to take place. As well as Jesus' saying concerning himself and living water, there is also a link with the light symbolism. Immediately after the Feast of Tabernacles has come to an end in the Johannine chronology at 8:12, Jesus speaks of himself as '*The Light of the World*'. The link here that John is making, directly following the festival of 'continual light', is, like the water symbolism, very obvious.

Therefore, before the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, although it had evolved and gained new meanings, the Feast of Tabernacles, still essentially resembled the ancient agricultural feast of the New Year. Such a feast as the Israelites would have found celebrated on their entry into Canaan, the water pouring and illuminations being the cultic rites of fertility and thanks developed by an insulated agricultural people. But while this underlying meaning remained the same, added to it was the liturgy of Temple and altar re-dedication. This tradition in commemoration of the dedication of the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

Temple by Solomon, alongside the agricultural basis, seems to have been of major importance to the basic character of the feast. As van Goodoever points out, however, "*the commemoration of the wanderings through the wilderness was not an important motive for holding the feast.*"<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> op. cit. p35.

## The Sun and the Religion of the Romans

Even though the Feast of Tabernacles can, in at least some sense, be seen as a denial of sun worship, the fact that the sun plays such an important role in the celebration of the feast cannot be denied. The feast, as we have seen, was agricultural in origin, and depended upon the Autumnal equinox when the night and day were the same length, and although the worship of the sun was specifically denied, the festival still ultimately depended upon the sun's crossing of the equator for the timing of the celebration in the year. The Israelites, it could be said, through the indigenous custom, still depended upon the traditions of cultic sun worship for their religious observances. Such a dependence on the sun for religious ceremonial of course is as old as religion itself. Primitive religions around the globe looked to the sun as their first principle and anthropological studies of primitive cultures often reveal religious ceremonies centred around worship of a god of the sun, religious devotion developing principally through a desire to know the origins of the created order<sup>25</sup> - there would, to primitive man, be no other omnipresent visible body which sustained life as did the sun, the giver of heat, light and agricultural prosperity. It is then quite simple to see why this daily returning 'watcher of the world' had such a profound effect upon pagan culture and by simple deduction, why primitive man presumed the sun to be the creator and

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<sup>25</sup> For the cult of the sun in Europe see M. Green, *The Sun-gods of Ancient Europe*, (Batsford, London 1991) pp14-32. In West Africa due to the oppressive heat the sun was not as common in primitive religion as in the cooler North Africa and Europe (see G. Parinder, *West African Religion*, (Epworth, London 1961) pp22-3), however cosmology was important even if not primarily concerned with the sun (see Noel Q. King, *African Cosmos*, (Wadsworth, California 1986).

sustaining god of life on earth, and as a corollary, why an event such as an eclipse or the intrusion of an alien body such as a comet should be interpreted by sages as the wrath of God or impending doom. Such interpretations through the centuries, even up to the superstitions of our present age are examples of a religio-anthropology centred on the sun as creator and sustainer, and why as Talley suggests, "*it would be difficult to find in the ancient world a religious tradition that was not sensitive to the movements of the sun.*"<sup>26</sup>

Our study must now move to the pagan religion of the Roman world, an epoch in world history which has had a profound effect on the culture of Western society. The most notable influence of Roman religion concerning the sun, on the topic of our study, is the celebration of the cult of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* established on the 25th December in 274 by emperor Aurelian. P.J. Jablonski and B.J. Hardouin were, in the eighteenth century, the first scholars of note to forge a link between this Roman feast and the primitive feast of Christmas,<sup>27</sup> but at this point I shall not concern myself with the possible origins of the Christmas festival that maybe found in the cult of *Sol Invictus*, rather, the origins of the sun cult in the Roman world itself must be examined as a background to this question.

Gaston Halsberghe in his book *The Cult of Sol Invictus* traces the origins of the cult of the sun in the Roman world from its possible beginnings up to the festival introduced by Aurelian. It is significant, bearing in mind the

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<sup>26</sup> Talley, *op. cit.* p87.

<sup>27</sup> see *ibid.* p88.

agricultural aspect of the origin of the Feast of Tabernacles discussed above, that Halsberghe chooses to begin his study with the comment that "[in] Rome's earliest centuries, her population was made up entirely of sturdy farmers whose public and family life was centred on their agricultural pursuits."<sup>28</sup> It should be pointed out that there are two schools of thought concerning the origins of the cult of the sun in Roman Mythology, one argument advocated most notably by G. Wissowa<sup>29</sup> puts forward the suggestion that there was never an autochthonous tradition of worshipping the sun god in Rome, rather it was more likely that this tradition had its origins in the religious piety of another culture, and that the Romans did no more than adopt the deities of the sun and the moon. The other opinion, the view preferred by Halsberghe, suggests that worship of the sun was quite naturally an integral part of Roman religion, developing without any outside influence, Von Domaszewski suggesting that worship of Sol was one of the most primitive elements of Roman Mythology.<sup>30</sup> There is of course no solid evidence to back up either of these arguments, scraps of information which do exist can be brought together and cited as evidence in a possible hypothesis but there is not enough material to prove or disprove either opinion. The question of the agricultural life of early Rome may be enough, even though the hypothesis is sketchy, to suggest that Sol was an autochthonous deity of agricultural ancient Rome. As Halsberghe concludes "...the fact that during Rome's first centuries her inhabitants were rugged farmers who put all their energies into cultivating the soil...[meant that] among the

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<sup>28</sup> op. cit. p26

<sup>29</sup> G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, (Munich 1912), see Halsberghe p26f.

<sup>30</sup> A. Von Domaszewski, *Abhandlungen zur Römischen Religion*, (1909), *ibid.*

early Romans, just as in other primitive societies, the sun's role in religious and ritual ceremonies was an important one, for the special responsibility of the sun god is to provide for the fertility of the fields."<sup>31</sup> There is an obvious comparison to be made here with the indigenous agricultural fertility festivals the Israelites would have been faced with upon their entry into the Promised Land. Although there are distinct differences between the *Akitu* festival of the Canaanites (it is certain that such a Roman fertility festival centred on the sun, if it existed at all, would not have been a new year feast, or even one of ingathering) the same underlying motive for holding the festival is apparent, that of the sun as the provider of fertility. There is solid evidence for the worship of the sun in the Roman world because of, for example, inscriptions on altars and solar symbolism on coins, but these examples do not take the date of the cult back before the first century B.C. But Halsberghe suggests,<sup>32</sup> with evidence from entries in early calendars, that the sun god was worshipped in Rome as early as the fourth century B.C. This may be so, but the question still remains as to whether this worship was indigenous or taken from some other Pagan religion of the time. The strongest evidence which suggests a conclusion that the cult of Sol was autochthonous in early Rome is the fact that her primitive population was agricultural. The mythology of the Romans centred around the *Di Indigites*, which included the gods Jupiter and Mars, and each god would have had its own group of adherents. But together with these principle deities, subsidiary gods were also worshipped, gods such as Sol and Luna. We can conclude that the god of the sun was worshipped by those who required

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<sup>31</sup> *op. cit.* p33.

<sup>32</sup> *op. cit.* p27.

his personal favours and blessings. This group in the early centuries would have consisted of the local farming community. It is then not too difficult to conclude that just as in other primitive pagan farming communities the sun must have played an important role in religious piety. With this suggestion in mind, it is possible to conclude that the god of the sun, together with other celestial bodies, may have been one of the autochthonous deities of early Rome.

It appears that at about the time of the beginning of the Christian era the importance of Sol seems to have increased, because of, as Halsberghe points out, an increasing interest in the old cults of the Roman world which had been pushed into the background<sup>33</sup>, and as a counter to the influence of eastern religions. This renewed devotion to Sol can be seen in the increased use of sun symbolism on coins and medals. At this point the worship of Sol shakes off its old agricultural origins, and the recognition and increased importance of the sun god at the highest levels of society can be seen in the action of Emperor Augustus<sup>34</sup> in the late first century B.C., who after his conquest of Egypt sent two obelisks back to Rome and had them erected in prominent places in the city and dedicated (as Halsberghe concludes) to the autochthonous Sol. The importance of this action is two-fold: firstly, this is an indication of a growing revival in the old sun cult, and secondly, this action was intended to drive out the influence of the more Syrian influenced sun ceremonies from the city.

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<sup>33</sup> Halsberghe, *op. cit.* p28f.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p29 and Talley, *op. cit.* p88.

By the first and second centuries A.D., the influence of the east again seems to have had the upper hand concerning the worship of Sol. This eastern influence can be seen in the cult of *Sol Invictus Elagabal* from Syria and the well known cult of Mithras, which both owe their rise in Rome to the soldiers of the Legions, especially those who served in Syria and Persia. The experience of the soldiers, together with the increasing numbers of immigrant Syrians and merchants, resulted in a gradual penetration of Roman sun worship during the first two centuries by eastern influences.

In 218A.D. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was proclaimed emperor, but took the name Elagabalus in honour of his fanatical personal devotion to the Syrian sun god. Elagabalus was high priest of the cult and succeeded, being both Emperor and High Priest, in replacing Jupiter as principle deity with *Sol Invictus Elagabal*. Thus during his reign Elagabalus imposed sweeping religious reforms which accorded his god with the honour of the chief deity of Rome. Temples were founded in honour of *Elagabal*, richly adorned with gold and jewels after the Syrian style in which daily the young Emperor-High Priest sacrificed to the sun dressed in highly ornamented robes and with his face made up in typical Syrian style. This ceremonial was intensified in the summer months between June and September with elaborate processions, the Syrian symbol of the sun god, a black, conical stone being carried through the city. Roman senators, military commanders, soldiers and citizens were all expected to take part in this overtly Syrian festival, primarily because of the power of constraint that the Emperor held. This "*Syrian carnival in the capital*

*city of Rome*"<sup>35</sup> must have taken place certainly with the disgust of most Roman officials, a disgust which can easily be seen in the downfall and murder of Emperor Elagabalus and the Herculean effort of his successor to wipe out memory of the cult. It is impossible to describe the beliefs of the followers of the cult of *Elagabal* in detail as information is minimal, but it seems that the religion was principally monotheistic, the other deities of Roman mythology explained as creations of the sun god. There was an expectation of an after life and in similarity with the beliefs of the Platonists, the soul had a craving for the deity, to whom he longed to ascend. Thus we can see a religion which in ceremonial was rooted in the traditions of the east and one which, as Halsberghe suggests, underwent enrichment from the traditions of other related cults in the region.

The cult of Elagabal which Emperor Elagabalus instituted in Rome seems originally to have been centred at Emesa<sup>36</sup>, but Halsberghe suggests that the cult originated in Canaan, being the "*personification of the male principle and of fertile warmth*"<sup>37</sup>, which ties in neatly with the indigenous agricultural population. Halsberghe cites a number of plausible etymologies of the word 'Elagabal' (variants being 'Elegabal' or 'Heliogabal', literally, 'the god Gabal'): firstly he suggests that 'Elagabal' is derived from the Semitic word 'gabal' meaning 'massive' or 'exalted', from which is derived the Arabic word for 'high-places'. He points out, with evidence from Ezekiel 27:9, that the city of Byblos

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p81.

<sup>36</sup> The city of Emesa, the site of the present day city of Homs, is 100miles north of Damascus.

<sup>37</sup> Halsberghe p62.

was once called Gebal and goes on to assume that 'gebal' in Syriac and Aramaic meant 'high places' and that the sun god Elagabal was worshipped at such 'heights'. Such an etymology is in complete agreement with evidence from the Old Testament, where worship of pagan gods and Yahweh from high places is common (see Num 23:3; 1 Sam 9:12,10:5; 1 Kgs 3:4; 2 Kgs 23:15; Ez 20:29). Halsberghe's conclusion is that the sun god Elagabal may have been worshipped in the mountains of Canaan before the cult was centred upon Emesa. Here again, as the above biblical references attest, we can see another example of an influence of the indigenous pagan religion on the incoming religion of the Hebrews. The second possible etymology that Halsberghe gives concerns 'Bil-gil', the Chaldean god of fire or cosmic fire, which can be very easily identified with a god of the sun. Both of these etymologies also include the symbol of Sol Elagabal, the black conical stone, sometimes explained as a meteorite, a body which to the eye, whilst in the sky, would be seen to flame, and therefore be identified with the sun god, the god of cosmic fire.<sup>38</sup> However, Richard Stoneman suggests that rather than (with scientific hindsight) being a cosmic body, the fabled black stone should be explained as a piece of hardened volcanic lava<sup>39</sup>, which, similar to a meteorite, would be hurled flaming through the air by the power of a volcano. When hardened, such a body would form a rounded black stone. As such, an explanation that the stone derived from a fire-god of the high-places would still hold true.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p63f.

<sup>39</sup> R. Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire*, (Michigan, 1992) p141.

Another possible etymological hypothesis which Halsberghe cites is the one put forward by Fuller and Tiele<sup>40</sup> who suggest that 'El-Gebal' is derived from the Syrian root *gebal* meaning 'to end', and as Halsberghe suggests, extending the meaning, 'form' or 'create'. This etymology seems to be the preferable one as it does not exclude the other two. Halsberghe concludes that the god of the high places can easily be equated in origin with the creator god and that the ultimate derivation seems to rest in a single original cult which was centred around the worship of a creator god, worshipped in high places, represented by a conical black stone and symbolised by fire. This conclusion seems to be qualified by Stoneman<sup>41</sup> who suggests that the original deity was a Syrian god of high-places (c.f. biblical sources mentioned above) who obtained solar attributes on the arrival of nomadic Arab tribes into Syria.

Forced to leave his position as high priest of the cult of Sol Elagabal at Emesa upon his proclamation as Emperor, Elagabalus took the cult of his god with him to the imperial capital, imposing upon Rome the cultic practices of an alien culture and religion; the Romans did practise sun worship as I have suggested above, but the overtly eastern ceremonial which Elagabalus instituted must have caused much disquiet, although probably private. The rich trappings of the Syrian sun god were paraded through the streets at festival time, priests clothed in gaudy costumes and face paint, and the conical black representation drawn in a chariot by four horses. It seems that the solar deity Elagabal did not communicate with its adherents directly, but through

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<sup>40</sup> see *ibid.* p63n2.

<sup>41</sup> *op. cit.* p143.

the mediation of an eagle, the Syrian bird of the sun, who carried the souls of the departed faithful to their destination. Evidence gleaned from an altar found in Rome, however, seems to suggest that together with the eagle the horse drawn chariot also transported souls to the afterlife<sup>42</sup> as well as being the transport of the conical meteorite.

This Syrian insult to the religion and culture of Rome was, though, short-lived. On 21st March 222A.D. Elagabalus was murdered, only four years after he had been proclaimed Emperor, and as Halsberghe puts it "*it was found necessary to obliterate him and his religious reforms.*" The so called *damnatio memoriae* was enforced, he was refused a grave and mourning was strictly forbidden, such was the hatred amongst the population for his fanatical religious campaign. His successor was immediately appointed and as much as possible, traces of the Syrian cult of the sun in Rome were erased.

In the intervening years between the end of the reign of Elagabalus and the succession of Aurelian (270A.D.), as would be expected, the cult of the sun did continue in earnest. Leaving Elagabalus aside, a key factor in the spread of the

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<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note the similarity between this solar symbolism and the description of pagan ceremonial found in 2 Kings 23:8-11. Scholars have noted that despite the apparent Assyrian character of these verses, the evidence seems to suggest the direct influence of indigenous religion upon the Hebrews in the time before the reforms of Josiah. In these four verses are contained notable aspects of pagan sun worship: high places (v. 8) where sacrifice was offered, presumably to the sun, horses (v. 11) dedicated to the sun, presumably intended to draw the solar chariot (v. 11) This whole point will be discussed later, but it is interesting to see the almost exact same symbolism described in the Second Book of Kings (late 6th century B.C.) as was being practised by Emperor Elagabalus in Rome (Early 3rd century A.D.) The common cultic origins of both these accounts seems to be the ancient pre-Semitic sun worship of Syria. There may also be a connexion between the eagle as the messenger of the sun god and the winged sun-disk symbol, common in early pagan cultic representations. This symbol may also be the ultimate origin of the reference in Malachi 3:20 to the '*Sun of Justice*' with '*healing in his wings*', of this, however, again I will concern myself later.

sun cult from the East was the religious piety and superstition of the legionaries. It is no coincidence that the large number of temples and altars dedicated to the sun god which have been discovered throughout Europe and the Near East were erected by the Roman legions and that they were intended to bring protection to the armies in their conquests throughout the empire. Increased worship of the sun god alone can be said to affirm the trend in the late Roman Empire towards monotheism which also can be seen in the growing influence of the Neo-Platonist school of philosophy, the popularity, again amongst the armies, of the cult of Mithras, and the spread of Christianity throughout the empire.

In the summer of 272, Aurelian fought and won a decisive battle against the Syrian queen, Zenobia which resulted in the slaughter of her entire army. In the mind of the sun-worshipping Aurelian, the fact that this battle was fought close to the site of the chief Temple of *Sol Invictus Elagabal* could only mean that the decisive victory was achieved as a direct result of the protection of Sol Elagabal. The personal devotion of Aurelian to the sun is also attested by his actions following his conquest and subsequent sacking of the city of Palmyra where the Temple of the local sun god was plundered by his legionaries. Aurelian, on hearing this news gave orders that the Temple should be fully restored and rededicated.

At least passing reference should be made of Queen Zenobia, who rather than adhering to a single religion, seems to have patronised many bizarre cults and

rites which sprang forth in the "*complex religious scene of third century Syria.*"<sup>43</sup> Facts about Zenobia are limited and it has been suggested that she may have been, albeit, an unconventional Jew. However, her relationship with the pseudo-Christian bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata (3rd century) is an intriguing one. Antiochene Christianity, by the very nature of the culture in which it found itself, was plagued by heretical sects.<sup>44</sup> Paul of Samosata was an adoptionist, believing that the divine Christ, the word of God, came to rest upon the human Jesus at baptism and that the two (Christ and Jesus) were not one person, Jesus being merely a human host for the divine word. Paul was denounced at the synods of Antioch in 264 and 268/9 and deprived of his episcopate leading to the Church's debate concerning the 'Homoousios'.<sup>45</sup> His refusal to leave his church in Antioch led to the intervention of Aurelian who appealed to the Church in Rome which found in favour of Domnus who took over leadership of the Antiochene Church.<sup>46</sup> At this point Paul seems to have allied himself with Zenobia, as Stoneman suggests, '*...add(ing) one more to the tally of fugitive intellectuals at Zenobia's court.*'<sup>47</sup> On the part of Aurelian, this episode shows his acceptance of the Christian Church as a legal body<sup>48</sup>, of Paul of Samosata, his heretical beliefs and the beliefs of those who came after him were to engage the Church in heated debate throughout the fourth century and beyond concerning the person of Christ and his relationship to the Father.

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<sup>43</sup> R. Stoneman op. cit. p138.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* p147.

<sup>45</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross.

<sup>46</sup> see Stoneman p150.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* p151.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

We will consider further the question of adoptionist Christology later in our study.

The years between Elagabalus and Aurelian had been ones of political weakness and insecurity in the Empire. Aurelian's remit was one of consolidation which he went about achieving by means of the institution of a new sun cult. He recognised the failings of Elagabalus. Whilst not overtly criticising his motives for imposing an Imperial cult, he did question the way Elagabalus went about instituting it. The overtly Eastern nature of the cult of Elagabalus angered the nationalistic Roman population as did its uncompromising imposition. Aurelian would not make the same mistake, his new cult would be imposed by degrees, firstly by having *Deus Sol Invictus* officially recognised as the chief deity of Rome, secondly, by having a new temple erected and thirdly, by instituting a college of priests.

The dogma of the new cult was intentionally imprecise so that in an effort to consolidate, the new cult could easily include all the localised sun deities which existed throughout his Empire and indeed, images of these other sun deities were accorded a place in the newly dedicated Temple. It seems that Aurelian's cult owed much to the previous cult of Elagabalus but was almost universally accepted because it did not overtly appear to be alien to Roman culture and tradition. In fact Aurelian took what was good from the traditions of the sun worship that had gone before but took away all the trappings which were of eastern origin. His master stroke was the fact that in the age of

Monotheism, the new cult as Halsberghe puts it "*satisfied the religious longings of the faithful far beyond the borders of Syria*"<sup>49</sup>

The feast of *Deus Sol Invictus* was kept on the 25th December, the date of the Winter Solstice, a date set, as Halsberghe suggests, not only because this was the anniversary of the birth of the sun (from shortening to lengthening light) but also because this was the date on which the Temple was dedicated.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Halsberghe p138.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p159.

## The Sun and the Religion of the Egyptians

Having examined the influence of the Sun in the cult in the Roman and early Hebrew traditions, we now turn to North Africa and more especially to the Nile Basin to consider another thread which may be woven into our study. We have already seen the importance of agriculture in the lives of the people of the Ancient Near East. For life and livelihood ancient Hebrews and Romans alike depended upon the fertility of the land, they watched the regularity of the changing seasons year by year, planting their crops in the spring, nurturing them during the summer, harvested them in the autumn and surviving the winter until spring returned again. Their astronomers, the ancient calendar-makers, watched the night sky for the portents which signalled the transition from season to season, marking out the right time to sow and reap; "*There is a season for everything,*" says the writer of Qoheleth. It is then not by chance that religious festivals and commemorations fell according to this agricultural calendar which was hinged upon the turning of the seasons and marked by the astronomical quarter days which separated the year by equinox and solstice. Neither is it then surprising that the Sun and Moon, the great powers of the heavenly realm should fill ancient mankind with the urge to worship and pray for their continued provision. This religious drama is played out perhaps more understandably in the narrow corridor of land which lies either side of the river Nile.

Ancient Egypt was a land of contrast, on the one hand a land of arid desert, on the other, a land of fertility and plenty. R. E. Witt<sup>51</sup> describes Egypt as a '*black land*' referring to the rich dark mud which the Nile gave to its people, a fertile oasis in the desert offering to its people a never-ending gift of irrigation which meant agricultural security and livelihood. The Nile could be considered almost a god in its own rite, for it was the peoples' great provider and indeed it is around this great river that the religious cult of Ancient Egypt is based. The Nile is a seasonal river - in the summer it swells due to the melting snow at its highland source, but in the autumn the lack of rain in the mountains makes it recede until the following year. This natural occurrence, as I hope to show, forms the basis of ancient Egyptian religion, and, as we shall see it also relies upon the solstices and equinoxes as did the dating of the feasts of the Hebrews as we have seen.

Egyptian religion, cannot, as A Weidemann<sup>52</sup> points out, be "*formulat[ed]...into a consistent system*" thus, "*it is open to us to speak of the religious ideas of the Egyptians, but not of an Egyptian Religion.*"<sup>53</sup> As the Egyptian state, under a single Pharaoh, Menes, came into being through the union of the smaller states which surrounded the Nile, so the cults of these states came together. It is for this reason that the religion of the Egyptians may seem sometimes confused, the same god therefore having different attributes in different states and epochs. Horus for example, as Wiedemann explains, "*[is the name which] at*

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<sup>51</sup> R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, (Thames and Hudson 1971) p14.

<sup>52</sup> A Weidemann, *Religion of the Ancient Egyptians*, (H Gravel & Co 1897) p4.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p3.

least two entirely distinct deities were originally denoted - Horus the son of Isis and Horus the sun god."<sup>54</sup> Horus the sun god became identified with the Greek Apollo, but eventually both of the deities became fused. An outline of Egyptian religious thought in all its intricacies is not needed for the purposes of our study so I shall concentrate on Isis, the moon goddess, her brother husband, Osiris, the Sun god and their son Horus, who also became synonymous with the sun. The myth that surround this 'holy family' of gods is preserved only in a work by Plutarch (AD 46-120) entitled '*Isis et Osiris*'. Although Wiedemann points out that, "*no such continuous story can be substantiated from the monuments... [however] nearly all the incidents are mentioned incidentally in the texts*"<sup>55</sup>. H. P. Cook<sup>56</sup>, assumes that Plutarch correctly records the traditional myth of Isis and Osiris, quoting P.D. Scott-Moncrieff<sup>57</sup>, he points out, "*It may at once be stated that his [Plutarch's] version of the legend....corresponds well with all that is known from the Egyptian records and rituals, and there is no doubt that it represents the current Egyptian myth at the middle of the first century.*" This conclusion, if indeed it is true, is of particular interest to us as Plutarch is recording this 'current myth' in the first century of the Christian era. Christianity was probably already established in Northern Egypt at the time that Plutarch was writing. There was a sizeable Jewish Diaspora community in Alexandria, one of the largest in the Roman Empire and because of this some scholars have questioned why it seems that Paul never went there. There is, however, some New Testament evidence to

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<sup>54</sup> op. cit. p27.

<sup>55</sup> op. cit. p210.

<sup>56</sup> H. P. Cooke, *Osiris, A Study in Myths, Mysteries and Religion*, (C. W. Daniel 1931) p 62.

<sup>57</sup> P.D.Scott-Moncrieff, 'De Iside et Osiride' in '*Journal of Hellenic Studies*' vol. xxix (1909) p81.

presume that there was a Christian community around the Nile Delta. In Acts 18:24-28 Luke gives an account of an Alexandrian Jew called Apollos<sup>58</sup> who seems to have been an outstanding preacher of the gospel in his home city, and who according to 1Corinthians 1:12, had his own group of followers. It has also been suggested by some that the Gospel of John is in some way connected with Christian North Egypt. Certainly, early papyri fragments of John have been found in Egypt<sup>59</sup> but this does no more than suggest early knowledge of John's Gospel, a fact which itself may be useful as we shall see later. Further, it has been suggested that the letter of Jude was intended for the Christians in Egypt. There is no hard proof of this, but the specific mention of Egypt in the text has led some scholars to believe that the writer's intention was to warn Christians of the dangers of those who "*have infiltrated among you...[who] pervert the grace of our God.*"<sup>60</sup> This may indicate the threat posed by some Gnostic sect, but again such speculations are without any hard proof. Gnostic groups were however active in Egypt in the first centuries of the Christian era and added to the cosmopolitan religious atmosphere of this portion of the empire as we shall see later.

What then of the religious thought of the Egyptians? It must be stated here that Egyptian religion seems to have developed through its long history, myths changing and acquiring new attributes from one epoch to the next,

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<sup>58</sup> The name Apollos itself suggests Hellenisation, the Graeco-Roman Apollo was analogous with the Egyptian Horus, both identified with the sun. Alexandria was also the centre of the peculiar cult of Serapis, a hybrid god also connected with the sun.

<sup>59</sup> Rylands Papyrus 457 (John 18:31-3, 37, 38) and Egerton Papyrus 2, of an unknown Gospel but with knowledge of John.

<sup>60</sup> Jude v4.

ultimately being fused with Graeco-Roman myths during the Hellenistic period. Primitive Egyptians developed a heavenly mythology, which was sometimes contradictory. The sky was said to be an expanse of water on which the sun, moon and stars sailed in boats, but we also find other examples of myths concerning the sun; in the morning being born as a child and in the evening dying as an old man, then passing through the underworld to be reborn the next day as it rose. Although complex and confused this idea of rebirth seems to be the origin of the Osiris myth, which, as it developed, became pre-eminent in the religious thought of the Egyptians, explaining the rising and falling of the Nile, the weakening and strengthening of the sun, the victory of good over evil and the whole cycle of nature from life to death.

The myth of Osiris as recorded by Plutarch is briefly as follows. Ra, the sun god had a son and a daughter, Shu and Tefnut, who married, and like their father, had a son and a daughter, Geb and Nut, who married. Geb and Nut had four children, two sons and two daughters, Osiris, who married his sister Isis, and Seth who married his sister Nephthys. Osiris ruled as king over Egypt and taught her how to tame the land. His brother Seth, however, plotted to kill Osiris and, by a trick, entombed him in a cask, then threw him in the Nile. Isis mourned for her husband and began to search for him. Finding her husband's cask at Byblus she opened it and wept over his corpse. She then left, leaving the cask safe. Seth, while out hunting, found Osiris' cask and tore the corpse into fourteen pieces, scattering them about the country. Isis on hearing of this, set about recovering all of the parts of her dead husband's

body. This eventually she accomplished, and by her magic, brought Osiris back to life, but as a god who reigned over the dead. In this form Osiris tutored his son Horus in the art of war, and Horus gained victory over Seth. The deified Osiris then copulated with his earthly wife Isis, and she conceived and bore a son, Harpokrates.<sup>61</sup>

Plutarch's narrative ends at this point, although there are further complications to the legend, but we need not be concerned with these. How then should this myth be interpreted? Osiris, as the god of the dead became identified with the sun, the great god who traversed the sky by day and the underworld by night. Isis for her part, thanks largely to Graeco-Roman assimilation became pre-eminent as a god in Egypt. She had brought her dead husband back to life, she gave fertility to the land, she was the mother god of all, she gave the Pharaoh his power, she was the archetypal wife and mother. Horus seems to have been confused at some stage in the development with Harpokrates and they become the same person. This matters not as the interpretation is still the same; Horus the victorious son who won victory over the evil Seth and sat on the throne of his father, the archetype of all Pharaohs that would follow him.

The Egyptians were alone in the ancient world in following a solar calendar, made up of twelve months, each being thirty days long. The remaining five days were made up by 'Epagomenal' days, on which the birthdays of the

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<sup>61</sup> see H. P. Cooke, *op. cit.* p7seq.

characters of the Osiris myth were celebrated. The calculation of the Egyptian year depends chiefly upon the heavenly behaviour of the star Sirius which they called Sothis. They observed that the length of the solar year could be calculated from its latest visible rising before dawn, until the next time it reached that point.<sup>62</sup> There is, however a problem with this reckoning, and one of which the Egyptian astronomers must have been aware, which is that, for whatever reason, but probably one of conservatism, omitting to inter-calculate an extra day every four years meant that the rising of Sirius would be observed later and later every year, until it arrived back at the same point 1460 years later; this is called the Sothic cycle. The obvious problem this causes, as many scholars have pointed out, is that "*the months lost all relations to the seasons.*"<sup>63</sup> It has been suggested that the Egyptians therefore employed two 'years', one which followed the Sothic Cycle and marked the year made up of the twelve months, and another, the so-called 'civic year'<sup>64</sup> which was concerned with the dates of annual festivals. A further question must however, be asked; what was the nature and the origin of the other year as opposed to the one which followed the Sothic Cycle? As we have already noted, ancient Egypt depended upon the inundation of the Nile for its prosperity and it is the date of this occurrence which has been suggested as the signal of the New Year. The first season in the agricultural year of Egypt, it is obviously supposed, is that of Inundation which occurred during the summer, roughly in the middle of July (Julian). It has therefore been supposed that the

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<sup>62</sup> see *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. I p166ff for a good general outline of the Egyptian system of reckoning.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p168.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p172.

date of the coincidence of both the rising of the Nile and the rising of Sirius must point to the time of the origin of the calendar following the Sothic Cycle. We know that a Sothic Year began in 139 AD, thanks to Theon, an Alexandrain mathematician, so therefore the origin of the reckoning of the year dependant upon the Sothic Cycle must have been either 2781B.C. or 4241B.C., the earlier date being adduced as the more probable.<sup>65</sup> This calculation is acceptable, but after only a few generations the date of the annual inundation, remaining static, would occur ever further before the rising of Sirius which would therefore be out of synchronization with the seasons. It would therefore be necessary for the Egyptians to set their 'civil year' by some other marker.

A plausible hypothesis has been put forward by H. P. Cooke<sup>66</sup>, who, with reference to Plutarch, has argued that there is a closer association between the changing seasons of the agricultural year (and therefore civil year), the risings of the Nile, the solstices and equinoxes and also the Osiris myth. Cooke also considers the rising of Sirius<sup>67</sup> (July 20th in the Julian Calendar), but rather than placing this event as the beginning of the year, considers it in relation to the summer solstice which, with the calculations of Biot in mind occurred at the same time in the year 3285 B.C.<sup>68</sup> Of course, Sirius from that date, as we have seen, would have appeared gradually later and later the nearer one comes to our time, Biot calculating that by the time of the Ptolomies there was

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* p248.

<sup>66</sup> *op. cit.* p18ff.

<sup>67</sup> *op. cit.* p32-3.

<sup>68</sup> Cooke (p33n2) himself notes that the calculations of Biot have been superseded by those of Oppolzer, but the correction was very slight and does not affect his argument.

a difference of twenty-four days between the solstice and rising of the Sothis. This calculation, however, and all other schemes which try to set Julian dates to points in the Egyptian year, as we shall see later, contains one simple but vitally important error, as Talley points out<sup>69</sup>, which is that the Julian calendar only came into existence in 45B.C., which itself also had an error that was not corrected until 1582A.D. It therefore becomes a nonsense to try to precalculate Julian dates in antiquity. We must then be led in our deductions purely by the markers which the Egyptians themselves would have known, namely, the Solstices, the rising of Sirius and the inundation of the Nile, without reference to the Julian calendar. Two of these events, the inundation and the Solstices, were roughly constant so it is these events, with help from Cooke's argument that we must use.

Cooke referring to Plutarch, points out that to the Egyptians, Sirius was the star of Isis as it heralded the season of growth and fertility at the height of the Nile's inundation, and it was said to be Isis who was responsible for this inundation. As one myth explains<sup>70</sup>, the Nile rose as Isis wept in lament for her murdered husband. Such a connexion, however, between the inundation of the Nile and the rising of Sirius, as we have already seen, would be impossible to argue with any credibility as only a few years either side of the beginning of the Sothic Cycles of 4241B.C. and 2781B.C. would Sirius rise in conjunction with the inundation. If then Plutarch is correct in identifying

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<sup>69</sup> Talley, *The Origins...* p108f.

<sup>70</sup> Witt, *op. cit.* p14f.

Sirius with Isis and the connexion between Isis and the inundation, then such a tradition could only have been inaugurated in years either side of the dates of the beginning of the Sothic Cycle. Such a connexion is certainly possible, however, a more satisfactory conclusion can be arrived at if one begins not with the rising of Sirius as the fixed point, but using the summer solstice instead. Here we are on safer ground, as the occurrence of the solstice marked, naturally, the change of season from spring to summer at roughly the time of the year when the inundation of the Nile began. Following on from Cooke we can therefore suggest that there may in Egypt, with evidence from Plutarch, be evidence of a connexion between Isis, the personification of fertility, primarily with the summer solstice rather than with the rising of Sirius. This theory is also preferable as it does not essentially employ any consideration of the Julian calendar, which, as I have pointed out above, because of its inaccuracy, causes problems. It also allows reference to the Osiris myth in relation to the solstices and equinoxes and on this point Cooke extends his theory.

Relying heavily on Plutarch's account, Cooke points out that all the aspects of the myth can be seen to relate to the behaviour of the Nile and the quarter-tense days. He continues by considering the time of the murder of Osiris by Seth, which occurred according to Plutarch's account at the time when the sun passed through the scorpion, that is, he concludes, in the autumn at the time when the Nile begins to recede. Osiris, identified with the sun, at this point in the year therefore can no longer regenerate the land by his power, being

murdered at the hands of Seth, the personification of darkness and drought, who in killing his brother causes the Nile to dry up, and the land to be thrust into winter darkness and infertility. This, he concludes, is roughly the time of the Autumn equinox.<sup>71</sup>

Cooke also argues that the birth of Osiris fits into the equinoctical year. He points out that Plutarch assigns his birth to the time of the festival of '*Pamyliā*' which resembles the festival celebrated in honour of the Greek Dionysus, at which an image of a phallus was carried in procession. This festival, concludes Cooke, bares all the hallmarks of a celebration of the fertility of Spring, which together with knowledge that the festival of Dionysus was celebrated in Athens in March, points to a spring date for the birth of Osiris in the myth. But further, the birth/phallus/fertility theme can also be seen in the section of the myth which describes Osiris' rebirth after Isis has pieced together the separated parts of his body. The myth relates that Isis found all the parts of her husband's body apart from his genital member, so she made a model of it to complete him. At this point in the account, Plutarch states, "*in honour whereof to this day the Egyptians hold a festival*".<sup>72</sup> This festival Cooke concludes to be '*Pamyliā*'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Cooke p23.

<sup>72</sup> see *ibid.* p13. Trans. of Plutarch 'Isis et Osiris' 12-19 by C. W. King in *Plutarch's Morals* (1889) p10-16.

<sup>73</sup> *op. cit.* 28ff.

Cooke also points out that Horus/Harpokrates, again with evidence from Plutarch, was born at the time of the winter solstice<sup>74</sup>. In relation to this, Horus can be considered as the fruit of Isis, who, in the dark days of infertile winter, brought forth a son at the time when the sun began to grow and the days lengthen. Horus can therefore be considered as a signal of hope, a hero who would defeat Seth, the personification of evil, and restore the kingdom of his murdered father, Osiris.

It is clear that Plutarch's account of the myth of Osiris is coloured by the influence of the religious thought of the Graeco-Roman world. Centuries before the age of Plutarch, trade and influence ran freely between major cities of the eastern Mediterranean, North Egypt being colonised by Greeks possibly earlier than 700BC. Alexander during his campaigns, journeyed to Egypt and in 331BC founded Alexandria. When Alexander died, Egypt passed to Ptolemy, whose descendants ruled until the Roman conquest of Augustus in 30AD. We therefore see Isis identified with the Greek Demeter, the mother goddess of fertility, Artemis, the virgin goddess of chastity and childbirth, whose temple at Ephesus became one of the wonders of the world<sup>75</sup> and the Roman Diana, goddess of the Moon. Likewise Osiris becomes Dionysus, the god of wine in Greece, Bacchus in Rome and Serapis in Ptolomaic Egypt. Horus becomes Apollo and Re becomes Zeus.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* p32n4.

<sup>75</sup> It is probably not a coincidence that Ephesus was also where Mary the Mother of Jesus is said to have lived with Saint John after the Ascension.

<sup>76</sup> see Witt, *op. cit.* ch. iv.

Although the theory of Cooke depends heavily upon the account of Plutarch, his conclusion that the origin of the Osiris myth may lie in the behaviour of the Nile in relation to the solstices and equinoxes is worth considering. The myth as Plutarch relates it is probably the account which was accepted in his time, not only in Egypt but throughout the Greco-Roman world, by which time it would have undergone a certain amount of colouration. We have in Plutarch's work an account which therefore contains an ancient basis, but with the additions of time and later empires. It is true that Plutarch's is the only full account of the myth, but it is also true that most of the traditions to which it appeals are recorded in the ancient Egyptian texts. We are therefore dealing with evidence which is rooted in the ancient, but with the additions of later ages. What therefore could be more ancient than the solstices and the equinoxes to which other ancient civilizations appealed, and natural occurrences such as the behaviour of the Nile?

Cooke concludes by pointing out that if he is correct in his reasoning, "*we have now both the equinoxes and both of the solstices also. The year is the equinoctial, the solar or tropical year.*"<sup>77</sup> We can therefore possibly consider a conclusion that the Osiris myth, if based upon the astronomical turning points of the agricultural year, may be an ancient mythical attempt at explaining the rising of the Nile, its gift of fertility and denial of fertility; the annual struggle between good and evil; light and life annually conquering over darkness and death. It would therefore seem that the Nile, so central in the life of Egypt may have led to the

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

religious belief that the 'holy family' of gods in the Osiris myth re-enacted and caused its yearly inundation and retraction. We can therefore see an ancient myth passing into the religious thought of the Graeco-Roman world, albeit in the guise of gods by different names, but a world in which the Christian faith and its calendar had its beginning.

## Some Scriptural References to the Cult of the Sun

### Deuteronomy 4:19

*"When you raise your eyes to heaven, when you see the sun, the moon, the stars - the entire array of heaven, do not be tempted to worship them and serve them."*

The writer here is very aware of the temptation which was laid before the Hebrews in Palestine to follow the model set by the indigenous culture. The opinion of scholars that the culture found by the Hebrews upon their entry into Canaan greatly influenced their own religious cult, as I have already suggested, seems to be the favourable one. The cultic influence of the indigenous population in the development of the Tabernacles ritual and ceremonial is a prime example. The first chapters of Deuteronomy constitute a sermon preached to the Hebrews and Chapter 4:1-8 looks back to the idolatry which occurred at Baal-Peor (Num 25). Worship of the sun is not explicit here, but the punishment seems to fit the crime, the offenders being *'impaled'* (NEB) or *'hung'* (RSV) against the sun for Yahweh *'to deflect his burning anger'* against them. Death by the power of the sun seems to be the punishment here. The power of the Palestinian sun as an adequate executioner is attested especially in Judith 8:3. Death by the sun's heat in this case is an apt form of execution, the very supposed deity the offenders were worshipping being responsible for their demise, and Yahweh able to exhibit his control over its power. The lesson of 'Baal Peor' is made explicit in Deut. 4:5-6. The Hebrews must not be tempted to follow the customs of the lands through which they are passing

and are to settle, they must abide by the laws which Yahweh has taught them or they will suffer the same fate as those who sacrificed to the pagan gods at Baal-Peor. Therefore the Hebrews are warned against worshipping any man-made image or anything they can see with their own eyes when they look heavenward, (cf. Deut. 17:3) following the custom of the indigenous pagan sun-worshipping population.

### 1 Samuel 6:1-16

*"The ark of Yahweh was in Philistine territory for seven months. The Philistines then called for their priests and diviners and asked, 'What shall we do with the ark of Yahweh? Tell us how to send it back where it belongs.' They replied, 'If you send the ark of the God of Israel away, you must certainly not send it away without a gift; you must pay him a guilt offering. You will then recover and realise why he continually oppressed you.' They then asked, 'What guilt offering ought we to pay him?' They replied, 'Corresponding to the number of Philistine chiefs: five golden tumours and five golden rats, since the same plague afflicted your chiefs as the rest of you. So make models of your tumours and models of your rats ravaging the territory, and pay honour to the God of Israel. Then perhaps he will stop oppressing you, your gods and your country. Why should you be as stubborn as Egypt and Pharaoh were? After he had brought disasters on them, did they not let the people leave? Now, then, take and fit out a new cart, and two milch cows that have never borne the yoke. Then harness the cows to the cart and take their calves back to the byre. Then take the ark of Yahweh, place it on the cart and put the golden objects which you are paying him as a guilt offering in the box beside it; and then send it off on its own. Watch it; if it goes up the road to its own territory, towards Beth-Semesh, then he was responsible for this great harm to us; but if not, we shall know that it was not his hand that struck us, and that this has happened to us by chance.'*

*The people did this. They took two milch cows and harnessed them to the cart, shutting their calves in the byre. They then put the ark of Yahweh on the cart, with the box and the golden rats and the models of their tumours.*

*The Cows made strait for Beth-Shemesh, keeping to the one road, lowing as they went and turning neither to the right nor to the left. The Philistine chiefs followed them as far as the boundaries of Beth-Shemesh.*

*The people of Beth-Shemesh were reaping the wheat harvest in the plain when they looked up and saw the ark and went joyfully to meet it. When the cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth-Shemesh, it stopped. There was a large stone there, and they cut up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to Yahweh. The Levites*

*had taken down the ark of Yahweh and the box with it containing the golden objects and put these on the large stone. That day the people of Beth-Shemesh presented burnt offerings and made sacrifices to Yahweh. The five chiefs of the Philistines, having witnessed this, went back to Ekron the same day."*

There is no mention of the sun or worship of it in this passage but the place name Beth-Shemesh gives a possible clue to the practice of an early sun-cult in Palestine. Shamash was the Mesopotamian god of the sun, a protector of the weak and a champion of justice. Scholars have pointed out that immersed into such a culture, cultic practises and symbolism must have crossed into the Hebrew religion, K. van der Toorn<sup>78</sup> suggests '*some of the traits formerly belonging to the deified sun were transferred to YHWH who thus acquired a solar aspect*' (c.f. Pss. 17:15;46:5). Some scholars have suggested a link between Shamash and the description of the sun's movements in Ps. 19:5-6.

*"High above, he pitched a tent for the sun, who comes forth from his pavilion like a bridegroom, delights like a champion in the course to be run. Rising on the one horizon, he runs his circuit to the other, and nothing can escape his heat."*

Even though Yahweh is depicted here as the creator of the sun, the '*tent*' from which it leaves and returns to daily shares the symbolism of the nocturnal habitation of the Mesopotamian sun god who descended into the realm of the dead, ministering to them before rising the following day, and, as we have seen, one of the myths attributed to the heavenly Osiris.

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<sup>78</sup> *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI p238.

## 2 Kings 23:4-14

*"The king ordered Hilkiah with the priest next in rank and the guardians of the threshold to remove all the cult objects which had been made for Baal, Asherah and the whole array of heaven; he burnt then outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron and had the ashes taken to Bethel. He exterminated the spurious priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed and who offered sacrifice on the high places, in the towns of Judah and the neighbourhood of Jerusalem; also those who offered sacrifice to Baal, to the sun, the moon, the constellations and the whole array of heaven. And from the temple of Yahweh he took the sacred pole outside Jerusalem to the Kidron valley, and in the Kidron valley he burnt it, reducing it to ashes and throwing its ashes on the common burial-ground. He pulled down the house of the sacred male prostitutes which was in the temple of Yahweh and where the women wove veils for Asherah.*

*He brought all the priests in from the towns of Judah, and from Geba to Beersheba he rendered unsanctified the high places where these priests had offered sacrifice. He pulled down the High Place of the Gates, which stood at the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, to the left of the entry to the city. The priests of the high places, however, did not officiate at the altar of Yahweh in Jerusalem, although they did share the unleavened bread of their brother-priests. He rendered unsanctified Rophet in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, so that no one could pass his son or daughter through the fire of sacrifice to Molech. He destroyed the horses which the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun at the entrance to the Temple of Yahweh, near the apartment of Nathan-Melech the official, in the precincts, and burned the solar chariot. The king pulled down altars which the kings of Judah had built on the roof and those which Manasseh had built in the two courts of the Temple of Yahweh, and broke them into pieces on the spot, throwing their rubble into the Kidron valley. The king rendered unsanctified the high places facing Jerusalem, to the south of the Mount of Olives, which Solomon king of Israel had built for Astarte the Sidonian abomination, for Chemosh the Moabite abomination, for Milcom the Ammonite abomination. He also smashed the sacred pillars, cut down the sacred poles, and covered with human bones the places where they had stood."*

It seems that before the reforms of Josiah sun worship played an accepted role in the religious life of Judah, such that worship of pagan gods actually took place in the Jerusalem Temple (v. 4). There seems also to have been a curious mixing of the cult of Yahweh with the cult of heathen gods, the priests of the 'high-places' whilst partaking of the unleavened bread of the Temple (v.9), also sacrificing to Baal. As I have pointed out above, the Assyrian nature of the solar symbolism which was being practised in Jerusalem, including sacred

horses dedicated to the sun and the solar chariot, bears striking similarity with the cult instituted by Elagabalus in Rome. Scholars have been quick to point out that such a cult in Palestine did not necessarily depend upon the Assyrian tradition, but that an indigenous sun cult may have existed. The etymological arguments put forward by Halsberghe<sup>79</sup> are of some use in this question; it is conceivable that such a pre-Semitic cult did exist, and such a cult seems to have greatly influenced the Hebrew festivals (e.g. Tabernacles), but the information gleaned from 2 Kings 23 and the arguments put forward by Halsberghe suggest that the development of the sun cult from a localised deity to a more organised faith, probably also taking in other local sun cults, influenced the Assyrian cult itself, later to be centred upon Emesa. It could be suggested then that the more powerful Assyrian overlords, whilst being influenced themselves by other cults, also in turn exerted their own influence over the sun cults of the Ancient Near East, enriching them with their own distinct symbolism, and therefore it is this idiomatic Assyrian symbolism that is being described in these verse of the Second Book of Kings.<sup>80</sup>

With this in mind, and to put the region in cultic perspective, the cult of the sun in its many guises was, in Old Testament times, well established in the Ancient Near East. The religion of the Hebrews, who believed in an unseen god, would have seemed to the indigenous population rather alien. It is then

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<sup>79</sup> Halsberghe, p62f.

<sup>80</sup> see *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI p238.

not surprising that a cult which worshipped a very visible god, tempted many a Judean, including kings, to its worship.

Ezekiel 8:16

*"He then led me to the inner court of the Temple of Yahweh. And there, at the entrance to Yahweh's sanctuary, between the portico and the altar, there were about twenty-five men, with their backs to Yahweh's sanctuary and their faces turned towards the east. They were prostrating themselves to the east, before the rising sun."*

Such was the embedded influence of the cult of the sun in the religious anthropology of the Ancient Near East that even reforms such as those of Josiah and prophetic oration could not stamp out all traces of sun worship in Israel. The visions of Ezekiel attest this fact. The prophet is shown in this verse the abomination of pagan worship in the Temple of Jerusalem, men with their backs to Yahweh worshipping the sun. This reference suggests an idolatry that the liturgy of the feasts of Tabernacles, as described in the Mishnah was designed to guard against; *"with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun towards the east."*<sup>81</sup> Obviously the Mishnah, being a later document was written with this verse of Ezekiel in mind, but this is no reason to suggest that the pre-exilic Tabernacles liturgy did not include such a denunciation of the local sun cult.

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<sup>81</sup> see above and Mish. *Sukkah* 5:4.

Malachi 3:20 (4:2)

*"But for you who fear my name, the Sun of justice will rise with healing in his rays."*

A common representation of the sun god in the religious art of Babylonia and Assyria was the winged sun-disc<sup>82</sup>. Such representations were common, as worship of the sun seems to have been universal in the Ancient Near East. Most people whilst singing Wesley's Christmas hymn *'Hark the herald angels sing'*, would pass over the reference to *'the Sun of Righteousness'* bringing *'light and life'* and rising with *'healing in his wings'*, not acknowledging this reference to Malachi, or the ancient sun-cult which lies behind it. The writer of Malachi makes no apology for his obvious sun metaphor. Could it be that the image of the sun and its traditional pagan symbol of a disk with its winged transport had become so integrated into the symbolism of the attributes of the Hebrew God that no such qualification is necessary? Later Christian writers were quick to consider this reference as a prophecy of Christ's coming, especially if it is coupled with the reference to the preparatory coming of Elijah at 3:23(4:5).

*"Look, I shall send you the prophet Elijah before the great and awesome Day of Yahweh comes."*

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<sup>82</sup> Examples of such art can be found in J.B.Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, for example no<sup>s</sup> 320,351,447,477,534,653,705.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The Computation Theory and the Date of Christmas**

## The Computation Theory

I have already outlined the agricultural nature of the major Jewish feasts in the year and their dependence upon the full moon for celebration at the proper time. The Feast of Tabernacles as I have pointed out was kept at the time of the Autumnal full moon, the so called 'harvest moon', the point in the year which is commonly described as the Autumn Equinox. The Feast of Passover, kept at the opposite point in the year to that of Tabernacles was regulated by the appearance of the Paschal full moon, the point in the year known as the Spring Equinox.<sup>1</sup> Israelite reckoning of the liturgical year from earliest times depended principally upon the phases of the moon in relation to the agricultural seasons of the year. Such a dependence upon the moon for religious observance, however, created a shortfall in days which had to be made up by the inclusion of another month, so as to ensure that the feasts were kept at the correct point in the year. The correct time for the feast of Passover, however, did not rest principally with the moon, as the lunar astronomy of the ancient Israelites first observed. The whole of the Ancient Near East, with the exception of the Egyptians, calculated the calendar by the moon, but the worship of the sun, whilst playing an important role in cultic religion, as I have outlined above, also played a significant part in the dating of the religious feasts of the Israelites as a marker of the change in the season, a marker upon which the ancient Israelite feasts depended. It is then no

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise introduction to the question of the placing of the Jewish feast in the year and a description of the Solar and Lunar years see Van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, p3-6.

surprise that the originally agricultural feasts of Tabernacles and Passover fell around the time of the Autumnal Equinox and the Spring Equinox respectively. Comment on this fact can be found in the work of Philo, who states, concerning the Passover, "*In the Spring Equinox we have a kind of likeness and portraiture of that first epoch in which the world was created.*"<sup>2</sup> This comment agrees with R. Joshua who held, as I have mentioned above, that the world was created in the month of Nisan.<sup>3</sup> Astrology also seems to have played a part in this question concerning the date of the Passover. The Babylonian year was calculated from the time the sun left a fixed star to the time at which it returned to it. Josephus attests to the fact that the Passover was the time when the sun passed through the constellation of Aries, who in astrology is signified by a ram.<sup>4</sup> Here Josephus seems to be making a link between Aries and the sacrifice of a Lamb in the Temple.

As far as the calculation of the nativity of Christ is concerned, such astronomical facts have an important role. To the agricultural people of the Ancient Near East, the time for planting and harvesting was naturally regulated by these markers in the year which signalled the changing seasons<sup>5</sup>, and as Van Goudoever points out, the three earliest feasts of the Israelites are contained between the Spring and Autumnal Equinoxes<sup>6</sup>; there are no feasts during the winter months. This again suggests that the original nature of

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<sup>2</sup> Philo, *Spec. Laws*, 11. 151.

<sup>3</sup> Tal. Bab. *Rosh Hashanah* 10b-11a.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* III.x.5.

<sup>5</sup> Such seasonal concerns are expressed in the book of Qoheleth, see 1:5; 3:2.

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.* p4.

these feasts was purely agricultural, and that, as I have suggested above, these were the feasts that the Israelites found on their entry into Canaan, the subsequent religious symbolism attached to them being an addition to their original meaning. Through time, as one would expect, the original meaning of the feast seems to have been pushed into the background, the attachment of the creation, the release from Egyptian bondage and the redemption of Israel to the Passover an example of this new religious importance placed on older feasts. With this in mind the work called *De Pascha Computus* which appeared in 243A.D., of unknown author, but ascribed to Cyprian must be considered. The author begins by considering 25th March to be the date of the passion, and as a corollary the date of the Passover and the Spring Equinox. Thomas Talley points out the eschatological importance of Malachi 4:2 to the writer of *De Pascha Computus* in his assumption that Christ was born during Passover tide<sup>7</sup>, but the traditional belief that it was at this time of year that creation occurred and that the messiah would come may also have been in his mind. The author's conclusion is that if the date of creation was 25th March, and as the sun was created on the fourth day, with the prophecy of Malachi in mind, Christ's nativity must have been on the 28th March.

Such was the expectation of the return of Christ by the Christians of the first century, that no recognition of the actual date of Christ's birth was necessary, only the eschatological celebration of his command to make remembrance of him until he came again, and the yearly marking of his Passion at the Pascha.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, p90.

The importance of the *De Pascha Computus* appears when it is considered alongside the *Natalis Solis Invicti* celebration in Rome. Aurelian's cult was instituted in 274A.D., thirty years after the date of *De Pascha Computus* and as Talley points out, the author clearly associates the birth of Christ with the *Natalis Solis Iustitiae*<sup>8</sup>. The question still remains, was there any recognition by Christians of the date of Christ's supposed birth before the feast of *Sol Invictus* was instituted in Rome? It could be proposed in the light of the evidence suggested by *De Pascha Computus* that there may have been, not necessarily a festival marking the date, as this would coincide with the Pascha, but at least a recognition of a birth date, which may have been thought necessary to guard against heresy. Even so, a date which placed the nativity at the same time as the Passover/Pascha without any influence of the Roman sun feast, would depend chiefly upon Jewish tradition, which could suggest a very early date indeed. Certainly up until the acceptance of the Church within the Empire by Constantine, the mood of Christians would have been one of eschatological expectation. After 312AD, with imperial protection and in her new found freedom, the mood of the Church changed, and it is generally accepted that it was at this point that the development of the Christian year began in earnest.<sup>9</sup> Such consideration of the birth date of Christ may then rest on one or two points: firstly, amongst the Jewish Christians or possibly amongst the Early Church shortly after the split with the Synagogue. The tradition outlined both in the '*Poem of the four Nights*'<sup>10</sup> and in the writings of R. Joshua<sup>11</sup> could have

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p91.

<sup>9</sup> see Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (Dacre 1947) p333-5.

<sup>10</sup> Tg.Nf: on Ex:12:42.

<sup>11</sup> Tal. Bab. *Rosh Hashannah* 10b-11a.

been considered in the case of Christ. The date of Targum Neofiti causes no problem to this hypothesis as scholars have placed its origin in the time of R. Ishmael, circa 130 A.D.<sup>12</sup> However, at least in written form, the Babylonian Talmud does not go back before the Fifth Century A.D., but as it concerns the oral tradition it may be safe to assume that at least some of its teachings were known in the Second Century. That no mention of the date of the birth of Christ is made before the *De Pascha Computus* of 243 may not be of importance either, for if the Early Christians accorded the same status to Christ as their Jewish forefathers had done to the great Patriarchs, then a life exact in its number of years would have been desirable. Of course they would not have known the date of Christ's birth, but a birth date which was the same as the date of death, which they did know to be the date of the Passover, according to this tradition, would be considered to be the date of birth. If, then, this was the date assigned to the nativity, its non-recognition in writing can be explained by the fact that to the eschatological Early Church, the keeping of the Pascha, which fell on the same day would have been of paramount importance, the birth of Christ being inconsequential. Secondly, the setting of a date for the birth of Christ may have been important as a weapon to use as a refutation against heresy. Marcion, who died circa 160 A.D., although centring himself in Rome, after his excommunication in 144, spread his beliefs around the Empire. He held that Christ had suddenly appeared, preaching and teaching at the Synagogue in Capernaum. Marcion's Docetic Christology, which did not deny the divinity of Christ (as Arius would 200 years later)

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<sup>12</sup> see for example M. McNamara, C.T.R.Hayward, M.Maher, *The Aramaic Bible - The Targums*, p3.

rather, affirmed Christ's non-humanity, in the sense that Christ only appeared to suffer and die on the cross. He also refused to believe the idea that Christ was physically born of a woman, principally because he held that the God of love in which he believed, instead of the God of hate of the Old Testament, would not allow the Messiah to endure the pain and suffering of being born, pain being a creation of the Old Testament God, and not of the God of the New.<sup>13</sup> Other Gnostic heresies of the Second Century, for example Valentinianism and the followers of Basilides also denied the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation of Christ.<sup>14</sup> The threat that such heresies posed was one that could damage the very heart of orthodox Christianity itself. Belief in the human death and resurrection of Jesus was of paramount importance as far as the celebration of the Pascha was concerned, and the Docetic doctrine of Christ only 'seeming' to die would make the whole orthodox Christian message meaningless - a belief in the actual human birth of Christ, however, would certainly act as a powerful weapon against Gnostic heretical claims.

There is absolutely no evidence that would adequately attest the hypotheses I have suggested; all is pure conjecture. It is, however, worthwhile to consider a possible basis for the celebration of the nativity of Christ, which does not require the inclusion of the Roman celebration of *Sol Invictus* within its argument. Such a consideration certainly pushes back the possible date, not

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (Penguin 1986) p331f.

<sup>14</sup> see Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, (Penguin 1990) p37f.

for the feast of the nativity as such, but for recognition of the need for the Early Church to state the date of the birth of Christ for the reasons I have outlined above. In any case it would be naive to conclude that the celebration of the feast of the birth of Christ was based entirely upon Aurelian's cult of the sun in Rome, and even if this cult were responsible for the dating of the feast proper, evidence from the *De Paschâ Computus* would suggest that, perhaps even from the early Second Century, the nativity may have played a role in the celebration of the Pascha, even if it was subordinate to it.

So much then for that date of the nativity at Passover. One further step only will bring us to consideration of the birth of Christ on 25 December. In a work first published in 1903, L. Duchesne<sup>15</sup> proposed a hypothesis which suggested that if the date of the Passover being March 25th, were taken to be the date, not of Christ's birth, but of his conception then the resultant date of his birth would be 25th December. The hypothesis is a simple one, but Duchesne had to concede that, no matter how attractive the solution was, it "*would be more readily received if we could find it fully stated in some author.*"<sup>16</sup> Unknown to Duchesne however, and as pointed out by Talley<sup>17</sup>, such evidence which would support the hypothesis did exist. In 1918, A. Wilmart published a work on thirty-eight homilies of an unknown author, but ascribed to Chrysostom<sup>18</sup>, one of which entitled *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini*

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<sup>15</sup> L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship - Its Origin and Evolution*, (tr. M.L. McClure), p263f.

<sup>16</sup> Duchesne, *op.cit.* p264.

<sup>17</sup> *op. cit.* p92.

<sup>18</sup> A. Wilmart, 'La collection des 38 homélies latines de Saint Jean Chrysostome', *JTS* *xix* (1917-18) pp 305-327, especially p316f.

*nostris iesu christi et iohannis baptistae*. This work contains computational evidence backing up Duchesne, although its starting point is not the Passover, but Tabernacles. As Talley points out, such a hypothesis of computation of the birth of Christ from a conception at Pascha is not without early evidence, for the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of Sardis (d. c. 190) clearly includes the theme of incarnation within that of the Passion.<sup>19</sup> The evidence from the *De solstitia*, however, begins not with the conception of Jesus, but with the date of the conception of John the Baptist as described in the narrative of Luke. Luke states that Zechariah was a Temple priest<sup>20</sup> and at the time of the conception of John it was his duty to enter the Temple and burn incense before the altar that stood in front of the Holy of Holies.<sup>21</sup> *De Solstitia* begins its argument at this point, presuming that the ceremonial performed by Zechariah was that of the Tishri festival of Tabernacles; thus it concludes that the annunciation to Zechariah, and therefore the conception of John took place at the time of the Autumnal Equinox. Biblical evidence does not back up this claim by the writer of *De Solstitia*, for the offering of incense was made every day, but this is not our concern. If, then, the date of John's conception is taken as the Autumnal Equinox (the Feast of Tabernacles) then the conception of Jesus, which took place in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy<sup>22</sup> must have occurred in the month of Nisan at the time of Passover, the Spring Equinox. From this, the conclusion is that John was born at the Summer Solstice, and Jesus at the Winter solstice, that is the 25th December.

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<sup>19</sup> see Talley p91.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 1:5.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 1:8-9, Ex. 30:6-8.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 1:36.

What then of the date and origin of *De Solstitia*? Talley agrees with Botte that the author probably had a North African background because of the use of phrases peculiar to African writers, but he concedes that the inclusion of certain semiticisms in the text show a possible Jewish influence.<sup>23</sup> The date of the text is unknown, but Wilmart makes the suggestion<sup>24</sup>, considering the chronological preoccupation of the tables of Hippolytus and *De Pascha Computus* that a late Third Century or early Fourth Century date is desirable. This could put the date of the work in the same period as, or possibly before, the institution of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* festival in 274. The question still remains, however, was the designation of a winter date for the nativity influenced by the Roman solstice festival, or was the date computed independently? The semiticisms of *De Solstitia* may suggest a calculation of the nativity, albeit taking the date of the conception rather than that of the birth of Jesus, upon the Jewish model, but, as Talley points out, the author's use of Roman month names does suggest some non-Jewish influence, which may suggest a possible re-calculation of the nativity date to coincide with the Roman festival.<sup>25</sup> All this of course is pure conjecture and no solid conclusion can be reached. Early Christians may have considered, influenced by Jewish models, that the date of the nativity was the same date as that of the passion, but the reason for the shift to a winter date, dependent ultimately upon the Lukan account of Zechariah's duties in the Temple, as argued by the author of

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<sup>23</sup> Talley, op. cit. p92.

<sup>24</sup> op. cit. p317.

<sup>25</sup> Talley, p93.

*De Solstitia*, cannot be dated or explained with any certainty at all. There is a possibility that the 25th December was arrived at independently of external influences but there is no proof for this conclusion, a conclusion which is based upon the very shaky belief that the annunciation to Zechariah took place at the feast of Tabernacles. A possible explanation of this question is that, if there was a recognition of the nativity of Jesus in the celebration of the Pascha of the early Church, then why would an author set down a computation theory placing the nativity on the 25th December if there was no challenge to the authority of the birth of the 'sun of Righteousness' on that date? The institution of the festival of *Natalis Solis Invicti* may have been the event which, being close enough in symbolism and doctrine to cause concern to the sensitive Christian community, especially as it is thought that Aurelian wished to encompass Christian theology in his ecumenical feast, caused Christians to institute a rival celebration in opposition to such an obviously popular pagan festival. With this in mind a theory calculating the nativity which used the dates of the solstices and equinoxes as its base and which proved the date of Christ's birth with scriptural evidence in accordance with past tradition, would serve as an ideal weapon against paganism. The nativity festival of the Christians would, in this light, not be a Christianization of a non-Christian festival, but a festival, the date of which could be arrived at by computation, attested by scripture, not only in the narrative of Luke's gospel but backed up by the symbolism of the sun in Malachi 4:2.

Of course it would be desirable if a conclusion could be drawn that a date for the nativity of Jesus on 25th December was reached without any influence from the Roman festival of the sun. Such a conclusion would be possible if an early date could be secured for the text of *De Solstitia*. This evidence unfortunately is unavailable. It is however, not beyond the realms of fantasy to make the tentative suggestion that the computation hypothesis of *De Solstitia* was known before 274, originating in North Africa, and with close association with the traditions of Palestine.

## Critical analysis of the Computation Theory

The computation theory raises questions. Even if there are scraps of evidence which exist that give a certain amount of proof concerning a computation theory, ultimate proof cannot be attained while questions still exist. One problem with this theory is that essentially it rests upon the Jewish tradition that believes the Patriarchs to have been born and died on the same calendrical date; a point relied upon too heavily in this argument and possibly taken too much for granted by Talley. If it could be suggested that the tradition concerning the birth and death of the Patriarchs was not widely known before the Fourth Century, then a conclusion using Jewish tradition as a basis would lack foundation and would push the earliest date for a nativity festival forward, after the date of Aurelian's festival in 274.

The problem with using the tradition of the birth and death of the Patriarchs is that the tradition itself is only specifically mentioned in the Talmud, a document which has existed in written form, only from the Fifth Century and therefore cannot with certainty be used as evidence of the existence of earlier traditions. It is possible that the traditions contained within the Talmud go back much earlier, certainly many do, but this is not good enough. It would then be desirable to find such a tradition concerning the Patriarchs in other Jewish material of an earlier date, ideally material from before the beginning of the Common Era.

L. Diez Merino in a recent article has outlined dates and events recorded in the Targumic tradition<sup>26</sup>. He points out that "*The Targumic literature takes special care with the dates, because the calendar is a particular creation of God.*"<sup>27</sup> He continues, "*According to the Targums one of the main tasks of Issachar's tribe was the study of the calendar.*"<sup>28</sup> With this in mind he singles out *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*(TJI) as the Targum "*usually more concerned than the others with the precise date of the events of history.*"<sup>29</sup> Of interest to our argument is the account of the birth and death of Moses in TJI of Deut 34:8: "*Moses, the Rabban of Israel, was born on the seventh day of the month Adar, and on the seventh day of Adar he was gathered from the world.*" Traditionally, however, Moses cannot be classified as a Patriarch in the sense that the *Rosh Hashanah* intends as the word 'Patriarch' strictly signifies a biblical father who was the head of a tribe or family. In TJI, however, we do at least have evidence of a tradition placing the birth and death of a notable biblical character on the same day. The exact date of the Targums themselves cannot be sure, but a date before the birth of Christ is probably ambitious. At present, the earliest possible date that can safely be ascribed to the Targums is the First Century A.D. Of the Old Testament Patriarchs proper, Diez Merino also mentions the anniversary of the birth of Abraham, which he concludes, according to the Masoretic tradition, took place in the month of Cheshvan.<sup>30</sup> This conclusion I feel, however, can be questioned, and may go a little way to aiding our study. Diez Merino states

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<sup>26</sup> L. Diez Merino, 'Dates and Events in the History of Salvation. Its Targumic Version' in *Liber Annuus XLIII* (1993) p181-221.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p181.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p182, see notes 7 and 8 for references to the tribe of Issachar in L. Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vols. I-VII (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909).

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p184.

that Abraham was born in Cheshvan, using Ginzburg as his only source.<sup>31</sup> Ginzburg relates the tradition that the Temple of Solomon was finished in the month of Cheshvan "*but the edifice stood closed for nearly a whole year, because it was the will of God that the dedication take place in the month of Abraham's birth.*"<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this is the case if one reads the account of the building, completion and dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 6-8. Solomon begins building work in the month of Ziv (Iyar), the second month<sup>33</sup>, and ends in the month of Bul (Cheshvan), the eighth month.<sup>34</sup> According to 1 Kings 8, the dedication of the Temple did not take place until the following Ethanim (Tishri), the seventh month, coinciding with the Feast of Tabernacles. If, then, Abraham was born, as related by Ginzburg, in the month of the dedication of the Temple, then according to 1 Kings, he was born in Tishri, not Cheshvan as concluded by Diez Merino. This then would give backing to the tradition expounded by R. Eliezer in the *Rosh Hashanah* and go some way to developing a tradition of the birth and death of the patriarchs in the month of Tishri.

Concerning the birth of Isaac, Ginzburg relates a tradition that he was born in the month of Nisan, on the first day of the Passover<sup>35</sup>, but interestingly he also mentions a tradition concerning the annunciation to Sarah occurring on New Year's Day, that is in the month of Tishri. A comparison between this and the

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<sup>30</sup> op. cit. p211.

<sup>31</sup> op. cit. vol. IV p155.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> 1 Kings 6:1. According to the reckoning of 1Kings, the year began in the spring as the Feast of Tabernacles is said to occur in the 'seventh month'; see 1Kings 8:2,65.

<sup>34</sup> 1Kings 6:38.

<sup>35</sup> op. cit. p261.

events surrounding the birth of Christ might seem rather contrived, but New Testament evidence suggests that at least from the middle of the First Century, Isaac was being described as a type of Christ (c.f. Gal. 4:21-31). In the Letter to the Hebrews the sacrifice of Isaac is linked to that of Christ,<sup>36</sup> and the early Christian art of the Catacombs uses this story as a representation of the Eucharist. Certainly then, the connexion between Christ and Isaac was well established by the end of the First Century, but as far as the tradition of the dates of the conception and birth of Isaac is concerned, again, a possible link with the birth of Christ depends upon the authenticity and date of the sources. Of the death of Isaac, Ginzburg mentions no date in the tradition. Of Jacob and the sons of Jacob, no further dates of significance are mentioned.

An earlier source which could be of use is the Book of Jubilees, dated somewhere between 140 and 100B.C. It provides source material of the Jewish tradition of the period leading up to the birth of the New Testament era. The book of Jubilees is written as a reinterpretation of the contents of Genesis 1 through to Exodus 12, arranged in forty-nine periods, each forty-nine years in length. Because of this, and because of its supposed delivery to Moses on Mount Sinai, the book has a patriarchal emphasis. Fragmentary evidence from ten differing manuscripts in the caves of Qumran suggest that its popularity may have been considerable. Jubilees gives an account of the birth and/or death of five patriarchs. Firstly, Abraham, to whom no birth date is ascribed, but is said to have died in the month of Sivan, on the feast of the

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<sup>36</sup> Heb. 11:21-31.

First Fruits of the harvest, that is the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost<sup>37</sup>. Secondly, the birth of Jacob and thirdly, Esau is recorded in Chapter 19:13-14 with no specific date, as is the death of Jacob (45:13-15). The death of Esau is not recorded. Fourthly, Isaac, according to Jubilees 16:13 was born on the same date as the death of Abraham, the Feast of First Fruits, but his death (36:17-18) is recorded without date. Lastly, the birth of Moses (47:1) also has no date. Although something may be concluded from the fact that the two birth/death dates that Jubilees records are the same, the Feast of First Fruits, there is not enough evidence here to suggest that an early tradition existed concerning the birth and death of the patriarchs on the same date. It would not be going too far to say that if such a tradition did exist and was known widely enough to have influence, one would expect to see evidence of it in Jewish writings. The death of Abraham and the birth of Isaac on the Feast of First Fruits gives only the smallest foundation to what would be a very flimsy hypothesis.

Of the evidence available, the points outlined above could begin to suggest an argument which would give support to a hypothesis concerning the birth/death/conception dates of Christ. These points are, firstly, the *Rosh Hashanah* tradition of the Rabbis outlined above, a tradition which can only be dated with confidence to the time that the texts were actually written down, that is, sometime during the Fifth Century. Secondly, TJI on Deut 34:5 places the birth and death of Moses on the 7th Adar. This tradition can be dated, but without absolute certainty, to sometime during the First Century. Although

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<sup>37</sup> Jubilees 23:1 (see 22:1 for the date of the story of the death of Abraham).

strictly Moses is not a Patriarch, the verse in TJI specifying that he died and was born on the same day is the only solid reference in the writings that I am aware of which asserts the tradition so solidly stated by the Rabbis in the *Rosh Hashanah*. Thirdly, discounting the assertion by Diez Merino that Abraham was born in Cheshvan, there may be a tradition that places the birth of Abraham in Tishri on the Feast of Tabernacles. There is no biblical tradition to support this, but the tradition suggested by Ginzburg that the delay in the dedication of the Temple was due to the wish of Solomon that this event should occur on the date of the birth of Abraham certainly could account for such a delay.<sup>38</sup> Fourthly, the tradition of the conception and birth of Isaac may suggest a link with Christ. The early Christian idea of Isaac as a type, when coupled with the story of his birth and that of Christ, could serve as a possible fragmentary evidence. Lastly, the Second Century BC Book of Jubilees ascribes the Feast of First Fruits to be the date of the birth of Isaac and the death of Abraham.

I have found, therefore, as far as resources allow, only five possible instances in early Jewish writings, outlined above, which either support the tradition of the Rabbis in the *Rosh Hashanah* that the Patriarchs died and were born on the same day, or offer possibilities of support. As far as dating is concerned, if the tradition of the *Rosh Hashanah* is to be accepted into the argument concerning the possible celebration of the feast of Christmas before the date of the institution of Aurelian's festival in 274A.D. by virtue of the computation

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<sup>38</sup> Ginzburg, *op. cit.* vol iv, p155.

theory, then because of the argument outlined above it would be necessary to find examples in Jewish writing supporting an early tradition which taught that the Patriarchs died and were born on the same day. Although there are teasing examples, perhaps even suggestions of such a tradition, neither the Book of Jubilees, the Jewish writings considered by Ginzburg or the Targums conclusively suggest such a tradition. This leaves us with the Talmud, Talley's starting point, which as a document of the Fifth Century AD, is rather too late to give the solid evidence needed to base a whole argument such as the computation of the birth of Christ. With this in mind, it may be impossible to suggest with any certainty because of the lack of evidence from Jewish writings from the First Century and earlier, that Christians were aware of and followed a Jewish patriarchal tradition in their computation of the date of the nativity of Christ from his Passion. As the evidence, or lack of it, suggests, it may therefore become difficult to maintain an argument which proposes that December 25th was already being celebrated as the date of the birth of Christ, or even that Christ was born and died on the same day, before the institution of Aurelian's festival of *Natalis Solis Invicti* of 274.

## The Feast of the Invincible Sun

Having expressed some doubt concerning a calculation of the date of the birth of Christ upon traditional Jewish models we must now turn to Aurelian's feast and examine the arguments concerning its relation to the origin of the nativity.

After a damaging succession of 'soldier' Emperors, Aurelian, acclaimed Emperor in 270A.D., took it upon himself to restore the power of the Emperor and unify the now far-flung parts of the Empire under his central authority. Aurelian, although a devoutly religious man, would not make the same mistake as his predecessor Elagabalus, "*(He (Aurelian) was) a man who was not only religious, but a clever politician as well.*"<sup>39</sup> His wish was to unite his empire around himself and to this end used religion to seize the hearts and minds of his citizens. Worship of the sun in the Empire was universal, from the indigenous Roman cults to the cults flavoured by Eastern tradition; the sun was worshipped in different guises from Hadrian's wall to the Easternmost reaches of the Empire, "*to Aurelian, the way to accomplish this unity lay in the cult of Sol Invictus....this cult would, he was convinced, form the mortar with which to cement his political system into a solid structure...*"<sup>40</sup> Between 274 and the conversion of Constantine in c320, the growth in the popularity of the new cult of the sun did much to usher in the epoch of Christianity and it could be argued that it was due to the way in which Aurelian organized his cult that the

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<sup>39</sup> Gaston H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, p132.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p136.

empire passed naturally from paganism to Christianity. The new cult was specifically designed by Aurelian. He had developed its essential elements himself through political motive in order to unite his unruly Empire. He decreed that the cult would be ecumenical, it would envelope the old Roman cult, the cult of Elagabal, Mithrasism and all the multifarious cults throughout the Empire. It was, however, an entirely new cult, not a development of one but a syncretic cult, one which made all existing gods equal, "*determining that the sun god be considered as the sum of all the attributes and guardian functions belonging to the other gods. In this way the cult of Deus Sol Invictus became a perfect expression of syncretism.*"<sup>41</sup> On 25th December 274 the new temple was dedicated and the new religion instituted, games were held in celebration of the birthday of the sun, the great provider and sustainer of man, the date on which his power was visible for all to see, the winter solstice. Sol Invictus became, not only the supreme deity of the empire, but the national religion, the god who was worshipped by all. Aurelian made his new cult of the sun the state religion. In effect what Aurelian had done was to create a monotheistic religion, a faith around one single God. Monotheism was nothing new, but by the end of the Third Century, with the influence of the Neo-Platonists, the new religious age seemed to be one of growing dissatisfaction with the old religion. There was without doubt in the first centuries of the new millennium a strong religious longing amongst thinking Romans for religious satisfaction. Philosophy satisfied the urges of many, for others it was Sol, but both of these

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p142.

creeds seemed ultimately to point in the same general direction, as did the religion of the Jews and of the Christians - world domination by one deity.<sup>42</sup>

As Halsberghe points out, Aurelian misjudged the Christian community of the Empire in thinking that they too could be satisfied with his ecumenical new religion. One is left with the impression that he misunderstood the Christian faith and its doctrines. Christians could not worship a temporal body as their god, neither could they worship the Emperor as an emanation of that deity. Let us not be misunderstood that Aurelian was naive about the Christian faith, he must have presumed it to be just one of many other cults which practised their faith throughout his vast empire, and that it also would be subsumed into his new religion. As Halsberghe puts it, "*the emperor soon realised that Christianity was out of place in the syncretism of the sun god and therefore formed a threat to his religious policies.*"<sup>43</sup> Having realised the threat that Christianity posed to his desire for stability, Aurelian decided to resume persecution, but the order was never carried out, due to his untimely death at the hands of his servant in 275.<sup>44</sup> Until the beginning of the reign of Constantine in 306 the monotheistic idea of the sun god became surer, and until c320 when Constantine gave way to Christianity, the worship of Sol remained the national religion of the Roman empire.

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* p167.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p154.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

The sun, as I have already pointed out played an important part in the development of Jewish religion. This importance passed to early Christianity. The sun was an example of God's power and his providence, through it, he provided warmth and sustenance as he had done since the creation. It would seem sensible to suggest that Christianity did not concern itself with pagan religion directly, and therefore not seeing it as a threat to its religious truth before the religious reforms of Aurelian. After 274, however, orthodox Christianity, alongside the threat posed by mystery religion, Gnostic heresies and Neo-Platonism, may have seen the growing influence of a pagan monotheism centred around the sun as a threat large enough to affect its own mission. The old pagan religion was sufficiently unlike Christianity for Christianity to stake its own claim to truth, but a new monotheistic religion which was centred around the feast of the birth of that god may have been too familiar. Not only was this god the sole deity, he was also identified with the Invincible Sun, a characteristic that Christians applied to Christ, the Sun of Righteousness.

We are then, if this is the case, left with the question of whether Christianity began to stress its own claim to the sun as identified with the birth of its saviour, the invincible Sun of Justice, between 274 and the conversion of Constantine in 320, or whether it remained passive until later in the Fourth Century when its own agenda had Empirical protection?

We have seen that the *De Pascha Computus* of 243 placed the celebration of the Christian Pascha on 25th March, the date calculated in the Julian Calendar to correspond with 14th Nisan in the Jewish Calendar. This date would not be a Sunday, but would have occurred on any day of the week depending on the year. By the third century, the Church had almost completely lost its association with Judaism, and so could no longer rely upon the pronouncements of the Rabbis for the accurate date of the Passover celebration. If, then, as I have argued, the Computation Theory cannot be upheld as being a widespread early Common Era tradition, then computational dating of the birth of Christ on 25th December from the accepted date of the Passover on 14th Nisan proves to be difficult. That Aurelian chose the date for his feast because this was the date of a feast held by a mischievous sect in his empire called Christians is out of the question, so a tentative *terminus ante quem* for the Christian date, it seems, must be post 274AD. Universally, scholars<sup>45</sup> have noted as evidence for the first recorded account of Christmas, the Martyrology written by the so-called '*Chronographer of 354*'<sup>46</sup>, but commonly known as the '*Philocalian Calendar*' after the artist it was illuminated by. The document was drawn up for the Christian Church in Rome in the fourth century as a calendar of feast days and Roman holidays. One list, the '*Depositio Episcoporum*', gives the dates of the burial dates of Roman bishops, the other, the '*Depositio Martirium*' those of the martyrs. Both lists are set out by month with the date of the feast and the year of the death of

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<sup>45</sup> Notably A.A. McArthur, *The Evolution of the Christian Year*, (SCM 1953) pp41-43.

<sup>46</sup> The name of the document was given by T. Mommsen in 'Über den Chronographen vom Jahre 354' in *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der (königlich) sächsischen Gesellschaft (Akademie) der Wissenschaften* i (1950) pp547-693 (Leipzig).

the bishop or martyr; the first entry for the bishops beginning with 27th December and for the martyrs, 25th December reading '*natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae*'. Not only does this show that 25th December was the date of the celebration of Christmas by 354, but also points us to the fact that this seems to be the point at which the liturgical year began. McArthur points out further, however,<sup>47</sup> that as the table for the bishops has two later additions placed at the end of the list, outside the chronology of months, the date of the latest entry other than the two additions must be the year in which the calendar was first compiled. This date is 335. Therefore a solid *terminus ante quem* for the keeping of Christmas on 25th December in Rome must be before 335.

Therefore the date for the inauguration of the celebration of Christmas on 25th December must be between 274 and 335. If the Christians began to celebrate Christmas before the conversion of Constantine, c320, this would give fifty years for the Christian community to stake its own claim to the Roman solstice festival as the birth, not of the Sun of Victory, but of the Sun of Righteousness and Justice.

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<sup>47</sup> *op. cit.* p43.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Egypt and the Epiphany**

## Egypt and the Epiphany

We have, in a previous chapter, outlined the religious beliefs of the Egyptians and noted that they were heavily influenced by nature and astrology. We also noted that by the beginning of our era trade and influence ran freely between all the countries of the eastern Mediterranean; Greeks and Jews had settled in Alexandria, Jews in Rome and Greeks in Palestine. Not only, however, were people and trade moving from country to country, so were religious ideas, even the gods themselves! This of course, as we have noted with the cult of Sol Elagabal, was nothing new, but in the Hellenistic age, cities were "*Multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural....even the gods of these strange new cities were new....their forms seemed familiar....[but] they too, like the human inhabitants....had undergone a vast if subtle change. This was a world where the gods of Egypt might be fused with the gods of Greece to make brand new patchwork deities. This is the urban world that Jesus Christ would enter....*"<sup>1</sup> We can therefore see the great gods of the Egyptians becoming synonymous with the gods of the Graeco-Roman world: Osiris, the god of summer growth and fertility becomes identified with the Greek Dionysus (Bacchus in Rome) originally a god of vegetation but later seen as the god of wine. Isis, probably because of her pre-eminence as a goddess in Egypt was worshipped in Greece and Italy as a goddess in her own right and under her Egyptian name, but as the goddess of nature and motherhood she became identified with Demeter (Ceres) and Artemis (Diana).

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<sup>1</sup> John and Elizabeth Romer, *The Seven Wonders of the World*, (Michael O'Mara Books, London 1995) p59.

Horus, the avenging son of Isis and Osiris, identified with the sun in the Egyptian myths, becomes in the Hellenistic world, Apollo and Helios (Sol). It is, then, to Hellenistic Alexandria that we go to begin our examination of the history behind the feast of the Epiphany.

For many years, scholars have pointed to a work by Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403) as evidence for the dating of the Epiphany on 6th January. Talley points out,<sup>2</sup> that although Epiphanius was later bishop of Salamis on the island of Crete, he had earlier spent time as a monk in Egypt and possibly, because of an experience of the pagan religion there, in his most famous work, *The Panarion*, known as '*the Refutation of all Heresies*', he relates the festivities in Alexandria on the night of the 5th/6th January.<sup>3</sup> It can be suggested that as Epiphanius founded his monastery in Judea in about 335, it was probably before this time that Epiphanius spent his time in Egypt, when he was about the age of eighteen.<sup>4</sup>

*"First, at Alexandria, in the Koreum, as they call it; it is a very large temple, the shrine of Kore."*<sup>5</sup>

Epiphanius presumes that the 'idolaters' copied their feast which took place on 5th/6th January from that of Christians, the Epiphany, but this we must

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<sup>2</sup> op. cit. p103.

<sup>3</sup> *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* 51.22, 8-11. (Tr. Frank Williams, E. J. Brill 1987, bks I-II, 2 vols.)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* vol 1 introduction xi.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 51.22,9.

dismiss first of all as it certainly was not the case. The Alexandrian feast had been celebrated long before the conception of Christianity. Alexandria itself was a cosmopolitan city, different religious groups celebrating different feasts on different days. We must, therefore, consider this evidence from Epiphanius with caution and examine his account with careful study.

In mythology, Kore was a Greek goddess, but is reported to be adorned with what Epiphanius considers to be five crosses. In fact these symbols are more likely to be the Egyptian symbol of life, the 'Ankh', much used in Egyptian art and often shown being carried by a god by the loop. The ankh could easily be mistaken for a cross with a loop at the top, but it is in fact supposed to represent a knot. An interesting theory has been put forward by Walter Moeller in his book *'The Mithraic Origin and meaning of the Rotas-Sator square'*<sup>6</sup> in which he argues that the enigma of the Rotas-Sator square can be solved if applied to the Mithraic religion in the early syncretic paganism of the Roman empire around the time of Christ. Consideration of the square is important to our study as, as Moeller says himself, "*I sensed that the SATOR was Saturn and the square transmitted a direct message concerning sowing and reaping.*"<sup>7</sup> Further, Moeller argues that contained in the square is the triad of Saturn/Aion, Sol Invictus and Mithras, and words which have a Mithraic meaning. However, even though he is correct in stating that the cross was used as a religious symbol before it was adopted by Christianity, he may be straining his

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<sup>6</sup> published by E J Brill, Leiden (1973)

<sup>7</sup> op. cit. preface.

argument when he says that "*it [the cross] was featured prominently in the cult of the Alexandrian Aion.*"<sup>8</sup> If the sense of the tradition described by Epiphanius is correct then the symbol of life, the ankh, would be more apt at this north Egyptian festival of birth. We need not for the purposes of this study consider Moeller's work in full, but his treatment of the Rotas-Sator square in a Mithraic context puts the festival described by Epiphanius in its Hellenistic context, especially as Moeller argues that one can consider the Roman Saturnalia as a festival, at the end of the year of the supreme father god, Saturn, who in the Greek tradition is the god of time, Cronus, while in Alexandria in the first month is celebrated the birth of a god who is a child, Aion, son of Kore.<sup>9</sup> Even if his conclusions concerning the origin of the word square are incorrect, I feel he is correct in suggesting a link between the Roman Saturnalia and the Alexandrian Koreionia and is supported by Macrobius, an early 5th Century Roman writer, who, writing of the Saturnalia and describing an unidentified Egyptian celebration says, "*The differences in age have reference to the Sun, for at the Winter Solstice the Sun would be seen as a little child, like that which the Egyptians bring forth from a shrine on the appointed day, since the day is then at its shortest and accordingly the god is shown as a tiny infant.*"<sup>10</sup> Moeller is not suggesting a link between the two festivals as far as their origins are concerned, but that they show certain similarities of theme. It is also interesting to note that some scholars have suggested a further link between the Roman Saturnalia and the Koreionia by means of the Greek equivalent of

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<sup>8</sup> op. cit. p3.

<sup>9</sup> Moeller op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> *Saturnalia* I.18.10, in *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, P Vaughan Davis (trans.) (New York 1969) p129, see Talley, op. cit. p107,157.

Saturn, Cronus (time) and Aion who also, it could be argued may, be interpreted as representative of time.<sup>11</sup>

There are other aspects of the Alexandrian festival of Kore which bear similarity with other cults in the Hellenistic world. It remains to be seen, however, whether these similarities are either confusions with existing festivals on the part of Epiphanius, show cross cultural influences of cultic practice, or represent an accurate account of the celebration at Alexandria. Certainly, there is more to Epiphanius' short description than first meets the eye.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that Kore or Core (meaning maiden) is the same character in Greek mythology as Persephone, (the Roman Proserpine) the daughter of Zeus (Jupiter) and Demeter (Ceres) and the wife of the god of the underworld, Hades (Pluto). The story of her rape by Hades and her habitation in the underworld is well known and need not be outlined here. Immediately however, one must begin to interpret the rites which Epiphanius is describing in the context of the pagan rites of the Hellenistic world, and in doing so come to understand the cosmopolitan and pan-influential nature of religion in the early years of the Christian era, as Luther H. Martin suggests, *"Hellenistic Mysteries were not new - they had been known from earliest times - but were themselves transformed into their Hellenistic roles....for with Hellenistic*

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<sup>11</sup> see Talley p107, 157n39

*internationalism, each had become a universal deity.*"<sup>12</sup> In the story, Persephone is not remembered for being the Virgin mother of a son called Aion as Kore is in Epiphanius' account, but as we have seen, the theme of motherhood and fertility is a common and important motif concerned with the agrarian cycle in Rome, Greece and Egypt; this motif is apparent not only in the myth of Isis and Osiris, but also in the myth of Demeter and Persephone as well as other local myths of the ancient world. However, in an Isiac hymn, probably composed during the 4th century BC, one Karpokrates (Harpokrates being the son of Isis and Osiris), is praised as "...son of Serapis and Isis, of Demeter and Kore and Dionysus and Iacchus, brother of Sleep and Echo."<sup>13</sup> Speaking for Karpokrates, the writer continues, "Every good season am I, Providing for every time, discoverer of the beginning..."<sup>14</sup> As obscure and confused as this reference is, it does contain the names of Demeter, Kore, Isis and Serapis, who are all related in some way to Karpokrates who could be either Aion or Harpokrates (Horus). But further, all the characters who play a part in the Eleusian mysteries, as we shall see, are present here, together with Serapis and Isis, the chief deities of Alexandria.

With this in mind we move to another aspect of the account of Epiphanius which deserves further thought, that of his important remark concerning the feast similar to that at Alexandria held at Eleusis, "And this [the festival of Kore] is

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<sup>12</sup> Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, (OUP, New York, 1987) p59.

<sup>13</sup> see *Paganism and Christianity*, R Macmullen and E N Lane (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992) p54, taken from *Abhandlungen der preussischen/deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Philologisch - Historische Klasse* (Berlin: Akademie- Verlag, 1943, 14 [1944]), *Karpokrates von Chalcis und die memphitische Isispropaganda*, trans. R Harder.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

also done that night in the city of Elusa, as it is in Petra, and in Alexandria."<sup>15</sup> Eleusis is an important town a short distance away from Athens and is noted as the foremost shrine of Demeter where in late September the so called '*Eleusinian Mysteries*' were celebrated in commemoration of her wanderings in search of her daughter Persephone. Akin to many other rites of ancient mystery cults, the liturgy of the mysteries of Demeter were complex, involving processions led by flaming torches with much music and joy, and the carrying of sacred objects representing the goddess. Secrecy was also paramount, but much of the festival was public prior to the initiation ceremonies which ended the ten day festal period.<sup>16</sup> Epiphanius describes much the same scene in his account of the rites of Kore, which is hardly surprising as contemporary accounts of such festivals bear witness to music and dancing being the norm at such feasts in the ancient world.<sup>17</sup> The fact that both the Alexandrian and Eleusian festivals seem to contain the same themes and the same character in Kore/Persephone may point to a possible confusion on the part of Epiphanius, which means that he was either unaware of the ritual meaning of the festivities at Eleusis and Athens, had mixed up his recollections of the experiences of his younger days or was badly informed about similar festivals which he did not personally witness. If this is the case then use of his account as evidence for a possible origin of the date and feast of the Epiphany in North Africa must be questioned.

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<sup>15</sup> Panarion 51:22,11.

<sup>16</sup> see Luther H Martin, *op. cit.* ch. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

What then of evidence for such a feast in Alexandria on January 5th/6th other than that given by Epiphanius? Certainly, as I have pointed out, Alexandria was a major city in the Ancient world and would have been home to many cults, and Epiphanius seems to imply that the festival of Kore was a major feast, but apart from a sixth century AD treatise by Joannes Laurentius which makes use of an account of the first century BC Roman writer Messala<sup>18</sup>, the primary feasts in Alexandria seem to have been those of Isis and Serapis. Further Epiphanius states that the Koreum was '*a very large temple*', but unless this temple is discovered, which seems unlikely, the only two sites which fit his description are, the Temple of Isis on the Pharos Island and the Temple of Serapis in the Ancient city.<sup>19</sup> Could it then be suggested that Epiphanius is not only confusing the festival of Kore with that of Demeter at Eleusis but also with the rites connected with Isis and Osiris/Serapis?

The Temple of Serapis is in the western quarter of ancient Alexandria on the so-called '*Hill of Rhakotis*'.<sup>20</sup> This site, it is known, was a place where Osiris was worshipped, but the Greeks had already identified Osiris with their god Dionysus, so when Ptolemy assumed the kingdom after the death of Alexander, in the cosmopolitan spirit of the age, he created for the city a new god, a unified and conglomerate god. Taking elements from Apis, the bull, Osiris, Zeus and Pluto, Ptolemy engineered Serapis, the god of the underworld, the incarnate bull in the upper world, the god of healing and

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<sup>18</sup> see Talley p106f

<sup>19</sup> A good outline to the ancient city of Alexandria with maps and archaeology is contained in E. M Forster, *Alexandria, a history and guide*, (Whitehead Morris, 1938).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* pp136-8.

plenty.<sup>21</sup> So the Temple of Osiris became the Serapium, and close by remained the Temple of his consort Isis. From here the worship of Serapis, Osiris and Isis spread across the empire.

The remains of the Temple itself are described in E.M. Forster's guide.<sup>22</sup> He points out the "*...subterranean galleries, excavated in the rock and lined with limestone*"<sup>23</sup>. These underground areas tie in well with the testimony of Epiphanius who speaks of the liturgy of the Koreum with worshippers descending into the shrine where the image of the god was kept.

There is, however, a problem here if we wish to go on to examine a link between the rites at the Serapium in Alexandria with those at Eleusis - there were no subterranean corridors at Eleusis and no evidence of the image of Demeter being brought out from an underground shrine. This fact may not cause us too much concern as no doubt there was room for local rites from shrine to shrine. Indeed, it is known that as well as the major feasts at Athens and Eleusis, celebrations were also conducted at local shrines, but this may suggest either a further confusion on the part of Epiphanius concerning the Eleusian rites and those of Alexandria or a closer link between the festival of Kore and that of Isis and Serapis. If, however, Epiphanius confused his recollections of the festivals of Demeter and Kore with those of Isis, then one would also have to suggest that he confused the dates of these festivals as well,

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p17.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* pp136-8.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p138.

for it is clear from the accounts that the Eleusian mysteries (and also presumably the rites which took place at the local shrines) happened only twice a year, at Eleusis in the Autumn, in memory of the descent of Kore to the underworld (corresponding with the start of the season of infertility) and at Athens in the Spring, in memory of her ascent back to the world of the living (corresponding with the start of the season of growth and fertility). Unless, therefore, the festival which Epiphanius is describing is one peculiar to Alexandria, which as far as a major festival is concerned is improbable, then it could be impossible to use these rites as evidence in connexion with the date of a feast on January 5th/6th considered to be a precursor to Epiphany as suggested by Epiphanius, leaving us with the conclusion that, as suggested by Talley, he may have been mistaken, or confused the major festivals which he knew from experience with a possible parochial festival celebrating the Winter Solstice at Alexandria.

What then of the rites of Isis and Serapis which would have taken place in the Serapium as sanctioned by Ptolemy Sotor in c305BC? I have already in an earlier section outlined the myth of Osiris and Isis, and this must be borne in mind here as the rites of Serapis exhibit many of the elements of the Osiris myth together with those of Apis the bull, and Pluto and Dionysus who made up the composite god. An important consideration here is that the similarities must be noted between the mysteries of Isis and Serapis in Alexandria and those of Demeter which took place at Eleusis. This similarity is due, according to Plutarch's account, to the fact that Ptolemy Sotor was assisted in the

conception of Serapis by one Timotheus, who was himself of a priestly family from Eleusis.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Luther H. Martin points out, "*in any case, the similarity between the Homeric Hymn of Demeter and the Hellenistic myth of Isis as narrated by Plutarch is a clear example of the shaping of non-Greek myth by religious conventions more familiar to Hellenized cosmopolitanism*"<sup>25</sup> From this we can conclude that it is therefore not surprising to find similarities in the cultic worship of Alexandria and that of the wider Hellenized world. Indeed, both the mysteries of Demeter and those of Isis took place in the autumn and in the spring, both contained aspects of the wanderings of the goddesses, and both were primarily concerned with fertility and infertility during the spring and winter months. Considering all this, it is therefore not surprising that Epiphanius may have been confused in his account, especially as his intention was not so much concerned with historical accuracy but with proving the orthodoxy of Christianity against paganism and heresy.

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<sup>24</sup> Luther H Martin, *op. cit.* p78.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p79.

## The Reform of the Civil Calendar

We have already made mention of the calendar in Egypt and commented upon how it exhibited an error of one day in every four years, and how this created a gradual discrepancy between the 'civic' and the 'agricultural' years (as I term them) such that the rising of the star Sothis would appear later and later according to the civil calendar even though the agricultural year signalled by the solstices and equinoxes would remain relatively static. Although this discrepancy was well known, it was not until Augustus gained victory over Mark Anthony in 26BC that a correction to the Egyptian calendar could be enforced. An extra epagomenal day was ordered by the Roman conquerors, but such was the unpopularity of Roman rule in Egypt that it took the influence of Christianity emanating from Alexandria to popularise the new, more accurate calendar in the Egyptian countryside.<sup>26</sup> Even so, the old '*annus vagus*' certainly continued as a concomitant reckoning well into the Christian era. We therefore have two calendars running parallel in this formative epoch, the 'official' calendar of the Roman Empire and the 'local' calendar of the countryside; we will call the two calendars the 'stabilised calendar' and the 'wandering calendar'.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, from 26BC, the first day of the Egyptian month 'Thoth', that is the month of the inundation, was stabilised as August (Julian) 29th, however, it must also be pointed out that in no way does this date conform to any actual or accurate date of the 1st Thoth,

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<sup>26</sup> Talley p110.

<sup>27</sup> after Talley.

as this date in the Julian calendar does not exist, even though the 29th August may correspond with the date of the inundation of the Nile. Therefore, one cannot state that the Julian 6th January existed as a feast day in antiquity although that feast may have been intended to mark the occurrence of the winter solstice or some other commemoration. This leads us again to the conclusion that such pre-Julian feasts must have depended upon agricultural, that is astronomic markers as the '*annus vagus*' and would only have been accurate for a number of years. The festival of Sol Invictus in Rome does not cause any real problems as this day was reckoned to be, if not the actual date of the winter solstice, the accepted and traditional day, even though by the third century AD, as Talley points out<sup>28</sup>, referring to astronomers such as the second century Ptolemaeus, the date of the actual solstice was known to occur on the 22nd December. Here again, as with the calendrical conservatism in Egypt, Aurelian's festival of Sol would be placed on the traditional date of the winter solstice, the 25th December as the Julian calendar prescribed. However, the error of one day every 128 years which the Julian calendar itself exhibited meant that the occurrence of the solstice was pushed back in the calendar. Talley takes up much of his consideration of the date of the Epiphany in considering different calendars and the efforts of a number of scholars in working out the stabilised dates of the especially Egyptian feasts which occurred around the Julian 6th January. Much attention is given to the arguments which attempt to assert that the festivals of 25th December and 6th January are somehow that same festival but divorced at some point in time by

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<sup>28</sup> op. cit. p111.

the inaccuracies exhibited by one or another calendar.<sup>29</sup> The short and presumed answer must be that as with the fixing of the date of the festival of Sol Invictus, if one does not wish to employ the computation theory, then these two, at first, Julian dates in question, namely 25th December and 6th January must have been fixed by convention sometime after 45BC. However, Talley distances himself from Norden's suggestion that January 6th was an ancient solstice date in Egypt,<sup>30</sup> as the calculations using the presumed error of one day every 128 years were incorrect because it was the Julian calendar itself that exhibited this error.

If January 6th cannot be united with 25th December in this way; if we disregard for the moment the evidence of Epiphanius as possibly suspect; if we do not wish to argue using the Computation Theory, we must find some other festival stabilised to 6th January in the Julian calendar.

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<sup>29</sup> Talley, p108seq.

<sup>30</sup> op. cit. p108, 157n40.

## The Egyptian Nile Festival

Both Epiphanius and Ephrem the Syrian designate 6th January as the date of Jesus' birth.<sup>31</sup> Epiphanius states that *"the Lord's birth in the flesh took place on the eleventh of the Egyptian month Tybi. And the first miracle in Cana of Galilee when the water was made wine, was performed on about the same eleventh day, thirty years later."*<sup>32</sup> However, amongst the writers of his period, Epiphanius is quite alone in his assertion that Christ was baptised, according to Egyptian tradition, on the 12th Athyr, the 8th November. Other writers, such as Clement of Alexandria, whose writings we shall examine shortly, pinpoint the 6th January as the date of Jesus' baptism, following Luke's account that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry directly after his baptism by John<sup>33</sup>. This probably began the tradition that Jesus was exactly thirty years old at his baptism and was therefore baptised on his birthday. Therefore, a tradition which placed either birth or baptism on this date for whatever reason must automatically mean that this was the date for either baptism or birth. The key question is, then, which was recognised first by the Church, the birth date or the baptismal date, and which was the corollary? Epiphanius does not concern himself with this question as he places the Cana miracle, rather than the baptism, on the same date as Jesus' birth thirty years earlier.

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<sup>31</sup> see Talley p117.

<sup>32</sup> Panarion 51.29.7.

<sup>33</sup> Luke 3:23.

It is clear to Epiphanius that 6th January is an important date, and that it was the date on which he personally celebrated the Epiphany. Chronologically his justification for his placing of the baptism on 8th November seems to stem from his use of the chronology of the synoptic gospels in conjunction with the testimony of John. Jesus, he asserts, spent forty days in the desert<sup>34</sup> then returned to Nazareth for about two weeks, then went to see John the Baptist, then back to Nazareth and on to Cana.<sup>35</sup> This chronology admittedly employs rather free use of scripture, as according to all the canonical Gospels that record the incident, John is imprisoned before Jesus begins his ministry after his forty days in the desert. However, for whatever reason, it is Epiphanius' intention to place Jesus' baptism before the first miracle at Cana. Seemingly, Epiphanius is preoccupied with accurate dating and all his conclusions seem to stem from the starting point of the 6th January as the date of the birth and first miracle. To accommodate Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness and his movements before John picks up the narrative in his gospel, Epiphanius calculated the event of the baptism taking place some sixty days before January 6th. Epiphanius, therefore, is apparently aware that the 6th January was the accepted date of the nativity in the area of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Of course Epiphanius is wrong in concluding that the pagans chose the 6th January as their feast day because this was the date that the Christians used. However, many scholars have argued that to suggest that the Christians took

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.

<sup>35</sup> Panarion 51.30.4.

over the date of a pagan festival is also not likely. Without an explicitly, or at least credible, Christian origin, following the traditions of pagans would have been anathema to most orthodox believers. Perhaps Epiphanius' assertion that pagans copied the Christians in their observance is enough proof to persuade his readership that such a festival on such a day was of wholly Christian origin. However, it would be, as I have already suggested, difficult to argue that the festival of Sol Invictus in Rome did not heavily influence the subsequent date of Christmas, and that the use of the Computation Theory before at least the fourth century has difficulties attached. If then, a Christian festival needed authentication in order to deny its non-Christian origin, by the late fourth century would it not have been possible to employ the Computation hypothesis in reverse, beginning at 25th December? This would have had the effect of proving the Christian origin of this date and allow the Christian community to argue that as a Christian date, 25th December actually predated Aurelian's festival. The same theory can also be employed when considering the 6th January as a Christian feast date.

Talley has argued that there is not enough evidence that January 6th was kept as a significant and universal feast day in pagan Egypt and Asia to suggest that the origin of the date was pagan.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, this argument is attractive if one agrees with Talley that there are "*...difficulties surrounding attempts to identify a widely observed pagan festival on January 6<sup>n37</sup>*". Indeed, concerning other

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<sup>36</sup> op. cit. p116.

<sup>37</sup> op. cit. p121.

examples of pagan festivals on January 6th we can only turn primarily to Epiphanius' account, which I have, in an earlier section, had cause to hold as possibly suspect.

Epiphanius, as well as assigning the birth of Aion to January 6th, also relates that on the same day (let us remember that Epiphanius also assigns the miracle at Cana to the date he believes Christ was born) "*this (that is the changing of water into wine) happens in many places as a testimony to unbelievers because of the miracle which was wrought at the time, as streams and rivers in many localities testify by being changed into wine. The stream at Cibyre, the chief city of Caria gives testimony at the same time of day at which the servants drew the water and Christ said, 'Give it to the governor of the feast'. I have drunk from the one at Cibyre myself, and my brethren have drunk from the stream in the shrine of the martyrs at Gerasa. And in Egypt itself, and in many countries, everyone draws water on the eleventh of the Egyptian month Tybi, and stores it up.*"<sup>38</sup> This is a very important extract from Epiphanius and one that has undergone much critical analysis by scholars as he mentions within it specific places where the miracle takes place. He gives no specific indication as to which pagan groups celebrate these mysteries but one would have to guess that he refers to the Egyptian and Hellenistic cultures whom he experienced during his life. The examples of water drawing must originate from the Nile ceremonies of Egypt alone, but the mysteries of water turning into wine are almost certainly a Greek tradition surrounding the rites of the god Dionysus (Bacchus in Rome).

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<sup>38</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.30.1-3.

We have had cause already to consider the involvement of Dionysus in our study in connexion with the religion of the Egyptians; at this point in our study this fusion of Greek and Egyptian religion must be discussed in relation to its possible influence upon early Christian practice. I shall firstly examine the rites of water drawing from the Nile celebrated in Egypt.

*"Water, for the ancient Egyptian", remarks R E Witt<sup>39</sup>, "constituted life itself, and its source was the Nile. Osiris, reborn as Horus, was the river's living power and in this sense, as a Christian writer tells us, the Egyptians could 'speak of Osiris as water'<sup>40</sup>"* I have already stated in an earlier chapter the importance which the Egyptians attached to their gift, the Nile. Alexandrian Christianity, as the quotation from even Hippolytus suggests, must have been very aware of the ritual surrounding the Nile. Christian communities from Alexandria by the sea right up the Nile would not have been able to let the scenes described by Apuleius<sup>41</sup> of *"...the sacred barges, the incense and the timbrels, the flowers and the libations"*<sup>42</sup> go unnoticed. Such scenes as these were no doubt witnessed by Epiphanius. The story of the murder of Osiris and his subsequent retrieval by his wife Isis form the centre of the Nile festivities; the river was dry, but the grieving tears of Isis for her husband flood the land. So Isis sets out in her ship to search for her husband, and finding him, brings him, after Seth has scattered his

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<sup>39</sup> *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, (Thames and Hudson 1971) p165.

<sup>40</sup> Hippolytus, *Her* 5.7,23. see *ibid.* p165n1 (p308).

<sup>41</sup> Apuleius was a Roman citizen born around 130AD in Madaura (in present day Tunisia) of an honourable family. He was educated at Carthage and Athens. He is noted as a writer who travelled widely and everywhere obtained initiation in the mysteries. He was an initiate of the mysteries of Osiris, making his account a valuable and probably accurate source.

<sup>42</sup> Witt, *op. cit.* p165.

dismembered body, whole again, back to Egypt, where their son, Horus will reign in his stead. Isis returns, we are told, no longer grieving, but happy, and the crowds in festival mood by the shore attest this. John of Lydia (early 6th century), who was born not far from Ephesus, attests that the festival of the voyage of Isis was still celebrated in his day.<sup>43</sup> Being an Ephesian, John identifies Isis with Artemis as the Moon goddess and the one who '*presides over the waters*'. Artemis herself was honoured with waterside processions<sup>44</sup>, the link therefore with Mary the Mother of Jesus, whose post-ascension home was Ephesus, is a clear one, and no doubt such rites have come down to us today as Mary is honoured in a similar way in Mediterranean Catholicism, especially amongst fishing communities. As Luther H Martin suggests, "*Isis survived even Christian dominance, for with her divine son Horus, she is remembered in the sentiment and iconography of Roman Catholic iconography.*"<sup>45</sup> The maritime nature of the Hellenized Isis is also well attested. Depicted on a 6th Century AD mosaic is Helios, the god of the Sun standing on the Pharos of Alexandria, beside him stands Isis, looking out as a guard over the sea.<sup>46</sup>

The dates of these festivities are however unhelpful to our cause, even if their content is supportive. The '*Ploiaphesia*', as John of Lydia calls the festival of Isis borne in her ship, took place on 5th March. This date is corroborated by the Roman Calendar of Philocalus, which places the '*Isidis Navigium*' in March and

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<sup>43</sup> Johannes Lydus, *De Mens.* 4.45.

<sup>44</sup> Witt, *op. cit.* p179.

<sup>45</sup> *Hellenistic Religions*, p72 (OUP, New York 1987) p72.

<sup>46</sup> see John and Elizabeth Romer, *The Seven Wonders of the World*, (Michael O'Mara Books 1995) p61ff.

also states that the ceremony of the search and discovery of Osiris took place in October, ending on the 3rd November; the March festival it seems heralded the season of summer, the October festival, the season of winter.<sup>47</sup>

The Nile also played its own specific part. Rufinus, a 4th century monk and historian who went to Alexandria in 372 reports that (quoting Witt's paraphrase) *"In Alexandria an annual procession in honour of the Nile's overflowing was bound up with the cult of the Lighthouse Goddess (that is Isis) and the God of the Sarapeum (that is Osiris/Sarapis). The pageant must have gone down shorewards, but the special exhibit was the Cubit measure of the rising waters of the Nile, normally kept in one of the chambers of the Serapeum but now carried on parade to a place some distance away and afterwards restored to its proper place."*<sup>48</sup> Here we see the pagan background to the later Christian tradition of drawing water from the Nile, indeed, as Witt points out, *"Significantly Constantine, about 325, enjoined that the Patriarch Alexander (of Alexandria) should superintend the removal of the cubit from the Sarapeum into one of his newly consecrated churches."*<sup>49</sup> One can only wonder what Alexander's answer to this was!

Talley is indeed correct in his conclusion that it is impossible to find any other evidence to support the testimony of Epiphanius<sup>50</sup> that water was drawn from the Nile on 6th January as only the dates connected with Isis and her boat in

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<sup>47</sup> see Witt, p180-1.

<sup>48</sup> Witt, p182, p310n39. Rufinus *Eccl. Hist.* 30.11.

<sup>49</sup> op. cit. p 182, p310n40. Socrates *Eccl. Hist.* 1.18.

<sup>50</sup> op. cit. p114.

March and the festival of search and discovery in October/November can be dated with some accuracy. Nowhere is the 6th January designated other than in Epiphanius' writings. However, I feel that Talley is going too far in suggesting that there is no account of an Egyptian festival of water drawing before Epiphanius, as the accounts of Apuleius and more especially Rufinus suggest that such a festival did exist in Alexandria in antiquity as part of the celebrations surrounding the pantheon of gods worshipped in the city.

Talley does concede that the rites of the Egyptians did find their way into the Christian liturgy. He cites an account by the 6th Century pilgrim Antoninus who, while in Jerusalem in about 570, witnessed an Epiphany celebration by the banks of the Jordan at which "*Alexandrians in boats pour aromatic substances into the water when it has been blessed, and then draw the blessed water and use it later to sprinkle their boats before going out to sea.*"<sup>51</sup> If this account does nothing else it confirms that the Egyptian influence passed to the Christian liturgy in the East at some time after 300 and before 570. Further, the Nile's risings affected the liturgy of the Copts greatly and interestingly, the intercessions appropriate for the harvest begin at the Epiphany.<sup>52</sup>

Epiphanius' unique statement that the baptism of Jesus occurred on November 8th, two months before the birth, and that the wedding at Cana occurred on Jesus' birthday is an intriguing one. Epiphanius' reasoning is

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<sup>51</sup> Talley p113.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p114.

purely biblical, and one formed from the belief that Jesus' ministry was only one year in length, the so called '*acceptable year*'. The miracle at Cana would, therefore, perforce, have to be after the baptism. It is probable that his reasoning is purely chronological, however, his date of November 8th is close to the date of the end of the Egyptian search and discovery festival on November 3rd. It is certainly impossible to know whether Epiphanius was meaning to suggest a link here, but Epiphanius is more than likely to have known about the October/November festivities. Yet again, however, we may be seeing Epiphanius being economical with knowledge of Egyptian religion, or what is more likely, he is, in the case of his dating of the baptism, trying to fit the events of two different gospels into a single chronology.

Considering all this evidence it seems impossible to link the Egyptian tradition of water drawing with the date of the Epiphany. Even so, a number of the liturgical motifs may have become part of the Christian liturgy and may have had a profound influence even up to the present day.

## Water into Wine

Talley seeks to dismiss the association of water turning into, or running as wine, with a pagan feast specific to January 5th/6th as argued by A Allan McArthur<sup>53</sup>, and Ronald H Bainton<sup>54</sup>. His argument is that there is not enough evidence to suggest that a wide-spread feast took place on January 6th and that Epiphanius' consideration of this event, which, according to classical sources, was commemorated throughout the year, "*reminded Epiphanius of Christ's miracle at Cana wedding feast [and] is a tribute to his piety*"<sup>55</sup>. It is clear from the evidence that reported 'water into wine' miracles were not confined to one specific date, but in accordance with local tradition took place at various times. It may, however, be possible to use such evidence to aid our study, and not dismiss it out of hand because of the apparent non-uniformity of its dating. At this point we must consider the rites attributed to Dionysus and his counterpart, the Roman Bacchus.

It is generally accepted amongst scholars that Dionysus was not an indigenous god of the Greek states of antiquity *per se*, but of perhaps Phrygian origin<sup>56</sup>. The origin of the god matters little as it appears that his cult migrated to Greece and Asia Minor, and as we have seen with other gods of the region and period (e.g. Isis) "*that under the name Dionysus, were included, by a process of*

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<sup>53</sup> A A McArthur, *The Evolution of the Christian Year*, (SCM 1953) p66f.

<sup>54</sup> R H Bainton, *Basilidian Chronology*, in JBL vol 42, (1923) p98.

<sup>55</sup> *op. cit.* p116.

<sup>56</sup> L R Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, (Oxford 1909) vol 5 p85f.

*absorption and attraction, many district deities...[such as] Dionysus of Thrace...of Crete...or even, according to Herodotus...a Dionysus of Egypt.*<sup>57</sup> Farnell goes on to suggest that this is the reason why Dionysus' genealogy is so confused and why he is considered in some places the son of Semele and in others the son of Persephone (Kore). It is interesting to note here the connexion that is building up between the various pagan deities in our study. Talley notes<sup>58</sup> that on July 21 AD 139, the rising of the dog star, Sothis (Isis' star) occurred on the first day of the Egyptian month Thoth (see above) marking the beginning of the Sothic Cycle. To commemorate this coins were issued in Alexandria by Antonius Pius with the inscription 'Aion' and bearing a depiction of the Phoenix, the miraculous Egyptian bird which burnt itself to death, only to be reborn, rejuvenated. This, firstly, shows a contemporary link between Alexandria and Aion other than that given by Epiphanius, secondly, between Alexandria and the Phoenix, and also between Aion and the Phoenix. Dionysus, similarly, as the son of Semele, we are told by classical literature, was born from the thigh of Zeus after being taken from the ashes of his mother who had been consumed by a lightning bolt from Zeus.<sup>59</sup> Thus again we see that pan-influential, pan-religious nature of the Alexandrian situation. The myth of Dionysus tells of how he, as a man, descended into Hades to bring back his dead mother. This accords well with the myth of Dionysus as the son of Persephone (Kore), the wife of Hades (sic) who carried her off to the

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p86.

<sup>58</sup> *Origins*, p110.

<sup>59</sup> see Richard Stoneman, *An Encyclopedia of Myth and Legend - Greek Mythology*, (Aquarian Press, 1991).



underworld, represented in the agricultural cycle by the winter season. From this, one can see how the Egyptian myth of Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, and indeed Osiris himself, as the Egyptian god of the underworld, may be interwoven. Therefore, Dionysus can be associated with Aion the son of Kore, and also by virtue of the theme of rising from death, with Horus and the descent into hell, with Osiris.

It is not until much later that Dionysus, possibly because of his assimilation into Hellenistic religion and his link with Bacchus in Rome, becomes connected with wine, or more correctly considered as a god of vegetation in general.<sup>60</sup> It is from this tradition that references of wine epiphanies obviously derive. Therefore, even before we consider the question of wine we can see a link between Dionysus and the area of our study.

Wine references in connexion with the Christian feast of January 6th derive principally from two sources as noted by McArthur<sup>61</sup>; Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) and Pausanius (AD c150). Pliny, as pointed out by Talley<sup>62</sup> was very familiar with instances of water turning into or running as wine, but did not specify at which time of the year these miracles took place apart from a reference to water having the flavour of wine on the nones of January (January 5th) on the island of Andros<sup>63</sup>. Pausanius follows Pliny in

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<sup>60</sup> L R Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, (Oxford 1909) vol V p88.

<sup>61</sup> *op. cit.* p66f.

<sup>62</sup> *op. cit.* p115.

<sup>63</sup> *Nat. Hist.* 2.106.

acknowledging that the Andrians held a feast in honour of Dionysus, but also mentions more especially that the Eleans (on the present day Dardanelles) held a similar festival called the Thyia at which *“three pots are brought into the building by the priests and set down empty in the presence of the citizens. The doors of the building are sealed by the priests and...on the morrow they are allowed to examine the seals, and going into the building they find the pots filled with wine.”*<sup>64</sup>

Admittedly there are problems with these two sources if they are taken on their own as evidence for a pre-Christian festival of wine/water miracle as neither specifically mentions water turning into wine; Pliny states that water had the flavour of wine and Pausanius does not mention water at all, only wine. Talley's contention is not, however, with this problem, but rather with the fact that these sources and others do not specify a universal festival in honour of Dionysus on January 5th/6th, therefore suggesting that a Christian festival could not be based on such flimsy evidence. This is indeed true, but one must remember that as a migrating deity, as Dionysus was, his cult became fused with other festivals of a similar nature as his worship spread.<sup>65</sup>

This point may prove to be the ultimate answer to the problem of the discrepancy in festival dates and traditions from place to place, the rites of Dionysus becoming merged with existing rites, therefore of their very nature the miracles attributed to him would not be universal but would exhibit regional variation. Thus the Dionysian ritual may have worked its way into Egypt, indeed Farnell<sup>66</sup> gives a very interesting account of the local rites of

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<sup>64</sup> Pausanius, *Description of Greece*, 6.26.

<sup>65</sup> L R Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, (Oxford 1909) vol V p86.

<sup>66</sup> *Cult of the Greek States*, p188-191.

Dionysus, first concerning Thebes, with reference to Pausanius, Orphic and Homeric Hymns, where the conflagration birth of Dionysus son of Semele is celebrated, notably in the winter, but also in another myth in some localities, presented in ritual which represents him being brought from the sea in a chest. The story goes that when Semele gave birth to Dionysus, they were both put in a chest by Cadmus (Semele's father) and thrown into the sea, subsequently being washed ashore, at which point Semele died. The ritual surrounding this event, that is, the birth of Dionysus, seems to centre around the sea; priests accompanied by the worshippers, according to Pausanius' account, taking the cultic object, the chest, in procession down to the sea shore and having bathed, returning with it to the Temple of Dionysus. This, in almost every major detail, shows similarity with the Alexandrian procession down to the sea in honour of the search and retrieval of Osiris by Isis and as such, the cult of Dionysus may have been easily assimilated into the Alexandrian and Egyptian pantheon, together with ideas concerning water turning into wine.

In startling disagreement with the opinion of Talley, Farnell<sup>67</sup> states that "*one fact strikes us at once, the prevalent rule of winter celebration*". He goes on to point out that a festival called the '*Theodaisia*' or '*entertainment of gods*', was consecrated to Dionysus and celebrated at Andros on the nones of January (5th January). This is the festival that both Pliny and Pausanius mention, but Farnell also concludes that the Theodaisia took place at the same time in

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<sup>67</sup> op. cit. p198-200.

Lesbos, Kos, Rhodes and Crete amongst other places. Farnell takes his evidence from various classical writings<sup>68</sup>, but his conclusion is hinged upon the fact that so important was this winter festival dedicated to Dionysus, that in certain regions it actually gave its name to the month; Theodaisios being called Gamelion in Attica, which is equivalent to January<sup>69</sup>. Farnell concludes "*And we need not doubt but that some rites in his [Dionysus'] honour at this time of the year were prevalent throughout the Hellenic world.*"<sup>70</sup> He also goes on to suggest, that these rites were celebrated in winter, not to the god of wine, but to the god of the underworld and vegetation at the very time in the year when fertility was at its most dormant. Wine therefore would not play a large part as it is presumed that the vines were bare and the vineyards inactive, indeed he cites evidence from both Plutarch and Philochorus who state that the libations offered to Dionysus in the winter were of milk, honey and water, and that the festival was sober. All these considerations show startling likeness again to the hellenized Egyptian festivities which we have noted in Alexandria; Osiris seen as the god of the underworld and the bringer of fertility to the land through his rising from the dead by Isis, and his divine continuation in the personification of fertility, his son Horus, who, likened to Helios, the sun, was born, according to some writers, as the year turned from its darkest infertile point in winter, heralding the new season.

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<sup>68</sup> see *Cults*, vol. V p313 n105.

<sup>69</sup> Farnell cites Paton and Hicks, *Incriptions of Kos* (?) who state without further proof that the Cretan Deusaisios equals the Attic Gamelion.

<sup>70</sup> *op. cit.* p198.

The reference to milk, honey and water noted above is an interesting one, and perhaps significant, especially if these offerings can be connected with the ritual of the Dionysian priests going down to the sea to bathe as mentioned above and the tradition in Egypt of the sanctifying waters of the Nile which undoubtedly passed into the Christian tradition. Although tenuous, this may explain to some extent the use of milk and honey in the baptismal ritual of the early church, mentioned most notably in the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* and Tertullian's *De Corona*. Both the *Apostolic Tradition*<sup>71</sup> and *De Corona*<sup>72</sup> speak of the baptised receiving a post-baptismal meal of milk and honey, and (in the case of the *Apostolic Tradition*) water. Both these works are amongst the earliest known Christian liturgical texts and are therefore more likely to be the purest form of early Christian worship at its infancy. Tertullian was a North African writer of the early 3rd century, the *Apostolic Tradition*, also of about the same date, written c215. The *Apostolic Tradition* may have been written in Rome for the needs of the Christian community there. Scholars are not in agreement, but it may have drawn upon earlier documents from Syria and Egypt<sup>73</sup> such as *The Egyptian Church Order* and *The Testament of the Lord*. However, Whitaker comments, "...the possibility cannot now be excluded that if any liturgical tradition is reflected in the work it is not that necessarily of Rome."<sup>74</sup> Added to this, Tertullian, a North African and therefore of the western tradition, stipulates<sup>75</sup> that the most solemn time to give baptism was at either

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<sup>71</sup> *Ap. Tr.* xxxiii.

<sup>72</sup> *De Coro.* 3.

<sup>73</sup> see E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, (SPCK 1960) p2.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* p3.

<sup>75</sup> *De Baptismo* 19.

Passover or Pentecost, Epiphany being unknown in the western tradition until the late 4th century. The *Apostolic Tradition* remains silent about the proper time to baptise. Egyptian Christianity, as we have seen, was influenced by the celebrations of the pagans, especially concerning water, and therefore the use of milk and honey at baptism may have passed from the Dionysian ritual here and on into the western use.

If then, the case concerning the calendar of the Dionysian feasts is not as imprecise as Talley concludes, that is, that in the light of the evidence above, Dionysian feasts were commonly celebrated in the winter and more especially on the Nones of January as the Theodaisia, and if, as I have argued, the cult of Dionysus became subsumed into the festivities in Alexandria, Aion, the son of Kore taking upon himself the character of Dionysus, as Bainton maintains<sup>76</sup>, then Epiphanius' account of the feast in the Koreion of the 5/6th January may be more accurate after all. Certainly, the inclusion of the Dionysian tradition would give evidence to support Epiphanius' assertion that the water/wine miracle occurred at the same time and therefore became part of Christian mythology surrounding the Epiphany.

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* p98.

## The Basilidians, Gnostics, Orthodoxy and the Baptism of Christ

An adequate reconstruction of the beliefs of the 2nd century Gnostic teacher Basilides cannot be achieved as only fragments of his writings remain, not enough to build up a picture of his system of beliefs. However, a number of Christian writers<sup>77</sup> thought his heresy to be enough of a threat to make mention of him in their writings; it is from these sources, even though they might contain heavy bias, that we gain most information about the thought and practice of Basilidian beliefs.

Basilides taught principally at Alexandria c150AD but it is thought that his beliefs spread to Asia Minor. Accounts of the beliefs of the Basilidians are in some cases contradictory, but it can be safely suggested that the system's Christology was adoptionist, that is, that the man Jesus was not divine until his baptism by John, at which point the divine Christ came upon Jesus in the form of a dove<sup>78</sup>, thus, for the Basilidians, the baptism was the pre-eminent feast, the physical birth of the man Jesus being inconsequential. Thus we can conclude that the Basilidians celebrated the feast of the baptism of Jesus, not being concerned with a festival of birth. However, Ronald H Bainton<sup>79</sup> in his work on the Basilidians seeks to link their baptism festival, not with that of human birth, but divine birth by adoption. Bainton suggests that to the Basilidians both birth and baptism were identical and therefore even to them

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<sup>77</sup> Notably, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Hyppolitus.

<sup>78</sup> Paraphrased by Bainton, JBL 42(1923) p93. Irenaeus *Haer.* 1.21.1.

<sup>79</sup> R H Bainton, *Basilidian Chronology*, in JBL 42(1923) p93f.

his baptism day was his birth day, following the Lukan suggestion that Jesus was baptised on his thirtieth birthday. Using evidence from Clement of Alexandria (c150-215AD)<sup>80</sup> Bainton links this festival with January 6th: "*The followers of Basilides celebrate the day of his baptism also, spending the night before in reading.*"<sup>81</sup> *They say that it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, the fifteenth of the month Tybi, but some the eleventh of the same month.*" It is interesting to note that Clement gives two dates for the baptism, 11th Tybi, which equals 6th January, and 15th Tybi, which equals 10th January. That Clement draws our attention to this discrepancy makes it clear that there were two groups of Basilidians celebrating the same feast but at different times. The suggested, and presumed accurate reason for this is the fact that, as I have mentioned in a previous section, there were in use at that time in Egypt, not one, but two calendars, the *annus vagus* of the countryside and the rectified calendar imposed by Mark Anthony in 26BC, used more commonly in the cities. Thus if the festival was instituted at a fixed point, as the date of the baptism, the two calendars would soon become out of synchronisation with each other giving two dates for the same festival on the dates stated at the time Clement was writing.

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<sup>80</sup> *Stromateis* 1.21.146.

<sup>81</sup> The evidence from Clement that the Basilidians' festival was nocturnal (that is, it began on the evening of the day before the feast, c.f. Epiphanius) is used by Bainton, McArthur and other scholars to reconcile the fact the so many of the instances of a pagan pre-Christian festival seem to fall on the nones (5th) January. This is a matter of contention for Talley. However, one must remember that the reckoning of the day from midnight to midnight was not widespread in the ancient world, and is no doubt the origin of the position of first vespers in the Roman Divine Office.

Therefore the Basilidians celebrated the baptism of Jesus, and if we follow Bainton, his divine birth too in Alexandria and other places, on January 6th in the stabilised calendar. If this is the case, then it would be logical to take our study one step further (a step that Talley, as far as I am aware, did not make and one that Bainton only mentions in passing<sup>82</sup>) which is, why did the Basilidians choose the 6th January as their date for baptism? By their very nature, the Basilidians would not have employed the computation theory from the conception to fix their date because the divine Christ was not conceived as a man; and the date of Jesus' conception would not have been important. As Talley points out<sup>83</sup> Bainton may be incorrect in his assertion that the computation theory could not have been used by orthodox Christians to arrive at the date of 6th January because April 6th is not affirmed as a significant date. Bainton holds that the computation theory was employed in reverse to produce the Montanist date of the Passion (6th April, nine months before January 6th)<sup>84</sup>, while Talley argues that as the calendar of Asia Minor was nine days later than its Roman counterpart, the traditional date of the Passion of 25th March would fall there on 6th April making computation possible.<sup>85</sup> Even though the Basilidians would have been aware of the Montanist date, such considerations of their own computation from a date they did not recognise are unlikely, even more so as the teachings of

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid.* p25n24 (I do not agree that Epiphanius was describing a Gnostic rite as suggested by Usener).

<sup>83</sup> *Origins* p120.

<sup>84</sup> 'The Origins of Epiphany', in *Early and Mediaeval Christianity*, (Hodder and Stoughton, 1962) p34. Bainton's article in JBL 42 (1923) which I have already cited is extracted in *Early and Mediaeval Christianity*. This point is made more clearly in JBL. 42 p100.

<sup>85</sup> Talley, *op. cit.*: p120.

Montanus (last third of the 2nd century) are significantly later than those of Basilides.

Our conclusion, therefore, must be that as a principally Alexandrian phenomenon in the first instance, the date of the feast of Basilidian baptism, it could be suggested, was possibly taken from a feast already in existence in Alexandria. This theory depends on two points, firstly that Alexandria did hold a feast of Aion/Dionysus on the date stated, and more or less described by Epiphanius, as I have suggested, and secondly, that Basilides must have placed his commemoration of the baptism on this same date. Indeed, as he invented his own religious system and Christology, this would certainly not be an impossibility.

We must now, in some detail, consider the part of Bainton's work on the Basilidian Chronology which is specifically relevant to our study, that is, the date of the Epiphany.<sup>86</sup>

Bainton's belief is, that as the 6th January was assigned by the Basilidians as the date of both baptism and birth, so it was also for the Montanists, the Marcionites and the Orthodox Christians. Because of this, he argues, as it would be impossible for each party to borrow from any other, the date must have been set before a split took place between Gnostic and Orthodox

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<sup>86</sup> The Epiphany section of the article in JBL vol. 42 which I have already cited is extracted in *Early and Mediaeval Christianity*, (Hodder and Stoughton, 1962) p22-38. I shall make reference to this edition.

Christianity<sup>87</sup> and therefore be of early second century origin. His evidence for this I will rehearse in due course, but hold with caution his statement that *"To January 6th was assigned most commonly the baptism, sometimes baptism and the birth, sometimes the birth without mention of the baptism."*<sup>88</sup> He continues that the feast might have been instituted later if the intention of the feast had been to fix a date to the exact date of the birth/baptism, rather than just a commemoration of the event which he believes to be the case. *"To celebrate the birth of Jesus on January 6th was one thing, to assign it to that date was another"*.<sup>89</sup> It seems also that Bainton seeks to assign the festival to January 6th by using the Computation Hypothesis, this he does by quoting a source much later than his preferred date for the feast of c110AD and suggesting that, *"if then there was in the fourth century this means of arriving by calculation at the date of the birth there is a possibility that such reckoning had an earlier beginning."*<sup>90</sup> My own problems with his suppositions are, firstly, that there is no evidence from Egypt, or anywhere else for that matter, apart from Bainton's theory concerning the adoptionist birth element of the Basilidian baptism festival, that the birth was of any great concern to the Early Church. As Talley points out *"Egyptian data will show that the feast of the Epiphany at Alexandria was focused on Christ's baptism."*<sup>91</sup> Secondly, as I have suggested in a previous chapter, use of the Computation Hypothesis before the 5th century is problematic as written

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<sup>87</sup> Bainton's assertion that there was such a split has been questioned by many scholars. The consensus believes that there was no such split. This does not necessarily invalidate all of Bainton's work.

<sup>88</sup> op. cit. p24.

<sup>89</sup> ibid.

<sup>90</sup> ibid. p30.

<sup>91</sup> Origins, p117.

evidence from its source, the Jewish tradition, is lacking until the writing of the Talmud; certainly, however, this methodology could have been safely employed in the 4th century, as Bainton suggests, but with difficulty before that date.

Bainton's evidence for the celebration of the Epiphany amongst the Montanists, which I have referred to above, is questionable if one considers Talley's conclusion to be probable. The suggestion that the date of the Passion in Asia Minor was the 6th April due to the divergent calendar seems convincing, a point that Bainton seems to be unaware of. Consideration of this does seem to suggest that he is incorrect in applying the computation hypothesis in reverse to engineer the date of the Montanist Passion. Bainton is on surer ground, however, with his evidence concerning the Marcionite date of the Epiphany. Marcion was a 2nd century heretic and a native of Asia Minor who moved to Rome in c140AD from where he directed his Gnostic community which spread throughout the empire and lasted until it was absorbed into Manichaeism at the end of the 3rd century.<sup>92</sup> Marcion's Christology was Docetic, that is, he held that the divine Christ appeared suddenly and began his ministry. Marcion is therefore roughly contemporary with Basilides. For evidence of a Marcionite festival on January 6th, Bainton makes reference to a passage of Tertullian (c160-c225)<sup>93</sup>:

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<sup>92</sup> see *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F L Cross.

<sup>93</sup> *Adversus Marcionem* 1.19. The translation is taken from Bainton, *Early and Mediaeval*, p35.

*"In the fifteenth year of Tiberius, Christ Jesus was deemed worthy to descend from heaven, the saving spirit of Marcion. I do not care to investigate in what year of Antoninus, the Elder, the wind of the dog-star blew him from Pontus, who thus wished the Spirit to be blown from heaven. From this, however, it appears that he was a heretic under Antoninus; under Pius, impius. From Tiberius, moreover, to Anotonius there are about 115 years and a half year and a half month. So much time they place between Christ and Marcion."*

This rather curious and cryptic passage, according to Bainton, seems to refer to a "*Marcionite calculation of the time between Christ and Marcion*"<sup>94</sup> and therefore the date for both can be worked out. The descent of Christ, it must be stated, refers explicitly to the descent of the divine Christ, in the Marcionite scheme of things, onto the man Jesus, and therefore refers to his baptism, which according to the passage happened in the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, that is 29AD. Tertullian has no cause to consider the precise date during the reign of Antoninus that Marcion began his teaching in Rome, but '*the wind of the dog-star*', which rose some time around 20th July in the stabilised calendar, blew him, so we are told by Tertullian, from his home in Pontus to Rome. The time span given by Tertullian from Tiberius to Antoninus is just over 115 years. However, if this date is applied by addition, as Bainton suggests, to 29AD, the resultant date is 144AD, the very same year that Marcion was excommunicated in Rome, a date which Tertullian would have known. Further, however, Bainton suggests that if the 115 years and six

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<sup>94</sup> Bainton *ibid.*

and half months are subtracted from the end of July 144AD, the result is the first week of January 29AD. Bainton suggests that "it is difficult to suppose that any other day was intended than the 6th corresponding with the Epiphany of Dionysus."<sup>95</sup> Indeed this is true and therefore it seems that the date of the Marcionite baptism was 6th January. Bainton's conclusion is that the comparison which Tertullian is making is between Marcion and Christ, and that what Christ taught to Marcion as truth was denied by the orthodox. It was therefore Marcion's task to make the Church see that what was truly orthodox was actually Marcionite; this, Bainton suggests, he would do by use of the Epiphany as a commemoration that both sides celebrated, but with a different ultimate meaning.<sup>96</sup>

The third source that Bainton considers is that of the *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria in which the orthodox writer states that Christ was born in the 28th year of Augustus<sup>97</sup>, that is 3/2BC, but 194 years, one month and 13 days before the death of Commodus which occurred on 31st December, 192AD. The date in the Julian calendar that this gives for the birth of Christ is November 18th 4/3BC which is completely unique and unhelpful. However, Bainton points out that in 140.7 and 145.5 of the *Stromata* Clement seems to be inconsistent concerning his calculation of the time between the captivity under Vespasian and the death of Commodus; in 140.7 he states that there were 121 years, six months and 24 days, while in 145.5 he says there were 121 years ten months

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.* p35f.

<sup>97</sup> *Strom.* 145.1.

and 13 days. This discrepancy, Bainton suggests, is due to the use of two calendars in Egypt (just as in the case of the two dates attributed to the Basilidian celebration of the baptism of Jesus by Clement<sup>98</sup> as we have already seen), the wandering *annus vagus* and the corrected Augustan. If then, one calculates<sup>99</sup> the date of Jesus' birth as suggested by Clement, 194 years, one month, and 13 days before the death of Commodus, using not the Julian calendar but the *annus vagus*, the resultant date is 6th January 2BC.

Bainton concludes that as the date of 6th January for the birth/baptism of Christ can be found conjointly in both Gnostic and orthodox sources, and as it would be inconceivable that these groups would have borrowed from each other, the date must have been recognised some time before a supposed split between Gnostic and orthodox, c110AD. However, Bainton suggests that even though this might point towards a Christian recognition of the date of the birth of Christ taken from the idea that he was baptised on his birthday following the Lukan account, it does not necessarily follow that there was an actual liturgical festival on this date, but that when the festival of birth was celebrated more widely, it was based upon this traditional calculation.<sup>100</sup>

As much as Bainton's argument commends itself, it does give a very early date for Christian recognition of the date that Jesus was born, principally because of

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<sup>98</sup> Clement states in *Strom.* 1.21 that some Basilidians celebrate the baptism on 15 Tybi, others on 11 Tybi.

<sup>99</sup> I need not write out the rather complicated computations which are made according to Schram's Tables, and can be found in Bainton, *Early and Mediaeval* p37.

<sup>100</sup> Bainton, op. cit. p38.

the mistaken conclusion that there was a Gnostic/Orthodox split. It is, however, without doubt from the evidence cited that the Basilidians and other Gnostic sects celebrated a festival commemorating an adoptionist baptism of Christ on January 6th which possibly had its origin in the pagan celebration on that date, but evidence from Clement and Clement alone that the orthodox Christians also recognised such a date as the date of birth so early, does seem rather difficult to reconcile.

## Egyptian Christianity

Christianity in Egypt, centred on Alexandria as it was, has always been something of a mystery; there are very few references in the New Testament to Egypt and as far as we know, Paul never visited the Christian community there, nor does scholarship know of any letter written specifically for them.<sup>101</sup>

As we have noted, heresy and the Gnostics seem to have found a home in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, and from there seem to have spread their doctrines into the empire. Hans Lietzmann comments, "*..we must admit that all the notices about Christianity in Egypt during the first three-quarters of the second century have to do with heresy.*"<sup>102</sup> Indeed, this does seem to be the case and commends us to the theory put forward by Lietzmann, following W. Bauer, that "*at the earliest period in Egypt, a Christianity flourished which was, later, felt to differ too widely from the ways of the Church in the following period, in other words, it was heretical.*"<sup>103</sup> We have already had cause to consider the proliferation of various arcane cults which flourished in Alexandria and its environs, a fact which only goes to emphasise Lietzmann's point. In the light of this a strong case could be made for the date of 6th January as a Christian date which had

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<sup>101</sup> I have, in a previous chapter, suggested that there may be a possible link between the Letter of Jude and a Christian community in Egypt because of the reference to Egypt in Jude v5. If this reference is coupled with the writers' intention, that of warning the community to keep the faith and not be 'infiltrated' (v.4) by those who 'pervert the grace of our God' then an Egyptian, and presumably Alexandrian readership may be intended. If this is the case and, as is thought, the letter is of Apostolic origin c60AD, then even from an early date, the Christianity of Egypt may have been influenced by Gnostic teaching, maybe accounting for the influence that Basilides certainly had there.

<sup>102</sup> Hans Lietzmann, trans. Bertram Lee Woolfe, *A History of the Early Church*, (Lutterworth 1961) vol. 1 p275.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

its beginning amongst the prevalent Gnostic community and taken from the already accepted date of 6th January as the Alexandrian festival of Kore/Aion/Dionysus. Because of the lack of orthodox teaching in the region until Clement of Alexandria, and presumed early orthodox intransigence, a Gnostic heretical festival falling on 6th January celebrating the adoptionist baptism of Jesus, would have been of little interest to the rest of the Church more concerned with imminent parousia. It may be for this reason that Egyptian Christianity of whatever form, seems to be concerned more with the commemoration and conferral of Baptism than with the birth of Christ at Bethlehem. The earliest evidence for this can be found in the sixteenth of the so-called *Canons of Athanasius*. Whether these canons were actually written by Athanasius is a matter for debate and should not concern us here, but evidence from a fragmentary 6th century Coptic copy of the text prompted W. Riedel<sup>104</sup> to conclude that the original Greek text may be a lost work of Athanasius prepared for the synod of 364. Talley concedes that even if this authorship is rejected the Greek original is quite possibly of Egyptian, and therefore Alexandrian, origin of c350-400AD. The relevant section is translated as follows:

*"...And at the feast of the Lord's Epiphany, which was in Tûbah, that is the [feast of] Baptism, they shall rejoice with them...So again in the month Tûbah did our Saviour appear as God, when, by a wondrous miracle, he made the water wine."<sup>105</sup>*

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<sup>104</sup> W. Riedel and W.E. Crum, *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria*, (London 1904).

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.* pp26-7.

The canons as a whole seem to be concerned in the main with the responsibilities of a bishop to his people, as does the passage quoted above, therefore, no matter who it is thought actually penned the instructions, he must have been someone significantly high ranking in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the day, possibly a bishop. If Clement of Alexandria c200AD did maintain, as Bainton suggests, that Christ was born on January 6th, then, as the *Canons* do not mention birth at all, only baptism, his belief does not seem to have been a widespread one by the middle of the fourth century in Egypt and Asia Minor. Indeed, contemporary references continue to stress baptism rather than birth at the Eastern celebration of the Epiphany for a number of years. If the theme of birth did play a part in the celebrations of the Epiphany in the East in this period then one would expect to find references to it in the writings of the Church Fathers following Clement, but no evidence is currently available which shows this at such an early date.

This all seeks to show that along with the Gnostics, the orthodox Christianity of Egypt and Asia Minor continued for the most part to celebrate the baptism of Jesus and not his birth on January 6th.

## Epiphany and the Beginning of the Christian Year

*"The poor shall rejoice with thee, O bishop, at all the feasts of the Lord and shall celebrate with thee these three seasons, each year: the Paschal feast shall be kept unto the Lord our God, and a feast at the end of the fifty days, and the New Year's feast, which is the gathering in of the harvest and the fruits. The last of all fruits is the olive, which is gathered in that day; wherefore by the Egyptians this is called the feast of the beginning of the year. As with the Hebrews New Year's Day was at the Pascha, which is the first of Barmûdah, so again in the month Tûbah did our Saviour appear as God, when, by a wondrous miracle, he made the water wine."<sup>106</sup>*

We have already seen that sixteenth of the *Canons of Athanasius* identifies the feast of Epiphany explicitly with the baptism of Christ. The passage above also comes from that same canon and describes the 'three seasons' which were known and celebrated by the Church in Egypt in the second half of the 4th century, which are, the Pascha (by this time celebrated according to the calculation of Anatolius (d. c. 280AD) which placed the Pascha on the Sunday after the Vernal Equinox, the latest date possible being 25th April), Pentecost, fifty days after the Pascha, and the New Year's Feast. Here the New Year Festival is identified with the Epiphany in the month *Tûbah*, therefore, for the writer in fourth century Egypt, the New Year was celebrated at the festival of Epiphany and signalled the passing of one year to the next. As we have seen, the *Canons* make no mention of the Epiphany being a festival of the birth of

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<sup>106</sup> Riedel and Crum, *The Canons of Athanasius*, (London 1904) p26f

Christ, only the baptism, so it is clear that not only did the Church here celebrate the baptism on January 6th, but they also saw that date as the turning of their year. The references to harvest, however, do seem rather confused. The writer is correct in stating that the Jews saw the Passover as New Year's Day, following the tradition of R. Joshua and the '*Poem of the Four Nights*', but his reference to ingathering in January does seem rather misplaced as not only would this be impossible, but neither the Jews nor the Egyptians celebrated any form of new year at this point. As we have seen already, there was a tradition in Judaism of two new years, one at Passover and one at Tabernacles, which was originally a harvest-home festival. This may be the tradition that the writer of the *Canons* is referring to, but it seems that the harvest imagery has been, for some reason, shifted to Epiphany. The Egyptians may have also celebrated some form of harvest festival, but their New Year's Day was signalled by the rising of the star Sirius and heralded the annual flood which took place in mid-summer, clearly not a time of harvest. It seems, then, that by the fourth century, the Epiphany had become not necessarily the beginning of the civil year, but was certainly identified as the beginning of the Christian liturgical year. As we saw in the Philocalian Martyrology of 354, Christmas was regarded in Rome as the beginning of the liturgical year, so we can see that at a similar date in the East, the Epiphany was also seen as the beginning of the liturgical cycle, but beginning at the baptism of Christ not his birth.

In the conclusion of his book *'The Origins of the Liturgical Year'*, Thomas Talley suggests that there are hints of a link between the Jewish festival of Tabernacles and the Christian Epiphany.<sup>107</sup> One of the biggest hints, I feel, is contained within the 16th of the *Canons of Athanasius*, quoted above, concerning the beginning of the year at Epiphany. If the *Canons* were indeed of Egyptian origin as has been suggested, the reference to the keeping of *'three seasons'* may have something to do with the traditional belief that Egypt knew only three seasons<sup>108</sup>, inundation, sowing and harvest, all aspects of the agricultural year. Talley<sup>109</sup> considers this in relation to the Coptic liturgy, in which the motion of the Nile has great influence to this day. R.G. Coquin points out<sup>110</sup> that in the Coptic rite, the intercessions which would be appropriate for a harvest festival begin on the Epiphany. This he concludes, for whatever reason, seems to show a shift of some two and a half months from the proper agricultural place in the calendar to their present day liturgical position. The initial conclusion from this is that, as with the calendar of the Jews in which Tabernacles, a harvest festival, marked the end of the agricultural year, so the same end of year celebrations connected with the harvest probably occurred in Egypt and Asia Minor. When the baptism festival of Epiphany was accepted as the beginning of the Christian New Liturgical Year,<sup>111</sup> as shown in the sixteenth of the *Canons of Athanasius*, the

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<sup>107</sup> op. cit. p237.

<sup>108</sup> see Talley, op. cit. p114.

<sup>109</sup> ibid.

<sup>110</sup> 'Les Origines de L'Epiphanie en Egypte', in *Noel, Epiphanie, Retour du Christ*, Lex Orandi 40 (Paris 1967) p157. see Talley p114,158n52.

<sup>111</sup> The same seems to be true, as we have seen, for Christmas in the West.

harvest theme was transposed. This transposition is still exhibited in the Coptic liturgy.<sup>112</sup>

In an article entitled *"The Feast of Tabernacles, Epiphany and Baptism"*, published in 1912, E.C. Selwyn<sup>113</sup> sought to show evidence of a link between Tabernacles and the Epiphany, noting that of the three major feasts of Judaism, only two, Passover and Pentecost, had explicitly passed into the Christian liturgy. Selwyn questions why<sup>114</sup> it seems that Tabernacles, the greatest feast of the Jews<sup>115</sup>, *"has been so far discontinued that we know not what has become of it."*<sup>116</sup> We have discussed earlier the origins of Tabernacles and its Hebrew observance, noting its celebration in the New Testament and the link which Jesus makes in John 7:37-39 between the water symbolism of Tabernacles and his gift of living water. Such baptismal and vegetational symbolism, suggests Selwyn, passed from the Jewish tradition to Christianity in the form of the Epiphany. As anecdotal evidence for his hypothesis, Selwyn cites an account of an Armenian ritual of Epiphany celebrated at St Petersburg, as witnessed by Dr J.G. King in 1780:

*"On the river upon the ice a kind of wooden church is raised, painted and richly gilt...this is called the Jordan...The Jordan is surrounded by a temporary hedge of the boughs of fir trees, and in the middle of it a hole is cut through the ice into the water.*

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<sup>112</sup> Talley p114.

<sup>113</sup> JTS vol. XIII (1911/12) pp225-249.

<sup>114</sup> op. cit. p225.

<sup>115</sup> Josephus *Ant.* viii 4.1.

<sup>116</sup> Selwyn, op. cit. p225.

*The water [having been drawn from the river] is held in such estimation by the common people that they look on it as a preservative form, as well as a cure of , not only spiritual but natural infirmities...Vast quantities are carried home by them in bottles.*<sup>117</sup>

A similar liturgy was also performed by the Orthodox Church in Russia. At first glance, this reference seems to reflect the water drawing ceremonies of Egypt which we have already had cause to consider, but more especially shows similarity with the Epiphany ceremonies of Jerusalem witnessed by Antoninus in 570AD, who tells of Alexandrians in boats blessing the waters. With this in mind, it is probably the case that the St Petersburg celebration had its origins in the celebration of Jerusalem, but Selwyn, disregarding this, seeks to associate these Armenian ceremonies with the Feast of Tabernacles. He notes the following major similarities: i) The use of torches during the ceremonial reminiscent of the all-night illuminations in the Jerusalem Temple, ii) The drawing of water, likened to the drawing of water from the Pool of Siloam, iii) The use of tree boughs, reminiscent of those used by the Jews to make booths, iv) The erection of the wooden church, likened to the structure erected in the Court of Women in the Temple. Selwyn also refers to the *Rituale Armenorum* of F.C. Conybeare and notes that certain liturgical texts it uses seem to have been borrowed from the Tabernacles liturgy; *"With joy shall ye draw water from the wells of salvation"*,<sup>118</sup> and *"Thy sun shall no more go down,*

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<sup>117</sup> Selwyn gives no reference for this work by King.

<sup>118</sup> Is. 12:3 - referring to the descent of the Temple priest to the Pool of Siloam to collect water.

*neither shall thy moon withdraw itself.*"<sup>119</sup> If Selwyn is correct in his conclusion that there are details in the Epiphany ritual of the Armenians and other eastern Churches which may have their origin in the Feast of Tabernacles, then, we may have the reason why certain texts appropriate for harvest appeared in the Epiphany liturgy, notably that of the Copts. Selwyn, I think, had the right idea about the link, but it would seem that some of the similarities which he cites could have their origin, not wholly in the Jewish Tabernacles rites, but may have arisen from the Egyptian water drawing ceremonies which we know passed into the Jerusalem liturgy. A tentative hypothesis, if we agree to some degree with Selwyn's conclusions, could be that an early Jerusalem celebration of baptism may have included some of the elements which were present in the Synagogue rite of Tabernacles, but that later, elements of the Egyptian baptism festival influenced worship of Jerusalem. This rite then passed into other liturgies. Therefore, at St Petersburg, the erection of the temporary wooden church and the tree boughs may have been taken from the Tabernacles liturgy, while the water drawing and water storing for the purpose of baptism and sanctification could have its origin in the baptism rites of Egypt whilst also being reminiscent of the water drawn from the Pool of Siloam at Tabernacles

Jean Daniélou,<sup>120</sup> like Selwyn, also questions why Tabernacles, unlike Passover and Pentecost, did not pass into the Christian tradition. To answer

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<sup>119</sup> Is. 60.20a - referring to the symbolism of continual light as a consequence of the Autumn Equinox.

<sup>120</sup> *The Bible and the Liturgy*, (DLT 1960) p333-347.

this question, he examines a number of aspects of the festival which could possibly have influenced early Christianity. Danielou firstly suggests a link between Tabernacles and the Transfiguration.<sup>121</sup> The use of tents or booths in both instances is the most obvious link, but Danielou also suggests that the scene has messianic motifs and *"marks the fact that the messianic times have come"*<sup>122</sup>. A link can also be made between the passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke concerning the Transfiguration and the passages in these gospels concerning Jesus' baptism, at both of which a voice says, *"This is/You are my son"*.<sup>123</sup> The baptism epiphany of Jesus can be seen as an affirmation of sonship, but the Transfiguration might also be viewed as an epiphany, however one of Messiahship. Indeed, as we have seen there was an expectation of the coming of the Messiah at Tabernacles. Such was this expectation amongst the Jews, that in the early first century Josephus estimated that as many as three million went up to Jerusalem in 64AD to keep the feast<sup>124</sup>. If then we wish to consider, as Danièlou does, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as occurring at the feast of Tabernacles, then the Messianic theme of the festival is purposely given more impact by the Gospel writer. The similarities between the Christian Palm Sunday and the Jewish feast can be seen in the processional carrying of the tree boughs and the singing of the Hallel psalm 118, *"Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord"*(v26). Danièlou points out that Tabernacles contains aspects of royal initiation<sup>125</sup> as

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<sup>121</sup> Matt. 17:1-8; Mk. 9:2-8; Lk. 9:28-36.

<sup>122</sup> op. cit. p341.

<sup>123</sup> Matt. 3:17; Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22.

<sup>124</sup> Bell. Iud. II,xiv,3.

<sup>125</sup> op. cit. p335.

well as aspects of Temple and altar rededication, exhibiting motifs of kingship, and as we have seen, expectations of the coming of the messiah. Such considerations as these may have been uppermost in the minds of the writers of the synoptic Gospels, when they reported this event, but their attempt to Christianise the meaning of their narrative may account for the fact that Tabernacles is not mentioned. After considering the Feast of Tabernacles in the New Testament, Danièlou seeks to link the feast with a Christian feast. He cites a sermon on the nativity<sup>126</sup> by Gregory Nazianzen (329-389) who seems, according to Danièlou, to be attempting to do the same thing. Gregory sees the messianic hope connected with Tabernacles and expressed in the Hallel, (ps. 118) as a prefiguring of the coming of Christ. As we saw at the very beginning of our study, the Jewish tradition espoused by R. Eliezer taught that Tabernacles saw the beginning of the New Year and at Tabernacles the Messiah would come. So Gregory, in his sermon, can speak of Epiphany as the "true Feast of Tabernacles"<sup>127</sup>, inaugurated by the kingly messiah, Jesus Christ.

In his book *The Primitive Christian Calendar* (Cambridge 1952), Philip Carrington sought to prove that the Gospel of Mark was originally constructed as a Lectionary made up of 62 readings for use by a Christian community on the Sundays of the year. Lectons 1 to 48, Carrington suggested, could be used for each of the Sundays outside Paschal-time, the remainder constituting a

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<sup>126</sup> P.G. XLVI, 1129-1130.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*

'Passion lection'. Carrington concedes that "the notion of a liturgical year in the Christian Church at so early a date may seem a novelty,"<sup>128</sup> even so, defending his research, he suggests that the "Gospel material often came into existence in short units generally inculcating a single evangelical message, and marked by opening and closing formulae."<sup>129</sup> If, says Carrington, the Gospel of Mark was not composed as a Lectionary, then why does it fall into self-contained units placed together in a particular order?

The Gospel begins at the beginning of the Christ story, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his baptism, nothing of his earlier life being commented upon. Carrington suggests and sets out to show that following the Jewish Synagogue tradition which the first Christians would have known, the Gospel began its course reading on the first Sunday of the new Jewish year, which for the Christian community would have been the first Sunday after the end of the Tabernacles festival (late September), the same point in the year that saw the beginning of the readings of the Torah in the synagogue. The suggestion is, therefore, that following the writing of the Gospel of Mark c70AD, the community that it was intended for, either during the transition period from Synagogue to Church, or after the split, used it as a primitive Lectionary at their Sunday worship throughout the year. The common view is that the Gospel of Mark was written in Italy, possibly Rome, but as it seems to exhibit Palestinianisms and Semitisms, and was written in Koine Greek. This may

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<sup>128</sup> op. cit. p16.

<sup>129</sup> ibid. p18.

suggest that it was not intended for Rome but for one of the Near Eastern Churches. According to tradition Mark was the first Patriarch of Alexandria. If this is the case, it may suggest that it was the Alexandrian community for whom the Gospel was intended,<sup>130</sup> but such conclusions must be treated with the utmost care as at such an early date all this must be educated conjecture.

Following on from Carrington, M.D. Goulder<sup>131</sup> considered a similar Lectionary theory for the order for the Gospel of Matthew. Goulder writes *"The theory I wish to propose is a Lectionary theory: that is that the Gospel was developed liturgically, and was intended to be used liturgically ; and that its order is liturgically significant, in that it follows the lections of the Jewish Year."*<sup>132</sup> Goulder's reckoning differs slightly from Carrington's, but the detail of his Lectionary need not concern us, only that it seems, as with Mark, that the course reading of Matthew can be found to follow the Jewish tradition of the reading of the *Simhat Torah*, beginning after the Tabernacles end of year festival. The Matthean Lectionary of course would begin with the birth narrative, unlike Mark, but this point need not concern us. Goulder also suggests that a similar Lectionary theory can be employed for the Gospel of Luke, while A.A. McArthur<sup>133</sup> suggests a similar theory for the beginning of the Gospel of John in relation to the Epiphany, accounting for the baptism of Christ and the wedding at Cana. McArthur's theory is not concerned with the transposition

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<sup>130</sup> see Talley p133.

<sup>131</sup> *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*,(SPCK 1974).

<sup>132</sup> op. cit. p172.

<sup>133</sup> op. cit. p69.

of the starting point of the Lectionary from late September to early January which we saw with the Coptic liturgy in relation to Tabernacles, but that the Gospel of John was written as a reflection of the liturgical tradition which was current in the Church at Ephesus. John's Gospel (early second century), suggests McArthur, was written according to this existent liturgical tradition at Ephesus and so the beginning of the Gospel exhibits all the attributes of the unitive Epiphany festival; the coming of the Messiah, the baptism<sup>134</sup>, the 'shining forth' and the miracle of water into wine, which all occur in the first two chapters. For McArthur, January 6th seems to be the accepted date in Asia Minor for the Epiphany by about 110/120AD, founded upon the pre-existent pagan tradition of the Epiphany of Dionysus.

Leaving the theory of McArthur aside and returning to Carrington's theory that a Christian community began its reading of the Gospel of Mark on Tishri 1st following the Jewish Synagogue tradition, it then follows that the community would not necessarily have been celebrating the actual day of the baptism of Christ, but only recalling the event on the first Sunday after the beginning of the Year as their Lectionary prescribed; in the Julian calendar this date is probably the last Sunday in September. If such a Christian community were living and worshipping in any major city on the Mediterranean, possibly Alexandria, and if one wishes to agree with Bainton's conclusion that January 6th must have been a generally accepted date for the

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<sup>134</sup> The actual event of the baptism of Jesus by John, as McArthur comments is not specifically related in John 1:24-34, but is non the less implied. McArthur points out that "*the Synoptic narrative is always there behind the Johannine interpretation.*" *ibid.*

baptism by about 110AD, then the orthodox community would have had to have been commemorating the baptism of Christ on January 6th before that date. This would mean that from the writing of the Gospel of Mark c70AD and its use as a Lectionary, to the adoption of January 6th as the general date of the baptism c110AD, there was only an interval of about forty years to make the change. This is not an impossible suggestion and may account for why Gnostic and Orthodox alike celebrated Epiphany on the same date. However, if the Orthodox community continued to use their Lectionary readings beginning after Tabernacles with the baptism, and then at a later time considered themselves to be so divorced from the Jewish community they were no longer connected in any way to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish calendrical system, then perhaps a decision was made to move the New Year to the Roman reckoning of the year, in common with the rest of the empire, beginning in January. This would then mean that on the first Sunday after the January New Year the baptism reading would be set. It would, then, be quite conceivable that orthodox Christianity could adopt the same date for the baptism as the Gnostics, who already celebrated the Epiphany on the 6th January, staking their own claim to it but proclaiming the orthodox definition of the baptism of Christ, that is that he was truly God and truly man, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of a woman and born the Son of God, not adopted by God or appearing on earth as the Gnostic sects maintained.

## Conclusions

Of the two feasts, Epiphany is commonly accepted as the oldest. The earliest evidence for an Epiphany festival on January 6th is from Clement of Alexandria (c150-215AD) who states that the Basilidians held such a festival and celebrated the adoptionist baptism of Jesus. It does not also follow that the same date was necessarily kept by orthodox Christianity, but does bring us to the conclusion that Basilides would not have computed the date from the conception date of Jesus, as such a date would not have been of any importance to an adoptionist. This date must then have been chosen by Basilides for some other reason. Talley sought to deny that 6th January was a widely accepted feast day in the Hellenized Mediterranean world, and this therefore pushed him to a conclusion that the evidence pointed to an argument for arriving at 6th January by computation from 6th April as a Paschal date. However, I believe that there is evidence to suggest that January 6th may have been a significant date in Hellenistic religion, especially in Asia Minor and Egypt, and was celebrated in many places as the '*Epiphany of Dionysus*'. This I believe is the festival at Alexandria which Epiphanius of Salamis describes in his '*Panarion*'. Such was the cosmopolitan spirit of the age that it was perfectly possible for Dionysus to be assimilated into the festivities of the Koreon, just as Isis and Serapis, Osiris and Horus had been. So to some the festival was that of the birth of Aion to Kore, to others the birth of Dionysus

to Persephone and to the Basilidians representative of the adoptionist baptism of Jesus.

If one takes the *Canons of Athanasius* to be indicative of orthodox practice in Egypt by the middle of the fourth century, then this leaves us with the conclusion that at some date between 100AD and 350AD the Church accepted January 6th as the date of the orthodox baptism of Jesus and the point at which the Christian year began. Carrington and Goulder may possibly be correct in their theories that the synoptic Gospels were originally written to act as Sunday Lectionaries for the communities for whom they were intended. The Gospel of Mark may have been written for the community in Alexandria but this theory is only based upon tradition, so could have been intended for one of other Churches around the eastern Mediterranean. The Gospel of John is traditionally assigned to Ephesus and as of a later date may have reflected both the traditions of the Church there whilst taking account of the narratives of the other Gospels. The link between the feast of Tabernacles and Epiphany that these Lectionary theories suggest is an intriguing one. It is, however, one which cannot be addressed satisfactorily within the confines of this thesis. However, a theory which suggests that the early Christian community, which would still have been in some way connected with the Synagogue until the end of the first century, would follow the New Year date of Tabernacles as a new year for the reading of scripture contains much to commend itself. If this theory is applied to the Gospels of Mark and John (those which are thought to have had the most influence in the gentile Church) then the first event in the

narrative, i.e., the baptism, would begin the year. It is then supposed that some time during the second century, the reckoning of the beginning of the year and therefore the beginning of the course reading of the Gospel, moved from the beginning of Tishri to the beginning of January. This move, I believe must have taken place at a time when the Christian community had lost all its connexions with the Synagogue and began to set the date of the Pascha itself without reference to the inaccurate Jewish Lunar Calendar. The tradition of not following the Quartodecimans who celebrated the Christian Pascha on the Julian equivalent of 14th Nisan whatever the day, came from Alexandria c160AD. The date of the Paschal celebrations, calculated by the Alexandrian method and perfected later by Anatolius, always placed the Pascha on a date after the Spring Equinox, falling within the confines of 21st March and 25th April. It may then have been at this point that the course reading of the Gospel was moved, beginning in January with the baptism.

All along I have argued that use of the Computation Theory is not as essential as Talley suggested. Such a tradition, as I have pointed out, did not exist in written form before at least the late fourth century and so therefore cannot be easily applied to calculate the dates of the Epiphany and Christmas. Furthermore, since the Church and the Synagogue split in the first century, by the late fourth century such Jewish traditions would be unknown to the Christian community. We have seen that the Basilideans were celebrating the baptism of Jesus on the 6th January by c200AD according to Clement of Alexandria, probably adopting this date from the indigenous festival at the

Korean in Alexandria and the *Epiphany of Dionysus* which may have continued up to and probably beyond the date of Epiphanius' writing. It would therefore be plausible to suggest that when the orthodox Church translated the beginning of the year to January, they too adopted this date as the date on which the Gospel reading concerning the baptism of Jesus was read, and therefore began celebrating the day as well as commemorating the event with the reading. It is quite possible that a number of the orthodox community also celebrated the baptism along with the Basilidian Church which may have made the transition less troubled. Even so, with both orthodox and the Basilideans celebrating the same event on the same date, the more powerful orthodox would be able to proclaim their belief that Christ was truly divine, born of a human mother, rather than adopted at baptism. With this in mind, it may be suggested that with orthodox Christianity concerned with the threat of heresy up to and beyond the First Council of Nicaea in 325, the orthodox argument that Christ was truly human and truly divine from the point of the incarnation lacked a firm foundation as it was not explicit in the Pascha or the Epiphany. Until such a date when the birth of Christ was celebrated, a commemoration which celebrated only baptism and not incarnation was open to adoptionist interpretation. From the third century onwards it seems that the Church became aware that it must guard against heresy. We have noted that the *De Pascha Computus* of 243AD contained suggestions of a birth date during passiontide and that Clement of Alexandria (c150-215) sought to place the birth on January 6th. The festival of *Sol Invictus* would have posed a threat to the Christian community in the west and

especially in Rome from where Aurelian desired to unite his entire empire around worship of one god. To combat this it would seem probable that Christmas was instituted in Rome sometime after the institution of *Sol Invictus* in 274 and before the conversion of Constantine c320, Christmas being accepted as the beginning of the Liturgical Year by 335 according to the Philocalian Calendar of 354. Epiphany on January 6th probably became an orthodox festival of baptism in the second half of the second century and must have remained basically the same until the beginning of the fourth century. The threat of heresy may have made the East add the theme of the birth of Christ to their celebration, but by 386 Christmas on the 25th December had been adopted by Chrysostom at Antioch.

This brings us to the conclusion that the orthodox Epiphany was probably first celebrated in Egypt at some point during the second century, and that Christmas in Rome, at the earliest, was first celebrated in the latter half of the third century.

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