

# From Cleopatra to Christ

A Devotional Guide to

## Cleopatra: The Search for the Last Queen of Egypt

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## **How Does Cleopatra Relate to Christ?**

Cleopatra died in 30 B.C, a generation before Christ was born. Consider that roughly the same amount of time separates our era from World War II as separates the era of Cleopatra's life and the early church. The famed Roman historian Plutarch, who was contemporary of St. Paul, remembers his grandfather's stories of serving with Mark Antony. Undoubtedly the events of this era would have loomed large in the imaginations of the next generations.

Cleopatra's story is told against the backdrop of Roman civil wars, first between the murderers of Julius Caesar, Cassius and Brutus, and his avengers, Octavian and Antony. But the civil wars continued even after the avengers won, as Antony and Octavian turned against each other. These conflicts engulfed the entire Mediterranean, including the cities of Ephesus and Phillippi. Jewish mercenaries served in her armies and in Antony's armies. Cleopatra crosses paths with Herod the Great, one of the major villains of the gospels. While Cleopatra and Herod were rivals in life, Herod survived her by decades. Joseph and Mary would flee his tyranny and become refugees in Egypt.

Alexandria, Egypt was home to one of the earliest churches outside of Israel. Apollos, the great Christian evangelist, hailed from Alexandria (Acts 18:24). Church tradition tells us that Mark, after working with Peter for a time and condensing his recollections into the gospel of Mark, travelled to Alexandria to build up the Christian community there. For centuries, the Egyptian church was one of the dominant players in the development of Christianity.

By taking advantage of this exhibit, we can come to a richer appreciation of the kind of world in which the early church developed. We also see that the Israel in which Jesus lived was part of a more globally connected network than we generally imagine.

It is my hope that through this devotional guide we will develop a richer appreciation of the Christian Scriptures and their historical setting. At the same time, I hope we can apply the lessons of the ancient world to our lives today.

## **Canopus:**

### Cleopatra as Isis:

In this room you will learn about ways in which Cleopatra used the imagery of the goddess Isis in order to bolster her rule. The exhibit commentary and the audio will instruct you how Cleopatra would participate in theatrical sacred boat journeys in which she used spectacle to reinforce for adoring crowds her association with Isis. Throughout her career, Cleopatra would make use of drama, costume, ornamentation, music, and imagery to further deepen the association with Isis. You will find several examples of such association throughout the exhibit.

In particular, Cleopatra would frequently depict herself as mother Isis with her son Caesarion as Horus. She used such imagery on coinage, on the walls of the great temple of Hathor at Dendera, and even in votive statuettes. In this room you will find a small votive figure of such an image. Though this is not conclusively a figure cast during Cleopatra's time, it gives a good example of the kind of imagery she used to associate herself with the goddess.

This association would prove very helpful following the murder of Caesarion's father, Julius Caesar. In this room you will see a video segment telling the mythic story of the murder of Ra, Isis' faithful search to reassemble the butchered body, and the claim of her son Horus to the throne. Cleopatra was able to appeal to this story as she strove to advance the cause of Caesarion after Julius Caesar was murdered by dozens of Roman senators stabbing him repeatedly with knives.

The Isis/Horus imagery became an opportunity for the early Egyptian church. They transformed the meaning of this Mother/Son imagery away from goddesses and queens and to Mary and Jesus. The popularity of the use of familiar imagery was further reinforced by the Holy Family's sojourn in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-23).

Lest we think that such a usage of pagan imagery is strange or somehow unchristian, let us remember Paul on Mars Hill in Acts 17: He observed the many idols all through Athens. However, his response to this paganism is to re-interpret it through the lens of missions: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious, for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." From there, Paul cites classical poets and philosophers to try to win over his hearers. Paul was able to see the shadows of God's hand even in the pagan culture, and use those shadows to point to Christ.

Scholars have also shown that Solomon appropriated pagan wisdom in compiling his proverbs. Proverbs 22:17-23 closely parallel the first two chapters of the Egyptian wisdom book *The Wisdom of Amen-em-ope*. Similarly, many scholars believe that David adapted a hymn to the pagan god Baal when he wrote Psalm 29.

Such adaptations should not threaten Christians. They demonstrate the old doctrine of common grace -- the idea that all truth, goodness, and beauty find their origin in God. The fact that Biblical writers appropriated previous pagan writings and used them to point to the covenant God gives great hope. We see that God's common grace is all about us. Everything in the world points to the triune God, if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear. With this truth in mind, consider the following passages anew:

- **Psalm 19:1-11:** The heavens declaring God's glory.
- **Psalm 148:** All creatures on earth declaring God's glory.
- **Romans 1:18-23:** God's glory evident in all creation.

What are the missionary opportunities we have all around us to speak about Christ in the midst of the idols around us? In what ways can we see hints of God in the culture around us? How can we appropriate the truth, beauty, and goodness that are in the world around us to point to the triune God who is the creator of all truth, beauty, and goodness?

#### Instruments of Worship:

As you wander this room, you'll encounter several instruments of worship, including lavers, bowls and an offering table. While these instruments would all be somewhat different from those used by the ancient priests of Israel, they can remind us of the many different types of offerings that would be made and the equipment that was required to administer these offerings (Leviticus 1-7). Imagine the care, effort and energy that went into making religious offerings for the sake of asking blessing, seeking guidance, or trying to restore relationship with God.

The book of Hebrews teaches that Christ is our great high priest who offers himself once and for all so that these ritual offerings are no longer necessary. Consider Christ's ongoing offering of himself for us for our forgiveness and our blessing (Hebrews 9:11-10:14)

#### Naos of the Decades:

As you come to the Naos of the Decades, you find one of the most spectacular pieces of this exhibit. In the next room you'll encounter a far less ornate Naos of Khonshu, which by contrast will demonstrate why this Naos of the Decades is such an interesting piece.

Of particular interest is the detailed calendar inscription on the back of the Naos. The exhibit notes and audio tour talk about the great powers attributed to the Naos: protection against enemies and the ability to discern future events. The Naos was kept in the holiest part of the temple (the "holy of holies") and only the priests would have access to it.

This artifact shows the Egyptian advancement in developing a sophisticated calendar system. However it also demonstrates the desire to rule and manipulate time through magic and incantation. The contrast with the Biblical worldview is marked. Deuteronomy 18:9-13 speaks against the practice of divination, seeking omens, or other methods of seeking to discern the future. The people of Israel are to rest in God's provision and leading. The book of Deuteronomy impresses upon Israel that theirs is a special covenant relationship of love. The calling is to be faithful in the relationship: "Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight, so that it may go well with you." (Deuteronomy 6:18a).

In what ways do people seek to find out future events in our era?

How does a confidence in God's providential care give us reassurance in the face of uncertain times?

### **Heracleion:**

#### Temple Worship and the rule of kings:

In this room you find the impressive Colossi of a king and queen of Egypt. You will see on the exhibit information that these Colossi would have been stationed at the entrance of a temple. The common people would be allowed to worship in front of these statues, while the priests would be allowed inside.

The large Colossi reinforced the role of the king as divine representative on earth. The power, might and serenity evident in the statues exhibit a strong and benevolent presence. While stylistic forms of sculptural representation changed in Egyptian history, the basic pose of the statue remained the same. The great pharaohs were represented as powerful intermediaries between the gods and the nation.

Consider the contrast with the Israelite king. The ideal king of Israel is portrayed in Deuteronomy as being humble and considering the Israelites as brothers. Deuteronomy 17:14-17 place limits on the acquisition of wealth and standing armed forces. Then we read this striking statement "When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel." (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). The prophetic histories of the books of Kings demonstrate that as the kings of Israel and Judah abandoned this ideal, their fortunes waned.

Most telling is Christ's own teaching on what it is to lead: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with

you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28). Consider those in our own day who seek to build giant monuments to themselves. Are there ways in which you seek to build monuments to yourself? What might we discern about leadership from these meditations?

### The Holy of Holies: the Naos shrine

In this hall you will also see the Naos of Khonshu. As we saw earlier with the Naos of the Decades, this shrine held a statue of the god. It would have been located in the far back portion of the temple, an area called the “holy of holies.”

The pattern of the temple in Israel is first laid out in the instructions for the tabernacle (Exodus 26). The tabernacle functioned as a portable temple while the Israelites wandered. The permanent temple in Jerusalem was built by Solomon, and was followed the same pattern of the tabernacle (I Kings 6).

The interesting distinctive of the temple in Jerusalem was what was found in the holy of holies. Rather than a Naos shrine with a statue, the temple in Jerusalem housed the ark of the covenant. This chest was not simply a box; it was considered the throne of God. Rather than a representation of God, the Israelites understood God to be spiritually present. This is why images of God were forbidden in the 10 commandments. They understood that God was not confined to the temple but moved all throughout the earth (Psalm 139). Similarly, though the temple was a special place, it was not the only place one met with God. The temple was but the throne room of the king of creation, but that same king met Moses on the mountain and Elijah in the desert.

The understanding of this contrast is heightened by thinking about the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well. (John 4). The woman says “Our fathers worshipped upon this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” To which Jesus replies “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem....a time is coming and has now come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.”

How does this contrast lead you to consider how you view God. Can God be approached anywhere, or must we go to a particular place to meet with God?

### Armor and Weaponry

The display of armor and weaponry reminds us that war was a constant drumbeat in the ancient world. In the audio commentary, you learn more about the conflict between Mark Antony and Octavian. One of the partisans in this conflict was Herod the Great. Early in his career, Herod

was a favorite in Rome. He was a rival to Cleopatra in Roman politics, and he advised Antony to be rid of her. Herod's name lingers in notoriety for his ruthlessness. The historian Josephus spins stories of how Herod had his own family members assassinated. We see a hint of Herod's ruthlessness in the gospel of Matthew when he orders a massacre of children in Galilee (Matthew 2).

War drew many Israelites into mercenary work. Cleopatra used Israelite mercenaries to supplement her armies, and there were many Israelite settlements of retired soldiers. Alexandria boasted a large Israelite quarter. The upper Nile village of Elephantine was a colony of Israelites deep in Egyptian territory. Such settlements would have been places of shelter for refugees from Herod's tyranny – such as Joseph and Mary's sojourn in Egypt in Matthew 2.

Such armor artifacts help us get a more vivid understanding of some of Paul's imagery in his letters. Consider the famous passage about putting on the "whole armor of God" against the spiritual attacks from evil: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled about your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Galatians 6:13-17)

### **Alexandria:**

#### **Wealth and Gold:**

As we enjoy the display of gold jewelry in this section, we can certainly appreciate the beauty and the craftsmanship of these treasures. The audio narrative speaks of the great wealth in the palace of Cleopatra, the rich banquets that astonished the Roman visitors with their decadence. The audio talks about the concept of *tryphe*: the rich display of wealth as an expression of gratitude to the gods for blessing.

However the Old Testament prophets pronounce God's judgment against such ostentatious display when it is built on the backs of suffering people: "In that day, the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, the earrings and bracelets and veils, the headdresses and ankle chains and sashes, the perfume bottles and the charms, the signet rings and nose rings, the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses, and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls." (Isaiah 3:18-23). The jewelry in this exhibit can help you imagine the kinds of instruments used by the wealthy of the ancient world.

And why does God declare he will snatch these things away? Is God against wealth? No. But God sees how wealth corrupted ancient Israel by making the elites greedy: "The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: 'It is you who have ruined my vineyard: the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?' declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 3:14-15)

Rather than a craving for great wealth, we ought to seek to learn the art of contentment: "...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:11-13)

What does the gold stir in your heart? Can we be content seeing the gold of others and appreciating the craftsmanship, or must we have it for ourselves and our own consumption? How do these artifacts make you consider your own contentment?

#### Papyrus document:

The Papyrus fragment is one of the most interesting pieces of the exhibit. It is an opportunity to see the kind of writing and documentation of the ancient world. Since the Christian faith is one that is rooted in the Bible, this piece prompts us to consider the amazing way in which the early Christian scriptures were preserved.

We have thousands of fragments much like this one, and many complete documents. It takes years of scholarship to learn the ancient languages, the scripts, and the syntax. It takes years of study to learn how to piece together the fragments. And yet time and again, the overall consistency of the New Testament documents are demonstrated. Yes there are a few variants among the papyri – what else might we expect from a society that didn't have the benefit of mass replication through printing presses.

It is worth noting that Kurt and Barbara Aland, two of the foremost scholars of New Testament textual evidence, give evidence of over 5,000 early manuscripts of the New Testament documents. By contrast, the much later *Meditations* of Emperor Marcus Aurelius comes to us in two manuscripts dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and a handful of fragmentary extracts from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century. This abundant textual evidence should increase our confidence in the reliability of the New Testament. These many copies testify to the abundant power of God's word, as said in the book of Hebrews "For the word of God is living and active, Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (4:12). The words of the New Testament were powerful, and people made sure they were preserved and transmitted.

#### Taposiris:

##### The melancholy end:

As we follow the hunt for Cleopatra's tomb, consider the melancholy end of the tale: as the armies of Octavian close about, Antony and Cleopatra take their own lives so as not to be paraded as trophies in Octavian's triumph. All the monuments that had been built were washed



to sea or buried. It has taken massive efforts to retrieve the artifacts that you have enjoyed in this visit.

The audio commentary ends this tour with the actress voicing Cleopatra saying:

“I will never be forgotten. My popularity never fades”

As a helpful corrective, we might consider the words of Romantic Poet Percy Shelly

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said -- “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert ... Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that it’s sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on those lifeless things.  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

“Ozymandias” Percy Bysshe Shelley 1817

In contrast to this final splash of glory in these sections, we might consider Jesus’ words from the gospel of Matthew 5:3-5:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; Blessed are they who mourn for they shall be comforted; Blessed are the meek, for their will inherit the earth.”