

St Cyril of Alexandria and the Mysteries of Isis in De Adoratione

by THOMAS PIETSCH

Australian Catholic University/Australian Lutheran College,
University of Divinity

E-mail: thomas.pietsch@myacu.edu.au

In his long, untranslated treatise De adoratione, Cyril of Alexandria interacts with the mysteries of Isis in two places. In one place he describes a ritual involving female initiates dressed in linen holding sistra and mirrors, and in another he describes the rotating of torches as a purification ritual, albeit without naming Isis in either. These passages enrich our understanding of the mysteries of Isis, and of Cyril's engagement with the cult beyond his purported actions at Menouthis. The passages also suggest why and how Alexandrian Christians engaged in Isiac practices, and show Cyril the bishop constructing a pastoral response to these practices.

During a discussion of idolatrous rituals in his untranslated treatise, *On worship and service in spirit and truth (De adoratione)*, Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444) asks: ‘How could torches rotating in a circle deliver the one who has sinned?’¹ Could Cyril here be referring to the mysteries of Isis and revealing details of Isiac cultic practice? Modern scholarship has largely confined Cyril’s engagement with the cult of Isis to one episode at the nearby coastal town of Menouthis.² Writing close to two centuries after the purported events, Sophronius of Jerusalem

CPG = *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*; NETS = *New English translation of the Septuagint*; PG = *Patrologia Graeca*

My thanks to Matthew R. Crawford, Jonathan L. Zecher and Michael W. Champion for their helpful comments and encouragement. The research on which the article is based was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

¹ ‘καὶ δῶδες ἐν κύκλῳ περιθέουσαι πῶς ἂν ἐξέλαιντο τὸν ἡμαρτηκότα’: PG lxviii.444B–C.

² See, for example, John A. McGuckin, ‘The influence of the Isis cult on St Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology’, in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica*, xxiv, Leuven 1993, and Sarolta Takács, ‘The magic of Isis replaced, or Cyril of

(c. 560–638) described Cyril’s translation of the relics of the Diocletianic martyrs, SS Cyrus and John, from St Mark’s basilica in Alexandria to a church neighbouring the Isis cult at Menouthis, the popularity of which he was seeking to supplant.³ While the homiletical fragments of Cyril that Sophronius alone preserves have typically been considered authentic, there are dissenting scholars who have raised doubts about whether Cyril himself preached at Menouthis or oversaw such a challenge to the cult of Isis.⁴ But beyond Menouthis, there is other evidence of Cyril’s engagement with the cult of Isis, given in a treatise that has an undisputed claim to authenticity.

In this article I argue that in two passages from his treatise, *De adoratione*, Cyril reveals details of how the mysteries of Isis were practised, describing rituals involving female initiates dressed in linen with sistra and mirrors, and the rotating of torches. He also addresses why and how Alexandrian Christians engaged in Isiac practices, giving his own pastoral response. Recently, Hans van Loon has looked at Cyril’s use of the terminology of mystery cults.⁵ Reflecting the current scholarly understanding, he restricts Cyril’s engagement with the cult of Isis to the shrine at Menouthis, and claims that, as the shrine was concerned with incubation and healing, there is no evidence of Cyril’s engagement with initiation into the mysteries of Isis.⁶ An earlier scholar, Etienne Driorton, ruled out there being any references in Cyril to Isis at all.⁷ Nevertheless, some scholars of the cult of Isis have recognised that Cyril’s engagement with Isis extended beyond the purported events at Menouthis, beginning with an identification made by the Czech philologist Theodor Hopfner.⁸ This study seeks to show that Cyril does engage with the cult of Isis outside of

Alexandria’s attempt at redirecting religious devotion’, *Poikila Byzantina* xiii (1994), 489–507.

³ In the work, *Laudes in SS Cyrum et Joannem* (CPG 5262), Sophronius mentions John the Almsgiver as the current patriarch of Alexandria, an office he held from 610 to 620. See Bronwen Neil, ‘The miracles of Saints Cyrus and John: the Greek text and its transmission’, *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* ii (2006), 183–93 at p. 187.

⁴ See, for example, Jean Gascoü, ‘Les Origines du culte des saints Cyr et Jean’, *Analecta Bollandiana* cxxv (2007), 241–81. Gascoü gives a summary of his position at pp. 266–8. See also Dominic Montserrat, ‘Pilgrimage to the shrine of SS Cyrus and John at Menouthis in late antiquity’, in David Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and holy space in late antique Egypt*, Leiden 1998. Montserrat summarises differing positions at pp. 261–4 while arguing in support of the authenticity of Sophronius’ account.

⁵ Hans van Loon, ‘The terminology of mystery cults in Cyril of Alexandria’, in Albert Geljon and Nienke Vos (eds), *Rituals in early Christianity*, Leiden 2020, 106–34.

⁶ *Ibid.* 121.

⁷ E. Driorton, ‘Cyrille D’Alexandrie et l’ancienne religion Égyptienne’, *Kyrialliana, Seminarium Franciscane Orientale Ghizae* (1947), 233–46 at pp. 234–5; cf. McGuckin, ‘The influence of the Isis cult’, 292.

⁸ Theodor Hopfner, *Fontes historiae religionis aegypticae*, iv, Bonn 1924, 654.

Sophronius' account of the episode at Menouthis, and that the engagement is both different and richer than scholarship has identified.

Cyril's *De adoratione* is an untranslated and relatively unexplored treatise, lacking a consensus not only on its dating, but even on its genre and purpose.⁹ In part, this is perhaps due to its length, which runs to over 200,000 words, but also to its novel structure and occasionally baroque expression. The work is a dialogue between Cyril and a certain Palladius who takes the role of a student, seeking to understand how the law of Israel can now be understood in Christ and so be of profit for Christians. Cyril leads Palladius through a journey on the Christian way of life, employing the Pentateuch as his primary text. However, Cyril by no means confines himself to the Pentateuch, nor does he work through the Pentateuch in sequential order. His exegesis fits within a larger pedagogical structure that is divided into seventeen thematic books and is not intended as a comprehensive or lemmatic commentary. Rather, Cyril gravitates especially (but not exclusively) to those texts concerning the cultic dimensions of Israel's law, seeking to show how a Christian may now live according to these texts in spirit and in truth. Thus while the title of the work is a near quotation of Christ's words in John iv. 24, Cyril adds λατρεία to the text, a word that specifically means cultic service, while incorporating also 'the demand for right disposition of the heart and the demonstration of this in the whole of religious and moral conduct'.¹⁰ Some readers of *De adoratione* – most prominently and influentially Robert Louis Wilken – have considered the work to be a polemical work against Judaism.¹¹ While Cyril certainly does engage in polemic, his target is not restricted to the Jews but extends also, as this article demonstrates, to the Isiac cult and other non-Christian cultic practices. But, more importantly, *De adoratione* is fundamentally a constructive work, concerned with the practical dimensions of living a Christian life in a late-antique Alexandrian context. As such, it

⁹ The treatise's name is ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΝ ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙ ΚΑΙ ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑΙ ΠΡΟΣΚΥΝΗΣΕΩΣ ΚΑΙ ΛΑΤΡΕΙΑΣ, but it is commonly known by its shortened Latin title, *De adoratione*, which is employed in this paper. The text can be found at *PG* lxxviii.133–1125. A critical edition of the first book (of seventeen) can be found in *Kyrrill von Alexandrien: De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate Buch 1*, ed. and trans. Barbara Villani, Berlin 2021. For recent discussions on the genre and purpose of *De adoratione* see Mark W. Elliott, 'What Cyril of Alexandria's *De adoratione* is all about', in Allen Brent and Markus Vinzent (eds), *Studia Patristica*, 1, Leiden 2011, 245–52; Matthew R. Crawford, 'The preface and subject matter of Cyril of Alexandria's *De adoratione*', *JTS* lxiv/1 (2013), 154–67; and Villani, *De adoratione Buch 1*, 20–8.

¹⁰ H. Strathmann, 'Λατρεύω, Λατρεία', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, iv, Grand Rapids, MI 1967, 58–65 at p. 60.

¹¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *Judaism and the early Christian mind: a study of Cyril of Alexandria's exegesis and theology*, New Haven 1971. For a summary of those who have read *De adoratione* as a polemic against Judaism, and for the alternative reading proposed by Elliott and Crawford see Crawford, 'The preface and subject matter', 162–4.

provides a unique window into lived ritual practices, coming from a central figure in the history of Alexandria.

When it comes to polemic against Hellenic challenges to Christianity, *Contra Iulianum* is Cyril's most direct retort. In that work, Cyril claimed that Alexandrian followers of the Emperor Julian were boasting that no Christian teacher had responded to Julian's critiques, made over fifty years earlier.¹² *Contra Iulianum* is a foray into this battle of ideas, making the case for the plausibility of Christian doctrine against Julian's intellectual critiques. With its concern for practice, *De adoratione* strikes a different and yet complementary note. In addressing his Christian audience on how to strive for perfection in their way of life amid their surrounding temptations, Cyril partly situates his instruction in the broad cultic environment that Alexandrian Christians found themselves in, including the Isiac cult.

It is noteworthy that Cyril's engagement both with Hellenic doctrine in *Contra Iulianum* and with cultic practices in *De adoratione* occurred against a backdrop of a forced retreat of many Hellenic rituals from Alexandria's public spaces. Cyril's predecessor and uncle Theophilus (patriarchate 385–412) had overseen a thorough closure of the city's temples. The Tychaïum, the temple of Dionysus and most famously the Serapeum (in 392) were all seized and repurposed as churches and martyr shrines.¹³ In doing this, Theophilus was enacting imperial legislation, for a series of Theodosian edicts in 391 forbade blood sacrifices and prohibited access to Hellenic temples.¹⁴ Sixteen years later and five years before Cyril was elected bishop, the legal provisions were strengthened by the edict of Honorius and Theodosius II which decreed that 'Pagan altars in all places should be destroyed and all temples on our (imperial) estates should be transferred to suitable uses ... to bishops of the local regions we grant the faculty of ecclesiastical power to prohibit the said practices.'¹⁵

There is no record of Cyril himself overseeing the destruction of altars, but nor is there a record of any Hellenic altars remaining in Alexandria, save for the shrine of Isis at Menouthis. It seems likely that the destruction of Alexandria's Serapeum had increased the popularity of the shrine at

¹² Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Iulianum*, GCS, prologue, 5.

¹³ See Zsolt Kiss, 'Alexandria in the fourth to seventh centuries', in Roger S. Bagnall (ed.), *Egypt in the Byzantine world, 300–700*, Cambridge 2007, 187–206.

¹⁴ Codex Theodosianum 16.10.10–11. See Laurent Bricault, 'Isis, Sarapis, Cyrus and John: between healing gods and thaumaturgical saints', in Juan Luis García Alonso, Luis Arturo Guichard and María Paz de Hoz (eds), *The Alexandrian tradition: interactions between science, religion, and literature*, Bern 2014, 97–114 at p. 106.

¹⁵ Codex Theodosianum 16.10.19. The translation is from John A. McGuckin, *St Cyril of Alexandria: the Christological controversy*, Crestwood, IL 2004, 10. While the law refers simply to 'altars' ('arae'), the previous sentence mentions the 'ritum paganorum' and so McGuckin is warranted in translating these as 'pagan altars'.

Menouthis, dedicated as it was to the consort of Serapis.¹⁶ Rather than destroy or seize the shrine, Sophronius of Jerusalem – some two centuries later – records Cyril as seeking to supplant its popularity by transferring martyr relics to a neighbouring church, dedicated to the Holy Evangelists. In the second homily Cyril is said to have preached on that occasion, Sophronius records him as saying:

So that we might be of service to all places, and especially those situated around the church of the Holy Evangelists, for those who live there – having no martyr shrine – were going off to some other places, and despite being Christians were falling into error, we therefore sought relics of holy martyrs out of necessity.¹⁷

This episode has received much scholarly attention, and while the homiletical fragments are often assumed to be authentic, there are dissenting opinions. In 1998 Dominic Montserrat considered that no consensus had emerged, even while arguing himself for their authenticity.¹⁸ The Sophronius scholar Jean Gascou has written that while at least one of the homiletical fragments bears the unmistakable mark of Cyril's vocabulary, style and even thought, nevertheless it is best considered as 'un faux'.¹⁹ John McGuckin treats the fragments as authentically Cyrillian, the position most commonly taken in scholarship today, and it is worth noting that there is no dispute that the Isiac shrine at Menouthis existed, owing to its appearance in the riot of the 480s.²⁰ If Sophronius' account is not authentic, then *De adoratione* would seem to provide the most significant account of Cyril's engagement with the Isiac cult. But if the homilies at Menouthis are from Cyril, then these passages in *De adoratione* show the prevalence of Isiac cultic practices provoking Cyril's later cultic response at Menouthis, much as the force of Julian's intellectual arguments had provoked Cyril's more doctrinal response in *Contra Iulianum*. Moreover, his cultic and pastoral response at Menouthis would be one consistent with his written response to Isiac cultic practices in the pages of *De adoratione*.

The sistrum and the mirror

In book 9 of *De adoratione*, Cyril gives the construction of the tabernacle a spiritual reading as a part of his project of instructing Christians in the

¹⁶ McGuckin, 'The influence of the Isis cult', 292.

¹⁷ "Ἴνα τοίνυν πάντα ὠφελήσωμεν τοὺς τόπους, καὶ μάλιστα τοὺς περικειμένους τῇ τῶν Ἁγίων Εὐαγγελιστῶν ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἀπήρισαν γὰρ οὐκ ἔχοντες μαρτύριον εἰς ἑτέρους τινὰς τόπους, καὶ Χριστιανοὶ ὄντες ἐσφάλλοντο, διὰ τοῦτο ἀναγκαίως ἐζητήσαμεν ἁγίων μαρτύρων λείψανα": PG lxxvii.1101B.

¹⁸ Montserrat, 'Pilgrimage', 261–8.

¹⁹ Gascou, 'Les Origines du culte des saints Cyr et Jean', 256–7. Gascou provides his reasoning more fully at pp. 266–8.

²⁰ See McGuckin, 'The influence of the Isis cult'. On the riot see Edward J. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: tradition and group dynamics in late antique pagan and Christian communities*, Berkeley, CA 2010.

excellent way of life. After some time, he comes to the construction of the bronze washbasin and base, made, as LXX puts it, ‘from the mirrors of the women who fasted, who fasted by the doors of the tent of witness’.²¹ As their dialogue progresses on this theme, Palladius asks Cyril about the mirrors and the women who fasted. Who were they?

Cyril responds that as the Israelites suffered under Egyptian slavery for a long time, they began to live according to the Egyptian customs (‘τοῖς ἐκείνων διαβιούντες νόμοις’):

Accordingly, it was a custom especially for the women of the Egyptians to go often into temples, having been clothed in linen dress, and adorned in sacred fashion with a mirror in their left hand and a sistrum in their right. Even those chosen among others specially as initiates were scarcely deemed worthy of this honour, or indeed of this outrage, for thus it is better and truer to say. So the women among those of the blood of Israel, finding among their instruments the remnants of the worship of Egypt, offered these mirrors as a first-fruit offering, which were refashioned into the material of the wash basin.²²

While the passage purports to present historical detail, it is unlikely that Cyril researched ancient Egyptian practices. On the contrary, it seems most likely that Cyril inferred past customs from present ones, not least because a few lines later he refers back to the very mirrors under discussion as the Hellenic mirrors (‘κατόπτρων Ἑλληνικῶν’), either inadvertently or deliberately eliding Egyptian ritual customs with Hellenic ones.²³ In so doing his depiction of historic ‘Egyptian’ cultic practice is apparently indistinguishable from contemporary ‘Hellenic’ cultic practice in Alexandrian Egypt.

Cyril’s description resembles Isiac customs, and the mystery rites especially, albeit without naming Isis. Women were especially devoted to Isis, with, for example, a late second century AD Isiac altar describing her as

²¹ Exodus xxxviii.26 (*NETS*). The verse is alternatively numbered in LXX as xxxviii. 8, which is the numbering of the Hebrew text.

²² ‘Ἔθος τοίνυν Αἰγυπτίων μάλιστα γυναῖξιν, εἰσφοιτῶν ἱεροῖς, λιπῆ μὲν ἐσθῆτι κατεσταλμέναις, κατόπτρῳ δὲ τὴν ἀριστερᾶν, καὶ σείστρῳ τὴν δεξιᾶν ἱεροπρεπῶς κατεστεμμέναις, αἱ ὅτι μάλιστα τῶν ἄλλων ἐξειλεγμέναί καὶ ἱερομύστιδες, τῆς τοιαύτης μόλις ἤξιούντο τιμῆς, ὕβρεως μὲν οὖν· ὠδε γὰρ ἄμεινόν τε καὶ ἀληθὲς εἰπεῖν. Γύναϊα δὴ οὖν τῶν ἐξ αἵματος Ἰσραὴλ, λείψανα τῆς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ λατρείας ἐν ἰδίοις σκεύεσιν εὐρηκότα, ταυτὶ δὴ τὰ κάτωπτρα προσεκόμισαν εἰς καρποφορίαν, ἃ καὶ εἰς τὸ τοῦ λουτήρος μετεσκευάσθη χρῆμα’: *PG* lxxviii.629D–632A.

²³ In an earlier passage in *De adoratione*, Cyril more explicitly connects past Egyptian ritual with present Hellenic ritual concerning the defilement that comes from corpses: ‘It was a custom for the Egyptians, which has been preserved until today by the worshippers of idols, that those who were going to enter the temples, had to be careful not to encounter a corpse’ (‘Αἰγυπτίους ἦν ἔθος, τετήρηται δὲ καὶ εἰς δεῦρο παρὰ τοῖς τῶν εἰδώλων προσκυνηταῖς, τὸ δεῖν, εἰσφοιτῶντας ἐν ἱεροῖς, νεκρῷ περτυχεῖν παραιτεῖσθαι σώματι’): *PG* lxxviii.189D.

the protectress of women.²⁴ While LXX mentions nothing of their dress, Cyril describes the women as wearing linen, which was customary of the initiates of Isis²⁵ – the women here also being referred to by Cyril as initiates (‘ἱερομύστιδες’). But perhaps most striking is the holding of a sistrum and a mirror. Sistra are strongly associated with Isis, while mirrors also feature in Isiac mystery ritual. To take the richest source for the mysteries of Isis, the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, Lucius in book 11 has a vision of Isis at the beach. Among other things, she is depicted as having a mirror in the middle of her forehead and as holding a sistrum in her right hand.²⁶ In her speech, she describes the high priest as having a sistrum in his right hand, and he appears thus later in the book.²⁷ Moreover, in the procession leading to Lucius’ initiation, there are women with polished mirrors tied to the backs of their heads. The procession also includes men and women who carry sistra made of brass, silver and gold.²⁸

While Cyrillian scholarship has not yet given attention to this passage, scholars of Isis have previously recognised the symbolism of Cyril’s description here, beginning with a listing of this passage by the Czech philologist Theodor Hopfner in a 1924 catalogue of references to Egyptian religion.²⁹ In 1947 the archaeologist and Egyptologist Etienne Driorton imagined Cyril was referring to priestesses of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1550–1292 BC).³⁰ Michael Malaise and Richard Veymiers were on more solid ground when they mentioned in passing that Cyril’s use of ‘ἱερομύστιδες’ refers to initiates.³¹ In her 1975 study *The cult of Isis among women in the Graeco-Roman world*, Sharon Kelly Heyob also picked up this passage *via* Hopfner’s work, recognising the references as Isiac.³²

²⁴ Sharon Kelly Heyob, *The cult of Isis among women in the Graeco-Roman world*, Leiden 1975, 53, and at pp. 81ff. for a discussion of the participation of women in the cult of Isis.

²⁵ For example, references to linen garments occur throughout Apuleius’ chapter on Isis, both as being worn by Isis herself in Lucius’ vision, and also by initiates and priests. See Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* 11.3, 11.10, 11.14, 11.23, 11.24, 11.27.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 11.3–4.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 11.6; 11.12.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 11.10.

²⁹ Hopfner, *Fontes historiae religionis aegypticae*, 654. See also Richard Veymiers, ‘Introduction: agents, images, practices’, in Valentino Gasparini and Richard Veymiers (eds), *Individuals and materials in the Greco-Roman cults of Isis: agents, images, and practices*, Leiden 2018, 1–58 at p. 21.

³⁰ Driorton, ‘Cyrille D’Alexandrie et l’ancienne religion Égyptienne’, 241–2.

³¹ Michael Malaise and Richard Veymiers, ‘Les Dévotes isiaques et les atours de leur déesse’, in Gasparini and Veymiers, *Individuals and materials*, 470–508 at p. 504.

³² Heyob, *The cult of Isis among women in the Graeco-Roman world*, 125. Heyob translates ‘ὄβρειος’ as sexual wantonness and so surmises that Cyril was mocking the women initiates of Isis as unchaste.

Hathor, whose cult traditionally also included sistra and bore similar characteristics to that of Isis,³³ is one possible alternative for identification in this cultic scene. Yet the relative prominence of Isis in late antiquity makes the plausibility slim, including the fact that the Isiac shrine at Menouthis survived the Theophilus purge when the record shows few other, if any, Hellenic shrines or temples in greater Alexandria did. Further, the cluster of Isiac cultic objects and practices that Cyril identifies makes Isis the most plausible identification. Female initiates, linen garments, sistra and mirrors all contribute to a portrait that most clearly aligns with the Isiac mystery cult.

How might Cyril have come to understand the Isiac mystery rituals? Remnants of Isiac material culture do show altars dedicated to Isis that include depictions of Isis or Isiac priestesses with sistra, as shown in a second-century Roman altar (*see* Fig. 1). The figures depicted here appear on the sides of the altar dedicated to Isis. Jörg Rüpke describes the male on the left as Astralagus, who dedicates the altar to Isis, ‘presenting a dove above an altar full of fruits’. The offering of fruits to Isis could plausibly be the context for Cyril’s remark that the Israelite women offered their mirrors ‘as a first fruit offering’ (‘εἰς καρποφορίαν’) for the construction of the temple washbasin. The female figure on the right side of the altar, Rüpke adds, is ‘probably Isis rather than an Isiac priestess’, ‘with sistrum and sacrificial vessels’ (‘patera and situla’).³⁴

Might remnants of altars such as this one in Alexandria have informed Cyril’s understanding of the mysteries of Isis, following the purges of his predecessor Theophilus? The survival of the Isis shrine at Menouthis attests to the continuity of Isiac material culture in greater Alexandria, and it is plausible to think that Cyril would have been exposed to other remnants of Isiac material culture. But Cyril’s eliding of ‘Egyptian’ with ‘Hellenic’ when referring to the mirrors perhaps suggests he is referring to contemporary practices of the Isis mysteries. Further, Cyril’s treatment of these mirrors presents them as being redeemed, transformed from use in an Egyptian/Hellenic cult to a new use in the worship of Israel, which is finally perfected in Christ, in spirit and truth. Indeed, as the discussion progresses, Cyril says the episode in Exodus looks forward to the appearance of the true tabernacle, the Church, when those devoted to demons will be transformed into consecrated vessels, suitable for the reception of holy baptism.³⁵ Cyril does not, then, draw an analogy to the repurposing of cultic material for the Church in this own day. Rather, the

³³ See Gaëlle Tallet, ‘Mourir en isiaque? Réflexions sur les portraits de momie de l’Égypte romaine’, in Gasparini and Veymiers, *Individuals and materials*, 413–47, esp. pp. 419–31, subtitled ‘Isis ou Hathor?’

³⁴ Jörg Rüpke, ‘Theorising religion for the individual’, *ibid.* 61–73 at p. 71.

³⁵ *PG* lxviii.632A–B.

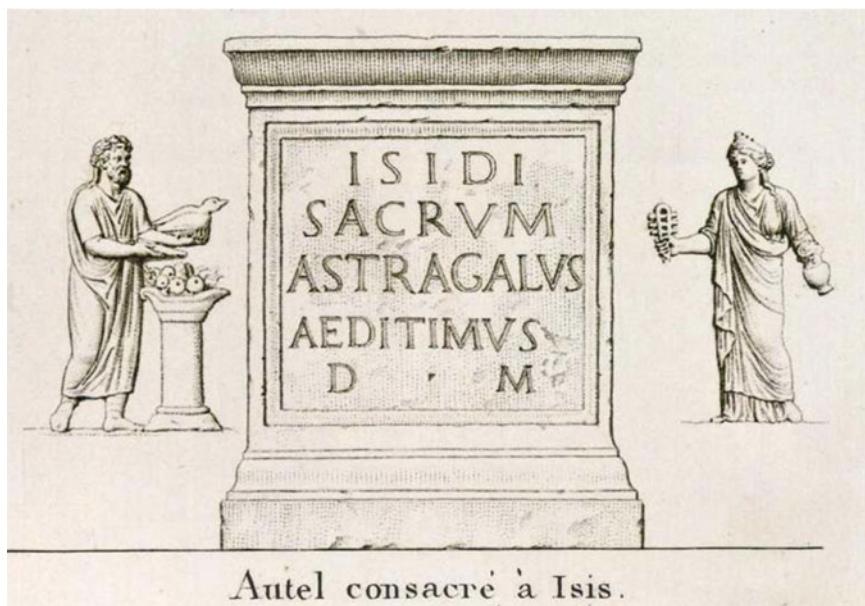


Figure 1. 'Drawing of the marble votive altar of Astragalus, Rome, mid second century CE, Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. MA 1544. After Bouillon 1811–27', reproduced in Gasparini and Veymiers, *Individuals and materials*, 1000. See also p. 1012 for photographs of the original.

analogue of the mirrors is those who worship demons, and the analogue of the washbasin is the soul prepared for baptism, ready to receive sanctifying water. Cyril's concern is more fundamentally pastoral, then – an appeal for people once devoted to non-Christian cultic practices to be prepared for sacramental reception into the Church.³⁶ It is noteworthy that the mirror ('κάτοπτρον') in the left hand that Cyril describes here in book 9 of *De adoratione* is not clearly attested either in Apuleius, or in extant material representations, such as that depicted in this Roman altar. Might Cyril be describing an Alexandrian version of the Isiac mysteries that he learned about from images on votive shrines? It is plausible. But given that Cyril moves to a spiritual and pastoral reading of the cultic material, it seems more plausible that Cyril's understanding was grounded in hearsay and reports of the cultic activity of Alexandrians, including those

³⁶ For a discussion on the growing interest and need to address Cyril's pastoral practice see Pauline Allen, 'St Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, and pastoral care', in Philip Kariatlis, Doru Costache and Mario Baghos (eds), *Alexandrian legacy: a critical appraisal*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, 228–45.

of his flock. This concern for contemporary idolatrous practices even among his Christian flock can also be seen in our next passage.

Purification by fire and water

Cyril's goal throughout *De adoratione* is to guide Christians through the way of life that is in Christ. While this is fundamentally a constructive vision, Cyril regularly warns his readers of the temptations that will come their way. The book that deals most thoroughly with temptations arising from Hellenic cultic practices is book 6, whose significant title echoes Deuteronomy vi. 5: 'That it is necessary that we devote ourselves to he who alone is God according to nature, and love him with a complete soul and heart.'³⁷ In this book Cyril addresses the temptation for Christians not to love God with a complete soul and heart, but rather to engage in 'εικαιολατρεία', vain or useless cultic service.³⁸ He mentions the constant temptations of Israel to idolatry before bringing his concerns to the immediate context of his first readers:

But sometimes it is one of those enrolled among us, one who is not yet firmly planted, but, practising an affected and counterfeit love³⁹ for Christ of the sort which, placing around oneself like a sheep-skin⁴⁰ an appearance that is God-loving, is a hateful and unholy beast, a deceitful knave, who, at home and at night (by which I mean secretly) is devoted to the cultic service of demons, thinking – as one would expect – it possible to escape God, and to fool the mind of the unutterable nature.⁴¹

Cyril spends the rest of the book admonishing his Christian readers to avoid various practices of the cultic service ('λατρεία') of demons: the

³⁷ "Ὅτι χρῆ Θεῷ τῷ κατὰ φύσιν ἡμᾶς προσκεῖσθαι μόνῳ, καὶ ἀγαπᾶν αὐτὸν ἐξ ὅλης ψυχῆς καὶ καρδίας": *PG* lxviii.408C.

³⁸ *PG* lxviii.421D–424A.
³⁹ Cyril's use of 'ἀγάπη' with reference to God in the chapter heading is here repeated. In a short article J. Gwyn Griffiths has drawn attention 'to the importance of the phrase ἀ[γά]πη θε/ῶν, used of Isis'. The association of Isis with love extends to the point where 'her benevolence assumes a wider, including a cosmic, aspect' as evidenced in Lucius' vision in which Isis brings 'the sweet love of a mother to the trials of the unfortunate': 'Isis and "the love of the gods"', *JTS* xxix (1978), 147–51. That Cyril deals extensively with the love of God in this chapter 6 focusing on ritual temptations is perhaps evidence of Cyril reacting to the Isiac cult (see, for example, *PG* lxviii.409, 412, 413, 417, 420, 421 etc.).

⁴⁰ Correcting *PG* κώδιον.
⁴¹ 'Ἄλλ' ὁ μὲν τις ἔσθ' ὅτε τῶν τελούντων ἐν ἡμῖν, ἐρηρσιζόμενος δὲ οὐπω λίαν, κατὰπλαστον δὲ καὶ νόθην τὴν εἰς Χριστὸν ἐπιτηδεύσας ἀγάπησιν, καὶ οἷος ὡσπερ κῶδιον ἐαυτῷ περιτιθεὶς τὸ δοκεῖν εἶναι θεοφιλῆς, πικρὸν καὶ ἀνόσιον ἔσται θηρίον, κέρκωψ τε καὶ ἀλλοπρόσαλλος, ὡς οἶκοι καὶ νυκτί, φημί δὴ τὸ λεληθότως, ταῖς τῶν δαυμονίων προσκεῖσθαι λατρείαις, οἶεσθαι δὲ πού κατὰ τὸ εἰκόσ, καὶ αὐτὸν δύνασθαι διαδράναι Θεόν, καὶ τὸν τῆς ἀρρήτου φύσεως παραλογίσασθαι νοῦν': *PG* lxviii.424B–C.

false divinations of idol-worshippers ('αἱ τῶν εἰδωλολατρούντων ψευδομαντεῖαι'),⁴² soothsayers ('χρησμολόγοι'),⁴³ necromancy ('νεκῦομαντεία'),⁴⁴ practising purification rites ('φοιβάω'),⁴⁵ submission to fate, fortune and birth ('Εἰμαρμένη, Τύχη καὶ Γένεσιν'),⁴⁶ the observation of hours, days and times ('Ἡ ὥρῶν ἄρα καὶ ἡμερῶν ἐπιτήρησις ... καὶ ἡ καιρῶν')⁴⁷ and auguries, whisperings and spells ('οἰωνοσκοπία, ψιθῦρισμοί τε καὶ ἐπωδαί').⁴⁸ In all of these discussions, Cyril's typical point of reference is the biblical text, and occasionally the Hellenic intellectual tradition. While he certainly is addressing Christian readers in Alexandria and beyond, his discussion of these non-Christian practices does not always suggest that the temptations were live ones for Alexandrian Christians, expounding as he is upon the biblical text and Hellenic tradition. Nevertheless, there are moments when Cyril does address his contemporary context more directly, providing a window into the cultic and practical lives of Alexandrian Christians, and the temptations to which those 'not yet firmly planted' succumbed 'at home and at night'.

One such place is Cyril's critique of ritual purification by fire. His biblical point of reference, cited by his interlocutor Palladius, is Deut. xviii.10 (*NETS*): 'There shall not be found among you one who cleanses his son or his daughter by fire.' While the Hebrew text is a condemnation of child sacrifice, Cyril takes the Septuagint text as forbidding purification rituals involving fire. He commends the law both for addressing ('πρόσφημι') this practice and denying ('ἀπόφημι') it, and soon makes observations beyond the biblical text, in the realm of his contemporary society: 'For in what way would the nature of fire be of benefit to us? And how could torches rotating in a circle deliver the one who has sinned?'⁴⁹ Before discussing these torches, it is worth paraphrasing the rest of Cyril's argument. Fire, he writes, can purify metal, but it is risible to imagine it can remove the pollution of the mind and soul, and yet this is precisely the claim of the chosen ranks of the Hellenes ('τοῖς Ἑλλήνων λογάσιν'). If it could, why would the Hellenes not simply free all the gods who suffer perpetual punishment for their sins?⁵⁰ And yet all the while the Hellenes are convicted of terrible vices only to release themselves with fire and branches ('πυρὶ καὶ θαλλοῖς'), thus washing off the accusations. Moreover, their accomplices, the ministers of purification ('τοὺς

⁴² PG lxviii.425A. ⁴³ PG lxviii.429B. ⁴⁴ PG lxviii.437B. ⁴⁵ PG lxviii.448A.

⁴⁶ PG lxviii.449A. ⁴⁷ PG lxviii.460C. ⁴⁸ PG lxviii.468B.

⁴⁹ 'ὀνήσει γὰρ κατὰ τίνα δὴ τρόπον ἢ πυρὸς ἡμᾶς φύσις; καὶ δᾶδες ἐν κύκλῳ περιθέουσαι πῶς ἂν ἐξέλονται τὸν ἡμαρτηκότα': PG lxviii.444B–C.

⁵⁰ Cyril asks: 'why is Tityus languishing in Hades with vultures as devourers of his liver? Why does a stone hang over Tantalus? Why is Ixion bound to the spokes of a wheel? Prometheus himself can hardly be said to lack the fire needed for purification, and yet you sing that he was held by unbreakable bonds. Give already! Give him purification through fire!' ('Δότε δὲ, δότε τὴν διὰ πυρὸς κάθαρσιν'): PG lxviii.445A.

της καθάρσεως ὑπουργούς’) are the most abominable of all (‘μάλιστα τῶν ἄλλων μυσαρωτάτους’), for they abandon the principle of manliness (‘τὸν ἀνδροπρεπῆ μεθέντες λόγον’) and degrade their bodies and tokens to the morals and manners of women. How will such a one purify? For, Cyril continues, even if one happens to be anointed with myrrh (‘καταμυρίζεσθαι’), nevertheless he will remain smeared with the most disordered slime. Cyril adds that these worshippers of evil spirits (‘τοὺς τῶν δαιμονίων προσκυνητάς’) are ignorant both of the way to cleanse and of what true defilement is. So they avoid dead bodies (‘νεκρῶν ἀποφοιτώσι σωμαίων’) and abhor that which is decomposed (‘καὶ καταμυσάττονται τὸ κατεφθαρμένον’). And if they should happen accidentally to come into contact with forbidden foods, ‘immediately leaping up, they hasten to purification through fire or water, on the grounds that if they abstain from these things alone, they will be holy and pure’.⁵¹ But, Cyril concludes, true purification (‘κάθαρσις ἀληθής’) comes in the bath of rebirth (‘τῷ λουτρῷ τῆς παλιγγενεσίας’), bringing grace of the Spirit who like a fire (‘ὁ καὶ πυρὸς δίκην’) consumes our defilement. ‘For the divinely inspired Scripture says for good reason that we have been baptised with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’⁵²

In looking at this passage, it seems plausible that Cyril is referring to rituals of purification practised by Alexandrians, seemingly administered by (or at least in some connection with) priests that he regarded as effeminate, ‘the ministers of purification’ (‘τοὺς τῆς καθάρσεως ὑπουργούς’). While anointing with myrrh (‘καταμυρίζεσθαι’) is mentioned, Cyril’s focus is on fire and water, including describing a purification ritual that involves torches rotating in a circle (‘δαδες ἐν κύκλῳ περιθέουσαι’). The phrase is a unique one, with the only similar occurrence in another work of Cyril himself, in his commentary on Isaiah. On Isaiah lxxv.5, Cyril writes that the evil and unclean spirits seek to persuade worshippers that they will be pure (‘ἔσονται καθαροί’) ‘with a torch having been taken hold of by them, revolving in a circle of fire, or perhaps, also by the sprinkling of water’.⁵³ While in *De adoratione* the torches are the subject of the verb (‘περιθέω’), here the worshippers seeking purification are revolving the torch. But evidently Cyril is describing the same purification ritual,

⁵¹ ‘εὐθὺς ἀναθρώσκοντες ἐπὶ τὴν διὰ πυρὸς ἢ ὕδατος ἵενται κάθαρσιν, ὡς ἂν εἰ μόνον ἀπόσχοιντο τούτων, ἅγιοι τε καὶ εὐκρινεῖς ἐσόμενοι’: *PG* lxxviii.445D.

⁵² ‘Ἐν Πνεύματι γὰρ ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ βεβαπτίσθαι ἡμᾶς φησι ταύτητοι δικαίως ἢ θεόπνευστος Γραφή’: *PG* lxxviii.448D. The whole discussion paraphrased in this paragraph occurs at *PG* lxxviii.444B–448D.

⁵³ ‘δαδὸς ἀφθείσης παρ’ αὐτοῖς, καὶ κύκλῳ πυρὸς περιθέοντες, ἢ τάχα πῦρ, καὶ ὕδατος ῥαντισμοῦ’: *PG* lxx.1408D. Robert Hill died before he could finish the translation of his third and final volume of Cyril’s Isaiah commentary which would have included this passage.

and again with the addition of water. And yet it is a cultic ritual that appears to be unknown in other sources.

The cultic practice of initiation described in book 9 is evidently Isiac. Could this purification ritual of fire in book 6 refer to the mysteries of a cult other than Isis? In his recent article on mystery cult terminology in Cyril, van Loon asks whether Cyril had a deliberate policy of Christianising pagan cultic terminology. After analysing Cyril's use of key terms such as 'δαδουχίας', 'μυσταγωγείται' and 'μυστήριον', he finds that Cyril had no such policy owing to the fact that some important terms are absent from his writings, and that those he does use 'have a meaning that is not metaphorically related to the pagan mysteries', all despite Cyril using the terminology of the mystery cults more often than earlier Christian writers.⁵⁴ While he acknowledges the shrine for Isis at Menouthis, van Loon notes the lack of any evidence for the mysteries of Isis being performed there, and so does not seem to look for Isiac terminology, focusing his efforts more on words typical in describing the Eleusinian mysteries and raising the possibility that the Alexandrian suburb called Eleusis may have been the site for Eleusinian mysteries.

Much stronger, however, is the presence of Isis in late-antique Alexandria, to say nothing of the clear allusion to Isiac ritual in book 9 of *De adoratione*. The cult of Isis at nearby Menouthis survived the destruction of altars under Theophilus and moreover thrived, even among Christians, thus provoking Cyril's concern, if indeed Sophronius' account is accurate. Christopher Haas, in his history of Alexandria, shows how Isis could be identified with the city of Alexandria itself,⁵⁵ and comments: 'One cannot help but be struck by the extraordinary diffusion of Isis shrines in and around Alexandria. The goddess may be found in every sector of the city, from the harbors (Isis Pharia) to the palaces (Isis Lochias), and from the city center (Isis Plusia) to the peripheral regions (Isis Nephron).'⁵⁶ While other cults such as that of Serapis were also popular in Alexandria, Haas explains that Serapis was revered in only one or two large sanctuaries and thus possessed of a cult less likely to survive a purge on sanctuaries, whereas Isis worship required 'a smaller, more intimate setting', and thus was one of the longest surviving cults.⁵⁷ Jan Bremmer, in his study on initiation into the mysteries, marks a more general move from collective to individual initiation, adding: 'In the cases of Isis and Mithras, the initiations seem to have been individual from the very beginning, and their Mysteries were characterised by an

⁵⁴ van Loon, 'The terminology of mystery cults in Cyril of Alexandria', 130.

⁵⁵ Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in late antiquity: topography and social conflict*, Baltimore, Md 2006, 133.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 149.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 149–50.

ever-expanding mobility.’⁵⁸ So the case for Isis mysteries surviving the purge of Theophilus more than others is strong.⁵⁹

Do the purification rituals that Cyril describes match what is known today of the mysteries of Isis? Cyril describes the ministers of purification as those who had abandoned the principle of manliness (‘τὸν ἀνδροπρεπή μεθέντες λόγον’). The priests of Isis had shaven heads and were circumcised,⁶⁰ both of which would fit with Cyril’s criticism here. The charge of effeminacy was typical of Christian criticism of Isiac practices, and Sophronius records Cyril’s own criticisms of effeminacy at the Isis shrine at Menouthis.⁶¹ In criticising the Hellenic elite’s misunderstanding of defilement, Cyril mentions their dietary practices, whereby if they inadvertently came into contact with forbidden food, they immediately sought purification through fire or water. In a similar way, taking up the *Metamorphoses* again, as Lucius prepares for his purification and initiation he states: ‘I should begin refraining from forbidden, profane foods, as the other worshipers did, so that I might proceed on a straighter path to the mysteries of this spotless cult.’ The high priest further commands him to abstain from food that is not plain, including meat and wine, before his initiation.⁶² Then there is the purification through water that Cyril mentions, both in *De adoratione* and also in his Isaiah commentary’s reference to the ‘sprinkling of water’ (‘ὕδατος ῥάντισμοῦ’) in direct connection with the revolving torches. Lucius’ participation in the mysteries of Isis begins with the high priest bathing him in the public baths, then further sprinkling him with holy water as a rite of purification.⁶³ Robert Wild has written that water was an especially common feature of Isiac ritual, with Isis temples often containing underground cisterns.⁶⁴ Bremmer notes that Lucius’ additional

⁵⁸ Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the mysteries of the ancient world*, Berlin 2014, 138.

⁵⁹ McGuckin also writes of Cyril’s concerns with Isis at Menouthis, saying that Cyril’s ‘explicit references to Isiac theology and ritual are generic’ but with ‘interesting traces beneath the surface’: ‘The influence of the Isis cult’, 292. He further writes (p. 293): ‘The Isis cult was renowned among all the ancient Mysteries for the warmth of its iconography and spirituality, its mystical as well as great magical appeal, and also for its extremely liberal syncretism. Allied with this, the celebration of splendidly arranged liturgical processions and rituals, its special appeal to women, and the provision of a healing cult, must have made Menouthis a pilgrimage site to rival the attractions of St. Mark’s basilica, even for Christians.’

⁶⁰ R. E. Witt, *Isis in the ancient world*, Baltimore, MD 1971, 91.

⁶¹ See McGuckin, ‘The influence of the Isis cult’, 292. McGuckin further notes ‘how at the great celebration of Isis’ ship-carrying (The Navigium) it was the festal custom for male devotees to masquerade as women’.

⁶² Apuleius, 11.21,23. The translation is from Apuleius, *The golden ass*, trans. Sarah Ruden, New Haven 2011, 264.

⁶³ Apuleius, 11.23.
⁶⁴ Robert A. Wild, *Water in the cultic worship of Isis and Sarapis*, Leiden 1981, 50–1, 154–7.

sprinkling stresses its importance, adding that ‘water was very important in the sanctuaries of Isis’.⁶⁵

After ten days of fasting, Lucius’ initiation proper begins in the evening. The high priest leads him into the inner recesses of the temple and yet, in Bremmer’s words, Apuleius fails us at this *moment suprême*, recording only a few lawful words, including that he made his way through all the elements, or levels of the universe.⁶⁶ Of particular relevance is Lucius’ phrase: ‘In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing in the purest brightness.’⁶⁷ When Lucius then emerges at dawn, among other things he holds a lighted torch in his right hand.⁶⁸ Bremmer comments that ‘Apuleius’ solemn words are tantalising but ultimately not informative’ concerning the mysteries of Isis. ‘We may therefore presume that at midnight a torch was lit, as torches were heavily imbued with solar symbolism.’⁶⁹ Could Cyril be shedding light on this practice within the Isiac mysteries? Cyril refers to torches rotating in a circle (‘δῶδες ἐν κύκλῳ περιθέουσσαι’) as the highpoint of ritual purification, perhaps as a kind of solar apparition. Marvin Meyer has even supposed that for Lucius ‘the experience of beholding the light in the darkness may very well have been prompted by priests manipulating torches at key points in the ritual’, the very practice which Cyril describes.⁷⁰

One challenge to this identification is that Cyril is talking about a rite of purification whereas Lucius has already been purified with water and is now being initiated.⁷¹ While in book 9, Cyril’s description of the female initiates (‘ἱεροθύστιδες’) holding a sistrum and mirror is more clearly concerned with initiation, the description here in book 6 of those seeking to purify themselves with water and fire seems to correspond to what might happen prior to initiation, and thus not to Lucius’ midnight sun. Two responses could be made. Walter Burkert has written that Lucius’ passing rapt through all the elements of the universe is the language of

⁶⁵ Bremmer, *Initiation*, 119–20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 121.

⁶⁷ ‘Nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine’: Apuleius, 11.23; *The golden ass*, 266.

⁶⁸ ‘At manu dextera gerebam flammis adultam facem’: Apuleius, 11.24. Bremmer connects this torch to the sun: ‘He received a torch in his hand and a crown of palm leaves in order to make him look like a statue of the Sun. Here, too, one is inclined to see a certain resemblance to the Eleusinian Mysteries, as one of its most important officials, the *daidouchos*, “the torch-bearer”, had been made to resemble Helios, in line with the growing importance of Sol/Helios in Late Antiquity’: *Initiation*, 124.

⁶⁹ Bremmer, *Initiation*, 123.

⁷⁰ Marvin W. Meyer (ed.), *The ancient mysteries: a sourcebook*, San Francisco, CA 1987, 158. It would, of course, not be unprecedented for a Christian like Cyril to reveal – provocatively – one of the secrets of the Isiac mysteries. Cyril’s countryman Clement of Alexandria, in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, included descriptions of mysteries, to take just one example.

⁷¹ See Bremmer, *Initiation*, 122.

purification, purification by the elements of water, air and fire.⁷² So the vision of the sun brightly shining at midnight is both a part of Lucius' purification and his initiation, even the climax of his purification, which would accord with the ritual Cyril is describing. As Isis is frequently referred to in connection with healings, it is perhaps hard to eradicate any notion of healing or purification from the initiation rite.⁷³ Another response might be to suggest that from Apuleius' second-century Latin account to Cyril's fifth-century Alexandrian description, the cultic rituals of Isis might plausibly have been subject to transformation, with the initiation rituals taking on a greater significance for purification. Cyril's own knowledge of this rite seems less likely to have been based on material culture, owing to his description of certain actions like rotating and sprinkling, and the means of supposed defilement. So it is also plausible that Cyril's own understanding of Isiac rituals is based on hearsay and open to distortion, not only because initiation to the mysteries was secretive, but also due to the forced retreat of some cultic rituals in Cyril's own day.

Cyril the pastor and Isis

When Cyril discusses Hellenic purification rituals by fire and water in *De adoratione*, it is in the context of guiding Alexandrian Christians in the excellent way of life in Christ, including those Christians 'not yet firmly planted' who are devoted to the 'cultic service of demons' 'at home and at night (by which I mean secretly)'.⁷⁴ With this audience in mind, Cyril's strategy of cultic appropriation comes more clearly into view. With reference to the Egyptian/Hellenic mirrors, Cyril does not so much seek to repurpose mirrors as material elements in the way Exodus xxxviii.26 suggests, but rather, in a pastoral key, to use the episode as a way of directing people formerly devoted to non-Christian cultic practices towards preparation for baptismal grace and reception into the Church. A similar sacramental appropriation is at work in his treatment of purification by fire and water. After critiquing those practices that have been shown to be Isiac, Cyril does not then undermine the cultic concern with defilement and purification so much as ridicule its inconsistencies, criticise its definition of defilement and reveal the powerlessness of its attempts at purification, pointing instead to Christian practice. True purification ('κάθαρσις

⁷² Walter Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults*, Cambridge, MA 1987, 98. Bremmer speculates that Burkert was unduly influenced by Mozart's *Zauberflöte* in which 'initiation into the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris is connected with a trial by water and fire': *Initiation into the mysteries of the ancient world*, 122.

⁷³ Laurent Bricault calls Isis a 'healing goddess' in an Alexandrian context: 'Isis', 105.

⁷⁴ PG lxviii.424B-C. See above.

ἀληθής'), he writes, is to be found in baptism ('the bath of rebirth', 'τῷ λουτρῷ τῆς παλιγγενεσίας'). Baptism brings the grace of the Spirit who like a fire ('ὁ καὶ πυρὸς δίκην') consumes our defilement. Baptism, then, is more effective than the Isiac cultic practices. 'For the divinely inspired Scripture says for good reason that we have been baptised with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'⁷⁵ Thus, in *De adoratione*, Cyril configures Christian ritual practice as a way of replacing and recasting the Isiac rituals of initiation and purification, appealing to those who seek fire and water for their purification to find it in the washing of baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This appropriation – rather than destruction – of Isiac cultic practice is the same strategy that Cyril employs at Menouthis, according to Sophronius' account. And, as at Menouthis, Cyril's motivation is concern for those Christians engaging in non-Christian cultic practices.⁷⁶

While Cyril draws a number of his ideas about non-Christian cultic practices from the Scriptural accounts of Canaanite practice, he does also draw from non-Scriptural sources. Indeed the case of the fasting women with mirrors suggests that he can project his own knowledge of ritual practices onto his reading of Scripture. Exodus, after all, is about Egypt, and so Cyril feels free to move between describing the mirrors as both Egyptian and Hellenic. Regardless of the veracity of Sophronius' account at Menouthis, this analysis of *De adoratione* suggests that Cyril was concerned about the ritual practices of Isis throughout his episcopal career, and that these concerns were wider and deeper than have been supposed. If the account at Menouthis is authentic, then the concern Cyril shows in *De adoratione* for the potency of Isiac ritual perhaps helps to explain why he was circumspect in taking action at Menouthis, choosing not to destroy but to supplant and appropriate. The portrait of Cyril is here of a more cautious operator, one who understands the appeal of non-Christian cultic practices, and is pastorally motivated to address it by supplanting popular devotion with Christian cultic practices.⁷⁷ Thus Cyril seeks not to look only to the historic action of Christ so much as the present, vivid and powerful sacramental presence of Christ that brings purification and a true immediacy with God.⁷⁸ His motivation is most obviously pastoral, seeking to draw his Christian flock away from idolatrous ritual, including what was apparently done in secret. In so doing he provides a unique window into the cultic practices of Alexandrians, and shows his own pastoral practice of redirection towards the sacramental life of the Church.

⁷⁵ 'Ἐν Πνεύματι γὰρ ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ βεβαπίσθαι ἡμᾶς φησι ταύτητοι δικαίως ἢ θεόπνευστος Γραφή': *PG* lxxviii.448D. See above.

⁷⁶ See McGuckin, 'The influence of the Isis cult', 293–5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 293.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 298.