THE GREATEST DISASTER IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

THE SEARCH AND EXAMINATION OF GREAT DISASTERS.

By
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at the Kit-Kat Club Meeting
March 21, 1978, Columbus Club

In preparing this paper I really learned more about disasters than I wanted to know. The entire field is fascinating and descends upon you as hypnotic as a drug.

I am not alone in this fascination. When disaster strikes it receives the total treatment by the news media. There is something magnetic in the human pathos, the loss of life, the tragedy and then the inevitable search for fault.

Hollywood has found that disaster is a sure box office draw. They produce such films as "The Towering Inferno," "Earthquake" (with "Sensiround"), "Posiedon," "The Hindenberg," and many others including fantasies such as the "Invasion of the Ant People."

Television, not to be left out, has created a program called "When Havoc Struck," which is providing a living inventory of various disasters.

THE SEARCH FOR THE GREATEST DISASTER

As the title to this paper indicates, I was not sure exactly what kind of beast I was going to write about. I did know of an event....one which I felt was permanent; a tragic loss to the world, and a disaster which left a gaping hole in the chronology of human experience on this planet.

In any event, I eliminated wars from my consideration of eligible disasters, although there are several that at least should be mentioned in passing.

One is Napoleon's invasion of Moscow. He started with a magnificently equipped army of 500,000 soldiers with high morale, and quickly occupied an abandoned Moscow which was set afire by the Muscovites. Finally, the great French army started an agonizing retreat through the Russian Winter. They were constantly under attack by Russian hit and run tactics. Only 25,000 soldiers returned from this ordeal. That is a disaster.

The other wartime event of disastrous proportions is, of course, the use of two atomic bombs, one on Hiroshima and the other on Nagasaki. Well over a million people were killed or injured.

However, I have read that more people died from the Roman short sword than any other weapon ever utilized by man.

I have also excluded from my consideration of great disasters, those that were prehistoric. This would include Noah's flood, and those catastrophes described by Immanuel Velikovsky in presenting his theory of cataclysmic evolution as opposed to Darwin's theory of gradual survival-of-the-fittest evolution.

Two disasters also deserve mention. One is the murder of 6,000,000 Jews during the Hitler regime and the other is the starvation of between 5 and 10,000,000 peasants by Joseph Stalin in the 1930's.

The disaster I have selected, is a different kind of disaster, and in and of itself did not involve the loss of life. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to provide you with an inventory of misfortunes that are recognized as being bonafide disasters.

There are many kinds of disasters, and they are being catalogued and studied in a scientific manner by the Disaster Research Center here in Columbus, at Ohio State University. I have made use of their library and wish to acknowledge my debt for their assistance in preparing this paper. Miriam L. Morris is the Executive Director of the Disaster Research Center.

Disasters are Categorized

NATURAL DISASTERS cover such events as: Avalanches, Cyclones (Hurricanes and Typhoons), Earthquakes, Famines, Floods, Landslides, Pestilence, Tornadoes, Tsunami, (these are huge tidal waves generated by oceanic earthquakes) Volcanoes and weather.

Disasters are usually measured by lives lost and property destroyed. Natural disasters are, without question, led by pestilence. The worst of all epidemics was the Black Death which ravaged Asia and Europe from 1330 to 1350 A.D. which killed from one-quarter to one-third of the world population existing at that time.

China lost some 13,000,000 people and outside China some 24,000,000 people died. Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the Decameron left a graphic description of the Plague in the city of Florence, which was almost totally depopulated. England lost one-third of its people.

Then there was the great Irish famine in which 250,000 people died and resulted in a great out-migration from Ireland to other lands.

There was the flu epidemic of 1918, called Spanish flu, it took over 500,000 lives, 10 times the death rate in World War I. News of the end of the war overshadowed completely the awareness of this disaster.

The Johnstown flood in May of 1889, resulted in the loss of more lives than were lost in the San Francisco earthquake and fire, the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, the Dayton flood and the 1937 Mississippi flood combined. Over 3,000 people were killed.

The blizzard of 1888 in New York has had a notorious reputation, but has actually been surpassed by some, more recent weather aberrations.

Under earthquakes we have to mention those of Japan and China, and our own San Francisco earthquake of 1906, where a 300 mile fault was exposed. 200,000 people were made homeless and 452 people killed. In 1883 Krakatoa exploded in the Dutch East Indies, and the entire northern part of the island disappeared. That was over 200,000,000,000 cu. ft. of earth gone.

MANMADE DISASTERS are generally classified as Explosions and Collapses, Fires, and Transportation disasters.

Of these, fires, by far, take more lives than any other man made disaster. But, the transportation disasters seem more tragic because there is so often the existence of a human error that is so minute, so inconsequential, so ignored, -- and yet results in a chain of events that culminates in death and destruction.

As to Fires.

Every forty-five minutes an American dies in a fire. We had a recent tragic fire in Cincinnati. This was similar to the Cocoanut Grove fire in Boston in 1942, where 602 people died. There was the Hartford circus fire (169 died) in 1944, the Ohio Penitentiary fire (320) in 1930, the Iroquois Theatre fire (575) in 1903, and a great multitude of hotel fires in Atlanta, Chicago, Milwaukee, among others. These were all single building fires.

So, we must mention the urban conflagrations such as the burning of Rome while Nero fiddled. The great London fire of 1666 left half of London in ashes and spurred the development of Insurance Companies. Also, we have to mention the great Chicago fire, said to have been started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow. This was in 1871 when Chicago had a population of 334,000 people and 60,000 buildings. Almost 18,000 (1/3) buildings were lost, including the Chicago Historical Society Building with all its records. Incidentally, in the London fire, hundreds of book sellers around Saint Paul's church were among the worst hit of the London merchants, with thousands of volumes lost forever. The great stock of books burned for one week after the city fire had ended, and charred pages flew as far away as Windsor forest.

A curious note. The Rome fire was blamed on the Christians, the London fire on the Catholics (as a Papist plot) and I guess the Chicago fire on the Irish.

The more glamorous disasters are in transportation. Probably the most glamorous of all-time was the sinking of the Titanic. This occurred on April 22, 1912 on the maiden voyage of an 8 million dollar luxury ship. It had fantastically expensive appointments, swimming pools, tennis courts, restaurants, - and best of all it was unsinkable. There were 2,340 people on board and 1,595 perished. Many millionaires were aboard and some of the leading citizens of England and America. Two other luxury ships came to a bad end: Morro Castle, 1934 and Andrea Doria, 1956.

The sinking of a submarine is always a heart rending disaster as rescue ships try to free men imprisoned below. The S-4 was sunk in 1927, the S-51 in 1925, and the Squalus in 1939, where for the first time a rescue diving bell was used.

Another glamorous area of disaster was the love affair by the U.S. Navy with the lighter-than-air dirigible. After the Hindenberg disaster and the British R-101, the United States built a series of airships containing helium that all met a catastrophic end. The "Shenandoah" was destroyed in an electrical storm over Marietta (1925) the "Akron" fell in the Atlantic ocean in 1933, and shortly thereafter the "Macon" (1935) fell victim to a storm and went down in the Pacific just off Los Angeles.

MY SELECTION

I have selected none of these disasters as the greatest in the history of the world. My winning award disaster was the burning and dismemberment of the Library of Alexandria. This library was literally the intellectual center of the world, and at one time probably contained 700,000 or even 1,000,000 scrolls or volumes. It was in existence for some 900 (331 B.C. to 638 A.D.) years, and scholars came from the four corners of the earth to study in its halls.

There are two renditions of the Library's destruction which we can repeat here describing what happened many years ago. One account is in the play "Caesar and Cleopatra," by George Bernard Shaw, who was a great playwright, but a poor historian. At the time represented in the play, Caesar has defeated Pompey and landed in Alexandria with only 3,800 Roman Legionaires. Achillas, the commander of the occupying forces, has thrown in with Ptomely, the 10 year old child whose sister is Cleopatra. There is a struggle for Egypt's crown between these two descendants of Ptolemy. Caesar has been surrounded by Achillas but he is holding Pothinas as hostage. Rufio is one of Caesar's officers, and Theodotus is the teacher and tutor of young Ptolemy. Caesar is suddenly interrupted in his conversation with them. Here is Shaw's rendition.

"Caesar is interrupted by an outcry as of an old man in the extremity of misfortune. It draws near rapidly; and Theodotus rushes in, tearing his hair, and squeaking the most lamentable exclamations. Rufio steps back to stare at him, amazed at his frantic condition. Pothinus turns to listen.

THEODOTUS (on the steps, with uplifted arms) Horror unspeakable! Woe, alas! Help!

RUFIO. What now?

CAESAR (frowning) Who is slain?

THEODOTUS. Slain! Oh, worse than the death of ten thousand men! Loss irreparable to mankind!

RUFIO. What has happened, man?

THEODOTUS (rushing down the hall between them) The fire has spread from your ships. The first of the seven wonders of the world perishes. The library of Alexandria is in flames.

RUFIO. Psha! (Quite relieved, he goes up to the loggia and watches the preparations of the troops on the beach).

CAESAR. Is <u>that</u> all?

THEODOTUS (unable to believe his senses) All! Caesar: will you go down to posterity as a barbarous soldier too ignorant to know the value of books?

CAESAR. Theodotus: I am an author myself; and I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream them away with the help of books.

THEODOTUS (kneeling, with genuine literary emotion: the passion of the pedant) CAESAR: once in ten generations of men, the world gains an immortal book.

CAESAR (inflexible) If it did not flatter mankind, the common executioner would burn it.

THEODOTUS. Without history, death will lay you beside your meanest soldier.

CAESAR. Death will do that in any case. I ask no better grave.

THEODOTUS. What is burning there, is the memory of mankind.

CAESAR. A shameful memory. Let it burn.

THEODOTUS (wildly) will you destroy the past?

CAESAR. Ay, and build the future with its ruins (Theodotus, in despair, strikes himself on the temples with his fists). (Caesar continues) But harken, Theodotus, teacher of kings: You who valued Pompey's head no more than a shepherd values an onion, and who now kneel to me, with tears in your old eyes, to plead for a few sheepskins scrawled with errors. I cannot spare you a man or a bucket of water just now; but you shall pass freely out of the palace. Now, away with you to Achillas; and borrow his legions to put out the fire. (He hurries him to the steps).

The second story of the destruction is related by Ab dal Lateef, an Arab historian who visited Alexandria and repeated a story indicating the Arabs burned the library. During the Arab occupation certain scholars asked access to the library. The Caliph of Alexandria, Amer bin al Az replied he could not grant access without permission. So he asked the Caliph Umar, who replied:

".... As for the books you mention, if their contents agree with the Book of God, then having the Book of God, we are wealthy without them, and if they contradict the Book of God, then destroy them.

"Thereupon Amir proceeded to distribute them among the sections of Alexandria, and burned them in the fireplace, so that they were exhausted in 6 months."

So, we hear two popularly accepted versions of destruction of the library. Both versions are contested by historians.

If the books were burned, what then?

Last month Al Kuhn, in speaking of literacy said, "when you look at great civilizations, you look at the literacy of those civilizations." We can't help but wonder how many pre-Alexandrian Samuel Johnsons were lost with the demise of this great facility.

Books have wielded an immense power for good and evil throughout the history of the human race. An interesting little book which demonstrates this point is "Sixteen Books That Changed The World," by Dr. Robert B. Downs, former President of the American Library Association and head of the University of Illinois Library. He did not select scholarly books but rather books that disseminated ideas that shook men into action. These were authors such as Machiovelli, Tom Paine, Adam Smith, Malthus, Thoreau, Karl Marx, Hitler, Darwin, Newton, Eistein and Freud.

All thinkers stand on the shoulders of someone who has gone before.

So, what is our loss if books are burned?

First, we all recognize our debt to previous generations. The one attribute of man is the ability to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. Our wisdom and indeed our very freedom come from historical perspective and experience. It is no accident that the word "library" and "liberty" come from the same root.

Secondly, I believe we are placed on this planet to use what abilities we have to serve and to grow, intellectually and spiritually. Sometimes it is very difficult to answer a desire to grow -- without a book.

Third, any historical loss is a breach in our human story; what were the things that happened yesterday that explains today? In two recent headlines we see the excitement of drawing back a page of history that has been closed to us. One says, "Findings In Syria Rewrite History." The other, "New Dig Sheds Light on Egypt's History." Were the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Alexandrian Library?

Fourth, a loss of the expressions of a past generation are a loss of human spirit. The very essence of living is the spirit of inquiry, the demand to know. Man has been haunted by the great philosophical questions we all face. Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?

The solar system is an infinitesimal part of infinity. Our closest star neighbor, Alpha Centauri, looking at our sun, see only another star in the constellation Cassiopeia. Our solar system would appear merely as four planets (Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune) and some little debris closer to the sun. How would anyone even suspect that a civilization with at least some technical capability exists on one of those inner pieces of rock? -- and so how can we think about these things without books?

THE STORY

Alexander The Great -- His Path to Egypt, and the Founding of Alexandria.

A Description of Alexandria -- a Remarkable City.

The Museum - Library

The Collecting of the Books -

Greek Books
Non-Greek Books

The Destruction

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Now, the library was a unique library, placed in a unique city, by a very remarkable and unique man. So let's consider the man, Alexander the Great.

Alexander was born in Pella, the ancient capital of Macedonia, in the year 356 B.C. His father had conquered most of the Greek world, but was assassinated when Alexander was 20 years old. Alexander, ruthlessly, put down a rebellion, and took his father's place as head of the Greek states. Two years later he declared war on Persia, crossed the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and defeated Darius at the battle of Granicus. He continued south, cut the Gordian Knot, and after various successful battles marched into Egypt, which he conquered without firing a shot. (figuratively speaking). It was at this time he viewed the canopic mouth of the Nile river and saw the importance of a ridge which separated Lake Mareotis from the Mediterranean sea. He apparently said to Dinocrates, "here you will build a great city and call it Alexandria." This was in the year 331 B.C.

Alexander then raced back to Babylon and proceeded beyond the Caspian sea, including modern Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Russian Turkestan and parts of India. All along the way he founded cities to develop and direct trade in the new empire.

The generals that served Alexander in these campaigns were Antigonus, Seleucus and, guess who, Ptolemy -- whom we shall meet again in Egypt.

Alexander, the man, was unusual on several counts. He had a brilliant mind, due to some degree, no doubt, to the fact that he received what we would call an "enriched education" by the great Greek philosopher Aristotle, who was his tutor. He was a great general, scholar, administrator, builder, city planner, -- he was accomplished in many things, both cruel and gracious in turn. He died in Babylon after a drinking bout at the age of 33. He had a vague will, which resulted in his three Generals fighting over the empire for 50 years.

Alexander's body lay neglected for 30 days while his Generals fought over the spoils. Then they called in Chaldean and Egyptian morticians who embalmed and mumified the body with great skill. They then hammered gold leaf over the body so each minute detail of the great conqueror could be seen. Then a gold sarcophagus over which a coffin was placed on a throne base which supported it all. Then this was placed on a huge ornate funeral chariot pulled by 64 mules. This was accompanied by the Macedonean bodyguard, war elephants, cavalry in battle formation and ships of war ready for battle.

Ptolemy had thoughtfully provided the soldiers, and although the parade started out for Greece, he decided the body of the great conqueror would be a great attraction for the city of Alexandria. He was right.

There was also a sizeable contingent of roadbuilders that accompanied the procession.

Each stop on the trip was marked by worship services, because Alexander had already been proclaimed a God.

Incidentally, the wheels of this chariot were 15 feet in diameter and the rims were shod with iron by the masters of iron, the Chaldeans. Also, Diodorus, the Sicilian, who recorded this procession, noted that there was a strange device used to ease the bumps. So, we had our first springs.

THE CITY of ALEXANDRIA

What of this city, that Alexander left behind, this city he had never seen. For a description I will rely on a book by Edward Alexander Parsons, entitled, "The Alexandria Library," in which he uses descriptions from the original reporters; primarily descriptions of Strabo, the geographer. This book describes Alexandria as the Glory of the Hellenic world and the Library in its rise, its antiquities, and its destruction.

Dinocrates, the architect, laid out the city and erected some of the principal buildings. Under Ptolemy Soter, and then under his son Ptolemy II, the city rapidly grew in imperial magnificence, although it was lavishly embellished by almost every ruler of the Ptolemaic line, the Hellenic Kings, who from little vantage-ground on the edge of the coast of Egypt, ruled that ancient land and people from Alexander's death (323 B.C. - Ptolemy I) to the ultimate triumph of Caesar's grandnephew, Augustus (30 B.C. - Cleopatra).

The city was divided into ethnic regions: First, the original Rhakotis, or native Egyptian quarter, in which was erected the Serapheum, considered the most magnificent public building, the Capitol at Rome alone excepted, in the ancient world. It also served as a branch or "daughter" library.

Second, the Brucheion, or Royal Greek-Macedonian quarter occupied the entire front of the Great Harbor from the promontory of Lochias to at least the mole or causeway (the Heptastadium) which joined the city to the island of Pharos. In the Royal quarter dwelt the Greek-Macedonians and the many races and peoples of Europe and Asia who came to live in the city of Alexandria. Here were the offices of government, the marts of trade, and the great public buildings, above all the mausoleum (Soma) of the conqueror, the Great Museum with its far-famed Library and its adjuncts, such as the Theatre for lectures and readings, all connected by splended colonnades of rare Egyptian marbles. Beyond, on the slender promonotory of Lochias, amid gardens and groves of exotic trees, plants and flowers, were palaces of the Ptolemaic Kings, vast piles of buildings and estates, which extended to the heart of the Greek city.

The third district of the city, the Jewish quarter, was almost as large as the Greek or Royal quarter. It had its own walls, and here dwelt the vast population of Alexandrian Jews, not in ghetto, but practically in a city of their own, immediately governed by their own ethnarch, having their own Sanhedrin or council, and under their own laws.

So solidly was the city constructed that even the ordinary dwellings, as well as the better city residences, were built of stone, without wooden floorings and timbers, with foundations of masonry, upon which arose vaulted arches, enclosing cellars and cisterns connected with the waters of the Nile. The water thus conveyed became in time clear of mud and fit for domestic use. The very roofs of the houses were made of rubble or paved with stone. This absence of wood in construction, made Alexandria a city indestructible and more fireproof than any city of antiquity or most cities of modern times.

The great city spread over its three quarters on the mainland and the island of Pharos presented a glorious assemblage of marts of trade, factories of industry, of institutions of culture, and of the peoples of the known world. Immense docks bordered its two harbors where the ships of all nations made port. Huge warehouses, perhaps to the west of the Mole, stored the grain and products of the fertile valley of the Nile, ready for export to Greece and Rome. From the littoral, great steps of marble descended into the waters of the sea.

There were military establishments for the Macedonian and mercenary soldiers, barracks for the men, and arsenals for the implements of war; there were quarters for the sailormen with a Poseidonium for their offerings; there was a gymnasium and a stadium for relaxation and athletics; a hippodrome for horse and chariot races; theatres for lectures and public readings, and the open "Greek Theatre" for drama, where the spectators from their seats could see beyond the stage the little islet of Antirrhodus in the Great Harbor, and the burning torch of Pharos, one of the wonders of the ancient world. This great lighthouse, the prototype for all land signals for the sea, built by Sostratus the Cnidian,

was five hundred ninety feet high and partly survived until the fourteenth century, when it succumbed to earthquake and the sea. The Theatre of Comedy was much patronized by the Alexandrians - that is some classic pieces, with much of even lighter vein, descending to vulgar buffoonery and indecent pantomine; and the fickle populace crowded the Marionette shows, in which the great engineer, Heron, like Leonardo, at Milan, had to devise ingenious contrivances for the puppet-plays. There were temples of all the gods, particularly Greek and Egyptian, culminating in the mighty Serapheum, where Greek and Egyptian could meet in common worship; there was the Panium, a curious shrine to Pan on the top of an artificial mound from which vantage-spot the teeming city could be surveyed; there were parks of wild animals and gardens of tropical plants, and above all, that which could be found in no other city of the ancient world, there were the Royal Museum and the Alexandrian Library.

THE MUSEUM

The Museum was apparently located in the Brucheion, the Royal Greek center of the city. It was an amazing pile of white marble and stone consecrated to the Muses. Here were statuary-halls, picture galleries, lecture rooms, and refectories for resident and itinerant scholars. Perhaps a hundred scholars lived under the generous patronage of the royal foundation: this was the Museum. Here, free from want and from taxes, they studied and labored, making researches into the history of the past, and seeking to discover the secrets of nature. In verse and prose, they produced original work in letters and made lasting contributions to science. Above all, they collated the MSS., critically studied the texts, and through critical comment, they issued revision of Greek literature. And still more humbly, they copied manuscripts which they sold to those who had the desire and means of having books of their own.

But the Museum, considered in its larger aspect as the University of Hellas, did not alone consist of sleeping-apartments, dining hall, common halls for eating, or walks in cloisters or colonnaded shelters with seats for rest and contemplation, of theatres for lectures on philosophy or science, or for readings of the classic poets and historians, of botanical gardens and animal-parks for the study of flora and fauna, but above all, it offered to its privileged fellows, or indeed to the scholarship of the world, the incomparable resources of the first real and greatest collection of intellectual materials or data ever assembled in antiquity: the Library of Alexandria.

Writing, incidentally, of the Museum-Library, Gregorovius says:

"The Alexandrian school diffused a splendour over the civilized world which lasted longer than that shed by any university afterwards, whether of Paris, Bologna or Padua." Long after the creative power of Greek genius was exhausted, encyclopedic knowledge and Greek sophistry were to be found in the Library and Museum of Alexandria.

Considering the date of its origin, at the close of the classic period of the world's greatest literature (Aristotle and Demosthenes died in 322 B.C.), when Athens, its mother, no longer afforded the means, power or genius necessary for its protection or preservation, the conception and building of this Library is an outstanding achievement in the intellectual life of man.

COLLECTING THE BOOKS and MANUSCRIPTS

The wealth and power of the Ptolemies, backed by the mighty name of the deified Alexander, gave to their agents a special opportunity as they ransacked the four quarters of the Hellenic, Mediterranean, and Asian cities, towns and countrysides for literary manuscripts and records of every kind. Manuscripts were acquired in every way, honestly and otherwise, by private purchase or unscrupulous force, and when it became known that there was a ready market for books at Alexandria the forerunners of today's book sellers must have looked to this queen city of Egypt to exchange precious documents for the gold of the Ptolemies.

We do know that large purchases were made from Athens and Rhodes. And certainly the new cities of greater Greece contributed great quantities of manuscripts.

From an heir of Theophrastus, was bought for a large price the famous library of Aristotle and the personal collection of Theophrastus, which included manuscripts from many famous men of the day.

Among the devious ways of acquiring manuscripts should be mentioned the embargo which was quietly placed on books. At this great port, where ships came from all the known world, vessels were searched, and when books or manuscripts were found they were confiscated. Copies were made and given to the rightful owners with some compensation, but the originals were retained by the library. It apparently is also true that Ptolemy III (Euegetes) borrowed a complete authenticated works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides from the library at Athens, deposited 15 talents to guarantee their safe return, and then forfeited the talents and kept the bcoks.

As a result of this acquisitive campaign it is reasonable to assume that an immense number of manuscripts were accumulated, representing the entire body of Greek verse and prose, and the production of the Greek creative genius over a period of 300 to 500 years.

We might mention two of the librarians who presided over the collection of the books, and the continuing organization of the library. The man apparently responsible for starting the book hunt in the early days was an advisor and companion of Ptolemy I, was Demetrious of Phaleron. The other important librarian was Callimachus who compiled a catalogue of books which unfortunately is lost. (The pinaces.)

A history of the Museum was written in the first century by Aristonicus, but this, too, was lost.

Starting from the Museum, which was the University, it was Demetrious who felt "the true University is a collection of books." So, the library was built next to the Museum, and then the expansion became so great they took over the temple to Serapis located in the Egyptian quarter and called it the "daughter" library.

Josephus, the great Jewish historian of the first century, says that Demetrious alone had collected over 200,000 manuscripts.

It is interesting that the library had no specific category for the sciences, and yet it is known they had collected ancient works on astronomy, mathematics, geometry and the writings of men who have contributed so much to pure science, such as Erostosthenes, Euclid, Archimedes, Conon, and the great Hipparchus of Nicaea.

NON-GREEK BOOKS

The Ptolemies had heard of the Scriptures, or Laws of the Jews; they had seen the pictographs of the Egyptians; they wondered at the cryptic cuneiform of the Assyrians and the mural histories at Babylon; all holding ancient knowledge and wisdom which easily excited the most curious of all peoples, the Hellenes.

Ptolemy the Second invited the Jews to send their best scholars to Alexandria to translate their law into Greek. The "Septuagint" was the old Testament, so named because 72 translators labored in this effort. So, much Jewish scholarship was preserved in the library.

An Egyptian priest by the name of Manetho was commissioned to translate the hieroglyphics of Egypt into Greek. He had access to vast recorded materials including: the temple libraries, the palace records, the rolls of the sacred books, the formulae for the living and dead, the annals of the Kings of Egypt kept through the ages, economic records of the temples and estates, as well as the poems and prose literature of Egypt. Of course, his original work is lost. Some of his effort has come down through quotation, and often changed by both Jewish and Christian early writers, to make Manetho's facts conform to the religious history which was espoused at that time.

Manetho's list of kings goes back 1500 years, and until modern scholars cracked the hieroglyphics in the 19th century, the only authoritative histories of ancient Egypt depended on copies of copies of portions of Manetho's writings.

Then there were the writings of the Babylonians, Phoenicians, Chaldeans, Assyrians and all of these civilizations had historians who were commissioned to write histories for the library. All are lost.

And last, we can mention some literature from India. An Indian liberated his country from Greek rule, but was so enamored with Alexander that he elevated the Greek hero to the position of a god, and worshiped him along with native gods. For many generations Indian rulers (Chandragupta, Bindusara and Osoka) maintained trade relations with Alexander's descendents.

THE DESTRUCTION

Now, this is the disaster. This is the catastrophe, the misfortune we have been waiting for. How was this library, this great university, this great center of world knowledge, this magnificent inventory of recorded history - how really, was it destroyed?

The plain fact is, in spite of Shaw, we really do not know for sure.

There are several culprits whom we suspect, and they may all be equally culpable.

First, is Julius Caesar and the Romans. The testimony against Caesar is overwhelming, but not of burning the library. He was probably responsible for the burning of some 40,000 volumes as they lay on the docks being readied for shipment to Rome.

At the time of Caesar's siege of Alexandria, in 48 B.C., the Library was still exceedingly rich. As he could not man the Egyptian fleet riding in the harbor, which might be taken by the Egyptian commander, Achillas, and used against him, Caesar set fire to it. The conflagration extended to the wharves and is said to have destroyed the Library. This is difficult to believe, because the main library was sufficiently distant from the harbor and docks, and the Serapeum was very far away on a hill. It is possible, however, that a quantity of books had been taken to the waterside to be shipped to Rome, and that it was those books that were destroyed.

This may explain why Mark Antony, the trimvir, gave to Cleopatra in 41 B.C. some 200,000 volumes taken from the Library of Pergamum. That story is far from certain, but it is plausible. If the Library had been diminished by Caesar's action, it would have been natural enough for the queen to complain and for Mark Antony to give her a rich compensation at the expense of his enemies.

The Library was still very important at the beginning of the Roman rule, when the Romans thought of themselves as liberators of Egypt. During the rule of Aurelian (emperor, 270-275 A.D.) the greater part of the Bruchion was destroyed. Did that involve the destruction of the main Library (housed in it)? We do not know. At any rate, the Serapeum (supplementary library)continued to exist.

Very suspect are the Romans who followed Caesar. It may be that the Romans shipped many books back to Rome, or held them in private collections.

Second, are the Christians. Sidney L. Jackson, in his book on libraries, says, "- - - - The main enemies of the Library, however, were not the Romans but the Christians. Its decline was accelerated in proportion as Alexandria was more effectively controlled by bishops, whether Orthodox or Arian. By the end of the fourth century, paganism was ebbing out of Alexandria; the Museum and the Serapeum were its last refuges. The old Christians and the proselytes hated the Library, because it was in their eyes a citadel of disbelief and immorality; it was gradually undermined and brought into decay.

The Library was now concentrated in the Serapeum and the latter might have been destroyed (many scholars disagree) under Theodosios the Great (emperor, 379-395), by order of Theophilos (bishop of Alexandria, 385-412), whose antipagan fanaticism was extreme. Many of the books may have been salvaged but, according to Orosius (416-417), the Library was greatly diminished in 416 A.D.

Third, are the Muslims. The story has often been told that when the Muslims took Alexandria in 640, then again in 645 and sacked it, they destroyed the Library. The khalifa 'Umar is supposed to have said: "The text of those books is contained in the Koran or not: If it is, we do not need them; if it is not, they are pernicious." That story is unproved. There was not much left of the original library to be destroyed. The Christian fanatics had argued in the same vein as their Muslim successors.

Now if Alexandria were built of stone, brick and stucco and therefore as a city was not inflamable, and if the only fire was a portion of a shipment of books lying on the docks, and if the library was fire-proof and was slowly dissipated from the time of Caesar Augustus to its sack and destruction by the minions of Islam --- where is our catastrophe? Our disaster?

So, we have all been led into a trap. The best we have is a calamity, which is defined as an extraordinary event marked by great loss and lasting distress and affliction.

Lasting distress and affliction, that is our condition, because we have lost a pearl of wisdom, a star in our intellectual firmament. We have lost the greatest accumulation of ancient knowledge in the history of the world, the Library of Alexandria.

We have no choice but to do as Caesar said in Shaw's play: "We must build the future on the ruins of the past."