

Who was Cleopatra? Is Cleopatra mentioned in the Bible?

First, a quick disambiguation, as history records two Cleopatras: Cleopatra of Jerusalem and Cleopatra of Egypt. Cleopatra of Jerusalem was the fifth wife of Herod the Great, and she is mentioned by the historian Josephus. The more famous Cleopatra of Egypt is the subject of this article. Neither Cleopatra is mentioned in the Bible.

Cleopatra of Egypt (approximately 70–30BC), a member of the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty, was queen of Egypt for 22 years until her death at age 39. She lived toward the end of the intertestamental period, the approximately 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and beginning of the New. She was a central figure in the early development of the Roman Empire, which is the cultural and political backdrop for the New Testament.

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, the Greek empire was divided among his generals. One of his generals, Ptolemy, received the territory that included Egypt. At the time of Cleopatra, Greeks had been ruling Egypt for almost 300 years. Cleopatra became queen upon the death of her father in 51 BC, and she ruled with two of her brothers and then with her son.

Shortly after her father's death, Cleopatra had to flee from her brother Ptolemy XIII, who was also possibly her husband. She raised an army and enlisted the support of Julius Caesar. The two eventually became lovers. With the help of Caesar and the Roman armies, she defeated Ptolemy XIII and was married to another brother, Ptolemy XIV. The couple reigned as king and queen. When she gave birth to a son, she named him Ptolemy Caesar (nicknamed Caeserion, "Little Caesar"), leaving some question as to who the father was. Later, while Cleopatra was visiting Julius Caesar in Rome, he was assassinated (44 BC).

When she returned to Alexandria, her brother/husband/co-regent died, and she became co-regent with her infant son.

In the aftermath of Caesar's assassination, Mark Antony, who was loyal to Caesar, defeated his opponents and became Caesar's heir apparent. He also became fascinated with Cleopatra and left his wife to take up residence with her in Alexandria. By most accounts they led a life of debauchery. Later, Antony returned to Rome to try to secure his rule against Caesar's nephew Octavian, who was also Caesar's adopted son. As part of a truce, he married Octavia, Octavian's sister—Antony's previous wife having died. This was an unhappy union, and Antony eventually returned to Cleopatra in Alexandria.

In Egypt, Antony declared Caesarion to be Caesar's son and lawful heir in an attempt to nullify the claims of Octavian. As it became clear that Antony intended to try to control all Roman territory, Octavian worked to turn public opinion against Antony and Cleopatra. (One of the claims he made was that Antony intended to move the capital from Rome to Alexandria, which may or may not have been true.) When Antony married Cleopatra in 32 BC without first divorcing Octavia, Roman public opinion coalesced against the pair. The Roman Senate declared Antony a public enemy and then declared war on Cleopatra. At the naval Battle of Actium (September 2, 31 BC) on the Ionian Sea, the forces of Octavian defeated the forces of Antony and Cleopatra. The couple fled back to Egypt.

Shortly after, Antony received word that Cleopatra was dead. In response to this news, which was untrue, he committed suicide. In response to Antony's suicide (and perhaps also the advancing forces of Octavian) Cleopatra also committed suicide. The method she used is unknown, but a tradition developed that she had purposely allowed an asp to bite

her. Antony and Cleopatra were buried together. Thus, the way was cleared for Octavian to become the first true Roman Emperor. He was later known as Caesar Augustus (see Luke 2:1).

The story of Antony and Cleopatra was told by William Shakespeare in his play by the same name. Much of the modern fascination with Cleopatra can be traced to this work. Shakespeare's portrayal is more heroic than the official Roman version, in which Cleopatra is a foreign villain.

Modern notions of Cleopatra as an irresistible beauty are not supported by contemporary artwork or descriptions. However, she wielded a lot of power, which can be a seductive attraction to men who aspire to rule the world. In the modern preoccupation with race, some have embraced Cleopatra as a Black African queen; however, Cleopatra was Greek, not ethnically Egyptian, although it is certainly possible that she had an Egyptian ancestor somewhere along the line. She did identify with Egyptian culture and religion more than most rulers who went before her. "It is unlikely that Cleopatra cared about her racial makeup, but people over 2000 years later still obsess about it" (Oxford University Press Blog, <https://blog.oup.com/2010/12/cleopatra-2>, accessed 2/24/22).