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A Living Faith: Christianity's Pre-Constantine Survival

Derek Seifert

CLAS 399

Father Norton, Doctor Byrne, Doctor Dewey

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Précis

In my thesis, I argue that the beliefs and practices of Christianity helped it to not only coexist with but survive beyond the cults that were prevalent and more established. To demonstrate this, I compare Christianity with said cults. In my first chapter, I examine three mystery cults, looking at the factors that gave them their popularity. In the second chapter, I discuss Christianity. Citing authors such as Tacitus and Pliny, I reveal the ill reception given to Christianity. I then use sources, such as Saint Justin Martyr, Saint Cyprian, and Saint Dionysius, to explain what exactly Christians believed and how they put those beliefs into practice. I then conclude with a final summary.

A. M. D. G.

Author's Note

The following paper is a thesis research project that I had written during my senior year. As someone who majored in the Classics and Philosophy HAB program, I was expected to write a thesis through the Fall and Spring of senior year. The process was difficult, but, with much help from and many thanks to God, I can say that I have completed it. Further, I am extremely grateful to my director and my readers for their help, as well as to all of those who offered patience, compassion, and support through this challenging project, most especially my family members.

The idea for this thesis began with an observation inspired by reflection. I noticed the contrast between the culture of ancient Rome and that of Christianity. For example, based upon my understanding, the Romans worshipped their emperors as deities. For a lack of better terminology, there seemed to be a general narcissistic pride rooted within the Roman culture. The culture of the early Christians, however, was full of selfless love. Rather than remember one-man armies that braved fearsome monsters, or worship emperor-conquerors that came home triumphant, the early Christians served others with humility and love, basing it upon a love for God, Who humbled Himself in both His Incarnation as Christ and in His willing death as an innocent man executed by a criminal's punishment.

Trying to imagine the perspective of a non-Christian Roman, there would seem to be no reason to become Christian, especially considering that Christians faced persecutions. Nevertheless, Christianity continues to survive. How this comes about is exactly what I try to decipher in my thesis. As a Catholic, it is my desire to always be in full communion with the Catholic Church and its teachings. If anything within this thesis is theologically inaccurate with

or does not coincide with the magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church, I fully assent to the Catholic teaching, and ask that such an error be brought to my attention so that I may correct it.

A. M. D. G.

Introduction:

In the twenty-first century, it can be very easy to spread a message. In the United States of America, for example, phones and e-mails send and receive messages in a matter of seconds. With social media platforms, such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*, Christians can also connect with other fellow Christians at a rapid and far-reaching rate. As a result, Christians can easily spread the Good News in any number of ways - a text, video, or even a blog, to name a few sources. Communication has become convenient and easily accessible.

Thanks to modern technological advances, the Christian community of today has better tools for reaching both Christians and non-Christians alike. However, spreading a message has not always been this easy for Christianity. Imagine being a Christian in the first century. Before His Ascension, Christ gave the instructions to go out and proclaim the Good News to every nation.¹ Here is this budding religion, with a small number of followers, in a time period where an “instant message” was conversing with someone in-person. Spreading the message of Christianity might not necessarily have been too hard, had the only obstacle been the limited means of communication.

Indeed, Christianity faced worse obstacles than a lack of technology. One of the more well-known issues that the religion faced were persecutions. Christ Himself warned His disciples about persecution: “You will be hated by all because of My Name.”² From the non-Christian authors at this time, we can find Suetonius (c. 70 – c. 130), who described Christianity as a “wicked cult” (*superstitio ... malefica*).³ The historian Tacitus (c. 57 – c. 120) offered a similar

¹ Lk 24:47 (NABRE).

² Mt 10:22 (NABRE).

³ Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18. EBSCOhost eBook Collection.

opinion, likening Christians to criminals.⁴ Christians even faced opposition during the time in which the Synoptic Gospels were being written. As Hurtado explained, those practicing Judaism tried preventing what they had believed was blasphemy.⁵ Even without the persecutions, the development of Christianity was an uphill battle. Godwin mentioned in her introduction that there were a variety of other religions and cults at the time.⁶ Multiple factors seemed to be going against Christianity.

Christianity experienced several obstacles during the early years of its development. Some early non-Christians may have expected Christianity's extinction. And yet, fast-forward a few hundred years to 313 A.D., when the emperor Constantine (r. c. 312 – 337), along with additional support, established legal tolerance for Christianity.⁷ Such a situation will lead one to wonder what exactly happened that created such a dramatic shift.⁸ This change clearly did not happen in a day; something must have happened in the world – in the environment – so that it became more growth-supportive, or, at the very least, more and more tolerant, of Christianity. Indeed, Christianity not only coexisted but survived in a world of cults that outnumbered it. While this survival is due in part to the changes in the social, cultural, and political climates of

⁴ According to Tac. *Ann.* 15.44, Christians were “hated for their crimes (*flagitia*); text and translation from Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 18.

⁵ Larry Hurtado, “Pre-70 CE Jewish Opposition to Christ-Devotion,” *JThS* 50, no. 1, (April 1990): 57. DOI: 10.1093/jts/50.1.35

⁶ Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1981), 7.

⁷ Mike Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire (301 – 490): Constantine, Councils, and the Fall of Rome*, (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2019), 27.

⁸ Theologically speaking, the Christian answer is that God and His wonderful providence is at work. However, as Bishop Robert Barron has said in an article, “God’s causality is operating noncompetitively.” Therefore, having noted the metaphysical cause, I seek to answer the combination of physical and psychological causes. For more information on Bishop Barron’s article, see Robert Barron, “Bishop Barron: Governor Cuomo and God’s Noncompetitive Transcendence,” *Aleteia*, May 22, 2020. URL: <https://aleteia.org/2020/04/22/bishop-barron-governor-cuomo-and-gods-noncompetitive-transcendence/>

that time, it was the theological beliefs, practice, and devotion of the Christian follower that made the biggest impact on the world because the level of devotion was unique.

In order to demonstrate Christianity's unique nature, I must first show how and why the pagan cults were different from Christianity. In my first chapter, I will talk about the non-Christian cults, specifically noting three in particular: the cult of Demeter, the cult of Isis, and the cult of Mithraism. For each cult, I will mention who initiates were, what they believed and practiced, and where they practiced. Understanding the various non-Christian cults will help see what ideas and rituals were supported and deemed acceptable by society. After examining the cults, I will move to my second chapter, where I will focus on Christianity and examine what the early Christians believed and how they practiced it. Sources from both non-Christian and Christian perspectives will show how both sides experienced Christianity.

Chapter 1: The Cults of Contemporaries

As evoked in my introduction, there were a lot of cults, both new and old, that had been thriving during the time of early Christianity. The terms "cult" and "mystery cult," used interchangeably, refer to a group of individuals who worship a specific mythological deity, partake in secret rituals, and understand certain beliefs about said deity. For example, some cults worshipped the legendary figures Hercules and Orpheus under the belief that they had been given the status of god.⁹ The "ruler cult" worshipped an emperor or ruler as a savior.¹⁰ Many of these groups existed throughout the Greek and Roman world.¹¹

⁹ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 144.

¹⁰ Antonia Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 15.

¹¹ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 2-3.

Part of the reason for the sudden boom in these mysterious cults is that Greece was experiencing a religious change at the time. As Tripolitis notes, Greece had started moving away from the older traditional gods of Olympus and instead began searching for a more personal spiritual experience.¹² Specifically, people began looking for “a personal savior, one who would offer them strength and support to cope with the changing world in which they lived and immortality and happiness after death.”¹³ People began desiring someone or something that would ease their worldly burdens and given them happiness in the immortal life.¹⁴ However, despite the decline of the traditional religions themselves, Grant justifies that “traditional paganism was still a living force.”¹⁵ This continued desire for a religion, but a lack of fulfillment in the Olympian religion is why, as Godwin explains, people began turning to the East for spiritual answers.¹⁶ Thus, the declining interest in traditional religion and the need for more spiritual fulfillment led to an increase in these mystery cults, wherein individuals sought to find a savior.

Due to the vast majority of mystery cults at this time period, it will be necessary to focus on only a select number of them. For the purpose of this thesis, I will examine three cults, two of which fall into a similar category. The first and second cults up for inspection are the Eleusinian mysteries and the cult Isis. These two groups, as will be explained, are very similar in nature, but have enough differences to be given separate sections. The third cult to be examined is also known as Mithraism due to its worship of the mythological deity Mithras. To see the political, social, and cultural context of these cults, I will explain four main factors: the mythology, the

¹² Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 14, 15.

¹³ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 15.

¹⁴ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 16.

¹⁵ Robert McQueen Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1990), 17.

¹⁶ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 7.

beliefs and practices, the intended worshiper, and, lastly, the cult's stretch of popularity. Through each investigation, I will also mention particular critiques about each group, as noted by scholarship.

Chapter 1.1: The Cult of Eleusis

One of the cults that was coexistent with the budding Christianity was the cult of Eleusis, better known by some as the "Eleusinian Mysteries." This was a group that focused worship on the goddesses Demeter and Kore.¹⁷ The mythology of the cult of Eleusis centers around Demeter and her daughter. Scholarship knows the myth primarily from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, a work written in roughly the seventh century, B.C.¹⁸ The myth starts with Demeter's daughter, Kore, being abducted by Pluto, the god of the underworld.¹⁹ Demeter begins a frantic search for her daughter, lighting torches along the way and even ignoring her own needs by not eating.²⁰ Upon hearing that her daughter was taken by Pluto, Demeter perseveres in her search for Kore, traveling away from Olympus and searching the earth.²¹ Demeter ends her journey on the island of Eleusis, where she is given hospitable reception by the local royal family.²² The royal daughters hire Demeter, disguised as an old woman, as the caretaker of the royal family's infant child.²³ When at the palace, Demeter is offered wine but requested instead a *kykeon*,²⁴ thus breaking her fast.²⁵ As caretaker, Demeter begins the process of making the child immortal, but

¹⁷ Marvin W. Meyer, editor, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook: Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient World*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1987), 17.

¹⁸ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 20.

¹⁹ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 21.

²⁰ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 17.

²¹ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 22-23.

²² Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 18.

²³ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 24.

²⁴ A *kykeon* is "a drink of water mixed with barley meal and mint" (cf. Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 18).

²⁵ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 18.

is discovered in her attempts, at which point she reveals her true self to the family and entrusts the rites of her mysteries to them.²⁶ Eventually, Kore was returned to Demeter, but because Pluto gave Kore food from the underworld she was required to return and live there for a period of time.²⁷ The mythology of Demeter involves loss, grief, and a joyous reuniting.

For mystery religions in general, the relationship between the mythology, beliefs, and rituals has been a subject of discussion. A proposed theory about the relationship is the “myth and ritual, or myth-ritualist, theory,” which suggest that “myth does not stand by itself but is tied to ritual.”²⁸ One of the leading figures of the discussion is Jane Ellen Harrison. Harrison is considered part of the “Cambridge Ritualists,” a group of scholars who supported the theory that “there was an inner core of primitivity in Greek religion; that, as a result, there were deep similarities between Greek religion and tribal religions that could be elucidated through methods of ethnological research.”²⁹ For Harrison, “ritual precedes myth,” but “Myth is still an explanation of what is presently happening in the ritual, just not of how the ritual arose.”³⁰ For Harrison, the myth derives from the ritual, and is dependent upon ritual. Another scholar, Walter Burkert, suggests that “ritual equally serves myth.”³¹ For Burkert, “myth bolsters ritual by giving merely human behaviour a divine origin,” while “ritual bolsters myth by turning a mere story into prescribed behaviour.”³² I find both Harrison and Burkert’s positions unsatisfactory, as both positions, and the myth-ritual theory in general, fail to account for beliefs held by the ancients. I speculate that the beliefs of the cult initiates were reinforced *by the rituals* and interpreted *from*

²⁶ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 26.

²⁷ Meyer *The Ancient Mysteries*, 28, 29.

²⁸ Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2013 [Online Publishing Date]), 71, 72. DOI: 10.1093/acrade/9780192803474.001.0001

²⁹ Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, (MA and UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 18.

³⁰ Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, 71, 72.

³¹ Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, 76.

³² Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, 76.

the myths. Given the importance of oral tradition, which Nagy acknowledged,³³ it is possible that the myths developed first, and rituals came after, then followed by the beliefs during the aforementioned period in which individuals were seeking salvation. I will take this approach with the three cults within this chapter.

The theological beliefs and practices of the Eleusis cult center around the myth. Demeter was known as the goddess of grain.³⁴ As Tripolitis explains, while the cult was originally more focused on Demeter's benefits towards agriculture, the cult broadens the focus with increasing popularity so that Demeter has benefits of all life.³⁵ One of the primary beliefs of the Eleusis cult was that partaking of the rituals will grant the initiate a happy life, both in this world and the next.³⁶ There is some dispute over the confidence of this belief. Robert Parker, in his book, notes that worshipers go away with "at best, 'good hopes,'" but Redfield mentions that these blessings were "certainly promised."³⁷ Regardless of the confidence of this claim, the general consensus among scholarship is that there were some sort of believed benefits from partaking in the cult. This blessing of a happy afterlife and current life was the spiritual belief of the Eleusinian cult. Such a certain promise of a happy immortal afterlife would have been an appealing factor for the pagan, especially for one living during a time of savior-seeking.

As mentioned earlier, the believed promise of the blessings was guaranteed only to initiates – that is, to those who had witnessed the secret rites. The cult was aptly called the "Eleusinian mysteries," as the cult's practices were, and still are, for the most part unknown.³⁸

³³ Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, 72.

³⁴ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 17.

³⁵ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 19.

³⁶ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 18, 19.

³⁷ Robert Parker, *On Greek Religions*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 252 and James M. Redfield, "Anthropology and the Fate of the Soul," *Electronic Antiquity: Communicating the Classics*, 12, no. 1, (November 2008-9), 24. *L'Annee Philologique*.

³⁸ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 21.

There were moments when the cult practiced rituals publicly, and scholarship has identified these rituals.³⁹ The unuttered rituals that took place inside the areas of worship, however, have not been as easily cracked.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, scholarship has made several inferences and conjectures based on archaeological findings and classical literary sources.⁴¹ According to Johnston, part of the public ritual involved bathing in a harbor.⁴² Referencing the church father Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - 215), Meyer details the rituals of the Eleusis cult, which involve the fasting and drinking of a *kykeon*, harkening to a part of the myth, where Demeter broke her fast through the consumption of a *kykeon*.⁴³ Meyer questions the credibility of these Christian sources because, not being themselves initiates, Christians would not be as knowledgeable about the mystery cults.⁴⁴ However, such sources could be insightful when assumed to be accurate.

Additional private rituals may be known. Johnston notes that the initiates carried torches while journeying from Athens to Eleusis, but Patera explains that the initiates carried torches through the night whilst searching for Kore. This action imitates Demeter's lighting of torches and unceasing search for her lost daughter.⁴⁵ There appears to be a pattern of trying to re-create a personal experience of Demeter's sorrow and loss and eventual rejoicing at her reuniting with her daughter. Further, Johnston explains that initiates "felt that they had personal contact with Demeter and Persephone."⁴⁶ This adds to the idea that a personal relationship was built between

³⁹ Sarah Iles Johnston, gen. ed., *Ancient Religions*, (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 100. *EBSCO eBooks*.

⁴⁰ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 20.

⁴¹ Tripolitis *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 20.

⁴² Johnston, *Ancient Religions*, 100.

⁴³ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 18.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 18.

⁴⁵ Johnston, *Ancient Religions*, 100; Ioanna Patera, "Chapter Eighteen: Light and Lighting Equipment in the Eleusinian Mysteries: Symbolism and Ritual Use," in *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*, eds. Menelaos Christopoulos, Efimia D. Karakantza, Olga Levaniouk (Lanham, Maryland, and Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, a division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 264. *EBSCO eBooks*.

⁴⁶ Johnston, *Ancient Religions*, 100.

the initiates and their goddess through experience and empathy. The rituals and especially the meaning behind the rituals of the cult would have drawn in someone seeking a personal and close relationship with a “savior” deity.

In addition to the beliefs and practices, the geographical spread of the Eleusinian mysteries would have also factored into the cult’s popularity. Tripolitis notes that the cult “spread throughout the Greek world,” and even gained “world-wide significance.”⁴⁷ However, Tripolitis also explains that, even though the cult reached distant locations, the initiation rites were strictly practiced at Eleusis alone.⁴⁸ This location restriction might have made becoming an initiate difficult for those, such as soldiers or the injured, who did not have the ability to travel to Eleusis. Apart from the geographical inconvenience of the rites, however, the knowledge of the cult, and the cult itself, had been established in many far-reaching locations. This spread of knowledge would have also factored into drawing in more initiates, since it allowed those seeking a savior to become familiar with the cult, and then eventually journey to partake in the rites.

The membership of the cult of Demeter was at once both inclusive and exclusive. On the one hand, the cult of Eleusis was open to many individuals; Parker explains that either gender of any social class was welcomed into the cult.⁴⁹ There were only two major requirements for initiation, the first being that there was an initiation fee, estimated to be about 15 drachmae.⁵⁰ While this may have been an issue that prevented those in poverty from entering, it does not appear to have halted the cult’s progression. The second requirement was that only those who

⁴⁷ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 19.

⁴⁸ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 19.

⁴⁹ Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 251.

⁵⁰ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 21.

“understood” Greek, as Parker words it, were allowed to become initiates.⁵¹ This appeared to have been inclusive to individuals who had learned Greek. For example, the emperors Augustus (r. c. 27 B.C. – 14 A. D.), Hadrian (r. c. 117 - 138 A. D.), and Marcus Aurelius (r. c. 161 – 180 A.D.), were all Romans who received initiation into the cult.⁵² Cicero (c. 106 B. C. – 43 B. C.), too, became an initiate.⁵³ And yet, all four individuals mentioned were of higher social status, further supporting that the cult was exclusive in practicality. The unfortunate consequence is that anyone who was unable to learn Greek was excluded from the mysteries, and therefore excluded from the benefits promised. However, while this restriction would have turned away non-Greek speaking individuals, the aforementioned Romans would have been good political publicity for the cult. This foreign political support would especially have been effective for bringing in initiates who were not native to Greece. Further, as a whole, the cult of Eleusis was very open regarding membership for Greeks. These factors would most certainly have enhanced the popularity of the cult, adding to the support of its establishment and growth.

The Eleusinian mysteries had grown in popularity, due a combination of factors. Although this initiation cost a few coins amidst a few other limitations, the cult was welcoming to Greek-speakers. The support from Roman senators and emperors helped the cult gain an influence in locations other than Greece. Part of the cult’s practices were performed in public festivals, which means the cult of Demeter and Kore must have been allowed to practice without fear of being disbanded or attacked. Further, the public festivals would have enticed the pagan into inquiring more about the cult. Although the rites were limited to Eleusis, the cult of Demeter and Kore had spread far, and developed a political backing. Last, but certainly not least, the

⁵¹ Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 251.

⁵² Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 16.

⁵³ Tripolitis *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 21.

pagan would have been enticed by the theological beliefs regarding the promises of happiness. In short, the Eleusinian mysteries experienced a political and social backing that helped it grow.

Chapter 1.2: The Cult of Isis

The next mystery religion that I will explore is the cult of Isis. Isis is an Egyptian goddess whose religion and cult were brought to Greece and Rome through trade and commerce.⁵⁴ Keeping in mind my attempt to examine the myth, beliefs, practices, membership, and stretch of popularity, I will start by focusing on the mythology of the cult of Isis. Plutarch (b. before 50 – d. after 120 A. D.) provides the majority of evidence for the mythology.⁵⁵ Technically, the mythology begins before Isis is born, but for this thesis, I will start the myth at the point of Isis and her brother-husband Osiris as rulers.⁵⁶ Seth, or Set,⁵⁷ the brother of Osiris, crafts a sinister plan.⁵⁸ Constructing a beautiful chest⁵⁹ exactly fitting Osiris, Seth holds a banquet where he offers the chest to whoever can fit inside of it.⁶⁰ When Osiris is inside the chest, Seth locks the box up and sends it floating down the Nile river.⁶¹ Osiris perishes, and while still in the box, ends up on an island named Byblos, where a tree grows around his coffin.⁶² The king of Byblos requests the tree to be used as a column at his palace, unaware that the column will also be housing the chest with Osiris.⁶³ Isis, upon learning of her brother-husband's fate, begins a

⁵⁴ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 120.

⁵⁵ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 160.

⁵⁶ Jaime Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation, and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras*, ed. and trans. Richard Gordon, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2008), 41. *EBSCO eBooks*.

⁵⁷ "Set": Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 160. Meyer cites Babbitt's translation, which uses "Typhon" for Set. Alvar Ezquerro uses "Seth."

⁵⁸ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 162.

⁵⁹ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 162. As earlier, Meyer uses "chest," while Alvar Ezquerro uses "sarcophagus."

⁶⁰ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 41.

⁶¹ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 42.

⁶² Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 42.

⁶³ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 43.

desperate search to find him.⁶⁴ Isis eventually finds out about the island of Byblos, where she is sent for by the ruling family of Byblos and acts as caretaker of the queen's child.⁶⁵ Isis attempts to make the child immortal, but is discovered and reveals her true identity.⁶⁶ Demanding the body of her brother-husband, Isis tries to hide the body, but Seth ends up finding it, rips it into pieces, and scatters the pieces.⁶⁷ Isis goes back out, finds the pieces, and gives each piece a proper burial.⁶⁸ There is also another ending to this myth wherein Isis is able to bring her brother-husband back to life.⁶⁹ The mythology of Isis involves a story of death, mourning, and renewed life. However, a few parts of this myth sound very similar to the myth on Demeter.

Indeed, the mythology of Isis shares similar elements to that of Demeter's, and there is a very clear reason for this: syncretism. Syncretism is the mixture of religious concepts and elements so that there is overlap or even multiple identifications of a deity.⁷⁰ Isis bore characteristics that seemed similar to Demeter. For example, both Demeter and Isis were mothers who lose and are returned loved ones. However, the details go much further than that. The two deities were made synonymous. Evidence for this synonymity even appears from the ancient author Herodotus, who equates Isis with Demeter.⁷¹ The importance of syncretism is that, in making foreign gods familiar, the Greek and Roman cultures adopted foreign cults and deities more easily so that they blended into society. In his book, *Isis Among the Greeks and Romans*,

⁶⁴ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 42.

⁶⁵ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 163, 164.

⁶⁶ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 164.

⁶⁷ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 44.

⁶⁸ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 165.

⁶⁹ R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 27.

⁷⁰ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 11.

⁷¹ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 27.

Solmsen affirms that the merging of Isis and Demeter helped the “extraordinary expansion” of the Isis cult.⁷² Other factors also helped this group grow.

The beliefs of the Isis cult take some inspiration from her myth, but also from other sources as well. Isis was associated with water, and one of the main beliefs about her was that she was in control of navigation and seafaring.⁷³ For her followers, Isis held the title as the “Divine Mother,” who understood the sufferings of humanity and empathized with them.⁷⁴ The initiates of the Isis cult also believed that the goddess promised them that she would fulfill their hopes and dreams in both the current life and the afterlife.⁷⁵ Much as the cult of Demeter promised a happy immortal afterlife, the cult of Isis also expressed similar beliefs. The initiates were given “salvation,” which was believed to have been granted by Isis after it was sought out by the initiate.⁷⁶ Just as Demeter’s promises of a happy afterlife would have been an alluring factor to the curious pagan, so too would the promises of Isis have been particularly enticing.

The cult of Isis did have rituals, just like the Eleusinian mysteries. However, these rituals are largely unknown.⁷⁷ It was clear that there existed some form of initiation rites, since there was an aretology, a listing of a deity’s believed accomplishments, written about Isis, and in which there was mentioning of the goddess revealing “mysteries.”⁷⁸ Further, there is knowledge of public rituals, such as a ritual that reminds the audience of the mythological quest and discovery of the dead Osiris.⁷⁹ There appears to have also been a fasting before the ritual, a fee

⁷² Friedrich Solmsen, *Isis Among the Greeks and Romans*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 27.

⁷³ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 122.

⁷⁴ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 28.

⁷⁵ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 28.

⁷⁶ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 46. “Salvation,” was the terminology Ezquerro uses.

⁷⁷ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 29.

⁷⁸ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 172.

⁷⁹ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 162.

for the rituals, and a ceremonial banquet at the end of the rituals.⁸⁰ There may have also been a ritual of washing or cleansing.⁸¹ The rituals helped reinforce the beliefs of salvation that the individuals held.

The membership of the Isis cult is quite diverse but has both inclusivity and exclusivity to it. Solmsen notes that one of the leaders that took over after Alexander's death (either the first or third Ptolemy) had established Isis as the protectress of Egypt's kings.⁸² There was also "imperial patronage" from Rome.⁸³ This would have provided political support for the cult of Isis. The cult of Demeter was available to any person so long as he or she knew the Greek language. The cult of Isis was exclusive, but in a different way. In addition to the ritual fees, the initiates also had to have been "selected by Isis," meaning that the goddess appeared to the person in a dream.⁸⁴ Apart from this, there does not appear to be any restrictions in terms of social class or gender. In fact, Witt notes that Isis appeals to "not just to the affluent citizen who had made his fortune in shipping but even to the man of lowly birth and the down-trodden slave."⁸⁵ Given how Isis was believed to have dominion over water, I speculate that cult had particular popularity among seafarers. Additionally, Isis was also viewed as a mother and that would have likely drawn female worshipers to her. Therefore, the cult had several different social groups to which it appealed, another factor adding to its popularity.

The Isis cult was geographically far-reaching, and as such gained popularity through location. Since Isis was connected with water, places such as the port of Athens, known as the

⁸⁰ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 158, 159, 164.

⁸¹ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 162.

⁸² Solmsen, *Isis Among the Greeks and Romans*, 22.

⁸³ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 120.

⁸⁴ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 29.

⁸⁵ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 84.

Piraeus, as well as the island of Delos housed places of worship for the mystery religion.⁸⁶ Temples were even at both Pompeii and the Capitoline Hill.⁸⁷ The worship of Isis expanded down shorelines and trading posts.⁸⁸ Not only was the cult within central Italy, but it also took the spot as one of the more popular religions.⁸⁹ Needless to say, popular devotion to Isis stretched far and wide, a convenience which brought in many initiates seeking salvation.

As with the Eleusinian mysteries, several factors had helped the cult of Isis gain substantial popularity. While the mysteries of Isis had specific requirements before initiation, it was open to both genders of any class. Additionally, the cult received political support from Rome, Egypt, and Greece. What became especially helpful was syncretism, which provided familiarity to people who recognized similarities between Isis and Demeter. Theologically speaking, the initiates believed in promises and spiritual benefits. These cultural and social aspects factored into the Isis cult's rapid popularity.

Chapter 1.3: The Cult of Mithras

The cult of Mithras is the third and final mystery cult that I will look at for this thesis. Some scholarship estimates that Christianity predates Mithraism by about a decade or so.⁹⁰ Chalupa places it “shortly before 75-125 CE.”⁹¹ As with the previous two cults, I will derive the social and political reception of the Mithras cult through the mythology, beliefs, practices, (intended) membership, and geographic reach. For reasons that will be made clear later, the

⁸⁶ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 120.

⁸⁷ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 120.

⁸⁸ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 71.

⁸⁹ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 72.

⁹⁰ Roger Beck and Alexander R. Rumble, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54. *Proquest Ebook Central*.

⁹¹ Ales Chalupa, “The Origins of the Roman Cult of Mithras in the Light of New Evidence and Interpretations: The Current State of Affairs,” *Religio* 24, no. 1 (2016), 95. *Atla Religion Database*.

beliefs, and especially the practices, of Mithras will be particularly important to examine in the context of this thesis. The first place to start is with the mythology of Mithraism.

The cult of Mithras, or Mithraism, had a somewhat obscured mythology. The myth is largely procured from the scenes depicted in the small caves or cave-like areas identified as *mithraea*, where the initiates practiced their rituals.⁹² The mythology starts with Mithras being born from a rock, witnessed by shepherds.⁹³ There is another version of Mithras being born from an egg, which is thought by some scholarship to represent Mithras as a creator.⁹⁴ Mithras was believed to have at one point fired an arrow into a rock, which produced a spring, and was also believed to have come out of a tree, which Meyer notes is similar to Osiris.⁹⁵ In the iconographic tradition, Mithras often appeared to be accompanied by two other figures. Scholarship identifies them as Cautes and Cautopates, representing the contrast between light and darkness, life and death.⁹⁶ The most common depiction in the *mithraea* is Mithras killing a bull.⁹⁷ The myth may have included a raven, understood to be a messenger of the god Helios, who commanded Mithras to slaughter the bull.⁹⁸ The bull's death was believed to have brought benefits to humanity.⁹⁹ Some scholars suggest that the belief was that bull's death led to the creation of humanity, which, for the cult, established Mithras as the creator of all.¹⁰⁰ In the final scene of the myth, Mithras, having accomplished his mission, held a "farewell feast with himself and Helios as guests of honour, attended by Cautes and Cautopates."¹⁰¹ After this, Mithras returned with Helios

⁹² Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 48.

⁹³ Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 20.

⁹⁴ Godwin, *Mystery Religions*, 100.

⁹⁵ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 201.

⁹⁶ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 106.

⁹⁷ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 48.

⁹⁸ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 87.

⁹⁹ Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 87.

¹⁰¹ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 91.

to “the abode of the gods, where Mithras took his place as the protector of his faithful followers.”¹⁰²

Such little information survived about the Mithraic cult that it is difficult to provide as in-depth a discussion as was given for the other cults. However, as with other cults, the beliefs are drawn from the myth. The beliefs of Mithras are based on the myth, much like other cults at the time. Scholarship agrees that there were a lot of astronomical elements in the Mithras cult, suggesting that the followers were interested in the order of the universe.¹⁰³ Mithras slaying the bull was understood to be good reigning victorious over evil.¹⁰⁴ Tripolitis identifies the tauroctony as an “act of salvation.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, it appears that the Mithraic followers believed in a salvation of some sort. Godwin explains that part of the belief for Mithraism was that Mithras would return at the end to judge mankind.¹⁰⁶ This concept of salvation would have been a factor that drew initiates into Mithraism.

The rituals of the Mithras cult, which reinforce the beliefs, would also have by their own right enticed an initiate seeking salvation. As with the myth and beliefs, the rituals are obscured due to a lack of literary evidence for the rituals.¹⁰⁷ Unlike the previous cults, current evidence does not appear to suggest that there were public rituals held by the Mithras cult.¹⁰⁸ While not many of the rituals are known, scholarship has identified a few parts of the rituals. First, there was a hierarchy of initiation levels, with highest level being the “Father.”¹⁰⁹ One ritual of the cult

¹⁰² Alvar Ezquerra, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 91.

¹⁰³ Alvar Ezquerra, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 20.

¹⁰⁵ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 99.

¹⁰⁷ Alvar Ezquerra, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 344.

¹⁰⁸ Alvar Ezquerra, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 344-5.

¹⁰⁹ Luther H. Martin, *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 45. *EBSCOhost eBook Collection*.

involves the “Father” aiming an arrow at the initiate, while the other involves the initiated being “menaced by sword and fire.”¹¹⁰ In some of the birth scenes, Mithras was depicted holding a torch in one hand and a dagger in the other, which is likely where the sword and fire comes from in the aforementioned initiation.¹¹¹ The Mithraic rituals also involved a washing with water and a branding on the hands or head.¹¹² Last, but not least, in the cult of Mithras, the initiates celebrated a communal meal, wherein, according to Saint Justin Martyr, bread and water were consumed with “certain incantations.”¹¹³ These communal meals harken to the point of the myth where Mithras held a celebratory feast with Cautes, Cautopates, and Helios.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, there were rituals that connected with the beliefs about the myth of Mithras. These rituals helped support the beliefs of the cult.

Membership of Mithraism was more exclusive compared to the aforementioned cults. Initiates were often those related to war and the emperor, such as soldiers and sailors.¹¹⁵ Further, the cult was exclusively for men.¹¹⁶ Failure to offer the promises of the beliefs to women must have impacted the membership numbers. Further, as Tripolitis explained, most initiates did not pursue higher levels of initiation, due to a “lack of either dedication, necessary education, or the funds required to progress to the higher grades.”¹¹⁷ While the membership was limited, the cult made up for such limitations through the geographical distance it had gained.

¹¹⁰ Martin, *The Mind of Mithraists*, 46.

¹¹¹ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 51. An example can be found in Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 101.

¹¹² Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 199.

¹¹³ Justin *Apol.* 66; from Justin Martyr, *The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy or the Rule of God*, Thomas B. Falls, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 6, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 106. *EBSCO eBooks*.

¹¹⁴ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 55.

¹¹⁵ Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 199.

¹¹⁶ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 51.

¹¹⁷ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 51.

The popularity of Mithras spread as far as the soldiers who were in the cult. The influence of Mithraism stretched from Syria all the way to Scotland.¹¹⁸ Due to the effects of syncretism, the image of Mithras was adapted to whichever culture and area the cult had contacted.¹¹⁹ Even when Christianity came around, the cult had political support – An altar for Mithras was consecrated by the emperor Diocletian (284 – 305) in 308, and the emperor Julian (361 – 63) both supported the group and became an initiate himself.¹²⁰ Mithraism spanned through several centuries before dying out in the fourth century.¹²¹ This mystery religion made up in political and cultural support what it had lacked in its inclusiveness.

Although not as much is known about the cult of Mithras as other cults, it apparently was prevalent enough to not only be supported by emperors and Roman officers, but it also had stretched very far. Although Mithraist membership was limited only to men, the beliefs and the geographical spread of the cult would have brought in a lot of them. Prevalence was large enough for Mithraism that Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr, talked about it. This mystery cult had a far-reaching influence and, although relatively younger, competed for members with other more well-known groups, such as the Eleusinian mysteries and the Isiac mysteries.

¹¹⁸ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 98.

¹¹⁹ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 56.

¹²⁰ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 57.

¹²¹ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 57.

Chapter 2: Christianity

When Christianity came into the picture, it was not as welcomed as the mystery religions. The cults of Isis, Demeter, and Mithras all received support from both political leaders and the culture as a whole. In addition, syncretism had taken effect, which brought elements from the traditional religions, such as the Olympian deities, into the foreign mystery religions. Therefore, the familiar elements acted as a catalyst that helped bring initiates into these mystery cults. As Parker notes in his book *On Greek Religion*, pagans could even be initiated into multiple cults, and it would have been, spiritually speaking, like “carrying a second credit card.”¹²² The Christians were the opposite: they refused to sacrifice to any pagan god whatsoever.¹²³ Before Constantine, the Christians lacked both social and political support, and it is important to see, very briefly, just how and why the support was lacking.

Chapter 2.1: Political Aggression and Social Exclusion

The early Christians lived in a politically unsupportive environment. Some emperors supported cults instead of Christianity, but other emperors took more extreme measures and specifically attacked Christianity. Although inconsistent, persecution had occurred in under several rulers.¹²⁴ More specifically, three reigns in which persecution occurred were the reigns of Nero (r. 54 – 68 A.D.), Decius (r. 249 – 251 A.D.), and Diocletian (r. c. 284 – c. 312 A.D.). During the reign of Nero, the city experienced a large fire in 64 A.D., which Nero decided was a good opportunity to blame the Christians.¹²⁵ Adding insult to injury, Nero begins a massacre of Christians as an attempt to “clean up Rome.”¹²⁶ Nero does not just execute Christians; he covers

¹²² Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 257.

¹²³ Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 8.

¹²⁴ Aquilina, *The Church and the Roman Empire*, 19.

¹²⁵ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 98.

¹²⁶ Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 18.

them in animal fur and throws them to the dogs, he crucifies them, and he burns them.¹²⁷ Tacitus explained that Christians “were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night” (*aut crucibus adfixi aut flammandi, atque ubi defecisset dies, in usum nocturni liminis urerentur*).¹²⁸ The reign of Decius was not much better. In an attempt to end Christianity, Decius had decided to enforce a required worship of pagan idols.¹²⁹ While some Christians decided to give in, others stood firm even though it cost them their lives.¹³⁰ The worst of the imperial pains were found in the reign of Diocletian. During Diocletian’s reign came “the Great Persecution—the biggest, most comprehensive, and bloodiest of them all,” which involved the destruction of Christian churches and scriptures.¹³¹ During these times, Christians experienced political rebuke.

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The social opinion of Christianity was just as acidic. We see several Roman authors writing with a strong distaste for Christianity. From Suetonius, we hear about an expulsion of Jews from Rome due to someone whom the author names “Chrestus,” a potential mix-up of the name “Christus,” or Christ, which might have occurred due to the names sounding similar on the Roman tongue.¹³² Suetonius also calls the Christians members of “followers of a new and wicked cult (*superstitio nova ac malefica*).”¹³³ The Roman historian Tacitus was just as unsupportive of Christianity as Suetonius. Tacitus notes that Christians were “hated for their crimes,” and were part of a “pernicious cult (*exitiabilis superstitio*),” and those convicted of what

¹²⁷ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 6.

¹²⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44, from Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 284-5. Loeb Classical Library 322. Both the text and translation are from Jackson.

¹²⁹ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 12.

¹³⁰ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 12.

¹³¹ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 17.

¹³² Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 5.

¹³³ Suet. *Ner.* 16.2; text and translation from Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 18.

he calls “the evil,” were charged with “hatred of the human race.”¹³⁴ Clark explains that *superstitio* was something that was not counted as an acceptable religion.¹³⁵ In a sense, *superstitio* held a negative connotation, implying that the religion is shameful or immoral in some way. The author Celsus was just as, if not more, hostile towards Christianity. Christians were accused of being a secret society and, in addition to attacking the beliefs of the religion, Celsus identified Christianity as being dangerous to the empire.¹³⁶ Unlike the previous authors, Pliny the Younger (c. 61 A.D. – 112 A.D.) appeared to be more unaware of Christianity and unsure of how to deal with it, provoking him to seek Trajan for guidance.¹³⁷ The culture of the ancient world showed distrust, disapproval, and irritation with Christianity.

Along with the broader, public disliking of Christians, society also impacted Christians on a more personal scale. Hurtado explains that “the social tensions experienced [by Christians] likely involved mainly their own immediate social circles of friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow members of their guilds, etc.”¹³⁸ Further, both Gentile and Jewish Christians experienced tension and exclusion from even his or her own family.¹³⁹ In a sense, Christians had only their fellow Christians to turn to for social support and comfort. I speculate that this almost complete lack of social connectivity had to have been exhausting or even traumatizing. Practicing Christianity was very difficult, as Hurtado notes:

[G]iven that virtually every area of social life was marked with religious acts and connotations, the early Christian scruple against reverencing any deity but the one God of biblical tradition would have comprised a wide basis for potential tensions and antagonism.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44; text and translation from Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 18.

¹³⁵ Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 18.

¹³⁶ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 99-100.

¹³⁷ Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 19.

¹³⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, “To Live and Die for Jesus: Social and Political Consequences of Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity,” *SEA* 70, (2005), 323. *AtlaSerials, Religion Collection*.

¹³⁹ Hurtado, “To Live and Die for Jesus: Social and Political Consequences of Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity,” 311-12.

¹⁴⁰ Hurtado, “To Live and Die for Jesus,” 324.

The Christians experienced a lack of support from both political and social realms. The political world was either actively against Christianity, or, at a minimum neglectful.¹⁴¹ In the social realm, Christians experienced public attacks from historians and other authors. Even families and friends disapproved of being a Christian. The world had little tolerance for the budding Christianity.

Chapter 2.2: What Purpose Did They Have?

The Christian faced social exclusion, public outcry, a lack of support from the political and cultural realms, and even persecution. From the physical, unbelieving world, there was no material gain in Christianity. In fact, for a Christian, money was to be given away. The Didache, a “manual for church leaders” that was made around “the middle of the first century,” instructed the reader:

οὐ διστάσεις δοῦναι οὐδὲ διδοὺς γογγύσεις· γνώση γὰρ τίς ἐστὶν ὁ τοῦ μισθοῦ καλὸς ἀνταποδότης. οὐκ ἀποστραφήσῃ τὸν ἐωθεόμενον, συγκοινωνήσεις δὲ πάντα τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου καὶ οὐκ ἐρεῖς ἴδια εἶναι·

You shall not hesitate to give, nor, when you give, shall you grumble, for you shall recognize who is the good paymaster of the reward. You shall not reject the one who is in need, but you shall share everything with your brother.¹⁴²

Christians focused on caring for the poor, so Christians sacrificed even *more* of their materials.

As we have seen from previous scholarship, there would not have been much of an appeal to Christianity for the ancient citizen. This religion was not like a cult where one could rise through the ranks and gain money for doing so, nor was this like a cult where one had the freedom to join multiple cults. In fact, Christians had a very strict and exclusive devotion to God.¹⁴³ The earliest “Christian faith involved an *exclusivist* religious claim upon adherents,” so that, for non-

¹⁴¹ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 19.

¹⁴² Didache, 4.7-8; translation and text from Rodney A. Whitacre, *A Patristic Greek Reader*, (United States of America: Baker Academic, 2012), 3, 10-11, 199.

¹⁴³ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 98.

Christians, the “faith involved a radical *disassociation* from their previous, traditional religious groups and practices.”¹⁴⁴ Further, there were also situations that would be confusing to the non-believing world, like the thief who tells Christ, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom,” to whom Christ says, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”¹⁴⁵ The poor become the uplifted, repentant thieves become models of virtue. The pagan would probably wonder what this religion is that flips the world’s ideas and values. This begs the question: what exactly compelled someone to become a Christian?

Why would anyone have become a Christian before Constantine’s time? I argue that the answer can be found in the theological beliefs and practices of Christianity. While there are certain theological concepts that would have been translatable for a converting pagan, not everything is the same. Couple the unique theological ideas of Christianity with the actions taken by Christians, and it can soon be seen why a pagan would convert. By taking a look at the theological beliefs, as well as the practices that came with them, we can get a glimpse of why someone seeking salvation would convert to Christianity.

Chapter 2.2a: The Theological Ideas

Christianity is full of theological beliefs and rituals. Some of these beliefs would have sounded familiar to a pagan. There are other beliefs that were wholly unique at that time. As I will demonstrate, when beliefs and rituals that appear similar are given further examination, it is made clear that they, too, are unique. Christianity holds many beliefs, and as a result, I will cover only a select number that are especially important for this thesis.

¹⁴⁴ Hurtado, “To Live and Die for Jesus,” 310.

¹⁴⁵ Lk 23:42-3 NABRE.

Some of the theological ideas of Christianity may at first glance look similar to those of the mystery religions. However, I will show how the similarities are not truly there. For the Christian, the Apostles' Creed is a statement of theological beliefs, dating from around the third century.¹⁴⁶ In the Creed, there is an affirmation of Jesus' Resurrection.¹⁴⁷ In her myth, Isis experiences a similar situation; for Isis, the mythology claims her brother-husband Osiris actually perishes and was thought to have been brought back to life by Isis. However, the Resurrection believed by Christians is actually quite different from that of the cults. As Alvar Ezquerro explains, Osiris may have been brought back to life, but "this is not a resurrection that reverses the rules of the real world."¹⁴⁸ Further, ancient pagan belief followed in the idea of a reincarnation, whereas, with the Resurrection of Christ, Christ was not reincarnated but brought back to life and had the same Body as before His Death.¹⁴⁹ Another theological similarity, evoked earlier, is the concept of a personal savior that was sought during this time. Each mystery cult had rituals that made the deity more personal to the initiate. In the Apostles' Creed, God is referred to as "the Father Almighty," Who cares for all of creation.¹⁵⁰ Christian believes that God is so personal with us that we can address Him in such a close way as to call Him "Father." Further, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."¹⁵¹ In Christian belief, God willingly dies for humanity. This is a profound personal love between God and humanity, a loving relationship which could not be offered by the cults. These are some of the many theological ideas which sound similar at first, but were actually very unique.

¹⁴⁶ Piotr, Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed: The Apostles' Creed and Its Early Christian Context*, (Great Britain: T&T Clark International, 2009), 2. EBSCO eBooks.

¹⁴⁷ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed*, 63.

¹⁴⁸ Alvar Ezquerro, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 46.

¹⁴⁹ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed*, 64.

¹⁵⁰ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed*, 18-19.

¹⁵¹ Jn 3:16 (NABRE).

Despite concepts that sound similar at first, Christian theology and ritual also contained wholly unique concepts. The Apostles' Creed also affirms a belief in the "Resurrection of the body," which, while familiar to some sects of the Jewish faith, would have been very unknown to the Greek and Roman religions, which believed at most in the soul and its immortality.¹⁵² Another theologically unique aspect of Christianity is the historical tangibility of God through Christ. Metzger describes the historical aspect of Christ:

Unlike the deities of the Mysteries, who were nebulous figures of an imaginary past, the Divine Being Whom the Christian worshipped as Lord was known as a real Person on earth only a short time before the earliest documents of the New Testament were written. From the earliest times the Christian creed included the affirmation that Jesus "was crucified under Pontius Pilate." On the other hand, Plutarch thinks it necessary to warn the priestess Clea against believing that "any of these tales [concerning Isis and Osiris] actually happened in the manner in which they are related"¹⁵³

In addition, not only is God an identifiable Person (Christ), but Christ has, in addition to His Divine nature, a human nature. The Apostles' Creed professes that Christ "conceived by the Holy Spirit" and "born of the Virgin Mary."¹⁵⁴ This statement not only affirms the doctrine of Incarnation, but the inclusion of the Virgin Mary further reinforces the historicity of Christianity. Celsus attacks the belief of the Incarnation, identifying it as "blasphemous" and questioning why God would want to humble Himself down to a human level.¹⁵⁵ These unique ideas brought unimagined concepts to salvation.

As with the theological beliefs, there were both similar and different theological rituals. Some rituals may have also seemed similar on the superficial level but in detail have distinct differences. One ritual that seems relatively similar to each other is the washing or bathing of the initiates for the cults. This appears to be similar to the sacrament of Baptism for Christians,

¹⁵² Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed*, 120.

¹⁵³ Bruce M. Metzger, "Considerations of Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," *HThR* 48, no. 1, (1955), 12. *AtlaSerials, Religion Collection (EBSCOhost)*.

¹⁵⁴ Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed*, 35, 36, 37.

¹⁵⁵ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 100-101; "blasphemous": Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 101.

which is referred to as one of the “Sacraments of Initiation” of the Christian faith.¹⁵⁶ While there are differences between the cult version of washing and Christianity’s Sacrament of Baptism, especially in terms of the practice and, quite clearly, regarding the theological beliefs, the superficial similarity would have helped a pagan relate to Christianity better. One interesting ritual of the cult of Mithras that seems, on the surface, to be similar to a Christian sacrament, is the communal meal practiced by the cult. As mentioned earlier, bread and water were consumed by Mithraic initiates, similar to how bread, water, and wine are used for the Sacrament of the Eucharist.¹⁵⁷ The water and bread of Mithraism are different, however, from the Eucharist of Christianity. For the cult of Mithras, some depictions of the farewell feast display wine and bread instead of the meat and blood from the freshly-slain bull.¹⁵⁸ This replacement actually would make sense, as the bull was depicted with wheat coming from its spine; the bull either created or became grain, i.e., bread.¹⁵⁹ Assuming this part of the myth was translated into the communal meal, the communal meal might have had bread and wine representing blood and body. Put another way, the body would become bread. For Christians, what was wine and bread truly becomes the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ. The Doctrine is expressed as far back as Justin Martyr and Saint Hippolytus, possibly even earlier to Saint John.¹⁶⁰ For example, Justin Martyr explains the belief as such:

οὐ γὰρ ὡς κοινὸν ἄρτον οὐδὲ κοινὸν πόμα ταῦτα λαμβάνομεν· ἀλλ’ ὄν τρόπον διὰ λόγου θεοῦ σαρκοποιηθεὶς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ὁ σωτὴρ ἡμῶν καὶ σάρκα καὶ αἷμα ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας ἡμῶν ἔσχεν, οὕτως καὶ τὴν δι’ εὐχῆς λόγου τοῦ παρ’ αὐτοῦ εὐχαριστηθεῖσαν τροφήν, ἐξ ἧς αἷμα καὶ σάρκες κατὰ μεταβολὴν τρέφονται ἡμῶν, ἐκείνου τοῦ σαρκοποιηθέντος Ἰησοῦ καὶ σάρκα καὶ αἷμα ἐδιδάχθημεν εἶναι. (Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 66.2)

¹⁵⁶ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 96.

¹⁵⁷ Justin *Apol* 65.3; translation and text from Whitacre, *A Patristic Greek Reader*, 218.

¹⁵⁸ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 50.

¹⁵⁹ Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 20.

¹⁶⁰ “Justin Martyr”: Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in The New Testament and The Early Church*, (Collegeville, MN, 1996), 176; “Hippolytus”: Mike Aquilina, *The Mass of the Early Christians*, (United States of America: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2001), 41; “Saint John”: LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 113.

For we do not receive these as ordinary bread or ordinary drink. But in the same way as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh through God's word, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food for which thanks has been given through a word of prayer that is from him, by which our blood and flesh are nourished in according with [its] change, are the flesh and blood of that one who became flesh, Jesus.¹⁶¹

As evidenced by this passage, Justin expresses that it is truly believed to be the Flesh and Blood of Christ that is being received in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Even non-Christians were aware of this belief, as some of the early first and second century mistakenly thought that Christians were practicing cannibalism.¹⁶² This belief also adds to the personability of God for Christians – that is, God is so personable that Christians are able to receive God. This most certainly was not a possibility in other cults. Christianity had practices that were, after closer inspection, quite unique. However, these unique traits were not the only factor that helped individuals convert.

Although some of the ideas of Christianity appear similar to those of cults from a superficial view, closer inspection reveals that the religion held new and unique beliefs. As seen with my examination of the Mithraic meals, it was erroneous to claim, as Celsus did, that Christianity was an uninspired re-hash of other religions.¹⁶³ Instead, Christianity offered a religion that believed in having a personal relationship with God, which was put into practice through the sacraments.

Chapter 2.2b: Testimonies

While the unique and similar rituals of Christianity did help it gain intrigue from pagans, one of the most striking things about Christianity was the followers and the way they lived their lives. The Christians acted and lived in ways that would have been off-putting to some and

¹⁶¹ Whitacre, *A Patristic Greek Reader*, 75-76, 218.

¹⁶² Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 11.

¹⁶³ Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 100.

intriguing to others. The Christians were working for a higher purpose, rather than for themselves, and testified through example, which was a lot more than could be said for the cult initiates.

The initiates could join multiple cults, like “carrying a second credit card,” Parker states.¹⁶⁴ This implies that there was almost a passive, indifferent nature to these cults. I speculate, therefore, that, had any of the mystery religions been threatened or banished by the authorities, the ancient citizen would have easily cut up that credit card and moved on without blinking an eye. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr wrote that “It is written that God once allowed the sun to be worshipped, and yet you cannot discover anyone who ever suffered death because of his faith in the sun.”¹⁶⁵ Interesting to note is that Mithras was sometimes identified as the “sun god,”¹⁶⁶ making it highly possible that Justin was criticizing Mithraism, which, as evoked earlier, Justin had mentioned in his *First Apology*. There may be some truth to Justin’s comment, given that Mithraism had a positive cultural reception and did as such did not need to fear persecution.

Further, ancient thought commonly placed an emphasis on the public good. When discussing the Christian’s refusal to worship the emperor, Hurtado explained that “withdrawal from such observances and an accompanying disdain for these deities would have provoked an understandable level of ire. Indeed, one could be seen as endangering the welfare of the city by failing to reverence its tutelary deities.”¹⁶⁷ To a non-Christian, a refusal to worship was a threat

¹⁶⁴ Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 257.

¹⁶⁵ Falls trans., *The First Apology*, 335.

¹⁶⁶ Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 102.

¹⁶⁷ Hurtado, “To Live and Die for Jesus,” 313.

to national security. When threatened, the Mithraist or the Isis initiate would probably have switched gods for the public good. The Christian, however, was not so easily moved.

Despite being in a group that was unsupported by the government, and practically disliked by the communities, Christians pursued their faith, even to the point of dying. In fact, the word “martyr” derives from the Greek μαρτυρ- which translates to “witness.”¹⁶⁸ Several words from this “μαρτυρ” stem: μαρτυρία, ἡ, μαρτύριον means a “witness, testimony, evidence,” or “proof,” but can also mean a “sermon.”¹⁶⁹ In English, the verb μαρτυρέω is understood as “to be a witness, to bear witness,” or, interestingly, “to confess,” or “to praise.”¹⁷⁰ Lastly, the noun μάρτυρος, ὁ, ἡ, μάρτυς, υρος, ὁ, ἡ translates to “a witness” or “a martyr.”¹⁷¹ For the Christian, martyrdom was a spiritual battle between good and evil, and a way of helping both their own community as well as helping convert those witnessing the martyrs’ deaths.¹⁷² Saint Agnes of Rome, for example, was a beautiful, young woman at the age of marriage, who died for her devotion to Christ.¹⁷³ Saints Perpetua and Felicitas were two mothers who, along with other Christian men and women, experienced imprisonment before being martyred in an arena in 203 A.D.¹⁷⁴ Before this occurrence, Justin Martyr gave up his life for Christianity. “No right-minded man forsakes truth for falsehood,” Justin answered those persecuting him.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁸ *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, s.v. “martyr,” accessed April 04, 2020, <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/Martyr>

¹⁶⁹ Karl Feyerabend, *Langenscheidt’s Pocket Greek Dictionary: Classical Greek-English* (Germany: Langenscheidt KG), 244.

¹⁷⁰ Karl Feyerabend, *Langenscheidt’s Pocket Greek Dictionary*, 244.

¹⁷¹ Karl Feyerabend, *Langenscheidt’s Pocket Greek Dictionary*, 244.

¹⁷² Robin Darling Young, *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 2, 9. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

¹⁷³ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 15.

¹⁷⁴ Carolinne White, ed. and trans., *Lives of Roman Christian Women*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), 4, 6.

¹⁷⁵ H. Hoever, *Lives of the Saints: Illustrated*, (Catholic Book Publishing Company), 218.

The martyrdom of a Christian had a lasting impact on those witnessing it. Saint Agnes' death reportedly brought thousands of spectators to conversion to Christianity. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* detailed the last days of the titular Christian, who died sometime between 150 A.D. and 180 A.D.¹⁷⁶ According to the text, many witnesses of the martyrs were “astounded by the great nobility of the godly and reverent race of the Christians” (ἐκ τούτου οὖν πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος, θαυμάσαν τὴν γενναιότητα τοῦ θεοφιλοῦς καὶ θεοσεβοῦς γένους τῶν Χριστιανῶν).¹⁷⁷ Placed under arrest, Polycarp asked to pray:

τῶν δὲ ἐπιτρεψάντων, σταθεὶς προσήξατο πλήρης ὄν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ οὕτως, ὡς ἐπὶ δύο ὥρας μὴ δύνασθαι σιωπῆσαι καὶ ἐκπλήττεσθαι τοὺς ἀκούοντας, πολλοὺς τε μετανοεῖν ἐπὶ τῷ ἐληλυθῆναι ἐπὶ τοιοῦτον θεοπρεπῇ πρεσβύτην.

When they gave their permission, he stood and prayed, being so filled with God's grace that for two hours he could not be silent. Those who heard him were amazed, and many of them regretted coming out for such a godly old man.¹⁷⁸

Even non-Christian sources admit that people were moved by Christian martyrdom. For example, as Tacitus related, Nero's persecutions backfired: “Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.”¹⁷⁹ Martyrdom was often public, and the bravery and courage, and often “joy”,¹⁸⁰ expressed by the Christians was something unique and possibly even jarring to onlookers. Nevertheless, such expression demonstrated the degree of conviction the Christians experienced about their faith.

¹⁷⁶ Whitacre, *A Patristic Greek Reader*, 55.

¹⁷⁷ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 3.2; Text and translation from Bart D. Ehrman, trans. and ed., *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume I: I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 370-371. DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.martyrdom_polycarp.2003

¹⁷⁸ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 7.3; from Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 376-7.

¹⁷⁹ *Unde quamquam adversus sontis et novissima exempla meritos miseratio oriebatur, tamquam non utilitate publica, sed in saevitiam unius absumerentur* (Tac. Ann. 15.45). Text and translation from Tacitus, *Annales: Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 284-5. DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.tacitus-annals.1931

¹⁸⁰ “joy:” cf. Caroline White, *Lives of Roman Christian Women*, 14, 17.

Martyrdom was one of the most extreme ways of living out the faith, but it was not the *only* way. Christians also testified their love for God by caring for their neighbor. For example, during the third century, about 249-70, a plague had broken out.¹⁸¹ Pontius the Deacon provided a description of how people reacted during the event:

Everyone shuddered, fled to avoid contagion, wickedly exposed their dear ones, as if along with the person who was about to die from the plague one could also shut out death itself. Meanwhile, throughout every district of the city there lay no longer the dead bodies, but many diseased and dying people who asked the pity of the passers-by. No one regarded anything but cruel gains; no one trembled at the remembrance of a similar experiences [sic.]; no one did to another what he wished done to him.¹⁸²

People sought after their own benefit, even letting their loved ones die. The same was not said for the Christians. Christians under the leadership of Saint Cyprian (c. 200-258), Bishop of Carthage, cared for both friend and foe during this crisis.¹⁸³ “Indeed,” Pontius wrote, “a man would only become perfect if he did more than the publican or heathen, by overcoming evil with good and by the exercise of a divine-like clemency, loving even his enemies.”¹⁸⁴ It did not matter whether the sick being cared for was a fellow Christian or a recent persecutor; all that mattered was that they needed help in a moment of fear and abandonment.

¹⁸¹ Kyle Harper, “Another Eyewitness to the Plague Described by Cyprian, with Notes on the ‘Persecution of Decius,” *JRA* 29 (October 2016): 473. DOI: 10.1017/S1047759400072263.

¹⁸² Pontius the Deacon, *Lives of St. Cyprian*, 13-14; found in Roy J. Deferrari, *Early Christian Biographies: Lives of St. Cyprian, by Pontius; St. Ambrose, by Paulinus; St. Augustine, by Possidius; St. Anthony, by St. Athanasius; St. Paul the First Hermit, by St. Hilarion, and Malchus, by St. Jerome; St. Epiphanius, by Ennodius; with a Sermon on the Life of St. Honoratus, by St. Hilary*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, John A. Lacy, Mary Magdeleine Müller, Mary Emily Keenan, Marie Liguori Ewald, Genevieve Marie Cook, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 15, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), *EBSCOhost eBook Collection*, Cf Aq 13

¹⁸³ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 12, 13.

¹⁸⁴ Pontius, *Lives of St. Cyprian*, 14.

Although many died while caring for the sick,¹⁸⁵ the mortality rate dropped for the Christians and those whom they treated.¹⁸⁶ More importantly, this love expressed by the Christians stuck with the nonbeliever:

They remembered that a Christian had come and risked his life to take care of them when *their own families* had abandoned them to the dogs and vultures. They remembered the difference in the way the Christians faced death—how even the dying had the certainty of a better life to come. . . . Many of these pagans nursed back to health by Christians became Christians themselves.¹⁸⁷

In a world where people cared for themselves and only their wellbeing, the Christians shined forth as example of what love and care meant. Moved by this deep self-sacrificial expression of love, many non-Christians desired to share and partake in this same love. For these converts, Christianity was the answer. Christianity had the salvation that had been so desperately sought for.

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Beyond the world's expectations, Christianity prevailed. Christianity upheld unique beliefs that, when closely examined, were unlike that of the mystery religions. In addition, Christians put their unique beliefs into action, becoming leaders of the faith through example. The Christians practiced their beliefs by caring for the poor and sick, expressing love to their enemies, and even laying their lives down for what they believed in. Such powerful and determined actions moved many nonbelievers. In some instances, as with the plague, the pagans were impacted by Christianity on a deep, personal level. This leadership by example, seen through the Christian practicing his or her beliefs, helped bring individuals to Christianity.

¹⁸⁵ Dionysius of Alexandria, *Epistle 12.4*; translation from “Dionysius,” S. D. F. Salmond, trans., *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius And Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, A. Cleveland Coxe, James Donaldson, Alexander Roberts, eds., Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, vol. 6, (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 108-109. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1973> ; Cf. Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 14.

¹⁸⁷ Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 14.

Conclusion:

Christianity was more than just a cult, and much more than *just* a religion. For Christians, of any age or time period, the faith is a way of life. A Christian way of life not just believing in the theological ideas handed down but applying and acting upon them each and every day. Christianity is taken seriously, not as just some cult or some unique philosophy. The cults of Mithras and Isis and Demeter all had similar ideas, similar concepts, and they had the political and social support to back their growth. Before Constantine, no such political support was offered for Christianity, and yet its followers knew they were working for something greater. For the ancient citizen, being a Christian offered the fulfillment that other cults were unable to provide. This fulfillment was made evident by the acts of love seen through the martyrs and caretakers. Tertullian is known to have said that “the blood of the martyrs is the ‘seed’ of the Church” (*semen est sanguis Christianorum*).¹⁸⁸ This appears to ring true, even to this day. As Justin Martyr wrote, “You can find men of every nationality who for the name of Jesus, have suffered, and still suffer, all kinds of torments rather than deny their faith in Him.”¹⁸⁹ The Church was not and is not built by teaching alone; it is built by leadership through example. And what better leadership is there than the Son of God, Who gave up His very own Life as a ransom for many?¹⁹⁰ Following this leadership, the Christian, especially the martyr, was someone who stood up for his or her beliefs and said with confident affirmation, “What I believe in is Truth, and not even the threat of death will deter that.” Combined with the theological beliefs, this

¹⁸⁸ Tertullian, *Apol* 50.13. Latin from Minucius Felix Tertullian, *Apology, De Spectaculis, Minucius Felix: Octavius*, T. R. Glover and Gerald H. Rendall, trans., (Cambridge, MDA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 226. DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.tertullian-apology.1931. The English translation is from Aquilina, *The Church and The Roman Empire*, 11.

¹⁸⁹ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 121; from Falls, *The First Apology*, 335.

¹⁹⁰ Mk 10:45 NABRE.

leadership by example, seen through Christ and all who practice living like Him, is what attracted the pagan to Christianity. Living their belief, Christians survived the cults.

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