

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

***BEHIND THE SECRET MEETINGS AND RITUAL
OF THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS:
THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY***

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INTRODUCTION

Early Christianity is often regarded as an outgrowth of two traditions: Judaic religion and classical philosophy. This thesis will examine the importance of a third tradition--the mystery religions of Greece and Rome. In this thesis I will argue that the familiarity of the mysteries in the early centuries of Christianity served as religious models. I will also describe several important ways that early Christian practice was shaped. Finally, I will suggest that the prominence attained by Christian religion was due to a significant extent from its adaptation to characteristics of the mystery cults.

The history of the mystery religions stems back to the Near East to approximately the year 2900 BCE. The mystery religions were secret cults that were open only to those who had a special, individual initiation.¹ The image that represents the mysteries most familiar to scholars is the basket closed with a lid. The *mystes*² is the only one who knows what the basket conceals. There is evidence available which reports the *cista mystica*³ contained a snake to provoke horror in the initiate. Clement of Alexandria, a Christian, attempts to disclose to his audience what is contained within the sacred chest.

Consider, too, the contents of the mystic chest; for I must strip bare their holy things and utter the unspeakable. Are they not sesame cakes, pyramid and spherical cakes, cakes with many navels, also balls of salt and a serpent? Are they not also pomegranates, fig branches, fennel stalks, ivy leaves, round cakes and poppies? These are their holy things!⁴

¹ Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 276.

² *Mystes* is the Greek term for the initiate of a mystery cult.

³ The sacred basket involved with the mystery is called *cista mystica* in Greek.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, 2.

However, the religion of the Near Eastern Egyptians was not considered a mystery; their practices were not something that needed to be kept secret. It was not until the Greeks invaded Egypt in the fourth century BC that various gods being worshipped by the Egyptians became "mysteries."

Egyptian gods, such as Isis and Osiris, became integrated into the religious life of the Greeks and continued to be worshipped when the Romans became the new world power. However, the cult of Isis was only one of the great mystery religions instituted into the Greek world. Other deities would take on the same mysterious persona as Isis and require special initiations and ceremonies before membership was permitted. Greece openly accepted new religious practices, and at one point in Greek history six hundred new and flourishing mysteries came into the foreground.⁵ This thesis will focus on these other deities: Demeter and the Eleusinian mysteries, Dionysus, the Great Mother,⁶ and Mithras.

The *mysteria*, the mystery religions, were known for their common themes of initiation, secrecy, and an interest in the afterlife. Also similar among the *mysteria* were the purifications and processions, fire torches and fasting, passion plays,⁷ and the exhibition of the sacred relics.⁸ The mysteries were different from the state religions of the Greeks and Romans because the members of the mysteries sought a personal loving relationship with their patron god, whereas the gods of the state were worshipped in exchange for practical favors.⁹ Generally, the worldly favors asked of the state gods included a better harvest, victory in a battle, and survival during an epidemic. Moreover,

⁵ Burkert, p. 278.

⁶ The Great Mother was also known as Magna Mater.

⁷ Passion plays were acted out by the members of a specific cult and demonstrated the mythological story of the deity worshipped. For example, the cult of Eleusis used the passion play to show the suffering that Demeter felt for the loss of her daughter.

⁸ Mylonas, George Emmanuel. "Mystery Religions of Greece." from *Forgotten Religions: Including Some Living Primitive Religions*. ed. Vergilius Ferm. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 172.

The sacred relics included the *cista mystica* and what was contained within the basket.

⁹ Mylonas, p. 171.

unlike the followers of the state religions who were born under the rule of a particular deity,¹⁰ membership into the mystery cults was voluntary and personal.

Evidence of the religious practices within the mystery religions demonstrates the effect these cults had on Christianity, although Christianity was originally born from Judaism. I seek here to discuss the similarities and effects the mysteries had on Christianity, focusing primarily on a select list of the mysteries in which the Greeks participated: the cults of Isis and Osiris, Demeter and Eleusis, Dionysus (Bacchus), the Great Mother (Cybele), and Mithras.¹¹ My paper will also focus on the attitude the Romans held toward early Christianity and how these attitudes shaped and strengthened Christianity in the first centuries of the Common Era.

However, for one to understand fully the expansion of the mystery religions throughout Greece and Rome, a brief background inquiry into Egyptian and Hebrew religious tradition is necessary. The appeal of the Egyptian and Near Eastern deities to Hellenistic society was established through the institution of Isis and Osiris, whereas, Christianity stems from the ancient Judaic belief in one God. The backgrounds of these religious cultures, Greek and Roman mysteries and early Christianity, had a bearing on the survival or dissipation of each of these customs.

Polytheism was a prominent practice amongst the Egyptians. Not only did the Egyptians worship the pharaoh, but they worshipped nature as well.¹² It was believed that the pharaoh was divinely appointed and considered to be both man and god, the earthly

¹⁰In the state religions, the worshippers were born under the rule of a particular deity and were then expected to pay homage to that god. For example, if I were born in Athens I would generally be expected to worship Athena because Athena was the patron god of the state. However, in the mysteries I am able to choose which deity I want to worship. I get to choose if I want to worship a particular deity or if I do not want to.

¹¹Mithras was Christianity's primary rival during the rule of the Romans. While the Greeks did not necessarily worship in the cult of Mithras, it grew to be one of the leading cults of the Roman Empire. Mithraism also shared a substantial amount of similarities with Christianity regarding philosophy and practice making it an important religion to discuss in regards to the survival of Christianity.

¹²To the Egyptians, nature should be treated with respect. The Egyptians believed that everything in nature contained the essence of the gods. By needlessly destroying the environment, the Egyptians believed that they were deliberately hurting the gods.

embodiment of the deity Horus.¹³ Horus was the son of Osiris, a king of Egypt, and his sister Isis. According to the Egyptian legend, Osiris was murdered by his brother Set. Isis, who mourned her brother's death, recovered Osiris' slain body and temporarily brought him back to life. During Osiris' revival, Isis conceived a child who became known as Horus. He was brought into the world to appease the calamitous death of Osiris.¹⁴ With the help of his mother, Horus battled and defeated Set and became one of the most honored deities in Egyptian myth. In one interpretation of the legend, Set is transformed into a hippopotamus that Horus dismembers and distributes among the gods. The following excerpt from an Egyptian poem discusses the ritual of dismemberment of Set's body. The poem is a conversation between the goddess Isis and her son Horus, the butcher. The "reader" is a pleased Egyptian praising the revenge done for Osiris' wrongful death.

Set is Butchered¹⁵

Isis

Thou seizest thy harpoon and doest what thou wilt with it,
My son Horus, thou lovable one.

Butcher

I am the skilled butcher of the Majesty of Re,
Who cuts up the Hippopotamus, dismembered upon his hide.

Reader

Be thou annihilated, O Set, be thou annihilated!
Thou shalt not exist and thy soul shall not exist.
Thou shalt not exist and thy body shall not exist.
Thou shalt not exist and thy children shall not exist.
Thou shalt not exist and thy flesh shall not exist.
Thou shalt not exist and thy bones shall not exist.
Thou shalt not exist and thy magic shall not exist.
Thou shalt not exist and no place where thou art shall
exist.

¹³Perry, Marvin. *Western Civilization: A Brief History*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 15.

¹⁴Wren, Linnea and Wren, David, ed. *Perspectives on Western Art: Source Documents and Readings from the Ancient Near East through the Middle Ages*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 29.

¹⁵Wren, p. 33. This poem was first cited from Herbert W. Fairman, trans., *The Triumph of Horus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 113-114.

Thou shalt die,...
 Horus in his strength has united the Two Lands;
 Set is overthrown in the form of a hippopotamus.

The Egyptians believed that Horus was responsible for choosing the man he wanted to represent him on earth as the pharaoh. The pharaoh was the absolute ruler that maintained control over the government and religion. Because of the widespread belief that the pharaoh was the earthly embodiment of Horus, Egypt was generally a peaceful and thriving civilization.

Just as the Egyptians were fearful of angering Horus, there was also the fear of disrupting and enraging their sacred environment. To the Egyptians, animals were a source of labor as well as food, the sun allowed their harvests to grow, and the Nile provided the nutrients needed for healthy soil and a flourishing crop. Because the gods were manifested in each of these phenomena, the Egyptians felt that nature deserved to be worshipped. The Egyptians believed that if they worshipped their supporting environment, the gods would continue to be happy and allow them to prosper.

The Nile is generally considered the central focus of Egyptian religion because the river flowed through the middle of a complete desert. Without the river Nile, the Egyptians would not have prospered. The Nile became the major meeting place for divine and human interaction.¹⁶ When the river flooded the gods were happy, but if there was a drought, with famine and starvation resulting, the Egyptians felt that the gods were greatly displeased. *Men, Boats, and Animals* is the earliest known Egyptian wall painting focusing on the worship of the Nile, and several poems have been recovered praising the Nile god. The following excerpt from an Egyptian poem illustrates the deification of the Nile river.

Adoration to the Nile!¹⁷

¹⁶Wren, p. 20.

¹⁷Wren, pp. 21-22. This poem was first cited from Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., *The Library of Original Sources*, Vol. I (New York: University Research Extension, 1907), 79-80, 82-83.

Adoration to the Nile!
 Hail to thee, O Nile!
 Who manifesteth they self over this land
 And comest to give life to Egypt!
 O inundation of the Nile,
 Offerings are made unto thee,
 Oxen are immolated to thee,
 Great festivals are instituted for thee.
 Come and prosper, come,
 O Nile, come and prosper!

The devotion and praise to a particular deity through poetry and art work became a theme common among cultures following the Egyptians.

Another common theme of Egyptian religion is the concept of an afterlife. The Egyptians desired to overcome death by instituting pyramid-tombs, mummification, and funerary art that would establish a life of eternity.¹⁸ They felt that the afterlife would offer the same pleasures that they enjoyed on earth. Later civilizations and forms of religion would adapt to this idea of an afterlife, but would desire a connection with the divine, rather than hope for an enjoyable death. A common theme amongst the mystery religions is the journey to the afterlife, or the Field of Rushes,¹⁹ borrowed from the myths of the Near East. In the Field of Rushes, the grain was always plenty and there was complete security and abundant resources for the soul of each of the dead. However, the Field of Rushes was surrounded by water and the only way to transverse the great expanse was by boat. Most commonly the traveler would accompany a mysterious ferryman, named Face-behind, so named because he always faced the back of the craft he operated. Of course not everyone would make it to the Field of Rushes. Only those who led a just and honorable life, worshipping and paying respect to the gods, would pass over the water and enter this land of abundance.²⁰

¹⁸Perry, p. 16.

¹⁹The Field of Rushes was how the Egyptians pictured the afterlife.

²⁰Wren, p. 25.

Monotheism was established in Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV in the years 1369-1353 BCE. Previously, the practice of worshipping several gods, with the primary focus on the god Amen, was the custom in Egyptian culture. Amenhotep wanted to replace polytheism with the worship of the sun-god Aton. Aton became known as the creator of the world, the maintainer of life, and the god of love, justice, and peace.²¹ Amenhotep changed his name to Akhenaton to demonstrate his devotion to his one and only god.²² Despite the devotion of Akhenaton to his new found religion, the worship of one god was not a popular concept amongst the Egyptians, and when Akhenaton was replaced polytheism in the culture was reinstated as the official mode of worship.

From Near Eastern customs emerged a new religion which completely broke away from the polytheistic worship of the Egyptians. In approximately 1250 BCE the Hebrews journeyed away from Egypt and made their way to Israel where they freely worshipped their one true God, Yahweh. This belief in one God became the central force in the life of the Hebrews. Unlike the gods of the Egyptians, Yahweh was eternal. The Egyptian gods had limits: they were born or created, they required food, drink, sleep, and sexual gratification. Often the Egyptian gods became ill or grew old and died.²³ Yahweh was eternal and incapable of experiencing the same faults that humans had. The Hebrews believed that before Yahweh there was nothing, no time surpassed Him because He was the source of everything in the universe. The concept of monotheism was usually an unwelcome passing phase within Near Eastern religions before the Common Era. Not until the advent of Christianity in the first centuries CE would a change emerge welcoming the worship of one true god.

²¹Perry, p. 17.

²² As was the custom in this dynasty of pharaohs, *Amenhotep* demonstrated that he worshipped the primary sun god Amen. By changing his name to *Akhenaton* it was obvious to the Egyptians that he paid homage to Aton.

²³Perry, p. 30.

As Judaism was spreading throughout the Near East, a great poet named Homer²⁴ told about the defeat of great society of Troy by the Greeks. These stories became reality when the Greeks conquered Asia Minor in the Persian Wars.²⁵ Rather than worrying about the Greeks fighting against the Egyptian dynasties, the pharaohs hired the Greek warriors to ally with Egypt. The first pharaoh to institute this practice was Psammetichus I.²⁶ He created settlements for the Greeks on the banks of the Nile so that they had a healthy place to live and farm. He was also emphatic that the Egyptians cordially mingle with Greeks to learn their language and customs.²⁷ Eventually the religious practices of these civilizations would integrate. This uniting of thought concentrated around the Egyptian goddess Isis. Isis was worshipped for several different reasons in the Egyptian culture. She was the protector of the pharaoh, and because he represented the earthly Horus, she was also regarded as the pharaoh's mother in a sense.²⁸ The Greeks associated Isis with Demeter because of their common link to the underworld. Persephone, Demeter's daughter, was kidnapped and taken to Hades²⁹ for half of the year, and similarly Isis recovered her husband's body from the underworld. This connection with Greek mythology established Isis as one of the most common foreign deities in the Greek empire. In fact, when Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in the fourth century BCE, he built a temple to Isis.³⁰

The popularity of the mysteries was quickly accepted with the advancement and expansion of the Roman Empire. Not only did the Romans respect the Greek arts and intellect, but the Greek religious practices were adopted as well. The ritual change of the

²⁴Homer wrote at approximately 700 BC.

²⁵The Persian Wars started in 480 when Xerxes invaded Greece and ended in 479 when the Greeks defeated Persia at Plataea

²⁶Solmsen, Friedrich. *Isis among the Greeks and Romans*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 6.

²⁷Solmsen, p. 6.

²⁸Solmsen, pp. 9-10.

²⁹The Greek underworld.

³⁰Solmsen, p. 22.

deity's name from Greek to Roman³¹ made each particular god a Roman trademark. The first centuries of the common era reveal two religious additions to rival the mystery cults for survival: Mithraism and Christianity. Only one of these six mysteries, Isis, Eleusis, Dionysus, the Great Mother, Mithraism, and early Christianity, would survive in uncompromising worship throughout the centuries. Yet part of each cult survives in and through the various facets of Christianity.

³¹ The Romans adopted the same gods as the Greeks but converted the names and myths to fit their legends. Demeter became Ceres, Dionysus became Bacchus, and the Great Mother became Magna Mater.

The mystery religions share many of the same characteristics. The mysteries of Isis and Osiris, Eleusis, Dionysus, Cybele and Attis, and Mithras are five of these cults with many of the same themes, rituals, and outlooks about life. These five cults also appear to have had the largest effect on Christianity in the first four centuries of the common era. The following section of this thesis will give a general overview of mystery religions and what makes them different from the other religions of their time. Following this brief synopsis, each of the five previously mentioned mysteries will be examined in more detail, focusing on points that may relate them to early Christianity.

MYSTERY RELIGIONS

Each state within the empire of Greece had at least one of its own patron deities.¹ The primary deity of each state was established as the protector of that state's people and was worshipped so the city would sustain in times of harvest, war, and disease. Athena is an example of a patron deity. She was the daughter of Zeus, who sprang from his head,² and became known as the protector over Athens. The Olympian³ god Athena, along with gods like Apollo, Aphrodite, and Artemis, formed some of the more popular state cults throughout Greece. Despite the popularity of the Olympian cults, they lacked any organized structure such as a priesthood, a scripture, and a theology.⁴ Often the Olympian cults were celebrated at home at the family shrine regarding a particular family need and widespread worldly favors for Greece. A component of the state religions that minimized the options of the people was that the devotees were born into a specific state and were expected to worship in that particular state cult. There was not an initiatory period where

¹ MacMullen, Ramsay. *Christianizing the Roman Empire*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 15. The patron deity was worshipped for the protection of the city in the time of an epidemic or war.

² Athena sprang from Zeus' head and became known as the goddess of wisdom.

³ The gods of Olympus generally consist of Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, Hercules, and Hades. These gods did favors for humans, but seldom related to them in a friendly manner because they felt that humans were meant to be subservient to them.

⁴ Mylonas, George Emmanuel. "Mystery Religions of Greece." from *Forgotten Religions: Including Some Living Primitive Religions*. ed. Vergilius Ferm. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 171.

the worshipper chose the deity to be worshipped.⁵ Each member of a specific cult was simply born into it because of the locale of their birthplace and the prominent religion in that particular region.⁶

According to Samuel Angus, the mysteries became an important aspect of the Greek world because the state religions could not offer the Greek society what it needed religiously and emotionally. The Olympian state religions collapsed with the state systems because of the lack of structure and organization within the cults. Furthermore, Angus speculates that the lack of order within the state religions started a panic in the Greek citizens which resulted in the introduction of the mysteries. During the political and social upheaval of the Greek states, individuals began to turn from state cults to religions that satisfied their personal needs. Some of the individual needs being addressed during this chaotic time were alleviated by the introduction of the mystery religions.⁷ The deities of the mysteries had always existed within the realms of Greece or other world powers;⁸ however, it was not until the neglected emotions of the Greek citizens surfaced that these deities attained their mystery roles.⁹ The gods of the mysteries were worshipped because of the suffering each of them had endured in their divine existence.¹⁰ Due to the emotional torment the mystery gods endured, these gods accordingly could feel compassion for and identify with human suffering. Whereas the devotees of the Olympian gods worshipped them out of fear, the members of the mystery cults worked to gain a personal and loving relationship with their gods.¹¹ The aim of the mystery religions was to allow the *mystes* to attain union with the deity. The gods of the mysteries suffered pain, loss and even death

⁵ Mylonas, p. 171.

⁶ Martin, Luther H. *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 9.

⁷ Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery-Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), pp. 65-66.

⁸ These other world powers included Egypt,...

⁹ Martin, p. 59.

¹⁰ The suffering of the gods of the mysteries will be discussed in the next section of this thesis.

¹¹ Godwin, Joscelyn. *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 27.

which demonstrated the affection these deities could feel for the members of the cult as they underwent the same trials.¹²

The mysteries were religions of emotions appealing not to the intellect but to the eyes, ears, and imagination, trying to access a relationship with the chosen deity and the experience of a new reborn life.¹³ Due to this common theme of unity with the divine and rebirth, there was a strong bond of fellowship among the members. The reliability and closeness of each member within the brotherhood made the burdens of life more tolerable.¹⁴ The grasping for truth and solving the riddle of life is what united all of the members, as well as all of the mysteries, together.¹⁵

Before the mysteries were exclusive, they served as the religions of primitive agricultural communities. Many aspects of the mysteries deal with death and rebirth, which relates to the cycle of crops. After several modifications, primarily due to the decline of the importance of the harvest cycle, the mysteries became the religion of the lower classes who, in the opinion of Angus, sought a break from the wealthier Greek citizens. The system of small communities, the organization of the mysteries, began to appeal to the Greek culture. The mysteries did not necessarily refuse conformity with the state cults, but focused on a small connected brotherhood. This brotherhood attracted the lower orders, who were overlooked in the larger scheme of public worship, and the foreigners to Greek culture. Eventually, through this evolution from a lower class religion to the reputable balance with the state cults,¹⁶ the mysteries became private universal religions. Men and women were not born into them like they were to the Olympian cults; rather, they entered into them through a voluntary individual initiation.

¹² Godwin, p. 26.

¹³ Angus, p. 58.

¹⁴ Angus, p. 40.

¹⁵ Rahner, Hugo. *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 20.

¹⁶ The rulers of Greece eventually allowed the mystery religions to practice along with the state cults as long as the worshippers still paid homage to the deity of the state. The approval of the mysteries contributed to their success in antiquity.

The mysteries readily accepted new members who participated in the initiatory process. This initiatory process, which was optional and individual, was called the *mysterion*.¹⁷ The initiation option within the cults probably originated from the puberty rites during the archaic period, 900-480 BCE, and were later incorporated within the mysteries. In the classical period, 480-323 BCE, mysteries such as Eleusis, the Great Mother, and Dionysus were open to virtually anyone who chose to participate in the *mysterion*. New members could be male or female, slave or free citizen, Greek or foreign as long as each participant spoke Greek and had not committed murder.¹⁸ Each new potential member needed to pledge a willingness to undergo the designated purifications and initiation specifications and to swear total secrecy about the rites bestowed upon them.¹⁹ The criteria demanded for membership into the mysteries united the initiates through their common vows, personal goals, and revived enthusiasm for life and death.²⁰ Eventually, through the initiation process into the mystery the initiate acquired a union with the patron deity by suffering in a similar manner that the god suffered.²¹

In another attempt to dispel the emotions of the initiates, Angus theorizes that the ritual events associated with the mysteries attempted to permit the initiate to relinquish their emotional inhibitions through a loving relationship with the divine.²² The connection with the deity through the emotions was one of the primary goals of initiation, and this bond could only be attained by the recovery of legitimate personality characteristics. The list of initiation rituals to strengthen this bond is almost endless. Fasting, whirling dances, offering individual sacrifice,²³ viewing physical stimuli, listening to music, inhaling the hallucinogenic fumes, smearing the body with mud and then bathing,²⁴ participating in

¹⁷ Nock, Arthur Darby. *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 5.

¹⁸ Foley, 66.

¹⁹ Mylonas, pp. 171-172.

²⁰ Angus, p. 66.

²¹ This aspect of initiation will be further discussed later in this thesis.

²² Angus, pp. 100-101.

²³ Most often the object of sacrifice is a piglet.

²⁴ This process is often considered a baptismal practice that equates with rebirth.

incubation, taking a new name, reading sacred scriptures, practicing enforced silences, veiling, offering of incense, roaring like a wild animal, wearing an initiatory mask, and drinking spirituous liquors were all common initiatory rituals which led to the personal rebirth of the novice.²⁵ One of the most impressive religious initiation sacraments into the mysteries was the *taurobolium*.²⁶ This method was costly due to the bull price for the various cultic brotherhoods and ultimately became the primary initiation ritual to the Cybele-Attis cult.²⁷ Other methods of baptism required during the purification ceremonies included using elements such as water and mud.²⁸ The initiates viewed baptism as a method of regeneration because the actual act promoted religious growth. The baptismal bath washed away existing sins and functioned as a procedure to approach and unite with the deity.²⁹

Abstinence from certain foods, especially luxurious and flesh foods³⁰ and wine, was another important aspect to initiation.³¹ The sacramental meal often consisted of flesh and wine, thus the uninitiated were advised not to partake in these sacred foodstuffs. By abstaining from specific foods required within the cult, impurities and evils could be restricted from entering the body. The weakening of the body was another aspect desired through abstinence. The cultic members believed that the bodily possession by the deity could be better reached if the *mystes* lacked bodily strength.³²

The other side to the practices of initiation was the harassment and humiliation the novices received. Often these practices resulted in pain and serious injury.³³ Prolonged fast, severe bodily mutilations and painful flagellations, long and uncomfortable

²⁵ Angus, pp. 42, 90, 100-101.

²⁶ Angus, p. 94. *Taurobolium* is the covering of the body with bull's blood. The participant of this process believed that this bath meant he was "born again for eternity".

²⁷ The Cybele-Attis cult will be discussed further in the next portion of this thesis.

²⁸ Angus, p. 81.

²⁹ Angus, p. 45.

³⁰ Meat is a flesh food.

³¹ Angus, p. 85.

³² Angus, p. 85.

³³ Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 102.

pilgrimages to holy places, and humiliating public confessions were also included in the long initiation process.³⁴ Generally, the most enthusiastic and willing initiates in these painful self-mortifications were prone to excel within the cult, becoming a hierophant³⁵ or receiving the fullest advantages possible within the brotherhood.

Another requirement of initiation was sexual abstinence.³⁶ Most initiatory ceremonies were nocturnal, conducive to sexual relations. Richard Reitzenstein believes that the members of the mysteries believed to be fully initiated and to truly unite with the deity, there must be a sexual union with the god.³⁷ He, along with Samuel Angus, speculates that this was accomplished through the torch light processions and late night orgies,³⁸ genital symbols and genital exposures common in several mysteries, the initiate receives the inner-most essence and power of the god.³⁹ This was also accomplished in "raving".⁴⁰ Moreover, special consideration is emphasized for the proper attire to be worn in this "holy marriage"⁴¹ with the deity--most often a white robe.⁴²

Another important component of the mystery religions was the necessity of secrecy. Secrecy pertaining to the initiation practices was extremely important and showed prestige within each cult. Secrecy also allowed the members to avoid useless arguments that may have arisen from non-initiates.⁴³ By not revealing the rites of the mystery, anything said against the mystery was simply unprecedented rumor. Ancient

³⁴ Angus, p. 84.

³⁵ A priest or priestess that directed the initiation ceremony.

³⁶ Burkert, p. 108.

³⁷ Reitzenstein, Richard. *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance*. trans. John E. Stealy. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), p. 25.

³⁸ Often the meaning of the Greek term *orgia* is misconstrued to mean a sexual act. *Orgia* means a "ritual meeting" in Greek. However, some scholars have dared to perceive an *orgia* as actually representing a sexual deviation because of rumors that may have surrounded the cults in antiquity, or due to the evidence about other rituals available presently that may suggest sexual fanaticism within the cults.

³⁹ Reitzenstein, p. 34. The most common cults these activities is evident in are the cult of Dionysus and the Great Mother cult.

⁴⁰ "Raving" is the possession of the body by the deity being worshipped.

⁴¹ Initiation into the cult. This marriage does not have to be in a sexual act, but rather is the uniting with the deity through a number of rituals including abstinence, fasting and processions.

⁴² Angus, p. 90.

⁴³ Godwin, p. 9.

records describe the importance of secrecy to these mysteries; however, these records ironically offer information that sheds light on the activities and responsibilities performed within the structure. This demand was so scrupulously observed that seldom is there any concrete evidence regarding the rites of the mysteries. Several ancient scholars and artists divulge any secret information that is known to them by writing and producing works of art because the inquiry of the rites and their mysteries was so sought after in Hellenistic culture. For example, a personal initiation experience was often captured on an art piece revealing a harmful ritual performed on the initiate that caused humiliation, pain, or even serious injuries.

Death and rebirth are two other primary functions that the mysteries worked to fulfill.⁴⁴ Through this rebirth, the mystery religions toiled to remove the gap between man and God. When this gap was filled the novice believed that his sins had been forgiven and the god would proceed in mediating between the initiate and the stain of sin from therein.⁴⁵ In the Hellenistic period the idea that the initiate would enjoy both a fulfilling spiritual situation in life and death became very popular.⁴⁶ Also, at this time the cults of Isis, Attis, Dionysus, and Mithras grew in popularity because of the increasing knowledge of the concept of regeneration within the mysteries.⁴⁷ The *mystes* would not die without hope for the afterlife because the mysteries promised salvation and provided a patron deity in death along with life.⁴⁸ The initiate awaited a blissful existence in the underworld overcoming the ills of death which the membership to a mystery religion alleviated.

Lastly the mysteries provided an immediate encounter with the divine and the guarantee of an afterlife. The joining with the divine through an immediate life changing experience, and the promise of an afterlife was promised within the mysteries. Through a

⁴⁴Burkert, p. 99.

⁴⁵Angus, p. 50.

⁴⁶Eliade, Mircea. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), p. 113.

⁴⁷Angus, p. 95.

⁴⁸Angus, p. 52.

purification ritual, the initiate was promised a happy afterlife. Through the sacramental meal of wine, and/or bodily substitute the initiate experiences the joining with the divine. In addition to the need for a loving relationship with the deity, the mystery religions arose to offer an explanation for the cycle of death and rebirth.⁴⁹ Death was a primary concern throughout the Greek culture and the mysteries provided an explanation and option to its members that satisfied this fear.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Angus, p. 43.

⁵⁰ The concept of death and rebirth will be discussed further in this thesis.

Isis and Osiris

Osiris was the sprouting grain and the rising water of the Nile. He invented all of the necessary attributes for Egypt to survive, agriculture, writing and the arts. These attributes turned Egypt into a prospering civilization instead of a barbarian community. Set, his jealous brother cut him into fourteen pieces. Isis, his beloved sister, wandered the world looking for her brother, and when she finally found him she brought him back to life for a night and the two of them conceived a son, Horus. Horus grew up and became a mighty god. His chief goal in life was to avenge his father by overthrowing his uncle, Set, and regaining the throne of Egypt.¹ The Greeks often compared Osiris with Dionysus and due to this comparison the Egyptian cult was adopted into the Greek pantheon of gods.

One of the first act related of Osiris in his reign was to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living. This he did by showing them the fruits of cultivation, by giving them laws, and by teaching them to honor the gods. Later he traveled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms, but most of the peoples he won over to his way be the charm of his persuasive discourse combined with song and all manner of music. Hence the Greeks came to identify him with Dionysus.²

The Roman poet Tibullus also wrote about the comparisons made between Osiris and Dionysus in *Hunc Cecinere Diem Parcae Fatalia Nentes*.

The river-god and Osiris--theirs is a double altar
where hymns to the ox make a wild barbaric strain.
It was Osiris in truth who was the plow's inventor,

¹Cott, Jonathan. *Isis and Osiris: Exploring the Goddess Myth*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 3. Osiris has sex with his sister Nephthys one night when he mistook her for Isis, she conceived a child who is known as Anubis. The already jealous Set, Nephthys's lover, took this cue as the time to get even Osiris and that is why he killed him.

²Babbitt, Frank Cole, trans. *Plutarch's Moralia*. vol. V. "Isis and Osiris," pp. 3-193. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949), sec. 13, p. 35.

turning the virgin earth with an iron share;
 he was the first to drop seed in the furrow, and gather
 from nameless trees the fruit they began to bear.
 He learned, and taught to men, how the vine is tied to the pole,
 and how the hook must lop the leaves from the vine.
 Out of the grape clusters that heavy feet had trampled,
 none before him had ever brought forth wine--
 and men, having drunk it, were moved to what would someday be singing,
 once they had smoothed it out, and to rustic dance.³

Osiris and Dionysus were considered similar because both of these gods governed over vegetation and the underworld, they were both torn to pieces by the enemy, Osiris by his brother Set and Dionysus by the Titans, each of their scattered limbs were collected by a goddess, and both were miraculously revived.

These similarities extend into the worship of Isis and Demeter also.⁴ By the time Isis entered Italy, she had become comparable to Venus as well as Demeter, and was worshipped especially by prostitutes because Isis was known as the goddess of love. In Rome she was very indulgent to human weaknesses. Her temples, which became notoriously known as the haunts of prostitutes, began to be frequented by young men in search of sexual gratification and ardor.⁵

Isis and Osiris, twin brother and sister, are believed to have fallen in love in their mother's womb. Besides brother and sister, they were also husband and wife, queen and king, and god and goddess.⁶ The career of Isis started in the fourth century BCE in the Greek world and ended in CE 391 when the temple in Alexandria was burnt to the ground.

³*The Poems of Tibullus*. Carrier, Constance. trans. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 52-53.

⁴Cumont, Franz. *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 77.

⁵Cumont, pp. 90-91.

⁶Cott, p. 3.

by Theophilus.⁷ Alexander was instrumental in transporting Isis to the Greek culture. By treating the Persians, Greeks, and Macedonians equally, he equated the deities of each of these cultures. He set the example by building a temple to Isis alongside temples to Hellenic deities, in the foundation of Alexandria.⁸ Furthermore, according to the tradition that a new dynasty introduce a unique god, the Ptolemies⁹ instituted the worship of Isis into the Greek world. They chose the gods of Isis and Osiris because they wanted this new religion to unite the two cultures, Greek and Egyptian, more thoroughly. By having the Greeks worship an Egyptian deity the two cultures would become further fused.¹⁰

After the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE, the Second Triumvirate¹¹ erected a temple to honor the cult of Isis, probably to win the favor of the masses, in 43 BCE.¹² Because of the flexible beliefs within the cult of Isis, it was transferred to a variety of new locations and new philosophies, adapting it to the new ways of thinking that surrounded the cult.¹³

Yet, these rites, once strictly Egyptian, are now at home also in Rome, so that you may make a fool of yourself with the swallow and rattle of Isis or before the empty tomb of your Serapis or Osiris, whose limbs are strewn about.¹⁴

It appears that the attraction to the cult of Isis in these new territories was the curiosity of the intellect through the use of Egyptian texts and prayers, the sense of atonement, the impressive ritual and abundant wealth within the cult, the separation of the priests from the rest of society (the feeling of organization), and the friendship between the different social

⁷Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery-Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), p. 246.

⁸Angus, p. 19.

⁹The name used by all 15 Egyptian kings of the Macedonian dynasty, 323-30 BCE. The first of the Ptolemies was Ptolemy I Soter and he was one of Alexander's generals.

¹⁰Cumont, p. 74.

¹¹The three men, Octavian, Marcus Lepidus, and Mark Anthony.

¹²Cumont, p. 82.

¹³Cumont, p. 88.

¹⁴Minucius Felix, p. 368.

levels of members and the acceptance of different cultures, along with the assurance of immortality after death and the overall kindness of Isis.¹⁵ However, Minucius Felix, a Roman lawyer and late convert to Christianity, illustrates that not all of the Roman citizens were eager to participate in the "foolish" rites of this foreign cult.

Finally, consider the sacred rites and mysteries themselves: you will find that the stories of these pitiable gods consist of tragic ends, dooms and burials, mourning and wailing. Isis, with her dog-headed companion and shaven priests, bemoans, bewails, and seeks her lost son; her miserable followers beat their breasts and imitate the grief of the hapless mother. Soon, when the child is found, Isis rejoices, the priests exult, and the dog-headed finder boasts of his feat, and so, year in and year out, they do not cease losing what they find or finding what they lose. Is it not ridiculous either to mourn for what you worship or to worship for what you mourn?¹⁶

Through the initiation into the cult the person was born again, like Osiris, and assumed equality with the gods.¹⁷ In the ten days before the initiation ceremony, Lucius¹⁸ had to abstain from meat, wine and sexual intercourse.¹⁹ There are many stages required for initiation into the cult of Isis. Apuleius speaks of seven different stages he had to participate in before he was allowed into the cult of Isis.²⁰ The seven different stages were virtually the same each time.

¹⁵Angus, p. 176.

¹⁶Minucius Felix, pp. 367-368.

¹⁷Cumont, p. 100.

¹⁸The main character in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. He is turned into a donkey after playing around with the magic of a witch. He experiences a number of adventures and is only returned to his human form after he encounters the goddess Isis.

¹⁹Godwin, Joscelyn. *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 19.

²⁰Solmsen, Friedrich. *Isis Among the Greeks and Romans*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 91-92.

Therefore I made the detailed preparations; for [another] time I happily confined myself to a meatless diet for ten days, and I also shaved my head. I gained enlightenment in the nocturnal mysteries of the highest god, and now with full assurance I regularly attended the divine services of this kindred religion.²¹

The initiation of Apuleius into the cult of Isis began when he fell asleep in the realm of darkness and death and awoke the next morning in the sun, which was a rebirth into the new day.²² Some believe that during the initiation into the cult of Isis when the initiate supposedly saw the sun during the night it was actually priests manipulating fire torches, common objects within mystery cults, at key points in the ritual. The significance of the initiate seeing the sun at night demonstrates the belief that the Egyptians assumed that the sun traveled through the underworld so the dead could greet the sun. Osiris was also the god of the underworld and this belief was a connection with him.²³

A benefit for worshipping the goddess Isis in the Greek and Roman world was the fact that Isis' wanderings and sufferings were finally relinquished in the final homecoming of Osiris. This meeting and happy ending gave the Hellenistic citizens something to grasp, some evidence that their suffering in the world would come to an end.²⁴ The passion-play enacted in the cult of Isis resulting in the revival of Osiris from death demonstrated to the initiate that he too could triumph over death.²⁵

Caligula²⁶ was the first emperor that allowed Isis to become a state religion, after she had received much resistance from other emperors of the empire.²⁷ In 59, 58, 53, and

²¹Walsh, P. G., trans. Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), book 11: 28, p. 238.

²²Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook, Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 176.

²³Meyer, p. 158.

²⁴Martin, Luther H. *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 59.

²⁵Angus, p. 45-46.

²⁶Roman emperor from 37-41 CE. He was insanely cruel and despotic and believed that he was a god. He went as far as wanting to make his horse a consul.

²⁷Cumont, p. 55.

48 BCE the senate ordered that the altars and sacred statues of Isis and Osiris be torn down.²⁸ One reason that the senate objected to the worship of Isis and Osiris was because the mystery that surrounded the cult excited suspicions of political parties and intrigues and sexual promiscuity. Juvenal, a Roman poet and devotee to the cult of Isis, tells the story of a female initiate into the cult, "She will break the ice and descend into the river in winter; thrice a morning she will bathe in the Tiber and have her tumid head in its very depths. Then, with bleeding knees, she will creep, naked and shivering, over the whole length of the Campus Martius".²⁹ When one becomes a member into the cult of Isis, one needs to give up any contact with other non-Egyptian gods.³⁰ Franz Cumont describes the morals within the religious society as very loose, and that the demonstration of emotions and senses by the initiate were generally violent.³¹ Another reason that the government objected to the cult was because it consisted primarily of the lower classes and the senate was afraid that the unity within the cult would promote the alliance of agitators and government spies.³²

Regardless of the cruel accusations that the cult of Isis was receiving from the inhabitants of Rome, Isis began to pride herself on purity. The priests of the cult usually submitted to ablutions before every ceremony and usually to fumigations or anointings, and most often abstained from certain foods that may contain societal evils. These restrictions supposedly put the priest in a healthy state of mind for handling the sacred objects or for purifications of other members.³³ Purity became expected and required to make man better. No longer was Isis the cult for prostitutes and "peaking" young men.

²⁸Cumont, p. 81.

²⁹Originally from Angus, p. 84.

³⁰Reitzenstein, Richard. *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance*. trans. John E. Steely. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), p. 28.

³¹Cumont, p. 81.

³²Cumont, p. 82.

³³Cumont, p. 91.

The pure of heart was better than the cleanliness of the body. Starting in approximately the second century CE, abstinence became the most important act within the cult.³⁴

The fascination regarding the cult of Isis surfaced in the daily worship service introduced by this Egyptian cult. Angus speculates on why the popularity of the cult grew by describing two primary services held during the day, the Matins and Vespers.³⁵ Matins was the morning service which served to open up the temple. A white curtain encompassed the statue of Isis, and at the opening hour the curtain was drawn back so the worshippers could experience the beauty of Isis. During the sacrifice, the temple altars were sprinkled with holy water from the sacred well within the temple while the morning prayer was being offered. Vespers started at 2:00 o'clock, and the audible chants could be heard by passers-by on the street outside the temples. These services were performed by white robed priests with shaved heads. The services consisted of hymns, adoration, sacrifice and prayers. The service of Vespers is not well recorded but there is evidence that singing of hymns was the most important aspect of the service. The re-covering of the goddess statue may have also occurred at this service.³⁶ A daily service was held due to the belief that Isis and Osiris were liable to destruction and were dependent on necessities. They both had to be fed, clothed and refreshed everyday or they would perish just like a human.³⁷

There were two public celebrations in the cult of Isis. One took place on March 5th and was called the *Blessing of the Vessel of Isis*. The other celebration was the *Passion and Resurrection of Osiris* which was celebrated from October 28th to November 1st. An account of the first is given by Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*.

Next, crowds of those initiated into the divine rites came surging along, men and women of every rank and age, gleaming with linen

³⁴Cumont, p. 92.

³⁵*Matins* and *Vespers* are words that modern society coined for these two services.

³⁶Angus, pp. 125-126.

³⁷Cumont, p. 95.

garments spotlessly white. The women had sprayed their hair with perfume, and covered it with diaphanous veils; the men had shaved their heads completely, so that their bald pates shone. With their rattles of bronze, silver and even gold, they made a shrill, tinkling sound. Accompanying them were the stars of the great world-religion, the priests of the cult who were drawn from the ranks of famed nobility; they wore white linen garments which fitted tightly across their chests and extended to their feet, and they carried striking attributes of most powerful deities. He [the priest] carried a herald's staff in his left hand, and brandished a green palm-branch in his right. Hard on his heels followed a cow rearing upright, the fertile representation of the goddess who is mother of all; a member of the priesthood held it resting on his shoulders, and he bore it with a flourish and with proud gait. Another carried the box containing the mysteries and concealing deep within in the hidden objects of that august religion.³⁸

The celebration started with a fast for ten days. There was a passion-play that demonstrated the sorrowful Isis searching for her dismembered brother and husband. A loud wailing by the priests of the cult and the initiates accompanied the progress of the performance. The beginning of the procession was led by women wearing white, throwing flowers upon the road. They were generally followed by a crowd of men and women carrying lanterns and torches and an instrumental band and a choir of youths. Behind the musicians came the initiates. The female initiates were identified by their veiled heads and the male initiates were bald, a common characteristic of the mystery cults. The last to march in the procession were the priests. Each of the priests carried a sacred symbol of the cult, a golden boat-shaped lamp, an amphora, and led a cow, which stood

³⁸Apuleius, book 11: 10-11, pp. 224-225.

for fertility. When the procession came to the sea, the vessel of Isis was blessed with sacred prayers of the cult, gifts were set inside the vessel and the boat was set out to sea. This purpose was to offer prayers for the success of the coming year.³⁹ In *The Error of the Pagan Religions*, Firmicus Maternus describes part of the ritual. After the worshippers had mourned as the goddess Isis had mourned over her lost Osiris, a fire torch is carried into the room filled with grief stricken worshippers and a priest anoints their throats and whispers, "Be of good cheer, O initiates, for the god is saved, and we shall have salvation from our woes". The initiates then cry out, "We have found! We rejoice together!"⁴⁰ Eventually the *Finding of Osiris* leads to the joy experienced by Isis and this joy is celebrated by the initiates in the public banquets in the temples and games.⁴¹

Followers of the cult of Isis believed that the statue of Isis that they carried with them in the parades and housed in the temples could make prophecies for them, most often coming to the worshippers in dreams. It has been recorded that a peace treaty with the Romans and the Blemyes in 451-452, allowed this fearsome tribe to take the statue of Isis to their territory so she could make prophecies for them, and then they would return her to her temple. This occurred until 537 BCE when the temple was closed.⁴²

The dues paid to be a member of the cult of Isis were very expensive. Because of the fasts incorporated into the cult, one may suspect that fees to the doctor were quite high due to the illnesses from malnutrition. One also had to obtain pure white robes to wear in the ceremonies to the goddess. The pay of the priests was very rewarding because they had to continue to intrigue the community by wearing robes and jewelry. The exquisite nature of the cult increased the eagerness of the society to become members.

³⁹ Angus, pp. 123-124.

⁴⁰ Originally taken from Meyer, p. 159.

⁴¹ Angus, pp. 124-125.

⁴² Chuvin, Pierre. *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 142.

The statues of Isis were very expensive and usually adorned with precious stones, increasing the fee to the cult even more.⁴³

The priests of Isis were recognized because of their bald heads, their severe habits by restricting their diets and communications outside of the cult, a linen tunic and their garb. Their profession as a priest to the cult of Isis was all that they did. The priest had to remain an Egyptian in character, if not in nationality.⁴⁴ One reason that the priests into the cult of Isis are required to be Egyptian is because the sacred books were written in hieroglyphs. Each initiate was instructed into the initial meaning of the books but most often they were not understood.⁴⁵ Flavius Josephus tells the story about the corrupt priest of the cult of Isis in *Jewish Antiquities*. His story is about a man named Mundis who wants to sleep with a very virtuous woman named Paulina. She refused him several times, so he hired a woman named Ida to help him plot a plan to get Paulina into his bed.

She [Ida] had an interview with some of the priests and promised them every assurance, above all, a sum of money amounting to 25,000 drachmai payable at once and as much more after the success of the plot. She then explained the young man's passionate desire for the woman and urged them to bend every effort to secure her for him. The impact of the money was enough to sway them, and they agreed. The eldest of them hastened to Paulina's house and, on being admitted, requested a private talk with her. This being accorded, he said that he had been sent to her by the god Anubis; the god had fallen in love with her and bade her come to him. The message was what he would most have wished. Not only did she pride herself among her lady friends on receiving such and invitation from Anubis, but she told her husband of her summons to

⁴³Angus, pp. 145-146.

⁴⁴Cumont, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁵Reitzenstein, p. 41.

dine with and share the bed of Anubis...When Tiberius had fully informed himself by examining the priests, he crucified both them and Ida, for the hellish thing was her doing and it was she who had contrived the whole plot against the lady's honor. Moreover, he razed the temple and ordered the statue of Isis to be cast into the Tiber River. Such were the insolent acts of the priests in the temple of Isis.⁴⁶

A prayer to Isis is still in possession, "O Isis, great one of the magic formulae! Free me from the hand of all wicked, evil and red things!"⁴⁷ Another poem found that reveals the self-predictions of Isis comes from Asia Minor in the second century CE and may have been copied from a stele from Memphis, Egypt. This statement reveals a large amount of acclamations that people believed of the goddess. Several of these include, "I made with my brother Osiris an end to the eating of men. I revealed mysteries unto men. I taught [men] to honor images of the gods."⁴⁸

The fifth century and the abundance of Christian churches did not limit the use of the temple of Isis throughout Egypt, her homeland.⁴⁹ However, in the fifth century CE the miracles of Isis in the Roman empire ended. Her last miracle was providing a barren couple with a child. According to Pierre Chuvin, the priestess did not make the woman fertile but instead gave the couple her own child. He asserts that "This story about a child provided through secret adoption, utterly unremarkable in Antiquity, was presented by believers as a miracle worked by their goddess."⁵⁰ Although the Christians wanted to challenge the sincerity of this "miracle," the government chose not to further investigate the incident.

⁴⁶Josephus, Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities*. Book 18.3.4. Originally published in Meyer, p.

⁴⁷Rahner, Hugo. *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 250. Originally from the *Papyrus Ebers*.

⁴⁸Meyer, p. 173. Originally from *Isis Aretalogy from Cyrene*, lines 22-24.

⁴⁹Chuvin, p. 142.

⁵⁰Chuvin, p. 107.

Demeter

Worship of the Demeter and Persephone¹ originated from the Greek legend that Persephone was stolen from the earth by Hades and taken to the underworld. The rites of Eleusis were held for over two thousand years. First the rites of Eleusis were withheld as a small agrarian cult in the small town of Eleusis; these rites were later incorporated into the religions of the government and became a religious center for the Greek and Roman world.² The primary motifs of the Eleusinian mystery are abduction of Persephone, rape, marriage of death, and separation.³ Demeter and Kore are often identified with grain because Demeter is the mature grain and Kore, the maiden, is the newly planted grain of the autumn sowing.⁴ Because of the fear of magic within the Greek and Roman culture, not everyone who wished to be initiated was allowed into the cult. The mysteries were not picky about who was initiated, women or men, slave or free citizen. However, there were limits. For example, a very saintly man named Apollonius of Tyana was not admitted into the cult of Eleusis because it was believed that he was a magician.⁵

Every year there was a celebration for the Mother and the Maid and anyone could attend and participate. Most often the sound heard regarding the mysteries was the Iacchos song which accompanied the festival.⁶ There were two types of mysteries in the cult of Eleusis. The first were the lesser mysteries and one had to go through the lesser mysteries in order to go through the greater mysteries in Eleusis. The lesser mysteries could take place at anytime, either at Eleusis or at the Agora of Athens, the affiliated sanctuary. When the greater mysteries approached, the initiates had to choose sponsors,

¹Often Persephone and Kore are interchangeable in the story of Eleusis.

²Mylonas, George Emmanuel. "Mystery Religions of Greece." from *Forgotten Religions: Including Some Living Primitive Religions*. ed. Vergilius Ferm. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 188.

³Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 306.

⁴Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook, Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 17.

⁵Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery-Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), p. 80.

⁶Meyer, p. 31.

people already members of the cult, *mystagogoi*, who would guide them in their preparations for membership.⁷ Each initiate had to bring a piglet that they took a bath with in the sea, to cleanse themselves as well as the impure piglet. The washing in the sea before initiation was generally believed to remove guilt from the initiate.⁸ Then the piglet was slaughtered in the name of the goddesses.⁹ According to legend, Demeter fasted for nine days. Thus, the initiates into the Eleusinian cult followed this example.¹⁰

Every year, hundreds of initiates journeyed to Eleusis in the autumn month of *Boedromion*, September, and participated in the secret vision of Persephone returning from the underworld. The journey along the "Sacred Way" was celebrated with dancing, almost ecstasy. In the ceremony, the priestesses carried the closed *kistai* which contained the sacred objects of the mystery. The procession sets off on the 19th of the month.¹¹ The journey on the Sacred Way was perhaps one of the most important aspects of initiation into the mystery. The initiatory march included stops for sacrifice, prayer, singing, and dancing. Veiled and masked figures stood on the bridge between Athens and Eleusis and offered insults and obscene gestures to the initiates.¹² This behavior caused the initiate humiliation and pain, but also demonstrated the dedication each initiate had for membership to the cult. The obscene gestures performed by the members may also have been a way of warding off evil that followed the initiates along the journey. Like other mysteries sexual abstinence was required during the holy season for the initiated into the cult of Eleusis.¹³

The passion-play in the Eleusis cult was used to demonstrate to the initiates the life of the two goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, but also to show the initiates the suffering

⁷Mylonas, p. 183.

⁸Nock, Arthur Darby. *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 60.

⁹Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 285-286.

¹⁰Angus, p. 85.

¹¹*Greek Religion*, p. 287.

¹²Foley, p. 67.

¹³Angus, p. 86.

that the goddesses went through because of Persephone's kidnapping.¹⁴ The emotions were activated in the passion-plays by a variety of external or personal stimuli. Some of these stimuli included extended periods of abstinence, hushed silences, loud and violent music or soft and enthralling music, delirious dances, drinking of hallucinogenic liquors, physical lacerations, alterations of dense darkness and dazzling light, the handling of holy objects, auto-suggestion and the promptings of the hierophant.¹⁵ The Thesmophoria, an ancient Greek feast, is where the myth of Demeter and Kore was enacted. This event was reserved for women and was exclusively reserved for that sex. This mystery dealt with the fertile field and the life-giving land, along with motherly child-bearing abilities. During the feast, the women made themselves beds out of willow branches that they picked up from the ground (Mother Earth). The women would rest on these mats during the festival. The custom of sleeping on these willow bed was a dedication to chastity because the willow represents sexual continence. The willow represents both the mother and the virgin, is both fruitful and chaste, living and dead. While the women rested on their willow beds they desired to be both virgin and mother in one, like the willow. On there beds they remained chaste, abstinent from sex. Any man that tried to witness this mystery, risked the loss of his manhood through castration.¹⁶

The passion-play probably included a sacramental meal as well as the performance of the wandering of Demeter. This sacramental meal probably consisted of a barley wine because grain symbolized both Demeter and Persephone.¹⁷ The grain wine that was drank during the sacramental meal into the cult probably contained hallucinogenic ingredients. The flower that Persephone was picking when she was abducted, the narcissus, is believed to have hallucinogenic powers, and is probably the ingredient in the sacred wine. Robert

¹⁴Mylonas, p. 185.

¹⁵Angus, p. 61.

¹⁶Rahner, Hugo. *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 290-292.

¹⁷Mylonas, p. 186.

Wasson suggests that orgies¹⁸ and drugs were common aspects into the rites of Eleusis.¹⁹ Evidence has been recorded that when the vision of Persephone is experienced by the initiates they encounter symptoms of fear and trembling, vertigo, nausea, and a cold sweat.²⁰

The process of making the sacramental wine was one of the central events of the heirophants. Ancient chants were recited in a falsetto voice, the man that recited was asexual because he sacrificed his gender to the goddess. After the potion was concocted there was more chanting, informing the listeners that each of the priests had drunk the potion and had handled the secret objects of the cult. This potion eventually cause a feeling of ecstasy, probably in response to the narcotic within the flower that is used. When this feeling of ecstasy was reached, a door was flung open and a tremendous amount of lights, torches manipulated by the priests, framed Persephone returning with her son from Hades. The child that Persephone has belongs to her and Zeus, conceived when he came to her as a serpent.²¹ These visions of Persephone were probably apparitions or hallucinations from the wine. After one had experienced the arrival of Persephone, the initiation into the cult of Eleusis was complete.

Hippolytus of Rome²² says that during the sacred rites of Eleusis the initiates cry out "Hye kye" which means Rain! Conceive! These words were probably uttered because in the myth Demeter claims that she will not let the crop flourish until her daughter is returned to her. During this ceremony it is likely that the act of pouring water on the ground accompanies the words of the worshippers.²³ Like the other mysteries, the rebirth

¹⁸Sources that deal with the sexuality of the cult may have misconstrued the meaning of the Greek term *orgia*, which simply means a secret rite. Often the early Christian fathers that talk of the procedures of the mysteries exaggerate the actual rites that were known to them to make Christianity more appealing and to win converts.

¹⁹*Greek Religion*, p. 289.

²⁰Wasson, Robert Gordon. *The Road of Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 37.

²¹Wasson, pp. 48-49.

²²A Christian author.

²³Meyer, p. 19.

from death, Persephone coming back from the underworld, was the secret of the mystery.²⁴ Hippolytus also tells how the heirophant, surrounded by a bright light, calls out, "A holy child is born to the Lady Brimo, Brimos". Brimo means "strong one" and is usually understood to mean Kore-Persephone. She had intercourse with Zeus and gave birth to the child Dionysus, Brimos.²⁵ The story goes that Zeus took the form of a bull and had intercourse with Demeter and produced the daughter Kore. Later, Zeus took the form of a serpent and had intercourse with his daughter Kore and produced the child Dionysus. Often in art Dionysus is depicted with horns like a bull.²⁶

In Plutarch's *Progress in Virtue*, he compares progress in philosophy with the initiation into the mysteries of Eleusis.

Just as person who are being initiated into the mysteries throng together, but when the holy rites are being performed and disclosed the people are immediately attentive in awe and silence, so too at the beginning of philosophy: about its portals also you will see great tumult and talking and boldness, as some boorishly and violently try to jostle their way towards the repute it bestows; but he who has succeeded in getting inside, and has seen a great light, as though a shrine were opened, adopts another bearing of silence and amazement, and 'humble and orderly attends upon' reason as upon a good.²⁷

The secret of Eleusis was occasionally profaned. One prime example is recorded by Plutarch in "Alcibiades".

During this time Androcles, the popular leader, produced sundry aliens and slaves who accused Alcibiades and his friends of

²⁴Wasson, p. 44.

²⁵Meyer, p. 19.

²⁶Meyer, p. 19.

²⁷Originally taken from Meyer, p. 38.

mutilating other sacred images, and of making a parody of the mysteries of Eleusis in a drunken revel. They said that one Theodorus played the part of the Herald, Pulytion that of the Torch-bearer, and Alcibiades that of the High Priest, and that the rest of his companions were there in the role of initiates, and were dubbed Mystae. Such indeed was the purport of the impeachment which Thessalus, the son of Cimon, brought in to the assembly, impeaching Alcibiades for impiety towards the Eleusinian goddesses. The people were exasperated, and felt bitterly towards Alcibiades."²⁸

Most of the information we have today comes from the time that the cult of Eleusis was celebrated in Athenian domination.²⁹

²⁸*Plutarch's Lives: With an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin. Vol. IV. "Alcibiades."* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1917), pp. 49, 51.

²⁹Meyer, p. 17.

Dionysus

There are two stories behind the cult of Dionysus. The most familiar is the story of Semele and Zeus. Semele was the most beautiful of all the maidens loved by Zeus.¹ Semele did not return Jupiter's advances so he disguised himself as a mortal to win her affections. Then Zeus revealed to her who he really was, and she was overjoyed that she had attracted the mightiest of all gods and immediately gave in to her hesitations. Their love grew and Zeus came down from Olympus as often as he could escape. However, his frequent absences caused suspicion to arise in Hera² and she began plotting how she could discover what Zeus was up to behind her back. After she had discovered the truth about Zeus' absences, she plotted a revenge. Part of her revenge was to disguise herself as Semele's old nurse, allowing Hera entrance into Semele's home. Under this guise Hera was able to get a full and eager confession from Semele as to how Zeus had won her heart. The next step in Hera's plan was to trick Semele into getting Zeus to appear to her in his god form since he had only appeared to her as a mortal. The nurse's reasoning was that if he did not come to her as a god, he did not love her as much as he loved Hera. These seductive words worked at raising Semele's suspicions about her lover's devotion. When Zeus came next she succeeded in making him give an oath promising her to grant any desire she might wish. Thus, Semele bade Zeus return to Olympus and don his godly apparel. Jupiter begged her to change her mind because his true identity would be of danger to her, but she insisted. Because he loved her and had given an oath he went back up to Olympus. Zeus modified his identity as much as he could, choosing the weakest of his lightening bolts, but the shock was too much for Semele and she fainted at the sight of him. Horrified that she might be hurt, Zeus sprang to her side, forgetting himself. In his forgetfulness as to what he was wearing, the lightning that danced around his head set fire to her home and burnt it to ashes. Semele perished and everything else burned except for

¹Zeus and Jupiter are interchangeable. Zeus is the Greek name for the most powerful Olympian god, while the Roman version of the same god is Jupiter.

²Hera is the Greek name for the god that the Romans know as Juno.

Zeus' and Semele's infant child Dionysus. Due to the hatred for the child Dionysus by Hera, Zeus sent Dionysus to the Nysiades, nymphs who raised him in the cave of a mountain. While still an adolescent, Dionysus was appointed the god of wine and merry-making by his father. At his side was his trusted companion Silenus, a satyr³ who was his educator. Dionysus had a large crowd of followers, men and women, all crowned in ivy leaves and drinking wine, singing and dancing. The Bacchantes were his wild group of female followers who were constantly intoxicated on their journey with Dionysus, while he traveled all over teaching the cultivation of the vine and the way to make wine.⁴

Another myth used in the worship of Dionysus is the story that Zeus came to his daughter Persephone in the form of a serpent, and born from them was the son Dionysus with the horns of a bull. The envious Titans, upset because Dionysus was destined to be the new world ruler, kidnapped the child and tore him limb from limb, cooked him and ate him. Zeus saved his heart and swallowed it⁵ and was the heart of Dionysus when he was born to Zeus and Semele. This is the myth most often repeated by the Orphics.⁶ Sometimes Dionysus is depicted as a bull but he also appears in more feminine fashion with fair skin and long blond curls.⁷ Lucian describes him with horns as well as a fair and feminine appearance,

As for the general⁸ himself, he rides on a car behind a team of panthers; he is quite beardless, without even the least bit of down on

³A satyr is half man and half goat and are usually associated with sex and drunkenness.

⁴Guerber, H.A. *Greece and Rome: Myths and Legends*. (Guernsey: The Guernsey Press Co., 1994), pp. 147-151.

⁵Some accounts of this story say that Zeus sewed the heart of Dionysus into his leg and put the heart in Dionysus when he was born to Zeus and Semele.

⁶Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery-Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), p. 47.

⁷Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook, Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 63.

⁸Dionysus.

his cheek, has horns, wears a garland of grape clusters, ties up his hair with a ribbon, and is in a purple gown and gilt slippers.⁹

Practice of the Dionysiac cult started in Greece around the tenth century BCE.¹⁰ The Bacchic cult was probably of Thracian origin and was complete with orgiastic ritual, emotionalism, and possession by the deity. It also consisted of a savage ritual including wild frenzy.¹¹ Dionysus can be identified with the Eleusinian cult from about the sixth century BCE because he was identified with Persephone's son Iacchos.¹² The Dionysiac mysteries borrowed from other mysteries, especially the Eleusinian mysteries because they were popular and had succeeded.¹³ The Bacchic mysteries were popular in Rome because they eased the mind of people that feared death. The mysteries promised happiness in the afterlife and this promise allowed people to live easier in their current life.¹⁴

Often the mysteries were held inside caves because in the summer they were cool and they held a prevalent position in the myth of Dionysus.¹⁵ In Greece there were houses called Baccheia where the cultic meeting occurred. In Rome the meetings occurred in private homes.¹⁶ It was important the mysteries were nocturnal. By celebrating the rites within a cave or a regulated house, it was possible to manipulate the environment surrounding the cult of Dionysus.

Initiation into the cult of Dionysus could be very painful for the initiate. Commonly there was a homosexual act that the men had to endure and both sexes may have suffered from blows with a metal rod. Obviously though, the initiation requirements probably changed with the changing time frames. Another example of an initiation

⁹Harmon, A.M., trans. *Lucian: in Eight Volumes*. vol I. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 51.

¹⁰Angus, pp. 13-14.

¹¹Angus, p. 151.

¹²Angus, p. 174.

¹³Nilsson, Martin Persson. *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age*. (New York: Arno Press, 1975), p. 56.

¹⁴Nilsson, p. 131.

¹⁵Nilsson, p. 62.

¹⁶Nilsson, p. 145.

practice includes sexual orgies.¹⁷ A medical writer tells of patients that had slashed themselves in religious madness but after the frenzy had worn off they recovered a very cheerful and carefree persona.¹⁸ The initiation practices were celebrated in two different rituals for men and for women although the overall practices incorporated both sexes.¹⁹ Omophagy²⁰ is a common practice in the Bacchic cult. Dionysus' presence in the initiation celebrations by his worshippers was in the raw flesh of wild beasts and in the goblet of wine.²¹ Any animal the wild initiates of Dionysus ingested was chosen because the animal was considered the embodiment of the god and by eating the raw flesh they were taking in the life of the god. There is documentation that illustrates that the followers of Dionysus would hunt wild game--a goat, a fawn, or preferably a bull--and then tear the victim apart, devouring the raw limbs that still reeked with blood.²² *The Bacchae* by Euripides²³ tells of the possession by the god and the savage mutilation of a human body. To further identify the intensity of a Bacchant initiation celebration, Euripides uses characters related to one another; Agave is the mother of Pentheus whom she rips apart and whose flesh she eventually eats.

Agave was foaming at the mouth, though. Her eyes were rolling,
wild; she was mad, utterly possessed by Bacchus: what Pentheus
said was nothing to her. She took him by the arm, under the elbow,
then she planted a foot against his ribs, and tore his arm off. Not by

¹⁷Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 292.

¹⁸Nock, Arthur Darby. *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 120.

¹⁹*Greek Religion*. p. 291.

²⁰The eating of raw flesh.

²¹Meyer, p. 63.

²²Zaidman, Louise Bruit, and Pantel, Pauline Schmitt. *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 39. Mylonas, George Emmanuel. "Mystery Religions of Greece." from *Forgotten Religions: Including Some Living Primitive Religions*. ed. Vergilius Ferm. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 175.

²³A Greek playwright.

herself: it was the power of the god that put so much force into her hands.²⁴

This may be considered a sacramental meal that bound Dionysus with his followers.²⁵ The worshippers also believed that their union with Dionysus increased with the drinking of wine. They also felt that the drinking of wine heightened their condition of ecstasy and frenzy. Through the drinking of wine, a common initiation practice in the Bacchant cult, a savagery surfaced in the initiates. However, the drinking of wine was not an attempt at getting drunk but rather the feeling of taking in the body of the god himself.²⁶ Tibullus praises Dionysus in his poem *Candide Liber Adest: Sic Sit Tibi Mystica Vitis*.

Dionysus confronts us, our equal, our friend,
but we must pay curt to him, and relish his wine--
there is no one he hates and will punish more than a prude.
It is wise to avoid a great god's anger, and drink.
Do you doubt his violence, the range of his wrath?
Remember mangled Pentheus, and be warned.
Let us run no risk; if anyone shall test
the rage of a furious god, let it be that girl.²⁷

Another example of the demoniac activity of the Bacchants is revealed by Apuleius, a Roman writer. He demonstrates this in his book *The Golden Ass*, "Then the kindly Panthia said: 'Wouldn't it be a good idea, then, sister, to deal with him first, to tear him to pieces as the frenzied Bacchants did, or to tie his legs together and cut off his manhood?'"²⁸

The Bacchics did not believe that they would rise up from the dead like Dionysus did, rather they thought they would live as happy a life in the underworld as they did in

²⁴Euripides, p. 70.

²⁵Mylonas, p. 175.

²⁶Mylonas, p. 175.

²⁷Tibullus, p. 90.

²⁸Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. trans. P.G. Walsh. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), book 1:13, p. 8.

their present life.²⁹ Since Dionysus was also the god of the underworld as well as the god of life the devotees thought that their union with him would last into death. They believed that the joy that they had attained in life by being a member of his cult would be just as rewarding in death.³⁰ Not only did the cult offer the devotees a happy outlook for the afterlife, but it also provided a group environment of like minded people of the same social and economical status.³¹ The followers of the Bacchic cult were broken into groups, one example of this is the Maenads.³²

The most public form of ritual in the Bacchic cult as well as the mysteries of Isis, Demeter, and the Great Mother is a public procession. One of the primary symbols in the Dionynastic ritual is the phallus. In the Bacchic parade a huge phallus was the center of the procession. The phallus may have symbolized sexuality within the cult or procreative power.³³ Apparently a liknon³⁴ was carried with a phallus rising out of a group of fruit.

His worshippers are usually depicted carrying thyrsi³⁵ and clothed in fawn skins.³⁶ These worshippers are called Bacchantes or Maenads. The dancing of women wild in the wilderness was common in the Greek society, so the portrayal of Dionysus' women followers in Euripides' *The Bacchae* was not uncommon.³⁷

There were old women and young,
and unmarried girls: all wonderfully
well disciplined. They shook their long hair
out over their shoulders. The ones whose
fawn skin robes had slopped refastened them

²⁹Nilsson, p. 130.

³⁰Mylonas, p. 176.

³¹Nock, p. 115.

³²Nilsson, pp. 49-50.

³³Nilsson, p. 143.

³⁴A basket that children could be carried in.

³⁵A long shaft which is topped with ivy or vine leaves, symbolizing wine.

³⁶Meyer, p. 63.

³⁷Euripides. *The Bacchae*. trans. C.K. Williams. (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), introduction.

with living snakes, whose tongues
 flickered over the women's cheeks.
 I saw mothers who'd abandoned babies;
 their breast gorged with milk, they held
 wolf cubs in their arms, or young
 gazelles, and were suckling them.
 Now they all put garlands on their heads,
 flowering myrtle and oak leaves.
 Now one, with her thyrsus, strikes
 a rock: living water fountains up.³⁸

Although women were generally confined to the home, it was not forbidden for the women to leave the home for an extended period of time every second year to attend the cults. This is another reason the Dionysiac cult was so popular among the women. The women could dance, scream wildly, and search for something different from their ordinary life.³⁹

Child initiation was common in the Bacchic mystery. Part of the reason that children were included within the membership was because of the love of children at the time of the Hellenistic age.⁴⁰ Children may have been initiated by the liknon, the basket of fruit with a phallus protruding from it. The basket was the right size to contain a child and there are art pieces that reveal a child being carried within the liknon.⁴¹ Another reason children may have been included is because some felt that the cultic religions stemmed back to archaic puberty rites. Also, the fact that the myths about Dionysus involve his childhood embodiment. Also the parents of the Hellenistic age were wealthy enough to pay the dues needed to incorporate their children into the cult, and it showed a standing of

³⁸Euripides, p. 45.

³⁹Williams, p. XV.

⁴⁰Nilsson, p. 111.

⁴¹Nilsson, p. 109.

prestige. Also it was a comfort to the parents to know that their child was in a happy place if they should lose him to death. They then knew that the god was watching over their child.⁴²

⁴²Nilsson, p. 115.

Cybele

The myth behind the Mother Goddess or Cybele, and her lover Attis is tragically humorous. The Great Mother was born from a rock on Mount Agdus. Father Jupiter fell in love with her but she refused his advances, but somehow she became pregnant. It has been deduced that drops of semen fell upon the rock and impregnated Cybele. The Great Mother gives birth to an androgynous child named Agdistis.

In him there was insuperable strength and uncontrollable ferocity of disposition, a lust mad and furious and stimulated by both sexes.

Violently he plundered, laid waste, wherever his monstrous spirit led him. He cared not for the gods nor men, nor did he think anything more powerful than himself; he despised earth, heaven, and the stars.¹

Because of Agdistis' wild nature the gods conspire to get him drunk and when this succeeds, the god Liber² slips a noose around him and when he wakes with a jerk he castrates himself.

He [Agdistis] gulps down an immoderate draught into his eager veins. Overcome by this unaccustomed experience, he sinks into a most profound sleep. Over his foot he [Liber] casts the end of a noose woven cunningly of hairs. When the power of the wine had been slept off, he [Agdistis] jumps up violently and, straining hard on the knots he himself, by his own strength, robs himself of that by which he had been a man. There is an immense flow of blood; this is snatched up and swallowed by the earth; thence suddenly is born a pomegranate tree with apples.³

¹Meyer, Marvin W. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook, Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 116. Originally from Arnobius of Sicca, *The Case Against the Pagans*.

²The god of wine.

³Meyer, p. 117. Originally from Arnobius of Sicca in *The Case Against the Pagans*.

From his blood a pomegranate tree grows and the fruit from the tree makes Nana, the daughter of the king, pregnant. Nana gives birth to Attis, whom both the Great Mother and Agdistis love. "Him [Attis] and the Mother of the Gods loved as none other because he was most superb of countenance."⁴ Agdistis is refused by Attis because he is soon to be married, causing Agdistis to become angered. He then stirs a frenzy within a group of people, including Attis. In his rage, Attis castrates himself and from his blood springs a violet colored flower.

As for Agdistis, bursting with anger at having the boy torn from him and brought to have interest in a wife, he inspires all the guests with fury and madness. Attis snatches the flute which the ? who was goading them to fury was carrying, and being himself full of frenzy, and roving about, hurls himself down at last, and under a pine tree mutilates himself. With the stream of blood his life flits away.⁵

In 204 BCE she was finally welcomed into Rome.⁶ The gods of Asia Minor, particularly Cybele and Attis, were the first to be accepted into Italy. The black stone that symbolized the Great Mother was transported to Rome at the end of the Punic Wars.⁷ The Great Mother was represented by a stone because it was believed that she was born from a rock. Her cult introduced a sensual and fanatical worship into the reserved Roman religion.⁸ At the time of the Second Punic war the Roman troops were suffering and so the government was doing anything in their power to give support to the dying troops. They consulted the Sibylline Books and the Delphic oracle and they were informed that

⁴Meyer, p. 118. Originally from Arnobius of Sicca in *The Case Against the Pagans*.

⁵Meyer, p. 118. Originally from Arnobius of Sicca in *The Case Against the Pagans*.

⁶Meyer, p. 113.

⁷Three wars between Rome and Carthage fought intermittently in 264 to 146 BCE. These wars allowed the expansion of Rome and eventually devastated and demolished Carthage.

⁸Cumont, Franz. *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 197.

the fortunes of Rome would improve if they brought the Great Mother to Rome.⁹ In Livy's *History of Rome*, he tells how the goddess was welcomed into Rome.

This young Scipio,¹⁰ then, was ordered to meet the Goddess at Ostia, accompanied by the married women of Rome; he was to receive her out of the ship, carry her ashore, and deliver her into the matrons' hands. The women then passed the Goddess from hand to hand, one to another in succession, while all the population came thronging to meet her; censers were placed before the doorways on her route with burning incense, and many prayers were offered that she might enter the city of Rome with kindly purpose and benignant thoughts. So the procession moved on, till they brought her to the temple of Victory on the Palatine. It was the day before the Ides of April, and that day was held sacred. People crowded the Palatine with gifts to the Goddess, and there was a Strewing of Couches and Games, called the *Megalesia*.¹¹

The Great Mother cult supported other Oriental cults through her stable position in the Roman empire and therefore these cults shared several of the same features.¹² Initially, the cult of the Great Mother had a very obscure position in the Roman empire. The cult of the Mother Goddess was known throughout Greece and Rome as an eccentric and dangerous mystery because of the castrated priests. Also, the cult was often looked at as a place for beggars and the grotesque.

No decency of language is there here: no regard for the manners of the table. You will hear all the foul talk and squeaking tones of

⁹Meyer, p. 120.

¹⁰He was believed to be one of the most pure citizens of the Roman world, and was chosen to be the first one to handle the Mother Goddess.

¹¹Meyer, p. 125. Originally from Livy. *History of Rome*. (Book 29. 10-14).

¹²Angus, Samuel. *The Mystery-Religions: A Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), p. 194.

Cybele; a grey-haired frenzied old man presides over the rites; he is a rare and notable master of mighty gluttony, and should be hired to teach it. But why wait any longer when it were time in Phrygian fashion to lop off the superfluous flesh?¹³

It was known primarily by the procession of the cultic priests on certain holidays. The priests were dressed in elaborate costumes, decorated with expensive jewelry, and beating tambourines. On these holidays the Senate allowed the priests to go from house to house and ask for money to support their temples.¹⁴ From the second century onward, her mysterious festivals became more familiar in the Roman world. The popularity of the Great Goddess cult probably happened because of the appeal of a dying and resurrected god, the taurobolium,¹⁵ and the goddess as the universal mother, tender and graceful, and giving peace through her cleansing rituals.¹⁶ Under the Roman empire though the self-castration performed by the Galli was against the law.¹⁷

The believers of Cybele thought that she resided on the high summits of Ida and Berecynthus. They also believed that the pine and almond trees were the symbolic trees of Attis.¹⁸ Cumont attempts to reconstruct a common procession of the Great Mother. A crowd of worshippers could be heard milling through the woods and thickets of Mount Ida, shouting and playing flutes. The sound of tambourines, castanets, and brass cymbals could be heard as well. The shrill sound of the instruments, and the breathless advance through the mountain caused an enthusiastic rapture surrendering to the Goddess.¹⁹

She was worshipped as the goddess of fertility, but her power lay in the wilds of the forests and mountains. She was also the mistress of wild animals which was evidenced

¹³Juvenal, *Satire II: Moralists Without Morals*, p. 27.

¹⁴Cumont, p. 53.

¹⁵The ritual sacrificing of a bull and the baptism by the use of the bull's blood. This ritual may have been a popular attraction to the Romans because violence was objectified within their culture. This is evidenced in the barbarian games that were held in the Coliseum.

¹⁶Angus, p. 176.

¹⁷Cumont, p. 52.

¹⁸Cumont, p. 48.

¹⁹Cumont, p. 49.

by her chariot pulled by her symbolic beasts, two lions.²⁰ The Great Mother is the embodiment of the powers of nature and the continuation of birth and renewal.²¹ The willow branch common in the cult of Eleusis belongs also to the Great Mother mystery. The Great Mother gives light to the dark earth, who gives the dead earth life, who allows the unfruitful in the earth to flower.²²

The Great Mother was worshipped in orgiastic dance. The ecstasy felt by the worshippers along with the self mutilations and the sufferings were believed to unite the initiate with the gods and a test to free the soul from the bonds of matter.²³ The worshippers believed that when they wounded themselves, and saw their blood, sprinkled it upon their altars, they were in fact united with their chosen deity.²⁴

Next day the priests set out, clad in multicolored garments and with features hideously made up; their faces were smeared with clay pigment, and their eyes were daubed with mascara. They had put on conical caps and saffron garments of linen and silk. Some wore white shirts decorated with purple stripes in spear-motifs pointing in different directions, and gathered up at the waist; they had yellow sandals on their feet. The goddess, who was attired in a garment of silk, they consigned to me to carry. Their arms were bared to the shoulder; they carried fearsome swords and axes; and they leapt about uttering ecstatic cries, for the pipe-music fired them to frenzied dancing. For some time they bent their heads low and twisted their necks in supple movements, making their dangling locks rotate. Occasionally they would sink their teeth into their own

²⁰Meyer, p. 113.

²¹Rahner, Hugo. *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 20.

²²Rahner, p. 327.

²³Cumont, pp. 50-51.

²⁴Cumont, p. 50.

flesh, and as a finale they each slashed their arms with the two-edged swords which they brandished.²⁵

Most of the initiation ceremonies to the Great Mother occurred in the *megaron*, which is an open-air altar in front of a temple. Usually the sacrificial ceremonies that occurred there involved grasping the nearest limb and cutting it off with a knife. It did not matter what limb it was, just the one that was grasped in the orgiastic frenzy of the initiates.²⁶ The Roman citizens were forbidden to worship in the orgiastic cult of the Great Mother. The primary reason for the hesitation in worship to the cult was because Attis castrated himself and during the ceremony many of the initiates did as well.²⁷ The devotees of the Great Mother worked themselves into a frenzy or some would call an ecstasy that made them lose themselves. They would then participate in self-mutilations, usually self-castration. These castrated men, who were priests to the Great Mother, were called *galli*.²⁸ The *galli* of the Great Mother not only castrated themselves, but they also lacerated their skin with broken pottery, gashed themselves with knives during delirious dancing, and participated in self-flagellations and floggings.²⁹

The passion-play involved in the Great Mother cult reenacted the myth of Attis. The cult of the Great Mother celebrated a festival from March 15th to the 27th. The beginning of the procession started with the reed-bearers on the fifteenth. This was significant because according to myth Cybele had discovered the baby Attis on the banks of the largest river in Phrygia, the Sangarius. After the reed-bearers there were several days of fasting from bread, wine, and other foods, as well as abstaining from sexual intercourse. The main ceremonies started with the equinox. The pine tree symbolic of Attis was cut down and brought to the Palatine by the tree-bearers on the 22nd. The tree

²⁵Apuleius, book 8:27, pp. 156-157.

²⁶Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 280.

²⁷Grant, Robert M. *Gods and the One God*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), p. 33.

²⁸Solmsen, Friedrich. *Isis among the Greeks and Romans*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 77.

²⁹Angus, p. 88.

was wrapped like a corpse in wool and decorated in bands of violets and ribbons along with an image of Attis. All of the images are of Attis after death and his castration. After the day of the deliverance of the tree, there was a day of sadness and abstinence, March 24th, and the believers fasted and mourned the god. This was a funeral to the god Attis and called the *Day of Blood*. The members and initiates beat themselves until they bled and then sprinkled their blood upon the altars in the sanctuary. Others were believed to follow in the path of Attis and castrated themselves. The worshippers believed that it was necessary to experience the same pain that Attis felt at his death to fully understand the mysteries of the cult. These members then became *galli* to the goddess. On March 25th the mood changed because the worshippers believed that the god had risen from the dead, this day was called the *Hilaria*. This celebration meant the coming of spring and the awakening of Attis. Fire-torches were brought to the opened grave and the priests anointed the lips of each of the initiates with the holy oil saying, "Be of good cheer, ye *mystae* of the god who has been saved; to you likewise there shall come salvation from your trouble." There were many festivals, masquerades, and banquets that followed this ritual. There was a complete day of rest on the 26th, and then on the 27th there was a procession throughout the streets of Rome. The 27th was called the *Lavatio*. The statue of Cybele was showered in a rain of flowers and taken to the river Almo where she was bathed and purified like in a baptism.³⁰ After the washing, the sacred objects were collected and brought back to the temple of Cybele. The public celebrated with an exuberant carnival in the city that cost the cult a tremendous amount of money. While the festival was occurring the *galli* collected money for the cult.³¹ One example of an initiation ceremony discussed the event of purification by first sacrificing a ram. Each new initiate had to pay for a ram sacrifice and witnessed their ram slaughtered to the accompaniment of music.

³⁰Cumont, pp. 56-57 and Meyer, p. 114.

³¹Angus, p. 122.

The process of baptism in the Taurobolium meant that the initiate allowed himself to be drenched in the blood of a bull, then offered himself to the crowd that surrounded him. The crowd suspected that he had been purified from all of his sins and had become equal to the gods.³² The descent into the grave was a symbol of burial. When the person emerged from the pit he was supposedly purified from all his crimes, and the blood upon the body symbolized a new life. Some believed that he was now raised to the heights of the god and should be worshipped from afar.³³ The taurobolium united the worshipper with the dead and resurrected god.³⁴ Prudentius was a Christian poet that wrote about the bull sacrificing of the Great Mother ritual. In Prudentius' time, the taurobolium worked as a baptism within the cult promising the person who participated, rebirth. Usually the period between each taurobolium was twenty years, but this was not always the case. The poem that reveals the procedure by Prudentius is in *On the Martyrs' Crowns*.

Deep down into the pit the priest descends,
 Across the pit is laid a board of planks
 Too loosely joined in careless workmanship
 And in its surface holes are cut and drilled;
 The wood is riddled through, and everywhere
 The eye discovers crevices and cracks.
 The formidable bull with lowering brow
 Whose horns and withers are with garlands decked
 Is presently escorted to the spot;
 And with the sacred spear they penetrate its chest;
 The wound gapes wide and pours in mighty waves
 A stream of gushing blood over the wood,
 An all-pervading odor spoils the air.

³²Cumont, p. 66.

³³Cumont, p. 68.

³⁴Rahner, p. 9.

Through thousand fissures now the shower drips
 Of sordid fluid down the dismal pit
 and on his head the priest catches the drops
 With utmost care, his vestment soiled with blood
 And all his body dabbled with the gore,
 Nay, bending backwards he presents his face,
 His mouth and cheeks now to the scarlet flood;
 His eyes he washes in the gory flow.
 He moistens then his palate and his tongue
 And sucks and sips and gulps the somber blood.
 The bloodless rigid body of the beast
 Is dragged away now from its wooden bed;
 The priest, a gruesome sight, emerges from the pit
 And shows his head, his soggy bloody beard,
 His ribbons and his robe, drenched with the blood.³⁵

Following the sacrificial and purification rituals, a procession took place that included sacred men and virgins dressed up like gods.³⁶ Yet another example of initiation into this cult includes the sealing of the sacrificial temple's door with bull's blood. This bizarre routine was followed by the eating of raw flesh and the swinging of fire torches.³⁷

In *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement of Alexandria discloses part of the sacred ritual within the cult of the Great Mother,

I have eaten from the drum;
 I have drunk from the cymbal;
 I have carried the sacred dish;

³⁵Meyer, pp. 128-130. Originally from Prudentius, *On the Martyrs' Crowns*. (10.1011-50).

³⁶Burkert, p. 279.

³⁷Burkert, p. 280.

I have stolen into the inner chamber (shrine).³⁸

It is interesting how the Roman culture treated the foreign deity in their midst. A Roman woman named Serena, when she came upon a statue of the Great Mother and saw a beautiful necklace she admired, took it from the statue and placed it around her own neck.³⁹

Mithraism

³⁸Meyer, p. 115. Originally from Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks*. (2.15).

³⁹Chuvin, Pierre. *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 82.

The legend of Mithras can only be retold through the numerous engravings and sculptures still present throughout the ancient Roman empire. Mithra was believed to be the creator and destroyer of all things to his followers. He was the Lord over the four elements that comprises the universe and united within his being was the power of all the gods.¹ Franz Cumont constructs a plausible myth that tells the story of Mithras' origin. According to Cumont, as the sun rose a few shepherds witnessed Mithras being born from a rock. He was naked except for the Phrygian cap that he wore and the knife he carried in one hand and the fire-torch he carried in the other. The shepherds brought him gifts and worshipped him. Because he was naked, Mithras climbed into a tree and made himself a garment out of fig leaves. Due to his warrior-like nature, Mithras immediately defeated the sun. Mithras then allied himself with the sun by shaking his hand and placing a radiant crown on his rival's head. Sometimes Mithras is portrayed as the sun-god or the god of light. Since light is born in the air the ancient Magi thought that Mithra inhabited the "Middle Zone" between Heaven and Hell.²

Mithras next defeated the Primeval Bull, which became one of the primary themes within the Mithraic religion.³ Initially the bull escaped from Mithras, but the Sun commanded Mithras to recapture and slay the beast. Although against his will, Mithras went with his faithful dog and plunged his knife into the bull's side. From the blood of the animal burst plants and herbs along with grain sprouting from the bull's spinal cord, making Mithras the provider of the Bread of Life.⁴

Mithraism grew to wide-spread influence in the first four centuries CE, especially toward the middle of the third century, because it appealed to the Roman mind that

¹Cumont, p. 109.

²Cumont, p. 127. Cumont further discusses Mithras' mediator position. He was the god that divided an unknowable and unapproachable god from the poor human race that suffered on the earth.

³Speidel, Michael P. p. 5. There is evidence of over five hundred representations of the bull slaying common to the mysteries of Mithras. Most of these illustrations have very minor variations, indicating the importance of this myth to the cult.

⁴Cumont, Franz, pp. 131-132.

thrived on law, order, and discipline.⁵ Plus, Mithraism had a genuine theology, and an unchangeable religious method consisting of fundamental principles from science.⁶ Although the Greeks never worshipped Mithras,⁷ the cult was adopted by the Romans, and spread very quickly.⁸ In the Occident Mithras was given the characteristics of invincibility, fortitude, austerity, courage, endurance, loyalty, strength, power, non-attachment, and purity.⁹ The diffusion of Mithraism through Rome probably started with the conquest of Cilicia by Pompey in 67 BCE.¹⁰ Plutarch describes the defeat of the Cilician pirates and the possible introduction of the Mithraic rites to the Roman soldiers. "They themselves [the pirates] offered strange sacrifices of their own at Olympus, where they celebrated secret rites or mysteries, among which were those of Mithras. These Mithraic rites, first celebrated by the pirates, are still celebrated today [in Rome]."¹¹

Mithras appealed to three types of men--those who were interested in ceremonials, those who had mystic tendencies and those who were intellectually minded.¹² The army was probably the primary agent for spreading Mithraism throughout the empire. Franz Cumont describes the Roman soldier as pious and superstitious, and because of the many dangers he was exposed to in his position it was natural for him to seek protection from a militant and protecting deity.¹³ Other initiates into the cult of Mithras included state bureaucrats, merchants, and slaves.¹⁴ Although not all of the initiates into the cult were soldiers, the army appears to have dominated membership. The Mithraic brotherhoods

⁵Taraporewala, Irach J. S. "Mithraism." from *Forgotten Religions: Including Some Living Primitive Religions*. ed. Vergilius Ferm. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1950), p. 212.

⁶Especially astrology and the placement of the stars. However, this system will not be focused on in my thesis.

⁷Taraporewala, p. 210.

⁸Taraporewala, p. 211.

⁹Wynne-Tyson, p. 25.

¹⁰Meyer, p. 204, and Taraporewala, p. 209. Pompey was a Roman general and politician who was very triumphant in the eastern Mediterranean. In 67 BCE he succeeded in quickly defeating the Cilician pirates. These pirates terrorized Cilician and Cretan society along the coast line. It was these pirates that were suspected of introducing the Mithraic rites to the Roman soldiers.

¹¹Plutarch of Chaeronea, *Life of Pompey*, 24. 5. Taken from Meyer, p. 204.

¹²Taraporewala, p. 211.

¹³Cumont, p. 42.

¹⁴Ulansey, p. 6.

gladly admitted their companions in arms, regardless of their origin.¹⁵ Cumont emphasizes that each follower of Mithras hoped to obtain the gods' successful military tactics and a happy afterlife with the deity.¹⁶ The soldiers that were transferred to new stations took their adoption of the Mithraic tradition with them and converted other fighters, allowing the religion to spread throughout the empire. Furthermore, the retired soldiers continued the familiar rites of Mithras at the place of their retirement, and Cumont believes that this new haven introduced the religion to imitators.¹⁷

The faithful member of Mithras needed to be pure in character. The ritual within the cult may have consisted of repeated lustrations and ablutions to remove any stain upon the soul that existed. The members of Mithras believed in remaining chaste.¹⁸ Absolute celibacy, along with abstaining from certain foods, was praiseworthy within the cult. Hence, sensuality was regarded as an aspect of evil that needed to be combated.¹⁹

Initiation into the cult is believed to have been in seven different stages.²⁰ The names that Cumont gave to the levels are, in order from the least difficult, Raven, Occult, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Runner of the Sun, and Father.²¹ Each of the disparate stages promoted a different degree of purity.²² It has also been suggested that there was a symbolic ceremony in each of the seven levels.²³ In the different levels of induction the initiate may have worn attire that suited each of the particular degrees.²⁴ Cumont suggests that the lower orders of initiation may have been allowed even to children.²⁵ Whether the initiate had to remain in a particular grade for a fixed period of time is not known.

However, Cumont proposes that the "Fathers" were in charge of determining when a

¹⁵Cumont, pp. 42-43.

¹⁶Cumont, p. 43.

¹⁷Cumont, p. 60.

¹⁸Taraporewala, p. 213.

¹⁹Cumont, pp. 141-142.

²⁰Reitzenstein, p. 10.

²¹Cumont, p. 152.

²²Taraporewala, p. 213.

²³Angus, pp. 89-90.

²⁴Cumont, p. 152.

²⁵Cumont, p. 156.

particular initiate was ready for the higher initiation.²⁶ One story of a higher initiation is told regarding the soldier position, *milites*. The initiate was offered a crown at the point of a sword and put upon his head. He then threw the crown from his head saying "Mithras is my crown." He was then branded on the head with a hot iron.²⁷ Another initiation into a particular degree was that the initiate had to participate in a simulated death. The emperor Commodus actually killed another celebrant in this practice and polluted the chapel.

A Mithraic initiate expected to undergo a baptism of total immersion, to walk through a flame with hands tied together and his eyes covered and to swim across a river.²⁸ According to Esme Wynne-Tyson there were also "Twelve Tortures" that the neophyte had to participate in to become a member of the mysteries.²⁹ These tortures included painful austerities, trials by water, fire, cold, hunger, scourging, branding, bleeding, and the chance of death.³⁰ Sacrifices were common within the Mithraic cults, especially bird sacrifices. When the incorporation of the Mother Goddess cult was introduced into the mystery the sacrifice of bulls also became common within the cult.

The male they worship is a cattle rustler, and his cult they relate to the potency of fire, as his prophet handed down the lore to us, saying: *mysta booklopies, syndexie patros agauou* ("initiate of cattle-rustling, companion by hand-clasp of an illustrious father"). Him they call Mithra, and his cult they carry on in hidden caves, so that they may be forever plunged in the gloomy squalor of darkness and thus shun the grace of light resplendent and serene. O true

²⁶Cumont, p. 156.

²⁷Angus, p. 90.

²⁸Angus, p. 89.

²⁹Wynne-Tyson, p. 42.

³⁰Wynne-Tyson, p. 42. These characteristics also seem common within the seven degrees of initiation. It would not be uncommon if Wynne-Tyson is of a different opinion of other scholars as to the number of initiation levels included within the cult of Mithras.

consecration of a divinity! O repulsive inventions of a barbaric code!³¹

There was a sacramental meal associated with Mithras that includes bread and a cup of water. The bread and a goblet of water were placed in front of the neophyte and the priest of the cult cited the sacred ritual associated with the rite.³²

Mithras' birthday was celebrated on December 25th according to the Mithraic calendar. His rebirth was remembered on Easter.³³ The mystery of Mithras taught the secret of regeneration, uniting with the spirit in a rebirth.³⁴ This concept was important to the devotee of Mithras because life was a continuous struggle that occurred even during death with evil and good spirits trying to gain possession of their souls.³⁵ Cumont suggests that the members believed in the survival of the soul after death, along with the punishments and rewards given by the deity beyond the grave.³⁶

Mithraism may have succeeded in being the religion of the Roman Empire according to some scholars.³⁷ However, there was a flaw regarding the rituals of Mithraism; women were not allowed to participate in the sacred rites like in the other mysteries. To try to alleviate this discrepancy, Mithraism linked up with other mysteries that did permit women. This was especially apparent in the connection with the Mother Goddess. Both of these mysteries originated in the same area and shared the same cultural connections. Moreover, Cybele allowed women to participate in her ceremonies. Eventually over the years, Mithras adopted rites common to the rituals of the Mother Goddess. The most notable adaptation was the Taurboleum.³⁸

³¹Firmicus Maternus, *The Error of the Pagan Religions*, 5.2. Taken from Meyer, p.208.

³²Cumont, p. 158.

³³Wynne-Tyson, p. 24.

³⁴Taraporewala, p. 214.

³⁵Godwin, p. 13.

³⁶Cumont, p. 143.

³⁷Taraporewala, p. 212.

³⁸Although the connection will not be furthered addressed in this thesis, it is interesting to see how the Oriental mysteries may have influenced each other. While my research does not involve the ritual roots of Mithraism or Cybele, it would be interesting to research the bull-slaying myth common in the Roman adoption of Mithras in regards to the tradition of bull sacrifice in the Great Mother cult. Perhaps part of

The mithraea³⁹ were usually built underground or within a cave and because of this, the contents have been preserved remarkably well.⁴⁰

Thus the Persians, as mystagogues, initiate the *mystes* by teaching him the downward way of the soul and their way back, and calling the place a grotto. First, as Euboulos says, in the mountains near Persia Zoroaster dedicated a natural grotto, flowery and with springs, to the honor of Mithras, the maker and father of all, because [for him] the grotto was an image of the cosmos that Mithras created, and the things arranged symmetrically within were symbols of the cosmic elements and regions. Then, after Zoroaster, the habit of performing the mysteries in caves and grottos, either natural or artificial, prevailed also with others.⁴¹

Because the iconography within the grottos has been preserved so well, information about Mithraic symbolism is occasionally reintroduced. Ulansey suggests that the bull-slaying scene common in the cult is actually the constellation Taurus and for a brief moment in the fame of Mithras the followers were not primarily soldiers.⁴² Instead, scientists and religious-minded philosophers carried a secret knowledge of a new god that was so powerful that the entire cosmos was under his control.⁴³ Ulansey further asserts that although the religion ended as a cult of soldiers, the Mithraic mystery of the Roman empire was the response by a group of imaginative intellectuals responding to a cosmos not quite as simple as they had previously imagined it to be.⁴⁴

the myth of the bull-slaying popular within the Roman tradition stemmed to the sacrifice associated with Cybele.

³⁹Mithraic temple.

⁴⁰Ulansey, p. 3.

⁴¹Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, 6. Taken from Meyer, p. 211.

⁴²Ulansey, p. 67.

⁴³Ulansey, p. 125.

⁴⁴Ulansey, p. 125. For reasons all ready mentioned, I have chosen not to dive deeply into the cosmological aspects recently introduced regarding the Mithraic mysteries. However, Ulansey has a very good argument regarding the astrological aspect of the mystery and should be consulted in further research endeavors.

Mithras may have disappeared from the empire as Christianity ascended because women were not permitted to participate in the rites. Esme Wynne-Tyson suspects that another component to the decline of Mithraism was the close-guarded secrets associated with the cult. At a time when Christianity was flourishing and revealing all of the truths of the universe, as they saw them, it may have been difficult for Mithras to gather initiates.⁴⁵ However, Wynne-Tyson later voices the opinion that Mithraism still exists today

"wherever we turn."⁴⁶

For, as we shall find, the Cult of Mithras, which, in the fourth century, appeared to vanish from the face of the earth, meets us today in the West wherever we turn, not only in the teachings of the Christian Faith, and the churches founded in order to perpetuate these teachings; not only in the secret societies that have preserved elements of the discredited ancient Gnosis, and have faithfully guarded, though sometimes unaware of the fact, certain aspects of Mithraism and its initiation rites, but chiefly and essentially in the spirit of Western man who has been so badly misled and misguided by the faulty education given to him by those who claimed to be training humanity into the worship of the Prince of Peace when, in fact, they were training him into the worship of the invincible warrior-God.⁴⁷

We are now at the proper point to discuss Christianity and the similarities it shared with the other mystery religions. At this point it is also appropriate to consider the

⁴⁵Wynne-Tyson, p. 27.

⁴⁶Wynne-Tyson, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁷Wynne-Tyson, pp. 52-53. My purpose for including this excerpt within this section is to demonstrate how similar Mithraism and Christianity were, and to further strengthen my opinion that Christianity was indeed a mystery religion in the first four centuries that it existed. Esme Wynne-Tyson demonstrates an interesting opinion for the existence of Mithraism still surviving today in the guise of Christianity. While I do not completely agree with this idea, it is very supportive of my theory that various aspects of the mysteries still survive today in Christianity.

possible influences the mysteries may have had on Christianity in the first four centuries of its existence.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has often been regarded as a mystery religion in its earliest state, primarily during the emergence as a new religion in the first four centuries CE. While several characteristics of early Christianity exist in art and literature pointing to the influence that the mysteries must have had on Christianity, the fact remains that out of the six mysteries previously discussed only Christianity survives today as a recognized religion. It is now necessary to focus on the mysteries and Christianity, along with the characteristics that shaped the early cult of Christ.

The Similarities Between Christianity and the Mysteries

Christianity offered many of the same attributes as the other mysteries in their sacred rites. For example, the attempt at unifying with one loving deity, a ritual meal, a holy legend, a liturgy in the form of a drama, the style of prayers, the festivals, and miracles connected with the brotherhood.¹ Professor Karl Holl further asserts that there was not one ritual within Christianity unparalleled by a Hellenistic event. Also, the Roman world may have saw the Christian religion as a new mystery. This thought is exemplified by Celsus, "The cult of Christ is a secret society whose members huddle together in corners for fear of being brought to trial and punishment. They also practice their rites in secret in order to avoid the sentence of death that looms over them."²

Socially, Christianity borrowed the eager acceptance of new members into the cult from the mysteries. Christianity was open to all races, including Jewish and Greek. Moreover, all classes, slave and free, were welcomed into the cult. There were no social distinctions made within the religion, the manual worker was just as welcome to practice as an ex-criminal.³ Also, women were just as embraced as men. The mysteries

¹Holl, p. 8.

²Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, p. 53.

³Dodds, p. 134.

contemporary to Christianity were also inviting, with a few exceptions, to anyone. The cult of Eleusis did not welcome members that had committed murder and did not speak Greek. The Mithraic brotherhood did not permit women into its cult. The mysteries were also leery of initiates that might have practiced magic.⁴

The mysteries shared with Christianity the birth of a divine child. While the divine child may not have been the central figure worshipped within the cults, the concept was characteristic of each of the cults.⁵ Horus was born to Isis and her resurrected brother Osiris; Mithras was born out of a rock; likewise Cybele was born from a rock; Dionysus was born from his father Zeus twice; Persephone gave birth to the divine child, Iacchos; and lastly, Jesus was born by a virgin impregnated by God.

This ray of God, then, as was ever foretold in the past, descended into a certain virgin and, becoming flesh in her womb, was born as one who is man and God united. The flesh, provided with a soul, is nourished, matures, speaks, teaches, acts, and *is* Christ. For the moment, accept this account--it resembles your own tales.⁶

Perhaps the birth of a divine child was the reason that child initiation into these cults was also a common characteristic. There is evidence that suggests that children were initiated into the cult of Eleusis, Dionysus, Mithras, and Christianity.

Another similarity between Christianity and the mysteries was the central God figure who died and rose again. This was displayed in the myth of Demeter and Persephone; Persephone was kidnapped and taken to the underworld resulting with Demeter allowing everything on the earth perish. Not until Persephone was returned to her mother did the harvest again flourish. In the story of Dionysus, the child Dionysus was murdered by the Titans and was reborn as a second Dionysus to a different mother. Likewise, Osiris was wrongfully butchered by his brother and brought back to life by his

⁴Martin, p. 119.

⁵Neumann, p. 312.

⁶Tertullian, *Apology*, p. 64.

sister Isis. Finally, in the Great Mother cult Cybele restores and deities her slain lover. This theme was emphasized in the cult of Christ as well. Rahner suggests that the members of the cult sought to imitate the dying and rising god and to partake in the power each initiate would have in the next world.⁷ One of the primary prayers within the Christian church, the Apostles Creed, incorporates this idea,

He suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Was crucified, died and was buried.

He descended into Hell,

On the third day he rose again

And ascended into heaven.

He is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

While the "myth" of the suffering deity was not uncommon in Antiquity, the concept of worshipping a tortured god was a new focus concentrated within the mystery religions.⁸ Christian writers were struck by the similarities of this belief in a god that rose again, as well as others, and began to denounce the mysteries as the work of the devil. Justin Martyr reveals these similarities in an address to the Roman society.

When, indeed, we assert that the Word, our Teacher Jesus Christ, who is the first begotten of God the Father, was not born as the result of sexual relations, and that He was crucified, died, arose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven, we propose nothing new or different from that which you say about the so-called sons of Jupiter.⁹

He then demonstrates this belief of trickery by the devil when he wrote about the rites of the Bacchants.

⁷Rahner, p. 8.

⁸I am of a personal opinion that despite the Judaic roots associated with Christianity, the new brotherhood emerging in the first centuries of the common era encompassing the Christ figure was indeed a mystery religion.

⁹Saint Justin Martyr, p. 259.

For, when they say that Bacchus was born of Jupiter's union with Semele, and narrate that he was the discoverer of the vine, and that, after he was torn to pieces and died, he arose again and ascended into heaven, and when they use wine in his mysteries, is it not evident that the Devil had imitated the previously quoted prophecy of the patriarch Jacob, as recorded by Moses?¹⁰

Another important element within the mysteries was the belief in present assurance of a future salvation.¹¹ The mysteries were important in supporting this concept because the uncertainty of death and the afterlife troubled the thoughts of humankind. William Burkert believes that this concept of redemption prepared or paralleled the rise of Christianity.¹²

According to Professor Holl, the curiosity of the afterlife was the central reason that the sacraments first arose. He believed that the members of the mysteries wanted to have an assurance that their god was actually with them, and this was achieved through the sacramental meal of body and blood. This meal also suggested that the deity was not only present during the rite, but actually present for each member of the cult. The meal allowed the neophyte to feel united with the Eternal. Reitzenstein discusses that the blood/wine relationship associated with the sacred supper induces the initiate to remember the deity's death and speak of it. The Christians would then be able to remind the devotees of Christ's death until his second coming to fully unite with his followers.¹³

The Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is living as Christ enjoined. For not as

¹⁰St. Justin Martyr, p. 259.

¹¹Holl, Karl. *The Distinctive Elements in Christianity*. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1937), p. 7.

¹²Burkert, p. 3.

¹³Reitzenstein, pp. 77-78.

common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.¹⁴

The bread and cup of water were common in the cult of Mithras, and Burkert describes the drinking a barley soup as very important in the Eleusinian mysteries.¹⁵

The initiation rites of each of the mysteries were very similar. For example, in the cult of Isis certain foods and drinks needed to be abstained from for a period of ten days. Abstinence from sexual intercourse was also common.¹⁶ Godwin relates these initiation practices with Christianity through the fasts performed within the church throughout the year and restrictions made about sexual relations.¹⁷

I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water.¹⁸

¹⁴Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, p. 64.

¹⁵Burkert, pp. 110-111.

¹⁶Godwin, p. 19.

¹⁷Godwin, p. 19.

¹⁸Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, p. 59.

However, Mircea Eliade believes that Christian baptism was the first equivalent to initiation in the early church. William Burkert also alleged that some of the features of early Christian baptism reminds one of the initiation rituals of the mystery religions. For instance, the ritual was an individual practice, preparation, and a nocturnal celebration.¹⁹ Baptism introduced the convert to a new religious community, as well as making him worthy of eternal life.²⁰

The Mithraic religion and Christianity seemed to have the most significant similarities.²¹ Franz Cumont endeavors to reveal these common characteristics. The members within the cults knew each other through the term "Brother."²² Also, members of both brotherhoods purified themselves through baptism, through confirmation they received the power necessary to combat evil, and they expected from their Lord's Supper the salvation of body and soul.²³ Other minor but important characteristics that each religion shared was holding Sunday sacred and the birth of the sun on the 25th of December. Cumont believes that to the early Christians and the Mithraics, there was an existence of Heaven and Hell, the immortality of the soul, a last judgment, and a final resurrection of the dead.²⁴

Christianity must have copied from the culture that it knew. While many of the characteristics of early Christianity must have developed from its Judaic roots, there is ample information that the mysteries were equally as important. The fathers of Christianity observed the features that prospered in the society that they lived and took what they liked, whether these characteristics came from Judaism, the mystery religions, or both. It cannot be refuted that what these early fathers of the church incorporated into

¹⁹Burkert, p. 102.

²⁰Eliade, p. 116.

²¹In my opinion the Mithraic tradition was not an important influence on Christianity. Because they were contemporary in Antiquity I feel that they were influenced by several of the same traditions before them. The similarities between the two religions may be due to their effort at attending to the needs of the cultures that surrounded them.

²²Cumont, pp. 190-191.

²³Cumont, pp. 190-191.

²⁴Cumont, pp. 190-191.

their new religion was an immense accomplish. Christianity exists in several cultures today as the dominate religion and through this surmounting existence of Christianity, the mysteries still prevail.

CONCLUSION

The mysteries that existed and challenged the views of Christianity still survive today. As Esme Wynne-Tyson suggests, the mysteries, especially Mithraism, continue under the guise of Christianity. While I would not be so assertive, I do believe that attributes of the mysteries are still incorporated in aspects of our society.

Fraternities and sororities have adopted many of the same initiation characteristics as the mystery religions. While the entry ritual generally remains a secret to outsiders, there is evidence that the initiates are occasionally hurt physically, degrees or levels must be achieved by the initiate to prove ones worthiness into the "brotherhood," and a special diet must be observed by the pledge. Secret meetings are then followed by all of the group's members. New pledges are encouraged to attend the initiation ritual.

The freemasons are another association that appears to have connections to the mystery religions. In fact, the masons tie their history with the mysteries. The initiates must attend a series of three levels, in each level the ritual changes. The degrees that must be attained are "Entered Apprentice," "Fellow Craft," and "Master Mason."¹ The meetings and initiation rites of the masons are held in a lodge room on the second or third floor of a building to protect their events from eavesdroppers.² An initiation fee is required before the new inductee is permitted to participate in the introductory ceremony.

The first degree consists of the initiate, a male, removing his coat, shoes and stockings, and trousers, along with expelling anything on his person that is metal. A pair of pants, furnished by the lodge, is required for the initiate to wear. He must also leave his

¹Whalen, William J. *Christianity and American Freemasonry*. (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1958), p. 19.

²Whalen, p. 19.

left arm and breast exposed from his shirt. A blindfold is then put over his eyes, a slipper is placed on his right foot, and a blue silk rope is put around his neck.³ During the ceremony that ensues, the following rite is read to the initiate with the point of a compass pressed against his exposed left breast.

Mr. --, on entering this Lodge for the first time, I receive you on the point of a sharp instrument pressing your naked left breast, which is to teach you, as this is an instrument of torture to your flesh, so should the recollection of it ever be to your mind and conscience, should you attempt to reveal the secrets of Masonry unlawfully.⁴

This is the ceremony called the "Shock of Entrance" or the "Rite of Induction."⁵ After the ceremony is complete the initiate makes a solemn vow to uphold the secrets of the brotherhood.

All this I most solemnly, sincerely promise and swear, with a firm and steadfast resolution to perform the same, without any mental reservation or secret evasion of mind whatever, binding myself under no less penalty than that of having my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by its roots, and my body buried in the rough sands of the sea, at low-water mark, where the tide ebbs and flows twice in twenty-four hours, should I ever knowingly violate this my Entered Apprentice obligation.⁶

Upon entering the next level of initiation, a similar promise is cited by the initiate.

All this I most solemnly promise and swear with a firm and steadfast resolution to perform the same, without any hesitation, mental reservation, or self-evasion of mind whatever, binding myself under

³Whalen, pp. 24-25.

⁴Whalen, p. 26.

⁵Whalen, p. 26.

⁶Whalen, pp. 28-29.

no less penalty than of having my breast torn open, my heart plucked out, and placed on the highest pinnacle of the temple there to be devoured by the vultures of the air, should I ever knowingly violate the Fellow Craft.⁷

The last and most graphic oath of the initiation ceremony allows the initiate membership in the last level of masonry, the Master Mason.

All this I most solemnly, sincerely promise and swear, with a firm and steady resolution to perform the same, without any hesitation, mental reservation, or secret evasion of mind whatever, binding myself, under no less penalty than that of having my body severed in two, my bowels taken from thence and burned to ashes, the ashes scattered before the four winds of heaven, that no more remembrance might be had of so vile and wicked a wretch as I would be, should I ever, knowingly, violate this my Master Mason's obligation.⁸

While the rites cited above may not be the same within each masonry, they are essentially of the same content. These rites and prayers seem so similar to the rituals one might experience in the cult of Mithras or Isis.

My future intentions on this subject are very extensive. While I feel I have learned a tremendous amount from the above information, there is still so much more I want to investigate regarding the mysteries and early Christianity. For instance, I would enjoy looking at the archaeological evidence that exists from each of the cults. Perhaps more work focused upon the actual evidence that we have in our grasp may shed light on areas that we do not. Furthermore, I would like to drive deeper into the Christian aspects of the mysteries. Perhaps the mysteries did not only influence Christianity, but allowed Christianity to influence them. While my research did not focus on this aspect, I believe it

⁷ Whalen, p. 36.

⁸ Whalen, p. 42.

would be very interesting to investigate this idea further and allow my viewpoints to expand on this subject. Lastly, I would like to work more with the primary sources regarding early Christianity and the mysteries. While it took awhile to begin the process of discovering which ancient writers touched upon the mysteries, I eventually compiled a large list that I have not fully exhausted. My goal will be to continue expanding this compilation of sources, and pursue my research on this most fascinating topic.

Early Christianity withstood all of the criticism the Roman society heaped upon it. Through adopting aspects of several mystery religions before Christianity, and incorporating attitudes of the society that surrounded the early cult of Christ, the religion encircling Jesus survives even today.

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