



# The Cult of Isis and Early Christianity

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Before the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, there was the Cult of Isis. This research paper is an exploration of the Cult of Isis and its possible effects on Early Christianity. Early Christianity is defined as about the first five hundred years of its existence. The cult of Isis certainly had an effect on the development of early Christianity, even if some of the specific beliefs within the religions were different. There are similarities in the worship and the belief behind the Cult of Isis during the Roman era with those that are reflected in Early Christian beliefs. However, it is the missing pieces in Isiac worship that Christianity seemed to satisfy that made it become so popular. The way that the Roman world came to embrace Christianity also had a staggering effect on the religion, and set it apart from Isis.

## The Cult of Isis

Isis was first worshiped in Egypt as a queen alongside her brother and husband, Osiris, the King of Egypt. When Osiris was killed by his brother Set and chopped up into pieces, it was Isis who put him back together. When she did so, she became the only god in the Egyptian Pantheon who was capable of resurrection. Most importantly, after reviving Osiris temporarily, she conceived Horus, who avenged the murder of his father and become the first Pharaoh of Egypt. As Osiris's wife, she became queen of the dead. As the mother of Horus, she was now the symbol of motherhood, the patron of childbearing and the protector of children. She was also the model for all the future queens of Egypt, who were referred to as "the daughters of god," "the great wives of the king" and "the mothers of god" (Eliade 1987, 302).

The queens' role in kingly succession was just as important as the role that the king played (Eliade 1987, 302). In *The contendings of Horus and Seth*, which tells the story of the dealings and rivalries of Osiris, Isis, Set, Nut, and Horus, and dates back to the reign of Rameses V (1147 – 1143 BCE), Isis' role as wife and mother are clear (Eliade 1987, 302). In the *Book of the Dead*, she is known as "she who gives birth to heaven and earth, knows the orphan, knows the widow, and

seeks justice for the poor and shelter for the weak" (Wikipedia: Isis). Her most important temple was built on the island of Philae in Upper Egypt and the oldest buildings date back to just before the beginning of the Ptolemaic dynasty in 330 BCE.

Worship of her moved from Egypt to the Greco-Roman world after Alexander the great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE (Witt 1971, 46). She became most popular during the reign of the Roman Empire. It was during this time that most of the Isiac temples were built (Eliade 1987, 302). When she made her transition to the Greco-Roman world, she absorbed many of the powers of other gods and goddesses (Eliade 1987, 302; Wand 1937, 137). She became the earth goddess, protector of sailors, and kindler of the fire in the sun (Mutz 1997, 13; Eliade 1987, 302). In the Greek text *Isis-aretaology*, dated to about the first century BCE, Isis is described as the goddess who was responsible for creation, was goddess of love and war, and was worshiped under many different names (Eliade 1987, 302). In Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Isis is said to identify herself with all of the female gods of the time (Wand 1937, 137; Bainton 1984, 124-127; Mattingly 1967, 78-79).

At the end of the Hellenistic Age (336 – 146 BCE), men were looking for a religion that held a different kind of comfort and inspiration that was lacking during the Greek era (Goodenough 1970, 4). Religions like that of Isis did not merely bring new gods from the East, but brought new religious ideas, including teaching the ideas of moral pollution and reconciliation, equalizing rich and poor and making women more equal to men (Glover 1971, 24). It was this kind of new thought process that led them away from the traditional Greek and Roman gods that were impersonal, and to Cults like that of Isis and Christianity. Isis satisfied a feeling of helplessness and guilt that people had felt during the Hellenistic Age (Goodenough 1970, 9). In the Roman form, Cult of Isis devotees insisted that their religion and practices satisfied the desire in the Hellenistic age for an all saving deity. She became popular because she represented a deeply desired compassion and a love for all men, and with devotion, would grant a happy life after death (Goodenough 1970, 9-10). It is this need to have a happy afterlife, one that during this time was only being provided to the masses by the Cult of Isis, that made the religion so popular (Glover 1975, 98).

Augustus thought that the rites of Isis were “pornographic” in nature, and that the cult of Isis was more than capable of destroying the moral fiber that Augustus cared so much about (Wikipedia: Isis). Augustus suspended the building of a temple that was to be built in honor of Isis and in the honor of Julius Caesar, who was recently assassinated (Wikipedia: Isis). This fear of the eastern religions was not abandoned by Roman emperors until the reign of Caligula (37 – 41 CE). It was during his reign that Rome had its first Isiac festival.

The last emperor that supported the Cult of Isis was Julian, who reigned around 360 CE. He thought that the pagan cults were good because they did not go out and coerce others to join their religion, and that to drag blasphemers to the altars of the gods would be a profanity against the gods (Goodenough 1970, 25; Glover 1975, 23). Julian however, only lasted three years on the throne, and was the last emperor of the Roman Empire to openly speak out against the early Christian religion. The Cult of Isis was tolerated by the Empire for just 30 more years before the declaration of Theodosius in 395 CE that the Roman Empire was a Christian State and that all heathen worship was abolished. The temple of Philae was the last stronghold of Isiac worship and was officially closed by Justinian in the sixth century (Eliade 1987, 302).

### **Christianity in the Roman World**

The new religious needs that were a requirement in the Roman Empire were only partially satisfied by the religious beliefs of the cult of Isis. However, it was the introduction of the religions of the Far East and Egypt that changed the “western” way of looking at the world. It was this change in thought that made Christianity so likable (Goodenough 1970, 9). Christianity was born in the far reaches of the Roman Empire, after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth around 30 CE. It was originally spread by those who were part of Jesus’ inner circle of Apostles and by those who thought they saw him rise from the dead.

Christianity spread easily because of the aggressiveness of missionaries and because of the ease of travel under the Roman administration. Missionaries like Paul would come into a city, go to the local synagogue, and come out with just a few converts. With these converts, and a few of the non-Jewish people he could convert, he would establish a new group in the city. Once he felt that the group had a good understanding of his message, he would leave and push on to another city (Goodenough 1970, 19). However, within the Roman Empire between about 117 CE until Constantine’s establishment of

Christianity as the state religion, Christianity was not widely accepted by the state (Mattingly 1967, 41). From 117-259 CE, although the state did not for the most part actively persecute, it was unlawful to be a Christian. If there was a natural disaster or a plague, Christians were persecuted in an effort to please the pagan gods. Before the persecution at Lugdunum, 175-176 CE, the empire had been suffering from a plague and from successful barbarian invasions. The outcry against the Christians was worsened by a combination of mass hysteria and a weak governor.

Under Septimius Severus (193-211 CE) a new prohibition was established against becoming a Christian, aimed against increasing the size of the Christian population (Mattingly 1967, 43). Maximian the First (235 BC) hated everything but the army, and this included the Christian population. Although Philip the Arabian (244 – 249 CE) was married to a Christian wife, he himself was not friendly to the Christian church. His successor Decius (249 – 251 CE) established the first general persecution of the Christians; all subjects of the empire had to present certificates that said they sacrificed to the Roman pagan gods (Mattingly 1967, 43). This occurred in conjunction with the celebration of the one thousandth year of Rome, and as seen in coins of this era, Decius took very seriously the job of the Roman gods to protect the state (Mattingly 1967, 44).

A positive thing for Christians, though, came from the persecution inflicted during the reign of Valerian (253-258). Valerian aimed his laws at the bishops, the heads of the churches. However, Valerian was captured by a Persian King in 258 CE, and many Christians saw this as a divine sign from God against the persecutor. Valerian’s son Gallienus gave the church peace during his reign (Mattingly 1967, 44). Even though all the persecuted endured, Tertullian says that there is no province and no class that Christianity hasn’t become a part of, and it was during this persecution that the early Christian creed was formulated (Mattingly 1967, 46).

When Gallienus took the throne in 258 CE, toleration was granted to the Christians. He himself was a philosopher and a patron of Plotinus, but his wife, the Empress Salonina, was Christian (Mattingly 1967, 54). From Gallienus through to Diocletian in 283 CE, the church and the empire maintained a relative peace. During Diocletian’s reign, the empire was split up into sections, all governed by themselves, and the empire became an extreme regiment that many who were part of the senate could not deal with (Mattingly 1967, 55). Outwardly the peace continued, but in 296 CE, a purge of Christians from the army and civil service positions began, foreshadowing the Great

Persecution that broke out in 303 CE. The purge in the army was carried out by Galerius, the Caesar of Diocletian in the East.

In 303 CE Diocletian ordered churches to be destroyed, sacred scriptures burned and heads of the churches to be arrested. Some sources say that Diocletian did not want to shed the blood of Christians, but he had a nervous breakdown and was incapacitated for months and by the time he recovered, the bloodshed was in full force (Mattingly 1967, 57; Wikipedia: Galerius). In 305 CE Diocletian and Maximian, one of his Caesars, abdicated. Those that took their place were men of Galerius, Severus and Maximin Daza, instead of the sons of Maximian and Constantius, the ruler in the west. Constantius died in 306 and his son Constantine was proclaimed Augustus by his troops. Galerius then offered the second rank of Caesar to Constantine, which was accepted. In 306 Maxentius, son of Maximian was made Emperor by the Praetorian Guard in Rome, and his father came back from his abdication to help him (Mattingly 1967, 58; Wikipedia: Galerius). Soon, six separate leaders were claiming to hold power at one time. The firm basis from which the Christian Persecution had grown disappeared. Galerius, on his deathbed, granted toleration of the Christian religion in April of 311 CE and asked them to pray for his recovery. He died the next month. This general edict ended the official persecution of the early Christians. However, many people of influence in the Christian religion were lost during the Persecution. Although Constantius supposedly kept the persecution in the West within reason, persecution had raged over most of the empire, no where more so than the extremes seen in the East (Mattingly 1967, 58; Wikipedia: Constantine).

The future of early Christianity now depended on Constantine. His father had been known as a kind ruler, and although he wasn't a Christian, he was a monotheist. Constantine was said to have been a man of strong physical and mental strength, a good general, a decent diplomat, and extremely ambitious. Before he converted to Christianity, he was a devoted worshiper of Apollo. Through the influence of Bishop Hosius of Corduba, Constantine came to the conclusion that the Christian god and Christ were really who he wanted to worship in the first place, and had been looking for in the religious following of Apollo (Mattingly 1967, 59; Wikipedia: Constantine). With the death of Galerius, there were four men remaining who wanted to be Emperor: Constantine, Licinius, Maxentius, and Maximin. Constantine formed an alliance with Licinius and resolved to win back Rome and Italy from Maxentius (Mattingly 1967,

59; Wikipedia: Constantine). Even though Maxentius wasn't known as a persecutor, Constantine made his campaign to conquer Maxentius a test of his faith and relationship with the Christian god. He told the bishop Eusebius that he had seen a vision of a cross of light in the night sky, and around it were the words "in this sign you shall conquer." He marked the sign on the shields of his men, attacked Rome, and won (Mattingly 1967, 59; Wikipedia: Constantine). Soon after this victory, Maximin attacked Licinius, was defeated, and died soon thereafter (Mattingly 1967, 60). Maximin had continued his persecution, trying to stop people from converting to Christianity and to rouse the pagan religions, and with his death, Constantine and Licinius reaffirmed the Edict of Milan (Mattingly 1967, 60). Constantine and Licinius had their last battle for power in 324 CE, and after Licinius reverted to paganism in their last battle, Constantine won and the empire was united under a single Christian man (Mattingly 1967, 60; Wikipedia: Constantine).

With the rise of Constantine to Emperor, the early Christian Church went from being an object of fear and hatred to having imperial protection, favor, and power. The church received back and confiscated property, and received more gifts from the Emperor. Bishops held high honors and traveled at the expense of the government (Mattingly 1967, 61). When the western emperor fell in 324 CE, Constantine had the bishop in Rome step in to take his place. Constantine, however, was upset to discover that the Christian church was not as united as his government, and until it was, wouldn't make a very strong partner (Mattingly 1967, 61). The first Council at Nicaea presented Constantine with an opportunity to unite the Christian church completely (Mattingly 1967, 61; Wikipedia: First Council at Nicaea). Even with Constantine's new power and religion, he did not immediately force Christianity upon the people even though it was something that he believed in very strongly (Mattingly 1967, 62). Almost all pagan deities on coinage disappear after the rise of Constantine in 312 CE except for the Sun god. He was not eliminated completely from coinage until five years later (Mattingly 1967, 62).

As civil service members of the state, early Christians had no success in being chosen for high ranking positions. Now that the empire and the religion had such a strong connection, Christians were being appointed to high and important positions. The arbitration of bishops became legal (Mattingly 1967, 63). With the church favored to the degree that it was, no dividing line could be drawn between church and public affairs, and under these circumstances

the church both influenced and was influenced by society (Mattingly 1967, 63). Even with the influence of Christianity, the corruption in the close presence of the Emperor and the merciless grind of the tax system continued with little sign of improvement. It was inevitable that with the new partnership between the church and the state that some of this corruption would brush off into the church (Mattingly 1967, 63-64).

The success of early Christianity at the local level depended largely on organization. In all parts of the Roman Empire, people were worshiping Christianity in different ways, and in order for Christianity to be successful, a group of religious leaders needed to come together to produce a standardized and regulated way of worship (Goodenough 1970, 25). This organization is one of the reasons why it became popular very quickly. It was the only religion in the Roman Empire that attempted to do more than simply organize on a local level (Goodenough 1970, 25), and while the Cult of Isis' beliefs were bound lightly, Christianity began to hold church councils for the firm formation of creeds (Witt 1971, 254).

### **The Thread**

One very obvious similarity between the two religions is that they offered religions with a one-on-one relationship with a deity, regardless of the background of the devotee. Both religions were popular with the lower classes. The cult of Isis offered magnificent rituals that people of the lower classes could participate in (Goodenough 1970, 10). Jesus of Nazareth, when preaching his sermons on love and devotion around 28 CE, sought companionship among the people of lower classes because the people of higher class refused to meet with him on his level (Goodenough 1970, 13). Like the cult of Isis, Jesus preached for equality and love for all men, something people of the upper class wanted nothing to do with (Harnack 1972, 161). A legend dating back to the early centuries of Christian persecution mentions the deacon Laurentius of Rome who, when ordered to give the treasures of the church to the government, indicated the poor as the churches only treasures (Harnack 1972, 161).

Although in the Pauline view of Christianity, god was a male, and Isis was a female, both religions still had the common characteristic of trying to sweep aside radical and social distinctions (Witt 1971, 268). Both religions also appealed to women on a scale that was not seen in other Roman religions after their introduction (Glover 1975, 22). Women in the Cult of Isis and women as part of the subculture of Christianity during the Greco-Roman world enjoyed

higher status than that of other religions (Glover 1975, 22; Stark 1996, 95). The appeal of these two religions probably comes from the fact that there were far more men in the Greco-Roman world than there were females (Stark 1996, 97). It was estimated that around 200 CE, in the city of Rome there were 131 males to 100 females, and in the outer parts of the empire, the ratio was 140 males for every 100 females (Stark 1996, 97). Sex ratios this extreme can only occur when tampering with the population occurred, and it is well known that infanticide was practiced during this era (Stark 1996, 96). A study of inscriptions at Delphi found that out of six hundred families, only six had raised more than one daughter (Stark 1996, 96). It is no wonder then that the Cult of Isis and Christianity became popular among women, because they are actually valued in these religions (Stark 1996, 98).

Studies show that Christianity may have been more popular among women because Christian women tended to get married later (Stark 1996, 106). This study was based on Roman inscriptions and was done in 1965 (Stark 1996, 106). The study found that female pagans were three times as likely as Christians to be married before the age of thirteen and that ten percent of pagan women were married by age eleven. Forty-four percent of pagan women were married by the age of fourteen, compared with only twenty percent of Christian women. Forty-eight percent of Christian females had not been wed before the age of eighteen, compared with only thirty-seven percent of pagan women (Stark 1965, 106). The status of women in the church was another matter. In Corinthians 24:34-36, Paul is said to prohibit women from even speaking in church. However, it is argued that this was an improper translation when the bible was translated into the King James Version because it contradicts many of the positive things that Paul said about women (Stark 1996, 108-109). This could easily been a reflection of societal views in the seventeenth centuries. In Romans 16:1-2, Paul introduces Phoebe, a female, to a roman congregation as "our sister Phoebe" who is a "deaconess of the church at Cechrea," and that she had been great help to him. Deacons were considered very important members of the early church because they assisted at liturgical functions and were in charge of the benevolent and charitable activities of the church. In the King James Version, Phoebe was misinterpreted to be a servant of the church and not a Deacon. Also, there are records of Paul sending many letters of thanks to women, including a letter to Prisca, thanking her for risking her neck on his behalf. In Tim, 3:11, Paul again mentions that only females who are serious and "temperate and faithful in all things" should

be appointed as deacons. In 451 CE, the council of Chalcedon handed down an edict that deaconesses had to be unmarried and over the age of forty. This different regard for women as part of the religion is what set the cult of Isis and Christianity apart from all other religions of the time period (Stark 1996, 109). It is thought that Christianity made its way through the upper classes of society through women, where wives would convert and then convince their husbands to convert.

Another stealthy connection between Isis and Christians is the similarities between how people became part of the Isis church and how the worship of Christianity was started. In the cult of Isis, one can not become part of the religion until one had a vision of Isis and the priest of the temple of Isis had a vision of the new devotee becoming part of the cult (Glover 1971, 99). A tenet of early Christianity is that Jesus rose from the dead. Facts aside, his disciples all had a similar religious experience, whether they actually saw Jesus rise from the dead or they simply had a vision of it occurring (Goodenough 1970, 16). These religious experiences are a common bond between the two religions.

Another important similarity arises in the trinity. Both the Cult of Isis and Christianity share this common thread. According to the Christian critic Tertullian, when the bible was first published at the end of the second century was when the trinity of Osiris, Isis, and Horus was reworked to become the Holy Trinity as it exists in the early Christian doctrine (Witt 1971, 205; Glover 1975, 23).

The cult of Isis had considerable influence on the Virgin Mary (Eliade 1987, 302). According to genealogies in the Books of *Mathew* and *Luke*, Joseph wasn't the biological father of Jesus, but Jesus was still part of the line of David. In order for this to be the case, Jesus had to inherit this from his mother, who was a descendent though David's son Nathan (Watts 1968, 103). It was this line that was supposed to link Jesus directly to the Chosen People. This is very similar to Isis, and all queens of Egypt, passing down the power of the throne through their ancestry. Another connection between Isis and Mary is motherhood. Both were mothers to kings of different sorts, but it is this motherhood that is reflected in art. Statues of Isis holding Horus to her breast look the same as statues created of Mary holding the baby Jesus to her breast. This similarity of iconography between the two is generally accepted by most scholars (Witt 1971, 272-275). A strong difference

arises, though, in a direct comparison between Isis and Mary in the ways that they became mothers.

### Differences

The difference between the ways that one reaches spiritual salvation in Christianity was that it showed men the way to the ultimate truth that the emptiness of the Hellenistic Age required. According to apostles like Paul, in the previous religions (including the cults of Isis and Judaism) scriptures could only lead men a certain distance to ultimate salvation and it was in Christianity that the goal of ultimate salvation was met (Goodenough 18). Also, it was the tangible form of worship in the religion that set it apart from ones like the cult of Isis. Although Isis offered a personal relationship with the deity and afterlife salvation, it did not offer a rite like that of the Christian Eucharist, where the breaking of the bread and drinking of wine represented a tangible connection to the religion. The Eucharist is said to have morphed from the breaking of bread and drinking of wine to commemorate the last night of Jesus to "the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, which suffered from our sins, and which the father of his goodness raised up again" in Roman tombs during the early part of the second century (Goodenough 1970, 23).

### Conclusion

It is the differences between the hardships that the two religions had to go through to become popular that set them apart from the other religions of the same time period. A connection clearly exists between the religions, even if it is a small one. Both religions attempted to fill a void in the aftermath of the Hellenistic era and both promise everlasting life through worship. However, because Christianity had a god on earth that someone saw and could talk about, and because this god made an ultimate sacrifice for his followers, it made Christianity more appealing to worshipers because the relationship became that much more personal. People were looking for answers after death, and although both Isis and Christianity could answer these, the more personal relationship in the early Christian church made it more powerful.

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