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The Power of Mothers: A Comparison of the Egyptian Goddess Isis and Virgin Mary During the Roman Empire Through Literature and Art

Katherine Burdick
Providence College

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by Katherine Michelle Burdick
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In her dark garments are shown the concealments and the obscurations in which she in her yearning pursues the Sun.

-    Plutarch

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

-    Revelation 12:1

To my family.

Dad, thank you for asking questions and inspiring me to find answers.
Mom, thank you for encouraging me to try new things and take risks.
David, thank you for always reminding me how proud you are.
Lauren, thank you for believing in me no matter what.
Timothy, thank you for supporting me along the way.
Emily, thank you for teaching me to dream big.
Philip, thank you for making me laugh.

I am who I am because of each of you.

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF MOTHERS

Classical history can be challenging to analyze because of the centuries that have passed since many of these events took place. Historians have had time to shift their opinions and conclusions and debate these topics with one another. Many primary sources can be lost or interpreted differently because of the context in which they are found. Secondary sources also shift as more research is done and interpretations of events change. Research surrounding the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary has also shifted as historians have compared the two divine mothers. Some historians believe that the art and artifacts found depicting them reveal that the iconography of the one figure has influenced the other. This leads to the question of whether Isis may have influenced how Mary has been depicted or has Mary influenced how Isis is shown. The question is important because it may reveal how Christianity has been influenced by ancient

Mediterranean cultures. Other historians reject this thesis and believe depictions of the two women developed independently. Evaluating a variety of sources helps to reveal the relationship between the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary. What is clear is that the two strongly influenced Roman culture.

The story of Isis is a key part of Egyptian mythology. There is no singular homogenous myth of Isis, but her worship dates back to 2000 B.C. and the Pyramid texts.[1] Her story has evolved over time, and historians cite Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* as one of the most complete versions of her life. This source is explored in detail in Chapter 2, but it is worth noting Isis is an Egyptian deity that is connected to the afterlife, mothering, and healing. She was the daughter of the earth god Geb and the sky goddess Nut, and her siblings were Osiris, Nephthys, and Set. She married her brother Osiris and together they began to rule Egypt. However, during their reign their brother Set became jealous and killed Osiris. Isis was able to bring her husband/brother back to life, revealing her ability as a magic healer and to resurrect others. This power set her apart from other Egyptian deities. Isis and Osiris gave birth to their son, Horus, who is believed to be connected to the pharaohs of Egypt. Egyptians thought that the pharaoh was a manifestation of Horus because he had parents that were so prominent in ancient Egyptian leadership. Therefore, Isis became known as the mother of all pharaohs and the ultimate example of an Egyptian mother. Today, she is still remembered even as Egypt has transitioned away from Pharaohs. She is seen as an important deity because of her ability to resurrect Osiris and be an exemplary mother.

The Virgin Mary's upbringing is much less mystical and dates to 1st century B.C. The Gospels introduce her as an ordinary Jewish woman who was engaged to a man named Joseph. She was visited by the angel Gabriel in the Annunciation and was told she would be the mother of

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[1] Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999, 155.

the coming Messiah. This worried her because she was a virgin and felt unprepared for God's call. However, she trusted in the Lord. During this time Emperor Augustus required everyone to return to their hometowns for the Roman census. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem. There she gave birth to Jesus and placed him a manger because there was not enough room in the inn for them. Her role as mother to Jesus expanded so that she is a caring and nurturing figure to all Christians.

Many pieces of art depicting Mary and Isis have been found which help us understand how these women were portrayed in the context of the Roman empire and beyond. For example, there are Roman coins from 133 A.D. that depict Isis and Horus and there is an icon of the Virgin Mary and Jesus from Rome dating to the fifth century. Artifacts like these assist historians in understanding how these two figures have been depicted in different media. It is essential to analyze art and artifacts from the Empire because they show how these women were seen by the public during this time period. Older primary sources can offer more insight into how the two women may have influenced one another as they started to be depicted more widely in a Roman context. These art and artifacts are the basis of understanding how the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary were connected to one another.

There are also numerous secondary sources that expand on Isis and Mary. Over time these sources have shifted and at times contradicted one another. These sources show how some historians believe the two may have influenced one another while others divide the trajectory of the two figures. First, it is important to look at Isis and Mary individually. *The Image of Mary According to the Evangelists* by Horacio Bojorge outlines how Mary is characterized in each of the four gospels. He sees that each of these books uniquely describes Mary, and they combine to form the one image of Mary that is familiar to Christianity. Ultimately, he explains, "There is one

Jesus Christ presented in four ways and one mystery of Mary presented in four ways."[2] This source is useful because it helps to explain the Christian perspective of Mary. By rooting his argument in the gospels Bojorge provides scriptural evidence of how Mary is described and depicted. However, the heavily Christian focus of Mary in this text separates her from outside influence, so it does not address her relationship with Isis and other divine figures. This source is useful for context but does not contribute to the debate around the relationship between Isis and Mary.

Another text that includes information about the Virgin Mary is *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* by Patrick J. Geary. This book has a much broader thesis about how a variety of women have been depicted and remembered. Geary provides insight into how the Virgin Mary played a role in early societies. This is a useful source because it places Mary into the complex context of ancient history when she was being depicted. Specifically, he states that "I have chosen to take specific moments and specific texts the illuminate key aspects of this complex problem, to look at how authors struggle with received traditions, cultural norms, and their own experiences to make sense of the contradictions and revelations in prototypical stories of women, origins, and power."[3] However, Geary does not include the Egyptian goddess Isis, whom I would argue should also be considered a "woman at the beginning." This text helps to emphasize the influence of women in history; however, it does not provide insight on how depictions of these women may have influenced one another.

The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary by George H. Tavard is another source that focuses primarily on Mary and her role in history. This text is centered on the variety of ways she has been

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[2] Horacio Bojorge, *The Image of Mary According to the Evangelists*, Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1978, ix.

[3] Patrick J. Geary, *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006, 5.

depicted in icons and texts and explains the impact that has had on modern culture. Tavard does not only focus on Mary's role in Christianity, rather he expands his research to female symbolism in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. He also approaches the topic from a scriptural approach because he uses scripture as his primary source of information. This study is useful because it attempts to place the Virgin Mary in a wider religious context. Although he does not specifically address how Mary may relate to Isis, Tavard does acknowledge that Mary is connected to many cultures. This contributes to the argument that these divine women were not depicted in a vacuum, but rather they each have a larger influence on society.

A useful text about Isis is *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* by R. T. Rundle Clark. He explains the complex myths surrounding ancient Egyptian culture and provides maps, artifacts, and ancient texts to supplement this information. Clark provides a clear explanation of the complex religious history of ancient Egypt. His work is useful in understanding the story of Isis and why she is an important figure. Also, Clark emphasizes that "In recent years psychologists and anthropologists have been showing with increasingly convincing evidence that the major psychic, religious and social problems are common to all mankind."[4] This adds to the argument that Egyptian culture interreacted with other cultures. Therefore, there may be stronger connections between Isis and other figures such as Mary. Although this text is primarily focused on explaining Egyptian myths and their meanings, Clark also provides an analysis of how many cultures are interconnected.

In addition to the many secondary sources about the Virgin Mary and the Egyptian goddess Isis as individuals, there are also sources focused on how the two may be connected. The main

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[4] R. T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt. Myth and Man*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, 11.

division between these sources is whether one figure influenced how the other is depicted in literature and art. To provide a brief overview of both of these arguments, Sabrina Higgins nicely explains the division in thought in an article entitled "Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactanss-Iconography." The primary focus of this article is to analyze depictions of Mary and Isis offering their breast in Egypt; however, there are other important themes she discusses including how scholars have discussed these depictions. This article is primarily useful because she presents both the Egyptologist argument, that there are connections between the two women, and the Mariologist argument, that there are no connections. She uses a variety of evidence to present both arguments as equals until she finally concludes that the answer is much more complex. She explains, "Thus, we have a clear borrowing of the image, but this does not warrant making generalizations for a deliberate cultic continuity."[5] Ultimately, she does not take the stance of either side, which contradicts both Egyptologist and Mariologist viewpoints, but this article explains the two rival theories that can assist modern historians in drawing more nuanced conclusions.

Another text that does not directly choose a side in the debate is an article by David L. Balch. He uses frescos in Greece and Rome to try and understand how Christianity and Egyptian myth may have come into contact with one another in the Greco-Roman world. Although most of the article is centered on comparing depictions of Christ crucified to the suffering of Io/Isis, Balch's approach and historical context provide a helpful analytical framework. The art and artifacts found depicting the Virgin Mary and the Egyptian goddess Isis are surrounded by other pieces of evidence that show the connection between Christianity and Egyptian culture. These two

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[5] Sabrina Higgins, "Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactans-Iconography," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4. (2012): 89.

cultures were connected in a variety of ways. By including context around the debate Balch helps to support the argument that depictions of Mary and Isis were connected and may have been influencing one another.

Susan Sorek's chapter in a book about the obelisks brought to Rome from Egypt entitled *The Emperors Needles* also takes a more nuanced position on the possible relationship between Mary and Isis. In this text, she emphasizes the connections between Egyptian and Roman cultures. She says, "Even before Octavian's victory at Actium, earlier contact with Egypt during the period of the republic had resulted in a migration of Egyptian religious ideologies, including the cult of Isis and the practice of astrology, which would later exert a profound effect on emperors and civilians alike."[6] Although she does not explicitly make the direct connection between Christianity and Egyptian myth, this work supports the idea that the two cultures were interacting with one another. The Romans began to emulate and assimilate many aspects of Egyptian culture, including numerous deities such as Isis. This strongly suggests that Mary and Isis were connected because their religions became closely tied in Ancient Rome.

One author that does choose a clear position in this debate is Robert A. Wortham. In his article, "Urban Networks, Deregulated Religious Markets, Cultural Continuity and the Diffusion of The Isis Cult," he focuses on the role urban networks played in transmitting cultures and he ultimately supports the conclusion that the two women are connected. This article is useful because it adds complexity to the debate surrounding Mary and Isis. It may not have been that Christians copied icons of Isis or vice versa, but rather the two became connected through people. He explains, "Findings indicate that the diffusion of the Isis cult and Christianity was somewhat

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[6] Susan Sorek, "Egyptian Influences in Rome," In *The Emperors' Needles: Egyptian Obelisks and Rome*, Liverpool University Press, 2010, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vj9pf.12, 33.

contemporaneous and that a deregulated Roman religious marketplace provided an opportunity for new religious movements to satisfy an unmet demand for religious products."[7] Wortham's argument shows that the Roman people were looking for a religious figure because their original pantheon left them wanting something more. Both Isis and Mary were intriguing to the Roman people because they satisfied their demands for a caring and motherly figure.

Stephen Benko places himself on the other side of the debate in his book *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*. This text is primarily focused on explaining Mariology which places Mary at the center of religious females. In comparing her to Isis and other pagan goddesses he writes, "Pagan and Christian concepts of the role of the "woman" here run side by side until the pagan concept converges with the Christian one and Mary emerges supreme."[8] This suggests that Mary was seen as superior to other divine women, and she was considered a unique entity. This text is important in understanding this argument because it uses evidence to support the idea that Mary and Isis may be similar, but ultimately not connected. Benko uses both Pagan and Christian lenses to support his argument which strengthens his evidence. It is essential to look at this debate from this perspective because he does not deny Isis as a divine mother but rather uplifts Mary above all others.

All of the evidence and arguments presented in these secondary sources are important to understanding the complex question about the relationship between the Virgin Mary and the Cult of Isis. It is important to note that none of the sources completely denies they are connected nor fully supports one has entirely influenced the other. The spectrum of interpretations and arguments

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[7] Robert A. Wortham, "Urban Networks, Deregulated Religious Markets, Cultural Continuity and the Diffusion of The Isis Cult," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 2, 2006, www.jstor.org/stable/23551759, 103.

[8] Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*, Numen Book Series, Studies in the History of Religions, V. 59. Leiden: Brill, 2004, 14.

is important. Historians continue to shift about the relationship between the two mothers as more artifacts are found and more research is done.

There are many challenges in trying to understand the relationship between Mary and Isis. The two figures rose to prominence in the Roman Empire during similar time periods, and they overlapped regionally. As ideas and cultures began to spread and disperse themselves in the Mediterranean and beyond boundaries became more fluid. It became less clear which ideas originated from which civilizations. By studying art and artifacts and analyzing various arguments, historians are slowly unwinding how these two figured are intertwined. Isis and Mary had a large impact regionally, religiously, and culturally, and they often worked tangentially. Examining the religious historical context of the Roman Empire reveals that the Roman people were looking for more and they found this in Isis and Mary. Both women played a motherly role for their children, Horus and Jesus respectively, and later the Roman people. This maternal role is emphasized in literature written at the time and artifacts from the Empire. Isis and Mary were deities that helped each other enter the role of mother for humanity and have a lasting impact on Roman culture.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Introduction:

To better understand the role the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary play in the context of the Roman Empire, it is important to explore culture and religion in this region during the period. The influence of the Roman Empire can be seen in modern politics, art, and customs. While the monotheistic Christian religion eventually became an important part of Roman culture, for much of Rome's history the state religion was polytheistic. There was a much larger emphasis on the Roman Emperors and ensuring that they were the most important figures. The rise of personal religion, sometimes referred to as mystery cults, in Rome began with worship of various deities, such as Isis. Rome adapted deities from numerous different cultures that the empire conquered. Some citizens became more connected to these deities because they provided them with hope for an afterlife and salvation. This led to tension and conflict between these religions and the emperors who wanted the Empire to remain at the center of citizen's lives. This tension is mirrored in the rise of Christianity. A few emperors supported it or simply tolerated its spread,

while others, such as Diocletian, attempted to bar it from the empire. This friction became more complex as Christianity began to gain prominence in the Empire. One of the emperors that was supportive of Rome's Christian population was Constantine. He converted to Christianity on his deathbed in 337 and was the first ruler to legalize the practices in the empire. This was a pivotal moment for religion in Rome and eventually, Christianity eclipsed pagan practices. During the Empire, Rome changed and adapted to many outside influences as they expanded. Christianity was transformed and began to have a larger influence in Greco-Roman culture. The developments during the Empire led to Isis prominence in cult worship followed by Mary's long-term influence on Christian society.

Historical Context of Religion in the Roman Empire

The Roman Empire transformed as it expanded both culturally and territorially. Today, it is known as one of the leading empires in history, but there is a large context to how this empire became so vast and powerful. The empire had a population of 60 million people across 5 million square kilometers during the 2nd century A.D. During this time, it included Hadrian's Wall in northern England, the coast of Northern Africa, modern day Turkey, and all of the Mediterranean Sea.[9] This meant that there were many different ethnic groups, religions, customs, and cultures all under the power of the Roman Emperor. Some areas remained under Roman rule until the fall of the Western part of the empire in 476 A.D., but for a majority of its height Rome was battling to ensure its borders remained intact. The history of the Empire is full of war and transformation. This was not a peaceful state.

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[9] Christopher Kelly, *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, https://doi-org.providence.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192803917.003.0001, 1.

Despite this constantly shifting area, the practices of the Roman state cult were a central part of society. Horace, a poet writing during the reign of the first emperor Augustus, wrote in one of his *Odes,* "Till, Roman, you restore each shrine," and also "The marriage-bed, the race, the home."[10] Horace urges Romans to remember what is at the center of Roman life. His ode "showed that the fabric of society, the constitution and role of the family, family tradition, the practice of traditional religion and a sense of straightforward morality were all important parts of what made up the *Respublica*."[11] The first emperor after the Republic, Augustus, continued this tradition by rebuilding most of the temples in the city and reviving old priesthoods. There were various gods that different people worshiped, and each group had their own relationships with the gods. Religion was not a uniform experience across the Republic or the early Empire. As Rome continued to expand religion also began to transform. There was a consistent focus on the worship of multiple gods; however, the identities and backgrounds of these gods shifted. New ideas from areas the empire expanded into became a part of the Roman pantheon.

Mystery cult worship was at the center of religion in the early empire because of the mix of cultures. As Rome became more expansionist, they adopted different cultural norms from the areas they invaded. Two of the most influential areas they expanded into included Greece and Northern Africa in 2nd century B.C. Deities from polytheistic religions in these regions gradually became more prominent in Rome and the Empire as a whole. One of the main differences between traditional Roman religion and these new influences is that "most of these were personal religions which stressed a relationship between a god and the individual devotee, and for this reason they

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[10] Horace. *The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace.* John Conington. trans. London. George Bell and Sons. 1882, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0025%3Abook%3D3%3Apoem%3D6, 3.6.

[11] David Shotter, *Augustus Caesar*, London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, 3.

attracted interest, particularly as the uncertainties of life seemed to increase."[12] As the Empire expanded people were looking for sources of comfort and many found this in these more personal religions. Roman imperialism drew people towards outside cultures.

Alongside the rise of Isis and Mary, worship was not only limited to the traditional Greco-Roman pantheon of gods. Another large influence in some parts of the Empire was the Roman Imperial Cult. The cult placed Roman emperors, mostly after they passed away, as a type of deity to be worshiped. This ruler worship also stemmed from outside cultures, particularly in the East.[13] Statues and edifices to these emperors were placed throughout the empire along with temples. The Imperial Cult became most popular in the city of Rome where there were temples dedicated to deified emperors like Augustus and Vespasian, and other members of the imperial family.[14] In Rome, religion and politics were closely tied together and citizens had the duty of worshiping the gods.[15] Religious worship is rooted in Roman culture during this time.

Isis's Rise to Prominence in the Empire:

After Augustus added Egypt as a Roman province in 30 B.C., the city of Rome began to emulate and assimilate many aspects of Egyptian culture, including numerous deities such as Isis.[16] There is archeological and other non-literary evidence that depicts Isis, along with other Egyptian gods and goddesses in Augustus' house and many other buildings in towns such as Pompeii and

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[12] David Shotter, *Augustus Caesar*, London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, 13.

[13] Henry Fairfield Burton, "The Worship of the Roman Emperors," *The Biblical World* 40, no. 2, 1912: 80–91, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3141986, 80.

[14] Henry Fairfield Burton, 85.

[15] Henry Fairfield Burton, 86.

[16] Sarolta A. Takács, "Cleopatra, Isis, and the Formation of Augustan Rome," In *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, edited by Miles Margaret M., 78-95, University of California Press, 2011, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnvmm.9, 82.

Herculaneum.[17] Examples include coins, statuettes, and mosaics. The Romans embraced many parts of Egyptian culture while simultaneously transforming aspects to better reflect Roman ideals. As they interacted with new cultures Roman citizens encountered ideas that intrigued them. There was a fusing of traditional Roman religion with these outside deities. The Roman cult of Isis was unique from the original Egyptian cult of Isis because it mixed Egyptian and Greek traditions and Isis was depicted in a more Roman way.[18] Statues of Isis began to resemble statues of emperors and other important Roman figures, rather than pharaohs and Egyptian gods and goddesses. Augustus created a mixing of cultures that would continue throughout the empire.

Most of Isis's history in the empire is positive; however there were a few instances where there were challenges. While Augustus welcomed elements of Egyptian culture into Rome, according to Dio, he did not allow for Egyptian religious worship inside the pomerium, the sacred boundary of Rome.[19] Eric Orlin argues that this provision was not meant as a hostile action against Egyptian cults, but rather a distinction between Roman and non-Roman cults inside the city of Rome. In fact, Augustus helped restore Egyptian shrines outside of the pomerium.[20] Augustus' main goal was to maintain aspects of Roman culture. Similarly, Emperor Tiberius who reigned from 14-37 A.D., also persecuted Isis worshipers because he wanted to purify the Empire from outside cultures. His reaction to the cult is shown in, "his destruction of the temple of Isis [in

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[17] David L. Balch, "The Suffering of Isis/Io and Paul's Portrait of Christ Crucified (Gal. 3:1): Frescoes in Pompeian and Roman Houses and in the Temple of Isis in Pompeii," *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 1 2003: 24-55, www.jstor.org/stable/1205435, 26.

[18] Susan Sorek, "Egyptian Influences in Rome," In *The Emperors' Needles: Egyptian Obelisks and Rome*, 37-44, Liverpool University Press, 2010, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vj9pf.12, 37.

[19] Cassius Dio Cocceianus, Earnest Cary, Herbert Baldwin Foster, & William Heinemann, *Dio's Roman History*, Harvard University Press. London; New York, 1914, 53.2.4.

[20] Eric M. Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults: Redrawing the Boundaries of Romanness," *The American Journal of Philology* 129, no. 2 2008: 231–53, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27566703.

Rome] in A.D. 19, his expulsion of the Jews, his attitude to the Druids, and his driving out Chaldaean astrologers early in his reign."[21] Also, he deported thousands of Isis worshippers from Rome.[22] Historians have noted, "There is little doubt that Tiberius intended to totally purge Rome of the foreign goddess."[23] Some later emperors would diverge from Tiberius's thoughts about outside cultures. Aside from Emperor Tiberius there was very little push back surrounding the rise of cult worship of Isis.

Emperor Caligula who reigned from 37 to 41 A.D. contrasted his predecessor. Although he is commonly known as a tyrant, he constructed the *Iseum Campensis,* the new Temple of Isis in Rome. It was located in the Campus Martius and helped the cult gain popularity. This temple stood alongside many other buildings dedicated to worship of deities from outside cultures. Rome was the center of the Empire and was heavily influenced by territories they had expanded into. However, in 80 A.D. the *Iseum Campensis* burned in the great fire of Titus.[24] Soon after Emperor Domitian, 81 to 96 A.D., rebuilt a double temple for Isis and Serapis, and later Emperor Alexander Severus would add further details. As the Empire continued to grow, worship of Isis expanded outside of Rome. Temples to Isis could be found throughout the entire empire and "the cult is

[21] H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*. London: Routledge, 1982, 359.

[22] Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, NY: Pantheon Books. 1995, 224. For more information about persecutions see: Tacitus, Ann. 2.85.4-5; Suet. Tib. 36.1; Josephus, AJ 18.63f.; Dio Cassius 57.18.5a; Philo, Leg. 159-61. Cf. also Philo, In Flacc. 1. I d.

[23] D.J. Merced-Ownbey, "Roman Isis and the Pendulum of Tolerance in the Empire," Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal, 9(1), 2008, 41.

[24] Cassius Dio Cocceianus, Earnest Cary, Herbert Baldwin Foster, & William Heinemann, *Dio's Roman History*, Harvard University Press. London; New York, 1914, 66.24.2.

believed to have particularly appealed to women and was spread by merchants, sailors and soldiers."[25]

At the center of Isis's rise to prominence is the diffusion of temple worship. Historians have found that "over 640 inscriptions have been linked to this period [second century B.C. through the second century A.D.], and it appears that at least 35 new sanctuaries were constructed."[26] One of these temples is found in Pompeii which is only about 250 kilometers south of the center of the empire in Rome. This temple shows how various groups in Roman towns practiced cult worship to various gods and goddesses. The myth of Isis gave hope to people of lower classes because there could be life beyond death.[27] If Isis was able to help Osiris, she was able to help Romans as well. Isis was a source of comfort to people in towns that may have felt separated from the vastness of the Empire. Cult worship of Isis was a personal religion that allowed people to have a connection to deities.

Mary's Rise to Prominence in the Empire:

In many ways Isis and Egyptian culture fit into the pantheon of Roman religion. The Virgin Mary and Christianity did not have the same public rise to prominence in the Roman empire. For much of early Roman history, "the Christian religion, then only one of many oriental resurrection cults in the Roman Empire, left no material traces, and the Christians produced no identifiable artifacts nor developed a distinctive iconography or art."[28] Most Christians met in homes and were

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[25] Robert A. Wortham, "Urban Networks, Deregulated Religious Markets, Cultural Continuity and the Diffusion of The Isis Cult," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 2, 2006, www.jstor.org/stable/23551759, 104.

[26] Robert A. Wortham, 103.

[27] Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007, 204.

[28] Robin Margaret Jensen and Mark D Ellison, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, Routledge Handbooks, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018, 21.

not as public as Isis followers. Most early Christian art was commissioned by individuals, rather than for use at larger sites.[29] There were no large temples or churches dedicated to Christian worship in the early Empire. One piece of evidence historians have are the Santa Priscilla Catacombs in Rome. These catacombs are an ancient Christian burial site with walls decorated with many frescos. One of these is believed in be the first depiction of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus from the 3rd century.[30] These catacombs reveal that Christianity was practiced in the Empire, but most of the early history of the Church is lacking.

Christianity faced persecution throughout the empire from various emperors. These persecutions were not constant throughout time or space but did impact Christian populations. One of the earliest examples of persecutions was during the Great Fire of Rome in 64 A.D. under Emperor Nero. The fire devastated the Roman economy and people. In response to a rumor that Nero set the fire himself, he blamed the fire on the Christians. The late first century A.D. historian, Tacitus wrote, "Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace."[31] Tacitus reports the rumor that Nero started the fire and reveals that most people felt pity for the Christians. They believed it was unjust for one group to be blamed and punished in such a ruthless way for a tragedy that devastated the entire city. Although the initial response of

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[29] André Grabar, *Early Christian Art: From the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius*, The Arts of Mankind, V. 9. New York: Odyssey Press, 1969, 9.

[30] André Grabar, 9.

[31] Tacitus, *Works of Tacitus*. Alfred John Church. William Jackson Brodribb. Sara Bryant, edited for Perseus. New York: Random House, Inc. Random House, Inc. reprinted 1942, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook%3D15%3Achapter%3D44, 15.44.

the general public did not mirror that of the emperor, by blaming the Christians he set a precedent of persecuting this group.

An illuminating document about the sporadic nature of Christian persecution is Pliny the Younger's letter to the Emperor Trajan from around 112 AD, which explains how different regions were responding to early Christian communities. Pliny the Younger was the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus, and he contacted the emperor for advice on how to manage this religious group. He explains, "I ask them whether they are Christians, if they say "Yes," then I repeat the question the second time, and also a third — warning them of the penalties involved; and if they persist, I order them away to prison."[32] Pliny feels obligated to respond to the accusations from the community and he looks to the Emperor for support. Pliny also details the Christian practices he was informed of,

> On a fixed day they used to meet before dawn and recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god. So far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, they swore to keep from theft, robbery, adultery, breach of faith, and not to deny any trust money deposited with them when called upon to deliver it. This ceremony over, they used to depart and meet again to take food — but it was of no special character, and entirely harmless.[33]

Pliny the Younger is seeking advice from Emperor Trajan because he is confused of how to punish the group that is participating in these actions. This letter reveals some of the practices of early Christians, such as congregating together and singing hymns. Ultimately Emperor Trajan responds, "The Christians are not to be hunted out. If brought before you, and the offense is proved, they are to be punished, but with this reservation — if any one denies he is a Christian, and makes it clear he is not, by offering prayer to our gods, then he is to be pardoned on his recantation, no

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[32]Pliny *Letters 10.96-97*, Internet History Sourcebooks Project and W. S. Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History, 1912-3.

[33] Pliny *Letters 10.96-97*.

matter how suspicious his past."[34] This letter shows that not every Christian was persecuted but they were given the chance to show their allegiance to be saved. The Roman State cult was open to worship of other deities, including Isis, but were less tolerant when these practices excluded other deities. Christianity threatened these polytheistic rituals so they often faced consequences.

Diocletian is the first Roman emperor to issue an empire-wide edict to persecute Christians. He reigned from 284 to 305 and transformed the role of emperor. He began the tetrarchy and ruled with three others, but he was at the center of persecutions. The *Church Histories* explain,

> This was the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian in Dystrus (which the Romans call March), when the feast of the Saviour's passion was near at hand, and royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches Should be razed to the ground, the Scriptures destroyed by fire, those who held positions of honor degraded, and the household servants, if they persisted in the Christian profession, be deprived of their liberty.[35]

This was an empire-wide attack on Christians. Another historian connected to the emperors, In 313/314 A.D. Lactantius wrote, "Next day an edict was published, depriving the Christians of all honours and dignities; ordaining also that, without any distinction of rank or degree, they should be subjected to tortures, and that every suit at law should be received against them."[36] Diocletian was against monotheistic religion in the Empire and was committed to destroying Christians and their establishments. His reign was detrimental to this population.

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[34] Pliny *Letters 10.96-97*.

[35] Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Vol 1-2. Eusebius of Caesarea, Kirsopp Lake. J.E.L. Oulton. H.J. Lawlor. William Heinemann; G.P. Putnam's Press; Harvard University Press. London; New York; Cambridge, Mass, 1926-1932, 2.23.20.

[36] Lactantius, *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died,* J. Vanderspoel, Department of Greek, Latin and Ancient History, University of Calgary, https://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/lactant/lactperf.html, 13.

In contrast, the Emperor Constantine, who reigned from 306 to 337 A.D. and transformed the role of Christianity in the Empire. Constantine felt a deep connection to Christianity which influenced many of his actions. For example, Lactanius describes, "Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of CHRIST."[37] Upon his deathbed he converted Christianity which led to the empire establishing it as the primary religion. While polytheistic Roman State cults remained for many more years, Christianity had transformed from a persecuted group incompatible with cultural norms, to the official religion of the Empire.

Conclusion:

Both the cult of Isis and Christianity with Mary as a prominent figure rose to prominence in the empire from the first century A.D. Isis was adapted to fit Greco-Roman cultural norms while Mary challenged this status quo. As Rome expanded, the people living within the bounds of the empire were introduced to many different cultural practices. A majority of these, such as the cult of Isis, easily fit into the polytheistic Roman state cult. Roman citizens were able to connect with these deities while continuing to attend religious festivals and sacrifices for other gods and goddesses. Christianity had a more complicated relationship with Roman religion. Because Christianity was not compatible with Roman religious norms such as sacrifice and worship of multiple deities, Christians faced persecution at times. The Virgin Mary was not always a publicly beloved figure in Rome. However, the images of these mothers were able to endure the challenges

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[37] Lactantius, 44.

they faced as they became prominent in the Empire. Isis and Mary became rooted in Roman history and culture.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE OF ISIS AND MARY

Introduction:

There are numerous pieces of literature that discuss the mystical natures of the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary. This chapter introduces how classical literature and religious texts have described these two deities and how these women influenced Roman culture. Two of the most important surviving pieces of Ancient Roman literature that depict Isis are *The Metamorphoses* of Apuleius and *De Iside et Osiride* by Plutarch. These texts largely shaped how Greco-Romans viewed Isis and they play a significant role in how she became an influential piece of Roman imperial culture. By describing Isis as an asset to humanity with mystical features, these texts reveal how Isis was seen and the role the cult of Isis played in the Roman world. The root of Christianity, on the other hand, is the Holy Bible, and while a majority of the books do not mention the Virgin Mary by name, she is a central character throughout the New Testament. The way that

she is described and the role she plays in this literature help to explain why Mary has a central place in Christianity. In the Gospels Mary is sparsely mentioned. However, in the scenes where she is included, she is highlighted as both a mother to Christ and all Christians. Similarly, the Book of Revelation specifically reveals how Mary has a mystical aura and helps all of humanity. Comparing Apuleius and Plutarch's descriptions of Isis and the Bible's depiction of the Virgin Mary suggests that these women share many similarities in how they were presented. The language used reveals that these two women influenced one another and Roman society. Other important writings about Isis and Mary are the hymns connected to each of them. Hymns are odes to religious figures that show their connection to humanity. Historians have found many hymns on temples in the Roman Empire describing Isis. These religious texts show that Isis had begun to influence cultures beyond Egypt and that Isis had become a central figure in these societies. In direct comparison there are also many hymns connected to Mary. One of these hymns is Mary's Magnificat found in the Gospel of Luke. Both women's hymns, in tandem, reveal that these deities greatly impacted humanity and had a lasting effect on religion in Rome. The literature found depicting Isis and Mary reveal both their divinity and humanity and how these two women are remembered in Roman imperial history today.

Although literacy rates were not very high during the early empire, these sources are evidence that these two women were depicted in similar manners. These stories were told in oral traditions and were a way for the general public to interact with both Isis and Mary, even if it was not through reading it directly. A majority of these texts and inscriptions would have been circulated throughout the empire through word of mouth. The divine and human natures of these two mothers were made clear to Roman citizens of varying literacy rates and social class.

Isis - *The Metamorphoses* of Apuleius:

The Metamorphoses of Apuleius*,* also known colloquially as *The Golden Ass,* is a second century ancient Roman novel. For context, it is set in the Roman provinces of Achaea and Macedonia in Greece. The story originates from a longish short story in Greek.[38] In the story the main character, Lucius, is cursed because he tries to use magic. He was transformed from a human being into a donkey. The novel tells the tale of him trying to break this curse, and in the end, he is only able to do this with the help of a goddess, Isis. This final chapter reveals how some Romans viewed Isis as a protector of the Roman people.

In the final chapter, when Lucius meets Isis, his descriptions of her are extremely vivid. He begins with,

> I was convinced that this first-ranked goddess evinced especial majesty and power: human affairs were altogether governed by her providence—and not only pastoral and feral beings but even lifeless things were quickened by the sovereign favor of this deity with her bright might. All bodies in the earth, sky, and sea grew in accordance with her additions and then were diminished in deference to her losses.[39]

This description suggests that Apuleius wanted Romans to view Isis as a central figure in the universe. Lucius's emphasis on *all* bodies shows that Isis was not only for one culture, but it was also for all life and lifeless things. The Romans had thus begun to transform Isis from an Egyptian goddess to their own figure. By extending her reign and power Rome defined her in their terms.

Apuleius also uses many astronomical and mystical terms to describe Isis in this final chapter. In one section he explains, "You brighten every citadel with your womanly radiance, nourishing the lush-growing seeds with your moist flames and dispensing changing light as the

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[38] Fergus Millar, "The World of the Golden Ass," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 71, 1981, 63.

[39] Apuleius, and Jack Lindsay, *The Golden Ass* 1St Midland Book ed. A Midland Book, Mb36. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1962, 248.

Sun moves on his circling course."[40] Later, as Lucius describes the goddess he says, "On the embroidered perimeter of the robe and over the whole span of it were scattered glittering stars, and in the midst of them a mid-month moon breathed out blazing flames."[41] The language that he uses gives Isis a mystical aura in this text. She is seen as being all powerful and other-worldly. Isis is not only meant to assist the people in this world, but rather the world as a whole. This attests to how expansive Romans viewed the influence of their deities.

In the scene where Isis assists Lucius by lifting his curse, their interaction offers insight into the relationship Romans had with their gods and goddesses. Apuleius has Isis say to Lucius, "I have taken pity on your wretched fate and am here, kind and propitious, to assist you. Let go your weeping, leave off your lamentations, banish your mourning. Already, through my beneficent care, the day of your salvation is breaking. So therefore turn your painstaking attention to these commands I give you."[42] Isis aids humanity and cares for them. She guides Lucius and leads him towards salvation. This relationship shows that deities were believed to have personal connections with humans. And while this is a work of fiction, the events that take place reveal how Romans trusted Isis and other gods and goddesses.

There are also a few moments in the novel that point to the growing relationship between Roman and Egyptian culture. When comparing the novel to the life of Apuleius, historian Fergus Millar argues that "in the Isis scene, and the subsequent conversion, Apuleius may-as is generally assumed-be importing into the novel a profound personal experience; and he may even at the end intend to blur the distinction between himself as author, from the African city of Madauros, and

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[40] Apuleius, and Jack Lindsay, 249.

[41] Apuleius, and Jack Lindsay, 250.

[42] Apuleius, and Jack Lindsay, 252.

Lucius the hero and narrator:"[43] By connecting this story to his own life in the Roman Empire, Apuleius emphasizes that Isis transformed into an important figure in the Empire. She influences his individual life and the greater culture as she enters literature and is described as an aid to Roman society.

Isis - Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*:

There were many authors that included Isis in their literature. In addition to Apuleius, Plutarch also included non-Greco-Roman gods in his work. Both authors helped to create connections between Egyptian and Roman imperial culture. Plutarch was a Greek philosopher and biographer well known for his biographies of numerous Greek and Roman figures. One of his lesser known pieces, entitled *De Iside et Osiride* is a retelling of the Isis and Osiris myth. Although it was originally written in Greek around A.D. 118, it circulated widely throughout the Roman Empire.[44] Plutarch's text offers insight into how outside cultures were beginning to adapt Egyptian religions. Although many of the details are similar to how the Egyptians described Isis, it is important to note how Plutarch uses Greece and Rome to contextualize the goddess. This retelling of the Isis and Osiris myth reveals how Greco-Roman culture viewed Isis.

Plutarch begins his piece by adding a note about the meaning of these myths because he wrote from a non-Egyptian perspective. He is careful to write, "Therefore, Clea, whenever you hear the traditional tales which the Egyptians tell about the gods, their wanderings, dismemberments, and many experiences of this sort, you must remember what has been already said, and you must not think that any of these tales actually happened in the manner in which they

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[43] Fergus Millar, 64.

[44] Richard Alston, "Conquest By Text: Juvenal and Plutarch on Egypt," Leicester University Archaeology Monographs; Vol. 3, University of Leicester, 1996, 100.

are related."[45] While a myth is meant to be fictitious it is interesting that even before beginning the story, he adds this note that his writing is not meant to be taken literally. He begins by qualifying that these *tales* are not as they seem and rather, they need to be interpretated. Specifically, Richard Alston notes, "By interpreting the myth in a Greek philosophical context, Plutarch divorces the story from its Egyptian origins and from the native interpretative context, whatever that was. The myth becomes part of universal - that is, Greek - knowledge."[46] Plutarch's comment takes away from the original roots of this myth as he transforms it into a Greco-Roman tale.

However, as Plutarch describes Isis in the myth, specifically after the death of Osiris, it becomes clear that he attempts to hold on to some parts of Egyptian culture in relation to the myth. In one part he explains, "The traditional result of Osiris's dismemberment is that there are many so-called tombs of Osiris in Egypt; for Isis held a funeral for each part when she had found it."[47] His attempt to connect some of the story to Egypt acknowledges the origins of the myth. Later, he says,

> And thus among the Egyptians such men say that Osiris is the Nile consorting with the Earth, which is Isis, and that the sea is Typhon into which the Nile discharges its waters and is lost to view and dissipated, save for that part which the earth takes up and absorbs and thereby becomes fertilized.[48]

This reemphasizes that Isis is connected to both Greco-Roman and Egyptian cultures and had not yet been fully Romanized. She is a deity in both contexts and not bound by borders. Although Isis has different meanings for Egypt and the Roman Empires, she is a universal figure.

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[45] Plutarch, *Moralia, Volume V: Isis and Osiris,* Translated by Frank Cole Babbitt. Loeb Classical Library 306, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936, 355.B.

[46] Richard Alston, 104.

[47] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 358.A.

[48] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 363.E.

Similar to other texts about the goddess, Plutarch also uses mystical language to describe her. Near the end of his telling of the myth he describes how Isis is viewed by humanity. The first point he makes is that Osiris is seen as the moon and Isis is only associated with him.[49] However, then he adds that others see Isis as the moon and therefore "in her dark garments are shown the concealments and the obscurations in which she in her yearning pursues the Sun. For this reason, also they call upon the Moon in love affairs, and Eudoxus asserts that Isis is a deity who presides over love affairs."[50] Both of these theories put Isis as a part of astronomy and connect her to something beyond Earth. She is seen as mystical and a symbol for something else. Plutarch concludes this debate about Isis by explaining,

> To put the matter briefly, it is not right to believe that water or the sun or the earth or the sky is Osiris or Isis; or again that fire or drought or the sea is Typhon, but simply if we attribute to Typhon whatever there is in these that is immoderate and disordered by reason of excesses or defects; and if we revere and honour what is orderly and good and beneficial as the work of Isis and as the image and reflection and reason of Osiris, we shall not be wrong.[51]

By drawing his own conclusions Plutarch is translating the myth into his own cultural context. He interprets it in the way he understands her rather than what she was originally meant to symbolize. Plutarch's work helps reveal how Isis was viewed, but it is essential to critically read through his text.

Historians have connected Plutarch's writings to the assimilation of other cultures' ideas. This is related to how the Roman Empire conquered many surrounding territories and adapted their

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[49] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 368.C.

[50] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 372. E.

[51] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 377:A.

religions and cultures. Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* is an example of this. Historian Richard

Alston explains,

> This allows Plutarch to invest the myth with a whole series of new and different meanings.
> By universalizing the myth, the context and, therefore the meaning of the myth is changed.
> In Plutarch's version, the myth is not the cultural possession of the Egyptians. It is, like so
> many other cultural artefacts of the imperial period, subject to the *interpretatio Graeca,*
> and in such an interpretation ceases to be Egyptian and becomes Greek.[52]

Isis was no longer seen as only an Egyptian figure, but rather a central figure in the Greco-Roman

world. Plutarch's writing expanded the influence of Isis and in some ways transformed her into a

universal deity.

Mary - The Gospels:

Religious texts are further evidence of how Isis and Mary are depicted. Although Plutarch

did not practice Egyptian cult worship, he expanded on the original Isis and Osiris myth. In

comparison, the Gospels found in the Christian Bible expand on Christian knowledge of religious

figures such as Mary. She is a central figure in Christianity, yet she is rarely mentioned in the

Gospels. John only mentions her by "Her mother" and Mark never mentions her at all. This may

be because the primary focus of these books is the life of Jesus. However, it is important to

understand how Matthew, Luke, and John describe Mary's role in the life of Jesus. In many scenes,

Mary has a divine aura around her, specifically in the description of her call to be Jesus' mother

(Luke 1:34-35). Simultaneously, in the moments where she is present, primarily at the birth of

Jesus and the wedding of Cana, she often exemplifies the role of a human being. Her reaction to

the angel Gabriel and the miracles her son performs show her humanity which is shared with all

of her followers and connects her to them.

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[52] Richard Alston, 104.

In the Gospel of Matthew Mary is only mentioned once. This is the longest Gospel and is full of many important details not found in other gospels, including the genealogy of Jesus and numerous parables. However, Mary is nearly omitted. He writes, "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Mathew 1:18). This is an important moment in the story of Christ. One of the distinct characteristics of his birth is that Mary is a virgin. Matthew may have included this detail because it adds to the divinity surrounding Mary. She had been an ordinary woman before becoming the mother of Jesus, but with the grace of God she became a mother to all Christians.

In contrast to the other Gospels, Luke includes Mary throughout his Gospel. Luke tells the full story of Jesus's birth and Mary is a central figure in these moments. To begin with, "The virgin's name was Mary. And he [the angel Gabriel] came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:27-30). These verses show both Mary's divinity and her humanity. She is called to as the *favored one* and is visited by one of the angels. Yet in this moment she must also be reminded not to be afraid. In reading these verses from Luke Christians are reminded that she was an ordinary woman and God found favor in her. God's actions that are shown here gives hope for all of humanity.

Luke continues this story by including Mary's response. The Gospel says, "Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:34-35). She responds with skepticism and her reaction mirrors how most human beings would have reacted in this moment. Her humanity is

present in this moment and throughout her life. However, what sets Mary apart from human beings is her response to this call, "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'" (Luke 1:38). Mary accepts this call with her whole heart. She no longer questions or refutes the angel but accepts this position. She becomes the *servant of the Lord* and the example for humanity. When the Lord calls, Christians are encouraged to emulate Mary and accept this call. This verse is a central pilar of what it means to be a Christian.

Another central moment in Luke's Gospel is when Elizabeth and Mary, both mothers that are expecting sons, meet to discuss their circumstances. Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist, who is also an important Christian figure. He is seen as a forerunner to Jesus and is most well-known for baptizing him. In Mary and Elizabeth's conversation Luke's Gospel reads, "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:41-42). These words are seen in the Hail Mary prayer in the line, "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." Elizabeth's words became a central part of a Catholic prayer to Mary. These words remind Christians that Mary is blessed along with Jesus. She shares in his divinity. Because Mary is blessed then all of humanity shares in her divinity.

The birth of Jesus is one of the central pieces of the Gospels. Luke writes, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). This is the ultimate sign of Mary and Jesus' humanity. The son of God was not born in royal or extraordinary circumstances, but rather in a manger. Jesus is both God and man, and this moment shows his humanity. And as shepherds and wise men begin to visit Christ, Mary holds onto this humanity. The Gospel says, "But Mary

treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Mary appreciates these moments as many human beings would. She remains humble and continues to trust in God's plan.

The final scene in the Gospel of Luke that includes Mary is when Joseph and Mary see Jesus in the temple. At this point Jesus is a young adult and has begun to follow God's call. Luke explains,

> "When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:48-49).

Mary's reaction in these verses emulates how many mothers would react to their son missing. She questions him even though he is the son of God. Luke continues, "Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51). This is one of the moments where Mary's humanity is present. She treasures being his mother and caring for him. This reaction highlights Mary role as the mother of Jesus and all of humanity in the Christian faith.

The Gospel of John includes a few more moments on Mary. Although John does not include the story of Jesus' birth, he does include the wedding of Cana. This story is only found in the Gospel of John and shows how Mary is a role model to all Christians. At this wedding Mary and Jesus notice that they have run out of wine. In response, "When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you'" (John 2:3-5). This conversation between Mary and Jesus shows how she trusts her son. This is the trust that all Christians are meant to have in Jesus. In the end of the story Jesus does make more wine and the wedding continues. This small moment between Mary and her son shows that her trust in God's plan is an example to all followers.

Another scene in John's Gospel that Mary plays a role in is Jesus' crucifixion. Mary was present at this event and in his last moments Jesus speaks to her. The Gospel of John explains, "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (John 19:26-27). This is one of the most difficult moments of the Bible. These verses reveal the love between mother and son that can be emulated in human relationships. Jesus trusts his mother to care for a disciple and all his disciples, and by extension all of humanity. In these final moments Mary becomes the mother of all of humanity. Mary is transformed from an ordinary virgin woman to a mother and model for Christians.

These scenes from three of the four Gospels show the central role Mary has in Christianity. Even though the moments she is mentioned are few, these verses are important to revealing her divinity and humanity. God's call to Mary through the angel Gabriel shows how she was specifically chosen for this role. She is set apart from other human beings. She shares in Jesus' divinity as she mothers him. Simultaneously, her reactions to these moments of God's plan emphasize that Mary was an ordinary virgin woman before becoming the mother of Jesus. And throughout this mothering of Jesus, she holds onto her humanity. She continues to care for Jesus and later care for the other disciples. In these moments of scripture Mary is revealed to be chosen by God and by the people of God. Similar to Isis, humanity is encouraged to emulate her. Mary's response to God's call and trust in Jesus is at the center of Christian life.

Mary - The Book of Revelation:

The Gospels describe both the life of Jesus and those that surrounded him, including Mary. They are a central part of the Christian Bible. In addition, the Book of Revelation reveals more information about Mary's role in Christianity. The final book of the Christian Bible is Revelation,

which is meant to tell of the Second Coming of Jesus. In the Book of Revelation there are numerous prophetic visions that are meant to describe the apocryphon which in the Christian tradition is the second coming of Jesus Christ. In the twelfth chapter one of these visions likely describes the Virgin Mary. It says, "A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1). Although Mary is not directly named in this verse, the author clearly describes an important woman in Christian teaching. Specifically, scholars suggest that "Patristic and medieval Christian interpreters most often took her to be Mary, or sometimes the church."[53] This image of a woman already in heaven is seen as a guide to other Christians. The Virgin Mary is leading the way and from this image she encompasses all of humanity, not only which is on Earth. Her influence is seen even among the vast universes.

The book of Revelation continues to describe this woman. Several verses later the text says, "And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (Revelation 12:5). This son is most likely Jesus who is meant to lead all of humanity. Mary is connected to Jesus in this scene and throughout the gospels, which reveals that their divinity is connected. This verse reaffirms that Mary is the mother of Jesus and by extension all of humanity. As Jesus rules, Mary is there to guide. This final chapter of the Bible emphasizes that Mary is not only important in the life of Christ, but also the future of Christians.

Hymns of Isis:

Information about how figures, such as Mary and Isis, are viewed is revealed in religious texts. In tandem, the Gospels and the Book of Revelation show features of Mary that connect her

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[53] Michael D Coogan, Marc Z Brettler, and Carol A Newsom. *New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford: New York, 2010, 2168, 12.1-17.

to Christians and humanity. In a similar way hymns and songs provide additional details about deities. Although ancient Egyptian myth does not have a singular religious text, there are many hymns that have been written about Egyptian gods and goddesses. The primary purpose of these hymns was to list the accomplishments of these deities. Inscribed on the gates of the Temple of Isis at Narmouthis, which is located in modern-day Egypt, are several hymns that describe Isis. These four hymns were inscribed around 96 B.C. by Isidorus of the Fayum.[54] Three of them are written to Isis and the final praises the founder of the temple. [55] They were written in Greek which shows how the Greco-Roman world had begun to recognize Isis as a deity. Although not much is known about this temple, it was in Egypt, but the architecture was very Greco-Roman which is further evidence that Isis had become a more universal deity.

The first hymn is focused on listing the achievements of Isis. The first set of lines relates to her miracles and how she cares for people that are devoted to her.[56] Specifically, it is inscribed, "All mortals who live on the boundless earth, /Thracians, Greeks and barbarians, /Express your fair name, a name greatly honoured among all, but/Each speaks in his own language, in his own land."[57] These lines make direct references to many other cultures including Greeks and Syrians revealing how wide-spread Isis had become. She had transformed from an Egyptian deity to being remembered as someone honored by *all* mortals. The note about different languages also shows that cultures were adopting her and making her a part of their customs and traditions. Although it

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[54] Vera Frederika Vanderlip, *The Four Greek Hymns of Isidorus and the Cult of Isis*, American Studies in Papyrology, V. 12. Toronto: A.M. Hakkert, 1972, 4.

[55] Vera Frederika Vanderlip.

[56] Vera Frederika Vanderlip, Hymn 1.

[57] Vera Frederika Vanderlip, Hymn 1.

is inscribed on a temple in Egypt, the text emphasizes how she is not restricted to Egyptians alone. She had become an *honored* figure throughout the Mediterranean.

Another hymn inscribed on this temple also emphasizes Isis's universality. This hymn expands farther than the Mediterranean and includes Asia and Europe. One section reads,

> Hear me, Good Fortune, when I pray to you, Lady,/whether you have journeyed into Libya or to the south wind,/or whether you are dwelling in the outermost regions of the north wind ever sweetly blowing,/or whether you dwell in the blasts of the east wind where are the risings of the sun,/or whether you have gone to Olympos where the Olympian gods dwell,/or whether you are in heaven above, a judge with the immortal gods,/or whether having mounted the chariot of the swift-driving sun,/you are directing the world of men, looking down on the manifold/deeds of the wicked and gazing down on those of the just.[58]

By describing Isis as traveling throughout the world we are meant to understand how wide-spread and important this deity is. She is not only relevant in Egypt, where this hymn is inscribed, but across the Greco-Roman Empire and the world. It encourages all people to praise her where they are because she is believed to be everywhere. Both of these hymns show how Isis had expanded into a deity for mankind.

Hymn/Song of Mary:

There are also numerous hymns that connect to the Virgin Mary. One of the most well-known ones is found in the Gospel of Luke. These verses are often labeled as the Song of Mary or Mary's Magnificat. Before these verses, Mary visits Elizabeth and they discuss their expected sons, Jesus and John the Baptist. Mary is a little worried about being the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth encourages her to trust in God. Mary's response to Elizabeth is seen in the Magnificat. These verses are now seen as one of Mary's hymns and they emphasize her trust in God. They reaffirm how Mary is seen as a model of faith for all Christians.

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[58] Vera Frederika Vanderlip, Hymn 3.

The song begins with Mary's devotion to God. It says, "And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:46-49). This passage reveals Mary's humanity in that it describes how she feels on the verge of Jesus's birth. However, she finds comfort in God and trust in Him. She emphasizes how her lowliness has transformed into blessedness. God has found favor in Mary, and He does that for all of His servants. This hymn is a guide for all of humanity to trust in God.

The hymn continues with further praise of God. Mary lists what God has done and emphasizes why humanity should trust in God. The Gospel says,

> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:50-55)

These verses are meaningful because they show all that God has done. Mary is praising Him and encouraging humanity to do the same. She highlights how God lifts up those who are struggling and helps those that are devoted to Him. In this hymn Mary shares that God's mercy is for all. The Magnificat inspires Christians to trust in God in a similar way to how Mary was able to before the birth of Jesus. This hymn is a source of comfort for Mary and all Christians.

Comparing Isis and Mary:

The hymns about Isis and Mary provide further evidence for how they shaped Roman imperial culture. The language used in each of these songs shows the devoutness of their followers and their mystical auras. In compiling some key pieces of the literature surrounding these two women there are connections that can be made about how Isis and Mary are similar based on the

language that is used to describe them. Specifically, when describing Mary in the Book of Revelation one historian explains, "Elements of her description are characteristic of several ancient goddesses."[59] Directly comparing the texts presented in this chapter reveals how Isis and Mary were connected.

To begin, the role Isis and Mary play in *The Metamorphoses* of Apuleius and the Gospels, respectively, are similar. In the final chapter of the book describing Isis, she is seen as being a source of comfort to all of humanity as she assists Lucius. This Egyptian deity thus became a universal figure. In a similar manner, Mary is seen as helping all of humanity in the Gospels. As she becomes the mother of Jesus she acts as a model for all Christians to follow. Her devotion and trust to God is meant to be emulated by humanity and she also is seen as a universal figure for all. Although one of these texts is a work of fiction and the other is considered sacred scripture by Christians, both emphasize how these two women are connected to humanity. Isis and Mary are both seen as influential figures who are not confined to a singular group of people.

There are also connections that can be made between their depictions in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* and the Book of Revelation. The language used to describe Isis and Mary has a mystical aura that reveals their roles as a goddess and a divine Christian woman respectively. In comparison to the previous texts, this mystical language sets them apart from humanity. Both Plutarch and the author of Revelation also connect these women to astronomical elements such as the sun and the moon. This connection creates a wider range of influence for both figures; they are not only relevant to their respective religions, but they are also a part of the universe as a whole. Isis and Mary's influence expands.

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[59] Michael D Coogan, Marc Z Brettler, and Carol A Newsom. *New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford: New York, 2010, 2168.

Finally, the hymns that are connected to these two women also show how there are similarities between them. In the hymns praising Isis she is seen as someone who should be honored because of how she helps care for humanity. In a similar fashion, the Magnificat shows how Mary praised God. She also helps care for humanity because she leads them to trust in God. The hymns emphasize the caring nature of both women. By comparing literature about the goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary their role in the Roman Empire is strengthened. These women became influential in similar ways because they were both connected to humanity while also being mystical and divine. They assisted humanity and became universal figures.

Conclusion:

The literature connected to the goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary is an important part of understanding the role they played in the Roman Empire. However, when analyzing this literature, it is important to think about literacy rates during this period. The evidence in this chapter is focused on how Isis and Mary were depicted in books, sacred scripture, and hymns. However, when these texts were written not all members of the Roman Empire were literate because education was not accessible to all. Also, it is difficult to gauge how widespread these texts were throughout the Greco-Roman world. Plutarch lived primarily in Greece, the hymns about Isis were in Egypt, and books such as *The Metamorphoses* of Apuleius and the Holy Bible may have only been available to wealthier citizens. This means that as important as this literature is to understanding Isis and Mary in the Greco-Roman world, it may have only been accessible to a limited audience. With that being said, the content of these texts and inscriptions likely reflects information that circulated orally about these two divine women. They also emphasize the duality of both of them. Some texts emphasized their humanity which connected them to society. While other texts were centered on their mysticism and divinity. It can be concluded that Isis and Mary

were complex but played similar roles in the Roman Empire. The connections between how these two women are depicted in literature show that they were becoming universal figures that heavily influenced the Greco-Roman world.

CHAPTER THREE

DEPICTIONS OF ISIS AND MARY

Introduction:

The art depicting Isis and Mary offers a glimpse into how these divine women were viewed during the Empire. The stylistic choices of the artists reveal characteristics about these two mother figures and provide further evidence of how influential they were for society. Artifacts depicting Isis and Mary from the Roman Empire have been found in numerous locations and each offers insight into the role these two women played. To begin, earlier images of Isis reveal how public worship of this deity was. She was a public image seen on coins and there were numerous temples devoted to Isis throughout Italy and the greater empire. In comparison, earlier images of Mary were more private. One of the earliest depictions historians have found is in catacombs where worship would be more private and hidden. There is juxtaposition between the different styles of worship devoted to these women during the early Empire. Specifically looking at the development of the iconography of the Egyptian goddesses Isis shows how Roman culture influenced how she was depicted. Statues of Isis from Egypt differ from those found in Rome and Italy. Icons of the

Virgin Mary also developed as Christianity became more popular. Worship of Mary becomes more public, and she transforms into an important figure for Christians living in the Roman empire. Looking at a later image of Isis and Mary found in the Vatican reveals how art depicting them came into conversation. Neither of these women came to prominence in a vacuum for the Roman Empire. Images of them are connected to Roman culture and one another. As depictions of them transformed throughout the first few centuries they became prominent deities.

The Development of the Image of Isis

As the goddess Isis began to spread throughout the Empire her depictions transformed. For context, Figure 1 shows a more traditional depiction of Isis from her original Egyptian context. This statue dates to eighth century B.C. Egypt. It is bronze and around 19 centimeters tall, showing Isis breast-feeding Horus. This statue is categorized as a lactan pose; "the gesture of offering the breast for feeding or the act of nursing" and "has a distinct symbolism in ancient Egypt. It symbolizes that the milk emitted from the divine is representative of the nourishment of life and divinity."[60] This Isis lactan has many Egyptian features including Isis's hair and headpiece. Her hair is very straight and placed on her head is a large crown showing her divinity. Her dress is simple and more tightfitting. Both Isis and Horus have serpent headbands, which is also common in Egyptian art. This depiction of Isis represents what was most likely first introduced to the Roman Empire as cultural contacts between Egypt and Rome developed.

However, as Isis was brought into the Roman pantheon, images of her also changed. Figure 2 is also an Isis lactan depiction, with Isis sitting on a throne with Horus in her arms, but from a later time period. It is from the third-fourth century A.D. and was found in Antinoe, Egypt. The statue is made of limestone and is much larger than Figure 1 at 88.5 centimeters tall. Both Isis and

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[60] Sabrina Higgins, 72.

Horus are depicted in a much more Roman style. Her hair is in tighter coils and her dress is more flowing. There is very little Egyptian influence even though the statue was found in Egypt. This reveals how Isis had been transformed by the cultural contacts of the empire. As worship of Isis grew, she was adapted to the visual vocabulary of Greco-Roman art. These adapted images then circulated throughout the Mediterranean, including Egypt. Although Isis was originally an Egyptian figure, artifacts reveal that she was transformed into a more Greco-Roman figure. Her role as a mother continued, but her worshippers greatly expanded. Although much is unknown about these early depictions because of looting in Egypt, they show how Rome adopted Isis as their own. They received these early images and brought her into their culture.

Early Images of Isis and Mary in the Roman Empire

Depictions of gods and goddesses played an important role in Greco-Roman religion. They were a way for people to worship their deities in both public and private settings. They were portrayed throughout the empire in a variety of forms including statues, paintings, and coins. One such depiction of Isis can be seen on a bronze coin from Alexandria dating to 131-132 A.D. (Figure 3). This is a coin of Hadrian that has Isis breast-feeding her son Horus on the reverse. On the obverse is Hadrian. The reverse of the coin shows Isis as a mother caring for her son. She is looking at him with love and tending to his needs. Her hair resembles a more Egyptian style with tighter curls, but her dress is more flowing and distinctly Roman. There is a clear blending of cultural influences on this coin. Although this coin was found in Egypt it was most likely used throughout the region for trade. At the time this coin was minted, Egypt had been a province of the Roman Empire for over 150 years. Isis sharing this coin with a depiction of a Roman Emperor is also significant. There is also evidence of later coins with Emperor Antonius Pius on the obverse. Coins of Isis were prevalent in the Empire and Vespasian also minted coins related to Isis, specifically a

depiction of the Temple dedicated to her in Rome.[61] At this point in time, Isis is included in the deities Romans worshipped. This Egyptian myth was publicly portrayed on Roman coins showing the role she played in their culture.

Another coin from this period is seen in Figure 4. It is from a few years prior, 130-133 A.D. It is made of gold and was originally minted in Rome. On the obverse is Emperor Hadrian and the titulature on the legend identifies the year the coin was made. On the reverse is Hadrian and his wife Sabina facing Serapis and Isis. Hadrian and Serapis are shaking hands like they are making a deal, while Isis holds a sistrum and Sabina has her arm raised. Although this coin does not show Isis in her mothering role, it does show that she has become a part of Roman political life. By placing her in conversation with the emperor it shows that her role had expanded past private worship. The Egyptian influence had dispersed throughout much of Roman culture.

These coins are significant because they were an essential part of the Roman Empire. They most likely traveled throughout as the empire traded with one another. However, they also served another purpose: "coins were commodities in which two different regimes of value, the economic and the symbolic, converged and reinforced one another."[62] The state was very specific about what imagery was placed on their coins. While all of the coins discussed in this paper convey the emperor on the obverse, there were a variety of designs seen that all had symbolic meaning. "In no other medium were simple messages transmitted under state authority so regularly, and so extensively communicated to so many individuals."[63] These coins carried a message to the Empire

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[61] *RIC* II 117.

[62] Carlos F. Noreña, "Coins and Communication," in M. Peachin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 248-68, 248.

[63] Carlos F. Noreña, 249.

stating important figures and events which means that the empire was establishing Isis as a public figure, and they communicated that to a vast number of people.

Similarly, Figure 5 reveals how public Isis was in the Roman empire in the 1st century A.D. This is the head of the goddess Isis found in the Temple of Isis in Pompeii, Italy. It is made of marble and was from the first century A.D. She has more Roman features, especially the tight wavy hair. The location of this depiction of her is significant because it was part of a larger temple devoted to her. This temple resembles many Greco-Roman temples from this time and shows how Rome had adopted her into their culture. Near the statue there was also a tablet with hieroglyphs, another piece of Egyptian influence.[64] This statue was believed to originally be placed in the *ekklesiasterion*, which "was probably the place where worshippers of Isis gathered and ritual banquets were held."[65] This room is originally Greek and with the tablet shows how many cultures were mixing alongside religious worship. Within the temple there were also many frescos depicting the myth of Isis. People would have entered this temple to learn about Isis and worship her.

This statue was at the center of this worship. Although much of this worship was restricted to only those in the Isis cult, "it is known that ceremonies were performed twice a day, at sunrise and at 2 pm, and they were elaborate festivals and processions during the year. Rites were conducted by male priests, but unlike the majority of Roman cults, women could hold positions within the cult and participate in ceremonies."[66] Alongside this there were also many private

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[64] Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007, 206.

[65] David L. Balch, 30.

[66] Joanne Berry, 204.

images of Isis found in homes in Pompeii.[67] These citizens connected with Isis and worshiped her both in private and in public. Although the temple fell in the earthquake in 63 A.D. it was quickly rebuilt. Joanne Berry noted that, "this means that the cult must have had the support of many members of the town's elite."[68] It is clear that in Pompeii Isis was a central figure to their citizens. Early images of Isis reveal that worship of her was public and fairly well-known throughout the empire.

In comparison, early images of the Virgin Mary in the empire are much more private. Christianity was not as widespread as worship of specific deities so there are not as many public images of Mary. Figure 6 is believed to be one of the first images of Mary. It was found in Rome, Italy and is dated to 150 B.C. This fresco was found in the Catacombs of Priscilla on the ceiling. The fresco depicts a woman holding a child with another figure in the background. While it is not confirmed, many historians believe this is an image of Mary holding Jesus because of the other Christian art in the catacombs.[69]

The setting of this fresco shows how private early Christian worship was in the empire. The Santa Priscilla Catacombs were originally owned by a family, rather than a church or religious group. Historians have noted that there are probably many different people buried in these catacombs alongside early Christians.[70] Specifically, "Christians began using the ample and irregular galleries on the first floor of the catacomb towards the beginning of the third century."[71]

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[67] Joanne Berry, 204.

[68] Joanne Berry, 205.

[69] Fabrizio Mancinelli, *Catacombs and Basilicas: The Early Christians in Rome*, Firenze: Scala Books, 1981, 28.

[70] Fabrizio Mancinelli, 28.

[71] Fabrizio Mancinelli, 28.

Alongside the catacomb there is also a chapel that is decorated with many pieces of early Christian art. Throughout the site there is evidence that Christians in the empire used this as a place of documentation as well as burying the dead. Although it is unclear that the image is Mary, it is significant that early Christians did have dedicated spaces. However, because this fresco is underground in a funerary context, it would not have been visible to anyone but those visiting the catacombs, compared to the more public artifacts of Isis adorning coins and public temples. Christians would have needed to travel to these catacombs to see this depiction of Mary and the placement of up high on the ceiling seems like the artist may have wanted to hide her or there was a limited amount of space. The painting is rather small, so it does not stand out as much as others at the site. Although there is much unknown about this image the placement of this fresco shows how images of Mary in the second century A.D. were not always widespread and openly on display. Figure 2 and Figure 6 show them holding their sons which highlights the common visual vocabulary for depicting divine mother figures across different religions. Isis and Mary had a variety of roles, but early depictions of them focused on them as mothers showing their caring and nurturing spirits.

One notable difference between Christian and polytheistic worship is the architecture. With earlier gods and goddesses, the Empire built temples to honor their deities. The interior of a Roman temple was meant to house the cult statue of a deity, as we see with Isis, while the altar was located in front of the temple. Worship happened in front of the temple, not inside of it. On the other hand, Christians constructed churches similar to the one in the catacombs. These churches were similar to the basilica model which were usually used for legal purposes in the Roman world.[72] Christian worship diverged from early Roman religious customs.

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[72] Frank Sear, *Roman Architecture*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

The Development of the Image of Mary

Similar to Isis, depictions of the Virgin Mary transformed as the empire began to expand and change. After the reign of Constantine, Mary entered a new role for the Roman people. Figure 7 shows Mary's place in the Roman Empire. This image is entitled *Salus Populi Romani*, Protectress of the Roman People. It is from fifth century Rome and is now housed in the Cappella Paolina of Saint Maria Maggiore Basillica. The image shows Mary holding baby Jesus. They both have halos around their heads with the image of the cross. Both are clothed in Greco-Roman style robes, with Mary in a blue robe while Jesus is wearing yellow. Jesus is holding a book in his left hand and seems to be blessing with his right hand. Jesus seems to be looking towards his mother while Mary is looking out to the people.

Historians have connected this image with the rise of Christianity in the Empire. The title of the piece clearly differentiates the image of Mary seen in Figure 6. She has transformed into a protectress for the people, rather than someone depicted underground in a catacomb. The halos and crosses around both her and Jesus' heads reveal a sense of divinity. It is clear that Mary now plays a prominent role in Roman life. Jesus's role in this artifact is also significant. His right hand is believed to be blessing both his mother and the people, while Mary is looking out towards Christians. She is a mother image and protector for both her son and the people. This is similar to the role the goddess Roma played earlier in the Empire. In the later centuries of the Roman Empire images of Mary have deep significance and connection to the Roman people. She has eclipsed other deities that originally played larger roles.

Alongside this new role Mary played for the Roman people, as Christianity spread more rapidly throughout the Empire images of Mary became more public. Figure 8 is from the sixth century and shows Mary holding Jesus surrounded by many saints. This is an icon that was made

using the encaustic technique, pigments mixed with hot wax, that was inserted into a wooden panel. It was found at the Monastery of St. Catherine near Mt. Sinai in Egypt. "Whether our icon could have been made during the reign of Justinian cannot be proved, but this seems a priori not unlikely in the light of the fact the Sinai monastery was founded by this emperor and that he surely would have sent gifts to it. [73] This image shows Mary holding Jesus surrounded by two saints and two archangels. Mary is again dressed in blue Greco-Roman robes with Jesus in yellow. The two military saints, Theodore and George, along with Mary and Jesus all have yellow halos around their heads. Saints Theodore and George hold crosses and are dressed in more complex robes. The two archangels are both clothed in white with white halos. They are both looking up toward heaven, as Jesus and the two military saints look forward. Mary is facing forward but is glancing to her left. This is similar to Figure 7; however, there are a few differences that emphasize another part of Mary's identity and role. In this depiction she is a member of the sacred Christian people.

This icon is very striking because of the style. All of the figures are portrayed in a very Greco-Roman manner, while the image originated in Egypt. It is similar to how Figure 2 is from Egypt but shows Isis in a Roman style. Mt. Sinai is believed to be where Moses received the Ten Commandments and has deep spiritual meaning for the Abrahamic religions. This image was found in a monastery. By this point, Christianity had gained prominence in the Empire and there were many Christian communities. Images of Mary were seen in Christian religious spaces, compared to earlier images seen in catacombs underground. By this point Mary had become an influential figure that was depicted among other saints and angels. Rome had transformed her into a public image that could be seen in Christian worship across the empire. These later images of

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[73] K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, the Icons*, Princeton, 1976.

Mary reveal how she transformed into an image of Christianity and guide for humanity. Her role as mother to Jesus made her a protectress for all of Rome, and later the Empire.

Later Images of Isis and Mary

Figure 9 shows the *Sala dei Santi*, the Hall of the Saints in the Borgia Apartment of the Vatican Palace. These frescos were done by Bernardino Pinturicchio from 1492-1495. The Hall showcases stories of various saints alongside images from Egyptian mythology. It was most likely the throne room for Borgia Pope Alexander VI and many of the images are connected to him. Specifically, "the primary motivation for this remarkable cycle has long been recognized – to provide a mythological exegesis on the origins and meaning of the Borgia family's heraldic symbol, the ox."[74] Throughout the room there are nods to the relationship between Egypt and Rome. In the largest fresco showing the Disputation of St. Catherine is set in Alexandria, while the frescos on either side are set in Rome. Saint Anthony Abbott and Saint Paul the Theban who founded Egyptian monasticism are also shown in this hall.[75] The major themes of this room are "conflict, threat, and triumph" as Rome establishes Christianity as the central religion and remembers how it has overcome other religions.[76] Figure 10 and Figure 11 show two scenes seen in the Hall of the Saints.

Figure 10 is from the ceiling vault in the main hall and shows the myth of Isis. The myth is told in four frescos and include scenes of Isis and her husband Osiris. Specifically, Osiris teaching Egyptians how to use the plough, Osiris marrying Isis, Osiris being killed by Set, Isis compiling the pieces of Osiris, and Egyptians worshiping the ox, which is a symbol of Osiris. It is

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[74] Brian A. Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 107.

[75] Brian A. Curran, 109.

[76] Brian A. Curran, 109.

very significant that these images are included in the Vatican, which is the center of Catholicism. Historians believe that Pinturicchio included this myth because of its connection to the pope. "The Osiris-Apis story provides a mytho-historical justification for the Borgia family's claim to rule in Italy through their descent from 'Egyptian' ancestor."[77]

Another important part of this fresco is the role the ox plays in it. In one of the vaults Osiris is teaching about agriculture and there is an ox driving a plow. This has been connected to the founding of Rome. "For, according to the tradition laid out by the Roman historians and poets, Romulus laid out the sacred boundaries of his new city with a plow driven by and ox and cow."[78] This is another example of how intertwined Egyptian and Roman history became during the Roman Empire. There are many small images that have larger motifs surrounding them that connect the two cultures. Isis and Osiris's presence in this room are evidence that Egypt was part of Greco-Roman culture. Further, the stylistic choices of Pinturicchio reveal further connections. Nothing in this room is fully Roman because Roman culture is a combination of many cultures. The Empire combined many aspects of other countries and created their own history and tradition that is seen at the Vatican.

The image of Figure 11 is only a few feet away from Figure 10. This is a fresco of the Visitation of Mary that is placed in one of the lunettes above a door to the Hall. There are seven saints included in this fresco, but in the center are Mary and Elizabeth. In this scene Saint Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, visits with the Virgin Mary and they discuss the imminent birth of their sons. Elizabeth also presents the Hymn of Mary, which is further discussed in Chapter 2. Mary is again clothed in blue Greco-Roman robes while Elizabeth is in pink. Similar to Figure 8,

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[77] Brian A. Curran, 108.

[78] Brian A. Curran, 111.

Mary is placed surrounded by other influential saints. This scene also connects to the larger themes present in the hall. Art historians have noted,

> the relatively peaceful scene of the *Visitation* is provided with an element of threat by the inclusion of Herod's soldiers in the background. In any case, the subject itself alludes to divine protection through the tradition that established the Feast of the Visitation as a day of prayer 'for assistance in the struggle of the church against her heretical foes.'[79]

Mary is placed in this room as a sense of comfort. Amid the many scenes filled with conflict and threat, she provides peace. The tone of this moment contrasts the other frescos but is still emphasizes the important role Mary plays in the lives of the popes and Christianity in general.

These frescos in the Vatican are significant because they place Isis and Mary in conversation with another. In earlier images from the Roman Empire Isis is much more public, while Mary is more hidden. However, as Christianity eclipses Roman state cult worship, Mary becomes much more prominent than other deities. She is given titles that Isis and other goddesses never received. The frescos in the Vatican reveal that one mother did not replace the other, but rather both were influential pieces of Roman culture during the Empire. They were mothers to their sons and humanity.

Conclusion:

Much is unknown about the context and meaning behind these depictions. However, it does reveal the relationship Isis and Mary had with the people of the Roman Empire. One consistency we see between images of Isis and Mary is their role as mothers. Not only are Horus and Jesus often included, but they are also shown as mothers to humanity. Stylistically they have more feminine features of being nurturing and caring towards their child. The prevalence of the lactans pose reveals how they have human characteristics alongside their divine elements. There is cultural

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[79] Brian A. Curran, 110.

continuity with the relationship between mother and child. Goddesses, divine figures, and humans all share in the role of mothering and loving their child. Depictions of Isis and Mary reveal that across many cultures mothers are a sense of comfort. Isis and Mary provide care for their children and all of humanity. At this time, some of the Roman people were attracted to the idea of being saved, something that was not offered in the Roman state cult. Isis and Mary offered a different path of hope for a better future. Their depictions reflect the sense of comfort they provided for the Roman people.

CONCLUSION

There is no singular way to define "Roman culture." The Roman Empire was not created in a vacuum and was heavily influenced by the people it interacted with in the vast lands they conquered. Roman culture is an anthology of religions, customs, traditions, and at the center of this, people. This culture includes the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Virgin Mary. Although the polytheistic ancient Egyptian religion may seem to juxtapose the monotheistic Christian religion, the two religions share some commonalities in the figures of Isis and Mary, including a motherly depiction and deep devotion from many followers. Both Isis and Mary were important figures in not only the Roman Empire's religious life, but Mediterranean culture as a whole.

The spread of the cult of Isis shows that many Romans were attracted to personal religions prior to the introduction of Christianity. There were many deities they worshiped and felt connected to. Isis, alongside many other foreign gods and goddesses, stood out because she gave the Roman people hope for an afterlife. She was also a source of comfort while protecting and caring for her followers. Her mothering nature was for all. She played an important role in the foundations for the role the Virgin Mary would play for the Roman people.

Similarly, the Virgin Mary became a primary figure for the Roman people, and later Christians throughout the world. Her humanity is seen in both literature and art depicting her as she answered God's call. At the center of her identity is mothering Jesus and by extension all of humanity. Her immaculate conception makes her divine, but her actions reveal that she is the true role model for Christians. She is caring and comforting while also trusting in God. Her and Isis guide humanity while supporting them. Both polytheistic cult worship and Christianity in the Roman Empire had strong females as a pivotal piece of their worship. The goddesses Isis and the Virgin Mary are only two women that have had a profound impact on cultures throughout history. An important piece of Roman culture is divine women because they act as both mother to their sons and humanity. The Roman people, both during the Empire and today, are able to find comfort in the divine feminine.

Appendix

Figure 1

Egyptian Isis Lactan

Figure 2

Isis Enthroned Suckling the Child Horus

Figure 3

Isis Coin of Hadrian (131-132)
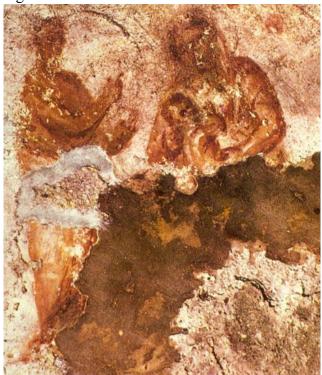
Figure 4

Isis Coin of Hadrian (130-133)

Figure 5

Bust in Pompeii Temple of Isis

Figure 6

Mary in the Catacombs

Figure 7

Protectruss of the Roman People

Figure 8

Madonna and Child Enthroned Among the Angels and Saints

Figure 9

Room of the Saints

Figure 10

Room of the Saints – Isis Myth

Figure 11

Room of the Saints – Visitation of Mary

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Artifacts:

Figure 1: Egyptian Isis Lactan
https://library-artstor-org.providence.idm.oclc.org/#/asset/BERLIN_DB_10313801386;prevRouteTS=1647970084544.

Figure 2: Isis Enthroned Suckling the Child Horus
https://library-artstor-org.providence.idm.oclc.org/#/asset/BERLIN_DB_10313749579.

Figure 3: Isis Coin of Hadrian (131-132)
https://library-artstor-org.providence.idm.oclc.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003680228;prevRouteTS=164841590494.

Figure 4: Isis Coin of Hadrian (130-133)
http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.2_3(2).hdn.1556.

Figure 5: Bust in Pompeii Temple of Isis
https://library-artstor-org.providence.idm.oclc.org/#/asset/LESSING_ART_10311441959;prevRouteTS=164841684943 4.

Figure 6: Mary in the Catacombs
https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150224-the-secrets-of-the-catacombs.

Figure 7: Protectruss of the Roman People
https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/s/salus-populi-romani.php.

Figure 8: Madonna and Child Enthroned Among the Angels and Saints
https://www.thebyzantinelegacy.com/catherine-virgin.

Figures 9, 10, 11: Room of the Saints
https://m.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani-mobile/en/collezioni/musei/appartamento-borgia/sala-dei-santi/sala-dei-santi.html.