


# Mystery Religions and their Influence on the New Testament and Early Christianity



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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses mystery religions and how they influenced the New Testament and early Christianity. It is a library research and is descriptive in nature. Data was gathered from books, journal articles, and internet sources. The research findings reveal that mystery religions influenced the New Testament to the extent that the knowledge derived from it sheds more light on the background of some New Testament texts, such as John 12:24 and Matthew 17:1-13. Also, some practices in the New Testament times, such as baptism, meal fellowship, the veiling of women, and other early Christian practices, were influenced by mystery religions. Both the mystery religions and New Testament contain the same linguistic form. Therefore, this article recommends that mystery religions be studied to gain background knowledge of particular texts in the New Testament. Also, the language in mystery religious texts can be examined since it can aid the understanding of New Testament writings at times.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the centuries immediately coming before and following the coming of Christ, a growing breakdown and distrust of the old, local and national deities existed, creating a vacuum that was eventually filled by what is known as mystery religions.<sup>1</sup> Human beings sought a more personal faith that would bring them into immediate contact with the divine. They were ready for any experience that would promise them communication, and Mystery religions fulfilled that desire.<sup>2</sup> Their fame continued well into the Christian era, occasionally assimilated into the official religion.<sup>3</sup> They are usually centered around strange mythical legends of various gods and goddesses.<sup>4</sup> Mystery religions gave opportunities for fellowship with the divine. Immortality could be obtained through initiation into an intimate experience intended to save the soul after death.<sup>5</sup> The harmony usually would be accepted by certain ceremonial acts;<sup>6</sup> the first was a baptism in water or blood of an animal. Their followers were not allowed to reveal the secrets of baptism, meal fellowship, and enlightenment, making them earn the name of mystery religions.<sup>7</sup> Based on this background, this article

<sup>1</sup> Danny McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction* (Bukuru, Plateau: African Christian Textbooks, 2014), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 68.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon C. Neal, "Mystery Religions", *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds., J. D. Douglas, Earle E. Cairns and James E. Ruark (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Regency Reference Library, 1978), 691.

<sup>4</sup> Neal, "Mystery Religions", 691.

<sup>5</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 804.

<sup>6</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church* (n.p: Daystar Press, 1976), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, 13.

discusses Mystery Religions, their characteristics, their initiatory process, how identical Mystery Religions are with Christianity, dissimilarities, and their influence on the New Testament.

### Essential Characteristics of Mystery Religions

Mystery religions were widespread in the Graeco-Roman world and characterized by secret rites and worship.<sup>8</sup> Regarding what represents mystery religions, Danny McCain notes that:

- They were based on myths descending from remote antiquity; their devotees likely thought of the events described in the various myths as occurring outside of human history.
- Magical effects and some physical processes received their benefits. These rituals were not merely symbolic but had a magical effect upon a worshipper.
- Salvation secured desirable human ends, and morality played very little in the mystery religions.
- The mystery religions were essentially polytheistic. There were usually at least two deities in all the religions. If not, the worshippers were tolerant toward others who worshipped other gods.
- The higher elements of the religions were crude manifestations of basic religious instincts native to man. However, these only developed in an elementary fashion without supernatural revelation.
- The mystery religions were often characterized by extreme sensuality, especially sexualism. Biblical standards of morality and purity were unknown.<sup>9</sup>

Merrill C. Tenney, with regards to their characteristics, notes that each of them had a ritual of formulae and illustrations of symbols and secrets, which were dramatic representations of the experience of the god by which the initiate was inducted. The initiate who had been inducted into that experience was presumably rendered a candidate for immortality.<sup>10</sup> He adds that the procedure of these initiations was somewhat similar to that of modern secret societies. Each religion maintained a brotherhood in which enslaved persons and enslavers, rich and poor, high and low, met on the same footing.<sup>11</sup> An initiate into the mysteries also participated in the closing and opening of eyes. People with closed eyes remain in darkness until they open their eyes to see the light, so the initiate whose eyes were closed moved from night to enlightenment literally and metaphorically.<sup>12</sup>

### The Initiatory Process

As the name implies, mystery religions centered on secret rituals of initiation. They were called mystery religions because their initiation and other rites were kept secret.<sup>13</sup> The more intense they are, the more private they tend to be: they only run the risk of being misunderstood if aired in public. This is why they are ‘mystery’ religions. Mysteries are things that are kept silent to avoid useless arguments and misapprehensions.<sup>14</sup> The oaths that the initiates took never to reveal the content of these initiatory rites rituals were so influential that to this day, scholars have only vague ideas about the character of such habits.<sup>15</sup> As initiates kept their vows, only little is known about these rites.<sup>16</sup> The experience of the initiatory traditions can be broken down into three constituent elements:

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period, 450 B.C.E to 600 C. E.* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 442.

<sup>9</sup> McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, 45-46.

<sup>10</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> David Noel Freedman, Garry A. Heerion and John David Pleins, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol 4, K-N* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 942.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Locyer, F.F. Bruce, R.K. Harrison, eds., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary: An Authoritative One Volume Reference Work on the Bible with Full-Color Illustrations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 738.

<sup>14</sup> Joycelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Hagerstown: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Watson E. Mills, Roger A. Bullard, Walter Harrelson et al, eds., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1991), 592.

<sup>16</sup> J. D. Douglas and Merrill Tenney, eds., *The International Dictionary of the Bible, Pictorial Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Regency Reference Library, 1963), 685.

*Dromena* ( things enacted) refers to the cult drama which acted out the myth on which the cult was based.<sup>17</sup> *Logomena* (things spoken) refers to the recitation of the legend, which explains the cult drama. *Deiknuemena* (items shown) relates to ritual objects displayed before the initiate. Mystery religions did not transmit doctrines to the initiates (a task more appropriate to the philosophical schools). Initiates did not need to learn but just to experience because the result of this experience was the conviction that the initiate would enjoy prosperity in this life coupled with a happy afterlife.<sup>18</sup>

### Points Common to Mystery Religions and Christianity

Some theologians have asserted that Christianity is a synthesis of many existing religions plus the addition of the Jesus factor.<sup>19</sup> Below are some points opined by some scholars as those that Christianity has in common with Mystery Religions. W. L. Liefeld notes that it has been maintained that the oriental religions had a significant influence on Christian doctrine and worship.<sup>20</sup> Some scholars believe that these Mystery religions were quite prevalent during the first century A.D. and thus provided enough competition for Christianity.<sup>21</sup> These Mystery religions included but were not limited to the cults of Eleusis, Dionysus, Isis and Osiris, Mithra, Cybele ( the Magna Mater or Great Mother), the Dea Syria, many local deities, all of which promised purification and immortality.<sup>22</sup> The alleged relationship between these cults and Christianity is discussed below.

McCain notes that these mystery religions had the following in common with Christianity; some believed in death and resurrection just like Christianity does; some understood the concept of redemption through a mystical union with the deity. Some had doctrines of regeneration, baptism, and a sacred meal.<sup>23</sup> They introduced daring innovations to enhance their attractiveness; they borrowed from each other in cult and rituals; they adopted new religious ideas or gave expression to such concepts as were in the air, so that each showed in its vocabulary the same excellent religious terms —baptism, regeneration, identification with the deity, ecstasy, theophanies, cathartic (purifying or purging), salvation, immortality.<sup>24</sup>

The Christian group itself was understood as a new community of believers in which, ideally, there was neither Jew nor Gentile, neither enslaved person nor free, male or female. For Paul and many after him, Christian baptism was interpreted as a death experience linked to the experience of new life. Like mystery religions, Christian initiates underwent ceremonial rituals, purification, fasting, and baptism to be admitted into the group.<sup>25</sup> Entry into the Christian community allowed believers to share in a sacred meal, the eucharist. John narrated the story of Jesus changing water into wine, which is associated with one of the deities of the mystery religion, Dionysus.<sup>26</sup> Equally, the adoration of Mary by Roman Catholics paralleled the forms of reverence traditionally reserved for the Egyptian Goddess Isis. Just like Mary was portrayed with her son Jesus sitting formally on her lap, it is the same as depicted with Horus seated on the lap of Isis.<sup>27</sup> Everett Ferguson adds that Christian borrowing outward gestures from the mysteries can be seen in the magical hands dedicated to Sabazius' (a Greek god), sometimes a show of the thumb and the first two fingers raised. The other two fingers bent in the same position as the Roman Catholic church's clergy blessing.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Douglas and Tenney, *The International Dictionary of the Bible*, 685.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas and Tenney, *The International Dictionary of the Bible*, 685.

<sup>19</sup> McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> W. L. Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible in five Volumes: Volume Four. M-P*, eds., Merrill C. Tenney and Steven Barabas (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 330.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, Gen. ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 872.

<sup>22</sup> Youngblood, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 872.

<sup>23</sup> Youngblood, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 872.

<sup>24</sup> S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions: A Study to the Background of Early Christianity* (New York: Dover publications Inc., 1975), 276.

<sup>25</sup> Freedman, Herion and Pleins, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 944.

<sup>26</sup> Freedman, Herion and Pleins, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 944.

<sup>27</sup> Freedman, Herion and Pleins, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 944.

<sup>28</sup> Everette Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 279.

## Dissimilarities with Christianity

Fergusson notes that the early Christian writers of the early centuries may have exaggerated the similarities of defensiveness or the same psychological process as modern researchers or, as it seems, more likely because they could make apologetical capital for the truth of Christianity by claiming demonic imitations in paganism.<sup>29</sup> He further notes that significant methodological difficulties are the scarcity of information and the lateness of much that is preserved. He argues that since most early Christians are the critical sources for the information on the similarities of the mysteries and religion, how well informed were they? Did they know as much as they claimed or did, they pass on rumor and gossip, and how reliable were they?<sup>30</sup> However, the following have been opined as to the dissimilarities between the mystery religions and Christianity.

Liefeld avers that mystery religions were detached from men's moral and personal needs, and these mysteries spread to fill the void left by other religious forms.<sup>31</sup> In gainsaying that mystery religions were similar to Christianity, he posits that mystery religions were both sexual and sensual of seeing and participating than believing and accomplishing.<sup>32</sup> This means that, while Christianity offers one the chance to think, especially in the hope of the afterlife, mystery religions were pleasure-oriented and could not have been similar in that aspect to Christianity.

Though some of the rites may have been similar to Christianity, like baptism in the mystery religions, these rites were done secretly. This means to Liefeld they were not open to scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> The traditions of Christianity, especially baptism, are usually not done in secret; thus, Christianity has no similarity with Mystery Religions in this regard.

The foundations of the Mystery Religions are mystical and natural and not historical and revelatory like Christianity is. Liefeld opines that the 'deaths' of the mythical gods were usually involuntary and meaningless, unlike the loving, voluntary sacrifice of Christ. Dying and rising was cynical in Mystery Religions, unlike the historical and unrepeatable death of Jesus.<sup>34</sup> That is to say that all the deities in the so-called mystery religions were only concerned about themselves, but the death of Jesus was purely about humankind and not Himself.

R.C. Kroeger and C.C. Kroeger opine that Christianity is based on a historical person, Jesus, a remarkable dissimilarity between Christianity and the mysteries. In contrast, their mysteries were based upon myths. The mysteries were primarily devoid of written revelation and constantly changed.<sup>35</sup> However, the syncretization of Christianity and mystery religions produced the heresies known as Gnosticism.<sup>36</sup> That is to say that many of their facts were not founded and were never standing the test of time, unlike Christianity, which has stood the test of time.

## Influence of Mystery Religions on Christianity

It is important to note that Christianity developed within the Graeco-Roman period and had Jewish roots in the same world as the mystery religions. It shows apparent affinities with the mysteries because early Christianity developed as a religion of salvation and personal choice like the mysteries.<sup>37</sup> There can be no gainsaying that Mystery religions greatly influenced Christianity, which was from a ritual angle. This further explains that Christianity was subject to the same influences from the environment as these cults.<sup>38</sup> Early Christian communities could also proclaim egalitarianism (believing in equality) and live-in unity-like

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 279.

<sup>30</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 279.

<sup>31</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions," 332.

<sup>32</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions," 332.

<sup>33</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions," 332.

<sup>34</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions," 332.

<sup>35</sup> R. C. Kroeger and C.C. Kroeger, "Mystery Religions", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed., Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984), 744.

<sup>36</sup> Kroeger and Kroeger, "Mystery Religions", 744.

<sup>37</sup> R. J. Bauckham and S.E. Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds., Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 723.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity," <https://www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu> Accessed February, 2022.

groups.<sup>39</sup> The mysteries and early Christianity often faced similar religious and social challenges, proposed similar ways of salvation and transformation, and shared points of similarity in their visions of the way of light and life.<sup>40</sup>

The most significant influence of the mystery religions on Christianity lies in a different direction from that of doctrine. It lies in the fact that these mystery religions paved or prepared the way for Christianity.<sup>41</sup> They designed the people mentally and emotionally to understand Christianity's type of religion. The resurrection of those gods was not in the sphere of history and the weird stories surrounding them. While there were promises of salvific gains, the nature of the deliverance promised was different from that of the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> The death of Jesus and his rescue was authentic and historically verifiable, unlike the mysteries.

Kurt Rudolph notes that as the church became organized in hierarchical nature, especially from the third century on and as it became an unshakable church under Constantine in the fourth century, it not only won more significant publicity to the disservice of the old firm religion but at the same time acquired an aspect of mystification whereby it sought to give a Christian direction to a new rare occurrence, the religiosity of the masses.<sup>43</sup> The "mystery" became a cultic term and followed a path blazed by ancient philosophy and made its way into Christian theology, where spiritualism came to mean a kind of knowledge of God that is not available to everyone.<sup>44</sup>

Another impact is that mysteries became more definite commencement in the second century C.E. The Christian church found itself increasingly contesting these forms of worship. The cultic area of the church's life, especially baptism and mass, went through a profound conversion as the rites became secrets to which not everyone had immediate access.<sup>45</sup> Preparation was now required in the form of fasts, instructions, and purifications. The non-baptized and those on the way to baptism were not permitted to the sacred Christian special meal, which was regarded as the remedy bringing deathlessness and acquired its efficacy through epiclesis (invocations) of the priest. In order words, the cultic meal was placed under a kind of discipline of secrecy.<sup>46</sup>

## **An Overview of Some Mystery Religions**

### **Eleusinian Mysteries**

They were the most highly regarded cult of antiquity for which even Plato, who generally spoke depreciatingly of such cults, had only words of respect.<sup>47</sup> These were well known and well honored in classical times. Their center was Eleusis near Athens.<sup>48</sup> They provided a reason to live with joy and die with better hopes. This is because, according to them, a civilized way of life had been established through their rites.<sup>49</sup> Demeter and her daughter Persephone were the prominent figures of the Eleusinian mysteries; the god of death, Pluto, abducted Persephone.<sup>50</sup> Demeter's sorrowful quest for her through the underworld and her subsequent withdrawal by the appearance again of Persephone are evident in the rites which connect the cult with the changing seasons.<sup>51</sup> Metzger notes that Demeter instituted the Eleusinian mysteries through which the initiate was assured of a happy future life. During each year, while she had her daughter, she allowed crops

<sup>39</sup> Bauckam and Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" 723

<sup>40</sup> Bauckam and Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" 723

<sup>41</sup> Bauckam and Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" 723

<sup>42</sup> Bauckam and Porter, "Apocryphal Acts and Epistles" 723

<sup>43</sup> Lindsay Jones ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Farmington: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6332.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6332.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6332.

<sup>46</sup> Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6332.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Manning Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 66.

<sup>48</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" 330.

<sup>49</sup> Kroeger and Kroeger, "Mystery Religions", 742.

<sup>50</sup> Kroeger and Kroeger, "Mystery Religions", 742.

<sup>51</sup> Kroeger and Kroeger, "Mystery Religions", 742.

to grow.<sup>52</sup>The Eleusinian rites involved preliminary instructions in the lesser mysteries celebrated in March at Agrae, a neighborhood outside of Athens on the banks of the Ilissus, and the greater mysteries celebrated in September.<sup>53</sup> The latter comprised stages of initiation, each becoming more solemn; the initiates were cleansed by baptism in the sea and sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial pig. After that, the candidates marched in a festal procession to Eleusis.<sup>54</sup>

### Dionysos

Dionysos is a god of fertility and the field's fruits, especially the fruit trees and the vine. He appears in various forms and shapes: a child carried in the arms of his mentor Silenus.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes he appears as a young man with almost female features or a bearded older adult. Liefeld notes that he was traditionally Thracian in origin as the god of wine.<sup>56</sup> His festivals were also of various types and centered around festive drinking of wine or consisted of goats or bull sacrifices and processions carrying a giant phallus or feature frenzied women running into the wooded mountains in mid-winter to eat the raw flesh of wild animals.<sup>57</sup>Dionysos' appearance in whatever form is always connected with intoxication and madness. He is next in line to Asklepios as the most widely worshipped god of the Greek world.<sup>58</sup> To attain communion with their god, the devotees of Dionysos (called Bacchantes) drank wine until they were thoroughly intoxicated, experiencing the influence of their god.<sup>59</sup>Another realistic sacrament was the feast of raw flesh, where people ate raw meat as part of the worship. After indulging in a wild, whirling dance that induced an agitated delirium, the initiates tore a goat or a fawn asunder and devoured the dripping raw flesh. Such orgiastic rites were called Bacchanalia.<sup>60</sup>

### Isis and Osiris

Isis was Egyptian and considered a model of wifely devotion, and excellent saving power was devoted to her. Osiris, her husband, was killed in the folk ballad, and Isis recovered the body that the evil god Set had dismembered.<sup>61</sup> Isis is said to have faithfully searched for the members of his body, which had been widely spread and brought him back to life. Recognition with Osiris thus was seen as a way of surviving death, and thus Isis was elevated as a representative deity.<sup>62</sup> An Egyptian text testifies to the hope of a future existence for one who had shared in Orisian rites for as truly as Osiris lives, he also shall live; as indeed as Osiris is not dead, he too shall not die; as certainly as Osiris is not eradicated, shall he not be eliminated.<sup>63</sup>

### Mithra

Worshipped initially by the ancient Indo-Iranians, Mithra became prominent in the Zoroastrian pantheon as the mediator between man and the god of light, Ahura Mazda.<sup>64</sup> He was carried westward first by the Persian army and later by the Romans. The devotees of Mithra were restricted to men and met in small chapels or sanctuaries located in caves or partly underground crypts.<sup>65</sup> However, this view has been challenged by David Jonathan that there is no ancient text stating that women were not allowed into Mystery cults. He notes

<sup>52</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1995), 173.

<sup>56</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" 331.

<sup>57</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" 331.

<sup>58</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" 331.

<sup>59</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 69.

<sup>60</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" 331.

<sup>62</sup> Liefeld, "Mystery Religions" 332.

<sup>63</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 69.

<sup>64</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> Metzer, *The New Testament*, 69.

further that Tertullian suggests a North African variant of Mithraism in which women were involved.<sup>66</sup> In the center of the apse (secret place) stood a statue depicting the most significant work of Mithra, the tauroctony (a modern name given to the central cult reliefs of the Roman Mithraic Mysteries). This represented Mithra clad with a pointed cap in the act of slaying a bull with his left knee astride the bull, which has been forced to its knees and his left-hand grasping and pulling back the snout of the animal.<sup>67</sup>

According to information preserved by early church fathers, Mithraism had an elaborate ritual of initiation that involved seven stages called the grade of the raven, the bridegroom, the soldier, the lion, the Persian, the courier of the sun, and the father. During the ceremony, the celebrants wore costumes and masks appropriate to the grade of initiation.<sup>68</sup> The most elaborate rite of Mithraism, appropriated from the Magna Mater cult, was the taurobolium or blood bath. The naked initiate, crouched in a pit covered with a grating over which a bull, garlanded with flowers, was slaughtered. As the warm blood streamed over the devotee, he would eagerly drink in some of the life-giving fluid. In this cult, the initiate must lay a finger on his lips, address silence as the symbol of the living imperishable god, and pray; Roman soldiers often embraced this cult for some reason.<sup>69</sup> Roman soldiers who came in contact with death were told Mithra would guide them to a peaceful afterlife.<sup>70</sup> The performance of this rite indicates that the initiate believed that he had been reborn for twenty years or, in some cases, for eternity.<sup>71</sup>

### Cybele (the Magna Mater or Great Mother)

Cybele was the mother of life for all living things, humans and animals alike. She was worshipped by Greeks as early as the archaic period.<sup>72</sup> She was sometimes identified with Rhea, the mother of Zeus. She was usually flanked by two lions who brought the wild orgiastic features of her cult and the myth of her unfortunate lover Attis.<sup>73</sup> Cybele was a Phrygian mother goddess, and Attis was her grandson, but she fell in love with him though he was unaware. When he fell in love with the daughter of the king of Pessinus Cybele, she got jealous, drove Attis mad. He later emasculated himself and killed himself.<sup>74</sup> The Great Mother was officially recognized in Rome as early as 204 BCE and was the first and stern cult to find such recognition for a long time. The religious fervor of the cult of the Magna Mater was radical and extreme. The festivals were filled with music from percussion instruments and raptured dance.<sup>75</sup> Although in bad taste by Greek standards, the rites were primitive, cruel, and fascinating. The moral demands of the religion of the Great Mother were severe and rigorous.<sup>76</sup>

In celebrating her principal rites in the springtime, her devotees would work themselves into a frenzy of excitement during which they gashed their arms and sprinkled the blood on their altars. At the same time, her priest went to emasculate them. Those who could afford the expense underwent the rite of *tauroblium* (a ceremony in which worshippers were baptized with the blood of a sacrificed bull). This religion was officially introduced into Rome in 204 BC.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan, David. "The Women Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?" *Numen* 47, no 2(2000): 121-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3270191>.

<sup>67</sup> David, "The Women Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries," 121-141.

<sup>68</sup> David, "The Women Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries," 121-141.

<sup>69</sup> Kroeger and Kroeger, "Mystery Religions", 744.

<sup>70</sup> "Mithras in the Roman Legions." Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained. *Encyclopedia.com*. (January 24, 2022). Accessed February, 2022. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mithras-roman-legions>

<sup>71</sup> "Mithras and Roman Legions." Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained.

<sup>72</sup> "Mithras and Roman Legions." Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained.

<sup>73</sup> "Mithras and Roman Legions." Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained.

<sup>74</sup> N.S. Gill, "The Love Story of Cybele and Attis." ThoughtCo. Accessed February 25, 2022 <https://www.thoughtco.com/cybele-and-attis-the-love-story-of-cybele-and-attis-112339>.

<sup>75</sup> Gill, "The Love Story of Cybele and Attis."

<sup>76</sup> Gill, "The Love Story of Cybele and Attis."

<sup>77</sup> Metzger, *The New Testament*, 70.

## The Dea Syria

The fertility goddess worshiped in Syria was Atargatis, also known as the Dea Syria, “the Syrian goddess.” The merging of deities was common in the ancient world, meaning that Atargatis was an almost universal figure despite historical and geographical distinctions. The name Astarte was also associated with Syrian worship. Adonis (lover of Aphrodite in Greek mythology) had much in common with Attis. Thus, sexual excesses characterized this cult compared with the ancient Tammuz (Sumerian and Babylonian shepherd god).<sup>78</sup> This Goddess was one of the popular deities of the Hellenistic period<sup>79</sup>, and she was a type of the standard mother-goddess figure, the complement copy of Aphrodite. She was related to the recognizable Ishtar or Astarte, the symbol of fertility religion which Josiah had opposed (2 Kings 23:13).<sup>80</sup>

She was known in ancient literature as the Syrian Goddess, Dea Syria, or Deasura.<sup>81</sup> The main center of worship was in Hierapolis, in northern Syria. Some other temples were at Carnaim, in Gilead, and Khirbet Tannur. As part of her worship, her priests, also called Galli, castrated (desexualized) themselves in wild orgies. The fertility idea was seen in the association of Atargatis with water, grain, fruit, and foliage.<sup>82</sup>

## Influence of Mystery Religions on the New Testament

Greg Herrick opines parallels between the Mystery texts and the New Testament. In some cases, the knowledge of the Mystery religions helps at times to elucidate background, that is, practices, beliefs, and linguistic phenomena, to understand specific New Testament texts.<sup>83</sup> Peter Wick concurs and asserts that Mystery Religions did influence the New Testament through the early church developed her elasticity and applied her missionary and communicative goals.<sup>84</sup> In Paul’s letters, Mark, and Acts, there are different places borrowed material from mystery religions have been used.<sup>85</sup> Both the New Testament and the Mystery religions contain the same linguistic form and theological content; for instance, the meaning of Jesus’ death is illustrated by the grain of wheat which has to die to bear fruit (John 12:24).<sup>86</sup> Greg Herrick asserts that such borrowed material also underlines the soteriological interpretation of Jesus’ death and resurrection in Paul’s letters.<sup>87</sup> The terminology of the cycle of fertility, birth, death, and new life is characteristic of Mystery religions borrowed and used by Paul.<sup>88</sup> Eleusinian mysteries offered “enlightenment” to those initiated. This is also reflected in texts like Ephesians 1:18, where Paul talks about spiritual enlightenment leading to the knowledge of several things, including the understanding of God and his power has the same joint base of religious vocabulary.<sup>89</sup> Herrick further opines that the Andanian Mystery is a rule book for worship in Andanian Mystery Religions (one of the Greek Mysteries). One of the rules includes the wearing of white face-caps by the women. He says Paul’s asking women in Corinth to wear veils borrowed from this particular mystery.<sup>90</sup> He further notes that the Homeric Hymn to Demeter 275-80 and Matthew 17:1-13 are similar. According to the hymn *To Demeter*, she undergoes a transfiguration that parallels in some way the transfiguration experienced by Christ.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Encyclopedia of the Bible - Mystery Religions. Accessed September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021.  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Mystery-Religions>

<sup>79</sup> Encyclopedia of the Bible - Mystery Religions.

<sup>80</sup> Encyclopedia of the Bible - Mystery Religions.

<sup>81</sup> Encyclopedia of the Bible - Mystery Religions.

<sup>82</sup> Encyclopedia of the Bible - Mystery Religions.

<sup>83</sup> Grek Herrick, “The New Testament and Greco-Roman Mystery Religions,” Accessed February, 2022.  
<https://bible.org/article/new-testament-and-greco-roman-mystery-religions>

<sup>84</sup> Peter Wick, “The New Testament and Mystery Religions,” Accessed, February, 2022.  
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<sup>85</sup> Wick, “The New Testament and Mystery Religions”.

<sup>86</sup> Wick, “The New Testament and Mystery Religions”.

<sup>87</sup> Herrick, “The New Testament and Greco-Roman Mystery Religions.”

<sup>88</sup> Herrick, “The New Testament and Greco-Roman Mystery Religions.”

<sup>89</sup> Herrick, “The New Testament and Greco-Roman Mystery Religions.”

<sup>90</sup> Herrick, “The New Testament and Greco-Roman Mystery Religions.”

<sup>91</sup> Herrick, “The New Testament and Greco-Roman Mystery Religions.”



However, Henry C. Sheldon gainsays and opines that whatever resemblances can be traced of Paul's characteristic ideas and various phases in the scheme of the mysteries differ so widely that ample proof is given he did not consciously or unconsciously takeover into his system any ruling conceptions from the latter.<sup>92</sup>The relation between Greek philosophical ideas and mystery occult practices could have been because of similar words or similar devotions (dying and coming back to the life of gods, for example). But such coextending can only be maintained if one does not examine the underlying religious systems. Shared vocabulary may result from living in the same cultural milieu, and what one group means by a particular term is not necessarily what another means.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discussed Mystery Religions, isolated some, studied them, and compared them with Christianity. It equally looked at the impact of the Mystery Religions on the New Testament. Scholars disagree whether they influenced Christianity, let alone the New Testament, as with many other issues in scholarship. However, the researcher asserts that these Mystery Religions predated Christianity and consequently the writing of the New Testament. This is because most of the New Testament texts were not originally written to be "The Scriptures" until when some of the scripts were later on canonized, hence the writings have initially been standard literature. The fact that the same milieu and era of writing was the Graeco-Roman World with the same kind of challenges and people, it is possible that the Mystery Religions may have influenced Christianity and some writings in the New Testament.

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<sup>92</sup> Henry C. Sheldon, *The Mystery Religions and the New Testament* ( n.p : n.p, 1918), 94-95.

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