

## ABSTRACT

Pagan Elements in the Afterlife Depictions of Early Christian Martyrdom Accounts

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This thesis is an exploration of the pagan influences on early Christianity and its depictions of the afterlife, as seen through popular martyrdom accounts. The first chapter situates early Christianity in its context of Greece and the Roman empire. Chapter two explores two significant examples of pagan eschatology through the Orphic gold leaves and Book six of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Chapter three explores *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp* and compares its eschatology to that of contemporary pagans. Chapter four explores the four eschatological visions in *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* and compares them to the depictions of the pagan afterlife explored in chapter two. These comparisons are done through a combination of scholarly research and literary analysis. This thesis makes no attempt to argue a pagan origin for Christian doctrines but seeks to explore the eschatological beliefs shared by contemporary religions.

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PAGAN ELEMENTS IN THE AFTERLIFE DEPICTIONS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN  
MARTYRDOM ACCOUNTS

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### An Incredibly Brief Introduction to the Roman Context of Early Christianity

Although it is a well-known fact that Christianity was born in the Roman empire, the implications of this fact have much greater consequences than we often acknowledge. In the Gospels, Jesus encounters Romans frequently. He heals members of their households, he forgives them, he welcomes them. Jesus was executed by Roman officials in the Roman manner of crucifixion. Modern Christians, however, while keenly attuned to the question of how Christianity impacted the Roman Empire, pay little attention to how the Roman Empire affected the development of Christianity, forgetting to acknowledge the context of the first believers, who lived in a world dominated by festivals and decorated with temples and shrines to the gods. Christians were seen as deviants and law breakers who refused to sacrifice to the gods, as was required. They neglected their public duties for their private religion. In this chapter, I attempt to introduce in brief what deserves a much lengthier discussion. After proposing a definition of paganism, I will discuss the Roman context of early Christianity, with special attention to the required participation in pagan practices that led to martyrdom, as well as how early Christianity was influenced by its Roman setting. Finally, I will discuss biblical passages that reveal Paul's experiences with pagans and Gentiles.

Ramsay MacMullen opens his work *Paganism in the Roman Empire* with the claim that the empire “was a proper melting pot.”<sup>1</sup> The religious variation within the

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsay MacMullen. *Paganism in the Roman Empire* New Haven: Yale University Press, 198, xi

Roman Empire was vast. It was not uncommon for new gods to be adopted to the pantheon or assumed into the ever-expanding identities of the familiar gods. Consequently, it is difficult precisely to define Greco-Roman paganism. Nevertheless, I will attempt to provide a succinct exploration of Greco-Roman paganism as it pertains to early Christians in the Roman empire. Paganism is defined by Robin Lane Fox in quite broad terms, as “essentially a matter of cult acts.”<sup>2</sup> The term “pagan” is a Christian creation, from the Latin *pagani*, meaning “civilian.”<sup>3</sup> According to Fox, “*Pagani* were civilians who had not enlisted through baptism as soldiers of Christ against the powers of Satan.”<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, I will limit the definition of paganism to the Greco-Roman sphere as the public and cult practices in service of the multiple Greco-Roman gods as the performance of one’s duty.

The average Greco-Roman citizen was not a devout person of faith, but a dutiful citizen who “performed rites but professed no creed or doctrine.”<sup>5</sup> One cannot apply modern standards of devotion to Greco-Roman paganism, particularly because they were polytheistic. It was difficult to be equally devout to such a considerable number of deities, at least, as we understand devotion today. A benefit of monotheism is that there is only one deity to whom the believers devote themselves. In a polytheistic society, it is unreasonable to expect a person to apply themselves fully to one god, at the expense of the rest of the pantheon. MacMullen provides an image of a pyramid to discuss the

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Lane Fox. *Pagans and Christians* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. 31

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

distinction between monotheism and polytheism. For monotheists, there is a line between the top of the pyramid, representing the deity, and the remainder of the pyramid, representing other supernatural beings including angels, demons, etc. Polytheists do not have the same divide; instead, they recognize a supreme deity at the top, followed by other gods, decreasing in power down the pyramid. For Greco-Roman pagans, Zeus, or Jupiter, resides at the top of the pyramid, but he does not receive all religious devotion, because

“if they adopted monotheism in its radical sense- they must take away power from every other god, thus denying or obliterating everything in the pyramid, save the top. To have done so would have involved the destruction of their whole culture.”<sup>6</sup>

Paganism necessitates the fulfilment of duty towards multiple gods.

A major aspect of paganism was providing the proper sacrifices to the gods in exchange for the preservation of the city. The sacrifices did not need to be underpinned with motives of faith or adoration; the act alone was sufficient to “ensure the peace of the gods.”<sup>7</sup> If people did not perform their natural duty to the gods’ standards, divine punishment was thought to be imminent. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, we see the titular character defying the king’s commands to leave her brother’s body unburied, thereby neglecting the duty of one mortal to another. Antigone braves the consequences of the king and buries her brother in the dead of night so that she might not “draw on [herself] the gods’ sure punishment.”<sup>8</sup> This interaction in Sophocles’ tragedy reflects the general beliefs of pagans, and the fear that ensures that they behave properly.

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<sup>6</sup> MacMullen, *Paganism*, 88

<sup>7</sup> Fox, 31

<sup>8</sup> Sophocles, David. Grene, and Richmond Lattimore. “Antigone” in *Sophocles 1* (New

Though mortals are duty-bound to the gods, the consensus among pagans was that their deities did not feel any sense of affection towards mortals, except towards a few great humans. Though pagans frequently sought the aid of the gods, whether for health, fortune, or prosperous relationships, it was not commonly expected that the gods would intervene. Their distance was anticipated; “Aristotle taught that gods could feel no love for mere humans.”<sup>9</sup> The perceived apathy was in no way a deterrent for the mortals to fulfill their duty, because the gods’ apathy was preferred to their wrath, or even their attention. Classical mythology abounds with stories and poem in which gods interact with mortals. Some of the greatest examples of pagan religion are from the “poets and philosophers,”<sup>10</sup> including, but not limited to Homer and Hesiod for the Greeks, and Ovid and Virgil for the Romans. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, there are countless examples of gods pursuing their desires at the expense of lesser powerful immortals or humans, with very little care for the well-being of those whom they desire. Often, the gods only see what sort of amusement or pleasure they can get out of an interaction with another; “classical mythology abounds in stories in which the gods do wicked things to humans- often for the sport of it.”<sup>11</sup> If a pagan desired a deeper connection to the gods, there were mystery cults into which they could be initiated. These cults offered a more personal and

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York: The Modern Library, 1958), 459

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: a Sociologist Reconsiders History* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996, 200-201

<sup>10</sup> MacMullen, *Paganism*, 30-31

<sup>11</sup> Stark, 200-201



intimate relationship with certain gods as well as a potential for special treatment beyond the grave.<sup>12</sup>

The sources for paganism vary, as do the stories they tell. The myths that survive from one region may not be known by another, especially considering the chances of a text surviving from antiquity. As such, one example of evidence is not representative of paganism across the empire.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, there was no pagan canon; the closest we have to canonical texts would be hymns to the gods<sup>14</sup> and Homeric poetry. Among the poets I previously referenced, Hesiod and Homer were honored highest, because “their antiquity in itself sanctified them.”<sup>15</sup> Antiquity was highly valued in the evaluation of stories, because the old age of a text implied that some stories and customs “could only have been learned from the gods themselves.”<sup>16</sup> Antiquity was of such paramount importance that it was one of the main criticisms of Christianity by pagans.

As stated above, Christianity was born in the Roman Empire, which was dominated by paganism at that time. There is plenty of evidence reflecting the tensions that existed between the Roman government and the new Christians. Famously, Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan, inquiring as to what he should do with the Christians in his community. His general ignorance regarding them paired with their reputation led Pliny to torture two slave women to find out the truth of the group, only to be underwhelmed with the answers. He found only “a pervasive and excessive

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<sup>12</sup> See Graf and Johnston, 114

<sup>13</sup> MacMullen, *Paganism*, 77

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., *Paganism*, 9-10

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., *Paganism*, 12

superstition”<sup>17</sup> in the women, and he was uncertain how he should punish them. Trajan’s response was brief: Pliny should not seek out Christians, nor should he give weight to anonymous accusations; former Christians must prove that they no longer are so, and unrelenting Christians should be punished. Romans feared that which was new and that which was different. Jews were tolerated by the Roman Empire on account of the antiquity of their tradition, but were not esteemed, especially because they refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods. They were considered unobtrusive and acceptable. Christians, however, were too new and too deviant to be accepted by the Roman empire. They played by their own rules and disrespected the pagan gods and traditions which surrounded them.

Christians could not avoid paganism in their daily lives. Pagan practices were heavily embedded in the Roman world. The Roman calendar was replete with opportunities to display proper piety were deeply ingrained in the Roman calendar, with festivals being constant and unavoidable; the only way to avoid the rituals and festivals in honor of the pagan gods would be to renounce “the commerce of mankind and all the offices and amusements of society.”<sup>18</sup> Just about any public event or celebration revolved around the gods, even those that would seem secular to us: tournaments, theater performances, feasts, all were dedicated to various gods, both in temples and public places that were central to the town. People would not be able to attend any event without engaging in pagan rituals because “sacrifice was an integral part of these public

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<sup>17</sup> Pliny, quoted in: Gillian Clark. *Christianity and Roman Society* Cambridge ;: Cambridge University Press, 2004., 19

<sup>18</sup> Gibbon quoted in Tessa Rajak. *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome : Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* Leiden ;: Brill, 2001, 359

celebrations.”<sup>19</sup> We see in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 that Christians could not even eat meat without the danger of consuming food dedicated to the gods, and it was such an issue that he discusses it on two separate occasions.<sup>20</sup> The constant pursuit of Christians to be different from the pagans created problems for them in the eyes of the empire.

Rather than performing their own religious duties, they were seen as neglecting their piety to the gods. To add insult to injury, the main Christian claim of Jesus’ death and resurrection was laughable to most pagans. Many pagans believed that there was no meaningful life after death. The Epicureans were dogmatic about this.<sup>21</sup> Those who did believe in an afterlife saw no potential for resurrection. Famously, Orpheus journeyed down to Hades to seek the reanimation of his wife, Euridice, but he was unsuccessful. There was no resurrection, not even in myths, and the sight of the decayed body in a grave proved to pagans that there was very little *to* resurrect.<sup>22</sup> In Acts 17, the notion of resurrection was enough to lose much of Paul’s Athenian audience and invite mockery.<sup>23</sup> Pagans were baffled that the Christians risked so much for something that, in their context, seemed so absurd.

Pagan festivals were a deeply ingrained part of Roman culture, with a celebration for virtually anything, with sacrifices to accompany them. Many festivals require the

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<sup>19</sup> Rajak, 359

<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14

<sup>21</sup> N. T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* 1st North American ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003, 34

<sup>22</sup> Fox, 265

<sup>23</sup> Acts 17:32

participation of all citizens. A lack of participation was equated with neglecting the gods and a possible invitation of calamity. Though many citizens were skeptical of the existence and power of the pantheon, they still performed their civic duties to the gods; “a degree of agnosticism did not lead to outright atheism.”<sup>24</sup> The emphasis was less on personal belief, and more on community belief. According to Porphyry, a renowned intellectual of the third century, “such is the chief fruit of piety, to honor the divinity according to one’s ancestral custom.”<sup>25</sup> One who refuses to honor the gods crosses into the dangerous realm of atheism. It did not matter that the early Christians believed in a deity; their atheism lay in their denial of others gods, whom they considered false.<sup>26</sup> Christians refused to partake in Roman festivals and celebrate “images of false or even demonic gods.”<sup>27</sup> Their refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods was sometimes paired with a refusal to perform sacrifices according to Jewish custom, because “they interpreted the death of Christ as the perfect sacrifice and commemorated it in the central Christian ritual of the eucharist.”<sup>28</sup> Christians neglected to perform their duties to the pagan gods as well as the sacrificial duties of their parent religion, Judaism<sup>29</sup>. For that, Christians were doubly condemned. They had no antiquity to fall back on as an excuse for their deviant behavior and they were accused of atheism. This was no light charge in Rome, for “to

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<sup>24</sup> Fox, 30

<sup>25</sup> Porphyry quoted in MacMullen, *Paganism*, 2-3. Trans. MacMullen.

<sup>26</sup> Fox, 30; Stark, 192

<sup>27</sup> Clark, 8

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>29</sup> MacMullen, *Paganism*, 2

deny the reality of the gods was absolutely unacceptable” and could lead to ostracism or stoning.<sup>30</sup> Pagans did not try to convert Christians to paganism. Instead, they attempted to draw Christians away from atheism.

The typical punishment that authorities used for Christian was to make them sacrifice to the pagan gods. This action was considered enough to “ensure the peace of the gods,” whether or not any real religious belief motivated the action.<sup>31</sup> Devout Christians would sooner face death than deny their God. Those who were killed for their faith became martyrs and were esteemed by communities of believers for their devotion in the face of death. It is in the accounts of these martyrs where we see the consequences of deviating from the bounds of licit Roman religion, and where we see paganism and Christianity blend and clash and lead to bloodshed.

The Greco-Roman pagan context of early Christianity is also seen in what could be considered continuities of elements of pagan culture. This is especially evident in the treatment of the dead, in the cult of saints, cemetery feasts, healing shrines, and the use of spells.<sup>32</sup> One of the most obvious forms of pagan continuity is in the pagan cemetery feasts, which was adopted to early Christian funerary practices. I will explore the pagan concept of death and the afterlife with much greater attention in the next chapter, but for now I will say that their concept of the afterlife was bleak, and the souls of the dead were dependent on the support of the living.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., *Paganism*, 62

<sup>31</sup> Fox, 31

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 22

The Ancient Roman cemeteries were decorated with images of people feasting at the graves of loved ones, and the tombs had holes and pipes into which their visitors' poured libations. The libations were believed to nourish the dead, and without them, the shades would suffer in the afterlife.<sup>33</sup> Many early Christians<sup>34</sup> adopted this custom and worshipped in the cemeteries beyond the city walls, which were not regulated by Christian leaders.<sup>35</sup> This practice was opposed by many of the church leaders. This practice was so ingrained in the culture that it remained through the fourth century CE, where we see it in Augustine's *Confessions*, when Monica is rebuked for this sort of devotion in cemeteries, "because the ceremonies were like meals to propitiate the departed spirits and similar to heathen superstition."<sup>36</sup> Monica is Augustine's model of a devout Christian, and even she partook in a practice of such obvious pagan origins. There is additional evidence of cultural influence in archeological sources, textual accounts of early Christianity, and, of course, in the New Testament.

The biblical text also presents evidence of pagan influence on early Christianity. Here, I will limit myself to the letters and experiences of the apostle Paul. Paul was the apostle to the gentiles, and thus interacted frequently with Roman pagans. In this section, I will begin with Paul's ministry in Acts, with attention to chapters 14 and 17, in which Paul and Barnabas are misidentified as pagan gods, the latter recording Paul's shock at

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<sup>33</sup> Ramsay MacMullen. *The Second Church : Popular Christianity, A.D. 200-400* . Leiden ;; Brill, 2009. Print, 24

<sup>34</sup> Though the third and fourth century Christians would not see themselves as *early* Christians, that is how they are perceived in scholarship.

<sup>35</sup> MacMullen, *The Second Church*, 58

<sup>36</sup> Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 2008., 6.2

the paganism in Athens; then, I will look at 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul advises Christians on marriage to nonbelievers.

In Acts 14, after a miraculous healing by Paul, the Lystrans declare that “the gods have come down to us in human form!”<sup>37</sup> They identify Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes, then they rush to sacrifice to them. Paul and Barnabas are horrified that the actions of the Lystrans would sabotage their plans of evangelism, and instead fortifies the community’s belief in their pagan gods. That the gods would visit Lystra is not a strange concept to pagans, because “the presence of the gods came to each generation with a long and hallowed prehistory,”<sup>38</sup> recorded in epics like Homer’s *Odyssey* and a multitude of hymns. This passage concludes with the stoning of Paul and Barnabas, which shows that the apostle was ill-prepared for such a misunderstanding. Rather than draw people to God, they instead seem to the Lystrans to be imposters of pagan gods.

Acts 17 describes another instance of Paul’s interactions in the pagan world. Luke tells us that when he was in Athens, Paul “was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols,”<sup>39</sup> and he preaches before the Areopagus. He first recognizes how religious the Athenians are, then he relates how he had seen an altar inscribed “to an unknown god.”<sup>40</sup> He uses this description as a starting point to evangelize the Athenians. Paul’s depictions of God are presented as a contrast to the pagan gods. The Christian God does not need sacrifices, nor does he reside in shrines, and he is not “an image formed by the

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<sup>37</sup> Acts 14:11 NRSV

<sup>38</sup> Fox, 99

<sup>39</sup> Acts 17:16 NRSV

<sup>40</sup> Acts 17:23 NRSV

art and imagination of mortals.”<sup>41</sup> Paul’s reduction of the pagan gods to the idols and shrines that decorated Athens may reveal some of the pagans’ insecurities, for some became believers, while others scoffed and rejected Paul’s message on account of his discussion of resurrection.<sup>42</sup> This passage helps to illuminate the context of the early Christian converts: they resided in a city full of idols, unable to escape images of that from which they turned in favor of Paul’s message.

The aforementioned passages discuss Christian and pagan interactions within the public sphere, but they were also relevant at the level of the household. Paul addresses these domestic interactions in 1 Corinthians 7. Theoretically, the people who converted in Acts 17:34 would be able to go home to a Christian sanctuary in their pagan world, but this was not the case for many. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul advises unmarried believers to remain single in order to focus on the Lord. This passage stands in an interesting tension with the Augustan marriage laws, which were enacted to “stimulate the birthrate and secure the state’s military manpower.”<sup>43</sup> When put in this context, Paul’s advocacy of singleness can be viewed as having a political dimension instead of merely the encouragement of asceticism that it is often viewed as.<sup>44</sup> Augustus’ laws required that widows marry within three years of their spouse’s death, and they limited the term of engagement, making it nearly illegal to remain single. Reed suggests:

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<sup>41</sup> Acts 17:29 NRSV

<sup>42</sup> Acts 17:32 NRSV

<sup>43</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, 58 quoted in David Alan Reed. “Paul on Marriage and Singleness: Reading 1 Corinthians with the Augustan Marriage Laws”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013, 18

<sup>44</sup> Reed, 8



When Paul's directives in 1 Corinthians 7 are compared with Augustus' legislation, we do not find a Paul who is creating a "unique Christian theology of marriage," as some interpreters would have it. In fact, this comparative exercise has shown that little in Paul is *sui generis*, considering that he borrows and mimics the culture around him. Instead, what we have found throughout this work is a Paul who is engaged in the cultural discussions of his day regarding marriage, singleness, and the value of children.<sup>45</sup>

The most striking part of 1 Corinthians 7, for our purposes, is Paul's advice in verses 7:12-16 towards believers who are married to nonbelievers, which we will call mixed marriages.<sup>46</sup> In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul advises believers who are married to non-believers. Paul acknowledges that a mixed marriage is not ideal, but he encourages the Christians to remain in the marriage, so long as it is the will of their unbelieving spouse. This claim contrasts much of the Jewish law pertaining to marriage, which advocated against marrying outside of the nation of Israel. There is nothing impure about these marriages, no division of purity between partners. Rather, Paul makes the family one by arguing that the believing spouse casts a circle of salvation around the parents and their children, uniting the household under Christ. This salvation of the household is a common theme in the New Testament, as in the case of Acts 16:31-34, where Paul tells his Jailer to "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household,"<sup>47</sup> followed by the baptism of his household. Instances similar to his happen five more times in the book of Acts, and many more times in the remainder of the New

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 134-135

<sup>46</sup> For a further exploration of Paul and mixed marriages, see: Barton, Stephen C. "Sanctification and Oneness in 1 Corinthians with Implications for the Case of 'Mixed Marriages' (1 Corinthians 7.12-16)." *New Testament studies* 63, no. 1 (January 2017)

<sup>47</sup> Acts 16:31

Testament.<sup>48</sup> For Paul, mixed marriages are not an insurmountable problem, but rather, an occasion to extend salvation to those who would otherwise not receive it. Paul is actively involved in the cultural discussions and debates surrounding him and his congregations.

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<sup>48</sup> See Acts 10:1-11:18; Acts 16:13-15; Acts 16:25-34; Acts 18:8, in which two households are converted.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Pagan Afterlife Accounts

To lay a framework for our comparison of the pagan afterlife and the afterlife accounts in early Christian martyrdom accounts, we must first explore what, exactly, is typical in the expectations and depictions of the Greco-Roman pagan Underworld. There are a great many sources one could choose from. For my purposes, I have selected two to focus on: the afterlife expectations in the Orphic and Bacchic mystery Cult and the Underworld depicted in Virgil's *Aeneid*. An abundance of scholarship deals with the Orphic mystery cult and the development of early Christianity and Paul's writings. It is, moreover, a prime example of a prevalent mystery cult with eschatological emphases. The *Aeneid* will serve as my second example because it provides a popular and thorough depiction of the Underworld, operating as an amalgamation of popular eschatological beliefs at the time of its conception.

Within pagan polytheism, there was, in general, little hope for a personal relationship with divinity or for personal benefits and blessings from the gods. As an alternative avenue for a more direct connection with the supernatural powers, many sought initiations into mystery cults to fill this lack. Entrance into these mystery cults was characterized by autonomy; one was never forced into one, nor did one inherit membership. Initiation into mystery cults was more of a financial investment than a lifestyle change or mark of piety to the divine. The practice of purchasing divine favor and the claim that "initiation alone would suffice to guarantee postmortem bliss" were

controversial.<sup>1</sup> The voices of the ancient critics serve us in showing the cost-benefit nature of mystery cults. The benefits were secured through financial investment rather than a change in one's behavior, but countless people were excluded from these benefits due to financial restrictions. Many of the mystery cults offered reassurance to the living, whether temporal reassurance for earthly matters or eschatological alternatives to the dreary Underworld that was depicted in the works of Homer.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence for such liberation in the works of Pindar, "Happy they all on account of the *teletai* that are free from suffering,"<sup>3</sup> contrasted with the image of the eternally toiling of those who were not initiated.

The mystery cult that is important for our purposes is the Orphic mystery cult, which is inextricably linked with the Bacchic mystery cult. They are permanently intertwined, as is evidenced by "the interrelation of Bacchic mysteries with books and groups of people called 'Orphic,' as if originating from Orpheus, the mythical singer."<sup>4</sup> The myth that serves as the foundation for this mystery cult is a very dark anthropogony that is attributed to Orpheus. In it, the more traditional genealogy of the gods has been changed; in the Orphic myth, Dionysus is the son of Persephone, likely a result of the desire to connect Dionysus with the Underworld and give validity to the cult's eschatological emphasis.<sup>5</sup> The myth narrates Zeus conferring his kingship to his son,

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<sup>1</sup> Graf and Johnston, 105. They observe further that "several voices complain that these cults promised salvation to those who had done nothing more than scrape together enough cash to be initiated."

<sup>2</sup> Robin Lane Fox. *Pagans and Christians* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990., 97. For a discussion of the cautions concerning promises for the afterlife, see J.Z Smith's *Drudgery Divine*

<sup>3</sup> Pindar, *Dirges*, quoted in Walter Burkert. *Ancient Mystery Cults* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987, 22

<sup>4</sup> Burkert, 5

Dionysus, only for him to be lured away by the Titans and dismembered, cooked, and consumed by them. Zeus discovers the Titans and what remains Dionysus' sacrificed body, smelling of roasted lamb. It is from the combination of the Titan's bodies and Dionysus' blood that humans are born. This anthropogony is not a creation story but an origin story of "spontaneous generation" in which "no deliberate design, action, or volition brings humanity to light,"<sup>6</sup> giving humans an incredibly grim genesis. This myth serves both as an origin story for humanity, as well as an origin story for human suffering, resulting from a corrupted sacrifice. Within each person is a part of Dionysus, the "positive, divine part" as well as a part of the Titans, constituting the "sinful, proud, and wicked part, from which we must liberate ourselves"<sup>7</sup> through ritual and atonement. This myth lays the foundation for the Orphic Mystery Cult. It is with this story in mind that Dionysus is placed almost on par with Zeus, "a move that was essential in the specific context of an eschatologically oriented mystery cult, where Dionysus' role would be more immediately important than Zeus'.<sup>8</sup>" It is to Dionysus and Persephone, the grieving queen of the Underworld, that those in the Orphic Mystery Cult, the *Orpheotelestai*, must give their attention to receive the afterlife benefits that are exclusively available to them.

Orphism had a special focus on eschatology; it is "often defined in modern scholarship precisely by the presence of certain kinds of ideas about the afterlife, the

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<sup>5</sup> Graf and Johnston, 74

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 88

<sup>7</sup> Alberto Bernabé Pajares and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal. *Instructions for the Netherworld: the Orphic Gold Tablets Leiden* ; Brill, 2008, 195

<sup>8</sup> Graf and Johnston, 91-92

nature and fate of the soul.”<sup>9</sup> The promises of Orphism are not for the living, but they are primarily eschatological, and the gods to whom the initiates adhere reflect this fact.

Eschatology is never a central concern of a divinity who, like Zeus, Apollo, or Athena, represents the daily life of the *polis*; rather, it typically falls to divinities such as Demeter, Persephone, and Dionysus who are important primarily to particular portions of the population or important only at particular times of the year or times of life.<sup>10</sup>

This eschatological emphasis within Orphism is an exception among the pagan religion in which it is situated. Even more exceptional is Persephone’s supremacy over the Underworld; she has “a central role in the soul’s salvation”<sup>11</sup> Persephone’s authority is abnormal when compared to the more hegemonic myth of the Underworld, in which Hades is king and all depends on him. Here, the rules are different, and the initiate must seek atonement from Persephone and Dionysus in order to be liberated from guilt inherited from the Titan’s treachery, resulting in the damnation of the kind of bleak afterlife that was anticipated by most Greco-Roman pagans. The initiates are set free from the “dreary Homeric afterlife,” instead belonging to “a more lively afterlife,”<sup>12</sup> exclusive to those who had undergone the proper procedures for atonement.

Though initiation liberated the *orpheotelestai* from the Titan’s burden, they still had to pursue their place of belonging in the paradisiacal afterlife, reserved for the initiates. The problem remained: how would the initiates remember who they were or where they were supposed to go in order to claim their place under Dionysus’ protection?

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<sup>9</sup> Radcliffe G Edmonds III. “A Lively Afterlife and Beyond : The Soul in Plato, Homer, and the Orphica.” *Études platoniciennes* 11, no. 11 (2014), 3

<sup>10</sup> Graf and Johnston, 73

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 122

<sup>12</sup> Edmonds III. “A Lively Afterlife and Beyond,” 7

Many traditions believed that the newly deceased souls would be confused and disoriented in their new postmortem environment, including those who adhered to Orphic beliefs. The *orpheotelestai* solution is found in a unique category of archeological artifacts: gold leaf tablets on which inscriptions are written.<sup>13</sup> These tablets include information that ranges anywhere from the name of the initiate to a litany of directions, guiding the spirit through the Underworld to their final destination. These tablets provide evidence of a long-lasting tradition of Orphism, dating from the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE.<sup>14</sup> For centuries, initiates were buried with these gold tablets, believing that they would ensure the initiated spirits did not make the mistake of falling victim to the traps intended for the average soul, of which they were exempt. I will focus on twenty tablets, which served as *mnemonic devices* tablets, providing instructions for the soul regarding where to go, to whom to speak, and what they must say. The inscriptions on the leaves originate from oral poetry, with the intended audience being the journeying spirit. Their oral origins explain why the inscriptions are not consistent across the board; the verses were “reformulated each time they were inscribed,” with the variation of “how much was remembered and what was felt to be the most important to fit onto the tiny leaf.”<sup>15</sup> Though the contents varied due to memory, availability of finances, and memory of oral passages, the purpose of the gold tablets is obvious: they are written “in order to

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<sup>13</sup> The origins of the gold tablets has been debated, but most scholars agree that they reflect an “Orphic pattern,” due to their eschatological emphasis, the evidence of oral transmission, and the foundational myth. Nuzzu, 142; Bernabé and Christóbal, 181; Tortorelli Ghidini (1995b), 474

<sup>14</sup> Radcliffe G Edmonds III. *Myths of the Underworld Journey Plato, Aristophanes, and the “Orphic” Gold Tablets* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004., 22

<sup>15</sup> Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey*, 36

avoid the initiate's (i.e., hero's) confusion, fear, and oblivion of what he had learnt in *teletais*, at the moment he has to start his Underworld journey."<sup>16</sup> The twenty longest inscriptions narrate the postmortem journey of the initiate to the promised region for the initiates, and who better to act as a poetic guide through the Underworld than Orpheus, who journeyed through the Underworld himself in myth. His storied first-hand experience lends credibility to the narrative maps recorded in gold to guide the newly-deceased initiates.

The prescribed journey means nothing without the divinities who make it possible for the initiates, specifically through the language of salvation. Persephone's presence in the tablets is that of a "divinity who protects the initiates, and plays a fundamental role in their salvation, since she is the judge who ultimately determines their destiny."<sup>17</sup>

Persephone's role in this is inextricably linked with Bacchus; she is both the mother of Bacchus and the mother of humanity, as they were born from the ashes of the Titans who ate the body of her son.<sup>18</sup> The myth provides an anthropogony detailing both the origin of humanity and the origin of corruption in humankind. Thus, humans must be purified of the wicked part of them that was borne of the Titans, and the only ones who can provide the necessary atonement of such wickedness are Persephone and Dionysus. Because Bacchus was the principal victim, he is "the only one who can liberate the human race from the guilt of their ancestors," and his forgiveness is "indispensable for obtaining the forgiveness of the god's mother, the queen of the Underworld.[51]"<sup>19</sup> This notion of

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<sup>16</sup> Bernabé and Cristóbal, 55

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 70-71

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 68



salvation found in the Orphic gold tablets is uncommon in Pagan religions. Most of the divine aid available to mortals was related to healing or prosperity. Life beyond the grave was not an immediate concern until death and interment were imminent. Most were resigned to the afterlife described in Homer and Virgil's epics, with no urgency for finding an alternative to the bleak and expected eternal existence.

Mystery, in its most literal sense, is inherent to the Orphic and Bacchic cult, with the secrets tucked away in the oral poetry attributed to Orpheus and recorded on the gold leaves to guide the deceased through the Underworld. Many of the tablets contain instructions and directions through the Underworld with details and passwords to get them to their final destination. Graf and Johnston argue that initiation sets apart the initiates as "one of the 'good-plus,' who should be allowed to join other members of that group in the paradisiacal part of the Underworld" through "set phrases that must be spoken to Underworld figures [to] prove that the soul has been ritually purified during initiation" and set free of the "stain caused by the Titans' murder of Dionysus."<sup>20</sup> These set phrases operate as quasi-passwords used to access the benefits exclusive to the *teletai*. These passwords often include instructions for whom the initiate must converse with and what they must say to identify themselves as one of those whom Dionysus has saved. One of the most common identifiers has a few variations, the main one being "I am a child of Earth and starry Sky," with the alternative "My name is Starry" and "My race is heavenly"<sup>21</sup> referencing Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which the gods are said to have been

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<sup>19</sup> Bernabé and Cristóbal, 72

<sup>20</sup> Graf and Johnston, 129

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 113

“born from Earth and starry Sky.”<sup>22</sup> Graf and Johnston claim that this identifier is to “establish a personal relationship between the initiate and one or more gods,”<sup>23</sup> which sets the initiates on a level above other mortals and reinforces their connection to Dionysus and Persephone. Walter Burkert asserts that these lines give the initiates a “foundation of privilege through genealogy” in which there is “A story of generation which the initiate has come to ‘know,’ in contrast to others who are excluded from the secret.”<sup>24</sup> It is the knowledge that the initiate must make this genealogical claim that is inscribed on the gold leaf and which allows them to access the “holy meadow”<sup>25</sup> which they are promised. On some tablets, there is an additional phrase that suggests a baptism, or a rebirth as a divinity: “you have become a god instead of a mortal. A kid you fell into milk.”<sup>26</sup> Multiple other times, these tablets reference falling into milk in some capacity, and the knowledge of this baptism must be relayed in order to solidify the soul’s status as *other* among the dead. In addition to the phrases that the tablets instruct the initiates to say, they also provide instructions for where to go and what to do.

One category of the gold leaves is the geographic tablets, which provide the initiates with specific instructions regarding the physical environment along the “proper

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<sup>22</sup> Hesiod. *Theogony*; and, *Works and Days*. Translated by Dorothea Wender. London: Penguin, 2004, line 106

<sup>23</sup> Graf and Johnston, 114

<sup>24</sup> Burkert, 76

<sup>25</sup> Tablet 27 from Pherae, Graf and Johnston, 39

<sup>26</sup> Tablet 3 from Thurii, Graf and Johnston, 9

path to take in the Underworld.”<sup>27</sup> The tablets are small and limited in their content, but they are rife with details pertaining to the geography and certain figures and elements present Beyond. The general consensus among the living was that the Underworld is a dark and confusing terrain, with many myths describing “the difficulties of finding one’s way in the Underworld and the dangers of wandering lost.”<sup>28</sup> This treachery necessitates a map of sorts through the afterlife, as found in these golden poetic excerpts. The gold tablets record their instructions “in order to avoid the initiate’s confusion, fear, and oblivion... at the moment he has to start his Underworld journey”<sup>29</sup> Thirteen of these tablets provide certain geographical features of the Underworld, listing features such as “paths, trees, bodies of water, and meadows... which suggests that mapping the Underworld” was incredibly important to both the producers and the purchasers of the tablets.

The image that these tablets provide us with is that of a “dark and shadowy” “subterranean place” in which one “abandons the light of day.”<sup>30</sup> Many of these tablets begin as the soul is dying or has just died, and they immediately discuss at least one body of water. They differ in which body is good or bad, but regardless, the spirit must drink. The spring on the right is next to a Cypress tree; some tablets say not to “do not even

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine Shortell Nuzzo. “Orpheus and Orphism: Philosophical Religiosity in the Crises of Third-Century C.E. Rome and Fourth-Century B.C.E Greece”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019, 123

<sup>28</sup> Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey*, 13

<sup>29</sup> Bernabé and Cristóbal, 55

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22

approach this spring!”<sup>31</sup> while others say, “grant me to drink from the ever-flowing spring on the right, where the cypress is.”<sup>32</sup> Those who forbid drinking from the spring suggest that the spirit drinks from the Lake of Memory, which, according to the general mythological consensus, will restore memory rather than erase it, which the first body would do. This choice is incredibly significant, as a drink from the wrong body of water would condemn the spirit of the initiate to the general afterlife from which they were to be liberated. After the spirit drinks, they are guided toward the “sacred road on which other glorious initiates and *bacchoi* travel,”<sup>33</sup> which interestingly includes limitations for which direction the spirits must go: always right, never left. Of the thirteen geographic tablets, twelve mention a need for the souls to drink water in the Underworld.<sup>34</sup> This is not unique to these mystery cults; “the motif of the thirst felt by the dead in the Beyond is a universal belief” that is reinforced by the common practice of “libations and the custom of depositing recipients with water on tombs... to assuage the thirst of the dead.”<sup>35</sup> This water is a necessary thing in the Underworld to both assuage the suffering of the spirit and to permit them to go to the paradise that awaits them. The final destination for the initiates is “the holy meadows and groves of Persephone,”<sup>36</sup> an image of abundance

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<sup>31</sup> Tablet 8 from Entella, Graf and Johnston, 17

<sup>32</sup> Tablet 10 from Eleutherna, Graf and Johnston, 21

<sup>33</sup> Tablet 1 from Hipponion, Graf and Johnston, 5

<sup>34</sup> Graf and Johnston, 98

<sup>35</sup> Bernabé and Cristóbal, 29

<sup>36</sup> Tablet 3 from Thurii, Graf and Johnston, 9

instead of the scarcity of the Underworld. There, they are fed and cared for by the queen of the Underworld herself.

The gold tablets exclusive to the Orphic and Bacchic mystery cult provide the initiates with the passwords and the instructions for what they must do when they enter and traverse through the Underworld. There is no mention of “the bad souls, their left-hand journey or their loathsome fate”<sup>37</sup> as the material was too costly, and the space was too precious to waste it on something irrelevant to the initiates. What we do have are depictions of the scenery, including the cypress and the streams and the passwords to say to guide the spirits on their journey to the holy meadow. The Orphic and Bacchic mystery cults are a rich source of eschatology whose archeological artifacts are few and far between but rife with imagery and poetry to provide insight.

The other text that I explore for the sake of understanding the Greco-Roman perceptions of the afterlife is Virgil’s *Aeneid*. This section takes on a literary analysis of book 6 of the epic for the sake of extracting geographical details and themes of the eternal existence Beyond. The *Aeneid* is the foundation that I use because it draws upon other mainstream pagan sources of literature, like the works of Homer and Plato. The general Roman “reflection on the afterlife was largely a continuation of that of the Greeks, but it also illustrates the increasing influence of Platonic thought.”<sup>38</sup> Eschatological beliefs only grew in intricacy as time passed and communication spread. For example, Virgil’s exploration of the Underworld, though similar, is far more complex

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<sup>37</sup> Graf and Johnston, 102

<sup>38</sup> Mark T. Finney. “Afterlife in Antiquity: Post-Mortem Existence in Its Greco-Roman Context.” In *Resurrection, Hell and the Afterlife*, 6–24. 1st ed. Routledge, 2016, 9

than Homer's in Book Eleven of the *Odyssey*. In the earlier Greek exploration, "the vast majority of people simply languish away in Hades, neither suffering any particular distress nor enjoying any particular pleasure."<sup>39</sup> Book Six of Virgil's *Aeneid* has multiple regions throughout the Underworld, with different punishments and characteristics to each, including a region of surpassing blessings.

Aeneas begins his journey through the Underworld begins by entering a cave to an underground region, where he passes sinister gods and horrifying monsters along the road. He then reaches the shore of the Acheron's Tartarean waves,<sup>40</sup> swarmed with the wandering souls of the unburied who wait for their chance to cross the waters and find the place where they will reside forever. Aeneas then boards Charon's boat, which bears him across the water to the next region of the Underworld, guarded by Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog. After Cerberus, Aeneas and his guide, the Sybil, pass the jury of the dead, comprised of those who died at infancy and "those who were condemned to die on a false charge."<sup>41</sup> This jury assists Minos, "the grand inquisitor" who "scans the lives of those accused, their charges."<sup>42</sup> The presence of Minos "suggests that the social hierarchies from the world of the living are reproduced in the land of the dead," that the "afterlife is not uniform for all"<sup>43</sup> The remainder of the *Aeneid* Book 6 depicts the various

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<sup>39</sup> Graf and Johnston, 106

<sup>40</sup> Virgil. & Fagles, R. (2006). *The Aeneid*. Viking., 6.337

<sup>41</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.496

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.499-501

<sup>43</sup> Edmonds III. "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond," 11. Minos places each soul and the varying destinations for each spirit suggests that the afterlife is not uniform, and Elysium is filled with many Roman leaders, suggesting that greatness is a prerequisite for admission.

regions into which souls may be placed after judgment, varying from torturous, to bleak, to glorious and paradisiacal.

The first region into which souls are placed is the Styx: “grisly swamp and its loveless, lethal waters,”<sup>44</sup> which holds the souls of those who died by suicide, though they were not criminals. Their reality is so wretched that they must “yearn” “to endure grim want and long hard labor!”<sup>45</sup> The region directly following the Styx is the Field of Mourning, with geographic descriptions of “lonely paths,” “myrtle bowers,”<sup>46</sup> and shadows to hide the shades in their misery. In this region, Aeneas learns that whatever ails a person at the time of their death continues to affect them after their life has ended. In the Fields of Mourning, the souls continue to suffer the consequences of “the harsh, wasting sickness, cruel love” and “not even in death do their torments leave them, ever.”<sup>47</sup> This is not uncommon in Greco-Roman depictions of the Underworld. In his *Gorgias*, Plato notes that “whatever sort of bodily appearance a man had acquired in life, that is manifest also after his death,”<sup>48</sup> which is supported by “vases of the period, where the dead are regularly shown with their wounds, sometimes still bandaged.”<sup>49</sup> This is not unique to Virgil’s epic, as Homer and Ovid both incorporate the perpetuation of wounds

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<sup>44</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.507-508

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.505-506

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.514

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.513-515

<sup>48</sup> Plato. *Gorgias*, Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 3 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967. 524d.

<sup>49</sup> Finney, 9

after death in their works, as well. Virgil's Aeneas finds Dido in the Fields of Mourning with a fresh wound and lingering emotions from her final moments, manifesting in "welling tears" and a "wild fiery glance."<sup>50</sup> Aeneas moves on from the Fields of Mourning to the outer fields, where the fallen heroes live. Here, Aeneas meets a son of Priam, Deiphobus, "mutilated, his whole body, his face hacked to pieces,"<sup>51</sup> nearly unrecognizable from the fatal and merciless wounds that killed him. It is Deiphobus who describes the place he resides as "these sunless homes of sorrow, harrowed lands."<sup>52</sup> This region contains no geographic features, just spirits wandering in perpetuity.

Aeneas and the Sybil next come to a fork in the road. To the right lies "our path to Elysium, but the left-hand road torments the wicked, leading down to Tartarus, path to doom."<sup>53</sup> Here, too, the left side is the one associated with the bad souls, while the right is the direction that the good souls will travel. Tartarus is described as an "enormous fortress ringed with triple walls and raging around it all, a blazing flood of lava, Tartarus' River of Fire, whirling thunderous boulders."<sup>54</sup> A gate protects the entrance, which neither man nor god can remove, watched closely by Tisiphone. Inside, Aeneas can hear that "groans resound from the depths, the savage crack of the lash, the grating creak of iron, the clank of dragging chains."<sup>55</sup> These sounds and sights horrify Aeneas, making

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<sup>50</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.543-544

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.574

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.623

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.630-632

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.639-641

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.647-648



him stop where he is. To this point, Aeneas has only stopped when he is so overwhelmed with emotion. When he encountered the wandering souls, pity had overtaken his heart. Here, Aeneas is frozen with terror. He demands to know what the souls did to deserve such a horrific punishment, to which Sybil explains. All who reside within the gates of adamant did something deserving of such punishment, and “no pure soul may set foot on that wicked threshold.”<sup>56</sup> Tartarus is described geographically as an abyss that “plunges headlong down through the darkness twice as far as our gaze goes up to Olympus rising toward the skies.”<sup>57</sup> The depth of Tartarus suggests a capacity to house an incredible amount of people, monsters, and divinities. The size may be explained, in part, by the fact that many of the most ancient Titans, as well as monsters and giants, reside there. The descriptions of the human souls in Tartarus belong to great categories with various examples of ways that mortals betrayed other humans. This suggests that there are countless souls beyond the adamant gates, enough to fill the immense space. There are too many for “a hundred tongues and a hundred mouths and a voice of iron” to “capture all the crimes or run through all the torments”<sup>58</sup> within the realm of Tartarus.

As Aeneas and the Sybil depart, Aeneas must wash himself, “rinsing his limbs with fresh pure water, there at the threshold”<sup>59</sup> of the gates of Elysium, where he must also place the golden bough. This is a baptism of sorts; he must cleanse himself of the dirt and atmosphere of Tartarus, where the worst of the wicked reside, as well as of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 6.654

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 6.671-672

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 6.724-726

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 6.737-738

remainder of the Underworld. The presence of the “fresh pure water” means that this baptism is something that all must do before entering the gates of the most blessed place below. It makes sense that there should be no trace of wickedness in the place that only the best might reach. Additionally, the requirement of a sacrifice, the elusive golden bough, is another check to ensure that only the best enter, permitted by Fate.<sup>60</sup> In sum, entrance to Elysium requires a rite of baptism and a sacrifice that proves worthiness. This “land of joy” with “fresh green fields, the Fortunate Groves where the blessed make their homes” stands in stark contrast to the rest of the Underworld through which Aeneas has journeyed. In contrast to the darkness of an eternal night, sometimes lit by flame, “here, a freer air, a dazzling radiance clothes the fields and the spirits possess their own sun their own stars.”<sup>61</sup> The purity and blessedness of the spirits is such that they glow from within. They are not hidden like those in the Fields of Mourning, but they light up their landscape. There is even song and dance to the music of Orpheus as well as “feasting [and] singing in joy a chorus to Healing Apollo”<sup>62</sup> all around Elysium. These happy spirits “with snow-white headbands crowning their brows, flow around the Sybil”<sup>63</sup> as she talks to them. Their headbands and fluidity of movement are indicative of their goodness and purity, as snow-white necessitates cleanliness to remain its true color. When asked where the spirits live, one answers, “we live in shady groves, we settle on

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.175

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 6.741-742

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 6.760-761

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6.771

pillowed banks and meadows washed with brooks,”<sup>64</sup> and he guides them to an “easy path.”<sup>65</sup> There is no need to make a permanent shelter in a paradise; when everywhere one looks is safe and comfortable, what need is there for a roof or mattress?

Immediately after leaving these souls, Aeneas and the Sybil find Anchises “deep in a valley’s green recess,”<sup>66</sup> watching souls pass by. They reunite joyfully but without the ability to embrace. From this vantage point, Aeneas sees the valley in its totality: “a sheltered grove and rustling wooden brakes and the Lethe flowing past the homes of peace.”<sup>67</sup> On the banks of the Lethe await a crowd of happy spirits, waiting for their opportunity to be reincarnated, that they might purge their souls of their earthly offenses. The lucky and virtuous few may reside in Elysium for a long time, left clear with “the eternal breath of fire purged and pure,”<sup>68</sup> set free from the cycle of reincarnation. Anchises then tells Aeneas the future of his people and his family and the glory to come for much of the remaining two-hundred lines of Book Six.

The *Aeneid* has its own political goals, but it provides a good representation of the pagan afterlife as it was typically seen. Virgil took common themes from Homer, Plato, and common myths to create the most celebrated description of the underworld in Roman literature. This, along with the Orphic Gold Tablets, comprises the pagan foundation to which I will compare the afterlife accounts in early Christian martyrdom texts.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 6.779-780

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 6.782

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 6.786

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 6.813-814

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6.864

## CHAPTER THREE

### Pagan Elements in the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*

The *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* is a work which narrates the martyrdom of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, dated most frequently to the mid-second century.<sup>1</sup> Though there is some debate as to the historicity of the events narrated,<sup>2</sup> Polycarp's martyrdom bore great significance both to the Christians within his community, who believed that they were spared persecution through his death, and to later Christians who encountered this account. In this chapter, I argue that the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* contains elements of pagan eschatological beliefs that have been adopted and reworked to fit in the context of second century Christianity. To do this, I explore Mursurillo's translation of the text through the lens of literary analysis, extracting relevant elements and situating them in their historical and cultural context in the Roman Empire.

I begin with an exploration of the context and audience of the treatise. The author of this account portrays the situation in Smyrna as one of intense and unrelenting persecution of Christians. The first indication of the cultural context is that the persecution is by the Roman Empire. This is shown through the perpetrator being the governor and the order that the persecuted must "swear by the gods and offer sacrifice" as well as the command to "swear by the Genius of the emperor" and declare that "Caesar

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<sup>1</sup> The events most likely took place in 155/156 or 166/167 AD. Cf, Parvis, 106

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. S. Parvis. (2006). The Martyrdom of Polycarp. *Expository Times*, 118(3), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00145246060726> and Candida R. Moss. "Nailing Down and Tying Up: Lessons in Intertextual Impossibility from the Martyrdom of Polycarp." *Vigiliae christianae* 67, no. 2 (2013): 117–136.

is lord”.<sup>3</sup> A major theme in the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* is the *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ) in life through death, including undergoing persecution. The foundational elements of Polycarp’s *imitatio* begin with their mutual suffering under the Roman Empire. Moreover, both Jesus and Polycarp were persecuted at the hands of a Roman official named Herod.<sup>4</sup> This is just one of many ways that Polycarp’s martyrdom resembles the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is also just one of many ways this martyrdom account has resonances with pagan literature and mythology.

There is a tendency in early Christian literature to reference Greco-Roman culture and mythology, possibly as a tool for evangelism or a “methodology of ‘integrated acculturation’ that seeks to build ‘linguistic bridges’ across thought worlds” between Christian and pagan audiences.<sup>5</sup> An exploration of other, similar instances will serve as the foundation for my argument that this phenomenon is present in *Polycarp*. In this chapter I will focus on the connection of Christianity with pagan eschatological themes. According to Kyrtatas, “Jesus was not (and could not have been) ignorant of ideas circulating about afterlife torments,”<sup>6</sup> and some of his parables reflect this knowledge. For example, Luke 16:19-31, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus contains an allusion to pagan eschatological beliefs, in which it was commonly believed that the spirits of the dead required sustenance for their comfort in the afterlife and the lack thereof brought

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<sup>3</sup> Musurillo, Herbert. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts and Translations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. *Polycarp* 4, 8, 9.

<sup>4</sup> In Matthew 2:13, an angel tells Joseph that Herod is seeking the infant Jesus “to destroy him”

<sup>5</sup> Bradley S Billings. “‘The Angels Who Sinned . . . He Cast into Tartarus’ (2 Peter 2:4): Its Ancient Meaning and Present Relevance.” *Expository times* 119, no. 11 (2008): 534

<sup>6</sup> Dimitris Kyrtatas. “The Origins of Christian Hell.” *Numen* 56, no. 2-3 (2009): 286

suffering to the neglected souls.<sup>7</sup> This was not a belief in the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, the rich man begged “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the top of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”<sup>8</sup> The image here is that of a pagan underworld; the rich man’s wicked life and the presence of flames may have landed him in Tartarus, though the NRSV, and most other translations, gives an overall destination of Hades. The overall setting of the parable reflects “widespread ideas in the Mediterranean world, according to which thirst was not a punishment for sins committed but the common lot of the great majority of the dead.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, there appears to be a conscious connection between a parable of Jesus and pagan eschatological beliefs, as the connections are too obvious to have been a mistake.

Another example of Biblical writings overlapping with pagan mythology is found in 2 Peter 2:4: “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness...”<sup>10</sup> The Greek says “Tartarus” for “deepest darkness,” and in doing so, the author “widens the conceptual field of meaning to enter the region of Grecian mythology” to engage “readers and hearers schooled and versed in the language and thought world of Graeco-Roman paganism.”<sup>11</sup> I would suggest that this overlapping of ideas here is intended to serve an evangelistic purpose, to provide a bridge to the Christian world for a pagan audience. It connects the new to the familiar religion, as Paul does in Acts 17, connecting the Christian God to an

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<sup>7</sup> MacMullen, *The Second Church*, 24

<sup>8</sup> Luke 16:14, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Kyratas, p. 285

<sup>10</sup> 2 Peter 2:4, NRSV

<sup>11</sup> Billings, p. 534

unknown pagan deity in the Areopagus.<sup>12</sup> This is an inclusive action on the part of someone preaching to a diverse crowd. Both Paul and the author of 2 Peter know that their audience contains Christians and non-Christians. Even if the intended audience of 2 Peter 2:4 was solely Christian, they would still be familiar with such a mainstream concept as Tartarus. These are just a few of many examples in early Christian literature where authors tailor their arguments to their surrounding culture.

We see this intentional connection multiple times in *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* when the author simultaneously utilizes pagan and Christian imagery. The writer hints at the contemporary eschatological beliefs of the Christians in Smyrna. It is a consistent theme throughout the martyrdom account that Polycarp is gaining great rewards in heaven, securing his salvation beyond that of a normal Christian. This theme is not unique to Polycarp; in fact, the fate and destination of the martyr after death is discussed frequently in martyrdom accounts, both by the voice of the martyrs and the writing of the authors.<sup>13</sup> Their suffering was not futile but brought them immediate certainty as to their eternal destination. They would face “neither the fires of Hades nor the judgment by God.”<sup>14</sup> Through martyrdom, the author tells us, the persecuted “in one hour [bought] themselves an exemption from the eternal fire... never to be extinguished.”<sup>15</sup> Their eyes were focused on Christ, seeking his glory and favor and rejecting the sorrows of this world, favoring the eternal over the temporal.

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<sup>12</sup> Discussed on pages 9 and 10 in chapter 1. Paul preaches in Athens and references the altar inscribed “To an unknown god” (Acts 17:23, NRSV) arguing that this god is the Christian God.

<sup>13</sup> Candida R. Moss. *The Other Christs Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* New York ;: Oxford University Press, 2010. 126

<sup>14</sup> Moss, 143-144

<sup>15</sup> Polycarp, 2

Polycarp had ample warning before he was killed; after days of prayer, he was given vision of his pillow burning, letting him know that he would be burned alive.<sup>16</sup> The devotion revealed by Polycarp preceding his vision lets him, and the reader, know the divine origins of this message. The reader gets a reminder that this vision is fulfilled in section twelve, reinforcing the miraculous and prophetic nature of his vision.

Additionally, the divine message received in section nine shows that God is with Polycarp throughout the entire event, speaking to him directly. These messages give credence to his later claims regarding eternal flames. Polycarp clearly has knowledge granted to him from God which encourages and fortifies him as he undergoes immense physical pain and fear. This knowledge allows him to speak confidently when he makes claims pertaining to the afterlife.

Polycarp himself is aware of the eternal consequences that would follow valuing earthly over supernatural suffering. He deems the governor's threat of fire insignificant, saying that the fire of the pyre "burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished."<sup>17</sup> He then almost mocks the governor's lack of perspective, telling him that "it is clear you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgment that is to come, which awaits the impious."<sup>18</sup> The governor is clearly listed among the impious, sentenced to burn in eternal fire due to judgment. The mentions of fire here and in paragraph two allude to the image of the Christian Hell, which is not a secure concept, Biblically. The

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<sup>16</sup> Polycarp, 5

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 11



image that contemporary readers, as well as the governor to whom Polycarp is speaking would conjure is that of Tartarus. The common conception of Tartarus was that of a fiery pit, surrounded by “a blazing flood of lava, Tartarus’ River of Fire.”<sup>19</sup> The image of flames connects the “everlasting punishment” as a commonly perceived defining feature of the depths of Hades. As Kyratas argues that Jesus’ allusions to the afterlife in parables like Luke 16’s The Rich Man and Lazarus may be viewed in light of the beliefs of the surrounding culture, so too may the images and allusions in the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*.

For a third and final time, Polycarp attempts to correct the governor, previously offering to share the “doctrine of Christianity”<sup>20</sup> and then telling him “it is good to change from what is wicked to righteousness.”<sup>21</sup> When Polycarp challenges the governor to “do what you will,”<sup>22</sup> he is filled with a supernatural “joyful courage” and grace, unafraid of what is to come. This courage and steadfastness follows him to the pyre, where he rejects the need to nail him down, saying that God “will grant me to remain without flinching in the fire.”<sup>23</sup> The supernatural courage he was filled with provides a confirmation from God that Polycarp’s death happens according to Providence.

Throughout the narrative, Polycarp’s martyrdom is presented as an imitation of Christ’s death. He goes peacefully with those sent to persecute him, he predicts his death multiple

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<sup>19</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.639-641

<sup>20</sup> Polycarp, 10

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

times, he offers salvation to others until his end, he is persecuted by a mob, is stabbed in the side to assure death, and his death is sacrificial. It is this “*imitatio Christi*” that buys Polycarp an exemption from judgment, enabling him to ascend directly to the Father<sup>24</sup>.

In this section, I will argue that Polycarp’s martyrdom resembles an initiation into a mystery cult. The work contains certain key aspects of a mystery cult: secret knowledge known only to the initiates, an initiation process for the elite members, and a special afterlife destination that offers much more than the destination for the masses. The Christians of Smyrna are a relatively small, but open group of people, ready to welcome more into their religion. The process of joining this group is presented as being very easy, as Polycarp’s attempts at evangelizing to the governor would suggest. The requirement to become a Christian is seen in Polycarp’s invitation to “learn the doctrine of Christianity, set aside a day to listen.”<sup>25</sup> Those who are a member of the religious group are granted exclusive knowledge and access to divine voices, as evidenced through the “voice from heaven” encouraging Polycarp with an Old Testament message to “be strong... and have courage.”<sup>26</sup> Nobody saw the source of the voice, suggesting its lack of a corporeal body and its divine origin, and “those of our people who were present heard the voice.”<sup>27</sup> The members of the crowd who were *not* Christians did not hear the voice, only those “of our people” were able to hear it. This suggests a special access to only those within the select

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<sup>24</sup> Moss, 118

<sup>25</sup> Polycarp, 10

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 9

group to the divine knowledge and messages. It is only available to those initiated through hearing and accepting.

There appears to be a second, elevated level of initiation attained through the process of martyrdom. There are the many Christians, and the select elite members whose status was bought through death. The privileges granted through martyrdom are evident through those who sought martyrdom unsuccessfully. Their pursuit of martyrdom was unsuccessful, and the church members “do not approve of those who [came] forward of themselves.”<sup>28</sup> The benefits of martyrdom are too great to be received lightly and are thus bought through the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) in life and death. Polycarp recognizes this gift in his prayer when he is tied to the stake. He thanks God for the opportunity “to have a share among the number of martyrs in the cup of Christ, for the resurrection unto eternal life of both the soul and the body in the immortality of the holy spirit,” asking to “be received this day among them before your face.”<sup>29</sup> The “cup of Christ” refers to Jesus’ crucifixion and preceding abuse, which he asks God to take from him in each of the Synoptic Gospels. Something that was dreaded by Jesus, the exemplary martyr, is actually sought by those who come later. Polycarp is aware that he will experience deep physical pain but persists because of the rewards he will receive and the glory that he will see. Polycarp’s inclusion among the “number of martyrs”<sup>30</sup> is a blessing that only the worthy receive. His initiation into “the number of martyrs” suggests that this is a place of glory, one that is desired but not sought, as is evident in Polycarp’s

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14

initial flight in paragraph five. This is also evident in the brief story of Quintus, who had turned himself in to die for his faith, only to cower at the sight of the beasts that would kill him. If God has not chosen the martyr, then they will not bring glory to the kingdom, but be used by the enemy to dissuade others. The heavenly rewards are exclusive, and not available to just anyone. Polycarp believes that those martyred before him are present together before God's face upon their death and he asks that he "be received this day."<sup>31</sup> This passage demonstrates "a belief that a martyr proceeds to the presence of God at the very moment of death,"<sup>32</sup> and suggests, through Polycarp's inclusion to the group of martyrs, that it is a privilege limited to the few, the faithful, and the chosen.

Some manuscripts include a dove coming out of Polycarp's stab wound in his side.<sup>33</sup> In the New Testament,<sup>34</sup> the dove is representative of the Holy Spirit descending. Here, it is representative of Polycarp's ascension to heaven immediately upon his death. The immediate ascension of martyrs is not a belief isolated to the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*. In in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, Nartzalus exclaims with joy that "today we are martyrs in heaven. Thanks be to God!"<sup>35</sup> The joy of martyrs at their deaths is due to the promise of immediate heavenly rewards, and those rewards are limited to those

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>32</sup> Moss, 127

<sup>33</sup> See Mursurillo's footnote 24 on p. 15

<sup>34</sup> Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22

<sup>35</sup> Scillitan, 89

who died for the faith. Their deaths are celebrated by their communities as “birthdays into eternity,”<sup>36</sup> marking their new life as new beings.

The heavenly rewards go beyond the ascension to God’s presence but includes a spiritual promotion to the next tier in “the heavenly hierarchy alongside angels.”<sup>37</sup> There are three parts to this hierarchy: the Trinity; the angels, martyrs, saints, and Mary; and the regular Christian dead<sup>38</sup>. The author of Polycarp’s account acknowledges him as belonging to a higher community than the regular dead. He is now among those who “were no longer men but angels.”<sup>39</sup> This claim leaves room for ambiguity, allowing the reader to interpret it either as the martyrs becoming equal with angels, or for them to actually become angels, receiving an “angelic metamorphosis”<sup>40</sup> along with their immediate resurrection as a reward for their perseverance. Either way, this higher status permits the martyrs to see and hear good things from the Lord that are only permitted to those of the status of angels. Martyrdom brings a new status, as well as inclusion in God’s presence. The exclusivity of this status resembles the initiation process into a mystery cult to those who could afford it. Only with martyrdom, the price is life, not money.

The impact that martyrs left on their communities is almost incalculable. Polycarp is attributed with bringing a cessation of persecution in Smyrna by his own martyrdom,

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<sup>36</sup> Robin Lane Fox. *Pagans and Christians* New York: Knopf, 1987. 435

<sup>37</sup> Moss, 114

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 114

<sup>39</sup> Polycarp. 2

<sup>40</sup> Greenberg, L. Arik. “*My Share of God’s Reward*” : *Exploring the Roles and Formulations of the Afterlife in Early Christian Martyrdom* New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 154

“as though he were putting a seal upon it.”<sup>41</sup> There is a great deal of sacrificial language and imagery in this document, which Moss notes as unique to this account.<sup>42</sup> Polycarp is bound to the pyre, “like a noble ram chosen for oblation from a great flock.”<sup>43</sup> The image of Polycarp bound to the pyre, waiting to be burned alive is reminiscent of Abraham binding Isaac and laying him on the altar, ready to stab him with a knife in Genesis 22. The difference here lies in the fact that God provided a ram to take Isaac’s place, while Polycarp is likened to a ram, acknowledging that he himself is the offering to God. Additionally, Polycarp was struck with a blade, similar to what Abraham was prepared to do to Isaac before God provided an alternative. In the section describing the martyrdom, Polycarp asks God to accept him as a “rich and acceptable sacrifice,”<sup>44</sup> acknowledging his role on behalf of his community. The “delightful fragrance”<sup>45</sup> emanating from the flames which could not consume Polycarp are also representative of the “pleasing aroma”<sup>46</sup> to God that emanates from Old Testament sacrifices. Polycarp’s sacrificial death allows him to intercede for others, able to communicate face-to-face with God on behalf of the living.

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<sup>41</sup> Polycarp, 1

<sup>42</sup> Moss, 127

<sup>43</sup> Polycarp, 14

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>46</sup> Exodus 29:18

Before his death, Polycarp prayed fervently for everyone he had ever met and “the entire Catholic Church scattered throughout the world.”<sup>47</sup> This passionate prayer for others translated well “into the image of martyrs praying and petitioning Christ in heaven.”<sup>48</sup> The position of martyrs is unique in the heavenly realm. They are deeply familiar with the suffering of the world, yet they stand in God’s presence, able to speak with him and petition on behalf of those still living. Because Polycarp had already petitioned God on behalf of others from a distance, how much more would he be able to accomplish for others standing before God!

Since he was seen as an intercessor in God’s presence, the community desired his body to help them commune better with Polycarp’s spirit and to serve as a physical example of a holy man. Quickly, however, the Roman authorities burned his body so that the remains might not get into the hands of the Christians. The author of this account blames “the jealous and envious Evil One... realizing the greatness of his testimony.”<sup>49</sup> That Satan intervened in the conflict over the martyr’s body suggests that the power it held, both supernatural and as an example of faith and perseverance, was too great to allow the relics into the hands of those who may desire to use them. The testimony of faithfulness and power in prayer was too great for Satan to leave alone. The Christians wanted Polycarp’s body so that they “may have a share in his holy flesh.”<sup>50</sup> To the Roman mindset, this would sound like cannibalism. According to the author, one reason

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<sup>47</sup> Polycarp, 8

<sup>48</sup> Fox, 445

<sup>49</sup> Polycarp, 17

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17

the Romans withheld Polycarp's body from the Christians is that they worried that they would abandon Christ and worship Polycarp instead. The author refutes this, saying that they love the martyrs for "their unsurpassed loyalty towards their king and master," wishing to "share with them as fellow disciples."<sup>51</sup> Polycarp's body was of high value, "dearer to us than precious stones and finer than gold."<sup>52</sup> The Christians buried what they could collect and gathered at his tomb annually to joyfully celebrate the day of his martyrdom, "both as a memorial for those who have already fought the contest and for the training and preparation of those who will do so one day."<sup>53</sup> His example and story encourage others to follow in his path and buy their own heavenly rewards through martyrdom. The rewards were so great that many desired them, even at the cost of torture and fire.

The acts of the martyrs, like the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, serve a similar role to that of the poetry of Orpheus. Within this document about martyrdom are secrets pertaining to the afterlife and evidence of exclusive knowledge from the divine. It also contains information about how to attain an exclusive paradise promised to just a few initiates. For the audience of *Polycarp*, all Christians will make it to heaven eventually, but the martyrs are expedited to their destination, and they are granted special access to God, as evidenced through their bodies being powerful relics in this document. All Christians are exempt from the bleak default afterlife, known by later Christians as Hell, which is in fact an image of Tartarus, and they are also spared the general bleak and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 18



hopeless wandering of the Underworld for pagans. Both sets of initiates are granted a special afterlife through the salvation of their deities. Initiates to Orphism are granted access to Persephone's gardens through salvation by Bacchus. Christians are granted access to heaven through salvation by Jesus. I discuss these similarities not to make any definitive claims about early Christianity, but to point out parallels between contemporary religions sharing a geographical and cultural context.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Pagan Elements in The Visions of Perpetua

In the year 203 C.E.,<sup>1</sup> a noblewoman named Perpetua was martyred in Carthage, along with several friends. Perpetua's writing is so significant because she is "one of the earliest Latin Christian writers, a contemporary of Tertullian's"<sup>2</sup> and a very rare female voice of her time. *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* was recorded and shared, in part, to prove that God was still active and moving in the third century Church. God was most visible through the deeds and actions of the martyrs, to whom God spoke most clearly due to their holiness. In this martyrdom account, four of the five visions are eschatological and they are laden with imagery and clear depictions of geography and people present in the various afterlife destinations. The images of the afterlife are not exclusively Christian; rather, this account "emphasizes how unbiased educated new Christians in urban environments of the third century used the language of their own cultures."<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I explore the four visions of the afterlife in this text and examine the pagan elements embedded in the depictions.

Perpetua provides the reader with a first-hand account of the tensions in a family that had only partially converted from paganism. The text states that one of Perpetua's

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<sup>1</sup> The date of Perpetua's martyrdom was likely March 7, 203 C.E., but it is also possible to have fallen on the same day in 202 or 204. See Trumbower, 3

<sup>2</sup> Parvis, Sara. "Perpetua." *Expository times* 120, no. 8 (2009): 365

<sup>3</sup> Katharina Waldner. 'Visions, Prophecy, and Authority in the Passio Perpetuae.' *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer, and Marco Formisano (Oxford, 2012; pubd online Mar. 2015). Oxford Scholarship Online, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199561889.003.0013>> accessed 03 Nov. 2021, 218-219

brothers “was a catechumen like herself,”<sup>4</sup> and she has the support of her mother, to whom she expresses her anxiety about her child, and from whom she receives support. Perpetua’s father was staunchly opposed to Perpetua’s new status and was “so angered by the word ‘Christian’”<sup>5</sup> that he nearly resorted to violence in a fruitless attempt to persuade Perpetua to renounce her faith. Perpetua’s father tried to persuade her with multiple other tactics, including inducing pity for himself, her other family members, and her child, whom he eventually withheld from Perpetua. In a desperate attempt to change Perpetua’s mind, her father was “thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod,”<sup>6</sup> though Perpetua still did not abandon her faith. The cost of her release from prison and martyrdom was a “sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors,”<sup>7</sup> which seemed to be a simple price to Perpetua’s father, but an eternal cost to Perpetua and her fellow prisoners. Nothing could dissuade Perpetua from her plans to be martyred, not even pity for her father, to whom she was evidently very close, nor for her infant son, who was miraculously weaned so that he might live after her death.

The Apostle Paul discusses families like Perpetua’s in 1 Corinthians 7, assuring the believing partner or parent that the entire family is made holy through the one believer.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that Perpetua’s situation is not uncommon, and it supports her decision to remain steadfast in the face of her father’s persuasion techniques, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> *Perpetua*, 2

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, NRSV

the physical persecution she will soon undergo. Through her martyrdom, Perpetua is understood to be saving the child that remains on earth.<sup>9</sup> Her own marital status is uncertain; the text states that she is a “newly married woman of good family,”<sup>10</sup> but there is no mention of her husband anywhere. If they were divorced, the husband might have tried to claim his child, though their son remains with Perpetua’s father. If he had died, his family would have tried to claim the infant in his place.<sup>11</sup> His absence is keenly felt in this work and it is left unexplained.

Perpetua’s biological family seems split nearly in half as to who converted and who did not. Since one of Perpetua’s brothers is identified to be a Catechumen, we can assume that either the other remained a pagan, or the second brother mentioned in paragraph 2 refers to Dinocrates. He is the focal point of two of Perpetua’s eschatological visions, as his posthumous salvation is both miraculous and a testament to the power of her intercessory prayer. His name is Greek and it is “almost certain that Dinocrates had died a pagan”<sup>12</sup> at the age of seven-years-old. Dinocrates is one aspect of the “familial link” present in Perpetua’s Martyrdom. She cares for him in place of her child; “while she struggled to wean her son, she prayed for her brother to be nourished.”<sup>13</sup> This trade from the physically present family to the family in Christ, into which her prayers invited

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:14b

<sup>10</sup> *Perpetua*, 2

<sup>11</sup> Parvis, 367

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey A Trumbower. “Perpetua’s Prayer for Dinocrates.” In *Rescue for the Dead*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 1

<sup>13</sup> Graf, Fritz, and Sarah Iles Johnston. *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* Second edition. London: Routledge, 2013, 80

Dinocrates, represents a shift from the physical, earthly family to the spiritual, heavenly family. Her fellow catechumens become her brothers and sisters and her heavenly father supersedes her earthly father, baptism serving as the catalyst for “Perpetua’s transfer from one family to another.”<sup>14</sup> Perpetua’s new family is found in Heaven, of which she receives a vision in prison.

Perpetua’s first vision occurred early in her imprisonment, a few days after her baptism, when her son joined her. She prayed for a vision at the advice of her brother, to seek “whether [she is] to be condemned or freed.”<sup>15</sup> The vision began with an image of a ladder of bronze, “reaching all the way to the heavens,”<sup>16</sup> akin to Jacob’s Ladder in Genesis 28, from which Jacob received a message directly from God. This ladder, and Perpetua’s ascent on it provide suggest that her destination is heaven. The ladder was surrounded with weapons, including the various weapons that were employed in persecution, like the swords by which Perpetua and her companions die. She includes the caveat that “if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.”<sup>17</sup> This suggests that martyrdom requires vigilance and it cannot be done partway. As in the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, those who sought martyrdom but were not chosen for it by God would not successfully ascend the ladder but would get “mangled” and they would “adhere to the weapons,”

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Klein. “Perpetua, Cheese, and Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity.” *Journal of early Christian studies* 28, no. 2 (2020): 186

<sup>15</sup> *Perpetua*, 4

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

instead. For Perpetua, this ladder “signifies future suffering and martyrdom,”<sup>18</sup> giving her certainty in her future trials and allowing her to prepare for them.

Before Perpetua steps onto the ladder of martyrdom, she must first get past the “dragon of enormous size”<sup>19</sup> who attacks potential climbers, attempting to deter them with fear. Perpetua declares “in the name of Christ Jesus”<sup>20</sup> that the dragon will not bite her. Immediately, there is a shift in the demeanor of the dragon. What was once a formidable and dangerous beast now moves “slowly, as though he were afraid”<sup>21</sup> of Perpetua, allowing himself to be used as a step onto the ladder. The dragon is representative of Satan<sup>22</sup> and Perpetua’s need to defeat Satan, and Rome in order to achieve martyrdom. Martyrdom is a cosmic battle between God and Satan, represented by the martyr and Rome. The true opponent is reinforced through the end of Perpetua’s vision where she is a gladiator; she says, “I realized it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew I would win the victory.”<sup>23</sup>

The physical act of stepping on the dragon’s head is also seen as a baptismal act by some scholars because “ascending the ladder is reminiscent of the renunciations of Satan before baptism.”<sup>24</sup> This baptismal imagery lasts throughout this vision,

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<sup>18</sup> Klein, p. 184

<sup>19</sup> *Perpetua*, 4

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>22</sup> The image of the dragon has its origins in Revelation 12, where it is a clear metaphor for both Rome and Satan and the cosmic battle between God and Satan. See Klein, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> *Perpetua*, 10

<sup>24</sup> Klein, 183

demonstrating its significance for the journey to heaven. Perpetua ascends the stairs after Secundus, who waits for her and advises her with caution. He serves as a guide, reminiscent of the inscriptions on the Orphic gold leaves directing the *telestai* or the Sybil, guiding Aeneas through the Underworld. In each afterlife account, the spirit who sojourns never travels alone. Solitude, in fact would only harm the wanderer.

When Perpetua summits the stairs, she enters into an “immense garden,” where a tall “gray-haired man sat in shepherd's garb.”<sup>25</sup> The garden is heaven, but it is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, the original paradise in Genesis 2-3, as well as both Elysium, the pagan paradise, and the groves of Persephone, where the *Orpheotelestai* reside. The gray-haired shepherd is an ambiguous figure but is evidently either Jesus Christ or God the Father. He “welcomes her as his child and feeds her quasi-Eucharistic curds into her cupped hands.”<sup>26</sup> One of the biblical images that this figure calls upon is that of Psalms 23, which begins with the declaration: “The LORD is my shepherd... he makes me lie down in green pastures.”<sup>27</sup> Those green pastures call to mind this garden in which Perpetua finds herself. Another image of the Lord as a shepherd is the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15.

The shepherd greets Perpetua and invites her to him, giving her a mouthful of milk, or cheese, depending on the translation.<sup>28</sup> Perpetua takes this milk “into [her]

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<sup>25</sup> *Perpetua*, 4

<sup>26</sup> Parvis, 370

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 23:1-2, NRSV

<sup>28</sup> Mursurillo translates *caseum* as milk, but Klein argues that it should be translated as cheese. The source of the cheese, directly from the sheep, is a surreal image, but Klein argues that this is not inconsistent with the surrealism of the vision itself. I use both words interchangeably because they vary by translation. See Klein, p. 176-177

cupped hands and consumed it,”<sup>29</sup> evoking imagery of the eucharist, especially ones’ first eucharist which follows their baptism.<sup>30</sup> Perpetua herself had just been baptized prior to seeing this vision, which suggests that the nourishment she is given in the vision is eucharistic. This cheese from God is the eucharistic meal, and the thousands of people in white saying “Amen” in unison are akin to “the reception of the newly baptized into the community.”<sup>31</sup> The people dressed in white are depicted like the martyrs in Revelations 6.<sup>32</sup> Perpetua is not given white clothing upon her consumption of the eucharistic cheese, as she has not yet joined their number. Presumably, the robe would follow the eucharist, had her vision lasted any longer. The sweetness of the milk lingers in Perpetua’s mouth after she wakes because milk is “related to the ideal of the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”<sup>33</sup> For Christians, the promised land is heaven; they must persevere through life on earth until they find their true home in heaven.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the sweet milk promises “the sweetness of the life of paradise and the promise of heaven on earth.” Through the liturgy Perpetua is given “access to the eternal”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Perpetua*, 4

<sup>30</sup> Klein, 193

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 192

<sup>32</sup> “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the testimony they had given... They were each given white robe and told to rest a little longer” Revelation 6:9-11, NRSV

<sup>33</sup> Griffin, 92

<sup>34</sup> Philippians 3:19-20

<sup>35</sup> Klein, 201



This liturgical process, which, as we have seen, signifies a Christian's full entrance into the community is akin to the initiation into the pagan mystery cults, like Orphism. The choice to be initiated was personal and independently done, as one could not inherit initiation or receive it from another. It granted the initiate a closer relationship with divinity, and sometimes, like in the case of the Bacchic cult, the initiates were believed to receive personal visions and messages directly from Dionysus.<sup>36</sup> We see this same pattern with Perpetua. After she has been baptized, she recognizes that she can speak directly with the Lord. This ability to communicate is certified by the vision that immediately follows this claim. Baptism evidently is not enough to merit this level of communication, as her elder brother, a Christian, calls her "greatly privileged,"<sup>37</sup> likely due to the fact that she appears to be divinely selected for martyrdom. Martyrdom sets her apart from other Christians. Initiation into the mystery cults is not for everybody; most frequently it requires a financial price, considerable enough to limit eligibility. Martyrdom is the cost of initiation into this selective group of Christians who can communicate directly with God, make intercessory prayers, and receive special benefits beyond the lot of the regular Christian. The cost for eternal benefits is physical and spiritual rather than financial.

The initiatory practice of martyrdom is demonstrated in the baptism, the ladder surrounded by weapons, the eucharist, and the community of blessed spirits whom she joins. The ladder is narrow and treacherous and only one can ascend it at a time, revealing the selectivity of the process. In order to ascend, one must renounce Satan, and

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<sup>36</sup> See Euripides *The Bacchae* to see an example of divine messages in the Bacchic mystery cult.

<sup>37</sup> *Perpetua*, 4

with him, Rome. The initiate must tread carefully to avoid the weapons, which demonstrate persecution as a necessary requisite for admission into the garden at the summit. The eucharistic meal from the hands of God is the final step for admission into this community. The liturgical and Old Testament images in this first vision combine to depict a “cosmic or heavenly rite of initiation.”<sup>38</sup> The destination that the initiated might enter seems exclusive to just this group, as there is no other entrance identified and the inhabitants wear the clothes of the Martyrs in Revelation 6. The garden is akin to Elysium, which is depicted in Virgil’s *Aeneid* as “fresh green fields, the Fortunate Groves where the blessed make their homes.”<sup>39</sup> Some of the residents of Elysium are adorned “with snow-white headbands crowning their brows,”<sup>40</sup> similar to the white clothing of those in Perpetua’s heaven. The garden that Perpetua enters also resembles the “holy meadows and groves of Persephone,”<sup>41</sup> where Persephone cares for the initiates of the Bacchic mystery cult after they are forgiven for their inherited sin. These regions are similar and exclusive to a particular set of spirits who proved their worth through their deeds in life or death.

The fifth vision in this work accompanies Perpetua’s first vision, though chronologically it comes much later than the others. Saturus’ vision is a mirror image of Perpetua’s, excluding the ladder and the eucharistic cheese. Instead, he sees “an intense

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<sup>38</sup> Klein, 177

<sup>39</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.741-742

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.771

<sup>41</sup> Tablet 3 from Thurii, Graf and Johnston, 9

light,”<sup>42</sup> cosmic beings, and specific and familiar faces among the martyred. Saturus and his companions are ferried by four angels to their heavenly destination, described as a “great open space... which appeared to be a garden, with rose bushes and all manner of flowers” and “the trees were as tall as cypresses.”<sup>43</sup> The garden that Saturus sees contains more detail than Perpetua’s, as she was focused on the Christ figure and the eucharist. The angels take Saturus and his companions to the familiar figures of four who had been martyred soon before those in the account. Together, they journey to a place with walls of light behind four angels “who entered in and put on white robes.”<sup>44</sup> The act of putting on these robes suggests that the angels are, or were, martyrs.<sup>45</sup> Martyrdom serves as a special baptism, and this physical act of putting on the identifier of baptism is akin to Aeneas bathing at the gates of Elysium. Just as Aeneas must cleanse “his limbs with fresh pure water, there at the threshold”<sup>46</sup> of paradise, so too must those entering these gates of light identify themselves as fully baptized. Saturus and his companions were excluded from this rite, perhaps because they had not yet undergone their baptism through martyrdom.

Within the walls of light, Saturus and his companions see a divine figure described as “an aged white man with white hair and a youthful face”<sup>47</sup> on a throne. This

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<sup>42</sup> *Perpetua*, 11

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. The cypress tree was one of the most common features in the geographic Orphic gold leaves, suggesting a possible connection.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>45</sup> Martyrs, angels, and the imperial family all wear white clothing, c.f. Griffin, p. 41. For a discussion of martyrs becoming angels, see [whatever page it actually ends up] in Chapter 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.737-738

<sup>47</sup> *Perpetua*, 12

figure is identical to the one who feeds Perpetua the eucharistic milk and is therefore either Christ or the Father. The companions kiss the aged man, and he touches their face, then sends them off to play. After this interaction, Perpetua tells Saturus that “I am happier here now than I was in the flesh.”<sup>48</sup> This affirms their decision to follow through with their martyrdom, despite the trials that they must undergo to get there. Following the command from the elders to “go and play,”<sup>49</sup> the group exits the gates and enters the garden once more so that the angels might close the gates, presumably until it is time for them to return permanently. At the end of Saturus’ vision, he reports that he and his companions “were sustained by a most delicious odour that seemed to satisfy us. And then I woke up happy.”<sup>50</sup> This is similar to the sweet taste that lingered in Perpetua’s mouth when she awoke from her first vision. These visions provide the martyrs with certainty regarding their destination, confirmed by the parallel visions.

Perpetua has two more visions with a focus on the afterlife, both of which center around the fate of her younger brother, Dinocrates. Perpetua had been praying in her community when she suddenly spoke the name Dinocrates. She admits that “the name had never entered [her] mind until that moment,”<sup>51</sup> suggesting that this reminder came from God, likely to demonstrate a miracle. At the memory of her brother and the circumstances surrounding his death, Perpetua “realized that [she] was privileged to pray

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<sup>48</sup> *Perpetua*, 12

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

for him.” She prayed and “began to sigh deeply for him before the Lord.”<sup>52</sup> Her privilege stems from her impending status as a martyr and the “extraordinary power of confessors to intercede for the living,”<sup>53</sup> and in this case, for the dead. Dinocrates seems to have died long before much of Perpetua’s family converted to Christianity, as their conversion was a recent event and Perpetua’s considerable grief had the time to pass to the point of near-forgetting. Even if Dinocrates had been alive when Perpetua and her brother became Christians, it is unlikely that Perpetua’s staunchly pagan father would have consented to his youngest son’s baptism. Thus, along with the status of Perpetua and her brother as catechumens before her imprisonment, Dinocrates had presumably died many years before anybody in the family had found Christ. Furthermore, it is incredibly unlikely that Perpetua would have a vision of “postmortem agony for Dinocrates had he been a baptized Christian.”<sup>54</sup>

The setting in which Perpetua sees Dinocrates is quite bleak. It is evident that he is suffering greatly after death. He came out of a dark, crowded hole, visibly “very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty” and “on his face was the wound he had when he died.”<sup>55</sup> He resides in a location that closely resembles the general afterlife in Book Six of the *Aeneid*, replete with the darkness, filth, thirst, and the lingering wound from his fatal face cancer. When Aeneas encounters Dido in the Fields of Mourning, he sees the wound that killed her plaguing her in death. He also sees Deiphobus, “mutilated, his whole body, his

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>53</sup> Trumbower, 9

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>55</sup> *Perpetua*, 7

face hacked to pieces,”<sup>56</sup> just as he was when he died. The lingering wounds are not the case in Perpetua and Saturnus’ visions of heaven, where those who died violent deaths that left their bodies mutilated have no marks of violence on their heavenly bodies. Thus, Dinocrates must be in a place similar to depictions of the pagan underworld.

Dinocrates’ thirst supports this idea; he is “very hot and thirsty,”<sup>57</sup> which is consistent with the need for libations for the souls in pagan beliefs.<sup>58</sup> This, and Perpetua’s admitted forgetting about her brother, suggests that nobody in the family has been providing him with the libations necessary to sustain him comfortably in the bleak and dark afterlife characteristic of pagan literature. This is not to say that his pagan father does not perform the paternal duties of bringing libations to his son’s grave. However, it is certain that Perpetua does not. She refers to Dinocrates as her “brother according to the flesh,”<sup>59</sup> and her earthly family has been demoted beneath her spiritual family after her conversion. Therefore, it is certain that she, and likely most of the remaining members of her family, do not provide Dinocrates with what he needs for comfort beyond. His thirst is emphasized by his proximity to a pool of water whose rim was taller than the boy himself. The water was within sight of Dinocrates, but just out of reach, much like Tantalus’ suffering in Tartarus. This is indicative to Perpetua of what Dinocrates needs: he needed to drink the water, and the only way he could was through Perpetua’s prayer.

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<sup>56</sup> *Aeneid*, 6.574

<sup>57</sup> *Perpetua*, 7

<sup>58</sup> Ramsay MacMullen. *The Second Church: Popular Christianity, A.D. 200-400*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Print, 24

<sup>59</sup> *Perpetua*, 7

Perpetua follows through with her duty and prays fervently for her brother, with tears to prove the earnestness of her prayer. The fourth and final of Perpetua's eschatological visions is an image of Dinocrates in the same place as before but set free from the burdens and sufferings that plagued him before his sister's intervention. Dinocrates' description suggests that he has been baptized and saved posthumously, someday to join Christians in heaven. The signs of salvation begin with Dinocrates' new cleanliness; he is no longer filthy with the mire of his suffering. Because "baptism and martyrdom both involve cleansing rituals... the concept of martyrdom emerges as a powerful means of cleansing the martyrs of sin, preparing them to live a new life."<sup>60</sup> Thus, Dinocrates' new status shows that he is prepared for a new *afterlife*. His new clothes are also intrinsic to this ritual, as re-clothing is a part of baptism. The fact that he is now refreshed additionally suggests that he is no longer subject to the toil of thirst that is characteristic of a pagan spirit; he no longer relies on libations, for he has been released from that need.

Twelve of the Orphic gold tablets "are concerned with obtaining water in the Underworld- a very common motif"<sup>61</sup> in pagan afterlife narratives. These tablets, however, focus a lot on where to get sufficient water, while Dinocrates had been lacking access to any at all. In this second vision, the rim of the bowl was lowered to the height of Dinocrates' waist, and from the accompanying gold bowl, he was able to drink freely. The bowl never emptied, suggesting divine origins.<sup>62</sup> When Dinocrates finished drinking,

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<sup>60</sup> Griffin, 4

<sup>61</sup> Graf and Johnston, 98

<sup>62</sup> "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." John 4:13, NRSV

he “began to play as children do.”<sup>63</sup> This is akin to the command to “go and play” from the elders to Saturus and his company in heaven.<sup>64</sup> In this narrative, a joy such as this with a physical expression exists exclusively in the spirits of those who belong to the Christian God.

Another major indicator of Dinocrates’ salvation is the scar on his face where before there existed a cancerous wound. The souls in the pagan afterlife, like Dido, had the scars lingering from the wounds that killed them. In this second vision, Dinocrates only has a scar on his face to replace the wound. This indicates that he was saved, but it may be a mark of his salvation being less glorious than that of his sister or her companions in martyrdom. Those who died for the Lord do not have scars, no matter how violent their deaths. Dido died by falling on a sword, thus her wound remains in the Underworld. Perpetua dies by plunging a gladiator’s sword into her throat, but she retains no wounds in the afterlife visions. Both deaths are self-inflicted and only one lingers past the physical body. Dinocrates’ scar might be suggestive of his soul having resided in both places. His posthumous salvation was a glorious miracle, but it was done by the glory of God and Perpetua’s prayer. Perhaps the scar lingers because the second baptism is lacking here. Dinocrates has a physical first baptism, but he did not receive the second, more complete baptism necessary for an entirely new body.

The martyrs have their first baptism in the prison, which cements their identities in Christ. This is evident in Perpetua’s comparison of herself to a pot: “Do you see this

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<sup>63</sup> *Perpetua*, 8

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 12



vase here, for example... Could it be called by any other name other than what it is? Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.”<sup>65</sup> Christ was so central to Perpetua’s identity that she could no longer be anything other than a Christ follower. She is sustained so sufficiently by this baptism that she needs nothing but water. This initial baptism is enough, but the second baptism of martyrdom is what sets these souls apart and gives them visions and access to the special privileges of a martyr. The first baptism is in water, while the second is in blood. The foundation of this duology is found in the Gospel of John, when the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side and both blood and water came out. This passage allowed Jesus followers to “unite baptism in blood and baptism in water as rituals of resurrection and cleansing.”<sup>66</sup> These signs of death also signify life, as Jesus’ death is an integral part of the Christian salvation; martyrs are baptized in both of the fluids released on the Cross.

The second baptism is one of violence; the baptized is cleansed in a liquid associated with brutality. The bronze ladder in Perpetua’s first vision supports the violence associated with martyrdom, as it is lined with weapons of persecution. It is the shedding of one’s own blood that is cleansing. The martyrs were concerned that Felicity, their companion, might not be martyred alongside them, as she had not yet given birth. They considered it a victory when she gave birth in time to be martyred with the rest of her companions. Felicity went “from one bloodbath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.”<sup>67</sup> Though both instances

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<sup>65</sup> *Perpetua*, 3

<sup>66</sup> Griffin, 4

<sup>67</sup> *Perpetua*, 18

involve a great deal of blood and both instances are depicted as honorable battles, only one ensures Felicity the eternal status of a martyr. The other martyr with an explicitly identified second baptism is Saturus, who the crowd mocks with the phrase “well washed.”<sup>68</sup> This ironic declaration is given another layer of truth, as it was a phrase associated with bathing and cleansing in Rome. Here it is associated with spiritual cleansing and purification for the martyr. The author agrees with the crowd’s mocking phrase, “for well washed indeed was one who had been bathed in this manner.”<sup>69</sup> The confirmation of the spiritual significance of this act is embedded within the physical statuses of the spirits; Dinocrates has a scar because he only had one baptism in water; Perpetua does not have any scars because she was renewed a second time through the blood baptism. The second baptism of martyrdom is the official initiation into the exclusive status of martyr, ensuring the benefits and access of the martyr.

The significance and benefits of martyrdom were so certain that Felicity and Perpetua were willing to pay the price of leaving behind their infant children in the care of others. They remained dignified to the end, even when they were stripped naked for the sake of humiliation. The crowd responded to the nakedness of the two women with an uproar, especially regarding Felicity, whose body wore the signs of her recent childbirth visibly and evidently to all. The clothes meant a lot to Perpetua, at least. She places a high value on decency, adjusting her tunic when she is thrown by the cow, “thinking more of her modesty than of her pain.”<sup>70</sup> Though their nudity was immodest, their bodies

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 20

were “symbols of purity, not shame. Their bodies were signs of rebirth and beauty,”<sup>71</sup> even when they were forced to reveal themselves in ways that might suggest the contrary. Through this first introduction to their public martyrdom, Perpetua’s actions and dignity are so great that they are not her own; she is in a trance, “so absorbed... in ecstasy in the Spirit.”<sup>72</sup> In this trance, she maintains all forms of dignity, even putting up her hair because “it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.”<sup>73</sup> She even lifts up Felicity when she falls due to the cow’s attacks, bringing her to her side. Their pose is one of dignity, power, and certainty in the face of certain and impending death. Upon their temporary reprieve from the violence of the stadium, Perpetua comes to. She realizes that she was under a trance of the Spirit, and she uses this moment to encourage her fellow martyrs and her spiritual family. This ecstasy sets her apart from her fellow Christians, for it is the “indispensable condition for the communication of the soul with the divine.”<sup>74</sup> Perpetua was blessed with multiple visions, a pre-emptive power of intercessory prayer, and a state of ecstasy, signifying her connection to God and establishing her favor in the eyes of the Lord.

Perpetua and Felicity were not the only ones who went to death with dignity. Saturus displays a confidence throughout his entire martyrdom which affirms his prophetic premonitions. He tells the soldier beside him that “it is exactly as I foretold and

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<sup>71</sup> Griffin, 192

<sup>72</sup> *Perpetua*, 20

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>74</sup> Waldner, 211

predicted... so now you may believe me with all of your heart.”<sup>75</sup> This indicates one core feature of martyrdom, that it is a tool for evangelism, drawing others to Christianity through a public and firm declaration of faith. The remaining members of the company go willingly and simultaneously to the place where they would die. They welcomed death because of the glory that martyrdom brings and the example it sets for potential believers. They went together<sup>76</sup> according to the will of the people, and “kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace,”<sup>77</sup> signifying their community in Christ. They took the fatal blow of the sword “in silence and without moving,”<sup>78</sup> demonstrating control, never to be overpowered by the Roman Empire, the representative of Satan in the cosmic battle. Perpetua herself assisted the gladiator in delivering the final blow. She “took the trembling hand of the young gladiators guided it to her throat.”<sup>79</sup> In this instance, the power roles are switched from what they ought to be. The person holding the weapon and killing the other is afraid, trembling in front of the young woman who exudes confidence. Meanwhile, Perpetua is steadfast and intent on reaching her goal. The author adds that this action signifies the magnitude of Perpetua, that “so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.”<sup>80</sup> This line also supports the layer of the supernatural battle; the

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<sup>75</sup> *Perpetua*, 21

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 18:20, Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. NRSV. This verse indicates that they all went together to the end, and that God was with them the entire time, cementing their certainty through the end.

<sup>77</sup> *Perpetua*, 21

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

devil fears martyrs like Perpetua, recognizing that she is close to his powerful enemy: God.

The martyrs died willingly and together. They were certain of their destination, having been granted multiple visions of heaven by multiple leaders amongst themselves. They found their strength in one another, evidenced by their concern that Felicity might not be able to be martyred with them. It is not that she would not be able to be martyred alone, but that they were stronger together. Martyrs are a special level of Christian, set above their peers for their faith and perseverance. They are “most valiant and blessed... called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord!”<sup>81</sup> Martyrdom is exclusive to Christians with the strongest faith and the strongest community, evidence of the worthiness of God, and the eternal rewards gained through faith. It was a “further guarantee of the heaven that was already promised in baptism to all believers.”<sup>82</sup> These martyrs were a glory to behold, and they were a product of their time and their cultural context, bearing evidence of the world around them. Perpetua’s visions are laced with notes of her pagan upbringing, though they are no less powerful or influential for it.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>82</sup> Griffin, 198-199

## CONCLUSION

I set out on this project because I was studying Classics, Religion, and Great Texts simultaneously at Baylor. Through my explorations of these different times, religions, and contexts, I discovered significant overlaps in the texts, specifically within these martyrdom texts, along with others. I make no attempt to assert anything about the validity of any religion nor do I value the Christian texts or religions any less for seeing connections to paganism. The purpose of my thesis is not to persuade, but to explore.

Paul regularly tells his readers to be set apart from their world but works like these martyrdom accounts reveal the fact that Paul and other Christian leaders are inextricably linked to the cultures that surround them. This is not a bad thing, and it makes them better witnesses, but it is something that people often forget when studying Christian documents and history. The *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* and *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* are also deeply connected to the cultures around the saints, through historical events, persecution, and the simple side effects of living somewhere. It was my aim to study these, as pertains to the eschatological visions of the martyrs, and their contemporary afterlife documents, with which they were most certainly familiar.

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