

# LOGOS



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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

WE WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN BY ACKNOWLEDGING THAT  
THE LAND ON WHICH WE GATHER IS THE UNCEDED  
TERRITORY OF THE COAST SALISH PEOPLES,  
INCLUDING THE TERRITORIES OF THE **XWMƏΘKWƏÝ  
ƏM (MUSQUEAM), SKWXWÚ7MESH (SQUAMISH),  
STÓ:LŌ AND SƏ́L ÍLWƏTƏ?/SELILWITULH (TSLEIL-  
WAUTUTH)** NATIONS.



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# From the Editor

As editor-in-chief, it is my pleasure to introduce the 2021-2022 issue of LOGOS. LOGOS is the undergraduate journal of the Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies Student Association. Their continuous support is the reason our journal is now in its seventh year of publication.

This journal is run, edited and created by students at the University of British Columbia. Thank you to the Editorial Board of Issue No 7, and our authors, for the level of commitment it took to get this issue out, considering we are living through the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dedication and patience everyone has had is the biggest reason we were able to accomplish our work during these very busy and trying times. I would also like to thank our supportive instructors within the Department of Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies for being willing to advise when called upon.

I am pleased to introduce seven essays that range from Plato's works, Roman Art, religion and numerology within various historic contexts, spatial analysis, aliens in archaeology, and more.

As I end my term as editor-in-chief, I am honoured to pass the baton on to the next Editor-in-Chief, whom I know will continue to bring student's academic and creative talents to light in the eighth issue of Logos.

With great pride, I welcome you to the seventh issue of LOGOS.

Ashley Samsone  
*Editor-in-Chief*

# Suicide in *Phaedo*

Markus Enns

**Abstract:** In this article, I develop Socrates' injunction against suicide, as presented in the *Phaedo* and find that while Socrates' conclusion can be validated, his pre-commitment to a binary understanding of the afterlife hinders the success of his argument. I demonstrate the flaws in Socrates' injunction against suicide (per the *Phaedo*), namely his "religious" and "prisoner" analogies, within his binary understanding of the afterlife, showing that the existence of a third option for the afterlife, i.e., a hell-like existence, bolsters his conclusion. I am acting, in a sense, as Socrates' editor, serving not to debase his argument, but to collaborate with him in re-establishing its veracity.

The *Phaedo* outlines Socrates' argument against the permissibility of suicide, asserting that although the philosopher should be willing to die, it is unlawful (τομικόν, or themiton) for them to kill themselves because deciding for one's self when life ends violates divine law.<sup>1</sup> Socrates defends this view by offering two analogies as justification—one of a prisoner, and another of religious appeal—that principally suggest suicide is improper for it allows an individual to forgo their obligation to serve the gods despite one's personal enslavement to these gods. I aim to demonstrate, however, that these analogies are insufficient in supporting Socrates' injunction against suicide by critiquing the flawed Socratic perception of the afterlife upon which the injunction is found. I argue that the proposition "the philosopher should be willing to die" is hindered by Socrates' binary understanding of death (as per the *Apology*, 40c-42a) that is insufficient without considering the possibility of eternal punishment (i.e., hell) as a potential afterlife existence.<sup>2</sup> Without the existence of hell, Socrates' argument is

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1 Plato, and C. D. C. Reeve. *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2012, note 11 on page 101. (Also see *Phaedo*, 61c.)

2 Put otherwise, Positing the hypothetical existence of a hell-like afterlife is one method of validating Socrates' conclusion.

problematic because there is no means by which the gods can punish suicide victims despite their deserving for punishment. Furthermore, the existence of hell challenges Socrates' surety that death is the greatest good because if it is possible for the gods to punish humans in the afterlife, then death no longer guarantees eudaimonia (ευδαιμονία). While I arrive at the same conclusion as Socrates, i.e., suicide is impermissible, I strive to demonstrate the inconsistencies in his argument and show how a potential hell-like afterlife existence bolsters Socrates' reasoning. In sum, I contend that Socrates' stance against suicide, as per the *Phaedo*, is not well-supported by his analogies because his perception of the afterlife is, itself, flawed in its failure to consider the potential existence of a hell-like realm to which a soul may be sent to suffer eternal punishment.

The claim that a true philosopher is eager to die, as put forth by Socrates in section 61c of the *Phaedo*, is central to the perplexity surrounding Socrates' injunction against suicide for killing one's self is a seemingly adequate means to satisfy the philosopher's desire.<sup>3</sup> Understanding Socrates' claim concerning the philosopher's desire to die first requires a comprehension of *eudaimonistic* ethical philosophy (or *eudaimonism*), to which Socrates subscribed.<sup>4</sup> The basic premise of *eudaimonistic* ethical philosophy is surmisable as the following: one's actions ought to be conducive to *eudaimonia*, i.e., happiness.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to contemporary ethical frameworks which aim to judge actions as good or bad via elaborate criteria, *eudaimonism* focuses on attaining eudaimonia, i.e., being "happy," and is subsequently unconcerned with evaluating actions as good (or bad) according to any other standard. Put otherwise, the sole criterion by which an action is evaluated within a *eudaimonistic* ethical framework is to identify whether that action brings about *eudaimonia*/happiness: if it does, then the action is "good," regardless of any (unintended) consequences, and should therefore be pursued. Though it is not unusual for morally good actions to be conducive to eudaimonia, it is important to note that a "good thing" according to *eudaimonism* need not be morally correct by other rationales.<sup>6</sup> It is equally important to note that eudaimonism may

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3 Recall, for clarity, that Socrates rejects this conclusion.

4 Murray, Miles, "Plato on Suicide ('Phaedo' 60C-63C)," *Phoenix*, 3/4, 55 (Autumn - Winter, 2001): 251.

5 Miles, "Plato on Suicide ('Phaedo' 60C-63C)," 251.

6 Angie Hobbs, "PHILOSOPHY: Platonic Ethics - Angie Hobbs," November 11, 2014. Educational YouTube video, 0:25-0:55.

also be supplemented with a metaethical adherence to certain moral laws and frameworks, like duty-based ethics and its (implicit) support of a slave's obligation to serve their master despite the immorality of slavery itself. Understanding this principle of *eudaimonism* is a vital precursor to appreciating Socrates' whole argument, which requires grasping why he held death as a good thing consistent with his *eudaimonism*.

The *Apology* expresses the Socratic perception of the afterlife, suggesting that life after death is either (i) an eternal sleep, or (ii) the "migration of the soul from [the body] to another [heavenly] place;" the latter, according to Socrates, is the greatest conceivable good because in such a heavenly place, one enjoys the company of past wisdom lovers.<sup>7</sup> Socrates says that if he is right in thinking that death leads to one of these existences, then he is "willing to die many times over," for both afterlife existences have zero negative effect on his happiness, i.e., if (i) is true, then Socrates' happiness is unaffected, and if (ii) is true, then Socrates' happiness is immeasurably increased.<sup>8</sup> By combining the basis of *eudaimonism* with the Socratic two-fold perception of the afterlife, we arrive at the following:

**(1) One ought to desire that which is good, i.e., brings *eudaimonia*.**<sup>9</sup>

**(2) Death is the greatest good.**<sup>10</sup>

**(3) Therefore, one ought to desire death (because it brings about *eudaimonia*).**

This is the extent to which Socrates would take the argument. In fact, this is the reasoning by which Socrates claims, in section 61b of the *Phaedo*, that the philosopher should be willing to die; however, let us follow these premises to one possible conclusion. From (3), it follows:

**(4) If death brings about *eudaimonia*, then suicide is a means of attaining *eudaimonia*.**

**(5) Therefore, suicide is good.**

This is a valid argument—the conclusions (3) and (5) follow from the premises preceding them—yet Socrates reaffirms, contrary to the syllogisms above, that suicide is not good, positing two analogies in his defense to suggest suicide contradicts divine law.

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7 Plato, *Apology*, 40c & 40e–41a.

8 Plato, *Apology*, 41a.

9 Recall that this is the primary facet of *eudaimonism*.

10 Recall that this is part of the Socratic perception of the afterlife.

Socrates' first analogy, the prisoner analogy, is developed in section 62b of the *Phaedo* which suggests that "just as condemned prisoners are not allowed to leave their imprisonment,... human beings are [also] not allowed to leave their bodies... until a lawful authority releases [them]."<sup>11</sup> This is not a strong defense for his claim that suicide is impermissible, and can be dismissed by alluding to the unanswered questions it begets. It is never addressed why humans are imprisoned, what authority has mandated their imprisonment, and if this imprisonment is lawful (and if it is unlawful, then why humans are not permitted to escape).<sup>12</sup> This lack of clarity prompts Socrates to hastily call this analogy "not easy to understand" (perhaps to avoid a difficult debate with his interlocutors) and begin expounding his religious analogy.<sup>13</sup>

In sections 62a–63a of the *Phaedo*, Socrates develops the religious analogy, claiming that human beings "are the possessions, indeed the slaves, of the gods," and, as such, humans should not kill themselves since suicide would incur the wrath of the gods.<sup>14</sup> While modern audiences may not find the fear of the wrath of the gods a convincing argument—regarding it as no more than a cheap scare tactic—a dialogue held between Socrates and his interlocutor Cebes gives insight into how those contemporaneous with Socrates feared this wrath-related consequence. On the assumption that humans are enslaved by the gods, which I allow to pass despite not being substantially proven for the aforementioned concerns above, Socrates asks Cebes if he would be angry if one of his slaves killed themselves—and if he would punish this slave if he had the means to—which Cebes positively affirms.<sup>15</sup> So, on these grounds, suicide is not permitted because it would make the gods mad, and suicide victims would be theoretically punished, if it were possible.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Cebes' affirmation that he would be angry with, and wish to punish, the slave is enough for Socrates to submit that the gods

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11 Anna B. Christensen, "As the God Leads: The Ethics of Platonic Suicide," *Ancient Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil202040220>, 267–8.

12 Christensen, "As the God Leads: The Ethics of Platonic Suicide," 268.

13 Plato, *Phaedo*, 62b.

14 Warren, James. "Socratic Suicide." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.2307/631830>, 98.

15 Plato, *Phaedo*, 62c–d; I have allowed the claim that the gods enslave humans "to pass despite not being substantially proven" because I wish to give a different objection to this analogy than used to object the previous prisoner analogy.

16 Socrates does include one significant condition permitting suicide, which is suicide is allowed if, and only if, the master had given approval to the suicide, which is why Socrates is clear to clarify the lack of consent in the *Phaedo*, 62c.

would also be mad and react similarly if human killed themselves. The argument is as follows:

- (A) Slaves are only permitted to do what their master orders.
- (B) A slave who acts contrary to, or without, their master's consent acts immorally.
- (C) Acting immorally deserves punishment.

Suppose that a slave commits suicide without their master's consent. Then, according to (B):

- (D) A slave who commits suicide without their master's consent acts immorally.

The suicide committed in (D), as per (C), is deserving of punishment, but before extending the argument, let us specify these unidentified slaves and masters in (A), (B), and (D) as humans and gods, respectively. The specified argument, and the effect (C) has upon (D), now reads:

- (A\*) Humans are only permitted to do what the gods order.
- (B\*) Humans who act contrary to, or without, the gods' consent act immorally.
- (C) Acting immorally deserves punishment.
- (D\*) A human who commits suicide without the gods' consent acts immorally.
- (E) Therefore, a human who commits suicide deserves punishment.

After (E), it would be conceded that the gods cannot actually punish the suicide, even though it deserves discipline, because the victim is dead. Being dead, according to the *Apology* (see "Socratic perception of the afterlife" above), the victim is experiencing either (i) an eternal sleep, or (ii\*) the soul's transition from the body to a heavenly place; thus, suicide victims cannot be punished. This is the core of my objection to Socrates. I contend that Socrates' view of a binary afterlife is insufficient in supporting his conclusion; this deficit in his argument necessitates the inclusion of a third potential afterlife.<sup>17</sup> In order to preserve Socrates' conclusion, I propose that the third potential afterlife be the existence of hell.

One may challenge my argument by mentioning that ideas of hell-like existences were seldom conceptualized in antiquity—in fact, there is no (ancient) Greek word for "hell." Conceptually related words within the ancient Greek lexicon include κακος (*kakos*, or unworthiness), πονηρία (*ponēria*, or deficiency), and ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*, or "missing the mark"/"sin"), none of which correspond exactly to the commonplace understanding of hell,

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17 Miles, "Plato on Suicide ("Phaedo" 60C–63C)," note 9 on page 249.

none of which correspond exactly to the commonplace understanding of hell, i.e., eternal punishment; however, this does not suggest ideas of punishment after death did not exist in antiquity. The *Odyssey*, for example, depicts individuals as residing in an underworld described in Book 11, line 105 as a “joyless kingdom of the dead.” Having described this residence in the aforementioned manner discredits arguments made to compare this place of residence to Socrates’ idea of (ii\*) a heavenly place, nor does it compare to Socrates’ idea of (i\*) nothingness. Although this idea expressed in the *Odyssey* predates Socrates by three centuries, which may suggest its mythological origins lost credibility throughout antiquity, it is crucial to appreciate that prototypical ideas of hell-like afterlives existed in antiquity, and that Socrates’ failure to consider its potential is not a universal admittance in ancient Greek thought. Moreover, one may also try to counter my argument with reference to the Myth of Er in Plato’s *Republic* X (614a–622a) which depicts the process of purification required of those who have died. It may be argued that the existence of some place wherein a deceased person is to ‘pay for their wrongdoings’ is akin enough to hell, but this counter does not dissuade me for it seems the Myth of Er better corresponds, at least conceptually, to the Christian doctrine of purgatory wherein the deceased eventually escapes their suffering and enters a better position.

Let us suppose that Socrates is right when he says that the gods would punish a suicide if they could. If this is the case, then perhaps suicide is wrong, even though it is unpunishable, because, in theory, the gods (the human’s master) would be upset, and provocation of a slave’s master is a forgoing of their slave duties. In other words, although the suicide victim is not punished, the consequences of the suicide, like the trauma suffered by those who survive the victim (e.g., the gods) are negative; however, this type of consequence-based thinking, as far as it relates to the moral value of some action, does not concern eudaimonism. Recall that, according to *eudaimonism*, if an action is conducive to “the good life,” then that action should be desired (and enacted), so the consequences of the suicide are irrelevant (see page 3). Hence, appealing to the notion that suicide upsets the gods does not adequately explain why suicide is wrong, because *eudaimonistic* “good things” need not be morally correct. The religious analogy is flawed in its attempt to prove suicide is wrong chiefly because it does not demonstrate that suicide is not conducive to *eudaimonia*.



To this end, we consider the Socratic perception of the afterlife, again.

The notion that the suicide is unpunishable by the gods is underpinned by the Socratic perception of the afterlife which lists the only two possible existences for the soul in the hereafter (see (i) and (ii) on page 3); but the possibility that life after death is (iii) eternal punishment, or (iii\*) the disciplining of the soul for the wrongful actions committed before death, is not entertained. It is unclear why Socrates does not seriously contemplate this hypothetical reality, though one may suggest that since Socrates' *daimon* (*Apology*, 40a-b) had not intervened during his explanation, his view on post death existence must be true; herein lays a multitude of further issues, like the reliability of the *daimon* and Socrates' trustworthiness is reporting if his *daimon* intervened. Even if we grant that this *daimon* is real, and Socrates did accurately report the lack of interference in the *Apology*, there is no evidence corroborating the infallibility of Socrates' *daimon*. If we extend Socrates' view of the afterlife to include the possibility of (iii) or (iii\*), then the claim that the gods cannot punish a suicide is not so obvious, for there could exist a place of punishment where the soul is potentially sentenced.

In this light, death is no longer the greatest good, thereby undermining premise (2) "Death is the greatest good," and weakening conclusion (3) "Therefore, one ought to desire death," because death could beget punishment, and suicide would be a means to hasten this suffering. In essence, upheaving (2) by speculating the existence of (iii) serves to upend the proposition that the philosopher should be willing to die (*Phaedo*, 61b) because death might not ensure *eudaimonia*, which is the central goal of Socrates' ethics, i.e., *eudaimonism*.

If the philosopher now does not desire death (because it no longer begets *eudaimonia*), then the conclusion (5) "Therefore, suicide is good" is no longer satisfied, which the *Phaedo*, 61b-63b (the two analogies) had tried to elucidate but demonstrably failed. Allowing the hypothetical existence of hell, an alternate justification for the injunction against suicide arises which dissents from Socrates'. The Socratic argument against suicide based on the religious analogy is incomplete because the Socratic perception of death itself is incomplete for it fails to consider the possibility of hell. By speculating the existence of hell, it may be concluded that death does not lead to happiness, and by failing to lead to happiness, it is not a "good thing" that should be desired by philosophers, particularly those subscribing to *eudaimonism*, like Socrates and his contemporaries.

Failing to attain these requirements suggests that through this alternate view, the philosopher should not only relinquish their desire for death but be cautious of acting immorally for such behaviour would incur punishment, not *eudaimonia*.

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**Suicide in *Phaedo***

**Markus Enns**

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# Why Are We Not Past Ancient Aliens Narratives?

## How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Ancient Near East

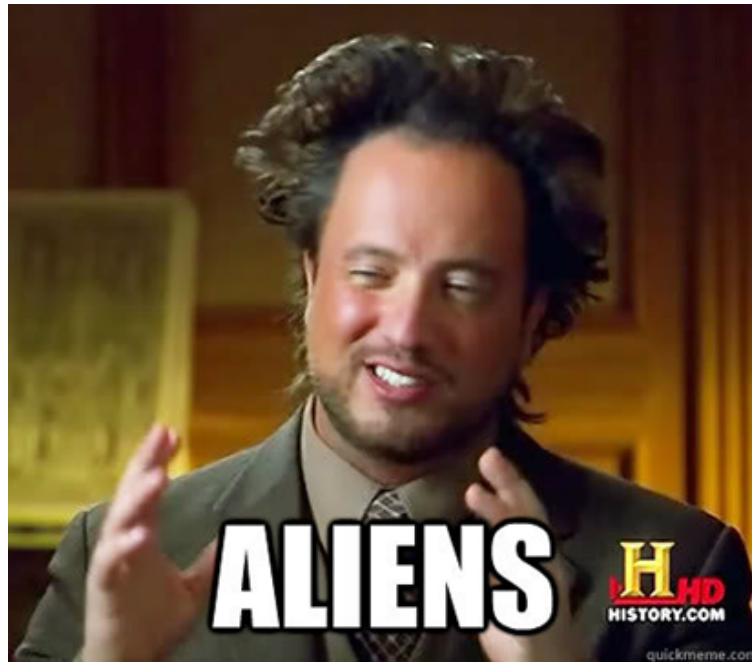
Brynn Gillies

**Abstract:** One of the most damaging practices that persists in the non-academic sphere of Near Eastern Archaeology are the constant ancient alien conspiracy theories perpetuated in online communities. These conspiracies placed throughout the internet in mass numbers argue in one format or another that almost every non-European culture and their art, architecture, and religion all are products of visitations from extraterrestrials that visited earth thousands of years ago. While these ideas may appear as nothing more than childish jokes, or perhaps idiotic ideals that only echo around in forums, they are in fact dangerous practices that have hindered the academic dissemination of archeological information, and have dominated the pop culture understanding of the Ancient Near Eastern historical past. By focusing on the theories that use sites and artifacts from the area of Mesopotamia as proof of alien intervention in human development, one can explore just how damaging ideas such as these are, and how they will always be rooted in white ethnocentric ideals.

The belief in ancient aliens, and all ancient alien theories are rightfully the butt of some of the most popular jokes online. The widespread mockery of ancient aliens and alien theorists eventually lead to the creation of a popular meme format after a particularly unfortunate screen shot from a History Channel show, aptly named *Ancient Aliens*, went viral back in the early 2010s.<sup>1</sup> The meme became popular to use in any situation on social media that depicted one or more parties acting particularly stupid or putting forth ridiculous conclusions without any evidence (see figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> "Ancient Aliens," Know Your Meme, 2011, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ancient-aliens>.



*Fig. 1 Image of the popular Ancient Aliens Meme.*

*Flickr.*

Ancient alien jokes, and the aforementioned meme format still persist to this day on social media accounts and subreddit forums. Those that truly believe in these theories are widely mocked by casual history fans and fervent scholars alike. Despite their humorous qualities that make for light topics of conversations at parties, ancient alien theories and beliefs can perpetuate rather extreme and harmful ideas of the past and the present. Most, if not all of these theories are based in white supremacist rhetoric that belittles the work, history, and culture of groups that are non-European in origin.<sup>2</sup> Narratives such as these can be incredibly damaging to both the culture the theory is trying to discuss, and those that are only casually involved in historical academia. The Ancient Near East is one of the most fruitful places ancient alien believers flock to in order to perpetuate their ‘theories’ and rather thinly veiled white supremacy ideas.<sup>3</sup> Egypt is an obvious contender for pulling in some of the most outlandish extraterrestrial claims, but Egypt’s neighboring cultures to the east also attract a fair amount of ‘researchers’ and internet sleuths drawing some very problematic conclusions about its long history. Alien ‘histories’ of the Ancient Near East tend to serve only one core purpose; make non-white cultures appear as inferior to European ones under an engaging facade of

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2 Lizzie Wade, “Beliefs in Aliens, Atlantis Are on the Rise,” *Science* 364, no. 6436 (December 2019): 110.

3 Franco D. Rossi, “Reckoning with the Popular Uptake of Alien Archaeology,” *Public Archaeology* 18, no. 3 (March 2019): 167.

genre bending sci-fi adventure stories.<sup>4</sup> Ancient alien theories focused on the geographical area of Mesopotamia perpetuate deeply racist agendas and pull focus and interest away from the academic study and subsequent dissemination of ancient history. By analyzing the various Near Eastern artifacts and sites that are used by these ancient alien communities to claim proof of alien intervention in the history of the human race, the social issues that these “theories” can cause, why they have become so mainstream, and how they undermine the academic ‘reality’ presented by scholars can be further understood.

The large world of online conspiracy theories relating to ancient aliens are beyond complex and convoluted. Due to the intense nature of how these communities operate and theorize, the established lore of ancient aliens in the Near East is not going to be the focus of this discussion. It is instead a focus on what these groups use, or do not use, and how they use them to formulate their theories. It is then necessary to begin with defining a few terms used by the academic community to discuss what it is these groups do regarding the historical and archeological records.

The first term is alternative histories, which are theories constructed on little to no scientific evidence that proclaim a different historical course of the human race.<sup>5</sup> One of the most popular alternative history conclusions often revolves around the presence of extraterrestrial life throughout antiquity. These beings have been coined within the community as the previously mentioned ancient aliens. One of the main ways that those involved in perpetuating alternative history narratives do so is through what the academic community has coined, pseudoarcheology. By only taking, if even, a surface level analysis of archaeological sites or artifacts and then applying bunk research methods or blatantly false observations, individuals then labeled as pseudo-archaeologists can effortlessly conclude that an ancient site has proof of extraterrestrial presence in antiquity. Michael Shermer notes on the ways pseudo-archeologists establish the foundations of their theories: “because scientists cannot explain X, then Y is a legitimate theory...because I cannot explain X, then my Y theory is valid”.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Derek D. Turner and Michelle I. Turner, “‘I’m Not Saying It Was Aliens’: An Archaeological and Philosophical Analysis of a Conspiracy Theory,” in *Explorations in Archaeology and Philosophy*, ed. A. Killin and S. Allen-Hermanson (Berlin: SPRINGER NATURE, 2022), 8.

5 Brian Fagan, “Archaeology and Pseudo-Archaeology,” *Expedition Magazine* 29, no. 2 (1987).

6 Michael Shermer, “Romance of the Vanished Past,” *Scientific American* 316, no. 6 (2017): 75.

Once a theory surrounding a particular site or artifact has been determined, pseudo-archaeologists can then fit their conclusions into the larger conspiracies already present within ancient alien online communities.<sup>7</sup> One of the richest sources for ‘alien evidence’ to fit into these established online theories are with archeological sites that contain large ‘man made’ structures.

Monumental architecture draws in the greatest number of alien conspiracies, as well as art reliefs, figurines, and artifacts of ancient Near Eastern religious cults. Large scale monuments draw the attention of alien theorists for the same reasons early archeologists were also drawn to them; they are incredibly impressive and express legitimate ancient power. However, to pseudo-archaeologists, they are impressed about the architectural feats for a different reason. An ancient site that receives attention from the alternative history crowd is the remarkable site of Göbekli Tepe located in modern day Turkey (see figure 2).



*Fig. 2 Photograph of the site of Göbekli Tepe and its stone pillars  
("Göbekli Tepe,") Wikimedia Commons.*

For scholars, the site of Göbekli Tepe has been integral in piecing together the complicated timeline of the Neolithic Revolution and changing the current understanding of how early monumental architectural construction could begin without the presence of sedentary living and farming.

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7 Cynthia Ann Humes, "Hindutva, Mythistory, and Pseudoarchaeology," *Numen* 59, no. 2-3 (2012): 194.

8 Tracy B. Henley, "On Prehistoric Psychology: Reflections at the Invitation of Göbekli Tepe," *History of Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2020): 214.



Dating back to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period, around 9,600 BC, the site of Göbekli Tepe has been nothing short of remarkable throughout its years of excavations. The main architectural features of the site includes large T-shaped stone pillars numbering in the hundreds, “interconnected by walls and stone benches and are decorated with varied animal motifs...as well as, in some cases, arms and hands”<sup>9</sup> as well as 20 large stone enclosures.<sup>10</sup> Interpretations of the site have varied since its discovery, but a larger emphasis has been put on the site as a type of communal religious cult center that served the hunter-gatherer societies in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic.<sup>11</sup> It was unlikely a permanent habitation site but served instead as a central gathering place to conduct religious rituals or large feasts.<sup>12</sup> At this early site of Göbekli Tepe, there was “requisite social hierarchies, divisions of labor, specialized craftsmen, and social coordination”, all internal parts that are needed for building such monumental structures but without the presence of “actual sedentism and domestication.”<sup>13</sup> Göbekli Tepe suggests that the previously known formula for understanding the Neolithic Revolution may in fact be inverted, that in fact a need for organization and organized religion facilitated sedentism and domestication.<sup>14</sup> Pseudo-archaeologists however, see this early site of architectural achievement from a Near Eastern culture as low hanging alien conspiracy fodder.

Speaking on the site of Göbekli Tepe, Graham Hancock, a pseudo-archaeologist with published works such as; *Supernatural: Meeting with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind*, had only this to say about the site:

“At the very least [the existence of Göbekli Tepe] would mean that some as yet unknown and unidentified people somewhere in the world, had already mastered all the arts and attributes of a high civilization more than twelve thousand years ago in the depths of the last Ice Age and had sent out emissaries around the world

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9 Oliver Dietrich et al., “The Role of Cult and Feasting in the Emergence of Neolithic Communities. New Evidence from Göbekli Tepe, South-Eastern Turkey,” *Antiquity* 86, no. 333 (2012): 679.

10 Henley, “On Prehistoric Psychology: Reflections at the Invitation of Göbekli Tepe,” 214.

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13 Henley, “On Prehistoric Psychology: Reflections at the Invitation of Göbekli Tepe,” 214.

14 Henley, “On Prehistoric Psychology: Reflections at the Invitation of Göbekli Tepe,” 214.



to spread the benefits of their knowledge”.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike academic scholars regarding Göbekli Tepe as a turning point in understanding the timeline of human civilization, ancient alien conspiracists immediately go towards discrediting the accomplishments of indigenous groups and attributing their success to some other more enlightened peoples who selflessly gave their knowledge to struggling cultures.<sup>16</sup> While this statement from Hancock does not explicitly name ancient aliens as the culprits for this advanced technology, it still perpetuates the agenda that non-white cultures did not possess the necessary intelligence to produce their own material culture, essentially stealing their own history away from them.<sup>17</sup> Hancock undermines the abilities that hunter gatherer civilizations had to produce such large and impressive structures and concludes without any evidence to support his argument that the only logical answer is, ‘someone else did it for them’.<sup>18</sup> Theories such as this one perpetuates a narrative that makes it harder for academic communities to disseminate ground-breaking new discoveries. Instead of seeing the site of Göbekli Tepe as a profound example of the remarkable achievements and skills that early civilizations possessed before the adoption of farming, it is instead reduced to nothing more than a poor copy of someone else's demanding work.<sup>19</sup> Plainly, ancient alien narratives make factual history ‘boring’ and drive people away from pursuing an interest in academia and scholarship while ingraining notions of racial superiority into the study of history.

The ways in which ancient Mesopotamian cultures expressed themselves and their religion also attracts a fair amount of speculation and alternative histories from ancient alien enthusiasts. Similar to how Amarna art styles and motifs from New Kingdom Egypt are heralded in ancient alien communities as proof of extraterrestrial influences, prehistoric figurines of Mesopotamia have been given the same pseudoscientific treatment and analysis. Found most often from the 7th and 4th millennium BCE in Southern Mesopotamia, are small

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15 Shermer, “Romance of the Vanished Past,” 75.

16 Steven Kurutz, “Suspicious Minds Mingling with Wariness and Wonder at a Conference Devoted to ‘Ancient Aliens,’” New York Times, July 21, 2018.

17 Sarah E. Bond, “Pseudoarchaeology and the Racism Behind Ancient Aliens,” Hyperallergic, November 13, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/470795/pseudoarchaeology-and-the-racism-behind-ancient-aliens/>.

18 Shermer, “Romance of the Vanished Past,” 75.

19 William Rathje, “The Ancient Astronaut Myth,” *Archaeology* 31, no. 1 (1978): 6.

humanoid figurines with exaggerated facial structures (see figure 3).<sup>20</sup> A typical style of the Ubaid period and Halaf culture, these prehistoric figures have been coined as ‘lizard’ or ‘Ophidian’ figurines given the odd shape of the figurine's heads and eyes resembling common reptilian features.<sup>21</sup> These figurines have been found across multiple sites and are not restrained to depicting one gender. However, a majority of recorded Ubaid ‘lizard’ figurines have been categorized as female.<sup>22</sup> Scholarship is undecided on who or what these figures are representing and in what ancient contexts they were used. The original excavator of the site in the 1920's, Leonard Wooley, concluded that these figures must have represented some form of deities. However, more modern scholarship argues that they could represent worshippers, deceased family members, or simply divine figures. Their purpose all hinging on whether or not these figures were found as grave goods or not.<sup>23</sup> It is from this known and debated gap within academia that pseudo-archaeologists take as proof that extraterrestrials were present in 5,000 BCE.



*Fig. 2 Photograph of the site of Göbekli Tepe and its stone pillars,  
("Göbekli Tepe,") Wikimedia Commons.*

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20 Robert A. Carter, Graham Philip, and Aurelie Daems, "A Snake in the Grass. Reassessing the Ever-Intriguing Ophidian Figurines," in *Beyond the Ubaid: Transformation and Integration in the Late Prehistoric Societies of the Middle East* (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 131.

21 Carter, Philip, and Daems, "A Snake in the Grass. Reassessing the Ever-Intriguing Ophidian Figurines," 131.

22 Ibid., 130.

23 Moorey P R S. et al., "Things Fall Apart, The Centre Cannot Hold," in *Culture through Objects: Ancient near Eastern Studies in Honour of P.R.S. Moorey* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 2003), 180.

Given the reptilian features and anthropomorphic qualities of these artifacts, alternative historical narratives conclude that the people of the Halaf culture were visited by some form of higher intelligence and subsequently worshiped those higher beings as deities and depicted them in their art.<sup>24</sup> Pseudo-archeologists also use these Ophidian figures' geographical isolation of appearance and disappearance from the archaeological record after this prehistoric period as 'proof' that the appearance of such strange looking figurines could have only occurred if some outside influence made them create such artifacts.<sup>25</sup> This argument denies the people of the Halaf culture of their own unique ability to create and express themselves and their religion through material objects, as well as undermines the level of craftsmanship and skill needed to create and disseminate such figurines.<sup>26</sup> To deny a culture their own ability to be complex and reduce their culture to nothing more than a single point of reference is beyond damaging.

In comparison, early Greek art and figures depicting divinity or humanoid figures do not receive the same treatment from the alternative history crowd.<sup>27</sup> Cycladic figurines with their elongated neck, sparse facial features, and exaggerated bodily proportions have escaped interpretation from ancient alien communities despite them sharing with the lizard figurines a certain 'otherness' quality to it (see figure 4). Separated both geographically and temporally, the Greeks and the Halaf peoples produced small scale humanoid figurines throughout antiquity that take artistic liberties in their expression, but it is only the non-European culture that gets an alien label attached to it.<sup>28</sup> This is because ancient alien communities believe that there is a form of inherent whiteness to Greek society and culture. The Greeks therefore possess an inherent superiority in their art, culture, and religion. As a result, Cycladic figurines are left alone in ancient alien discussions because these communities deem it believable that a 'white' culture could be this expressive and imaginative without intervention. But 'eastern' cultures do not possess the same capabilities according to those in the ancient alien

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24 Tasha Shayne, "Are the Ubaid Figurines Evidence of Reptilians in Ancient Sumer?," Gaia, January 2020, <http://www.gaia.com/article/the-ubaid-lizardmen-figurines-reptilians-in-ancient-sumer>'.

25 Turner and Turner, "I'm Not Saying It Was Aliens", 15.

26 Moorey P R S. et al., "Things Fall Apart, The Centre Cannot Hold," 183.

27 Bond, "Pseudoarchaeology and the Racism Behind Ancient Aliens".

28 "I'm Not Saying It Was Aliens", 16.

community. Therefore, they must conclude that these non-white peoples were helped by an outside force to create their own culture. That concept, which is the basis for hundreds of alien conspiracies is blatantly racist, and steeped in dangerous white supremacist rhetoric, all hidden under the poorly constructed guise of harmless science fiction.



*Fig. 4 Three Cycladic figurines,  
("Cycladic Three Figurines Group,") Wikimedia Commons.*

It is not only 'strangely shaped' 9-thousand-year-old figurines that draws in the attention of ancient alien enthusiasts, but the artistic wall reliefs and carvings of later Near Eastern cultural groups do as well. These pieces of art located in the large palaces of several ancient Neo-Assyrian kings of the 9th century BC bring in a great deal of scrutiny from the alternative

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24 Tasha Shayne, "Are the Ubaid Figurines Evidence of Reptilians in Ancient Sumer?," Gaia, January 2020, <http://www.gaia.com/article/the-ubaid-lizardmen-figurines-reptilians-in-ancient-sumer>'.

25 Turner and Turner, "I'm Not Saying It Was Aliens", 15.

26 Moorey P R S. et al., "Things Fall Apart, The Centre Cannot Hold," 183.

27 Bond, "Pseudoarchaeology and the Racism Behind Ancient Aliens".

28 "I'm Not Saying It Was Aliens", 16.

history crowd simply due to how the Assyrians thought to express themselves and their religious icons. Specifically, the ancient Assyrian capital city of Kalhu,<sup>29</sup> also known by the name Nimrud, located in modern day northern Iraq,<sup>30</sup> is the location of a quite impressive palace complex built by the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II.<sup>31</sup> This specific palace has attracted the attention of numerous alien conspiracy theories due to the perceived strangeness of its wall reliefs.



*Fig. 5 Wall relief depicting an eagle headed figure, (“Relief from Assyrian Palace at Nimrud, 9th Cent. BCE,”) Flickr.*

Adorning the walls of this massive complex at Kalhu are numerous detailed carvings of the king, his many accomplishments in battle, and the Assyrian gods.<sup>32</sup> Each relief is meant to visually telegraph the power, prestige, and authority of the king,<sup>33</sup> and his strong relationship with the Assyrian gods as a vassal for their divine power.<sup>34</sup>

29 Eva Miller, “Drawing Distinctions: Assyrians and Others in the Art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire,” *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 9, no. 2 (2021): 84.

30 Allison Thomason, “The Materiality of Assyrian Sacred Kingship,” *Religion Compass* 10, no. 6 (2016): 133.

31 Springer Cham, “Nimrud,” *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Archaeology*, 2021, 936.

32 Cham, “Nimrud,” 936.

33 Miller, “Drawing Distinctions: Assyrians and Others in the Art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire,” 103.

34 Thomason, “The Materiality of Assyrian Sacred Kingship,” 134.

These ideas of the relationship between kingship and divinity manifested over time,<sup>35</sup> and the most profound and optimal way for the Assyrians to communicate such complex ideas about their gods was to present their gods visually as large humanoid figures with wings, and occasionally heads of birds of prey (see figure 5).<sup>36</sup> The reasoning behind these decisions are lost and far removed from us today, but that does not mean it should be forgotten or dismissed for something alien in nature. The images of the carvings from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II are quite striking and powerful, and show the importance of these religious figures to Assyria and their empire.<sup>37</sup> As why else would a king spend so much time, money, and effort into making sure these images would last for millennia? These wall reliefs also reveal just how complicated and intricate the religious culture was to the Assyrian peoples, as the final images are the culmination of hundreds of years of thought and communication in order to find the best way to express themselves (see figure 6).<sup>38</sup> These carvings are small but rich windows into the late Ancient Near Eastern past that provide a plethora of information about the lives, although selective, of those who lived then.<sup>39</sup>



*Fig. 6 Wall relief from Ashurnasirpal II's palace, ("King Ashurnasirpal II and a Winged Genie,"). Wikimedia Commons.*

35 Marian H. Feldman, "Mesopotamian Art," ed. Daniel C. Snell, *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, April 2020, 370.

36 Mehmet-Ali Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (2006): 70.

37 Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture," 84.

38 *Ibid.*, 69.

39 Feldman, "Mesopotamian Art," 369.



However, those in ancient alien communities do not see any of these complexities just mentioned.<sup>40</sup> Instead, how the Assyrians chose to depict their own religion is only just concrete proof of alien involvement in the history of the human race and nothing beyond that.

The wall reliefs that adorn Neo Assyrian places that depict both human headed and animal headed figures with wings are actually not representations of gods to ancient alien conspiracy theorists. Instead, these carved figures are visual proof that alien creatures, dubbed the Anunnaki,<sup>41</sup> must have visited and subsequently influenced ancient Near Eastern culture in the past. Ancient alien theorists argue that these extraterrestrials were so commonplace throughout the entirety of the Neo Assyrian empire that they came to be worshiped as gods, which is how they ended up being depicted in said wall reliefs.<sup>42</sup> Because, for those that subscribe to this way of thinking, what other reason could there possibly be for a culture to choose to depict their gods as creatures with wings and bird heads if those types of figures did not actually walk amongst them? The only logical conclusion for ancient alien conspiracies is that these ancient Assyrian peoples must have seen these creatures constantly, that they mistook them as their gods and documented them in their art.<sup>43</sup> This way of viewing ancient art completely undermines and ignores the simple truth that humans express themselves in ways that often don't make sense or line up with 21st century thought processes. While it is impossible to get into the minds of ancient peoples and ask why they felt it necessary to depict their gods with anthropomorphic qualities, that does not automatically mean that the only avenue left to explore is one of an alien influence.

For whatever reason that may escape us now, the Assyrian people felt it most appropriate and correct to represent their gods as anthropomorphic figures with wings.

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40 'I'm Not Saying It Was Aliens', 20.

41 "How Humans Were Created by Anunnaki Ancient Astronaut Aliens," Afrika is Woke, July 29, 2019, <https://www.afrikaiswoke.com/anunnaki-creation-of-man/>.

42 William DeLong, "Why Some Say One of History's First Civilizations Was Actually Created by Ancient Aliens," All That's Interesting (All That's Interesting, July 7, 2021), <https://allthatsinteresting.com/anunnaki>.

43 Rathje, "The Ancient Astronaut Myth," 6.

For alien enthusiasts to essentially remove Assyrian people from their own rich culture in order to claim evidence of alien involvement on Earth is dehumanizing and shamelessly racist. This statement of alien involvement in the culture of the Neo Assyrian empire argues that this non-white, non-European based group was not artistically talented enough to express themselves in a way that cannot be fully understood in modernity. In short, what the Assyrians made and did with their art is too complicated to comprehend even by 21st century standards. That must mean that the only way a culture this old could do this was by outside external alien involvement.<sup>44</sup> Paradoxically, alien theories, unintentionally, then undermine every human's both ancient and current, abilities to express unique and complicated ideas in a way that makes sense to them and them alone. By purporting that the ancient Assyrians could not have come up with these artistic reliefs alone, alien theorists tragically also perpetuate that no human is capable of complex thought, which is devastatingly depressing and self-defeating.<sup>45</sup> However, those in alien communities do not tend to express this deeper sentiment, nor do they look that closely at what their own ideas are arguing, and instead conclude that only non-white cultures are incapable of being creative and expressive which is wildly problematic as previously mentioned.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps even more disturbing is, it is not only specific artifacts that make ancient alien communities draw these problematic conclusions, but it is also the general level of progress and technological invention that occurred during the long history of the area of the ancient Near East that causes many to scream that encounters of the third kind occurred frequently in Mesopotamia.

From the amount of focus and dedication alien communities have shown to the area of the Ancient Near East, it appears that many alien enthusiasts have a problem accepting how inquisitive, smart, and knowledge driven cultures of the past really were. The area of the Near East specifically is an incredible place where a great deal of development occurred in regard to the human race as whole. As archaeologist Eric Cline notes, the invention of the plow for more advanced farming techniques, and farming as a practice,

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44 Barry Vacker, "Ancient Aliens: Evidence of Stephen Hawking's Claim That 'Philosophy Is Dead,'" Medium (Explosion of Awareness, February 26, 2017), <https://medium.com/explosion-of-awareness/ancient-aliens-evidence-of-stephen-hawkings-claim-that-philosophy-is-dead-7a06e4a28fbc>.

45 Vacker, "Ancient Aliens: Evidence of Stephen Hawking's Claim That 'Philosophy Is Dead'".

46 "I'm Not Saying It Was Aliens", 19.



originated in the area.<sup>47</sup> The invention of mathematical principles hundreds of years before the Greeks came along occurred in the Near East.<sup>48</sup> This is an astonishing amount of development to occur in just one area over a long period of time. And that makes the Near East 'prime real estate' for conspiracy theories. All this progress that occurred in the Near East is simply too much to have occurred without alien intervention for certain people, which as noted with the wall reliefs, indicates how condescendingly alien enthusiasts believe in the capabilities of their own species for progress and invention.<sup>49</sup> Most notably for alien enthusiasts, hundreds of thousands of tablets dedicated to tracking the movements of the stars and planets were written by a variety of different cultures in the Near East thousands of years ago and methods of astronomy were being developed. This is a large indicator to some that aliens were present in the area of Ancient Near East.<sup>50</sup> The presence of astronomical related artifacts in the Near East for ancient alien communities proves alien involvement in the history of the human race. For these groups, there is no other logical conclusion that explains why a non-white cultural group would be interested in the sky, and work to be innovators of astronomical theories. This belief continues to ignore the fact that humans, even today, can be interested in things such as the stars out of genuine non-alien related curiosity. Ancient alien theories like this make it impossible for those in the community to then comprehend the basic reality that people throughout history could have had an interest and desire to learn more about astronomy. Everything produced in these ancient alien communities are reductive and often self-cannibalizing to an extreme degree. It is remarkably easy then to dismiss everything that these alien communities believe in and write about as nonsensical internet babble that has no real impact on the academic world, but that is an ignorant stance to take as well.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most important aspects about these pseudo archaeological and alternative history narratives that are often overlooked and ignored altogether,

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47 Kristina Killgrove, "What Archaeologists Really Think about Ancient Aliens, Lost Colonies, and Fingerprints of the Gods," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, September 3, 2015), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristinakillgrove/2015/09/03/what-archaeologists-really-think-about-ancient-aliens-lost-colonies-and-fingerprints-of-the-gods/?sh=ed1a3c97ab0c>.

48 Luke Hodgkin, *A History of Mathematics: From Mesopotamia to Modernity* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2005), 14.

49 Killgrove, "What Archaeologists Really Think about Ancient Aliens, Lost Colonies, and Fingerprints of the Gods".

50 DeLong, "Why Some Say One of History's First Civilizations Was Actually Created by Ancient Aliens".

51 Rathje, "The Ancient Astronaut Myth," 5.

are their accessibility and readability when compared to scholarly and academic resources and publications about history and archaeology.<sup>52</sup> Frankly, science fiction stories and themes are easier and quicker to consume and have more entertainment value to them than any scholarly thesis.<sup>53</sup> Further, ancient alien theories are more often than not free to access on online public platforms like Reddit, where there are active comments sections that encourage communication with zero to no moderation. These platforms are updated frequently and rely on the use of language that does not require a secondary education experience to comprehend.<sup>54</sup> When ancient alien theories are put to print and sold commercially, they come as cheap eBooks via Amazon or are sold at large retailers like Walmart in the ten-to-fifteen-dollar range. Ancient alien books also sell commercially extremely well. The most notorious of those books, “Chariots of the Gods?” by Erich Von Daniken, written in 1968 has sold over 50 million copies,<sup>55</sup> and continues to put out anniversary editions.<sup>56</sup> In a poll conducted by Chapman University in 2018, researchers found that nearly 41% of North Americans believe that aliens have visited Earth, and 57% believe that forgotten civilizations like Atlantis were real, with a 3% margin of error. Those percentages are on the rise, as just a few years earlier in the 2016 results of the same survey, those statistics were 15% lower.<sup>57</sup>

Even if someone outside the sphere of university or higher education wants to access peer reviewed scholarly materials to learn about archaeology, there are many walls hindering their ability to do so. Published journals are often put behind paywalls that require monthly or yearly subscriptions. Published scholarly books can easily reach price points of over \$100, and require a university level or above reading comprehension ability.<sup>58</sup>

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52 Wade, “Beliefs in Aliens, Atlantis Are on the Rise,” 111.

53 Killgrove, “What Archaeologists Really Think about Ancient Aliens, Lost Colonies, and Fingerprints of the Gods”.

54 Joseph E. Uscinski and Josh Pasek, “Don’t Trust the Scientists! Rejecting the Scientific Consensus ‘Conspiracy,’” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 203.

55 John R. Cole, “Cult Archaeology and Unscientific Method and Theory,” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 1980, 2.

56 Kurutz, “Suspicious Minds Mingling with Wariness and Wonder at a Conference Devoted to ‘Ancient Aliens’”.

57 “Paranormal America 2018 – Chapman University Survey of American Fears,” *The Voice of Wilkinson*, October 16, 2018, <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/paranormal-america-2018/>.

58 “What Archaeologists Really Think about Ancient Aliens, Lost Colonies, and Fingerprints of the Gods”.

Updates to both scholarly journals and books occur slowly and infrequently simply due to the nature of academic literature and publishing, so it can be frustrating to try and find new information if one is curious about a certain topic in archaeology.<sup>59</sup> Quality of content aside, from a non-academic world, alternative history communities are inclusive platforms to engage with that encourage any and all discussions with no oversight. Scholarly spheres of knowledge are, on the other hand, hard to break into and often require increased financial stability to access, and have a perceived, if not true elitist foundations to them.

Pseudoarcheology has none of the same hurdles as academic publishing, making it easier to access and consume, and that makes them extremely dangerous. It is not that an everyday consumer wants to turn to online forums to learn about the ancient Near Eastern past, it is often the only choice they are presented with.<sup>60</sup> For a lot of people, academic truth is expensive and not a right to access. As a result, what is perpetuated in the public sphere about incredibly important and culturally rich periods of history are narratives that present the past as science fiction. They do nothing but sustain their core beliefs of racial superiority that lie at the heart of every conspiracy theory.

Alternative histories such as ancient aliens attract people with interesting stories and fascinating sci-fi elements and plot lines, only to over time indoctrinate or encourage people to act on racial superiority theories and make it difficult to ever pull them out of those lines of thinking. When comparing alternative histories vs. historical truth, it is easy to observe which one is inherently more ‘interesting’ and draws more on human interests of exploring gripping adventure narratives. What it does even further is invalidate how interesting the reality of history actually is, making it more difficult to get people interested in the discipline itself. By twisting historical truth to suit only the needs of the few, alternative histories and ancient aliens’ theories about the Ancient Near East are incredibly damaging and dangerous and should not be left alone to fester online. At best, ancient alien theories perpetuate ideas that may cause someone to be laughed at a party if they bring up how the pyramids of Giza were built by aliens. At their absolute worst, which takes up a majority of their purpose, ancient aliens destroy the already fragile agency of ancient Near Eastern peoples to produce artifacts

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59 Wade, “Beliefs in Aliens, Atlantis Are on the Rise,” 111.

60 “What Archaeologists Really Think about Ancient Aliens, Lost Colonies, and Fingerprints of the Gods”.

and larger cultural ideals, and even have their own voices that should be listened to. At every turn, ancient alien theories triumphantly promote heinous principles of racial superiority. Sadly, they currently remain untouched and ignored by wider scholarly communities.<sup>61</sup> Ancient alien theories about the Near East perpetuate ideals that once engrained are near impossible to remove. Outlandish though the theories may be, their impact is real, growing, and shifting the way that only those involved in the peripheries of pop-culture history see and interact with one of the most critical areas in the development of the human race. And they see it as nothing more than a fantastical farce.

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61 Rossi, "Reckoning with the Popular Uptake of Alien Archaeology," 178.

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# "I Am the Messiah"

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**Abstract:** The Gospel of John depicts Jesus proclaim "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι or 'ego eimi' in Greek) throughout the Gospel, including thrice in its eighth chapter: "...you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he" (8:24 NRSV), "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he" (8:28), and "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." (8:58) (emphasis mine). Who is Jesus claiming to be within these passages, according to John? These statements, I argue, are messianic claims, of a specific sort: Jesus is rendered as a mystical, divinized Messiah who should be, in John's view, the focal point of Jewish veneration and obedience. These "I am" passages undercut the religious authority of Jesus' portrayed opponents through the language of mysticism, interjecting into them contemporarily circulating liturgical practices and texts of ascent to a vision of God's throne, as well as traditions about divinized Hebrew prophets, patriarchs, and eschatological figures including messiahs, many of whom are portrayed as making this ascent.

This paper's argument will proceed in three sections. First, some of the literary motifs and religious themes of Jewish mystical practices and texts near the first century CE will be reviewed to show that the evangelist, John's author,<sup>1</sup> was likely consciously playing upon and subverting three key, interrelated themes: first, the ascension to and vision of the divine. Second, attaining this vision or ascension can lead a figure to becoming 'divine' in some sense. Third, there are apocalyptic and supernatural messianic figures other than God that have authority on the earth. In the subsequent section, verses from John 4 and later John 7 will be analyzed through close reading to argue the "I am" statements refer to a messianic claim interjected within this religious and textual milieu.

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<sup>1</sup> The anonymous author of the Gospel, henceforth referred to as John.



Last, this paper will analyze and posit why John portrays Jesus making this claim through a close reading of passages within the Gospel's eight chapters, in light of the above circulating themes, and how John aims to challenge the authority of the depicted pharisaic leadership and reconfigure Jewish spiritual life through the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Mysticism: Historical Background & Themes**

'Mysticism' is difficult to define and even its very notion is deeply contested.<sup>2</sup> Within the context of Second Temple Judaism, a useful definition of a 'mystical' element of faith is that it discloses heavenly or divine realities through direct experience (be it visionary or through a transformed state of consciousness), rather than through ethical or legal practice. The sites of mystical encounter were diverse for Jews of this era, ranging from exegesis of 'mystical' verses of scripture to liturgical and cultic practice. The dominant form of mysticism of the period, Merkabah mysticism, focused primarily on<sup>3</sup> the vision of God's Glory upon throne and chariot (Merkabah) attained by prophetic figures, as in Ezekiel 1, 1 Enoch 14, and Isaiah 6. It is this form of mysticism and its adjacent tropes this paper will focus upon. The centrality of vision and throne motifs lead Gershom Scholem to write:

"What was the central theme of these oldest of mystical doctrines within the framework of Judaism? No doubts are possible on this point: the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism. Its essence is not absorbed contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world."

By the second century BCE and into the first and second centuries CE, Merkabah mystical ideas, texts, and related traditions circulated throughout Jewish communities around the

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2 Difficult because there is no agreed upon academic definition of the term as a subset of religious experience, much less Jewish mysticism of this period. Even the very category of religion has come under recent scrutiny. See, for instance, Brent Nongbri's *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. Yale University Press, 2013.

3 Crispin Fletcher-Louis, "Jewish Mysticism, The New Testament And Rabbinic-Period Mysticism," in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Florentino García Martínez, Didier Pollefeyt, and Peter Tomson (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 439-470.

4 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941), 43-44.

Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> These include including apocryphal texts, other apocalyptic literature,<sup>6</sup> and exegetical traditions,<sup>7</sup> built upon Enoch and Isaiah,<sup>8</sup> all of which portrayed its writer or other prophetic figures ascending to a vision of the throne,<sup>9</sup> and in some cases even being enthroned by God upon it. The pre-Christian writings of the Qumran community attest to the circulation of these themes through Jewish life in the Mediterranean world. Within the Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, were found a series of liturgic Sabbath Songs, composed no later than 100 BCE,<sup>10</sup> recited by the Qumran community for each month of the year communally “in which the text and reciter ‘journey’ through celestial levels.”<sup>11</sup> The climax of these songs aurally induces a vision of God's Glory on the throne in which the reciters joined angels praising in “one harmonious heavenly company.”<sup>12</sup> Later, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, writing mere decades before John, also placed the vision of and union with God as the highest goal of mystical practice.<sup>13</sup>

Closely related to these themes of vision or ascent was divinization, where the journeyer through the heavens, particularly in the case of prophetic figures or patriarchs, would be exalted to a status beyond other humans, in some cases even beyond angels and second only to God. Some of the literature implies the journeyer would transform into an angellike being, as

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5 Timo Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Christian Exaltation Discourse* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 4. Eskola notes that these themes of an ascent and/or throne version can be found in at least 23 pieces of writing from the pre-Christian era to the 2nd-3rd centuries CE.

6 Such as the 1st century CE Apocalypse of Abraham, in which the eponymous patriarch journeys through the heavens with the company of an angel, culminating in a vision of God's throne, or merkabah.

7 That is, interpreting and expounding upon the Torah and other sacred texts can disclose a mystical vision of the throne.

8 Christopher Rowland and C.R.A Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 234

9 In some cases, such as in cultic settings, a person (mainly a priest) has a vision of the throne without a direct transportation to the celestial realm. In writings about Biblical patriarchs and prophets who achieve this vision, it is often at the end of a physical journey to the ends, an ascension.

10 Carol A Newsom, "Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Oxford University Press, 2000). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195084504.001.0001/acref-9780195084504-e-511>

11 Rowland and Morray-Jones, “The Mystery of God”, 308-309.

12 Fletcher-Louis, “Jewish Mysticism,” 435.

13 Adam Afterman, *"And They Shall Be One Flesh": on the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

within 2 Enoch, where the Enoch is anointed and made like the angels.<sup>14</sup> Crispin Fletcher-Louis argues this theme was not uncommon within the Second Temple period, including the Qumran community's aforementioned Song of Sabbath Sacrifice:

“At the climax of the Qumran community's Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, for example, the mystical liturgy turns to the direct praise of the community's chief priests who are identified with the Glory of God that Ezekiel saw by the river Chebar. For others, such a close identification with Israel's one God is precluded and, like Moses, Jacob-Israel, the patriarchs and other heroes of the faith, transformation is to an angelic identity such that, in various ways, the worshippers become “divine.” ... the truly human righteous not only ascend to the heavenly heights, they become the holy ones, the holiest of the holy ones, and, probably, even the “gods” (both *elohim* and *elim*), surrounding the heavenly throne in worship.”<sup>15</sup>

This theme would continue again into the works of the otherwise adamantly monotheistic Philo, writing at the end of the 1st century CE, who maintained that Moses, Abraham, and other patriarchs became ‘divine’ in a sense, through traditions of their heavenly ascents, where they saw and spoke to God; so much so that he refers to Moses and these others as ‘god’.<sup>16</sup> For Philo, the divinizing ascent, vision, and subsequent transformation, made the patriarchs “better able to embody God's presence in the world for others.”<sup>17</sup> They became “incarnations of the will of God and of the life and nature of God.”<sup>18</sup>

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14 F.I. Andersen, “2 (Old Bulgarian Apocalypse of) Enoch, a new Translation and Introduction”, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 ed. James Charlesworth

15 Fletcher-Louis, “Jewish Mysticism,” 444.

16 Deborah Forger, “Divine Embodiment in Philo of Alexandria,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 49, no. 2 (2018): 223–262, 247.

17 Forger, “Divine Embodiment,” 247.

18 Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, *By Light, Light: the Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935), 121.

These figures became God's representatives on the earth and not only teachers of his decree, but such that to obey and venerate them is to obey God.<sup>19</sup> For example, one apocryphal Greek text, the 2nd century BCE Exagogue of Ezekiel, depicts Moses as ascending to heaven and, temporarily, being offered God's place on the throne by his Lord—the highest possible authority a created being could attain within the Jewish tradition.<sup>20</sup> As Wayne A. Meeks observes, these texts explicitly connotated exalted authority with Moses gaining epithets such as 'King of Israel' due to this journey.<sup>21</sup> Other similar texts from this 2nd-1st BCE period and the next century described Adam, Abraham, and other prophetic or angelic figures similarly enthroned. In this way, the divinization journey communicates a sense of authority and power, with these figures attaining royal titles or gaining the ability to be in judgement of men after being enthroned.<sup>22</sup>

These themes of ascent, enthronement, and divinization of human figures exalted into a position of royal or cosmic authority also overlap with messianic expectations of the period. In his survey of the main texts which speak of a messiah or messianic figure from the 2nd Century BCE to the 1st Century CE, Andrew Chester notes that while the most common messianic trope was of a human figure (often descended from David) who in the near or far future will overthrow Israel's enemies and usher in an era of peace and justice, other expectations existed as well, including increasing expectation of a heavenly man, angelic saviour, or other transcendent figures as the messiah or a supplementary figure still critical to messianic mission as a whole. For example, the apocalyptic work 2 Baruch, dated to immediately after the post-70 CE period, depicts a transcendent and heavenly messiah who overthrows Israel enemies, establishes a kingdom of justice, and then returns to heaven.<sup>23</sup>

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19 Here is a striking example of Philo's thinking. He writes: "When God lent Moses to earthly things and permitted him to associate with them. He endowed him not at all with the ordinary virtue of a ruler or king with which forcibly to rule the soul's passions; rather He appointed him to be god, and decreed that the whole bodily realm and its leader, the mind, should be his subjects and slaves." *ibid*, 199

20 Andrew Chester, "Jewish Messianic Expectations and Mediatorial Figures and Pauline Christology," in *Paulus Und Das Antike Judentum* ed. Martin Engel & Ulrich Heckel (Tübingen: Mohr P. Siebeck, 1991), 17-89, 55-64.

21 Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

22 Chester, "Jewish Messianic Expectations." 58

23 Chester, "Jewish Messianic Expectations." 58

What these figures have in common with some of these ascension tropes are celestial figures or exalted humans, here making a divine descent, who have been given authority on the earth. Though not called the messiah, Melchizedek, for example, is depicted as becoming God's agent of eschatological earthly judgement in the Qumran fragment 11QMelch, dated to around 100 BCE, and serves an example of "an earthly figure [that] is given an extraordinarily exalted position, and apparently accorded divine status and functions."<sup>24</sup> In addition, Chester notes there are also near contemporaneous texts that speak of other, non-messianic, figures who also have celestial authority second to God. The aforementioned Apocalypse of Abraham has the eponymous patriarch accompanied by the angel Iaoel, whose description is reminiscent of the Ancient of Days in Daniel, is set beside the throne, and whose name is one that God bears as well.<sup>25</sup> Thus in his influential study which connected Merkabah mysticism to these divine agents or mediatorial figures,<sup>26</sup> Larry Hurtado argued:

"[T]he literature of postexilic Judaism contains many references to various heavenly figures who are described as participating in some way in God's rule of the world and his redemption of the elect. In particular, there are heavenly figures described as occupying a position second only to God and acting on God's behalf in some major capacity. It is these figures which are most relevant for the historical problem of the origin of the cultic veneration of Jesus."<sup>27</sup> (emphasis mine).

Three, interrelated, though distinct motifs emerge from these circulating texts and practices which precede or are near contemporaneous to John's composition: that there are individuals who have ascended or been given a vision of God (or at least His throne), that some of these figures have been made divine in some sense, sometimes with accorded authority because of this vision or ascension, and that there are figures (messianic or otherwise) who, regardless of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Another example is the 1st century CE Prayer of Joseph, in which Jacob is depicted as an incarnation of the pre-existent angel Israel.

<sup>26</sup> That is, these figures are discharged with a responsibility and authority from God, and are mediating forces in His providence and relationship to humans.

<sup>27</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 17.

making this ascension, are second in celestial authority to God and have been given this status by the Creator. The Gospel of John radically confirms and undercuts these themes, saying all three are true of one person, alone: Jesus of Nazareth.

### Circulation of Mystical Themes

The Gospel of John was composed sometime towards the end of the 1st century CE, by an anonymous Greek-speaking writer outside of Ancient Palestine.<sup>28</sup> Biblical scholars observe that John was likely exposed to the themes discussed in the previous section. In his study of the Moses ascent traditions mentioned above,<sup>29</sup> Meeks notes that these narratives Moses' of ascent and divinization circulated through not only Palestinian Jewish traditions, but also Samaritan and Mandaean sources, suggesting a wide dissemination.<sup>30</sup> He concludes this Moses veneration, which often include ascension narratives, was widespread in the 1st century BCE and that, given John's accurate topographical description of the area and other textual clues, "many of the Johannine traditions were shaped in Christian communities situated in Samaria and in Galilee and engaged there in intensive missionary propaganda."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the final setting for the Gospel's compositional environment is commonly thought to be in (Western) Asia Minor,<sup>33</sup> which also witnessed the circulation of these mystical themes. Fletcher-Louis, for example, argues that Paul's letter to the Colossians (a church in Asia Minor) seems to address the type of liturgical worship in the Qumran community's Sabbath songs, where the community ascends to a place of vision and participates in the worship of God *alongside*, not *of*, angels.<sup>34</sup>

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28 Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

29 E.g. the Exagogue of Ezekiel and others

30 Meeks, "The Prophet-King," 300-301.

31 Meeks notes how non-Rabbinic sources such as the aforementioned Philo, Josephus, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphical valorize Moses as a model man and authority. For example, for the Hellenized Josephus, Moses is the ideal legislator and sovereign leader that predates yet mirror Greek notions of excellent leadership, a Semitic philosopher-king.

32 Ibid, 316.

33 See: Robert Crotty (2017). "John's Gospel in Western Asia Minor" in *The Christian Survivor* (Springer 2017), 277-293 and P.R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, WUNT 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 241-263.

34 Louis-Fletcher, "Jewish Mysticism", 438-439. Fletcher argues it is unlikely Paul was addressing actual angel-worship due to a lack of evidence that such practice was prevalent.

“Do not let anyone disqualify you,” Paul writes, “insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.” (Colossians 2:18 NRSV). It follows that these mystical practices were practiced, if not by the early Jesus followers, then by other Jews in their community. An additional source of overlapping traditions or concerns can be found in the aforementioned Philo, who not only utilizes similar motifs and language as John (such as his emphasis on the Logos, whom John identifies with Christ), but who also wrote both of figures divinized through their ascent into the heavenly realm, and the mystical vision of God. Peder Borgen writes: “...points from Philo exemplify the kind of Jewish traditions, thought categories, and historical contexts that were formative elements in John’s background.”<sup>35</sup> Thus regardless of their precise source of influence, it is likely John was exposed to these ascent, vision, and divinization traditions, and, moreover, seems to allude to these themes clearly and recurrently.

### **Mysticism & The Messiah in John**

From the outset of the text, John’s Gospel repeatedly asserts that no one has seen nor heard God (1:18), except Jesus (5:37, 6:46), nor seen His kingdom (3:3), nor has anyone ascended to heaven except Christ (3:13). Moreover, John equates the vision of God to the vision of Jesus (14:7) and when Philip requests to see the Father, asking for this coveted vision, Jesus forcefully declares “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). Further, the vision of glory Isaiah saw, this throne vision, becomes transformed from a vision of God’s glory on the throne to a vision of Jesus’s glory (12:41). Analyzed whole, these verses suggest that none of the prophetic figures, nor any priest or other worshipper, has ascended to heaven nor directly seen or heard God, except Jesus. Thus the goals of Jewish mysticism are both undercut and reconfigured: only Jesus has achieved these goals (ascent and vision) in full. The closest anyone can get to attaining them is through witnessing and obeying him. The Gospel also seems to tie Jesus’ messianic identity to these mystical themes. Part of Jesus’ function as the messiah is to disclose and embody the identity of God, such that Jesus himself becomes the

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35 Peder Borgen, “3. The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria,” in *The Gospel of John: More Light from Philo, Paul and Archaeology*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 65



“mystical path to Him. John signals this in the Gospel’s first ‘ego eimi’ passage, which I will use to anchor and contextualize all others.

In John 4, a Samaritan woman, noticing Jesus’ otherworldly insights into her, says “I know the Messiah is coming” (4:25). Jesus responds, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” (4:36) (emphasis mine). Here, the predicate ‘he’ is inferred, since in the Greek the statement is literally ‘ego eimi’ or ‘I am’.<sup>36</sup> Jesus is saying ‘I am’ to pronounce his messianic status, something confirmed with the subsequent discussion about his identity with the woman, a claim will recur in the context of John 8.<sup>37</sup> This ‘I am’ statement is a clear allusion to the Sinai theophany of Moses. When Moses asks the name of the Being who has commissioned him to free his people, the response follows: “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). In the Septuagint,<sup>38</sup> this would be “ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ὢν”, transliterated as ‘ego eimi ho on’. Here ‘ho on’, not the more mundane ‘ego eimi’, is the second, more significant ‘I am’, literally translating to something like ‘He Who Is’.<sup>39</sup> Thus ‘ego eimi’, while not the Divine Name, is still alluding to a statement that preludes and discloses the name of God. Later in the Gospel Jesus is said to manifest and declare God’s name (17:6). John here is drawing a parallel to the burning bush and Jesus: the latter never refers to himself as ‘ho on’; Jesus is not claiming to be God Himself, but is likened to a kind of theophany. This thematically ties to the original context of John 4, where Jesus is informing the Samaritan woman of God’s future plans, his answer signalling a dual identity: Jesus is the messiah who reveals God’s identity, and, like Moses’ vision of the burning bush, he is the way to see God; in other words, Jesus as the Messiah discloses the

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36 Colleen Conway, “The Gospel According to John” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 5th edition, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1528.1c

37 Ali Ataei offers this clear-headed and insightful reading of the passage in his doctoral dissertation, in which he uses this first evidently messianic ‘I am’ to analyze subsequent passages with similar wordings. See: Ali J. Ataie, “Authenticating the Johannine Injil: Sunnite ‘Polemirenic’ Interpretive Methodological Approaches to the Gospel of John” (dissertation, 2016), 209.

38 The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible.

39 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII Anchor Bible Series*, Vol. 29 Yale Doubleday 1966, 533. Brown, while admitting this issue of predicates, argues against ‘I am’ as relating to messiahship, identifying ‘ego eimi’ as a type of divine name nonetheless. For a counterview, see Ataei, “Authenticating the Johannine Injil”, 283–284. As we will see, I think reading ‘ego eimi’ as a messianic claim is perfectly plausible in light of the mystical Jewish traditions discussed earlier.

identity of God, and can therefore speak for him. This theme of authority is supplemented by these motifs of ascension and visions, as well as the messianic expectations and tropes of other secondary celestial authority discusses earlier: like the divinized, messianic, or mediatorial figures in the aforementioned circulating literature, Jesus has been given authority second to God, here because he is both the Messiah and because he (alone, as we will see) has seen and spoken to God. Because of his proximity and close relationship to God, including being in His presence, Jesus is a theophany akin to the burning bush; a limited vision of God, though not God himself.

Not only is this reading of ‘ego eimi’ grammatically plausible, but thematically coherent with the ‘vision’ theme discussed above. These themes of Jesus as ‘mystical’ messiah will unlock the ‘ego eimi’ passages in John’s eighth chapter.

### **Authority, Polemics, & Mysticism**

Thus far we have established some of the key mystical themes within the milieu of the evangelist, their circulation, and the likelihood of his engagement with these themes, and how they can help explain Jesus’ messianic identity within his Gospel. The commonly speculated hypothesis of some conflict between the Jewish followers of Jesus and their coreligionists would also explain the evangelists’ writing as an intervention in not only a broader Jewish religious and literary milieu, but directly addresses and criticizes possible rites and beliefs of these figures the evangelist’s circle were possibly in tension with.<sup>40</sup> This section will summarize and analyze passages from John 8 to understand how these mystical themes function within the ‘ego eimi’ statements and what point John is advancing with them.

In the 7th chapter, in response to Jesus’ preaching and miracles (or ‘signs’), crowds discuss whether he is or is not the Messiah (7:40). This spurs some Jewish leadership to search for and try to arrest him.

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<sup>40</sup> The degree to which there was a distinct community John belonged to which then faced censure, expulsion, or persecution or some other form of tension with synagogue authorities is contested; my argument does not rest on such a theory but would be buttressed by it. For an overview of various Johannine community hypotheses and their criticisms, see: Wally V. Cirafesi, “The Johannine Community Hypothesis (1968–Present): Past and Present Approaches and a New Way Forward,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 12, no. 2 (2014): pp. 173–193,

This discussion and drama forms the backdrop of the eighth chapter. In the chapter's opening, during his preaching, Jesus asserts he is "the light of this world" and that whoever follows him will "never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8:12). He is emphasizing that following him is the prerequisite for spiritual illumination. The Pharisees challenge him, starting a debate over the validity of his testimony. Jesus rebukes them, asserting his divine appointment by God himself. Thus, the question of authority and identity are intrinsically connected: who is Jesus to say these things about himself? He continues, tying knowledge of the Father to knowledge of him (8:19), and then says, "You will die in your sins unless you believe I am he" (8:24).<sup>41</sup> As I have argued, Jesus' 'I am' statements are a messianic claim; he is hence equating the acceptance of his messianic status and spiritual authority as saving Jews from spiritual death. This leads the Pharisees to ask:

They said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Why do I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me (8:25-28).

If we take the first 'ego eimi' statement and the subsequent ones to be messianic claims tied to mystical themes, we can see two allusions to those themes here. Firstly, the reference to Jesus being 'lifted' connotes themes of ascent as well as his crucifixion where he is lifted up onto the cross. Secondly, some of the ascent traditions discussed earlier depict not only a vision of God or His throne, but hearing His speech as well. Jesus here is the messiah who has attained the mystical goal of hearing and seeing God, which gives him authority, yet whose messianic identity will be fully realized at his death. Note that some of these traditions had prophetic figures enthroned, implying their right to rule. Meeks observes that the Moses traditions specifically refer to him as 'King of Israel' due to his ascent, and that by Jesus later being mockingly deemed 'King of the Jews' at his crucifixion, John is ironically and subversively

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<sup>41</sup> Again, the literal statement is 'I am', the predicate 'he' is inferred. This is true of the next passage as well.

‘enthroning’ Jesus via his death.<sup>42</sup>

Jesus continues, saying that the knowledge he is offering is the truth, which will make his opponents, and the Jewish people more broadly, free. The Pharisees bristle, appealing to ancient authority: “They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” (8:33 NRSV). He answers that anyone who commits sin is a slave to that sin. He is declaring only what he has seen in God’s presence and that “as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father” (8:38 NRSV). Jesus appeals not only to authority through a mystical allusion of vision/presence, but contrasts that with the Pharisees whose only interactions with God are mediated by scripture. Jesus has authority because he has attained, in the language of mysticism, what they have not: direct communion with the divine. The discourse worsens, with the Pharisees claiming authority as the children of Abraham. Jesus counters they are not Abraham’s children at all. Furthermore, they are trying to kill a man who has directly heard from God (the motif continues). The Pharisees change tactics, claiming “We are not illegitimate<sup>43</sup> children; we have one father, God himself.” (8:41 NRSV). Thus the discussion of identity is even more entrenched in the question of identity: the Pharisees claiming to be children of Abraham, their authority stemming from both genealogy and obedience to their forebears as God’s chosen people, while Jesus counters it is to him their fealty now lies. Ultimately, the broader discussion taking place around the question of obedience on account of Jesus’ messianic status is fundamentally tied to the question of his authority as the divinized messiah. Jesus emphatically asserts “Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God”(8:47 NRSV). Once more, he has attained the presence and vision of God, his opponents have not. They are not truly faithful to God, for if they were, they would follow him. The chapter ends with the debate reaching a boiling point. Jesus once again makes a promise of salvation, in this case a reference to a literal or metaphorical immortality.

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42 Meeks, “The Prophet-King”, 20

43 The Greek word here used for ‘illegitimacy’, ‘porneai’, refers literally to sexual transgression (adultery, etc) and connotes themes of idolatry and being ‘unfaithful’ (to use a marital metaphor) to God. See: Kyle Harper, “Porneia: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012): pp. 363–383.

The Pharisees respond: “Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?” (8:53 NRSV). In a symmetrical fashion, John introduces and then closes the chapter on the question of Jesus’ identity and authority: who is he to say these things? The evangelist writes:

“Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.” Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am (‘eigo eimi’).” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. (8:56–59 NRSV)

On one level, Jesus’ theological opponents are challenging his authority (tied to the question of his identity), via their appeal to Abraham and their connection with him. He responds by saying they are not truly following Abraham, for Abraham would rejoice at seeing Jesus’ day. Thus this passage and messianic statement would function on three levels: Jesus is not negating but complimenting Abraham’s way, but yet his authority as the Messiah *precedes* that of Abraham. Given the mystical traditions John was consciously addressing, it is possible the narratives of Abraham’s ascent and enthronement are also being addressed here. John is rejecting these narratives. Instead, Jesus alone has ascended and seen God alone; that is part of what makes him the Messiah. To achieve the same, one can do so only through him. Thus, Jesus’ spiritual rank takes precedence over that of Abraham. Thus it can be argued that here John claims the messianic claim here is a present one: Jesus is and continues to be the messiah, before Abraham (whether temporarily, in pre-eminence, or both). This could also be an allusion to some state of pre-existence or being created before Abraham as well; however, that does not negate the messianic argument I am making. As Chester has shown, while the dominant textual depictions of the Messiah or Messianic figures were of a human figure who would overthrow Israel’s enemies to bring about an age of justice or peace, sometimes the Messiah or a similar figure was depicted as an angelic saviour, cosmic agent, or some other sort of primordial, pre-existent figure, rather than the incarnate God of later Christian theology.<sup>42</sup>

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42 Chester, “Jewish Messianic Expectations, 305. See also: Rowland and Murray-Jones, “The Mystery of God”, 501–502

In response to this claim of messiahship, the Pharisees pick up stones to assault him with, but Jesus hides and exits the scene, concluding the chapter.

Tracing John's argument and engagement with mystical tropes within this chapter, we can see how the 'ego eimi' statements cohesively support each other. The eighth chapter addresses tension over debates whether Jesus is the Messiah, set-up in the preceding chapter. When Jesus asserts the necessity of following him, his testimony and identity are interrogated by his opponents. He makes an indirect Messianic claim, frustrating his opponents, the first claim of which stresses following him to avoid spiritual death, and continues with a subsequent messianic claim, one with a double allusion to ascent and his crucifixion, the latter of which intertextually engages with divinized Moses traditions. The Pharisees shift tactics, asserting their authority through Abraham. Jesus counters, repeatedly using mystical language of ascent and vision, of being directly in the presence of the Father and hearing His words, to emphasize his own authority; this takes on a double significance given the divinized Abraham traditions also circulating during the Gospel's compositional period. Finally, his opponents ask Jesus once more who he is and if he is insinuating, he is greater than Abraham. For John, the answer to the latter is 'yes' through this mystical messianic theme's culmination; Jesus has spiritual pre-eminence and authority over Abraham, not only due to this attainment of presence, but also because he discloses who God is. "If you knew me," he proclaims, "you would know my Father also" (8:19 NRSV). In this chapter, Jesus is disclosing God's Will for his Son to be obeyed and his messianic claim to be believed.

Within the Jewish world across the Roman Empire, from the 1st Century BCE, to the 2nd Century CE, there developed a series of 'mystical' practices and circulating traditions. The core themes of this mysticism was ascent to God's throne, and a subsequent vision of Him. Many of these traditions and other sources spoke of figures that made this ascent, beheld this vision and were 'divinized' as a result, often with some kind of authority now accorded to them. Closely related to these themes were expectations of a messianic or other supernatural figures second in authority only to God and carrying out his will. John reimagines the tradition in such a way that Jesus is the only divinized, ascending figure and thus the sole source of authority. The Gospel of John's author consciously addresses, revises, and undermines these mystical tropes to bolster the spiritual authority of Jesus against the

Johannine author's theological opponents. One way the Gospel accomplishes this is by depicting Jesus as the messiah who not only has achieved this mystical attainment of vision and presence, but is also the sole path to God and hence worthy of obedience. The evangelist links themes of ascent and vision to Jesus as a divinized messiah. By tying the language of the Septuagint to a disclosure of his messianic status to the Samaritan woman, Jesus is rendered a theophanic expression revealing God through various "I am" (*eigo eimi*) statements; that is, like the burning bush, Jesus discloses to the world the presence and knowledge of the Divine. These themes and language are present particularly in the eighth chapter of the Gospel, the central conflict of which is between the Pharisees and their resistance to following Jesus, through a debate about the nature of his testimony and authority. In their discussion of Jesus' authority and identity, his discourse and *eigo eimi* statements use the language of this mysticism to undermine his opponents and reaffirm Jesus' divine identity and God given commission. In this way, John reconfigures the goal of mysticism from a vision of the enthroned God to witnessing and attesting the authority of Jesus of Nazareth



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# Roman Portraits of Women: Naturalizing and Solidifying Standard Roman Values

Liam Lester

**Abstract:** Portraiture, as one of the most innovative art forms throughout Roman history, served as a medium of socio-cultural action, going beyond artistic expression and the desire to represent a person's likeness. Much scholarship has been conducted on the social effect that Roman portraits of men had on their viewers, but little when it comes to portraits of women. This research paper analyzes public Roman portraits of women in the first- and second-century CE to determine if female portraits were used as a medium to naturalize and solidify their Roman values—namely modesty, chastity, and marriage—just as male portraits did. Furthermore, it seeks to understand how viewers responded to these portraits within the private sphere; whether they accepted or rejected the ideals being exposed to them through public imagery. In doing so, the Large Herculaneum Woman portrait type, imperial images of Livia, and privately funded portraits of women are discussed to show that portraits of women actively worked to display Roman ideals. Ideals of modesty, chastity, and marriage are represented through symbols, such as Livia's *novus*, and references, like presenting a woman similar to her husband. After analyzing the Roman portraiture of women across the first- and second-century CE, it is apparent that these representations of ideals began with imperial and elite public imagery and in response, this greatly influenced private portraiture. This new semiotic approach to Roman female portraiture illustrates that public portraits of women were used as mediums of socio-cultural action that projected certain ideals of women onto viewers and these were accepted and reduplicated by private women.

Portraiture was arguably the most defining and innovative aspect of the Roman artistic sphere, but the inclusion of mortal women did not become significant until the Imperial Period after the empress Livia was imaged frequently.<sup>1</sup> While most portraits of women were created for an honorary purpose,<sup>2</sup> they were used as a medium for the sculptor and the commissioner to communicate their values, attitudes, and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Portrait types with identical iconography were employed and reduplicated endlessly as they created a collective understanding of symbols which immediately evoked certain values in the subject to the viewer.<sup>4</sup> Augustus' changes to political imagery, most notably the incorporation of Livia in portraiture, had an effect on all Roman art, including within the private sphere.<sup>5</sup> Portraits of Livia were filled with symbols of moral righteousness, likely influenced by Augustus' moral legislation,<sup>6</sup> that altered the way in which Roman women displayed themselves based on evidence from private female portraiture. This paper will examine portraits of Roman women through a semiotic approach focusing on the material evidence of the Large Herculaneum Woman portrait type, the influence of Livia, and private women's response to imperial portraits. With this, it is evident that female portraiture actively helped to naturalize and solidify Roman values, ideals, and roles for women, particularly modesty, chastity, and marriage.

Before analyzing portrayals of Roman women, it is essential to first establish the definition of a portrait. There are two main issues in determining what constitutes a Roman portrait: (1) the lack of identifying inscriptions and (2) the great variation in the degree of realism.<sup>7</sup> Hansen explains that since many portraits survive without the inscriptions that identify the depicted person, they are indiscernible from votive offerings and decorations that are perceived as portraits.<sup>8</sup> She further states that the varying degrees of realism due to differences in sculptors, the use of portrait types, and the amount of idealism creates portraits that likely

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1 Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women*; Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

2 D'Ambra

3 Jeremy Tanner, "Portraits, Power, and Patronage"

4 Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication*

5 Paul Zanker, "The New Imagery in the Private Sphere"

6 Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

7 Inge Lyse Hansen, "Roman Women Portrayed in Divine Guises"

8 Hansen

did not resemble the physical likeness of the depicted person.<sup>9</sup> For that reason, I am employing a broad definition of Roman portraits that includes both identifiable portraits and those that are viewed as portraits. In this instance, the degree of realism is not a major concern for defining a portrait as it is presumed not to have been the desired objective in Roman portraiture.<sup>10</sup> In a similar way to Tanner in his research on Late Republican portraits, this paper will analyze Roman portraits of women through a semiotic approach that seeks to reconstruct how Roman contemporary viewers would create meaning from these images.<sup>11</sup> In other words, my interpretation of these portraits considers art as a medium of socio-cultural action rather than art as an object, which has been the norm for past art history scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Roman portraiture served to construct relationships of power and materialize the influential motives engendered by these relationships.<sup>13</sup> Since the main objective of this paper is to illustrate this through portraits of women, less focus will be placed on the cultural, political, and historical context of these images even though here is great information to be gathered from that type of approach.

### **The Large Herculaneum Woman**

An analysis of Roman female portraiture would be insufficient without addressing the Large Herculaneum Woman (LHW) portrait type (Figure 1). This standardized body was by far the most commonly used representation of the female body in the Roman world based on surviving portraits. Over two hundred replicas have been found across the empire; all with differing portrait heads that have individualized facial features but are relatively identical from the neck down.<sup>14</sup> It seemed to be used for the entire span of the Imperial Period but most of the recovered portraits are from the second-century CE.<sup>15</sup>

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9 Hansen

10 Hansen

11 Jeremy Tanner, "Portraits, Power, and Patronage"

12 Tanner

13 Tanner

14 Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication*

15 Trimble



*Figure 1. Cast of the Large Herculaneum Woman Statue Type, 19th century CE, Plaster cast statue, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

The LHW depicts a woman standing on her right leg with her left slightly bent wearing a mantle veiling her head that is draped over a tunic of crinkly material. Her left arm extends downwards and her right reaches to the center of her chest covering her right breast.

The mantle falls in a way that responds to and highlights the curves of her legs, abdomen, and left breast.<sup>16</sup> The origins of this portrait type are not entirely clear and beyond the scope of this paper, but in summary, it likely relates back to a former Greek sculpture from the fourth-century BCE with its classicizing style that evolved through time and was then replicated endlessly.<sup>17</sup> Even during the mass reduplication of the second-century CE, it seems that recalling a single original or point of origin was irrelevant to Roman sculptors, commissioners, and viewers.<sup>18</sup> Most of the LHW statues were found in areas of high public activity where many viewers would not know the reference to Hellenistic art history,<sup>19</sup> therefore the importance of the reduplicated body was in its use as a symbol.

By nature, portraits are like political speeches of introduction as their main purpose is to present ‘the person who...’ by establishing the identity of an individual with certain attributes and characteristics.<sup>20</sup> The most common use of the LHW in portraiture was for honorific statues of women which, in theory, should have an intense focus on individualization.<sup>21</sup> The reduplication of the body, however, strengthens Brilliant’s argument that specific identity is established through features of the head and face while the body is used to construct social and symbolic meaning.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the head illustrates ‘who’ the subject was and the body illustrates ‘what’ the subject’s social role was.<sup>23</sup> In his examination of male portraits, he explains that portraits of men also repeat generic, iconographic features on the body although to a lesser degree of exactness than the LHW.<sup>24</sup> The togate, for example, is one of the most replicated body types for men and to the Roman viewer, this body automatically evoked a sense of eliteness and political authority of the subject.<sup>25</sup> When this theory is transferred to portraits of women, Trimble argues that women used the LHW in their honorific statues to

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16 Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication*

17 Trimble

18 Trimble

19 Trimble

20 Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine*, 166

21 Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication*

22 Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine*

23 Brilliant, 167

24 Brilliant

25 Brilliant



utilize the collective aspects of feminine identity to their advantage.<sup>26</sup> The LHW directly responds to and promotes the social pressures and requirements of Roman women.<sup>27</sup> By wearing a long veiled mantle that covers her entire body without any jewelry, the subject is intentionally portraying herself as a modest and chaste woman. And since the LHW was so widely reduplicated, it was a naturalized cliché for contemporary Roman viewers who would immediately comprehend the social status and civic value of the subject through the body's symbolism.<sup>28</sup>

I want to push Trimble's argument on the presented virtues of the LHW even further by showing how the body type is designed in the male gaze. The male gaze in the Roman context, as defined by Ferris,<sup>29</sup> is the theory that images of women were sexualized for male consumption, giving them the ability to have sexual dominance. The LHW is not overly erotic, but it plays with the viewers' imagination to both sexualize the female body while upholding and asserting modesty. Yes, the woman is entirely covered up by her mantle but it falls in an unnatural way that emphasizes the shape of her right breast, exposes the curves of her hips, and brings the focus to her genitalia through intentional triangular folds in her mantle. In this way, I argue that the LHW, as the most common body image for female portraits, held Roman women to an unattainable standard for being sexually alluring while retaining their complete modesty.

### **Livia as the Standard for Roman Women**

Imperial women were considerably the group of mortal Roman women to have the most portraits depicting them across the empire.<sup>30</sup> Images of Livia, as the first empress, revolutionized Roman portraiture by influencing all images of succeeding empresses and private elite individuals, comparable to her husband Augustus' portraits.<sup>31</sup> Bartman defines four main portrait types of Livia that are the standard in Roman art history:

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<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication*

<sup>27</sup> Trimble

<sup>28</sup> Trimble

<sup>29</sup> Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

<sup>30</sup> Ferris

<sup>31</sup> Ferris

(1) Maybury Hall type, (2) Faiyum type, (3) Kiel/Salus type, and (4) Diva Augusta type.<sup>32</sup>

The first two, which were the most common during Augustus' reign as emperor, are the most important for the research of this paper but the latter two, which existed after Augustus' death and after her death and deification respectively, are significant in their own right.

A main focus of Augustus' ruling was his interest in appropriate and moral behaviour, as seen in the *lex Julia et Papia* which served as his moral legislation,<sup>33</sup> and this likely played a role in the attributes of Livia's portraits. The first of these attributes is her hairstyle, called the *nodus* meaning knot or knob, which first appeared in the Maybury Hall type but remained continuous through the Faiyum type.<sup>34</sup> As shown in the portrait head of Livia found on Crete dating to 20 BCE (Figure 2), the *nodus* is a gathered roll of hair above the forehead that connects to a braided bun in the back—underneath the veil of this portrait—with waves on either side.



Figure 2. Portrait Head of the Empress Livia, 20 BCE, Parian marble statuehead, National Archaeological Museum of Athens, Athens

This was perceived by Roman contemporaries as a marker of female restraint which originated in Republican times that signals seriousness and modesty in a public woman.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Elizabeth Bartman, *Portraits of Livia*

33 Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*; Paul, *Opinions* 2.26

34 Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

35 Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

It is unclear who first designed Livia's portrait types, but I argue that this hairstyle was utilized by Augustus and Livia as a display of female modesty and served as the standard for how Roman women were to socially hold themselves. Livia's second attribute is a response to Augustus' portraits which portrayed him as *primus inter pares*—first among equals.<sup>36</sup> In a similar way, Livia was presented as equal to, but ultimately different and more virtuous than other contemporary Roman women.<sup>37</sup> Ferris argues that portraits of Livia elevated her appearance through Hellenistic idealism and intentional adaptations in a way that created an exemplary model for Roman women.<sup>38</sup> This becomes particularly apparent in the last notable attribute influenced by Augustus which is the fact that she is made to appear as 'not of Cleopatra'.<sup>39</sup> Cleopatra was married to Mark Antony, Augustus' enemy during his rise to power, and was perceived by Romans as the dangerous appeal of decadence and corruption.<sup>40</sup> This gave Augustus and Livia motivation to contrast Eastern otherness of sensuality and luxury through the emphasis of Roman ideals of modesty and chastity.<sup>41</sup> By incorporating these attributes, I argue that Augustus was using Livia's portraits as a medium to present and naturalize his standardized ideals of women which he expected them to follow.

Beyond her physical attributes, the way in which portraits of Livia depicted her roles as a mother and a wife are also important for the way they impelled Roman women to follow certain values. The Grand Camée de France (Figure 3), carved around 26–29 CE<sup>42</sup> can be used as a case study to illustrate this argument. This cameo depicts Tiberius as the ruling emperor in the guise of Jupiter alongside the deified Augustus and Livia seated holding poppies and wheat sheaves with a number of other figures that are of little importance to this argument. In Ferris' interpretation,<sup>43</sup> he explains Tiberius and Augustus as the key figures of the cameo and Livia as a subsidiary character which I emphasize is crucial to the portrayal of her roles.

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<sup>36</sup> Ferris

<sup>37</sup> Ferris

<sup>38</sup> Ferris

<sup>39</sup> Ferris

<sup>40</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*; Plutarch, *Life of Mark Antony*

<sup>41</sup> Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

<sup>42</sup> Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

<sup>43</sup> Ferris



Figure 3. Grande Camée de France, 1st century AD, Five-layered sardonyx cameo, National Library of France, Paris.

As a subsidiary character, this depiction overlooks her own achievements and situated her societal role only in association to men: mother of Tiberius and wife of Augustus. Literary sources show that, in reality, she played a well respected role in Roman public life and some even called her the Mother of the Country for helping senators politically, raising children, and paying daughters' dowries.<sup>44</sup> In other portraits too, she was given a subsidiary role that diminished her achievements, particularly by often portraying her alongside other Julio-Claudian women like Octavia and Julia.<sup>45</sup> Bartman (1999) argues that by placing Livia beside other women, her presence as a powerful individual is overshadowed and she is simply depicted as an element of the group categorized as "female".<sup>46</sup> Thus, I argue that the placement of Livia in broader portraits that included other individuals reinforced the Roman ideal that women were not meant to hold power. By doing so, these pieces of art actively worked to put both Livia and ambitious female Roman viewers in their place as subsidiary citizens in the Roman world.

### Private Responses of Women

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<sup>44</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.2.3

<sup>45</sup> Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Bartman, *Portraits of Livia*

The last section of this paper will analyze how elite Roman women responded to these values forced upon them by public portraits in the creation of their own private portraits. Unlike imperial women who had numerous portraits made for them by other people, private elite women likely played a more prominent role in the design of their portrayals as the commissioner.<sup>47</sup> For this reason, these portraits acted less to keep women in their place and be used as a moral standard, but rather allowed them to celebrate and enhance their roles in the private sphere, giving us a glimpse of their values.<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, portraits of Livia monumentally changed Roman portraiture for all women, whether imperial or not, by creating fashions and expanding the creative outlets available in female portraiture, evident in portraits of other elite women. The first of these fashions is the *nodus* hairstyle, first emerging as Livia's signature, then being repeated numerous. This is visible in the Funerary Relief of Lucius Vibius and Family, carved around 13 BCE – 5 CE (Figure 4). This relief sculpture presents a deceased family of three with the mother wearing the *nodus* hairstyle. The Maybury Hall portrait type, where the *nodus* first emerged, dates to the Early Augustan Period,<sup>49</sup> so this example shows how quickly Livia's fashions were uptaken by the public. With this, I argue that Roman women used the *nodus* in response to the values it represented, which Ferris explains to be seriousness and modesty,<sup>50</sup> in a way to elevate themselves to the standards set by Livia.



Figure 4. Funerary Relief of Lucius Vibius and Family, 1st century BCE, Museo Chiaramonti, Rome.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Ackers, "Portrait Busts of Roman Women"

<sup>48</sup> Ackers

<sup>49</sup> Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

<sup>50</sup> Ferris

This funerary relief can also be used as an example for the second notable fashion created by Livia which is sharing physical attributes and expressions with portraits of her husband to strengthen the link between them and emphasize marital unity.<sup>51</sup> Portraits of Livia were a direct response to those of Augustus by using the same Hellenistic style of idealism. In a similar way, both the husband and wife of this funerary relief are depicted in the Veristic style, most commonly used in male portraits to stress the age, gravity, and severity of the subject.<sup>52</sup> I argue that this was intentionally used, like in Livia's portraits, to highlight her societal role in association to men as a mother and wife.

The final fashion in female portraiture established by Livia—arguably the most profound—continues to portray women in terms of the values highlighted in imperial portraits, but here, they are displayed in the guise of a mythological figure. Livia, as seen on the Grand Camée de France where she is depicted as Ceres, was the first mortal woman to be given divine attributes in her portraits.<sup>53</sup> Bartman even argues that the Faiyum portrait type was designed in such a way for Livia to appear in a space between Republican matron and classical goddess.<sup>54</sup> This quickly became a fashion that lasted from the Augustan period to late fourth-century CE.<sup>55</sup> Similar to the LHW, this style of portraiture most commonly used a generic body of the mythological figure as a symbol with a portrait head for identification.<sup>56</sup> The focus here will be on portraits in funerary contexts as that is the space where many women would have their only portrait.<sup>57</sup> The Sarcophagus of Euhodus and Metilia Acte from 140–150CE can be used as a case study for its depiction of the subjects in the guise of Admetus and Alcestis (Figure 5). This myth, in summary, is about Alcestis agreeing to die in the place of her husband, Admetus.<sup>58</sup> By showing herself in the guise of Alcestis, she emphasizes her role in association to men by depicting herself as a well-known faithful wife.

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51 Helen Ackers, "Portrait Busts of Roman Women"

52 Jeremy Tanner, "Portraits, Power, and Patronage"

53 Iain Ferris, *Mirror of Venus*

54 Elizabeth Bartman, *Portraits of Livia*

55 Inge Lyse Hansen, "Roman Women Portrayed in Divine Guises"

56 Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine*; Inge Lyse Hansen, "Roman Women Portrayed in Divine Guises"

57 Hansen

58 Euripides, *Alcestis*





Figure 5. Sarcophagus of Euhodus and Metilia Acte, 2nd century AD, Vatican Museums, Rome.

In Hansen's comprehensive research on women in the guise of mythological figures,<sup>59</sup> she explains that the most common reasons, regardless of the chosen figure, were to use marriage as a symbol for virtues and define themselves within a familial context. I argue that elite women, in response to portraits of Livia, depicted themselves in subsidiary roles associated with men to similarly emphasize the Roman values of being a loving mother and a faithful wife as these were the main themes presented to them in imperial portraits.

Roman portraits, by nature, were crafted to honor their subjects, but it is evident in the analysis of female portraits in this paper that they did much more than that. They served as a medium for communicating values and a standard for how women should portray themselves in portraits and hold themselves socially. Approaching the topic of female Roman portraits with a semiotic focus, outlined by Tanner,<sup>60</sup> provides a new perspective on how an image functioned in the Roman Empire. The material evidence demonstrates that contemporary viewers took certain values from the images of women highlighted in this paper; such as, chastity from the LHW, modesty from Livia's *nodus*, and marriage from women in the guise of mythological figures. Then, in private women's responses to these portraits, it becomes clear that they served to naturalize and solidify Roman ideals and standards of women.

59 Inge Lyse Hansen, "Roman Women Portrayed in Divine Guises"

60 Jeremy Tanner, "Portraits, Power, and Patronage"



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# Qumran: Purity in Stone

Avril Lindsay

**Abstract:** The site of Qumran is arguably most famous for the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the nearby caves to the settlement instead of the settlement itself. But who were the people who lived at the site of Qumran, who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls and likely also created them?

Accepted to be a Jewish Sectarian community of 1st century BCE to 1st century CE, Qumran and its inhabitants have been far less studied than the scrolls they hide. Perhaps a group of Essenes seeking to escape a no-longer desirable Jerusalem, the founders of Qumran did what most famous figures of the Hebrew Bible (Torah) did when looking for sanctity – escape to the desert. We have documentation, such as the Community Rules Scroll, of how these people thought a pious Jew should live, but how did those living at Qumran live? Using spatial analysis alongside traditional Jewish texts from this time, questions of who and how the Sectarian Jews at Qumran lived between the 1st century BCE to 1st century CE will be addressed. Through this study, an extreme purity culture can be seen to have developed there that is not only reflected in texts but within the settlements' own controlling architecture.

In the midst of the Judean wilderness, on the sloping hills of the Dead Sea basin, there are the ruins of an ancient Jewish settlement: Qumran. This site is most known for the biblical scrolls (respectively known as the Dead Sea Scrolls) that were found within multiple caves surrounding the area. These scrolls are famous for being some of the earliest written records of several of the stories of the Hebrew Bible. The scroll and the settlement are explicitly linked by proximity, as the settlement would have controlled sole access to many of the caves the scrolls were found in, as well as, a group of scrolls called the “Community Rules” which are a set of cultural-religious laws by which the inhabitants of the Qumran settlement would have had to abide.

These scrolls link the settlement and its inhabitants unquestionably to the ancient Jewish faith. The reasons behind the settlement's unique construction and remote location can be directly attributed to the beliefs of its founders and inhabitants. The Hellenized world which Qumran belonged to was in many ways in direct opposition to the Israelite/Judah faith (which would later become known as Judaism) and therefore this opposition was a direct factor of the settlement's creation.

Qumran represents its occupants' struggles of living in a Hellenized world and acts as a response against what they would have considered a corruption to the holy lands. It is unclear whether or not its occupants would have completely dismissed the cult at the Jerusalem temple, but their abandonment of that area for the Dead Sea wilderness indicates a desire to escape Jerusalem. This settlement's location, layout, and practices were fixated on devoutly abiding by the purity laws of scripture. Knowing the ancient Judean concepts of pure versus impure can be used to analyze how these religious rules may have influenced the architectural design. The hypothesis is that areas that are least accessible architecturally would likely be the purest places religiously in the settlement and therefore would likely be controlled by multiple areas of cleansing to reach. Additionally, it is predicted that visibility within the settlement could be correlated to highly controlled movement patterns that would be in place to protect the purity of spaces. Archaeological evidence from the site will be used to cross-examine the spatial data, as well as, other archaeologists' theories of use with the different spaces on the complex.

### **Historical Background**

The Qumran settlement had some degree of occupation in the late Iron age (8th -7th c. BCE), but it was small and short-lived, likely not related to the settlement we see today which was built some six to seven hundred years later. The most active and impactful period of occupation at Qumran was from ~130 BCE - 68 CE. The settlement was abandoned by its Jewish settlers after a Roman garrison attacked in 63 CE as part of the First Jewish-Roman Revolt (66-73 CE), the Roman military utilizing it until the end of the revolt, after which it

abandoned and lost until archaeological excavations in the 1950s.<sup>1,2</sup> The settlement was created during the start of the Hasmonean period (140 – 37 BCE), a fact which is corroborated by the presence of numerous coins dating to the 130s, as well as, coins from the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103 – 76 BCE) – the second king of the Hasmonean line.<sup>3</sup> This royal family of Judea stemmed from the leaders of the Maccabean revolt (167–160 BCE), a conflict between traditional Judaism practice and forced Hellenization by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes.<sup>4</sup> Antiochus sought to ‘defile’ the Jerusalem temple in 167 BCE by raiding it and attempting to establish a cult to the Greek God Zeus instead.

Unfortunately for Antiochus, the Maccabeans were successful in their revolt and established their own royal house for Judea: Maccabees/ Hasmoneans. Despite being the first Yahweh<sup>5</sup> following kings of Judea since the Babylonian exile, their rule was controversial to the Jewish people. The leader of the revolution, Judah Maccabee made alliances with Rome, arguably an empire that was no better than the Seleucids. Even though the Maccabees held control of Judea, through this alliance Rome could enforce a soft power in the area, thereby squeezing out the Seleucids.<sup>6</sup> The second Maccabean king, Jonathan Maccabee – Judah’s brother – established an even worse prestige, taking on the title of both king and high priest of the Jerusalem temple which is a direct violation of biblical law that separates priestly and royal power.<sup>7,8</sup> Ironically, later kings within the Maccabean/ Hasmonean dynasty would go on to conquer neighbouring lands with a policy of forcible Judization – forcing gentiles to convert to Judaism. This would be a very uncomfortable policy for many ancient Jews since gentile conversion was often not welcomed, as can be seen in the scripture such as in the

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1 Magness, Jodi. *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. 2002)

2 Galor, Katharina, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, and Jürgen Zangenberg. *Qumran, the Site of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Archaeological Interpretations and Debates : Proceedings of a Conference Held at Brown University*. (November 17-19, 2002. Vol. 57. Leiden;Boston;: Brill.)

3 Magness (2002)

4 Cohen, Shaye J. D. *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*. Third ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. 2014)

5 A Hebrew name of God in the Jewish faith

6 Magness, Jodi. *The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest*. (New York: Cambridge University Press. 2012)

7 Exod 28: Attridge, Harold W. 2006. *HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

8 Magness (2012)

books of Nehemiah 13 and 1 & 2 Maccabees. All of this political change and strife occurred in sixty years or less and left a good portion of Judean Jews unhappy with both the running of the country and the cult in Jerusalem. It is in this historical context that the settlement at Qumran was created, and its isolated location in the wilderness can likely be attributed to its inhabitants being upset with the management in Jerusalem of both cult and country.

## Judean Scripture and Literature of Purity

### *The Wilderness*

Going to live out in the wilderness to find [religious] clarity is a trope that occurs repeatedly throughout Jewish scripture and literature. It is out there in the harsh elements, away from what they felt was the pollution of society that followers of Yahweh had claimed to have found not only clarity and protection, but in some stories to be in the literal presence of their god. Prominent stories of this sacred wilderness can be found within the books of Samuel and Exodus, both books that the inhabitants at Qumran would have known, as both stories are attested for in the Qumran scrolls. Half of the book of Exodus is stated to have occurred in the wilderness after Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, anytime Moses witnesses a revelation from God he is in the wilderness.<sup>10,11</sup> Moses is directly spoken to by God in these scenes of revelations, such as Exodus 3:13–21 wherein God reveals his divine name: Yahweh. Similarly, when David flees from Saul in First Samuels, he flees into the wilderness where he remains protected from Saul's army by implication that he is God's chosen one. The wilderness was considered not only a place of reverence but of revelation to the ancient Jewish people. If the inhabitants of Qumran were seeking a place to better worship their God than the corrupt Jerusalem, venturing out into the Judean wilderness like their ancestors did in scripture would be the obvious solution. Similar sectarian communities, such as the Samaritans at Mount Gerizim, also broke away from Jerusalem during the time of the Maccabean revolt due to the desecration of the temple at Jerusalem, therefore making the temple no longer a valid centre for cult worship.<sup>12</sup> The wilderness gave a purity for the

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9 Exod16–40

10 Exod 3:19 – 20

11 Exod 24:9–18

12 Magness (2012)

Qumran settlement to be built on, removed from any prior corruptions of cult and closer perhaps to divine revelations.

### *Concept of Impurity*

Impurity in the minds of ancient Isrealites could be compared to the ambiguous concept of germs in the modern world. There were innumerable items or acts that could be considered impure to the inhabitants of Qumran, however, it is less important for this discussion to know what all the cases of impurity are but what being pure versus impure meant. Purity was a scalar concept and there were varying levels of being impure. These impure concepts are often referred to as defiling acts. Depending on the degree of impurity, a person could be barred from certain if not all cult activities and/or spaces. For example, a woman who was menstruating would not be allowed within cult buildings or in extreme cases such as at Qumran, not allowed with in the settlement during that time.<sup>13</sup> Being contaminated with impurity could therefore extremely limit one's involvement in important cultural-religious activities. Since the builders of Qumran had left Jerusalem in order to practice the Isrealite religion in the manner they deemed proper, having to be removed from cult practices would want to be mitigated as much as possible. Likewise, the inhabitants wanted to keep spaces that were impure and impurities clearly removed from critical spaces of worship in order to practice properly and not potentially offend their god. If someone had to come into contact with something impure, there were a multitude of ways to cleanse and be reintegrated into worship.

### *Bathing and Defiling Acts*

Many different acts could cause impurity in the ancient Jewish world. The impurity bearers that Qumran inhabitant were likely most concerned with were corpses, bodily fluids, skin afflictions, animal carcasses, excrement, and outsiders.<sup>14</sup> These are the main genres of impurity as discussed in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but there are hundreds of examples of how these impurities could occur in the Isrealite scripture corpus.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen (2014)

<sup>14</sup> Harrington, Hannah Karajian. "The Biblical Foundations of the Impurity Systems of the Qumran Sectaries and the Rabbis." (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. 1992)

In the most basic of explanations, coming in contact with any of these impurities causes oneself to become contaminated and therefore barred from most religious and/or everyday activities – such as eating – until cleansed. What one was barred from doing depended on the severity of one's impurity. For the inhabitants of Qumran, the worst cause of impurity would be being in contact with a corpse.<sup>15</sup> There are many mentioned ways to cleanse oneself of impurities found throughout the Hebrew Bible and other scripture, such as waiting a predetermined amount of time excluded from the group, shaving one's head, or offering sacrifice. However, there is one that the Dead Sea Scrolls (and the Qumran Settlement) seemed to obsess over: immersing oneself in water.<sup>16,17</sup> Cleansing by water is a common idea throughout the ancient world and could be done often as simply sprinkling water over one's head, however the Dead Sea Scrolls are very explicit that full immersion in pure natural waters is the best and/or only way to properly take care of impurity.<sup>18</sup> These procedures of going from impure to pure will be further examined in the architectural and archaeological discussion of the Qumran settlement.

### *Pottery*

When examining themes of purity, pottery was being heavily discussed in the first and second centuries BCE. According to the Hebrew Bible, pottery is a type of vessel that, once exposed to an impurity, retains that impurity and is no longer usable. Versus Leviticus 11:33–4 and 15:12 both state that once an impure substance touches an “earthen vessel” then one must “break the vessel”.<sup>19</sup> Since pottery could so easily be contaminated it was highly supervised, the life of a potter being regarded with suspicion and even being considered a lowly profession.<sup>20</sup> This scepticism around pottery made the industry so regulated that clay for pottery had to be obtained within the lands of Judea by Hebrew law and regarded imported vessels, such as Mediterranean amphora containing wine or olive oil, as impure.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Harrington

<sup>16</sup> Cohen

<sup>17</sup> Harrington

<sup>18</sup> Magness (2002)

<sup>19</sup> Attridge, Harold W. HarperCollins Study Bible. (New York, NY: HarperOne. 2006)

<sup>20</sup> Magness (2012)

<sup>21</sup> Magness (2002)



What and how a vessel could become impure was a topic of popular discussion within ancient Jewish practitioners, even the inhabitants at Qumran were taking part in the debate. A discussion has been found within the scroll fragment 4QMMT of whether or not a vessel could become impure by an impurity flowing upstream from one vessel pouring into another.<sup>22</sup> 4QMMT seems to argue in favour of these risks and therefore the inhabitants at Qumran would have had to take extra precautions when transferring liquids between pottery vessels.<sup>23</sup> These concerns become more apparent when examining the architecture and archaeology for impurity and purity factors.

### Spatial Analysis and Ritual Purity

*Settlement Layout*<sup>24, 25</sup>



*Figure 1. Sketchup Map of Qumran Settlement*

The settlement at Qumran resides on top of a wadi terrace, with the entirety of its western side bordering on the cliffs of the wadi. This is a strategic placement in the landscape which allows for the control of both water and people. Being on a terrace of the wadi as opposed to being at the tops of the cliffs let the inhabitants at Qumran manage water coming into their

<sup>22</sup> Magness (2002)

<sup>23</sup> Magness (2002)

<sup>24</sup> The first excavations at Qumran were undertaken by the French biblical scholar and priest Roland de Vaux from 1951–1956. It is from his initial excavations that the room/space numbers throughout the settlement were assigned. It can be assumed that the room number order is arbitrary on all plans from Qumran and merely reflects the order to which the different spaces were excavated.

<sup>25</sup> See figure 1 for Map; view appendix

settlement more easily by redirecting some of the cliff streams that would go into the wadi basin into their finely constructed water system. Wadi terraces are also sloping in nature, giving the settlement a gradual incline which they have used to their advantage. There is a complex water system of cisterns, distillation pools, and miqva'ot (ritual stepped baths; singular mikveh) that are spread across the settlement, starting in the northwest corner, and draining down to the southeast side. There are six miqva'ot within Qumran, referred to as spaces 138, 117, 118, 58, 49, and 71 (ordered from north-east to south-west). This control of water would not only have been crucial for survival in the semi-arid environment of the Dead Sea basin but also for ritual purity.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, getting this water directly from a natural running source like a wadi and rainfall, as opposed to a well, could grant people greater control and confirm the water's purity. Being able to visually look into any point along the water system would be crucial in order to monitor for impurities in the water, such as animal contact or faecal matter.

Being attributed as a sectarian community, the settlement at Qumran would have wanted complete authority over who did or did not enter. Sectarian communities usually attribute themselves as the one and only group who is properly practising the cult and view outsiders with a negative, if not hostile, perspective. This idea is further supported by the fact that outsiders are named as a cause of impurity in the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>27</sup> Topographically, the approach to the settlement was highly controlled. The only way to access its location was from the northeast, via a tightly ascending route through the various northern wadi embankments. A two-story-tall tower situated the north east side of the settlement would have acted as a watchtower, easily looking over the landscape to spot anyone approaching. This tower also regulated the two entrances into the settlement. An interesting point that Dr Yoo (from the University of British Columbia) made when discussing placement of the settlement and purity was how anyone wishing to approach Qumran would have had to pass through the cemetery first. This would likely have acted as a barrier in itself for the settlement, with few Jews who were not connected to the settlement wanting to pass through an area of the dead that would have been considered an impure space.

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<sup>26</sup> Magness (2002); Harrington

<sup>27</sup> Harrington

Within the settlement, spaces are distinctively marked off and tightly packed together. There are two identifiable building complexes: the main complex which contains the tower and the two entrances, and the auxiliary complex which seems to be made up of work and storage spaces. The main complex consists (at least in part) of two-level buildings surrounding a central square courtyard.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly the tower could not be entered by the ground level, but instead was accessed by a set of stairs in room 3 that would have led to the second floor.<sup>29,30</sup> Such a design demonstrates a need for a high level of control in the tower, which is logical since it is the only structure in the settlement which possess heavily fortified walls and ramparts. This main complex also possesses different levels of gathering/discussion rooms (rooms 1, 2, 4, 30) off the courtyard and perhaps a space that was once used as a kitchen (rooms 41 & 38).<sup>31</sup> The courtyard is additionally subdivided by short partition walls into unique spaces (rooms 23–25, 32– 37). Two miqva'ot and latrine rooms are attached to the main complex but are accessed separately from the spaces built around the courtyard.

These two miqva'ot (56 and 48) seem to each be tied to another space. 56, which is the largest mikvah, is directly outside room 77 which has been attributed as being the dining hall due to its incredible size and pantry full of over a thousand dishes.<sup>32</sup> This is a logical correlation between these two spaces because consuming food and drink is an activity for which one would wish to be pure. In particular, group dining is often associated with ritual dining which could have acted as a substitute practice of cult offering at Qumran since there is no apparent altar space.<sup>33</sup> Room 77 could have likely accommodated the entirety of the settlement's [male] population of 100 – 120 people for group meals. It would have been expected that everyone partaking in the meal had cleansed himself in the mikvah before entering the dining hall. Interestingly, mikvah 56 has a divider running down its stairs into the ritual bath. It has been argued that this acted as a barrier for the impure to descend on one

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28 Cargill, Robert Raymond. "The Qumran Digital Model: An Argument for Archaeological Reconstruction in Virtual Reality." (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. 2008)

29 Cargill

30 Magness (2002)

31 Magness (2002)

32 Magness (2002)

33 Magness (2002)

the other.<sup>34</sup> If this is the purpose of having the divider along the stairs of mikvah 56, I would argue that the northern side (left when facing) of the stairs was an impure descent side and the southern (right when facing) was the pure ascent side. This is surmised simply because the southern side of the stairs of mikvah 56 is closer to the entrance of room 77 and would be a logical flow between the two so that the now pure man does not need to cross paths with the impure man waiting to bathe.

The purity of group meals was controlled by the participants bathing at Qumran, as well as, with dishware being highly monitored. During this period in Ancient Judea, group meals would have been eaten off of large communal plates, however, this was not the case here. The Community Rules of the Dead Sea Scrolls alongside the presence of thousands of pieces of dishware, points to each person eating from their own plate.<sup>35</sup> This is due to two purity factors: the act of eating and of the vessels being eaten off. Eating – especially if in a ritual setting – was considered a delicate activity that could easily be corrupted. This is similar to the modern sense of hygiene when consuming food and drink, but the ancient inhabitants of Qumran would have strictly thought of this religiously.<sup>36</sup> The other factor surrounds the issues with the purity of pottery earlier discussed. It is due to such issues that the inhabitants of Qumran produced the majority of their own pottery, and with a great surplus.<sup>37</sup> It is this great surplus of pottery found at the site along with a substantial pottery workshop (spaces 60, 61, 64, 84), that has made scholars in the past incorrectly assume that Qumran may have been a pottery manufacturing site part of a greater trade network. In the context of being an ancient Jewish site this simply does not make sense. Since pottery needed to be highly regulated and often discarded, it is simply easier for a remote community to produce their own than import it with the risk of breakage or contamination.

Turning attention back to the miqva'ot, the second biggest mikvah (48) seems to be directly related to the latrine building (51). These two structures are tucked between the outer

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34 Magness (2002)

35 Magness (2002)

36 Magness (2002)

37 Gunneweg, Jan and Márta Balla. "Was the Qumran Settlement a Mere Pottery Production Center?: What Instrumental Neutron Activation Revealed." (2010)

wall and the 'back' of the main building. They are removed from the rest of the complex, which can again be attributed to the Qumran priorities of purity. Dealing with any sort of bodily fluids was considered incredibly impure, both to the inhabitants at Qumran and the greater ancient Jewish community as well. Unlike much of the ancient world though, the Qumran peoples. wanted to deal with such washroom activities in privacy.<sup>38</sup> One of the scrolls found at Qumran, known as the Temple Scroll, very specifically states that latrines should be inside "roofed houses with pits in them". Room 51 does indicate that it was once roofed and possesses terracotta pipes that emptied into a mud-lined pit that was buried in the floor.<sup>39</sup> This is a space that would have been considered highly impure, not only by the actions of its users but because the terracotta (a type of pottery) would have held onto that impurity permanently making the space impure. There is only one entrance into this structure, and it would have held a wooden door that would probably have remained closed to keep the impure actions out of sight. The use of wooden doors has been assumed by the presence of metal nails found in doorways which also held pivot holes.<sup>40</sup> There is no evidence in ancient Judean or Jewish literature/ scripture that impurity could be transferred by anything besides touch, so the closing of the door and the latrines' overall location in the settlement is a case of keeping the unseemly unseen. It can be assumed that once one was done in the latrines that they would need to clean the impurity from themselves promptly to resume activity within the settlement, hence the immediate presence of mikvah 48, situated directly outside the building. This mikvah also appears to have had a dividing structure down its steps, however, evidence from this mikvah is less clear due to earthquake damage it suffered around 31 BCE.<sup>41</sup> If it did possess this divider down its stairs, the side which would be for the pure vs impure is less clear. Perhaps the eastern (left) side would be for the impure to descend because it is the closest access for people coming from the latrine, similar to how mikvah 56 could have been used.

Two of the miqva'ot relationships with other spaces have been discussed but there are at least four other miqva'ot within the settlement. Out of the eight large, water retaining structures within Qumran, six are indicated to be miqva'ot by the presence of stairs

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38 Magness (2002)

39 Magness (2002)

40 Magness (2002)

41 Magness (2002)

descending into them. For a larger settlement, this may have been less impressive but Qumran is predicted to have had a maximum population of 120–150 people living at its peak (~130 – 31 BCE).<sup>42</sup> When compared to the much larger settlement of a similar era, Masada (72 843 sq. m) possessed only two identified miqva'ot despite being four and a half times larger than Qumran (approximately 16 044 sq. m). Increasingly interesting is the fact that most of Qumran's population did not live within the walls of the settlement, but likely lived outside in tents and/or the surrounding caves.<sup>43</sup> Some may have lived inside the settlement in the second level of the main building, but not the entire predicted population. This population is based on the cemetery and past proxemics studies.<sup>44</sup> If there was a population of 150, that would create a ratio of 25 people per bath. However, both men, women, and children are attested to have lived at the site, but only men would likely have been allowed to partake in the ritual bathing of a mikvah, which would mean a further decrease in the number of users per pool. It has been proposed that some of the population of Qumran may have been seasonal as well, which would again lower the number of users per bath.

Two of the miqva'ot have been explicitly connected with other spaces and the actions within those spaces, but miqva'ot generally do not need to be assigned to the cleansing of one activity. For the inhabitants at Qumran, this may have been considered convenient if not necessary so that impurity could not be spread (by touch) throughout the settlement. Certain spaces may have been attributed to having a larger degree of impurity within them and the inhabitants did not want those impurities spread beyond that space, such as the case for the latrines. In other cases, a mikveh could have acted as a catch-all so that no unseen impurities could enter a space, like in the case of the dining hall. Three of the other miqva'ot can be given assumed cleansing purposes based on proximity to certain activities; 71 cleansing for the pottery workshop (spaces 84, 63–64), and 117 and 118 for cleaning from workshop activities that have been assumed to have taken place in the auxiliary complex. The last mikveh 138 is located in the northern courtyard area and is not located in any proximity of a certain activity that may need cleansing from. If there was an assignment for mikveh 138, perhaps it was used

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<sup>42</sup> Magness (2002)

<sup>43</sup> Galor, Katharina, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, and Jürgen Zangenberg <sup>42</sup> Magness (2002)

<sup>44</sup> Magness (2002)

by those who just entered the settlement because it is not connected to any specific space but the outside and therefore an unclean outsider would not have to enter any building the cleanse – although this is highly conjectural. Each mikvah may have been associated with a certain type of impurity or more general cleansing; nevertheless, it is obvious that the cleansing of impurities by ritual bath was critical to the proper practice of Isrealite cult at Qumran.

### *Visual and Control Analyses*

To analyse visual/spatial access and control, a digital spatial analysis program called Depthmap was employed. Within Depthmap, model graphs of different spaces, such as archaeological ruins, can have detailed topographical assessments done based on factors such as visibility or predicted movement patterns. All of these assessments rely on the techniques of space syntax, a set of theories which can link spatial layouts with human activity patterns. These patterns can be incredibly insightful for archaeologists and historians because they revealed that movement patterns are not always immediately seen when at a site or looking at a map and can reflect societal space and place norms at a site. Before Depthmap can be employed, a digital model (.dxf file) has to be created. For this study the program Sketchup was used alongside several photo reference maps in order to create a accurately scaled .dxf for Depthmap analysis. One point to take into consideration with all of the depthmap analysis is that it does not account for height levels, which could be an important factor for the miqva'ot in particular because they would all be set down into the ground.

The first analysis run was a visual step depth which examines how far a person could see into a complex from a set start point (usually outside the complex), with each space subsequently entered in order to see further adds a 'step' to the 'visual depth' (see Appendix A, Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, there is a fairly substantial depth range (1 – 9) due to the size and closedness of the settlement. The depth for most rooms in either building complex was an average of 5 (lowest 3 – highest 7). Mikvah 138, 117, and 118 all possessed a step depth of 4

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42 Magness (2002)

43 Galor, Katharina, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, and Jürgen Zangenberg 42 Magness (2002)

44 Magness (2002)



suggesting that they were the more accessible of the miqva'ot (See Appendix A, Figures 1 and 3).



*Figure 3. Visual Step Depth*

138 had a mixed step depth, being mixed between 3 - 4 score, which supports the theory that it was the most accessible to people coming into the settlement. Mikvah 58 held a score of 5 with the dining hall corresponding to having a 6 score. Mikvah 49 got a score of 6 while the latrines were assigned a depth of 8. This emphasizes the fact that the latrines were a private space which is interesting since in this case private does not mean pure but an opposite to the assumed hypothesis. One of the most removed spaces in the step depth analysis is one of the most impure spaces, with the only space scoring higher removal being within the pottery workshop areas (64, 61, 44?). Based on this analysis the spaces which would likely require the most amount of purity - discussion/assembly rooms (4, 3, 77) acquired mid-ranged depth scores. It seems that the most impure activities were given the most private of areas with the corresponding mikveh being one to two degrees less removed.

The other visibility analyses attempted provided little information, likely due to two factors: 1) the severity of closed off architecture within the settlement, and 2) the northern

courtyard skewing the data because it is an incredibly open space compared to the rest of Qumran. The first set of tests also included the incredibly large southern courtyard, but almost no extractable data could be obtained due to the sheer size of that space taking away any detail from the rest of the settlement. In that file, visual integration was not possible to run since it predicted 211 hours for the calculations to be complete. In total, four different .dxf files had to be created until a suitable balance of accuracy and specificity was obtained in the final digital was submitted into Depthmap.

Visual Integration [HH], just called Integration [HH] on the All-Line Map, was the only other visual map analysis that provided insightful data (See Appendix A, figure 4 and 5). This type of assessment puts visual data into axial representations of longest lines of sight from every point in a space which can be quantified into numbers as 'Integration'. These can be simplified into least number of lines per each space, but for this study the simplification was too limiting for such a closed-off structure. The highest integration score and therefore the most visible space in the settlement was the courtyard space (99?) between the entrances to the two main building complexes just after the gatehouse (128). The highest score within that area was 5.42. This compared to other building complexes is a fairly low integration score (smaller house spaces on the same grid size can get up to 79 point scores), but even with a grid 0.500 m, speaks to how unintegrated the settlement of Qumran is. This space scoring the highest integration is logical due to it being the main axis route for travelling both north-south within the settlement and going east-west between the main building complex and the auxiliary complex. The lowest scores of integration (1.7 - 2) were again found within the latrine building and pottery workshop, with the pottery workshop areas, in particular, being isolated (score of 1.7).<sup>45</sup> All the miqva'ot - except for the potters' mikvah (71) - held a mid-range score of 3.5 for integration, with the most integrated ones being within the auxiliary building (117, 118). Overall the auxiliary building was more integrated than the main building which may speak to the type of activities being held in each. The auxiliary building has been assumed by scholars to have possessed workshops, storage, and perhaps even the kitchen (105) which are less private and religious activities, while the main building seemed to

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45 It should be noted that stables got similar scores of these two other private areas in both integration and visual step depth, but this space has not appeared relevant to the discussions at hand, partially with little scholar note on them.

be more interested in spaces of discussion and meeting likely pertaining to cult activity and becoming more private (Magness 2002). The dining hall (77) had similar integration levels to that of the meeting rooms of the main building (4, 30). As found in the step depth analysis, the most private areas are for impure activities while places needing the most purity are mid-range in their integration and accessibility.

The Jewish settlement of Qumran was keenly focused on living by purity laws established in general scriptures as well as their own specific writings (Community Rules Scroll). This obsession for abiding by purity laws can be seen directly in the architecture of the settlement. The number of ritual baths (miqva'ot) alone shows a clear indication for wanting to keep the space pure and clean, but in addition, the location of each mikvah can seem to be tied to a type or set of activities which an individual may pick up impurities and need to be cleansed of. There are only two miqva'ot (58 and 138) which would be used before entering their tied ritual spaces, opposed to cleansing after committing a defiling act. Unexpectedly, the most private spaces appeared to be where impure activities occurred, such as pottery work and using the latrine. The suspected spaces where activities of the cult were being performed and therefore needing purity showed to be mid-range in architectural accessibility and integration. This was an interesting development of the spatial analysis that was not predicted but it helps to give an insight into how the Qumran inhabitants thought the proper practice of their religion was to be performed. This study also demonstrated how ancient Israelites views on how to arrange space can differ greatly from modern Jewish perspectives. Miqva'ot are used for the same purpose today as they were at Qumran as cleansing tools, however, presently these ritual baths are only seen in dedicated spaces connected Synagogues (prayer houses) or in the houses of wealthy and devout practitioners of the faith.<sup>45</sup> To have the multitude of miqva'ot in such close proximity at Qumran is not an architectural design seen modernly, especially in the context of a small living community (population likely under 150). Additionally, the postulated specific links of each mikvah with the cleansing of or for a specialized task is not something seen contemporarily. It shows an intense devotion to purity laws throughout everyday life that would likely seem obsessive to a modern-day Jewish

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<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that stables got similar scores of these two other private areas in both integration and visual step depth, but this space has not appeared relevant to the discussions at hand, partially with little scholar note on them.

community. How the Qumran inhabitants dealt with impurities and viewed the proper practice of their religion can certainly be dissected more through spatial analysis but this examination lays a significant foundation for the correlation between purity practice in ancient Jewish settlement architecture.

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# Appendix A

## Qumran: Purity in Stone

Avril Lindsay



*Figure 1. Sketchup Map of Qumran Settlement*

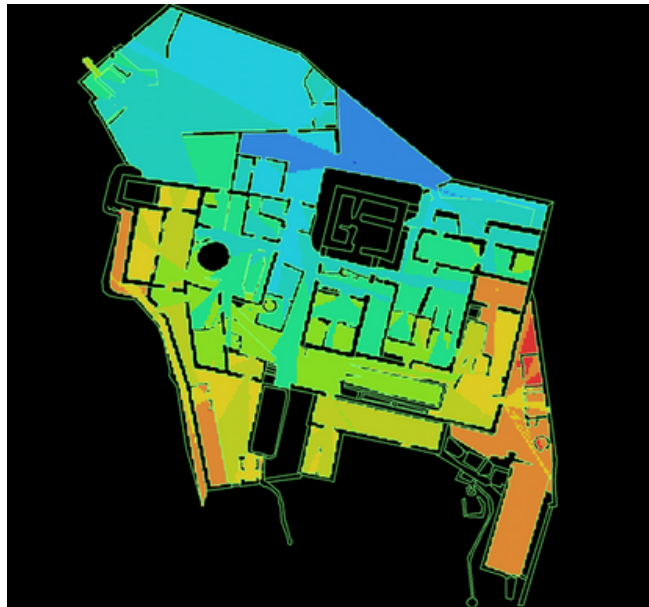


*Figure 2. Defined Spaces Map*

# Appendix A

Qumran: Purity in Stone

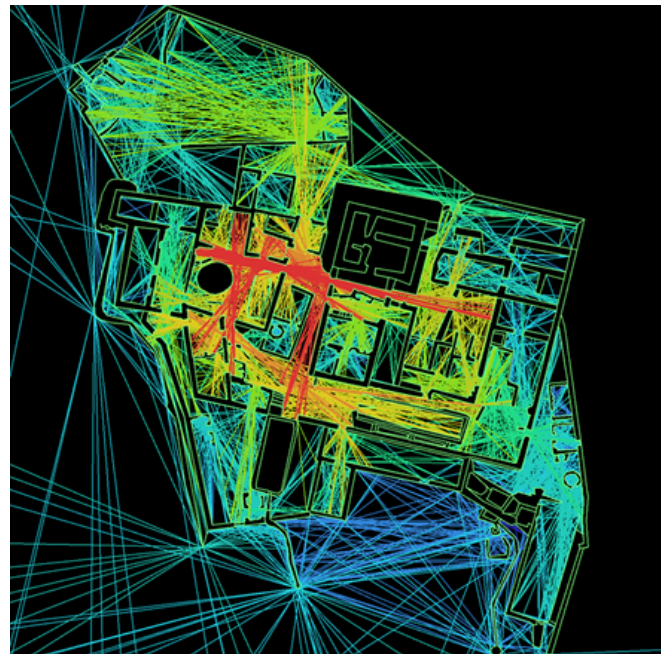
Avril Lindsay



*Figure 3. Visual Step Depth*



*Figure 4. Visual Integration [HH]*



*Figure 5. Integration [HH] all-lines map*



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Avril Lindsay

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# Divinely Appointed but Averse to Divinity: Authority and Romans 13 in the Early Soviet Union

Kristina Shishkova

**Abstract:** Romans 13 stands as a notoriously difficult passage to interpret in the New Testament. While on the surface it is most easily read as a call to obey authority, a closer look at the text can also reveal its subversive message. Throughout history, the dual interpretations have been used to endorse authoritarianism and justify horrific oppression, but also to denounce regimes and call for resistance against them. In the Soviet Union, this passage takes on an especially interesting role. While other historical contexts use Romans 13 as a religious justification for or against authority, the Soviet Union was a unique case where the passage would have to stand in the face of an anti-religious regime. Religion, however, is next to impossible to eradicate, and it quietly played a role in the background of the USSR. This paper examines the antithetical interpretations of Romans 13 by two Orthodox bishops, Patriarch Sergei and Patriarch Tikhon, in response to the Soviet Union's anti-religious campaigns. While Bishop Tikhon's interpretation of Romans 13 firmly rejected the new regime, Bishop Sergei's authoritarian interpretation helped Stalin to use the Church as a tool for his own purposes, allowing a religious text to hold value for an anti-religious state.

Throughout history, the text of Romans 13 has often served as a theological justification for oppressive governments. The Soviet regime, however, sought to eliminate religion from society entirely—it would seem then that the Bible should have no place promoting such an atheistic ideology. While it might be conceivable that it played little role under Soviet rule, religion steadily persisted throughout the duration of the USSR. In response to the initial Communist revolutions of the early 1900s, Patriarch Tikhon, the Patriarch of the Eastern

Orthodox Church in Moscow<sup>1</sup> at the time, maintained that the Church would not submit to such an anti-religious regime, citing Romans 13 as religious backing for this resistance. Following his death in 1925 however, the successive Moscow Patriarch, Sergei, issued a declaration announcing the Church's recognition of the Soviet state and duty to comply with its orders, now citing Romans 13 as religious backing for this submission. Sergei wanted to present this as a continuation of Tikhon's will— aiming to maintain the Church within the bounds of Soviet law in order to preserve its existence. However, a closer analysis of the contexts and outcomes of Sergei's stance reveals there may have been more intentional collusion between the Church and the government at the hands of Stalin. Romans 13, interpreted opposingly by Tikhon and Sergei, becomes both a point of resistance against and a tool in favour of the anti-religious Soviet regime, the latter solidifying the Church's role as an instrument for Stalin's own purposes. This paper examines both patriarchs' responses to Soviet reach into the religious sphere, and contextualises these reactions to highlight their differing goals and motives for the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union.

### **The Context of Russian Orthodoxy in the Soviet Union**

In analysing the political and social aspects of the Soviet Union, the role of religion may be more easily forgotten in discourse. The assumption that Orthodox practitioners in the USSR would be scarce after suffering a “70-year war on religious belief”<sup>2</sup> by the Soviet state appears sensible, but it would likely take far more to uproot such an innate inclination as faith for these people—a faith which ultimately survives the intense religious persecution to the present day. Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Slavic lands dates as far back as the ninth century, when the Rus' were converted to Christianity from their native pagan faith.<sup>3</sup>

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1 The Eastern Orthodox Church is comprised of separate autonomous churches, each with their own hierarchies. Each of these churches is headed by a Patriarch or Metropolitan—the highest ranking bishop. These Patriarchs often represent a national church, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, or Russian Orthodox Church. Each church is governed distinctly from one another, and is each made up of smaller districts or dioceses led by bishops.

2 Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (2004), 35.

3 George P. Majeska, “Patriarch Photius and the Conversion of the Rus.” *Russian History* 32, no. 3/4 (2005), 414. The Rus' were the ancient people located in modern-day Belarus, Ukraine, and (Western) Russia.

Under the Russian Empire, Orthodoxy settled into a “symphony of church and state,”<sup>4</sup> and served as a moral compass for society for centuries.<sup>5</sup> The Church and the tsarist autocracy within the empire were wholly entwined; the monarchy was seen as an “expression of the ideal theocracy” and a sacred power itself.<sup>6</sup> By the early 1900s, the Russian Orthodox Church had substantial influence outside the territory of the Russian Empire, and continued to hold a close bond with families in the private sphere. Alongside their own personal beliefs, many individuals used icon corners in their own homes, allowing for religious practice beyond the territory of a church building, and maintaining a physical and visual connection to the Church in constant view at home.<sup>7</sup> Given Eastern Orthodoxy’s centuries-old influence and firm presence in its practitioner’s lives then, it was quite the shock that the revolutions in 1917 put the very existence of such a long standing institution on thin ice.

The revolutions in 1917 sought to overthrow the existing monarchy and ruling elites in order to bring power back to the oppressed classes. Guided by Marxist-Leninist beliefs against religion, the revolution also targeted the Orthodox Church and other religions in society. The eradication of religion was even an explicit goal of the new regime. Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union, had a certain disdain for religion, asserting that “every religious idea, every idea of god, even every flirtation with the idea of god is unutterable vileness [. . .] of the most dangerous kind.”<sup>8</sup> This contempt towards religion was further kindled by the Church’s privilege and close involvement with the monarchy, as well as its vast possession of private property.<sup>9</sup> The new regime did not hesitate to begin cracking down on religion. Following a decree officially separating the Church from the state in 1918, historic churches and monasteries were shut down or destroyed, historic churches and monasteries were shut

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4 Adriano Rocucci, “A Contradictory and Multifaceted Relationship: Russian Orthodoxy and 1917,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, no. 1/2 (2019), 88.

5 Geraldine Fagan, “There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names: Evaluating Russian Orthodox Collaboration with the Soviet State,” in *The Dangerous God: Christianity and the Soviet Experiment*, ed. Dominic Erdozain, Cornell University Press (2017), 187.

6 Ibid., 90.

7 Daniela Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917–1948: From Decline to Resurrection*, London: Routledge (2014), 12.

8 Fagan, “There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names,” 188.

9 Philip Walters, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483 (1986), 137.

down or destroyed, and church leaders were imprisoned or killed.<sup>10</sup> These years marked the beginning of the struggle between the Russian Orthodox Church and Soviet power for “the symbolic and sacral space of the ancient capital.”<sup>11</sup> The Soviet state’s persecution of the Church was brutal; in 1917, the Russian Empire had some 78,000 Orthodox churches and 1,250 monasteries open, but by the beginning of World War II, there were roughly 350 operating churches left, and not a single monastery.<sup>12</sup> While many of the clergy fled to avoid being killed, the Church persisted in its resistance.

### **Patriarch Tikhon’s Response to Soviet Persecution**

Patriarch Tikhon, the head bishop of the Moscow Patriarchate at time of the revolutions, almost immediately established a firm stance against the Bolsheviks. In a fiery letter in February of 1918, he calls upon his fellow “children of the Church” to “come to the defence of [their] outraged and oppressed Holy Mother.”<sup>13</sup> Later that year, in a November letter to Lenin, he denounces the actions of the Bolsheviks directly. He references damages done to the Church—destroying “the ancient form of church community” and blocking access to the “sacred inheritance of the faithful people” in the Kremlin<sup>14</sup>—as well as damage done to Russia as a whole—the collapse of “a once great and mighty” nation, hunger and “unprecedented agricultural devastation,” and a “lack of everything needed for maintaining a household in the villages.”<sup>15</sup> In this letter, Tikhon cites Romans 13 directly: “it is not our business to judge earthly authorities; all authority, allowed by God, would attract our blessing if it were truly ‘God’s servant’ for the good of its subjects, and not a terror to good works, but to the evil

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10 Ibid.

11 Roccucci, “A Contradictory and Multifaceted Relationship,” 90.

12 Fagan, “There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names,” 193.

13 Patriarch Tikhon, “A Pastoral Letter, February 1, 1918,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History: An On-Line Archive of Primary Sources*, Accessed 12 December 2021, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/conflict-with-the-church/conflict-with-the-church-texts/a-pastoral-letter/>.

14 The Kremlin refers to the seat of the government, a medieval fortress complex in Moscow that houses administrative buildings and palaces, as well as churches. Here Tikhon refers to these churches, which Orthodox practitioners are no longer able to access.

15 Patriarch Tikhon, “Patriarch Tikhon’s 1918 Letter to Lenin,” *The Catalog of Good Deeds*, Accessed 12 December 2021, <https://blog.obitel-minsk.com/2018/03/patriarch-tikhons-1918-letter-to-lenin.html>.

(Rom. 13:3).”<sup>16</sup> Here, he implies that prior authorities, such as the Russian Imperial State, had previously “attracted the blessing” of the Church since they had, in the Church’s eyes, been serving the good of the Russian people. Under Soviet rule however, Tikhon declares that the Church cannot extend such support for the new regime; it does not serve God or the people, and goes against the wording of Romans 13:3 by being a terror to good works (that is, the institution of the Church) rather than to evil.

Interestingly, Tikhon invokes the language of the sword from Romans 13:4 in both letters. In the first letter, he asks the Orthodox believers to fight for the Church even if they must suffer for it, adding that “the Apostle has said: ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?’ (Rom. 8: 35.).”<sup>17</sup> In the second letter, after asking Lenin to cease using his authority for persecution, he warns that, if he does not, “all the righteous blood you have spilled will be required of you (cf. Lk. 11:50), and you who took sword in hand will yourselves die of the sword (cf. Matt. 26:52).” In his article on resistance interpretations of Romans 13, Sze-kar Wan notes that nearly all commentators have taken the sword to refer to “the use of police action by the powerful to maintain control of their subjects.”<sup>18</sup> Tikhon views Soviet authority as a dangerous entity—as a sword—and if the authority is to be used as a sword to separate believers from their love of Christ, then the Church and state are fundamentally incompatible. Soviet authorities evidently did not approve of Tikhon’s views, and eventually arrested him and kept him in isolation.<sup>19</sup> He appeared to undergo a change in viewpoint by the end of his life however. Shortly before his death in 1925, Tikhon’s final testament was published. In it, he offers a “pragmatic acknowledgement” of Soviet authority, urging believers to respect Soviet authority “without allowing any compromises or concessions in the sphere of faith.”<sup>20</sup> This change in standpoint is perhaps a final attempt to save the Church from further persecution, and creates space for Tikhon’s successor to further develop the Church’s official stance on the matter. The authorship of his testament has since been questioned

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16 Ibid.

17 Tikhon, “A Pastoral Letter, February 1, 1918.”

18 Sze-kar Wan, “Coded Resistance: A Proposed Rereading of Romans 13:1-7,” *The Bible in the Public Square*, 183.

19 Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948*, 18.

20 Fagan, “There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names,” 188.

however,<sup>21</sup> and I return to the question of the testament's authenticity later on in this paper.

### A Shift in Perspective: Patriarch Sergei on the Soviet Regime

Patriarch Sergei became the leader of the Moscow Patriarchate after Tikhon's death, initially as a *locum tenens*. His stance on church-state relations evolved to be significantly different from his predecessor, placing the Church in near submission to Soviet authority in an attempt to lessen its persecution— an approach which was heavily criticised.<sup>22</sup> In 1927, he issued a declaration recognizing the Soviet regime, which he opens by referring directly to Tikhon's final testament. Tikhon, he claims, wanted to place the Orthodox Church "in the correct relationship with the Soviet government" in order to "provide the Church with a chance for a perfectly legitimate and peaceful existence."<sup>23</sup> In the declaration, Sergei blames Russia's problems on foreign enemies, and insists that the Church must show everyone that it stands "with our people and with our government."<sup>24</sup> To help unite the Church and the state, he asks all clergy to "commit in writing to complete loyalty to the Soviet government in all of its social activities," and threatens anyone who refuses with exclusion from all future Church matters.<sup>25</sup> His declaration also offers public thanksgiving to the Soviet government for its "attention to the spiritual needs of the Orthodox population," and unites Orthodox identity with being Soviet: "we want to be Orthodox and at the same time to be conscious of the Soviet Union as our civil motherland, whose joys and successes are our joys and successes and whose failures, failures."<sup>26</sup>

Like Tikhon, Sergei also quotes Romans 13 in his declaration directly: "while remaining Orthodox, we remember our duty to be citizens of the Union 'not only out of fear, but also for Like Tikhon, Sergei also quotes Romans 13 in his declaration directly: "while remaining Orthodox, we remember our duty to be citizens of the Union 'not only out of fear, but also

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21 Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948*, 22.

22 This leads to the term "Sergianism," referring to the unconditional loyalty of Orthodox leaders shown to the Soviet Union following this time.

23 Metropolitan Sergius, "Declaration on Recognition of the Soviet Regime," *Historical Studies of the Russian Church Abroad*, Accessed 12 December 2021, <https://www.rocorstudies.org/2017/06/09/3098/>.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.



for (Romans XIII, 5).”<sup>27</sup> Unlike Tikhon, however, Sergei uses Romans 13 here to argue for submission to the Soviet government. He elaborates, pointing out that many feel the Soviet government is a mistake—perhaps alluding to Tikhon’s concerns of the government not serving the good of the people. However, he assures the reader that “for a Christian nothing happens by chance,” and that in the establishment of Soviet authority, “as at all times and places, acts the same right hand of God.”<sup>28</sup> Despite insisting in the opening of the letter that he wants to continue Tikhon’s work, it appears here that he has almost entirely flipped the previous Patriarch’s message. Tikhon had referenced Romans 13 to show that the Church cannot support the government since it is not truly God’s servant. Sergei, on the other hand, uses Romans 13 to suggest that it is reasonable to submit to authority, especially since all authority is allowed by God. Sergei’s use of Romans 13:5 specifically is interesting as well. Wan notes that, from a resistance perspective, the contrast of fear and conscience in verse 5 suggests a subject would make an informed evaluation of where authority truly lies: “the implication is that submission is warranted if, and only if, God, the only true legitimation for authority, stands behind the local officials.”<sup>29</sup> Tikhon had concluded that God does not stand behind Soviet authority, and so submission is not warranted, but here Sergei does the opposite.

Sergei’s declaration thus far completely reverses the claims in Tikhon’s letters. Towards the end of it, however, Sergei re-emphasises his goal, namely “to establish the right relationship between the Church and the Soviet government.”<sup>30</sup> He insists that “it is for a very good reason that the Apostle admonishes us that in order ‘to quietly and peacefully live’ in all godliness, we can either obey the legitimate authority (I Tim. II, 2) or withdraw from society.”<sup>31</sup> He notes that it would be impossible for such a vast institution as Orthodoxy to exist in a country whilst walled off from its authorities, and so the only way it can exist peacefully is to obey. It would seem then that, though he asks believers to submit to authority entirely, he ultimately wants to ensure the survival of the Orthodox community under its

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27 Ibid.

28 Sergius, “Declaration on Recognition of the Soviet Regime.”

29 Wan, “Coded Resistance,” 178.

30 Sergius, “Declaration on Recognition of the Soviet Regime.”

31 Ibid.

current leadership— which actively persecutes dissenters— by keeping peace with authority. In a way, Sergei's method works. Soon after, the Russian Orthodox Church was granted official legal status in the Soviet Union, and Stalin's Constitution of 1936 allows "freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda...for all citizens."<sup>32</sup> Above everything, the Russian Orthodox Church ultimately survives the Soviet Union, and remains the most prominent religious institution in the Russian Federation today. Despite these outcomes though, it would perhaps be superficial to assume the Church Patriarchs were the only ones pulling strings.

### **Calculated Survival or Intentional Collusion: Sergei's Obscure Motives**

Adriano Rocucci points out that historians often view the sphere of religion as separate from other aspects of history, including politics. In the Soviet Union especially, where leaders were staunchly atheist and anti-religious, religion may be dismissed as having little effect on historical events. Rocucci argues that the opposite is the case: "the bolshevik leadership always paid great attention to religion throughout all phases of its rule, and saw it primarily as a threat rather than an irrelevance, contrary to the claims of its own propaganda."<sup>33</sup> Throughout his leadership, Joseph Stalin paid careful attention to religion and used it to pull strings in the Church. In his early life, Stalin received over a decade of church training and nearly became a Russian Orthodox priest himself at a theological seminary in Georgia—which was a part of the Russian Empire at the time— before taking time off.<sup>34</sup> Of course, he never returned, but his training gave him an intimate familiarity with Christian scripture, and awareness of the importance of interpretation for developing new meanings out of texts.<sup>35</sup> Stalin's writings are "sprinkled with biblical allusions, invocations and inflections,"<sup>36</sup> and in his 1936 Constitution, Stalin reinterprets biblical texts and presents them as communist slogans,<sup>37</sup> demonstrating his ability to flip scripture to suit his purposes.

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32 Roland Boer, "Sergei and the 'Divinely Appointed' Stalin: Theology and Ecclesiology in Church-State Relations in the Soviet Union in the Lead-up to the Cold War," *Social Sciences* (2018), 12

33 Rocucci, "A Contradictory and Multifaceted Relationship," 87.

34 Boer, "Sergei and the 'Divinely Appointed' Stalin," 5.

35 Ibid., 6.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 10.

With this in mind, Sergei's declaration may be viewed in a different light, especially given that even his authority is questionable to many.

Though she remarks that Patriarch Sergei's authority is seldom questioned in academic discourse, Geraldine Fagan posits that he "would never have led the Russian Orthodox Church were it not for Bolshevik manipulation."<sup>38</sup> Tikhon had nominated three other successors, but all three were imprisoned or exiled soon after his death.<sup>39</sup> Under normal circumstances, Sergei should have only remained as *locum tenens* briefly until a council could elect a new patriarch, and so his authority was "tenuous from an Orthodox perspective" from the beginning.<sup>40</sup> To add another layer of suspicion, the details surrounding Tikhon's final testament are obscure as well. Tikhon died at the age of 60 after becoming sick and being taken to a hospital, and on the same day as his death, his final testament was published.<sup>41</sup> The authenticity of the testament has been questioned multiple times since its publication, especially due to Soviet claims that it was written by Tikhon on his final day.<sup>42</sup> While of course nothing is proven, Sergei succeeding Tikhon—likely by the hand of the Bolsheviks—and then building off of Tikhon's final testament—of questionable authorship and containing contradictory opinions to all his others—calls into question who Sergei's declaration truly serves.

### **Sergei's Possible Collusion with the Government**

Fagan argues that Sergei's 1927 declaration mainly serves "to allow the Soviet authorities to use Metropolitan Sergii as a tool to crush the Church from within."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, his strict request for loyalty from clergy provides a clear test to see who disagrees with the state. Countless bishops were removed from power following the declaration, though Sergei maintained that they were removed for opposing authority rather than for their faith.<sup>44</sup> Other Orthodox leaders rejected Sergei's position as uncanonical: one metropolitan argued that the

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38 Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 189.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948*, 22.

42 Ibid.

43 Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 190.

44 Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 191.

cornerstone of Sergei's program "rests not upon utmost care to guard the true faith, but upon completely unnecessary servility to the 'external.'" <sup>45</sup> Another leader powerfully asked Sergei, "did the thought never enter your head that you enjoy 'freedom and peace' due to the slow death of our senior hierarchs whom the authorities find disagreeable? If such a thought crossed your mind but once— how can you sleep soundly, stand calmly before the holy altar?" <sup>46</sup> Evidently Sergei's peers did not buy into his stated goal of preserving the Church through submission. Even the times when the Church was able to gain more footing— when Sergei's plan "worked" — might have just been a part of Stalin's own plans.

After the Church became a legal entity, the Soviet government quickly co-opted it as an instrument for its own diplomacy. In occupied countries where Orthodoxy was already an established religion, such as Ukraine, the Soviet government could now use the Church to "pacify the local population and bring them around to a pro-Kremlin way of thinking." <sup>47</sup> Likewise, after re-capturing territories from the Nazis, who allowed Orthodox churches to reopen in order to gain favour from locals, <sup>48</sup> the Soviet government became more lenient towards religion to increase control over its territories— and to gain more support from Western allies during the war. <sup>49</sup> Stalin had realised that the "semblance of a functioning Orthodox Church for the outside world" would need some grounding in reality; the legalisation of Sergei's Church came as a result of Stalin's own diplomatic plans then, rather than the rhetoric in Sergei's declaration. <sup>50</sup> In fact, anti-religious propaganda ceased almost entirely during World War II as Stalin used the Church to unite the former Russian Empire against a common enemy, <sup>51</sup> and to strengthen a sense of Russian national identity. <sup>52</sup> So, regardless of Sergei's claims about his own goals for the Church, the circumstances of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>46</sup> Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 192.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Bourdeaux, "Persecution, Collusion, and Liberation: The Russian Orthodox Church, from Stalin to Gorbachev," in *The Dangerous God: Christianity and the Soviet Experiment*, ed. Dominic Erdozain, Cornell University Press (2017), 54.

<sup>48</sup> Roger Reese, "The Russian Orthodox Church and 'Patriotic' Support for the Stalinist Regime during the Great Patriotic War," *War & Society* 33, no. 2 (2014), 137.

<sup>49</sup> Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 193.

<sup>50</sup> Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 193.

<sup>51</sup> H. A. Freund, "Church and Religion in Soviet Russia," *The Australian Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1945), 21.

<sup>52</sup> Reese, "The Russian Orthodox Church and 'Patriotic' Support for the Stalinist Regime," 141.

of Sergei's leadership and Stalin's use of the Church as a tool strongly point to the possibility of the Church's collusion with the state.

### **Interpretation is Never Black and White: The Murkiness of the Situation**

In the same way that Romans 13 can be read from all different angles, the interaction between the Orthodox Church and the Soviet state can be interpreted from all different angles too. Kalkandjieva notes that, while it is certainly the Soviet government who played a more active role in the relations between the two, "it would be wrong to think that the church was just a pawn on Stalin's chessboard."<sup>53</sup> The Church took actions for itself too, and asserted itself to the people as a historic institution in 'holy' Russia.<sup>54</sup> Hours after the start of the German invasion in 1941, Sergei acted independently and started a campaign to "reintegrate the Russian Orthodox Church into the lives of ordinary Soviet citizens,"<sup>55</sup> and so perhaps Sergei himself wanted to restore the Church too. His contrast with Patriarch Tikhon is not so black-and-white either. Though Tikhon's letters seem to have the needs of the people in mind, his defence of the Church is also a defence of its immense privilege and wealth in a nation of peasants. During the famines in the years after the Russian Civil War, the Church allegedly refused to sell its belongings to help feed the poor,<sup>56</sup> so Tikhon's defence of the Church might not necessarily be entirely for the good of the people either. Ultimately though, regardless of possible angles to interpret Sergei's actions, it still stands that he caused immense damage. Though he insisted on wanting to preserve the Church, Sergei's declaration led to the deaths and imprisonments of countless clergymen, and ensured the Church would be complicit in the atheist Soviet regime's plans. In a 1972 letter to Patriarch Pimen, Solzhenitsyn asks, "by what reasoning is it possible to convince oneself that the planned destruction of the spirit and body of the church under the guidance of atheists is the best way of preserving it? Preserving it for whom? Certainly not for Christ."<sup>57</sup>

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53 Kalkandjieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948*, 180.

54 Reese, "The Russian Orthodox Church and 'Patriotic' Support for the Stalinist Regime," 135.

55 Ibid., 152.

56 Walters, "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State," 137.

57 Fagan, "There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names," 194

This paper has demonstrated the contradictory interpretations of Romans 13 in the context of the early Soviet Union, both as a resistance and a submission reading. Patriarch Tikhon, the last Patriarch in power from Imperial Russia, pushed back against Bolshevik anti-religious sentiments. He cites Romans 13 to argue that the Church can only acknowledge authority that is truly backed by God. But, because of the Bolsheviks' intense persecution of the Church, he concludes that this cannot be said of Bolshevik authorities. By the end of his life, he seemed to change his stance slightly as a final attempt to preserve the Church, allowing for submission to authority as long as personal faith is not compromised, though the authenticity of this change is questionable. Following Tikhon's death, Sergei was established as the *locum tenens*, but his authority was not necessarily seen as legitimate from within Russian Orthodox leadership. He issued a declaration acknowledging Soviet authority, citing Romans 13 to argue that all authority is divinely approved and therefore warrants submission. While he states that the goal of his declaration is to allow the Church to exist peacefully under Soviet rule, it causes countless deaths and opens the door for Stalin to use the Church for his own purposes. The context of these events suggests the possibility of more intentional collusion with the state by the Church, though the situation is ultimately more nuanced and multifaceted than may often be assumed. Regardless, the use of Romans 13 in Sergei's declaration led to further death and caused the Church to give in to an atheistic state, effectively undermining the Church's historical role as an institution of God.

The interpretation of Romans 13 in the Soviet Union offers a fascinating look into the diversity of biblical interpretation that can stem from a single text, as it is simultaneously used both to argue for resistance against and justify submission to the regime. As an added layer, it is remarkable that the Church, albeit through Sergei, would even agree to submit to such an anti-religious government, and that such an anti-religious government, through Stalin, could use religion for its goals to such a great extent. Even today, the Tikhon and Sergei's interpretations hold great significance for modern Orthodox practitioners in the region. Russian Orthodoxy remains deeply culturally significant to those who practise or identify with it today, and Fagan notes that it is the "only pre-revolutionary Russia-wide social

institution to have survived Soviet rule.”<sup>58</sup> It continues to maintain elevated significance as the Church has returned to a close relationship with the state, and it is interesting to reflect how one piece of scripture shaped the fate of a deep rooted old institution. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Orthodox groups around the world have solidified their commentaries on church-state relations: “it is unacceptable, in particular, to use the texts of Holy Scripture (for example, Romans 13:1–5) in a way which does not correspond with the interpretation and spirit of the Holy Fathers. Earthly and temporal powers of the state are recognized as imperative to the degree that they are used to support good and limit evil.”<sup>59</sup> Fittingly, Freund quotes the Bolshevik Lunacharsky, who said that “religion is like a nail, the harder you hit it the deeper it goes into the wood.”<sup>60</sup>

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58 Fagan, “There are Things in History that Should be Called by their Proper Names,” 187.

59 Ibid., 202.

60 Freund, “Church and Religion in Soviet Russia,” 19.



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# The Greeks and Their Mystery Numbers: Three, Triad, and Trinity

Chuzheng Tan

**Abstract:** Three, a number that contains countless symbolic meanings throughout the world, has its special place in Greco-Roman myths and religion. From triple gods and goddess, to triple monsters, such as the gorgons, a long-lasting fascination of trinities and triads stems and stretches from Antiquity. Three has possessed a sense of perfectness and sacredness since the time of Pythagoras. Modern authors have also been interested in delving into the mysteries of the number and the obsession around it. Milena Bogdanović spends a hefty amount of time discussing the symbolic values behind the numbers in Greek culture. Likewise, Daniel G Brinton, who researched the religious significance of numbers and the mythical history, touches on the divinity of three and the essential part it plays in the minds and creations of early human beings. This essay combines the contemplations of the ancient writers with the modern interpretations, adopting actual examples in mythology, to reach an understanding of the “how” and “why” did three prevail in the myths.

Numbers and their associations have featured significantly in religions and mythology throughout human history. Among all numerals, three appears notably often and seemingly possesses significant symbolic meaning in folktales and traditions. While three has popularity in other prominent mythologies, its phenomenon is magnified in Greco-Roman myth. Relevant examples include the triple gods of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades; Athena, Artemis, and Hestia, the triplet goddesses who are thought to be the protector of virginity and girls; and the triple goddesses of Hecate that mark the phases of the moon, and witchcraft mentioned

in *Metamorphoses*.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the *Metamorphoses*, other sources indicate the importance of three, such as *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, in which a series of “triple” epithets is adopted to address the goddesses Selene, Artemis, and Persephone.<sup>2</sup> Later religions such as Christianity also feature such notions into their doctrine, as in the holy trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The significance of such a combination is identifiable globally, and in the formation of myths due to the frequency of its appearance. This essay will uncover the mysteries surrounding the number three, and investigate the reason as to why it is so prevalent in Greco-Roman Mythology.

In order to cement our understanding of the symbolism in the number three, it is crucial to tackle the question of how the origins of numbers are associated with later mythological creations. As a fundamental instrument in human intelligence, numbers contain more than just what is coined in the dictionary as “an abstract entity representing the quantity.”<sup>3</sup> The origin of the numbers and their symbolic meanings tells us about the earliest formation of ideas in the first few millenniums of human culture. They possess a specific symbolic connotation to the culture that reveres such an entity. The ancient Greeks and most other societies from antiquity have found three to be the most sacred of all these numerals. As stated by Brinton, “The number three derives its sacredness from abstract, subjective operations of the intelligence, and has its main application in the imaginary and non-phenomenal world.”<sup>4</sup> Brinton addresses the whereabouts of the sacredness in the number three, as it—3—is a number that bridges reality and imagination; it has an innate nature of liminality and transcendence, which is a vital component of divinity in Greco-Roman mythology and culture.<sup>5</sup> Bogdanović went further on the notion of the sacredness and the theological justification of numbers, as she claims that numbers in the ancient world, especially in the Platonic view of the cosmos, were the foundation of harmony.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Ovid, *Met.* 7.

2 Betz. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*. 84.

3 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Number”

4 Brinton, Daniel G. *The Origin of Sacred Numbers*. 168.

5 Brinton, Daniel G. *The Origin of Sacred Numbers*. 168.

6 Bogdanović, Doc. Dr Milena. “The Number and Its Symbolism in Ancient Greece.” *Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 116-117.

Plato's view on three stems from his predecessors, who have provided the logical framework behind the sacredness of the numerals. Numbers in the ancient Greek world are philosophically and religiously significant. In *The Origin of Sacred Numbers*, Brinton proposed that, "Philosophers like Pythagoras and Heraclitus very early taught the mystic or occult powers of numbers, and this rapidly diverted their significance from their original intent in myth and art." Within <sup>7</sup>the context provided, it is clear that the numbers were of rather significant status in the ancient world. The next stage of this exploration is to utilize existing myths and folklore to validate the importance of the number three.

The triad divinity is rather prominent in the mythology. In this case, to analyze the importance and its cause, the triple goddesses of fate can suffice as the object of discussion. In *Theogony*, Hesiod separated fate into three personifications, hence three goddesses, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos.<sup>8</sup> These three deities, in *Theogony*, are in charge of the fate and destiny of men; they symbolize the stages of life, from beginning to end. The accounts vary on how the fates appear and act in the myth, but the fates are inescapable in most accounts. Just as Ovid states in *Metamorphoses*, "The gods were moved; but none can break the ancient Sisters' [the Moirai's] iron decrees."<sup>9</sup> In this particular text, "the ancient sisters" display a fearsome nature. Expanding on this idea, it is safe to assume the gods are afraid of the fates because of their nature as the inescapable fate and their unprecedented place in the mythical world. With this established, if we look back to the functions of the triple deity, the traits played an essential part in conveying the philosophical, abstract concept of fate, life, and destiny, acting as the guideline and charters for the ideas. Not only does this myth carry the weight of the cultural and religious ideologies, but it also strengthens the importance of the number three by embedding such an idea in society. Evidently, it echoes with the notion brought up by Brinton, as this sense of grouping the deities in three is more than just phenomenal but transmits an understanding of the abstract to the mass public through mythology. Thus, it is arguable that the number itself possesses an intrinsic, even primal sense to the people of antiquity. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine which - myth or sacred number -

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Hes. Theo. 217.

<sup>9</sup> Ovid. Met. 15. 781

originated first; yet, it is sure that the numbers have manifested in the lore, and myth carries their connotations.

The sacred numbers, especially three, bear the weight of conveying culture, ideas, and religion. As one of the most prominent genres in ancient society, Myths function more than entertainment but as a vessel for culture and ideals. In this sense, numbers and myths are interconnected, along with culture. Three has been perceived as the perfect number in the classical era, it contains: the future, past and present; birth, life, and death; beginning, middle, and end.<sup>10</sup> The perception of the number on the physical level has established a bridge for the ancient people to apply abstract concepts. Building upon the notion, it becomes apparent why the number holds such a gigantic mythical value of its recurrent pattern in myths. Numerals are but a vessel that encompasses the culture. It is the case for the goddesses of fate and the other seemingly less apparent pairs. An example of the less obvious grouping would be the three goddesses that started the Trojan war. The notorious decade-long warfare between the Greeks and the Trojans started with a quarrel of three goddesses at a wedding.<sup>11</sup> These three goddesses each represent an aspect of the human desire: Aphrodite for sexual desire and primal instinct of love, Hera for the desire of power and status, Athena for the desire of glory. As Bogdanović states in his work, three contains the cosmos harmony, and applying the idea to the specific case of *The Judgement of Paris*, it is arguable that the cosmic harmony in this particular myth is the combination of the three goddesses – power, glory, and love.<sup>12</sup> The triad depicts the ideology of the Greeks thousands of years ago, using the established ideas of the sacredness that Pythagorean scholars had proposed (the idea of a sacred three was earlier than this, but in this particular context, the focus will be on contemporary ideas).<sup>13</sup> The combination of the three goddesses, or the ideals behind them, is a discourse between the myth makers and the public and between culture and the people in it. In this case, the three qualities are fundamental to the society and, using the triad paring, justified the culture.

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10 WNO, “Three Is The Magic Number”.

11 Apollo. Bibl. E3. 2.

12 *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*

14 FOWLER, ROBERT L. “Greek Magic, Greek Religion.” 1–22

The trinity of goddesses creates the harmonious cosmos and a perfect state of society; the idea has manifested in mythology, and it reappears in the culture through mythology. The number three acts actively in shaping culture; the preconceived notions in this particular number started as the intrinsic perception, and then through myth, it renovated itself. Three is the ultimate perfection, to begin with, and such perfection is explained through mythology, then passed on to society with more depth tied to the culture.

Mythology has always been a source of validation and social confirmation in ancient times as it carries out the societal ideologies and traditions to properly instruct the machinery of society. The significance of the sacred three and the triad in mythology persists throughout the ages, such ideas manifested from folktales to traditional practices. In classical Greek, the most critical practice was the various rituals and sacrifices, which were common in the culture.<sup>14</sup> During ritualistic events, the priest or priestess invoked deities to help them achieve their goals. Among those invocations, many sources referred to the deities they were conjuring as “triple-headed,” “triple-faced,” or just simply “triple.”<sup>15</sup> Specifically, female deities were called on, for instance, Artemis, Persephone, Selene, and Helios.<sup>16</sup> Within these figures, one particular deity’s incantation is worth analyzing. In *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, the scholars have translated several ancient texts that focus on invocations and “spells.” In the translated text of the prayers to Selene, one specific verse stands out, “With Helios, who with triple forms and triple graces dance in revel with the stars,”<sup>17</sup> this particular sentence portrays Helios with a threefold trait. On a surface level, this sentence takes the mythological references of the deity to echo the ritual/spell process, as the number and its connotations shed light on the religious practices which regulate the magical and religious procedures. Emory Lease points out, “As an inherent element in the temporal triad is the threefold repetition of the same act, as in thrice offering a prayer or in thrice repeating an oath, under the belief that in this way it is rendered more potent.”<sup>18</sup>

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14 FOWLER, ROBERT L. “Greek Magic, Greek Religion.” 1–22

15 Betz. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*. 91. 2810–2825.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid. 90. 2790–2794.

18 Lease, Emory B. “The Number Three, Mysterious, Mystic, Magic.” 73.



Yet, if we dig deeper, the “triple graces” of Helios might be referring to the three phases of the sun: sunrise, noon, and sunset, which echoes the particular theory proposed by Lease in his essay where he says, “a threefold division of daylight and a threefold division of darkness.”<sup>19</sup> By dedicating efforts in reality based on the notions in myth, the number became a vessel for information and abstract ideas of time. In this case, three shapes the culture and transmitting the information. Aside from the ritualistic aspect of the sacred number, it seems to appear frequently and influences other parts of the culture, such as what Lease stated, “... the tragic art of Athens, as also the comic, had its three great representatives, that the idea of a trilogy was introduced by Aeschylus.”<sup>20</sup> The perfect number three deviates from the religious context and manifests itself in the mundane world. It is because of the significance of three in the ancient Greek considerations of sacredness, through the expression of mythology, that it fulfills one of its purposes as the fundamental elements of the machinery we call society, both religious and mundane.

After a deep dive into the ancient world and mythology, it is clear how the culture functions around the sacred number. Three, as the most primal and fundamental numeral in human perception, plays an enormously significant role in the classical period. It possesses the deep connection to the fundamental considerations of humans, and from it, sprouted a number of philosophical and religious contemplations to make sense of the number. From these thoughts, the number three was given more traits and qualities manifested in society and culture. Mythology and folklore are vitally driven from entirely abstract to contextualized by such transference. From there on, three has become the lubricant for the wheels of society and culture to function properly. Three is sacred, as it means more than just quantity.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 59.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 60.

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