

# Isidi Invicte

## Introduction

Even today people are trying to find ways of reaching back and making contact with the Great Goddess Isis.<sup>1</sup> Arguably the most popular, certainly the most wide spread free choice religion of all time. Born out of Egypt and beloved by Rome, Isis represents the Divine Feminine, love in all its forms and true equality amongst gender and race. Paul of Tarsus hated everything about her and Constantine set out to destroy her and yet in the 21st century people are founding new Iseums to counteract the tyranny that Rome has imposed on society for almost two thousand years.

Isis was loved by all, worshipped by prince and pauper and spoke to the many, regardless of their own deities and religions. Her religion is one of the Mysteries, a faith wherein priest and priestess are initiated, not ordained and her teachings encapsulate universal truths to which all humanity can relate. Herein we will examine the Goddess herself, explore why she was a threat to Christianity and how the Christian religion tried to bind her and control her by making her of secondary importance to their own God.

## Who Is Isis?

*“There, in the beginning was Isis. Oldest of the old, she was the goddess from whom all Becoming arose.” - R.E.Witt<sup>2</sup>*

When Isis entered the Greek Islands and the Roman Empire met with loving arms and bowed heads she was already ancient beyond remembering. Her story was known for thousands of years before her first statue landed on Greco-Roman soil. A Great Goddess, *Isis Myrionomous* was the Grand Creatrix, the Great Mother and had already assimilated the many names and attributes of her sisters in Egypt. All of the Goddesses were seen to bow unto her, and she could clothe herself as any one of them as she saw fit. Goddess of the Sea, Eye of the Moon, Isis represented all that was good, all that was love and all that was the Divine Feminine.

Isis is Love<sup>3</sup> in all of its forms by all of its names. She is the passionate lover, the devoted

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1 There is a modern manifestation of Isiacism called the Fellowship of Isis based in England with groups all over Europe and the US.

2 Throughout this essay I have drawn heavily on the 1971 book *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (reprinted in 1997 as *Isis in the Ancient World*) by R.E. Witt. It is generally frowned upon in university essays to rely so much on a single source but I have found it very difficult to find many other reliable sources which Dr. Witt has not already thoroughly cited in this text. This book represents an excellent amalgamation of the best resources on the subject currently available. His extensive bibliography is a veritable who's who of the relevant literature. If it's worth finding it's almost always already cited in this excellent survey of the subject.

3 Capitals intended.

mother and the dutiful wife. She is attributed with teaching humanity how to worship and she desires a synthesis between religion and science. Her love knows no boundaries and, unlike so many of the Greco-Roman Goddesses, Isis loves both men and women equally. Goddess of fertility she claims all children as her own and was therefore worshipped by prince and pauper alike. So different from the Olympians upon their distant mountain, her temples could be found in every marketplace open to all regardless of sex, race or social status. As the Goddess of domestic bliss she was also venerated in the lararium of most homes.

The story of Isis is one of strength, fortitude and loving devotion. Although she eventually developed a 'second husband' her love for her beloved Osiris encapsulates the epitome of love; her only regret being that her power was not enough to bring him to life permanently but, after conceiving Horus, she was forced to allow him to descend into the Underworld. Serapis, her second husband, enjoyed no less love and devotion even to the point of having his own small chapels always attached to the greater temples of Isis. Like the 'Lady Chapels' of today's Christian Churches, the Iseum would have a small place where one could worship and leave offerings to Serapis.

Isis is the eternal Female. She is both the docile mother suckling her child as well as the mother bear protecting her young. Her aid is still sought in naval navigation whereby sailors place the Eye of Horus, her son, upon the prow of their vessels in hopes that she will grant them good sailing and safe return home. Strength in adversity, joy in peace, ecstasy in love are all attributes of the Divine Mother of all, called Most Blessed Isis.

## **Isiac Religion**

The religion of Isis is reasonably well documented, at least as well as it could be considering its nature. Isiacism was a Mystery Religion wherein one could be initiated and given great and powerful secrets which bestowed the title and duties of priesthood upon the initiate. In *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius the hero of the story receives the sacred initiation of the Iseum and passes through the ordeals set out for him. From this we can learn many things about the ancient mysteries and even connect them with our own modern Western Mysteries.

From the story we know that Lucius passes through twelve zodiac based ordeals during his initiation. Little else is given except certain rules for fasting and preparing. Yet from his prayers to the Goddess we can discover much about her place in people's lives and it is from this that we know so much about the average person's relationship to their Celestial Mother. Of particular interest is the position of the HighPriest of the temple who is given the name "Mithras" who is also associated with Osiris and Serapis. Unlike the layperson or the neophyte, the HighPriest is consort to the Goddess. It is documented that in Babylonian,

Celtic and other religions that sexual intercourse between Priest and Priestess during certain rituals and times (during which both are possessed by their respective God and Goddess) were quite common.<sup>4</sup> We also know that Isiac rituals made use of ithyphallic imagery similar to other Greco-Roman practices and can, therefore, deduce that similar rituals may have been part of the inner initiations.

The new Priest, though, is told to spread light and love. Those dedicated to Isis are expected to improve themselves through ritual, prayer and meditation as well as help others in the same way. Lucius travels quite far and performs missionary work in other countries. Perhaps it is such missionary work that helped Isiacism spread across the Empire and beyond. From Persia to Britannia, from Spain to Germany we find evidence of Isis worship. And yet, unlike the major religion to follow, Isis' penetration of the world was done without violence or coercion. Isiacs respect all other Gods and Goddesses and do not seek to convert by force. The missionary Isiac Priest usually lived in a small apartment attached to the Iseum itself. His or her clothing consisted of a black robe covered by a white surplice, very much like the Catholic Church adopted after Constantine.<sup>5</sup> (This may have been intentional to aid the assimilation of the Roman population.) Isiac priests wore the black as a symbol of their sacred oaths and the silence of their mysteries and the white as a sign of purity and light. It may also represent the white light in the black sky as Isis was also associated with the Moon. Isis sacred symbols include the rose, the lotus the cross/ankh, the situla (a mammary shaped pitcher for holy water), the Isis Knot and the sistrum (which in German is called the 'Isisklapper').<sup>6</sup> Such symbolism can be seen today in the Rose-Cross of the Rosicrucian and Western Mystery Traditions. R.E.Witt, in his excellent book *Isis in the Ancient World* makes several comparisons between the Isiac mysteries and those of Freemasonry, Hermeticism and Rosicrucianism.<sup>7</sup> He points to symbols, practices and ideals as being of similar roots between all legitimate modern manifestations of the Mysteries.

### **Subtle Transformations**

At the advent of the Christian Era various changes began to sneak into the Isiac faith. Christian expansion began to influence the ideals of Isis and similarities were developing between the Divine Mother and the Son of God matching Isis and Mary alongside Horus and Jesus. By the third century the core of the Empire was worshipping Isis as a virgin and

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4 These were generally the fertility rituals of the New Year festivals performed between the King and the HighPriestess. Babylonian, Mesopotamian, Chaldean and Assyrian rituals are discussed in Dunstan's *The Ancient Near East*.

5 Witt 97, 276.

6 Witt 55.

7 Witt 157-158.

Serapis her devoted consort. This made the transition to Christianity particularly smooth when Constantine instituted the Christian faith as the official Roman state religion.

Isis seemed ready made for the assimilation and statues of her with Horus were simply renamed rather than destroyed. Isis and Mary shared many traits, including their sacred rose, the title of Stella Maris, the cornucopia, and of course, Divine Mother and this made it even easier for the emerging Christian religion to adopt her as their very own.<sup>8</sup> By the time Constantine declared Christianity to be the Roman state religion Isis had already donned the guise of the paradoxical virgin fertility Goddess and slipped into the role of Mother Mary. Her own son, Horus the Younger, being so very different from Jesus didn't seem to make much difference at the time.<sup>9</sup> The blue robed Goddess took second chair to the new male deity and fell further and further from the central focus of the religion.

Under the nose of the new church many refused to accept the new God as the one and only and rather than abandon their Great Goddess they simply disguised their worship so as to avoid prosecution. Their rites did not change much as far as we can see but it is assumed that, in public at least, the Virgin Mary replaced (at least in body) great Isis. The Mary cult continued to grow until its origins were lost in history and even today Catholics keep small shrines to Mary in their homes never suspecting that these are remnants of the Isis shrines which Roman housewives maintained in their homes and villas over two thousand years before.<sup>10</sup>

The true fatality of this adaptation was the Isiac religion itself. It is safe to assume that the initiations of Isis were no longer allowed under the new Gods and we are told that those centres which continued to harbour the mysteries (like Alexandria) were stamped out by such emperors as Theodosius.<sup>11</sup> And yet the new church adopted the black cassock and white surplice so common in Isiacism so as to lessen the shock to the common people. It makes one wonder if these changes were even immediately obvious to the lay person at the time; at least until the Isis temples were knocked down to have churches built on top of them.

It is, of course, obvious by any examination of the Canon as to what the minds of the early Christians were like. Paul's own misogyny is rampant whereas more egalitarian texts were cut out completely.<sup>12</sup> The idea of an all powerful female, or even an equal to their new male

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8 Witt 272-273.

9 Hoor-Paar-Kraat, or Horus the Younger was a God of vengeance whose primary goal was to defeat and exile his uncle Set who had murdered Osiris. Horus avenged his father's death while Christ gained the moniker "Prince of Peace". In *Liber Al vel Legis* Horus is quoted as saying "Now let it be first understood that I am a God of War and of Vengeance. I shall deal hardly with them" (III:3).

10 In Isis all of the various Marys in the Christian mythos have their synthesis. -Witt 138

11 Witt 274.

12 Fortunately we now have these texts through the discoveries at Nag Hammadi.

Gods could not have been tolerated by the new church. By transforming Isis into Mary Her priests and worshippers were able to keep at least part of her faith alive even in the face of the intolerant regimen of Christianity.

## **Conclusion**

Isis was ancient even before Rome became an empire. She is arguably the most widely worshipped Goddess in history, at least geographically and as such left us a great legacy to discover all of these years later. Her mysteries have survived even if they had to be couched in Christian symbolism and language, and her teachings forever changed those who took initiation. With this in mind we can see that she's never left us, never abandoned her children for she has always been there watching us lovingly from above. Her very teachings, when examined today, seem very modern.

She taught human equality regardless of sex, race or status, the very things we've fought so hard to regain in the twentieth century. She taught that religion and science can work together and that neither should be rejected in favour of the other, yet the war between the Church and those who would seek knowledge has raged for centuries. She taught that sex is beautiful and holy, not shameful and sinful. Her ancient statues were often naked, almost always topless, which shows us that the form is beautiful, not shameful. Almost all of the things we now think of a liberal and modern ways of thinking were her own, taught by her religion over two thousand years ago.

Perhaps it is time to look at her in more detail, to see what her religion has to offer us now at the beginning of the new millennium. When people adopted Isis as their Goddess they did so willingly, freely coming to her with love. Tyranny is an offence to her and I am certain that she wept as the Christian Church interrogated, slaughtered and murdered millions of her children in the name of a God who proclaimed peace. Perhaps our modern ways are really ancient ways. Perhaps now is the time to consider Isis Creatrix as Isidi Invicte.

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