

# Section 10 – Roman Christianity

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Judaism was the product, like all religions, of the society that invented it. In this case the society was small, insular, isolated, poor, weak, extremely socially conservative and constantly threatened by vastly more powerful and acquisitive cultures all around it. It would be difficult to think of a greater contrast with Rome in the early centuries CE, which was expansionist, cultured, cosmopolitan, confident and the most economically and militarily powerful civilisation for thousands of miles. Judea suffered from fear and weakness, which made it put all its faith in one warrior god. Romans were highly religious and superstitious, but Rome was far from powerless, and its culture was built on the exploits and examples of god-like warrior kings like Alexander, and more recently the Caesars.

The initial success of Christianity was due largely to the popular appeal that is integral to the faith because of its roots in Goddess culture. Within the extreme form of the patriarchy that existed in the first century CE, its message fell on fertile ground. Paul the Apostle brought the new religion into the Hellenistic milieu of the eastern Mediterranean, and here it took firm root. However, in practical terms, Christianity became the dominating world religion that it did for another, much more pragmatic, reason altogether.

The Roman Empire was fuelled by expansion. It needed to conquer new lands and peoples, for the spoils were what kept the Roman people happy, so conquest was never far from an emperor's thoughts. It was the Empire's custom to reward loyal soldiers with land, but since Roman Law protected land within the Empire, new territories had to be added continually. This is not a sustainable practice, and by the end of the third century CE, two problems had begun to appear. The first was the inevitable result of expansion: lines of communication and supply became longer and more tenuous. Armies marched for hundreds of miles to reach their destinations and on the way they consumed vast amounts of food. While Roman armies could, and did, simply help themselves to supplies from the peoples they were conquering, they could not do this within the Empire. Food and replacement clothing, animals and things as mundane as boots had to be transported to them and paid for. Even though Roman commanders were able to make strategic decisions without reference to political control, as demonstrated by Julius Caesar during his war in Gaul, the greatly extended lines of communication rendered the Empire vulnerable.

The second problem, which made the first worse, was that the Romans began to encounter other acquisitive cultures, which in turn invaded Rome for plunder or to take territory. The Empire promised protection to those whom it had conquered, and this meant that responsive measures had to be taken, and quickly, to defend Imperial assets far from Rome.

Roman expansion halted, and the Empire began to contract. At the same time, internal stresses began to appear. These erupted in the Crisis of the Third Century, during which the Roman Empire split into competing states: the Gallic Empire in the far West, centred on Gaul and Roman Britain, the Roman Empire proper, and the Palmyrene Empire in the east.

While this was a short-lived arrangement that was ended militarily by Aurelian, it had lasting consequences. In 284 CE, Diocletian consolidated the fractured Empire into two, the Western Empire, which was initially ruled from Rome and the Eastern, ruled from Byzantium, modern Istanbul. However, the volatility of Gaul and the Celtic west had been demonstrated and could not be ignored. Gaul was the breadbasket of the Western Empire, and its allegiance was vital.

After such recent violent schism, there was a call for a state religion that could unite the Empire politically, spiritually and morally. Rome had, for hundreds of years, incorporated deities and cults from all over its conquered territories to add to a basic Hellenistic pantheon. After the consolidation of the Empire into West and East, Romans began to search for unity in religion.

The cult of Sol Invictus was made the official Imperial religion by Aurelian in 274 CE.<sup>1</sup> Although it was the state religion, it was not compulsory, and many Romans continued to worship older deities. Despite this, we must wonder why Sol Invictus was replaced. After all, had it not been, it is likely that billions of people across the globe would now be following it and worshipping the sun.

We have no records of Constantine's deliberations before he adopted Christianity and replaced Sol Invictus with it, although the circumstances he was in are well known. The Empire was fading and menaced by adversaries, and had recently split in a cathartic schism that had only been resolved by diverting military resources that were badly needed elsewhere. At the heart of that schism had been Gaul, along with Britain and Spain. This was the world of the Celts – the Goddess-worshippers.

Gaul was indispensable; its rich, broad farmlands were incredibly productive and vital to the Western Empire. The Gauls had been hard to conquer and doing so had entrained decades of civil war in Rome. They had re-asserted their independence during the brief Gallic Empire, and this must have weighed on Constantine's mind. Strategically, Gaul was a corridor made up of the Rhine and Rhone valleys, through which invading armies, having crossed the German plain, could reach the Mediterranean and threaten Rome itself. Constantine could not afford to lose Gaul; its protection and retention at the heart of the empire were essential. The Gauls and the other Celtic peoples had to remain bound into the family of Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, Alaric. *Aurelian and the Third Century*. Routledge. 2003.

Adopting a new religion that satisfied the Gauls would be one way to assure this. In doing so, in offering an olive branch of appeasement and showing them how important they were to the Empire, Constantine would have followed well-established tradition. Gaius Julius Caesar had made Gaulish nobles senators of Rome, much to the outrage of many Patricians, and his heir, Augustus, carried out programmes of public works in Gaul, notably at the new city of Augustodunum.<sup>2</sup>

Finding a religion that would fulfil Constantine's aims had a major obstacle. The Celts were resolute in their devotion to the Goddess. Any attempt to remove her would have provoked outrage, political turmoil and possibly insurrection, threatening not only the essential supplies of grain but also the integrity of the Empire. On the other hand, imposing the Goddess on the other, more patriarchal peoples would have been equally divisive, and might have been rejected. In short, Constantine needed a patriarchal cult centred on a male deity, which retained a core of Goddess theology, a widespread popular appeal and a hierarchical structure that would match Rome's.

Christianity had all of these elements. Its structure had been established by Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul the Apostle, who used the hierarchy of the Empire as his model. Paul was a Hellenised Jew, a tax collector for Rome, so he was intimately familiar with its pyramidal command structure. Paul's quasi-militaristic hierarchy, with priests, bishops, and archbishops, each level with increasing authority and responsibility, meant that the Catholic Church dovetailed seamlessly with the Empire's military and civil structures. The religious authorities could be slipstreamed into the temporal bureaucracy. Christianity was a patriarchal religion, but it was built around a core of Goddess theology. It would require little alteration to accommodate the Gauls.

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<sup>2</sup> Modern Autun in France.