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# TITUS AND OTHER JESUS MISSIONARIES ON CRETE: ENCOUNTERING THE LEGACY OF THE GODDESS

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## ***Abstract***

*Examining Titus as an example of an early missionary of the Jesus movement can help us learn more about that movement on Crete. Crete, as home to a peaceful goddess-centered civilization dating to the Neolithic era, offers an important perspective on the social and religious background behind the New Testament (NT) texts; the goddess and god cults that existed in the early Roman Imperial era would have been encountered by the early Jesus followers and belie the traditional narrative that polytheists were automatically attracted to the new movement. Reliance on archaeological evidence in conjunction with texts has only recently been explored in NT scholarship, but examining Titus from this perspective shows that veneration of ancient deities, especially goddesses, and the involvement of women remained strong and viable for centuries. This perspective paints a truer picture of the ancient environment and the trajectory of Christian growth.*

**Keywords:** St. Titus, St. Paul, early church, Judaism, Jesus movement, Pastoral Epistles, Crete, Greece, Roman Empire, Graeco-Roman religion

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## INTRODUCTION

“I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order  
what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town,  
as I directed you” (Titus 1:5 NRSV)

Titus – known from several passages in the New (Christian) Testament (NT) and the letter in his name – traveled widely on behalf of the nascent Jesus movement. The main locale with which he is associated is the island of Crete, mentioned in Acts 27 and Titus 1; in Christian lore, Titus is known as the island’s first bishop. There is almost no NT scholarship examining in detail the Graeco-Roman cults that Titus, his contemporaries and his immediate successors would have encountered. Rather, Christian tradition exalts Titus, other Jesus followers and the mainline church as the rightful winners in the conflicts with traditional deities. The Orthodox Church of Crete, for example, asserts that “Christianity encountered strong resistance from the Nations [Graeco-Roman groups] on Crete. During Emperor Decius’ persecution (249-251 A.D.) a group of ten Christian men suffered martyrdom; they are the Ten Callinica Holy Martyrs of Crete, and the glory of the island.”<sup>1</sup>

While traditional Christian history, based on NT texts, promotes the ministry of Titus and other men of the movement that worshiped a male God and the man Jesus, called the Christ, the rich archaeological record – and several often-overlooked NT passages – enlarges our understanding of the island’s heritage into the arena of female deities and women. The record from the Bronze Age includes remains from the temple complexes at Knossos, Phaestos and Mallia that have become very well known since the efforts of famed archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans in the early 20th century.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological finds also include circular and vaulted tombs and the jewels, sealstones and votive offerings buried in them, all of which testify to the worship of a powerful female deity.<sup>3</sup> Even earlier finds from the Neolithic era, which are less well known to the general public, demonstrate the longevity not only of the veneration of a goddess but also how that veneration created a vibrant, peaceful civilization for thousands of years and a generally high regard for women, including women in leadership roles.<sup>4</sup>

Prehistoric remains on Crete would not have been present during the Roman Empire due to widespread destruction by an earthquake around 1450 BCE,<sup>5</sup> which begs the question: what can we actually know from the archaeological record centuries later when the Jesus movement took hold? Which Graeco-Roman deities were prominent? Did a goddess cult still attract devotees who would have interacted with members of the Jesus groups? Did women hold leadership roles in the Graeco-Roman cults, and if so, how did that situation impact leadership in the Jesus groups?

Examination of the polytheistic environment in Cretan locales visited by the early Jesus missionaries expands our knowledge of what became the Christian church. Examining especially the roles of female deities and leaders in these locales is important to complement the traditional narrative of primarily male leadership and membership as Christianity grew. The Jesus movement of the Roman Imperial era was diverse and vibrant, which is well illustrated and revealing when both textual and archaeological evidence is utilized.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://orthodoxcrete.com/en/the-church-of-crete/>, accessed March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> While Evans designated these buildings as palaces, the term “palace” is incorrect according to more recent studies. It is more accurate to consider these complexes to be “religious-administrative-economic complexes,” thus more properly termed “temple complexes” (Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, edited and supplemented by Miriam Robbins Dexter [Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999; first paperback printing, 2001], 134).

<sup>3</sup> John Bowman, *A Guide to Crete* (London: Pantheon Books, 1962), 72-74. See also Nanno Marinatos, *Minoan Religion: Ritual, Image, and Symbol* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 147-66.

<sup>4</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, ed. Joan Marler (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991) 342-46.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Crete/Government-and-society>, accessed March 2023.



## WHO WAS TITUS?

We can glean information about Titus from several NT passages. The most trustworthy are those from the authentic Pauline letters, written between 50 and 60 CE: Galatians 2:1ff and several examples from 2 Corinthians: 2:13; 7:6-7, 13-15; 8:1-6, 16-23; and 12:18.<sup>6</sup> Less reliable are references from two of the so-called Pastoral Epistles – 2 Timothy 4:10 and the Letter to Titus – and from Acts of the Apostles, but respected scholarship can still aid us in gleaning important information.

In Galatians 2:1ff, Paul relates that, after 14 years, he went again to Jerusalem, accompanied by Barnabas and Titus.<sup>7</sup> These verses refer to the controversy between Jesus missionaries who wanted to convert Jews versus those, like Paul, who felt called to minister to non-Jews. Paul notes that Titus “was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.”<sup>8</sup> The passage goes on to relate that Cephas (Peter), a pillar of the early movement who had agreed to allow Paul to preach to non-Jews, joined Paul in Antioch but became a hypocrite by stopping to eat with Gentiles “for fear of the circumcision faction.” This led to Barnabas venturing in a different direction than Paul (it is not clear from Paul’s authentic letters and the accounts in Acts what the nature of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas actually was later, although the relationship seems positive in 1 Cor 9:5-6).

Paul also refers to Titus in 2 Corinthians 2, 7 and 8. Scholars have determined that 2 Corinthians is a letter comprised of several letters written by Paul, which causes some of the narrative to be disconnected and sometimes confusing.<sup>9</sup> However, information can still be teased out. In 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, Paul travels to Troas in Asia Minor to proclaim the Jesus message. However, he is disturbed because Titus is not present, so he departs and travels to Macedonia. There, Paul takes great comfort from the work of Jesus followers in those communities and, in addition, from “the joy of Titus, because his mind has been set at rest by all of you” (2 Cor 7:5-16 NRSV). Paul indicates that he has boasted about Titus in the past, that Titus in turn was gladdened by the Macedonians’ obedience and that they “welcomed him with fear and trembling.”

2 Corinthians 8 and 9 – which are most likely two separate letters to two different regions in Achaia<sup>10</sup> – focus on the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, which is significant in the history of the Jesus movement and in relation to Titus’ role. Paul writes to the Macedonian Jesus groups about the grace of God, a “severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty [that] have overflowed in a wealth of generosity” (2 Cor 8:1-6 NRSV). They had given generously to the poor in Jerusalem; Titus had already begun this important collection task and was now completing it.

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<sup>6</sup> The dates of documents that inform our knowledge of the early Jesus movement and Christianity are crucial. Dates have been determined by decades of work by experts in the fields of classical literature, linguistics, Graeco-Roman history, archaeology and so on. Dating makes an enormous difference not only in theological perspective but also, for instance, in how women were viewed and what their roles were. Scholarly research has determined which letters attributed to Paul are authentic and which are not. See, for instance, Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Reading Real Women Through the Undisputed Letters of Paul,” in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 199-220; and L. Michael White, *From Jesus to Christianity* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004), 143-68. See also <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>, accessed November 1, 2023; and John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004), 105-06.

<sup>7</sup> It is unclear as to the date from which the 14 years is understood. See Shaye J.D.Cohen, “The Letter of Paul to the Galatians,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011), 335.

<sup>8</sup> The word “Greek,” “Hellene,” means a non-Jew, a Gentile or a polytheist (<https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/hellen>, accessed March 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Alan J. Avery-Peck, “The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians,” in Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 315.

<sup>10</sup> Avery-Peck, “Second Letter,” 325.



In verses 16-23 of 2 Corinthians 8, Paul rejoices in Titus' eagerness for those Jesus followers, praising them for not only accepting Paul's appeal but taking added initiative with the Macedonians. Paul refers to another "brother" in the ministry whom he is sending to them, then mentions Titus again as "my partner and co-worker in your service."<sup>11</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul relates his own mystical experiences, how he has asked God to remove his physical impediment, how he boasts of his weaknesses "so that the power of Christ may dwell in" him, and how he is planning a third visit to the Corinthians. Paul mentions Titus again, in verse 18, saying, "I urged Titus to go [to oversee the collection], and sent the brother with him."<sup>12</sup> Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?"

When we seek information about Titus from the Pastoral Letters/Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and Acts of the Apostles, we must consider recent scholarship about the authorship and dates of these works. Most mainstream scholars date the Pastorals to between the late first century and 100-150 CE,<sup>13</sup> based on external and internal evidence – long after Paul's death around 64 CE.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Acts, which is the second of a two-volume work by Luke (author of the Gospel by that name) that describes the Jesus movement in its early decades, there has long been debate not only about its date but also its historical reliability and genre. Despite familiarity with such things as authentic place names, "in several instances the information presented in Acts contradicts what we know from other sources, including the letters of Paul." Furthermore, "[w]hatever historical information may be present in Acts, the selection of events, their ordering, the content of the speeches, and many of the details were determined by the theological and literary interests of the author."<sup>15</sup> The late scholar Richard Pervo, who has produced one of the most comprehensive treatments of the dating of Acts, concluded that the most likely date is 115 CE.<sup>16</sup>

The primary concerns of the three Pastoral Epistles are "the life and rules governing individual Christian communities"<sup>17</sup> and possible differences between Jewish and non-Jewish members of the Jesus communities.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Acts, it "paints an idealized church expanding in an orderly, harmonious fashion, from Jerusalem to Rome and from Jew to

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<sup>11</sup> It is unknown to whom Paul refers by the designation "brother."

<sup>12</sup> This appears to be a different "brother" from the one mentioned in 2 Cor 8:18, which suggests that Titus was accompanied by two male Jesus missionaries. See Avery-Peck, "Second Letter," 330.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>, accessed November 1, 2023. J.C. Beker, "Pastoral letters, The" in George Arthur Buttrick, Dictionary Editor, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, 668-75 (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), summarized the scholarship up to that point and maintained, first, that "the vocabulary [of the letters] stands ... decisively against Pauline authorship" and "It seems impossible to fit the situation which the Pastorals describe anywhere in the life of Paul as described in Acts [of the Apostles] and the Pauline letters" (670). Beker, relying on "the great majority of scholars," dated the Pastorals to the early second century (671). Three decades later, Robert J. Karris, OFM, "Pastoral letters, The," in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 573-76 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), came to similar conclusions. He too summarized prevailing theories about authorship and concluded that the Pastorals date from approximately 85 CE: the letters were written under the name of Paul but after his death. See also Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 105-06.

<sup>14</sup> Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 401.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Gilbert, "Acts of the Apostles," in Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 197. Gilbert dates Acts to the early second century.

<sup>16</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006), 346. Pervo debates many scholars in the more traditional, and often evangelical, strand of scholarship, such as I. Howard Marshall, author of several books on Luke and Acts, who dates both Luke and Acts to ca. 70 CE; see Pervo, 179, 225, 340, 418 n. 162, and 430 n. 142. Pervo agrees with Marshall at 456 n. 215 in a discussion about arguments on behalf of an early date of Acts: "accuracy in detail does not mean historicity." See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/i-howard-marshall-new-testament-scholar-dies-at-81/> (accessed November 8, 2023) about Marshall's primary goals in his scholarship to "reconcile men to God" and to foster a "clear acceptance of the supreme authority of scripture."

<sup>17</sup> Naomi Koltun-Fromm, "The First Letter of Paul to Timothy," in Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 383.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer L. Koosed, "The Letter of Paul to Titus," in Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 397-98. There are theological and other reasons for the composition of these texts, which we cannot explore in depth here.





Gentile. . . Acts replaces an ethnic distinction with a theological distinction that comes to define. . . the new people of God.”<sup>19</sup>

2 Timothy 4:10 indicates that Titus has gone to Dalmatia (modern Croatia), while other missionaries have gone elsewhere. While we do not know how historically accurate this narrative is, we will see below the significance of 2 Timothy 4:19-21 and 1:5 because, among the named male members of the Jesus movement, are the women Priscilla, Claudia, Lois and Eunice.

In addition, 1 Timothy 5:1-6:2 and Titus 2:2-10 are examples of so-called Household Codes that encourage the restriction of women’s roles in the early Jesus groups, a stance quite different from the women who interacted with Paul, as can be seen in Phil 4:2-3, 1 Cor 16:19, Phlm 2, and Rom 16 passim.<sup>20</sup> The Household Codes thus serve as additional evidence for concluding that Titus was not written by Paul.<sup>21</sup>

What can we learn about Titus the Jesus missionary from Titus the letter? Without knowing the epistle’s author, this is not easy to answer. We *can* conclude, from internal and external evidence, that “the Pastorals represent the views of late first- or early second-century Christians who appealed to Paul for their authority.”<sup>22</sup> This period of time in the development of the Jesus movement was more concerned with conformity with the wider culture, so this “corrective mode” of the Pastorals presents “Paul as supporting the status quo” rather than the previous, more non-conformist stances such as erasing distinctions between slaves and freepersons and advocating celibacy.<sup>23</sup>

The primary insights about the man Titus from the epistle to Titus are several:

- Titus had a reputation for being very loyal to the Jesus mission (1:4).
- The stated reason that Paul sent Titus to Crete was for Titus to “appoint elders [presbyteroi] in every town” (1:5).<sup>24</sup> These leaders are admonished to possess certain positive personal attributes.
- The Jesus movement on Crete was probably fairly new, although it is doubtful that it had come about solely due to Paul’s efforts.<sup>25</sup>
- The reputation of the inhabitants of Crete – Cretans – was very negative: rebellious, “liars, vicious brutes, and lazy gluttons” (1:10, 12 NRSV). Here the author is quoting or referring to the sixth-century BCE poet Epimenides.<sup>26</sup>

The controversy around Titus and circumcision (Galatians 2:1ff) has some support from the ancient literary record. Evidence for Judaism on Crete dates from at least the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, written in the late second century BCE,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that there was frequent commerce between the Jewish community, Crete, especially Gortyna, and Judea. 1 Maccabees 15:15-24 relates that Gortyna was apparently one of the recipients of a letter from the Roman consul Lucius to King Ptolemy. The letter requested “our friends and allies,” the Jews, to renew their original alliance and support the high priest Simon, and Lucius demanded extradition for any “traitor” Jews who had taken refuge in the cities that received the letter.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gilbert, “Acts of the Apostles,” 198.

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, “Reading,” 200-11.

<sup>21</sup> See Sarah J. Tanzer, “Older and Younger Women Exhorted,” in Meyers, Craven and Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture*, 494-95.

<sup>22</sup> Koltun-Fromm, “First Letter,” 383.

<sup>23</sup> Koltun-Fromm, “First Letter,” 383.

<sup>24</sup> This is the only canonical reference to a Pauline mission to Crete (Kooosed, “Letter of Paul,” 398).

<sup>25</sup> See discussion in William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 46. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 385-87.

<sup>26</sup> Kooosed, “Letter of Paul,” 399; see also <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Epimenides>, accessed March 2023.

<sup>27</sup> William H. Brownlee, “Maccabees, Books of” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Buttrick, Vol. 3, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78-79.





As is the case with many saints and martyrs of the early church, tradition has added information that can often be inspiring but may not be historical in the modern sense of the word. Some Christian denominations that venerate Titus offer details about his early life, ministry, old age, death and even the disposition of his mortal remains.

According to Urho the Way, associated with the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, (Saint) Titus, from a polytheistic family from Crete, studied Hellenistic philosophy and did not engage in Graeco-Roman cultic activities. This hagiography claims that Titus, beginning to doubt what he had learned from his early studies, heard Jesus in person in Jerusalem, became a follower, and witnessed the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The narrative further asserts that Titus was baptized by Paul, later became his secretary and may have been his “interpreter.” In Corinth, Titus was credited with important administrative capabilities to resolve the issues there. Before Paul left Crete after working on the island with Titus, Paul ostensibly ordained Titus and appointed him as bishop. Titus’ main responsibilities then included ordaining other priests and bishops.<sup>29</sup> (It should be noted that, according to scholars, “Christians have never taken a purely formal, institutional view of Church offices.”<sup>30</sup> An ordination ceremony in the earliest communities is purportedly found in Acts 14:23, which uses wording similar to that in Titus 1:5-6, but the implication of both passages is that the movement of the Spirit takes precedence over the ceremonial laying-on of hands. There is little direct transition from the charismatic aspects of the Jesus mission to the institutional.)<sup>31</sup>

According to some sources, Titus led the “Church of Crete well into his 90s, overturning paganism and promoting the faith through his prayers and preaching.” He died peacefully in old age.<sup>32</sup> The lore also reports on Titus’ mortal remains. They were entombed in the cathedral of Gortyna, and his relics were moved to Venice during the Turkish occupation. Now, however, only his skull remains; since 1966, it has been kept in veneration in the Church of St. Titus at Heraklion.<sup>33</sup> Titus’ feast day in the Syrian Orthodox Church is August 25.<sup>34</sup> In the Episcopal Church<sup>35</sup> and the Roman Catholic Church, Titus and Timothy are celebrated together on January 26.<sup>36</sup> While we know little about Titus from actual historical sources, his life and works are held in high regard by many Christians today.

#### GODDESS HERITAGE ON CRETE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND OTHER EVIDENCE

Our interest in Crete originates with the ministry of Titus there as mentioned in the NT texts. The passages that specifically mention Crete and Cretans are Acts 27:7, 8, 12, 13, and 21 and Titus 1:5, 12. As we have noted, both Acts and Titus contain elements that do not reflect historical reality, but they do demonstrate ancient writers’ interest in the island and its inhabitants. We have treated the Titus passages above. Those in Acts 27 are basically passing references in Luke’s story of the early Jesus movement.

Here we will turn our attention to a broader picture of Crete, starting with an overview of prehistoric Crete and its goddess-oriented legacy. We will also note references to Crete from literature and mythology that would have been familiar to those who lived in the first few centuries CE; and we will examine archaeological evidence from the Roman

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<sup>29</sup> Urho, The Way, “St. Titus,” August 2020, <https://urhotheway.com/2020/08/25/st-titus/> (accessed March 2023). This assertion may originate with the church historian Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.4, “We may for instance Timothy, stated to have been the first bishop appointed to the see of Ephesus, as was Titus to the churches of Crete” (G.A. Williamson, tr., *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House], 109). Note that Ti 1:5 does not support the assertion that Paul ordained Titus as Bishop of Crete (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 387).

<sup>30</sup> Pervo, *Dating Acts*, 214.

<sup>31</sup> Pervo, *Dating Acts*, 214-15.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/sts-timothy-and-titus-128>, accessed March 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Urho, The Way, “St. Titus,” August 2020, <https://urhotheway.com/2020/08/25/st-titus/> (accessed March 2023).

<sup>34</sup> Urho, The Way, “St. Titus;” see also James Moffatt, “Titus, Saint,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 22 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1963), 260.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/titus/>, accessed March 2023.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/sts-timothy-and-titus-128>, accessed March 2023. See also “Titus, St.,” in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), 1381-82.



Imperial era. As we shall see, the legacy of female deities and women's involvement, even leadership, in Graeco-Roman cults is ancient, persistent and significant for the history of the Jesus movement and early Christianity.

Crete is well-known in modern times for its association with the so-called Minoan civilization of the Bronze Age, the work of famed archaeologist Sir Arthur John Evans (1851-1941),<sup>37</sup> the temple complexes of Knossos, Phaistos and Mallia, and the island's striking sculpture, frescoes, pottery, jewelry, and metalwork. While the association between Crete and King Minos is spurious – invented primarily by Evans – the archeological record from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages points clearly toward the prominence of both women and goddesses in art of the so-called Neopalatial period on Crete,<sup>38</sup> which suggests that women may well have dominated the society, perhaps even politically.<sup>39</sup>

While it is somewhat difficult to reconstruct Minoan religion from the available evidence and without documentary sources,<sup>40</sup> some scholars have been able to draw compelling theories from what *is* available. Nanno Marinatos, for instance, writing at approximately the same time as the late archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who worked extensively with Cretan evidence, explores goddesses and gods on Crete at some length. Examining a large selection of finds, Marinatos cites evidence for a goddess or goddesses linked to vegetation, animals, trees, mountains, birds, snakes, lions, monkeys, and even imaginary griffins. She declares, "The iconography of the female Minoan deity points unambiguously to a concept of primary importance: a nurturing goddess of nature."<sup>41</sup>

Marinatos also cites evidence for male gods, although these examples are far fewer than those for goddesses. Marinatos states that the role of female deities in this culture was to feed or tend animals, and the role of the male god was to control the beasts and nature as a whole.<sup>42</sup>

Gimbutas came to similar – perhaps even more evocative – conclusions in the 1980s. Postulating a vibrant, peaceful civilization that was focused on an all-powerful nature goddess,<sup>43</sup> Gimbutas further described this culture as based on a matrilineal structure through which the goddess and her council guided the life of a community through "the role of an honored elder, the great clan mother, who was assisted by a council of women." The queen-priestess presided over agriculture and religious life, while the male figure – a priest or consort figure – had control over craft organization, trade and other aspects of communal life. Significantly, neither the female nor male figures had dominating control; "they seem to have functioned as collective entities, not as autocracies."<sup>44</sup> Evidence from clay figurines depicting various aspects of the goddess – the snake, the nourishing mother, and pregnant – has been found on Crete and dates from 5800 to 1600 BCE,<sup>45</sup> demonstrating the longevity of this civilization.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-Evans>, accessed March 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Scholars date this period with slight variations: 1650-1450 BCE, as per Marinatos, *Minoan Religion*, 4, or 1750-1460 BCE as per Stuart W. Manning, "Chronology and Terminology," in Eric H. Cline, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean (ca. 3000-1000 BC)* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14, 23. See also Jeremy B. Rutter of Dartmouth College, <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/aegean-prehistory/lessons/lesson-18-narrative/>, who uses the approximate dates of 1750/1720-1490/1470 BCE (accessed October 2023).

<sup>39</sup> John G. Younger and Paul Rehak, "Minoan Culture: Religion, Burial Customs, and Administration," in Cynthia W. Shelmerdine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 182.

<sup>40</sup> Younger and Rehak, "Minoan Culture," 165, 167.

<sup>41</sup> Marinatos, *Minoan Religion*, 147-66.

<sup>42</sup> Marinatos, *Minoan Religion*, 166-74.

<sup>43</sup> Gimbutas, *Civilization*, 342-46. Significantly, neither Younger and Rehak nor Lupack dialogue with Gimbutas' material on Crete.

<sup>44</sup> Gimbutas, *Civilization*, 344. See also Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1976; rev. ed., Sage Publications, 1992), 216: "There is little evidence of a formal priesthood in this society, although dance leaders may have been priestesses."

<sup>45</sup> See Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), Figures 5, 10 and 11. Further examples can be found in Gimbutas, *Civilization*, 22, 234, 237, 240, and 247.



The ancient goddess, on Crete and throughout Old Europe,<sup>46</sup> was the ancestor to many of the goddesses with which we are familiar from later eras – and this is where we start to see the connection between prehistoric evidence and the environment in which the early Jesus missionaries would have worked. The Linear B tablets, discovered in the early 20th century on Crete and in Mycenaean sites on mainland Greece and translated in 1952, provide clear evidence for the survival of the ancient goddess into the Graeco-Roman era. Along with fairly mundane short lists and inventories, the tablets also contain names of deities that were worshiped in Minoan times and survived much longer: the goddesses Eileithyia, associated with Artemis Eileithyia, who protects women in childbirth; Hera; and Athena; along with male deities such as Zeus, Poseidon, Dionysos, Ares and possibly Apollo.<sup>47</sup> On Crete specifically, two caves still carry the ancient names of Artemis Eileithyia and Dikte (possibly related to the Greek word diktyon, “net,” and another name for the ancient Minoan goddess of regeneration, Diktynna); caves have long been associated with rituals to the prehistoric goddess.<sup>48</sup>

There is a further connection between the temple complex at Knossos and the major goddess that was worshiped there. One of the Mycenaean Linear B tablets contains a reference to a honey offering dedicated to “Our Lady (or Queen) of the Labyrinth,” the goddess whose symbol was the labrys, or double ax,<sup>49</sup> from which the word labyrinth comes. Also found in one of the Knossos tablets is a dedication to a variation of the name of Athena in her death aspect – which is, in effect, also her aspect of regeneration.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the survival of ancient deities into the historical period, as partially attested through their names, people in the Roman Imperial era would have known about Crete and its heritage through mythology. In Greek mythology, stories about Zeus, Europa, Minos, the Minotaur, and Daedalus, as well as songs, tales, ballads and other popular lore concerning Crete, would have been transmitted orally for generations until written down. Many of these remnants would have centered around female deities, demonstrating that Cretans “remained faithful to the Great Mother Goddess in all her manifestations”<sup>51</sup> for millennia.

In addition to mythology, Paul, Titus and other early Jesus followers would have been familiar with traditional writings in which Crete was featured, including the works of Greek historians Thucydides, Diodorus Siculus, and Strabo, famed philosopher Aristotle, and artist Apollodorus, as well as renowned Roman Pliny the Elder and the Egyptian astronomer, mathematician and geographer Ptolemy.<sup>52</sup> Crete – an influential island at the crossroads of commerce and a home to many diverse peoples for centuries – reached its peak around 500 BCE, and its history was marked for several centuries by alliances with various Mediterranean powers, but these references indicate that it was still honored as Roman rule commenced in the first century BCE.<sup>53</sup>

Archaeological evidence can easily be neglected in treatments of NT texts and stories of venerated saints, but Roman-era remains of buildings, artifacts and finds related to the Graeco-Roman cults on Crete are vital to better illustrating the context in which the early Jesus followers lived, worked and worshiped. The remains are not numerous due to modern construction, but those that do exist support in material form the persistence of deities, especially goddesses, whose names, mythology and literary references we have just noted. When Christian tradition asserts that Titus was instrumental in “overturning paganism” on Crete,<sup>54</sup> the evidence compels us to question that claim and its validity.

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<sup>46</sup> Gimbutas has coined the term Old Europe to refer to Neolithic Europe before the Indo-Europeans, approximately the seventh to the third millennia BCE (*Civilization*, vii).

<sup>47</sup> Gimbutas, *Living Goddesses*, 133, 139, 149, 151.

<sup>48</sup> Gimbutas, *Living Goddesses*, 139, 142; Lupack, “Minoan Religion,” 253-54;

<sup>49</sup> Gimbutas, *Living Goddesses*, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Gimbutas, *Living Goddesses*, 144.

<sup>51</sup> Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 82-83.

<sup>52</sup> Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 71-77.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/sts-timothy-and-titus-128>, accessed March 2023.



The major site that has yielded Roman-era finds is the city of Gortyna, mentioned above in conjunction with Judaism on the island. In addition, villas, mosaics, temples, sculptures, aqueducts, roads and brickwork from the Roman and early Byzantine eras can be found throughout the island.<sup>55</sup> (The harbor of Kaloi Limenes/Fair Havens is mentioned in Acts 27:8 but is a modern tourist attraction that has yielded no archaeological finds of note.)

Gortyna (Gortyne) is Crete's largest archaeological site and was "the political center and chief city" in Imperial times. Its population in the second century CE may have been as high as 100,000 inhabitants. The site has yielded remains of the Hellenistic-Roman odeon, the amphitheater, large Roman baths, smaller baths, the praetorium and the Temple of Apollo. The existence of the sixth-century CE Basilica of St. Titus suggests the city's probable focal point of Titus' ministry.<sup>56</sup>

The Great Inscription, which is written on the north wall of the odeon, is a world-renowned law code from around 500 BCE that included rules concerning trade, family law, and personal rights. Because many Greek cities "based much of their own law systems" on the code, and because the odeon was built in the first century CE,<sup>57</sup> early Jesus missionaries would no doubt have known about it.

The Temple of Apollo, which should more precisely be called the Temple of Pythian Apollo,<sup>58</sup> due to the discovery of a colossal statue of Apollo Pythios in its ruins, was highly significant well into the Byzantine era, having originally been built in the seventh century BCE and restored and enlarged during the Hellenistic period. Further changes were made during the Roman period, and many inscriptions with administrative and law content have been found dating as late as the second century CE. From this evidence, we know that the Apollo cult was still active during and after the time of the early Jesus movement.

The most famous Apollo sanctuary in antiquity was at Delphi on the Greek mainland. It would have been widely known throughout antiquity that the primary religious figure there was the Pythia, a female oracle or priestess who was frequently consulted for advice on wars and political situations. This influential woman who served in the position at any given time – "over 50 who lived apart from her husband and dressed in a maiden's clothes" – first belonged to Mother Earth/Gaia.<sup>59</sup> Even though the myth of Apollo later indicated that he had overcome (perhaps even killed) the Pythia,<sup>60</sup> the impressive natural setting of the sanctuary at Delphi reflected "the might of the natural world and of its goddess" for centuries. It is likely that Greeks throughout the ages believed that the Olympian gods such as Apollo would never fully conquer centuries-old female-oriented power.<sup>61</sup>

The prophetic gifts of the priestesses who served as the Pythia eventually subsided, especially after the capture of Delphi by Rome in the early second century BCE. Since the prophecy of the priestess who served last was said to have been delivered around 393 CE during the reign of Emperor Theodosius I, her reputation and close connection with Apollo would have endured into the Christian era.<sup>62</sup> Thus the long association between a significant female religious figure in the Apollo cult – not only at Delphi but also at Gortyna and elsewhere – would have been familiar to Paul, Titus, and other early Jesus followers. What may be further confirmation of this connection is the existence of an oracle of Apollo near Samaria, Crete. The nearby Gorge had much to do with the connection between nature and the female side of life; visitors to this, the largest true gorge in Europe forged by thousands of years of downpours, have described with awe their visit "like some descent into the underworld or back into some past" age.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 77.

<sup>56</sup> Fant and Reddish, *Guide to Biblical Sites*, 78. See also Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 118.

<sup>57</sup> Fant and Reddish, *Guide to Biblical Sites*, 79.

<sup>58</sup> Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 118.

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Delphic-oracle>, accessed May 2023.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Apollo-Greek-mythology>, accessed May 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods*, revised ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979; first printed 1962), 108.

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Delphic-oracle>, accessed May 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 179-80.



Most significant at Gortyna for our purposes are the second-century CE ruins of the Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods – Isis and Serapis.<sup>64</sup> The Egyptian goddess Isis was a relatively new deity in the Empire, often worshiped along with her husband/brother Osiris/Serapis and their son Horus/Harpocrates. Isis became popular throughout the Empire after her introduction in the Hellenistic era, in large part because her cult addressed the personal needs of her devotees, such as personal safety and security, other challenges of everyday life, and what happens after death.<sup>65</sup> Further, Isis was a healing deity linked to women and children,<sup>66</sup> making her quite attractive to many Cretans whom the Jesus missionaries, even long after the time of Paul and Titus, would have encountered.

The activity in these religious buildings of the Imperial era and for several centuries thereafter would have included the leadership of women. The high level of female involvement and leadership in ancient cults, especially among women of elite families, has become widely documented over the past several decades. Women were primary to the centers of power and influence; their involvement in public and private rites throughout the Mediterranean region is reflected in the large number of festivals on cities' calendars and the festivals' significance for the entire citizen body. Because many offices available to women were highly prestigious, especially in Greece,<sup>67</sup> the prevalence of female leaders on Crete and elsewhere must be fully acknowledged when discussing the context in which Paul, Titus and other male Jesus missionaries operated.<sup>68</sup>

The persistence of the worship of Graeco-Roman deities into the first several centuries CE does not automatically signal conflict between polytheists and early Christians, nor does it mean that devotees of other deities were immediately attracted to the missionaries' message. Rather, it encourages us to better understand the nuances of "conversion" to the Jesus message, why some polytheists may have retained their involvement with traditional cults while others may have been attracted to the Jesus movement, and how the role of women may have influenced their decisions.

#### TITUS AND WOMEN LEADERS IN THE EARLY IMPERIAL ERA

Toward the end of 2 Timothy (4:19, 21), two women in the Jesus movement are mentioned: Priscilla (always mentioned in the NT with her husband, Aquila) and Claudia. Two other women, Lois and Eunice, mentioned in 2 Timothy 1:5, are noted by name or relationship along with male missionaries in the Pastorals (1 Tm 1:20, 2 Tm 1:16, 4:10-14, and 19-21, and Ti 3:12-13). Even though 1 Timothy 2:8-15 contains this restrictive admonition – "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (NRSV) – the women mentioned in these post-Pauline letters point in the direction of female involvement, if not also leadership, in the early Jesus movement, along with men.

Priscilla is one of the best-known female figures in the Pauline corpus and the early Jesus group story. She and her husband Aquila, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:19, 2 Timothy 4:19 and Acts 18, were probably a missionary pair and worked as tentmakers. Forced to leave Rome because of Emperor Claudius' edict expelling all Jews (49 CE), they moved back to Rome after 54 CE when the edict was lifted. Although Paul wrote to them at Rome, they had already been active as missionaries in the Jesus movement before Paul met them in Corinth. Their roles would have included preaching, teaching, and presiding.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Fant and Reddish, *Guide to Biblical Sites*, 79, and Bowman, *Guide to Crete*, 118.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth A. McCabe, *An Examination of the Isis Cult with Preliminary Exploration into New Testament Studies* (Lanham/Boulder/New York: University Press of America, 2008), 55-56.

<sup>66</sup> Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice* (Uppsala: Coniectanea Biblica; New Testament Series 20, 1988), 81-82, 117-19.

<sup>67</sup> Valerie Abrahamsen, "Priestesses and Other Female Cult Leaders at Philippi in the Early Christian Era," in *The People beside Paul: The Philippian Assembly and History from Below*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 37-39. See also Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3-10.

<sup>68</sup> "The appearance of women in leadership roles should not be seen as unique in ancient society. Rather, early Christian women acted in ways that were in keeping with the leadership of women in other communities in the Roman imperial world" (MacDonald, "Reading," 218).

<sup>69</sup> Julette M. Bassler, "Prisca/Priscilla," in Meyers, Craven and Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture*, 136-37.



At Rome, Priscilla and Aquila hosted gatherings of Jesus followers in their house that would have included slaves, freedmen, freedwomen, workers and others, with the leader almost certainly being Priscilla, since she is listed first several times in the texts. The couple was probably relatively well off and may have been patrons or benefactors of Paul. In short, Priscilla was “a very important, well-traveled missionary and church leader whose work on occasion intersected with that of Paul.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, while there is no direct connection between Priscilla and Titus, her appearance in one of the Pastoral Letters provides evidence for women’s leadership in the early Jesus movement that parallels what we know from the authentic Pauline letters, archaeology and other sources.

The figure of Claudia is included in a short list of other Jesus missionaries – Eubulus, Pudens, and Linus – who send greetings to the recipients of 2 Timothy. The fourth-century document, “Apostolic Constitutions,” identifies “Linus as Peter’s successor in Rome and Claudia as his mother.”<sup>71</sup> It is also possible that Claudia is an invention of or someone known to the author of the letter, an unattested member of Paul’s circle, or a compilation of several female missionaries. In 2 Timothy, Claudia is associated in some way with the Pauline mission, although it is not known whether she traveled for the mission, may have owned or lived in a home that hosted other missionaries, and/or who may have provided monetary support. Even if Claudia is fictitious, her mention in 2 Timothy – a letter by an author who otherwise promotes the silencing of women in the Jesus groups (1 Tm 2:9-14) – does suggest a parallel with the significant involvement of women in authentic Pauline communities, as noted above. On the other hand, the absence of any specific roles mentioned for her in the mission may suggest that the author wished to avoid explicitly representing women as the leaders and patrons, as they were in the authentic Pauline epistles<sup>72</sup> (although specific roles are not mentioned for the men either).

Lois and Eunice appear to be familiarly related to Timothy, according to 2 Timothy 1:5: Eunice as his mother and Lois as his grandmother. It is impossible to know whether these women were real or fictitious, since the letter was written and circulated one or two generations after the time of Timothy and Paul. We also cannot know for sure about their backgrounds. Acts 16:1-3, which might also be fictitious, implies that Eunice was Jewish and his father a polytheist, while 2 Timothy 3:15 mentions “sacred writings,” which could be Jewish or Christian. It was not unusual in ancient Jewish and Christian writings to assign names to unnamed but venerated figures, so the names Eunice and Lois may have been added to Timothy’s biography for the sake of the narrative.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, because these women, who possessed “sincere faith,” is contrasted with “little” or “silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires” (2 Tm 3:6 NRSV), the emphasis on their characterization as devout mothers would fit more comfortably with the author’s preference that women perform traditional as opposed to leadership roles: the other letter by the same author forbids women to teach or have authority over men (1 Tm 2:9-14).<sup>74</sup>

The mention of Priscilla, Claudia, Lois and Eunice in “sister” letters of Titus strongly suggests that Titus too would have encountered, known and worked with female missionaries, women leaders, and women who helped train his male co-workers from youth. What we are witnessing, of course, is the beginning even at this early stage in the movement of the attempt to restrict women’s roles in some circles – from Priscilla and Claudia as leaders to Lois and Eunice in maternal roles.

What these examples lead us to consider is the general context of women in the Graeco-Roman cults on Crete during the early Imperial era; even if the restriction of women’s roles in the early Jesus groups is reflected in the Pastoral Letters to some extent, and even if that trend were ultimately victorious in what became the mainline church, women did

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<sup>70</sup> Bassler, “Prisca/Priscilla,” 136-37.

<sup>71</sup> Tal Ilan, “The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy,” in Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 396.

<sup>72</sup> Ross S. Kraemer, “Claudia,” in Meyers, Craven and Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture*, 63.

<sup>73</sup> Ross S. Kraemer, “Eunice,” in Meyers, Craven and Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture*, 78; and Ross S. Kraemer, “Lois,” in Meyers, Craven and Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture*, 109-10.

<sup>74</sup> Kraemer, “Eunice,” 78, and “Lois,” 110.





continue to be involved and exercise authority in early Christianity and polytheism for centuries. As Ramsey MacMullen asserted in a 1996 article, paganism was extremely hard to kill.<sup>75</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Christian tradition has promoted the powerful, dominant narrative in the West that the movement begun by Jesus, Paul, Titus and others was the “true religion” and victorious within the first few decades over Graeco-Roman deities and their cults. Examining reliable archaeological evidence from the earliest years of what ultimately became Christianity, in conjunction with texts, literature and mythology, provides us with facts that enable us to question traditional assumptions. Cults to gods and goddesses survived for millennia for a reason: they met everyday people’s needs. Neither these cults nor their adherents were necessarily immoral, corrupt, or evil, as promulgated by many Christian apologists. Trade and travel allowed new belief systems, practices and rituals to enter a community and take root; people added deities to their religious repertoire when the newcomers were attractive. The polytheism of the ancient world, originating in prehistoric times when a powerful nature goddess ruled, enabled dozens of cults in any given city or colony to coexist in harmony.

Women and goddesses were an integral and essential part of the ancient environment, and that fact leads to several reasonable conclusions. First, female objects of devotion were common in the Roman Imperial era and highly respected in many circles. Second, polytheistic women would probably not have been attracted to the Jesus movement if they had been excluded from its leadership roles. Third, male and female worshippers of the traditional deities would not have automatically been drawn to the religion of Paul, Titus and others unless their various needs were met by the new cult. Finally, any conflicts between groups may well have been relatively muted.

The example of the ministry of Titus on Crete opens many windows into early Christian origins. A deeper knowledge of the people and deities encountered by Titus, his fellow Jesus followers, and their successors helps us not only to better understand why the ancient traditions were so resilient in the face of unrelenting opposition, and even violence, but also to correct the record.

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<sup>75</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, “Paganism – Hard to Kill,” *Journal of Higher Criticism*, Vol. 3., No. 1 (Spring 1996) 3-17.





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