

**UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH EVIL AND SUFFERING:
A FOURTH CENTURY A.D. PAGAN PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

People of late antiquity were subjected to the universal and perennial human woes - injustice, affliction, adversity and pain - that cause suffering. The experience of suffering is subjective. There are however, common sources of and expressions of suffering in humans. The fourth century was a period of significant cultural and social changes which drew responses from pagans that not only reflected traditional knowledge but also engaged with new sets of ideas. This thesis examines the problem of evil and suffering as experienced by pagans of the fourth century of the Common Era.

Having received imperial sanction from the emperor Constantine after his conversion in 312, Christianity was gaining momentum in both membership and strength. The Graeco-Roman world had become one where Christianity, it seemed to some, had effectively surpassed pagan state cult. Against this backdrop of religious change, pagans had taken on a self-consciousness that engendered a rethinking of many traditional ways of coping with and explaining the evils of the world and the suffering that could result from them. Some rules and conditions had changed, so how and where could pagans seek explanation for, protection from or alleviation of their suffering? The study addresses this question by posing and responding to further questions. Firstly, how did pagans understand the presence of evil and suffering in the world? Secondly, from what sources, natural or supernatural, could they draw hope in the face of evil and suffering? And thirdly, what degree of autonomy could pagans claim in approaching the problem?

Religion and philosophy might be perceived by pagans to contain the answers to why there was evil and suffering in the world. The addition of science and the occult to religion and philosophy offered further ways through which pagans might seek to deal with the problem. By drawing primarily on extant literary evidence from the period as well as selected material evidence (predominantly pagan, but including some Christian), the research will trace the evolution of ideas regarding evil and suffering that pagan thinkers were bringing to the contemporary debate.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for photocopying and loan.

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