

MITHRA THE PAGAN CHRIST: DID CHRISTIANITY BORROW FROM MITHRAISM?

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Summary

A study of the ancient evidence from the religion of Mithraism, both the Roman version and its root mythos, ritual and tradition from Persia, Armenia and other parts of the Near East and Anatolia, reveals many correspondences with the Christian religion. These parallels were noted in antiquity with great consternation by a number of Christian Church fathers, while others have been discerned since that time, significantly in the works of Mithraic scholar Dr. Franz Cumont and many others.

Going against a modern trend of "anti-Cumontism," this paper seeks to demonstrate that many elements in Roman Mithraism do indeed have their origins in Persian, Armenian and Near Eastern Mithraism and that the aforementioned parallels are not only valid but also possibly one source for many Christian doctrines, motifs and traditions. (Note: For space considerations, this paper does not examine the popular Mithraic subject of the bull-killing or tauroctony, which requires a fuller treatment elsewhere.)

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INTRODUCTION

BECAUSE OF ITS EVIDENT RELATIONSHIP TO CHRISTIANITY, special attention needs to be paid to the Persian/Roman religion of Mithraism. The worship of the Indo-Persian god Mithra dates back centuries to millennia preceding the common era. The god is found as "Mitra" in the Indian Vedic religion, which is over 3,500 years old, by conservative estimates. When the Iranians separated from their Indian brethren, Mitra became known as "Mithra" or "Mihr," as he is also called in Persian.

By around 1500 BCE, Mitra worship had made it to the Near East, in the Indian kingdom of the Mitanni, who at that time occupied Assyria. Mitra worship, however, was known also by that time as far west as the Hittite kingdom, only a few hundred miles east of the Mediterranean, as is evidenced by the Hittite-Mitanni tablets found at Bogaz-Köy in what is now Turkey. The gods of the Mitanni included Mitra, Varuna and Indra, all found in the Vedic texts.

MITHRA AS SUN GOD

The Indian Mitra was essentially a solar deity, representing the "friendly" aspect of the sun. So too was the Persian derivative Mithra, who was a "benevolent god" and the bestower of health, wealth and food. Mithra also seems to have been looked upon as a sort of Prometheus, for the gift of fire.¹ His worship

¹ Schironi, 104.

purified and freed the devotee from sin and disease. Eventually, Mithra became more militant, and he is best known as a warrior.

Like so many gods, Mithra was the light and power behind the sun. In Babylon, Mithra was identified with Shamash, the sun god, and he is also Bel, the Mesopotamian and Canaanite/Phoenician solar deity, who is likewise Marduk, the Babylonian god who represented both the planet Jupiter and the sun. According to Pseudo-Clement of Rome's debate with Appion (*Homily VI*, ch. X), Mithra is also Apollo.

In time, the Persian Mithraism became infused with the more detailed astrotheology of the Babylonians and Chaldeans, and was notable for its astrology and magic; indeed, its priests or *magi* lent their very name to the word "magic." Included in this astrotheological development was the re-emphasis on Mithra's early Indian role as a sun god. As Francis Legge says in *Forerunners and Rivals in Christianity*:

The Vedic Mitra was originally the material sun itself, and the many hundreds of votive inscriptions left by the worshippers of Mithras to "the unconquered Sun Mithras," to the unconquered solar divinity (*numen*) Mithras, to the unconquered Sun-God (*deus*) Mithra, and allusions in them to priests (*sacerdotes*), worshippers (*cultores*), and temples (*templum*) of the same deity leave no doubt open that he was in Roman times a sun-god.²

By the Roman legionnaires, Mithra—or *Mithras*, as he began to be known in the Greco-Roman world—was called "the divine Sun, the Unconquered Sun." He was said to be "Mighty in strength, mighty ruler, greatest king of gods! O Sun, lord of heaven and earth, God of Gods!"³ Mithra was also deemed "the mediator" between heaven and earth, a role often ascribed to the god of the sun.

An inscription by a "T. Flavius Hyginus" dating to around 80 to 100 AD/CE in Rome dedicates an altar to "Sol Invictus Mithras"—"The Unconquered Sun Mithra"—revealing the hybridization reflected in other artifacts and myths. Regarding this title, Dr. Richard L. Gordon, honorary professor of Religionsgeschichte der Antike at the University of Erfurt, Thuringen, remarks:

It is true that one...cult title...of Mithras was, or came to be, Deus Sol Invictus Mithras (but he could also be called... Deus Invictus Sol Mithras, Sol Invictus Mithras...

...Strabo, 15.3.13 (p. 732C), basing his information on a lost work, either by Posidonius (ca 135-51 BC) or by Apollodorus of Artemita (first decades of 1 cent. BC), states baldly that the Western Parthians "call the sun Mithra." *The Roman cult seems to have taken this existing association and developed it in their own special way.*⁴

As concerns Mithra's identity, Mithraic scholar Dr. Roger Beck says:

Mithras...is the prime traveller, the principal actor...on the celestial stage which the tauctony [bull-slaying] defines.... He is who the monuments proclaim him—the Unconquered Sun.⁵

In an early image, Mithra is depicted as a sun disc in a chariot drawn by white horses, another solar motif that made it into the Jesus myth, in which Christ is to return on a white horse. (Rev 6:2; 19:11)

² Legge, 2.240.

³ Legge, 2.266.

⁴ Gordon, "FAQ." (Emph. added.)

⁵ Beck 2004, 274.

MITHRA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Subsequent to the military campaign of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, Mithra became the "favorite deity" of Asia Minor. Christian writers Dr. Samuel Jackson and George W. Gilmore, editors of *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, remark:

It was probably at this period, 250-100 B.C., that the Mithraic system of ritual and doctrine took the form which it afterward retained. Here it came into contact with the mysteries, of which there were many varieties, among which the most notable were those of Cybele.⁶

According to the Roman historian Plutarch (c. 46-120 AD/CE), Mithraism began to be absorbed by the Romans during Pompey's military campaign against Cilician pirates around 70 BCE. The religion eventually migrated from Asia Minor through the soldiers, many of whom had been citizens of the region, into Rome and the far reaches of the Empire. Syrian merchants brought Mithraism to the major cities, such as Alexandria, Rome and Carthage, while captives carried it to the countryside. By the third century AD/CE, Mithraism and its mysteries permeated the Roman Empire and extended from India to Scotland, with abundant monuments in numerous countries amounting to over 420 Mithraic sites so far discovered.

From a number of discoveries, including pottery, inscriptions and temples, we know that Roman Mithraism gained a significant boost and much of its shape between 80 and 120 AD/CE, when the first artifacts of this particular cultus begin to be found at Rome. It reached a peak during the second and third centuries, before largely expiring at the end of the fourth/beginning of fifth centuries. Among its members during this period were emperors, politicians and businessmen. Indeed, before its usurpation by Christianity, Mithraism enjoyed the patronage of some of the most important individuals in the Roman Empire. In the fifth century, the emperor Julian, having rejected his birth-religion of Christianity, adopted Mithraism and "introduced the practise of the worship at Constantinople."⁷

Modern scholarship has gone back and forth as to how much of the original Indo-Persian Mitra-Mithra cultus affected Roman Mithraism, which demonstrates a distinct development but which nonetheless follows a pattern of this earlier solar mythos and ritual. The theory of "continuity" from the Iranian to Roman Mithraism developed famously by scholar Dr. Franz Cumont in the 20th century has been largely rejected by many scholars. Yet, Plutarch himself (*Life of Pompey*, 24) related that followers of Mithras "continue to the present time" the "secret rites" of the Cilician pirates, "having been first instituted by them." So too does the ancient writer Porphyry (234-c. 305 AD/CE) state that the Roman Mithraists themselves believed their religion had been founded by the Persian savior Zoroaster.

In discussing what may have been recounted by ancient writers asserted to have written many volumes about Mithraism, such as Eubulus of Palestine and "a certain Pallas," Dr. Gordon remarks: "Certainly Zoroaster would have figured largely; and so would the Persians and the magi."⁸ It seems that the ancients themselves did not divorce the eastern roots of Mithraism, as exemplified also by the remarks of Dio Cassius, who related that in 66 AD/CE the king of Armenia, Tiridates, visited Rome. Cassius states that the dignitary worshipped Mithra; yet, he does not indicate any distinction between the Armenian's religion and Roman Mithraism.

It is apparent from their testimony that ancient sources perceived Mithraism as having a Persian origin; hence, it would seem that any true picture of the development of Roman Mithraism must include the latter's relationship to the earlier Persian cultus, as well as its Asia Minor and Armenian offshoots. Current scholarship is summarized thus by Dr. Beck:

⁶ *Schaff-Herzog*, 7.420.

⁷ *Schaff-Herzog*, 7.423.

⁸ *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, 2.150.

Since the 1970s, scholars of western Mithraism have generally agreed that Cumont's master narrative of east-west transfer is unsustainable; but...recent trends in the scholarship on Iranian religion, by modifying the picture of that religion prior to the birth of the western mysteries, now render a revised Cumontian scenario of east-west transfer and continuities once again viable.⁹

In his massive anthology, *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Dr. James R. Russell, professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard University, essentially proves that Roman Mithraism had its origins in not only Persian Mithraism and Zoroastrianism but also in Armenian religion, dating back centuries before the common era.

THE MANY FACES OF MITHRA

Mainstream scholarship thus speaks of at least three Mithras: Mitra, the Vedic god; Mithra, the Persian deity; and Mithras, the Greco-Roman mysteries icon. However, the Persian Mithra apparently developed differently in various places, such as in Armenia, where there appeared to be emphasis on characteristics not overtly present in Roman Mithraism but found as motifs within Christianity, including the Virgin Mother Goddess. This Armenian Mithraism is evidently a continuity of the Mithraism of Asia Minor and the Near East. This development of gods taking on different forms, shapes, colors, ethnicities and other attributes according to location, era and so on is not only quite common but also the norm. Therefore, we have hundreds of gods and goddesses who are in many ways interchangeable but who have adopted various differences based on geographical and environmental factors.

MITHRA AND CHRIST

Over the centuries—in fact, from the earliest Christian times—Mithraism has been compared to Christianity, revealing numerous similarities between the two faiths' doctrines and traditions, including as concerns stories of their respective godmen. In developing this analysis, it should be kept in mind that elements from Roman, Armenian and Persian Mithraism are utilized, not as a whole ideology but as separate items that may have affected the creation of Christianity, whether directly through the mechanism of Mithraism or through another Pagan source within the Roman Empire and beyond. The evidence points to these motifs and elements being adopted into Christianity not as a whole from one source but singularly from *many* sources, including Mithraism.

Thus, the following list represents not a solidified mythos or narrative of one particular Mithra or form of the god as developed in one particular culture and era but, rather, a combination of them all for ease of reference as to any possible influences upon Christianity under the name of Mitra/Mithra/Mithras.

Summarizing and simplifying apparent ancient and recurrent themes, and framing them in Christian terms for the lay reader, the following may be said of Mithra, in common with the Jesus character:

- Mithra was born on December 25th of the virgin Anahita.
- The babe was wrapped in swaddling clothes, placed in a manger and attended by shepherds.
- He was considered a great traveling teacher and master.
- He had 12 companions or "disciples."
- He performed miracles.
- As the "great bull of the Sun," Mithra sacrificed himself for world peace.
- He ascended to heaven.
- Mithra was viewed as the Good Shepherd, the "Way, the Truth and the Light," the Redeemer, the Savior, the Messiah.
- Mithra is omniscient, as he "hears all, sees all, knows all: none can deceive him."
- He was identified with both the Lion and the Lamb.
- His sacred day was Sunday, "the Lord's Day," hundreds of years before the appearance of Christ.
- His religion had a eucharist or "Lord's Supper."

⁹ Beck 2004, 28.

- Mithra “sets his marks on the foreheads of his soldiers.”
- Mithraism emphasized baptism.

DECEMBER 25th BIRTHDAY

The similarities between Mithraism and Christianity have included their chapels, the term “father” for priest, celibacy and, it is notoriously claimed, the December 25th birthdate. Over the centuries, apologists contending that Mithraism copied Christianity nevertheless have asserted that the December 25th birthdate was taken *from* Mithraism. As Sir Arthur Weigall says:

December 25th was really the date, not of the birth of Jesus, but of the sun-god Mithra. Horus, son of Isis, however, was in very early times identified with Ra, the Egyptian sun-god, and hence with Mithra...¹⁰

Mithra’s birthday on December 25th has been so widely claimed that the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (“Mithraism”) remarks: “The 25 December was observed as his birthday, the *natalis invicti*, the rebirth of the winter-sun, unconquered by the rigours of the season.”¹¹

Yet this contention of Mithra’s birthday on December 25th or the winter solstice is disputed because there is no hard archaeological or literary evidence of the *Roman* Mithras specifically being named as having been born at that time. Says Dr. Jaime Alvar:

There is no evidence of any kind, not even a hint, from within the cult that this, or any other winter day, was important in the Mithraic calendar.¹²

In analyzing the evidence, we must keep in mind all the destruction that has taken place over the past 2,000 years—including that of *many* Mithraic remains and texts—as well as the fact that several of these germane parallels constituted mysteries that may or may not have been recorded in the first place or the meanings of which have been obscured.

The claim about the Roman Mithras’s birth on “Christmas” is evidently based on the Calendar of Filocalus or Philocalian Calendar (c. 354 AD/CE), which mentions that December 25th represents the “Birthday of the Unconquered,” understood to refer to the sun and taken to indicate Mithras as Sol Invictus. Whether it represents Mithras’s birthday specifically or “merely” that of Emperor Aurelian’s Sol Invictus, with whom Mithras has been identified, the Calendar also lists the day—the winter solstice birth of the sun—as that of *natus Christus in Betleem Judeae*: “Birth of Christ in Bethlehem Judea.”

Moreover, it would seem that there is more to this story, as Aurelian was the first to institute officially the winter solstice as the birthday of Sol Invictus (*Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*) in 274 AD/CE.¹³ It is contended that Aurelian’s move was in response to Mithras’s popularity.¹⁴ One would thus wonder why the emperor would be so motivated if Mithras had nothing whatsoever to do with the sun god’s traditional birthday—a disconnect that would be unusual for *any* solar deity.

Regardless of whether or not the artifacts of the Roman Mithras’s votaries reflect the attribution of the sun god’s birthday to him specifically, many in the empire *did* identify the mysteries icon and Sol Invictus as one, evidenced by the inscriptions of “Sol Invictus Mithras” and the many images of Mithras and the sun together, representing two sides of the same coin or each other’s alter ego. Hence, the placement of

¹⁰ Weigall, 134.

¹¹ *CE*, 3.725.

¹² Alvar, 410.

¹³ Halsberghe, 158.

¹⁴ Restaud, 4.

Mithras's birth on this feast day of the sun is understandable and, despite the lack of concrete evidence at this date, quite plausibly *was* recognized in this manner in antiquity in the Roman Empire.

PERSIAN WINTER FESTIVALS

In addition, it is clear that the ancient peoples from whom Mithraism sprang, long before it was Romanized, were very much involved in winter festivals so common among many other cultures globally. In this regard, discussing the Iranian month of Asiyadaya, which corresponds to November/December, Mithraic scholar Dr. Mary Boyce remarks:

...it is at this time of year that the Zoroastrian festival of Sada takes place, which is not only probably pre-Zoroastrian in origin, but may even go back to proto-Indo-European times. For Sada is a great open-air festival, of a kind celebrated widely among the Indo-European peoples, with the intention of strengthening the heavenly fire, the sun, in its winter decline and febleness. Sun and fire being of profound significance in the Old Iranian religion, this is a festival which one would expect the Medes and Persians to have brought with them into their new lands... Sada is not, however, a feast in honour of the god of Fire, Atar, but is rather for the general strengthening of the creation of fire against the onslaught of winter.¹⁵

This ancient Persian winter festival therefore celebrates the strengthening of the "fire" or sun in the face its winter decline, just as virtually every winter-solstice festivity is intended to do. Yet, as Dr. Boyce says, this "Zoroastrian" winter celebration is likely pre-Zoroastrian and even proto-Indo-European, which means it dates back far into the hoary mists of time, possibly tens of thousands of years ago. And one would indeed expect the Medes and Persians to bring this festival with them into their new lands, including the Near East, where they would eventually encounter Romans, who could hardly have missed this common solar motif celebrated worldwide in numerous ways.

The same may be said as concerns another Persian or Zoroastrian winter celebration called "Yalda," which is the festival of the Longest Night of the Year, taking place on December 20th or the day before the solstice:

Yalda has a history as long as the Mithraism religion. The Mithraists believed that this night is the night of the birth of Mithra, Persian god of light and truth. At the morning of the longest night of the year the Mithra is born from a virgin mother....

In Zoroastrian tradition, the winter solstice with the longest night of the year was an auspicious day, and included customs intended to protect people from misfortune.... The Eve of the Yalda has great significance in the Iranian calendar. It is the eve of the birth of Mithra, the Sun God, who symbolized light, goodness and strength on earth. Shab-e Yalda is a time of joy.

Yalda is a Syriac word meaning birth. Mithra-worshippers used the term "yalda" specifically with reference to the birth of Mithra. As the longest night of the year, the Eve of Yalda (Shab-e Yalda) is also a turning point, after which the days grow longer. In ancient times it symbolized the triumph of the Sun God over the powers of darkness.¹⁶

It is likely that this festival does indeed derive from remote antiquity, and it is evident that the ancient Persians were well aware of the winter solstice and its meaning as found in numerous other cultures: To wit, the annual "rebirth," "renewal" or "resurrection" of the sun.

In the end the effect is the same: "Christmas" is the birth not of the "son of God" but of the *sun*. Indeed, there is much evidence—including many ancient monumental alignments—to demonstrate that this highly noticeable and cherished event of the winter solstice was celebrated beginning hundreds to

¹⁵ Boyce 1982, 24-25.

¹⁶ "Yalda," Wikipedia.

thousands of years before the common era in numerous parts of the world. The observation was thus provably taken over by Christianity, not as biblical doctrine but as a later tradition in order to compete with the Pagan cults, a move we contend occurred with numerous other "Christian" motifs, including many that *are* in the New Testament.

MITHRA THE 'ROCK-BORN'

Mithra's genesis out of a rock, analogous to the birth in caves of a number of gods—including Jesus in the apocryphal, non-canonical texts—was followed by his adoration by shepherds, another motif that found its way into the later Christianity. Regarding the birth in caves likewise common to pre-Christian gods, and present in the early legends of Jesus, Weigall relates:

...the cave shown at Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus was actually a rock shrine in which the god Tammuz or Adonis was worshipped, as the early Christian father Jerome tells us; and its adoption as the scene of the birth of our Lord was one of those frequent instances of the taking over by Christians of a pagan sacred site. The propriety of this appropriation was increased by the fact that the worship of a god in a cave was commonplace in paganism: Apollo, Cybele, Demeter, Herakles, Hermes, Mithra and Poseidon were all adored in caves; Hermes, the Greek *Logos*, being actually born of Maia in a cave, and Mithra being "rock-born."¹⁷

As the "rock-born," Mithras was called "Theos ek Petras," or the "God from the Rock." As Weigall also relates:

Indeed, it may be that the reason of the Vatican hill at Rome being regarded as sacred to Peter, the Christian "Rock," was that it was already sacred to Mithra, for Mithraic remains have been found there.¹⁸

Mithras was "the rock," or *Peter*, and was also "double-faced," like Janus the keyholder, likewise a prototype for the "apostle" Peter. Hence, when Jesus is made to say (in the apparent interpolation at Matthew 16:12) that the keys of the kingdom of heaven are given to "Peter" and that the Church is to be built upon "Peter," as a representative of Rome, he is usurping the authority of Mithraism, which was precisely headquartered on what became Vatican Hill.

By the time the Christian hierarchy prevailed in Rome, Mithra had already been a popular cult, with pope, bishops, etc., and its doctrines were well established and widespread, reflecting a certain antiquity. Mithraic remains on Vatican Hill are found *underneath* the later Christian edifices, a fact that *proves* the Mithra cult was there first. In fact, while Mithraic ruins are abundant throughout the Roman Empire beginning in the late first century AD/CE, the "earliest church remains, found in Dura-Europos, date only from around 230 CE."

THE VIRGIN MOTHER ANAHITA

Unlike various other rock- or cave-born gods, Mithra is not depicted in the Roman cultus as having been given birth by a mortal woman or a goddess; hence, it is claimed that he was not "born of a virgin." However, a number of writers over the centuries have asserted otherwise, including several modern Persian and Armenian scholars who are apparently reflecting an ancient tradition from Near Eastern Mithraism.

For example, Dr. Badi Badiozamani says that a "person" named "Mehr" or Mithra was "born of a virgin named Nahid Anahita ('immaculate') and that "the worship of Mithra and Anahita, the virgin mother of

¹⁷ Weigall, 50.

¹⁸ Weigall, 138.

Mithra, was well-known in the Achaemenian period [558-330 BCE]...¹⁹ Philosophy professor Dr. Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi states: "Dans le mithraïsme, ainsi que le mazdéisme populaire, (A)Nāhīd, mère de Mithra/Mehr, est vierge"—"In Mithraism, as in popular Mazdaism, Anahid, the mother of Mithra, is a virgin."²⁰ Comparing the rock birth with that of the virgin mother, Dr. Amir-Moezzi also says:

...il y a donc analogie entre le rocher, symbole d'incorruptibilité, qui donne naissance au dieu iranien et la mère de celui-ci, Anāhīd, éternellement vierge et jeune.²¹

(...so there is analogy between the rock, a symbol of incorruptibility, giving birth to the Iranian god and the mother of that (same) one, Anahid, eternally virgin and young.)

In *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, Dr. Leroy A. Campbell calls Anahita the "great goddess of virgin purity,"²² and Religious History professor Dr. Claas J. Bleeker says, "In the Avestan religion she is the typical virgin."²³

One modern writer ("Mithraism and Christianity") portrays the Mithra myth thus:

According to Persian mythology, Mithras was born of a virgin given the title "Mother of God."

The Parthian princes of Armenia were all priests of Mithras, and an entire district of this land was dedicated to the Virgin Mother Anahita. Many Mithraeums, or Mithraic temples, were built in Armenia, which remained one of the last strongholds of Mithraism. The largest near-eastern Mithraeum was built in western Persia at Kangavar, dedicated to "Anahita, the Immaculate Virgin Mother of the Lord Mithras."

Anahita, also known as "Anaitis"—whose very name means "Pure" and "Untainted" and who was equated in antiquity with the virgin goddess Artemis—is certainly an Indo-Iranian goddess of some antiquity, dating back at least to the first half of the first millennium prior to the common era and enjoying "widespread popularity" around Asia Minor. Indeed, Anahita has been called "the best known divinity of the Persians" in Asia Minor.²⁴

Moreover, concerning Mithra *Schaff-Herzog* says, "The Achaemenidae worshiped him as making the great triad with Ahura and Anahita."²⁵ Ostensibly, this "triad" was the same as God the Father, the Virgin and Jesus, which would tend to confirm the assertion that Anahita was Mithra's virgin mother. That Anahita was closely associated with Mithra at least five centuries before the common era is evident from the equation made by Herodotus (1.131) in naming "Mitra" as the Persian counterpart of the Near and Middle Eastern goddesses Alilat and Mylitta.²⁶

Moreover, Mithra's prototype, the Indian Mitra, was likewise born of a female, Aditi, the "mother of the gods," the inviolable or *virgin* dawn. Hence, we would expect an earlier form of Mithra also to possess this virgin-mother motif,²⁷ which seems to have been lost or deliberately severed in the all-male Roman Mithraism.

¹⁹ Badiozamani, 96.

²⁰ Amir-Moezzi, 78.

²¹ Amir-Moezzi, 79.

²² Campbell, 78.

²³ Bleeker 1963, 100.

²⁴ de Jong, 268.

²⁵ *Schaff-Herzog*, 7.420.

²⁶ de Jong, 269-270.

²⁷ Well known to scholars, the pre-Christian divine birth and virgin mother motifs are documented in the archaeological and literary records, as verified by Dr. Marguerite Rigoglioso in *The Cult of the Divine Birth in Ancient Greece and Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*.

MITHRA AND THE TWELVE

The theme of the teaching god and “the Twelve” is found within Mithraism, as Mithra is depicted as surrounded by the 12 zodiac signs on a number of monuments and in the writings of Porphyry (4.16), for one. These 12 signs are sometimes portrayed as *humans* and, as they have been in the case of numerous sun gods, could be called Mithra’s 12 “companions” or “disciples.”

Regarding the Twelve, John M. Robertson says:

On Mithraic monuments we find representations of twelve episodes, probably corresponding to the twelve labors in the stories of Heracles, Samson and other Sun-heroes, and probably also connected with initiation.²⁸

The comparison of this common motif with Jesus and the 12 has been made on many occasions, including in an extensive study entitled, “Mithras and Christ: some iconographical similarities,” by Professor A. Deman in *Mithraic Studies*.²⁹

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS ON MITHRAISM

Mithraism was so popular in the Roman Empire and so similar in important aspects to Christianity that several Church fathers were compelled to address it, disparagingly of course. These fathers included Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Julius Firmicus Maternus and Augustine, all of whom attributed these striking correspondences to the prescient devil. In other words, anticipating Christ, the devil set about to fool the Pagans by imitating the coming messiah. In reality, the testimony of these Church fathers confirms that these various motifs, characteristics, traditions and myths predated Christianity.

Concerning this “devil did it” argument, in *The Worship of Nature* Sir James G. Frazer remarks:

If the Mithraic mysteries were indeed a Satanic copy of a divine original, we are driven to conclude that Christianity took a leaf out of the devil’s book when it fixed the birth of the Saviour on the twenty-fifth of December; for there can be no doubt that the day in question was celebrated as the birthday of the Sun by the heathen before the Church, by an afterthought, arbitrarily transferred the Nativity of its Founder from the sixth of January to the twenty-fifth of December.³⁰

Regarding the various similarities between Mithra and Christ, as well as the defenses of the Church fathers, a harsh yet frank assessment is provided by the anonymous author of the intriguingly titled pamphlet, *The Existence of Christ Disproved*:

Augustine, Firmicus, Justin, Tertullian, and others, having perceived the exact resemblance between the religion of Christ and the religion of Mithra, did, with an impertinence only to be equalled by its outrageous absurdity, insist that the devil, jealous and malignant, induced the Persians to establish a religion the exact image of Christianity *that was to be*—for these worthy saints and sinners of the church *could not deny* that the worship of Mithra *preceded* that of Christ—so that, to get out of the ditch, they summoned the devil to their aid, and with the most astonishing assurance, thus accounted for the striking similarity between the Persian and the Christian religion, the worship of Mithra and the worship of Christ; a mode of getting rid of a difficulty that is at once so stupid and absurd, that it would be almost equally stupid and absurd seriously to refute it.

²⁸ Robertson, 323.

²⁹ Hinnells, 507ff.

³⁰ Frazer, 1,526.

In response to a question about Tertullian's discussion of the purported Mithraic forehead mark, Gordon says:

In general, in studying Mithras, and the other Greco-oriental mystery cults, it is good practice to steer clear of all information provided by Christian writers: they are not "sources," they are violent apologists, and one does best not to believe a word they say, however tempting it is to supplement our ignorance with such stuff.³¹

He also cautions about speculation concerning Mithraism and states that "there is practically no limit to the fantasies of scholars," an interesting admission about the hallowed halls of academia.

PRIORITY: MITHRAISM OR CHRISTIANITY?

It is obvious from the remarks of the Church fathers and from the literary and archaeological record that Mithraism in some form preceded Christianity by centuries. The fact is that there is no Christian archaeological evidence earlier than the earliest Roman Mithraic archaeological evidence and that the preponderance of evidence points to Christianity being formulated during the *second* century, not based on a "historical" personage of the early first century. As one important example, the canonical gospels as we have them do not show up clearly in the literary record until the end of the second century.

Mithra's pre-Christian roots are attested in the Vedic and Avestan texts, as well as by historians such as Herodotus (1.131) and Xenophon (*Cyrop.* viii. 5, 53 and c. iv. 24), among others. Nor is it likely that the Roman Mithras is not essentially the same as the Indian sun god Mitra and the Persian, Armenian and Phrygian Mithra in his major attributes, as well as some of his most pertinent rites.

Moreover, it is erroneously asserted that because Mithraism was a "mystery cult" it did not leave any written record. In reality, much evidence of Mithra worship has been destroyed, including not only monuments, iconography and other artifacts, but also *numerous books by ancient authors*. The existence of written evidence is indicated by the Egyptian cloth "manuscript" from the first century BCE called, "Mummy Funerary Inscription of the Priest of Mithras, Ornouphios, Son of Artemis" or MS 247.

As previously noted, two of the ancient writers on Mithraism are Pallas, and Eubulus, the latter of whom, according to Jerome (*Against Jovinianus*, 2.14), "wrote the history of Mithras in many volumes."³² Discussing Eubulus and Pallas, Porphyry too related that there were "several elaborate treatises setting forth the religion of Mithra" during his time, all of which afterwards were lost or destroyed by the Catholic Church. The writings of the early Church fathers themselves provide much evidence as to what Mithraism was all about, as do the archaeological artifacts stretching from India to Scotland.

These many written volumes doubtlessly contained much interesting information that was damaging to Christianity, such as the important correspondences between the "lives" of Mithra and Jesus, as well as identical symbols such as the cross, and rites such as baptism and the eucharist. In fact, Mithraism was so similar to Christianity that it gave fits to the early Church fathers, as it does to this day to apologists, who attempt both to deny the similarities and yet to claim that these (non-existent) correspondences were plagiarized *by* Mithraism *from* Christianity, even while blaming their *pre-Christian* existence on the prescient devil.

Nevertheless, the god Mithra was revered for centuries prior to the Christian era, and the germane elements of Mithraism are known to have preceded Christianity by hundreds to thousands of years. Thus, regardless of attempts to make Mithraism the plagiarist of Christianity, the fact will remain that Mithraism was first, well established in the West decades before Christianity had any significant influence.

³¹ Gordon, "FAQ."

³² Schaff, 397

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