

“A Study of Mithraism”

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During the first semester of his second year at Crozer, King wrote this paper for Enslin's course on Greek religion. Mithraism, a sect of Zoroastrianism characterized by the worship of Mithra as the defender of the truth, was a monotheistic mystery religion prevalent in the Roman empire before the acceptance of Christianity in the fourth century. Followers of Mithra became less common after the Roman emperors banned their cults, and Christianity gained the popularity that once belonged to Mithraism. Enslin gave the essay an A and wrote: “This is an exceedingly good paper. You have given a very complete picture of the essential details and you have presented this in a balanced and restrained way. And furthermore you know how to write. You should go a long way if you continue to pay the price.”

The Greco-Roman world in which the early church developed was one of diverse religions. The conditions of that era made it possible for these religions to sweep like a tidal wave over the ancient world. The people of that age were eager and zealous in their search for religious experience. The existence of this atmosphere was vitally important in the development and eventual triumph of Christianity.

These many religions were not alike in every respect; to draw this conclusion would lead to a gratuitous and erroneous supposition. But it is to be noticed that they possessed many fundamental likenesses; (1) All held that the initiate shared in symbolic (sacramental) fashion the experiences of the god. (2) All had secret rites for the initiated. (3) All offered mystical cleansing from sin. (4) All promised a happy future life for the faithful.*

It is not at all surprising in view of the wide and growing influence of these religions that when the disciples in Antioch and elsewhere preached a crucified and risen Jesus they should be regarded as the heralds of another mystery religion, and that Jesus himself should be taken for the divine Lord of the cult through whose death and resurrection salvation was to be had.

It is at this point that we are able to see why knowledge of these cults is important for any serious New Testament study. It is well-nigh impossible to grasp Christianity through and through without knowledge of these cults. That there were striking similarities between the developing church and these religions can-

* Enslin, Christian Beginnings, pp. 187, 188.

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not be denied. Even Christian apologist had to admit that fact. For an instance, in the mystery-religions identification between the devotee and the Lord of the cult was supposed to be brought about by various rites of initiation; the taurobolium, or bath of blood; the eating of flesh of the sacrificial beast and the like. Now there was something of this in Paul too, for he thought of the believer as buried with Christ in baptism and as feeding upon him in the eucharist. This is only one of many examples that I could give to prove the similarity between the developing Christian Church and the Mystery Religions.

This is not to say that a Saint Paul or a Saint John sat down and copied these views verbatim. But after being in contact with these surrounding religions and hearing certain doctrines expressed, it was only natural for some of these views to become a part of their subconscious minds. When they sat down to write they were expressing consciously that which had dwelled in their subconscious minds.¹ It is also significant to know that Roman tolerance had favoured this great syncretism of religious ideas. Borrowing was not only natural but inevitable.

One of the most interesting of these ancient cults was Mithraism, which bore so many points of resemblance to Christianity that it is a challenge to the modern student to investigate these likenesses and learn more about them. Mithraism is perhaps the greatest example of paganism's last effort to reconcile itself to the great spiritual movement which was gaining such sturdy influence with its purer conception of God.* Ernest Renan, the French philosopher and Orientalist, expressed the opinion that Mithraism would have been the religion of the modern world if anything had occurred to halt or destroy the growth of Christianity in the early centuries of its existence. All this goes to show how important Mithraism was in ancient times.

The present study represents an attempt to provide

* Dill, Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius, p. 585.

1. King used similar phrasing in a paper written the previous year: "This is not to say that the pentateuch writers sat down and copied these views verbatim. The differences of expression attest to that fact. But after being in contact with these surrounding cultures and hearing certain doctrines expressed, it was only natural for some of these views to become a part of their subconscious minds. When they sat down to write they were expressing consciously that which had dwelled in their sub-conscious minds" ("Light on the Old Testament from the Ancient Near East," 14 September–24 November 1948, p. 163 in this volume).

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a survey of the general character of the Mithraic religion. The main source of reference for this study was the magnificent work of Cumont. In order to give a comprehensive picture of this mystery cult, I will discuss four points:

- (1) The origin and dissemination of Mithraism
- (2) The doctrines of Mithraism
- (3) The liturgy of Mithraism
- (4) The influence of Mithraism on Christianity

The Origin and
Dissemination of
Mithraism

The history of Mithraism lies deep in the roots of the past. Documents which belong to the fourteenth century before Christ have been found in the Hittite capital of Boghaz Keui, in which the names of Mithra, Vanuna, Indra, and the Heavenly Twins are recorded.² It is also known that they were written long before the separation of the Indian and Iranian races. But to give the exact origin of this cult and to determine exactly where Mithra came from would be merely conjecture.

Many have held the opinion that Mithra came originally from the high plateaus of the Hindukush;³ and the differences in his nature, when he is found later in India and Iran, were due to environmental influences in the two distinctly different areas. In the Vedas he was associated with Varuna and was invoked together with him as a light god. The Iranians, however, placed Mithra in the position of Archangel. Although Ahura Mazda was the supreme god, he created Mithra equal to himself and made him chief among the *yazatas*. Evidence of his exalted position lies in the fact that the longest yasht, eight times longer than that in honour of Ahura Mazda, is dedicated to Mithra.* He possessed many attributes, the most important being his office of defender of truth and all good things. In the Avesta,† Mithra is represented as the genius of celestial light. He emerges

* Dhalla, History of Zoroastrianism, p. 183.

† This is the sacred book of the religion of Iran.

2. W. R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity* (London: University Press of Liverpool, n.d.), p. 283: "Documents which belong to the fourteenth century before Christ have been found in the Hittite capital of Boghaz Keui, in which the names of Mitra, Varuna, Indra, and the Heavenly Twins, the Nasatyas, are recorded."

3. Enslin marked "Hindukush" and wrote that it was "more commonly written as two words."

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from the rocky summits of eastern mountains at dawn, and goes through heaven with a team of four white horses; when the night falls he still illumines the surface of the earth "ever walking ever watchful." He is not sun or moon or any star, but a spirit of light, ever wakeful, watching with a hundred eyes. He hears all and sees all: none can deceive him.*⁴ Mithra was the god of wide pastures and the giver of gifts. He was worthy of sacrifice and worship and desired the respect and prayer of the faithful, on whom he bestowed bounteous gifts. On the other hand, he was a warrior of violent and bitter nature; the forces of evil were his enemies, and he joined with Sraosha (Obedience) and Rashnu (Justice) in opposing them.

The fame of Mithra spread as the Persian empire expanded, and he became particularly strong in Asia Minor. Many of the Persian Kings grew very fond of Mithra and sponsored worship of him. It was during this time that the worship of Mithra developed into an independent religion. It is interesting to know that as Mithraism was spreading through the Persian empire, it was constantly borrowing ideas from other cultures. When it came in contact with Semitic star worship, it assimilated much of it as well as some of the mythology of ancient Babylon. Also the cult incorporated many local practices and ideas from Asia Minor. Finally it was influenced to a certain extent by Hellenistic culture. After having consolidated its theology and drawing into its ranks many converts in Asia Minor and Persia, Mithraism had almost reached its climax. It was, however, the latest religion of its kind to become popular in the Roman empire.†

The greatest agency of propagation of Mithraism was the army. Under the Roman policy of conscription troops from conquered lands were sent to serve in other parts of the empire. Among the forces which were drawn up in that fashion were soldiers from such places as Cappadocia, Commagene, Pontus and Armenia, where Mithraism was extremely popular.

* Cumont, Mysteries of Mithra, pp. 2, 3.

† Mithraism was not popular in the Roman empire until ca. A.D. 100.

4. Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Chicago: Open Court, 1910), pp. 2-3: "In the Avesta, Mithra is the genius of the celestial light. He appears before sunrise on the rocky summits of the mountains; during the day he traverses the wide firmament in his chariot drawn by four white horses, and when night falls he still illumines with flickering glow the surface of the earth, 'ever waking, ever watchful.' He is neither sun, nor moon, nor stars, but with 'his hundred ears and his hundred eyes' watches constantly the world. Mithra hears all, sees all, knows all: none can deceive him."

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When these men were sent out to foreign outpost to serve in the Roman army they did not forget their religious customs. Converts were quickly gained within the army. Evidences of the diffusion of Mithraism by the army has been found in Scotland, Africa, Spain, Germany, and almost every locality where Roman troops were sent.

A second means of spreading Mithraism in the empire was through slaves who were sent to Italy from Asia Minor. Many of these slaves became public servants in the great bureaus of the government. It was these slaves who were missionaries for Mithra in Italy and who practiced his mysteries in the very heart of the Roman world.

There was a third group which spread the Mithraic religion. This group consisted of Syrian merchants who established trading posts throughout the empire. Cumont is of the opinion that most of these Syrians belonged to the upper classes and were not the true worshippers of Mithra. He argues that it was the slaves and servants of these merchants who were followers of Mithra; and they introduced the religion to the inhabitants of maritime towns where their masters engaged in trading.*

* Cumont, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

The great expansion of Mithraism in the ancient world can be traced to these three sources in almost every case. The slaves were forever looking for a better day, and they beleived that through worshipping Mithra that day would eventually come. As for the soldiers they found Mithraism very appealing because it offered them the protection of a deity who they believed would help them to be victorious in combat. After seeing these facts it is very easy to understand why these worshippers were so zealous in spreading their religion. It was a part of their total make-up. To argue that many were drawn into this cult through curiosity alone is certainly an unwarranted assumption. To be sure, the iniatory rites (as we will see later in the paper) were so strenuous that only the sincere and earnest converts would have wished to take part in them.

After the cult became popular throughout the Roman Empire, it received many converts from the upper classes. It had been spread by slaves and freedmen for the most part, but it did {not} remain a religion of the lower classes alone. As stated above, even the emperors gave it their approval.

Whether the religion of Mithra gained great influ-

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ence in Greece is still under discussion by many scholars. There seems to be many conflicting statements about this question.⁵ Cumont writes, "It may be said, in a general way, that Mithra remained forever excluded from the Hellenic world. The ancient authors of Greece speak of him only as a foreign god worshipped by the kings of Persia."* Dhalla says that Mithra "is the only Iranian divinity who won popularity for himself in Greece."† George Foot Moore says of Mithraism that "it never took root in the lands of Hellenistic culture."‡ The majority of opinions seem to support the fact that Mithraism was excluded from Hellenized countries. It is probable that the name of Mithra was well-known in these lands, but the inhabitants declined to worship him.

The worship of Mithra, which had had its very first introduction into the western part of the empire only a short time before the birth of Christ and had not begun to expand until the end of the first century, became widespread and popular in a remarkably short time. It was during the same period, of course, that christianity was beginning to develop and reach out into new territories. The question immediately arises, why did the two religions not conflict?

One reason that the two religions did not conflict in the early years of their growth in the Roman Empire is that their activities for a while took place in different geographical areas. Another reason why these religions did not clash with each other was because each thought the other was too insignificant for serious competition. It is apparent, therefore, that geographically and socially these religions did not clash for a while.

The Doctrines Of Mithraism

Unfortunately, there is practically no literary evidence for the inner history of Mithraism. A few scattered facts may be gathered from the remains of Christian polemics, a great deal of information about the overall character of the ideas to which they gave expression may be gotten from the writings of Neo-

* Cumont, op. cit., p. 9.⁶† Dhalla, History of Zoroastrianism, p. 303.‡ Moore, History of Religions, Vol. 1, p. 600.

5. Enslin underlined "many" and wrote in the margin: "It is pretty generally recognized that it never 'took' in Greece. Dhalla's view is not widely held."

6. The quotation is actually from page 33.

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Platonists and a close examination of mystical papyri.⁷ Fortunately, these numerous monuments have been synthesized in the scholarly work of Cumont. From this work we are able to get with a degree of certainty the mythological and eschatological teaching of this cult. For the moment let us look into these teachings.

First we turn to the cosmogonic views of Mithraism. It is interesting to know how Mithraic preachers sought to explain the origin of the world. They explained it in terms of a series of successive generations. The first principle begot a primordial couple, the Heaven and the Earth; and the Earth, who was impregnated by her brother, gave birth to the vast Ocean. This group formed the supreme triad of the Mithraic Pantheon.⁸

At times these cosmic divinities were personified in quite different names from their original ones. The Heaven was called Ormazd or Jupiter, the Earth was identified with Spenta-Armaiti or Juno, and the Ocean was called Apam-Napat or Neptune.⁹

As was stated above, Jupiter (Heaven) and Juno (Earth) were the sovereign couple. They gave birth not only to Neptune (Ocean) who became their peer, but to many other immortals. Shahrivar or Mars, Valcun or Atar, Bacchus or Haoma, Silvanus or Drvaspa, Diana or Luna are but a few of the long line of immortals. These innumerable multitude of divinities composed the celestial court.* This in short sums up the cosmogonic views of the Mithraic religion.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was another view which was very prominent in Mithraism.

* Cumont, *op. cit.*, pp. 111, 112.

7. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, pp. 289–290: “It is profoundly to be regretted that we possess practically no literary evidence for the inner history of Mithraism, nor indeed of any of the pagan mystery religions of this period. A few random facts may be elicited from the *obiter dicta* of Christian polemic, a good deal of information about the general character of the ideas to which they gave expression may be gleaned from the difficult study of Gnosticism in its pagan and Christian forms, from the writings of the Neo-Platonists, and from the careful examination of magical papyri.”

8. Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 109: “The first principle, according to an ancient belief found in India as well as in Greece, begot a primordial couple, the Heaven and the Earth; and the latter, impregnated by her brother, gave birth to the vast Ocean which was equal in power to its parents, and which appears to have formed with them the supreme triad of the Mithraic Pantheon.”

9. Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 111: “The Heavens were naught less than Ormazd or Jupiter, the Earth was identified with Spenta-Armaiti or Juno, and the Ocean was similarly called Apam-Napat or Neptune.”

23 Nov 1949 Mithraism insisted that the soul was immortal and its temporary sojourn in a body was a period of trial. The worshipper's action determined the posthumous fate of his soul. Of course, he was not alone in his attempt to attain purity and truth; Mithra stood by his side as a divine helper.¹⁰

The background of Mithraic eschatology was provided by that theory of the relation of the soul to the universe. It was believed that the soul descended at birth {from} the eternal home of light through the gate of Cancer, passing down through the seven planetary spheres to earth. As the soul passed through each stage it accumulated more and more impurity. It was possible for the initiate, while in his trial period on earth, to gain purity through the practice of courage and truth.¹¹

After death there was judgment of the soul. Mithra, the protector of the truth, presided over the judgment court. If the soul had lived an impure life, it was dragged down to the infernal depths, where it received a thousand tortures. If, on the contrary, its good qualities outweighed the bad, it rises through the gate of Capricorn, passing in reverse order through the planetary sphere. At each stage the impurities which the soul picked up in its downward flow gradually diminished. The end of this great rise was supreme happiness and eternal bliss.

The doctrine of resurrection of the flesh was also a basic belief in the Mithraic circle. It was believed that the long struggle between the principles of good and evil would one day end. At this time a great bull would reappear on earth; and Mithra would descend and reawaken men to life. All would come forth from the tombs with the same appearance they had on earth. All mankind would unite into a great

10. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, p. 294: "In Mithraism the soul was regarded as immortal, and its temporary sojourn in an earthly body was a period of trial. Upon the degrees of purity and truth which was attained by the worshipper, and upon the part played by him in fighting upon the side of Good, depended the posthumous fate of his soul. In this mortal life Mithras stands by the side of the initiate as a divine helper."

11. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, pp. 294-295: "The background of Mithraic eschatology was provided by that theory of the relation of the soul to the universe. . . . The soul was thought to have descended at birth from the eternal home of light through the gate of Cancer, passing down through the seven planetary spheres to earth. At each stage it became more heavily weighted by accumulated impurity. During its time of trial upon earth came the opportunity to acquire purity through moral struggle, that is to say, by the conquest of passions and appetites and the practice of courage, endurance, fortitude, and truth."

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union, at which time the god of truth would separate the good from the bad. Then the great bull would be sacrificed. The fat of this bull would be mingled with the consecrated wine, and would be offered to the just. From this they would receive immortality. After this great event, Jupiter-Ormazd would cause a great fire to fall from heaven which would destroy all the wicked. The Spirit of Darkness would be completely destroyed. The universe would then enjoy eternal happiness and peace.

There was another doctrine which remained fundamental to Mithraism throughout its history. It was the doctrine of dualism. This doctrine was taken from Zoroastrianism. This doctrine accounted for the problem of evil by supposing that the world was a battleground between the Good Principle, Ahura Mazda, and the Evil Principle, Ahriman. The powers of good were identified with Light or Day, and the powers of evil were identified with Darkness or Night. These two powers were in a state of perpetual war. It was Mithra, the spirit of light and truth who became naturally a celestial warrior on the side of Ahura Mazda.*¹²

* Halliday, The Pagan Background of Early Christianity, pp. 285, 286.

It was many of these doctrines that became very influential in later years to the Christian religion. They molded the thinking of the ancient world.

Mithraic Liturgy

According to a text of St. Jerome, there were seven degrees of initiation which the Mithraic convert passed through. At each stage he assumed a different name: (1) Raven, (2) Occult, (3) Soldier, (4) Lion, (5) Persian, (6) Runner of the sun, (7) and Father. It is probable that there were slight variations of names of the grades from East to West. Each grade had its appropriate mask and costume.

The taking of the first three degrees did not authorize the status of full participation in the Mysteries. These initiates were called the Servants. Only

12. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, pp. 283–284: “The great Iranian prophet accounted for the problem of evil by supposing that the world was a battleground between the Good Principle, Ahura Mazda, and the Evil Principle, Ahriman. The powers of Good were identified with Light or Day in conflict with the powers of Evil, Darkness or Night, and Mithras, the spirit of light and truth, became naturally a celestial warrior on the side of Ahura Mazda.”

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the Mystic who had received the Leontics could become a "Participant". At the top of this structure were the Fathers, who probably presided over the sacred ceremonies and had command over the lower classes.¹³

It was possible to enter the lowest grades at infancy. Whether or not the initiate had to remain in each grade for a fixed length of time is not known. Cumont is of the opinion that the Fathers decided when the initiate was sufficiently prepared to move to the higher grade.*

One of the prominent features in the ceremony of initiation was the sacrament (*sacramentum*) or military oath of loyalty to the service of the god and to the fellow members of the brotherhood. In this oath the initiate promised to depart from certain sins and follow a life of moral behavior. Moreover, he promised not to reveal to the uninitiated the rites and knowledge he was about to learn.

Although our knowledge of the liturgy of Mithraism is inevitably fragmentary, we know that there was a form of baptism designed to wash away the sins of the initiate. This rite was probably carried out by sprinkling holy water, or in an actual immersion. At another stage in the development the initiated was sealed with a brand in his forehead. It appears that this mark was burned with a red-hot iron. This inefaceable imprint was always a reminder to the initiate of what he had vowed. In the grade of soldier, the initiate was offered a crown which he caused to fall on his shoulder, saying that Mithra was his only crown. In the grade of Lion, the initiate's tongue and hands were purified with honey.¹⁴

Another important Mithraic ceremony was the celebration of a communion service which was in memory

* Cumont, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

13. Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 155: "The taking of the first three degrees did not authorize participation in the Mysteries. These initiates, comparable to the Christian catechumens, were the Servants . . . Only the mystics that had received the Leontics became Participants . . . At the summit of the hierarchy were placed the Fathers, who appear to have presided over the sacred ceremonies (*pater sacrorum*) and to have commanded the other classes of the faithful."

14. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, p. 304: "Our knowledge of the initiatory rites of Mithraism is inevitably fragmentary. We know that in this, as in many contemporary cults, a form of baptism represented the mystical washing away of sin. The initiated in certain grades were sealed upon the forehead with the mark of their calling, probably with a brand. At the initiation into the grade of Soldier, the neophyte was offered a crown which he renounced with the words 'Mithras is my crown.' The tongue and the hands of a Lion were purified with honey."

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of the last meal which Helios and Mithra partook together upon earth.¹⁵ Here the celebrant took consecrated bread and mingled it with the juice of Haoma. It is quite obvious that only the initiate who had attained the degree of Lions could take this communion.

The worship services were carried on in chapels or Mithraea. These chapels were technically called "caves" *spelaea*. They were probably called "caves" because they were either constructed in natural caves or in subterranean buildings. In most of the Mithraea there was a portico which led into a second sacristry, where the ritual dresses were probably kept. Beyond the sacristry lay the shrine. It was here that most of the ritual was performed. On each side were benches where the new converts were probably seated. At the end of the building there was an apse, in which stood the relief of Mithra slaying the bull. It is probable that this was veiled with curtains. The walls of the building were very fascinating; they were covered with paintings and mosaics of mystical designs.¹⁶

The worship period was conducted by the priest, who bore the title of *sacerdos*. The priest was considered the intermediary between God and man. It was his duty to administer the sacraments. He also presided at the formal dedications. He probably had to see that a perpetual fire burned upon the altars. He addressed a prayer to the sun three times a day, at dawn, at noon, and at dusk. This, in short, gives the overall function of the priest.

It was a characteristic of Mithraism to be organized in small and apparently independent communities. In this community the individual had a right to hold property. For the management of the affairs of the community, officers were selected. The officers were

15. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, p. 304: "One of the principal Mithraic ceremonies was the celebration of a communion service in memory, it was thought, of the last meal of which Helios and Mithra partook together upon earth."

16. Halliday, *Pagan Background*, pp. 298–299: "The chapels or Mithraea in which the worship of the cult was carried on, were technically called 'caves,' *spelaea*, and were constructed either in a natural cave or, for obvious reasons, more often in a subterranean building which was made to resemble a cave. . . . In the most usual type of Mithraeum a portico led off the road into a vestibule, this led into a second sacristy, where probably the ritual dresses, etc., were kept; beyond this again lay the shrine. . . . At the end of the building opposite to the entrance was an apse, in which stood the relief of Mithra slaying the bull. It would appear that this was normally veiled with curtains. . . . The walls of the building were covered with paintings and mosaics of mystical design."

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masters (magistri) or president, the curators (curatores), the attorneys (defensores), and the patrons (patroni).

Mithraism possessed a characteristic that was unique and which for a time may have been an asset but in the end was probably a weakness. It was a cult for men only. In some cases young boys were taken into the lower orders, but under no circumstances were women admitted. Women were compelled to seek salvation in some other cult, for Mithraism excluded them entirely. "It has been surmised that the frequent juxtaposition of Mithraea (places of worship) and temples of the Magna Mater was due to the fact that the wives and daughters of the Mithraists were addicted to the worship of the latter."* In the exclusion of women Mithraism missed "that ardent religiosity and fervent proselytism of devout women which had so large a share in pushing the fortunes of Isis and Cybele or in propagating the tenets of Christianity."†

* Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 600.

† Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

The Influence of Mithraism on Christianity

When Mithraism is compared with Christianity, there are surprisingly many points of similarity. Of all the mystery cults Mithraism was the greatest competitor of Christianity. The cause for struggle between these two religions was that they had so many traditions, practices and ideas that were similar and in some cases identical.

Many of the similarities between these two religions have already been alluded to, but there are many others of greater or lesser significance. The belief in immortality, a mediator between god and man, the observance of certain sacramental rites, the rebirth of converts, and (in most cases) the support of high ethical ideas were common to Mithraism as well as to Christianity. In fact, the comparison became so evident that many believed the Christian movement itself became a mystery cult. "Jesus was the divine Lord. He too had found the road to heaven by his suffering and resurrection. He too had God for his father. He had left behind the secret whereby men could achieve the goal with him."‡

‡ Enslin, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

There were many other points of similarity between these two groups. Let us look at a few of them:

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(1) Both regarded Sunday as a holy day.¹⁷ (2) December 25 came to be considered as the anniversary of the birth of Mithra and Christ also. (3) Baptism and a communion meal were important parts of the ritual of both groups. (4) The rebirth parts of converts was a fundamental idea in the two cults. (5) The struggle with evil and the eventual triumph of good were essential ideas in both religions. (6) In both religions only initiates who passed through certain preliminary phases of introduction were admitted to the mysteries which brought salvation to converts. There were many more similarities between Christianity and Mithraism—most of them purely superficial. These which have been mentioned are largely only surface likenesses because the reasoning behind them is quite different, but the general effect is almost startling.

The sacraments of baptism and the eucharist have been mentioned as rites which were practiced both by christians and pagans. It is improbable, however, that either of these {were} introduced into Christian practices by association with the mystery cults. The baptismal ceremony in both cases (christian and mystery) was supposed to have the effect of identifying the initiate with his saviour. But although baptism did not originate with the Christians, still it was not copied from the pagans. It seems instead to have been carried over from Jewish background and modified by the new ideas and beliefs of the Christians. The eucharist, likewise though similar in some respects to the communion meal of Mithraism, was not a rite borrowed from them. There are several explanations regarding the beginning of the observance of the Lord's Supper. Some held that the sacrament was instituted by Jesus himself. Others saw it as an outgrowth from Jewish precedents. Still others felt that, after the death of Jesus, the disciples saw in their common meal an opportunity to hold a kind of memorial service for him.

On the whole, early Christians were not greatly concerned about the likenesses between the Mithraic cult and their own. They felt at first that these competitors were not worthy of consideration, and few references to them are found in Christian literature.

17. Enslin asked in the margin, "How early did Christians make this the [*first?*] day?"

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When Mithraism became widespread and powerful, it attracted so much attention that certain Christian apologists felt the need to present an explanation for the similarities in their respective characteristics. The only one they could offer was quite naive, but it was in keeping with the trends of thought in that age. They maintained that it was the work of the devil who helped to confuse men by creating a pagan imitation of the true religion.¹⁸

The greatest influence of Mithraism on Christianity lies in a different direction from that of doctrine and ritual. It lies in the fact that Mithraism paved the way for the presentation of Christianity to the world of that time. It prepared the people mentally and emotionally to understand the type of religion which Christianity represented. It was itself in varying degrees, an imperfect example of the Galilean cult which was to replace it. It encouraged the movement away from the state religions and the philosophical systems and toward the desire for personal salvation and promise of immortality. Christianity was truly indebted to Mithraism for this contribution, for it had done this part of the groundwork and thus opened the way for Christian missionary work.

Conclusion

That Christianity did copy and borrow from Mithraism cannot be denied, but it was generally a natural and unconscious process rather than a deliberate plan of action. It was subject to the same influences from the environment as were the other cults, and it sometimes produced the same reaction. The people were conditioned by the contact with the older religions and the background and general trend of the time.

Many of the views, while passing out of Paganism into Christianity were given a more profound and spiritual meaning by Christians, yet we must be indebted to the source. To discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing.

18. The previous two paragraphs also appear in another essay by King, "Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity," 29 November 1949–15 February 1950, pp. 309–310 in this volume.

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