

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

5-1-1927

Mithraism and Early Christianity

Edward A. Jenne

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_jenne@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jenne, Edward A., "Mithraism and Early Christianity" (1927). *Bachelor of Divinity*. 654.
<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/654>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

MITHRAISM AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A thesis

presented to the faculty of

Concordia Seminary

by

EDWARD A. JENNE

in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree

BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

1927

27

Mithraism and Early Christianity

In the introduction to his work The Mysteries of Mithra Cumont, the most outstanding investigator in this field, says: "The work which I have undertaken could not have been other than difficult. On the one hand, we do not know to what precise degree the Avesta and the other sacred books of the Parsees represent the ideas of the Mazdean of the Occident; on the other, these books constitute the sole material in our possession for interpreting the great mass of figured monuments which have gradually been collected. The inscriptions by themselves are always a sure guide, but their contents are upon the whole very meager. Our predicament is somewhat similar to that in which we should find ourselves if we were called upon to write the History of the Church of the Middle Ages with no other sources at our command than the Hebrew Bible and the sculptured debris of Roman and Gothic portals. For this reason our explanation of the Mithraic imagery will frequently possess nothing more than a greater or less degree of probability. I make no pretensions of having reached in all cases a rigorously exact decipherment of these hieroglyphics and I am anxious to ascribe to my opinions nothing but the value of the arguments which support them." The sources available to the student of the Mysteries of Mithra are extremely scanty

and fragmentary, a fact which necessitates caution in drawing conclusions as to what Mithraism actually stood for.

The word Mystery was the name of a religious society, founded not on citizenship or kindred, but on the choice of its members, for the practice of rites by which, it was believed, their happiness might be promoted both in this world and in the next. The Greek word *μυστήριον* does not, of its own force, imply anything in our sense of the word "mysterious," that is to say, obscure or difficult to comprehend. That which it connotes is, rather, something which can only be known on being imparted by someone already in possession of it, not by mere reason and research which are common to all.

In that unknown epoch when the ancestors of the Persians were still united with those of the Hindus they were already worshipers of Mithra. Later he was adopted into the theological system of Zoroastrianism. Ahura Mazda was the supreme god. Below him was Mithras, the god of celestial light, his emissary and chief of the celestial armies in their ceaseless combat with the Spirit of Darkness. "An analysis of the constituent elements of Mithraism, like the cross-section of a geological formation, shows the stratifications of this composite mass in their regular order of deposition. The basal layer of this religion, its lower and primordial stratum, is the faith

of ancient Iran, from which it took its origin. Above this Mazdean sub-stratum was deposited in Babylon a thick sediment of Semitic doctrines, and afterwards the local beliefs of Asia Minor added to it their alluvial deposits. Finally, a luxuriant vegetation of Hellenic ideas burst forth from this fertile soil and partly concealed from view its true original nature." (Cumont). At first Mithras plainly was a being of subordinate rank. Formally, the aspect of subordination may not have been canceled at any period, but practically it came in the end to be set aside. While Mithras continued to be assigned the office of mediator, to a large extent religious dependence was directed rather to him than to the higher and remoter deity.

The oriental religions found the way prepared for them by the bankruptcy of Greek religion and the disintegrating influence of Greek philosophy. Mithraism, however, secured but few converts in the Hellenic domain. But the rapid dissemination of Mithraism throughout the West is one of the outstanding phenomena of religious propaganda. In Mithraism, the most virile of the oriental cults, and therefore most attractive to the Roman soldiery, the conception of the sympathy of god and man was prominent. Men saw in the struggles of Mithra the Unconquered the prototype of their daily life. The tauroctonous mediator, so familiar on the revolving slab in the chapels, the champion of light against darkness, of men against the demons and

cosmic powers, was a human figure, whose triumphant struggle encouraged men to higher endeavor. Moreover, Mithra compensated for any apparent deficiency in sympathetic communion by alliance with the other Eastern cults, particularly that of the Great Mother, and, in its latest stages, with that of the Egyptian Mother of Sorrows. Mithraism was represented in Rome as early as 67 B.C. (Plutarch), but gained no appreciable foothold till the closing decades of the next century. In the second and third Christian centuries it was given a relatively wide extension in the West. Being to a peculiar degree the religion of soldiers, it was carried wherever the Roman legions were sent. Furthermore, it was propagated by slaves from the East and by the Syrian merchants. The Emperor Commodus became an adherent, and various of his successors regarded it with favor. The climax of its progress was probably reached toward the end of the third century. Julian the Apostate beyond the middle of the next century exerted himself to the utmost to restore its fortunes, but his short-lived reaction (361-363) availed little to check the movement toward irretrievable downfall. Under Theodosius it came to an end.

As respects the extent to which Mithraism gained a footing in the Graeco-Roman world there seems to be a tendency among scholarly investigators to question the warrant for the strong statements which have sometimes been

made. Against Renan's representation that at one time this religion bade fair to dispute the ascendancy of Christianity in the Roman empire, attention is called to the fact that the evidence fails to prove that Mithraism ever prevailed widely outside the cantonments of the Roman legions. Furthermore, as is indicated by the map which Cumont has prepared, we have the fact that it failed to strike root in most of the territory which could boast a high stage of culture. "Almost the entire domain of Hellenism," says Harnack, "was closed to it, and consequently Hellenism itself. Greece, Macedonia, Thrace, Bithynia, Asia (proconsular), the central provinces of Asia Minor (apart from Cappadocia), Syria, Palestine, and Egypt - none of these ever had any craving for the cult of Mithra. And these were the civilized countries by preeminence. They were closed to Mithra, and as he thus failed to get into touch at all, not in an early stage at any rate, with Hellenism, his cult was condemned to the position of a barbarous conventicle. Now these were the regions in which Christianity found an immediate and open welcome, the result being that the latter religion came at once into vital contact with Hellenism." Harnack adds that even in the West, where Mithraism had a relatively wide expansion, there is inadequate ground to conclude that it became any real rival of Christianity.

In the last struggle with paganism Mithraism came

to the front to oppose Christianity. It gave expression to the craving for moral support, purification, and comfort through religion. In the course of time the ancient god of light became the protector of the faithful, the conqueror of evil demons, who assures to his followers the hope of immortality. Nothing is more familiar on the monuments found than the group in which the young warrior, wearing a Phrygian cap and short tunic, and mantle blown back by the wind, kneels on the back of a bull and buries his pionard in its throat, surrounded by the mystic beasts and the two Dodaphori. His worship was conducted in underground grottoes, brilliantly lighted and adorned with symbolic figures. The symbolism of his ritual has exercised and puzzled the ingenuity of modern archaeologists. ^{ally} Probably it conveyed many meanings to the devotee; but the central idea in the end seems to have been that of a power who conquers the spirit of darkness, leads souls from the underworld, and gives peace by purification. There was a kind of baptism of neophytes, confirmation, consecration of bread and water, cleansing of the tongue with honey, and other ablutions. The great festival of the god was celebrated on the 25th of December. His mysteries created a powerful bond of union, and in this respect satisfied one of the most urgent needs of society under the later Empire. The initiated formed a close guild or corporation presenting many points of resemblance to Freemasonry. Women were

not admitted. The novice had to submit to a series of severe ordeals and ascetic exercises, prolonged fasting, flagellation, and passing through water and flame. There were many degrees of initiation: Raven, Occult, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Runner of the Sun, culminating in the dignity which bore the title of Pater. Whatever the real moral effect of initiation may have been, there can be no doubt that it developed a warm devotion in that future life which it promised to the true worshiper. The most impressive rite in Mithra worship was the baptism of blood, called the Taurobolium. This ceremony was apparently a sacramental repetition of the symbolic slaughter of the bull by the god himself. It was originally part of the Phrygian ritual of the Great Mother, and is connected with her name on many monuments, but, after the religious fashion of the times, it had been absorbed by the cult of the Sun.

We know the nature of this sacrifice of which Prudentius gives a stirring description based on a personal recollection. On an open platform a steer was killed, and the blood dropped down upon the mystic, who was standing in an excavation below. "Through the thousand crevices in the wood," says the poet, "the bloody dew runs down into the pit. The neophyte receives the falling drops on his head, clothes, and body. He leans backward to have his cheeks, his ears, his lips, and his nostrils wetted; he

pours the liquid over his eyes, and does not even spare his palate, for he moistens his tongue with blood and drinks it eagerly." After submitting to this repulsive sprinkling he offered himself to the veneration of the crowd. They believed that he was purified from his faults and had become the equal of the deity through his red baptism.

The Taurobolium is thought to have signified a death to the old life and a new birth to a higher, divine existence. But it is not perfectly clear that it had that significance in the East and in the early period. According to Hepding the Taurobolium was in the early period a mere sacrifice, and the first man who is said to have received it in that sense just described was the Emperor Heliogabulus (third century after Christ). Other scholars refuse to accept Hepding's distinction between an earlier and a later form of the rite. But the matter is at least obscure, and it would be exceedingly rash to attribute pre-Christian origin to the developed Taurobolium as it appears in the fourth century sources. Indeed, there seems to be no mention of any kind of taurobolium whatever before the second century, and Hepding may be correct in suggesting that possibly the fourth century practice was influenced by the Christian doctrine of the blood of Christ.

The nature of the divine services and their frequency in Mithraism are very imperfectly known to us.

We know of an ordo sacerdotum, but whether the sacerdotal succession could be strictly maintained in the Western countries as in the home-lands of Mithraism is a moot question. The duty of such a clergy was to celebrate the daily offices, maintain - at least in the Eastern chapels - the perpetual holy altar fire, invoke the planet of the day, offer the frequent sacrifice for the adherents, and preside at initiations. The great festival of the Mithraic calendar was held on December 25, the Natalis Invicti. The first day of the week was dedicated to the Sun, to whom prayers were recited thrice daily. Special services were probably held on Sunday. The sixteenth was kept holy to Mithra. "The small size of the Mithraea, and the scanty number of the members supporting it, make it extremely unlikely that there was anything like regular congregational worship, or that the faithful assembled there except for initiations or meetings for conferring the different degrees," says Legge. No doubt the soldiers with the colours, who formed the majority of the adherents, could not observe a regular attendance at fixed hours, nor could the slaves with their long and irregular hours of toil. But despite difficulties, opportunities were found for worship, both fraternal and private devotion. The "brothers" met in the artificially lighted cave or grotto, where they seated themselves on the stone benches running along both sides of the chapel, separated by a center aisle. The service

consisted chiefly in the contemplation of the holy symbols, prayer, participation in the chanting of a litany to instrumental music. Sacrifices were offered, on great occasions a bull, on ordinary occasions birds. (Angus).

Mithraism satisfied the devotional feelings which could find little nourishment in the cold abstractions of the old Roman religion and the anthropomorphism of Greece. It cultivated an ecstatic devotion, gave relief to remorse from sin, and fostered the desire for immortality and the expectation of final justice. Another reason for its success may be found in the fact that Mithraism emphasized the divine right of kings and hence was fostered by emperors in support of their absolutism. Furthermore, the titles conferred by it satisfied the natural desire of man of playing a part in the world and of enjoying some consideration in the eyes of his fellows. Again, Mithraism was really the religious expression of Roman physics and astronomy, and was thus designed to appeal to the cultured and educated.

A similarity between Mithraism and Christianity struck even early observers, such as Justin, Tertullian, and other Fathers, and in recent times has been urged to prove that Christianity is but an adaptation of Mithraism, or at most the outcome of the same religious ideas and aspirations. This arbitrary, erroneous, and unscientific procedure is not endorsed by the greatest living authority

on Mithraism. In the following we shall discuss Mithraism in its relation to Christianity.

Many scholars seek the genesis of Paulinism in the manifold products of the union of Greek philosophy and oriental religions, but this rests upon an unwarranted reconstruction of pre-Christian paganism, a failure to understand the exclusiveness of the Christian Church, an enormous exaggeration of the similarity between the pagan and Christian usages, and a lordly disregard of dates. Dr. Machen of Princeton in his book The Origin of Paul's Religion proves that the genesis of Pauline teaching cannot be found in the syncretistic pagan religion of the Hellenistic age. Emphatic declarations in Paul's Epistles make it evident that he never could have dreamed of going into this domain for any part of his theological furnishing. The supposition of conscious recourse to that province is simply preposterous. The similarities of Pauline representation to those of the Mystery cults are explicable apart from any supposition of borrowing, and they are accompanied by very pronounced contrasts.. The given cults, it is admitted, made much of a future and immortal life. But how could Paul, as a believer in the Jesus who taught the doctrine of a vital immortality and who rose from the dead, fail to magnify this theme? The dramatic expedients of the Mysteries for working up the hope of a blessed hereafter were paltry and inefficacious compared with the grounds

of confidence laid for him in the vital message and triumphant experiences of Him on whom he believed. Paul's individual experiences regarding the privilege of personal communion with his Lord were infinitely more potent than any suggestion which could come from the idea of the Mysteries of an intimate relation between the initiate and the divinity in whose name the mystic rites were celebrated. That Paul should have drawn his ideal regarding the believer's relation to Christ from the Mysteries is nothing less than grotesque. The naturalistic stamp which all the Mysteries bore forms a fundamental contrast to Pauline teaching. Furthermore, the cross as he understood it, with its profound moral significance both for God and for man has no counterpart in the Mystery religions. Paul's declaration that the message of redemption preached by himself was foolishness to the Gentiles is a decisive evidence that he was not aware that Greek or Graeco-Oriental theory had in any wise prepared the way for the Christian doctrine of salvation through Christ. The similarities discussed were found also in Mithraism. Mithraism, however, became influential in the Roman Empire only after the time of Paul. Great stress has been laid upon the fact that Plutarch attests the practice of Mithraic mysteries by the pirates whom Pompey conquered in the middle of the first century B.C. and says furthermore that the Mithraic rites begun by the pirates were continued until the writer's own day.

The pirates practiced their rites at Olympus, which is on the south coast of Asia Minor. But the Olympus which is meant is in Lycia, some 300 miles from Tarsus. It is a mistake, therefore, to bring the Mithraic practices of the pirates into any close geographical connection with the boyhood home of Paul. Against the hypothesis of any dependence of Paul upon the Mysteries of Mithra is to be placed the authority of Cumont, the chief investigator in this field, who says: "It is impossible to suppose that at that time [the time of Paul] there was an imitation of the Mithraic mysteries, which then had not yet attained any importance." Attempts have been made to explain away this judgment of Cumont, but without success.

As already noted, Mithraism made much of a future and immortal life and possessed the idea of an intimate relation between the initiate and the deity. Other similarities between Mithraism and Christianity urged by investigators are: The idea of regeneration; the idea of a mediator, a god who became man; rites resembling Baptism and the Eucharist; confirmation; the idea of an atoning sacrifice; ascension; the presence of the adoring shepherds; a universal flood; the celebration of the birth of the sun-god on the 25th of December; observance of Sunday as a day of worship; the ideas of heaven and hell, a last judgment, a resurrection of the dead, final conflagration of the universe; the fraternal, democratic spirit; the drawing of water from the rock; constant warfare between good and evil.

Before entering upon a discussion of these similarities we must call attention to the scantiness of our information regarding the Mysteries. In connection with the Mystery Religions as a class, it is important to recognize the serious limitations which are imposed upon our knowledge. Cumont says: "There is no period of the Roman Empire concerning which we are so little informed as the third century, precisely the one during which the Oriental religions reached the apogee of their power." None of these religions has bequeathed a complete liturgy or ritual. Albrecht Dieterich has claimed that in the content of a Paris papyrus we have a substantially complete liturgy of Mithras. But Cumont and others have challenged the legitimacy of this identification. The fragmentary character of the sources of information evidently enforces the need of caution against indulging in overbroad and ill-founded inductions. It is possible for a reviewer to be tempted to gather up the scattered hints derivable from the several Mystery religions and then to apply them collectively to one or another of these religions, thus assigning to it a larger and more definite content than is warrantable. "There is undoubtedly," writes Maurice Jones, "a tendency among the students of these cults to erect a building out of material that is wholly inadequate for the purpose and to counterbalance their lack of genuine matter by inserting their own hypotheses." The Avesta cannot be an authority for Roman

Mithraism with which Christianity is compared. Of the real inner working of Mithraism and the sense in which it was understood by those who professed it at the advent of Christianity, we know nothing. Another point to be mentioned in this connection is that there was occasionally a disposition in apologists of the early Church to lay undue stress on some points of resemblance between Mithraism and Christianity.

Furthermore, it remains true, despite all reservations, that adherents of the "comparative-religion school" are entirely too impatient with regard to questions of priority. They are indeed very severe upon those who raise such questions. But dates have their importance. For example, the phrase, "reborn for eternity," occurs in connection with the blood-bath of the taurobolium. How useful as establishing the origin of the Christian idea! From the confident way in which the phrase "reborn for eternity" is quoted in discussions of the origin of Christianity, one would think that its pre-Christian origin were established beyond doubt. As a matter of fact this phrase does not appear until the fourth century, when Christianity was taking its place as the established religion of the Roman world. If there is any dependence, it is certainly dependence of the taurobolium upon Christianity, and not of Christianity upon the taurobolium. (Machen)

Some apparent similarities exist between Chris-

tianity and Mithraism, but in a number of details it is quite as probable that Mithraism was the borrower from Christianity, a fact disregarded by many writers on the subject. Christianity is supposed to have undergone kaleidoscopic changes in the course of a few years or even months, changes involving a transformation of its inmost nature; yet pagan religion is apparently thought to have remained from age to age the same. On the other hand, the paganism of the third and fourth centuries is thought to have constituted such a unity that the presence of certain elements of it in the pre-Christian period is regarded as permitting the whole system to be transplanted bodily to that early time. In view of the crass syncretism practiced by the Mysteries, we shall hardly be wrong in judging that, though Mithraism contained elements of a religion much older than itself not necessarily borrowed from Christianity, resemblances were pushed forward, exaggerated, and modified with a special view to the necessities of the conflict with the new faith. Mithraism was all comprehensive and tolerant of every other cult, the Pater Patrum himself was an adept in a number of other religions. Mithraism, at least in the fourth century, had as its end and aim the union of all gods and all myths in a vast synthesis - the foundation of a new religion in harmony with the prevailing philosophy and the political constitution of the Empire. The Mazdean Mysteries sought to conciliate paganism by a succession of adaptations

and compromises, whereas the Church was essentially exclusive, condemning all other religions in the world, alone and unique in its majesty. It performed the miraculous feat of triumphing over the ancient world in spite of legislation and the imperial policy and the Mysteries were promptly abolished the moment the protection of the state was withdrawn and transformed into hostility.

Moreover the resemblances pointed out are superficial and external. Not even a long list of parallels can, of themselves, establish dependence. Nor is any amount of outward resemblance sufficient basis for a theory of borrowing, when there are wide divergences in the more essential contents of the subject matter. Parallelism must be essential in content and be supported by an appropriate historical background before one may use it as a proof of real genetic relationships. The rationale behind the conceptions of Mithraism and the way in which they were carried out are radically different from those of Christianity.

Let us now enter upon the resemblances in detail. Mithras is called a mediator and so is Christ; but Mithras originally only in a cosmogonic or astronomical sense. Christ was an historical personage, crucified under a Roman governor; Mithras was an abstraction, a personification not even of the sun, but of the diffused daylight. His incarnation is supposed to have happened before all

history. *that this conception became prevalent in the Church* Some of the sacred rites commonly in vogue in Mithraism were analogous to the rites of the Christian Church. Confident judgment is properly regarded as materially abridged by our very scanty information respecting the ceremonies which the Mysteries placed under the ban of secrecy. It is quite generally believed, however, that they included transactions somewhat resembling the Christian rites of Baptism and the Eucharist. In Mithraism baptism may have been an adaptation of the ablutions of Zoroastrianism or a parody of the Christian rite. Conformably to the ancient Iranian rites, repeated ablutions were prescribed to neophytes and a kind of baptism designed to wash away their guilty stains. It might be of interest to mention in this connection that initiations into Mithraism were accompanied by masquerading in the guise of animals. The idea of a sacred banquet is as old as the human race and existed in all ages and among all peoples. Mithras ascends into heaven after a sacred banquet with the sun. We find no resemblance whatever here to Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper. The sacred ceremonies of Mithraism had an opus ex operato efficacy and the supposed purity and holiness imparted by the practice of the sacred ceremonies were an indispensable condition of eternal life. The New Testament teaches no opus ex operato efficacy of its Sacraments. It must be admitted,

however, that this conception became prevalent in the Church a few centuries later, probably through the influence of the Mysteries..

If, as is urged by some, Mithraism possessed a rite similar to Christian confirmation we may regard this similarity as purely fortuitous. Possibly it may also have been copied from the early Christians.

Mithras became the creator of all the beneficent things on earth by slaying the sacred bull, and after protecting the early human race during various catastrophes, ascended into heaven. According to the Bible God created heaven and earth by His omnipotent Word, the eternal Logos. In the fullness of time Christ became man, fulfilled the Law in man's stead, and suffered and died on the cross to redeem men from their sins and reconcile them to God. Mithraism taught nothing of the kind. In Mithraism man is his own savior. Mithraism saved exclusively by sacramentalism. When ascending the seven planetary spheres after death the soul in its transmigration must give the secret formulae imparted in the Mysteries in order to pass the guardian spirit. It would be blasphemous to institute any comparison between the tauroctonous Mithra and Christ crucified.

Mithra, like Christ, is said to have ascended into heaven. This parallel is rather striking and difficult to explain. We do not know the date of the origin of the

Mithraic myth. We might assume it to be an adaptation of Elijah's ascent into heaven.

Much has been made of the presence of the adoring shepherds, but their existence on sculptures has not been proven, and considering that man had not yet appeared, it is an anachronism to suppose their presence. Cumont says: "Apparently the attempt was made to discern in the legend of the Iranian hero the counterpart of the life of Jesus, and the disciples of the Magi probably drew a direct contrast between the Mithraic worship of the shepherds, the Mithraic communion and ascension, and those of the Gospels. The rock of generation, which had given birth to the genius of light, was even compared to the immovable rock, emblem of Christ, upon which the Church was founded, and the crypt in which the bull had perished was made the counterpart of that in which Christ is said to have been born in Bethlehem. But this strained parallelism could result in nothing but a caricature." Cumont also states that the Mazdean beliefs regarding the advent of Mithra into the world have strangely varied.

Mithraic mythology places a universal flood at the beginning of history. The story of the flood is, however, found in practically all religions and is evidently a remnant of the tradition handed down through the ages regarding that terrible catastrophe.

The Mithraic mysteries celebrated the birth of

Mithras on the 25th of December. Cumont says: "It appears certain that the commemoration of the Nativity was set for the 25th of December, because it was at the winter solstice that the rebirth of the invincible god, the Natalis Invicti was celebrated. In adopting this date, which was universally distinguished by sacred festivities, the ecclesiastical authority purified in some measure the profane usages which it could not suppress." Others maintain that both Mithraism and Christianity adopted the date of a solar festival of unknown origin. In his Christian Art Dr. P. Kretzmann states: "The careful research work of Tille and of Usener have established beyond a doubt that Pope Liberius fixed the celebration of Christmas for December 25th in 354."

Both Christianity and Mithraism sanctified Sunday and set it aside for their worship. We need assume no borrowing on either side. It is merely a case of parallelism. The Christians sanctified the Lord's day in commemoration of Christ's resurrection, while the Mithraists followed a pagan usage according to which Sunday was dedicated to the worship of the Sun.

The Christians reinterpreted the heathen name as implying the Sun of Righteousness with reference to the "arising" (Mal. 4,2). Cumont believes that reference to the passage just cited gave rise to misunderstanding. He says: "The ecclesiastical writers, reviving a metaphor

of the prophet Malachi, contrasted the 'Sun of Justice' with the 'invincible Sun,' and consented to see in the dazzling orb which illuminated men a symbol of Christ, 'the light of the world.' Should we be astonished if the multitudes of devotees failed to observe the subtle distinctions of the doctors, and if in obedience to a pagan custom they rendered to the radiant star of day the homage which orthodoxy reserved for God? In the fifth century, not only heretics, but even faithful followers, were still wont to bow their heads toward its dazzling disc as it rose above the horizon, and to murmur the prayer, 'Have mercy upon us.'"

Mithraism is cited as presenting something like the Christian representations regarding resurrection of the dead, visitation of the world by fire, judgment and sentencing of men, according to their deserts, to heaven or to hell. It would be rash, however, to infer from this correspondence any borrowing of Mithraic materials by Christianity. It is very doubtful whether Mithraism came into any real contact with the Christian domain when the New Testament was written. Besides, the supposition that the writers of either the Old or the New Testament should go to pagan sources for their materials is utterly preposterous. Furthermore, there are radical differences in the Mithraic and Christian conceptions as will be seen from the following.

Like all the Oriental cults, the Persian Mysteries

mingled with their cosmogonic fables and their theological speculations ideas of deliverance and redemption. They believed in the conscious survival after death of the divine essence that dwells within men, and in punishments and rewards beyond the tomb. The souls, of which an infinite multitude peopled the habitation of heaven, descended here below to animate the bodies of men, either because they were compelled by dire necessity to fall into this material and corrupt world, or because they had dropped of their own accord upon the earth to undertake here the battle against the demons. When after death the genius of corruption took possession of the body, and the soul quitted its human prison, the devas of darkness and the emissaries of heaven disputed for its possession. A special decree decided whether it was worthy to ascend again into paradise. If it was stained by an impure life, the emissaries of Ahriman dragged it down to the infernal depths, where they inflicted upon it a thousand tortures; or perhaps, as a mark of its fall, it was condemned to take up its abode in the body of some unclean animal. If, on the contrary, its merits outweighed its faults, it was borne aloft to the regions on high. (Cumont)

The heavens were divided into seven spheres, each of which was conjoined with a planet. A sort of ladder, composed of eight superposed gates, the first seven of which were constructed of different metal, was

the symbolic suggestion in the temples, of the road to be followed to reach the supreme region of the fixed stars. To pass from one story to the next, each time the wayfarer had to enter a gate guarded by an angel of Ormazd. The initiates alone, to whom the appropriate formulas had been taught, knew how to appease these inexorable guardians. As the soul traversed these different zones, it rid itself, as one would of garments, of the passions and faculties that it had received in its descent to the earth. It was naked, stripped of every vice and every sensibility, when it penetrated the eighth heaven to enjoy there, as an essence supreme endless beatitude. Mithra presided over the judgment of the soul. He also served as guide to the faithful ones in their ascent to the empyrean. (Cumont)

When the ages assigned for the duration of the struggle between the principles of good and evil have rolled away, the scourges sent by Ahriman will compass the destruction of the world. A marvelous bull, analogous to the primitive bull, will then appear again on the earth, and Mithra will redescend and reawaken men to life. The good will be separated from the bad. Then in a supreme sacrifice Mithra will immolate the divine bull, will mingle its fat with the consecrated wine, and will offer to the just this miraculous beverage which will endow them all with immortality. Then Juppiter-Ormazd, yielding to the prayers of the beatified ones, will cause to fall from

the heavens a devouring fire which will annihilate all the wicked. The defeat of the Spirit of Darkness will be achieved, and in the general conflagration Ahriman and his impure demons will perish and the rejuvenated universe enjoy unto all eternity happiness without end. (Cumont)

A great number of critics assume that both Christianity and Mithraism received their eschatology from a common source, the ancient Mazdean beliefs of the Persians. Judaism is accused of having copied Zoroastrianism during the Babylonian Captivity. This is especially urged with regard to the doctrine of the resurrection. It is, however, foolish to suppose that Daniel and Ezekiel, in whose eyes the exile was itself a penalty provoked by heathenish tendencies, should have slid away into the superstitions either of their patrons or their taskmasters. Where a truly old relationship exists between the Hebrew and Persian systems, it is naturally explained in the hypothesis of aboriginal unity, as for instance the doctrine of the devil; in other cases there is either no true parallelism at all, or else points of doctrine said to be imported by the later class of writers, such as the doctrines of the angels and the resurrection, had been actually current in the Hebrew Church for centuries anterior to the Babylonish Exile. Christ shows the Sadducee that the doctrine of the resurrection is found already in Genesis. Luther points out that the resurrection is taught

already in Gen. 3, 15. Hofmann says: "Nichts kann irriger sein als die Meinung, die Totenauferstehung sei eine spaet erst durch menschliches Nachdenken aufgekommene Idee, deren ersten Spuren, wenn sie nicht gar erst von den Parsen an die Juden gekommen ist, wie bei Jesaia und Hezekiel, vielleicht auch schon in den Psalmen Davids begegnen sollen Es ist keine Zeit zu finden, wo sich der Glaube ohne diese Hoffnung denken liesse, und kein Zeitpunkt nach der ersten Verheissung, wo sie zuerst haette aufkommen koennen Hengstenberg sagt einmal, wo man den Tod als Strafe der Suende ansah, habe der Glaube an das ewige Leben notwendig hervorbrechen muessen, sobald die Hoffnung auf die Erloesung Wurzel gefasst haette. Die Hoffnung auf die Erloesung hat aber Wurzel gefasst, als jenes ernste Gotteswort nach der Suende der Erstgeschaffenen vom Siege der Menschheit (sollte heissen: vom Siege des Weibessamens) ueber ihren Verfuehrer sagte. In diesen Sieg ist auch der Tod verschlungen. Was aber der Menschheit verheissen war, sollte sich der Glaube der einzelnen das nicht zurechnen? Wenn sie wussten, dass ihnen die Suende vergeben war, wie konnten sie anders als sich der Hoffnung getroesten, dass sie nicht im Tode bleiben wuerden?"

Mithras shooting arrows at a rock to draw water for the human race offers a similarity to Moses causing the water of Horeb to gush forth. The Persian

myth is manifestly an adaptation of the historical fact recorded in the Bible.

Persian dualism explains the universe as the outcome of two eternally opposed and coexisting principles, conceived as good and evil, light and darkness. Ormazd (later Mithra) is infinite light, supreme wisdom, and the author of all good; Ahriman is the principle of darkness and of all evil. This conception differs radically from the Christian conception. According to the Christian view God was the only existence before the Creation. The Devil, is a creature of God, one of His angels, who subsequently rebelled against God.

According to Scripture the cause of sin is twofold: a) the Devil, who sinned first, then seduced man, and still rules the unbelievers and tempts the believers; b) man himself, because the fact that he is seduced to sin does not excuse him for committing sin, nor does it remove his responsibility for his sin.

Both Zoroastrianism and Mithraism held the mistaken view that the body is the seat of sin, the soul being an innocent prisoner. Scripture teaches that the seat of sin is the soul, the body being the seat of sin insofar as it is the organ of the soul. According to Mt. 15, 19 the heart is the real seat of sin and the source of all sins in thought, word, and deed. Zoroastrianism and Mithraism assumed two substances, a good and an evil substance.

This is in direct contrast to Scriptural teaching.

Original sin is not a substance but an accident, because the human nature is a creature of God also after the Fall, and as such it is and remains good. (Job 10, 8).

The fraternal and democratic spirit of Mithraism deserves our approbation - as far as it went. However, the small Mithraic congregations were like masonic lodges for a few and for men only - even those mostly of one class, the military. A religion that excludes half of the human race bears no comparison to the religion of Christ. Christianity presented itself to the world as an open system, not a fenced-off mystery. Free access to its whole message was offered to every man and to every woman. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3, 28).

With the similarities there are equally impressive differences, some of which have already been mentioned. Mithraism presents a pantheon, a personification of abstractions and forces; Christianity the one living God; the one an eternal dualism of good and evil, the other a creation subject to the will of an unrivalled Creator; the one the controlling and inexorable power of fate, the other the government of a wise and beneficent God; the one a mythological savior, the other a historic person, who lived a real yet sinless life and died a

heroic death to rescue the world from sin. Mithraism saved exclusively by sacramentalism, Christianity by faith. Mithraism was grossly syncretistic, Christianity exclusive. Further than this, Mithraism was established in the Western world only after the Christian doctrines had been wrought out in the Church. Disregarding the reasons already mentioned, Christianity could never have absorbed a religion so disparate from itself without becoming radically affected by the act. De Jong is quite right in rejecting utterly the assumption that Christianity borrowed any of its tenets from the Mithraic cult.

"There is no doubt that while the visions of the Bundehesh [the Persian Genesis] derived their colouring, and in part their substance also, from Semitic or from quasi-Christian influences, the advocates of Mithra-worship in the earlier centuries of our era were engaged with more or less of system in retarding the triumphant march of Christianity. At a period when the claims of our religion were put forward with an irresistible charm alike in the unspotted lives and the heroic deaths of its true-hearted converts, many of the heathen, still unwilling to embrace it, so far yielded to vibrations it excited in all quarters, as to recognize in it the hidden working of a supernatural virtue. We discern this tendency amid the swarm of startling heresies that sprang up in its track; for most of them were anxious to embody one or more dis-

severed doctrines of the Gospel with their wild and heathenish speculations; and others have been also charged with mimicking the smaller details of its ritual system. We discern this tendency still more in one particular instance, bearing on the present theme, for 'almost every thing that Zoroaster taught of Mithra' was perpetuated in the school of Mani, with the noticeable difference that the Persian misbeliever did not scruple to transfer it all directly to his Christ." (Hardwick: Christ and Other Masters).

"Vain, however, and unfruitful was the zeal put forward in transplanting the fantastic shadows of paganism; while the primitive vision of the helper Sosiosh, dim and fluctuating at the best, was blotted from the Persian mind entirely, or was fading under the augmented brilliance of Mithra,- Christ and Christ alone, expected in the old economy and made manifest in the new, the living, reigning, and historic Christ was everywhere imprinting on the world an image of His love, which neither time nor space could deaden.... While Mithra, once His rival, has left no traces, save in monumental sculptures, of the homage rendered to him in the early centuries of our era, Christ, the sovereign Lord of all, is going forward on His peaceful conquest of the nations, 'the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever.'" (Hardwick).

Encyclopedia Britannica
Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia
Catholic Encyclopedia
McClintock and Strong: Cyclopedia
Dictionary of the Apostolic Church - Hastings
Foakes-Jackson: History of the Christian Church to A.D.461
Neander: Kirchengeschichte
Gieseler: Ecclesiastical History
R. Hume: The World's Living Religions (Zoroastrianism)
Sheldon: The Mysteries and the New Testament
Angus: The Mystery Religions and Christianity
Uhlhorn: The Conflict of Christianity and Heathenism
Cumont: The Mysteries of Mithra
Cumont: The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism
Robertson: Pagan Christs
Dunlap: The Ghebers of Hebron
**Dill: Roman Society in the Last Centuries of the Western
Empire**
Machen: The Origin of Paul's Religion
Kretzmann: Christian Art
Pieper: Christliche Dogmatik I. III.
Glover: The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire
Hardwick: Christ and Other Masters