

Does Christ's Resurrection Story Originate in Mithraism?

Who is Mithra (aka Mithras)? According to the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (1997), Mithra is a god worshipped in four different regions. His origins are traced from Persia, to India and China, then to Babylonia (some Jewish contact), and then to the Roman Empire and the Mani heresy of the 3rd century CE. Mithraism finally died out in the 5th century CE, except for a small following (less than 70,000) of Parsis (Persians) in India to this day.

The world's most widely recognized researcher of Mithraism was Franz Cumont. Born in 1868 he published several large works on the subject in spite of the fact that no specifically Mithraic texts have survived, only inscriptions and accounts by outsiders, principally Porphyry, an anti-Christian writer c. 232-303 whose works were burnt as heretical in 448 but survive from works of refutation (*Oxford Dictionary*, 1997).

Because Mithra worship is hailed as the pagan Roman Empire's final state religion, many excavated cave-like temples have been found throughout what was the Roman Empire during the first through fifth centuries (notably: Britain, Italy, Romania, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey, Persia, Armenia, Syria, Israel, and North Africa). Because the military people were its basic adherents, it went where they did.

The Roman Mithraic mystery religion claimed to have its origin in Persia where, in the 6th century BCE, a prophet named Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek) undertook the reformation of the polytheistic religion practiced at the time, by elevating Ahura-Mazda, god of the skies, and Ahriman, god of darkness, and placing the myriad other gods under them. One of the members of this pantheon of gods was Mithra, named the 'judge of souls.' He became the divine representative of Ahura-Mazda on earth and was directed to protect the righteous from the demonic forces of Ahriman. Mithra was called omniscient, undeceivable, infallible, eternally watchful and never-resting. The name 'Mithra' means 'contract' and Mithra's divine duty was to ensure general prosperity through good contractual relations between men.

It should be noted that occurring contemporary to this reformation were the Babylonian captivity of the Jews (597 BCE) and their emancipation by Cyrus the Great of Persia (538 BCE). While some hold that the Jews were influenced by the Persians to create the 'Satan' figure, my observation is that perhaps the Persians (specifically Zoroaster) were influenced by Jewish thought to create a hierarchical system out of their gods, obviously bringing about a dualism, but ultimately having one really 'good' guy, Ahura-Mazda, on top of the pile.

Zoroaster also incorporated the expectation of a savior, who was to be a god incarnated into human form. It is believed by most scholars that the three magi following the start to Bethlehem were looking for Zoroaster's predicted savior. Persian tradition, however, says that Mithra was actually born in Persia to Anahita, an immaculate virgin mother once worshipped as a fertility goddess before the hierarchical reformation, and that he ascended into heaven in 208 BCE, 64 years after his birth.

When Christianity was being birthed in the pagan Roman Empire, it was Mithra who was being worshipped by the military and also by many businessmen (because of the 'contract' aspect of the blessing). In fact, from 67-70 CE, the *legio XV Apollionaris*, took part in suppressing the uprising of the Jews in Palestine. After sacking and burning the second Temple and capturing the Ark of the Covenant, they offered sacrifices to Mithra on the banks of the Danube River along with new troops from Turkey. By 200 CE the Roman Emperors were claiming to be divine and Nero actually claimed to be the reincarnation of Mithra. But after Constantine, Emperor from 306-337 CE converted in 312, Christianity was made the state religion and all emperors following him were openly hostile to Mithraism.

While there are some seemingly parallel practices (offering sacrifices, purification rituals, a life seeking good and resisting evil, life after death), the differences are many and definitive (a men-only religion, celibacy, seven levels of initiation, pre-existence of the soul, use of hallucinogenic drink with sacrifice, secret ceremonies, passwords and handshakes).

Mithraism is not Christianity, nor did its practices lead to Christian practices—unlike Jewish practices that were given new meaning/fulfilled/explained by Jesus/Christianity.

And while there are some seemingly parallel traits in the lives of Jesus and Mithra (male, celibate, born of a virgin mother, saving by shedding of blood), the differences are many and definitive (born of the virgin 'Anahita' who swam in a lake where Zoroaster [a prophet, not god] had left sperm 400 years earlier vs. born of a virgin of the line of David by the Holy Spirit of God Himself according to prophecy, shedding the blood of a bull rather than his own blood, ascension rather than death and resurrection).

The god Mithra is not the god-man Jesus, nor did Jesus' "story" copy that of Mithra - unlike Jewish messianic prophecy that was fulfilled by Jesus. Christianity is of Judaic origin, not Mithraic origin.

Regarding the Roman Mithraic mystery religion, Ron Nash in *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* writes, "Allegations of an early Christian dependence on Mithraism have been rejected on many grounds. Mithraism had no concept of the

death and resurrection of its god and no place for any concept of rebirth-at least in its early stages ... During the early stages of the cult, the notion of rebirth would have been foreign to its basic outlook ... Moreover, Mithraism was basically a military cult. Therefore one must be skeptical about suggestions that it appealed to nonmilitary people like the early Christians."

In summary, the Christian faith rests on the belief in the resurrection of Christ, his victory over sin and the grave, and the hope of believers in the redeeming work of Christ for salvation. Because there is no death and resurrection of Mithra in whatever scanty information there is about the 'old' Mithraic religion, and nothing about a death and resurrection in the Roman Empire era of the religion, we have no choice other than to draw the conclusion that there is no connection whatsoever about the number one, most critically important doctrine of the Christian church (i.e., the resurrection) and the story of Mithra.

In the end, Christianity swallowed up Mithraism-most probably because the nearness of the people to the historicity of Jesus proved compelling and real. His claims and those of his followers met the needs of those who practiced mystery religion, and while based on the ancient morality of Judaism, were contemporary and more meaningful to all people.

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