Mithraism and Christianity
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There are many cults and pagan religions that sprang up during the reign of the Roman Empire, Christianity being one of them. One that is not so commonly known is the cult of Mithraism, a Persian religion that gained widespread popularity in the Roman Empire during the first few centuries A.D. Mithraism was very different from most cults, mainly in its rites, its exclusion of women, and especially in the significant relations it bore to Christianity.

The deity Mithra was originally an Indo-Iranian god who was worshipped by small, exclusively male groups (Gordon 6088). Mithra’s origins are in Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, but the deity has no particular cult in either religion. Mithra was originally the god of war and friendship, but had many other personages and attributes as well. One personage ascribed to Mithra was the mediator between mankind and Ahura-Mazda, who was the god of salvation (Morse 33). The god Mithra also had different names in different religions, Mithra being the Roman version. The names Meitros, Mihr-Varuna, Mithra, Mitra, Mehr, Mihr, and Meher are all interchangeable with Mithra and refer to the same god (Morse 33).

The origin of Mithraism is not clear. It probably began around 1400 B.C. and continued to about 400 A.D. when it finally declined and all but disappeared after it was crushed by the newly popular mystery cult of Christianity. It reached its height of popularity around the time that Christianity was coming to power and was practiced by Persians, Babylonians, Indians, Romans, and Greeks (Morse 33). Mithraism entered the Greek world with groups of Persians who remained in Asia Minor after the victories of Alexander the Great (Nock 108-9). Mithraism never flourished in Greece or in heavily Hellenized lands. The conquest of the kingdom of Mithradates by Pompey brought the Roman armies into regions where Mithraism flourished (Moore 592). Mithraism did not show up in the west until the end of the first century after Christ following the annexation of Commagene and Armenia by the emperor Vespasian (Moore 593). For the most part “...the cult was carried by pirates, soldiers, functionaries, traders, and slaves...” (Nock 109). The slaves’ vital role in the spread of the cult came with the large number of Asiatic slaves sold into the West who carried the religion throughout the provinces of the empire (Moore 594).

There is little evidence left of the cult of Mithraism, and there are no surviving religious texts. Since Mithraism is a mystery cult based on secret knowledge that was never recorded by its practitioners, much can only be inferred about the finer details of the religion. The main source of information concerning the cult that does exist comes from “the inscriptions discovered in a Mithras sanctuary under the Church of Santa Prisca on the Aventine in Rome” (Betz 62). The only other sources of evidence are votive inscriptions and references made by poets and church fathers (Betz 62). Mithraic houses of worship have been discovered all throughout what was the Roman Empire. Called a mithraeum, it was an underground temple which looked very much like a cave. The caves were small, and most could barely have contained more than one hundred followers at a time (Moore 594). Many mithraea have survived and have been found as far north as modern day England. To the delight of archeologists and scholars, mithraea are also
marvelously well preserved since they were built underground. The sites of mithraea were never recorded and have been discovered largely by accident by archeologists excavating for other purposes (Martin 2).

The central ritual that surrounded Mithraism was the bull-slaying. In every mithraeum ever discovered there is a relief or painting of the tauroctony or the bull-slaying scene. It shows Mithra pulling the bull’s head back and stabbing its throat. There is also a god drinking the blood that flows from the bull’s wound and a scorpion attacking its genitals (Morse 34). The interpretation of this act is that the bull’s blood gave both fertility to earth and immortality to the initiates who participate in the sacred meal or ceremony (Betz 77). This supports the Babylonian belief that blood granted man immortality (Morse 35). These rites bear striking similarities to the Christian belief of rebirth and purification through Christ’s blood and sacrifice. Similarities can be seen here between the feasts of Mithraism and the Christian ritual of communion as well. The bull slaying ritual did not take place in the Iranian religion that Mithraism is supposed to have originated from. This could simply be the evolution of the religion through the ancient world or as some scholars believe, a totally different religion.

Mithraism may have been a mystery cult, but there were certain aspects of it that did not conform to that label. First, “Mithras in the western world does not seem to have had a priestly caste of a professional clergy” (Nock 109). The cult did have an order however, which was organized through a series of grades of initiation that a person gradually rose through (Ulansey 6). The grades of initiation, from lowest to highest, were Crow, Nymphus, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Heliodromus, and Father (Ulansey 19). One facet that mystery religions often possessed that Mithraism did not was the presence of a cult-drama. A cult-drama is where “. . . the sacred story of man’s deliverance was annually set forth in action before all who cared to attend. . . .” and “. . . was normally an integral part of the cult. . . .” (Nock 110). Yet Mithraism practiced no such thing. These rituals also would have been performed in what Nock calls a “substantial temple” (110), which Mithraism did not have. Unlike the cult-drama, “Mithras was not born annually and did not die annually: he was created once; in the present he helped and saved; in the end he would inaugurate the new order which would last forever” (Nock 111). Obvious parallels can be seen here between Mithraism and Christianity, as the “. . . essential mystery-idea of a deity annually doing or suffering something was absent” (Nock 111). Nock notes that “Mithras was quite different from the myths of the other oriental gods who were attracting attention at the same time” (111). Mithraism possessed aspects that set it apart from other oriental religions at the time and made its cult more appealing to Roman soldiers. One such aspect was the cult’s “instinct for unsparing exertion in the face of mighty obstacles” and “vigorous heroic achievement” (Nock 112).

One well known fact about Mithraism is that it was a male dominated and a male-exclusive religion. Perhaps Mithraism appealed to Romans so much because of the exclusion of women, as females were not treated as equals in Rome and were often excluded. Mithraism is also a very masculine cult with no female figures and no concern for or mention of sexuality. Without an erotic mythology the male dominated structure of the religion may be a product of its lack of sexual myth. There is really no reason why women would even be drawn to the religion when the Greek and Roman theologies had plenty of female deities and positions in their temples for women. Although, it is possible that women were admitted into the cult in far western sects like the one found in northern
Africa (David 125). Small statues of women have been found in mithraea in Rome, Germany, and England, leaving some scholars to question the male dominance of Mithraism (David 126). This was not commonplace though, and scholars still agree that Mithraism was a completely male cult. A list found concerning a mithraeum in Virunum names ninety-eight members over a period of eighty years but not one woman is mentioned (Gordon 6090). Gordon further states that “... the repeated attempts to show that women might belong to the cult are wishful thinking” (6090).

Mithraism and Christianity are surprisingly very similar religions, and this paper has already made several comparisons between the two. Some scholars cite the numerous parallels between the two. Some go as far to say that “Christianity borrowed or stole concepts from Mithraism” (Morse 37), but this is impossible to prove. The proposed similarities between Christianity and Mithraism stem in part from Mithraism’s belief that the blood of the slain bull brings salvation, as seen in Line 14 of the Latin inscription found in the mithraem in Santa Prisca, “And you saved us after having shed the eternal blood” (Betz 77). But as Betz says in his article regarding Mithras inscriptions and the New Testament, “there is no possibility of assuming a direct dependency of either side upon the other” (64). Betz does note however that both religions share commonalities that are characteristic of Hellenistic mystery religion (64) such as the ideas of rebirth and recreation (72). His claim thus asserts that any comparisons between the two religions only have merit in that both were influenced by the same Hellenistic type, not that one was influenced by the other. As it was mentioned earlier Mithraism and Christianity existed during the same time with Mithraism developing first. That both could have been exposed to the same theological influences is very possible and a far more plausible theory than Mithraism and Christianity borrowing material from one another.

Mithraism is only one of the many pagan cults that flourished under the Roman Empire. Like most all of them it met its end when Christianity began its world domination. Mithraism however was not like its pagan and cult contemporaries in that it shared so much doctrine and ritual with the Christian religion. The French Philosopher Ernest Renan once observed that “If Christianity had been arrested in its growth by some mortal malady, the world would have been Mithraist” (Morse 33). That is quite a liberal conjecture, but perhaps not impossible.

Cited Works


