

Mithras as a Model of Modern Christianity

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Few writers have mentioned the cult of Mithras or of the possible existence of a relationship between it and modern Christianity. Most of the evidence is archaeological in nature, and few written documents remain. Ancient temples have been discovered with wall paintings, sculptures, and inscriptions. The early Christian churches erased most evidence in the attempt to destroy the earliest rival of Christianity during the first four centuries of its existence. From these works however, important information can still be discovered.

The earliest written reference to Mithras comes in the form of a treaty between the Hittites and the Mitanni about 1375 B.C.E. When the Aryan tribes came down from the Russian steppes, sometime between 2000 and 1500 B.C.E., they brought their gods with them. These people were called the Mitanni and entered India and Iran (Persia). Mithras was a redeemer god and also was the epitome of morality. Mithraism began to spread throughout the area because of its appeal to three main groups of people. The merchants, also known as “Syrians”, because of the god’s demand for honesty, the slaves and the military for the god’s demand for high moral integrity. These three groups were perhaps the most enabling means of expansion for this “mystery” religion, as all three groups were able to travel widely throughout Persia, India and into Rome. Roman soldiers had an attraction for oriental and eastern gods due to a belief in their reputation for wisdom, and accepted other gods into their already multitudinous array of gods and goddesses. From the eastern side of the early Roman Empire therefore came what is known today as the Roman cult of Mithras.

Romans usually called Mithras “Sol Dominus Invictus” meaning lord of the unconquerable sun and Plutarch confirms that Mithraism entered the Empire from Persia when Pompey’s soldiers encountered pirates from Cilicia. In fact, one of the most important areas for Mithraism was to be found in Tarsus – The home of Paul the apostle.

Mithras was originally an angel, but later was elevated due to his being a mediator between man and those on the divine level. Eventually Strabo would write that “The Persians honor the sun, whom they call Mithras, and the moon, and Aphrodite, and fire and earth, and winds and water.” Mithras became omniscient, the god of light, the heavenly light, a spiritual sun, the enemy of darkness and therefore the enemy of evil. He was the god of military victory and battles, contracts and oaths; he protected the righteous in this world, helped them into the next, sent the rain from heaven, and helped mankind. He was known also as the Logos or more commonly as “The Word”.

In comparison with the New Testament’s version of Jesus in today’s Christian Bible, Mithras is exceedingly one in the same individual. Mithras was born from a rock or cave and the stable from which Jesus is born is a cave. They are both said to have been born on the 25th of December, had 12 main disciples, ate a communion dinner consisting of bread and wine denoting the flesh and blood, had a last supper with his disciples and returns to heaven. They will both be victorious over evil at the last battle and will sit in judgment over mankind.

Other similarities that come from Mithraism and have been adopted onto the modern Christian churches are the concept of a central aisle and seats or pews down the sides, calling the minister “father”, the red cap, ring and vestments of the Pope, the miters of the bishops, the use of the sign of the cross at anointing the foreheads of believers and redeeming them as soldiers to fight the good fight. Even the wafers are marked with a cross that also was used by Mithraic priests. Mithraic language and symbolism is used throughout the New Testament. The Dayspring from on high, the light, and the sun of righteousness are all Mithraic expressions. Mithras has also been called the protector of the flock or as the good shepherd. Both Mithraism and Christianity introduced symbolic sacrifice (wafers and wine).

Even Easter, when the lamb was slain and eaten was a Mithraic festival to the goddess Astarte or Aphrodite and the early church tried to suppress pictures of Jesus as a lamb during the seventh century precisely due to its pagan associations. The Vatican hill of Rome considered to be sacred to Peter was originally sacred to Mithras and the cave of the Vatican was once a Mithraic temple. The very throne upon which the Pope sits is to this very day Mithraic in its origins from the inscriptions on it. The Magi who are mentioned as bringing gifts in the New Testament to the baby Jesus were priests of Mithras seeking their king.

Mithraism eventually died out in the time after Constantine. By then most of its customs had been absorbed by the Christian church, and Constantine had successfully merged his Mithraic worship of the sun into worship of Christianity. Augustine of Hippo, Saint Augustine, admits that the two religions had effectively merged when he proclaimed that the priests of Mithras worshipped the same god he did. Jesus and Mithras are the same individual. The two religions were and are the same religion but with a few differences. The original cult of Mithras excluded women from its membership, and the initiation of the membership is no longer a secret ritual.

Most Christians will claim that Mithraism came from Christianity instead of the other way around, but from the evidence of scholars and from works of sculpture, mosaics and the like it becomes obvious that Christianity came last. From the written evidence of the treaty between the Hittites and Mitannites, The inscription of Mithras being pictured as shaking hands with King Antiochus 1 dates to between 69-34 B.C.E. and takes place approximately 100 years before the crucifixion. Mithras can be found in Aryan, Persian, Indian, Roman, and even Chinese mythology.

Sources:

Excerpts from: Mithras: Mysteries and Initiation Rediscovered by D. Jason Cooper (1996, Samuel Weiser, Inc., York Beach, Maine. 12.95). Pages 1-8

The Religion of Mithras (www.askwhy.co.uk)

Mithraic Mysteries (www.bizstore.f9.co.uk)

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