

## Mithraism



The Mithraic Mysteries or Mysteries of Mithras was a mystery religion practised in the Roman Empire, best attested in Rome and Ostia, Mauretania, Britain and in the provinces along the Rhine and Danube frontier. Today, the beliefs of this cult are also referred to as Mithraism, but this is a recent development.

### Principles of Mithraism

Romans encountered worship of the deity Mithras as part of Zoroastrianism in the eastern provinces of the empire, particularly in Asia Minor (now modern Turkey).

Mithraism is best documented in the form it had acquired in the later Roman Empire. It was an initiatory 'mystery religion,' passed from initiate to initiate, like the Eleusinian Mysteries. It was not based on a supernaturally revealed body of scripture, and hence very little written documentary evidence survives. Soldiers appeared to be the most plentiful followers of Mithraism, and women were apparently not allowed to join.

Roman worship of Mithras began sometime during the early Roman empire, perhaps during the late first century of the Common Era (hereafter CE), and flourished from the second through the fourth century BCE. during which it came under the influence of Greek and Roman mythologies. The Mithraic cult maintained secrecy. Its teaching were only revealed to initiates.



The evidence for this cult is mostly archaeological, consisting of the remains of mithraic temples, dedicatory inscriptions, and iconographic representations of the god and other aspects of the cult in stone sculpture, sculpted stone relief, wall painting, and mosaic. There is very little literary evidence pertaining to the cult. Remains of Mithraic temples can be found throughout the Roman Empire, from Palestine across north of Africa, and across central Europe to northern England.

For over three hundred years the rulers of the Roman Empire worshipped the god Mithras. In Rome, more than a hundred inscriptions dedicated to Mithras have been found, in addition to 75 sculpture fragments, and a series of Mithraic temples situated in all parts of the city. One of the largest Mithraic temples built in Italy now lies under the present site of the Church of St. Clemente, near the Colosseum in Rome.

### **The Mithraeum**

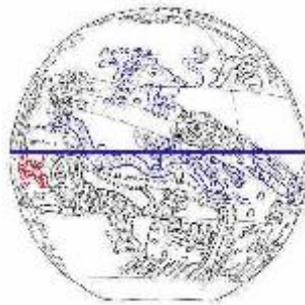


It is known that the center of the cult was the Mithraeum, either an adapted natural cave or cavern, preferably sanctified by previous local religious usage, or an artificial building imitating a cavern. Mithraea were dark and windowless, even if they were not actually in a subterranean space or in a natural cave. When possible, the mithraeum was constructed within or below an existing building. The site of a mithraeum may also be identified by its separate entrance or vestibule, its "cave", called the 'spelaeum' or 'spelunca', with raised benches along the side walls for the ritual meal, and its sanctuary at the far end, often in a recess, before which the pedestal-like altar stood.

Many mithraea that follow this basic plan are scattered over much of the Empire's former area, particularly where the legions were stationed along the frontiers. Others may be recognized by their characteristic layout, even though converted as crypts beneath Christian churches.



In every Mithraic temple, the place of honor was occupied by a representation of Mithras killing a sacred bull, called a tauroctony. It has been more recently proposed that the tauroctony is a symbolic representation of the constellations rather than an originally Iranian animal sacrifice scene (Ulansey, 1991).



Mithras is associated with Perseus, whose constellation is above that of the bull. A serpent, a scorpion, a dog, and a raven are present, also thought to represent associated constellations.

From the structure of the mithraea it is possible to surmise that worshippers would have gathered for a common meal along the reclining couches lining the walls. It is worth noting that most temples could hold only thirty or forty individuals.

### **Mithraic Ranks**

The members of a mithraeum were divided into seven ranks. All members were apparently expected to progress through the first four ranks, while only a few would go on to the three higher ranks. The first four ranks seem to represent spiritual progress, while the other three appear to have been specialized offices. The seven ranks were:

- Corax (raven)
- Nymphus (bride)

- Miles (soldier)
- Leo (lion)
- Perses (Persian)
- Heliodromus (sun-courier)
- Pater (father)

The new initiate became a Corax, while the Leo was an adept. The titles of the first four ranks suggest the possibility that advancement through the ranks was based on introspection and spiritual growth.

### The Iconography of Mithraism

In the absence of any Mithraist scripture, all we know about Mithras is what can be deduced from his images in the mithraea that have survived.

Some depictions show Mithras carrying a rock on his back, much as Atlas did, and/or wearing a cape that had the starry sky as its inside lining. A bronze image of Mithras, emerging from an egg-shaped zodiac ring, found associated with a mithraeum along Hadrian's Wall (now at the University of Newcastle), and an inscription from the city of Rome suggest that Mithras may have been seen as the Orphic creator-god Phanes who emerged from the cosmic egg at the beginning of time, bringing the universe into existence. This view is reinforced by a bas-relief at the Estense Museum in Modena, Italy, which shows Phanes coming from an egg, surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac, in an image very similar to that at Newcastle.



He is sometimes depicted as a man being born or reborn from a rock (the 'petra genetrix'), typically with the snake [Ouroboros](#) wrapped around it. It is commonly believed that the cave in Mithraism imagery represents the cosmos, and the rock is the cosmos seen from the outside; hence the description of this god as 'rising from the dead'. According to some accounts, Mithras died, was buried in a cavernous rock tomb, and was resurrected.

Another more widely accepted interpretation takes its clue from the writer Porphyry, who recorded that the cave pictured in the tauroctony was intended to be "an image of the cosmos." According to this view, the cave depicted in that image may represent the "great cave" of the sky. This interpretation was supported by research by K. B. Stark in 1869, with astronomical support

by ROGER BECK (1984 and 1988), DAVID UIANSEY (1989) and NOEL SWERDLOW (1991). THIS interpretation is reinforced by the constant presence in Mithraic imagery of heavenly objects - such as stars, the moon, and the sun - and symbols for the signs of the Zodiac.

One of the central motifs of Mithraism is the tauroctony, the myth of sacrifice by Mithra of a sacred bull created by the supreme deity Ahura Mazda, which Mithra stabs to death in the cave, having been instructed to do so by a crow, sent from Ahura Mazda. In this myth, from the body of the dying bull spring plants, animals, and all the beneficial things of the earth. It is thought that the bull represents the constellation of Taurus. However, in the period we are considering, the sun at the Vernal Equinox had left Taurus two thousand years before, and was in the process of moving from Aries to Pisces.

In light of this interpretation, it has been suggested in recent times that the Mithraic religion is somehow connected to the end of the astrological "age of Taurus," and the beginning of the "age of Aries," which took place about the year 2000 BC. It has even been speculated that the religion may have originated at that time (although there is no record of it until the 2nd century BC).

The identification of an "age" with a particular zodiac constellation is based on the sun's position during the vernal equinox. Before 2000 BC, the Sun could have been seen against the stars of the constellation of Taurus at the time of vernal equinox [had there been an eclipse]. Due to the precession of the equinoxes, on average every 2,160 years the Sun appears against the stars of a new constellation at vernal equinox. The current astrological age started when the equinox precessed into the constellation of Pisces, in about the year 150 BC, with the "Age of Aquarius" starting in AD 2600.

Indeed, the constellations common in the sky from about 4000 BC to 2000 BC were Taurus the Bull, Canis Minor the Dog, Hydra the Snake, Corvus the Raven, and Scorpio the Scorpion, all of which may be identified in the fresco from Dura-Europos, a standard Hellenistic iconography. Further support for this theory is the presence of a lion and a cup in some depictions of the tauroctony: indeed Leo (a lion) and Aquarius ("the cup-bearer") were the constellations seen as the northernmost (summer solstice) and southernmost (winter solstice) positions in the sky during the age of Taurus.

The precession of the equinoxes was discovered, or at least publicized, by the Greek astronomer Hipparchus in the 2nd century BC. Whether the phenomenon was known by Mithraists previously is unknown. In any case, Mithras was presumed to be very powerful if he was able to rotate the heavens, and thus 'kill the bull' or displacing Taurus as the reigning image in the heavens.

Some commentators surmise that the Mithraists worshipped Mithras as the mediator between Man and the supreme God of the upper and nether world. Other commentators, inspired by James Frazer's theories, have additionally labeled Mithras a mystery religion with a life-death-rebirth deity, comparable to Isis, the resurrected Jesus or the Persephone/Demeter cult of the [Eleusinian Mysteries](#).

## History of Mithraism

### Mithraism In [Persia \(Iran\)](#)

Mithraism is generally considered to be of Persian origins, specifically an outgrowth of Zoroastrian culture, though not of [Zoroaster's](#) teachings. For Zoroaster was a monotheist, for whom Ahuramazda was the One god. Darius the Great was equally stringent in the official monotheism of his reign: no god but Ahuramazda is ever mentioned in any of the numerous inscriptions that survive of his reign (521-485 BC).

However, the official cult is rarely the sole religion in an area. The following inscription from Susa of Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-358 BC) demonstrates that not all the Achaemenid kings were as purely Zoroastrian as Darius the Great.

It is tempting to identify the Roman Mithras with the Persian Mithra, except that there is no known Persian legend or text about Mithra killing a bull or being associated with other animals. On the other hand, there is a story of Ahriman, the evil god in popular developments of Zoroastrianism, killing a bull. It is also hard to explain how the Sun-god Mithra would come to be worshipped in the windowless, cave-like mithraeum.

A possible link between Persia and Rome, which could be the stage for these changes, may be the kingdoms of Parthia and Pontus in Asia Minor. Several of their kings were called Mithradates, meaning "given by Mithra", starting with Mithradates I of Parthia (died 138 BC). It would seem that, in those kingdoms, Mithra was a god whose power lent luster even to a king. And it was at Pergamum, in the 2nd century BC, that Greek sculptors started to produce bas-relief imagery of Mithra Tauroctonos, "Mithra the bull-slayer." Although the cult of Mithras never caught on in the Greek homeland, those sculptures may indicate the route between Persian Mithra and Roman Mithras.

Around the first century AD, the Greek historian Plutarch wrote about pirates of Cilicia who practiced the Mithraic "secret rites" around 67 BC. Since Cilicia was the coastal province in the southeast of Anatolia, the Mithras mentioned by Plutarch may have been worship of the Persian god Mithra; or may have been associated with Ahriman, the Persian god who killed a bull.

In Persia Mithra was the protector God of the tribal society until the [Zoroaster's](#) reformation of Persian polytheism (628-55BC). Mithra like the rest of the gods and goddess of the Iranian Pantheon was stripped of his sovereignty, and all his powers and attributes were bestowed upon Zarathustra.

Mithraism began in Persia where originally a multitude of gods were worshipped. Amongst them were Ahura-Mazda, god of the skies, and Ahriman, god of darkness. In the sixth and seventh century B.C., a vast reformation of the Persian pantheon was undertaken by Zarathustra (known in Greek as Zoroaster), a prophet from the kingdom of Bactria. The stature of Ahura-Mazda was elevated to that of supreme god of goodness, whereas the god Ahriman became the ultimate embodiment of evil.

In the same way that Ahkenaton, Abraham, Heliogabalus, and Mohammed later initiated henotheistic cults from the worship of their respective deities, Zarathustra created a henotheistic dualism with the gods Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman. As a result of the Babylonian captivity of the

Jews (597 B.C.) and their later emancipation by King Cyrus the Great of Persia (538 B.C.), Zoroastrian dualism was to influence the Jewish belief in the existence of HaShatan, the malicious Adversary of the god Yahweh, and later permit the evolution of the Christian Satan-Jehovah dichotomy. Persian religious dualism became the foundation of an ethical system that has lasted until this day.

The reformation of Zarathustra retained the hundreds of Persian deities, assembling them into a complex hierarchical system of 'Immortals' and 'Adored Ones' under the rule of either Ahura-Mazda or Ahriman. Within this vast pantheon, Mithras gained the title of '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. Mithras was called omniscient, undeceivable, infallible, eternally watchful, and never-resting.

In the Avesta, the holy book of the religion of Zarathustra, Ahura-Mazda was said to have created Mithras in order to guarantee the authority of contracts and the keeping of promises.

The name Mithras was the Persian word for 'contract'.

The divine duty of Mithras was to ensure general prosperity through good contractual relations between men. It was believed that misfortune would befall the entire land if a contract was ever broken.

Ahura-Mazda was said to have created Mithras to be as great and worthy as himself. He would fight the spirits of evil to protect the creations of Ahura-Mazda and cause even Ahriman to tremble. Mithras was seen as the protector of just souls from demons seeking to drag them down to Hell, and the guide of these souls to Paradise. As Lord of the Sky, he took the role of psychopomp, conducting the souls of the righteous dead to paradise.

According to Persian traditions, the god Mithras was actually incarnated into the human form of the Saviour expected by Zarathustra. Mithras was born of Anahita, an immaculate virgin mother once worshipped as a fertility goddess before the hierarchical reformation. Anahita was said to have conceived the Saviour from the seed of Zarathustra preserved in the waters of Lake Hamun in the Persian province of Sistan. Mithra's ascension to heaven was said to have occurred in 208 B.C., 64 years after his birth. Parthian coins and documents bear a double date with this 64 year interval.

Mithras was 'The Great King' highly revered by the nobility and monarchs, who looked upon him as their special protector. A great number of the nobility took theophorous (god-bearing) names compounded with Mithras. The title of the god Mithras was used in the dynasties of Pontus, Parthia, Cappadocia, Armenia and Commagene by emperors with the name Mithradates. Mithradates VI, king of Pontus (northern Turkey) in 120-63 B.C. became famous for being the first monarch to practice immunization by taking poisons in gradually increased doses. The terms mithridatism and mithridate (a pharmacological elixir) were named after him. The Parthian princes of Armenia were all priests of Mithras, and an entire district of this land was dedicated to the Virgin Mother Anahita. Many Mithraeums, or Mithraic temples, were built in Armenia, which remained one of the last strongholds of Mithraism.

The largest near-eastern Mithraeum was built in western Persia at Kangavar, dedicated to 'Anahita, the Immaculate Virgin Mother of the Lord Mithras'. Other Mithraic temples were built in Khuzestan and in Central Iran near present-day Mahallat, where at the temple of Khorheh a

few tall columns still stand. Excavations in Nisa, later renamed Mithradatkirt, have uncovered Mithraic mausoleums and shrines. Mithraic sanctuaries and mausoleums were built in the city of Hatra in upper Mesopotamia. West of Hatra at Dura Europos, Mithraeums were found with figures of Mithras on horseback.

Persian Mithraism was more a collection of traditions and rites than a body of doctrines. However, once the Babylonians took the Mithraic rituals and mythology from the Persians, they thoroughly refined its theology. The Babylonian clergy assimilated Ahura-Mazda to the god Baal, Anahita to the goddess Ishtar, and Mithras to Shamash, their god of justice, victory and protection (and the sun god from whom King Hammurabi received his code of laws in the 18th century B.C.) As a result of the solar and astronomical associations of the Babylonians, Mithras later was referred to by Roman worshippers as 'Sol invictus', or the invincible sun.

The sun itself was considered to be "the eye of Mithras". The Persian crown, from which all present day crowns are derived, was designed to represent the golden sun-disc sacred to Mithras.

As a deity connected with the sun and its life-giving powers, Mithras was known as 'The Lord of the Wide Pastures' who was believed to cause the plants to spring forth from the ground. In the time of Cyrus and Darius the Great, the rulers of Persia received the first fruits of the fall harvest at the festival of Mehragan. At this time they wore their most brilliant clothing and drank wine. In the Persian calendar, the seventh month and the sixteenth day of each month were also dedicated to Mithras.

According to Persian mythology, Mithras was born of a virgin given the title 'Mother of God'. The God remained celibate throughout his life, and valued self-control, renunciation and resistance to sensuality among his worshippers. Mithras represented a system of ethics in which brotherhood was encouraged in order to unify against the forces of evil.

The Persians called Mithras 'The Mediator' since he was believed to stand between the light of Ahura-Mazda and the darkness of Ahriman. He was said to have 1000 eyes, expressing the conviction that no man could conceal his wrongdoing from the god. Mithras was known as the God of Truth, and Lord of Heavenly Light, and said to have stated "I am a star which goes with thee and shines out of the depths".

Mithras was worshipped as guardian of arms, and patron of soldiers and armies. The handshake was developed by those who worshipped him as a token of friendship and as a gesture to show that you were unarmed. When Mithras later became the Roman god of contracts, the handshake gesture was imported throughout the Mediterranean and Europe by Roman soldiers.

In Armenian tradition, Mithras was believed to shut himself up in a cave from which he emerged once a year, born anew. The Persians introduced initiates to the mysteries in natural caves, according to Porphyry, the third century neoplatonic philosopher. These cave temples were created in the image of the World Cave that Mithras had created, according to the Persian creation myth.

As 'God of Truth and Integrity', Mithras was invoked in solemn oaths to pledge the fulfillment of contracts and punish liars. He was believed to maintain peace, wisdom, honour, prosperity, and cause harmony to reign among all his worshippers. According to the Avesta, Mithras could decide when different periods of world history were completed. He would judge mortal souls at death and brandish his mace over hell three times each day so that demons would not inflict greater

punishment on sinners than they deserved.

### **Mithraism In Eary Rome**

Mithraism arrived fully mature at Rome with the return of the legions from the east in the first century BC. As an action god of armies and the champion of heroes, he appealed to the professional Roman soldiers, who carried his cult to Iberia, Britain, the German frontiers and Dacia.

The cult of Mithras began to attract attention at Rome about the end of the first century AD, perhaps in connection with the conquest of then-Zoroastrian Armenia. The earliest material evidence for the Roman worship of Mithras dates from that period, in a record of Roman soldiers who came from the military garrison at Carnuntum in the Roman province of Upper Pannonia (near the Danube River in modern Austria, near the Hungarian border). These soldiers fought against the Parthians and were involved in the suppression of the revolts in Jerusalem from 60 A.D. to about 70 A.D. When they returned home, they made Mithraic dedications, probably in the year 71 or 72.

Statius mentions the typical Mithraic relief in his *Thebaid* (Book i. 719,720), around A. D. 80; Plutarch's *Life of Pompey* also makes it clear that the worship of Mithras was well known at that time.

By A. D. 200, Mithraism had spread widely through the army, and also among traders and slaves. The German frontiers have yielded most of the archaeological evidence of its prosperity: small cult objects connected with Mithra turn up in archaeological digs from Romania to Hadrian's Wall.

### **Mithraism in the Roman Empire**

At Rome, the third century emperors encouraged Mithraism, because of the support which it afforded to the divine nature of monarchs. Mithras thus became the giver of authority and victory to the Imperial House. From the time of Commodus, who participated in its mysteries, its supporters were to be found in all classes.

Concentrations of Mithraic temples are found on the outskirts of the Roman empire: along Hadrian's wall in northern England three mithraea have been identified, at Housesteads, Carrawburgh and Rudchester. The discoveries are in the University of Newcastle's Museum of Antiquities, where a mithraeum has been recreated. Recent excavations in London have uncovered the remains of a Mithraic temple near to the center of the once walled Roman settlement, on the bank of the Walbrook stream. Mithraea have also been found along the Danube and Rhine river frontier, in the province of Dacia (where in 2003 a temple was found in Alba-Iulia) and as far afield as Numidia in North Africa.

As would be expected, Mithraic ruins are also found in the port city of Ostia, and in Rome the capital, where as many as seven hundred mithraea may have existed (a dozen have been identified). Its importance at Rome may be judged from the abundance of monumental remains:

more than 75 pieces of sculpture, 100 Mithraic inscriptions, and ruins of temples and shrines in all parts of the city and its suburbs. A well-preserved late 2nd century mithraeum, with its altar and built-in stone benches, originally built beneath a Roman house (as was a common practice), survives in the crypt over which has been built the Basilica of San Clemente, Rome.

### **India -- Hindu**

Mithra is an Indo-Iranian sun god. In Hinduism he is praised as the binomial Mitra-Varuna. A hymn is also dedicated to him alone in Rig Veda. He is the Lord of Heavenly light, protector of truth, and is invoked when a contract or oath is taken.

### **Babylonian**

The Babylonians also incorporated their belief in destiny into the Mithraic worship of Zurvan, the Persian god of infinite time and father of the gods Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman. They superimposed astrology, the use of the zodiac, and the deification of the four seasons onto the Persian rites of Mithraism.

### **China**

Mithra is also seen in Chinese mythology, where he is known as *The Friend*. Mithra is represented as a Military General in Chinese statues, and is considered to be the friend of man in this life and his protector against evil in the next.

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## **The Demise of Mithraism**

Worship of the sun (Sol) did exist within the indigenous Roman pantheon, as a minor part, and always as a pairing with the moon. However, in the East, there were many solar deities, including the Greek Helios, who was largely displaced by Apollo. By the 3rd century, the popular cults of Apollo and Mithras had started to merge into the syncretic cult known as Sol Invictus, and in 274 CE the emperor Aurelian (whose mother had been a priestess of the sun) made worship of Sol Invictus official. Subsequently Aurelian built a splendid new temple in Rome, and created a new body of priests to support it (pontifex solis invicti), attributing his victories in the East to Sol Invictus. But none of this affected the primitive cult of Mithras which remained a secret cult.

invictus. But none of this affected the existing cult of Mithras, which remained a non-official cult. Some senators held positions in both cults.

However, this period was also the beginning of the decline of Mithraism, as Dacia was lost to the empire, and invasions of the northern peoples resulted in the destruction of temples along a great stretch of frontier, the main stronghold of the cult. The spread of Christianity through the Empire, boosted by Constantine's tolerance of it from around 310 CE, also took its toll - particularly as Christianity admitted women while Mithraism did not, which obviously limited its potential for rapid growth.

The reign of Julian, who attempted to restore the faith, and suppress Christianity, and the usurpation of Eugenius renewed the hopes of its devotees, but the decree secured by Theodosius in 394, totally forbidding non-Christian worship, may be considered the end of Mithraism's formal public existence. Mithraism still survived in certain cantons of the Alps into the 5th century, and clung to life with more tenacity in its Eastern homelands. Its eventual successor, as the carrier of Persian religion to the West, was Manichaeism, which competed strenuously with Christianity for the status of world-religion.

### Connections

There is much speculation that Christian beliefs were influenced by Mithraic belief. Ernest Renan, in *The Origins of Christianity*, promoted the idea that Mithraism was the prime competitor to Christianity in the second through the fourth century AD, although most scholars feel the written claims that the emperors Nero, Commodus, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and the Tetrarchs were initiates are dubious at best, and there is no evidence that Mithraic worship was accorded any official status as a Roman cult. Except in its official form as 'Sol Invictus,' the first universal religion of the Greco Roman world.

Bull and cave themes are found in Christian shrines dedicated to the archangel Michael, who, after the officialization of Christianity, became the patron Saint of soldiers. Many of those shrines were converted Mithraea, for instance the sacred cavern at Monte Gargano in Apulia, refounded in 493. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Mithras cult was transferred to the previously unvenerated archangel.

Bull and crypt are linked in the Christian saint Saturnin (frequently "Sernin" or "Saturninus") of Toulouse, France. The Mithraeum is retained as a crypt under his earliest church, evocatively named "Notre-Dame du Taur."

It has also been speculated that the ancient Orobouros of Mithraism (the encircling serpent about to bite its own tail) was adapted for a Christian symbol of the limited confines of time and space. The snake around a rock also is reminiscent of the Midgard serpent, Jrmungandr, who was said to surround Midgard (the Earth) according to Norse traditions.

Christians would argue that because the Gospels were written mostly before 100 and that since little is known of Roman Mithraism until after 100 that it is not plausible to say that Christianity borrowed any of its doctrines from Mithraism; some Christians have suggested that Mithraism may have borrowed some elements from Christianity. Other, non-Christian scholars disagree on both the dating of the gospels and with the conclusions made.

A better determinant of borrowing, is to compare core doctrines between Christianity and Mithraism. The adoption of imagery or icons or festivals is fairly peripheral (such as the adoption by Christendom of winter solstice or Saturnalia festivals as Christmas) but seldom reflects basic religious tenets. A further example of this is the various gnostic cults (such as Pelagianism) which adopted the personage of Jesus or the concept of a Savior, yet did not adopt the underlying doctrinal elements.

### **Parallels to Christianity**

According to Martin A. Larson, in *The Story of Christian Origins*(1977), Mithraism and Christianity derived from the same sources, originally from the savior cult of Osiris. However, Larson believes that the Essenes were Jewish Pythagoreans, whose members not only gave birth to Christianity as Essenes, but were directly influenced by Zoroastrian doctrine as Pythagoreans. Mithraism, an established but exclusive sect devoted to social justice, was assimilated by state-sponsored Christianity before being disposed of in name.

Though no texts of Mithraism survive, various fragments, inscriptions and critical commentaries show that Mithraism and early Christianity both possess similar religious doctrines. <sup>3</sup>The resemblances between the two churches were so striking as to impress even the minds of antiquity<sup>2</sup> (Cumont, 193). From their common Zoroastrian sources, Mithraism first held that all souls pre-existed in the ethereal regions, and inhabited a body upon birth. Life then becomes a great struggle between good and evil, spirit and body, the children of light versus the children of darkness (identical to Pythagoreanism). All souls were to be judged by Mithra (represented as a bull) with the Elect going to heaven, and the earthly and evil being annihilated in a great battle. Mithraism divided the human race into three classes: the spiritual Elect, the wicked, and those who try to be good but can't seem to overcome evil. The Elect go straight to heaven, while the good-intentioned wait until judgment to be resurrected, where the wicked will be destroyed.

Both Christianity and Mithraism prided themselves in brotherhood and organized their members as church congregations. Both religions purified themselves through baptism, and each participated in the same type of sacrament, bread and wine. Mithra was born in a cave; a cave is likewise the setting for the nativity of Jesus in the widely-read and influential Gospel of James, which though not canonical is the earliest surviving document attesting the veneration of Mary and claiming her continuing virginity. Both nativities were celebrated on December 25th, and each savior was visited by shepherds with gifts. Both Mithraism and Christianity considered Sunday their holy day, despite early Christianity observing the Jewish Sabbath for centuries. Many have noted that the title of Pope is found in Mithraic doctrine and seemingly prohibited in Christian doctrine. The words Peter (rock) and mass (sacrament) have original significance in Mithraism.

Both Mithraism and early Christianity considered abstinence, celibacy, and self-control to be among their highest virtues. Both had similar beliefs about the world, destiny, heaven and hell, and the immortality of the soul. Their conceptions of the battles between good and evil were almost identical, with Christianity adopting millennial epochs that were integral to Mithraism from Zoroastrianism. "They both admitted to the existence of a heaven inhabited by beautiful ones<sup>4</sup> and a hell peopled by demons situate in the bowels of earth." (Cumont, 191) Both religions placed a flood at the beginning of history, and both believed in revelation as key to their doctrine.

Both awaited the last judgment and resurrection of the dead after the final conflagration of the universe. Christ and Mithra were both referred to directly as the "Logos" (Larson 184).

It is probable that Christianity emphasized common features that attracted Mithra followers, perhaps the crucifix appealed to those Mithra followers who had crosses already branded on their foreheads. In art, the halo was a well-known depiction of Mithra, a true sun god, but which also depicts Christ in the same way. However, the similarities were an embarrassment, and differences such as star gazing were persecuted as heresy. Trypho wrote that Justin Martyr declared that in a certain cave near Bethlehem Mary brought forth the Christ those who presided over the mysteries of Mithras were stirred up by the devil to say that in a place called among them a cave, they were initiated by them (LXXVIII). Tertullian seems to have feared the parallels between Mithraism and Christianity the most, demonizing Mithraism as a perverted truth planted by the devil.

Source and Links: [Mithraism](#) Wikipedia

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### Degrees of Initiation



[Zurvan](#)

There were seven degrees of initiation, these degrees allowed the neophyte to proceed through the seven celestial bodies. Allowing the reversing of the human soul's descent into the world at birth.

The first degree was of corax (Raven) under Mercury. This stage symbolized death of neophyte. In ancient Persia it was a custom to expose dead bodies to be eaten by ravens on funeral towers.

Raven as symbol of death can also be seen in some tarot packs as card 13 instead of Grim Reaper [13=1+3=4=4th Dimension=Time - Grim Reaper=Time.]

At this stage the neophyte dies and is re-born into a spiritual path.

A mantra was given to him to repeat and his sins were washed away by baptism in water.

The next degree is of Nymphus (male-bride) under Venus. The neophyte wears a veil and carries a lamp in his hand. He is unable to see the 'light of truth' until the 'veil of reality' is lifted. He is vowed to the cult, and becomes celibate for at least duration of this stage.

He is a bride (lover) of Mithra. He also offers a cup of water to the statute of Mithra, the cup is his heart and the water is his love.

On reaching Miles (solider) under Mars, the neophyte had to kneel (submission to religious authority, naked (casting off old life), blindfolded with hands tied. He was then offered a crown on the point of a sword .

Once crowned, his binds were cut with a single stroke of the sword and blindfold removed. This represented his liberation from bondage's of the material world.

He would then remove the crown from his head and placing it on his shoulder, saying: 'Mithra is my only crown'.

This also symbolizes the removing the head(intellect) itself, allowing Mithra to be the guide.

At this stage the neophyte starts the real battle against his lower self, a solider is one actively struggles with the real enemy.

The stage of Leo (lion) is first of the senior degrees and is under Jupiter. He is entering the element of fire. Therefore the lions were not allowed to touch water during the ritual, and instead honey was offered to the initiate to wash his hands and anoint his tongue. The lions carry the food for the ritual meal that was prepared by the lower grades to the ritual feast, and take part. Lions duties included attending the sacred altar flame. The ritual feast represented Mithras last supper of bread and wine with his companions, before his ascend to the heavens in Sun's chariot.

The degree of Perses (Persian) under moon, *The initiate to this grade obtained through it an affiliation to that race which alone was worthy of receiving the highest revelations of wisdom of Magi* (Fanz Cumont, Rapport sur une mission a Rome, in Academic des inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Comptes Rendes, 1945 p.418).

The emblem for this stage was a harpe, the harpe that Persus decapitated the Gorgon. Symbolizing the destruction of the lower and animal aspect of the initiate.

The initiate was also purified with honey as he was under the protection of the Moon. *Honey is associated with purity and fertility of the moon as this was, in ancient Iran believed to be the source of honey, and thus the expression of honey-moon denotes not the period of a month after marriage, but continued love and fertility in married life.*

- Dr. Masoud Homayouri *Origin of Persian Gnosis*

In grade of Heliodromus (sun runner) under sun, the initiate imitates Sun at the ritual banquet.

file:///G:/flh-10/hoseini/prehist/sasa/12.htm

Sitting next to Mithra (Father), dressed in red, color of sun, fire and blood of life.

Highest grade was of Pater (father) under Saturn. He was Mithras earthly representative, light of heaven embodied, the teacher of congregation which he lead, wearing a redcap and as well as a red baggy Persian trousers, carrying a staff symbol of his spiritual office. (Charles Daniels, Mithras and his temples on the Wall).

<http://www.crystalinks.com/mithraism.html>