

MITHRAISM: ZOROASTRIAN GNOSTICISM

By David Livingstone

The theory, originally proposed by Franz Cumont, that Mithraism evolved from Persian Zoroastrianism, is now generally dismissed. However, the theory has not been carefully examined. A primitive version of the Mithraic mysteries certainly existed among them, as can be determined from circumstantial evidence, where they contributed heavily to the Greek traditions of Orphism, which not only later emerged as prominent themes in Mithraism, but of Hellenistic mysticism in general. While based on these earlier tradition, Mithraism nevertheless, modified during these times, to conform to these same Gnostic tendencies.

The Magussaeans

On all sides, the Persians were surrounded by nations that celebrated mysteries, by Egyptians to Isis and Osiris, the Syrians to Bel and Astarte, the Phrygians to Attis and Cybele, and the Greeks to Dionysus and Persephone. As these gods were merely considered national versions of the same gods, they would have been regarded among the Persians as the equivalent to Mithras and Anahita, to whom mysteries would undoubtedly have been dedicated by the heretical Magi.

We do not know the content of these mysteries, but we can gather a fair idea of the doctrines of the “Magi” who inhabited Asia Minor from where they might have originated. Here, Zoroaster was confounded as the founder of the Chaldeans, a school of Babylonian astrologers. As Cumont and Bidez have pointed out, these “Magussaeans” practiced a heretical or Zurvanite form of Zoroastrianism combined with elements of Chaldean astrology.

Daeva-Worship

Though the Magi had continued the astrological traditions of the Chaldeans, they were primarily recognized as specialists in theurgy, or necromancy, that is, divination by means of summoning the spirits of the dead. It is with the practices by these “Magi” that Heraclitus, in the fifth century BC, equated with the bull-slaying rites of the Dionysiacs or Bacchantes. He commented: “if it were for Dionysus that they hold processions and sing hymns to the shameful parts [phalli], it would be a most shameless act; but Hades and Dionysus are the same, in whose honor they go mad and celebrate the Bacchic rites,” and of the “Nightwalkers, Magi, Bacchoi, Lenai, and the initiated,” all these people he threatens with what happens after death: “for the secret rites practiced among humans are celebrated in an unholy manner.”

A papyrus from Derveni, near Thessalonika, belonging to the fourth century BC, contains an allegorical interpretation of a theogony by Orpheus and prescriptions for rituals. In it we read about “incantations” of the *magoi* that are able to “placate daimones who could bring disorder... Therefore, the *magoi* perform this sacrifice as if they would pay an amend,” and initiates of

Dionysus, “first sacrifice to the Eumenides, like the *magoi*.” In *Magic and the Ancient World*, Fritz Graf, Professor of Classics at Princeton University, remarks:

Not only does the unknown author connect the rites of the magi with those of the mystery cults (a topic which becomes fundamental with the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri), but also he introduces the magoi as invokers of infernal powers, daimones whom he understands as the souls of the dead, the disorder that they bring manifests itself in illness and madness, which are healed by rituals of exorcism.ⁱ

Though communion with evil spirits was strictly forbidden in the orthodox version of the faith, the accounts of Greek authors accord in many respects with the doctrines of those referred to in the *Avesta*, and other Zoroastrian literature, as a certain people hostile to the orthodox community, called “sorcerers” or “*daeva* worshippers”. The prime object of their worship was Ahriman, for “by the religion of the sorcerers (Ahriman) so inclines men to love him and to hate Ahura Mazda that they abandon the cult of Ahura Mazda and practice that of Ahriman.”ⁱⁱ

Essentially, the Magussaeans were *daeva* worshipping Magi who practiced mystery rites dedicated to Mithras. They preserved the dualism of Zoroastrianism, though in the heretical form of Zurvanism, which they combined with Chaldean astrology. They venerated fire as the symbol of the divine, and adopted the trinity worshipped by the Babylonians, composed of a father, mother and their offspring, a son-god, represented by the Sun, Moon, and Venus, which they identified with the Persian deities of Ahura Mazda, Anahita and Mithras. They conserved the Chaldean doctrine of pantheism, regarding the universe as a single living being, governed by a fate determined by the stars. Astrology was connected to mathematics, and the use of numerology was widespread in their literature. The Zodiac of the Chaldeans was divided according to the four elements traditionally worshipped by the Persians. The soul was seen to be subjected to numerous reincarnations, sometimes into beasts, causing them to abstain from the meat of animals. Porphyry explained that the seven grades of the Mithraics, ordinarily, were associated with signs of the Zodiac, but that they also concealed the mystery of reincarnation.

Mithras-Hercules

Though derived from the primitive mysticism of the Magussaeans, the Mithras of the Roman period was a composite figure, a combination of Dionysus, Attis, and Osiris. The Dionysiac element was derived from Orphism, though, which itself is believed to have had a Persian origin. The Orphics regarded Dionysus, Phanes and Hercules as a single god and representative of the Sun. Elements of the myth of Hercules are accounted for in the Mithraic iconography, such as taking the place of Atlas. More importantly, Hercules, in his seventh labour, captured the Cretan bull, which he carries over his shoulder, and which is ultimately killed by Theseus.

All the sun-deities of antiquity were equated with the Bull, including Dionysus and Osiris. Originally, they are descended from Bel of Babylon, known as the Bull of the Sun, and ultimately from Tammuz. They were eventually equated with the sign of Taurus, and as fertility gods, they represented the Sun who descended to the “underworld” causing winter, and whose resurrection was celebrated every spring.

Hercules also had a near eastern ancestry. He was equated with *Melqart* of Tyre, or Baal, the Phoenician Bel. The constellation of Hercules in Babylonia was the hero Gilgamesh, whose prowess in battle against the monsters paralleled those of Hercules. Another hero related to Gilgamesh is Perseus. As M.L. West pointed out, Gilgamesh cuts off the gorgon's head and takes it back as a trophy, as Perseus does with Medusa.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most importantly, after refusing her marriage proposal, Ishtar sends the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh, which he manages to kill. Having assimilated their own Persian deity with the Babylonian sun-god Bel, the Magi would have associated Mithras with the Bull, and likely, Mithras would also have been recognized as a Hercules figure, appropriated from Gilgamesh.

While we are able to trace many of the elements of Mithaism back to the Magussaeans, the one component whose date of origin is difficult to determine, which is at the origin of the astrological philosophy that would come to pervade most schools of Hellenistic mysticism, including Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, is the ascent through the seven planets.

Merkabah Mysticism

In the opinion of Gershom Scholem, such a mode of ascent, through which the soul ascends to its original home, either after death or in a state of ecstasy while in the body, is certainly very old. However, there is no evidence of the idea of the seven heavens prior to the end of the first century AD, when it was probably invented, perhaps by Rabbi Akiva, the principle figure of early Merkabah mysticism. About Rabbi Akiva the Talmud noted that among four men who engaged in such mystical subjects, one died, one went mad, one apostatized, and only Rabbi Akiva had a true visionary experience. Of the oldest literary sources of Merkabah are two Hekhaloth texts, the *Lesser* attributed to Rabbi Akiva, and the *Greater*, to his colleague, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha.

The purpose of Merkabah mysticism, or Chariot Mysticism, is union with the highest god, interpreted as the vision of the One Who sits on the Throne, described by Ezekial as a chariot. Tracts of the third century AD onward, describe the seven Hekhaloth, or Heavenly Halls, guarded by gatekeepers, which are hostile to the ascending soul. The mystic's quest, and the passage through the first six palaces were described in great detail, with all the technical and magical means which assist the soul and save it from the impending dangers. Deceptive visions confront the ascending spirit and angels of destruction try to hinder its success. At the gates of all the palaces, it must show the doorkeepers "the seals," which are the secret Names of God, or pictures imbued with a magical power.

As Scholem remarked, similar dangers in the ascent of the mystic are described in the Liturgy of Mithras, contained in the magical papyrus of Paris, where the description of the ascent shows many parallels of detail with the account given in the Greater Hekhaloth. The similarity may be the result of Roman soldiers coming into contact with Jewish mystical doctrines during their invasion of Palestine. As Cumont pointed out, having first been sent to the Euphrates in 63 BC to fight the Parthians, from 67 to 70 AD, the Fifteenth Apollonian Legion of the Roman army took part in

suppressing the uprising of the Jews in Palestine, when 97,000 Jews, according to Josephus, were taken captive.^{iv} This legion accompanied Titus to Alexandria, where they were probably reinforced by recruits from Cappadocia in Asia Minor.

It seems to have been a curious mix of these several elements, after the Legion had been transported to Germany, that erected the first temple dedicated to Mithras on the banks of the Danube.^v Thus, the ascent through the seven planets of Merkabah may have been introduced to the primitive mystery rites the Magussaeans, forming the Roman Mysteries of Mithras, spread far and wide by the Roman soldiers, and through Mithraism, to the other schools of Hellenistic mysticism.

Essentially, we should understand Mithraism as the Zoroastrian Gnosticism.

Initiates of the Mysteries of Mithras ascended to heaven in commemoration of the ascent of Mithras in the chariot of Helios, the Sun-god. Mentioned in the Hindu scriptures, the *Rig Veda*, Mitra was a god of light, but also depicted fate, war, and victory, and was imagined to ride in a chariot drawn by white horses, and as Hannah has brought to light, in at least one Yasht, a prayer-hymn to ancient Iranian gods adapted into the Zoroastrian scriptures, Mithra is pictured in a similar chariot.

Xenophon explained that Cyrus the Younger led his processions with three empty chariots for the gods, the second specifically for the Sun. Dio Chrysostom recorded a hymn sung by the Magi of Asia Minor on account of its allegorical resemblance to the Stoic theory of conflagrations and the myth of Phaethon, where Zeus as the perfect and original driver of the most perfect chariot, drawn by four horses that represent the four elements. The hymn ends at the moment that the Divine Fire, having absorbed all the substance of the universe, prepared for a new creation.

On a relief in a Mithraeum at Dieburg Mithras was also identified with Phaethon, the son of Helios. In the *Timaeus*, Plato explained the myth of Phaethon in connection with the conflagration of the world by fire. According to the Greek version of the myth, Helios reluctantly grants permission to drive the chariot of the Sun across the sky his son Phaethon, who, though, being unable to guide it, burns a part of the earth. According to Plato, when Solon inquires with the Egyptians, they explain to him that the myth actually refers to the fact that “there is at long intervals a variation in the course of the heavenly bodies and a consequent widespread destruction by fire of things on the earth.”^{vi}

In the Bible, according to *II Kings* 23: 11, Hilkiah “removed from the entrance of the Lord’s Temple the horse statues that the former kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun... The king also burned the chariots dedicated to the Sun.” Among the Jews of the Hellenistic era, the Essenes were already known to worship the Sun, and Philo of Alexandria equates God with a charioteer in several instances. He described how God made the seven zones and put a planet in each, and that, “He has set each star in its proper zone as a driver in a chariot.”

Helios is Hades

Iao, the form usually given to the name Jehovah in magical papyri, was equated sometimes with Zeus, and sometimes with Helios, who drives a chariot pulled by four horses. The connection between the Sun-god Helios and Judaism is further discovered in the ruins of Jewish synagogues of

the late Roman period. The central image was composed of a circle of the zodiac, containing segmented rings within squares, with figures representing the seasons in the corners, the signs in the segments, and in the center, Helios riding a chariot drawn by four horses.

The chariot of Ezekiel's vision further held striking similarities not only the Phanes, but also to the image of the Mithraic Leontocephalus, identified variously as Mithras, Aeon, Kronos, Zurvan, Phanes and Ahriman. Reserved for the highest ranking members of the sect, representing the ultimate mystery, the Leontocephalus was equated with both Mithras and Ahriman, as Macrobius recorded, that according to Orpheus: "one Zeus, one Hades, one Sun, one Dionysus."^{vii}

The Leontocephalus is depicted either with the head of a lion or a man, a human body with two sets of wings and sometimes the feet of a calf. Likewise, Ezekiel described a chariot as a fiery cloud, in which there were four creatures each with a human body, two sets of wings and cloven feet like that of a calf. Each creature had four faces, of a man, lion, ox and eagle. Understood esoterically these faces represent the four points of the Zodiac and the four elements. The man is Aquarius or air, the lion is Leo or fire, the ox is Taurus or earth, and the eagle is Scorpio or water.

The Leontocephalus was depicted standing on a globe, on which there are two circles intersecting each other, which according to Celsus, "is a symbol of the two orbits in heaven, the one being that of the fixed stars and the other that assigned to the planets." Ezekiel's creatures stand on four wheels, each like "a wheel inside a wheel," representing the apparent double circuit of the planets, resulting from both the rotation of the earth on its own axis, and its orbit around the Sun.

David Livingstone is the author of *The Dying God: The Hidden History of Western Civilization*.
<http://www.thedyinggod.com>

Endnotes

ⁱ p. 23

ⁱⁱ *Greater Bundahishn*, 182. 2. quoted from Zehner, *Zurvan*, p. 15

ⁱⁱⁱ West, *The East Face of Helicon*, p. 454

^{iv} *Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, Chap IX: 3.

^v Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, p. 47.

^{vi} 22c.

^{vii} *Saturnalia*, Book I, 18