

CHRISTMAS PAGAN OR CHRISTIAN?

I. THE CULT OF MITHRAS

A. Mithraism came from the west to the east

1. Mithras originally was an Indo-Iranian *sun* god

- a. The Persians worshipped the sun, called either Mithras or Apollo**
- b. Their rites passed from the Persians to the Phrygians and from the Phrygians to the Romans**

2. Mithra was known in India as Mitra

3. Mithra was known to the Romans as Mithras

B. In the Roman Empire, the iconography of the Mithraic Mysteries were both cosmical and zodiacal

1. Leo (lion) and Taurus (bull) are figures of the zodiac

2. The Babylonian background

a. The Epic of Gilgamesh and the slaying of a bull

b. Tarsus and Perseus

- 1. Perseus, legendary Greek hero, was founder of Tarsus**
- 2. Perseus was worshipped as a god in Tarsus**
- 3. Perseus was depicted on Tarsian coinage as a lion attacking a bull**

c. Tarsus and the Stoics

- 1. Tarsus was both an intellectual centre as well as a centre of Stoic philosophy**
- 2. Chrysippus [Third Century B.C.], second founder of Stoicism, was born at nearby Soli**
- 3. The Stoic, Athenodorus [74 B.C.-A.D. 7], Augustus' teacher, lived at and was**

governor of Tarsus

- 4. The Stoics were active in cosmological speculations**
- 5. Here are the several currents that came together and emerged to form the “Mysteries of Mithras.”**
 - a. Mithras coming from Persia was assimilated with Perseus, ancestor of the Persians through Perses**
 - b. Mithras/Perseus replaces the lion [Leo] in the slaying of the bull [Taurus]**
 - c. The import of the central iconography was both astronomical and cosmical**

C. Mithras came to have an important place in Zoroastrianism

1. In Zoroastrianism we have light

- represented by Ahura Mazda
2. **Darkness is represented by Ahriman**
 3. **The mediator is represented by Mithras**
 4. **Therefore, in Zoroastrianism, we have the conflict between good and evil and light and darkness and thus the Iranian dualism is preserved in the Roman Empire through Mithraism**

D. Mithraism was born in a CAVE

1. **A typical chapel of the Mithraic Mysteries was subterranean**
 - a. **It was a cavern or a crypt**
 - b. **It was a military camp of darkness according to Tertullian**
 - c. **It was only able to accommodate fifty or sixty people**
2. **The Church of San Clemente in Rome**
3. **The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Grotto [Cave] of**

the Nativity

- 4. Justin Martyr states, “It is remarkable that, as Mithra was [born] out of a [cave], so the idolatrous nominal Christians of the East represent our Saviour as having in like manner been born in a cave.... ..There is not the least hint of such a thing in the Scripture”**
- 5. The ceiling of a Mithraic chapel is often adorned with stars**

E. Tauroctony [Bull-slaying]

- 1. Mithras is depicted as riding a bull while wearing a tunic and Phrygian cap**
- 2. And seizing the bull by the nose he plunges a dagger into its shoulder**
- 3. ...A painted inscription in the Mithraeum at Santa Prisca plainly refers to Mithras: “And you saved us after having shed the eternal blood”**
- 4. Here is a divine sacrifice in which the blood of the bull gives life.**
- 5. The tauroctony is overarched by the**

signs of the Zodiac (Aries the Ram, Taurus the Bull, etc.) or the representations of the seven planets (Sun, Saturn, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Moon)

- 6. Also identifiable in the tauroctony are a series of stars and constellations, including Scorpion (Scorpio), snake (Hydra), raven (Cervus), cup (Krater), lion (Leon Major), dog (Canis Minor)**

F. We have a procession of the equinoxes according to Hipparchus (125 B.C.), a Bithynian astronomer

- 1. From 4000 to 2000 B.C., we have the Age of Taurus**
- 2. From 2000 to 0 B.C., we have the Age of Aries**
- 3. From Aries to the present era, we have the Age of Pisces, the fishes**
- 4. What is the next Age to come? The Age of Aquarius, the water carrier**

G. Cult meals and initiations are to be

associated with Mithraism

- 1. Justin Martyr relates that “bread and a cup of water are set out with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated.”**
- 2. Jerome ... tells of the destruction of a cavern of Mithras by a city official in Rome, and of the “dreadful images” used in the initiation of votaries; the latter are listed in what are apparently seven successive grades: *corax* (raven), *nymphus* (bridegroom), *miles* (soldier), *leo* (lion), *Perses*, *heliodromus*, and *pater*. The last three are the highest grades: *Perses* is the Persian (originally the name of the son of Perseus and Andromeda, the eponymous ancestor of the Persians), *heliodromus* is the courier of the sun, and *pater*, the father of the community, must represent Mithras himself. The seven grades were also equated with the planets in the sequence Raven/Mercury, Bridegroom/Venus,**

Soldier/Mars, Lion/Jupiter, Persian/Moon, Courier of the Sun/Sun, and Father/Saturn (the most remote planet known to the ancients). Thus advancement through the grades of the cult symbolized the ascent of the soul after death through the planetary spheres and presumably on to an ultimate destination in the realm of the fixed stars.”

- 3. Tertullian describes the initiation of a soldier of Mithras in the “camp of darkness” as involving washing with water...and ceremonies in which a crown is offered on a naked sword (as if in mimicry of martyrdom), placed on the head, then voluntarily transferred to the shoulder with the declaration by the initiate that Mithras is his crown.... Mithras “sets his marks on the foreheads of his soldiers, celebrates an offering of bread, introduces an image of a resurrection..., and with the sword**

opens the way to the crown”..., perhaps suggesting that in the initiation there was a simulation of death and experience of life beyond.

II. THE CULT OF SOL INVICTUS

- A. Mitra/Mithra/Mithras has many associations with the sun (Latin, sol)**
- B. In paintings in the Mithraeum at Santa Prisca in Rome, at the head of a procession of the seven grades of the Mithraic community, the Heliodromus (courier of the sun) wears a red robe and golden radiate crown to represent Sol, and walks toward the Pater (father of the community), who is seated on a throne and identified by a red Phrygian cap as representing Mithras who himself was also often identified with the sun.**
- C. Therefore Mithras is himself called the divine and invincible sun**
- D. The sun was also declared to be unconquered and unconquerable**
- E. Julian the Apostate [361-363 A.D.]**

- 1. Julian worshipped the sun as both Mithras and Sol Invictus**
- 2. Julian also noted that in his role as the sun Mithras is a savior and a guide for souls in the after life [The Caesars (336c)]**
- 3. Julian called Mithras “The seven-rayed god”**

F. Celsus [178 A.D.]

- 1. Celsus, quoted by Origen (*Against Celsus* 6.22), says that in the mysteries of Mithras the ascent of the soul through the celestial spheres of the fixed stars and the seven planets is represented as on a ladder with lofty gates and, on top, an eighth gate.**
- 2. The first seven gates are characterized by the metals of which they are made and are named for the gods of the planets: lead/Saturn, tin/Venus, copper/Jupiter, iron/Mercury, a mixture of metals/Mars, silver/Moon, and**

gold/sun.

3. Salvation with Mithras eventuates in ultimate passage through the solar gate into the boundless beyond.

G. Sol Invictus, even though identified with Mithras by the Romans, was also an independent deity

H. Sol Invictus was also worshipped at Emesa in Syria as Elagabalus [the god Gabal/Arabic-mountain-gebal]

I. In the year 274 A.D., the Emperor Aurelian [270-275 A.D.] declared the god now called Deus Sol Invictus as the official deity of the Roman Empire

J. Aurelian set the sun's birthday celebration on December 25th.

K. Why December 25th?

1. This was the accepted date for the winter solstice

2. This was also in his solar character

the birthday of Mithras

- L. With the coming of Constantine [280-337 A.D.] to the Emperorship in Rome, he changed the existing sacred date of the birthday of Jesus from January 6th in East to December 25th in the West, the date of the birthday celebration of the Sol Invictus. Why? Because**
- 1. Constantine desired to be non-offensive to non-Christians and Christians alike**
 - 2. Constantine stopped worshipping the sun and instead started worshipping the one who created the sun.**

This study on [Christmas-Pagan or Christian?](#) was researched and written by Dr. Gary E. La More, Ph.D., D.D., Pastor of Grace Missionary Baptist Church and President of Historic Baptist Bible College and Seminary. His mailing address is: 1378 Kingston Road, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada M1N 1R2 Telephone: 1-416-281-4865 Email address: gracemissionary@bellnet.ca Web site: www.gracembc.org