

INTRODUCTION

In the early to middle part of the twentieth century it was common for some scholars to call into question the origin of the Christian faith based on an assumed dependent relationship to a number of ancient Hellenistic mystery cults, most notably Roman Mithraism. By the latter part of the twentieth century such arguments--at least on a scholarly level--had lost most of their credibility.¹ As a popular argument against Christianity, however, the alleged Mithraic connection lives on.²

This paper will explain what little is known of Roman Mithraism and its complex, sometimes evolving, and often misapprehended nature. It will appraise specific allegations regarding Christian dependence. Finally, it will assess the scholarly method employed in defense of dependence and evaluate the weight of the argument in general.

BASIC MITHRAISM

Obtaining a complete and accurate understanding of Roman Mithraism is elusive for at least three reasons. First, because of its very nature as a mystery religion, its initiations, ceremonies, and rites were not observable unless one chose to become a *mystes* (initiate). Those who entered the ranks were sworn to secrecy. Women were denied membership.³ Few, therefore, could or would have written with an insider's perspective. Indeed, preserving its tenets in

¹ Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought?* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 119.

² In recent years I have personally encountered this argument in discussions with atheists and on the internet.

written form was not a priority at all. As Ulansey notes, “[O]wing to the obscurity of Mithraic iconography and the general absence of any ancient explanations of its meaning, the internal aspects of Mithraism (i.e., the beliefs and teachings of the cult) have resisted the attempts of scholars to decipher their secrets.”⁴

Second, Roman Mithraism, was an evolving system. By no means was it especially guarded against accommodations and adaptations. Many believe that the name “Mithra(s)” is a shared term for very distinct religious systems⁵ that, aside from the name, have almost nothing in common.⁶

Third and finally, recent popular works on Mithraism are replete with distortions, fabrications, and an overall inattention to detail. Much ancient literature is too late to give a credible account of the early beliefs and practices.⁷ The modern understanding of Mithraism has often been reconstructed in the absence of reliable data.⁸

There are, however, some items that are agreed upon. Original Mithraism (i.e., Eastern Mithraism) is believed to have had connections in Iran with Zoroastrianism,⁹ many hundreds of years before Christ. Some form of Mithraism--we will later examine to what degree it resembled original Mithraism--appeared in Rome. The historian Plutarch records that Cilician pirates first introduced the cult to the Romans at least seventy years before Christ.¹⁰

³ Maarten Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God*, trans. Therese and Vincent Megaw (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), 163-64.

⁴ David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6.

⁵ Namely, Roman Mithraism and Iranian Mithraism.

⁶ David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 11.

⁷ Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 203.

⁸ Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (New York: Dover, 1956), vii.

⁹ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 144.

¹⁰ “The power of the pirates had its seat in Cilicia at first, and at the outset it was venturesome and elusive; but it took on confidence and boldness during the Mithridatic war, because it lent itself to the king’s service. . . . [the

Mithraism, in its Roman version, was a military cult--although not exclusively so--and its spread was largely due to the Roman military's vast geographic dispersion. Aspiring Mithraists proceeded through several layers of initiation as a part of membership.¹¹ Because of its initiations and its secretive nature, it has been referred to as the "Freemasonry of the Roman World."¹² Lending to its mysterious ambiance, the Mithraic place of worship (*Mithraeum*) was most often a crypt-like underground sanctuary¹³ or a place decorated so as to give that appearance.¹⁴

Roman Mithraic art often portrays Mithras¹⁵ appearing out of a rock naked except for a Phrygian cap. He carried a flaming torch in one hand and a knife in the other.¹⁶ Mithras is most known for the depiction of him slaying a bull with his knife. This scene, the famous *tauroctony*, is represented in numerous ancient icons.

After the first century A.D., Mithraism was Christianity's closest competitor for the predominant religious position in the Roman Empire. After having withstood a last-ditch effort by Julian the Apostate to resuscitate Mithraism, Christianity, for a number of reasons, prevailed once and for all by the end of the fourth century.¹⁷ Mithraism's broad geographical presence in

pirates] also offered strange sacrifices of their own at Olympus, and celebrated there certain secret rites, among which those of Mithras continue to the present time, having been first instituted by them." (Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives* vol. 5. 24. 172-75.)

11¹¹ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 6.

12¹² Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 98; Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 247.

13¹³ Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 218.

14¹⁴ Oliver Nicholson, "The End of Mithraism," *Antiquity* 69 (June 1995): 358.

15¹⁵ In this paper, two names will repeatedly be used: *Mithra* and *Mithras*. "Mithra" refers to the Iranian deity while "Mithras" refers to the object of Roman Mithraic worship. It is important for the two to remain distinct.

16¹⁶ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 131-32.

17¹⁷ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 143.

the Roman empire is confirmed by archaeology. Nearly all dated Mithraic inscriptions and monuments belong to the second through the fourth centuries.¹⁸

THE NECESSITY OF CONTINUITY TO DEPENDENCE

It is the Roman version of Mithraism alone that will concern us when answering the question of what role Mithraism may have had in the formation of Christian beliefs and practices. But because there is a complete absence of *early* Roman Mithraic doctrinal literature¹⁹ it is necessary for dependency theorists to presuppose a strong continuity between Iranian-Persian Mithraism and Mithraism in Rome for the purpose of interpreting Roman Mithraic art. We will later evaluate the similarity between the Mithraism that significantly predated Christianity (Persian) and that which was contemporary and made contact with Christianity (Roman). John Hinnells remarks, “It has been said, with justice, that the great problem of Mithraic studies is the question of continuity and discontinuity between the Eastern and Western traditions.”²⁰

There are three basic positions on the relationship between Persian-Iranian Mithraism and the later Roman Mithraism which coexisted with Christianity: 1. Strong continuity; 2. Some continuity with diminished elements of commonality as a result of accommodation and evolution;²¹ 3. Little or no substantial continuity.

For nearly seventy years the dominant model in Mithraic studies was that of Franz Cumont who, in the 1890s, theorized that early Iranian Mithraism was the logical basis for the Roman Mithraism which vied with Christianity in the early centuries of the Roman Empire. He

18¹⁸ Edwin Yamauchi, “Easter--Myth, Hallucination, or History?” *Christianity Today*, 15 March 1974, 661.

19¹⁹ David Ulansey, “The Mithraic Mysteries,” *Scientific American*, Vol. 261, No. 6, December 1989, 130.

20²⁰ John Hinnells, “Reflections on the Bull-Slaying Scene,” in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, vol. 2, ed. John Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 312.

21²¹ Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 195, 200.

not only subscribed to strong continuity but popularized it. Ulansey summarizes Cumont's position:

[T]he name of the god of the cult, Mithras, is the Latin (and Greek) form of the name of an ancient Iranian god, Mithra; in addition, the Romans believed that their cult was connected with Persia (as the Romans called Iran); therefore we may assume that Roman Mithraism is nothing other than the Iranian cult of Mithra transplanted into the Roman Empire. Thus, claimed Cumont, the proper way to go about interpreting Roman Mithraism was to refer each aspect of the cult to some element of ancient Iranian religion with which it bore a similarity.²²

Cumont in his assumption of strong continuity even speculated that Roman Mithraism succumbed to Christianity in part because it “retained too much of its Asiatic coloring to be accepted by the Latin spirit without repugnance.”²³ Concerning Roman Mithraism, he confidently asserted, “A branch torn from the ancient Mazdean trunk, it has preserved in many respects the characteristics of the ancient worship of the Iranian tribes.”²⁴ But despite his commitment to this premise, Cumont had to admit that the doctrinal explanations of Western Mithraic art rely on guesswork.²⁵

While continuity between Iran and Rome is necessary to dependence, it does not prove dependence. Those who follow the Cumont school of thought would still have to sort through the evolutionary shifts. In Iranian religion Mithra began as a subordinate deity. In Rome he appears to be the primary object of veneration. John Ferguson notes, “But somehow, somewhere, he became the central deity as a saviour-god in an almost new religion.”²⁶ In Persia he was associated with peace (as well as agriculture, contracts, and a number of other domains).²⁷

²² Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 8.

²³ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, v.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

²⁶ John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 122.

²⁷ Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 196.

Centuries later in Rome it is thought that he became associated with courage and war.²⁸ There is no evidence that early Mithraism was secretive to any significant extent.²⁹ Later Roman Mithraism was, of course, highly secretive. Everyone would agree that (given the present available data) tracing the exact times and places of these complex evolutionary shifts is impossible.

Cumont's work was built upon by a number of scholars whose findings presupposed strong Iranian-Roman continuity. It became natural to assume that practically all that was known (or thought to be known) of Roman Mithraism derived from Iranian Mithraism.

For those who insisted that Christianity borrowed from Roman Mithraism the argument became: 1) Iranian Mithraism is the source of Roman Mithraism, which must therefore resemble it. Age is thereby added to Roman Mithraism; 2) because certain Iranian beliefs are available to us, Roman Mithraic imagery must be interpreted according to what we know about Iranian Mithraism; 3) any possible similarities between Christianity and supposed Roman Mithraic doctrines--based on Cumont's admittedly uncertain interpretations of Roman art--prove that Christianity (being relatively new on the scene) must have as its source the secret doctrines of Roman Mithraism. Freke and Gandy represent many who are persuaded by this reasoning to conclude that the Jesus story was "the literal culmination of its many mythical precursors."³⁰ In light of Cumont's confession as to the speculative nature of his work this conclusion is problematic.³¹

ALLEGED PARALLELS BETWEEN ROMAN MITHRAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

²⁸ Esme Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1958), 28.

²⁹ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 8.

³⁰ Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?* (New York: Harmony Books, 1999), 6.

To justify claims that Christianity borrowed from Roman Mithraism, the following parallels have been alleged:³²

- Mithras was thought to be born of a virgin.
- It was believed that at his appearance shepherds came and worshipped him, bringing gifts.
- Mithras was known as the logos, or Word.
- He was known as the “Way, the Truth and the Light,” “Redeemer,” “Savior,” and “Messiah.”
- He was believed to have created all good things.
- He was believed to have provided the “Bread of Life.”
- He was thought to have had 12 companions or disciples.
- It was believed that Mithras sacrificed himself for world peace.
- It was believed that he was buried in a tomb and after three days rose again.
- He was believed to have descended into hell.
- It was believed that Mithras will preside over the Last Judgment.
- Mithraites celebrated communion.
- Mithraism taught about rebirth.

Clearly, if the claims of proponents of early Christian syncretism are true and a substantial number of these supposed beliefs could be shown to have been well-entrenched in the pre-apostolic Western Mithraic milieu, it would be the first step in damaging the credibility of the assertions Christians have traditionally made regarding the origin of Christian theology. If those who claim dependence could offer persuasive proofs, the New Testament and especially the gospels and Acts would fall under suspicion for concealing Mithraic influence and thereby

31³¹ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, vii-viii.

32³² Specific documentation is found below. This list is distilled from Wynne-Tyson, Freke and Gandy, and Acharya S (see bibliography). It does not represent anyone’s exhaustive list of alleged parallels.

misrepresenting history. The thoughtful Christian would be forced to reevaluate his commitment or resort to fideism.

AN ASSESSMENT OF ALLEGED PARALLELS

Though limited space prevents a thorough investigation of these claims, a short treatment will be given to each. The contention by Acharya S and others that the Roman Mithras was believed to have been born of a virgin is easily refuted.³³ Cumont calls attention to two legends, one that the Iranian Mithra (the supposed source of the Roman Mithras) was conceived from an incestuous relationship between Ahura-Mazda and his mother and another that has him the son of a “common mortal.”³⁴ In either event a virgin birth is ruled out. The majority view is that the Roman Mithras was born when he emerged from a rock. One writer grants, “I suppose technically the rock he was born out of could have been classified as a virgin.”³⁵ To allege a parallel in this case constitutes a stretch.

Cumont’s story of the shepherds may have some legitimacy as a genuine article of Iranian mythical belief.³⁶ However, no reason is given by Acharya S to believe that any such belief made its way into Roman Mithraism.³⁷ Accusations of dependence proved too much even for Cumont.³⁸

The set of charges which indict the historical Jesus based on a presumed antecedent Mithras who was titled the Logos, the Way, the Truth, and the Light, Redeemer, Savior,

³³ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy* (Kempton, Ill.: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1999), 119.

³⁴ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 16.

³⁵ J. P. Holding, “Mighty Mithraic Madness: Did the Mithraic Mysteries Influence Christianity?” *Tekton*, (accessed 13 July 2001) available from http://www.tektonics.org/tekton_04_02_04-MMM.html; Internet.

³⁶ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 131.

³⁷ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

³⁸ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 194-95.

Messiah³⁹ and Creator⁴⁰ may be taken as a whole. It is remarkable that such allegations are so boldly advanced when any documentation is entirely absent. The lack of documentation is easily explained by the fact that there are no early corroborating sources. Consider the words of one Mithras expert, “. . . the teachings of the cult were, as far as we know, never written down. Modern scholars attempting to understand the nature of Mithraism, therefore, have been left with practically no literary evidence relating to the cult which could help them reconstruct its esoteric doctrines.”⁴¹ To assert that these titles and the intricacies of orthodox Christology are owed to the secret doctrines of a mystery cult for which we have no trace of reliable literary data borders on the extreme.

Furthermore, there is no need to multiply hypotheses when a simple and accepted explanation of the origin of these titles exists. Not the slightest question exists concerning the origin of such terms as “Redeemer,” “Messiah,” and “Creator.” These were Hebrew concepts known prior to the incarnation of Christ (and Roman Mithraism) through the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. Geisler notes, “The Christ of Paul and Jesus is utterly at home in Judaism and foreign to the mystery cults.”⁴² There is no denying that Jesus was well acquainted with the Old Testament. He regarded himself as the promised Anointed One and in John 4:26 clearly claimed to be the Jewish Messiah.⁴³ When one measures the exclusivistic and monotheistic Jewish faith against the mythical and polytheistic Mithraic tradition it is obvious which background is more compatible with Christianity.

³⁹³⁹ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

⁴⁰⁴⁰ Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, 5.

⁴¹⁴¹ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 3.

⁴²⁴² Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 491.

⁴³⁴³ John 4:25-26: The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he." NIV (New International Version).

The claims that the Roman Mithras was believed to have provided the Bread of Life and to have had twelve disciples will be scrutinized in the discussion on methodology.

Concerning the parallel that Mithras was believed to have died sacrificially, in the scarcity of writings at our disposal one will find no evidence of Mithras even dying.⁴⁴ Acharya S's statement that the goal of the sacrifice was "world peace" is merely claimed and not accompanied by any attempt to support the claim.⁴⁵ If for the sake of argument we grant that a sacrifice of some sort took place, we are still left with an ambiguous deed. Presumably it is Mithras himself who died, but even that is unclear because the only death we know of is that of the tauroctonous bull. If it somehow could be shown that Mithras was believed to have died a sacrificial death, the question for whom or for what he died would need to be answered long before it could be said that such belief was analogous to the New Testament's early teaching on the purpose of the vicarious atonement. Advocates of dependence could counter that the Christian concept built on the rougher and less sophisticated Mithraic doctrine, but, as has been noted, the content of that doctrine--if it ever existed--is unknown.

In reference to Mithras, Cumont states, "Thus, through the sacrifice which he had so resignedly undertaken, the tauroctonous hero became the creator of all the beneficent beings on earth; and, from the death which he had caused, was born a new life, more rich and more fecund than the old."⁴⁶ This parallel sacrifice may look impressive until we discover that Cumont's source is a very late (ninth century A.D.) Zoroastrian text and that this sacrifice is actually the

⁴⁴ There is no hard evidence that anyone believed that Mithras died. It seems best to conclude with Roger Beck that "[t]he 'unconquered' Mithras. . . does not die and therefore does not rise again." Roger Beck, "Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel," *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 175.

⁴⁵ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

⁴⁶ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 137.

sacrifice of a bull, not Mithra!⁴⁷ It cannot possibly be identified as the origin for any early Christian belief about Jesus. In addition, Cumont makes the serious error of unjustifiably superimposing various aspects of Persian belief upon the tauroctony and the Roman system.

The charge that Mithras was believed to have been buried in a tomb and resurrected three days later encounters the problem of having no early documentation whatsoever.⁴⁸ As has been pointed out, there is no firm doctrine relating to the death of Mithras. A resurrection without a death seems problematic even in mythology. Nash carefully contrasts so-called resurrection stories of other ancient myths with the historical resurrection of Christ, but of Mithraism he says, “And of course no claim can be made that Mithras was a dying and rising god.”⁴⁹ The lack of a death story likewise makes trouble for the claim that Mithras was buried in a tomb. The only possible sense in which a resurrection claim might be made is in reference to the adult Mithras’ “birth” out of a rock, which cannot be said to parallel any early Christian belief about Jesus.

Because it is not likely that Christians in the first few centuries after Christ believed that Jesus descended into hell, it is of no value to argue that the supposed parallel Mithraic doctrine was a factor in the development of early Christian theology.⁵⁰ Apart from a vague undocumented quotation, Wynne-Tyson offers no support for the claim that Mithras descended into hell.⁵¹

Wynne-Tyson does not cite a source for the claim that Mithras was believed to be the one who would preside over the final judgment.⁵² Freke and Gandy allege the same parallel and introduce details about how Mithras would separate the “good” from the “bad.” It is alleged that

⁴⁷ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 8-9.

⁴⁸ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

⁴⁹ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 173.

⁵⁰ Philip Schaff argues that the phrase *descended into hell* in the Apostle’s Creed was a later development in the Church and is not found in the older creeds. Schaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 2, *The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 46.

⁵¹ Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, 28.

the story of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is a plagiarism of an earlier Mithraic doctrine. Their only source is Cumont.⁵³ Cumont doesn't reveal a source for this belief nor does he supply a date for the supposed Mithraic belief.⁵⁴ That Christianity borrowed its doctrines of the second coming of Christ and the final judgment from Mithraism is a statement of pure conjecture. Jesus made no attempt to hide the fact that many of his apocalyptic thoughts mirrored the book of Daniel, again pointing to the Jewish roots of Christian theology.⁵⁵

In his long list of parallels, Wynne-Tyson states that the communion meal “became one of the chief rites of the Mithraists.”⁵⁶ He neglects to offer even an approximate date at which this practice began. Freke and Gandy strongly imply that the Christian Church invented the words of Jesus in John 6 which exhort us to “eat the flesh of the Son of Man” after the Mithraic quotation, “He who will not eat of my body and drink of my blood, so that he will be made one with me and I with him, the same shall not know salvation.”⁵⁷ Instead of citing an original source, Freke and Gandy cite Joscelyn Godwin. Godwin cites nothing at all, nor does he make any such contention.⁵⁸ As it turns out, the real source of this quotation, according to Vermaseren, is a *medieval* text from Persia containing the sayings of Zarathustra, not Mithra.⁵⁹

With respect to alleged parallels relating to the Lord's Supper, Nash responds, “Of all the mystery cults, only Mithraism had anything that resembled the Lord's Supper. A piece of bread and a cup of water were placed before initiates while the priest of Mithras spoke some

52⁵² Ibid., 24.

53⁵³ Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?*, 75.

54⁵⁴ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 146.

55⁵⁵ Compare Matthew 24 and Mark 13 with Daniel 9, 11, and 12.

56⁵⁶ Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, 24.

57⁵⁷ Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?*, 49.

58⁵⁸ Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, 28.

59⁵⁹ Maarten Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God*, 103-04.

ceremonial words. But the chronology of Mithraism precludes its sacred meal from influencing first-century Christianity.”⁶⁰ In fact, it may be argued that if there is influence it flows from Christianity to Mithraic practices. It will not do simply to declare that Christ’s followers mimicked Mithraic communion practices. Even to move out of the blocks with this argument, one must document that Mithras’ devotees possessed an equivalent celebration by the early part of the first century. No evidence for this exists.

Concerning a “magical papyrus from Egypt,” Ferguson remarks, “it demonstrates that Mithraism is about rebirth; there is a continual contrast between physical birth and spiritual rebirth.”⁶¹ Problematic to a dependency theory regarding the new birth is the fact that this papyrus dates to the end of the third century A.D. The earliest possible Mithraic source suggesting anything concerning rebirth is a wall painting which dates to the late second century A.D.⁶² The argument for dependence rests on extremely tenuous grounds when the best it can offer is a non-literary source dating one hundred years after the Christian church adopted the terminology of rebirth.⁶³ Nash asserts, “The belief that pre-Christian mysteries used *rebirth* as a technical term is unsupported by even one single text.”⁶⁴ Therefore the charge that Christianity copied the concept of rebirth from Mithraism is not persuasive.

While the case for any early parallels is weak, consider hypothetically the suggestion that Christianity was affected by Mithraism in *later* centuries. It is of no benefit to the dependency theorist to attempt to demonstrate that secondary Christian doctrines in the fourth century and following (e.g., Christ’s descent into hell) are in some sense owed to the exertion of Mithraic

⁶⁰ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 159.

⁶¹ John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions*, 122.

⁶² Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 176.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

influence. This very well could be true but it comes several hundred years too late to be useful to the overall argument for dependence. In the words of Nash, “[T]he crucial question is not what possible influence the dying mysteries may have had on Christianity after A.D. 400 but what effect the emerging mystery cults may have had on the New Testament in the first century.”⁶⁵ At most it would be mildly embarrassing for the Christian to learn that accommodation took place long after Christian beliefs about Jesus Christ were codified. Also, reasonable arguments that Christian art may have imitated Mithraic iconography⁶⁶ are interesting, but have no bearing on the discussion of whether the meat of Christianity is covertly mythical.

Even if it could be confirmed that Christian language was borrowed from Mithraism, that by itself would not prove theological dependence. As Nash explains, “Commitment to a high view of Scripture is not at all inconsistent with saying that biblical writers could have adapted language and ideas from their culture for the specific purpose of explaining and communicating the Christian message.”⁶⁷

AN ASSESSMENT OF METHODOLOGY

Concerning the methodological integrity of authors who produce dependency theories, it is not difficult to show that raw speculations are being served up as profound factual insights. But another issue is how these speculations are revealed. Traditional Christian terms and concepts are routinely and carelessly used to describe a supposed Mithraic belief or practice.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶⁶ A. Deman, “Mithras and Christ: Some Iconographical Similarities,” in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, vol. 2, ed. John Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 507-17.

⁶⁷ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 122.

Concerning this habit Nash remarks, “It is an odd kind of scholarship that first describes a pagan rite in Christian terminology and then marvels at the alleged parallels.”⁶⁸

Consider the claim of Acharya S that Mithras had twelve disciples.⁶⁹ It is true that at least one German bas-relief of the tauroctony scene shows two vertical rows of six human figures.⁷⁰ It is not at all clear that these figures are disciples of Mithras. This is a case of importing Christian wording into the description of a Mithraic tauroctony scene. Other persons also appear in the same scene as well as multiple mini-scenes of which the meanings are equally inaccessible. In the Christian sense the word “disciple” conveys the idea of a devoted learner or follower (see Luke 14:26-27). Yet, although it has been confidently declared that Mithras was a great teacher, there seems to be no evidence that he taught anyone anything.⁷¹ In fact, at most, the Roman Mithras could only be said to have had two human companions which appear to be smaller replicas of himself⁷² (and possibly several animals who tagged along).⁷³ The Iranian Mithra had diverse acquaintances who were also gods, not human followers.

Even if it could be proven from this image that Mithras had twelve disciples, there is good reason to believe that the image belongs to the late first century A.D. or after. According to Vermaseren, “it is not until [the end of the first century] that we actually find in Rome the characteristic representation of Mithras as bull-slayer.”⁷⁴ He later adds that *no* Mithraic monument “can be dated earlier than the end of the first century A.D.”⁷⁵

⁶⁸⁶⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁹⁶⁹ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

⁷⁰⁷⁰ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 117.

⁷¹⁷¹ J. P. Holding, “Mighty Mithraic Madness: Did the Mithraic Mysteries Influence Christianity?”

⁷²⁷² Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 129.

⁷³⁷³ This is based on various tauroctony scenes in which a dog, a snake, a scorpion, and sometimes a lion or a raven appear.

⁷⁴⁷⁴ Maarten Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God*, 29.

⁷⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

Wynne-Tyson retells the famous story of Mithras slaying the unlucky bull. Added to the segment about grain coming from the bull's spine we read, "Thus Mithras indirectly provided the Bread of Life."⁷⁶ Before being impressed, the casual reader ought to recall that this phrase was used first by Jesus as a divine title, not as a mere agricultural expression.⁷⁷ This is another example of the dependency of dependency theorists upon Christian terminology. Again Wynne-Tyson is silent on a date when this was supposedly believed by Mithraists.

Without the slightest documentation to verify that such wording was ever used in ancient times, Wynne-Tyson goes on to describe the evil deity of Iranian Mithraism as the "Father of Lies."⁷⁸ In John 8:44 Jesus uses this title in reference to the devil. One might expect to find a generic "Father of Lies" in any religious system which acknowledges the reality of evil. The question is whether Wynne-Tyson would ever have thought to use this phrase to describe Ahriman if he had not come into initial contact with the expression through Christian sources.

Another habit of dependency theorists is the refusal to consult primary sources. For example, Freke and Gandy quote an inscription to Mithras which is translated, "Thou hast saved us by shedding the eternal blood."⁷⁹ They assert that Christians centuries later used the same language to express their gratitude to Christ. If Freke and Gandy have a legitimate reason for believing this, they need to cite their source because Turcan's recent book, the only source given,

⁷⁶ Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, 23.

⁷⁷ See John 6:35.

⁷⁸ Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, 23.

⁷⁹ Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?*, 54.

supplies no dates for the inscription.⁸⁰ Turcan says nothing about Christians or Christianity, and in addition indicates that the interpretation is not especially plain.

Upon examination, the scores of ostensible analogies and parallels are the mere products of indulgent imaginations. It may be correct to say that, at least in a few cases, Mithraism did indeed put forward some parallel ideas. What is missing in every example is an early documented date. Even Franz Cumont, who could be regarded as a moderate advocate of the notion of Christian dependence admits, “[U]ndoubtedly though it may be that the Persian Mysteries underwent some modification in the Occident, the inadequacy of the data at our disposal prevents us from following this evolution in its various phases and from distinctly defining the local differences which it may have presented.”⁸¹ So even to grant some level of continuity does not help the case of the dependency theorists, for if one is to argue that Christian theology was dependent on Mithraism, it is not optional to disclose specific places and dates of the doctrines held or in Cumont’s words to follow the “various phases.” Dependency theorists must at the very least demonstrate that alleged parallel doctrines pre-date their Christian counterparts (not to mention the additional and toilsome obligation to prove a causal connection). They have not done so.

Often proponents of Mithraic influence carelessly take very late sources and apply their testimony--implicitly if not explicitly-- to much earlier conditions. Wynne-Tyson refers to a statement by Firmicus in which it is implied that the Roman Mithras was believed to have died.⁸² The date of this belief is conveniently omitted. If the Firmicus statement is authentic, it could

⁸⁰ Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 226.

⁸¹ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, vi, 104.

⁸² Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, 24.

not have been written prior to the fourth century A.D.⁸³ To be persuasive, Wynne-Tyson must prove that the Mithraic doctrine existed prior to the Christian doctrine in the same geographical location, in the same sense, and that it actually had some type of causal effect on the formation of Christian doctrine as opposed merely to existing side by side. Because of the difficulty of this task, it is not surprising to encounter so many scholarly shortcuts.

With respect to the dating error Nash observes, “Far too many writers on this subject use the available sources to form the plausible reconstructions of the third-century mystery experience and then uncritically reason back to what they think must have been the earlier nature of the cults.”⁸⁴ But as we have seen, Mithraism was in fluctuation. This especially appears to be the case during the period in which Mithraism was struggling with Christianity. Nash continues, “We have plenty of information about the mystery religions of the third century. But important differences exist between these religions and earlier expressions of the mystery experience (for which adequate information is extremely slim).”⁸⁵

A reverse error has been to apply very early Iranian or Zoroastrian beliefs to later Roman conditions. One author comments that Mithraism predated Christianity by “hundreds to thousands of years” and, as though it were a seamless whole, immediately goes on to tell of its clash with Christianity.⁸⁶ It is irresponsible to write on Mithraism and be oblivious to the current debate over the question of continuity.

Franz Cumont was the first to be guilty (at least on a grand scale) of forcing Roman Mithraism into the scheme of Iranian mythology. According to Cumont, it was believed in Rome

⁸³⁸³ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 126.

⁸⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶⁸⁶ Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy*, 118.

that after emerging from the famous rock and wrestling with the Sun, Mithras found an unsuspecting bull on a hillside, took it by the horns, and succeeded in riding it until it finally surrendered. Mithras then dragged it by the hind hooves into a cave which was his home. The bull soon escaped back to its former pastures. Mithras, with orders from the Sun and against his own will, set out with his faithful canine companion in pursuit of the bull. He recovered it and seized it by the nostrils. Mithras then mounted it and stabbed it with his hunting knife. From the wound of the dying animal flowed blood that enabled the vine to grow which “produces the sacred drink of the Mysteries.” From the spinal cord came wheat for the earth. All living things find their genesis in this sacrificial occasion. The Evil Spirit sent demons in the form of a scorpion, an ant, and a serpent to try to consume the blood and genitals of the slain beast and thereby prevent the creation of life. But the miracle of creation could not be stopped.⁸⁷

This entire story in all of its detail has been superimposed on Roman Mithraism by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers who assumed a basic continuity from Iran to Rome.

But Ulansey offers an astonishing observation:

However, from the beginning there were obvious problems with Cumont’s interpretation. The Western mystery cult of Mithraism as it appeared in the Roman Empire derived its very identity from a number of characteristics which were completely absent from the Iranian worship of Mithra: a series of initiations into ever higher levels of the cult accompanied by strict secrecy about the cult’s doctrines; the distinctive cavelike temples in which the cult’s devotees met; and, most important, the iconography of the cult, in particular the tauroctony. None of these essential characteristics of Western Mithraism were to be found in the Iranian worship of Mithra.⁸⁸

Notice that the tauroctony itself, the centerpiece of Cumont’s story and the all-important element of Roman Mithraism, was nowhere to be found in the East. So what is the source of all the

⁸⁷⁸⁷ Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 132-37.

⁸⁸⁸⁸ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 8.

elaborate details surrounding the famous bull-slaying scene which are commonly repeated even by authors (such as Ronald Nash)⁸⁹ who do not share Cumont's conclusions?

Ulansey argues that Cumont's assumption of a strong similarity between Roman and Iranian beliefs forced him to "hypothesize the existence of a variant on this myth [of a bull slaying scene]." Cumont found his variant in a ninth-century A.D. Zoroastrian text which incorporated earlier traditions. But according to the story, both a man and a bull were slain, and not by Mithra but by his nemesis, *Ahriman*.⁹⁰

THE QUESTION OF CONTINUITY BETWEEN IRANIAN AND ROMAN MITHRAISM

While Cumont's assumption of strong continuity is vital for dependency theorists, it has fallen out of favor with contemporary scholarship. At the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies, held in 1971 at the University of Manchester, Cumont's edifice began to crumble. Several Mithraic scholars challenged the notion of continuity suggesting that, "Mithraism had in fact been created as a completely new religion somewhere in the Greco-Roman world and that it had merely adopted the name of the Iranian god to give itself an exotic flavor and an aura of antiquity."⁹¹ One Mithraic expert, challenged Cumont's conventions as, in Ulansey's words, "virtually useless."⁹² In short, practically everything once thought to be known about Mithraism in the West must be jettisoned. The position that the tauroctony was based on new astronomical discoveries (and not a combination of various Iranian beliefs) became the standard explanation. The tauroctony is understood to be an astronomical code. As of the Fourth

⁸⁹ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 144.

⁹⁰ Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 9.

⁹¹ Ulansey, "The Mithraic Mysteries," *Scientific American*, 131.

⁹² Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, 10.

International Congress of Mithraic Studies in 1990 these findings still stood.⁹³ Even Roger Beck who currently endorses what appears to be the most generous position regarding continuity concedes, “For Mithraism, the days are long gone when one could credibly claim that the continuities from its Persian antecedents are more significant than its re-creation as the ‘Persian’ mysteries of the Graeco-Roman world.”⁹⁴

Freke and Gandy seem to acknowledge the new model when they write, “Scholars now understand that altar-pieces representing Mithras slaying a bull are actually star maps depicting the ending of the Age of Taurus.”⁹⁵ However, Freke and Gandy do not recognize how devastating Ulansey’s conclusions are to their argument that Mithraism contributed to Christianity’s early theological development. If we have a new religion which was itself in its formative stages, it is hardly in a position to influence Christianity’s development. This certainly appears to be the case as Beck, a Cumontian in many respects, postulates, “Nothing from the Mysteries is extant from [the first century B.C.] because, quite simply, the Mysteries did not then exist.”⁹⁶ And if one leading Mithraic scholar is correct in contending that Western Mithraism “did not exist until the mid-second century,” the criticism that Christianity borrowed from Mithraism is altogether refuted.⁹⁷

In order to prove that Christianity was dependent upon Roman Mithraism, the latter needs to have existed in a systematized form by the early part of the first century and we must be deeply acquainted with it in its earliest structure. But we cannot know anything of early Roman

⁹³ Ibid., xi.

⁹⁴ Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and the Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 176.

⁹⁵ Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?*, 77.

⁹⁶ Roger Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of their Genesis,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1998): 122.

Mithraic doctrines from early Roman Mithraism itself because, as we have seen, it left us no written records from that time. Attempting to ascertain anything doctrinal of early Roman Mithraism from late-first through second-century iconography is futile. Written material belonging to the third and fourth centuries is inadequate because there is no proof that Mithraism was stable enough to resist the mutations of time. In fact, there is good reason to believe it was not. Because of Ulansey's conclusions and those of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies, we cannot look to the East. Ulansey and company have closed the door on hopes that Iranian Mithraism might offer some help in knowing just what Mithraism in the West believed and taught. Roman Mithraism is now what it was then—a mystery.

R. L. Gordon is not optimistic about prospects for ever achieving certainty on Roman Mithraic doctrines:

There is an abyss where Cumont planned to see solid ground. In some areas of classical scholarship, no doubt, speculation is of positive value: but in Mithraic studies there has been very little else for a very long time. In all probability we can never look forward to a time when it will be possible to present a straightforward description of the levels of symbolism of the central cult scene, of the legitimating myths about various deities, of their mutual relationships and their functions in the economy of the cult. Most of the elementary facts about the belief system are not, and probably will never be, available to us.⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

In contrast to the imaginary dependence theories of Freke and Gandy, those who produce more sober and scholarly work seem to be in the same camp as Beck when he writes, “I make no claim that things in early Christianity were as they were because of the influence of Mithraism--

⁹⁷ R. L. Gordon, “Second Plenary Discussion” in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, vol. 2, ed. John Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 352.

⁹⁸ R. L. Gordon, “Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism” in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, vol. 1, ed. John Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 246.

or vice versa.”⁹⁹ While Freke and Gandy declare that Christianity was just another mystery cult,¹⁰⁰ Nash correctly points out that Christianity was the antithesis of a mystery religion. It was, in fact, an antimystery religion.¹⁰¹ Ulansey attributes the eventual collapse of Mithraism under the weight of Christianity to precisely this fact: “. . . from the beginning Christianity sought to make as many converts as possible. . . . Mithraism, in contrast, was based on a secret, and secrets lose their appeal in direct proportion to the numbers of people who know them.”¹⁰²

If Christianity and Mithraism arose at roughly the same time,¹⁰³ is it not strange to think that the secretive religion with a comparably small number of adherents,¹⁰⁴ whose teachings were mysterious and not readily available, influenced the religion which from the outset aimed to make its doctrines available to the whole world? And would not the religion which eventually sensed its imminent demise be the object of greater suspicion?

Those who allege Christian dependence take some of what is known of early Iranian Mithraism and, against the tide of contemporary scholarship, wrongly assume a strong continuity with Roman Mithraism. They then embellish the details, inject Christian terminology, and in some cases fabricate whole stories. Dependency theorists disregard the relevance of specific dates and assume that a well-defined and unified system of Mithraic doctrines antedated the apostolic period of the church.¹⁰⁵ In addition, they assume that the church overcame the secretive

⁹⁹ Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and the Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel,” 173.

¹⁰⁰ Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?*, 231.

¹⁰¹ Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 128.

¹⁰² Ulansey, “The Mithraic Mysteries,” *Scientific American*, 135.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 130; Roger Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of their Genesis,” 117-118. Beck is convinced that Mithraism’s formation as a Roman cult occurred “approximately in the third quarter of the first century A.D.”

¹⁰⁴ Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 221.

¹⁰⁵ It is very doubtful that an incoherent Mithraism, of which impressions varied greatly, would have possessed the ability to inspire imitations.

nature of this mystery cult to learn of its beliefs and that the church successfully (and without great scandal) copied them from Mithraism. We have a lengthy series of implausible assumptions that ignore an accepted and eminently defensible explanation of the source of Christian theology, namely, the Old Testament and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

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