

MITHRA

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Ahura Mazda is a divine name, but you can meet men in flesh named Hormoz. Mithra is the name of an ancient Iranian divinity, but you can meet men named Mehr, and nowadays boys and even girls are named Mitra.

One such man by the name of Methr or Mehr or Mir appeared in Eastern Iran in the third century BCE, and he was hailed as the expected saviour or Sosyant, and the religion he founded spread all over the ancient world from the British Isles to Japan, South to the confines of the Sahara desert, down to southern Arabia, and the Indian sub-continent. It was the official religion of the two rival powers of the ancient world, the Parthian and the Roman empires for half a millennium.

It had time and again been observed that the Mithraism with whose remains we are familiar in the Roman Empire was in many respects different from the ancient Mithra cult, that there was some new development, perhaps some sort of a revival or reform. This called the forth for new nomenclature, among others neo-Mithraism, later Mithraism (Humbach), or Saco-Median Mithraism of the Modified Seythians (Gershevitch).

The explanation of this new religious phenomenon was sought in the accretion of Mesopotamian and Syrian elements, in the activities of Hellenized Magians, or even, as tendencies in some quarters indicate, in an almost Western, Roman creation and, as far as the silence and confusion of extant sources permit, almost a total denial of its connection with Iran, particularly as it bears on its relations with Christianity.

However, I believe we are now in a position to offer a new explanation.

The Saviour was born in the middle of the night between Saturday and Sunday, 24th and 25th of December, 272 BCE, and according to those who believed in Him from an Immaculate (Anahid) Virgin (Xosidhag) somewhere not far from lake Hamin, Sistan, Lived for 64 years among men, and ascended to His Father Ahura Mazda in 208 BCE

The literary evidence.

Keeping in mind the fate of the religion of Mithra in the West and its utter absorption in Christianity, and the similar fate it had, even more severely, under the Sasanian neo-Zoroastrianism and later under Islam, we would naturally expect in Moslem historians a total identification of Mithra with Jesus, the only Messiah allowed in orthodox Islam.

The following are some of the texts related to the birth of the Messiah. (All references are to Persian translation of the Arabic text Hazma, History of Prophets and Kings, p.41:

"Shabur son of Ashk: The Lord Messiah appeared in his days. Shabur fought against Rum, and at that time the king that ruled there was Antiochus, the third king after Alexander, and it was he who built Antioch."

Tha'alibi, Ghurur, p.215:

"Jesus and John son of Zacharias, on them be peace, lived during the reign of Sabur Shah son of Afghur Shah."

Ibn Miskuwaih, Ta jarib:

"Jesus appeared during the reign of Sabur son of Ashkan."

Tabari, History, vol. II, p.498:

"And these were the Ashkanian kings that are now called Muluk-al-Tawafif (Kings of the Tribes, the Parthian Federation)... During this period Ashk son of Ashkan ruled for ten years. After him Shabur son of Ashkan ruled for sixty years, and in the forty-first year of his reign Jesus son of Mary appeared in the land of Palestine."

Ibid. , p.466:

"Jesus son of Mary, on whom be peace, was born in Jerusalem fifty-one years after the beginning of the reign of the Parthian Federation."

In contrast, Ibid. p.495:

"In the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus Jesus son of Mary, on whom be peace, was born, and his birth was 303 years after the uprising of Alexander."

Tabari continues, p. 501:

"The Persians think that Mary, daughter of Amran, gave birth to Jesus, son of Mary, sixty-five years after the domination of Alexander over the land of Babylon, but the Christians think the birth of Jesus occurred 303 years after the reign of Alexander, and they also think that the birth of John, son of Zacharias, was six months before the birth of Jesus."

Tabari goes on, p. 507:

"The Magians agree with the Christians and Jews as to the duration of the desolation of the Holy City and What Bukhtnash did with the Israelites until the domination of Alexander over the Holy City and Syria and the death of Dara, but they disagree as to the interval between the reign of Alexander and the birth of John; they think that the interval was fifty-one years, and the disagreement between the reign of Alexander and the birth of John and Jesus is what I have said."

Mas'udi in the Muruj and Tanbih is still more explicit.

Muruj, vol. I, p.229:

"After Ashk there was Shabur son of Ashk who ruled for sixty years, and in the forty-first year of his reign the Lord Messiah, on whom be peace, appeared in Ilya of Palestine."

Ibid. , p.550:

"Tishirin Second is thirty days and Kanun First is thirty days. Nineteenth of Kanun the day is 9 1/2 hours and a quarter, and the night is 14 hours and a quarter maximum. On the eve of the 25th of this month is the birth of Messiah, on whom be peace."

And, incidentally, in connection with the island of Socotra he says, ibid. , p.382, that Aristotle wrote a letter to Alexander and made recommendations to the effect that Alexander should send a group of Greeks to that island and settle them there, Alexander did accordingly.

Then "Alexander died and Messiah appeared and the inhabitants of the island became Nasranis."

And now in contrast, ibid, p.303:

"In the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, on whom be peace, who, as we have said before, is Yasu Naseri (Jesus of Nazareth) was born."

And he adds in the Tanbih, pp 114-115:

"In the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus the Messiah was born in Bethlehem of Palestine...According to the Christians in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, Ishu Nasiri was baptized in the river Jordan... According to the Christians in the seventeenth year of the reign of Tiberius, who was king 342 years after Alexander son of Philip, Ishu Nasiri was crucified."

Masudi uses, it seems advisedly, two distinct expressions, al- sayyid al- Masih, the Lord Messiah, and Ishu Nasiri, Jesus of Nazareth, although he used both expressions for Jesus son of Mary because he would not dare to say otherwise, which, by the way, reminds one of Augustine's reference to Mithra as the "Fellow in the Cap", for apparently any reference to the name Mithras was declared anathema by the church.

However, it is quite clear from the above texts that these historians made a distinction between two Messiahs, one born 65 years after the beginning of the reign (mulk) of Alexander (336-335 BCE) and in the fifty-first year of the founding of the Parthian dynasty: i.e. in 272-271 BCE, and the other, Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus.

The same narrative and dates are given in the Koranic commentaries on the Sura' Al' Amran, for example Ab-ul- Futuh, Qomshei's Tehran edition, vol. II, p. 372

There seems also to be a distinction running through all the sources between a Messiah that was crucified and the Messiah that was not crucified, and the Koranic narrative of the crucifixion was perhaps as assimilation of the two traditions in one presentation.

It may be observed that these narratives do not supplement each other, but are derived from one source, which was universally accepted by these historians, for there was no other tradition.

And finally, from Armenia, the last stronghold of the religion of Mithra, we had the testimony of Elise Vardapet to the effect that the Lord Mihr was born of a human mother and he is King and the Son of God.

I believe all students of Iranian religions are familiar with the story of virgins bathing in Lack Hamun where the seed of Zoroaster is preserved for making the chosen virgin pregnant, who is to give birth to the expected Saviour, on the model of which the story of the virgin birth of Jesus from the seed of David was constructed. Although no seed of David is in substance is present at the appearance of the angel in the Annunciation scene on the 25th of March, Koranic commentators repeat the story that the angel blew in the sleeves of Mary's dress when she came out of the water.

The story of the virgin birth originates from the materialization of Farr or Xvarenah, which after all, in spite of the scholarly literature that has grown about it, is the light within man, what in modern terminology we name aptitude. Now the capacity of the individual for kingship or prophet hood is of course of a higher order and was therefore specified as the Kingly Farr and the Farr of Zarathushtra. Since in popular belief this Farr had taken a material form it could only be transmitted through materials means. Hence the transmission of the Kingly Farr in the case of Freydon through plant, animal and milk, or the Farr of Zardosht conveyed to the future Saviour by means of his reserved seed. And in the case of Zoroaster himself, the heavenly Farr descended in the form of fire and mingled with the holy fire in the atrium and penetrated into the body of His mother and joined the baby Zarathushtra. In this connection is should be pointed out that due to the supposed preservation of the seed as bearer of the Farr in water, three *Mithraic symbols* came into use.

(1) The pearl and its shell, a "seed" that grows into an organism in water. The pearl is seen in Mithraic monuments, for example in the hands of angels in Taq-e-Bostan, in the beak of birds in eastern Iran and elsewhere, and in literature, such as the Pearl of great price in the gospels and the well-known Syriac Hymn of the Pearl. The shell is represented in some of the scenes of the birth of Mithra that have been erroneously interpreted as an egg, and also appears as the vaulting of niches in Mithraic monuments and in the churches, especially where Mother and Child are depicted. Incidentally the word for niche in Italian means shell (Nicchia, nicchio).

(2) The second symbol is the dolphin, obviously as a mammal raising its young in water. This symbol is found on some Mithraic monuments in Europe and appears abundantly in the Khirbabs or Mithraeums in Syria and Arabia.

(3) The third symbol is the lotus, a water-flower. Mithra stands n a lotus in Taq-e-Bostan and it seems to me that the stylized object from which Mithra emerges, and which has been interpreted as rock, is nearer to the shape of the lotus, besides the possible confusion in the Greek title of Mithra as Petregenes, from petra, rock, and petri-on, the name of a plant; of petal-on, petal.

And now we pass on from the virgin birth to the ascension.

Hamza, p. 42, says:

"Gudarz son of Ashk, after John was killed by the Children of Israel, fought against them and destroyed Jerusalem for the second time."

Tha'alibi, P.216:

"Gudarz son of Shabur started his reign with a war of revenge against the Children of Israel for their having killing John of Zacharias, and destroyed Jerusalem."

Now leaving aside again the confusion arising from the identification of Mithra with Jesus, and taking notice of the information in Islamic writings and the Messiah was charged with his mission when he was 25 years old and preached for 40 years among men, and the date of the second destruction of Jerusalem in 168 BCE, and the date given for the second destruction of Jerusalem as 40 years after the Ascension, we conclude that the death of Mithra took place in the year 208 BCE and from the Turfan fragment that was taken by Henning, with his own emendation, as a description of the death of Mani, we learn the death of Mithra Messiah occurred on Monday, the fourth of Shahrivar, at the eleventh hour at night. (Henning's ascription of the said fragment to Mani's death is impossible because the day and the month do not coincide with the dates we for Mani's death in prison.)

The Archaeology of Mithraism

I shall deal briefly with some of these relevant archaeological problems in my forth coming small book in Persian with the title An Essay on Mehr and Nahid, and I shall only make a few remarks here.

Motives for Identification

1. When a foreign thought, religious or otherwise, or even foreign material objects are imposed upon or adopted by a people, they are adapted by the receiving people and one means of adaption and reception is the identification of the foreign thing to what is already existing and familiar. This is natural and permissible, and one may say sincere.

Specially in the case of the religion of Mithra which was the most universal religion in the ancient world, and which had its object the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth and the brotherhood of man, as symbolized in the Mithraic sign of the Cross, explained in the Mithraic monument of Hsian-fu in China as representing the unity of man from the four corners of the earth, even the encouragement of such a policy of identification on the art of the followers of Mithra is quite understandable. (Incidentally, the Hsian-fu monument carries all the three symbols of the pearl, the lotus and the dolphin.)

2. A second motive of identification is the protection of native monuments from vandalism of fanatical groups who are imposing a new religion or a new way of life. Under this category may be listed such identifications as the Mosque of Solomon's Mother, Takht-e-Soleyman, Ebrahim-e Zardosht, or the substitution of Mithra with Jesus, that may be literally multiplied a hundred fold in Iran and elsewhere.

Now the modern scholarly attempts at identification of things Iranian with Greek mythological names do not fall within either of these two categories, unless it is committed as an act of defence for the protection of the West, and on particular the Church, against an Iranian re-invasion.

Furthermore, I sympathize with Herzfeld when he said that the constant mention of gods and goddesses of fertility is really sickening.

Passing on to the problem of lack of Mithraeums in Iran, it must be pointed out that in Iran they had the same fate as in Europe, where

excavations have revealed a Mithraeum under almost every old church building. In the east, for example the Cathedral in Etchmiadzin we have encountered the same phenomenon, and recent excavations under Jame Mosque in Esfahan by the Italians, as also in other Jame Mosques in Iran have revealed remains of pre-Islamic monuments which must certainly be of a religious character.

In Iran the Parthian Mithraeums were first turned into Sasanian fire-temples, still preserving the name dare-e Mehr, and second time into mosques, also preserving the old designation as the "House of Communion" (myazda-kada> mazget> masjid, Arabic sajada being a back-formation).

But Iran is not lacking in Mithraic monuments. The Taq-e-Bostan with its cave-like construction and the religious scenes inside the Taq is a Parthian monument, situated in a district named in honour of Mithra, Baghestan, with its Mithraic appendages of flowing spring and small lake, and the figure of Mithra standing on a lotus flower. The ascription of the scenes to Khosro Parvis is impossible and follows the policy of identifications discussed above, which may have been encouraged even in the Sasanian period.

The "fire-temple" in Bishapur is another similar case. When some years ago I argued that we could not consider an underground building as a Zoroastrian fire-temple I did not have Professor Ghirshman's Bichapour, vol. II on hand. The figure of Mithra on a fragment discovered in that temple and reproduced on Plate XVII removes any doubt as to the Mithraic origin of that temple.

Furthermore, the Khirbahs scattered all over Arabia and Syria are Mithraeums in which Mithraic figures and statuettes have been discovered. Khirbah has no connection with Arabic Kharaba, ruined. It is the Iranian Khorabe, a "sun-dome." Abe is found in compounds as in gur-abe, a "tomb-dome," a mausoleum, or in the name Saavee, "three domes," reminding one of Marco Polo's, mention of the tombs of the three Magi in that town. It is the name of a locality near Hamedan in its older form, Avaj, and the word lives on in English Abbey and ab-bot, old English ab-bod, the head of the abbey. In the Masnavi we have Khor-bod, head of the Khor-Khane, translated into Arabic shammas, a title still used in oriental churches for an office of the clergy. (Dozy also translated Arabic Khirba as "court.")

In the last story in the kitab al-Aghani it is narrated, "in Sistan there was a man called Burzen, an ascetic, whose father had been impaled in his Khiraba." He could not have been impaled in his "ruins" but in the Khorabe, Mithraeum. So there were Khorabes as far as Sistan.

In the poems of Hafez the Khorabat-e Moqan, Mithraeums of the Magians, synonymous with Deyr-e Moghan, the convent of the Magians, is common theme. The word deyr, from Avestan dauru-upadarana-, wooden house, is also found the compound Se-deyr, the three Convents, the old name of Dura Europas, the word dura itself representing deyr.

In Armenia, as Starbo mentions, a whole district was named in honour of Anahita, the Mother of God, and the word Mehean from Migryan, i.e. Mithraism, is the common noun in Armenian for temple. Now the ruins of the Mehean in Garni show that the temple was a magnificent monumental edifice. It was natural that the royal house of the Armenia who were followers of Mithra should build such royal temples for worship. It follows that the Parthian emperors must have built such monumental cathedrals in the homeland of Mithra. The temple at Kangavar, dedicated also the Mother of God, was one such building, and we have references to other Mithraic cathedrals, some of which were later turned into fire-temples by the Sasanians. The buildings in Old Nisa and Kishan monuments open another chapter in the story.

It is unthinkable that the Roman Empire, where the official religion was Mithraism for almost half-a-millennium, or at least as it is admitted, several of the emperors were outspoken followers of Mithra, the only house of the worship for the emperors and the Roman nobility should have been confined to underground crypts which were used for community chapels. That part of the building in the baths of Caracalla set apart for worship show that magnificent halls were also dedicated for Mithraic worship. The basilica of Trajan is another such temple. Trajan is depicted elsewhere with the Mithraic Cap of Liberty, and while we are mentioning Trajan let me throw out this thought for consideration that the wars of the Romans against the Parthians were in many instances a proto-type of the later Crusades in the Middle Ages, that is to say, an attempt to possess the Holy Land where Mithra was born and had preached.

Mehrayns or Mirans or Milans were scattered all over the ancient world as great centers of Mithraism from Milan in Italy to numerous Milans and Mirans in Iran to Miran near lake 'Lob Nor' not far from Turfan.

The Cult and the Doctrine

From the extant remains, literary and archaeological, of the religion of Mithra, we gather that the salvation of man, after the slaying of the Bull, is symbolized in the obtaining of blessed eternal life by partaking the holy meal in the community of the brethren.

The Iranian origin of this divine supper is proved by the terminology. In the Armenian rites the meat is nishkhark, Persian Nushkhare, the edible thing of immortality, the corresponding liquid element nushabe, the water of immortality. The whole meal is the eucharistia, the Greek form of Iranian hu-khoresht, the good meal, the divine meal.

The two ancient Iranian words for the holy repast in the Gathas are myazda and myastra; one gives the Persian miz and Latin mass, and the other gives Greek musterion, mystery. That is why Mithraism as well as Christianity are mystery religions. Secrecy is not essential to the myastra.

As regards the word Messiah itself, it might be interesting to point out that the western Iranian form is Missa, and the eastern missi, possible originals of the Arabic and Hebrew forms of the word which were popular etymology related to the root for rubbing and anointing, and incidentally for the first time used in the Bible for an Iranian, Cyrus. The word would then mean mediator, supported by Plutarch's mesites and confirmed in the Sorkh Kotal inscription.

In the divine meal, the Lord's Supper, apparently the Cup used for the nushabe became the holiest object in the service. That cup figures very prominently in Persian literature and especially in the mystical poems. The cup has seven lines or measures corresponding to the seven degrees in Mithraism. The full cup is for the Pir or the Father, who is known as the Pir of the seven lines. In the West it gave rise to the "Graded cup", Latin gradalis > grail. The story of the Holy Grail as well as the Arthurian legends will occupy our attention at another meeting.

Remnants of Mithraism

As to remnants of Mithraism in Iran, at its best it survives in Iranian mysticism represented by the Divan-e Shams, the Golshan-e Raz, and above all, in the poems of Hafez, and of course in the strong influence it exerted on Islamic Sufism, which is quite distinct from Iranian mysticism.

In sects, there is a survival of Mithraism in the Ahl-e Haq and the Yazidis, and other small sects scattered in closed communities.

In Europe the remnants such as the medieval Albigensis and Bogomils are considered to be Manicheans. No doubt that they were influenced by Manichean doctrines just as the Christian Church was, but they are more likely to be remnants of the followers of Mithra, and the case of the Bogomils is more clear in as much as the name composed of Bog, bagh, special title of Mithra, and mil, the same word as Mihr, which in the Slavic languages even carries the meaning of live as in Persian mehr. Bogomil is then the etymological and semantic equivalent of the Soghdian Bagh Misi.

It is written in the Bayan al- Adyan, that "the Manicheans say that Jesus called men to Zoroaster."

¹ The late Dr. M. Moghdam at the Second International Congress of Mithraic Studies held in Tehran in 1975 presented this paper. Copy received courtesy of Mr. Parviz Varjavand