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Mithraism What Mithraism Isn't

by Ceisiwr Serith

You don't have to search the web long to find quite a few sites eager to tell you the great similarities between Mithraism and Christianity. These sites either imply or outright state that Christianity is a fraudulent creation based primarily on Pagan religion, and especially on Mithraism. There you will see lists, some quite long, of the things the two religions have in common. The only problem is that most of the items on these lists aren't true. What we have here is a garbage in, garbage out, situation. If the majority of your facts are wrong, your conclusion will also be wrong.

In the comparison between Mithraism and Christianity, the situation is even worse. Even if every single item on these lists were true, it can still be proven that Christianity didn't take any of them from Mithraism. Before getting to the lists, I want to get one thing out of the way.

We often read that Mithraism was a major rival of Christianity. The classic expression of this is from Ernest Renan, who wrote in 1923, that "If Christianity had been arrested in its growth by some fatal malady, the world would have become Mithraist" (quoted in Manfred Clauss' *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, p. 168. I will be relying heavily on this book for references, since it is in print and a very good summary of the evidence. For a fuller bibliography, see the reading list page.)

But was it? Mithraism was a mystery cult, open only to men, popular primarily among soldiers and middle managers (Clauss, chapter 6), with no central organization. Right away we see a problem: membership was barred to half the population. Of the half that could join, only certain classes showed interest. And why not; did the average citizen of Rome have the leisure or the education to study for initiation in such a group? Further, it is hard to conceive of a religion made up of small, independent, secret groups ever becoming in any sense official.

The relevance of this to whether Christianity took things from Mithraism is this: what would have been the point? The two religions weren't competing for the same converts until Christianity was fairly well established. Now to the lists. I'll give the list entries in italics, followed by my re-sponses in ordinary print. This list is a composite of a number of those found on the web, many of which repeat the same points, making it impossible to determine the originator of any of them.

Mithras was the son of a virgin. We have a large number of representations of the birth of Mithras. (Clauss, pp. 63 - 71, shows some of these, as does Ulansey, pp. 36

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and 96.) He rises from a rock, with a dagger in one hand and a torch in the other. He is wearing a cap. There are no women in any of these images. Mithras was born on December 25th. The answer to this is somewhat complicated. The Christian Scriptor Syrus, writing in the late fourth century CE, tells us:

"It was a custom of the Pagans to celebrate on the same 25 December the birthday of the sun. ... Accordingly, when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnized on that day" (quoted in Hutton, p. 1).

December 25th was the birthday of the sun, then; to be specific, of Sol Invictus, the "Unconquered Sun." The complication here is over the question of whether Mithras and Sol Invictus are the same deity. Sometimes it seems that they are. There is an inscription from the first quarter of the second century CE, found in Rome, that refers to "Sol(i) M(ithrae)" (Clauss, p. 22). (Roman dedications commonly included abbreviations; that the "M" referred to Mithras is obvious because the inscription is on an image of him.) Further, Mithras is often called "Invictus," just like the sun.

There are two problems here. First, "Invictus" was a title which was applied to gods other than Mithras and Sol. Hercules, for instance, was called that, as were even emperors (Clauss, p. 24). This particular title is therefore not significant.

Even more telling, in the images we find in the Mithraic temples Sol is clearly separate from Mithras. He sends Mithras a message, invites him to heaven, shakes his hand, puts a crown on his head, and sits down at a meal with him. The best we can say, then, is that Mithras both was and wasn't the sun.

Of course, the date of Christmas is not particularly important in the origins of Christianity, and has no bearing on Christian theology. It is worth noting, however, that the feast of the birthday of the sun, while definitely Pagan, wasn't pre-Christian. It was only established in 274 CE by the emperor Aurelian (Hutton, p. 1). Even more significant, the most important feast day of Sol Invictus wasn't even on December 25th, but rather took place in October (Hutton, p. 2). All in all, then the idea that Christians took the date of Christmas from Mithraism is shaky at best, and insignificant to boot.

He was attended at his birth by shepherds. In images of Mithras' birth from the rock he is sometimes accompanied by two small figures. The same figures appear flanking the images of Mithras killing the bull in the Mithraic temples, the most important cult image of Mithraism. They're dressed like Mithras, and usually one carries a torch pointing up and one pointing down. In no representations are they connected with sheep or with any tools of shepherding. There are some rare examples when other figures, such as Saturn or Oceanus are present, and a few show a snake as well. In short, there are never shepherds present.

He was considered a great travelling teacher and master. The main event in the life of Mithras is the killing of a bull. After this he ascends to heaven, so any travelling and teaching would have to have been done prior to the sacrifice. We have some representations of his life between his birth and the death of the bull. (Clauss dedicates chapter 8, "The Sacred Narrative," to these.) We know from these that he went hunting, he procured water by shooting an arrow at a rock, and he carried the bull to a cave. That's it. There was neither travelling nor teaching.

Mithras had twelve followers. I've already mentioned the two torchbearers. They are present in almost every image of Mithras killing the bull. Other figures can occur, some more frequently than others. The sun and the moon are very common, although they are clearly meant to be up in the heavens looking down at the death of the bull rather than accompanying Mithras. Oceanus and Saturn, whom I mentioned earlier as sometimes present at Mithras' birth, are also sometimes found in the tauroctony, although outside of the main scene. There are, however, no twelve companions. Perhaps this idea came from the fairly common representation of the circle of the zodiac surrounding Mithras and the bull. Whatever the

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source, the point is made moot, since as we have seen Mithras didn't travel or teach, so he would have had neither companions nor followers.

He performed miracles. This one is actually partly right; we know of the one miracle of producing water from a rock. I can't see any significance in this, though; how many major religious figures haven't performed miracles?

He was killed and buried in a tomb. Sometimes we are even told that he was crucified. I am perplexed at how to respond to this. I suppose one way is say that no Mithraic scholar seems to be aware of any image, inscription, or text to this effect. If the makers of these lists know of one, I ask them to send the references to me and I will pass them on to the scholars.

After three days he rose again. This is easily answered. Since he didn't die he couldn't have risen from the dead.

He ascended into heaven. This is actually true. After killing the bull, he was raised into heaven by the Sun, usually on the Sun's chariot. Note the difference in theology between this and the ascension of Jesus, who ascends through his own power. The ascension of Mithras is a typical Pagan ascension to divinity. There is another important difference in this that cuts to the heart of the question of whether Mithraism is similar to Christianity. In Christianity Jesus ascends to heaven as a result of dying, but Mithras ascends as a result of killing.

Once Mithras is in heaven, he and the Sun shake hands. They then sit down to feast on the meat of the bull. This means that the killing of the bull, the ascension, the handshake, and the feast follow one right after the other. This speaks to the question of Mithras' reputed death and resurrection. Since he killed the bull immediately before ascending, when was there time for him to die and be resurrected?

This completes both the actual and the claimed story of the life of Mithras. Our lists also tell us about Mithras himself.

He was called "the Way, the Truth, and the Light," "Redeemer," "Savior," "Messiah." As to the first three titles, I can only say that I have never encountered them. But then, since none of the lists give any references, it can't be said that any of their makers have encountered them either. If any of my readers are aware of any inscriptions or texts with these titles, please send them to me. "Redeemer" is a title which could not have been applied to Mithras for theological reasons. A redeemer must redeem from something. In Christian theology, this is seen as having been redeemed from sin. The word "redemption" implies a payment, and we see this in the words of St. Paul: "For ye are bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:20). This concept did not exist within Roman Paganism, so the term "Redeemer" would have been meaningless to Mithraists. Mithras was, however, called "Savior" ("Soter"). To compare Mithraism and Christianity on this point is simply to note that they are both religions of salvation. This is an extremely underwhelming observation. I am perplexed as to why Mithras would have been called "Messiah," since that was a Jewish term that long predated contact between Rome and the Jews. Are people suggesting that Roman Mithraists introduced the word "Messiah" into Hebrew so that hundreds of years later it could be applied to Jesus? If indeed Mithras had been called "Messiah" (and I am unaware of any example of this), it could only mean that Mithraism had taken the term from Judaism or Christianity, rather than the other way round.

Mithras was called the "Good Shepherd." Again I must first answer that if anyone has an inscription to this effect, please contact Mithraic scholars; they don't seem to know of it. It is worth noting as well that there is no pastoral imagery among Mithraic artifacts.

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He was identified with both the lion and the lamb. One more time, there are no sheep of any age in Mithraism. We do sometimes find lions, but as companions of Mithras, not forms of him. There is as well a deity found in Mithraic temples who has a lion's head. This is not Mithras, however.

Mithras' resurrection was celebrated every year. Since, as we have seen, Mithras didn't die, and could therefore not have been resurrected, it would have been impossible for his resurrection to have been celebrated.

This celebration was at Easter. This one is almost laughable. An impossible event was celebrated by Romans on a date determined by the Jewish calendar? Christians taking from the Romans a date they had already inherited from Judaism?

The holy day of Mithraism was Sunday. We know nothing about when Mithraic rituals took place.

Mithraism had a ritual meal. This is true. Mithraic temples were set up for this very purpose, and we are told by both Tertullian and Justin Martyr that Mithraists had ritual meals of bread and wine (or bread and water) (Clauss, pp. 108 - 109). As Clauss writes, however, "In the case of these analogies, there can be no question of imitation in either direction. The offering of bread and wine is known in virtually all ancient cultures, and the meal as a means of binding the faithful together and uniting them to the deity was a feature common to many religions" (p. 109).

In some lists, such as that given by Acharya S., this meal is referred to as a "Eucharist," or "Lord's Supper." This choice of words is clearly meant to assert a connection with Christianity simply by applying similar words. Those words are, however, highly inappropriate, since they possess meanings that we don't find in Mithraism. "Eucharist" comes from a Greek word meaning, "grateful, thankful." There is no evidence of such an attitude in the Mithraic ritual meal. Its modern meaning implies some sort of presence of a deity in the food and drink consumed; again there is no evidence of this in Mithraism. In fact, since the meal of Mithras and Sol, which is surely the prototype of the Mithraic cult meal, has as its main element the meat of the bull, the cult meal could not have had the meaning of eating the god. "Lord's Supper" is equally loaded, since it implies a similarity with the Last Supper of Christianity. But the first supper eaten after an ascension which did not involve death is a very different thing from a last supper eaten before death.

Of all the elements on this list, then, the significant ones aren't true, and the true ones aren't significant. Where these ideas originated is beyond me, but their repetition does no service to those who repeat them.

I've perhaps been a little dishonest up to now. I've shown point by point how the supposed links between Mithraism and Christianity don't hold up. But even if they were all true, it wouldn't show that Christianity had taken anything from Mithraism, because that theory relies on an important assumption, that Mithraism pre-dates Christianity. That seems obvious; Mithraism is Pagan, and Paganism is pre-Christian. This assumption is wrong.

The Roman god Mithras has an ancestor in the Persian god Mithra. The worship of this Persian deity can be traced to at least 2000 BCE, and continues today. Mithra is a god of justice, truth, and light, and a helper in the battle against evil.

Mithra and Mithras are not, however, the same deity, except in name. The exact nature of the connection between the two is still debated, but Clauss states the general attitude of Mithraic scholars quite succinctly: "We cannot account for Roman Mithras in terms borrowed from Persian Mitra" (p. 7). This is a position based on the fact that the defining characteristics of Roman Mithraism - small groups, initiations, masculine exclusivity, underground worship, the god killing a bull, astrological symbolism - aren't found

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Ostara Recipes

Violet Salad

1 Tbsp raspberry vinegar
 1 Tbsp minced Shallot
 1/2 tsp dijon mustard
 fresh ground black pepper
 1 1/2 tsp chicken stock, (use vegetable stock for vegetarians)
 1 1/2 tsp virgin olive oil
 1/2 lb mixed greens washed
 1/4 cup violet blossoms
 1/4 cup wild strawberries (optional)

Combine vinegar, shallot, mustard and some pepper in a small bowl.
 Let stand 5 minutes
 Whisk in stock then oil. Toss greens with dressings, top with violets and strawberries and serve immediately.

Green Man Salad and Green Dressing

Zucchini
 Greens
 Cucumbers
 Watercress

Toss all ingredients in a salad bowl. Dress with lemon and honey or Green Dressing: 1 cup mayonnaise, 1/4 cup pesto, a pinch of watercress, poppy seeds, and a dash of vinegar.

Dandelion Honey

1 Liter dandelion petals
 1 Liter water
 3 slices lemon - 1-2 cm thick
 1/4 vanilla bean, cut in half
 1 kg sugar

Pick the dandelions in full sunshine. Pull off all the dandelion petals and put them in a pot with the water, lemon slices and vanilla bean. Simmer for about 30 minutes.

Let the mixture sit by the side of the stove for 5 to 6 hours.

Strain to separate the petals from the juice. Return the juice to the pot and bring to a simmer. Slowly add the sugar and simmer until desired thickness

(takes about 4 hours).
 Serve on toast, muffins or danish
 Yield: about 1 liter

Apache Acorn Soup

3 lb Stew beef
 2 qt Water
 1 tsp Pepper
 1 tsp Salt
 1 cup Ground acorn meal

Cover beef with water and bring to boil in a heavy pot. Simmer until done; add salt and pepper as meat cooks tender. Remove beef and chop on a flat stone until split in shreds. The meat broth continues to cook vigorously while meat and acorn meal are mixed together.

Meat and meal simmer together until the broth bubbles creamy white with yellow flecks, pleasantly acorn scented and flavored.

Calendula Butter

8 Tbsps (1 stick) butter, at room temperature
 1/2 cup calendula petals
 Blend together in a small bowl. Use right away or cover and refrigerate for up to 1 week.



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in the Persian worship of Mithra. Roman Mithraism can therefore not be said to date back to 2000 BCE; it was a new religion that appears rather suddenly in the Roman empire.

When did it appear? Here is a hard truth: the earliest Mithraic artifact is dated to about 90 CE (Clauss, p. 21). Let me repeat that date: 90 CE.

This date doesn't require much comment. It shows something that may seem radical: any influence between Mithraism and Christianity would have had to have flowed from Christianity to Mithraism, rather than the other way round. Mithraism is not, in fact, a pre-Christian religion.

In summary, the argument that Mithraism was a source for Christian beliefs or practices falls on three ground. First, there would have been no reason for Christianity to have taken anything from Mithraism. Second, the elements of Mithraism generally put forward as similar to Christianity are either untrue or insignificant. Third, and most deadly, Mithraism actually appears after Christianity.

Did Christianity steal from Mithraism? Most definitely not.

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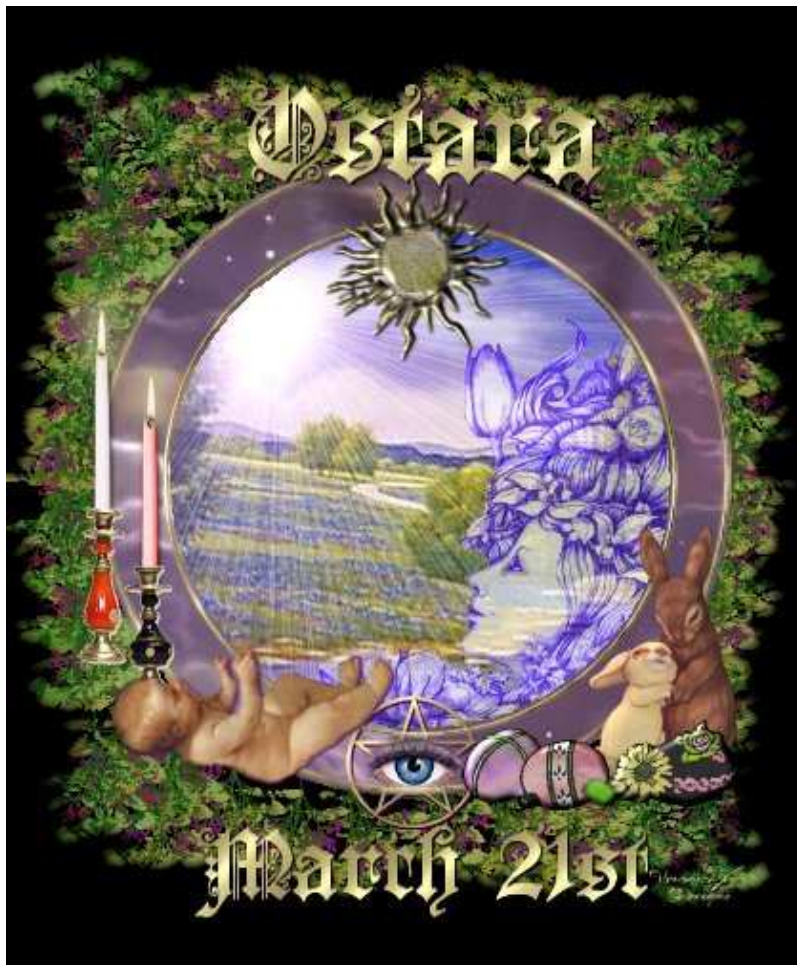
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<http://www.ceisiwrserith.com/mith/whatmthisnt.htm>

Ceisiwr Serith is author of *A Book of Pagan Prayer* and *The Pagan Family: Handing the Old Ways Down*. Forthcoming books from this author include: *Speaking of the Sacred* and *Reinventing Wicca*.





What books have you read, that you would suggest for the rest of us to read?

The Spring Equinox by Ellen Jackson

Celebrating the Seasons of Life: Samhain to Ostara : Lore, Rituals, Activities, and Symbols by Ashleen O'Gaea

Spring (Blastoff! Readers: Seasons) (Seasons) by Ann Herriges

Crafting Wiccan Traditions: Creating a Foundation for Your Spiritual Beliefs & Practices by Raven Grimassi

Magickal Self Defense: A Quantum Approach to Warding by Kerr Cuhulain

Magic and the Power of the Goddess by Gareth Knight

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