

CHRISTMAS AND THE NATIVITY OF MITHRAS.¹

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[Christmas is a festival that, long before the Christian era, has been celebrated as the birth of the new sun. Christianity adopted it from Mithraism, and in northern countries many customs of the merry Yule-tide were incorporated in its celebration.

Christmas has become the main family-feast among all the Teutonic nations, and to us the idea that it is originally a pagan festival does not detract from its significance but on the contrary adds to it, and its greater age makes it the more venerable.

We here reproduce the statement of a Christian scholar, a theologian, who has collected the most important passages that throw light on the history of Christmas and its adoption as a church festival.—P. C.]

AS Mithraicism gradually blended with Christianity, changing its name but not altogether its substance, many of its ancient notions and rites passed over too, and the Birthday of the Sun, the visible manifestation of Mithras himself, was transferred to the commemoration of the Birth of Christ.

Numerous illustrations of the above remarks may be found in ancient inscriptions, e. g., SOLI INVICTO ET LUNÆ AETERNÆ C. VETTI GERMANI LIB. DUO PARATUS ET HERMES DEDERUNT,² or ΗΑΙΩ ΜΙΘΡΑ ΑΝΙΚΗΤΩ³ (Gruter, *Inscriptiones Antiquae*, p. xxxiii). In the legend on the reverse of the copper coins of Constantine, SOLI INVICTO COMITI,⁴ retained long after his conversion, there is at once an idea of the ancient Sun-God, and of the new Sun of Righteousness.

The supporters of this theory cite various passages from early Christian writers indicating a recognition of this view. The ser-

¹ Reproduced from William Smith's *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (pp. 357-358).

² "To the unconquerable sun and the eternal moon this is given by P. and H., the two children of C. V. G.

³ I. e., to Helios (or the sun) Mithras the invincible.

⁴ "To the invincible Sun, the protector."

mon of Ambrose, quoted by Jablonsky, is certainly spurious, and is so marked in the best editions of his works; it furnishes, however, an interesting illustration of an early date. The passage runs thus: "Well do the common people call this somehow sacred day of the birth of the Lord 'a new sun,' and confirm it with so great an authority of theirs that Jews and Gentiles concur in this mode of speech. And this should willingly be accepted by us, because with the birth of the Saviour there comes not only the salvation of mankind, but the brightness of the sun itself is renewed."¹ (*Serm. 6, in Appendice*, p. 397, ed. Bened.)

In the Latin editions of Chrysostom is a homily, wrongly ascribed to him, but probably written not long after his time, in which we read: "But they call it the birthday of the Invincible (i. e., Mithras). Who, however, is invincible if not our Lord, who has conquered death? Further, if they say 'it is the birthday of the sun,' He is the sun of righteousness, about whom the prophet Malachi says, 'Unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.'²" (*Sermo de Nativitate S. Joannis Baptistae*; Vol. II., 1113, ed. Paris, 1570.)

Leo the Great finds fault with the baneful persuasion of "some to whom this day of our celebration is worthy of honor not so much on account of the birth of Christ as for the sake of the renewal of the sun." (*Serm. 22, § 6, Vol. I., p. 72, ed. Ballerini.*) Again, the same father observes: "But no other day appears to us more appropriate than to-day for worshipping in heaven and earth the Feast of the Nativity, and while even in the material world (in the elements) a new light shines, He confers on us before our very senses, the brightness of his wonderful sacrament." (*Serm. 26, §1, p. 87.*)

We may further cite one or two instances from ancient Christian poets: Prudentius, in his hymn *Ad Natalem Domini*, thus speaks (*Cathemerinon*, xi. init., p. 364, ed. Arevalus):

"Why does the sun already leave the circle of the arctic north?
Is not Christ born upon the earth who will the path of light increase?"

Paulinus of Nola also (*Poema* xiv. 15-19, p. 382, ed. Muratori):

¹The Rev. Sinker quotes this passage as well as all other references in the original, which is here replaced by English translations.

²The preceding lines of this quotation from Chrysostom (Hom. 31) plainly state that Christ's birthday has been fixed upon the day of the birth of Mithras: "On this day (the birthday of Mithras) also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that whilst the heathen were busied with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their holy rites undisturbed."

“Truly, after the solstice, when Christ is born in the body,
 With a new sun he will change the frigid days of the north wind.
 While he is offering to mortals the birth that will bring them salvation,
 Christ with the progress of days gives command that the nights be declining.”

Reference may also be made to an extract in Assemani (*Bibl. Or.*, ii. 163) from Dionysius Bar-Salibi, bishop of Amida, which shows traces of a similar feeling in the East; also to a passage from an anonymous Syrian writer, who distinctly refers the fixing of the day to the above cause; we are not disposed, however, to attach much weight to this last passage. More important for our purpose is the injunction of a council of Rome (743 A. D.): “No one shall celebrate the 1st of January and the Brumalia” (can. 9, Labbé vi. 1548), which shows at any rate that for a long time after the fall of heathenism, many traces of heathen rites still remained.

[The more we study the history of Christianity and its origin, the more are we impressed with the fact that a great part of its growth is due to assimilation. Christianity conquered not only by being the fittest to survive among several rival religions, but also by adopting those institutions and doctrines that, for some reason or another, recommend themselves to great masses of the people. The early Christians considered Mithraism as a pagan religion, but the more we know of the faith of Zarathustra, the more can we appreciate the philosophical significance of its doctrines and the moral earnestness of its ethics.¹—*Ed.*]

¹We recommend in this connection a study of *The Zarathustrian Gathas*, translated by Prof. Lawrence H. Mills, as representing Mazdaism in its original purity, and Prof. Franz Cumont's *The Mysteries of Mithra*, a study of Mithraism in its later phase, gathered from the scattered remnants of the Mithraic monuments and other sources. Both books are published by The Open Court Publishing Co.