

# THE DOCTRINE OF THE MITHRAIC MYSTERIES.<sup>1</sup>

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[CONCLUDED.]

THE god with whom Mithra first measured his strength was the Sun. The latter was compelled to render homage to the superiority of his rival and to receive from him his investiture. His

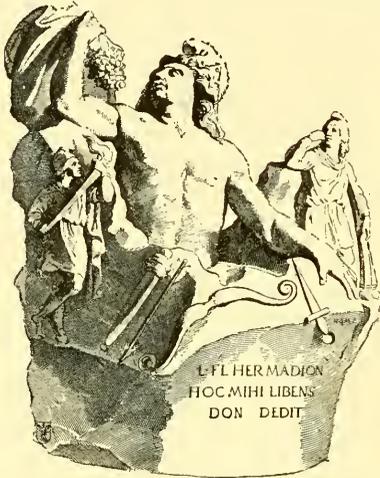


Fig. 1 a. MITHRA BORN FROM THE ROCKS.

Holding in his hand the grape which replaces in the West the Haoma of the Persians.



Fig. 1 b. SOL THE SUN-GOD

Installed by Mithra as the governor of the world. To the right the globe of power.

conqueror placed upon his head the radiant crown that he has borne in his daily course ever since his downfall. Then he caused him to rise again, and extending to him his right hand concluded

<sup>1</sup> Extracted by the author from his *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (Brussels: H. Lamertin). Translated by T. J. McCormack.

with him a solemn covenant of friendship. And ever after, the two allied heroes faithfully supported each other in all their enterprises.

The most extraordinary of these epic adventures was Mithra's combat with the bull, the first living creature created by Ormuzd. This ingenuous fable carries us back to the very beginnings of civilisation. It could never have risen save among a people of shepherds and hunters with whom cattle, the source of all wealth, had

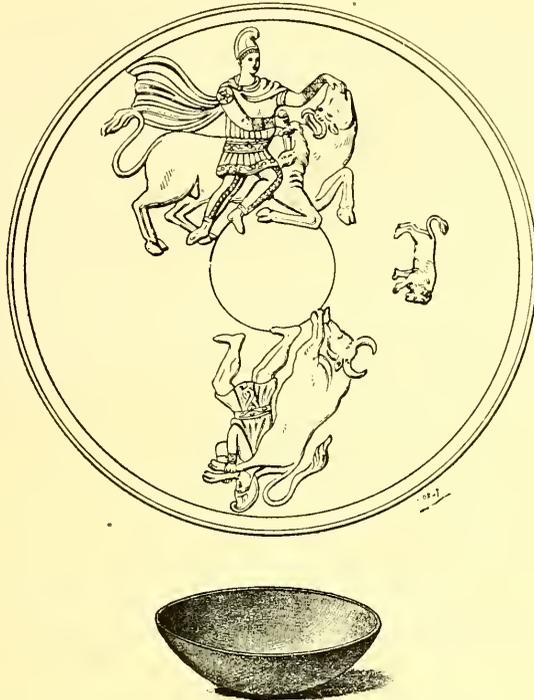


Fig. 2. THE TAUROCTONOUS (BULL-SLAYING) MITHRA AND THE TAUROPHOROUS (BULL-BEARING) MITHRA; BETWEEN THEM THE DOG.

Clay cup found at Lanuvium.

become an object of religious veneration. In the eyes of such a people, the capture of a wild bull was an achievement so highly fraught with honor as to be apparently no derogation even for a god.

The redoubtable bull was grazing in a pasture on the mountain-side; the hero, resorting to a bold stratagem, seized it by the horns and succeeded in mounting it. The infuriated quadruped, breaking into a gallop, struggled in vain to free itself from its

rider; the latter, although unseated by the bull's mad rush, never for a moment relaxed his hold; he suffered himself to be dragged along, suspended from the horns of the animal, which, finally exhausted by its efforts, was forced to surrender. Its conqueror then seizing it by its hind hoofs, dragged it backwards over a road strewn with obstacles (Fig. 2) into the cave which served as his home.

This painful Journey (*Transitus*) of Mithra became the symbol of human sufferings. But the bull, it would appear, succeeded in making its escape from its prison, and again roamed at large over the mountain pastures. The Sun then sent the raven, his messenger, to carry to his ally the command to slay the fugitive. Mithra received this cruel mission much against his will, but submitting to the decree of Heaven he pursued the truant beast with his agile dog, succeeded in overtaking it just at the moment when it was taking refuge in the cave which it had quitted, and seizing it by the nostrils with one hand, with the other he plunged deep into its flank his hunting knife.

Then came an extraordinary prodigy to pass. From the body of the moribund victim sprang all the useful herbs and plants that cover the earth with their verdure. From the spinal cord of the animal sprang the wheat that gives us our bread, and from its blood the vine that produces the sacred drink of the Mysteries. In vain did the Evil Spirit launch forth his unclean demons against the anguish-wrung animal, in order to poison in it the very sources of life; the scorpion, the ant, the serpent, strove in vain to consume the genital parts and to drink the blood of the prolific quadruped; but they were powerless to impede the miracle that was enacting. The seed of the bull, gathered and purified by the Moon, produced all the different species of useful animals, and its soul, under the protection of the dog, the faithful companion of Mithra, ascended into the celestial spheres above, where, receiving the honors of divinity, it became under the name of Sylvanus the guardian of herds. 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.

Meanwhile, the first human couple had been called into existence, and Mithra was charged with keeping a watchful eye over this privileged race. It was in vain the Spirit of Darkness invoked his pestilential scourges to destroy it; the god always knew how to balk his mortiferous designs. Ahriman first desolated the land by

causing a protracted drought, and its inhabitants, tortured by thirst, implored the aid of his ever-victorious adversary. The divine archer discharged his arrows against a precipitous rock and there gushed forth from it a spring of living water to which the suppliants thronged to cool their parched palates.<sup>1</sup> But a still more terrible cataclysm followed, which menaced all nature. A universal deluge depopulated the earth, which was overwhelmed by the waters of the rivers and the seas. One man alone, secretly

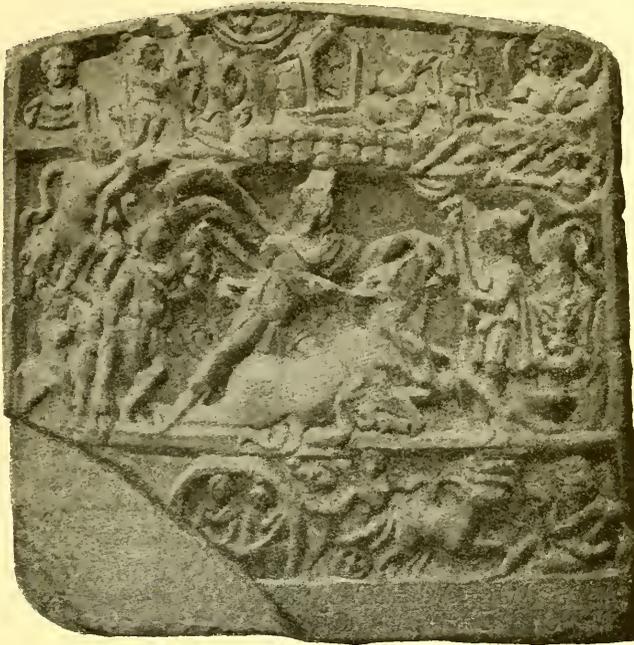


Fig. 3. BAS-RELIEF OF APULUM, DACIA.

In the center, the Tauroctonus Mithra with the two torch-bearers ; to the left, Mithra mounted on the bull, and Mithra taurophorous ; to the right, a lion stretched lengthwise above a cup (symbols of fire and water). Upper border : Bust of Luna ; new-born Mithra reclining near the banks of a stream ; shepherd standing, with lambs ; bull in a cabin and bull in a boat ; underneath, the seven altars ; Mithra drawing a bow ; bust of the Sun. Lower border : Banquet of Mithra and the Sun ; Mithra mounting the quadriga of the Sun ; the Ocean surrounded by a serpent.

advised by the gods, had constructed a boat and had saved himself together with his cattle in this ark buoyant upon the broad expanse

<sup>1</sup>See the curved border in centre of frontispiece to *The Open Court* for June, 1902, and the picture of the bas-relief of Mayence, to be published in a subsequent number.

of waters. Then a great conflagration ravaged the world and consumed utterly both the habitations of men and of beasts. But the creatures of Ormuzd also ultimately escaped this new peril, thanks to celestial protection, and henceforward the human race was permitted to wax great and multiply in peace.

The heroic period of history was now closed, and the terrestrial mission of Mithra accomplished. In a Last Supper, which the initiated commemorated by mystical love feasts, he celebrated with Helios and the other companions of his labors the termination of their common struggles. Then the gods ascended to Heaven. Borne by the Sun on his radiant quadriga, Mithra crossed the ocean, which sought in vain to engulf him, and took up his habitation with the rest of the immortals. But he never ceased from the heights of Heaven to protect the faithful ones that piously served him.

This mythical recital of the origin of the world enables us to understand the importance which the tauroctonous god enjoyed in his religion, and to comprehend better what the pagan theologians endeavored to express by the title "mediator." Mithra is the creator to whom Jupiter Ormuzd committed the task of establishing and of maintaining order in nature. He is, to speak in the philosophical language of the times, the Logos that emanated from God and shared His omnipotence; who, after having fashioned the world as demiurge, continued to watch carefully over it. The primal defeat of Ahriman had not reduced him to absolute impotence; the struggle between the good and the evil was still carried on on earth between the emissaries of the sovereign of Olympus and those of the Prince of Darkness; it raged in the celestial spheres in the opposition of propitious and adverse stars, and it reverberated in the hearts of men,—the epitomes of the universe.

Life is a battle, and to issue forth from it victorious the law must be faithfully followed that the divinity himself revealed to the ancient Magi. What were the obligations that Mithraism imposed upon its followers? What were those "commandments" to which its adepts had to bow in order to be rewarded in the world to come? Our incertitude on these points is extreme, for we have not the shadow of a right to identify the precepts revealed in the Mysteries with those formulated in the Avesta. Nevertheless, it would appear certain that the morals of the Magi of the Occident had made no concession to the license of the Babylonian cults and that it had still preserved the lofty character of the ethics of the ancient Persians. Perfect purity had remained for them the cult

toward which the life of the faithful should tend. Their ritual required repeated lustrations and ablutions, which were believed to wash away the stains of the soul. This catharsis or purification both conformed to the Mazdean traditions and was in harmony with the general tendencies of the age. Yielding to these tendencies, the Mithraists carried their principles even to excess, and their ideals of perfection verged on asceticism. Abstinence from certain foods and absolute continence were regarded as praiseworthy.

Resistance to sensuality was one of the aspects of the combat with the principle of evil. To support untiringly this combat with the followers of Ahriman, who, under multiple forms, disputed with the gods the empire of the world, was the duty of the servitors of Mithra. Their dualistic system was particularly adapted to fostering individual effort and to developing human energy. They did not lose themselves, as did the other sects, in contemplative mysticism; for them, the good dwelt in action. They rated strength higher than gentleness, and preferred courage to lenity. From their long association with barbaric religions, there was perhaps a residue of cruelty in their ethics. A religion of soldiers, Mithraism exalted the military virtues above all others.

In the war which the zealous champion of piety carries on unceasingly with the malign demons, he is assisted by Mithra. Mithra is the god of help whom one never invokes in vain, an unfailing haven, the anchor of salvation for mortals in all their trials, the dauntless champion who sustains in their frailty his devotees in all the tribulations of life. As with the Persians, so here he is still the defender of truth and justice, the protector of holiness, and the intrepid antagonist of the powers of darkness. Eternally young and vigorous, he pursues them without mercy; "always awake, always alert," it is impossible to surprise him; and from his never-ceasing combats he always emerges the victor. This is the idea

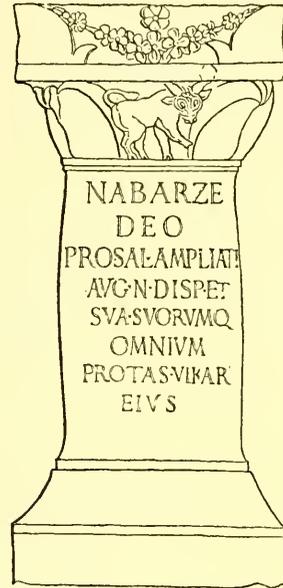


Fig. 4. DEDICATORY INSCRIPTION OF MITHRA NABARZE (VICTORIOUS).

Found at Sarmizegetusa.

that unceasingly recurs in the inscriptions, the idea expressed by the Persian surname *Nabarzes* (Fig. 4), by the Greek and Latin epithets of ἀνίκητος, *invictus*, *insuperabilis*. As the god of armies, Mithra caused his *protégés* to triumph over their barbarous adversaries, and likewise in the moral realm he gave them victory over the instincts of evil, inspired by the Spirit of Falsehood, and he assured them salvation both in this world and in that to come.

Like all the Oriental cults, the Persian Mysteries mingled with their cosmogonic fables and their theological speculations, ideas of deliverance and redemption. They believed in the conscious survival after death of the divine essence that dwells within us, and in punishments and rewards beyond the tomb. The souls, of which an infinite multitude peopled the habitations of the Most High, descended here below to animate the bodies of men, either because they were compelled by bitter necessity to fall into this material and corrupt world, or because they had dropped of their own accord upon the earth to undertake here the battle against the demons. When after death the genius of corruption took possession of the body, and the soul quitted its human prison, the devas of darkness and the emissaries of Heaven disputed for its possession. A special decree decided whether it was worthy to ascend again into Paradise. If it was stained by an impure life, the emissaries of Ahriman dragged it down to the infernal depths, where they inflicted upon it a thousand tortures; or perhaps, as a mark of its fall, it was condemned to take up its abode in the body of some unclean animal. If, on the contrary, its merits outweighed its faults, it was borne aloft to the regions on high.

The heavens were divided into seven spheres, each of which was conjoined with a planet; a sort of ladder, composed of eight superposed gates, the first seven of which were constructed of different metals, was the symbolic suggestion in the temples, of the road to be followed to reach the supreme region of the fixed stars. To pass from one story to the next, each time the wayfarer had to enter a gate guarded by an angel of Ormuzd. The initiates alone, to whom the appropriate formulas had been taught, knew how to appease these inexorable guardians. As the soul traversed these different zones, it rid itself, as one would of garments, of the passions and faculties that it had received in its descent to the earth. It abandoned to the Moon its vital and nutritive energy, to Mercury its desires, to Venus its wicked appetites, to the Sun its intellectual capacities, to Mars its love of war, to Jupiter its ambitious dreams, to Saturn its inclinations. It was naked, stripped of every

vice and every sensibility, when it penetrated the eighth heaven to enjoy there, as an essence supreme, and in the eternal light that bathed the gods, beatitude without end.<sup>1</sup>

It was Mithra, the protector of truth, that presided over the judgment of the soul after its decease. It was he, the mediator, that served as a guide to his faithful ones in their courageous ascent to the empyrean; he was the celestial father that received them in his resplendent mansion, like children who had returned from a distant voyage.

The happiness reserved for these quintessentialised monads in a spiritual world is rather difficult to conceive, and doubtless this doctrine had but feeble attraction for vulgar minds. Another belief which was added to the first by a sort of superfœtation offered the prospect of more material enjoyment. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was rounded off by the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh.

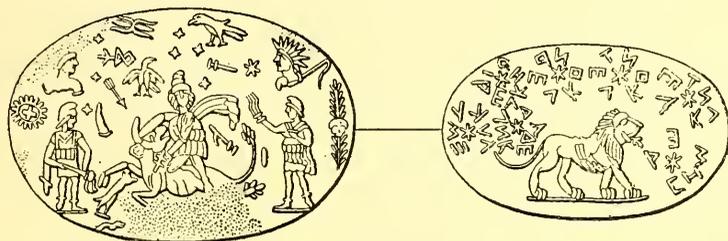


Fig. 5. MITHRAIC CAMEO.

Showing Mithra born from the rocks between the Dioscuri, surrounded by Mithraic symbols, among them the cup and bread of the Eucharist.

The struggle between the principles of good and evil is not destined to continue into all eternity. When the age assigned for its duration shall have rolled away, the scourges sent by Ahriman will compass the destruction of the world. A marvellous bull, analogous to the primitive bull, will then again appear on earth, and Mithra will redescend and reawaken men to life. All will sally forth from the tombs, will assume their former appearance, and recognise one another. Humanity entire will unite in one grand assembly, and the god of Truth will separate the good from the bad. Then in a supreme sacrifice he will immolate the divine bull; will mingle his fat with the consecrated wine, and will offer to the just this miraculous beverage which will endow them with immor-

<sup>1</sup>This Mithraic doctrine has recently been compared with other analogous beliefs and studied in detail by M. Bossuet. "Die Himmelfahrt der Seele" (*Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, Vol. IV., 1901, p. 160 ff.)

tality. Then Jupiter Ormuzd, yielding to the prayers of the beati-  
fied ones, will cause to fall from the heavens a devouring fire which  
will annihilate all the wicked. The defeat of the Spirit of Darkness  
will be consummated, and in the general conflagration Ahriman  
and his impure demons will perish and the rejuvenated universe  
enjoy unto all eternity happiness without end.

We who have never experienced the Mithraic spirit of grace  
are apt to be disconcerted by the incoherence and absurdity of this  
body of doctrine, such as it has been shown forth in our recon-  
struction. A theology at once naïve and artificial here combines  
primitive myths, the naturalistic tendency of which is still trans-  
parent, with an astrological system whose logical structure only  
serves to render its radical falsity all the more palpable. All the  
impossibilities of the ancient polytheistic fables here subsist side  
by side with philosophical speculations on the evolution of the uni-  
verse and the destiny of man. The discordance between tradition  
and reflection is extremely marked here and it is augmented by the  
contrariety between the doctrine of fatalism and that of the efficacy  
of prayer and the need of worship. But this religion, like any  
other, must not be estimated by its metaphysical verity. It would  
ill become us to-day to dissect the cold corpse of this faith in order  
to ascertain its inward organic vices. The important thing is to  
understand how Mithraism lived and grew great and why it failed  
to win the empire of the world.

Its success was in great part undoubtedly due to the vigor of  
its ethics, which above all things favored action. In an epoch of  
anarchy and emasculation, its mystics found in its precepts both  
stimulus and support. The conviction that the faithful ones formed  
part of a sacred army charged with sustaining with the Principle  
of Good the struggle against the power of evil, were singularly  
adapted to provoking their most pious efforts and transforming  
them into ardent zealots.

The Mysteries exerted another powerful influence, also, in fos-  
tering some of the most exalted aspirations of the human soul :  
the desire for immortality and the expectation of final justice. The  
hopes of life beyond the tomb which this religion instilled in its  
votaries were one of the secrets of its power in these troublous  
times, when solicitude for the life to come disturbed all minds.

But several other sects offered to their adepts just as consoling  
prospects of a future life. The special attraction of Mithraism  
dwelt, therefore, in other qualities of its doctrinal system. Mithra-  
ism, in fact, satisfied alike both the intelligence of the educated

and the hearts of the simple-minded. The apotheosis of Time as First Cause and that of the Sun, its physical manifestation, which maintained on earth heat and light, were highly philosophical conceptions. The worship rendered to the Planets and to the Constellations, the course of which determined terrestrial events, and to the four Elements whose infinite combinations produced all natural phenomena, are ultimately reducible to the worship of the principles and agents recognised by ancient science, and the theology of the Mysteries was, in this respect, nothing but the religious expression of the physics and astronomy of the Roman world.

This theoretical conformity of revealed dogmas with the accepted ideas of science was calculated to allure cultivated minds, but it had no hold whatever upon the ignorant souls of the populace. On the other hand, these were eminently amenable to the allurements of a doctrine that deified the whole of physical and tangible reality. The gods were everywhere, and they mingled in every act of life; the fire that cooked the food and warmed the bodies of the faithful, the water that allayed their thirst and cleansed their persons, the very air that they breathed, and the light that illuminated their paths, were the objects of their adoration. Perhaps no other religion ever offered to its sectaries in a higher degree than Mithraism opportunities for prayer and motives for veneration. When the initiated betook himself in the evening to the sacred grotto concealed in the solitude of the forests, at every step new sensations awakened in his heart some mystical emotion. The stars that shone in the sky, the wind that whisped in the foliage, the spring or brook that babbled down the mountain-side, even the earth that he trod under his feet, were in his eyes divine; and all surrounding nature provoked in him a worshipful fear for the infinite forces that swayed the universe.