

December 25: The Birthday of the Iranian God, Mithra and Jesus of Nazareth
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*Grass-land magnate Mithra we worship, whose words
are correct, who is challenging, has a thousand ears, is
well built, has ten thousand eyes, is tall, has a wide outlook,
is strong, sleepless, (ever-)waking,
whom the warriors worship at (=bending down close
to) the manes of their horses, requesting strength for
their teams, health for themselves, much watchfulness
against antagonists, ability to strike back at enemies,
ability to rout lawless, hostile opponents.
[Mithra] who is the first supernatural god to approach across
the Har_ , in front of the immortal swift-horsed sun;
who is the first to seize the beautiful gold-painted
mountain top; from there the most mighty surveys the
whole land inhabited by Iranians,
where gallant rulers organize many attacks, where high,
sheltering mountains with ample pasture provide
solicitous for cattle; where deep lakes stand with surging
waves; where navigable rivers rush wide with
a swell towards Parutian Iškata, Haraivian Margu,
Sogdian Gava, and Chorasmia.*

We began this essay with one of the most beautiful passages (4.3-4) from the Avestan hymn in praise of Mithra as translated by the eminent Iranist Ilya Gershevitch. Mithra was a deity common to at least two branches of Indo-European people, namely Iranians and Indo-Aryans. In addition to the hymn in the *Avesta*, we are also aware of the presence of the god Mithra or Mithras (Vedic “Mitra”, Middle Persian “Mihr,” and Persian “Mehr”) in the ancient Indian scriptures known as the *Rig-Veda* (BC 1400). For the ancient Iranians, the god Mithra had two significant functions: he was first and foremost the sun-god whose thousands of eyes spied on every deed and nothing, particularly evil deeds, could escape from his gaze. Secondly, he was the god of contracts. For example, even in late Pahlavi/Middle Persian texts which are concerned with legal and religious matters, there exists a severe crime and sin which is related to the functions of Mithra, i.e., the crime of “*mihr_druz_h*”(Avestan: *miθr_drujīm*) which signifies “breaking promise or contract,” and by extension, “perfidy.” Perfidy was classified as one of the most heinous crimes with severe punishment prescribed for the offender.

During late antiquity, the worship of Mithra became popular, particularly among Roman soldiers and merchants. The reasons for the popularity of the cult of Mithra among these two groups are easily understood: the martial nature of the hymn can explain the popularity of Mithra among soldiers. Similarly, his reverence by the merchant class is equally clear as he was the god of contracts. It is not unreasonable to think that merchants traversing across ancient commercial highways such as the famed Silk Road in antiquity preferred to conduct business with those whom they trusted and the affiliation with this mysterious fraternity only served to cement the bond between them.

The adherents of the Mithraic cult, similar to those of other religions such as Judaism, Christianity,

and Islam, also held festivals celebrating different aspects of their religion. It appears that the annual celebration held on December 25, the winter solstice, was the most important celebration of the cult; it was believed that Mithra was born on this day, hence “the birthday of the unconquered sun” (Latin: *natalis solis invicti*). Later, the practices of the cult seem to have gained much in popularity. With the advent of Christianity, a number of pagan practices which could not be abandoned found their way into this new religion. The most significant of these was the identification of the birthday of Jesus, commonly known as Christmas (Old English *Cristes maesse*: Christ’s mass), with that of the undying Mithra.

Much has been written on pagan cults in the Roman empire and particular attention has been paid to the cult of Mithra (consult the partial bibliography below). In fact Ernest Renan went as far as stating that “if the growth of Christianity had been halted by some mortal illness, the world would have become Mithraic.” As Walter Burkert points out, Renan may have exaggerated the case as the worship of Mithra belonged to a rather elitist segment of the society. However according to Werner Jaeger, there is no doubt that Mithraism and Manichaeism, two religions with well-established Iranian connections, posed a serious threat to the spread of the new faith which became known as Christianity.

Further readings on Mithraism:

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