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COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY II. IN MITHRAISM
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ii. In Mithraism

The cosmogony and cosmology of Mithraism, the mystery cult centered on the god Mithras, which flourished in the Roman empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E., are difficult to determine for two reasons. First, the sacred texts of the cult have all perished, as has almost all contemporary writing about it by outsiders. Reconstructing its cosmology is thus a matter of interpreting its sacred art (statues, reliefs, frescoes), which, though plentiful and complex, has as its primary referent a cycle of myth, not a set of doctrines. Second, there is still, and probably always will be, room for legitimate scholarly disagreement about the extent of the Iranian legacy to Mithraism (for a survey of the question, see Beck, 1984, pp. 2063-71). The classic view is that of Franz Cumont, that Mithraism was essentially “reformed Mazdaism” (p. 104), that its core had been shaped by Iranian magi in Anatolia during the final centuries b.c.e, and that its Western elements were superficial and adventitious (pp. 15-32). Its cosmology (pp. 104-40) was thus an Iranian one, thinly veiled in Greco-Roman guise. This is most apparent in the pantheon of Mithraism. For Cumont each Mithraic divinity was but a mask for an Iranian counterpart (pp. 107-12). The

Mithraic Jupiter-Caelus, for example, was really Ohrmazd, and hence he, rather than Mithras, was, after Zurwān (see below), the ruling power of the cosmos. Recent scholarship has generally taken a less thoroughgoing iranizing position. Reinhold Merkelbach, in the latest full monograph on the cult, while recognizing many Iranian borrowings (especially in the area of myth), views Mithraism as a new Western creation, with its cosmology largely determined by Western philosophy, especially Platonism, and by a Western astronomical/astrological outlook (pp. 75-77, 193-244). He concludes that "there is no trace of Ahura Mazdā" (p. 75; see Gordon, 1975, for the most effective critique of Cumont's iranizing interpretations; Widengren, 1966, 1980, for succinct reaffirmations; and Turcan, pp. 12-25, 94-114, for a well-presented intermediate position; Campbell postulated an extremely detailed Iranian cosmology behind all aspects of Mithraic iconography, but his work, though valuable in parts, commands little credence overall).

That Mithraism had an elaborate cosmology, central to its doctrines, is proven first by the structure of its cult shrines (*mithraea*), which took the form of caves (real or artificial) because, as Porphyry (6) stated, the cave is an "image of the cosmos." For this reason *mithraea* were equipped with "symbols of the cosmic elements and climates set at appropriate intervals." They functioned, in effect, as cosmic models, a fact borne out by certain of the actual excavated exemplars, notably the "Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres" at Ostia (Gordon, 1976). Mithraic art is indeed replete with symbols of the great constituents of the universe, significantly deployed: the seven planets, the twelve signs of the zodiac, the sun and moon (which also figure as persons in the myth cycle; and, of course, in the cult Mithras is himself *deus sol invictus Mithras* "the invincible sun god"), the wind gods (as symbols of the four quarters of the world), the seasons (with the celestial bodies, symbols of time), the four physical elements, and so on. Cosmology was important in Mithraism because it impinged directly both on its cult life (each of the seven grades of initiation was under the protection of one of the planets) and on its doctrine of the destiny of souls (a Mithraic *symbolon* of a "seven-gated ladder with an eighth gate on top" represented the passage of souls through the spheres of the seven planets and the single sphere of the fixed stars beyond; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22). (On all these matters see, most conveniently, Beck, 1988.)

Mithraic art also suggests an elaborate cosmogony, the cardinal event of which was the slaying of a bull by Mithras. This bull slaying is the subject of the famous central icon in Mithraism (see Plate IX). Although Mithra's deed was

undoubtedly cosmogonic in some sense, there is considerable dispute as to whether it actually created the world (Merkelbach, pp. 193-206; see also Bellelli) or ordered and vivified a world that Zurwān or Ohrmazd had already created (Cumont, pp. 107-08; Turcan, pp. 103-04). Mithras was indeed called the "maker and father of all," who "created" (*edēmiourgēse*) the cosmos (Porphyry, 6; see Giuffré Scibona), but the exoteric and philosophical provenance of the information has put it in question (Turcan, pp. 94-95). More than any other episode in the cycle, the bull slaying has important Iranian parallels, which are also cosmogonic. In the *Bundahišn* (TD $_2$, p. 68.1-12; tr. Anklesaria, chap. 6E, pp. 80-81) useful plants and beasts are said to have been created from the marrow and sperm of a primal bull, which were first purified in the moon. In the Mithraic bull slaying the moon goddess is a witness to the deed (bull and moon are also closely related astrologically), and the bull's life-giving fluids in the form of blood and sperm are also indicated, the former by the dripping wound at which a dog and a snake dart upward, the latter by the presence of a scorpion seizing the genitals. To be noted, too, is the magical transformation of the tip of the bull's tail into cars of wheat. In the myth of the *Bundahišn*, however, it is the evil Ahriman who slays the bull, not the good Mithras. The question, then, is whether it was Mithraism that altered the myth (Cumont) or the *Bundahišn* (a comparatively late source, probably compiled in the 8th and 9th centuries) that records a change from an original Iranian cosmogony accurately reflected in Mithraism (Lommel; for a summary of the question, see Merkelbach, pp. 9-14). (On further cosmological dimensions of the bull-slaying scene, in particular its astronomical/astrological significance, see Beck, 1984, pp. 2081-83; Ulansey.)

Finally, certain peculiarly Mithraic deities must be mentioned, for, according to the most probable interpretations, they encapsulate important cosmological principles. First is a pair of deities who are found flanking the bull slaying, one bearing an upright and the other an inverted torch; they are named Cautes and Cautopates (for possible Iranian etymologies, see Schwartz). They represent the principles of opposition and polarity (sunrise and sunset, summer and winter, growth and waning, and so on), which Mithras, set symbolically at his "proper seat at the equinoxes" (Porphyry, 24), controls and reconciles (Beck, 1984, pp. 2084-86). Second, numerous representations, mostly statues, of a formidable lion-headed deity whose body is wrapped in the coils of a snake have been discovered. Unfortunately, with one ambiguous exception (Vermaseren, nos. 833-34; see Beck, 1984, pp. 203-04), no dedications have preserved its name. There is general agreement, however, that the image

symbolizes time (or eternity), cosmic sovereignty, and perhaps control over the processes of ascent through the celestial spheres (for a survey, see Beck, 1984, pp. 2086-89). Cumont (pp. 107-10), on his general principle that Mithraic gods are all Iranian gods in disguise, affirmed that the lion-headed god is the god of time Zurwān, parent of Ohrmazd and Ahriman, and the ultimate cause of the universe. Cosmologically, Mithraism would thus be an offshoot of Zurvanism. An alternative identification, first proposed by I. F. Legge, is that the god is actually Ahriman, purged perhaps of his exclusively evil connotations. The view is supported by dedications (unfortunately without accompanying statues) to a god "Arimanius" (Vermaseren, nos. 222, 369). These at least confirm that Ahriman played some role in the cosmology of the cult, whether or not the lion-headed god is he. Mithras, according to Plutarch (*De Iside* 46), was the median god (*mesitēs*) between Ōromasdēs and Areimanios. (For a syncretistic interpretation that reconciles a number of identifications, see Duchesne-Guillemin.)

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