The Sword and the Cross: Examining the Transference between Mithraism and Christianity

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I. The Cult of Mithras: Imagery, Practices, and Beliefs

In the spring of 2011 an American atheist group put up a billboard in downtown New York City which read: “Born of a virgin on December 25th, known to his 12 disciples as “the Son of God, and resurrected three days after his death, we wish a Happy Birthday to Mithras, the mythical Persian god imagined over 600 years before that other guy...”¹ This billboard was made to challenge the beliefs of Christianity by comparing their savior, Jesus Christ, to the ancient deity Mithras. It suggests the life of Mithras to be extremely similar to the life of Christ, so that a passerby might think about whether or not Jesus was truly a god and the savior of man. Although this billboard is controversial, it illustrates a very interesting point, that Jesus and Mithras share many striking similarities. Although the gods are different they are similar in many aspects: they both spill sacred blood to create a new world order, they both participate in a ritual meal in celebration of this act, and they both offer salvation to their followers. Coincidently, the religions which surround these gods also share a number of similar practices, beliefs, and imagery.

The number of similarities between the two religions, Christianity and the cult of Mithras, are too numerous for it to be mere coincidence. There must have been some level of transference between the religions, mainly from Mithraism to Christianity, since it existed before Christianity and was widespread and extremely popular during the first centuries of Christianity. Christianity adopted and adapted many of the practices and beliefs of the cult of Mithras during its development and its rise to dominance in the Roman Empire.

Mithras or Mitra is an Indo-European deity who is first worshiped in the eastern Iran and northern India, who evolved and changed over millennia of worship.\(^2\) The earliest documented evidence, on which archeologists have found with the name Mitra engraved, is a clay tablet dating from the second millennium BCE. The tablet, found in Boghaz-Koy in modern central Turkey, the capital of the Hittite Empire, invokes Mitra as an insurer of an agreement between the Hittites and their neighbors, the Mitanni. Thus, it seems that as early as the second millennia BCE Mitra was a god of treaties and agreements. In fact, in the ancient Iranian dialect Avestan, Mithra means “treaty” or “agreement.”\(^3\)

During the rule of the Persian Empire Mitra evolved as a deity and became related to the cosmos, specifically the sun. The earliest reference to Mitra as a solar deity is found in the fifth or fourth century BCE.\(^4\) His role as a powerful solar deity who sees all things likely evolved from his status as a god of treaties. Ruling from above the god could watch over contracts and ensure they were followed.

In Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander* he narrates a story of how Darius III, King of Persia from c. 380-330 BCE, beseeches a eunuch to tell him information by reminding the eunuch of his loyalty to Mitra and his King: “reverest the great light of Mitra and the right hand of thy king.”\(^5\) By referencing Mitra’s role as the god of treaties and oaths along with his role as the sun deity he is able to obtain the information he so desperately needs from the eunuch.

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\(^2\) Scholars use the name Mitra to distinguish this eastern deity from the Roman Mithras.


With the rise of Zoroastrianism Mitra evolved again and became a god of truth, light, and good. Zoroastrianism believes in a dualist universal where the good forces are locked in an eternal battle with the evil forces. Mithras became a leading force for the good spirits locked in the eternal struggle against the darkness and the evil spirits.

In 4th century CE Persia Mitra still retained his position as a sun god and a god of treaties. In 383 CE the Emperor Theodosius I sent Stilicho, a Roman general of Vandal descent, to complete a treaty with the Persians. The poet Claudian travelled with Stilicho and described the ceremony that took place between the Persian King and Stilicho: “After offering heifers as sacrifice the King of the Persians took the bowl of sacrifice and sealed the treaty by swearing to the mysteries of Bel and by Mitra who, as the sun deity, directs the stars of the heavens.”

Mitra had become such an important deity that the name Mitradates was very popular among the royal houses throughout the eastern Mediterranean, such as Commagene and Parthia. The kingdom of Pontus, for example, was ruled by six consecutive Mitradates from 302 BCE to 63 BCE, the final and most famous of whom was Mithridates VI, one of the greatest enemies of Rome. He committed suicide in 63 BCE after being defeated by Roman legions led by Pompey Magnus in the Third Mithradatic War.

In Plutarch’s Life of Pompey, Plutarch describes the first documented encounter of a Roman with the worship of Mitra. In Cilicia Pompey encounters the famous Cilician pirates who, “celebrated certain secret rites, among which those of Mithras continue to

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the present time.\textsuperscript{7} Although the Cilician pirates worship the same god as the followers of the cult of Mithras, this is not the same religion. The Roman cult does not appear for about another hundred years.

In Armenia he was often worshipped by the royal family. Cassius Dio notes Mitra’s importance to the Armenians in his description of a ceremony in which the Emperor Nero gave the throne of Armenia to Tiridates I. During the ceremony Tiridates knelt before Nero and said, “Master, I am...thy slave. And I have come to thee, my god, to worship thee as I do to Mitra.”\textsuperscript{8}

It should be noted that tracing the direct evolution of eastern Mitra to the Roman Mithras has been attempted several times by scholars, but such a direct line is impossible. Religious ideas in the ancient world simply varied too much from place to place and time to time to create a continuous timeline of the evolution of Mitra to Mithras. Additionally, the mixture of the ancient eastern worship of Mitra, western ideas, and astrology of the cult is so unique that the Roman Mithras must be dealt with in his own historical timeline, which has it roots in its eastern predecessor.

In order to begin to understand this cult, its practices and its beliefs it is important to understand the myths behind their god Mithras. There is no written record of the divine story of Mithras so instead scholars have attempted to piece the story together from the depictions of the myths found in Mithraea throughout the Empire. There are four major parts to the sacred narrative of Mithras: the rock-birth, the hunting of the bull, the slaying of the bull, and the water miracle.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{9} Due to their being no written record of the story of Mithras there is much which scholars simply do not understand. For example, one of the biggest problems with the sacred narrative of Mithras is the order in
The myths of Mithras have several common characters, specifically Mithras and, often alongside him, are his two assistants Cautes and Cautopates. These male figures have been interpreted as mere helpers of Mithras, but there may be a deeper meaning behind them. Some interpret these beings as a part of Mithras himself.\textsuperscript{10} Cautes and Cautopates are often represented as bearing a torch with Mithras positioned between them. Cautes holds his torch upwards while Cautopates holds his torch down. Cautes could stand as the rising sun, and then Mithras would represent the sun at its apex while Cautopates would be the setting sun. In this way there is a sort of trinity formed by them to create the one god Mithras.

Another possible interpretation of these figures is that Cautopates represents death and decay while Cautes symbolizes the new life which Mithras creates by slaying the bull.\textsuperscript{11} By raising his torch Cautes represents the new light and new life which Mithras is bringing into the world with the slaying of the bull. Similarly, by lowering his torch Cautopates represents the failing and extinguishing light of the world, which existed during the rampaging of the bull. Mithras kills off this light, which Cautopates holds, and creates the new light of Mithras, which brings salvation and life to the world. Once again, Mithras stands in between these two symbolic figures, and in this interpretation he stands as the way or the path from the darkness and death which Cautopates holds to the light and new life of Cautes.

Other common figures within the Mithraic myths are the sun and the moon, Sol and Luna. Sol seems to have a much more important role in the stories than Luna.

\textsuperscript{11}Clauss, 98.
Mithras has a strong connection with the god Sol, as he is the bringer of this new light which he brings into the world by his slaying of the bull and due to his historical Persian past as a solar deity.\textsuperscript{12} There are several interpretations of Mithras’ relationship with Sol. Some interpret Mithras and Sol as being the same person, similar to the trinity of Mithras, Cautoes, and Cautopates.\textsuperscript{13} Others argue that Mithras gave Sol his powers over the sun after defeating him in battle, that then the two heroes became allied with each other.\textsuperscript{14} Whatever their relationship was, it is obvious that they assisted each other. Mithraic representations of Sol often have a raven next to him, which is interpreted as the messenger of Sol who carries messages to Mithras as he completes his tasks on earth.

The rock-birth of Mithras is the first event to take place in his sacred narrative. Depictions of Mithras rising out of a rock with his hands raised have been found in many Mithraea. There are even some inscriptions which confirm this; one reads, “To the almighty God Sun Invincible, generative god, born from the rock.”\textsuperscript{15} Mithras is usually depicted with a naked torso rising from the rock, with no feet as if the sculpture or painting was made right in the middle of the act of Mithras’ birth. Mithras’ arms are raised, with at least one holding a torch and the other hand holding either another torch, wheat ears, or a sword. The torches are representative of Mithras’ light-bringing aspect, while the wheat ears are a reference to his ability to create and give life. The sword alludes to the next act in the sacred narrative of Mithras.

After rising from the rock, Mithras immediately takes up the task of hunting down the sacred bull which is ravaging the land. This hunt is a long struggle due to the god and

\textsuperscript{12} Clauss, 63.
\textsuperscript{13} David H. Sick, “Mit(h)ra(s) and the Myths of the Sun,” \textit{Numen} (Vol. 51, No. 4 2004): 445.
\textsuperscript{14} Cumont, 132.
\textsuperscript{15} Clauss, 62.
the bull being almost evenly matched. The hunt begins either with Mithras seeing the bull grazing in a field or seeing the bull within a temple. Mithras then captures the bull and attempts to drag him into a cave to slay it, but the bull escapes and Mithras chases him down. There are depictions of Mithras being dragged by the bull, or riding the bull with one hand grasping a horn and the other raised in the air. Eventually Mithras wears the bull down, successfully grabs the hind legs of the bull, places them over his shoulders and drags the bull into a cave.

It is in this cave when the sacred narrative of Mithras reaches its climax. This event is most important in the sacred narrative of Mithras, and thus it is depicted in Mithraea throughout the Roman Empire by his followers. For example, the Mithraeum in Capua has a large painting on the back wall of the main chamber which depicts the slaying of the bull by Mithras. In this painting Mithras is wearing a red outfit with a Phrygian cap. His left knee rests on the back of the bull and holds the beast on the ground. At the same time his left hand grasps the nostrils of the bull, in order to lift the bull’s head upwards, which allows Mithras to slay the bull by cutting its neck with the knife he holds in his right hand. Ten other figures in the painting are present for the sacrifice of the bull in the cave. These include two man-like figures in the cave with Mithras, Cautes and Cautopates, to help him with the slaying of the bull. They both hold a torch in their hands. Cautes, who is depicted in a yellow tunic on the left, raises his torch in order to illuminate the cave, while Cautopates, wearing a blue tunic on the right, lowers his torch closer to the bull, so Mithras is able to see clearly the bull’s neck in order to make a clean kill.

\[\text{Figure 1 in the Appendix.}\]
There are three animal figures which are placed near and on the bull in almost every example of this scene in Mithraic iconography. These figures are a scorpion, snake, and a dog, which can be seen in the painting from the Mithraeum in Capua. As in most of these scenes the scorpion, which is difficult to make out due to the decay, is attached to the testicles of the bull. The snake lies below the bull and covers most of the bottom of the painting, while the dog eagerly stands on his hind legs with his front legs against the chest of the bull in anticipation. The dog and the snake are both waiting for the moment Mithras makes the kill, in order to drink from the life blood of the bull. This symbolizes the power of the blood and the life-giving blood sacrifice which Mithras gives to the world by slaying the bull. The scorpion is more difficult to interpret, and perhaps his attachment to the testes of the bull symbolizes the new fertility which Mithras brings to the world with the act of killing the bull.

There are five other figures which reside in the painting from Capua. Two busts in the bottom corners of the paintings are most likely the winds personified, who look on during this momentous occasion. Two other figures are above the clouds, looking down on Mithras as he prepares to cut the neck of the bull and spill its sacred life-giving blood. These figures are often Sol and Luna, the deified sun and moon.

Sol has a raven next to him and Mithras' head is turned away from his task of slaying the bull and towards Sol, as if he is listening to a message which Sol sent to him through the raven, before he completes the act of slaying the bull. Some depictions of this event have Sol joining Mithras in the cave for a feast after the bull is killed.

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17 Clauss, 99.
18 Cumont, 115.
The final story of the sacred narrative of Mithras is the water miracle which he performs. In this miracle Mithras either strikes a rock with his hand or shoots the rock with a bow and arrow, which causes water to gush forth from the rock. Two other figures are usually depicted with Mithras in this miracle. One waits beneath the rock with his hands cupped in anticipation of catching and drinking the water, which Mithras will bring from the rock. The other is near Mithras, usually kneeling or touching him in supplication. These figures are almost certainly Cautes and Cautopates, who await the life water which Mithras will bring to the world by shooting the rock with his bow and arrow. Many Mithraea are believed to be placed next to a water source for the ability to reenact or highlight this miracle.

These stories make up the sacred narrative of Mithras, which like the sacred narratives of any religion forms the foundations of the beliefs and the worship of the deity. In the case of Mithras, his sacred narrative makes him the bringer and the path of light and life into the world and banisher of darkness and decay. Perhaps most importantly the sacred narrative has a large impact on how the worship of Mithras is conducted by his followers. The most obvious effect is in the place where the worship of Mithras takes place itself.

The Mithraeum, or the temple of Mithras, is modeled on the site where the most important aspect of the sacred narrative of Mithras took place, the cave. Throughout the Roman Empire Mithraea have several common characteristics that make them easily distinguishable from other temples and buildings. They are relatively small structures, with the largest ones to have been fully excavated, those beneath the Baths of Caracalla, being 23 meters long and less than 10 meters wide. Most of the Mithraea are less than 10
meters in either dimension, which is an indication of the importance of the intimacy among the congregants. Due to its small size many large cities had several different Mithraea including, Ostia which alone had seventeen different Mithraea.\(^{19}\)

The architecture of the Mithraeum was unique among the temples of the ancient world, since it was modeled after the cave of Mithras rather than designed as a "home" for the god. It was often a part of or attached to some part of a private building, such as a house. This was because of the size of the Mithraeum; since it was so small, a wealthy member of the congregation often simply put forth the money and property for the Mithraeum.\(^{20}\) However it was not unheard of for a Mithraeum to be found in or beneath public buildings as well. In Ostia, for example, Mithraea have been found in warehouses, shops, baths and apartment buildings.\(^{21}\)

In imitation of the cave, Mithraea were dark, had no windows, and were underground. In rural locations when a cave could be found, it would often be the site of a Mithraeum. Sometimes the caves would be artificially enlarged, and the cult image was carved directly into the rock. In the urban settings caves were difficult to find so the improvised and often constructed the Mithraeum under the ground to simulate a cave.\(^{22}\)

The Mithraeum had a simple layout, having only two main parts, the service rooms and the cult rooms.\(^{23}\) The service room, or ante-chamber, would hold tableware, cult vessels, and other equipment which were necessary for cult practice. The priests

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\(^{20}\) Clauss, 45.


\(^{23}\) Clauss, 44.
would prepare for the service and prepare the meal in this room. The service room could be one simple room with shelves, or it could be expanded into multiple different chambers, with large and small rooms, and additional side rooms.

The cult room of the Mithraeum had the same basic layout in every Mithraeum throughout the Roman Empire.²⁴ Being the main room, it was the largest part of the Mithraeum. It had a large center aisle running down its entire length, which was flanked on each side by raised seats. The congregation would recline on these as the service took place. The walls of the room were plastered and painted. These paintings often varied from colorful striped patterns, astrological symbols, or depictions of cult rituals.

The cult room also held other images and furnishings such as statues, basins of water, and lamps.²⁵ This would also vary from Mithraeum to Mithraeum, depending on the wealth of the individual congregation and how much money they could afford to put towards the buying and creation of statues of images such as Mithras, Cautes, Cautopates, the bull, and the rock birth. These images could be placed throughout the Mithraeum on ledges and in niches that dotted the chamber. Additionally, the Mithraeum would be lit by lamps and torches. These would be positioned near the entrances into the chambers and along the wall. In richer Mithraea the floor could be made into a mosaic of one of the events in the sacred narrative or of a character such as Cautes or Cautopates.

The dominating feature of the cult room would have been the cult image which was at the end of the center aisle on the back wall.²⁶ This image would have been a painting or engraving depicting the climax of the sacred narrative, the slaying of the bull.

²⁵ Clauss 114.
²⁶ Clauss 52.
Some of these cult images would have a border surrounding it, which had panels depicting each of the events in the narrative of Mithras. This image would be viewed by the congregation in the flickering light of the lamps reminding them how their god saved them with the sacrifice of the bull.

Many Mithraea had altars which were dedicated to Mithras and commonly also Cautes and Cautopates.\textsuperscript{27} These altars were small due to the limited space within the Mithraeum. They varied in shape but were usually rectangles and had decorative relief work on them such as bullheads, torch bearers and lions. Unlike most ancient religions, the cult of Mithras was unique in that everything happened within the Mithraeum itself. The altar to Mithras was within the temple and, all festivals, feasts, and celebrations took place within the small Mithraeum. This worship in the Mithraeum created a strong sense of unity and community among the members of the congregation. But who were these people, who would have been followers of the Mithras?

There were many different foreign cults in the Roman Empire which were just as large or larger than the cult of Mithras.\textsuperscript{28} Many of the cults came from the eastern provinces and began integrating themselves into Roman society during the second century BCE, when Rome began to spread its influence further east. Rome would come into contact with these cults either through trade or through its military conquest of the region. The cults of these eastern provinces would then find their way westward towards Rome through trade or perhaps through the Roman soldiers themselves, who, being stationed in these provinces, would pick up the cult and then bring it back to Rome with them, after their time of service was over.

\textsuperscript{27} Clauss 57.

These cults came from all over the eastern provinces: the cult of Dionysus came from Greece, the cults of Isis and Serapis from Egypt, and the cult of the Great Mother from Anatolia. These cults, like the cult of Mithras, are difficult to understand due to our paltry knowledge of them, although we do know who would have made up the congregation of these cults. The cults of Dionysus, Isis and Serapis would have included men and women from all walks of life, while the cult of the Great Mother would include women and only men who had castrated themselves in front of the statue of the Great Mother.\textsuperscript{29}

The cult of Mithras was not as universal as the cults of Dionysus, Isis and Serapis, or even the cult of the Great Mother. It denied the entry of any women into the cult. This means that half of the Roman population was not allowed to participate in the cult, which limited the size of the congregation but not the influence of the cult throughout Rome. Since Rome was a male-dominated society, a male cult would not cause any particular disadvantage by denying women.\textsuperscript{30}

Secondly, the cult was not accepted by the ruling and elite class of Rome.\textsuperscript{31} Senators were usually conservative when it came to religious policies, so it is not surprising to find them highly underrepresented in the cult. Additionally, equestrians were also greatly underrepresented in the cult; instead, the members were soldiers, freedmen, members of the imperial administration, slaves, and ordinary citizens. The lack of the upper class in this cult helps to explain the lack of information which exists about it. It is the upper class which had the money and the desire to leave inscriptions

\textsuperscript{30} Clauss, 33.
\textsuperscript{31} Beard, 291.
regarding who they were and what they accomplished in their life. Since the upper class was so underrepresented in the cult of Mithras, there is a lack such evidence.

The Mithraic cult was very popular with soldiers during the imperial period. The Mithraic cult was very popular with soldiers during the imperial period. There are numerous Mithraic sites along the frontiers of Rome, including along the Danube and the Rhine. Soldiers brought the cult with them to their frontier bases of operation and spread the cult among the ranks, and eventually to the local population itself. Generals were often influential in the spreading of the cult, mainly due to their money and their ability to individually dedicate a Mithraeum. For example, Marcus Valerius Maximianus, a favored general of Marcus Aurelius, is responsible for founding a Mithraeum in Dacia and two in Numidia during his military service as a legionary legate.

The cult of Mithras was very attractive to soldiers. The god Mithras himself was known as the unconquerable god, which would have been popular with any army which was continuously fighting. In addition by founding Mithrea and offering dedications to Mithras, generals and other officers influenced their troops’ behavior. The unity which war creates among the soldiers would have helped to spread the cult among the men, all the more so due to the denial of any women into the cult, creating a brotherhood which would be carried onto the battlefield from the Mithraeum and vice versa. Additionally, the cult at its core was a savior cult, and it offered salvation to its followers, an attractive prospect for someone who faces life and death on a daily basis. The attractiveness of the cult to the soldiers is even represented in the cult, with the most

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32 Meeks, 148.
33 Clauss, 36.
34 Cumont, 42.
obvious example that one of the grades was Miles, or soldier. The cult was popular with
the legions, but about only ten to twenty percent of the army at any one time was a
follower of Mithras. 

The large number of Mithraic reliefs and inscriptions is due to the popularity of
the cult among the administrative officials of the Empire. In administrative centers the
cult of Mithras was popular among the numerous imperial slaves. In Ostia half of the
Mithraists known from inscriptions were slaves or ex-slaves. The cult placed the entire
congregation on an equal footing. The additional aspect of salvation also gave the slaves
hope for a brighter future. The cult of Mithras, however, was not there to free the slaves
and destroy the social order. The cult had its own system of authority, and each member
of the cult had his place. The cult would have been popular among those slaves and
soldiers who valued social structure and authority, which were both key components of a
legionary's and an imperial slave's life.

Initiation into the cult of Mithras involved seven progressive stages. Much of the
knowledge of these grades has been passed down through Christian authors. For
instance, Jerome tell us that the names of the seven grades are the Raven, Bridegroom,
Soldier, Lion, Persian, Runner of the Sun, and Father. Although Christian authors do
tell us a great deal about the grades of the cult, much of the initiation rites and roles of
each grade has been lost. Scholars theorize that the seven grades were connected to
seven celestial bodies: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, the moon, the sun, and Saturn.

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35 Clauss, 36.
36 Beard, 295.
37 Clauss, 40.
38 Cumont, 152
39 Klauck, 143.
Astrology was a large part of Mithraism. Each planet in orbit of the earth represented a closer level to the divine. The idea was to ascend these planets like a ladder to reach salvation with Mithras. Each grade is connected with a celestial body and has the initiate climb through the grades. It represents his ascension towards the divine.\(^{40}\)

The Raven was the initial grade of the cult. This may have been connected to Mercury due to a small beaker and a caduceus near the image of a raven in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus.\(^{41}\) The members of this grade may have in fact worn special ravenesque masks on certain occasions. The author Ambrosiaster states that some followers of Mithras, “flapped their wings like birds imitating the croak of a raven.”\(^{42}\)

The next grade was the Bridegroom, which Jerome actually gives another name as well, Gryphus. Archaeological evidence points to the term Bridegroom although in the fourth century some inscriptions using the term Gryphus do appear.\(^{43}\) There is an oil-lamp, a diadem and an indistinguishable object next to the term Bridegroom, so perhaps this grade was associated with the planet Venus.

The Soldier was the third grade. The initiation rites of this grade are actually partially described by Tertullian, in a passage challenging the Christians soldiers not to take part in an official army cult.

Are you not ashamed, fellow soldiers of Christ, that you will be found wanting, not by him, but by some Soldier of Mithras? At his initiation in the cave, in the very camp of darkness, a crown is offered to the candidate at the point of a sword, as if in imitation of martyrdom, and put on his head; then he is admonished to put his hand up and dash it from his brow onto his shoulder, as it may be saying: ‘My crown is Mithras!’\(^{44}\)

\(^{40}\) Clauss, 131.
\(^{41}\) Clauss, 133.
\(^{42}\) Clauss, 133.
\(^{43}\) Clauss, 134.
\(^{44}\) Clauss, 134-135.
In the Mithraeum of Felicissimus this grade’s symbols are the soldier’s sling, a lance, and a helmet connecting the Soldier with Mars.

Next is the grade of the Lion. Members of this grade may have also worn lion masks like the Ravens and even roared like lions. There is a passage by the author Porphyry which describes an act of the initiation into this grade.

So in the Lion mysteries, when honey is poured instead of water for purification on the hands of the initiates, they are exhorted to keep them pure from everything distressing, harmful and loathsome; and since he is an initiate of fire, which has a cathartic effect, they use on him a liquid related to fire, rejecting water as inimical to it. They use honey as well to purify the tongue from all guilt.45

The Lions appear frequently in the epigraphic record, second only to the Father. This may be because the Lions served as an intermediary between the lower grades and the upper grades. This also helps to explain an inscription beneath the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome. A Mithraeum beneath the church holds an inscription which states, “Accept, O holy Father, accept the incense-burning Lions, through whom we offer the incense, through whom we ourselves are consumed.”46 Here the Lions act as an intermediary, between the Father and the congregation of worshipers. They bring the offering of the congregation to the Father, while the congregation asks the Father to accept the incense. In the Mithraeum of Felicissimus the grade’s symbols are the fire shovel, the rattle, and the thunderbolt, which may connect this grade with Jupiter.

After the Lion comes the Persian. Porphyry tells us some of the initiation rites of this grade as well. Like the Lion, the Persians are also offered honey, but there is a difference in its meaning. “When they offer honey to the Persian as preserver of fruits, it

45 Clauss, 135.
is its preservative powers that they treat symbolically."  In the Mithraeum of Felicissimus there is a crescent moon and a star next to the Persian panel, which are symbols for the moon.

The second to last grade was the Runner of the Sun. As the name indicates, the members of this grade were probably directly under the protection of the sun. In the Mithraeum of Felicissimus the symbols are the torch, the seven-rayed crown, and the whip, which represent the sun.

The final grade of the cult was the Father. The Father has the most testimony in the epigraphic record. This is because the Father is so pivotal in the role of offerings and the rituals of the cult. There are four symbols next to the Father in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus. A Phrygian cap, which represents his role as the god’s representative on earth, a libation bowl, which symbolizes his function in rituals, and a staff and sickle which connect the grade to Saturn are symbols in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus.

Soldiers and slaves spread the cult throughout the Empire. Soldiers have returned home after their service was complete and spread the cult through family and friends. After their service for the Empire the slaves began a new life and retained the worship of Mithras and spread it as well. These men compromised the freedmen, private households, and ordinary citizens who belonged to the cult of Mithras.

Through this method the cult likely spread, and by the middle of the second century CE the cult spanned the entire Empire. The cult became so popular and influential that under Commodus, *invictus* (invincible), one of the epithets of Mithras, became part of the imperial titulature. However, the cult of Mithras never made it onto the lists of cults that were supported by the state and was never added to the official list.

[^47]: Clauss, 136.
of festivals, which were celebrated by the state and army. Although not officially endorsed the cult of Mithras was able to be supported by the state under the guise of Sol Invictus. Sol Invictus, invincible sun, was the god of the sun, contracts, and loyalty. He was strongly employed by Commodus and the Severans. The emperor himself also assumed the epithets of Sol Invictus such as, *invictus, comes, and conservator*, and thereby took on the same epithets as Mithras (invincible, companion, and protector). Sol Invictus became a popular cult in the Empire and the protector of the imperial family.

The followers of Mithras did not fail to see the similarities between Sol Invictus and Mithras. In fact many might have thought they were one in the same. Both were sun gods and the bringer of light. Both were gods of treaties and bore the same epithets. Dedications to Sol Invictus have been found in Mithraea, such as a cult relief at Durnomagus. To the followers of Mithras, Sol Invictus and Mithras were one in the same, and they therefore saw their god as the protector of the imperial family.

Before a person was allowed into the cult of Mithras and began to rise through the grades he first had to be initiated into the cult. There are a number of Christian authors who discuss these initiation rites. These Christian texts discuss eighty different tests of increasing difficulty including swimming for several days and being hurled into a bonfire. Cosmas of Jerusalem states that, “the initiates were made to starve for fifty days; then, if they endured steadfastly, they were abraded for two days, and afterwards thrown into snow for twenty.” Other than these hyperbolic writings the main source for these initiation rites are several writings by Christian authors and depictions of these rites found in Mithraea.

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48 Clauss, 24.
49 Clauss, 103.
There is a set of frescoes in the Mithraeum at Capua that has five panels, which scholars believe are representations of initiation rites candidates had to go through before they were admitted into the cult.  

The first panel depicts an assistant mystagogue in a short white tunic guiding the initiate, who is blindfolded and naked. This is attested by the writings of Ambrosiaster: "They were deceived in the cave when they have their eyes blindfolded."

In the next panel the initiate is still blindfolded, but now kneeling and his arms appear to be tied behind his back. Behind the initiate the assistant mystagogue is standing and holding the initiate in place with his hand. This panel is dominated by the mystagogue, who is standing on the left wearing a billowing cloak and a Phrygian cap. His left hand is outstretched towards the initiate and he holds a rod-like object in his hand, possibly a sword.

The third panel depicts the initiate kneeling again on one knee with his hands tied behind him, and the sword now lies on the ground next to him, but he is no longer blindfolded. The assistant mystagogue still stands behind him, but now he places a crown on the initiate's head. In the next panel the initiate still kneels, while the assistant holds him by the shoulders and steps on his calves, in an attempt to keep him kneeling. The mystagogue, in his red cloak faces the initiate and gestures towards an object on the ground with his staff. In the final panel the initiate lies on the ground with the assistant and the mystagogue standing at his head and feet.

This initiation process may have been considered a kind of rebirth into the new light and world of Mithras. The blindfold creates a dark world for the initiate, and his.

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50 However, some scholars argue that these panels are rituals which were carried out for the seven grades and not the initiates. Whether these frescoes depict initiation rites or rituals for the grades is unknowable.

51 Clauss, 113.
hands being bound behind his back illustrates his powerlessness in this new world. Then a man, standing in for Mithras, known as the “liberator,” cuts his blindfold and bonds. Thus, the initiate then lies on the ground as in a state of death, which was his old life, and rises, reborn, in the new light and world of Mithras. There is a piece of graffiti on the side wall of a cult-niche of the Mithraeum beneath St. Prisca in Rome. The graffito reads, “Born at first light when the Emperors Severus and Antonius were consuls, on the 12 day before the first of December, the day of Saturn, the 18 of the Moon.”

It is not inconceivable that the man who wrote this considered himself to be born again in the new light of Mithras after his initiation ceremony. The purpose of the initiation ceremony was to enable the initiate to learn and understand the mysteries of Mithras and therefore be capable of obtaining salvation.

Including the initiation ceremony there were several important acts which would have taken place in the Mithraeum, namely the liturgy, during which prayers and the sacred meal would take place. Like most things regarding the cult, the practice is preserved through Christian literature and depictions of it found in Mithraeum. The best representation of this meal is from Konjic in Dalmatia. This representation is framed by two columns on either side of picture. In the center are two figures that are larger than any other figures in the representation, who are undoubtedly Mithras and Sol. They are reclining on cushions with their left arms bracing them and holding cups of wine, while their right arms are raised in a blessing gesture. A table, covered with a bull’s hide and with small round bread loaves, is in front of them. Next to this table are a Father and a

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52 Clauss, 105.
Sun-Runner sitting down to a meal. To the left and right stand people of lesser grades including a Lion and a Raven.\(^{53}\)

This depiction of the ritual meal shows what the members of the cult believed took place during their own meals. The meal is a reenactment of what took place between Mithras and Sol after Mithras killed the bull. Sol came down and joined Mithras for a celebratory meal of bread and wine. The reenactment also features bread and wine, and the depiction suggests that they believed Mithras and Sol come down to bless the victory meal and join in the celebration. The bull’s hide on the table is a reminder of Mithras’ victory. The ritual meal would have also taken place in the Mithraeum, which was itself a representation of the cave in which Mithras and Sol had the original meal.

The mystery cult of Mithras developed in the early first century. The parishioners believed their god had spilled sacred blood in order to create a new world and offer eternal salvation to mankind. It quickly became popular and spread throughout the Roman Empire and had a particularly strong presence wherever the Roman Army was encamped. It was a private cult that established small communities and accepted only a limited number of initiates. It practiced a number of initiation rites and had a celebratory meal in honor of their god. Christianity would develop similarly and have many of the same practices as Mithraism.

\(^{53}\) Clauss, 109-110.
II. Examining the Transference between Mithraism and Christianity

As popular as the cult of Mithras was throughout the Roman Empire it appears to have completely vanished in the fourth century CE.¹ It arch rival and greatest competitor, Christianity, had won the struggle between the religions with the proclamation of the Edict of Milan by Constantine, which removed state funding for pagan religions and announced tolerance for all religions throughout the Empire. The baptism of Constantine at the end of his life was the nail in the coffin for Mithraism and other pagan cults, as the Roman Empire had become Christian. But how had Christianity, a religion started by a single man in the backwater province of Judea, come to dominate the Roman Empire and snuff out all other religions?

The rise of Christianity is a long and complex story, but unlike with the cult of Mithras there are numerous written sources which help to show exactly how the religion developed. Christianity began in the province of Judea after the death of Jesus Christ. His followers were practicing Jews who believed he was the messiah who would lead the Jewish people to their new kingdom. Naturally, the earliest Christian communities developed within Jewish communities,² which already had a basic understanding of Jewish beliefs and were able to convert to Christianity without too much difficulty. Thus these early Christian communities adopted and carried on many of the practices of their parent Jewish communities, such as charity to the poor and to the sick.³ In fact, in the

¹ Esme Wynne-Tyson, Mithras The Fellow in the Cap, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972) 53.
³ Josef Lossl, The Early History and Memory of the Church, (New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 76.
very early stages of Christianity the communities were integrated and distinctions would not have been easily made.  

Christians did not at first want to separate their communities from the Jewish communities. They did not have a desire to leave their shared heritage and culture and were not ready to abandon their history. But the separation of the two communities was inevitable, and Christian resentment towards the Jewish people was the first step. The Christians started to accuse the Jews of killing their messiah and hate speech towards the Jews began to appear in many Christian writings. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for example, the Christian author addresses the Jews in the crowd as being, “the destroyer of our gods” and “lawless.”

It is obvious that the Christians began to resent the Jews as the murderers of Christ, but perhaps the main catalysts for the separation of the two communities were the Jewish revolts in 70 CE and 135 CE. The growing hatred of their Jewish neighbors by the Christians was matched only by the growing desire among the Jews to throw off the Roman yoke and create an independent state. These revolts were led by Jewish nationalists in a futile attempt to achieve Jewish independence, since they were brutally crushed and resulted in the destruction of the temple and the razing of Jerusalem. The Jewish Wars quickened the separation of the communities, since Christians distanced themselves from the Jews for fear of the Romans mistaking them for Jews.

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4 Lossl, 75.
5 Lossl, 91.
6 Lossl, 82.
As these communities were separating the Christians had also begun to preach salvation to the gentiles. Christian missionaries began to spread the word of their god throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. The most notable of these missionaries is Paul. Some describe Paul as the real founder of Christianity. While Jesus truly created another sect of Judaism, it was Paul who single-handedly turned this Jewish religion into a worldwide religion. He is responsible for the transition from a Jewish Christianity to a Gentile Christianity of the second century onwards.⁹

Paul was a Roman citizen and was most likely a descendant of a freedman.¹⁰ He was born in Tarsus in the southeastern part of modern-day Turkey.¹¹ He was a practicing Jew and a member of the Pharisees.¹² This means he would have been well educated. From scripture we learn he was a persecutor of Christians until he was struck down by a vision of Christ on his way to Damascus.¹³ After this encounter Paul became an avid Christian and began to spread the teachings of Jesus throughout the Empire. During his travels throughout the Empire, to Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, Paul’s main goal was to convert as many people as possible to Christianity.¹⁴ Paul’s need to spread the word of Christ to all the Gentiles stemmed from his belief that the world was soon coming to an end.¹⁵ There was a popular belief among the populace that the end times were near. Christians took this belief and connected it with Jesus’ teaching that the Kingdom of God was coming to earth. Christians, and Paul, believed that the physical

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¹⁰ Dunn, 326.
¹¹ Wynne-Tyson, 67.
¹⁴ Wynne-Tyson 69.
¹⁵ Lossl, 85.
Kingdom of Heaven was going to come down upon the earth and establish a new world order, ending the old one. Paul wanted to convert as many people to Christianity as possible because he believed the world was ending and that Christianity was the only way toward new life and salvation.

However, the world did not end and Christianity still grew and spread throughout the Empire. As missionaries such as Paul spread the teachings of Jesus, the message of Christianity drew many of the same types of people who were attracted to Mithras. In fact one of the first Gentiles to convert was a soldier, Cornelius the Centurion, who was converted by St. Peter. Christianity attracted the soldier, slave, freedman, and lower class citizens. These people helped to establish the first Christian communities in the Roman Empire beyond Judea. Christians could be found in Damascus as early as 33 CE. The apostles themselves traveled throughout the Empire to found new churches and communities: St. Peter founded Christian communities in Antioch and Rome while John headed towards Ephesus and Mark towards Alexandria.

By 180 CE Christianity had begun to establish itself in the western half of the Empire with communities in both North Africa and Gaul. Christianity moved itself along the trade routes and into major cities throughout the Empire. First evidence of Christians in Spain comes in 256 CE and by 300 CE about seven to ten percent of the Empire was

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16 Freeman, 49.
18 Freeman, 45.
19 Lossol, 140.
20 Freeman, 221.
21 Freeman, 180.
22 Schaferdiek, 68.
23 Freeman, 220
Christian. The first documented Christian church dates to 240 CE in the remote city of Dura-Europus on the Euphrates. Prior to the establishment of churches, Christians meet in houses in small communities, similar to the practice of Mithraism. By 250 CE twenty five different Christian churches could be found in Rome. However, the growth of early Christianity was plagued by a number of rival doctrinal sects. Christianity had never been completely unified, and many of the varying churches and communities held contradictory beliefs. There was no sense of a priestly hierarchy in the Early Church. Instead bishops from rival towns competed for supremacy. Rome had achieved a sort of central power, but the idea of a ruling pope had not even been conceived. The bishop of Rome held no effective power over other churches in the region much less at the edges of the Empire. In fact, early on Rome itself was split by rival bishops who held different parts of the city. The population of Christians was so small in the city of a million inhabitants that the different churches might have hardly interacted at all until Christianity dominated the city. These rival sects Christianity would not be united until Constantine called the bishop to a meeting determine official Christian beliefs, since the quarreling had threatened the safety of the Empire itself. The growth of Christianity was also hindered by a number of state persecutions by the Romans. Prior to 100 CE the populace either was not aware or did not care that there

24 Freeman, 215.
25 Freeman, 132.
26 Russel, 375.
27 Lossl, 195.
28 Freeman, 217.
29 Freeman, 217.
were Christians within their midst. Then in 111 CE the first evidence of persecution against Christians emerges. Pliny the Younger, as governor of Bithynia, received an anonymous book accusing a number of people of being Christians and wrote to the Emperor Trajan regarding the prisoners. Pliny killed those who admitted to being Christians, released those who prayed to the pagan gods and cursed Christ, sent the Roman citizens to Rome for trial, and kept those in prison who said they were once Christians but were no longer. It is about this last group that Pliny writes to Trajan asking how to proceed.

Trajan agrees with Pliny's procedure so far and tells him to release those who admit to once being Christians after they worship the Roman gods. Trajan commends Pliny for executing the Christians and therefore sets forth a precedent that it is a capital crime to be a Christian. Due to the fact that the Christians will not offer a sacrifice or worship the gods of the state and the emperor, which is seen as detrimental to the wellness of the state, the religion is outlawed. However, Christians are not hunted down and killed throughout the Empire until Constantine legalized it. The execution of Perpetua is an excellent example. Perpetua is arrested for being a Christian and she is given every opportunity to live. Other known Christians are free to come and go from her cell and to pray with her. She was even baptized in her cell. However, she refuses to worship the Roman gods and so she is executed in the arena.

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32 Barnes, 233.
33 Freeman 205.
However, certain emperors, who feared that the growing number of Christians threatened the stability of the Empire, did carry out vicious persecutions against them. Emperors Decius (249-251 CE) and Valerian (253-260 CE) both carried out severe attempts to suppress Christianity.\(^{34}\) They required people to make an offering to the Roman gods, and those who did not were punished. The most famous persecution, The Great Persecution, by Diocletian lasted from 303-311.\(^{35}\) Unfortunately for Diocletian by the time of the Great Persecution the Christians already held a firm minority in the Empire and would never be fully extinguished by a state persecution.\(^{36}\) This failure of a persecution would led to the eventual legalization of Christianity.

By the late third century Christians had become a normal part of life within the Roman Empire.\(^{37}\) The practice of apologetic writings had gained some respect for the Christians in the Empire.\(^{38}\) These writings began to separate the Christians from false accusations against them, such as cannibalism. Justin Martyr wrote a number of apologies, and his first was addressed to emperor himself. This apology asked the emperor to judge Christianity by its merits and not the rumors which surrounded it.\(^{39}\) Instead, calling the emperor a philosopher and a cultured man, Justin argued that Christianity was actually supported by Greek philosophy. Tertullian, another early church writer and leader, wrote an apology in 187 CE, which argued that the Christian Church was a respectable business which could run in the Roman Empire just as well as any other business, and it did not

\(^{34}\) Schaferdiek, 69.  
\(^{35}\) Schaferdiek, 70.  
\(^{36}\) Schaferdiek, 72.  
\(^{37}\) Barnes, 237.  
\(^{38}\) Barnes, 236.  
\(^{39}\) Justin Martyr, Apol, 1, 2-5.
present any threat to the state.\textsuperscript{40} Writings such as these helped Christians change the perceptions of Christians throughout the Empire towards a more positive view. By the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth century it was clear that Christianity was here to stay. Constantine's conversion to Christianity further helped to propel Christianity towards being the dominant religion in the Empire.\textsuperscript{41} The failure of the Great Persecution by Diocletian led to the Edict of Milan by Constantine, which legalized all religions in the Empire and removed public funding towards the Roman religions. These things, the apologies, the conversion of Constantine, the failure of the Great Persecution, and the Edict of Milan, led to the substantial growth of Christianity in the late third century and early fourth century. Christian communities throughout the Empire saw amazing leaps forward in numbers. In 260 CE thirty percent of the population of Asia Minor was Christian but by 300 CE eighty percent of the population called themselves Christian.\textsuperscript{42} In Egypt by 280 CE only twelve percent were recognized Christians and in 300 CE only seventeen percent, but after the Edict of Milan the Christians jump to seventy percent of the population by 325 CE.\textsuperscript{43} Christians had obviously come to dominate most of the Mediterranean and eventually would dominate all of Europe.

It would be impossible for Christianity to rise to dominate the Mediterranean after 300 years and still retain the form in which it was originally practiced in Judea. The religion adapted and developed due to its interactions with other cultures and religions. Christian authors often used Hellenistic and Classical sources to help explain their beliefs and to

\textsuperscript{40} Barnes, 236
\textsuperscript{41} Lossol 209.
\textsuperscript{42} Freeman, 218.
\textsuperscript{43} Freeman, 218.
form their ethical guidelines. They used these older sources to help justify and explain their beliefs to gentiles. For example, Justin Martyr used these sources in his First Apology addressed to the Emperor.

Pagan religions also had a large effect on Christianity. Pagan religions, as the dominant religions of the time, would have certainly had a conscious and subconscious effect on the developments of Christian beliefs and practices. Of the pagan religions the foreign cults, in particular the mystery religions, have the closest fundamental similarities to Christianity. Most have to do with the afterlife and offer some sort of eternal salvation, have a type of initiation ceremony, and worship gods which are foreign to Rome. Christianity certainly borrowed things from these mystery religions, such as symbols, practices and beliefs.

Of these mystery cults Mithraism clearly stands out as the one most similar to Christianity. Mithras was the only god of the mystery cults who remained a “private” god. His worshipers met in small groups in subterranean buildings, much like the gatherings of the early Christians. These two religions also attracted similar types of people, including people who were typically not well off, such as freedmen, slaves, and soldiers. The two religions began to clash over who was the imitator and who was the imitated. Both religions recognized the numerous similarities and accused the other of

44 Riches, 36.
47 Ferguson, 239.
49 Freeman, 220.
plagiarism and imitation. Some Christian authors suggested the devil created Mithraism to defeat Christianity, and that he used many of the same practices and beliefs in order to make his imitation seem authentic. Yet, some of the fundamental similarities may be a result of the time rather than an act of plagiarism by one side or the other.

The similarity of a god who offers salvation in the next world, for example, is a common theme of the time. The savior deity appears throughout many of the mystery religions of the time, perhaps as a result of the belief that the world was going to end. Both religions presented their deity as the savior of mankind and the creator of a new better world order. The Christians present Jesus as the heavenly figure come down to bring life and salvation with freedom from bondage and death. At the same time Mithras is present as the unconquerable god sent down from the heavens to free humanity from the darkness and usher in a new world, light and salvation.

Both religions have equal ownership of one who came from the heavens to spill sacred blood and redeem the world. Neither Mithras or Jesus were the first and only savior deities, but both followed the established archetype of a savior deity, of coming to earth performing and performing an act which saves or redeems mankind and offers eternal salvation. Their goals on earth were the same and they are portrayed by their religion in a similar manner. These fundamental similarities were not a result of plagiarism by one

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50 Wynne-Tyson, 34.
51 Wynne-Tyson, 38.
52 Riches, 38.
53 Wynne-Tyson 38.
54 Freeman, 25
group or the other but of common themes and beliefs of the times in which the religion was begun.

The eucharist or ritual meal was another common phenomenon of the time and had its roots in Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions.\textsuperscript{55} For instance, the Greeks would have instantly recognized the story of the Last Supper as mean where a teacher giving a lesson is surrounded by his loyal male students.\textsuperscript{56} Justin the Martyr accuses the devil of imitating Christianity through the creation of the cult of Mithras and the Eucharist practice in particular.\textsuperscript{57} However, this fundamental practice was not a result of the imitation but instead a practice common throughout the Mediterranean with roots in a common Greco-Roman and Jewish practice.

Another common practice which was used by many of the mystery religions including Christianity and the cult of Mithras is the initiation rite. This practice was used by all mystery religions and was common throughout the Mediterranean. Mithraism used a gradual initiation system in which there were a number of steps. Christianity used the single initiation rite of baptism. This common use of initiation rites is the result of the religions' similar roots and not a result of imitation.

Although the two religions share fundamental parts, a savior deity, a ritual meal, and initiation rites, which were a result of their common roots and not imitation, there were some aspects of these which were a result of some level of imitation. Perhaps the biggest reason for imitation of Mithraic practices and beliefs was Paul. Paul was from Tarsus in Cilicia, which is where the Romans first encountered Mithras during the

\textsuperscript{55} Lossl, 137.
\textsuperscript{56} Freeman 43.
\textsuperscript{57} Justin Martyr, \textit{Apol.} I, 2-5
campaigns of Pompey. Tarsus had remained a stronghold of Mithras and Paul must have undoubtedly encountered the beliefs and practices of the cult during his life.\textsuperscript{58} As a Pharisee he would have been well educated and would have had knowledge other religions and philosophies throughout the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{59} He referenced these popular philosophies and religions in his epistles to various church communities.\textsuperscript{60} Mithraism would have been one of the religions Paul was likely very familiar with due to his birthplace and his education. Paul's knowledge of Mithraism can be seen in his letter to the Romans. He spoke of those who, "changed the glory of the incorruptible god into an image like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four footed beasts, and creeping things."\textsuperscript{61} Roman readers would have recognized this reference as a reference to the cult of Mithras. Who else could be the incorruptible god and what are the birds, beasts and creeping things if not the animal masks worn and described by Jerome? Paul imitated the language and rhetoric of Mithras in his epistles, which became widely read by Christians throughout the Empire and thus the cult of Mithras slipped into Christianity through Paul. Perhaps the best example of Paul's use of Mithraic rhetoric is found in his epistle to the Ephesians. His speech in chapter seven is very Mithraic, as he describes the word of God in terms of armor and weaponry. Mithras, due to his connection with soldiers and his title as the unconquerable god, emphasizes military qualities, and his followers are called the soldiers of Mithras.\textsuperscript{62} Paul takes this Mithraic rhetoric and applies it to God.

\textsuperscript{58} Wynne-Tyson, 67.
\textsuperscript{59} Freeman, 48.
\textsuperscript{60} Riches, 36.
\textsuperscript{61} Romans 1:23.
\textsuperscript{62} Wynne-Tyson, 72.
Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This speech is distinctly Mithraic. The talk of spiritual warfare and the use of helmets, swords, shield, and breastplates are all types of Mithraic rhetoric. Paul continues his use of Mithraic rhetoric in his second letter to Timothy. He asks Timothy to, “Join with me, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” Tertullian even uses the “term soldiers of Mithras” twice in his description of the initiation rites. The term may originate from the third grade of the cult, the Soldier. The soldier of God is Mithraic rhetoric which was imitated by Paul in his letter to Timothy and was then used by other Christians to describe themselves as the spiritual warriors of God.

Mithraic beliefs surrounding the ritual meal may have also been borrowed and used by Christians. A ritual meal was common in the ancient world, since it was a way to bring the community together on a regular basis and worship and celebrate their deity. However, the belief that the deity came down and was physically present during the meal was not a common aspect of this process. It is clear from the Mithraic illustrations of the ritual meal that they believed Mithras came down to eat among them and celebrate

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63 2 Timothy 2:3.
64 Tertullian, De Corona, 15.
65 Some scholars argue that Paul created the entire ritual meal and Last Supper himself in order to create some sort of bonding moment within the Christian community, but I think this is giving Paul too much credit and taking the imitations between the two religions too far.
66 Wynne-Tyson, 89.
with them, just as Sol came down to eat and celebrate with Mithras after the victory over
the bull. During the Last Supper Jesus never says that he will come back and be with
them during the meal. However, it is clear from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that
they believed Jesus was there and present at the meal. The Christians adopted this
belief in the physical presence of Jesus entering into the ritual meal just as Mithras would
during the Mithraic ritual meal.

The Christians seemed to also imitate aspects of the Mithraic initiation rites. The
Christians did not copy the practices of the initiation rites, such as wearing masks, but
certain symbols which were used during the rites were imitated. Tertullian describes the
Mithraic initiates as being sprinkled with water, fully submerged in water, or being
baptized in the blood of a bull as an act of purification. The Christians also believed in
baptism as a purification process, in order to remove original sin. This belief was not
an imitation, but the use of the sign of the cross during baptism on one’s forehead was.
The cross or crucifix was never depicted in early Christianity until after Constantine
outlawed that form of execution. The symbol of the cross is used often in modern the
baptism process, when the baptized receives a sign of the cross on the forehead with
water. This process was not practiced by Jesus, John the Baptist, or the Apostles, in any
of the gospels or the in Acts. Instead they practiced full submersion of the body into
water. However, the cult of Mithras did use the practice of placing the cross on the
forehead during the baptisma l process but instead of a cross the symbol meant the sword

67 Freeman, 43.
68 Wynne-Tyson, 43.
69 Lossl, 147.
71 Wynne-Tyson, 88.
of Mithras. This practice seemed to be picked up by the Christians after Constantine outlawed the crucifixion and used in their own baptismal right in the place of full submersion.

The cult of Mithras was imitated by Christians, although they argued it was the other way around. Due to the many similarities between the two religions it was easy for Christians to pick up something from Mithras, such as rhetoric or symbols, and transfer them onto Christianity. Paul was perhaps the biggest practitioner, and as the founder of universal Christianity he had a large effect on Christianity as a whole. In a way Christianity owes its place as a world religion to Mithras. Mithras helped pave the way for Christianity to become the dominant religion in the Mediterranean. Christianity followed in the footsteps of Mithras and spread throughout the Mediterranean but Mithras died out and Christianity expanded. This is because during the time of Constantine Christianity was in an amazing position to become the dominant religion of the Empire, it only needed the support of the state. Constantine gave Christianity that support by removing all state support from the pagan religions. It was obvious that Christianity was coming into its own and that the pagan religions of the Empire were on their way out. This move ironically harmed the cult of Mithras, the religion most similar to Christianity, more than any other religion. The Christians feared the cult so much that they removed any evidence of the religion that they could find. The religion completely disappeared as if it had never existed. This may be the biggest evidence for imitation between the two religions. The Christian authors discussed Mithras so much they gave support to the

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72 Tertullian, De Praescriptione Haereticorum, 40.3-4.
73 Fox, 575.
74 Frend, 449.
75 Wynne-Tyson, 53.
argument of imitation not as they intended, the cult of Mithras imitating Christianity, but with Christianity imitating the cult of Mithras.
III. Appendix

Figure 1. Cult Image of the Mithreaum in Capua, Italy.
Bibliography


