



SOME REMARKS ON MITHRAIC WORSHIP IN THE  
WESTERN WORLD.

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THE worship of Mithras, so interesting on many accounts to the student of religion, originated amongst the primitive Aryan people, as yet not divided into the nations which afterwards peopled India, Persia, and Europe.

The Persian Mithras and the Sanscrit Mitra are identical; and although we do not meet with any early mention of Mithras in Greece, still we find the primitive idea of the Persian and Sanscrit deity, so named, embodied in the Greek Athené, both pointing to the light of day shed forth on the world at the opening dawn. It is one of those singular instances of perversion in the development of religion that the worship of Mitra, which was at one time a comparatively pure worship (like that of the *ἄει πάρθενος*), should have degenerated in later days to the degraded form it assumed in the Roman Empire.

The earliest object of reverence among the undivided Aryan nation was the bright sky, Dyaus; known as *Zēus* in Greece, and Jupiter in Rome. In this idea of the bright sky are contained two distinct elements, which afterwards came to be invoked separately, and in fact supplanted the worship of Dyaus amongst the Aryans in India. The two elements are the *sky* itself, *i.e.*, the vault of heaven, called Varuna in Sanscrit, and *ὕψωνος* in Greek, and the *light* of heaven, called Mitra in Sanscrit, and, as I have said, the same as the Greek Athené.

Hence, in all the Vedic hymns, save one, Mitra and Varuna are associated. They are invoked together. Their union, in fact, is the same as Dyaus, and Dyaus consequently is no more heard of.

Varuna, however, is worshipped separately, and to him is attributed supreme power, even when so distinguished from Mitra; and the reason of this is plain, for though the *light* of heaven disappears, the *vault* of heaven remains unmoved. Hence, again, Varuna is very often identified with the night, *i.e.*, the vault of heaven without the light. Thus the old Vedic commentator, Sâyana, says (Rig. Veda. I., 89, 3.): "Mitra is the god who presides over the day," according to the Vedic text, "the day is Mitra's;" and, again, "Varuna is derived from the root *vri*, "to cover." He envelops the wicked in his snares, and is the god who rules over the night." It is to be observed, therefore, that the earliest idea of Mitra was not the *Sun*, but the light of the sun.

This has been well brought out by Professor Roth, in his paper on "The Highest Gods of the Arian Nations" (Journal of the Germ. Oriental Soc., VI., p. 70). "Within the circle of the Adityas there subsists the oldest connection between Mitra and Varuna, who are invoked more frequently together than Varuna is invoked singly. We find only one hymn in which Mitra is invoked singly. This dual invocation is observed in the Zend Avesta, under the form of Ahura and Mithra, which proves how close the ancient connection of the two was. The essential character of the two gods, as distinguished from one another, is nowhere expressed in the hymns, and was in fact originally one which could not be defined with intellectual precision; but the stage of religious culture which lies before us in the Rig Veda enables us to distinguish the difference as one already existing, *viz.*, that Mitra is the celestial light in its manifestation by day, whilst Varuna, though the lord of all light and of all time, yet rules especially over the nightly heaven. A hymn of Vaisishtha (VII., 36, 2.) says:—"One of you (*i.e.*, Varuna) is the lord and unassailable guide, and he who is called the friend (Mitra) calls men into activity." Here it is shown that the light of day which calls men into activity, *i.e.*, awakens life, and brings joy and activity to the world, is the narrower sphere of Mitra's power, though Varuna is not thereby relegated to the night alone, for he continues to be lord and the first;" or, in other words, the vault, or covering canopy of the firmament, remains the same though his companion and friend (Mitra), the light, is absent.

I said that the knowledge of Mithras was possessed by the entire Aryan race before their separation. In proof, let me quote the words

of Dr. Windischman, who, in his dissertation on the Persian Mithras, says:—"It is established that this god was known to the old Aryan race before its separation into the Iranian and Indian branches, though the conception of his character was subsequently modified by Zoroastrian ideas." That Mithras was worshipped in Persia in and previous to the age of Herodotus is proved, as Windischman remarks, by the common use of such names as Mitradatae and Mitrobates. Herodotus, indeed (I., 131), speaks of Mitra as a goddess, and not a god; but Xenophon (Cyp. VIII., s. 53.), and Plutarch (Artax. 4) describe him as a god; whilst Plutarch (de Iside et Osiride XLVI.) tells us that Zoroaster considered Mithras as standing intermediate between the deity Oromazdes and Areimanius; that is, between light and darkness, or God and sin.

Here we get hold of the idea of Manes, the Persian founder of the Manichean sect, who said that Mithras was Christ. It is simply this: the light is mediator, or intermediate between the rising sun and the setting sun; *i.e.*, between Ahuramazda and Ahriman, the harbinger of day, and the power of darkness—the night. Manes, trying to reconcile the realistic teaching of nature worship with the Divine Revelation, introduced Mithras as mediator between God and man, and called him Christ.

To show that the primitive idea of Mitra was not the sun itself, but the light of the sun, we need only quote Rig Veda, VII., 6, and VII., 63, 1, and X., 37, 1; where the sun is spoken of as the eye of Mitra, just as he is said by Hesiod to be the eye of Zeus *πάντα ἰδὼν Δίος ὀφθαλμὸς καὶ πάντα νοήσας*" (Op. et dies, 265); or, as Shakespeare says (Henry VI., pt. 1, 1, 4):—

"Tho' thy speech doth fail,  
One eye thou hast to look to heaven for grace,  
The Sun with one eye vieweth all the world."

Or, again, King John, IV., 2:—

- "To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish."

And from this we shall have to show presently that the factor Mithras, in the resolution of Dyaus or *Zéus* into Varuna and Mitra, is often taken for the whole, *viz.*, *Zéus* himself. I said that Mitra alone is only once celebrated in the Rig Veda (III., 59), but sufficient is

afforded in the phrases employed in this hymn to lead to safe conclusions as to his early character. First, it is stated, "Mitra uttering his voice calls men to activity." This is the voice of Nature, or the returning light of day. "Mitra, with unwinking eye, beholds all creatures." Here the idea of the sun, the source of light as the eye of the world, is presented, from which eventually sprang the confusion of cause and effect in making the sun equal to Mitra. "Mitra, son of Aditi (*i.e.*, the Infinite), may the mortal who worships thee with sacred rites have food. He who is protected by thee is neither slain or conquered." Here comes in the idea of "invictus," again the cause confused with effect. "This Mitra, adorable, auspicious, a king strong and wise has been born." Here the idea of strength and wisdom anticipate the character of Athene. "This great Aditya (*i.e.*, son of Aditi), who rouses men to exertion, who is favourable to his worshipper, is to be approached with reverence. Mitra, who by his greatness transcends the sky and the earth by his renown. The five classes of men have done homage to Mitra, the powerful helper who sustains all the gods." Here is the idea of Mitra as *friend*.

In this hymn we have certain properties pointed out belonging to Mitra which are also essentially elements in the character of Athéné, as we shall afterwards show.

It is plain that in the Indian section of the Aryan family the worship of Mitra was preserved from the Vedic period, or the probable period of separation, downwards to a late date, at least as late as Buddha; but in the Iranian section we have no specific mention of Mithras in the Gâthas, and the name only comes into usage at the time when the Yasna was written, *i.e.*, about the fifth century B.C. The tendency of the authors of the Yashts was to raise the dignity of angels such as Mitra to that of Ahuramazda, with whom they were said to be equal. So says Haug. Now, this is a curious expansion of doctrine. The first idea of Mithras was "pure light," but then by a confusion of light and the Sun the Persians were led to frame the theory of angels; so that Mithras now becomes the angel of the Sun. Hence the Sun, Khurshéd, is plainly distinguished from Mithras, or Mihir, the angel of the sun, in the Yasna. This is evidently a corruption of the primitive idea of light diffused by it from the rising Sun; these rays are by the writers and the Yasna or Yashts called



the Sun's angel. The probable reason of the absence of all mention of Mithras in the earlier Vendidad writings of Zaratushtra is to be found in the fact that Zoroaster was entirely opposed to the Nature worship of the Indian Aryans. Hence the Devas, or bright gods of India, became Daevas or devils of Persia, and the Asuras or devils of India were the Ahuras or good beings (Ahuramazda being the chief) of Persia. So Mitra, the bright daylight, was for a time ignored by the Persians; but at the period when the Yashts were written he became again the great and beneficent being he had always been ere the Iranians and Indians were divided by a religious schism. If we come to consider the actual honour paid to Mithras in the later period of Persian history, we shall find enough for our purpose in the Mihir Yasht, or the songs used at the sacrificial celebration of Mithras or Mihir, *the friend*. In the first section of this Yasht, Ahuramazda says to Zaratushtra:—"I created Mithras, who rules over wide fields, to be of the same rank and dignity as I myself am. He who belies Mithras spoils the whole country. Therefore, never break a promise, neither that contracted with a fellow-religionist, or with an infidel."

\* \* \* \* Again, "Mithras, who always speaks the truth, has a thousand ears, and ten thousand eyes, and is always watching without falling asleep over the welfare of creation. He, first of all the celestial spirits, crosses the Mount Alborz on its eastern side, where the immortal sun with his swift horses is stationed; he, first covered with gold, reaches the summit of the mount, and thence overlooks the whole of Iran. \* \* \* \* He brings light to all the seven regions of the earth. Victory sounds in the ears of all those who by knowledge of the appropriate rites and prayers continuously worship him with sacrifices." Here, then, we are getting nearer to the form under which the worship of Mithras was introduced into the West. The ideas of strength and victory are now associated with the beneficent purposes of light, shed over the world lying in darkness.

This development was a simple one. When first "light" was adored as an "abstract element," derived from the compound Dyaus, the principal thought was that of "friendship" to men, and hence the name Mithras, or Mitra; but afterwards, when the idea of light was lost in the concrete form of the visible sun, the source of light, then Mithras was clothed with other attributes derived from solar influences.

He was clad in gold, strong and invincible, truthful and uniform. All these attributes were derived from the character of the deity with whom he was now identified.

Hence, all solar phenomena are to be found in the later idea of Mithras. The *unconquered* Sun is in fact the unconquered Hercules, and it is, probably, on account of these physical qualities of strength and victory that this deity became so popular in Rome and Western Europe.

The idea of "invictus" is, of course, derived from the unsurpassed energy of the Sun in conquering the evil powers that would compel him to leave the world to darkness and woe. When he is drawn piercing the bull with his knife, the thought is simply this: the sun entering Taurus at the spring equinox, returns to the northern world again, and his light as he rises in the east, paling the stars of the zodiacal constellation, is simply the dagger of Mithras piercing the sides of the bull. So he is always spoken of as the strong, the victorious, the fully armed, with the silver helm, golden mail, armed with dagger, mighty, strong, lord of the clan, the warrior, and so on, all indicating the thought uppermost in the mind of the writer, that the power of the sun in contending with the powers of darkness, whether in its daily or yearly course, is invincible.

The worship, then, of Mithras as a physical power would naturally recommend itself to the Romans, who as a nation typified physical strength. The idea of "invictus" would be most congenial to that brave people, who remained unvanquished through ages of warfare, and who for so many years struggled against the talent and determination of Mithradates VI. himself, a type of the unconquerable character of the power from which he derived his name.

This probably is the secret of the first introduction of the worship of Mithras into the Roman Empire. As Athens had her Parthenon, so Rome had her Pantheon, a building, we are assured, consecrated to the worship of Apollo, the Roman Mithras; a dome to represent the visible heaven or Varuna, and a vast space on the summit through which the light of the sun, after the vernal equinox, poured its rays into the interior of the building, to represent Mithras.

It is a strange leap from the Pantheon and the altar erected in the Capitol to the god "Soli invicto, Mithræ" to the altars found in

Britain, but yet it must be made ; and we find the same fealty to the "unconquered one" animating the legions who kept North Britain in check by the stupendous work of the Roman Wall as influenced Lucullus or Sulla in their struggle with Mithradates VI., in Pontus and Asia.

It will be as well, however, before going further, to say a word or two as to the agreement of the dawn myth of Athéné with the description given in the character of Mithras.

We will select some few points of resemblance as they are found in the Iliad of Homer and the Mihr Yasht of the Persians. Assuming the idea of Athéné, as the ever pure and invincible, to be derived from the character of the dawn (Ahaná), and also assuming, as Spiegel says in the Mihr Yasht, p. 58, *n*, "that Mithras was typified by the first sunbeams that illumine the mountain tops," we shall find some remarkable points of agreement between the two. First, as in the Iliad, IV., 150, Athéné diverts the arrow of Pandarus from the breast of Menelaus:—

" But not unmindful, then, the blissful gods,  
Of thee, great Menelaus! In thy front  
First she, Zeus-born, the spoiler of the slain,  
Athené stood, and half repelled the dart.  
She brushed it from his form as from her child,  
Lapped in sweet sleep, a mother might a fly."

—*Cordery's Translation.*

Compare this characteristic with that of Mithras (Mihr Yasht, 39)—

"Their arrows swift-flying from well-bent bows [compare the account of Pandarus bending his bow], flying out of sight, hit not the mark when Mithras, who possesses wide pastures, comes enraged, angered, displeased."

Again, compare Iliad XI., 500, *ss.*:—

" He spake, and on the orbèd shield struck full;  
Through the bright buckler passed the stout good lance,  
And through the enamelled corselet making way,  
Laid bare the ribs of flesh : Athené there  
Stay'd it, nor suffered it to reach his heart."

with Mihr Yasht, 39:—

"Their lances well sharpened, pointed, long handled, reach not the mark when they fly from their arms, when Mithras, etc., comes."

Again, notice that Athené is described as a wrathful deity:—

“ He spoke, and kindled in Athené’s breast  
A wrath, erst flaming high to higher flame.  
Down from Olympus heights she sprang, and seemed  
Some flashing meteor.”

So also Mithras is described as a wrathful deity (Mihr Yasht, 18:—

“ But if one lies to him \* \* \* then Mithras, the wrathful, offended,  
destroys the dwelling, etc.”—[vid. also extract quoted above; Mihr Yasht, 39.]

Again, observe the remarkable connection between Mithras, *i.e.*, the Dawn, as denoted by the rays of the sun, and the Sun itself, and compare this with the marked relationship of Athené and Apollo.

Again, observe the special offerings made to Athené—twelve heifers never touched by goad (Iliad VI., 93, 274, 308), etc.—with the special offerings made to Mithras:—“With *offerings by name*, with fitting speech, will I offer to thee with gifts, O strong Mithras.” (Mihr Yasht, 31) [and in other places].

In short, the attributes and special characteristics of Mithra, summed up in the following invocation, might perfectly be applied to Athené:—“Give us the favours we pray thee for, O hero, in accordance with the given prayers: kingdom, strength, victoriousness, fullness, and sanctification, good fame, and purity of soul, greatness and knowledge of holiness, victory created by Ahura, the blow which springs from above, from the best purity, instruction in the holy word; that we may be well-wishing and friendly-minded, loved and honoured, may slay all foes; that we, well-wishing and friendly-minded, loved and honoured, may slay all evil wishers; that we, etc., may slay all torment, etc.” (Mihr Yasht, 33, 34.)

That Mithras represents the Dawn is rendered probable from various passages in the Mihr Yasht, *e.g.* (13):—“Who, as the first heavenly Yazata, rises over Hara before the sun.” And compare the note on this passage in Bleek’s version.

Again, Mihr Yasht, 95: “Mithras, who advances at sunrise, broad as the earth,” etc.

Again, compare the marked connection between Athené and Zeus; and compare with it the close union of Mithras with Ahuramazda (Mihr Yasht, 1):—“When I created Mithras, who possesses wide



pastures, O holy, I created him as worthy of honour as praiseworthy, as I myself, Ahuramazda."

Again, Mihr Yasht, 145:—"Mithras and Ahura, both great, imperishable, pure, praise we."

Again, compare the epithet constantly applied to Mithras, who has "ten thousand eyes," with the epithet *γλαύκωπις*, where the idea appears "flashing or gleaming-eyed;" and so, again, in the Mihr Yasht, the idea of "brightness" is constantly attached to the character of Mithras, as the epithet *κνδιστη* is to Athené in Homer.

With respect to the expression Tritogoneia, which Mr. Gladstone concludes (*Contemporary Review*, July, 1876, p. 284) is derived most probably from an old word, *trito*, for the head, there is a curious illustration bearing on this point in the *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, edited by Dr. Bruce (p. 40), where there is a figure of Mithras (so supposed) of the following character.



It would seem from this that *Mithras* might either be called *Tritogoneia*, as born from the head, supposing the three rays represent the dawn; or that the three rays themselves are the prelude or cause of the dawn, in which case the word *trito* would be allied to the Sanscrit *trétá*, in the sense of a triad or three-fold, corresponding to the expression *tretini*, a three-fold flame; *retagni*, the three fires collectively; or the other form of *traita*, "a collection of three;" or perhaps from *Trita*, who is a son of the water, and is made by M. Williams (*Sansc. Dict., Sub. Voc.*) to be the origin of the compound Tritogenes. At any rate, this curious illustration of Mithras throws light on the history of the "three rays," which are so constantly connected with *power*, *wisdom*, or the *origin*, as in the *trisula*, the *sudamani*, the *trident*, the *three-forked crown* of Buddha, and perhaps the *Prince of Wales' plume*.

The connection of Mithras with Athené is further signified by the description given of both as fully armed "him with the silver helm, golden coat of mail, armed with dagger, mighty, strong, lord of the

clan, the warrior," etc. (Mihir Yasht, 112.) The helm and spear of Minerva are well known.



Again, Mithras is stated to be "the most understanding of the gods" (Mihir Yasht, 141); and, again, "the skilful" (Mihir Yasht, 54.)

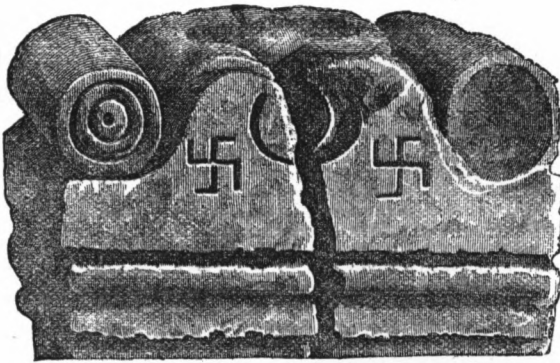
But I pass on now to offer some remarks on the *Swastika*, which is generally found on altars dedicated to Mithras. The Roman altar, 366, found at Amboglanna (*Lapidarium*, p. 184) bears on it the mark of the Swastika, as shown in the woodcut. This is the correct form; the circular cross or wheel in the centre indicating strength. The wheel is always so used in the East as the symbol of *invincible might*; hence the expression

*to turn the wheel of the law*, etc.

In the altar, No. 546 *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, the upper portion of which is given in the woodcut, the Swastika is turned the wrong way, the reason of which we will explain presently.



Again, 553 *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, is the following :—



Where the Swastika is correct.

With regard to the origin of this emblem, called in the Greek Church the *gammadion*, and by a singular coincidence corresponding to the letter G in the earliest Runes (Prof. Stephens), it can be traced to the early idea of the good fortune attending the movement of the Sun in his apparent journey from east to west. In a Chinese book in my possession there is a treatise on the origin of this world-wide opinion. The writer states that in the East it was customary to observe the sun's shadow cast on the ground by a gnomon, both to determine the hour of the day and the season of the year; and as this shadow would always move from left to right *in northern countries beyond the tropic*, so it was regarded as a sign of respect either in religious worship or in any ceremony of consequence, to move round the object revered in a direction agreeing with the sun's movement round the earth, *i.e.*, always from left to right; whilst *in countries within the tropics*, when the sun was in high declination, the shadow would appear to move from right to left; or the sun would be on our right hand instead of the left. Now, the earliest symbol of the earth was a plain cross, denoting the four cardinal points; hence, we have the word *Chaturanta*, *i.e.* the *four sides*, both in Pāli and Sanscrit, for the earth; and on the Nestorian tablet, found at Siganfu some years ago, the mode of saying "God created the earth," is simply this "God created the +." Granting this—and we can gather it conclusively from the Chinese symbol for a "field" or an "enclosed space," which is

simply the + surrounded by four straight lines, as a square or parallelogram  $\boxed{+}$  denoting *the earth* enclosed—assuming this, it will be seen at once that to represent the sun's movement from left to right, a line drawn in that direction at the end of each arm of the + would be enough; and to represent the same movement from right to left, the lines would be drawn in *that* direction. Hence the Swastika is drawn in both ways. It is universally regarded as a sign of *good fortune*; hence, in Scotland, to move round an object from right to left is considered most unlucky and called *withershins*; and so Sir Walter Scott remarks (*Waverley*, cap. xxiv.) that "the old mountain people always move round any one to whom they wish to show respect, or for whom they desire good fortune, in the direction known as *dearsil*; whilst to move in the contrary way is considered as wishing to curse one." Mr. Joyce ("Irish Names of Places," p. 29) makes the same remark with respect to Irish customs; it will be seen at once, then, why this symbol should be identified with Mitra, "the friend," the bringer of good fortune; and accordingly we ever find it so.

If we seek for other reasons except the natural one of "invincible strength" for the common worship of Mitra in the time of the Roman Empire, we shall find it in the fact of Hadrian's putting an end to the monopoly held by Alexandria in the Indian trade, and admitting Palmyra into the commercial system of the empire. It is true that trade between India and Palmyra had existed for a long period before this, as Trajan, according to Cassius (L. 67, cap. 28.), when he descended the Tigris and came to the Ocean "saw a certain ship sailing to India," but it was under the patronage of Hadrian and that of his successors, the Antonines, who lived much in the East, and followed out his policy, that Palmyra rapidly developed the advantages it derived from its position as the nearest route to India; and when Emesa, almost on its frontiers, and on the high road to Antioch and Damascus, gave to Rome Julia Domna, the wife of one Emperor Severus, and the mother of another Caracalla; and afterwards two emperors, Heliogabalus and Alexander; then Palmyra rose to be a power which for a while held with Rome divided Empire. It was during the reigns of Severus, Caracalla, and the pseudo-Antonines that Roman intercourse with India was at its height, and Roman literature gave its attention to Indian matters, and did not as before satisfy itself simply by quoting

from the historians of Alexander. It was then that Clemens of Alexandria wrote an independent account of the gymnosophists and Buddhists (*Stromata* I., 15); then, also, Philostratus published his Romance of Apollonius of Tyana, and Ælian his *varia historię*; then also Dio Cassius wrote his history, and then again Bardasanes gave to the world his *Indica*, the materials of which he derived from Dandas, at Babylon. It will be seen, then, that at this time the worship of Mitra, *the fortunate and invincible*, would be particularly familiar to the Roman merchants and the Roman soldiers, the latter of whom would carry their superstition into distant lands, and erect altars to the "Unconquered God," wherever they went. Hence they crop up in Britain and Germany at the present time, and are being brought to light as testimony of the vast energy, and at the same time the unbounded superstition, of those who erected them.

I have before stated that Mitra was not only a symbol of the light of the Sun, but also of the light of Truth. To lie to Mitra was considered by the Persians a great crime, and was certain to bring upon the criminal condign punishment. In this aspect *we* may also inscribe on our altars, "Deo invicto," the unconquered Truth, for when the Sun shall be darkened and the light of day extinguished, still the light of God's truth will remain unconquered, and those who have loved the truth shall shine for ever and ever. *Magna est veritas et pręvalebít.*