The Mysteries of Mithra, The Vision of Aridaeus

G. R. S. Mead

The Mysteries of Mithra, The Vision of Aridaeus

G. R. S. Mead

G. R. S. Mead

THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA, THE VISION OF ARIDAEUS

Published by BoD - Books on Demand, Norderstedt
ISBN: 9783748147824

-->

Table of contents

THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA

PREAMBLE.

This brief outline of the comparatively meagre information we possess on what at one time was the most widely spread mystery-institution in the Roman empire, is introductory to the following small volume which will deal with the only Mithriac Ritual known to us.

In dealing with this exceedingly instructive Ritual I found that the limits of one booklet would not suffice for an adequate introduction; and without this, I fear, many readers will not be in a position to appreciate the Ritual at its just value.

For, in spite of the wealth of epigraphic and monumentary material now in our hands, the texts of the ancient writers which treat of the religion of Mithra, are, with rare exceptions, provokingly deficient in information on the doctrines and inner meanings of these famous Mysteries; and, therefore, a Ritual that unfolds to us the nature of the chief secret to which the lower grades of the mystery-rites conducted the brethren, is of the utmost value. It articulates, clothes with flesh, and puts life into what have been hitherto for the most part the dry bones of a skeleton.

And this, too, in spite of the splendid labours of the Belgian Hellenist Franz Cumont, who has done all that scholarship can do to make accessible to us every scrap of information on the subject that industry can discover.

The two sumptuous quarto volumes of Cumont's Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra will long remain the most authoritative work on the subject; and the unstinted thanks of all who are interested in this fascinating study are due to Cumont for the admirable presentation of the labours which have occupied upwards of ten years of his life.

The second volume, which is embellished with no less than 493 figures and nine heliogravures, contains a reproduction of (i.) the literary texts--Oriental, Greek and Latin; (ii.) the inscriptions or epigraphic texts; and (iii.) the figured monuments and bas-reliefs; while the first volume, which contains fourteen additional figures and a map, is devoted partly to a critical introduction, in which this heterogeneous and puzzling mass of information is skilfully analyzed, and partly to the conclusions that may be drawn from the evidence.

Cumont has endeavoured rigorously to exclude any appearance of subjectivity from his judgments, and claims to have founded his conclusions on purely objective data. But when we remember that the secrets of the Mithriaca have been most strictly guarded by all the faithful, and that not even a single Church Father has been able to boast that he is in possession of their jealously guarded rites and doctrines, it will be seen that the elements of subjectivity and speculation must enter largely into the conclusions of even so rigid an objectivist as Cumont, at any rate as far as the rites and doctrines are concerned.

Again, it is the habit of most of those who follow the German school, in spite of the excellence of its methodology, to rest content when they have traced the elements of the main doctrines and features of a tradition to elements of a similar nature of an earlier date. If what are called "sources" and "prototypes" can be indicated, it is almost tacitly assumed that there is an end of the matter.

It is true that this is all the rigid adherents to pure objectivity can accomplish; but in the domain of religion it is with every day becoming clear that many doctrines which have been hitherto held to be direct physical derivatives from prior doctrines, have arisen independently owing to the natural evolution of the human soul and mind; that is to say, their source is subjective and not objective. The human soul has needs which it seeks to satisfy; and in all climes and times of similar stages of culture, similar means of satisfaction have been devised. And this simply because man is man.

The history of the evolution of the tradition of the Mithra-religion in Hither Asia, and of its continued development when it spread like wild-fire through the length and breadth of the Roman empire, in the first four

centuries of our era, is an instructive study; but the main interest for many of us is the inner nature of the religion itself.

This, however, is a subject of extreme difficulty, as we have seen, owing to the jealously and secrecy with which its tenets were guarded. In spite of our more than 400 inscriptions, in spite of our upwards of 500 sculptures and bas-reliefs, we are unable to reconstruct the doctrines.

It is as though the living tradition and written records of Christianity had disappeared from the world for fifteen hundred years, and there remained to us only a few hundred monuments and the ruins of some three-score churches. What could we glean from these of the doctrines of the faith? How, from such meagre remains, could we reconstruct the story of the God, the saving doctrines, the rituals, the liturgies?

Nevertheless the fragments of information which can be gleaned from all this débris are of immense importance for the comparative history of religion, and throw light

on many problems.

The Mithraism that spread over the Roman world in the first four centuries of our era, though it was the strongest, was not the only stream from the same source that reached the Western world.

Post-exilic Judaism was strongly tinged with Mazdaism, in the form of Pharisæism. Though it is strongly disputed by some, the Pharisees (Gk. Pharisaioi, Aram. Perishaya, Heb. Perushim) may have even owed their name to those whose doctrines they had partially absorbed; and Perashim may thus spell Persi in Hebrew transliteration, even as P~ rs§ does in India to-day.

But not only were the Pharisees, who gradually became the national party among the Jews, imbued with Mazdæan ideas, but many schools of a mystic and gnostic nature arose in Syria and Arabia who were more or less adherents of the Magian traditions, or influenced by Magian doctrines. Such schools formed one of the links between Jewish and Semitic Gnosticism on the one hand, and the Christianized Gnosis on the other.

It is to be remarked that Simon, whom the Church Fathers regarded as the earliest Gnostic heretic in Christendom, was surnamed the Magian, and that The Great Announcement, which was the principal document of the Simonian tradition, is filled with Magian doctrine.

Moreover the names of the Æons in a number of Christianized Gnostic systems, are those of ethical abstractions, precisely as are the names of the Amshaspands in the Avesta.

And not only are there distinct traces of this influence in some of the Christian Gnostic documents preserved to us, as for instance in the system underlying the Coptic Gnostic works contained in the Askew and Bruce Codices; but also we have many indications of a large literature derived from the doctrines of Zoroaster, and his Mazdayasnian successors, and directly attributed to him by the Greek writers.

This literature was in circulation among certain Christian Gnostic circles, and is also directly referred to by