

The Mithraic Leontocephaline: A Conjecture Using Beck's Approach

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In 1998 Roger Beck published a paper entitled “The Mysteries of Mithras: a New Account of Their Genesis”.[1] In it he reasoned that some Commagenian military units at the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD constituted the founding group of the Greco-Iranian cult of Mithras. That Cumont's original scenario for Mithraism was rooted in Anatolia and the Mazdean diaspora appeared correct in some respects. But the Commagenians as part of the royal cult under Antiochus who fought at Jerusalem did not represent the Hellenized Mazdean magi, the Magousaioi—which is an important point I will use later.

Beck's argument established reasonable answers to a number of questions about the cult. I say “reasonable” because, as Richard Gordon has noted, “in this field guesswork is of the essence”. [7, p.468] (1)The Mithraic Mysteries were a genuinely new creation at a time when old Roman religious ideas were dying, but a creation that drew on Anatolian tradition (2) the transmission of the Mysteries within a comparatively short time span to different parts of the empire could be explained by Commagenian contact with Roman legionary and other troops including the earliest carriers of the new mystery cult, the 15th Apollinaris and the 5th Macedonica (3) the hypothesis of Ulansey[16] and Turcan[14] that Cilician pirates participated in Mithraism as Plutarch described does not coincide with the fact that the earliest known dedications and monuments appeared over a century after the event.¹ The founder(s) whoever he(they) were, made it unlikely that he(they) originated the cult in the first century BC. (4) the founding group could have included a master astrologer who could have provided the metaphors of cosmology and soteriology implied in the Mysteries. Ti. Claudius Balbillus who had resided in Alexandria and Rome fits the description. As a leading astrologer of the period, he was consulted by Vespaian and, continuing with Beck's argument, was involved in the formulation of an ideology focused on the emperor—another important point I will use later.

Throughout much of Beck's work on Mithraism, a recurring question keeps appearing: what is the function of the leontocephaline in the already complex Mithraic iconography when the celestial ascent and passage of the soul was the essential purpose of Mithraism? It is the conjecture of this paper that the lion-headed Aion or leontocephaline served *inter alia* as (1) a symbol to strengthen allegiance to the emperor and the Roman system as a whole and (2) as an eschatological representation of what was to happen in the “end of days”. Specifically, the Romans were inspired by the legend that the Jewish saoshyant would be born in the same astrological sign as the destruction of the Jerusalem temple on August 2, 70 AD, a day of Saturn. The saoshyant was a Roman emperor, not a Jew or Jewish king, who was born in the sign of Leo and who would emerge at the end of time, presumably the close of the Roman Empire, to unlock the doors of heaven to the “faithful” at the Zoroastrian resurrection. The lion headed personage holds the key(s) and therefore should not be confused with the lion headed Yaldabaoth whose context can also be found in Jewish texts and myths.[5]

What is the internal and external circumstantial evidence for this conjecture? First of all, it is debatable whether the Romans thought the Jewish prophecy of the “star” and the “scepter” referred to Vespaian alone or to Vespaian and Titus together. Suetonius (Life of Vespaian 4)

would prefer one individual, whereas Tacitus (Histories 5:13) interprets the prophecy in the plural. Josephus (Jewish War 6.5.4) suggests Vespasian only. What Vespasian actually thought is a question mark, although from Cassius Dio's description of all the portents and "miracles" that Vespasian experienced (Roman History, 66:1-8) the messiahship was probably thought of as the natural extension of being emperor. Furthermore, Eusebius of Caesarea (Ecclesiastical History 3:12) states that Vespasian issued a command immediately after the siege of Jerusalem to search out any rival claimant that might impersonate the Jewish saoshyant, suggesting that Vespasian claimed the title for himself. Certainly no Roman—and probably no Mithraist—believed at that time that the Jewish saoshyant had already come. The Romans had not considered or even known about the magi's statistical finding that Christ had already been born in Pisces and would presumably return at the end of the age in Aquarius or Leo[12]. The scenario indirectly validates Beck's argument that the founders of Mithraism were not Mazdean magi but some other group, in this case from the royal house of Commagene.

Second, Mithraism was created in secret and the Sol Invictus imagery is generally believed to have been exploited by the emperors. Gordon writes, "It(Mithraism) may often have begun as a religion of soldiers, in its extension into the Rhine Danube provinces, but this is more an historical accident than a glimpse into the cult's essential appeal, which was to modest social risers eager to demonstrate their conformity with the socio-political order"[7,p.463]. The founding group's work must have been approved (and perhaps paid for) by the emperor who could then reaffirm loyalty to himself and the system as a whole. What better way than to create a religion in secret in part as an oath of allegiance to the emperor himself without his appearing directly involved. And the leontocephaline, inspired by the myth of the Jewish saoshyant, served *inter alia* as a reminder to future followers of the role of the emperor in the destiny of religion. The fate of Mithraism, in short, I argue, was bound up with the fate of the Empire. But, just as the increasing frequency of imperial over divine festivals did not imply the emperor outranked the gods, so the lion head did not imply that the last emperor superseded its probable multi-valent symbolism.²

The Jews right after the Temple fire had noticed that the disaster had occurred on the same month and day as the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians some six hundred years or so earlier (Josephus, Jewish War 6.4.5). This made the fast day less obscure, for R. Eliezer ben Zadok (Megillat Ta'anit 5 and Babylonian Ta'anit 12a) reported that the fast day was celebrated even before the destruction of the second Temple. No doubt, some surviving Jews must have made the connection that a future Jewish saoshyant born on the tenth of Ab would vindicate them. They must have recalled Lamentations where destruction and consolation are intertwined, where God does not destroy without giving hope for the future. The Cross after all represents the most famous example. Yet, the first written glimpse that the Jewish saoshyant would be born on the ninth or tenth of Ab cannot be found until a fourth century Jew recorded the belief in the Palestinian Talmud (Berakhot 2:4). The problem then that the founding group of Mithraists may have faced in developing the Mysteries was the birthdates of both Vespasian and Titus. Neither emperor was born in the sign of Leo, appropriately a sign of fire, which in this experimental religion no doubt also had meaning as a solar symbol. Could the Romans have also looked to the future?

If the lion head represents the final emperor and the Roman system as a whole, we would predict that the end of the Mysteries coincided with the end of the Roman Empire. Nicholson points out that it is too simple to blame the Christians for the final demise of the Mysteries starting at the end of the fourth century.[11] The argument that an expression of devotion to the emperor would have been senseless after the emperors professed Christianity can be explained by the fact that the leontocephaline could have been as much a political statement as it was a religious one. It should also be noted that paganism outlasted Mithraism by centuries. Christianity's rival was as much paganism as it was Mithraism—and this has to be explained.

What is the circumstantial evidence for the eschatological significance of the lion head? Hinnells[8] argues that there was no centralized Mithraic bureaucracy that could oversee faith, practice and iconography so that local variations or syncretism, unrepresentative of the Mysteries as a whole, were possible.³ He goes on to state that, since wings, key(s) and a snake are universally evident in the statues, the lion head represents “the cosmic being which guides the soul's ascent through the celestial spheres, while the snake symbolizes the passage of time and the wings the upward flight of the soul.”[8, p.354] He concludes that the lion head was not inextricably linked to the main body of Mithraic myth, but represented the cosmic power for the fourth grade. Does this suggest that the purpose of the lion head was not strictly cosmological or soteriological? When combined with Ulansey's study of the Barberini Mithraeum that the leontocephaline implied a mediator between the cosmos and the realm beyond, could that “boundary guardian” be the final emperor or is this the end of the story?[15]

CIMRM 312[17] exhibits a leontocephaline with the hammer and tongs of Vulcan at the base as well as the cock and pine cone of Asclepius and the caduceus of Mercury. The symbols are all associated with creative powers. If eschatology plays a significant role here, the cock, pine cone, and caduceus imply universal resurrection itself while the hammer and tongs the perfection of resurrected bodies. From the texts of Zoroastrian tradition the eschatological scenario is well known, revealing the final triumph of Ahura Mazda over evil. Airyaman(not to be confused with Ahriman for Arimanius[19]) through fire “melts the metals in the hills and mountains”, but the good are not harmed. The supernatural agent of Ahura Mazda, the saoshyant, resurrects the dead to physical perfection and reunites their souls forever to the divine (Bundahishn 34). For Mithraism thus the world ends with fire just as it begins with fire.

Conclusion

The perennial problem with researching the Mithraic Mysteries rests in the secrecy of their origins and their religious ideas, even if the cult obtained a certain degree of visibility and recognition on the part of local authorities.[10] Many theories can be worked out with the same data. Nothing is certain. However, some theories and some solutions about the origin and meaning of the Mithraic leontocephaline are more probable than others. The particular conjecture presented here is based on an extension of another theory. Both of these use existing circumstantial evidence that might appear reasonable. Pursuing the overall approach will require future research first to develop and test one or more predictions if possible. In the larger picture, we have the intriguing situation of two contemporary rival religions with Christianity looking to the past to a Piscean figure and Mithraism looking to the future to a Leo figure. Neither religion seemed concerned that the “star” and the “scepter” prophecy in the Hebrew bible could refer to

two individuals, a priest and a “philosopher king” perhaps, in two consecutive astrological ages, revisiting the “Jacob and Israel” of Isaiah and “the Castor and Pollux” allegory of Acts 28.

1. D. Ulansey’s hypothesis that Mithraism emerged from Hipparchus’ discovery of precession has been severely attacked. M. Clauss, for example, notes that the hypothesis cannot be proved right or wrong and thus proves nothing.[3] Furthermore, Hipparchus discovered the rate of precession but not its existence. [8]

2. J. Duchesne-Guillemin suggests lion headed or human Aions “ne sont donc que deux variations sur le theme de l’identite Aion-Serapis-Zeus-Helios-Mithra et Ahriman”. [6, p. 97] H. Jackson states that “in the hodge podge of theocrasies that were carried out to symbolize an astral Aion, two heavenly bodies—together, of course, with all the divinities associated with them—stood out as natural candidates for the job: Saturn/Kronos....Sol/Helios”[9] M. Clauss sees “lineaments of Sarapis, Apollo, Jupiter, Pluto, Aesculapius, Pan and other divine beings, a splendid example of the commingling of different conceptions which did not always need to be made fully coherent with one another”[4, p. 165]

3. This contradicts I. Roll’s claim that there was a continual current of influence from Italy to the orient, not simply sporadic and isolated contact. [13]

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