

SHORT PAPER

## Parallels Between Jesus and Mithra: A Comparative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Mithra, in ancient Persian mythology, was associated with various aspects, including the concept of contracts and oaths. The concept of Mithra as a guardian of truth and the enforcer of oaths played a significant role in Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia. People would invoke Mithra's name when making promises or entering into contracts, believing that breaking such agreements would incur Mithra's wrath. The bull-slaying scene in Mithraism symbolized the triumph of light (Mithras) over darkness (the bull), emphasizing the solar aspects of the deity. This symbolism linked Mithraism to the changing seasons and the sun's journey across the sky. Mithraism declined with the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. However, some of its symbolism and ideas influenced later religious traditions, including aspects of Christian iconography. The comparison between Jesus Christ and Mithra, a deity from ancient Persian religion, has been a topic of fascination for scholars and enthusiasts alike. While the two figures belong to different religious traditions and historical contexts, this paper aims to explore some of the intriguing similarities that have been identified over the years.

### KEYWORDS

Mithraism; Mithras; Sun; Equality; Liberty; Fraternity

## 1. Introduction

Mithraism and Christianity, two distinct religious traditions with their own unique beliefs and practices, also share certain ethical principles. In Mithraism, the concept of incarnation was portrayed symbolically through rituals and the bull-slaying scene. It represented themes of renewal, cosmic cycles, and spiritual transformation. Although Mithraism has faded into history, its unique interpretation of incarnation continues to captivate scholars and those interested in ancient religions.

In Mithraism, the god Mithras was often associated with the concept of an incarnate deity, representing the sun god. This belief included the idea of Mithras undergoing various symbolic acts, such as slaying a bull, which were interpreted as metaphors for cosmic events and the cycles of life and death. The concept of incarnation in Mithraism is part of the broader religious beliefs and symbolism of that ancient mystery religion. The veneration of the sun holds a prominent place in both Mithraism and Christianity, despite the significant theological differences between these two religious traditions [1]. It is necessary to explore the ways in which the sun was revered in Mithraism and Christianity, shedding light on the significance of solar symbolism and its implications

for these faiths [2].

This paper explores the ethical similarities between Mithraism and Christianity, shedding light on common moral values that resonate across these faiths.

## **2. Sun Veneration in Mithraism and Christianity**

In Mithraism, the god Mithra was closely associated with the sun. He was often depicted as driving a chariot across the sky, representing the sun's journey from east to west. Mithra's role as a solar deity symbolized light, truth, and purity. In Christianity, the veneration of the sun is not directed at a deity but is intertwined with the symbolism of Jesus Christ as the "Sun of Righteousness" or "Light of the World." This association underscores Jesus as the source of spiritual illumination and divine truth.

Both Mithraism and Christianity incorporated solar imagery into their religious iconography [3]. Mithraic temples, known as "mithraea," were often constructed with an opening in the roof called an oculus, allowing sunlight to penetrate and illuminate the central scene of Mithra slaying a bull, emphasizing the solar aspect of the faith. In the cult of Mithras, Mithra is depicted as being born from a rock, and he is often shown wearing a Phrygian cap. This cap symbolizes his status as a liberator and is an important aspect of his iconography in the context of the Mithraic mysteries. It is also worth mentioning that the Phrygian cap is used to symbolize the sun's rays or the idea of enlightenment. In Christian art and symbolism, the halo or aureole around the heads of saints and divine figures is reminiscent of the radiant sun, signifying their spiritual enlightenment and divine nature.

Mithraism celebrated several solar festivals, including the "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti" (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun) on December 25th, marking the winter solstice and the sun's gradual return. In Christianity, December 25th was chosen to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, further associating him with the symbolism of the sun and the renewal of light during the darkest time of the year. Both traditions attribute spiritual significance to the sun's light. In Mithraism, the sun's light was seen as a symbol of divine revelation and enlightenment, leading initiates on a path to spiritual knowledge and salvation. In Christianity, Jesus is often described as the "light of the world," signifying his role in guiding believers toward spiritual truth and salvation.

The veneration of the sun in Mithraism and Christianity reflects the enduring human fascination with light, illumination, and spiritual enlightenment. While the specific theological interpretations differ, the sun's symbolism in these faiths serves as a common thread, underscoring the importance of divine truth, spiritual awakening, and the renewal of hope that sunlight brings to the human experience.

## **3. The number twelve holds significance in both religions**

In Christianity, the number twelve is most notably associated with the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus to be his closest followers and the primary witnesses to his teachings and ministry. The apostles played a crucial role in spreading Christianity after the death of Jesus. The number twelve is also significant in the Old Testament, where it represents the twelve tribes of Israel, descendants of the patriarch Jacob. These twelve tribes held a central role in the history and religious traditions of ancient Israel. Moreover, In the Book of Revelation, which is the final book of the New Testament, the number twelve appears frequently, symbolizing completeness and divine order [4].

For example, there are references to the "twelve gates" of the New Jerusalem.

Mithraism, like many ancient religions, placed significance on the zodiac and the twelve signs that make up the zodiac. Mithraic iconography often depicted Mithra surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac, symbolizing his cosmic and celestial attributes. While the number twelve is significant in both Mithraism and Christianity, its specific meaning and symbolism differ between these two religions. In Christianity, it is closely linked to the twelve apostles and the tribes of Israel, while in Mithraism, it is associated with the zodiac.

#### **4. Ethical Parallels Between Mithraism and Christianity**

Both Mithraism and Christianity emphasize the importance of leading a virtuous and moral life. In Mithraism, followers were encouraged to embrace virtues such as courage, loyalty, and honesty, which were associated with Mithra, the god of light. Similarly, Christianity places a strong emphasis on moral conduct, promoting virtues like compassion, humility, and love. Both traditions stress the significance of community and fellowship. Mithraic initiates belonged to a closely-knit brotherhood, emphasizing mutual support and camaraderie. In Christianity, believers are encouraged to love their neighbors and engage in acts of charity, fostering a sense of unity and compassion within the Christian community. While the concepts of redemption and salvation are expressed differently in Mithraism and Christianity, both traditions offer a path to spiritual growth and ultimate salvation. In Mithraism, initiation into the mysteries of Mithra was believed to grant the soul a path to the divine realm. In Christianity, faith in Jesus Christ as the redeemer and savior is central to obtaining salvation.

Both Mithraism and Christianity have moral codes and commandments that guide the behavior of their followers. In Mithraism, adherence to the principles of truthfulness, justice, and loyalty were essential. Christianity, on the other hand, follows the Ten Commandments and teachings from the New Testament, which outline ethical guidelines for believers. Despite the fundamental theological differences between Mithraism and Christianity, there exist ethical parallels that reflect shared human values and aspirations for a virtuous life. Both traditions encourage believers to embody moral virtues, foster community and fellowship, seek spiritual growth and salvation, and follow ethical codes. These similarities underscore the universality of certain ethical principles that transcend religious boundaries and continue to resonate with individuals seeking to lead righteous lives.

#### **5. Mithraea, and churches**

Mithraea and churches, while both serving as places of worship, exhibit some notable differences, primarily due to the distinct religious traditions they represent. Mithraea were the places of worship for followers of Mithraism that was particularly popular among Roman soldiers and traders in the Roman Empire from the 1st to the 4th century CE. These were typically underground or semi-subterranean structures used for rituals and initiations into the Mithraic mysteries. Mithraic temples were often constructed underground or with a cave-like design, symbolizing the cave in which Mithra was believed to have been born. They featured an altar, an image or relief of Mithra slaying a bull (a central symbol in Mithraism), and benches for participants. Mithraic rituals and practices were secretive and exclusive to initiates. The central

rite often involved a meal that symbolized the divine feast shared by Mithra and the sun god, Sol Invictus.

Churches, on the other hand, are places of worship in Christianity. They serve as communal spaces for Christian congregations to gather for religious ceremonies, including the Mass or Eucharist, prayer, and teaching. Christian churches vary widely in architectural styles, ranging from grand cathedrals to simple parish churches. They typically have a nave, an altar, stained glass windows, and religious iconography like crosses and statues. The layout and design can differ based on Christian denominations and historical periods. Christian churches are open to the public, and their religious practices, including Mass or worship services, are intended for all members of the congregation and visitors. Christian rituals involve the Eucharist, baptism, prayer, and the reading of sacred texts.

Christianity is one of the world's major religions with a well-documented history and a diverse set of denominations. Christian churches are central to the practice of Christianity, which has had a profound impact on world history and culture. It is important to note that there are examples of churches that were built on or near the sites of former Mithraea. One notable example is the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. The Basilica of San Clemente is a Roman Catholic church located in Rome, Italy [5]. What makes it particularly fascinating is its layered history. The current basilica was built in the 12th century, but beneath it lies an earlier Christian basilica dating to the 4th century. Even more intriguingly, below the Christian basilica, there is a Mithraeum, a temple dedicated to the god Mithra, dating back to the 2nd century.

This layered structure offers a unique historical perspective, showcasing the transition from Mithraism to early Christianity in Rome. Visitors can explore all three levels and witness the architectural and religious evolution over the centuries. The presence of a Mithraeum below the Basilica of San Clemente is a testament to the changing religious landscape in ancient Rome, where Mithraism eventually gave way to Christianity as the dominant faith in the region. In summary, while Mithraea and churches both function as places of worship, they are fundamentally different in terms of their religious contexts, beliefs, practices, and architectural styles.

## **6. Pater, and Pope**

The words "Pope" and "Pater" do share some linguistic and historical connections, but they have different meanings and contexts within Christianity. The term "Pope" is commonly used to refer to the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope, also known as the Bishop of Rome, is considered the spiritual leader and the highest authority in the Roman Catholic tradition. He is regarded as the successor of Saint Peter, who is traditionally considered the first Pope. The word "Pope" is derived from the Latin word "papa," which means "father" or "pope." It reflects the role of the Pope as a spiritual father to the Catholic Church, providing guidance and leadership to the worldwide community of believers.

On the other hand, the word "Pater" is also of Latin origin and means "father." It is used in a religious context, particularly in reference to the "Pater Noster," which is Latin for "Our Father." The "Pater Noster" is the opening phrase of the Lord's Prayer, a central Christian prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples. In this context, "Pater" is a term of reverence and address to God as the heavenly Father. It emphasizes the relationship between believers and God as their spiritual Father and the source of divine guidance and care. It is essential to note that while both "Pope" and "Pater"

have roots in the Latin word for "father" and are associated with religious leadership and guidance, they refer to different roles and concepts within Christianity. "Pope" specifically denotes the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, while "Pater" is a term of reverence used in the Lord's Prayer to address God as the heavenly Father.

In Mithraism, the term "Pater" refers to the highest grade or rank within the Mithraic priesthood. Mithraism had a hierarchical structure with seven distinct grades or levels, with "Pater" being the seventh and highest grade. Each grade had its own set of responsibilities, rituals, and knowledge. The progression through these grades represented an individual's spiritual journey and growth within the Mithraic mysteries. The "Pater" was considered the spiritual leader and authority figure within a Mithraeum (a Mithraic temple). They played a central role in conducting rituals and guiding initiates on their path to spiritual enlightenment. Mithraism was known for its secretive and exclusive nature, and the ranks within the priesthood were part of the intricate system of initiation and knowledge transmission. While Mithraism was a prominent religious tradition in the Roman Empire, it gradually declined with the rise of Christianity.

## 7. Jesus, and Mithra

One of the most striking parallels between Jesus and Mithra is the similarity in their birth narratives. According to Christian tradition, Jesus was born to a virgin, Mary, in a humble setting. Similarly, in Mithraic beliefs, Mithra was said to have been born from a rock, symbolizing his divine birth. Both stories emphasize the miraculous and divine nature of these figures' births.

Another noteworthy similarity is the celebration of both Jesus and Mithra's birthdays on December 25th. Early Christians adopted this date to celebrate the birth of Jesus, while the Mithraic festival of "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti" (the birthday of the unconquered sun) was also observed on December 25th. This coincidence in dates has led to speculation about the influence of Mithraism on early Christianity. Moreover, Both Jesus and Mithra are portrayed as savior figures and mediators between humanity and the divine. In Christianity, Jesus is considered the savior who redeems humanity from sin [6]. In Mithraism, Mithra was seen as a mediator between the god of light, Ahura Mazda, and humanity, offering salvation and protection. Additionally, Both traditions incorporate ritual practices involving purification through water. In Christianity, baptism symbolizes spiritual cleansing, while in Mithraism, initiates underwent a ritual bath to purify themselves. Additionally, both belief systems included communal meals as part of their religious practices—the Eucharist in Christianity and the Mithraic feasts.

One of the key rituals in Mithraism was the communal meal or banquet, sometimes referred to as the "sacred feast" or "Mithraic banquet." During this ritual, initiates would gather in an underground chamber known as a "Mithraeum," which was often designed to resemble a cave. The participants would dine together and engage in various symbolic actions. The comparison between the Mithraic banquet and the Christian Last Supper arises from certain shared elements, such as the communal aspect of dining and the symbolism of bread and wine. In the Mithraic banquet, beef and wine were consumed, with the wine often being seen as a symbol of regeneration or spiritual purification.

In Mithraic symbolism, red wine was often interpreted as representing the blood of the sacrificial bull. This connection between red wine and the bull's blood further

emphasizes the central myth of Mithras slaying the bull. The blood of the bull was seen as a powerful symbol of life, death, and regeneration within the Mithraic belief system. In the context of Mithraism, the consumption of red wine during the Mithraic banquet held deeper symbolic meaning, reflecting the cyclical nature of life, death, and spiritual renewal. It reinforced the themes of transformation and the victory of light over darkness that were central to Mithraic beliefs. The ritual slaying of the bull by Mithras is one of the central and iconic scenes in Mithraic art and symbolism. The bull's sacrifice represented the victory of light (Mithras) over darkness (the bull), and its consumption during the banquet could be seen as a symbolic act, although interpretations may vary.

These symbolic elements, including the red wine and beef, were integral to the Mithraic rituals and contributed to the broader themes of the religion, such as the triumph of light and the spiritual journey of initiates. Red wine was often associated with the concept of regeneration and spiritual purification in Mithraism. It symbolized the transition from darkness to light and was an essential element of the Mithraic banquet. It's important to emphasize that while there are similarities, the two rituals served distinct purposes within their respective religious contexts. The Christian Last Supper, as recorded in the New Testament, is closely tied to the Eucharist and the commemoration of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and the establishment of the Christian sacrament. In contrast, the Mithraic banquet in Mithraism had its own symbolism and was part of the initiation process for adherents.

## 8. Conclusion

While it's important to note that Jesus and Mithra belong to distinct religious traditions and historical periods, these parallels in their narratives and practices have fueled speculation about potential influences or shared cultural elements. Whether these similarities are a result of cultural diffusion, coincidence, or a deeper connection remains a topic of scholarly debate and intrigue. This paper provides a brief overview of some key similarities between Jesus and Mithra, inviting further exploration into the rich tapestry of religious and cultural history that connects these two iconic figures.

## 9. references

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