



AN ALLEGORY, BY THE LATE SOLOMON J. SOLOMON, R.A.  
(For description, see p. xi.)

*The Age of Transition.*

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# JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

VOLUME I  
THE AGE OF TRANSITION (1)

Essays by

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Edited by

W. O. E. OESTERLEY

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NEW YORK  
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1937

## VII

### THE WAY OF THE INITIATE

IN the preceding essays of this volume the attention of the reader has been directed mainly to those characteristics of the Age of Transition belonging to the Jewish communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. But we turn now to an important element in the religious and social life of the Empire which takes us outside the comparatively narrow limits of the Jewish communities. As we shall see, its roots are far older than Judaism, older even than the beginnings of that prophetic movement out of which the Hebrew religion, the parent of Judaism, sprang. This element is that vivid and many-coloured manifestation of religious needs and emotions comprised under the general name of the Mystery religions.

The subject is a vast one, and it is impossible to do more, in the brief compass of an essay, than indicate the chief features of those strange and alluring cults which, while differing in many ways, all exhibit a similarity of aim and pattern pointing to their common origin in the religious life of the ancient East.

Recent studies in this field have made it clear that in the beginning of the second millennium B.C. the kingdoms of the ancient Near East were dominated by a common religious outlook. A study of the myth and ritual complex of this region, comprising Egypt, Crete, Babylonia and Canaan, shows that under the

bewildering variety of their pantheon lie certain common fundamental concepts which express themselves in a ritual pattern whose main features show a remarkable resemblance to one another.

These central concepts are, first, the place of the king in the community. We find that he is the pivot round which the life of the community revolves. Upon his physical vigour and the continuance of his life depend the various aspects of the well-being of the community, and this feeling finds expression in ritual acts of which the king is the object and centre. The close association of the king with the god in these rituals, and the many ways in which the king is identified with the god, suggest the possibility that originally the king and the god were one.

Next, we find that the ritual life of these early communities is determined by the course of the seasons. In the Tammuz ritual, possibly the earliest organized Mesopotamian ritual, now made available for study in P. Witzel's great collection of Tammuz Liturgies, we find that the ritual re-enacts the death of the god, the desolation of the land and the withering of the crops, the mourning of the goddess, his consort, her descent into the underworld to seek him, his resurrection and return, and the celebration of his victory. In Babylonian ritual texts from the Seleucid period we find that out of the earlier and simpler Tammuz ritual there has developed an elaborate New Year festival, celebrated in the spring month of Nisan. The main outline of this festival was the same, and consisted of the dramatic representation of the death, resurrection and triumph of Marduk, followed by a sacred marriage and a ceremony known as the fixing of destinies, intended to

ensure a happy and prosperous New Year for the community.

Similarly, in Egypt, from the Old Kingdom period down to the decay of Egyptian civilization, the ritual surrounding the myth of Osiris, his death and resurrection, was the central feature of Egyptian religion, and is abundantly illustrated on Egyptian monuments and in Egyptian ritual texts.

The recently discovered Ras Shamra texts show that the same general ritual pattern existed in such an important centre of Canaanite civilization as excavation shows the ancient city of Ugarit to have been. Nor are traces of the same pattern wanting in early Hebrew literature. There is not space in such an essay as this for detailed illustration of this position, but those who may be interested in a fuller exposition of the subject may be referred to the recent volume of essays entitled *Myth and Ritual*, published by the Oxford Press.

While the complex of ritual practices comprised under the description given above was closely bound up with the political structure of ancient society during the second millennium B.C., it constituted the atmosphere, so to speak, of the religious life of the community, and penetrated deeply into the religious consciousness of the individual, so much so that it was able to survive the decay of the political framework of the ancient empires which took place towards the end of the first millennium B.C.

But in order to estimate the significance of this survival, it is necessary to touch briefly on two important lines of religious development which are characteristic of this Age of Transition.

In the first place, as the result of the prophetic

movement which began in the eighth century, together with the subsequent political extinction of Israel, a religion and a people came into being, namely, Judaism and the Jews, completely emancipated from the atmosphere and influence of the ancient ritual pattern. The lofty conception of the Holy One of Israel, the Eternal God who fainteth not, neither is weary, the Maker and Sustainer of all things, who had chosen Israel from the womb to be his servant, was utterly incompatible with the conception of a dying and rising god. Fragments of the ancient pattern might survive in Hebrew poetry, bearing witness to a time when Hebrew religion shared the same general characteristics as did the religion of their neighbours, but the picture of the Jew which we gather from the records of the Age of Transition is of one who is at once at home and a stranger in every city and country of his wide dispersion. Carrying with him his own atmosphere and his own spiritual heritage, bearing the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven in prosperity and adversity, he is almost completely immune from the influences of the flood of Oriental Mystery-cults which overflowed the Roman Empire during the period with which we are concerned. It is only in the various forms of the Apocalyptic movement in Jewish thought that we can trace the late survival and the transformation of the elements of the old ritual pattern,<sup>1</sup> but this movement left no abiding stamp on later Judaism. As we shall see later, this fact is of great importance in estimating the influence of the Mystery religions upon early Christianity.

<sup>1</sup> See "The Myth and Ritual Pattern in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic" in *The Labyrinth* (S.P.C.K., 1935), ed. S. H. Hooke.

Secondly, the effect of what we may call the Greek Enlightenment had been to make the fundamental ideas of the ritual pattern, with its sacramental and magical attitude to life, intellectually impossible. We see this reflected in Paul's polemic against Greek rationalism. To the Greek a crucified and risen God was foolishness.

Hence a large section of the more educated and intelligent laity of this period would, like the Jew, but for a different reason, be immune from the emotional influences of the Mysteries.

But these two classes constituted a comparatively small minority of the population of the Roman Empire. For the vast majority other factors were at work which favoured the eager acceptance of the various Oriental cults which, even before the beginning of the Empire, had started to work like leaven in the West. There is not space here to describe these factors in detail, but in brief they are as follows.

First, the destruction of older forms of national government and the obliteration of political boundaries resulting from the conquests of Alexander, a process still further developed by the expansion of the Roman Empire, led to the loss of political consciousness and of that sense of solidarity which the individual derives from his membership of a state or nation. Citizenship in the Roman Empire, in spite of its privileges, could not replace this loss, and for innumerable individuals the close ties and intimate fellowship which membership of one or other of the new religious communities afforded them served to supply this sense of solidarity.

Further, the same process of destruction of ancient states and political units involved the discrediting of

the gods with whom the fortunes of these states were bound up. Greek philosophical scepticism tended in the same direction, and although the statues of the Olympians might occupy their ancient places in the temples, their worship had become little more than a respectable convention, and they themselves, as Jane Harrison has said, were little more than *objets d'art*, decorative but devoid of religious significance.

Lastly, the destruction of ancient political and religious beliefs and hopes lay at the root of that failure of nerve already mentioned. While the belief in the vast potency of evil spirits and the sense of their ubiquity, surviving from the older religions, had lost none of its hold upon the common mind, the old safeguards and protective rituals had lost their power with the decay of the older gods. Hence men felt themselves naked and helpless amid hostile spiritual forces. Even in Paul's letters we can feel the ever-present menace of this lowering cloud of evil in the universe. A famous passage from Harnack's *Mission and Expansion of Christianity* may be recalled in this connexion: "The whole world and the circumambient atmosphere were filled with devils; not merely idolatry, but every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered around cradles. The earth was literally a hell, though it was and continued to be a creation of God."

While these factors, together with the growth of Greek as an international language throughout the Mediterranean area, were specially favourable to the spread of Christianity throughout the Empire, they also provided a congenial soil for the growth of the many forms of Oriental religion which had already

begun to invade the Empire before the rise of Christianity.

We turn now to a brief survey of the main types of Oriental Mystery-cults which gained a footing in the Roman Empire during this period of transition.

There were, no doubt, many obscure local cults of which no record has remained, but even such would be embraced under the four main types of which we have evidence from contemporary sources. These are as follows :

(a) *Phrygian*.—This wild and remote region of Asia Minor was not only the home of a very early form of the cult of the Mother-goddess, but was also a channel from the earliest times by which various influences from Mesopotamia were transmitted to the West. It is possible that the Cretan form of the cult of the Mother-goddess, which is abundantly illustrated on early Cretan seals and in cult-objects, was derived from Phrygia. But the three best known forms of Mystery-cult of Phrygian origin which had a wide vogue in our period were the cult of Ma-Cybele, the Dionysiac mysteries, and the cult of Sabazius. A valuable study of the last-named cult and its history by Professor W. O. E. Oesterley is to be found in the volume of essays entitled *The Labyrinth* (S.P.C.K., 1935). For fuller details of the other two the reader may be referred to Professor Cumont's book *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*.

(b) *Syrian*.—From Syria, which was closely linked with the West during our period, there spread into the Empire the cult of Attis, a form of the far more ancient cult of Tammuz, and the cult of the Syrian Goddess, mainly known to us from Lucian's treatise *De Dea Syria*. The latter was derived from the

Mesopotamian cult of Ishtar, the origin of the many forms of Astarte worship prevalent in Canaan in earlier times.

(c) *Egyptian*.—From Egypt came two of the most popular forms of Mystery-cult prevalent in the early period of the Empire, the cults of Isis and of the Lord Serapis, which were closely intertwined with one another. We have a full contemporary account of the mysteries of Isis in the amusing treatise, or romance, known to English readers under the title of *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, a convenient edition of which exists in the Loeb Classical Library. The name Serapis has been derived, with some doubt, from the names Osiris and Apis, but the rites of Serapis were based upon the very ancient Egyptian myth and ritual of Osiris, one of the central elements of Egyptian religion. From the well-known treatise of Plutarch, *Concerning Isis and Osiris*, we can gather something of the nature of the influence which these cults exercised upon the religious life of the Empire.

(d) *Persian*.—The main contribution of Persia to the movement with which we are concerned was the widespread cult of Mithra. This was the latest of the four forms here described to make its influence felt in the Empire. As is well known, it was carried to the farthest western bounds of the Empire by the legions, and its monuments and sanctuaries are known to us from the magnificent work of Cumont. It is, moreover, the only one of the Mystery-cults of which a liturgy has survived. This has been published by Dietrich under the title of *Eine Mithras Liturgie* (1910). In the third century A.D. Mithraism was the most serious rival to Christianity in the Empire, and for this reason its main features will be

dealt with more fully later on in this essay, since space will not allow of a detailed account of each of the various forms of Mystery-cult enumerated above.

Such a detailed description is the less necessary for our purpose in that all the various forms of Mystery-cult possessed certain characteristics in common, and we shall now go on to describe those central elements in these cults which constituted the main reason for their success, that which they offered to men and women who had found the more orthodox forms of established religion incapable of giving them what they sought.

In the first place, as their name indicates, all these cults were Mysteries. In order to enjoy the benefits which they offered it was necessary to be initiated, to undergo certain secret rites. These rites all possessed the common character of being *rites de passage*, to use a convenient French anthropological term; by means of them the participant passed from one condition to another. From the dangers and darkness and ignorance of a world which lay under the domination of hostile spiritual powers he passed into a region of enlightenment, privilege and hope.

Secondly, the central feature of these initiatory rites consisted of a symbolic identification of the initiate with the god or goddess whose myth gave its distinctive character to the cult in question. There were two main types of Mystery, differentiated by the nature of their central rite. This consisted either of the symbolic representation of the death and resurrection of the god, or the symbolic enactment of a sacred marriage. As we have already seen, both these rites were essential features of the ancient ritual pattern.

In the rites of Dionysus, Attis, Serapis, and above all in the Mithraic ritual, the death and resurrection of the god were the central feature of the myth, and by some ritual act the initiate was identified with the god in his death and resurrection. On the other hand, in those rites in which a goddess was the central figure, such as those of the Syrian Goddess, or of Isis, other forms of initiation were practised : for instance, the sacrifice of virility, or the ritual of sacred prostitution.

Thirdly, in nearly all these cults attainment was progressive. A common symbol of the Mysteries was the ladder, representing the successive stages of enlightenment through which the initiate passed in his upward journey. It is interesting to observe that the ladder enters into the very ancient Egyptian coronation ritual preserved in the Ramesseum Papyrus. There it is the magical means by which the dead king attains his deification.

This leads us to the last point, namely, that the goal of the Mysteries in general was deification, the attainment of the age-long desire of man to become as God. The words of an early Father, although intended to apply to Christianity, are borrowed from the language of the Mysteries, and illustrate well the feeling which drew men to them : "Thou shalt avoid hell when thou hast gained the knowledge of the true God. Thou shalt have an immortal and incorruptible body as well as a soul, and shalt obtain the kingdom of heaven. Thou who hast lived on earth and known the heavenly King, shalt be a friend of God and a joint-heir with Christ, no longer held by lusts, or sufferings, or sicknesses. For thou hast become divine, and all that pertains to the God-

life hath God promised to bestow on thee, seeing that thou, now become immortal, art deified” (Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, x. 34).

While many of the Mystery-cults undoubtedly provided opportunities for the indulgence of the lower elements in man's nature, the more reputable Mysteries demanded of their devotees a long course of training, strict asceticism, and patient endurance of many severe tests, before the higher stages of initiation were reached. Even Christianity never completely divested itself of a certain magical element attaching to its rites, especially to baptism, and the pagan Mysteries to a great extent depended on the general belief of the uneducated in the magical potency of the secret rites, the spells and mysterious *abracadabra* with which they were surrounded. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the initiate did at times experience that sense of enlightenment and enlargement, of union with a vaster richer life, which is characteristic of the mystic experience, whether Christian or pagan.

But the main objects which the initiate believed himself to have attained through deification were the deliverance from the power of the demons and evil forces which threatened him with disease and misfortune in this present life, deliverance from the sense of guilt, the feeling that he might have broken some unknown taboo, or unwittingly offended some vengeful deity; he also believed that through union with Mithra or the Lord Serapis he was assured of a happy immortality after death. In addition to these inestimable gains he enjoyed the warmth and enrichment derived from fellowship in a community whose sacramental meals and common rites sustained him

in the trials of his daily calling. It is not surprising that the Mysteries which offered such privileges to their devotees attracted vast numbers of adherents in every corner of the Empire.

We have already referred to the comparative immunity of the Jew from the influence of the Mystery-cults. There were exceptions, as Professor Oesterley has shown in his essay on the Cult of Sabazius mentioned above (p. 219), but the exceptions may well be considered to prove the rule, since a Jew could not become an initiate of any of the Mystery-cults without losing his Jewish privileges. The reasons for this immunity have been touched on above. The more difficult question of the extent to which Christianity was influenced by the Mysteries is dealt with in a short essay later on in this volume. The rest of this essay will be devoted to a description of the characteristic features of Mithraism, since it is the cult concerning which we have most evidence, and, as we have already pointed out, it was the most serious rival to Christianity for the conquest of the Empire.

Like the religions of the ancient East whence it sprang, the cult of Mithra not only possessed an elaborate ritual, but also an imposing myth explanatory of the various stages of the ritual. In addition to these elements there was a body of esoteric teaching of which the priests were the depositaries, and which they communicated to the initiates.

The cult of Mithra goes back to the earliest period of Persian history, possibly to the time when the ancestors of the Hindu peoples had not yet separated from their Iranian kinsmen. But the Mithraism of the period with which we are concerned had under-

gone many changes and borrowed from many sources. Its doctrine contained elements of Oriental theosophy and Greek philosophy, its myth had borrowed largely from Babylonian myths, and its ritual was compounded of early Magian rites, fragments of Babylonian ritual, and elements assimilated from other contemporary Mystery-cults, especially that of Attis which had close connexions with Mithraism in our period.

The theology of Mithraism is too complicated to describe in detail, but its principal features as set forth by Cumont in his *Mystères de Mithra* (1913) may here be briefly summarized. First we find that the characteristic dualism of Persian religion underlies the Mithraic system. The universe is the scene of the age-long struggle between Good and Evil, personified in the figures of Ahuramazda and Ahriman. In Persian apocalyptic the ultimate triumph of Light and Goodness over Darkness and Evil is envisaged, but in the meantime men are exposed to the attacks and constant malevolence of hostile demonic powers, although, on the other hand, they can, by suitable rites and prayers, obtain the help of good spirits, and in this long conflict Mithra, the god of light, is the Mediator, the most powerful aid whom suffering men can invoke.

Secondly, Mithraism had borrowed elements from Babylonian astrology, which played an important part both in the theology and in the ritual. The seven planets and the twelve signs of the Zodiac, taken up into the Mithraic system, together with the conception of Zervan, or Endless Time, were regarded as divine beings, exercising potent influences for good or evil upon human destiny. Of the planets Cumont says: "Each of the planetary bodies presided over

a day of the week, to each some one metal was consecrated, each was associated with some one degree in the initiation, and their number has caused a special religious potency to be attributed to the number seven. In descending from the empyrean to the earth, the souls, it was thought, successively received from them their passions and qualities."

Thirdly, the apocalyptic element in Mithraism, like that in early Christianity, exercised a very powerful influence upon the minds of its devotees. Cumont's vivid description of it is worth quoting: "The struggle between the principles of good and evil is not destined to continue into all eternity. When the age assigned for its duration shall have rolled away, the scourges sent by Ahriman will compass the destruction of the world. A marvellous bull, analogous to the primitive bull, will then again appear on earth, and Mithra will redescend and reawaken men to life. All will sally forth from the tombs, will assume their former appearance, and recognize one another. Humanity entire will unite in one grand assembly, and the god of truth will separate the good from the bad. Then in a supreme sacrifice he will immolate the divine bull; will mingle its fat with the consecrated wine, and will offer to the just this miraculous beverage which will endow them all with immortality. Then Jupiter-Ormazd, yielding to the prayers of the beatified ones, will cause to fall from heaven a devouring fire which will annihilate all the wicked. The defeat of the Spirit of Darkness will be achieved, and in the general conflagration Ahriman and his impure demons will perish, and the rejuvenated universe enjoy unto all eternity happiness without end."

Those who are familiar with Jewish apocalyptic of this period will recognize the resemblance between its general outline and the picture here set forth, a resemblance which is due, in part, to the influence of Persian religion upon Jewish thought after the Exile.

The last point to be noticed in this summary of Mithraic theology is its high ethical standard. This was probably an inheritance from Zoroastrianism. The metaphysical dualism of Good and Evil provided a natural basis for an ethic of action. The initiate was from the first imbued with the idea that he was being enrolled in a holy war against every form of evil. That sense of the inherent evil of the flesh, which pervaded all the various forms of Gnosticism, was strongly present in Mithraism, and strict asceticism was the rule for all who sought the privileges of initiation. In this respect Mithraism stood out in sharp contrast with many of the contemporary Mystery-cults.

We turn now to a brief description of the central myth of Mithraism, which underlay the ritual, and which is represented in the rich variety of symbolism depicted in the many monuments of the cult. Like the theology and the ritual, the myth is of a syncretistic character, containing elements borrowed from Babylonian sources intermingled with the original Iranian legend.

According to the myth, the god was born from a rock by the side of a river, under the shade of a sacred tree. His birth was witnessed by shepherds who saw him emerge from the rock, wearing a Phrygian cap, and bearing a knife and a torch. The shepherds made offerings to the new-born god from their flocks and their crops. He then concealed himself in a

fig-tree, whose fruit provided him with food and its leaves with clothing. The first of his exploits was a combat with the Sun, with whom, after he had vanquished him, he made an alliance, and whose help he sought in his subsequent adventures. These, which are depicted upon the various Mithraic bas-reliefs, show the influence of the myths of Gilgamesh and of Heracles. The next exploit was the conquest of the primeval bull, the first creature created by Ahuramazda. Mithra caught the bull, subdued it, and brought it to his cave. The central event of the myth is the favourite theme of the Mithraic monuments, and is familiar to us from the great bas-relief of Heddernheim and similar monuments. Here we see Mithra, by divine command, slaying the bull, whose dying body becomes the source of life for mankind. The evil emissaries of Ahriman, symbolized by the scorpion, the ant, and the serpent, vainly endeavour to poison the life at its source. In the words of Cumont, "The seed of the bull, gathered and purified by the Moon, produced the different species of useful animals, and its soul, under the protection of the dog, the faithful companion of Mithra, ascended into the celestial spheres above."

Then came the creation of the first human couple, the attempts of Ahriman to destroy them, and the frustration of his designs by the intervention of Mithra. In this part of the myth we have the representation of a universal deluge and the deliverance of mankind by an ark. The myth closes with the celebration of a Last Supper by Mithra with the Sun and other companions of his labours, and the departure of the god, in the chariot of the Sun, to the celestial abodes.

Such, in brief outline, was the story which formed

the ideas and inspired the actions of the soldier of Mithra, playing the same part in his experience as the Gospel records played in the life and thought of the early Christian, who in like manner was imbued from his baptism with the conception of an unceasing warfare to be waged against the powers of darkness. For the Mithraic initiate, his god, immortal and victorious, was his leader in the stern fight, his defender from the demonic powers by whom he was surrounded, his mediator, the source of his life here and hereafter, and in the ritual he became identified with his god, in symbolic actions he passed along the road by which his forerunner had gone towards the apotheosis which was his goal.

The close resemblance between many of the principal ideas and practices of Mithraism and those of the Christian mysteries was the cause of much bitter recrimination on the part of the early Christian writers, who accused the guardians of the Mithraic rites of shameless plagiarism. But while Mithraism was undoubtedly influenced by certain Christian ideas and practices, nevertheless, the main stock of Mithraic myth and ritual is derived from elements which are far older than Christianity. The questions raised by such similarities will be dealt with in the next essay.

There is one point of connexion between the myth and the ritual which calls for comment here. It has already been remarked that the central element in all the various Mystery-cults is some form of *rite de passage* by which the initiate passes from a state of darkness and sin to light and freedom. In many of the cults this element is a symbolic identification of the devotee with the death and resurrection of the

god, whose passion and triumph is related in the myth. In her valuable book *From Ritual to Romance* Miss Weston has remarked on the apparent contrast between the two closely connected cults of Attis and Mithra as follows: "There is thus a marked difference between the two initiations; the Attis initiate dies, is possibly buried, and revives with his god; the Mithra initiate rises direct to the celestial sphere, where he is met and welcomed by his god. There is here no evidence of the death and resurrection of the deity" (*op. cit.*, pp. 157-8).

Now although this statement is justified by the superficial aspect of the myth and ritual of Mithra, yet a closer examination points to the presence of this element of identification with the death and resurrection of the god in the Mithraic mysteries. In the first place, it is generally recognized that the very ancient rite of the Taurobolium was practised in the cults of both Attis and Mithra. In this rite the initiate was placed in a pit with a grating over it; the sacred bull was then slain on the grating and the initiate was drenched with the blood of the slain bull.

From the knowledge which we now possess concerning the early stages of Mesopotamian religion, we know that the bull was a substitute for the king-god in the ancient ritual of the killing of the king. Hence, it can hardly be doubted that the true significance of the Taurobolium in the mysteries of Attis and of Mithra was the identification of the initiate with the death of the god. It was also a λουτρὸν παλιγγενεσίας, "a washing of regeneration," if we may use the phrase employed by the author of the Epistle to Titus (Tit. iii. 5), a phrase which is no doubt borrowed from the language of the Mysteries. Hence

the initiate of Mithra, like the initiate of Attis, undergoes a symbolic death before he ascends the ladder which leads to the celestial spheres and ultimate deification.

Most of our knowledge of the ritual of the Mithraic mysteries is derived from references in the writings of the early Christian Fathers, although, since the appearance of Cumont's account in his *Mystères de Mithra*, much light has been thrown on the liturgical formulæ of the rites by Dietrich's publication of the text of a Mithraic liturgy under the title of *Eine Mithras Liturgie*. From this we learn that the general pattern of the rite consists of a series of magical formulæ by means of which the initiate is successively conducted by the priest, or mystagogue, through the seven stages of initiation until he is finally brought by Mithra himself into the presence of the supreme god. It is clear that each stage of the initiation was accompanied by symbolic acts.

The seven stages of initiation, not necessarily taken by all initiates, were denoted by symbolic names derived from elements in the myth. These stages were: the Raven, the Occult, the Soldier, the Lion, the Persian, the Sun-runner, and the Father. The first three ranks were known as the Servants, and were of a lower degree of importance than the last four ranks which bore the title of Participants, since only the members of these ranks were entitled to partake of the full privileges of the mysteries, and probably only these were allowed to participate in the sacramental meal which was the central act in the Mithraic mysteries, being the re-enactment of the Last Supper in the myth, partaken of by the god with his companions before his return to the celestial regions.

Each of the various stages of initiation had its own ritual. Cumont tells us that "conformably to the ancient Iranian rites, repeated ablutions were prescribed to neophytes as a kind of baptism designed to wash away their guilty stains. As with a certain class of Gnostics, this lustration doubtless had different effects at each stage of initiation, and it might consist, according to circumstances, either in a simple sprinkling of holy water, or in an actual immersion as in the cult of Isis."

Apparently, initiates were signed or "sealed" on their foreheads, probably with a red-hot iron, a custom which Paul may have had in mind when he says "I bear in my body the *stigmata* of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. vi. 17). The custom was an exceedingly ancient one in Oriental religion. When the stage of the Lions was reached, we find new methods of purification used. Honey, much in evidence in the Hermetic rites, was poured on the hands and placed on the tongue of the initiate to preserve him from sin. The preservative properties of honey were known to the ancients, and we may recall that the earliest means of deification was the magic ritual of mummification in ancient Egypt.

A further element in the initiatory rites which accompanied each stage of the neophyte's progress was the element of trial. From what we know through the allusions of early Christian writers, the initiate might be said to have died many times, and, as we have already seen, continuous and prolonged asceticism and other austerities marked the whole period of initiation.

Finally, it is clear that the Mithraic sacramental meal was derived from the earlier Mazdean Haoma

ritual, which is intimately connected with the kindred Soma ritual preserved in the Vedic literature. Haoma and Soma were both herbs possessing intoxicating properties, and were regarded as a means of partaking of the life of the gods, that is, of deification. In the Mithraic sacramental meal wine took the place of the Haoma. One of the bas-reliefs published by Cumont in his *Mystères de Mithra* is a representation of a sacramental meal. He describes it as follows: "Before two persons stretched upon a couch covered with pillows is placed a tripod bearing four tiny loaves of bread, each marked with a cross. Around them are grouped the initiates of the different orders, and one of them, the Persian, presents to the two a drinking-horn; whilst a second vessel is held in the hands of one of the Participants. These love-feasts are evidently the commemoration of the banquet which Mithra celebrated with the Sun before his ascension. From this mystical banquet, and especially from the imbibing of the sacred wine, supernatural effects were expected. The intoxicating liquor gave not only vigour of body and material prosperity, but wisdom of mind; it communicated to the neophyte the power to combat the malignant spirits, and what is more, conferred upon him, as upon his god, a glorious immortality" (*op. cit.*, p. 160, English trs. 1903).

Resemblances with the Christian Eucharist are obvious, and were the subject of much controversy in the early Church, but need not be discussed here, as they are dealt with in the next essay.

Enough has been said to show the general character of the Mystery-cults and the place they occupied in the strange melting-pot of races and religions which was the Roman Empire in the Age of Transition.