

## CHAPTER 10

### “The Sun, the Lord of the Roman Empire”

**T**HERE is hardly a land that has not been at one time or another under the seductive spell of Sun worship. The ancient peoples of both the Old and the New World were charmed by it, as is abundantly revealed by the literature and archaeological remains preserved from the civilizations of the past.

Far back in antiquity the Sun was adored under the name of Shamash, among the people of Babylonia and Assyria.<sup>1</sup> The cult of the Sun had notable centers at Senkreh, Sippara, and Larsa.<sup>2</sup> Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian monarch of Biblical fame, referred to himself as the “chief worshiper” of the Sun-god.<sup>3</sup> The famous ruins of Palmyra, designated by the name of Tadmor<sup>4</sup> in the Old Testament, bear witness to the magnificence of the solar cult of Baal in Mesopotamia and Syria.<sup>5</sup>

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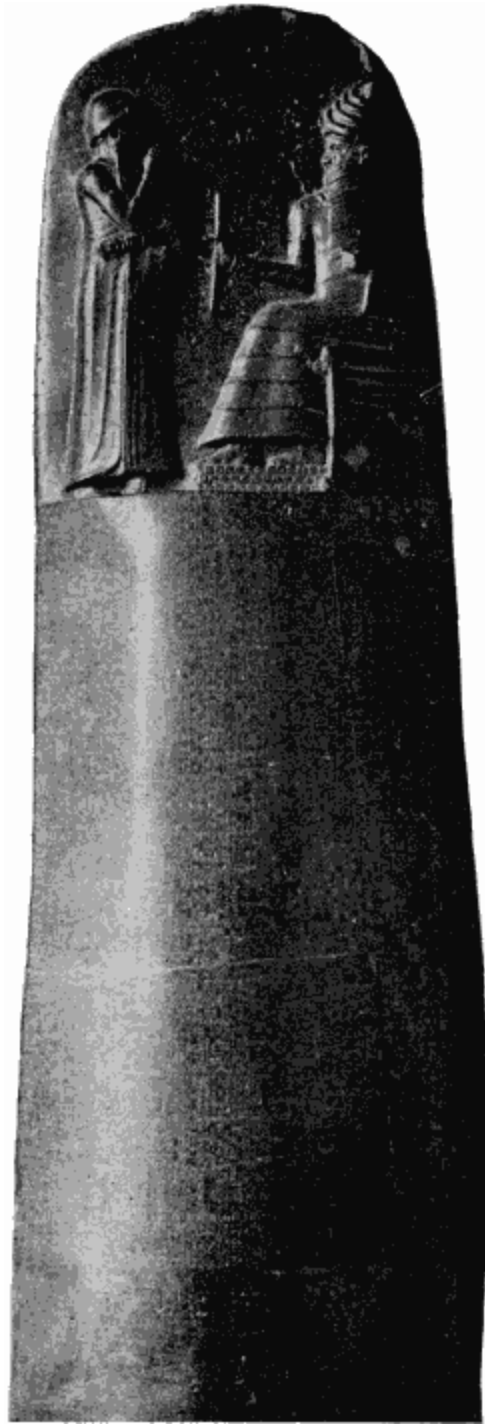
<sup>1</sup> The Sumerians worshiped the seven planetary gods, including the Sun. See *The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania* (Series A, Cuneiform Texts), Vol. 29, part 1, pp. 33-38.

<sup>2</sup> The Society of Biblical Archaeology, *Records of the Past*, Vol. 7, pp. 69-72; F. Lenormant, *A Manual of the Ancient History of the East*, Vol. I, p. 485; J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 2, pp. 309-311, art. “Babylonians and Assyrians.”

<sup>3</sup> The Society of Biblical Archaeology, *Records of the Past*, Vol. 7, pp. 71, 72.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 9:18; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 8, chap. 6, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 231; Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, chap. 11, p. 354.

<sup>5</sup> *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 17, p. 778, art. “Palmyra”; W. Wright, *An Account of Palmyra and Zenobia*, pp. 63-73.



On this Babylonian stele is pictured the famous Hammurabi receiving his renowned code of laws from Shamash, the Sun-god of ancient Chaldea.

Dominant among the Canaanite nations was the worship of “Baal, the Sun-god of Phoenicia.”<sup>6</sup> The notable piles of stones that once formed the temple of the Sun at Baalbek (The City of Baal), about forty miles northwest of Damascus, Syria, show that Sun worship was very popular in the Near East in the early centuries of the Christian Era.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E. G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, p. 583. In later chapters Baal will be discussed more fully.

<sup>9</sup> *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, pp. 472, 473, art. "Baalbek."

Sun worship was popular far back in Egyptian history.<sup>8</sup> The kings of Egypt were regarded as the offspring, and even the incarnation, of the Sun. The city of On (Heliopolis) was the celebrated seat of Sun worship in the land of the Nile. The Obelisks and the Sphinx are declared to be relics of Egyptian Sun worship.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> J. H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 8.48.

<sup>11</sup> J. Mitchell and H. R. Holland say that "according to inscriptions of the XVIIIth Dynasty in the shrine between the paws [of the Sphinx], it represented the Sun-god Harmachis."—*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 21, p. 214, art. "Sphinx." See also Vol. 16, p. 667, art. "Obelisk."

According to Sir James G. Frazer, when Sun worship in the form of Mithraism became prevalent in Persia, "every layman over eight years old was bound to recite a prayer to the Sun thrice a day, namely at sunrise, at noon, and at three o'clock in the afternoon."<sup>10</sup> The Sun was anciently worshiped among the Chinese.<sup>11</sup> According to Japanese tradition, Hirohito, who was enthroned as emperor of Japan in 1926, is the 124th ruler of a dynasty beginning with Jimmu, the first human sovereign of the nation. Jimmu is supposed to have been a descendant of the Goddess of the Sun.<sup>12</sup> The rising Sun is the national emblem of the Nipponese.

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<sup>10</sup> Sir James G. Frazer, *The Worship of Nature*, Vol. 1, p. 460.

<sup>11</sup> Sun worship does not appear to have become so prominent in China as it did in Japan.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 12, p. 88, art. "Sun, Moon, and Stars (Japanese)."

In ancient India it was a common practice to worship toward the rising Sun.<sup>13</sup> Missionaries who have lived in India state that it is the practice of many Brahmans today, when they are about to take their morning bath, to turn their faces toward the Sun and, with hands clasped, address a salutation to *Surya-Narayan*, the solar orb.

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<sup>13</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 11, p. 143, art. "Sun and Sun Worship" (Sec. 6); J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 12, p. 83, art. "Sun, Moon, and Stars (Hindu)."

### **Sun Worship in America**

The Inca rulers of the Indians of Peru claimed to be descendants of the Sun, and this heavenly orb was the chief object of adoration among them. Inca tradition holds that four brothers and their four sisters, all procreated by the Sun, founded their race. The great temple of the Sun at Cuzco, Peru, was perhaps the most noted building in America when the Spaniards came. One of the great Indian pyramids built near the present site of Mexico City is named after the Sun. The famous Aztec Calendar, the real name of which is "Stone of the Sun," is a relic of American Indian Sun worship.<sup>14</sup> In the center of it is pictured the Sun-god, who wears a necklace of seven

beads, which probably symbolize the seven planetary deities—Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn.

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<sup>14</sup> E. J. Palacios, *The Stone of the Sun and the First Chapter of the History of Mexico*, p. 8

### **Sun Worship Among the Teutons**

When Julius Caesar was made the Roman military commander in Gaul in 58 B. C., and invaded the British Isles in 54, he became acquainted with many of the religious customs of those peoples. In his memoirs of his wars with the Germanic tribes, Caesar said of them: “They reckon among the gods only those whom they see and by whose offices they are openly assisted—to wit, the Sun, the Fire-god, and the Moon; of the rest they have learnt not even by report.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, book 6, chap. 21, in Loeb Classical Library *Caesar, The Gallic War*, pp. 345, 347.

The cult of the Druids was then widely diffused among the Gaul, and Caesar said of it: “They have many discussions as touching the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth, the order of nature, the strength and powers of the immortal gods, and hand down their lore to the young men.”<sup>16</sup> The famous stone monuments of Stonehenge in the plain of Salisbury, England, are believed by scholars to be relics of Sun worship in connection with the ancient Druidic cult in the British isles.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 14, in Loeb Classical Library, *Caesar, The Gallic War*, p. 339.

### **Sun Worship Among the Greeks**

Plato (c. 427-347 B. C.), the Greek philosopher, said of men of his day, that “at the rising and setting of the Sun and Moon they heard and saw the prostrations and devotions of all the Greeks and barbarians under all conditions of adversity and prosperity.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Laws*, book 10, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plato, Laws*, Vol. 2, p. 307.

### **Roman Sun Worship**

Among the Romans the Sun was early worshiped as Sol, later as Apollo, and lastly as Mithras, the Invincible Sun. Here is how poetic fancy pictured the glory of King Sol in the age when Christ was born. Ovid, the Latin poet, says:

“The palace of the Sun stood high on lofty columns, bright with glittering gold and bronze that shone like fire. Gleaming ivory crowned the gables above; the double folding doors were radiant with burnished silver. And the workmanship was more beautiful than the material. For upon the doors Mulciber had carved in relief the waters that enfold the central earth, the circle of the lands and the sky that overhangs the lands. The sea holds the dark-hued gods: tuneful Triton, changeful

Proteus, and Aegaeon, his strong arms thrown over a pair of huge whales; Doris and her daughters, some of whom are shown swimming through the water, some sitting on a rock drying their green hair, and some riding on fishes. They have not all the same appearance, and yet not altogether different; as it should be with sisters.

“The land has men and cities, woods and beasts, rivers, nymphs and other rural deities. Above these scenes was placed a representation of the shining sky, six signs of the zodiac on the right-hand doors, and six on the left....

“Clad in a purple robe, Phoebus sat on his throne gleaming with brilliant emeralds. To the right and left stood Day and Month and Year and Century, and the Hours set at equal distances. Young Spring was there, wreathed with a floral crown; Summer, all unclad with a garland of ripe grain; Autumn was there, stained with the trodden grape, and icy Winter with white and bristly locks.

“Seated in the midst of these, the Sun, with the eyes which behold all things, looked on.”<sup>18</sup> Reference is also made to the solar chariot and “the Sun’s swift horses, Pyroïs, Eoüs, Aethon, and the fourth, Phiegon, fill all the air with their fiery whinnings, and paw impatiently against their bars.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 153-155, in Loeb Classical Library, *Ovid, Metamorphoses*, Vol. 1, pp. 61, 63.

While the worship of Sol, the ancient solar deity of the Romans, may be traced far back into the history of that people, it does not appear to have been dominant among them prior to the time of Julius Caesar, who was assassinated in 44 B. C. From that time forward the cult of the Sun waxed greater in prestige until it became the official and supreme religion of the Roman Empire.

### **The Adoration of the Rising Sun**

The veneration of the Romans for the Sun influenced the building of their temples. Vitruvius, an architect whom Augustus Caesar (31 B. C. to 14 A. D.) employed in restoring the city of Rome, wrote a treatise in Latin on architecture, in which he said:

“The aspects which the sacred temples of the immortal gods ought to regard are so to be appointed (if no reason hinders, and the opportunity is presented) that the temple and the statue which is in the shrine look towards the western quarter of the sky, so that those who come to the altar to sacrifice or make offerings may look towards the eastern heaven and the image in the temple. In like fashion persons undertaking vows may look upon the temple and the eastern heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, book 4, chap. 5, sec. 1, in Loeb Classical Library, *Vitruvius, De Architecture*, Vol. 1, p. 231.

The reason for this was that the Sun rose in the east, and it was in that direction that the people turned to worship and pray. Tertullian said to the pagans of his day, as already quoted: “But most

of you at times, in affectation of worshipping the heavenly bodies, move your lips toward the sunrise.”<sup>21</sup> And in another treatise he asked them, “Do not most of you, in affectation of worshipping the heavenly bodies, at times move your lips toward the sunrising?”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, chap. 16, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 1, col. 371, author’s translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 31

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, chap 13 in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol 1, col. 579, author’s translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 123.

Clement of Alexandria speaks of the practice thus: “In correspondence with the manner of the Sun’s rising, prayers are made looking towards the sunrise in the east. Whence also the most ancient temples looked towards the west, that the people might be taught to turn to the east when facing the images.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, book 7, chap. 7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p. 535.

Some of the pagan temples were built so as to face the east, instead of toward the west, and in this case the worshiper, in his religious devotions, made a turn toward the east and bowed toward the rising Sun. Plutarch attempted to explain the origin of this custom, saying:

“And the worshipers’ turning round is said to be an imitation of the rotary motion of the universe;<sup>24</sup> but I would rather think that the worshiper who enters a temple, since temples face the east and the Sun, has his back towards the sunrise, and therefore turns himself half round in that direction, and then wheels fully round to face the god of the temple, thus making a complete circle, and linking the fulfillment of his prayer with both deities.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In referring to “the rotary motion of the universe,” Plutarch does not make allusion to the rotation of the earth upon its axis; but he speaks of the pagan belief that the universe revolved from east to west around the terrestrial center.

<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, “Numa,” chap. 14, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch’s Lives*, Vol. 1, p. 357.

### **Among the Cultured Romans**

Cicero, the great Roman orator and statesman (106-43 B. C.), shows the corresponding names for the Sun in the Greek and Latin languages. He says: “The name Apollo again is Greek; they say that he is the Sun, and Diana they identify with Moon.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, book 2, chap. 27, in Loeb Classical Library, *Cicero, De Natura Deorum, Academica*, p 189.

Also, his regard for the Sun as a god shows the esteem that cultured Romans then had for Sun worship, for he refers to it as “the Sun, the lord, chief, and ruler of the other lights, the mind and guiding principle of the universe, of such magnitude that he reveals and fills all things with his light.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cicero, *The Republic*, book 6, chap. 17, in Loeb Classical Library, *Cicero, De Republica, De Legibus*, p. 271.

Pliny the Elder, the Roman naturalist, furnishes us with an example of the veneration of the Sun among Roman men of letters in the time of Christ and His apostles. Speaking of the planetary gods, he says:

“In the midst of these moves the Sun, whose magnitude and power are the greatest, and who is the ruler not only of the seasons and of the lands, but even of the stars themselves and of the heaven. Taking into account all that he effects, we must believe him to be the soul, or more precisely the mind, of the whole world, the supreme ruling principle and divinity of nature. He furnishes the world with light and removes darkness, he obscures and he illumines the rest of the stars, he regulates in accord with nature’s precedent the changes of the seasons and the continuous rebirth of the year, he dissipates the gloom of heaven and even calms the storm clouds of the mind of man, he lends his light to the rest of the stars also; he is glorious and pre-eminent, all-seeing and even all-hearing.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, book 2, chap. 4, in Loeb Classical Library, *Pliny, Natural History*, Vol. 1, pp. 177, 179.

### **The Circus Maximus**

The Circus Maximus, where the great games—especially the chariot races—were celebrated in the city of Rome, was connected with Sun worship. This institution originated in or before the fourth century B. C. Tertullian says of it:

“The Circus is chiefly consecrated to the Sun, whose temple stands in the middle of it, and whose image shines forth from its temple summit; for they have not thought it proper to pay stands in the middle of it, and whose image shines forth from in open space. Those who assert that the first spectacle was exhibited by Circe, and in honor of the Sun her father, as they will have it, maintain also the name of *circus* was derived from her.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, chap. 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, pp. 82, 83.

Among the planetary gods of the seven days of the pagan week, the Sun is represented as a charioteer carrying a whip in his hand, it is no marvel therefore that he should be venerated as the presiding deity at the chariot races. Sol was imagined as a being of youthful form, having his head surrounded with rays, and riding in a chariot drawn by four horses, which represent the four seasons: *Ver*, the spring; *Aestas*, the summer; *Autumnus*, the autumn; and *Hiems*, the winter.

### **Foreign Sun Cults**

As the Romans extended their dominion over the nations beyond the Mediterranean, they came into contact with the more highly developed systems of Sun worship in Egypt and Western Asia. When Antony, for example, conspired with Cleopatra to establish a world empire, with

Alexandria, Egypt, as its capital, they apparently intended to make the worship of the Sun the supreme religion of mankind.

“Cleopatra had brought her twins to Antioch, and when Antony married her,” says W. W. Tarn, “he acknowledged them as his and renamed them Alexander Hellos and Cleopatra Selene, the Sun and the Moon. The names of all Cleopatra’s children are significant, but especially that of Alexander Hellos. Hellos and Selene in conjunction possibly had a political meaning; the Parthian king was ‘Brother of the Sun and Moon,’ and if the Sun and Moon really typified the Iranian *fravashi* and *hvareno*, Antony, by annexing these luminaries to his own family, was perhaps symbolically depriving Phraates of the supernatural adjuncts of his royalty. As to the name Helios, Antony’s coin-type after Philippi had been the Sun radiate, and his momentary revival of that type late in 37 shows that he was passing on to the boy whatever the Sun meant to himself. Probably it meant to him the supreme deity of Asia, but it had other connotations also; an Egyptian oracle had derived prosperity from the Sun, in the prophecy of the Cumaean Sibyl the rule of the Sun was to precede the Golden Age, and for Greeks *ambulus*, in the story of his Sun state, had definitely connected the age of gold with the Sun. As, in addition, it was Cleopatra’s privilege, as a New Isis, to bear the Sun, and as she herself was the Sun-god’s daughter, the boy could not really be called anything else; he was the Sun child who should inaugurate the Golden Age.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> W. W. Tarn, in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 10, p. 68. See also Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 49, chap. 41; book 50, chaps. 2, 5, 25, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio’s Roman History*, Vol. 5, pp. 425, 437, 445, 489.

### **The Sun and the Caesars**

It is probable that the political importance of Sun worship as a means of gaining favor with the people of Egypt and the Near East influenced the policies of Octavian, better known as Augustus (31 B. C. to 14 A. D.). It must be recalled that the victory over Antony and Cleopatra was essential to the aims of Augustus, for it assured him dominion over the world. He undoubtedly sought the favor of the Sun, and vowed to him his devotion if he should win the battle with Antony and Cleopatra. He got the victory at Actium in 31 B. C. And his subsequent acts concerning the Sun-god Apollo, who was identified with the Roman Sol, and his setting up the Egyptian obelisks in the Circus Maximus, indicate that the Sun-god was a favorite deity in the devotions of Augustus.

The historian Eugénie Strong remarks: “With the accession to power of the Julian house, the cult of Apollo, protector of the ancestral Trojans in their struggle against the Greeks, and Lord of the Sibylline books, continued in the ascendant, and the god himself was soon chosen as religious center of the Augustan program. As early as 36 B. C. Octavian had vowed to Apollo—till then kept as a foreign divinity outside the Pomerium—a temple on the Palatine, which was dedicated in 29, the year of the threefold triumph, in thanksgiving for the victory of Actium won by the grace of the god. Above the pediment Apollo as Sol rode in his chariot illuminating the Orbis Romanus with his rays. Within the temple the divine Triad—Apollo between Latona and Diana, with the Sibyl at their feet—stood for the new spiritual forces of the Empire, the logical counterpart of that older Triad that held sway on the Capitoline hill opposite.”<sup>31</sup>



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<sup>31</sup> Eugénie Strong, in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 10, p. 574.

There was a temple of Apollo on the promontory in Acarnania hard by which the naval battle of Actium was fought. “Octavian set up many monuments of Actium. He ascribed his success to Apollo of Actium, whose temple he enlarged.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> W. W. Tarn, in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 10, p. 113.

“He [Apollo] was made one of the chief gods of Rome by Augustus, who believed himself to be under his peculiar protection, and ascribed the victory of Actium to his aid; hence he enlarged the old temple of Apollo on that promontory, and decorated it with a of the spoils....At Rome he [Augustus] reared a splendid new temple to him [Apollo] near his own house on the Palatine, and transferred the Ludi Saeculares to him and Diana.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Harper’s Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, p. 100, art. “Apollo.” See also Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 51, chap. 1 book 3, chap. 1 in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio’s Roman History*, Vol. 6, pp. 5, 195; O. Seyffert, *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, p. 397, art. “Mithras.”

It was about 10 B. C. that Augustus brought two obelisks from Egypt, and set one of them up in the Circus Maximus and the other in the Campus Martius.<sup>34</sup> The obelisks were relics of Egyptian Sun worship. Tertullian, in describing the Circus Maximus, says of the obelisk set up there: “The huge obelisk, as Hermeteles affirms, is set up in public to the Sun; its inscription, like its origin, belongs to Egyptian superstition.”<sup>35</sup> Augustus also placed the radiant crown of the Sun on some of his coins.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 1, Introduction, p. cxxxiv; J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 8, p. 59, art. “Light and Darkness (Greek and Roman).”

<sup>35</sup> Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, chap. 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 1, Introduction, p. cxxxiv; J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 8, p. 59, art. “Light and Darkness (Greek and Roman).”

## Mithraism

Roman Sun worship received special impetus when it came into contact with Mithraism. Mithra (or Mithras) figured in ancient Iranian religious beliefs as an angel of light or a genius which attended the Sun.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, pp. 419, 420, art. “Mithra, Mithraism.”

In time this fine distinction between Mithra and the Sun disappeared to the extent that for the people in general they were one and the same god. Strabo, who wrote in the reign of Augustus, says of the Persians: “They also worship Helius [the Sun], whom they call Mithras.”<sup>38</sup> The cult of Mithra became very popular in the East before the birth of Christ. One evidence of its popularity

in Asia is seen in the name *Mithridates* (Gift of Mithra), which was borne by several kings of the Near East. It was Mithridates VI who so powerfully opposed the claims of Rome in Asia, and was finally defeated by Pompey the Great between 66 and 64 B. C. Mithraism easily identified itself with the local Sun worship of every country it invaded.

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<sup>38</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, book 15, chap. 3, in Loeb Classical Library, *The Geography of Strabo*, Vol. 7, p. 175.

Among the Sicilian pirates taken as captives to Rome by Pompey in 67 B. C., there were devotees of Mithra.<sup>39</sup> And P. Papinius Statius, who long resided at Rome and died about 96 A. D., speaks of “Mithras, that beneath the rocky Persean cave strains at the reluctant-following horns.”<sup>40</sup> This is a poetical reference to the Persian Sun worship of Mithraism, in which the bull is represented as being dragged to the place of sacrifice. This shows that the Romans of the time of Christ and the apostles were familiar with the ceremonies of the cult of Mithraism.

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<sup>39</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, “Pompey,” chap. 24, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch’s Lives*, Vol. 5, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> P. Papinius Statius, *Thebaid*; book 1, lines 718-720, in Loeb Classical Library, *Papinius Statius*, Vol. 1, p. 393.

And Clement Huart declares: “In Roman times Chaldea was the holy land of the Mithraists; Mithra had a temple in Babylon, and Antiochus of Commagene (69-34 B. C.) raised a statue to him at Nimrud-Dagh.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Clement Huart, *Ancient Persia and Iranian Civilization*, p. 112. Huart presents an illustration showing a reproduction of this Mithraic monument.

In the collection of Roman inscriptions compiled by J. Gruter, there appears one of an altar dedicated by Julius Caesar to Mithra.<sup>42</sup> For a time its genuineness was questioned, because the date was supposed to be too early for Mithraism among the Romans. But the archaeological evidence now published rather favors it. Many modern writers say that the worship of Mithra came into the Roman Empire about the time of Pompey the Great, and began to spread over Europe.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> J Gruterus, *Inscriptiones Antiquae Totius Orbis Romani*, Vol. 1, p. 34, figs. 9, 10.

<sup>43</sup> F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 37.

### **In the Reign of Augustus**

In reporting recent archaeological discoveries, Camden M. Cobern writes “As the Mithras worship was such a rival of the early Christian worship, it may be added that in 1915 there was opened under the church of St. Clement at Rome, and made accessible to visitors, the foundations of a temple of Mithras built during the reign of Augustus. The sacred font was found, also a part of the altar and the remains of ancient sacrifices which proved to be wild boats. (See C. R. Acad. Inscri., 1915, pp. 203-211.)”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> C. M. Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries*, 9th ed., p. 506.

Another authority says: “In the first Christian century there were organized at Rome associations of the followers of Mithra.”<sup>45</sup> Among the Romans the Sun-god Mithra was more popularly known as *Sol Invictus*—“The Invincible Sun.” An inscription belonging to the reign of Tiberius (14-37 A. D.) says: “Claudius Suffecius Sacer (dos) Sol (is) Inv (icti) M (ith rae).”<sup>46</sup> “There are traces of his worship at Rome under Tiberius,” says another.

<sup>45</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, p. 421, art. “Mithra, Mithraism.”

<sup>46</sup> Theo. Mommsen, *Inscriptiones Regal Neapolitani*, No. 6864. Some authorities question the genuineness of this inscription.

It is said of Mithra that “much worship was given to him in the time of Claudius, Nero, and Commodus.” Claudius (41-54 A. D.) and Nero (54-68 A. D.) governed Rome in the days of the apostle Paul. It is recorded that Nero wished to be initiated into the mysteries of Mithraism.<sup>49</sup> This emperor “erected a ‘Colossus Neronis’ at the highest point of the Velia, representing the Sun, with the features of Nero and with seven long rays around his head.”<sup>50</sup> In the words of another, we have it thus: “Nero ended by going beyond precedent in the erection of a colossus of the Sun with his own features in front of the Golden House, and his representation with a radiate crown on coins, and in the depicting of himself driving a chariot among the stars on the hangings over the theatre in 66.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, p. 421, art. “Mithra, Mithraism.”

<sup>50</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 1, Introduction, p. cxxxiv; see also p. clxxi.

<sup>51</sup> A. D. Nock in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 10, p. 501.

Sun worship was prominent in Rome at that time. In describing a plot to assassinate Nero, the Roman historian Tacitus shows that special worship was paid then to the Sun, saying: “Offerings and thanks were then voted to heaven, the Sun, who has an old temple in the Circus, where the crime was to be staged, receiving special honor for revealing by his divine power the secrets of the conspiracy.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, book 15, chap. 74, in Loeb Classical Library, *Tacitus, Annals, Histories*, Vol. 4, p. 333.

The same historian, in describing a battle between the Roman troops under Vespasian and those under Vitellius, says that “the soldiers of the Third Legion, according to the Syrian custom, hailed the rising Sun.”<sup>53</sup> “It is at least certain that the Fifteenth [Legion], which served in the Parthian Wars of Nero and was transferred by Vespasian to the Danube, brought the cult of Mithras to its camp at Carnuntum in A. D. 71.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Tacitus, *The Histories*, book 3, chap. 24, in Loeb Classical Library, *Tacitus, Annals, Histories*, Vol. 1, p. 371.

<sup>54</sup> J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 8, p. 755, art. “Mithraism.”

## Early in the Second Century

F. Cumont, the noted authority on Mithraism, tells of “certain marbles discovered at Rome and at Ostia, which unquestionably go back to the beginning of the second century.”<sup>55</sup> They are fine bas-reliefs in white marble, which show Mithra stabbing the bull. One inscription connected with the Mithraic cult at Ostia is said to be dated as of 107 A. D.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it is very evident that when the early Christian church went forth into the pagan world to win the hearts of men, she found in Mithraism a powerful rival already established and prepared to contest her efforts.

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<sup>55</sup> F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 210; see also his illustrations, figs 4, 5, 6, 10, on pp. 21, 22, 23, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Lily Ross Taylor, *The Cults of Ostia*, p. 91.

In Rome there has been found a bilingual inscription set up by a freedman of the Flavians (Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian) as a dedication “to the Sun-god, Mithra.”<sup>57</sup> It is supposed to belong to the third consulship of Trajan, who reigned from 98 to 117 A. D. At the same time the worship of the Sun, under the name of Baal, was flourishing in Syria. “Baalbek had an oracle held in such high esteem that in the second century A. D. it was consulted by the emperor Trajan prior to his entrance on his second Parthian campaign.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> H. S. Jones, *Companion to Roman History*, p. 300; Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 7th ed., Vol. 2, p. 293; J. G. R. Forlong, *Faiths of Man*, Vol. 2, P. 546, art. “Mithra.”

<sup>58</sup> *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, p. 473, art. “Baalbek.”

The emperor Hadrian (117-138 A. n.) “forbade human sacrifices to Mithra and Baal.” And Porphyry says: “Pallas declares that under the emperor Hadrian human sacrifices were almost entirely abolished; and he is the best exponent of the mysteries of Mithra.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> J. B. Bury, *A History of the Roman Empire*, p. 514.

<sup>60</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, book 4, chap. 16, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 21, col. 272, author’s translation; see also Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*, book 2, chap. 56, in *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum, Porphyrius, Opuscula*, pp. 180, 181.

Hadrian “consecrated to the Sun” the Colossus Neronis after “removing the features of Nero.”<sup>61</sup> And Lily R. Taylor writes: “Probably the earliest Mithreum known is the one near Metroum at Ostia, which seems to date from the time of Hadrian.”<sup>62</sup> It is known that Ostia had at least four temples to Mithra in the second century.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Aelius Spartianus, *Hadrian*, chap. 19, in Loeb Classical Library, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Vol. 1, p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> Lily Ross Taylor, *The Cults of Ostia*, pp. 83, 84.

<sup>63</sup> S. Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 591.

### **In the Days of the Antonines**

The writings known as *The Clementine Homilies* are believed to have been composed in the second century, and they speak of “Apollo as the wandering Sun, a son of Zeus, who was also called Mithras, as completing the period of a year.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *The Clementine Homilies*, Homily 6, chap. 10, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, p. 264.

The *taurobolium* or bull-stabbing ceremony was a prominent feature in the Mithraic mysteries, and was popular in the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161 A. D.).<sup>65</sup> According to S. Dill, “The mithraeum, found under the church of St. Clement of Rome, has yielded an inscription of the last year of Antoninus Pius. That emperor erected a temple to Mithra at Ostia. (See Reville, P. 81.)”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> W. R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*, p. 307.

<sup>66</sup> S. Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 591.

The same writer observes also: “It is significant that the earliest inscription to Mithra yet found in Germany, of the year A. D. 148, is that of a centurion of the 8th Legion, which was quartered in Moesia from 47 till 69, and which during that time had frequent communications with the East.”<sup>67</sup> This inscription was dedicated “to the Invincible Sun-god Mithra.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 596.

<sup>68</sup> F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 50.

In his *First Apology* to Antoninus Pius and the Roman people, Justin Martyr referred to the mysteries of Mithra as things which his readers either knew by personal experience or might learn by inquiry.<sup>69</sup> In his *Dialogue With Trypho* the same writer refers to Mithraism twice.<sup>70</sup> This emperor took a deep interest in the worship of the Sun at Baalbek, in Syria. “Its Greek name, Heliopolis, ‘City of the Sun,’ is merely a translation of the native term Baalbeck, which appellation the ruins at the present day retain. Heliopolis was famed for its temple of the Sun, erected by Antoninus Pius (Malala, Chron., 11, p. 119), and the ruins of this celebrated pile still attest its former magnificence.”<sup>71</sup> The name of Antoninus Pius is still seen on the temple bases.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 66, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 185.

<sup>70</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, chaps. 70, 78, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 233, 234, 237.

<sup>71</sup> C. Anthon, *A Classical Dictionary*, p. 586, art. “Heliopolis (II).”

<sup>72</sup> *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, p. 472, art. “Baalbek.”

Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A. D.), the son of Antoninus Pius, appears to have been a devotee of Sun worship. According to H. A. L. Fisher, “Marcus Aurelius instituted a temple to Mithras on the Vatican hill.”<sup>73</sup> Memorials of Mithra worship have been found in the very place where the Vatican now stands.<sup>74</sup> An inscription found in Great Britain and dedicated “to the God the Invincible Sun,” is attributed to this period.<sup>75</sup> At Nersae, in the Aequian territory, the treasurer of the town restored in 172 A. D. a chapel which had fallen into ruins. This shows that the cult was already long established there.<sup>76</sup> The inscription states that it was dedicated “to the Invincible Mithra,” and it speaks of him as “the Invincible Sun.”<sup>77</sup> An inscription connected with the Mithraic cult at Ostia is dated as of 162 A. D.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>73</sup> H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, p. 90.

<sup>74</sup> J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 8, p. 60, art. "Light and Darkness (Greek and Roman)"; G. Boissier, *La Fin du Paganisme*, book 6, chap. 1, Sec. I, Vol. 2, p. 236.

<sup>75</sup> Alexander Tille, *Yule and Christmas*, p. 87.

<sup>76</sup> S. Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 593.

<sup>77</sup> *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 9, p. 389, Nos. 4109, 4110.

<sup>78</sup> Lily Ross Taylor, *The Cults of Ostia*, p. 84.

It was in this reign that Celsus, the Roman eclectic philosopher, so bitterly crusaded against Christianity.<sup>79</sup> He drew parallels between the practices of the Sunday-keeping Christians and the followers of Mithra. Gnosticism was then in its heyday and played great havoc in the church by attempting to reconcile Christian theology with pagan philosophy.

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<sup>79</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, pp. 395.669.

### Commodus and Heliogabalus

Commodus (180-192 A. D.), the son of Marcus Aurelius, "desecrated the rites of Mithra with actual murder, although it was customary in them to merely say or pretend something that would produce an impression of terror."<sup>80</sup> Thus it appears that he revived the sacrifice of human beings in the Mithraic mysteries, which had been prohibited by Hadrian. Commodus even assumed the title of Invictus,<sup>81</sup> and placed the image of the Sun on his coinage.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Aelius Lampridius, *Commodus Antoninus*, chap. 9, in Loeb Classical Library, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Vol. 1, p. 289.

<sup>81</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 73, chap. 15, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. 9, p. 103; *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, p. 355.

<sup>82</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 4, p. 723

Septimius Severus (193-211 A. n.) was married to Julia Domna, the daughter of the high priest of the Sun, at Emesa, in Syria.<sup>83</sup> The coins of this emperor are decidedly stamped with the impress of Sun worship.<sup>84</sup> The name of Julia Domna also appears on the bases of the Temple of the Sun at Baalbek, in Syria.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, p. 613.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 356-358, 416.

<sup>85</sup> *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, p. 472, art. "Baalbek."

About the year 200 Tertullian attempted to answer charges of Sun worship brought against Sunday-keeping Christians by their pagan opponents. This writer also describes many of the practices of Mithraism.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Tertullian, *De Corona*, chap. 15; *On Prescription Against Heretics*, chap. 40, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, pp. 103, 262, 263.

The elaborate baths of Caracalla (211-217 A. D.) were equipped “with even a Mithraeum in the basement.”<sup>87</sup> The Sun-god figured prominently on the coinage of this Roman ruler.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Grant Showerman, *Eternal Rome*, p. 245.

<sup>88</sup> *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, pp. 359, 416.

When Varius Avitus was a child, his mother took him to Emesa, in Syria. When he was five his education to be a priest of the Sun was begun; and while he was still a youth, he became high priest of the Sun.<sup>89</sup> As soon as he became emperor of Rome (218-222 A. D.), he assumed the title of Heliogabalus. According to Julius Capitolinus, “the Phoenicians give the name Elagabalus [Heliogabalus] to the Sun.”<sup>90</sup> This emperor built a temple to the Sun on the Palatine hill, where Augustus had erected one long before. “He wore his pontifical vest as high priest of the Sun, with a rich tiara on his head.”<sup>91</sup> On his coins he had such legends as these: “Priest of the Sun-god Elagabalus,” “Sacred to the Sun-God Elagabalus,” and “To the Defender of the Sun.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Aelius Lampridius, *Antoninus Heliogabalus*, book 1, in Loeb Classical Library, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Vol. 2, pp. 104 (footnote), 106 (footnote 2), 105; Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 79, chap. 30, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. 9 p. 409; Herodianus, *History of the Kingdom After Marcus*, book 5, chap. 3, sec. 4, in Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum, *Herodianus*, p. 129.

<sup>90</sup> Julius Capitolinus, *Opellius Macrinus*, chap. 9, in Loeb Classical Library, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Vol. 2, p. 67.

<sup>91</sup> *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, p. 576, art. “Elagabalus.”

<sup>92</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 4, part 2; *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, p. 417.

His successor, Alexander Severus (222-235 A. D.), was dedicated to the Sun at his birth. His coinage was also stamped with markings of a solar type.<sup>93</sup> It was in this period that Origen attempted to answer pagan charges of Sun worship brought against Sunday-keeping Christians.<sup>94</sup> Valerianus (253-260 A. D.) had the image of the Sun on his coins. And his son Gallienus (260-268 A. D.) placed the phrase “To the Invincible Sun” on his coinage.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, pp. 57, 417. <sup>94</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, pp. 395-669.

<sup>95</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 5 (part 1), pp. 140-190.

### **“The Sun, the Lord of the Roman Empire”**

The emperor Aurelian (270-275 A. D.), whose mother was a priestess of the Sun, was especially devoted to Sun worship. His biographer says: “He set the priesthoods in order, he constructed the Temple of the Sun, and he founded its college of pontifis; and he also allotted funds for making repairs and paying attendants.”<sup>96</sup> This emperor officially proclaimed the solar deity as “Sol Dominus Imperii Romani” (the Sun, the Lord of the Roman Empire). This solar title repeatedly appears on his coinage.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Flavius Vopiscus, *The Deified Aurelian*, chap. 35, in Loeb Classical Library, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Vol. 3, pp. 263, 265.

<sup>97</sup> H. Mattingly and E. A. Sydenham, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, Vol. 5, part 1, pp. 264, 312; S. W. Stevenson, C. R. Smith, and F. W. Madden, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins*, p. 753, art. "Sol"; *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, pp. 193, 309, 719. In *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 5 of Plates, pp. 238, 231, there is shown a photographic reproduction of coins minted by the emperor Aurelian. The Latin inscription on the coins clearly shows the titles *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani* and *Soli Invicto*.

From this time until the reign of Constantine I (306-337 A. D.) the cult of the Invincible Sun was the supreme and official religion of the Roman Empire. After 323 A. D., its prestige declined, because the emperors from that time forward favored Roman Christianity. Julian the Apostate (361-363 A. D.), who was initiated into the mysteries of Mithraism about 355 A. D., displayed great zeal in trying to restore this Sun cult to its former prestige in the empire, but he failed.<sup>98</sup> It gradually waned until it practically disappeared about two hundred years later.

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<sup>98</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 13, p. 178.

### **Mithraism a Mystery Religion**

There were seven degrees of initiation into the Mithraic mysteries: (1) Raven, (2) Griffin, (8) Soldier, (4) Lion, (5) Persian, (6) Courier of the Sun, and (7) Father.<sup>99</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says: "The chief of the fathers, a sort of pope, who always lived at Rome, was called 'Pater Patrum' or 'Pater Patratus.'"<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *The New international Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 16, pp. 40, 41, art. "Mithras"; Ahneida Paiva, Agostinho de *O Mithraismo*, p. 56; *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, pp. 402, 404, art. "Mithraism."

<sup>100</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, pp. 402, 404, art. "Mithraism."

Referring to the initiation ceremony into the degree of Soldier, Tertullian writes: "If my memory still serves me, Mithra there (in the kingdom of Satan), sets his marks on the foreheads of his soldiers; celebrates also the oblation of bread, and introduces an image of a resurrection, and before a sword wreathes a crown. What also must we say to (Satan's) limiting his chief priest to a single marriage? He, too, has his virgins; he, too, has his proficients in continence."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, chap. 40, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, pp. 262, 263. See also his *De Corona*, chap. 15, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, pp. 102, 103.

Thus Mithraism had its male and female celibates. The same writer also says: "We find him, too, practising baptism in his subjects."<sup>102</sup> And C. H. Toy states that there were also "processions, striking dramatic performances, and brilliant effects of light and music."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism*, chap. 5, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 671

<sup>103</sup> C. H. Toy, *Introduction to the History of Religions*, p. 511.



Tertullian, as already shown, says that those initiated into the Mithraic degree of Soldier were marked on the forehead. F. Cumont explains this thus: “It appears, however, that the sign or seal impressed was not, as in the Christian liturgy, an unction, but a mark burned with a red-hot iron like that applied in the army to recruits before they were admitted to the oath. This indelible imprint perpetuated the memory of the solemn engagement by which the person under vow contracted to serve in that order of chivalry which Mithraism constituted.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 157.

Speaking of the Mithraic communion service, Justin Martyr said in his apology to the emperor Antoninus Pius and the Roman people:

“Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 66, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 185. Paul, in speaking of the paganism of his day, mentions that it also had a communion service—“the cup of devils” and “the table of devils.” 1 Corinthians 10:21.

### **Cliadeaii Astrology in Mithraism**

The elements of Chaldean astrology were incorporated into Mithraism. The contact of the Persian religion with that of the Chaldeans, after the conquest of Babylon by Persia, apparently brought this about.<sup>106</sup> From this source Mithraism adopted the pagan week of seven days dedicated to the planetary gods,<sup>107</sup> among which the day of the Sun was considered the most sacred. Julian the Apostate, in a discourse on the grandeur of Sun worship, said: “And if I should also touch on the secret teaching of the mysteries in which the Chaldean, divinely frenzied, celebrated the God of the Seven Rays, that god through whom he lifts up the souls of men, I should be saying what is unintelligible.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> O. G. von Wesendonk, “Asia Minor and the Introduction of the Worship of Kybele, Ma, and Mithra Into Rome,” in the *Royal Asiatic Journal*, January, 1932, p. 23. See F. Cumont, “La Théologie Solaire du Paganisme Romain,” in *Memoires a l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Vol. 12, part 2, pp. 447-479; *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 16, pp. 40, 41, art. “Mithras”; G. C. Ring, S. J., *The God of the Gentiles*, pp. 322, 323; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 15, pp. 619.621, art. “Mithras”; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, pp. 419-421, art. “Mithra, Mithraism”; Arthur E. R. Koak, *A History of Rome to 565 A. D.*, p. 332; E. D. Soper, *The Religions of Mankind*, pp. 132, 133; F. Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, p. 171; *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 120; S. Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 602; Felix Lajard, *Introduction a l’Etude du Culte Public et des Mystères de Mithra*.

<sup>107</sup> This is the general opinion of authorities on this point.

<sup>108</sup> Julian, *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*, in Loeb Classical Library, *Julian*, Vol. 1, p. 483.

The same emperor speaks of “the seven spheres, from the highest vault of the heavens [and down] as far as Selene the Moon: for Selene is the last of the heavenly spheres.” He declared that the Sun “assigned as his own station the midheavens, in order that from all sides he may bestow

equal blessing on the gods who came forth by his agency and in company with him; and that he may guide the seven spheres [of the planets] in the heavens and the eighth sphere [the fixed stars] also, yes and as I believe the ninth creation too, namely our world which revolves forever in a continuous cycle of birth and death. For it is evident that the planets, as they dance in a circle about him, preserve as the measure of their motion a harmony between this god and their own movements.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Julian, *Hymn to Helios*, in Loeb Classical Library, Julian, Vol. 1, pp. 399, 401.

### **The Seven Planetary Spheres**

The following Mithraic doctrine of the planetary spheres undoubtedly molded to a large extent the teachings of many of the Gnostic sects concerning the organization of the universe into various heavens. A modern authority, speaking of Mithraic belief, gives this excellent statement on this point:

“The psychology of man is as follows: An infinite multitude of souls pre-existed in the ethereal heavens, and these descend to inhabit the bodies of men. As they descend, they pass through the realms governed by the planets and receive from them certain qualities, the proportion of which determines the character of the man. Thus from Saturn was received the determining dispositions, from Jupiter ambition, from Venus sensual appetite, from Mercury other desires, from Mars combativeness, from the Moon vital energy, and from the Sun intellectual powers. At death judgment by Mithra decided the soul’s fate. If it was to return to heaven, it was enabled by the saviour Mithra to satisfy the guardian of the gate to each sphere, where it gave up the qualities received on its descent, and so passed to the eighth sphere to enjoy life with Mithra.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, p. 422, art. “Mithraism.”

### **Widely Diffused**

Soldiers, traders, and slaves propagated Mithraism to the remotest parts of the Roman Empire. The interest of the Roman government in it as the state religion naturally gave the cult of the Invincible Sun wide publicity. Remains of this form of Sun worship have been found in Germany, France, Spain, North Africa, and Great Britain. S. Dill says: “More than 100 inscriptions, more than 75 pieces of Mithraist sculpture, with the ruins of many chapels of the god, attest his powerful influence at Rome.”<sup>111</sup> At Ostia, the seaport a few miles down the river from Rome, no less than seven Mithraic chapels have been uncovered.<sup>112</sup> The cult of the Invincible Sun was too complex and elaborate for us to discuss it in detail here, but the general features and scope of it, as we have outlined, show that it was undoubtedly the most powerful pagan rival that Christianity had to meet.

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<sup>111</sup> S. Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 591.

<sup>112</sup> Guida Caiza, *Historical Guide to the Monuments*, p. 20.