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HERODOTUS AND MITHRAS: *HISTORIES* I.131

The Persians sacrifice to the Sun and Moon, also to earth, fire, water and the winds. These were at first their only objects of sacrifice, but they have now learned to sacrifice to the Uranian Aphrodite, having adopted this rite from the Assyrians and the Arabs. The Assyrians call Aphrodite Mylitta, the Arabs Alilat, the Persians Mithra. (Herodotus I.131)

Much, indeed most, of the information given here is correct. The Persians are shown by texts of some antiquity to have paid regard to the Sun and Moon, and also to the four elements with the substitution of wind for the air of the Greeks.¹ The goddess Ishtar, who ruled the planet Venus, was worshipped in Babylon from an early date, and these devotions were imitated in other Near Eastern cultures.² Mullissa is the Assyrian name of Nin.lil, whose association with Ishtar has been proved by recent scholarship.³ Nor is there any doubt that Venus was also an object of veneration in the Persia of the Achaemenids: the error is one of names.

Nothing in Persian texts has suggested to scholars that Mithras, a masculine deity, was the counterpart of the goddess Aphrodite. Anahita, who presided over the planet Venus, was indeed said to be the

¹See M. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden 1982) Vol I, 79 on Vaya, Lord of the Winds, and pp. 34–35 on the complementary elements represented by Mithras and Varuna. See J. M. Robinson (ed.) *The Naq Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden 1977) 114 for a similar list of elements, the source of which, a Book of Zoroaster, may be of some antiquity. G. Nagy, "Phaethon, Sappho's Poem and the White Rock of Leukas," *HSCP* 77 (1973), 174–75, suggests that Aphrodite had acquired the attributes of Ishtar in the archaic period.

²Boyce (note 1 above) Vol II, 29.

³Boyce (note 1 above) Vol II, 30; see further S. Dalley in *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale* 73 (1979) 177–78.

consort of Mithras,⁴ but why should the habit of accurate inquiry have failed Herodotus at this point, so as to make him take one deity for another of different sex? His error is all the less intelligible if we believe those commentators who assume that the name Mithras in this period was already an appellation of the Sun.⁵

I submit that the cause of the error can be detected if we divest the Persian god of his later attributes and remember those which were already known to belong to the planet Venus. The latter are easily demonstrated: Democritus, according to the epitome of Aetius,⁶ named three of the planets Helios, Phosphorus, and Moon, and it is obvious that the morning-star could not have been enrolled in such a company had its identity with Venus not already been ascertained. It is possible that Pythagorean cosmology had discovered the additional fact that the morning-star and the evening-star were one.⁷

It is not so easy to ascertain how soon, or how consistently, the theology of the Persians treated Mithras as the Sun.⁸ Ancient Iran had a different solar deity,⁹ and there is more of assumption than argument in the statement of Mary Boyce that he was at once displaced by Mithras when the Persians wished to confer the powers and functions of the Babylonian Shamash upon one of their native gods.¹⁰ *Mih*r is the word for the Sun in the time of the Sassanids, but there is no proof that it was in use at an earlier date.¹¹ The equation of the Sun and Mithras, so usual

⁴ Boyce (note 1 above) 29–31 and 217; F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figurés Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, Vol II (Brussels 1896) 87–89.

⁵ E. G. Baehr (Leipzig 1956) 272–73; Stein (Berlin 1883) 155 n. 12; Sayce (London 1883) 79 n. 6; Legrand (Paris 1964) 130 n. 4.

⁶ See H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin 1879) 344.15.

⁷ Diels (note 6 above) 467.1. Nagy (note 1 above) 174–75, cites Ibycus Frag. 331 Page to show that the identity was known at an earlier period.

⁸ For sceptical studies see R. L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism" in J. R. Hinnells (ed.) *Mithraic Studies* (Manchester 1975) Vol I, 229f and I. Gershevich, "Die Sonne das Beste" in Hinnells, *op. cit.* Vol I, 70. The case on the other side is maintained by Boyce and Lincoln (cited below); see also G. Gnoli, "Sol Persice Mithra" in U. Bianchi (ed.) *Mysteria Mithrae* (Leiden 1979) 725–40. All are agreed that the evidence is neither copious nor transparent.

⁹ On Hvar see Boyce (note 1 above) Vol I, 69.

¹⁰ Boyce (note 1 above) Vol I, 28–29, but she offers little proof of her assertion that Mithras not only resembled Shamash in his judicial functions, but also adopted his solar character. In general Boyce treats the identification of Mithras with the sun as a "late" development, though it is not always clear what this means.

¹¹ See R. N. Frye, "Mithra in Iranian History" in Hinnells (note 8 above) Vol I, 66.

in the west in the Christian era, is not securely attested before the reign of Antiochus of Commagene;¹² and, though a case has been made for a local occurrence of it at a very much earlier period,¹³ the caution of How and Wells is to be applauded when they state that: "Mithra, at first only closely connected with the sun, was later identified with him."¹⁴

Two passages in early Iranian literature are of importance both for this larger question and for the justification of Herodotus. One is Yasht 10.13, which extols Mithras as "one who rises with his own light before the Sun."¹⁵ Here the god and the solar orb are clearly distinguished. Though a modern interpreter¹⁶ finds parallels in phrases that speak of the rising of a person, the power of illumination ascribed to Mithras seems to imply that he is (figuratively at least) conceived as a star.

The second passage offers greater difficulties of translation, but is rendered as follows by one who maintains that even the Achaemenid Mithras was deemed to be the Sun:¹⁷

Thus spoke Ahura Mazda: "After a man . . . has come to an end . . . at dawn on the third night (after death), the radiant goddess (Dawn) lights up and shines, and Mithras, whose weapons are good, shining like the sun, rises up and ascends the mountains . . ." (Videvat I.28-29)

If Mithras shines like the Sun, then he and the Sun are not identical.¹⁸ What is the self-illuminating body, not the Sun, which rises at

¹²See H. Waldman, "Die Kommagenische Kultreformen" (Leiden 1973) 17-21; B. Lincoln, "Mithras as Sun and Saviour" in U. Bianchi and M. J. Vermaseren (eds.) *La Soteriologie dei Culti Orientali nell'Impero Romano* (Leiden 1982) 513.

¹³Gershevich (note 8 above) 81-89 seems to concede more than the evidence demands with regard to the extent and date of the influence of the Sakas upon the religion of Iran.

¹⁴W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford 1936) 112-13.

¹⁵On the Mithra Yasht see R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London 1961) 107-20, and on this verse 110. Zaehner's insistence that it proves Mithras to be a Sun-god requires a loose construction of this term.

¹⁶Gershevich (note 8 above) 70.

¹⁷Lincoln (note 12 above) 510f. Lincoln maintains (512) that linguistic reasons for doubting the antiquity of this text are unsound; it remains, however, an insecure foundation for any argument, and the weight of mine must rest upon Yasht 10.13.

¹⁸The alternative renderings "with the Sun" or even "as the Sun" do not imply an essential identity of character. The last would imply at most that the Sun is an aspect of the luminous deity.

Dawn and even appears before the solar orb? The identity of Venus and the morning-star perhaps escaped the Persians, and their depiction of Mithras' glory may in any case be symbolic; but it is easy enough to see how an ingenuous though knowledgeable Greek will have drawn conclusions at which his informants would have smiled.

“Venus is the morning-star, and therefore the morning-star is worshipped by those who worship Venus. Mithras is the morning-star, since he is the astral body that appears before the Sun. Mithras is therefore the Persian name for the planet of Aphrodite, and hence, no doubt, for Aphrodite herself.” The argument does not even require a mistake in the gender of Mithras, since Hesperus and Phosphorus are Greek titles for a planet which bears the name of a feminine power. The reasoning has proved to be erroneous, but it is not that of an uninformed or uninquiring mind.

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