



[Home](#)  
[About](#)  
[What's new?](#)  
[FAQ](#)  
[Literary sources](#)  
[Monuments and images](#)  
[History of Mithraic scholarship](#)  
[Cautes and Cautopates](#)  
[Arimanius](#)  
[The lion-headed god \(Aion?\)](#)  
[Mithras and Phanes](#)  
[Mithras and Christianity](#)  
[Modern myths: "Mithras and Jesus"](#)  
["Maybe Mithras" material from newspapers, eBay, etc.](#)  
[Discoveries since 1960](#)  
[Contact me](#)

# Mithras and Jesus

- [1. On the nature and origins of modern "pagan parallels" literature](#)
- [2. Mithras had a "virgin birth"](#)
- [3. Mithras "visited by Magi"](#)
- [4. Mithras "died on the cross"](#)
- [5. The "twelve disciples of Mithras"](#)

See also [Mithras and Christianity](#).

In certain sorts of literature, the claim is made that Jesus is merely a copy of Mithras. A series of statements are made about Mithras - born of a virgin, had a last supper, died, resurrected, etc - which do make him seem identical. This portrait of Mithras is entirely misleading. Some of the statements about Mithras being like Jesus have some basis, and the evidence for them is given under [Mithras and Christianity](#). Other claims do not, and are wholly spurious, and mislead the unwary reader. In view of the wide circulation of these mistakes on the internet, it seemed useful to discuss a number of them here, and to reference them to some sample sources. Works referenced here are NOT scholarly unless otherwise noted.

## 1. On the nature and origins of modern "pagan parallels" literature

Collections of "sayings of the philosophers" were made in antiquity and into the medieval period. These are sometimes known as "wisdom literature" or *gnomologia*. One category of these consists of sayings which predict the coming and life of Christ, attributed to pagan philosophers or other notable figures. Collections of this kind formed part of the apologetic of the medieval church, which thus had a two-fold proof of Christianity; one from Jewish prophecies of Christ, one from pagan prophecies.<sup>1</sup> Similarly early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr, or Clement of Alexandria, were willing to point pagans to similarities in pagan cult myths, not to show that Christianity was the same as paganism, and still less derived from it, but rather to demonstrate that Christian teaching was not entirely novel or threatening and should therefore be legal.<sup>2</sup>

From the 17th century onwards, Protestant writers routinely accused the "Romanists" - the Roman Catholic Church - of basing its worship on pagan ritual.<sup>3</sup> With the rise of anti-Christian movements such as socinianism in the 18th century, this developed in some writers into the claim that the Christ story was not different to that of older pagan legends and so was, by inference, equally untrue.

The French revolutionary writer Dupuis continued this line of thought in 1794.<sup>4</sup> He seems to be the originator of the claims that Mithras was very similar to Christ. The French original<sup>5</sup> is [here](#), but the key passage of the 1872 American abbreviated translation runs as follows:<sup>6</sup>

It is chiefly in the religion of Mithras or the God Sun, worshipped under that name by the Magi, that we find mostly those features of analogy with the death and resurrection of Christ and with the mysteries of the Christians. Mithras, who was also born on the 25th December like Christ, died as he did; and he had his sepulchre, over which his disciples came to shed tears. During the night the priests carried his image to a tomb, expressly prepared for him; he was laid out on a litter, like the Phoenician Adonis. These funeral ceremonies, like those on good Friday, were accompanied with funeral dirges and the groans of his priests; after having spent some time with these expressions of feigned grief; after having lighted the sacred flambeau or their Paschal candle and anointed the image with Chrism or perfumes, one of them came forward and pronounced with the gravest mien these words: "Be of good cheer, sacred band of Initiates ("initiés,") your God has risen from the dead; his pains and his sufferings shall be your salvation."

[...]And it would really seem, in this instance, as if Firmicus, in his onset on the ancient religions, had set his heart on it, to collect all the traits of analogy, which their mysteries had with those of the Christians. He clings chiefly to the Mithraic Initiation, of which he draws a pretty uniform parallel with that of Christ, and to which it has so much resemblance, merely because it is one and the same sect. It is true, he explains all this conformity, which exists between these two religions, by asserting, as Tertullian and St. Justin did, that a long time before there were Christians in existence, the Devil had taken pleasure to have their future mysteries and ceremonies copied by his worshippers. This may be an excellent reason for certain Christians, such as there are plenty in our days, but an extremely paltry one for men

of common sense. As far as we are concerned, we, who do not believe in the Devil, and who are not, like them, in his secrets, we shall simply observe, that the religion of Christ, founded like all the others on the worship of the Sun, has preserved the same dogmas, the same practices, the same mysteries or very nearly so; that everything has been in common; because the God was the same; that there were only the accessories, which could differ, but that the basis was absolutely the same.

The oldest apologists of the Christian religion agree, that the Mithraic religion had its sacraments, its baptism, its penitence, its Eucharist and its consecration by mystical words; that the catechumens of that religion had preparatory trials, more rigorous than those of the Christians; that the Initiates or the faithful marked their foreheads with a sacred sign; that they admitted also the dogma of the resurrection; that they were presented with the crown, which ornamented the forehead of the martyrs; that their sovereign Pontiff was not allowed to marry several times; that they had their virgins and their laws of continence; finally, that they had everything, which has since been practiced by the Christians.

Of course, Tertullian calls again the Devil to his assistance, in order to explain away so complete a resemblance. But as there is not the slightest difficulty, without the intervention of the Devil, to perceive, that whenever two religions resemble each other so completely, the oldest must be the mother and the youngest the daughter, we shall conclude, that since the worship of Mithras is infinitely older than that of Christ, and its ceremonies a great deal anterior to those of the Christians, that therefore the Christians are incontestably either sectarians or plagiarists of the religion of the Magi.

Dupuis' claims are repeated in England by Joseph Priestley<sup>7</sup>, although he is otherwise rather sceptical of Dupuis, well before any scholarly investigation had taken place or was possible. Further examples may be found in the early 19th century onwards,<sup>8</sup> and are repeated afterwards, usually in rationalist or deistic writings.<sup>9</sup>

Today such claims tend to be found in low-grade literature with an anti-Christian purpose, often making crudely false claims about what is or is not known about Mithras.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Mithras had a "virgin birth"

Some non-scholarly writers say that the birth of Mithras was a virgin birth, like that of Jesus.

No ancient source gives such a birth myth for Mithras. Rather Mithras is always described as born from solid rock.<sup>11</sup> Scholar David Ulansey, who has suggested that Mithras might be the "outside name" of a cult of Perseus, has speculated that the idea of a rock-birth derives from the myth in which Perseus was born because Zeus visited Danae in an underground cavern.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Mithras "visited by Magi"

In 1882 American writer T.W. Doane claimed that Mithras, the "mediator between God and man", was visited by Magi at the time of his birth and given gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.<sup>13</sup>

In support of his claim, Doane offered two sources. The first is "King: The Gnostics and their Remains, pp. 134 and 149", a respectable source in 1864 when it was published.<sup>14</sup> But King's statements are purely speculative and no evidence is offered.

Doane's second source is given as "Inman: Ancient Faiths, vol. ii. p. 353", which dates from 1868.<sup>15</sup> Inman appears to have been a crank. But his statement is equally a piece of speculation, and does not even mention gold or frankincense.

Despite this, Doane's statement may be found, with or without reference, online in various places.<sup>16</sup>

No ancient source depicts the Magi attending the rock-birth of Mithras. He is, however, sometimes depicted attended by Cautes and Cautopates.<sup>17</sup>

## 4. Mithras "died on the cross"

The following claim may be found online:<sup>18</sup>



[S. Stephano Rotondo](#). The birth of Mithras from the rock.

"3) According to Mithraism, before Mithra died on a cross, he celebrated a "Last Supper" with his twelve disciples, who represented the twelve signs of the zodiac.

"4) After the death of Mithra, his body was laid to rest in a rock tomb."

No ancient source records that Mithras died, still less that he did so on a cross.

This claim may perhaps be the result of some careless reading of a passage in T.W. Doane, making various claims about Mithras and then Zoroaster.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. The "twelve disciples of Mithras"



[CIMRM 860](#)

The earliest appearance of this claim appears to be by Godfrey Higgins in 1836, where it is unreferenced and appears in passing.<sup>20</sup> Higgins work was apparently quarried extensively by the theosophist Madame Blavatsky.<sup>21</sup>

The claim appears in an elaborate form in the notorious "Jesus Mysteries" of Freke and Gandy in 2001.<sup>22</sup> It has been publicised by someone calling themselves "Acharya S", who turns out to be an American woman named Dorothy Murdock.<sup>23</sup> Murdock was made aware that the claim was

untrue, but has since elaborated and reiterated the claim. She knows that Mithras is depicted surrounded by the zodiac on a couple of reliefs, and proposes that these 'must' be disciples, since sometimes in renaissance Christian art the apostles are depicted with the signs of the zodiac.<sup>24</sup>



[CIMRM 75](#)

- <sup>1</sup> The reader is referred to studies of medieval sayings literature or *gnomologia* for examples. The [Sharing Ancient Wisdoms](#) project contains a number of these texts. See also posts about the subject, with some sample texts, at the [Roger Pearse blog](#).
- <sup>2</sup> A discussion of the various approaches to the similarities in Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, *Orphism and Christianity in late Antiquity*, de Gruyter, 2010, [p.278](#)-285. **TODO: some quotes**; For uses of allegory see J. Pépin, *Mythe et allegorie: les origines grecs et les contestations judeo-chretiennes*, Paris, 1976. Online [here](#).
- <sup>3</sup> E.g. Conyers Middleton, *A Letter from Rome: Shewing an Exact Conformity Between Popery and Paganism: Or, The Religion of the Present Romans to be Derived Entirely from that of Their Heathen Ancestors*, 1729. Online at [Google Books](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Francois Dupuis, *Origene (de tous les cultes)*, (1794), vol. [III](#), [p.118](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Charles-François Dupuis, *Abrégé de l'origine de tous les cultes* (1798), p.291.
- <sup>6</sup> Dupuis, *The Origin of all Religious Worship*, 1872, chapter 9, [p.248f](#).
- <sup>7</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works. Ed. with Notes by John Towill Rutt, Volume 17*, 1797, [p.348](#): "This same child however, suckled by the constellation Virgo and of course one of the stars, we find presently advanced to a much higher rank. He is nothing less than the sun. From the twelve great gods of Egypt M. Dupuis says (as quoted before p 332) 'the Christians have taken their twelve apostles, the companions of God, the Father of light, whose death and resurrection they celebrate like that of Adonis in Phoenicia and Osiris in Egypt. Christ,' he says, 'has all the wonderful characters of Mithra, Adonis, Osiris &c. They all died descended into hades and rose again like him. He is the only son of an invisible Father placed beyond the visible universe and who alone retains his image.'" Referenced to Dupuis, *Origene (de tous les cultes)*, (1794), vol. [III](#), [p.118](#). See also these criticisms [here](#).
- <sup>8</sup> From 1827 see George Houston, *The Correspondent*, 1827, [p.150](#): "To counteract the influence of the bad principle an emanation of Ormuzd or the supreme light was sent to the world under the name of Mithra Messites or Mediator to combat Ahriman and save mankind. To obtain this end the Mithra of Magi, like the Osiris and Bacchus of the Egyptians (all signifying the sun) is born of a virgin (Isis, Ceres or the moon; or the virgin adored at Sais and mother of the sun), he is put to death by Typhon or the evil principle, descends into Hell, rises again and ascends triumphant to the celestial regions. The same thing with little difference is told of Adonis, Atys, and Serapis. They all work numberless miracles are persecuted put to death and rise again from the dead." etc.
- <sup>9</sup> An example from 1884 is this article by a certain C.E. Vredenburg, "Mythology and Religion", in *The Index ...: A Weekly Paper, Volume 4; Volume 15*, 1884, [p.581](#): "The story of the Christ is by no means peculiar to Christianity. It was told in different parts of the East centuries before Jesus of Nazareth was born. It enters either wholly or in part into the mytho-theological basis of an entire group of religious systems. In the Persian religion we have it related of the divine being Mithra, who was born of a virgin in a cave on or about the 25th of December, grew to man's estate despite the conspiracy of the evil powers against him, was attended by twelve disciples, was finally killed, descended to the underworld but rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven and thereby became the redeemer of mankind. Mithra is spoken of as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The religion of his followers contained the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, and the doctrines of the fall of man, incarnation, atonement and final resurrection."
- <sup>10</sup> See for instance the writings of Dorothy Murdock, writing as "Acharya S" in *The Christ Conspiracy*, **TODO: precise ref pls**
- <sup>11</sup> Franz Cumont, "The Dura Mithraeum", in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*. Manchester U. Press, 1975, p. 173: "Following the cataclysm, we attend the birth of Mithra. As usual, the young θεός

νετρογενής, already wearing his Phrygian cap, issues forth from the rocky mass. As yet only his bare torso is visible. In each hand he raises aloft a lighted torch and, as an unusual detail, red flames shoot out all around him from the *petra genetrix*."

- <sup>12</sup> David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*. Oxford U. Press, 1989, p.35: "Another interesting area of similarity between Mithras and Perseus concerns the fact that both figures are connected with underground caverns. The Mithraic mysteries were often conducted in subterranean sanctuaries, or, where this was impossible, in temples made to look like underground caves. It is thus worthy of note that Perseus was believed to have been born in just such a subterranean enclosure. According to the story as told by Apollodorus, when Acrisius, the grandfather of Perseus, "inquired of the oracle how he should get male children, the god said that his daughter would give birth to a son who would kill him. Fearing that, Acrisius built a brazen chamber under ground and there guarded Danae. However, she was seduced, as some say, by Protus, whence arose the quarrel between them; but some say that Zeus had intercourse with her in the shape of a stream of gold which poured through the roof into Danae's lap. . . . Acrisius afterwards learned that she had got a child Perseus." If we do have here a connection between Perseus and Mithras, then there may also be a connection between Perseus' birth in the underground chamber and the so-called birth from the rock of Mithras, an event often depicted in Mithraic iconography."
- <sup>13</sup> T.W. Doane, *Bible Myths and their Parallels in other Religions*, 7th ed., 1910. Online at Project Gutenberg [here](#). P.152: "Mithras, the Persian Saviour, and mediator between God and man, was also visited by "wise men" called Magi, at the time of his birth. [152:8] He was presented with gifts consisting of gold, frankincense and myrrh.[152:9]". I have used the 1910 edition, as this is probably the source of more recent claims, but the claim is doubtless found in earlier editions also.
- <sup>14</sup> Charles William King, *The Gnostics and Their Remains: Ancient and Medieval*, 1864 (online [here](#)). (A 2nd ed. 1887 is online at Archive.org [here](#)). p.133-4: "The importance attached to the names of the three Magi [in medieval Christianity] is probably connected with certain reminiscences of the ancient Mithraic worship... The notion that the three Kings typify each one of the three ancient divisions of the earth - the first being painted as a European, the second as an Asiatic, the third as a Negro - seems borrowed from some ancient representation of the same regions, so personified, attending at the 'birth of Mithras,' or the Natale Invicti, on December 25th." and p.149, in which the idea is repeated.
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas Inman, *Ancient faiths embodied in ancient names; or, An attempt to trace the religious belief, sacred rites, and holy emblems of certain nations*, Vol. 2, Self-published in London and Liverpool, 1868. Online at Archive.org [here](#), and p.353: "No one can, for a moment, suppose that the Magi, who came to adore Jesus and his mother, were Christians, making Christian offerings; the context, indeed, paints them as Eastern Asiatics and they are represented making the same oblations as they would to Mithra, Mai-Mri, or Mriam, in their own district."
- <sup>16</sup> E.g. J.D. Stone, "Mithras = Christianity?", [here](#). Accessed 25 April 2014. "Hundreds of years before Jesus, according to the Mithraic religion, three Wise Men of Persia came to visit the baby savior-god Mithra, bring him gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense."
- <sup>17</sup> TODO: Include an example relief, probably from a German bas-relief.
- <sup>18</sup> J.D. Stone, "Mithras = Christianity?" [here](#). Accessed 26 April 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> T.W. Doane, *Bible Myths and their Parallels in other Religions*, 7th ed., 1910, p.194-5. Online [here](#): "Mithras, who was "Mediator between God and man,"[194:9] was called "The Saviour." He was the peculiar god of the Persians, who believed that he had, by his sufferings, worked their salvation, and on this account he was called their Saviour.[194:10] He was also called "The Logos." [194:11] The Persians believed that they were tainted with original sin, owing to the fall of their first parents who were tempted by the evil one in the form of a serpent.[194:12] They considered their law-giver Zoroaster to be also a Divine Messenger, sent to redeem men from their evil ways, and they always worshiped his memory. To this day his followers mention him with the greatest reverence, calling him "The Immortal Zoroaster," [Pg 195]"The Blessed Zoroaster," "The First-Born of the Eternal One," &c.[195:1] "In the life of Zoroaster the common mythos is apparent. He was born in innocence, of an immaculate conception, of a ray of the Divine Reason. As soon as he was born, the glory arising from his body enlightened the room, and he laughed at his mother. He was called a Splendid Light from the Tree of Knowledge, and, in fine, he or his soul was suspensus a lingo, hung upon a tree, and this was the Tree of Knowledge." [195:2] How much this resembles "the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints." [195:3]
- <sup>20</sup> Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis: An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or, an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions*, London: Longman, 1836, vol. 1, p.781 : "The number of the twelve apostles, which formed the retinue of Jesus during his mission, is that of the signs, and of the secondary genii, the tutelary gods of the Zodiacal signs which the sun passes through in his annual revolution. It is that of the twelve gods of the Romans, each of whom presided over a month. The Greeks, the Egyptians, the Persians, each had their twelve gods, **as the Christian followers of Mithra had their twelve apostles**. The chief of the twelve Genii of the annual revolution had the barque and the keys of time, the same as the chief of the secondary gods of the Romans or Janus, after whom St. Peter, Bar-Jona, with his barque and keys, is modelled." No footnote is given; is the phrase "followers of Mithra" intended to be in brackets?
- <sup>21</sup> Tim Maroney, preface to M. Blavatsky, *The Book of Dzyan*, Chaosium, 2000, p.25: "This two volume [*Isis unveiled*] set was largely derived in form and title from the monumental two-volume work of comparative religion by Godfrey Higgins..."
- <sup>22</sup> T. Freke and P. Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God*, 2001. From Google Books snippet: "The Mithraic disciples were dressed up to represent the 12 signs of the zodiac and circled the initiate..."
- <sup>23</sup> "Acharya S.", *Suns of god*, 2004, and frequently since.
- <sup>24</sup> Web article [Is Christ a clone of Mithra?](#)(sic), Oct. 27, 2010: "Over the centuries, many scholars have pointed out the obvious correspondences between Mithraism and Christianity, based on the remaining evidence, including the writings of early Church fathers who were flummoxed by the similarities. Later writers, however, were not so startled, because they could discern that the Christ character was apparently a rehash of Mithra, among others. Following is a list of the characteristics of Mithra as found in my book [Christ Conspiracy](#), p. 119:
  - \* Mithra was born of a virgin on December 25th in a cave, and his birth was attended by shepherds bearing gifts.
  - \* He was considered a great traveling teacher and master.
  - \* He had 12 companions or disciples.
  - \* Mithra's followers were promised immortality.

- \* He performed miracles.
- \* As the "great bull of the Sun," Mithra sacrificed himself for world peace.
- \* He was buried in a tomb and after three days rose again.
- \* His resurrection was celebrated every year.
- \* He was called "the Good Shepherd" and identified with both the Lamb and the Lion.
- \* He was considered the "Way, the Truth and the Light," and the "Logos," "Redeemer," "Savior" and "Messiah."
- \* His sacred day was Sunday, the "Lord's Day," hundreds of years before the appearance of Christ.
- \* Mithra had his principal festival on what was later to become Easter.
- \* His religion had a eucharist or "Lord's Supper," at which Mithra said, "He who shall not eat of my body nor drink of my blood so that he may be one with me and I with him, shall not be saved."
- \* "His annual sacrifice is the passover of the Magi, a symbolical atonement of pledge of moral and physical regeneration."" It is unclear whether much of this is original invention, or merely repetition for other, equally ignorant, sources.

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## 7 Comments The Roman Cult of Mithras

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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS **roger\_pearse** Mod • 6 years ago

I thought that I would begin a page on the wild claims, researching them. It is tedious to take time away from real scholarship to devote to this rubbish - Doane must have been little better than a madman - but it will probably be of use to people who would otherwise be deceived. Once I can remove the rubbish from the Mithras and Christianity page, then it will be possible to discuss seriously the elements of similarity there.

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**Andre Cilliers** ➔ roger\_pearse • 2 years ago

well done Roger. Did you encounter any credible evidence that this Mathras actually lived as a human being?

60 ^ | ▾ 1 • Reply • Share ›

**roger\_pearse** Mod ➔ Andre Cilliers • 2 years ago

None at all.

8 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**det2hou4ever** • 4 years ago

I wish a similar page existed for Cybele and Attis as this page and your 'Mithras and Christianity' page. Good work.

Paul Pearson

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**roger\_pearse** Mod ➔ det2hou4ever • 4 years ago

Thank you. It would be useful, I agree, to have similar material on Cybele and Attis.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Lays Farra** • 5 years ago

Hello,

Thanks for your many helpful articles.

I just want to point out Dupuis claims are indeed repeated by Joseph Priestley, but from what I can gather he is rather skeptical and even contemptuous of such claims.

<https://books.google.ch/boo...>

From your formulation I thought he was a proponent of such theories. Not really a big deal but someone (like me) who doesn't know Priestley's background can

[Home](#)