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YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY
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Attilio Mastrocinque, *The Mithraic Prophecy*, BAR International Series 3074. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022. 105 pp. ISBN 978 4073 5913 7

Publius Vergilius Maro's early first-century BCE Fourth *Eclogue* has been taken as a prophecy that can be interpreted to refer to the coming of different Roman heroes and divine persons, including the offspring of Mark Antony, Octavia the Younger, Augustus, Apollo, even Vergilian poetry itself, and, more famously by Christians, as Jesus Christ (p. 49). For Italian Professor Attilio Mastrocinque (hereafter M.), Virgil's *Eclogue* was the trigger for a Mithraic prophecy (pp. 5, 74). *The Mithraic Prophecy* is a sequel to M.'s earlier *The Mysteries of Mithras* (2017), in which he also argued that Virgil's *Eclogue* is central for an understanding of Mithraism.

The existence of a Mithraic prophecy, is not only inferred by M. from Virgil but also from a similar prophecy attributed to mid-first century Roman scholar Nigidius Figulus (pp. 52–53, and n. 21), both of which show Persian influence (pp. 5, 70, 74). M. contends that a

prophet of Mithraism probably conceived of a sacred story similar to those of Virgil, of the Sibyls, of [the Persian Apocalypse of] Hystapes, and other authors. The coming of Apollo as leader of the new historical cycle was forecasted by both Virgil and the Magi, and the Mithraic prophet simply used the Persian name and the Persian clothes of Mithras to speak of Apollo and his earthly sovereignty, represented by Augustus (p. 74).

In M.'s reconstruction of the Mithraic prophecy, he argues that the ostensibly forecasted savior of the Fourth *Eclogue* was Mithras, a 'solar god like Apollo,' who also 'was a god of dawn and the morning star' that mediated between light and darkness (p. 75, 78), but who also especially mediated 'harmony, friendship, treaty, agreement' (pp. 96, 97). It was under the protection of this solar God of light that a Golden Age, presumably prophesied for Augustus in the Fourth *Eclogue*, was largely realized with his *Pax Romana* (pp. 75, 76).

M. rightly rejects understandings of Mithraism from the perspective of Christianity. We 'must use all available tools at our disposal,' he argues, 'to approach the mind of Roman pagans such as the Mithraists and reduce the gap between European and Roman mentalities' (p. 4). Curiously, M. seems to question whether the 'Roman cult of Mithras was a religion' (p. 1, n. 6), even though its adherents were dedicated to and worshiped a superhuman agent, i.e., Mithras as *Deus Sol Invictus*. Nevertheless, he characterizes "Mithraism" as 'a secret cult' (p. 2), the secrets of which have been seen as 'impossible to crack' (p. 6). This occult characterization of the Roman cults of Mithras is closer to the esoteric influences on nineteenth-century historians of ancient religions than it is to the initiatory rites representative of the Mithraic cults (Martin 2020). And, like those scholars who draw upon the temporal and geographic dispersal of oftentimes distinctive Mithraic images to construct what they supposed to be a universally-shared Mithraic myth, so M. draws upon temporally incongruent and geographically distributed texts—from Herodotus to Porphyry, from the *Rig Veda* to the *Avesta*—to similarly assemble a presumably commonly-shared Mithraic story.

No mythological texts by Mithraists have survived (or were ever produced?); there is, however, an abundance of archaeological evidence, largely iconographic, that does. M. argues that the Mithraic prophecy, is key for understanding the meaning of this iconography (p. 96). We cannot understand the meaning of reliefs on Romanesque and Gothic churches without the Old and New Testament, he argues, so we cannot understand the meaning of Mithraic iconography without reference to Virgil's Fourth *Eclogue* (p. 96). M. contends that 'the series of scenes on the left of the Tauroctony correspond[s] to the prophecy of the Sybil in Virgil, in his Fourth *Eclogue*' (p. 6). But he doesn't identify which tauroctony despite Richard Gordon's conclusion that 'no two [of the]

complex paneled reliefs show the same selection of scenes, and...no two reliefs present them in the same order' (Gordon 1996, IX, 211).

The tauroctony itself, or the ubiquitous representation of Mithras sacrificing a bull, familiar to Romans from its well-known image of 'Victory,' i.e., of Nike slaying a bull (pp. 4, 42), was, according to M., an act that 'produced salvation' (p. 40). It was 'probable,' M. suggests, that this 'salvation' referred to an 'afterlife' (p. 40), also inferred by Mithras' association with images of a 'flying Eros' (pp. 91–92). At the same time, however, M. agrees with Roger Beck that 'Mithraic salvation was experienced in the earthly life' (pp. 40, 97; Beck 1988, 78), in which the Mithraic '*salus*' referred to that 'which Augustus provided the Roman Empire' (p. 43).

M.'s stated method is a comparison of the extensive data referencing Mithras, 'with poetic traditions as well as monuments and images' (p. 4), from India to Persia to Rome. Historian of religion J. Z. Smith has questioned the comparative approach, specifically with reference to second- to fourth-century Roman religions, the life-span of the cults of the Roman Mithras, to ask whether perceived comparisons are 'analogous processes,' which responded 'to parallel kinds of religious situations,' or whether there are 'genealogical relations between them' (Smith 1990, 112–13). M. seems to opt for both. For example, he argues that Mithraic and Christian iconographies 'borrowed independently from Graeco-Roman iconographic canons' (p. 4). And Mithraism, he contends, was influenced by Persian and Anatolian traditions as well as by Roman religious traditions (p. 6). Further, the 'tradition followed by Virgil was similar to some Jewish traditions' (p. 52). These analogies, M. concludes, suggest that Mithraic iconography was influenced by ancient prophecies that were widespread 'both in Orient,' e.g., the Persian *Apocalypse of Hystapes* (p. 69), 'and in Occident' (p. 52). But, at the same time, M. seems to favor a genealogical link from Virgil to the imperial cult and Mithraism, i.e., Virgil's prophecy referencing Augustus (p. 29), who was Apollo, who was Mithras (p. 36).

An often-cited warning by Sherlock Holmes is that 'It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts' (A. Conan Doyle, 1892, 5). Although M. clearly has encyclopedic knowledge of the various widespread data for Mitra/Mithra/Mithras, these data are not necessarily apposite. Therefore, it might be asked which of these data are relevant to the Roman cults of Mithras, a relevance for which M. himself insists (p. 4). Rather, it seems as though he is arranging his comprehensive array of facts to suit his presumed theory of an essentialized "Mithraism," which supposes a commonly shared myth that was maintained and transmitted throughout the three-century duration and widespread dispersal of Mithraic cults throughout the geographical expanse of the Roman Empire. Assuming the validity of M.'s theoretical reconstruction of a Mithraic story, however, it must have remained the creation of its founding 'prophet'(s) since there is no evidence for the development of any centralized authority, administration, or 'canonical' text(s) to maintain conceptual or behavioral control, nor for any on-the-ground, systematic network of Mithraic cults committed to espouse and faithfully to transmit its complex accuracy (Martin, 2018). Significantly, such a centralized governmental administration with a hierarchical leadership did develop in Doliche for the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus that were contemporaneous with those of Mithras and similarly largely embedded in the Roman military (Collar, 2013). Without any such mechanisms for conceptual and behavioral control and means of faithful transmission, the Roman cults of Mithras remained largely religio-social groups characterized by localized (or regionalized) connotations.

M. presents in *The Mithraic Prophecy* a detailed if complex argument for his alternative but ambitious hypothesis about a "Mithraism" that should receive careful consideration by all of those interested in the Roman cults of Mithras (and, indeed, in the Hellenistic initiatory cults in general).

Whatever one concludes about the validity of his fascinating theory, the preponderance of Mithraic initiates that were in the military with their regular redeployments, the imperial administrative officials with their reassignments, and merchants (concentrated in Ostia) with their mobile trade links, all support M.'s final conclusion, at least generally, that 'Mithras was a fit god for protecting and increasing the Roman Empire and supporting the imperial ideology' (p. 97), a conclusion that echoes Reinhold Merkelbach's earlier conclusion that Mithraism was a Religion der Loyalität zum römischen Kaiserreich (1984, 153–88).

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Luther H. Martin

University of Vermont
luther.martin@uvm.edu

John A. North (ed.), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: The Republican Centuries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 416 pp. ISBN 978-0-199-64406-3.

This volume in honour of Simon Price assembles the evergreens of Roman religious history, bringing together papers that have provoked the minds of scholars for years, and even decades. As a student and scholar of Roman religious history, this reviewer is certainly no exception in this regard. All the assembled papers paved the way towards my dissertation; they piqued my curiosity, challenged my existing perspectives and inspired my research to this day. Due to this personal background, I fully agree with John North who, in his introduction to this volume, states that 'for some scholars [this volume] will still present a basis for future study; for some others it will mark the end of one era and the launching of a very different one' (p. 2). The fields of study covered in this collection therefore involve key aspects of debate, including: (a) gods and goddesses (J. North, A. Bendlin, F. Coarelli); (b) war rituals (J. Rüpke, O. De Cazanove); (c) priests (J. Scheid, M. Beard, R. Flemming, D. Gargola); (d) communication (A. Bendlin, J. Rüpke, D. Feeney); and (e) innovations (C. Smith, J. Scheid, M. Beard, D. Gargola, A. Schmid, F. Coarelli). This broad thematic outline is complemented by a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches that