

The Wonder Child

Friday, August 26, 2005

4:04 PM

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By Joseph Campbell



Fig. 27

The recurrence of many of the best-loved themes of the older, pagan mythologies in legends of the Christian Savior was a recognized feature intentionally stressed in the earliest Christian centuries. The meaning, for example, of the ass and ox in the Nativity scene would in the fourth century a.d. have been perfectly obvious to all, since these were the beasts symbolic in that century of the contending brothers, Seth and Osiris. Their inclusion in the new setting would have signified, firstly, that in Christ opposites are reconciled: "I say to you, Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44); and secondly, that in the birth, death, and resurrection of the new Savior the promises prefigured in the mere myths of the pagan gods had been historically, in actual fact, fulfilled: "For," as we read in a second-century text, the so-called Second Epistle of Peter, "we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (II Peter i: 16).

Likewise, the Magi above, wearing the Phrygian cap then associated with the Persian savior Mithra, must have made the point that even the followers of that most threatening rival of the Christian mission had recognized and were now worshiping the newborn King. Thus the promises and aspirations of all the mysteries of antiquity were shown harvested in the gospel of this sole historic incarnation of the one and only true God.



27a. Detail of Figure 27



28. *Head of Mithra*

The night of December 25, to which date the Nativity of Christ was ultimately assigned, was exactly that of the birth of the Persian savior Mithra, who, as an incarnation of eternal light, was born the night of the winter solstice (then dated December 25) at midnight, the instant of the turn of the year from increasing darkness to light.

From *The Mythic Image*