PROBABLY NOT MITHRAS

H. D. BETZ: *The 'Mithras Liturgy'*. Text, Translation, and Commentary. (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 18.) Pp. xviii + 274, pls. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003. Cased, €69. ISBN: 3-16-148128-3.

Arthur Darby Nock once aptly remarked that the 'Mithras Liturgy' (ML) is neither Mithraic nor a liturgy. But the name, bestowed a hundred years ago by Albrecht Dieterich, has stuck. In its present form, the text is a recipe for a 'face-to-face' divinatory encounter with a god, one of fifty-odd magical recipes in an early fourth-century papyrus codex of eighteen leaves that once formed part of the Anastasi collection and is now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Bibl. Nat. suppl. gr. 574 (= Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* no. IV). The papyrus as a whole was first edited by Carl Wessely in 1888, but it was Dieterich, the son-in-law of Hermann Usener, who realized that the unusual recipe contained in ll. 475–820 (or 834) might be of help against Franz Cumont's oppressively magisterial account of the cult of Mithras, the second volume of which had appeared in 1899. In the absence of ancient texts, Cumont privileged sculptural monuments and epigraphy; but where was the cult's inner life? Here, said Dieterich, here is the text's value: it may subsequently have been edited by a Graeco-Egyptian magician, but its basis is a genuine, albeit of course secret, Mithraic ritual for a spiritual ascent to heaven. And that is what the Mysteries were all about. Richard Reitzenstein and Cumont protested vehemently; Wilamowitz had his own grand Hellenic reasons for dismissing Dieterich as a 'Botokudenphilologe'; and (at least until Manfred Clauss) no serious scholar of Mithras has been prepared to entertain the thesis for more than a moment. Yet Dieterich's book has remained alive, re-edited by Richard Wünsch (1910) and Otto Weinreich (1925), reprinted in 1966; partly, I think, because it seemed to offer a privileged insight into what went on in mystery cults, partly because the text is genuinely opaque, and everyone enjoys a mystery.

As a distinguished New Testament scholar and the editor of an English translation of Preisendanz's Corpus (*GMPT*) which has been highly influential in the current revival of interest in ancient magic, B. has long been interested in the 'Liturgy'. His commentary has two aims: to offer a detailed account of ML to anglophone scholars and students, and to reassess Dieterich's thesis in the light of subsequent research. As such, it has a great deal to offer. Admittedly, it is not a philological edition, so that there is no apparatus criticus (for which one still has to consult that of Preisendanz, itself already out of date when *PGM* was reissued in 1973), but excellent new plates of the cleaned leaves are provided, and the text has been looked through by David Martinez and David Jordan, both of whom make one or two useful suggestions in the commentary. Moreover, the translation provided is that of Marvin Meyer, first published in 1976 and reprinted with minor alterations in *GMPT* in 1986. But, in sharp contrast to Merkelbach's wayward treatment in *Abrasax* 3 (1992), B. provides admirably clear accounts of the papyrus, of Dieterich's life and intellectual career, and of the delicate matter of genre, together with a very detailed formal analysis which lays out clearly the way the text is built up. The commentary itself is wide-ranging and thorough, virtually each word and expression receiving judicious, and learned, discussion.

B. rightly has little time for Merkelbach's view that ML is the text of a

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'face-to-face' divination ritual in which Egyptian priests performed a kind of dumb show, insisting that it is to be taken literally as a ritual text. He prefers to locate ML at the meeting-point of several traditions, Greek, Egyptian, and Mithraic, finally identifying the central 'ascent' section as a product of early Hermeticism. He distances himself here explicitly from Dieterich, who largely ignored the Corpus Hermeticum; but tends to side with him in other important matters. Like Dieterich, B. claims that ML has a significant Stoic element, and that the Mithraic influence is much more than window-dressing, modelling as it does the seven stages of the ascent. Crucial to the first claim is the rôle of *pneuma*, to the second, that of the final encounter with a God in trousers, carrying a calf's shoulder in his right hand. Yet, as his own citations from Philo and St Paul make plain, by the early imperial period *pneuma* had been assimilated into religious discourse without any meaningful link to Stoicism; as for the cult of Mithras, it is far from plain that the ascent does contain seven stages (Preisendanz, for example, seems to have seen only three), and though the Mithras of the Mysteries wears trousers, he is never dressed in a white overgarment, and the object which in certain bye-scenes he holds over Helios' head is not a calf's shoulder but the bull's hindquarter (on a fresco in the recently discovered mithraeum at Hawarti in Syria, indeed, he seems to be threatening Helios with a lighted torch).

More seriously problematical, however, is the choice of explanatory context. It seems to me that Dieterich was quite correct not to see any significant Hermetic influence in the ML. Indeed, I do not believe that there is any unfathomable mystery about the text's general character: the basis is a pneumatic ascent in the tradition of the Chaldaean Oracles, thoroughly assimilated and refashioned by a Graeco-Egyptian expert in the writing of *autopta* (face-to-face visions). Although B. cites Hans Lewy's *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (1978²), he ignores his observation on pp. 209–10 that the pneumatic ascent of ML is exactly that of the *Oracles*. Lewy's case has been recently expanded by Sarah Johnston in an important article likewise cited by B. and ignored. Yet, to mention just three telling features: the very word *apothanatismos* is a technical term in the theurgy of the *Oracles*; some of ML's epithets for Aion are certainly Chaldaean, where this cosmic power is of central (albeit different) importance; the ascending soul in the *Oracles* enters into the doors of the Sun. For B., however, there is no Platonism in ML and, as we all know, the Oracles are Platonic. Moreover, although B. is of course aware of the recipes in the magical papyri for *autopta*, he makes no special examination of them, ignoring their use of the expression 'You will see . . .' and their foible for presenting the reader with imaginary scenarios. In fine, it is as though B., who once did a considerable amount of work on the Corpus Hermeticum, has not been able to free himself from a conviction then formed, even when the work of others has shown that there are more plausible contexts for ML. That said, B.'s rich and learned commentary will be an indispensable aid to anyone attempting to study or teach this complex and enigmatic text.

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