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Σπήλαιον καλῶσι τὸν τόπον: Justin the Philosopher and the Mithraic Cave

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Justin the Philosopher, a second-century Christian author, discusses the cult of Mithras in his works *First Apology on behalf of the Christians* and *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. Justin's portrayal of Mithraic customs is traditionally interpreted in the light of his conception of *imitatio diabolica*, as the ἀρχή of pagan myths and beliefs. To illustrate the theory of diabolical imitation, Justin touches upon several features of Mithraic rituals and provides us with a few indications of Mithraic ethical teachings. Two curious accounts of Mithraic cave shrines in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (Justin. *Dial.* 70, 1–3; 78, 6) have not been closely examined by previous researchers and require our special attention. Justin draws a parallel between the Mithraic cave shrines and the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 33, 13–16), focusing on the prophet's words concerning a cave and a cliff as he finds them analogous to Mithraic sanctums. Remarkably, Justin never refers to Mithraic temples as caves, but only as places, called so by Mithraists. He does not claim that the devil has taught Mithraists to perform rituals in caves, but insists that he has taught them to name their sanctuaries caves. Justin's wording exposes his effort to accentuate the difference between the object (a shrine) and its name (cave). This indicates that Justin believed that Mithraists did not use natural caves as their sanctuaries, despite his knowledge of other aspects of this cult.

Keywords: cave shrines, *mithraea*, Mithraism, prophecies, *imitatio diabolica*, Christian apology.

Justin the Philosopher, a second-century Christian apologist and martyr, is the foremost Christian author to mention Mithraic rites. He discusses the cult of Mithras in his works *First Apology on behalf of the Christians* and *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. Justin

portrays Mithras' worship in the Roman Empire, along with other pagan cults, as an example of *imitatio diabolica* — a demonic imitation of Old Testament prophecies and the evil one's attempts to deceive people and hinder the Christian faith.¹ Having heard the words of the prophets, argues Justin, the devil devised pagan myths of gods and heroes in such a fashion as to make prophecies and stories about Christ just as believable as mythological miracles and fables (Just. *Apol.* 1, 54, 1–2). However, the devil and the demons failed to accurately replicate the life of Christ in those myths, as they could not understand the true meaning of the prophecies (Justin, *Apol.* 1, 54, 4).

To prove his theory of demonic imitation, Justin refers to several Greek myths resembling the stories of ascension or birth of Jesus (Just. *Apol.* 1, 21, 1–4; 1, 54, 6–10; *Dial.* 69, 2–3). Furthermore, he illustrates the demonic imitation of prophecies and the life of Christ by touching on Mithraic beliefs and rites. Although Justin never describes Mithras' worship extensively, his works give us useful testimonies of Mithraic rituals,² as well as a few indications of Mithraic ethical teachings (Justin. *Dial.* 70, 2–3).

Justin the Philosopher's testimonies of Mithraism are generally analysed in consideration of Mithraic realia, implied by likening the customs of Mithraists to the Old Testament prophecies and the Christian life. The present research aims to analyse two mentions of the Mithras' cult in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, paying particular attention to the author's accounts of Mithraic cave shrines. The author of this paper does not seek to parse the reasons behind mentioning *mithraea* in the *Dialogue*, but to analyse the manner in which Justin depicts these shrines. This paper does not aim to discuss any other mentions of Mithraic customs in the writings of Justin the Philosopher.

Mithraic sanctuaries are found not only in natural caves but also in artificial ones, such as vaults or chambers and buildings designed to resemble natural caves.³ Architectural *mithraea* are more commonly found in urban areas, unlike those in natural caves, which are more typically placed in rural and mountainous regions (Claus 2001, 42–44). Neoplatonist Porphyry thoroughly describes these sanctums. He calls *mithrea* the symbols of the universe and speaks of their structure, which coincides with cosmical elements (Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 6, 24). Findings in *mithrea* confirm Porphyry's testimony.

In the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Justin defends Christianity from the attacks of the Jews, represented by Trypho and his argumentation. When Trypho remarks that the life of Christ bears a likeness to pagan myths, he reproaches Christians for repeating the senseless beliefs of the Greeks (67, 2). In turn, Justin mentions examples of Dionisos, Herakles and Mithras (69, 2–3, 70, 1–3), interpreting them from the standpoint of *imitatio diabolica*. In this manner, he associates the words of the prophets Daniel (Dan. 2, 34.) and Isaiah (Isa. 33, 13–16) with several features of Mithraism:

“Ὅταν δὲ οἱ τὰ τοῦ Μίθρου μυστήρια παραδιδόντες λέγωσιν ἐκ πέτρας γεγενῆσθαι αὐτόν, καὶ σπήλαιον καλῶσι τὸν τόπον ἔνθα μεῖν τοὺς πειθομένους αὐτῷ παραδιδούσιν, ἐνταῦθα οὐχὶ τὸ εἰρημένον ὑπὸ Δαναίηλ, ὅτι λίθος ἄνευ χειρῶν ἐτμήθη ἐξ ὄρους μεγάλου, μεμυῆσθαι

¹ For a more detailed account on *imitatio diabolica* and its significance in the writings of Justin Martyr, see Borgeaud 2010, 80–95.

² In his *First Apology on behalf of the Christians* (1.66.3–4) Justin describes a rite resembling the Mithraic custom of common meals, well documented by Mithraic iconography and archaeological findings in Mithraic sanctums. For a more detailed discussion, see Claus 2001, 108–113; Alvar 2008, 354.

³ For a more detailed account on types of *mithraea* based on Mithraic iconography, see Campbell 1968, 7–8.

αὐτοὺς ἐπίσταμαι, καὶ τὰ ὑπ' Ἡσαΐου ὁμοίως, οὗ καὶ τοὺς λόγους πάντας μιμήσασθαι ἐπεχειρήσαν· Δικαιοπραξίας γὰρ λόγους καὶ παρ' ἐκείνοις λέγεσθαι ἐτεχνάσαντο. Τοὺς δὲ εἰρημένους λόγους τοῦ Ἡσαΐου ἀναγκαιῶς ἀνιστορήσω ὑμῖν, ὅπως ἐξ αὐτῶν γνῶτε ταῦθ' οὕτως ἔχειν. Εἰσι δὲ οὗτοι· Ἀκούσατε οἱ πόρρωθεν, ἃ ἐποίησα· γνώσονται οἱ ἐγγίζοντες τὴν ἰσχύν μου. Ἀπέστησαν οἱ ἐν Σιών ἄνομοι· λήψεται τρόμος τοὺς ἀσεβεῖς. Τίς ἀναγγελεῖ ὑμῖν τὸν τόπον τὸν αἰώνιον; Πορευόμενος ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ, λαλῶν εὐθείαν ὁδόν, μισῶν ἀνομίαν καὶ ἀδικίαν, καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἀφωσιωμένος ἀπὸ δώρων, βαρθύνων ὧτα ἵνα μὴ ἀκούσῃ κρίσιν ἄδικον αἵματος, καμμύνων τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἵνα μὴ ἴδῃ ἀδικίαν· οὗτος οἰκῆσει ἐν ὑψηλῷ σπηλαίῳ πέτρας ἰσχυρᾶς. Ἄρτος δοθήσεται αὐτῷ, καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ αὐτοῦ πιστόν. (Justin. *Dial.* 70, 1–3)

Am I not right to say that, every time those who impart the mysteries of Mithras say he was born of a rock and call the place where they teach his believers to initiate a cave, they have mimicked the words of Daniel that the stone was hewn out of a great mountain without any help of hands? That they have, in a similar way, mirrored the words of Isaiah, whose sayings they attempted to imitate? For they have deftly contrived that the words of righteousness were spoken by them as well. I will faithfully retell you the mentioned sayings of Isaiah so that you may learn from them that it truly is so. These are the words: 'Hear, you who are far off, what I have done. The ones who come near shall acknowledge my might. The impious in Zion have departed. Trembling will seize the godless. Who shall herald to you the everlasting place? The one who walks in righteousness, who speaks the truth, who scorns anomie and injustice, whose hands are clean of bribes. He who stops his ears from hearing the unjust judgement of blood, who shuts his eyes from looking at unrighteousness. He shall abide in a lofty cave of strong rock. Bread will be given to him, and his water shall be sure.'⁴

At the beginning of this passage, Justin draws a parallel between the stone from the prophecy of Daniel and the petrogenesis of Mithras. In addition, he associates the cave, the place of Mithraic sacraments, with the words of Isaiah. One can easily assume that the prophecy of Daniel is unrelated to the Mithraic cave shrines as it features only a rock hewn out of a great mountain, which resembles the Mithraic petrogenesis. However, the mention of a similar image only a few sentences below (ἐν ὑψηλῷ σπηλαίῳ κτλ.), shows that Justin draws the parallel carefully. His references cannot be incidental as the first introduces the listeners to the matter and prepares them for the second one. We ought to assume that he found a great resemblance between the two prophecies, and we should not consider them separately. For Justin, seemingly, the cave could have resembled the mountain, from which the stone was cut out in the Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan. 2, 31–35). Hence, Justin mentions the words of Isaiah concerning a cave and a cliff as he finds them analogous to Mithraic shrines as well. Mentioning the cave must have reminded the Christians of the birth of Jesus. Moreover, when describing the story of the nativity of Jesus to Trypho, Justin tells that the child was born in a cave near Bethlehem (*Dial.* 78, 5).

At the beginning of the above-cited passage Justin argues that Mithraists simulate all the words of Isaiah, seeking to imitate the righteousness of the prophesied Messiah. That suggests that Justin saw a parallel between Isaiah's prophecy and Mithraic ethical teachings. The lack of Mithraic mythology, as well as the paucity of allusions to Mithraic morality in the narrative sources, greatly hampers the reconstruction of Mithraic ethics.⁵

⁴ All translations mine.

⁵ Porphyry of Tyre gives a short account of Mithraic ethics, analogous to Justin's remarks: καθαρὰς ἔχειν τὰς χεῖρας παραγγέλλουσιν ἀπὸ παντὸς λυπηροῦ καὶ βλαπτικοῦ καὶ μυσαροῦ, καὶ ὡς μύστη, καθαρτικοῦ

During the following day of the dialogue, Justin retells the passage from Isaiah to further explain the correlation between the prophecy and the Mithraic cave shrines:

‘Ὅτι δὲ Ἡσαΐας καὶ περὶ τοῦ συμβόλου τοῦ κατὰ τὸ σπήλαιον προεκεκλήρυξε, ἀνιστόρησα ὑμῖν, ἔφη, καὶ δι’ αὐτοὺς δὲ τοὺς σήμερον σὺν ὑμῖν ἐλθόντας πάλιν τῆς περικοπῆς ἐπιμνησθήσομαι, εἶπον· καὶ ἀνιστόρησα ἦν καὶ προέγραψα ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἡσαΐου περικοπὴν, εἰπὼν διὰ τοὺς λόγους ἐκείνους τοὺς τὰ Μίθρα μυστήρια παραδιδόντας, ἐν τόπῳ ἐπικαλουμένῳ παρ’ αὐτοῖς σπηλαίῳ μνεῖσθαι ὑπ’ αὐτῶν, ὑπὸ διαβόλου ἐνεργηθῆναι εἰπεῖν.

(*Dial.* 78, 6)

‘I have already told you’, said I, ‘that Isaiah had foretold the symbol of the cave. However, for those who have joined you today, I will quote the passage once again.’ I repeated the mentioned fragment, saying that the devil had, on account of those words of Isaiah, urged those who transmit the mysteries of Mithras to say that they initiate people in the mysteries in a place they call a cave.

It is conspicuous that Justin never unveils any detail about Mithraic customs of performing rituals in caves, and never refers to Mithraic temples as caves, but as places, called so by Mithraists (σπήλαιον καλῶσι τὸν τόπον..., ἐν τόπῳ ἐπικαλουμένῳ παρ’ αὐτοῖς σπηλαίῳ). In *Dial.* 78, 6. the author explicitly mentions the name of Mithraic temples, insisting that it originates from the mention of a cave in the book of Isaiah (Isa. 33, 16). The words διὰ τοὺς λόγους ἐκείνους should be interpreted as the devil’s imitation of Isaiah’s prophecy: the devil has, on account of those words of Isaiah, moved Mithraists to say that they initiate novices in places they call caves. Justin does not claim that the devil has taught Mithraists to perform rituals in caves but that he has brought them to *name* their sanctuaries caves.⁶

Justin turns to be the only author to insist on this designation of Mithraic sanctums. Porphyry of Tyre mentions caves, both natural and artificial, and gives a thorough explanation of the tradition of consecrating them.⁷ Still, neither he nor the other authors specify which kind of *mithrea* they have in mind, when portraying Mithraic customs. This might indicate that the nature of a shrine was insignificant for their arguments. However, some Christian authors give brief descriptions of Mithraic caves, depicting them as dark and unholy places.⁸

In contrast to that, Justin does not disclose any detail about the shrines, save for mentioning their names. The word σπήλαιον is always followed by a verb of appellation (καλέω, ἐπικαλέω) or utterance (λέγω). Justin does not use the word cave for Mithraic temples on his own, but solely when he emphasizes that the Mithraists use it. His choice of words points out to his effort to highlight the contrast between the object (a shrine)

ὄντος τοῦ πυρός, οἰκεῖα νίπτρα προσάγουσι, παραιτησάμενοι τὸ ὕδωρ ὡς πολεμοῦν τῷ πυρὶ. καθαίρουσι δὲ καὶ τὴν γλῶσσαν τῷ μέλιτι ἀπὸ παντὸς ἀμαρτωλοῦ. ὅταν δὲ τῷ Πέρσῃ προσάγῃ μελί ὡς φύλακι καρπῶν, τὸ φυλακτικὸν ἐν συμβόλῳ τίθενται (Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15–16)

⁶ εἰπὼν... τοὺς τὰ Μίθρα μυστήρια παραδιδόντας... ὑπὸ διαβόλου ἐνεργηθῆναι εἰπεῖν... ἐν τόπῳ ἐπικαλουμένῳ παρ’ αὐτοῖς σπηλαίῳ μνεῖσθαι ὑπ’ αὐτῶν.

⁷ δι’ ἄντρων καὶ σπηλαίων εἶτ’ οὖν αὐτοφυῶν εἶτε χειροποιήτων τὰς τελετὰς ἀποδιδόναι (Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 6).

⁸ E. g. *qui cum initiatur in spelaeo, in castris vere tenebrarum* (Tert. *De corona* 15, 3); *sacra vero eius in speluncis abditis tradunt ut semper obscuro tenebrarum squalore demersi gratiam splendidi ac sereni luminis vitent* (Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 5.)

and its name (cave). This distinction seems to be very significant for his views on diabolic imitation and falsity of paganism.

Justin the Philosopher's testimonies of Mithraic symbolism and rituality, as well as his examples of the resemblances between Mithraism and Old Testament prophecies, undoubtedly prove his knowledge of the cult. The above-cited passages seem to prove that Justin, not having precise knowledge of the entirety of Mithraic customs, believed that Mithraists did not use natural caves as their sanctuaries. Having learned of cave shrines, but not of those in natural caves, Justin interpreted this discrepancy according to his concept of diabolical imitation — the true reason for naming Mithraic temples caves was the devil's attempt to entice people away from Christianity by abusing the words of the prophets. This seems to have remained unnoticed by previous commentators. Moreover, from Justin's point of view, this might have been proof of the falsehood and erroneousness of paganism — striving to imitate Christianity, pagans misname their most sacred places.

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