

2021 Solstice Greeting

Originating in the pre-Zoroastrian worship of Mithra, the God of Sun, but popularized by Zoroastrians, Shab-e Yalda (Yalda Night) celebrates sunrise after the longest night of the year. Ancient Persians believed that evil forces were strongest on the longest and darkest night of the year, so they kept vigil together, awaiting the Solstice dawn. In some traditions, each guest made a wish and then randomly opened Hafez's book of poems and recites the poem, which is believed to be an interpretation to the wish. The appearance of the light of dawn was celebrated with drumming and dancing.



Shab-e Yalda, also known as Chelle continues to be celebrated not only by Persians, but also in Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan as well as by Kurds and Aseris. Traditionally, family and friends gather to eat the fresh fruits particularly pomegranates whose red color symbolizes the crimson hues of dawn and the glow of life. Often they sit around a low table covered with a blanket under which to keep their legs warm.



According to the pre-Zoroastrian myth, Mithra was born bearing a torch and armed with a knife beside a sacred stream and under a sacred tree, a child of the earth itself. He soon rode, and later killed, the life-giving cosmic bull, whose blood fertilizes all vegetation. The dead bull's tail turned into a sheaf of wheat, symbolizing the end of the prior cycle and rebirth in the new growing season to come.



Mithra (Sanskrit Mitra) dates to the Vedas in the Indian sub-continent from 1400 B.C. Zoroastrianism is a mono-theistic religion, but Mithra was assimilated as a guardian of prosperity and protector of the sanctity of agreements by which he was believed to maintain the cosmic order. Mithraism was reinvented as a mystery cult in Rome during the first to fourth centuries. Mithraic temples were built throughout the empire as far away as Britain. Mithraism was popular, particularly among soldiers, and was, for a time, competitive with then nascent Christianity. Mithraism faded after Christianity was made the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380 C.E. by the Edict of Thessalonica, which also prohibited other forms of worship. In Roman times Mithra was known as the Lord of Light and directly connected with the Sol (the sun), sometimes worshiped together as Sol Invictus.



Some myths just refuse to die! Ridley Scott's new science fiction series "Raised with Wolves" on HBO Max centers around a religious order known as the Mithraic. Pablo Picasso said, "great artists steal" and Ridley Scott has quite accurately stolen the central elements of the Mithras mystery cult at the height of the Roman Empire, replete with symbols of SOL, as above and below.



As long as their names are spoken, myths will be reinvented. Unlike myths, phenomena such as the Solstice are elemental. However, the Solstice is not entirely immutable, but that story will have to wait until next year.