THE MITHRAS INSCRIPTIONS OF SANTA PRISCA
AND THE NEW TESTAMENT *

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The inscriptions discovered in a Mithras sanctuary under the Church of Santa Prisca on the Aventine in Rome, which have now finally been published by M. J. VERMASEREN in his excavation report 1), prove to be informative for the understanding of certain concepts of the New Testament. While up to now the written materials of and information about the hellenistic Mithras cult consisted of votive inscriptions, and references and allusions of poets and church fathers 2), these new inscriptions give us a glimpse of the mithraic cult itself, as it existed in the second century in Rome. It is this late date of the inscriptions which at first sight seems to make impossible any comparison with the New Testament. The editors have shown that the part of the building which housed the sanctuary belonged originally to the "Privata Traiani", while the sanctuary itself was only instituted under the emperor Severus. A graffito which can be dated from the year 202 A.D. shows that the sanctuary was in use at that time. About 220 A.D. the Mithraeum was renovated and considerably enlarged. The paintings and inscriptions of the older phase were painted over and replaced by new ones.

The editor provides the following general description of the

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2) The texts have been collected by F. Cumont, Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra, vol. I-II. Bruxelles 1899. 1896.
inscriptions 1): "All the lines of the texts are in metrical form, mostly in hexameters or pentameters, but in a few cases an iambic senarius is used. The texts were painted at comparatively regular distances from each other, if at times somewhat roughly aligned, and the letters are of equal height. On one occasion a letter was omitted and the painter subsequently added it above the word. Occasionally there are two or three lines which appear to follow each other but which nevertheless do not form a sequence, and these may be quotations from hymns or poems whose full content would be well known to the initiates. It is also possible that only the initial lines of the hymns were recorded, but proof is naturally difficult and a single line could be an odd quotation or it could be specially composed for this sanctuary."

The inscriptions which are most interesting for us were part of the older decoration. There are several indications for the assumption that the inscriptions go back to older traditions. In all cases we have to do with cultic material, in spite of the fact that part of the material is poetic in origin. Cultic material, however, is always tied to tradition. Greek and oriental influence is evident in the spelling 2), in the names of the initiates 3), and in the paintings 4). One must, therefore, come to the conclusion that the Mithraeum was instituted by way of a cult transfer. This does not exclude the development of peculiarly Roman forms, but we can hardly go wrong in supposing that the decisive cultic materials and mythological concepts date back to older times. In general we can say that the syncretistic nature of hellenistic Mithraism once so pertinently stated by A. D. Nock 5) is confirmed by the new material. "His (sc. Mithras') worship had indeed entered the Greek world on a national basis, starting, as it must have done, with groups of Persians who remained in Asia Minor after the victories of Alexander; an indication of this remains in the use of 'Perses' as the title for the fifth grade of initiation. Nevertheless, the Mith-

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3) Ib., pp. 184 ff.