
Bull the Savior: Jehovah and the Symbolism of the Bull

PROFESSOR BOYLE: I'm Nancy Boyle and Dr. Bolchazy is with me again today to discuss the symbolism of the bull in Indo-European cultures. The title of this program is "The Bull as Savior." Dr. Bolchazy, what connotations does the bull have?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The bull is a god whom people ate in sacramental communion, in whose blood their sins were washed, on whose head they put their sins, and a god who would bring them eternal bliss. Also, it was from the bull that all creation sprung. As the god El, the bull is identified with Jehovah in the Bible.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Do you mean the bull is another name for Jehovah in the Bible?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The Hebrew word for "bull" is abir. The word abir is used for Jehovah in four passages: Genesis 49:24; Isaiah 1:24 and 49:26; and in Psalm 132.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Why haven't I noticed these passages in which Jehovah is called a bull?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The name abir in Hebrew existed only in ancient manuscripts of the Bible. In later manuscripts, the name fell out.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: In other words, you're saying that it was deleted. Jehovah—a bull! That is intriguing. What was the reason for calling Jehovah a bull— was it simply figurative language?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Figurative language, yes. This is true in several passages in the Bible in which the bull is a symbol of virility, life, and strength. But in the four passages I cited, the reason is different.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: What is that?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The early Hebrews, it seems, identified their god with the chief god of Canaan. His name was El, and he was a bull god. From El comes Elohim—one of the two names used for the Hebrew god in Genesis. From the fact that El was a bull god, the Hebrew god is called a bull, abir. Sometimes Jehovah is called "iron-horned bull" as in 1 Kings 2:11. The Sumerian god Enlil was also a bull god. He was the god of storms and fertility.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So, Hebrew theology was influenced by their surrounding cultures.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Naturally. During the Hebrew sojourn in Egypt, the Hebrews came in contact with another bull god—Apis, whose cult is extremely interesting to us belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Why so?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Apis was the reincarnation of Osiris. Osiris, like Dionysus, was the god of vegetation and fertility who died seasonally every year. Apis, as the god's reincarnation, was killed annually and a new bull would be chosen to be honored and worshipped as Apis. Before Apis was killed, an interesting ritual took place. The Egyptians spoke over its head all evils and in so doing put their sins on his head.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Apis was the Egyptians' scapegoat.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, similar in function to the scapegoat of the Hebrews.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So, Apis, the bull, was the god Osiris reincarnated and killed again to take away man's sins. You also stated that the bull comprised sacramental communion.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, this is true in the Dionysiac mysteries.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: What is the connection between Dionysus and a bull?

DR. BOLCHAZY: If you recall, when the Titans at the instigation of Hera tried to kill Dionysus, Dionysus turned himself into a bull. According to one tradition, Dionysus was killed in the form of a bull. So, in the performance of the Dionysiac mysteries, a bull would be killed and sacrificed. The faithful would eat its flesh, believing they were eating their god Dionysus.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: A sacramental communion.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, eating the god in this sacramental communion made it possible for the faithful to be transubstantiated into the god himself. In other words, the faithful as a result of this sacramental communion would become gods themselves. Thus we read that a follower of Dionysus in the underworld was told: "Theos Egenou Ex Anthropou" ("Thou hast become god out of man").

PROFESSOR BOYLE: When were the Dionysiac mysteries practiced?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Roughly speaking, from the fifth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: So the Dionysiac mysteries were at one point contemporaneous with Christianity.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Not only contemporaneous but also rival to Christianity—not only because of its sacramental communion, but also because of a promise of eternal bliss to the faithful and eternal punishments to those who refused to accept Dionysus as their savior.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: You also said the bull was connected with baptism,.

DR. BOLCHAZY: This kind of baptism was called taurobolium: from the word taurus (the bull).

PROFESSOR BOYLE: How was this baptism performed?

DR. BOLCHAZY: One about to be baptized would go into a pit with wood grating over it. A bull, wearing flowers on its head and a gold leaf on its forehead, would be stabbed with a sacred spear. The blood of the bull would then flow down over the person in the pit.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Being bathed in the blood of the bull. What did that symbolize?

DR. BOLCHAZY: We have the sacred formula spoken at this ceremony which tells us the meaning of taurobolium: “Taurobolio in aeternum renatus” (“You are reborn unto eternity by means of this taurobolium”). You have here a baptism of blood by which you were initiated into the sacred mysteries and into a new life, and promised immortality of bliss.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Was this taurobolium used in the Dionysiac mysteries?

DR. BOLCHAZY: No, so far as we know, the taurobolium was used in Mithraism and also in the mysteries of Cybele, the great mother goddess imported to Rome in 205 B.C.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Were these religions contemporary with Christianity?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The earliest evidence we have for taurobolium is second century B.C., and the last description of it is in the fourth century A.D. by Prudentius, a Christian writer.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Were there other aspects to initiation besides the taurobolium?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Oh, yes. In the mysteries of Mithras, for example, one had to undergo eighty trials: fire, water, fast, thirst, scourging, and also solitude in a cave. The cave seems to have symbolized not only the place where the god Mithras was born, but also the new world into which the individual was reborn.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: How about the mysteries of Cybele?

DR. BOLCHAZY: The initiation or baptism would take place once a year, at the vernal equinox in spring. During this time, Attis, the consort of Cybele, would suffer death and experience resurrection. During his death, the faithful fasted and mourned. Then the bull would be killed in whose blood you would be baptized. Then the resurrection of Attis would be celebrated with a communal meal. The communion consisted of eating from a drum and drinking from a cymbal—both instruments used in the celebration of the death and resurrection of Attis.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Wasn't this also the religion in which men castrated themselves?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes, those who wanted to become priests of Cybele would castrate themselves, just as Attis had done.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: That's literally making yourself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven.

DR. BOLCHAZY: I guess so.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Well, so far, Dr. Bolchazy, we've seen that eating of the bull was a sacramental communion through which one became not only united with the god but became the god himself. And, of course, in the blood of the bull one became baptized and washed from sins. You've also shown us how the bull was identified with the chief god of the Canaanites, El, with Dionysus, Osiris, and Attis. Are there any more?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Zeus also appeared in the form of a bull. It was as a bull that he seduced Europa. Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, was also associated with the Minoan bull. And on the island of Crete in Minoan culture, the bull was the sun and the cow was the moon—the two deities responsible for rain and vegetation.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: There is one further point we haven't discussed, and that's the bull as the creator of the universe.

DR. BOLCHAZY: This belief existed in Mithraism, which was a very popular mystery religion during the first three centuries of Christianity. There are several important parallels that I think would be of interest to us Christians.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Mithras was an ancient Persian god, son of the sun god. He was born of a rock in a cave. At his birth, shepherds appeared in adoration. He is important in the history of ethics since he was the god who sanctioned friendship and contracts. As a god of friendship and contracts, he played an important civilizing role.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: What was his connection with the bull?

DR. BOLCHAZY: Mithras had to sacrifice the god Soma, who was a bull. He did this unwillingly and from representations of it we see that he did it with sorrow and pathos in his face. But he had to do it in order to bring this world into existence. From the bull's tail and blood arose ears of corn and the vine, then also trees and plants and the four elements—fire, water, earth and air as well as the seasons. From the seed of this divine bull, animals and all living creatures sprung.

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Mithras unwillingly sacrificed this bull god for mankind's welfare.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Yes. In one hymn we read: "Thou, O Mithras, hast saved us also by pouring out the blood eternal."

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Rather strange, a god sacrificing a god for mankind's welfare!

DR. BOLCHAZY: There's another god credited with something similar. In John we read: "For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son."

PROFESSOR BOYLE: Thank you Dr. Bolchazy.

DR. BOLCHAZY: Thank you, Professor Boyle.

[Return to the Table of Contents](#)