

## MAZDAK.

The Persian Bolshevik of the sixth century, whose teachings had a far-reaching influence upon the economic, political and religious life of Western Asia.

BY PAUL LUTTINGER, M. D.

### I.

**I**N the colorful and riotous history of Asia, there are few events which surpass Mazdakism in significance and timely interest. And among the great leaders who stood at the crib, if not at the cradle of civilization, there were not many endowed with a more magnetic personality and whose end was more tragic than that of Mazdak, the son of Bamdad. To this day, his teachings still find expounders and disciples among the Persians and Arabs; and the readiness with which Central and Western Asia is embracing the tenets of Russian Bolshevism could be traced to the profound impression made by the Persian Communists of the sixth century. Archeological findings, as far west as Tripoli, show the extent of Mazdakian propaganda and the high place which Mazdak's name occupied among the Gnostics of the West, might explain the infiltration of communist ideas among the Bohemian and other mediæval sects of Central Europe.

Yet, nothing is more pathetic than the heavy shroud of oblivion which has settled upon Mazdakism and the widespread ignorance concerning one of the phenomenal epochs in the history of civilization which prevails among modern European and American students.

A gigantic political, economic and religious movement which rocked the foundations of the powerful Persian Empire of the Sassanides and the Abassides and drew into its tumultuous vortex the largest part of Western Asia, remains unmentioned in our textbooks of history. The Encyclopedias do not devote any special articles to Mazdak, and the Britannica only mentions his name in a casual way, under Persia. To complete this conspiracy of silence, Mazdakism is completely omitted from the Students' abridged

edition of Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Wm. Smith, LL. D., Editor, American Book Co.) under the specious pretext that "the theological disputes of the oriental sects" would not interest the student.

Theological disputes, forsooth! One might as well refer to Russian Bolshevism, of which Mazdakism was an early forerunner, as a theological quibble!

This inexplicable failure of modern historians to understand the communist movement initiated by Mazdak, might explain the lamentable lack of comprehension of events of a similar character which are swaying Persia, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Turkestan, Russia and Egypt at the present day. There is no surer method of mastering contemporary conditions than the diligent perusal and analysis of similar occurrences in the past.

That Mazdakism was considered by its contemporaries as a movement of prime importance can be readily ascertained from the large space it occupies in the chronicles of the Greek and Oriental historians of the sixth and succeeding centuries. Theophanes, Procopius, Eutychius, Tabari, Mirkhond, Abulfeda and others devote long dissertations to Mazdak, Babak and the various insurrections engendered by their teachings. The famous Persian poet, Firdousi, celebrates the stirring events in his glorious national epic, the *Shahnameh*, in stanzas that have become immortal.

The real facts, however, like those of the modern communist movement, have been obscured by a mass of uncritical narrative which varies, not only according to the nationalistic or economic prejudices of the respective historians; but shows contradictions of the most glaring character in the text of one and the same writer.

From this maze of controversial, tendencies and legendary reports, I have attempted to glean the few historical facts and to interpret them in the light of modern criticism. My aim is to visualize the state of affairs which gave rise to Mazdakism, to analyze the causes of its meteoric propaganda and apparent failure and, thereby, contribute to the deeper study of modern movements of the same social and economic character.

## II.

The state of Persia at the time of Mazdak was not unlike that of Russia during the European War. The last half of the fifth century might be characterized as a period of famine, pestilence.

atrocious religious persecutions, civil war and foreign invasion. The treaty of 422, between Persia and Constantinople, had guaranteed, to Christians, the free exercise of their religion; but Yezdegerd II, a zealous Zoroastrian, embarked upon a series of relentless persecutions and savage pogroms against Manicheans, Nestorians and Jews. They were forcibly impressed into military service, forbidden to use fire in their dwellings and houses of prayer and, under penalty of death, were interdicted the burial of their dead. The Jews were not allowed to observe the Sabbath, as a day of rest, and could not practice the ritual slaughtering of cattle in public slaughter-houses. The murder of Christian bishops and Jewish rabbis became a daily occurrence and the persecutions aroused the non-magian population to such an extent that public prayers were offered for the sovereign's death. The legend represents him as having been swallowed by a serpent.

Perozes (459-486) went still further in his determination to establish Zoroastrianism as the only religion in Persia. He is said to have been even more cruel than Sapor who had slaughtered 22 bishops with his own hand. The Jews and Christians were declared to be outlaws and were turned over to the mercy of the magi; their children were forcibly removed to the fire-altars for instruction in the Persian religion. Half of the Jewish population of Ispahan were slaughtered and Huna Mari, son of Mar Zutra I, was publicly executed, in spite of the fact that his father was the officially recognized prince of captivity. A brother of Perozes, sickened by these atrocities, rose in rebellion; the ensuing civil war further decimating the distracted population. The crazed citizens of Ctesiphon, the new capital of the Empire, firmly believed that the year 468, "the wicked year" would see the destruction of the world. In the meantime, the Albanians had invaded the northern provinces of the Empire and were reducing to ashes the cities in their path. The Armenians who had embraced Christianity were forced to abjure, *en masse*, after several unsuccessful insurrections. Even Vahan, the ranking Armenian prince, embraced Zoroastrianism; receiving, as the price of his apostasy, the position of *Sparapet* (Commander-in-chief) of Persarmenia. Before the Albanians could be checked, a fresh enemy, the White Huns (Ephthalites, Hailab, Nephthalites) swooped down upon the eastern boundary and with fire and sword decimated the population and burned the crops. Finally, the wild Arabs, from the south, began those fierce periodic raids which, hundred and fifty years later, culminated in the con-

quest of Persia by the Mohammedans. In order to have a free hand with his "unbelieving" subjects, Perozes had to submit to the terms of the Hun and pay an enormous indemnity and yearly tribute to the Khan.

Furthermore, as if nature had conspired to ruin the pleasant land of Fars and to destroy its miserable inhabitants, the most dreaded scourge of the East, a drought of seven years, accompanied by its ghastly twins, famine and pestilence, spread its deadly mantle over the Persian Empire. The frightful consequences of such a calamity could only be visualized by those who have witnessed periods of absolute aridity. The earth becomes as dry as parchment and the garden soil takes on the hardness of concrete; the grass, and later all vegetable life, even the trees, disappear and the smiling countryside is changed into a dull, lifeless desert. The wells and cisterns dry up; the fountains and rivulets cease to flow until the largest rivers are reduced to mere threads of the life-giving fluid, dejectedly trickling between its anemic banks. Gaunt Famine now stalks in and the poor begin to die by the hundreds and thousands. The unburied corpses fill the air with pestilential emanations and the plague carries away those who had been spared by hunger. The rich who manage to sustain life by stealth, on food and water imported from other countries, succumb to the contagion which issues from their poorer brethren and as the aridity lasts, neither wealth nor position is of any further avail. In those rare instances of absolute drought, lasting for more than a year, even the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air perish: wild animals and reptiles succumb to the inexorable aridity. And in order to complete the desolation of the land, the locusts, those winged messengers of God's wrath, had destroyed the vegetation from the few remaining oases of the Persian desert.

Perozes is said to have imported corn from Greece, India and Abyssinia and that for every poor man who died of hunger, he threatened to execute a rich man from the same community. This would seem to indicate that while the poor must have suffered terribly, the wealthier classes had managed to get along pretty well: Persian profiteers were probably as conspicuous as our own modern brand.

No sooner did the famine relent, than the persecutions redoubled in fury; but Perozes realized, like so many tyrants before and after him, that he could not prevail against the spiritual convictions of his victims. Many Jews emigrated to more tolerant

countries. Joseph Rabba led a vast number of pilgrims to India, where they still maintain their community life. Being unable to extirpate Christianity, Perozes reluctantly permitted the schismatic Christians of his realm to call a synod (483 A. D.) and recognized the Nestorian sect as the official Nazarene church of his dominions. He, thus, succeeded in splitting off a large contingent from the church of Rome; a breach that has not healed to this day.

A new invasion of the Huns resulted in the death of Perozes and the accession of Balash who had to pay a heavy indemnity and continued to bleed the country white by constant civil war against his brother Zarech. It is interesting to note that Kush-newaz, the chief of the White Huns not only used trenches in his war against Persia, but had anticipated modern warfare by the judicious use of "propaganda behind the front." This did not consist of the famous "fourteen points" but in the exhibition of the treaty that Perozes had broken.

Finally, the people of Persia, unable to endure their miserable state, rose against the King and nobles and proclaimed his nephew, Kavadh, who had fled to the Ephthalites and who obligingly furnished him with an army to obtain the throne.

The nature of the revolution which put Kavadh (Cabades I) on the throne seems to have been entirely unrecognized by the Greek chroniclers of the time. Those who copied them must also have had only a rudimentary knowledge of economic problems. After half a century of civil war, persecutions, famine and pestilence aggravated by the rapacity of the magnates, the revolution could only be explained on economic grounds. Thus, we learn from other sources that the land tax consisted in as high as one-third to one-half of the produce and that the farmer was not allowed to touch his crop or even the grape on the vine before the tax-gatherer had taken his share. Tabari tells us a characteristic story of King Kavadh and the peasant woman who did not dare pluck a fruit from the tree, in her own garden, for fear of the government. The people were groaning under the burden of maintaining the vast multitude of tax-gatherers, priests, military and civil officials. The reforms later introduced by Chosroes show how the poor peasant and artisan were oppressed by the wealthy, and also the rampant venality of the officials and the widespread bribing of judges and governors. He is said to have executed eighty tax-collectors in one day, for extortion. At the time of Kavadh's accession, however,

the people's sufferings and indignation had reached frenzied proportions and the time for superficial reforms had passed. Something absolutely radical had to be done and it had to be done immediately. The failure to understand this desperate state of the people of Persia has led the chroniclers of the time to also misjudge the nature of the second revolution which drove Kavadh out of the capital; a counter-revolution led by the magnates and the clergy. Finally, the proper comprehension of the two revolutions would explain the third which put the crown back on Kavadh's head and also the conflicting policies of his reign.

### III.

The revolution which put Kavadh on the throne was a spontaneous uprising of the people in which probably all classes took part. It was not unlike the first revolution against the Czar of Russia. The farmers on account of the taxes, the city dwellers protesting against extortion and mismanagement of the officials; and the magnates because of the weakness of the government and of the king. The first reign of Kavadh lasted about seven years (488-496) and during this time the various elements that took part in the revolution began to realize that it had not fulfilled their respective expectations. A new king was apparently not sufficient to bring about the millenium! The poorer classes had to starve and slave, as before; while the nobles and the wealthy were smarting under the curb which Kavadh was trying to impose upon their rapacity and resisted any reforms which would limit their privileges or income. This must have resulted in more discontent among the people, who were now ripe to listen to any proposition that promised them instant relief. Under the pressure of socialistic agitation, the king had to accede more and more to the demands of the people and alienate to himself the powerful magnates of the empire. These became more and more insolent and arrogant and with the help of the higher clergy must have threatened to depose him. As the nobles grew bolder, the common people became more violent until they no longer were satisfied with socialistic reformers, but gave ear to the Bolsheviki, the communists, who preached a radical change in the social and economic system of Persian society. It is Kavadh's leaning to and final acceptance of the Communists' program, which he recognized as the strongest party, that led to the counter-revolution of the magnates, his deposition and

the accession to the throne (for two years) of his brother Djamasp (496-498).

The cause of the revolution is ascribed by Firdousi to the execution of the Grand-Vizier, Souferai, who had been Prime Minister under the previous reigns and who had ruled the empire with an iron hand until Kavadh became of age. First of all, Kavadh came to the throne long after he was 21. All historians agree that he died in 531 A. D., after a reign of 43 years, aged 82; he must, therefore have been at least 39 years old when he began his first reign. A king, at that age, does not need, nor does he fear, the tutelage of an old man. Secondly, it is not customary for a Oriental people to revolt on account of the somewhat sudden demise of a vizier. The son of Kavadh, Chosroesi, who would have learned from his father's experience, did not hesitate to execute his own Grand-vizier without causing the slightest political ripple. Some two hundred years later, Harun-al-Rashid beheaded his Prime-Minister, Jaafar the Barmecide, together with 1,000 members of his family and, although the reason for this cruelty was never known, nobody stirred against the authority of the Caliph.

There is another reason which renders doubtful the argument of Firdousi and the historians from whom he copied his data. He relates that after his deposition, Kavadh was handed over to Rezmihl, the son of Souferai, so that he might revenge himself upon him for his father's death. Rezmihl not only spared his life, but escaped with the king and five other men to the Heitaliens. Furthermore, in passing through Ahwaz, Kavadh fell in love with the daughter of a Dikhan (freehold farmer), a descendant of Firidoum, the national hero of old Persia who delivered his people from the monster tyrant Zohak. Rezmihl actually wooed the girl (who later became the mother of Chosroes) for his sovereign and brought her to him in his exile. The episode points to the fact that through the endeavors of Rezmihl (who probably belonged to the new party; while his father had been a reactionary) the bulk of the nation which was composed of the dikhans had espoused the cause of the King. It is quite possible that the execution of Souferai should have precipitated the revolt of the nobles, who beheld in his disgrace the fate that was awaiting them; but it cannot be said that it was the cause of the counter-revolution, any more than the murder of Sarajevo was the cause of the European war.

The share of the nobles in the deposition of Kavadh can be

readily appreciated from an incident related by Procopius. While the fate of the king was being discussed, one of his officers, Gunastades, taking out the knife with which he was accustomed to pare his nails and showing it to the assembled chiefs, exclaimed: "You see how small this knife is; yet, it is big enough to accomplish a deed which a little while hence, not twenty thousand men would be able to manage." His advice was not followed; why?

Kavadh's life was spared for the simplest of reasons: The magnates felt themselves too weak and were afraid of the retaliation which would be visited upon them by the communists. They feared the power of Mazdak and the Mazdakites; but who was this man Mazdak?

#### IV.

Mazdak was a native and archimagus of the city of Nishapur, in Khorasan. According to Mirkhond and others, he was born in Persepolis or in Irak. Firdousi calls him an eloquent, educated, intelligent and ambitious man who announced himself as a reformer of the Zoroastrian religion and became the king's Destour, guardian of the treasure and treasurer. The career and deeds of Mazdak do not seem, however, to point to any religious activity. It is not the habit of religious teachers to become treasurers of the realm or Grand-viziers of the king. If he invoked Zoroastrianism at all, it must have been in relation to the economic problems of the country. The various abuses of the Magian church, like those of the Catholic and Orthodox churches in France and Russia, were some of the many causes of the Persian revolution of the sixth century; just as the others contributed to the upheaval of the French and the Bolshevik revolutions (compare the monk Rasputin).

The essential tenets of Mazdakism, as reported by the Greek and Arabian historians (and detractors), seem to have been as follows: All men, by God's providence, were born free and equal; none brought into this world any property or any natural right to possess more than another. Property was, therefore, theft (compare Proudhon's: *la propriété, c'est le vol.*). Property and marriage were human inventions, contrary to the will of God, who requires the equal division of all good things, among all the people, and forbids the appropriation of particular women by individual men. Adultery, incest and theft were really not crimes; but the necessary steps for the re-establishment of the laws of nature, in



a corrupt society. This last view has been distorted by the chroniclers into the express command to commit incest, adultery and theft; while Mazdak simply condones them as products of a corrupted system of society. This "twisting of the truth by knaves to make a trap for fools" has been closely paralleled by the "nationalization-of-women" *canard* sent out broadcast by the enemies of the Russian Bolsheviki.

Mazdak also preached the sacredness of animal life, the abstinence from animal food other than milk, cheese and eggs; simplicity in dress, moderation of all appetites and devotion to the primordial cause of all things. These ascetic and communistic views, akin to the teachings of the Hindu Brahmists, show the desire of Mazdak to revert to the simple life of his forefathers. It is the system of society under which the great Iranian people lived on the central Asiatic plateau, before the great cleavage which resulted in the migration of the two main branches of the Aryans into India and Persia, respectively.

Thus, we see the ascete Mazdak, like our modern teachers Tolstoy and Lenin, preach a doctrine of apparent laxity and self-indulgence; not from base or selfish motives, but from a profound conviction and devotion to truth. Eudoxus of Cnidus, the Greek astronomer who calculated the solar year and invented the sundial had entertained similar views, 400 years before Christ. Naturally enough, Mazdakism was enthusiastically adopted by the young of all ranks; by the lovers of pleasure (by the free-lovers, as we would say, nowadays) and by the great bulk of lower orders, the exploited from time immemorial. But there is one point which is not clear, namely the reason which induced Kavadh to become the most ardent supporter of Mazdakism. What could the king gain by embracing a creed which levelled him with his subjects and absolutely incompatible with the monarchical principle? He was no youngster and he was not poor and still he worked with all his might to introduce Mazdakism as the official state polity of Persia. Upon this point all authorities agree; but upon the circumstances of his conversion and extreme zeal there is either complete silence or contradicting opinions.

Mirkhond conjectures that the confidence of Kavadh was gained through an elaborate and clever trick. An excavation was dug beneath the fire-altar and a metal tube inserted so that it debouched on the altar where the perpetual fire was burning. A confederate was placed in the cavern who, in stentorian tones, invited

the king to approach. Mazdak was then supposed to talk into the fire and the answers he received could not have failed to convince the monarch that the prophet was in direct communication with God; the fire being the symbol and embodiment of the deity. This puerile explanation of a mighty revolutionary movement stands unsupported by the other chroniclers and it is contrary to reason to believe that such an acute mind as Kavadh's could be deceived by a rather coarse imposture, akin to ventriloquism. In Persia, where the priests were past-masters of magic and sleight-of-hand tricks, such rough work could not pass as a miracle. Moreover, the character of Mazdak, from the few details we possess, seems to have been too lofty for such subterfuges and we find nowhere the claim that he was on speaking terms with the Almighty.

According to Firdousi, Mazdak used his great gifts of oratory and sincere persuasion. His account is much more rational, albeit too detailed and partial. There was a great drought and famine; the rich as well as the poor incessantly besieged the king's palace, asking for bread and water. Mazdak, who already seems to have been in attendance at the court (as a minister without portfolio, perhaps), calms the populace by telling them that the king would show them the way to hope. He then went in to the king and asked a series of questions, among them were the following: "A man has been bitten by a snake and his life is in danger. Another man has an antidote, but refuses to give it except at an exorbitant price which the poor man cannot pay; what should be done?" The king replied: "That man is a murderer and should be killed before my door by the relatives of the victim of his greed". The next day, Mazdak asked the king: "A man's feet are bound in chains and he is hungry; what should be the punishment of the man who, having surplus bread, refuses to share it with the famished one?" The king replied: "The miserable wretch is responsible for the hungry man's death by his inactivity and greed!" Mazdak then kissed the ground before the king and going out to the people exclaimed:

"Go wherever there is hidden corn, take each a part and if the price is demanded, destroy the village!"

He gave the example by delivering to the people everything he possessed, himself, and when the guardians of the royal stores complained to the king about the pillage and the latter spoke to Mazdak about it, the latter reminded him of his answers to the two

parables and added: "Surplus of wealth is sinful!" Firdousi continues:

"The king was impressed with the words of Mazdak which *seemed* so true; he saw that his heart and head were full of what the prophets, the priests and chiefs of justice had said in olden times. Mazdak treated old and young as his equals, he took from one and gave to another and the king exalted him over all his servants".

We cannot assume that the king was carried away by youthful enthusiasm; he probably was impressed with the sincerity of Mazdak and specially by the power which he had over the people. He was too good a politician to go against the rising tide and he was anxious to avail himself of the revolution to curb the turbulence and arrogance of the nobility. Thus, we saw, before the European War, the King of Italy hobnobbing with the proletarian *hoi polloi* and declare himself in sympathy with the economic theories of Socialism. It is better to be a socialist king than no king at all!

## V.

The Greek historian Agathias states that the people revolted against Kavadh because he was a tyrant and they preferred his brother Djamasp, because the latter was known for his mildness and love of justice. Tabari, on the other hand, says emphatically that Djamasp did not administer justice satisfactorily. Both statements are vitiated by the fact that Djamasp seems to have been a child who was tenderly treated by Kavadh after the restoration. Everything seems to point to the conclusion that it was the reactionary party of the magnates that deposed Kavadh and that they felt too weak to murder him. Instead of following the advice of Gunastades, the king was cast into the prison known as the *Castle of Oblivion*.

His escape from prison is differently related by the various chroniclers. According to some he escaped by disguising himself as a woman and fled to the Eplthalites who gave him an army with which he reconquered his throne. According to others, his wife seduced the warden and remained in prison, while Kavadh was carried out by a slave, in a bundle of bed-clothes. It is questionable whether he really fled to the Huns or not. From the story of his wooing the Dikhan's daughter and the fact that Djamasp relinquished the crown without putting up any resistance, it seems

that he remained for a considerable time within the country where the bulk of the farming and nationalist elements rallied to his support. The Mazdakites, subsequently, opened the doors of the capital, upon his triumphal return.

It is significant that neither Mazdak nor his followers were molested. One writer claims that Mazdak was also imprisoned; but his adherents rose and freed him by breaking the prison doors.

The attitude of Kavadh towards Mazdakism, after his return, has been variously related. According to some authorities, he remained as zealous as ever; according to others, although an unwavering adherent, he would not countenance any violence. The result being that Mazdakism languished as a harmless speculation of some enthusiasts who did not venture to carry out their theories into practice. Finally, Procopius claims that the crown prince, Chosroes, put a check to the fanaticism of the Mazdakites. Neither view would stand criticism. Chosroes was an infant at the beginning of Kavadh's second reign and the further developments will prove that the communists had not abandoned the principle of direct action. What probably did happen was some kind of a compromise entered upon by the king with the center parties of the farmers by which a *modus vivendi* was established between the moderate elements and the radicals. Later, when the king needed men, officers and money to fight the Romans, the Khazars, the Huns and the Arabs he must have made further concessions to the nobles. These concessions led to the recrudescence of Mazdakite disorders in the third decade of the sixth century.

In the meantime, the astute king must have placated the communists with the usual promises and seems to have amused them and occupied their minds by numerous debates, dissertations, parades and such baubles. The bulk of the population were probably satisfied by a few judicious reforms. There is a record of one of these parades which must have taken place about 520 A. D., during which thirty thousand Mazdakites were reviewed by Kavadh, sitting on a throne outside the city. During this demonstration, Mazdak, according to Firdousi, remarked to the king that the crown prince, Chosroes, did not seem to share the Communistic view of his father. In his Address to the Throne, Mazdak expatiated upon the five vices which deviate the human race from the path of righteousness: jealousy, revenge, anger, necessity and covetousness. All five were due to superfluous wealth and superfluity of women. He, therefore, exhorted the king again to declare the

common ownership of all surplus wealth; he would then witness that all men could become virtuous. The prophet attempted to take the crown prince's hand; but Chosroes withdrew it, indignantly. This incident probably points to an attempt made by the Mazdakites to win Chosroes to their cause or to the crown prince's repudiation of a pact, previously entered upon. Chosroes now asked his father for five months of respite and that on the sixth he would confound the doctrine of Mazdak in a public debate. This shows that the Mazdakites had the upper hand in the affairs of the realm; otherwise force, instead of spiritual arguments, would have been used by their enemies.

At last, the day of the great disputation arrived and a vast throng of people filled the great hall of the king's audience room. The greatest authorities had been assembled by the diligence of Chosroes. Old Hornuzd, the centenarian dean of the Magian priesthood, was induced to leave his retreat in the fastnesses of Khorasan and to lend dignity and weight to the opponents of Mazdakism. Khourrehi-Ardeshir of the University of Istakhar (Persepolis) and the Persistan philosopher, Mihr Ader, had been invited with thirty of the latter's famous disciples. A so-called neutral board composed of the great teachers of the various academies, among whom were Resmihir (*Zer-Mihr?*), Khorrad, Ferrahin, Benhoui and Behzad were to act as judges of the contest.

Arguments advanced by the various debaters against Communism (the points in favor of it are not recorded) sound strangely modern. On reading them, one has the haunting impression that he had read them recently, somewhere; perhaps in the editorial columns of a great metropolitan newspaper or in a backwoods weekly of a prosperous farming county.

One of the mobeds, for instance, exclaims:

"O thou, Mazdak, who seekest the truth! Thou hast introduced a new faith into the world; thou hast put in common women and other property. But how will a son know his sire and how will the father recognize his children? If all were equal in this world and if there were no difference between the great and the small, who would serve and how would power be exercised? Who would work for thee and me and how would the good distinguish themselves from the wicked? When a man dieth, to whom shall his home and fortune belong, if the king and the artisan are equal?"

Another speaker said:

"The world will surely become a desert and I pray God that such a misfortune shall not overtake our glorious Iran!"

One of the debaters asked the following questions:

"When all are masters, who would be the wage-earners? When all will have treasures, who will be the treasurer?"

Finally, the hoary Hormuzd ended with an imprecation:

"Never has any founder of a religion spoken as thou, Mazdak! Thou hast done the secret work of Divs (Devils). Thou leadest man to Hell as thou reckonest not as evil the crimes of the human race!"

According to Firdousi, who reports some of the details of the disputation, the king was convinced of the wickedness of Mazdak's views and turning to Chosroes, said:

"Don't speak to me about Mazdak any more, do as you wish in this matter!" He then delivered into his hands all the Mazdakites, among whom there were 300 nobles. That a debate could have changed Kavadh's views would be as great a fallacy as to believe that he was converted by tricks of prestidigitation. Everything seems to point, on the contrary, to the fact that the Mazdakites won this debate as all others and that their influence began to wane only when other than spiritual arguments were injected into the issue. It is a well known psychological fact that no educated man is ever convinced by a public debate; both sides marshal apparently irrefutable arguments and their "facts" cannot be verified on the spur of the moment. The presence of 300 nobles, among the Mazdakites, would have, in itself, prevented the king from meeting out summary justice. As to the presence of those magnates among the Mazdakites, they can only be explained on the ground of the sympathy that all generous natures have always had for the under-dog. Thus did Prince Kropotkin abandon the Russian Court and throw in his lot with the Communist-Anarchists.

The real causes which led the Mazdakites to jeopardize their standing with the king were of a different nature than theoretical debating. From indirect evidence, these might be classified as general and personal. The general causes were the external wars, the passive and armed resistance of the Christians Arabs and Jews to Mazdakism; while the personal reasons were the advancing age of the monarch, the opposition of Chosroes and the plots for the succession to the throne. Contrary to the chroniclers, all these

factors only made themselves felt towards the end of Kavadh's reign and not at the beginning, as they invariably assert.

## VI.

The influence of foreign wars upon the internal conditions of a country need not be stressed. These wars were probably prevented in the early reign of Khavad by the influence of Mazdak; but as each fight has two sides and the power of the communists was unable to reach to Constantinople or to prevail spiritually against the wild Khazars and Huns, the Persians were ultimately forced to fight, in self-defense; the Mazdakites, as their modern followers, the Bolsheviki, being probably in the first ranks of the army. Later as these wars and invasions became chronic and the internal troubles multiplied, the king must have come to rely more and more upon that section of the population whose business it was to fight, the professional warriors or magnates. As in all human relations there is more or less of give and take, the king must have gradually compromised with the nobles and returned to them, step by step, some of their former privileges; this in turn must have aroused the Mazdakites against the king and a vicious circle was thus created.

The passive and active resistance of the magian, as well as non-magian population of Persia, to the doctrines of Mazdak must have become increasingly determined as the economic situation of the country began to improve. We do not know, except in the case of the Jews, how far this resistance went; but it must have been considerable and ever present. The Armenian Christians rose *en masse*, several times; but were always suppressed. The Nestorians and Arabs probably helped the Jews in their armed insurrection as they all lived near each other, in Babylonia, Assyria and Hira. A more subtle anti-communist propaganda must have been carried on by the Jewish and Christian traders who traveled all through the empire, and to whose commercial interest it was to abolish all vestiges of political theories in restraint of trade. That the Nestorian Christians were zealous propagandists of their faith can be seen from the fact that in 505 A. D., their missionaries had reached as far as China. They and the Jacobites, together with the Armenians, who had been schooled in the endurance of persecution by two centuries of repression, looked upon Zoroastrianism as the most abhorrent of religions and upon Mazdakism as the acme of abomina-

tion. The Syro-Christian population of Persia were strict monogamists and the report that Mazdak had preached the community of wives and had obtained even the king's wife and sister, must have filled them with dread and abhorrence.

Christianity had permeated large classes of Persian society; the Persians always having been prone to religious and philosophical speculations (compare Mithraism, Manichaeism, the Zervanites, etc.). Although most of the propaganda was done underground, it nevertheless had gained many adherents and if it had not been for the spread of Al-Islam, Persia might today be as Christian as Armenia. The extent of the propagation of the faith may be learned from the fact that Nushizad, one of Chosroes' sons was a Christian, a rebel and perhaps a martyr. There is good circumstantial evidence to believe that the Persian Christians had contributed a good deal to the suppression of Mazdakism.

The role of the Arabs is not well defined. We know that Kavadh had deposed King Mondhir II, of the principality of Hira, on the western bank of the lower Euphrates and, therefore, in close proximity to Babylonia, where most of the Jewish and Christian settlements were situated. It is quite possible that Mondhir helped them to revolt. Another Arab chieftain, Arethas, of the Gassa tribe, was probably antagonistic to Mondhir who was a protégé of Chosroes. The mother of Mondhir, known as Celestial Water, owing to her remarkable beauty, might have had something to do with her son's decision to oppose Communism.

## VII.

The relation of the Persian Jews to Mazdak and their reaction to his teachings, deserve a special chapter; first because of the interesting and positive data we have upon the subject and secondly on account of the character of the reaction which was a successful war for independence.

It seems to be an irony of fate that the Jews, who, in modern times, have been accused as well as praised as the foremost propagandists of the subversive creed of Bolshevism, should have fought, with arms in hand, as the bitterest opponents of the Persian Bolshevism of fourteen hundred years ago. Not only did they fight the Mazdakites with words and swords, but they actually succeeded in establishing for themselves an autonomous state, the duration of which is variously estimated at from seven to twenty years.



The Jews of Persia and especially those who had settled in Babylonia were probably the most powerful and cultivated of the Diaspora. They had always enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy and their Prince of Captivity or Exilarch (Resh Galutha) was a hereditary prince who was credited with being a scion of the royal house of David. The exilarchs had surrounded themselves with royal pomp and received the homage of the presidents of the Universities which were in the most flourishing condition. The Talmud had just been completed (501) and the decisions of the rabbinical scholars of Babylonia were honored and obeyed by all the Jewish communities in the world. The chief seats of Persian Judaism were in Babylonia and centered around the academies of Sura, Pumbedita, Nehardea and Mahusa. The latter city was the seat of the Exilarch's Court and only three parasangs (about 12 miles) to the south of Ctesiphon, the capital of the Empire. The citadel of Koke is mentioned in the Talmud as well as the luxury and the passion for jewelery which characterized the inhabitants of the city. Their intelligence was ascribed to their drinking the water of the Tigris (Ber. 59b) and their opulence and charitable inclinations had become a household word (B. K. 119a).

Twice a year, during the months of Adar (March) and Ellul (September), a huge crowd of extra-mural students would assemble in the University of Mahuza to pass their examinations and receive their stipend for subsistence and their release from the payment of taxes. These general assemblies, at which as many as twelve thousand students would attend, were regulated by formalities and an etiquette worthy of Byzance or China. Facing the President or Dean of the University were the seven chiefs of the assembly (*reshe kallah*) and their three associate members (*haberim*). Each of them was attended by ten full professors (*allufim*) and the seventy, sitting on ten benches formed the body known as the Sanhedrin. Behind them sat the assistant professors and the students.

One can readily imagine what effect Kavadh's proclamation to adopt Mazdakism must have had on this wealthy and cultured center of Judaism. A population, steeped in the learning of the Torah who "treasure their maidens as the apple of their eye", could not allow itself to be sullied by "pagan filth". There must have been a spontaneous flare of insurrection, the immediate cause of which, according to Graetz, was the murder of Mar Isaac, the dean of one of the academies. Whether Mar Isaac was killed by

Persian Mazdakites or by Jewish Communists (the very wealth of the city implies that there must have been a corresponding exploitation of weaker brethren) is not on record. According to Hebrew traditions, only four hundred warriors were able (with the help of a miraculous fire-cloud) to defeat the king's troops, sent to quell the insurrection, and to set up an independent state which endured for seven years and was ruled by the youthful exilarch Mar Zutra II.

This was not the first time that the Babylonian Jews had struck for their independence. Five hundred years, previously, they had taken up arms in defense of their religion and the purity of their family-life. At that time, led by the two patriots and scholars, Asinai and Anilai and by the inevitable fire-cloud, they successfully withstood the Parthian idolaters and drove them out of their settlements. But when those Jewish soldiers had abandoned the tenets of Judaism by adopting loose morals and by drinking unclean wine, the fire-cloud had disappeared together with their independence.

The four hundred warriors who fought against the armies of Kavadh should be taken with a grain of salt. Forty thousand would be a much nearer estimate, as the number of students alone must have been near fifteen thousand. The Jews were probably helped by the Christians of the vicinity and perhaps by the Arabs, under Mondhir, whose territory bordered on Babylonia. As the Jewish prince is said to have laid the non-Jewish, as well as the Jewish population of Irak, under tribute, it would mean that the new state embraced considerably more than the Jewish pale. Irak was the western division of the Persian Empire and comprised Babylonia, Assyria and Mesopotamia.

With all this, it is still a puzzle how an independent state could be allowed to exist, at such close proximity to the Persian Capital. It could only be explained by the fact that during the first few years of his reign, Kavadh was too tolerant to impose his views upon an alien population and that Mazdak probably shared these views; expecting that they would gradually be converted to the new order of things by recognizing its superiority from practical demonstration. Later, when the troubles of the succession started and the Mazdakites had become incensed with the concessions to the nobles, they probably insisted that Kavadh send a strong expedition to Mahuza which put an end to this thorn in their side.

According to the Hebrew legend, the career of Mar Zutra had been foreordained in heaven. His father, the Exilarch Huna, had been at odds with his father-in-law, Mar Hanina, the President of the University. He had punished the holy man by forcing him to stay outside the city gate during a whole night. The prayers or imprecations of the pious rabbi resulted in the death of every member of the Exilarch's family, save his wife, the daughter of Mar Hanina. In a dream, the latter saw himself destroying a forest of beautiful cedars and as he was about to uproot the last tender nursling, King David appeared and interfered. This dream was interpreted as a warning and when his daughter gave birth to a posthumous child, he was reared and educated by his grandfather. The tender care and careful training resulted in a remarkable precocity of the young prince, who, at the age of fifteen, had all the faculties and knowledge of an adult. He was then taken to Navadh who invested him with the title and prerogatives of the office of Exilarch (511).

This tradition is somewhat at variance with the actual facts given by historians. The young prince seems to have been born in 496 A. D., and became Exilarch in 511; but his father, Mar Huna VI, became Exilarch in 488 and reigned till 508; in other words he was invested in his office when Kavadh came to the throne, the first time, and not after the death of the tyrant Perozes as some state. If this date is correct, and it has everything in its favor, then Mar Zutra, his son, was twelve years old when his father died and the exilarchship was under the regency of Huna's nephew, Pahda, for only three years. It seems that Pahda was reluctant to give up his regency and either by bribes or perhaps by declaring himself in favor of Mazdakism, he might have prevailed upon Kavadh to defer the coronation of his youthful cousin. Hence, the insurrection must have taken place in 511. The arms of the independent Exilarch, Mar Zutra II, bore a fly, the insect to which the death of the wicked Pahda had been attributed. This would indicate that Pahda had played a greater role in the matter than it is generally assumed.

When the final assault was made upon Mahuza, the young Exilarch was, therefore, not older than 24. The Hebrew records give him only 22 and set the date of his execution at 520 A. D. As an example to the population, the young prince was crucified, together with his aged grandfather, on the bridge of Mahuza.

His infant son, Mar Zutra III, was carried to Palestine, where he became an archipherecites. Most of the male inhabitants were slaughtered, the women were distributed among the harems of the Guebres (Zoroastrians, Habrim) and the remainder of the population was impressed into the Persian army. A poll-tax was laid upon all Jews and Christians, 20 to 50 years old, and the rabbis were dispersed. The talmudical academies were razed to the ground and the last great teachers, Ahumai and Giza, had to flee to Arabia and Palestine or to the River Zab. The greatest part of the city of Mahuza was reduced to ashes and its glory was ravished for more than a hundred years.

Thus ended the Jewish revolt against Mazdakism, drowned in the blood of its best manhood and the shame of the daughters of Judah. But the insurrection had not been in vain. The victory of the Mazdakites must have spurred them on to fresh demands and Kavadh must have begun to think of some means by which he could curb the turbulence of his erstwhile comrades. Theophanes speaks of Mazdakite troubles in the year 523 which coincides with the growing power of the Communist party, with the beginning of the second war against Rome and the personal factors, mentioned above, which finally led to their destruction.

### VIII.

Of the numerous progeny of Navadh, there were four principal sons who could lay claim to the crown: Kâoses, Zames, Phtasuarses and Chosroës.

Kâoses, as the eldest, had the natural right of primogeniture and of the established custom; but, for some reason or other, was disliked by his father. It may be surmised that he was either intellectually inferior or that his mother was not a favorite. Perhaps because he had Hunnish blood; his mother being probably the daughter of the Khan whom Kavadh married while a hostage.

Zames, according to Procopius, had the respect and good wishes of the people; but is said to have had a physical defect (cataract on one eye?) which according to Persian tradition excluded him from the succession.

Phtasuarses had pledged himself to the Communist party and was naturally supported by the Mazdakites. As the party grew stronger, they must have clamored more and more vehemently that Kavadh make up his mind about the succession and designate his

third son as the only one deserving to sit on the Turquoise throne. This must have been one of the strongest causes of Chosroës' hatred for the Mazdakists.

Chosroës, who was endowed with great physical beauty as well as remarkable mental and strong will power, was the darling and favorite son of Kavadh. To his personal qualities were probably added those of sentimental association with his mother who was the king's most beloved wife, all which induced the king to design the reversal of the natural and customary order of succession in his favor. To add lustre to his name he had ordered his ambassadors in Constantinople to propose to the Emperor Justin, who was childless and nearly seventy years old, the adoption of Chosroës as his son. This singular proposition seems to have fallen through mainly on account of the opposition of the questor Proclus, who feared that it might induce the Persian prince to claim the throne of Byzance.

A good deal of intriguing must have been going on, which probably gained in recklessness as the king was approaching the age of eighty. Finally, in a desperate mood, the friends of Chosroës must have hit upon the sympathy of the Mazdakites towards Phtasuarses as a possible means of forcing the issue. The story of Pocock that Chosroës' enmity towards Mazdak dated from the day when the latter was offered the mother and sister of Chosroës for his harem; and that Kavadh only desisted from his plan after Chosroës had entreated him, with tears in his eyes, does not deserve serious credence. It was not humiliation, but ambition that was at the bottom of Chosroës' hatred of the Mazdakites.

Kavadh was probably made to discover accidentally an imaginary plot against his life with the object of placing Phtasuarses on the throne. Upon the advice of Chosroës, he invited the Mazdakites to a solemn assembly, at which he was to confer the royal dignity upon their candidate. This stratagem so much similar to the one employed by Jehu (2 Kings, x. 18-28) proved a complete success. The unarmed multitude was surrounded by the soldiers and cruelly massacred. Their bodies, according to John of Malala, were dipped in boiling pitch and planted, head downwards, along the walls of the royal gardens (529 A. D.) As the name of Phtasuarses does not appear again in the chronicles of the time, we may surmise that he was either publicly executed or privately murdered. Mazdak himself does not seem to have been molested; either because he took no part in these seraglio intrigues or that

he was shielded by the personal friendship of the sovereign. According to Firdousi, Chosroës showed Mazdak, the rows of corpses planted, like trees, along the walls and exclaimed:

“Look upon the wonderful crop that your doctrines have brought forth!”

## IX.

Kavadh had a paralytic stroke on September 8th and died September 13th, 531, after a reign of 43 years and two months, at the age of 82. His death removed the only rampart between the meek leader of the communists and the vindictive cruelty of Chosroes. His first concern, however, was the problem of the succession.

Käoses having claimed the throne, the grand-vizier intervened with the axiom: “No one has the right to the Persian throne, until assigned to it by the assembly of nobles.” Upon his acquiescence, Mebodes produced Kavadh’s testament and eloquently exhorted the nobles to accept the brave son of a brave and successful father. His eloquence swayed them to acclaim Chosroes; but fearing Chosroës’ restlessness and dreading his cruelty, they regretted the hasty decision and as Zames was disqualified physically, they reconsidered their action and proclaimed the son of Zames as the King of Persia and appointed his father Regent. Zames was supported by several of his other brothers and even by Chosroes’ maternal uncle; but Chosroes could not be caught napping and after seizing the leaders of the conspiracy, he executed Käoses, Zames and his brothers together with their entire male offspring, the young puppet king, Kavadh, alone escaping to Constantinople.

After the pretenders and their supporters had been effectively removed, Chosroes turned his full vindictiveness towards the Mazdakites. More than a hundred thousand communists were rounded up and their martyred bodies blackened the gibbets of the capital for weeks. Mazdak himself was seized and hanged, head downwards, and his body shot through with arrows. No greater historical jest has ever been perpetrated than the bestowal of the title “Anushirwan” (the blessed, the just) upon the perpetrator of these inhuman cruelties. A few weeks after these wholesale executions, he put to death the life-long friends of his father, the grand vizier to whose eloquence he owed his throne and a host of veteran generals who had incurred his displeasure for some trifle.

## X.

During these executions, a comet was seen in the heavens accompanied by a remarkable paleness of the sun. From modern calculations we know that it was probably Halley's comet whose appearance had then been recorded for the fifth time in the history of civilization; but the superstitious magi saw in its appearance a foreboding of ill-omen, pointing to Persia's ruin. Nor were they wrong in their prophecy. In the south, a new power was rising who, led by a new prophet, was destined to conquer the degenerated empires of Persia and Bysance. Before the century had drawn to its close, the Arabs, under the banner of Mohammed had invaded Syria and Irak. In 633 all Persia was under their heel.

---

But the tenets of Mazdakian Communism did not perish with its founder. Three hundred years later (808) we find Haroun-al-Rashid and his son Mamun vainly contending with the Mazdakites in Azerbaijan and Media. Under the Caliph Motasim they waged a three-year war against Al-Islam and the *Mohammira* ("Reds", "Redmakers") as the disciples of Mazdak had been either nicknamed or called, nearly wrecked the Empire of the Abassides.

"If you are a wise man, do not follow the path of Mazdak!" sang Firdousi; but the poet lived in the shadow of the tyrant Mahmoud, whose dynasty was threatened by a powerful uprising of the *Khorrami* or *Khorramdini* ("followers of the pleasant religion"), a reincarnation of Mazdakites in the eleventh century.

And now, after fifteen hundred years, we find the subversive teachings of Mazdak, rising phoenix-like from its ashes and fanned into a conflagration by the fierce Russian north wind. The community of wealth and the abolition of privileged classes which he so earnestly advocated is again gaining adherents in central Asia; but whether the present movement will be more successful than its predecessors, it is not within the province of a modest historian to prophesy. *Qui vivra, verra!*