

MITHRAISM AND ITS INFLUENCE UPON CHRISTIANITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

MAZDAISM, the religion of Zarathushtra (Zoroaster or Zerdusk), is distinguished by its purity and high moral tone. The word is derived from Mazda, which means wisdom or omniscience, and occurs mainly in connection with Ahura, the Lord. Ahura Mazda (abbreviated by the Greek into Ormuzd) is now commonly translated Lord Omniscient.

The sacred books of Mazdaism, especially the Avesta, breathe the spirit of a lofty monotheism, which in the course of its further development was supplemented by the belief in a divine mediator, Mithra, born of a virgin and destined to be the ruler of the kingdom of God on earth, for the coming of which all good worshippers of Ahura Mazda were praying.

Mazdaism has on several occasions powerfully influenced the religious life of the Western world, first in the days of Cyrus, then in the time when the Apocrypha of the Old Testament were written, furthermore in the beginning of the Christian era when Mithraism became a rival of Christianity, and finally in its sectarian revival as Manicheism, after the suppression of which the very names of Ahura Mazda, of Zarathushtra, and of Mithra were forgotten. Though Mazdaism (with the exception of the small sect of Parsees) has disappeared from the face of the earth, some of its traditions have been preserved in its greatest rival religion, Christianity, and some traces of it are left even in the canonical books of the Old and the New Testaments. Isaiah regards it so much as the religion of his own people that he calls Cyrus, the king of the Persians, the Anointed One (Messiah) of the Lord. God says of Cyrus:

“He is my shepherd and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be rebuilt; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”

In the Greek text of Ezra we read that Cyrus had the symbol of Mazdaism, the eternal fire, transferred to the temple of Jerusalem (Septuagint Ezra vi. 24).

In the second book of Maccabees (i. 20) we read that the priests were requested by the King (of the Persians) to search for the holy fire which their fathers had hidden in a dry pit, and they found no fire, but thick water; and he ordered them to dip it out and pour it over the altar and the sacrifice. When they had done so, and when the clouds had dispersed and the sun shone, a great fire was kindled and they marvelled greatly (i. 22), and Nehemiah prayed (i. 24-29) and the King had the place fenced in, and the followers of Nehemiah called the water Nephthar, which is "cleansing."

The Jewish priests were dressed like the Persian priests, in linen garments.

The influence of Persian views in the Apocrypha is universally recognised and in the religious life of the Jewish people it resulted in the formation of sects, especially the Essenes, whose institutions were so similar to the Nazarenes and the Ebionites (the sect of the Poor) that they may have been different names for the same institution.

We know that Jesus came from the ranks of the Nazarenes, for not only is he called a Nazarene himself, but St. Paul, too, is called a ringleader of the Nazarenes.

A trace of Mazdaism left in the canonical Gospels is the story of the Wise Men of the East (Matthew ii.) who, guided by a star, came to Bethlehem offering gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the new-born king of the Jews. One of the Apocryphal Gospels, viz., "the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy," directly mentions that they came in obedience to a prophecy of Zoroaster, the venerable founder of Mazdaism;¹ and the names of the Magi still in use in the Roman Catholic calendar of saints are Caspar, which means "Splendor," Melchior, meaning "Light of Melech,"² and Balthazar, which means "he whom Baal protects."³

The pagan significance of the names has been lost sight of in later centuries; otherwise, the Magi would not have proved worthy of canonisation.

Many rabbis adopted the Mazdean invocation for the coming of God's kingdom, and Jesus deemed it worthy to be incorporated as the prayer which he taught to his disciples.

¹ See The Apocryphal Gospels translated by B. Harris (London: Norgate, 1874) p. 176.

² Another form of *Moloch*, which means "King."

³ *Baal*, or Babylonian, *Bel* means "Lord."

The similarity of the Lord's Supper to the sacrament of Mithra was so striking that Justinus Martyr speaks of it as "the same ritual," which had been introduced among the pagans by the intrigues of Satan.

Man is more conservative in religious practices than in the common walks of life. So the Jewish priests even to-day use flint knives in preference to steel blades, and unleavened bread has remained in many instances the sacramental food of various rituals. We may assume that the Persian sacrament consisted of wafers which were called in Persian *myasda* (or in Hebrew *mazza*) and it seems probable that the very name of the Christian mass is nothing but a corruption of the Persian word that denoted the bread used in this mystical ceremony.

The last flickering up of the flame of Mazdaism under its own name is the revival of Manicheism—the religion of Mani, which spread from Persia and Mesopotamia over the whole East and penetrated even the Roman empire, where it gained its most numerous adherents in North Africa. The Manichees assert that the struggle between the two empires, that of light and that of darkness, is still going on, and that the duality of spirit and body enjoins a rigorous asceticism. They accepted Christ, but rejected the Church as a worldly institution. The main danger of Manicheism to Christianity lay in the moral earnestness of the Manichean movement, and yet it was the rigidity of its ethics that rendered it unacceptable as a universal religion. Manicheism was naturally limited to small numbers, and so it could easily be crushed. Pope Leo the Great took energetic State measures against it; Valentinian III. punished Manicheans with banishment and Justinian with death. In Africa the Vandals made an end of Manicheism.

Some Church historians, who see a doctrinary kinship in all heresies, regard them as the forerunners of the Albigenses, the Waldenses, the Hussites, and finally even the Reformers. And in a certain sense this may be granted. Though the Reformers, far from favoring asceticism, abolished monastic institutions, we cannot deny that Luther's conception of Satan (as represented in the famous battle-hymn of the Reformation) reminds one very much of Ahriman, the fiend, the enemy of God and man, and thus we may say that with certain modifications Luther may be regarded as Zaratrusthra *redivivus*.