

## CHRISTIANITY AS THE PLEROMA.

BY THE EDITOR.

[CONTINUED.]

### GNOSTICISM AND THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION.

WE call Christianity the grandchild of paganism because there is an intermediate link between Christianity and the ancient polytheistic paganism of Græco-Roman mythology. Ancient paganism represents a stage in the religious development of mankind which has become typical for all religions characterized by being limited to well-defined boundaries. These boundaries were very narrow in the beginning. There were state religions in Athens, in Sparta, in Ephesus, in Syracuse, in Rome, in the several cities of Egypt, in Tyre and Sidon, in the great centers of population in Babylonia, Assyria, Phœnicia etc., and the mass of people in each district came little in contact with their neighbors. But as trade and commerce expanded, people of different cities became acquainted with each other and with their several religious views. The different legends were retold in foreign countries and persisted there, so far as it was possible, side by side with the native religion. We know that much confusion originated in this way; e. g., the genealogies of the gods were different in different cities, and so were the marriage relations between gods and goddesses. Thus in Greece when the different local traditions were combined and systematized, the conflicting traditions were adjusted as well as could be done in the haphazard way in which the religious development took place. It is in this shape that Greek mythology has been preserved in the well-known poem of Hesiod, and students of classic lore are sometimes puzzled by the many contradictions.

It frequently happened that the same god or goddess was called by different names in different localities. In one country one feature was developed, and in another, others; and the legends told of

them were so modified that when they were retold and compared, the several devotees no longer recognized that these figures had once been the same. So we know that Astarte, Aphrodite or Venus develops one feature of the great female divinity while Hera, Athene and Artemis develop others. The Babylonian Istar combined all of them and yet the Greek worshiper saw no resemblance between Artemis and Athene. The same is true of such heroines as Danae, Andromeda, Io, and others. This state of affairs naturally tended to obscure the issues.

A similar state of confusion existed in Egypt, where we are unable to present a perfectly consistent mythology of the popular gods. The official priests in ancient On, or as the Greeks called it, Heliopolis, made an attempt to settle all disputes and to systematize Egyptian religion, but their creed does not solve all difficulties, nor does it help us to bring order into the chaos of previous times.

It is obvious that the religious development of mankind could not halt at this stage of a unification of the mythologies of the several nations. When the differences of nationality and language ceased to constitute dividing lines, the problem of adjustment presented itself in a renewed form, and this happened in the history of the antique world through the conquest of Asia by Alexander the Great.

On the ruins of the Persian Empire a number of Greek kingdoms were established. The old barriers that had separated the East and the West had been removed, and a new period originated in which Eastern lore became known in the West, and Western views superseded and modified the traditions of the hoary Eastern civilization. This Hellenistic period affected religion more than is commonly known, and the period from Alexander's overthrow of the Persian Empire to the time of Christ was the preparatory stage for the formation of a new religion that was destined to be the religion of the Roman Empire.

The exchange of thought that took place between the East and the West discredited the belief in the traditional gods. The old priesthood lost its hold on the people, and complaints of infidelity were heard everywhere; but the cause was not (as it was then thought) a decay, but rather an expanse of the religious spirit.

Even before the conquest of Alexander the Great we notice a strong influence of Eastern religion upon ancient Hellas which found expression not only in philosophy (e. g., Pythagoreanism) but also in religious institutions, mainly in the mysteries such as were celebrated at Eleusis and in other cities. They fascinated the

Greek mind, for they taught more plainly than the ancient myths the eternal repetition of the life of nature, deriving therefrom an evidence for the immortality of the soul, the promise of which was held out to the initiates in dramatic performances and suggested through allegories. We know that ears of wheat, phallic symbols, and other emblems of regeneration played an important part in the mysteries. There were ablutions or baptisms, the lighting of torches, the blindfolding of the initiated and the removal of the veil, exhibiting a vision of deep significance; there were trials and tribulations finding their climax in a descent into the underworld, and finally a great rejoicing at the conquest of life over death.

In their later stages of development, the mysteries incorporated more and more a great moral earnestness, for we find purity of life and freedom from guilt demanded as the most indispensable condition for participation in the bliss that was to be gained through initiation. All this infiltration of Oriental lore into Western countries took place before the expedition of Alexander the Great. It would have continued even if Alexander had not crossed the Hellespont, but here as in many other cases, a catastrophe hastened the historical process that was slowly preparing itself in the minds of the people.

The process of the formation of modern England is similar, and in this respect we may compare Alexander's expedition to the invasion of William the Conqueror into England. Norman words and Norman civilization had invaded the Saxon kingdom long before the Norman conquest, and might have produced by a slow and peaceful process some kind of modern English, such as we have it now. But the Norman conquest was a catastrophe in which the factors at work gained a free play by an overthrow of the retarding conservatism and thus hastened the process that was actually going on. The old Saxon England could not have remained isolated and would have modified its institutions as well as its language under the influence of continental Europe. With or without the Norman conquest its destiny was in all main features foreordained and the same law of history holds good in other cases, especially in the formation of the religion of Europe which we call Christianity.

When the barriers of the different countries broke down in the time of Alexander the Great, a religious movement spread during the Hellenistic period over the Mediterranean countries which received no definite name, but in its religio-philosophical form, may best be characterized as pre-Christian gnosticism. While gnosticism is generally treated as a phase in the development of Christianity,

we insist that it existed before Christianity. Its beginnings lie in the first century before Christ and it reached its maturity before Paul wrote his Epistles.

Biblical scholars have repeatedly called attention to the fact that the Epistles of St. Paul abound in the most important terms of gnostic philosophy. We will mention here only such gnostic notions as the doctrine of the three bodies, the corporeal body, the psychical body and the spiritual body; the ideas of the pleroma, the fulfilment or the fulness of the time; of the parousia, the presence of the saving deity; of the mysteries; and there are some others all of which are presupposed as known to the congregations whom the Apostle addresses. He uses these terms freely as known quantities, and nowhere deems it necessary to explain their meaning. This proves that his Epistles represent the conclusion of a prior movement, the development of gnosticism, as much as the beginning of a new one, the formation of the Church which is a definite individualization of the preceding gnosticism.

It was a natural consequence that the gnostic sects which preserved some of the original and tentative, or we may say cruder, types of the movement, were repudiated as heretical, and Church historians, ignorant of the fact that they represent an older phase than Christianity, regarded them as degenerate rebels. We may well assume that some of the later gnostics were Christian heretics, i. e., they were unorthodox members of the Church but assuredly not all, and we have reason to believe that not a few of the later gnostics such as the Manichæans had developed on independent lines religious notions that were not derived from, but were parallel to Christianity.

One thing is sure, that the appearance of Christianity cleared the situation at once. So far the movement had developed among Jews and Gentiles around various centers with general tendencies, all verging in the same direction. The world was in a state of fermentation and the idea that the saviour had come acted like a reagent which caused the turbid ingredients to settle. To use another allegory we may say that pre-Christian gnosticism was like a liquid ready for crystallization, as for instance a cup of water chilled much below the freezing point. The walls of the vessel being smooth, the water does not crystallize, but as soon as a straw is dipped into the water a point of attachment is given around which the ice forms and the water of the whole cup freezes with great rapidity. When St. Paul preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a definite issue was raised which could not be ignored, and forced all gnostics to take

issue with it. The hazy and vague conception of a Christ appeared here actualized as a tangible personality which had either to be rejected or accepted.

All minds of a religious nature were full of expectancy and in the circles of Jewish gnostics the expected saviour had already been identified with the Messiah and was called Christ. The term occurs frequently in the Solomonic psalms which were sung as hymns in the synagogue of Alexandria in the first century B. C. So we see that a vague notion as to the nature of the Christ existed long before Paul had come to the conclusion that Jesus was he. In the New Testament, mention is made of an Alexandrian Jew, by name Apollos, a gnostic teacher who was well versed in expounding the scriptures and knew all about "the Lord," but he had not yet heard of Jesus. A few lines in the Acts of the Apostles (xviii, 24-25) throw a flood of light on the situation. They read thus:

"And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John."

Apollos was converted to the belief of St. Paul, as is stated in verse 26: "And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly." The conversion of Apollos consisted simply in this, that henceforth when he expounded "the way of the Lord" he identified the Lord with Jesus, as we read in verse 28: "For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ."

Of Gnostic sects we will mention the Zabians, the Ophites, and the Simonians, all of which are pre-Christian, although we know them mainly in later forms of their development, or from the polemical literature of Christian authors.

#### THE MANDÆANS AND ZABIANS.

An old form of gnosticism which has its home in Babylon and is still in existence, is the religion of the Mandæans who worship as their saviour a personification of the gnosis under the name Manda d'Hajjê, the Enlightenment of Life. Remnants of this sect still exist in the swamp districts of Mesopotamia and in Persian Khusistan. They claim to be Zubbâ, i. e., Zabians,<sup>1</sup> or "Baptizers,"

<sup>1</sup> זבאי

whereby they mean to establish an historical connection with the disciples of John the Baptist. Though this claim has been suspected of being invented to gain the respect and toleration of the Moham-medan authorities, it seems not improbable that the Zabian or Bap-tizer sect in Palestine in the first century before the Christian era must be regarded as a kindred movement among the poorer classes of the Jews, for the Zabian creed bears many resemblances to the gnosticism of the educated people of Asia Minor and Alexandria.

The great prophet of the Zabians in Palestine was John, sur-named "the Baptizer," or as we now say, "the Baptist." He was one of their leaders, perhaps their chief leader in the times of Christ, but we need not for that reason assume that he was the founder of the sect, for the Zabians counted many adherents outside of Pales-tine, in Samaria as well as Asia Minor, at the time when the apostles began to preach the Gospel of Jesus. They were called the disciples,<sup>2</sup> and when we read the passages referring to John the Baptist in the Gospel, we are involuntarily under the impression that they were written to gain converts among the Zabians. No doubt that many Zabians were gained for Christianity, but large numbers kept aloof and fortified themselves against further inroads of Christian pros-elytism by an intense hatred which shows itself in the sacred books of the Mandæans.

In their complicated system Manda d'Hajjê is again and again incarnated for the sake of salvation, his visible image on earth is called Hibil, and he appeared last in John the Baptist, called Yahya. This Yahya baptized Yishu M'shiha (i. e., Jesus), a false Messiah. To remedy the mistake, Anush 'Uthra, a younger brother of Hibil, came down to earth, and while Yahya was slain by the Jews the false prophet was crucified. Then Anush 'Uthra punished the Jews by the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the nation.

The Mandæan religion is an extremely complicated system which in its present form bristles with polemics against Christian-ity and Mohammedanism, but there can be no doubt that the nucleus of this queer faith in its main tenets is derived from ancient Baby-lonian sources, and many of its points of resemblance to Christian-ity must be explained as parallel formations.

If the religious tenor of a religion is best known from the hymns which the devotees sing, we must look upon Mandæism as a Baby-lonian faith which had broadened by the acquisition of the knowl-edge of the age as it was imported into Mesopotamia from the east, i. e., Iran and India; the extreme west, Hellas and also Asia

<sup>2</sup> μαθηταί.

Minor; and from the southwest, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. The foundation remained the same, the world-conception of ancient Babylon, as modified by Persian monotheism, now commonly called Mazdaism or Zoroastrianism. The prayers of the Mandæans retain the ring of the ancient Babylonian hymns.

For all we know it is not impossible that the Mandæan religion originated under Indian influence and the word *manda*, which corresponds to the Greek term *gnosis*, i. e., cognition, knowledge, or enlightenment, may be a translation of the Buddhist *bodhi*.

#### THE OPHITES OR NAASÆANS.

One of the strangest gnostic sects are the snake-worshippers, called Ophites or Naasæans,<sup>3</sup> whose pre-Christian existence can scarcely be doubted and here even the old Neander when referring to the probability that their founder Euphrates<sup>4</sup> lived before the birth of Christ, says:

“We would thus be led to assume a pre-Christian gnosis which afterwards partly received Christian elements, partly opposed them with hostility.”

Like the Zabians, the Ophites are of pagan origin and incorporated traces of ancient Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian, and perhaps also of Indian notions. The snake is originally the symbol of goodness and of wholesome life, the good demon,<sup>5</sup> as we find him represented on the Abraxas gems. The snake was sacred to Hygæa, the goddess of health, and also to Æsculapius, the god of healing. We can not doubt that the brazen serpent which was erected by Moses for the healing of the people had a similar meaning, and *seraphim* in the original Hebrew means serpent-spirits.

In Christianity the snake of paradise is identified with the principle of evil, represented in Parseeism by the dragon; and so the Christians were greatly offended at the idea of revering the snake as the symbol of divine wisdom. On the other hand the Ophites, as also the Zabians, regarded the Jewish God, whom they called Ialdabaoth, as the prince of this world, the creator of material existence and of evil, and they pointed out that the snake promised to Adam the boon of the gnosis, i. e., of the knowledge of good and

<sup>3</sup> From the Greek *ὄφεις* or the Hebrew *נָחָשׁ*. The term *nakhash* is the snake of the occultists. It is the name of the constellation called the great serpent, or the dragon, and the Piel of the verb *nakhash* means “to practice sorcery, or to consult an oracle; to have forebodings, or receive omens.”

<sup>4</sup> *Origen, c. Ccl.*, vi. 28.

<sup>5</sup> ἀγαθοδαίμων.

evil, which the jealous Ialdabaoth tried to withhold from man. The Ophites distinguish between a psychical Christ and a spiritual Christ.<sup>6</sup> The former was present in Jesus at his birth, it is the lower form of mind, but the spiritual Christ descended upon Jesus at the moment of baptism in the shape of a dove and abandoned him when the passion began. This, they claim, explains also that Christ could no longer perform miracles and became a helpless victim of his enemies.

The Ophites criticise the God of the Jews, whom they regard as the demiurge, for his many vices which indicate the low character of his divinity, especially his pride, jealousy, envy, wrath and love of vengeance. The highest God, the God of love and mercy, he whose messenger is the snake, and whose representative is the spiritual Christ, is absolute benevolence, and he communicates himself lovingly to all things, even to the inanimate things of nature. The Ophites say, as we learn from Epiphanes (*contra Haeres*, xxvi. c. 9) :

“When we use the things of nature as food, we draw into us the soul that is scattered in them and lift it up again to its original source.”

In quoting this passage Neander comments on the Ophites, that “thus eating and drinking became to them an act of worship.”

Further we read in one of their gospels that the Deity thus addressed those who consecrate themselves to him: “Thou art I and I am thou. Where thou art I am, and I am in all things. Thou canst gather me up wherever thou mayest desire, but when thou gatherest me up, thou gatherest up thyself.”<sup>7</sup>

The Ophite doctrines may also contain traces of Indian influence. Bodily existence is regarded as evil *per se*; and the gnosis or enlightenment, like the Buddhist *bodhi*, is the means as well as the end of salvation. We know their doctrines only as preserved by their Christian critics and must assume that the Ophites themselves were perhaps only superficially acquainted with the Hebrew scriptures; and their identifications of the God of the Jews with the evil deity and of the snake with the principle of wisdom would appear in a different, probably in a better, light if we could fall back upon statements of their belief as formulated by themselves.

#### THE RELIGION OF MANI.

How powerful the non-Christian gnosticism was appears from the fact that Manichæism, a doctrine that in spite of its resemblance

<sup>6</sup> ψυχικός and πνευματικός.

<sup>7</sup> See Neander, Germ. ed., p. 246.



to Christianity originated from non-Christian sources, could spread so rapidly over the Roman empire in the third century A. D., and remain a most powerful rival of Christianity down to the time of Pope Leo the Great.

Mani, the founder of this sect, was born (according to Kessler<sup>8</sup>) in the year 215-216 A. D., as the son of Futak<sup>9</sup>, a Persian nobleman of Ecbatana. He was most carefully educated and raised in the faith of the Zabians, but being of an intensely religious nature, he devoted himself to religious exercises and speculation and became a reformer. His efforts resulted in a revival that gradually developed into a new religion on the basis of the traditions from which Mani had started, and this religion, called Manichæism, is distinguished not only by devotion and earnestness but also by the most rigorous asceticism which is but the moral application of a dualistic world-conception. What interests us here in the Manichæan movement, is the great similarity it bears to the dualistic and ascetic tendencies of Christianity which continued to influence the Church down to the time of the Reformation. Though Manichæism belongs to the Christian era, it is not a Christian sect; it has acquired its similarities to Christianity from other sources; it is a development of impulses which started in ancient Babylon and its relation to Christianity is more an attitude of hostility based mainly upon rivalry and intensified by competition.

Harnack<sup>10</sup> says, "Manichæism did not originate on Christian ground. . . . It is Kessler's merit to have shown that the ancient Babylonian religion, the original source of all the gnosis of Western Asia, was the basis of the Manichæan system."

If Manichæism had not come in contact with Christianity it would in all main points have been the same religion, and so we are justified in looking upon the Manichæan movement as a strand of religious tendencies which represents a parallel formation to Christianity and which will therefore help us to understand the general drift of the age.

#### THE SIMONIANS.

Samaria seems to have been a hot-bed of religious sects, for we know that several prophets arose there at the time of Christ who claimed to be Messiahs of Israel and incarnations of God. They

<sup>8</sup> *Genesis des Manichæischen Religionssystems.*

<sup>9</sup> The Greeks call him Παρέκιος.

<sup>10</sup> See *Enc. Brit., s. v.* "Manichæism," Vol. XV, p. 485.

are Simon Magus, Dositheus, Cleobolus, and Menander, the first having been the most successful among them,<sup>11</sup> for the sect which he founded spread beyond the boundaries of Samaria and was still flourishing in the second century.

Simon Magus was a gnostic who, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, came in contact with the disciples of Jesus, especially Philip and Peter. The very existence of Simon Magus in the forties of the first century, his claims and doctrines, prove that gnosticism antedates Christianity, for even before St. Paul's conversion, it was a powerful movement while the Christian Church was still in its infancy.

We read in Acts viii. 9-10:

"But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God."

"The great power of God,"<sup>12</sup> is a gnostic expression and the original reads literally, "This one is the Power of God, the so-called Great One," which indicates that we have to deal here with a technical term.

We know of the Simonians who worshiped Simon Magus as God incarnate, through Justin Martyr,<sup>13</sup> Clement, Irenæus, Hippolytus and Origen, also through Celsus as preserved by Origen.

Their doctrine must have been very similar to the Christian faith and it is a strange fact that they taught a trinity long before the Christian Church adopted or even began to discuss this conception of God. The founder of the Simonians continued to live in Christian legend as a kind of Antichrist, and the supernatural power with which the faith of his adherents had endowed him, was changed to a charge of sorcery and black magic.

#### THE THERAPEUTES, THE ESSENES, THE NAZARENES, AND THE EBIONITES.

There are some more pre-Christian religious movements which are inspired by the spirit of gnosticism. In his *De vita contemplativa* Philo tells us of the Therapeutes in Egypt who led a life of

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius. H. E. N., 22.

<sup>12</sup> Οὗτός ἐστιν ἡ Δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη Μεγάλη.

<sup>13</sup> Justin Martyr wrote a book on Simon Magus entitled *Syntagma*, which is unfortunately lost, but he refers to him frequently in his other writings, and the main contents of the *Syntagma* has been preserved by Irenæus.

holiness, religious contemplation and divine worship, anticipating so much that is commonly regarded as typically Christian that the date and the authority of the book and even the genuineness of his reports have been questioned by Eusebius who discusses the problem at length in his *Ecclesiastical History* (II, ch. 17), and by others who accept his arguments. But it is difficult to discover a motive for such an intentional falsification of history, and after all the opinion of Eusebius rests upon a very weak foundation, namely the assumption that Christian ideas, and with them the aspiration for leading a life of holiness in the fashion of monks, can not have antedated the Christian era. Yet this is exactly the point which has to be conceded. Even if the evidence of the existence of a pre-Christian gnosis which originated in Mesopotamia and spread to Asia Minor and Egypt and thence over the whole Roman Empire counted for nothing, we have still the Scriptural evidence that Christianity has developed from the Zebian movement, that Jesus was baptized by the leader of the Zebians in Palestine, and that Christ was a Nazarene. In fact the Jerusalemite Christians continued to be called Nazarenes even after the death of Christ.

When St. Paul visits Jerusalem and creates a disturbance he is accused before Felix, the governor, in these words: "For we have found\* this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes."

It is absolutely excluded that Nazarenes can mean men born in Nazareth; the word must be the name of a sect of which Jesus was a member, a sect which had its headquarters at Pella after the destruction of Jerusalem, and which is mentioned by Epiphanius (Pau. XXX, 7) and Jerome (*Epistle* 72, addressed to Augustine).

The Essene communities constitute another unequivocally pre-Christian sect with similar tendencies as the Nazarenes. The two sects are so much alike that there is some reason to believe that they are identical, but it will be difficult to bring proof for this contention.

The Essenes are mentioned by Josephus (*Bell. Jud.* II, 8 and *Antiq.* XVIII, 1, 5), by Philo (in his *Quod omnis probus liber*), by Eusebius (*Pr. Ev.* viii. 11) who quotes from a lost book of Philo's, and by Pliny (in his *Hist. Nat.* V. 17). They date back to the second century B. C., and Josephus himself joined their community for a while.

The meaning of the name is unknown and need not concern us now. Our main purpose is to point out their kinship to the

gnostic movement which is indicated by their religious seriousness, the similarity of their views to Persian and Babylonian doctrines, and the ascetic tendency of their moral teachings.

The Ebionites, i. e., the sect of "the poor," may have been a name for the Nazarenes, for it is probable that Jesus referred to them whenever he spoke of "the poor." We know that the Nazarenes were communists who required those who joined their ranks to deliver all their property to the authorized leaders of the sect. In the Acts we are told the grewsome story of Ananias and Sapphira who, having kept back part of the money they had received for the sale of their property, fell dead before the feet of St. Peter. If the Ebionites are indeed the Nazarenes we might interpret the proposition of Jesus to the young rich man, "Sell all thou hast and distribute unto the poor," as an invitation to join the congregation of the Nazarenes.

Wherever we turn, we find that tendencies and movements animated by the spirit of gnosticism existed at the beginning of the Christian era, and that even the New Testament presupposes their existence in Palestine, for Christianity itself is stated to have developed from the local gnostic sects.

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Gnosticism therefore is older than Christianity. It is a religio-philosophical movement which originated through a fusion of the Eastern and Western civilizations during the first century before the Christian era. Eastern doctrines were studied in Greece in the light of Western conceptions having as a background the religious traditions of the Western, especially the Greek, nations together with the impressions which the dramatic performances of the initiations into the mysteries had left upon the people. Thus gnosticism, the product of a fusion of all pagan religions of classical antiquity, is the real mother of Christianity.

Our proposition seems strange to those into whose minds the idea that Judaism is the mother of Christianity has been inculcated since the days of childhood, but the facts of history speak for themselves.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)