

MAZDAISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

MAZDAISM, the belief of the ancient Persians, is perhaps the most remarkable religion of antiquity, not only on account of the purity of its ethics, but also by reason of the striking similarities which it bears to Christianity.

Ahura Mazda, the Lord Omniscient, is frequently represented (as seen in Fig. 1) upon bas-reliefs of Persian monuments and rock



Fig. 1. AHURA MAZDA.

(Conventional reproduction of the figure on the great rock inscription of Darius at Behistan.)

inscriptions. He reveals himself through "the excellent, the pure and stirring Word," also called "the creative Word which was in the beginning," which reminds one not only of the Christian idea of the Logos, $\acute{\omicron} \lambda\acute{\omicron}\gamma\omicron\varsigma \acute{\omicron}\varsigma \eta\grave{\nu} \acute{\epsilon}\nu \acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\eta\grave{\nu}$, but also of the Brahman *Vdch*, word (etymologically the same as the Latin *vox*), which is glorified in the fourth hymn of the Rig Vêda, as "pervading heaven and earth, existing in all the worlds and extending to the heavens."

On the rock inscription of Elvend, which had been made by the order of King Darius, we read these lines¹:

“There is one God, omnipotent Ahura Mazda,
It is He who has created the earth here ;
It is He who has created the heaven there ;
It is He who has created mortal man.”

Lenormant characterises the God of Zoroaster as follows :

“Ahura Mazda has created *asha*, purity or rather the cosmic order ; he has created both the moral and material world constitution ; he has made the universe ; he has made the law ; he is, in a word, creator (*datar*), sovereign (*ahura*), omnis-

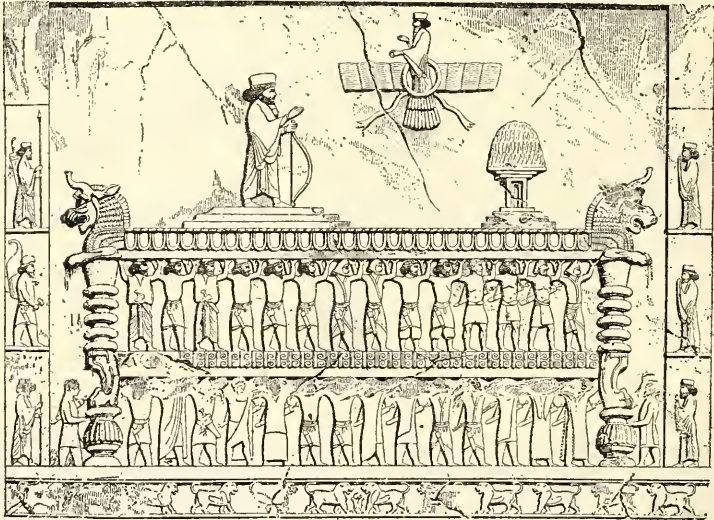


Fig. 2. SCULPTURES ON A ROYAL TOMB.

(Coste et Flandin, *Perse Ancienne*, at Persepolis, pl. 164. Lenormant, V., p. 23.)

cient (*mazdâo*), the god of order (*ashavan*). He corresponds exactly to Varuna, the highest god of Vedism.

“This spiritual conception of the Supreme Being is absolutely pure in the Avesta, and the expressions that Ormuzd has the sun for his eye, the heaven for his garment, the lightning for his sons, the waters for his spouses, are unequivocally allegorical. Creator of all things, Ormuzd is himself uncreated and eternal. He had no beginning and will have no end. He has accomplished his creation work by pronouncing ‘the Word,’ the ‘Ahuna-Vairyo, Honover,’ i. e., ‘the word that existed before everything else,’ reminding us of the eternal Word, the Divine Logos of the Gospel.” (*Histoire ancienne de l’Orient*, V., p. 388.)

Concerning Ahriman, Lenormant says :

“The creation came forth from the hands of Ormuzd, pure and perfect like himself. It was Ahriman who perverted it by his infamous influence, and labored

¹ Translated from Lenormant’s *Histoire ancienne de l’Orient*, Vol. V., p. 388.

continually to destroy and overthrow it, for he is the destroyer (*paourou marka*) as well as the spirit of evil. The struggle between these two principles, of good and of evil, constitutes the world's history. In Ahriman we find again the old wrathful serpent of the Indo-Iranian period, who is the personification of evil and who in Vedism, under the name of *Ahi*, is regarded as an individual being. The myth of the serpent and the legends of the Avesta are mingled in Ahriman under the name of *Aji Dahaka*, who is said to have attacked Atar, Traëtaona, and Yima, but is

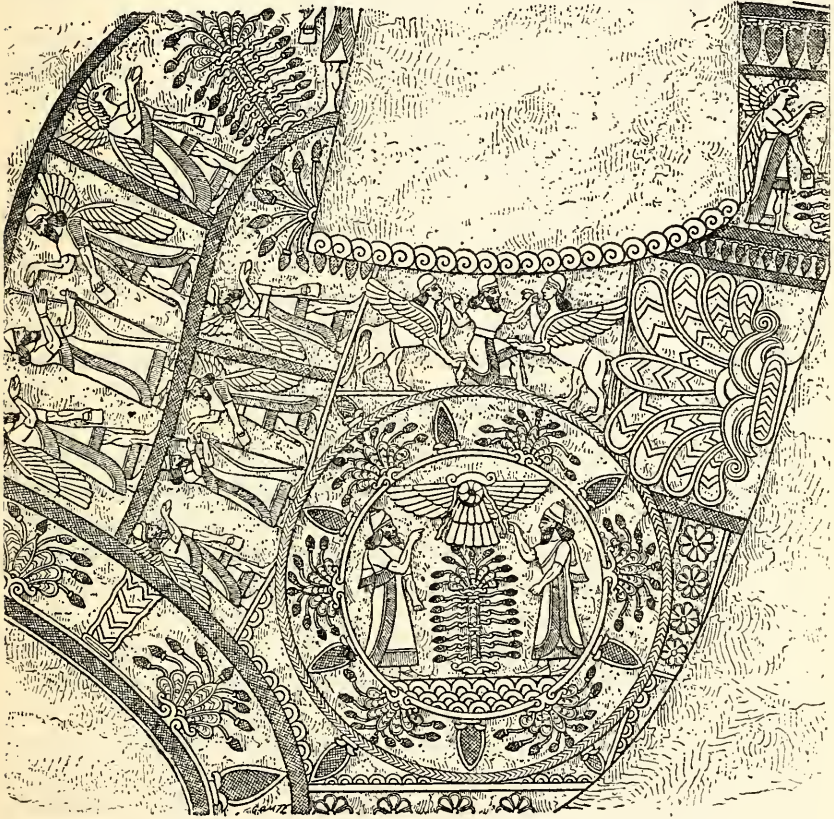


Fig. 3. THE TREE OF LIFE.

Decorations on the embroidery of a royal mantle.

(British Museum. Layard, *Monuments*, 1st series, pl. 6. Lenormant, *l. l. V.*, p. 108.)

himself dethroned. It is the source of the Greek myth that Apollo slays the dragon Python. The Indo-Iranian religion knew only the struggle that was carried on in the atmosphere between the fire-god and the serpent-demon Afrasiab. And it was, according to Professor Darmesteter, the doctrine of this struggle, which, when generalised and applied to all things in the world, finally led to the establishment of dualism." (*Ibid.*, p. 392.)

The tree of life, which is known to us through the first chapter of Genesis, is an old Accadian idea, which is of immemorial origin,

dating perhaps from the days when men lived mainly upon the fruits of trees,¹ and having been handed down through the Assyrians to the Babylonians and Persians. It always remained a favorite idea among the artists of the various nations that successively held sway over the valley of Mesopotamia; and it still appears in Persian bas-reliefs, where we find it for instance in the shape of decorations in the embroidery of a royal mantle. (Fig. 3.)

The fire sacrifice of the Persians was accompanied by partaking of the haoma drink, a ceremony which reminds us, on the one hand, of the soma sacrifice of the Vedic age in India, and, on the other hand, of the Lord's Supper of the Christians. We know through the sacred scriptures of the Persians that little cakes (the *draona*) covered with small pieces of holy meat (the *myazda*) were consecrated in the name of a spiritual being, a god or angel, or of some great deceased personality, and then distributed among all the worshippers that were present. But more sacred still than the draona with the myazda is the haoma drink which was prepared from the white haoma plant,² also called gaokerena. Says Professor Darmesteter: "It is by the drinking of gaokerena that men, on the day of the resurrection, will become immortal."³

The way in which the Persian sacrament of drinking the gaokerena was still celebrated in the times of early Christianity, must have been very similar to the Christian communion, for Justinus, when speaking of the Lord's Supper among the Christians, adds "that this very same solemnity, too, the evil spirits have introduced in the mysteries of Mithra." (*Apol.* I., 86.)

The most characteristic feature of the Persian religion after the lifetime of Zoroaster consists in the teaching that a great crisis is near at hand, which will lead to the renovation of the world *frashôkereti* in the Avesta, and *frashakart* in Pahlavi. Saviours will come, born of the seed of Zoroaster, and in the end the great Saviour who will bring about the resurrection of the dead. He will be the "son of a virgin" and the "All-conquering." His name shall be the Victorious (*verethrajan*), Righteousness-incarnate (*astvat-*

¹ The tree of life may originally have been the tree of life-preserving fruits. It is noteworthy that the names of *fagus*, the beech-tree, and of *φηγός*, the oak, which are both etymologically identical with the English word *beech* and the German *Buche*, mean "eating" or "the tree with edible fruits." The word *acorn*, which is not derived from oak, but is connected with *acre*, the field, means "harvest" or "fruit," which indicates that it was eaten at the time when its name was coined. The word *acorn* has no connexion with the German *Eichel*, i. e., little oak, or oak-fruit, but it is the same as the German *Ecker*, which is the name of the beech-tree fruit.

² There is another species of the haoma which is yellow. The yellow haoma is called the earthy haoma and the king of healing plants.

³ *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. IV., p. lxxix. Compare *Bundahis*, 42, 12; 59, 4.

ereta), and the Saviour (*saoshyañt*). Then the living shall become immortal, yet their bodies will be transfigured so that they will cast no shadows, and the dead shall rise, "within their lifeless bodies incorporate life shall be restored." (Fr. 4. 3.)¹

In a similar way John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth announce that the Kingdom of Heaven is near at hand; and St. Paul still believed that the second advent of Christ would take place during his own life-time. The dead who sleep in the Lord will be resurrected, and the bodies of those that are still in the flesh will be transfigured and become immortal.

The Persian world-conception, like the religion of the Jews, was too abstract to favor any artistic development. Therefore we do not possess representations of either the good or evil spirits that

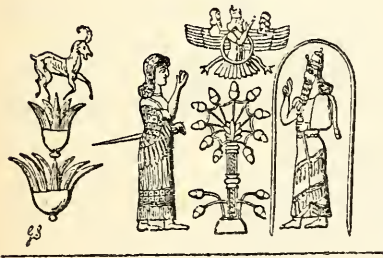


Fig. 4. ASSYRIAN CYLINDER.
(British Museum. Lenormant, V., p. 234.)



Fig. 5. THE GODDESS ANNA.
(Bas-relief in the British Museum. Lenormant, V., p. 259.)

are exclusively and peculiarly Persian. Even the picture of Ahura Mazda (as we find it on various bas-reliefs) is not based upon a conception that can be regarded as original. The winged form from which the bust of the god of Mazdaism rises can be traced to Assyrian emblems, and may, for all we know, be of Accadian origin. There is, for instance, a picture of the trinity of Anu, Ea, and Bel, which exhibits exactly the same figure that we find in the Persian representation of Ahura Mazda. (Fig. 4.) Other pictures of Babylonian gods which appear in the same form as the Persian representations of Ahura Mazda are quite frequent,

¹For a concise statement of the Persian religion, which in many respects foreshadows the Christian doctrines of a Saviour and of the bodily resurrection of the dead, see Prof. A. V. Williams Jackson's excellent article, "The Ancient Persian Doctrine of a Future Life," published in the *Biblical World*, August, 1896.

and we reproduce one instance in which the deity is floating in the sky. (Fig. 7.) This illustration is of interest, because it shows the sun and the idol before which the religious ceremony of worship is performed as distinct objects. Thus the deity itself is ap-



Fig. 6. AN ASSYRIAN
CAMEO. 1



Fig. 7. ASSYRIAN CYLINDER.
(Layard, *Culte de Mitra*, pl. xxx., No. 7. Lenormant, V., p. 248.)



Fig. 8. A PERSIAN
CAMEO.

parently identified with neither and is believed to be an invisible witness of the homage paid him at his statue.

The Babylonian trinity was thought to be male and female, and it is noteworthy that the female representative of the divine



Fig. 9. MERODACH DELIVERING THE MOON-GOD FROM THE EVIL SPIRITS.
(From a Babylonian cylinder. Reproduced from Smith's *Chaldean Account of Genesis*.)

father Anu, the god-mother Anna, also called Istar, was worshipped under the symbol of a dove. (Fig. 5). There is no trace of it in Mazdaism, but the dove as an emblem of most significant spirituality reappears, in a purer and nobler form, in Christianity, while

¹ Both cameos are at the Louvre in the "Cabinet des médailles." See Lenormant, *l. l. V.*, pp. 448 and 493.

there is no trace of the conventional representation of Ahura Mazda.

As to the picture of Ahura Mazda, we have to add that Prof. A. V. Williams Jackson explains the ring in the hands of Ahura Mazda as "the Circle of Sovereignty,"¹ and interprets the loop with streamers in which the figure floats as a variation of the same idea, for in some of the pictures it appears as a chaplet, or waist-garland with ribbons.²

It is not possible that the loop with streamers is originally a disc representing the disc of the sun after the fashion of Egyptian temple decorations. At any rate, there are a great number of Assyrian sculptures of the same type which are unequivocally representations of the sun. A cylinder (published in Layard's *Culte de Mithra*, plate XLIX., No. 2) illustrating the myth of god Isdubar's descent to Hasisatra, shows the two scorpion-genii of the horizon watching the rise and the setting of the sun. Here the sun appears, like the figure from which Ahura Mazda rises, as a winged disc with feather-tail and streamers. In addition, we find the same picture in the deity that protects the tree of life (Fig. 3), which can only signify the benign influence of the sun on plants; and an old Babylonian cylinder representing Merodach's fight with the evil spirit that darkens the moon (Fig. 9), shows above the moon-god the sun covered with clouds in this very same conventional shape.³

Ahura Mazda is pictured as a winged disc without any head, in the style of Chaldean sun-pictures, in a cameo representing him as worshipped by two sphinxes, between whom the sacred haoma plant is seen (Fig. 6). In another cameo (Fig. 8) he appears as a human figure without wings, rising from a crescent that hovers above the sacrificial fire. Above him is a picture of the sun, and before him stands a priest or a king in an attitude of adoration.

It is noteworthy that there are a few bas-reliefs which replace, in the representation of Ahura Mazda, the circle of sovereignty by a lotos flower, which may indicate either Egyptian or Indian influence. Was the lotos flower in the hands of Ahura Mazda perhaps an emblem that was introduced since objections were vigorously made against bloody sacrifices? If that were so, we might

¹See his article on "The Circle of Sovereignty," in the *American Oriental Society's Proceedings*, May, 1889.

²See K. O. Kiash, *Ancient Persian Sculptures*; and also Rawlinson, *J. R. A. S.*, X., p. 187 Kossowicz, *Inscriptiones Palaeo Persicae Achaemeniorum*, p. 46, et seq.

³There is no need of enumerating other cylinders and bas-reliefs of the same kind, as they are too frequently found in Assyrian archæology. See for instance the illustrations in Lenormant, *J. J. V.*, pp. 177, 230, 247, 296, 299, etc.



Fig. 10. BAS-RELIEF OF PERSEPOLIS.

fter Coste et Flandin, *Perse Ancienne*, pl. 156. Reproduced from Lenormant, V., p. 485.)

attribute its use to the spread of a movement that in its rise was similar to the Buddhism of India.

In conclusion we state that some of the early Christians esteemed the religious wisdom of Persia almost as sacred as the dicta of the prophets of Israel, for in one of the apocryphal gospels the statement is made that the Magi of the East who saw the star of Bethlehem came in response to an ancient prophecy of the advent of the Saviour that had been made by Zoroaster.