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978-1-108-01526-4 - The Religion of the Manichees
Francis Crawford Burkitt
Excerpt
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THE RELIGION OF THE MANICHEES

·I·

Sicut pictura cum colore nigro loco suo posito, ita
uniuersitas rerum (si quis possit intueri) etiam cum pecca-
toribus pulchra est, quamuis per se ipsos consideratos sua
deformitas turpet. *De Ciuitate Dei*, xi 23.

THE RELIGION OF THE MANICHEES

I

SUNDAY the 20th of March, A.D. 242, was a holiday in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, for it was the coronation festival of the new King of Kings, Shāpūr I, whose father Ardashir, sixteen years before, had overthrown the Parthians and founded the Sasanian Empire. Shapur himself was destined to reign for over thirty years, to take prisoner in battle a Roman Emperor, to sack the great city of Antioch and look upon the Mediterranean as a conqueror. But the official date of the beginning of his reign is even more memorable as the Pentecost of the Manichæan Religion. It was on the 20th of March, 242, that a young man called Mānī began to announce to the crowds assembled in the streets and bazars of Ctesiphon the new Religion of which he was the Prophet. Such was his success that within a century, in the midst of the decay of Graeco-Roman paganism and the public triumph of Christianity, it seemed to many observers doubtful whether Manichæism would not overwhelm them both.

Now there are no Manichees left. The new Religion failed to keep a footing in the West, and it has perished in the land of its birth. But it survived for more than a thousand years and only disappeared, like so much that was ancient and interesting, in the age when nearly all Asia and much of Europe was devastated by the Tatar hordes under Zenghis Khan and Tamerlane.

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During nearly all that millennium the Manichees were a proscribed and persecuted society, or found a refuge only in outlying regions at the edge of the civilized world. A faith that can command such loyalty must have in it something that corresponds to the needs and aspirations of men and women, something therefore that may be interesting to us. It is from this point of view that I have chosen it as a subject for these Lectures. It is the strange tale of a tragedy of long ago and far away, but I hope it may awake in the end some sympathetic echoes in our thoughts.

I propose to begin by sketching the general outline of the history of the Manichees. This will lead up to a consideration of the literary sources upon which our knowledge of them is based, including the wonderful discoveries of recent years in Central Asia. Finally we shall consider the Manichaean Religion itself, and the philosophy which underlies it.

The message that Mani announced was, in brief, that there are two eternal sources or principles, Light and Dark; that by the regrettable mixture of Dark with Light this visible and tangible Universe has come into being; and that the aim and object of those who are children of Light is not the improvement of this world, for that is impossible, but its gradual extinction, by the separation of the Light particles from the Dark substance with which they have been mixed. To our Western ears this is a melancholy and

MANI AND HIS FATE

desperate creed, but it is certain that it possessed a wonderful attraction to the age in which it was first proclaimed.

In 242 Mani was a young man of twenty-six: he was about sixty when Bahrām I, Shapur's grandson, had him executed. Mani's corpse, or his flayed skin stuffed with hay, was set up over one of the gates of the royal city of Gundē-Shapur, east of Susa, which in consequence was known for centuries as the Mānī-gate. Bahram also proscribed Mani's religion and attempted to root it out altogether, but after a whole generation of missionary effort it had become well established all through the East, and persecution only drove it below the surface. Four hundred years later, when the Sasanian Empire, exhausted by long wars with Constantinople, fell before the vigour of the Arab conquerors, the Persian dominions were honeycombed with Manichees. No doubt at first the change must have been to them a great relief. The first generation of Arabs were probably unaware of their existence. Persecution directed against Unbelievers concerned in the first instance the Zoroastrian Fire-worshippers, under which the old national Religion of the Persians, now disestablished and harassed with vexatious regulations, sank into obscurity. But as soon as the existence of Manichees became known to Moslem rulers of every sort they were ruthlessly suppressed wherever they were discovered.

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No continuous history of the Manichees can be written. All we know from Mohammedan sources is that from time to time Manichees—Arabic writers call them *Zindīks*—were detected, ruined, killed, and held up to execration. They were considered by Moslems not merely Unbelievers, the followers of a False Prophet, but unnatural and unsocial, a danger to the State. Yet the author of the *Fibrist*, who lived at the end of the 10th century, tells us that he had been acquainted with about 300 Manichees in Baghdad alone. All these, of course, were Manichees in secret: neither in Christian nor in Mohammedan lands was Manichaeism a *religio licita*. But Al-Birūnī, writing about the year 1000 A.D., says that “most of the eastern Turks, of the people of China and Thibet, and some of the Hindus, adhere to Mani’s law and doctrine¹.” In the *Fibrist* we read that the Manichees were tolerated about the same period in Samarkand, because the “King of China”—probably, says our author, it was the Chief of the Taghazghaz² Turks—had threatened reprisals if they were killed. The Taghazghaz lived in Chinese Turkestan, east of Kashgar, round about the lake or inland sea called on our maps Lop Nor.

These statements of ancient writers were verified

¹ Sachau, p. 191.

² This is the name given in Arabic sources, such as the *Fibrist*. It is a corruption of *Toqux Oghuz*, i.e. ‘The Nine Clans.’ See A. von Le Coq, *Manichaica* III (1922), p. 40.

MANICHEE MSS. FROM TURKESTAN

in the early years of this century in a surprising and most satisfactory fashion. Three or four scientific expeditions were made to Chinese Turkestan, and some thousands of fragments of mss. were discovered and brought back to Europe, especially from the neighbourhood of a town called Turfan. Some hundreds of these fragments are from Manichaean mss., written in the peculiar script used by the Manichees, so that we now know something about them from their own writings, and not only from the refutations of their adversaries. Unfortunately these newly-found documents are all scraps, bits of torn books and rolls, and written in languages as yet imperfectly known. Were it not for our other sources of information, from Mohammedan and Christian opponents, we should be unable to understand the allusions in the Turfan documents.

Let us now glance at the history of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire. Here again no continuous account can be given, and some of the chief sources of information most used by Christians about the Manichees seem to have been semi-fabulous. But certain incidents stand out with startling vividness. One episode in particular may be told in full in the words of an eye-witness. Mark, deacon to S. Porphyry of Gaza, is prejudiced and superstitious and no doubt he writes some years after the events he describes, but his account of the Manichee missionary who

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came to Gaza about the year 400 shews us the movement as a living and active religion.

About that time (says Mark¹) there came to sojourn in the city [of Gaza] a certain woman of Antioch called Julia, who was of the abominable heresy of them which are called Manichaeans; and knowing that certain persons were but lately enlightened and not yet stablished in the holy faith she wrought secretly and corrupted them, bewitching them by her doctrine, and much more by gifts of money. For he that invented the said godless heresy was not able to catch any otherwise than by the bestowing of money. For unto those who have understanding their doctrine is filled full of all blasphemy and condemnation and old wives' fables that entice foolish womenfolk and childish men of vain mind and wit. For out of divers heresies and opinions of the Greeks did they build up this their evil belief, desiring by wickedness and craft to take hold on all men. For they say that there be many gods, that they may be acceptable unto the Greeks; and moreover they acknowledge nativities and fate and the science of the stars, in order that they may sin without fear, holding that the commission of sins is not in us, but cometh from the necessity of fate. (86) But they confess Christ also, for they say that he was made man in appearance; for they themselves in appearance are called Christians. . . . For even as a painter making a mixture of divers colours perfecteth the appearance of a man or a beast or some other thing for the deceit of them that behold it, that it may seem to them that are foolish and without understanding it to be true, but to them that have understanding it is a shadow and a deceit and an invention of man; so also the Manichaeans having drawn out of divers opinions did perfect their own evil belief, nay rather, having gathered together and mingled the venom of divers serpents, did prepare a deadly poison for the destruction of the souls of men. But, as aforesaid, that pestilent woman having come to the city, certain persons

¹ Mark the Deacon, 85-91: I quote from the admirable translation of G. F. Hill.

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were led away by her deceitful teaching. (87) But after some days Saint Porphyry, having been informed by certain of the believers, sent for her and questioned her, who she was and whence and what manner of belief she held. And she confessed both her country and that she was a Manichaean. And when they that stood around him were moved with wrath (for there were certain devout men with him), the blessed man besought them not to be angered, but with patience to exhort her a first and a second time, observing the saying of the holy Apostle (Tit. iii 10). Then saith he to the woman: "Abstain, Sister, from this evil belief, for it is of Satan." But she answered: "Speak and hear, and either persuade or be persuaded." And the blessed man said: "Prepare thyself against the morrow and present thyself here." So she took her leave and departed. But the blessed man, having fasted and prayed much unto Christ that he would shame the devil, prepared himself against the next day and called certain of the devout, both clergy and laymen, to hear the dispute between himself and the woman. (88) And on the morrow the woman presenteth herself, having with her two men and as many women; they were young and fair to look upon, and the faces of them all were pale; but Julia was old in years. And they all did build their reasoning upon the teaching of this world, and much more Julia than the others. And their guise was lowly and their manner gentle, but, as it is said, they were outwardly sheep and inwardly ravening wolves and venomous beasts; for hypocrisy is in all their words and deeds. Then being bidden to sit down they inquired into the matter. And the saint, holding the holy gospels and having made the sign of the Cross on his mouth, began to ask her to declare her belief and she began to speak. And brother Cornelius the deacon, being skilled in the shorthand of Ennomus, did at the bidding of the most blessed bishop note all that was said and disputed, I and brother Barochas reminding him.

I am sorry to say that Mark now explains that he did not write the dispute in this book, "seeing

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that it was long," so that we have no report of "the old wives' fables which the marvel-monger and magician Julia spake in her foolishness."

The end was dramatic. Mark goes on to say (89):

After she had said many vain things for many hours and spoken the customary blasphemies against the Lord and God of all, Saint Porphyry, being moved by divine zeal, when he saw Him that comprehendeth all things both seen and unseen blasphemed by a woman possessed of the devil and submitting herself to his will, gave forth his sentence against her, saying: "God, who made all things, who alone is eternal, having neither beginning nor ending, who is glorified in trinity, shall smite thy tongue and muzzle thy mouth, that thou mayest not speak evil things." (90) And straightway with the sentence followed also the punishment; for Julia began to tremble and her countenance to be changed, and continuing as in a trance for a certain time she spake not, but was without voice or motion, having her eyes open and fastened upon the most holy bishop. But they that were with her, beholding that which she suffered, were sore afraid, and sought to awake her spirit and sang charms into her ear; and there was no speech and there was no hearing. And after she had been for a certain time without speech, she gave up the ghost, departing unto the darkness which she honoured, holding it to be light.

Bishop Porphyry had the old lady properly buried: "he was exceeding compassionate," says Mark, who adds that the men and women who had appeared with Julia confessed their error. "(91) But the blessed man caused them all to curse Manes, the author of their heresy, after whom also they were called Manichaeans, and having instructed them for many days he brought them into the holy Catholic Church."

Poor Julia! I have quoted this story almost in

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CONVERSION OF AUGUSTINE

full, because it gives us so much of the fear and animosity with which the Manichæan Religion was regarded during the centuries when it was a crusading, missionary Faith.

The Manichæan propaganda when at its height was not stopped by barriers of language or culture. It had spread by the middle of the 4th century into the Latin-speaking West, and in Carthage it secured its most famous convert. For nine years, from 373 onwards, Augustine was a Manichee and in various ways the Manichæan Religion left an enduring impress on his mind, relics of which can still be traced in actually current notions. Certainly in the contrasted conceptions of the *Civitas Dei* and the *Civitas Mundi* there is a perceptible reflexion of the Manichee notion of the eternal realms of Light and Dark.

The experience that S. Augustine had had served him well when as a Bishop in Africa he had to withstand Manichee missionaries such as Fortunatus and Felix, or to confute Manichee books of controversy such as that of Faustus. Several of Augustine's works still remain among our chief authorities for the doctrines of Manichæism. But after Augustine's day, that is, from the middle of the 5th century onwards, our information is very scanty. It is all the scantier if account be taken of the fact that orthodox Christians often used the word 'Manichæan' to describe heretics whose doctrines were imperfectly