

ZOROASTER'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY.

BY THE EDITOR.

WE read in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy (p. 176) the following passage which we cannot doubt is but a more complete version of Matt. 11:1:

“And it came to pass when the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem of Judah, in the time of Herod the King, behold Magi came from the East to Jerusalem, as Zerdusht had predicted: and they had with them gifts, gold, incense and myrrh; and they worshipped him and offered unto him their gifts.”

Zerdusht is the Arabic name for Zoroaster, and we have here the positive statement that Zoroaster had predicted the Saviour.

The three Magi are now commonly supposed to be representatives of the Gentile nations, but among the early Christians they were Magi, or priests of Mesopotamia. They are always represented as wearing Persian caps, the same head covering which Mithra wears, and which under the name of miter, has become the typical cap of honor of the Christian bishops. The names of the three Magi according to an ancient popular legend, are Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. All are pagan names; not one of them is Jewish. Caspar means “radiance”, Melchior means “the light of Malech or Moloch” (i. e. the king, viz., God). Balthazar means “Bel protect the king.”

The story of the Magi is the last remnant in the Christian canon of the evidences of the influence which the religion of the Persians exercised on early Christianity. We know now that this influence must have been enormous although it appears that during the rivalry between Mithraism and Christianity, the vestiges that might testify to it have been systematically obliterated, leaving only hints of the significance of Zoroaster's faith at the beginning of the Christian era.

In the light of these facts, a knowledge of the noble faith of the Persians has become indispensable to a proper comprehension of our own religion, and so it is but natural that of late much attention has been paid to its sacred canon, the Zend Avesta.*

The study of the Zend Avesta will prove more and more important for our insight into the genesis of both Judaism and Christianity, and it is greatly to be regretted that the men who do the work in this important direction are very rare. It was begun on a larger scale by Spiegel, a German scholar; it was continued by Darmesteter, a Frenchman of Jewish blood; and is represented to-day in the Old World by Professor Lawrence H. Mills, and in the United States by A. V. Williams Jackson.

The religion of Zoroaster (or, as the original name reads, Zarathushtra) bears a close resemblance in many respects to both Judaism and Christianity. It is commonly called Mazdaism, or the worship of Mazda, Ahura Mazda, the Lord Omniscient, being the common appellation of God among the followers of Zarathushtra. While the Iranians, the inhabitants of Elam, and later on of Persia, were greatly benefited by the civilisation that had sprung up in the valley of the Euphrates and Tigris, they made a new departure in the line of practical religion by boldly taking the consequences of the philosophy of the day, by discarding the old polytheism, and by placing in its stead a rigid monotheism. While their knowledge of facts, their science, their culture, their art, and their habits of life generally were greatly influenced by Babylonian thought, these sturdy mountaineers in the highlands northwest of Babylon, resented the superstitions of the inhabitants of the plains, and felt a superiority in the purity of their religious conviction such as we find expressed also in the canon of the Jews.

Are we not perhaps entitled to assume that conditions similar to these prevailing in the mountainous provincial centers of the northwest obtained also on the highlands of Judah? Thus we are confronted by a parallel development of monotheism on similar lines accompanied by a similar scorn of Babylonian idolatry, while the entire atmosphere in both Judea and Persia is permeated with Babylonian culture.

The Babylonian captivity constituted the school-years in the

* In view of the importance of Zend Avesta study we will publish in the next number a condensed biographical account of Professor Lawrence H. Mills. He thinks that a publication of such a personal nature might be misconstrued as vanity, but grants at the same time that many students interested in his line of work have repeatedly called for just such details. Hence we deem ourselves justified in publishing both his portrait, and a short sketch of his course of study.

development of the Jewish people. After the conquest of Jerusalem, the nobility, and with them all intellectual leaders, including representative artisans of all the crafts, were transported to Babylon and were there confronted for the first time in their national life with a civilisation superior to their own. Their view was widened, and while they felt themselves strangers in the new land, they there absorbed the best thought and reconstructed their own faith on broader lines.

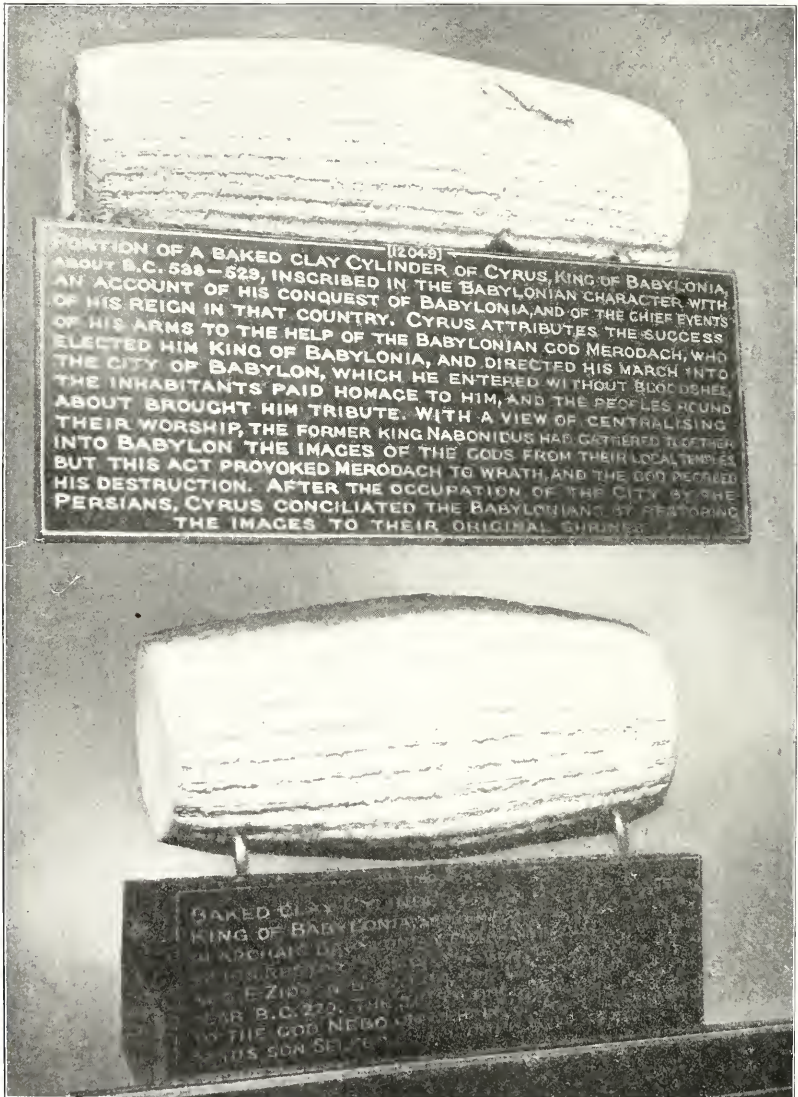
It is well known that monotheistic tendencies existed in Babylon, that the different gods were interpreted to be different manifestations of the same deity, and we may very well assume that philosophical minds must have looked with disgust on the idolatrous practices of the national temple service. The Jews imbibed the monotheism of these isolated thinkers of their new home, because they were prepared for it through the prophetic movement that antedated the downfall of Judea and were thus enabled to identify that one sole and supreme God with Yahveh, their own tribal deity. Under such auspices the entire literature of Israel was revised and the history of the nation reconstructed from the monotheistic point of view, which made it appear that Yahveh had always been the one supreme God, who, however, had taken special pains to select Israel as his own chosen people.

It was no accident that Babylonian rule was overthrown by Persia, for the Persian kings and their people were a vigorous race ensouled with high ideals and noble principles. They had embraced the religion of Zoroaster and thus their cause in the destiny of nations had become identified with a monotheistic faith. There is but this difference between the Persians and the Jews, that the former were tolerant of other religious institutions while the latter were iconoclastic and over-zealous in condemning the idolatry of the Gentiles.

When Cyrus entered Babylon he took possession of the city in the name of Marduk, the tutelary deity of that great metropolis, identifying Marduk with his own god Ahura Mazda; and in the same way he recognised the religion of the Jews as being practically the same as his own, tacitly assuming that Yahveh, the Lord of the Jews, was but another name for Ahura Mazda, the Lord of the Persians.

Cyrus was a great man, and history has rightly named him "Cyrus the Great." He had a deep insight into the several nationalities whom he united under his sceptre. He was not only victorious in war, but also successful in peace; and so he amalgamated

this heterogeneous mass of people, speaking many different languages and being guided by as many different religions, into one



CLAY CYLINDER RECORDING THE ENTRANCE OF CYRUS INTO BABYLON.

After a photograph by Mansell.

great empire, of which his own people, the Persians, remained for many centuries the administrators and rulers. Thus the Semitic

world of Hither Asia was for the first time guided by a nation of Aryan blood, the rule of which continued until the Persian Empire broke down before the irresistible onslaught of Alexander the Great.

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But let us now consider the significance of the religion of the Persians, and how it affected the development of the religion which dominates the civilised nations today. We shall see that it entered into the make-up of Judaism and exercised a most powerful influence upon it. At the time of Christ it became a factor in the origin of Christianity, and later on it affected its development, not only once but several times.

First of all, Cyrus is hailed by Isaiah as the Messiah, i. e., "the Anointed One," Chapter xiv, 1, where the passage reads in the authorised version: "Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him." The famous passage which John the Baptist applies to Jesus when he speaks of himself, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight," has originally been spoken by Isaiah of Cyrus, who in the same chapter as above quoted, declares in the name and words of God (Is. xiv, 2): "I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron."*

Cyrus recognised in the monotheism of Judea a religion akin to his own, and therefore took a personal interest in the destiny of the Jews. He organised the temple service in Jerusalem, and with it introduced the Mazdaian symbol of the deity, the holy fire—an institution which has been preserved in Christianity under the form of the eternal lamp, which is even today kept incessantly burning in Roman Catholic churches.

Historians assume that a man of the great common sense of Cyrus was also moved by practical motives. In consideration of the fact that his own people were a small majority in that great empire which he had conquered, he needed sympathisers and supporters of his cause, which was nowhere more endangered than at the Egyptian frontier; and he was wise enough to show his clemency and bestow favors upon those people who held the key to the roads between Babylon and Suez. So long as he could trust the population of Jerusalem, an Egyptian invader could not take him by surprise; while, on the other hand, if the allegiance of the rulers of

* Cf. also Is. xl, 3-5, where the same idea is set forth without, however, making special allusion to Cyrus.

Jerusalem was doubtful, his Syrian possessions could easily be attacked by Pharaoh. The impulse which Cyrus gave to the development of Judaism was no doubt lasting, but in addition we know that Persian thought continued to sway the religious development of the Jews, and its traces are especially noticeable in the apocalyptic writings.

The canon of the Jews as we have it in the Old Testament does not as yet show the supremacy of the Persian faith. It is still an expression of the opposition made by the religious leaders of the Jews to the polytheistic superstitions of Babylon. Thus they oppose above all the idea of immortality, which is closely connected with Tammuz worship and is by no means free from idolatrous practices. It is presumably on this account that no reference is made in the Old Testament to the doctrine of immortality. Times changed, however, and the idea of the soul, of resurrection, and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth became powerful factors in the popular religion of Judea,—notions which appeared mainly in sectarian life and in the post-canonical literature of the times, commonly called apocryphal.

The Apocrypha consists of a peculiar mixture of Babylonian ideas, modified by the Persian religion, and finally assimilated to Jewish ways of thinking. They were written at a time of great tribulation for the Jews, who were suffering from persecution at the hands of the kings of Syria. This part of the Persian empire had fallen into the hands of the family of Antiochus, and these proud rulers endeavored to break the exclusiveness of Jewish institutions. In those troublesome days, the Jews felt consolation in the hope of a Messiah, which found expression in prophecies that were echoes of ancient legends ultimately founded on the aboriginal faith of the oldest inhabitants of Babylonia.

The ancient Babylonians looked upon earthly life as a reflection of heavenly events, and represented the successive eras of history as cycles; thus the stories of the gods contain prophecies concerning the destiny of mankind, and the legend of the origin of the world was considered typical for the regeneration of conditions in a new age. For this reason the story of the struggle of Bel Marduk, the main god of Babylon, with Tiamat, the monster of the deep, was regarded as prophetic, and the myths of cosmogony were interpreted as foreshadowing an eschatology.

The continuation of eschatological literature in the Christian era and its conclusion are found in the Revelation of St. John the Divine. This strange composition contains passages which remind

the student of the Babylonian antiquities of the ancient Marduk epic, and the chapters xii. and xix. contain a Christianity whose Christ has apparently nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ of the twelfth chapter is born in heaven, not on earth; and the mother is persecuted by a dragon who is evidently a creature of mythological significance, for we are told that "his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and drew them to the earth." We are told of a war in heaven, in which Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the man-child that was born had to be reared in secrecy. "It was caught up unto God and to his throne."

The Christ of chapter xii. does not preach the love of enemies or the Golden Rule, but "is to rule all nations with a rod of iron." He rides on a white horse and is "clothed with a vesture dipped in blood and his name is called the Word of God." Further details are supplied by Professor Hermann Gunkel who was the first to call attention to the mythological features of the Book of Revelation in his book *Schöpfung und Chaos*.

The Jews under the tyrannical rule of the Antiochs were fully convinced that the present world-order had waxed old and that a change was close at hand. The Son of Man was expected to bring redress from evil, and perhaps for the first time in the history of the world individualism began to stir the people. It was no longer sufficient to glory in the continuation of the state. Every individual soul should be preserved and treasured up, and so the belief gained ground that those who had suffered in times of tribulation should be resurrected and live again on the great day of the regeneration of the world.

Similar ideas of a growing individualism can be traced in other countries, especially in Greece where the Orphic mysteries introduced similar ideals and hopes.

If we ask ourselves where the new faith that was to develop into full bloom in Christianity has been most clearly anticipated in the special form in which it appears among the Nazarenes (the primitive Christians of Jerusalem of which St. Paul is spoken of as a ringleader, Acts xxiv. 5), we can point only to Persia.

The Persians worshipped Ahura Mazda, the Lord Omniscient, as the only deity, but according to their faith he was opposed by the wicked demon Angra Mainyu. While the Lord Omniscient is omnipotent, the Evil One has great power in this world and the struggle is being waged between the partisans of the Lord and of the Fiend. Man stands between the two and has to take issue for or against God. No doubt exists that God will be victorious in the

end. In the right season a saviour, *Saoshyant*, will be born of a virgin who will conceive while bathing in the pure waters of a lake. The Saviour is called Mithra, the Glorious One, who is a manifestation of God as much as its corona. is a manifestation of the sun. The Saviour will be the mediator between God and man. He will smite the Fiend and establish God's kingdom on earth, called *Khashathra Vairja*, "the Kingdom of Perfection." On his appearance the dead will rise and the age of immortality begin. Then Mithra will sit in judgment. The good shall be clothed with transfigured bodies that will cast no shadow, while the reprobates, the supporters of Angra Mainyu, will be doomed to the eternal fires of hell, but on earth an age of holiness, *Asha Vahista*,* will be established forever.

It is noticeable that many ideas bear a remarkable resemblance to Christian thought. The Word, for instance, played a very significant part with the Persians as it did also in ancient Babylon and in India. According to primitive logic, the word not only represents the thing itself, but contains the essence of its nature, and so the name of God, and also prayers, were considered as powerful spells, capable of working miracles. We know that Bel Marduk evinced his worthiness of taking up the fight with Tiamat, by showing that with his word he could call things into existence or make them disappear, and it is but a natural consequence of this idea that the Persians believed that Ahura Mazda had created the world by pronouncing the word, and Zoroaster drove away the fiend Angra Mainyu by reciting the formula of prayer.

The Persian religion was practical. It taught its devotees to trust in God whose nature was light. It taught them to regard the lie as the worst sin they could become guilty of, and they considered themselves champions of the cause of Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda was conceived after the allegory of a Persian King of Kings who had a host of messengers and officers at his command. So we understand that in combination with Persian monotheism was a belief in angels, and we can have no doubt that Persian ideas concerning angels, good as well as evil, were introduced in Judea. The Persian daily prayer was for the kingdom to come, and the liturgy in their temple service contains a passage which resembles the close of the Lord's Prayer. In answer to the question: "Who is there who will smite the reprobate and turn them aside from their wickedness?" the priest answers: "Lord, Thine is the power, Thine is the kingdom,

* Literally "Holy Order."

and by it Thou bestowest the highest bliss upon the right-living poor.”*

The Zarathushtrian religion developed more and more the idea of Mithra the Saviour, and so Mazdaism comes to be named Mithraism. And Mithraism spread over Western Asia, and the great kings of the Parthians bore such names as Mithradates to show their reverence for the Viceroy of God that was to come and govern the world. Mithraism spread over the Roman Empire and in the second century became a powerful rival of Christianity. We know that the Christian sacraments, especially baptism and the Lord's Supper, resemble closely similar institutions of Mithraism, and the church fathers were appalled by this similarity discovered in a religion which was older than Christianity. Justin Martyr attributes their invention to the ingenuity of evil spirits, and Tertullian with reference to these parallels, pronounces the theory that Satan imitates the sacraments of God (*Satanus affectat sacramenta dei*).

The Mithraic institution of eating holy cakes (*myazda*) and drinking from a sacred cup the juice of the *haoma* plant, which is done to nourish the resurrection body, is ancient; for the custom is frequently referred to in the Gathas, which are the oldest Zarathushtrian writings. We might incidentally mention that it is most likely that the Persians did not originate this ceremonial eating and drinking, for there are allusions to similar practices in Assyrian monuments; and we have no reason to doubt that we have to deal here with a ceremony that is not only very ancient, but also widely spread over the whole face of the earth, since vestiges of it can be traced even among savages of the western continent.

In the struggle for supremacy Christianity conquered Mithraism, but the spirit of Mithraism continued to flourish and found expression in such sects as the Manichees, who are more and more recognised to be a continuation of the old Mazdaism.

Anyone who reviews the history of the Christian Church with a view of Mazdaic influences will understand how important our knowledge of the Zend Avesta and all the sacred writings of both Mazdaism and Mithraism must be for the proper understanding of the history of our own faith, and it is for this reason that comparative religion should devote more attention to a study of this much neglected branch of knowledge.

* *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXXI, p. 194.