

THE ORIGINS OF MITHRAISM.¹

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IN that unknown epoch when the ancestors of the Persians were still united with those of the Hindus, they were already worshippers of Mithra. The hymns of the Vedas celebrated his name as did those of the Avesta, and despite the differences obtaining between the two theological systems of which these books were the expression, the Vedic Mitra and the Iranian Mithra have preserved so many traits of resemblance that it is impossible to entertain any doubt concerning their common origin. Both religions saw in him a god of light, invoked together with Heaven, bearing in the one case the name of Varuna and in the other that of Ahura; in ethics he was recognised as the protector of truth, the antagonist of falsehood and error. But the sacred poetry of India has preserved of him an obscured memory only. A single fragment, and even that partially effaced, is all that has been specially dedicated to him. He appears mainly in incidental allusions,—the silent witnesses of his ancient grandeur. Still, though his physiognomy is not so distinctly limned in the Sanskrit literature as it is in the writings of the Zends, the faintness of its outlines is not sufficient to disguise the primitive identity of his character.

According to a recent theory, this god, with whom the peoples of Europe were unacquainted, was not a member of the ancient Aryan pantheon. Mitra-Varuna, and the five other Adityas celebrated by the Vedas, likewise Mithra-Ahura and the Amshaspands, who according to the Avestan conception surrounding the Creator, are on this theory nothing but the sun, the moon, and the planets, the worship of which was adopted by the Indo-Iranians ‘‘from a neighboring people, their superiors in the knowledge of the starry

¹ Extracted by the author from his *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (Brussels: H. Lamertin). Translated by T. J. McCormack.

firmament," who could be none other than the Accadian or Semitic inhabitants of Babylonia. But this hypothetical adoption, if it really took place, must have occurred in a prehistoric epoch, and it will be sufficient for us to state, without attempting to dissipate the obscurity of these primitive times, the simple fact that the tribes of Iran have never ceased to worship Mitra from their first assumption of worldly power till the day of their conversion to Islam.

In the Avesta, Mithra is the genius of the celestial light. He appears before sun-rise on the rocky summits of the mountains; during the day he traverses the wide firmament in his chariot drawn by four white horses, and when night falls he still illuminates with flickering glow the surface of the earth, "ever waking, ever watchful." He is neither sun, nor moon, nor stars, but watches with "his hundred ears and his hundred eyes" the world. Mithra hears all, sees all, knows all: none can deceive him. By a natural transition he has thus become for ethics the god of truth and integrity, the one that was invoked in the solemn vows, that pledged the fulfilment of contracts, that punished perjurers.

The light that dissipates darkness, restores happiness and life on earth; the heat that accompanies it fecundates nature. Mithra is "the lord of the wide pastures," the one that renders them fertile. "He giveth increase, he giveth abundance, he giveth cattle, he giveth progeny and life." He scatters the waters of the heavens and causes the plants to come forth from the ground; on them that honor him, he bestows health of body, abundance of riches, and talented posterity. For he is the dispenser not only of material blessings but of spiritual advantages as well. His is the beneficent genius that accords peace of conscience, wisdom, and honor along with prosperity, and causes harmony to reign among all his votaries. The devas, who inhabit the places of darkness, disseminate on earth along with barrenness and suffering all manner of vice and impurity. Mithra, "wakeful and sleepless, protects the creation of Mazda" against their machinations. He combats unceasingly the spirits of evil; and the iniquitous that serve them feel also the terrible visitations of his wrath. From his celestial eyrie he spies out his enemies; armed in fullest panoply he swoops down upon them, scatters and slaughters them. He desolates and lays waste the homes of the wicked, he annihilates the tribes and the nations that are hostile to him. On the other hand he is the puissant ally of the faithful in their warlike expeditions. The blows of their enemies "miss their mark, for Mithra, sore incensed, hath received

them"; and he assures victory unto them that "have had fit instruction in the Good, that honor him and offer him the sacrificial libations."

This character of god of hosts, which is the predominating trait in Mithra from the days of the Achæmenides, undoubtedly became accentuated in the period of confusion during which the Iranian tribes were still at war with one another; but it is after all only the development of the ancient conception of struggle between the day and the night. In general, the picture that the Avesta offers us of the old Aryan deity, is, as we have already said, similar to that which the Vedas have drawn in less marked outlines, and it hence follows that Mazdaism left unaltered the main foundation of its primitive nature.

Still, though the Avestan hymns furnish the distinctest glimpses of the true physiognomy of the ancient God of light, the Zoroastrian system, in adopting his worship, has singularly lessened his importance. As the price of his admission to the Avestan Heaven, he was compelled to submit to its laws. Theology had placed Ahura-Mazda on the pinnacle of the celestial hierarchy, and thenceforward it could recognise none as his peer. Mithra was not even made one of the six Amshaspands that aided the supreme deity in governing the universe. He was relegated, with the majority of the ancient divinities of nature, to the host of lesser genii or *Yazatas* created by Mazda. He was associated with some of the deified abstractions which the Persians had learned to worship. As protector of warriors, he received for his companion, Verethraghna, or Victory; as the defender of the truth, he was associated with the pious Sraosha, or Obedience to divine law, with Rashnu, Justice, with Arshtât, Rectitude. As the tutelar genius of prosperity, he is invoked with Ashi-Vaňuhi, Riches, and with Pâreňdî, Abundance. In company with Sraosha and Rashnu, he protects the soul of the Just against the demons that struggle to drag it to Hell, and under their guardianship it soars aloft to Paradise. This Iranian belief gave birth to the doctrine of redemption by Mithra, which we find developed in the Occident.

At the same time, his cult was subjected to a rigorous ceremonial, conforming to the Mazdean liturgy. Sacrificial offerings were made to him of "small cattle and large, and of flying birds." These immolations were preceded or accompanied with moderate libations of the juice of Haoma, and with the recitation of ritual prayers,—the bundle of sacred twigs (*baresman*) always in the hand. But before daring to approach the altar, the votary was obliged to

purify himself by repeated ablutions and flagellations. These rigorous prescriptions recall the rite of baptism and the corporeal tests imposed on the Roman mystics before initiation.

Mithra, thus, was adopted in the theological system of Zoroastrianism; a convenient place was assigned to him in the divine hierarchy; he was associated with companions of unimpeachable orthodoxy; homage was rendered to him on the same footing with the other genii. But his puissant personality had not bent lightly to the rigorous restrictions that had been imposed upon him, and there are to be found in the sacred text vestiges of a more ancient conception, according to which he occupied in the Iranian pantheon a much more elevated position. Several times he is invoked in company with Ahura: the two gods form a pair, for the light of Heaven and Heaven itself are in their nature inseparable. Furthermore, if it is said that Ahura created Mithra as he did all things, it is likewise said that he made him just as great and worthy as himself. Mithra is indeed a *yazata*, but he is also the most potent and most glorious of the *yazatas*. "Ahura-Mazda established him as the protector of the entire movable world, to watch over it." It is through the agency of this ever-victorious warrior that the Supreme Being destroys the demons and causes even the Spirit of Evil, Ahriman himself, to tremble.

Compare these texts with the celebrated passage in which Plutarch expounds the dualistic doctrine of the Persians: Ormazdes dwells in the domain of eternal light "as far above the sun as the sun is distant from the earth," Ahriman reigns in the realm of darkness, and Mithra occupies an intermediary place between them. The beginning of the Bundahish expounds a quite similar theory, save that in place of Mithra it is the air (*Vayu*) that is placed between Ormuzd and Ahriman. The contradiction is only one of terms, for according to Iranian ideas the air is indissolubly conjoined with the light, which it is thought to support. In fine, a supreme god, enthroned in the empyrean above the stars, where a perpetual serenity exists; below him an active deity, his emissary and chief of the celestial armies in their constant combat with the Spirit of Darkness, who from the bowels of Hell sends forth his devas to the surface of the earth,—this is the religious conception, far simpler than that of Zoroastrianism, which appears to have been generally accepted among the subjects of the Achæmenides.

The conspicuous rôle that the religion of the ancient Persians accorded to Mithra is attested by a multitude of proofs. He alone,

with the goddess Anâhita, is invoked in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes alongside of Ahura-Mazda. The "great kings" were certainly very closely attached to him, and looked upon him as their special protector. He it is whom they call to bear witness to the truth of their words, and whom they invoke on the eve of battle. They unquestionably regarded him as the god that brought victory to monarchs; he it was, they thought, that caused that mysterious light to descend upon them which, according to the Mazdean belief, is a guaranty of perpetual success to princes, whose authority it consecrates.

The nobility followed the example of the sovereign. The great number of theophorous, or God-bearing, names, compounded with that of Mithra, which were borne by their members from remotest antiquity, is proof of the fact that the reverence for this god was general among them.

Mithra occupied a large place in the official cult. In the calendar the seventh month was dedicated to him and also doubtless the sixteenth day of each month. At the time of his festival, the king, if we may believe Ctesias, was permitted to indulge in copious libations in his honor and to execute the sacred dances. Certainly this festival was the occasion of solemn sacrifices and stately ceremonies. The *Mithrakana* were famed throughout all Hither Asia, and in their form *Mihragân* were destined to be celebrated, in modern times, by Mussulman Persia at the commencement of winter. The fame of Mithra extended to the borders of the Ægean Sea; he is the only Iranian god whose name was popular in ancient Greece, and this fact alone proves how deeply he was venerated by the nations of the great neighboring empire.

The religion observed by the monarch and by the entire aristocracy that aided him in governing his vast territories could not possibly remain confined to a few provinces of his empire. We know that Artaxerxes Ochus had caused statues of the goddess Anâhita to be erected in his different capitals, at Babylon, Damas, and Sardis, as well as at Susa, Ecbatana, and Persepolis. Babylon, in particular, being the winter residence of the sovereigns, was the seat of a numerous body of official clergy, called *Magi*, who sat in authority over the indigenous priests. The prerogatives that the imperial protocol guaranteed to this official clergy could not render them exempt from the influence of the powerful sacerdotal caste that flourished beside them. The erudite and refined theology of the Chaldeans was thus superposed on the primitive Mazdean belief, which was rather a congeries of traditions than a

well-established body of definite beliefs. The legends of the two religions were assimilated, their divinities were identified, and the Semitic worship of the stars (astrolatry), the monstrous fruit of long-continued scientific observations, became amalgamated with the nature-myths of the Iranians. Ahura-Mazda was confounded with Bel, who reigned over the heavens, Anâhita was likened to Ishtar, who presided over the planet Venus, while Mithra became the Sun, Shamash. As Mithra in Persia, so Shamash in Babylon is the god of justice; like him, he also appears in the east, on the summits of mountains, and pursues his daily course across the heavens in a resplendent chariot; like him, finally, he too gives victory to the arms of warriors, and is the protector of kings. The transformation wrought by Semitic theories in the beliefs of the Persians was of so profound a character that, centuries after, in Rome, the original home of Mithra was not infrequently placed on the banks of the Euphrates. According to Ptolemy, this potent solar deity was worshipped in all the countries that stretched from India to Assyria.

But Babylon was a step only in the propagation of Mazdaism. Very early the Magi had crossed Mesopotamia and penetrated to the heart of Asia Minor. Even under the first of the Achæmenides, it appears, they established themselves in multitudes in Armenia, where the indigenous religion gradually succumbed to their cult, and also in Cappadocia, where their altars still burned in great numbers in the days of the great geographer Strabo. They swarmed, at a very remote epoch, into distant Pontus, into Galatia, into Phrygia. In Lydia even, under the reign of the Antonines, their descendants still chanted their barbaric hymns in a sanctuary attributed to Cyrus. These communities, in Cappadocia at least, were destined to survive the triumph of Christianity and to be perpetuated until the fifth century of our era, faithfully transmitting from generation to generation their manners, usages, and modes of worship.

At first blush the fall of the empire of Darius would appear to have been necessarily fatal to these religious colonies, so widely scattered and henceforward to be severed from the country of their birth. But in point of fact it was precisely the contrary that happened, and the Magi found in the Diadochi, the successors of Alexander the Great, no less efficient protection than that which they enjoyed under the Great King and his satraps. After the dismemberment of the empire of Alexander, there were established in Pontus, Cappadocia, Armenia, and Commagene, dynasties which

the complaisant genealogists of the day feigned to trace back to the Achæmenian kings. Whether these royal houses were of Iranian descent or not, their supposititious descent nevertheless imposed upon them the obligation of worshipping the gods of their fictitious ancestors. In opposition to the Greek kings of Pergamus and Antioch, they represented the ancient traditions in religion and politics. These princes and the magnates of their *entourage* took a sort of aristocratic pride in slavishly imitating the ancient masters of Asia. While not evincing outspoken hostility to other religions practised in their domains, they yet reserved special favors for the temples of the Mazdean divinities. Oromazes (Ahura-Mazda), Omanos (Vohumano), Artagnes (Verethraghna), Anaïtis (Anâhita), and still others received their homage. But Mithra, above all, was the object of their predilection. The monarchs of these nations cherished for him a devotion that was in some measure personal, as the frequency of the name Mithradates in all their families attests. Evidently Mithra had remained for them, as he had been for the Artaxerxes and the Dariuses, the god that gave monarchs victory, —the manifestation and enduring guaranty of their legitimate rights.

This reverence for Persian customs, inherited from legendary ancestors, this idea that piety is the bulwark of the throne and the sole condition of success, is explicitly affirmed in the pompous inscription engraved on the colossal tomb that Antiochus I, Epiphanes, of Commagene (69–34 B. C.), erected on a spur of the mountain-range Taurus, commanding a distant view of the valley of the Euphrates. But, being a descendant by his mother of the Seleucidæ of Syria, and supposedly by his father of Darius, son of Hystaspes, the king of Commagene merged the memories of his double origin, and blended together the gods and the rites of the Persians and the Greeks, just as in his own dynasty the name of Antiochus alternated with that of Mithradates.

Similarly in the neighboring countries, the Iranian princes and priests gradually succumbed to the growing power of the Grecian civilisation. Under the Achæmenides, all the different nations lying between the Pontus Euxinus and Mount Taurus were suffered by the tolerance of the central authority to practice their local cults, customs, and languages. But in the great confusion caused by the collapse of the Persian empire, all political and religious barriers were demolished. Heterogeneous races had suddenly come in contact with one another, and as a result Hither Asia passed through a phase of syncretism analogous to that which is

more distinctly observable under the Roman empire. The contact of all the theologies of the Orient and all the philosophies of Greece produced the most startling combinations, and the competition between the different creeds became exceedingly brisk. Many of the Magi, from Armenia to Phrygia and Lydia, then doubtless departed from their traditional reserve to devote themselves to active propaganda, and like the Jews of the same epoch they succeeded in gathering around them numerous proselytes. Later, when persecuted by the Christian emperors, they were obliged to revert to their quondam exclusiveness, and to relapse into a rigorism that kept growing more and more inaccessible.

The definitive form that Mithraism assumed will receive brief consideration in our next article.