

Manicheism and Freemasonry

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There are legends that the gnostic religion of Manicheism influenced the Knights Templar and Freemasonry. Mani, also known as Manes or Manichaeus, was the Persian founder of the Manichean religion, known as the “religion of light.” It claimed to be the true compilation of all the religious systems then known. Mani was a title and term of respect rather than a personal name, and while its exact meaning is not known, it was likely derived from the Babylonian-Aramaic Mana, which among the Mandaeans was a term for a light spirit. Thus, Mani would mean the “light king,” or “the illustrious,” a title known to be used in freemasonry.¹

The Shabuhragan, a book ascribed to the Persian King, Shapur I, states Mani was born in Babylonia in a village called Mardinu on the upper canal of Kutha in the year 527 of the astronomers of Babylon (14 April 216 C.E.).² History has two accounts of Mani’s early childhood. The first account notes that he was born of a noble Parthian family. The story states that his father frequented a temple of idols, which was described as likely being Sabean astrologers. One day an idol called out to his father directing him to not eat meat, drink wine, and refrain from sex. Mani’s father joined a Baptist community, but his wife was already pregnant at the time and thus Mani was born. When Mani turned four years of age,

he joined his father and was brought up by Baptists.³

The second account of Mani’s early life is more interesting for freemasonry and is based on the account of a fourth-century Christian, Hegemonius. His writing on Manichaeism was called the Acta Archelai. The Acta’s account of Mani’s life states that a man named Scythianus was the founder of Mani’s sect, and Scythianus introduced Mani to the concept of dualism, which he indebted to Pythagoras.⁴ Thus, according to this account, Manichaeism was founded upon principles established by Pythagoras, whose teachings have importance in Masonry.

James Anderson, the author of Anderson’s Constitutions of 1723, notes “Nor do we find the Grecians arrived to any considerable knowledge in Geometry, before the Great Thales Milesius, the philosopher, who died in the reign of Belshazzar, and the time of the Jewish captivity. But his scholar, the Greater Pythagoras, proved the author of the 47th problem of Euclid’s first book, which, if duly observed, is the foundation of all Masonry, sacred, civil, and military.”⁵

Pythagoras was said to have been initiated into the mysteries and hence derived his teachings from the ancient mystery religions. William James Hutchinson notes that “It is known to all the learned that Pythagoras traveled into Egypt and was

initiated there into several different orders of priests, who in those days kept all their learning secret vulgar. He made very geometrical theorem a secret, and admitted only such to the knowledge of them, as had first undergone a five-year silence.”⁶

Pythagoras’s dualism was perpetuated by Scythianianus. Archelaus claimed Scythianianus was a member of the Saracens and lived in Egypt where he was taught the wisdom of the Egyptians. He had a disciple named Terebinthus who wrote four books, *The Mysteries, The Heads, The Gospel, and The Treasury*. When Scythianianus died, Terebinthus fled to Babylonia. There, he preached the wisdom of the Egyptians and took the designation of a Buddha, and spoke of the nature of the soul and nature. He then became intimate and lived with a widow. During his time with the widow, Terebinthus fell from the roof of his house and died, leaving all the effects he brought with him from Egypt. Being alone, the widow adopted a seven-year-old boy named Corbicius. This boy became the widow’s son. When the widow died when he was twelve, Corbicius was left with all her possessions, including the four books Scythianianus wrote. Corbicius altered his name to Manes, more properly pronounced Mani due to the infliction of the Persian language. Mani lived till he was sixty years old and learned many different teachings of the area of Persia that he lived in. He grew wise and took three disciples.⁷

At the age of 12, Mani received his first revelation brought to him by the angel al-Tawm. The angel told him to leave the Baptist community and revealed Mani to the

mysteries. Al-Tawm is reminiscent of the apostle Thomas “the Twin” brother of Jesus. When Mani was 24 years of age, al-Tawm announced that the time had come for him to come forth and proclaim the true gospel. Mani preached that he was the paraclete of Jesus foretold of and one of his apostles. According to the Kephalaia, Mani traveled widely in Persia, Parthia, and Adiabene (Azerbaijan), all the way to the eastern Roman frontier regions. Mani also thought that the revelation of Zarathustra, just as the revelations of the Old Testament prophets and the Buddha, was but one part of the truth. Mani was known as the “Apostle of Light,” and supreme “Illuminator.” He stated that the body could not be purified by water, but by knowing how to separate light from darkness and life from death. With permission from the Persian King, Shapur I, Mani could preach his religion across the empire. Mani saw his teachings as the true religion of previous traditions which had become corrupt and had lost their true meaning.⁸

Mani’s dualistic gnostic doctrine involved a feud between two opposite forces consisting of light and darkness, good and evil. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Dualism as “the quality or state of being dual or having a dual nature, a doctrine that the universe is under the dominion of two opposing principles, one of which is good and the other evil, and a view of human beings as constituted of two irreducible elements (such as matter and spirit).”⁹ Mani’s doctrine viewed the world as a fusion of spirit and matter. As masons, we are taught to progress through life lifting the compasses, representing the heavens or

spirit, above the square, representing the earthy and material.

Early in our masonic career, we learn of the black and white checkered pavement that was the ground floor of King Solomon's temple. We know the temple is a symbol of the universe and the checkered pavement is symbolic of the good and bad within nature and all things. This duality of the human passions, the material and the spiritual, can be viewed from a gnostic or Manichaeism perspective. Manichaeism's dualistic cosmology taught of a battle between the spiritual world of light and an evil materialistic world of darkness. Mani taught that the light is gradually removed from the world of matter and returned to the world of light, "whence it came."¹⁰ In *Morals and Dogma*, Pike notes that Mani's doctrine of two principles is the tessellated pavement, which was symbolized in the higher degrees by the colors black and white, which was the juxtaposition of the two principles Zoroaster and Mani alluded to.¹¹ Thus, even in the early degrees of freemasonry, we see the Manichaeism gnostic principles in our attempt to subdue our animal and evil passions and allow light to triumph over darkness.

Mani believed he was the final successor in a line of prophets with Adam, Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus. He taught adherents a universal message and a lost "original truth," that was present in the ancient religions. As Masons, we seek this same lost word or truth. Mani attempted to found an ecumenical and universal religion that would integrate partial truths of previous revelations by Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus.

This syncretism, the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought, was unique in that it was adaptive to be translatable into a wide range of cultures. Mani's religion was that it did not dismiss other religions as false religions; instead, Mani accepted earlier religions and their prophets as carriers of the truth.¹²

As freemasons, we are travelers in the continuous search for light and we allow brothers from all faiths. Known as the "religion of light," Manichaeism incorporated the divine truths found in many religions. He utilized concepts from Christianity, Manceaism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrian. His religion was adaptable to the culture it was delivered to and has been found in cultures around the world. Just as Mani accepted the universal divine truths of the world's religions, so do we as freemasons search for the universal truths. We are encouraged to travel and learn from others, which can symbolically or figuratively mean to search out others who have found universal truths and learn from them just as Pythagoras traveled and was initiated into many mysteries and Mani traveled afar.

In the Scottish Rite, we learn in the twentieth degree, *Grand Master of all Symbolic Lodges*, of how the true mason is a philosopher who utilizes the universal language of nature through reason and wisdom. We learn it is our duty to "aid in restoring Masonry to its primitive purity." The venerable master states that no man has the right to dictate to others what they should believe. We hear from many of the ancient sages such as Zarathustra, Manu, Hermes, Confucius, Moses, Hammurabi, and Numa. "You are to hear patiently,

weigh deliberately and dispassionately, and decide impartially.”¹³ Therefore, as Grand Masters of All Symbolic Lodges, we are to become masters of the all symbolic truths expressed in all faiths throughout time. The light of this lodge represents the 47th Problem of Euclid, which was the great symbol of Pythagoras. This is like Mani, in that he did not deny any religion and sought to extract the true word and teachings from all the religions of that day.

Later in life, Mani claimed he could cure King Wahram I's son, but he failed and the son died. Mani was thrown into prison and loaded with chains. His disciples escaped and continued Mani's teachings. Mani was eventually flayed and hung before the gate of the city. His flesh was “given as a prey to the birds.” According to al-Nadim, King Wahram I had him executed and the two halves of his body hung at two different gates of the city of Gondeshapur. He was decapitated, and his head placed on a spike at the entrance of the city.¹⁴

Between 1000 and 1350 A.D., Manichaeism is said to have been passed via the Paulicians and the Bogomils to re-emerge in the European Cathars, the last of whom were martyred by being burned on a pyre in southern France in 1244.¹⁵ According to Rudolf Steiner, Manichaeism was a small sect that became a mighty spiritual current that influenced the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Cathars of the Middle Ages, and which also belong to the Knights Templar and “by a remarkable chain of circumstances the Freemasons.”¹⁶ Thus, we have the lineage of Freemasonry originating from that of the

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Manicheans, which was formed from the ideas of Pythagoras' teachings and passed through the Cathars and Knights Templar.

According to Charles William Heckethorn, “The sect of the Albigenses, the offspring of Manicheism, fructified in its turn the germs of the Templars and Rosicrucians, and of all those associations that continued the struggle and fought against ecclesiastical and civil oppression.” Heckethorn also stated that “Masons in this degree call themselves the ‘children of the widow’, the sun on descending into his tomb leaving nature — of which Masons consider themselves the pupils — a widow; but the appellation may also have its origin in the Manichean sect, whose followers were known as the ‘sons of the widow’.”¹⁷

According to Joseph Schauberg in his book (*Vergleichendes Handbuch der Symbolik der Freimaurerei mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Mythologien und Mysterien des Altertums*) on the symbolism of Freemasonry, “... nearly all Freemasonry symbols show that the Masons of old believed in and dedicated their service to a worship of the light after the manner of the Oriental sects of the Parsecs, Sabaeans, perhaps also of the Manicheans.”¹⁸

Interestingly, among Mani's teachings, we find an account of “three blows struck at the enemy on the account of the light.” This is an interesting twist of the legend of Hiram Abiff with the enemy rather than the hero being assaulted by three blows. In Mani's teaching, the Darkness received three hard blows and suffered three wars and menacing perils on the part of the Light in these three wars. Mani's account of the blows is as

follows, including the final blow which sends the enemy to the grave and speaks of how to escape death:

"The first blow: He was removed from the center and separated from his Land of Darkness, from whence he had come. He was vanquished in the first war and seized and bound by the Living Soul."

"The second blow: This is the time when he is dissolved and melted away in the great fire and destroyed and annihilated, out of the images, which are all the things in which he exists, and gathered into the fetters corresponding to his first appearance, and so he shall become as he was at the very beginning."

"The third blow, which will strike the Enemy, is the setting in of the end, and the male is parted from the female. The male shall be chained up in the bolos [heap] but the female shall be cast into the grave. He shall be divided into pieces [.] stone in their center of all generations and eternities."

"This is the manner the Enemy shall be bound, in heavy and painful bondage from which there is no way out, ever, but they have succeeded in separating him off and have separated him off for eternity."

"For this reason, I say to my loved ones: Harken to my words which I proclaim to thee. Hold fast to the works of life!"

"Endure persecutions and temptations, which will come to you, fortify yourselves in these commandments which I gave you, that you may escape the second death and these last bonds, in which there is no hope of life, and that you may avoid the evil end of the deniers and blasphemers who have seen the truth with their own eyes and have turned away from it. They shall come unto the Place of Punishment at which there is no day of life. For the shining Light shall hide from them, and from that hour onward they shall not see it. The wind and the air shall be taken from them, and they shall receive no breath of life from that hour onward. Water and dew shall be removed from them and they shall never again taste these."

"Hail to all those who escape the end of the sinners and deniers and avoid the ruin which confronts them in concealing for all eternity!"¹⁹

Finally, it is interesting to examine the manner that Manichaeism paintings depict Jesus with the cross. In the Manichaeism Painting of the Buddha Jesus, as depicted in a Chinese Southern Song dynasty silk hanging scroll from the 12th and 13th century, a person is depicted holding the "cross of light," also known as St. Thomas's Cross, in his left hand. The cross is gold and seated on the top of a red lotus pedestal that has five pedals.²⁰ The lotus has commonly been synchronous with the rose. Thus, we have the cross and the rose, which are known to have been associated with the Rosicrucians.



"Those who advocate using the crucifix in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church instead of the Mar Thoma Cross claim that the Mar Thoma Cross is actually the "Manichaean Cross" a symbol of Manicheism (a heretical early Christian sect that blended Christian and Zoroastrian beliefs and whose founder, Manichee, claimed to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit)."²¹

The cross has a dove above it representing the Holy Spirit. The lotus below is meant to

represent the Father. The lotus in the East also represents the flowering of great beauty from the sludge and slime; perhaps, here, another symbol of good overcoming evil and its results.²²

We cannot absolutely say that Manichaean influenced the Knights Templar, Rosicrucians, and Freemasons. However, we can reflect upon the similarities of their symbolism, teachings, and history to receive further light in some of the ancient lessons presented by this Gnostic society. Just as any great teacher's lessons contain universal truths, so too does Mani provide light worthy of consideration in our lifelong masonic journey.

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