

LESSON NINE – Manichaeism and the Great Persecution

Manichaeism

- In the 3rd century, Christians ideas were mixing with other religions in the Middle East. Mani, who lived in Babylonia, was the most successful in the mixing of those religions.
- Mani combined Christian, Buddhist and Zoroastrian doctrines to create what he considered the perfect religious system.
- Like the Gnostics, Mani believed the spiritual realm is good and that matter is inherently evil. He believed he had been sent from heaven to cobble together a new faith from bits of all the major religions of his world.
- Despite heavy persecution by the Persians, Romans and Chinese, Mani's new religion spread quickly, from the Chinese coast to North Africa, where it posed a serious threat to orthodox Christianity.
- Mani was born somewhere in Babylonia in 216. His father, Patik, had made considerable personal sacrifice to convert to a Jewish-Christian sect known as the Elchaisites that was founded by a Jewish Christian named El Chasai.
- The Elchaisites retained a strict interpretation of the Jewish law in addition to a belief in Christ as a divine teacher, and they emphasized a kosher diet, a deep reverence for the environment, and baptism.
- When Mani was around 25 years old, he had a vision of an angel, who revealed to him that God had chosen him as the "Paraclete," that Jesus had promised. This angel explained to Mani that the true primordial religion had been corrupted by the Elchaisites and that freedom came only from separation.
- Instead of expanding on the Elchaisite doctrine, Mani rebelled against it, cutting out most of the Jewish elements and elevating Christ.
- He rejected all the Old Testament and much of the New. He referred to himself as "Mani, Apostle of Jesus Christ by appointment of God the Father."
- Mani rejected kosher food rules and declared all plant foods clean. The Elchaisites cast him out of the community.
- Mani traveled from Iran to India, where he made some converts and secured political support.
- It was perhaps during this journey that Mani encountered Zoroastrianism, the religion of fire that soon would become the official religion of the Persian Empire, and Buddhism, which had made significant inroads in Eastern Iran at the time.
- Zoroastrianism became the basis for much of Mani's view of the universe as a war between good and evil, while Buddhism influenced his ideas about the presence of God in the natural world.
- After spending some time in India, Mani journeyed back to Iran and won the affection of the Persian emperor, Shapur. Followers of Mani were called Manichaeans.
- Unfortunately for Mani, King Shapur died soon after Mani found favor with him and Shapur's successor, Bahram, threw Mani in prison, where he died under torture in 276.
- Manichaeism did spread far and had converts from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. - Since they came from Iran, the Romans suspected them of being Persian spies;

meanwhile since Mani had incorporated so much Buddhism into the system, Buddhist Chinese suspected them of being Buddhist heretics.

- As a result, the Manichaeans were persecuted with extreme vigor in most of the lands they settled in.
- Mani's ideas persisted and small pockets survived up to the 14th century and although Manichaeism never made great headway into Europe it may have influenced two great heresies of the Middle Ages, Catharism and Bogomilism.

Overview of Mani's Theology¹

- For Mani, the key to salvation was separation: the divine spirit was confined in the material world and needed to be released. But how did the divine spirit get there in the first place?
- Mani developed an elaborate cosmology based on Zoroastrian dualism, the idea that good and evil are locked in an eternal battle, with neither side having the upper hand. Manichaean cosmology bears little resemblance to Christianity, but the structure of the story is familiar.
- In ages past, according to Mani, the kingdom of darkness launched a supernatural attack on the kingdom of light, which the kingdom of light was unable to repel entirely. God was forced to send part of himself as a soldier, known as the Primal Man, along with five gods, to battle the evil gods known as Archons. In the struggle the Primal Man was defeated and taken captive. The Archons then created the material world to hold the Primal Man captive, every plant, animal and human contained glimmers of him. In an ingenious move, the Archons came up with the idea of sex, which would imprison more and more pieces of God in matter as humans reproduced.
- Humankind is made up partly of the Primal Man, who is dazed and only faintly remembers his heritage, and partly out of the material prison.
- The next stage of the story involves redemption, where God begins the process of extracting the Primal Man from the material world. Through messengers such as Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus, God tried to alert Primal Man to his condition. Most of the story of redemption involves only one teaching – it is a matter of awakening a sleeping God rather than restoring a fallen nature.
- Christ's role is primarily reminding Primal Man of his latent divinity. Christ also takes the lead in the conflict with darkness, but his main duty is to make Primal Man aware that the material world is not his home.
- The final stage of the cosmology involved the duties of the believers before the destruction of the world. While Christ was preaching his message, the kingdom of light organized a final counterattack. The material world would be destroyed and so unfortunately would the pieces of God held hostage in it. Time was running short.
- Church historian JND Kelly describes the Manichaean view that humans are both saved by God and the savior of God.

“As he exists, man is tragically involved in the material order; he is fallen and lost. Actually however, he is a particle of Light, belonging to, though exiled from, the transcendent world. He is of the same essence as God, and human souls are fragments of the divine substance...in the process of salvation, God is at once redeemer and redeemed.”²

- After Christ revealed to Mani that God had been trapped in an alien world, Mani organized an elite class known as the Righteous or the Elect, to carry out the work of redeeming God.
- The Elect went through a lengthy purification process and lived an ascetic life, wholly dependent on the financial support of the Manichaean peasants and craftsman, who led ordinary lives.
- Although good works and prayer were important, the main task of the Elect was to free the pieces of God that were trapped in plants, especially cucumbers and watermelon which according to Mani smelled so good that they must be direct links to heaven.
- They would free those trapped pieces by eating the plants. To maintain this power to free God by eating, they could not buy themselves clothes or food and they could not have any sexual relations. Having children would just trap more pieces of God. The freed particles of God would drift up to heaven in a spectacular display known as the column of glory.
- To protect and support the Elect, Mani organized a second, much larger class known as the hearers or auditors. The Auditors could own property and marry, although they practiced self-restraint and birth control. Most importantly, they provided the Elect with food and allowed them to maintain their ascetic lifestyle. Although the Auditors were not freeing pieces of God themselves, they were guaranteed security from the coming destruction because of their support of the Elect. This guarantee came with a contingency though. If the Elect slipped in moral purity, the salvation of the Auditors would also disappear. The two classes were mutually dependent on each other.
- Using Mani’s vision as a guide, the Elect were promised immediate access to the afterlife, where they would be freed from their material prisons and made into angels.
- The Auditors were offered the chance to be reincarnated as Elect or, if they were especially good, as melons, a sort of express route to heaven. As far as others were concerned, the God particles would continue cycling in different forms until the final battle of good and evil took place.
- Because all material things, including the physical body, were viewed as evil and restrictive, the Manichaeans rejected the New Testament concept of the bodily resurrection.
- Life was incredibly hard in the ancient world. One option was to become a Manichaean without a terrible amount of commitment by joining as an Auditor.
- There were also theological reasons it was appealing as well. Mani seemed to have solved the problem of suffering very neatly. In this scheme, God is purely good, but He is thwarted by a potent evil force. The goodness of the world is trapped in evil and needs to be extracted. There is no theological difficulty over the problem of evil and the goodness of God, and little need to confront ourselves as sinners.

- In Christianity, humans are fallen from goodness both in body and soul, but in Manichaeism the material part is evil in itself. This view of God and humankind is a crucial difference between Manichaeism and orthodox Christianity.

The Orthodox Response to Manichaeism

- Orthodox Christians were very concerned about Manichaeism. The Manichaean's used Christian terminology and claimed its central figure while rejecting most of its core doctrines.

Orthodox Christian theologians attacked Manichaeism in four main areas.

1. **First, that by stripping God of His omnipotence, Mani had also stripped Him of His goodness.**
2. **Second, that the Manichaeans rejected God's work in history by rejecting the Old Testament.**
3. **Third, that Manichaeans could not accept the incarnation and this made the work of Christ meaningless.**
4. **And finally, that by placing their hopes in their efforts to free God particles, Manichaeans were looking to the wrong source for salvation.³**

- Ephrem, a Syriac Christian writer who lived on the border of the Persian Empire, had extensive contact with the Manichaeans.
- Ephrem argued that the Manichaean doctrine that the forces of evil are equally as powerful as the forces of good boils down the question of good and evil to the preference of the individual. Neither side can claim to have created the world or to have a pre-existing right to rule.

Augustine and Manichaeism⁴

- Augustine adhered to Manichaeism for ten years while he was in Carthage and then for a short time in Rome before he was dramatically converted to Christianity. After his conversion, Augustine wrote against Manichaeism in his *Confessions* and *Against Faustus the Manichaean*.
- Faustus was a chief theologian in Manichaeism. Augustine's experience within Manichaeism provided him with some of the best arguments against it.
- When he was a young man, Augustine was horrified by the moral failures of the Old Testament. Its angry God, its ruthless wars and its apparent crudeness. This made Manichaeism appealing to Augustine because they rejected the Old Testament.
- After his conversion, Augustine gained more appreciation to the Old Testament and maintained that it was a crucial part of understanding who God is and how Christ came to fulfill the revelation of the Old Testament.
- Manichaeans denied that Christ was really born or really suffered. They believed Christ merely made Himself visible to remind the Primal Man of what he was. Christ's sufferings were symbolic and not real. For the Son of God to take on human flesh and nature would be to contaminate Himself with evil.

- Because of this the Manichaeans doubted the gospel account of Christ's birth, citing the conflict in Matthew and Luke's genealogies as proof that the humanity of Christ was a later invention. The only reliable information was thought to be Christ's ascetic teaching to "sell all" and live a life of devotion and self-sacrifice.
- Augustine replied to this by pointing to the significance of Christ's death and resurrection to overcome evil. In the Manichaean account, Christ remained aloof from the material world and called to the parts of God trapped therein. In the New Testament, Christ entered the material world and "became a curse," by bearing the punishment of death that God had laid on humanity.
- Augustine argued that the fact that Christ was a human, flesh and all, was vital to understanding how He saved humanity, and that He had taken great pains to demonstrate His material nature by inviting Thomas to touch Him after the resurrection.
- Manichaeans believed they were the truer Christians because they lived a purely ascetic life.

Faustus said: "Do I believe the gospel? You ask me if I believe it, though my obedience to its commands shows that I do. I should rather ask you if you believe it, since you give no proof of your belief. I have a father, mother, wife and children, and all else that the gospel requires; and do you ask if I believe the gospel? Perhaps you do not know what is called the gospel. The gospel is nothing else than the preaching and precept of Christ. I had parted with all gold and silver, and have left off carrying money in my purse; content with daily food; without anxiety for tomorrow; and without solicitude about how I shall be fed, or wherewithal I shall be clothed: and do you ask if I believe the gospel?"⁵

- When it came to works, the Manichaeans were nothing if not devout. They gave their entire lives to their beliefs, and not only in consuming cucumbers to free god-particles. They were a people who really tried to be temperate, to guard the environment, and to cultivate humility.

In response to Faustus, Augustine writes: "For the precepts, you are supposing you really [were] to fulfill them, would not profit you without true faith. Do you not know that the apostle says, 'If I contribute all my goods to the poor, and give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profits me nothing?' Why do you need to boast of Christian poverty, when you are destitute of Christian clarity?"⁶

Conclusion on Manichaeism

- There are many similarities among all these early church heresies. Most of them assert that Christ did not really have a human body and His suffering was merely an illusion. Many of them believed the material world is evil and reject the final bodily resurrection.
- Manichaeism no longer directly influences any major religion today.
- Mani's view of salvation lay in separating darkness from light, and he drew a sharp distinction between the two. That doctrine has a small nugget of truth, we also believe that we are being drawn out of sin and into God's salvation through progressive

sanctification. While it is true that salvation is a process, Christians are not attempting to become more and more free from their material body.

- In Christ, Christians have put on the new self that renders the fallen nature as dead. We have newness of life in Christ, but that newness of life will fully be recognized only at the final bodily resurrection, when the fullness of salvation is finally consummated.
- Mani's ascetic interpretation of the gospel offers a significant challenge to contemporary consumerism and calls into question how we spend our money and time.
- Lastly, Christians of every age must overcome one of the primary ways that Mani stumbled. Mainly in his rejection of the elements of Christianity that clashed with his own worldview and offended him.

The Great Persecution

- After the persecutions of Decius and Valerian, the church enjoyed a long period of relative peace. Early in the 4th century though, the last and worst persecution broke out.
- The reigning emperor was Diocletian, who had reorganized the empire and brought renewed prosperity. Part of Diocletian's reorganization had consisted of placing the government on the shoulders of a team of four emperors.
- Two of these held the title "Augustus," Diocletian himself in the East and Maximian in the West. Under each of them was a junior emperor with the title, "Caesar." Galerius under Diocletian, and Constantius Chlorus under Maximian.
- Under Diocletian's administration the empire was enjoying relative peace and prosperity. Among the team of emperors, Galerius seemed to be the only one to give any indication of enmity towards Christianity. Diocletian's wife, Prisca, and their daughter, Valeria, were Christians.
- The first difficulties arose in the army. There was no general consensus among Christians regarding military service.
- Galerius seems to have become more prejudiced against Christians and in 303 he convinced Diocletian to issue a new edict against them.
- The purpose of the edict was not to kill Christians but to remove them from positions of responsibility within the empire. It was then ordered that Christians be dismissed from any government position and that all Christian buildings and books be destroyed.
- Fire broke out twice in the imperial palace and Galerius accused Christians of having set it out of revenge for the destruction of their meeting places and the burning of their books.
- The only area where there seemed to be some respite was the territory under the rule of Constantius Chlorus, where persecution was limited to tearing down some church buildings.
- There were disturbances in some areas and Diocletian became convinced that Christians were conspiring against him.
- This unleashed the most cruel of all the persecutions that the ancient church had to endure.
- Accustomed to the relative ease of several decades, many Christians succumbed. The rest were tortured with extreme cruelty and eventually killed in a variety of ways. A number

were able to hide and some took the sacred books with them. There were even a few who crossed the border into Persia, thus appearing to confirm the worst suspicions as to their lack of loyalty.

- While all this was taking place, Galerius aspired to the supreme position within the empire.
- In 304 Diocletian became ill and although he survived, he was weak and tired. Galerius went to him and apparently convinced him to abdicate.
- Galerius also succeeded in securing Maximian's abdication by threatening to invade his territory with his clearly superior army.
- In 305 both Diocletian and Maximian abdicated, while Galerius and Constantius Chlorus took the title Augustus. The two Caesars under them, Severus and Maximinus Daia, were Galerius's incompetent creatures.
- These arrangements were not well received by many in the legions, where the sons of Constantius Chlorus and Maximian, Constantine and Maxentius, were very popular. When Constantius died, the troops refused to obey the designs of Galerius and proclaimed Constantine as their Augustus.
- Galerius invaded the territories held by Maxentius; but his troops began to desert him and join the other side, forcing Galerius to retreat to his eastern portion of the empire where he had more support.
- In desperation, Galerius appealed to Diocletian to come out of retirement and establish order.
- The final result was a very unstable arrangement, which included the appointment of a new Augustus, Licinius.
- Meanwhile, Constantine, the son of Constantius Chlorus, was simply biding his time and strengthening his position in his territories in Gaul and Great Britain.
- In the midst of this political chaos, persecution continued, although its impact depended upon the policies set by each emperor in each region.
- In the west, most of the territory was under the effective control of Constantine and Maxentius, and neither of them enforced the decrees against Christians, which they saw as the work of their rival Galerius.
- Galerius and his protégé, Maximinus Daia, continued persecuting Christians. Maximinus sought to perfect the policies of Galerius by having Christians maimed and put to work in stone quarries.
- Then help came from an unexpected quarter. Galerius became ill with a painful disease and perhaps convinced by those Christians who said that it was a punishment from God, grudgingly decided to change his policy. According to the Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea, on April 30th 311, Galerius proclaimed:

“With all the new laws which we have decreed for the good of the state, we have sought to restore the ancient rules and traditional discipline of the Romans. We have particularly sought to have Christians, who had abandoned the faith of their ancestors, return to the truth...After the promulgation of our edict ordering all to return to the ancient customs, many obeyed for fear of danger, and we were forced to punish others. But there are still many who persist on their opinions, and we are aware that they neither worship nor serve

the gods, nor even their own god. Therefore, moved by our mercy to be benevolent toward all, it has seemed just to us to extend to them our pardon and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order. In another edict we shall instruct our magistrates regarding this matter. In return for our tolerance, Christians will be required to pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace.⁷

- Such was the edict that ended the most cruel persecution that the church had suffered from the Roman Empire.
- Galerius died five days later, and Christian historian Lactantius, who made it a point to show that those who persecute Christians died horrible deaths, declared his repentance came too late.
- The empire was divided among Licinius, Maximinus Daia, Constantine, and Maxentius. The first three recognized one another and declared Maxentius a usurper.
- As to their policies towards Christians, Maximinus was the only one who soon began anew the persecution that Galerius had ended.
- Suddenly, when least expected, Constantine gathered his armies in Gaul, crossed the Alps and marched on Rome, Maxentius's capital.
- Taken by surprise, Maxentius was unable to defend his strongholds, which Constantine's troops rapidly occupied. All that he could do was collect his army before Rome and there fight the invader from Gaul.
- Rome itself was well-defended and if Maxentius had chosen a wiser course and stayed behind the walls, history may have taken a different course.

According to two Christian chroniclers who knew Constantine, on the eve of the battle he had a revelation. One of the sources, Lactantius, says that it was in a dream that Constantine received the command to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. The other chronicler, Eusebius, says that the vision appeared in the sky, with the words "in this you shall conquer." In any case, Constantine ordered that his soldiers should use on their shield and on their standard a symbol that looked like the superimposition of the Greek letters chi and rho. Since these are the first two letters of the name Christ, this symbol could well have been a Christian symbol.⁸

- Although eventually Christians saw in this the great moment of Constantine's conversion, historians point out that after this event Constantine continued worshipping the unconquered sun.
- The important fact is that Maxentius was defeated and that as he fought on the Milvian bridge he fell in the water and drowned. Constantine became the master of the western half the empire.
- After the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine met with Licinius at Milan, and there concluded an alliance with him.
- Part of what was agreed was that the persecution of Christians would stop, and that their buildings, cemeteries, and other properties would be returned to them.

- This agreement became commonly known as the Edict of Milan and marks the official date for the end of the persecutions, although Maximinus Daia continued his policy of persecution until Constantine became the sole emperor.

¹ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., chapter 5

² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. New York Harper Collins, 1978

³ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., page 70

⁴ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin S., chapter 5

⁵ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin, S., page 73

⁶ Know the Heretics, Holcomb, Justin, S., page 73

⁷ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 124

⁸ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., pages 125-126