

## Early Church Heresies – 3. Manichaeists

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In 216AD, not far from the present site of Baghdad, Mani was born. His father belonged to a Jewish Christian sect, but as a 12 year old, in a vision of an angel called “The Twin” Mani was instructed to leave the sect, and begin to purify himself, by living a harsh life. The angel returned when he was in his 20s, and instructed him to begin a new world religion, which would unite the world’s religions.

This zealous missionary preacher called himself “the apostle of Jesus Christ” and wore flamboyant clothing (blue cloak, red and green trousers), had a staff in one hand and a book in the other.

He preached in Mesopotamia and India. He healed many and delivered many from demons. He was a gifted painter, composing the Ardahand (a picture book of his religion, for the illiterate). He also wrote 7 books.

When decapitated in a Persian prison in 276, his followers zealously spread his teaching thru the Roman Empire, and even to China. The religion drew from Gnostic Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, although it tended to blend in with whatever religion was around.

Manichaeism grew in popularity, but died in the West by about the 6th century. It flourished in the East, and was still present in South China in the 1600s. It made a modified reappearance in the West in the teachings of the Cathars or Albigensians in South France and Northern Italy in the 12th and 13th centuries.

What did Mani teach? He taught the “Teaching of the Light.” The 2 eternal and warring principles in life: Light and Darkness. Life is split into 3 time zones. The 1st epoch had light and darkness separated.

In the 2nd, they intermingled, and in the 3rd epoch, light and darkness will be unalterably separated again.

The battles that came when light and darkness intermingled in the 2nd epoch led to the formation of the world. In a very intricate story he taught that the world came about through spiritual beings fighting, giving birth, having abortions which lived, and included the 12 zodiac signs.

Matter is a blend of light and darkness. Plant life has more light than animal life. However, in humans there is a strong blend of light and dark. The darkness is found in lust and greed, which was

placed in us to ensure that the Light would continue to remain imprisoned in matter, and not escape to be free.

Mani saw himself as being in the line of Jewish and Christian prophets, and stated that Jesus’ death and resurrection were important as part of the fulfilment of the creation process, as well as being part of the enlightenment that we need.

He looked forward to the last day, when the world would capitulate to darkness, but then darkness would be entombed as a lifeless clod, in pitch black, forever to remain away from Light. The Restoration of the Light would then be complete.

The Manichaean Church had the task of caring for the remaining Light in the world. They had to protect it from injury, and attempt to purify it and lead it on the path of deliverance. The way to do this was by living under extremely harsh conditions and reducing all relations in life to a minimum.

In practice, such a lifestyle could only be achieved by a few. This divided their church into 2 groups. The “elect” of “Perfect” were those able to stand the rigor, and the “Hearers” weren’t able to. The hearers gathered around the elect, to be taught and to serve them to earn merit.

The elect were forbidden to work, eat meat, drink wine, lie, be hypocrites, have sex, abuse plants or animals, pollute water, or own personal property. They could eat vegetables once a day, fasting every Monday, and fasting for 2 extra days 5x a yr. They wore white robes.

They had to contemplate, study and translate their scriptures. Prayed 7 times a day, and sang hymns facing the sun or moon. Their harsh life meant that their soul was delivered at death.

However there was no such hope for the Hearers. As they served the elect, bringing them their daily offerings of cucumbers, melons, wheat bread and fruit juice (all of which were claimed to contain high amounts of light to be absorbed into the elects’ bodies), their hope was that they would be reincarnated into another human body, maybe to be an Elect.

The ultimate goal was that humans help bring about the final separation of light and darkness.

Manichaeism did not greatly affect the Christian church, however Mani’s teachings did interact with the outreach of the believers in 2 main ways.

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First, is in explaining the presence of evil. The Christian truth of one all-knowing, all-powerful and good God makes explaining this much more difficult. Some Christians reacted by elevating the devil into another god, so that there is a dualism like the battle between dark and light as in Manichaeism. Some Christians feel the enormous burden that they must pray, otherwise Satan will win the on-going battle. Like Mani's followers, they feel that the fate of the world rests on their capabilities, instead of on the completed work of Christ for us.

We know that Jesus decisively won the battle against Satan on the cross. Satan has been defeated; yet 1 Peter 5:8 says he's like a prowling lion waiting for the final judgement, devouring anyone straying near him.

The 2nd problem is the elitism of Manichaeism. Christians can elevate certain believers into a special group, whether they are clergy, gifted musicians, healers, teachers, carers etc. They are treated as 1st class Christians, while the others become the less important also rans.

Yet the Bible teaches the priesthood of all believers. None is more loved, or more special than any other. We have different gifts given by the Spirit, but we all belong to the body of Christ. An eye cannot say that the toe does not belong etc. We all have the same hope of heaven, and we do not have to earn our place there, stuck here in a seemingly never ending cycle of trying to be good enough.

As Ephesians 2:8-9 says *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast.*

Mani thought his religion would unite the world, but it caused major divisions even within his church, and he twisted the grace and truth of Jesus into a way of earning the right for salvation. He took parts of the Bible and adapted them to his view of God and the world. We must avoid making God and his Bible fit our whims.