

THE TWO WAYS AND EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY

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Although the dramatic moment of discovery of what have been called the Dead Sea Scrolls lay some fifteen years in the past at the time of this article, the excitement had not in any sense abated. It had rather increased as that discovery and later ones in the same area revealed the historical importance of the little Essene community at Qumran.

Progressive scholars were already reviewing the great body of literature of the Intertestamental Period in a new light since these discoveries reveal the great library at Qumran to have been the inspirational storehouse of early Christian writers.

The following article, adapted for present-day readers, is an example of the light these documents throw on the sources and development of many of the ideas of Christian and Jewish philosophy and dogma—as well as the practices of early Christian communities. It also places the Essene teachings in the context of the Mystery traditions from the surrounding Middle East and Egypt.

The closing of the New Testament canon in the fourth century left Christian posterity with the mistaken notion that the twenty-seven books—which we call the New Testament—listed in the Easter Letter of Athanasius (367 CE) comprised the entire body of sacred literature for the Christian world.

It is difficult for people today to realize that our New Testament books were merely a selection from a much wider collection of literature and that those books, while perhaps more historically valuable, and perhaps more spiritually inspiring, were

actually the nucleus and source of a tremendous literary movement that produced scores of gospels, acts, letters, and apocalypses, many of which are still coming to light.

In 1873, an eleventh-century Greek manuscript was found in the Patriarchal Library at Constantinople. Called *The Didaché*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, it was a composite writing. The first part was called *The Two Ways*, and the second contained certain ecclesiastical regulations. In its initial form *The Didaché* may have been written between 80 and 100 CE, but the recension of which this codex is a copy comes from the year 125.

The Didaché, like the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, both of which contain the doctrine of *The Two Ways*, was written in Alexandria, Egypt. This little handbook, I consider the most important extracanonical book of the early Christian community. Antedating the period of the canon, the creed, and the episcopacy, and appearing before any ritual or form of worship had been adopted, it was used as a catechetical manual and guide for the church in its services of worship and parish life.

The Teaching begins with the statement that there are two ways: *The Way of Life* and *The Way of Death*; *The Way of Light* and *The Way of Darkness*. Then it lists a series of prohibitions in the manner of the Ten Commandments. The ethical tone of these sayings resembles the teachings of James more

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than any other New Testament writer, a fact which would suggest Essenic origin. *The Way of Life* echoes the *Sermon on the Mount*, while the precepts of *The Way of Death* follow the negative form of the Decalogue. It admonishes the convert to cultivate the virtues of the one and to avoid the evils of the other.

Ethical Dualism of Zoroastrianism

This interesting Christian doctrine of *The Two Ways* can be traced back to the ethical dualism of Zoroastrianism. The religion of Persia (reflecting the contrasting elements of its natural environment) was one of fierce contrasts and stern reality—the most conspicuous form of dualism in the history of civilization.

According to Zoroaster, there were two great forces in the universe: Good and Evil, perpetually at war with each other. The good was personified by the god Ahura Mazda, who was opposed by Angra Mainyu, the evil spirit. To enlist on the side of Ahura Mazda meant that individuals were committed to do their utmost to create order and stability, to destroy all that was evil or filthy, and to worship the Light.

This dualistic warfare extended to all realms: All things—animals and people that were evil and unclean were destroyed; all holy things were to be protected. Consequently, the followers of the Light could do no harm to cows, dogs, sheep, or any other animal considered sacred. Humanity's necessity of choice between the malevolent and the benevolent forces was perpetual. A person belonged either to the Children of Light or the Children of Darkness. Truth is always in conflict with falsehood, life with death, light with darkness. Humans must make the choice.

With the conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus in 539 BCE, Palestine became a puppet state of Persia. In the long period of occupation, post-exilic Judaism was influenced greatly by Persian thought. This influence is particularly seen in Jewish literature, in the so-called four

silent centuries from 400 to 50 BCE. This impact on Judaism—and also on its offspring, Christianity—has never been fully recognized by laypersons or scholars.

During this period of close contact with Persia, the religious leaders of Judaism, who were the Hasidim and the forerunners of the Pharisees, absorbed many of the Persian ideas and taught them to the people. The principles of Mazdaism, transmitted to the Pharisees by the Hasidim, therefore, became an integral part of the intellectual climate of Judaism in the Intertestamental Period.

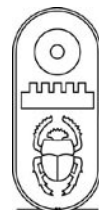
The dualism thus adopted was both apocalyptic and ethical: We hear much of Satan and his kingdom of evil as the adversary of God and the heavenly hosts. For the first time in Judaism, we find ourselves in a world of angels and archangels, Paradise and Hades, Light and Darkness. The present and the future life, the material and the spiritual, the body and the soul, are fundamentally opposed to each other. All this clearly shows a continuity with Zoroastrianism.

This brings us to a consideration of Essene dualism, which also took two forms: cosmic (or apocalyptic) and personal (or ethical). The Essenes saw themselves caught in a great cosmic conflict between the powers of Light and the powers of Darkness. There were two warring spirits in the world: The spirit of Truth and the spirit of Perversity.

The Spirit of Truth

The spirit of Truth was the Prince of Light and the spirit of Perversity was the Prince of Darkness. All people belonged to one or the other of these warring powers; they were either Children of Light or Children of Darkness. In the spiritual dualism of the Qumran Rule, the Children of Light have a special knowledge that helps them to distinguish between good and evil.

The Prince of Light is the advocate or helper of the Children of Light, an idea that is reflected both in the later Fourth Gospel



and in Gnosticism. In the war between the “powers,” we also see a possible source for Paul’s reference in *Ephesians* to the war “against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.”

God’s will prevails in the end and the powers of darkness will be destroyed. The Essene ideas of world judgment, immortality, punishment of the wicked and reward of the righteous, the belief in angels and demons, the necessity of one’s commitment either to the Spirit of Light or to the Spirit of Darkness, and the coming Day of the Lord all bear witness to the Persian character of Essene thought.

In the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which was held in high esteem among the Essenes, there is a similar ethical dualism: In each person there are two spirits at war and the individual has the power to choose which he or she will follow. There are numerous references in the *Testaments* to *The Two Ways* and a person’s freedom to choose between them.

According to this literature, humans are potentially good and also potentially evil. Both inclinations reside within each person, but being wholly different from God, humans are inherently sinful—a principle reappearing in early Christian theology.

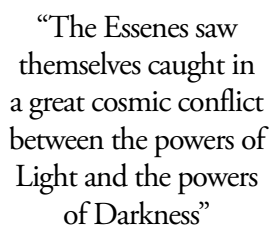
Pursuing the development of dualism still further, we see its continuation in Gnosticism and early Christianity. Gnosticism was a Christian *heresy*, but its roots go back to Qumran thought. The chief theme of the Gnostics was the conflict between the Spirit of Light and the Spirit of Darkness in humans and the necessity of freeing the soul from the domination of the Evil Spirit by bodily discipline and through revealed wisdom. Those who possess this divine insight or knowledge are redeemed and inherit the blessed life.

Gnostics and Essenes

The Dead Sea Scrolls continually emphasize knowledge as a divine illumination necessary for salvation although it was not the *sole* key to salvation. The chief similarity between Gnosticism and Essenism was the juxtaposition of light and darkness, but the dualism of the Scrolls was an ethical one (*good* versus *evil*), while the Gnostic contrast was metaphysical (*spirit* versus *matter*).

Whereas the dependence of Gnosticism upon Essene teaching is only partial, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has confirmed the belief, long held by progressive scholarship, that *early Christianity was a direct continuation of Essenism*. The Graeco-Roman world in the first three centuries was in a state of religious flux; there were many sectarian movements and mystery religions.

Christianity, being a part of this milieu, must be studied against the background of its Jewish inheritance and its Hellenistic environment. Paul was a Jew, but the chief influences playing upon his teaching were Greek. When he tells the Colossians to



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“set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth,” he is echoing the philosophy of the Orphics and the Pythagoreans, the first groups to express the antagonism between flesh and spirit.

The metaphysical element in Paulinism cannot be ignored. The Persian-Greek dualism runs through all his letters: God and Satan, the church and the world, the first and second Adam, the present age and the world to come, the cosmic conflict of good and evil, spirit and matter, life and death.

The Persian-Greek dichotomy of body and soul, matter and spirit, good and evil, and light and darkness finds complete expression in Hermeticism and Manichaeism, two systems of thought that were prominent

in the third and fourth centuries. But the culmination of the doctrine of dualism is to be seen in Christian monasticism with its fanatical attempt to subdue the flesh and elevate the spirit.

Space has not permitted documentary evidence confirming the continuity of the dualistic principle from Zoroastrianism down through all subsequent religious systems, but it is present in abundance for those who wish to view religious history in an objective manner.



Initiatory Hallway by James Collins, F.R.C.

Characteristic of all these philosophies was the centrality of the principle of Light, an idea that may be traced to early Egyptian thought as seen in the Pyramid Ritual, the Book of the Dead, and the Osirian-Solar faith. The possibility of Egyptian influence upon later Jewish and Christian thought, particularly in the Dead Sea Scrolls and extracanonical Christian literature, is a theme that deserves special treatment.

Egyptian Spirituality Lives On

The characteristic dualism of Light and Darkness found in Essenism may have stemmed from Zoroastrianism, but it came from Egypt originally. The solar faith of Egypt had actually been based on the conflict of

Light and Darkness for three millennia before the Christian era. It was inevitable that the ancient Egyptians, living under a cloudless sky and conscious of the unfaltering daily appearance of the sun, should fashion a theology that was focused on Light, the principle of Creation.

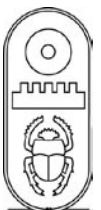
The *ben ben*, a small pyramid-shaped stone in the inner sanctuary of the Heliopolitan temple, symbolized the creativity of the sun. The pyramid, it is believed, was simply an enlarged *ben ben*. This stone fetish, in fact, may provide the key to the religious significance of the pyramid itself.

The king was buried under the sun-god symbol, which was placed in the center of the pyramid. The pyramid must have been built to represent the rays of the sun slanting toward the earth. It also represented a ladder to heaven for the symbolic ascent of the king to the realm of Osiris. Several of the pyramid-texts speak of the pyramid as “a staircase to heaven laid for the king.”

The dualism of the solar cult must have been known by the Diaspora Jews, who were in Egypt in great numbers after 350 BCE. Geographically, it is not far from Alexandria to Qumran; and, ideologically, there is little difference between the ethical teaching of the Egyptian Therapeutae and the Jewish Essenes. Both were engaged in a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Both tried to maintain a life of purity by overcoming evil and the world of the flesh.

According to Philo, Josephus, Pliny the Elder, and, in our time, Adolf Harnack, the Therapeutae and the Essenes were branches of the same movement. Other modern scholars maintain that Essenism was a product of synthetic Hellenistic Judaism, which would point to Alexandria as the chief source, a view suggested by Gerald Friedlander, who described the synagogue of the Essenes as “the beloved daughter of the synagogue of the Diaspora.”

Still others (Döllinger, Zeller, Schürer, Dietrich, Pfeleiderer and Lévy) hold that all the essential customs and beliefs of the



Essenes derived directly from Pythagorism and Orphism. They refer to the *Weltanschauung*, the cardinal virtues, the principle of fraternity in an esoteric community, ascetic rules of conduct, rituals, and purificatory ceremonies. But even here

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the Qumran movement may have been the Pythagoreans of Alexandria, the stronghold of Diaspora Judaism. Finally, the Essene veneration of the sun suggests the influence of the syncretistic solar cult, which emanated originally from Egypt.

