

Augustine's *Confessions*

Book III Study Questions

Background

MANICHAISM

Once regarded as a Christianized form of *Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism is now generally accepted as one of the last and most complete manifestations of *Gnosticism. It was founded by the Syro-Persian Mani (216–76) who was brought up in a Jewish-Christian sect in south Babylonia and subsequently rebelled against it. The Manichaean *gnōsis* embodies a complex cosmic drama which centres on a primordial battle between the originating principles of Light and Darkness. An initial invasion of Light by Darkness led to a counter-attack by Light which was designed to fail, tricking the powers of Darkness into swallowing particles of Light. The universe was then created to redeem and purify this captive light and to punish and imprison the archons of Darkness. Through their concupiscence some of this defiled Light escaped from the archons' bodies and became plant life. They also brought forth humankind through a series of horrific acts involving abortion, incest and cannibalism; this resulted in the imprisonment of Light-particles, the soul, in a body which is utterly evil and corrupt. The soul could, however, be awakened by *gnōsis* and be made aware of its divine origins.

Jesus in Manichaeism is one of a series of Gnostic saviours, and his historical manifestation was purely *docetic. The individual details of the Manichaean cosmic drama are derived mainly from Jewish and Christian apocrypha and from the cosmogonic teaching of the Edessan philosopher Bardaisan (154–222). Mani was also heavily influenced by *Marcion, from whom he acquired a strong 'Pauline' *antinomianism and claimed the title of 'Apostle of Jesus Christ'.

The Manichaean sect was extremely hierarchical, and was divided into elect and hearers; the former were priests who had to observe sexual abstinence and strict food taboos including vegetarianism so that they could enable the liberation of the Light particles trapped in the plants. The hearers, the lay followers, had to attend to the needs of the elect, and were not bound by the same rigid rules. Easily organized into small units, the religion was able to spread swiftly and to survive persecution.

A combination of missionary zeal and persecution by Sassanian authorities resulted in the religion being diffused in the Roman Empire and the lands east of the River Oxus. It was particularly well established in Roman Africa where it passed itself off as a more perfect form of

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Christianity, including the young *Augustine among those who were captivated by its 'higher criticism' of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The *dualism of Manichaeism was later seen by church authorities in the Middle Ages as having been inherited by heretical movements such as the Paulicians, the Bogomils, the Paterenes and the Cathars (see *Albigenses). In the East, the religion gradually expanded along the Silk Road and eventually reached China where it was outlawed. After the ninth century, however, the religion became strongly established in Central Asia. Later the sect went underground in China and survived as a secret religion in the south until the sixteenth century.

The Manichaean canon consists of a corpus of seven works by Mani, none of which has survived in a complete form. Besides a large body of polemical writings on the sect by the Church Fathers, our knowledge has been greatly increased by the discovery of genuine Manichaean writings from Turfan, Dunhuang (both in China), Medinet Medi (Egypt) and Theveste (North Africa). In the 1970s and 80s a small papyrus codex from Egypt, belonging to the papyrus collection of the University of Cologne, containing a hagiographical version of the life of the founder (the Cologne Mani Codex), was successfully restored and edited. It shows beyond doubt that the sect had its origins in the fringe of Judeo-Christianity and not in Iranian religions.¹

MANICHAISM ma-nə-kē'izm, man';ə-kē-izm. A syncretistic religion that flourished in the 3rd–14th centuries. Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, was born to an aristocratic Parthian family in Babylonia ca A.D. 216. Shortly thereafter his father, Pattik, became involved in a baptistic sect, probably of Elkesaite origin, in southern Mesopotamia. Mani also joined the group, but broke with it at the age of twenty-four, after two encounters with an angel who was identified as his "twin companion." Mani began to preach a new religion derived from his revelatory experiences and soon gained adherents. Shapur, the Parthian king, supported his message, although there was serious hostility from other regimes.

Both Mani and his followers traveled widely as they propagated the new faith, which spread within his own lifetime as far as Egypt, China, and India. Drawing heavily upon Christian, Jewish, Persian, Gnostic, and perhaps Babylonian and Buddhist traditions, Mani himself wrote extensively and encouraged the faithful to translate and reproduce the texts. He viewed himself as the Paraclete promised by Jesus and as the ultimate prophet after Adam, Abraham, and Jesus.

Despite his claim of seeking to integrate the old Persian wisdom with Christianity, Mani met fierce opposition from representatives of Persian religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, and was crucified by them in A.D. 276. The cult, perpetuated and augmented by Mani's

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* A reference in brackets in the body of an article such as speaks for itself.

¹ S. N. Lieu, "Manichaeism," *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (London; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 548–549.

ca *circa*, about

disciples, developed an extensive following among a variety of peoples from North Africa to China. It survived until at least the 14th century. In Europe, Manichaeism influenced the thought of the Bogomils, Albigensians, and Paulicians.

Manichaean theology may be described as a consistent Gnostic dualism. It posits two opposing forces in the universe, which were originally separate and totally antagonistic to one another both essentially and existentially. Mani called these two governing principles God and Hyle (matter) and thought them to be expressed in the universe by darkness and light. The boundaries between the realms of darkness and light were breached, however, with the result that the whole world, including all humanity, became filled with a mingling of the two principles. For Manichaeism the goal of history is to achieve an ultimate re-separation of the two forces, which would render evil harmless and never again able to merge with good. An elaborate mythology embodies these theological tenets.

Humanity might be delivered from evil by a recognition of the forces of good and evil and by adherence to precepts gained through recognition of this universal dualism. Human beings have the special responsibility of preventing further harm to the light. They are also to release from admixture with darkness the particle of light that lies within themselves. At the death of an elect Manichee, the light-particle trapped within the body might pass again to the realm of light. If the light does not thus escape from its union with evil, it must pass again into another human body.

Manichaean devotees were divided into two classifications, the "elect" and the "hearers." The elect were monks and nuns who had been initiated into the complete mysteries of Manichaeism and were forbidden normal activities and occupations in the world, including all sexual activity and the consumption of meat. The hearers, commissioned with providing support for the elect, lived in the world but avoided killing, idolatry, sorcery, and sexual immorality. A hearer might hope to return to this life as one of the elect. Before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine was a Manichaean hearer for nine years.

Mani held orthodox Christianity to be a grievous error. Three different figures of Jesus appear in Manichaeism, but none is congruent with the biblical picture of Him. In consequence, Manichaeism met with vehement opposition and condemnation by Christians, among whom Augustine became a leading proponent.

A considerable amount of Manichaean literature has been preserved, including a recently published account of Mani's life (see Henrichs). Manichaean homilies, psalms, and theological writings are also extant. Most are beautifully copied translations from the original Eastern Aramaic dialect in which Mani wrote. In the 19th cent. significant new texts were discovered, principally in Egypt and Chinese Turkestan. More recently the Cologne Mani Codex and some personal letters attributed to Mani have been published.²

² C. C. Kroeger with R. C., "Manichaeism," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988) 237–238.

Chapter 1

1. How far is Carthage from Thagaste?
2. What does Augustine mean when he says he was “...*was in love with the prospect of being in love...*”?

Chapters 2

1. What is the “*amazing madness*” that Augustine identifies that so often occurs in the watching of theater?
2. Why do we enjoy watching the portrayal of things on screen that we would not enjoy were they happening to us?

Chapter 3

1. Is Augustine arguing that we should not have sympathy toward the tragedies of others?
2. What does Augustine pity?
3. How does God “...*more sincerely pity than we do...*”?

Chapter 4

1. What does Augustine identify as the source of his “...*disgusting mange...*”?

Chapter 5

1. Consider the poem *Invictus*. How does that poem capture the “...*stiff-necked will...*” that Augustine laments in this chapter?
2. How does Augustine describe God’s mercy toward him at this time?

Chapter 6

1. For what occupation was Augustine studying?
2. How did Augustine fare in his studies?
3. Why do you suppose Augustine enjoyed the friendship of those whose actions repulsed him?

Chapter 7

1. What classic work did Augustine find at this time? How did it impact him?
2. What parable might Augustine have in mind when he states "*I began to pick myself up so that I could return to you.*"?

Chapter 8

1. What is the *one* thing that most delighted Augustine's heart about Cicero's *Hortensius*?
2. What was the great lack of Cicero's great work?

Chapter 9

1. What was Augustine's opinion of sacred Scripture at this time?
2. What drove this opinion?

Chapter 10

1. At this time, Augustine falls in with a quasi-Christian sect known as the Manicheans. In what way were the "*truths*" they were feeding him like food that is eaten in a dream?
2. Was Augustine nourished by such "*truths*"?

Chapter 11

1. Why does Augustine say that he would have been better off consuming the fairy tales of the scholars and poets than the Manichean works he was reading?

Chapter 12

1. What types of questions were the Manicheans plying Augustine with at this time?
2. How did Augustine conceive of God during this time?

Chapter 13

1. What is the basis for true justice?

2. Does the standard of righteousness ever change?
3. How then do we account for different laws, even in Scripture, from one time to another?

Chapter 14

1. What fault did Augustine find with the Old Testament patriarchs?

Chapter 15

1. What positive command does Augustine identify as being true at all times and in all places?
2. What negative command does he identify as being true at all times and in all places?

Chapter 16

1. What two methods of sinning does Augustine identify?
2. What does Augustine mean when he speaks of our "*horns of a fictional liberty*."?

Chapter 17

1. How do motives play into assessing the sinfulness of various deeds?
2. How do we reconcile God's law forbidding an act that God later commands to be done, i.e., the prohibition against murder, and God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Chapter 18

1. What was Augustine's attitude toward Christianity at this time?
2. How did Manichaeism view the created world?

Chapter 19

1. How does Monnica's faith seem to have grown over the last three years?
2. Why did she weep for Augustine?
3. What was Monnica's dream?
4. How fervently do you pray for your lost loved ones?

Chapter 20

1. How did Augustine interpret Monnica's dream?
2. How long did Augustine continue in Manichaeism?
3. Thought comforted by her dream, why did Monnica continue to weep for Augustine in her prayers?

Chapter 21

1. What did Monnica ask of the priest?
2. What was the priest's response?

Summary

1. Augustine describes Manichaeism as sort of a halfway house between his licentiousness and Christianity. Did you imbibe any philosophies or other religions prior to coming to Christ? What impact did that have?
2. Have any non-Christian books impacted you as deeply as Cicero's *Hortensius* affected Augustine?
3. How is the hound of heaven motif played out throughout this chapter?
4. How many scripture references/allusions does the author identify in this chapter?