

A Cypriot Adept on the oldest Armenian Monastery



Chronicling the ferocious and cruel deeds committed by
Christians and Moslems against the followers of Zarathushtra.

A letter from Surb Ohannes¹

Annotated by H.P. Blavatsky

From *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (A LETTER FROM SURB OHANNES) III pp. 211-18.

[This excerpt from a long letter signed “X . . . F.T.S.” was originally published in *The Theosophist*, Vol. II, July, 1881, pp. 213-15, and its authorship has remained unknown through the intervening years. However, when a Manuscript on the subject of Zoroastrianism, in H.P. Blavatsky’s own handwriting and held in the Archives at Adyar, was transcribed and published in *The Theosophist* (Vol. 80, October–November, 1958), the name of the author of this letter suddenly came to light. It appears that it was written by the Adept known under the name of Hillarion (or Ilarion), also Hillarion Smerdis, who at one time resided on the Island of Cyprus. Blavatsky mentions this letter and definitely identifies its author. From other sources, it is known that Hillarion Smerdis collaborated with Blavatsky in the writing of her occult stories, such, for instance, as “The Ensouled Violin” which is actually signed with his name in *The Theosophist* (Vol. I, January 1880). It has been stated both by Blavatsky (*Light*, August 9th, 1884) and by Col. H.S. Olcott (*Diaries*, entry of February 19th, 1881) that this Adept has “gone for his final initiation, passing through and visiting us [the Founders] in his physical body on his way, at Bombay.” To the same Brother is attributed the authorship of the first part of *Light on the Path*, recorded by Mabel Collins. Surb Ohannes is the name of the oldest Christian monastery in Armenia. It has been thought advisable to publish the entire text together with the footnotes appended to it by H.P. Blavatsky. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

. . . Our Zoroastrian Fellows would fain hear a page of their history torn out of the book of popular memory and woven into legends. That book, so full of the glories of their forefathers, in that hoary past when they formed not only a proud and independent nation, but many linked together by one religion, one polity and civilization — is rapidly fading out. Its fate was like that of some precious manuscripts of the pre-Christian ages, which are sometimes found mouldering in the libraries of old monasteries. First its broad margins were used for monkish dissertations, and later on, its contents themselves began being rubbed out by vandal hands to make way for polemical discussions on some Arian heresy. . . . Strange to say, even the few traditions that have remained intact, did not find refuge among the *Behedin* — that small remnant of “the followers of the true faith,” who, clinging to their old religion are now scattered all over the province of Kerman — but, are all centred, on the contrary, around the mountain chain of Great or Major Armenia, and of the Lake Van, among the semi-Christian Armenian population. To extricate them whole and undisfigured from the entangled skein of Mohammedan, Christian and pagan traditions, demands a more dexterous hand than that of the enchanted Princess in the fairy tale of “Blue-beard.”² Very luckily, some of the principal records are saved and preserved in the

¹ Frontispiece by Martiros Saryan.

² [“La Barbe bleue” is a French literary folktale, the most famous version remaining that written by Charles Perrault and first published by Barbin in Paris in January 1697 in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*. It is the story of a violent nobleman who keeps murdering his wives and the attempts of one wife to avoid the fate of her predecessors.]

shape of a whole library of cylinders. They may serve one day to strongly damage the wild theories and interpretations of the Anquetil-Duperrons, the Spiegels and Haugs. *Vox populi, vox dei*. Popular rumour, always alive to the marvellous, has spun out an intricate cobweb of fancies around the central speck of fact: it *will* have a stately figure — which it persists in identifying with Mathan, the last of the great Magian High Priests, gathered unto his fathers for the last Sixteen centuries — appear daily at sunset at the entrance of an inaccessible cave at the top of one of the peaks of Ala-Dag, with a book of records under his arm. . . .

With the exception of the “Guebers” — the Behedin of Kerman — now, all the millions of the ancient Fire-worshippers have turned Mussulmans and Christians. Of the human blood spilt during the forcible conversions to Christ and Mohammed, the national traditions are full. The tears of the Recording Angel, wept throughout the whole duration of the two ages allotted to humanity from the period of Gayo-Maratan, would hardly suffice to wash away the entries made in his book of the ferocious and cruel deeds committed by Christians and Moslems against the followers of Zarathushtra. Of the works of ages in the shape of Fire-temples and monuments destroyed by the zeal of the proselytizing “Saints” — the “men of honest repute” recorded in the Ecclesiastical fables called the History of the Church — the ruins are plentiful and each of them has its tale of woe to relate. I have just visited one of such historical spots built in the undated period of an antiquity, more remote from us than would be willingly conceded to us by the Europeans. I write to you on a fire-altar, 4,000 years old, which has escaped destruction by some miracle, having turned it into a very comfortable *pupitre*.¹

Leaving Dyadin the day before yesterday early in the morning, I made my way to the foot of through snow and ice and arrived at *the cave* 36 hours later. . . . Ala-Dag, geographically speaking, is the modern name for the whole range of the mountainous chain south of Bayazid and Dyadin; Nepat, Shushik-Dag, Tchir-Geruk and Kumbeg-Dag being all independent peaks, though included in the same denomination of Ala-Dag or “God’s Mountain.” They are not to be compared with the Himalayas, their loftiest peak measuring but 11,600 feet above the sea level, but they are interesting for the traditions clinging to them. It would be premature and even useless to give out what may be known of the truth. Your archaeologists and ethnologists are yet bound hand and foot by the Biblical weeds which, for a century or so, will still prevent the Plant of *True Knowledge* from taking firm root on the Western soil. . . . But, I may tell you of a popular tradition the nucleus of which is built upon *fact*. Upon hearing of my intention to start on exploration of the mountain fastnesses, a venerable Armenian patriarch of Dyadin, on the decline of life, and who tries to put to the best use the only and solitary organ left in him intact by the Kurds, namely, his tongue, let it loose upon that occasion. He tried his best to frighten me out of my intention. No mortal man, he said, could ever visit *that* particular place and live. Besides every cave being the private property of “Mathan,” he would cause the sacred fire to appear under the traveller’s foot and burn him to death for his sacrilegious attempt; and then *Noah’s Ark is preserved in the highest cave* . . . “And what do you make of the Arc on Mount Ararat then?” I inquired of him. Forthwith I was appraised of the novel geological discovery that Ararat had formed once upon a time part and parcel of Ala-

¹ [French for a pupil’s desk, a school desk.]

Dag, but falling into the hands of the Persians it broke away from the latter and placed itself on Christian territory, leaving in its precipitate flight the “sacred” ark in the safe keeping of Ala-Dag. Since then “Mathan” refuses to give it up.¹ Another tradition — among the *Behedin*, and in the oasis of Yezd — tells us of the initiated Magi who in times prehistoric had become through their knowledge and wisdom — “gods.” These lived in the Armenian mountains, and were astrologers. Having learned *from the star-gods* that the world was going to be flooded, they caused the mountain on which they lived to breathe fire and lava, which covered with bitumen all the outward surface of the mountain; and this made the great cave in it secure against the water. After that they placed all the good people with their cattle and goods inside the mountain, leaving the wicked ones to perish. A still simpler version might be found, and one which would come nearer to the historical facts. But of that, no more at present.

You know, of course, that the Armenians, who, until the fourth and even seventh centuries of the Christian era were *Parsees* in religion, call themselves Haigs, the descendants of Haig, a contemporary of *Bilu* (Belus), a king of the Babylonians² who deified and worshipped him after death as a Sun and Moon God. Haig is made to have flourished 2200 B.C. according to accepted date, and more than 7,000 agreeably to truth. Their legend states that Haig and his clan were compelled to emigrate from Babylonia to Armenia on account of the religious persecutions to which they were subjected from *Bilu* who sought to pervert them from pure Parseeism to Sabaeism by including the moon in sun worship. Twenty-six centuries later (accepted date), their King Tiridates the last of the Arsacidae began to force them into Christianity (fourth century) and the new faith had spread its own versions of cosmogony from *Genesis*, that Haig had the honour of finding himself transformed into a descendant of Japhet, the son of Noah — that virtuous old man who had performed every achievement but that of being born. But even in their forgotten traditions we find that they claimed to have remained true to the teachings of Zoroaster. These they had accepted ever since Musarus Oannes or *Annēdotus* — the Heaven or Sun-sent (the first Odakōn Ano-Daphos, the man-fish) arising daily from the sea at sunrise to plunge back into it at every sunset, taught them the good doctrine, their arts and civilization. That was during the reign of Amenon the Chaldean, 68 sari, or 244,800 years before the Deluge. Since then (as demonstrated by the Assyriologists, according to the cylinder records), several other Odakōns had ascended from the sea, the last coming during the days³ of the Chaldean King Ubara-Tutu — “the glow of sunset,” — the last but one of the antediluvian kings of Berosus. Each and all of these Aquarian teachers came from his *habitat*, in lands unknown *ascending from*

¹ In George Smith’s *The History of Babylonia*, the author expresses an opinion to the effect that the Biblical Ararat “does not mean the mountain now called Ararat, but a mountainous country south of this and near the lake Van” (pp. 49-50). The great Assyriologist can hardly have heard of that popular tradition and must have been prompted to say this on some knowledge grounded upon weightier reasons than popular tradition. But one corroborates the other. — ED. THEOS. [*H.P. Blavatsky*]

² Not to be confounded with the Sun-God Belus and Baal — two far more ancient deities. — ED. THEOS. [*H.P. Blavatsky*]

³ During the *millenniums* rather, since, according to the chronology left to us by Berosus, the reign of that king lasted 8 sari or 28,800 years.

the Persian Gulf.¹ If we study the account given of the Annēdotus by Apollodorus and then amplify it with the old pre-Christian traditions of Armenia, which say that *he made them know the seeds of the earth, taught them to worship their mother Earth and their father the Sun* and showed them how to help the two to bring forth fruit, *i.e.*, taught them the arts of agriculture, we will not wonder at discovering that the Chaldean Oannes and Zoroaster *are one* in their reminiscences. The Chaldean Annēdotus was called the “Son of the Fish,” and the latter was the name of Zoroaster’s mother. Wonder, what your Zend scholars, Parsees and Europeans, will say to this? They will not feel a little surprised, perhaps, when told, that it was the Hellenized name of their Zoroaster — Annēdotus, whom the Greeks called *Oannes* that led the old Armenians more easily into accepting Christianity than they otherwise might — as I am now prepared to show.

From Ala-Dag I proceeded west of Dyadin and halted at the Monastery of *Surb-Ohannes* — “John the Precursor” (the name *Ohannes* being identical with the Greek *Iōannēs* or John).² Now *Surb-Ohannes* is the oldest Christian monastery in Armenia. It is built on the site of an antediluvian Fire-temple, and situated on the left bank of the Euphrates, at the foot of the majestic Napat. Centuries before the Christian era there was a town here, called by some *Bhagvan* and by others *Ditza-van* consecrated to *Ahura-mazda* or *Ormuzd*. The country is alive with traditions, and even the convent libraries have preserved many fully authenticated records of these pre-Christian centuries. There is one thick manuscript, among others, which contains the *Chronicles* of all the festivals of the fire-worshipping Armenians, written upon parchment. Their New Year, which began with them in August, was celebrated with extraordinary pomp. Armenian civilization wrought out by the Zoroastrian philosophy, seems to have been ignorant of but few of our modern comforts. These chronicles (fourth century of the Christian era) contain an account of the death and burial of the High Priest *Mathan* (with whose ghost I am daily threatened by the inhabitants), a brother of the King *Tigranes III*. When he died his royal relative had a gorgeous fire-temple built to his memory. There were several inns attached to it, offering free lodging and board to every traveller and relief to pilgrims of whatever nationality. Alas! these were the last *sunny* days of the faith. . . . In 302 King *Tiridates* with his nobles and army was receiving baptism on this same spot in the waters of the Euphrates from *Gregory the Illuminated*. There is no doubt but that the venerable saint could claim to have found himself illuminated with a most brilliant idea; since, had it not occurred to him at the time, the many millions of the baptized Armenians might have remained fire-worshippers to this day. Though the king and a portion of his nobles had accepted baptism, the people resisted, and had to be forced with great trouble to accept the new faith. To overcome their reluctance, the king was advised in the same year by *Gregory* to pull down and rase the *Bhagvan* fire-temple to the ground and replace it with a Christian church, wherein relics (a thigh bone and two finger bones) alleged as those of *St. John the Baptist*, or the “Precursor,” were placed. The Armenians, during a century and a half of subjection to *Macedonia* (from 325 B.C.) had accepted the name of *Ohannes* for their Chaldean man-fish *Annēdotus*. They were easily made to

¹ One of the cylinders states that this sea was part of the great chaotic deep out of which our world was formed; the celestial region where the “gods and spirits” (the initiated Magi, or Sons of God) dwelt *was in their neighbourhood, but not in their country*. — ED. THEOS. [*H.P. Blavatsky*]

² [*Ἰωαννης Προδρομος*, John the Forerunner]

believe that “Ohannes the Baptist” who led them into the water, was identical with Ohannes or *Oannes*, who had instructed their forefathers arising out, setting in, and replunging back into the water before, during, and after the preaching. The identity of the name and the element, in short, proved useful allies in the plan devised by the diplomatic Saint. Before the end of the eleventh century all Armenia was baptised.¹ The moral to be inferred from the tale is that old men die and new arise in their place, but that the same partisan and sectarian spirit which animates the missionary and the priest of today animated the missionary and the priest of old — the priestly caste being the toughest of all. This tradition about, and belief, in the Chaldean Oannes was the only additional feature to that of modern Parseeism in the Armenians of old. And yet I am not prepared to say that the Parseeism of the pre-Sassanian period did not include the same belief, at least in a legendary form. At the time when the last sparks of Persian nationality were quenched by the downfall of the Sassanidae, nearly all their books and records spared by Alexander were lost. The Sassanian dynasty, I know, had restored the Magian religion in all its primitive splendour; and the ancient Chaldean Magi were believers in Oannes the man-fish, the messenger sent to them by Belus, the Sun-God, to instruct humanity, as Berosus a priest of the Temple of Belus tells us. To accept Zoroaster as the *reformer* of the Magian religion is to move the period in which he flourished to the very threshold of the Christian era, in which case there could never exist such a discrepancy about the age he lived in, as there is now, and as we find among the Greek historians.

Now to bring my letter to a close. In the years 634-639 the Byzantine Emperor Irakli (Herakleios) returning from his campaign to Persia, and finding the church too mean to contain such a treasure, as the relics of the “Precursor,” had the edifice pulled down and a monastery of gigantic size built in its place. Its outward majestic and most grandiose proportions strike the traveller with astonishment up to this day. It is the largest building in Armenia. But — inside it is all darkness and emptiness. The wall bearing the deeply cut inscription which tells of the meritorious deed of the Byzantine Emperor is perforated with Mussulman bullets. . . . The cupola rests on four massive granite pillars, inside which are excavated a number of rooms, several stories high, one above the other, with spiral staircases winding round them and leading to each of the cells, and secret passages managed in the wall leading the inmates in hours of danger to the top of the cupola, and from thence into the heart of the mountain and its many natural caves. Owing to the recent invasions of the Kurds the last ornaments of the church and altar have disappeared — the holy thigh and two fingers having failed to protect the place. Alone the library, composed of books and old manuscripts heaped up as waste paper in every corner of the pillar-cells tempting no Kurd are scattered over the rooms. Out of the three monks who were

¹ “Iōannēs, the Baptist who is usually associated with Waters, is but a Petro-Pauline name and symbol of the Hebrew Ionah [the Jonah swallowed by the whale] and the First Messenger, Assyrian Oannes . . . The fishermen and fishers of men in the Gospels are based on this mythos.” (*Enoch, the Book of God*, Vol. II, p. 80) This appears the more probable as the Mohammedan inhabitants of Mosul, near the ruins of Nineveh have assumed for centuries that the mound called by them — “Nebbi Yunus” — contained the tomb or sepulchre of the prophet Jonah, on its summit; while the excavations of Layard brought to light on the neighbouring mount Kuyunjik a colossal image of the Fish-God Oannes — the cause most probably of the later legend. — ED. THEOS. [*H.P. Blavatsky*]

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here in 1877 there remains but one. For the consideration of a dagger and a few silver *abazes* I got several precious manuscripts from him. . . .¹



Lake Van (1996), the world's largest endorheic lake. The original outlet from the basin has been blocked by an ancient volcanic eruption. Altitude 1,640 m. Coordinates 38° 38' N – 42° 49' E.

¹ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (A LETTER FROM SURB OHANNES) III pp. 211-18

Surb Ohannes was razed to the ground by the Turks in 1948, along with thousand other Armenian monasteries

From the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, art. Bagawan (2)

Bagawan is an ancient locality in central Armenia situated at the foot of Mount Npat (Greek *Niphates*, Turkish *Tapa-seyd*) in the principality of Bagrewand west of modern Diyadin.¹ The name means literally “town of the gods.” It is attested in Greek as Sakauana (for Bagauana) in Ptolemy.² Agathangelos³ explains it as *dic'-awan* “town of the gods,” but Moses of Khorene⁴ as *bagnac'n awan* “town of altars.”⁵

Bagawan was one of the chief shrines of pagan Armenia and a perpetual fire was kept burning there;⁶ the New Year's festival on the first day of the month of Nawasard was celebrated by the royal family at Bagawan.⁷ The account of Moses of Khorene⁸ of the altar erected at Bagawan by the “last Tigran” and his attribution of the establishment of this festival to King Valarsaces (Valaršak) are probably his own inventions.⁹

After the conversion of Armenia to Christianity (c. 314), it is here that King Tiridates (Trdat) the Great and his court are said to have been baptized by St. Gregory the Illuminator in the Euphrates,¹⁰ whose southern arm (Muratsu) takes its source nearby. St. Gregory is said to have founded the important monastery of St. John the Baptist here from which the town received its Turkish name Üç Kilise “the three churches.” According to Moses of Khorene,¹¹ Shah Yazdegerd (Yazkert) II of Iran camped at Bagawan during his invasion of Armenia in 439.

The church of St. John the Baptist at Bagawan was erected on the left bank of the Euphrates in 631-39. It was surrounded by a high wall flanked with towers which protected the monastic buildings within. The monastery was pillaged by the Kurds in 1877 and was totally destroyed after 1915.¹²

From *Wikipedia*, art. Bagawan

The church was 46 meters in length, 27 meters in width and 20 meters in height (with dimensions comparable to the Armenian Apostolic churches of Dvin, Zvartnots and Talin). The outward appearance of the temple was made of strict shaped mason-

¹ [Geographic coordinates 39.6231° N – 43.5252° E]

² *Geography*, 5.12.7

³ ¶ 817

⁴ [Author of the *History of Armenia*.]

⁵ See Hübschmann, *p.* 411.

⁶ Moses of Khorene, 2.77, *tr.* Thomson, *p.* 225

⁷ Agathangelos, ¶ 836; ed. and *tr.* Thomson, *pp.* 371 *ff.*

⁸ 2.56

⁹ *Cf.* Moses of Khorene, *tr.* Thomson, *pp.* 493-94 notes.

¹⁰ Agathangelos, ¶ 832

¹¹ 3.67; *tr.* Thomson, *p.* 347.

¹² [Actually, levelled to the ground by the Turkish Army in 1948, a shameful sequel to the Armenian Genocide that begun 24th April 1915.]

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ries and ornaments, a contrast to the well brightened interior. People of 19th century associated the monastery's appearance with the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (now Istanbul). The monastery had 5 doors and 51 windows.

This monastery was destroyed to foundation by Turks in the late 1940s. Part of its stones were used in the construction of houses in Taşteker village that was founded around the monastery, but most of them were removed to the town of Ağrı, where they were laid in the lower stonework of the principal mosque erected in 1950.

