



MESSINA, GIUSEPPE

MESSINA, GIUSEPPE, SJ (b. San Cataldo [Caltanissetta] January 1, 1893; d. Messina June 28, 1951), Italian scholar of Middle and Modern Iranian studies.

Following the completion of his philosophical and theological training, Father Messina took up Oriental studies first at the Pontificio Istituto Biblico (Political Biblical Institute) in Rome, and then in Berlin, under the guidance of Joseph Markwart. There he received his doctoral degree on April 6, 1930 with a dissertation that was published under the title “Der Ursprung der Magier und die zarathustrische Religion” (*The Origin of the Magi and the Zoroastrian Religion*). In the academic year 1928/29, prior to the completion of his doctoral studies, and soon after obtaining his laurea on June 26, 1928, Messina began to teach at the Pontificio Istituto Biblico, where he read Sanskrit, Avestan, Middle and New Persian as well as courses in the history of religions. From 1929 to 1941 he was also active as *Praefectus* of the library of his Institute, and in this capacity he contributed to the development of a rich Oriental section. In 1942 the Italian government awarded him the *venia legendi* at the University of Rome “La Sapienza,” recognizing his merits as teacher and researcher in the field of Iranian studies.

His studies covered a vast range of subjects, with a focus on the Zoroastrian religion, on its relation to the classical world and to other faiths, primarily Judaism and Christianity, as well as on New Persian texts, mainly a Persian Diatessaron translated from Syriac. His interest in the Iranian world is also attested by his trips to Iran in 1936 and 1938.



His first article discussed the role played by the Manichean creed in the early stages of the Christian religion (1929). A year later, Messina published his doctoral dissertation (1930), a long and detailed study on the Magi, discussing with great attention Greek and Latin sources side by side with Iranian ones. In this work, which still ranks among the most important contributions on the subject, the author presents a possible etymology for the name *magu-*, deriving it from an older *magavan-*, and suggests the existence of two different levels in the Zoroastrian religion: the first, which he describes as “Soziallehre,” open to all, and the other, esoteric, known only to the Magi, and to the kings and nobles who were taught by the Magi. According to Messina, the Magi were the first followers of Zoroaster and, since there were Magi well before the time of Darius’ father Wištāsp, he believed that a 6th century date for Zoroaster – as suggested by Ernst Herzfeld – could not be accepted. Rather, he suggested a date around the 10th century, accepting the notice reported by Xanthus of Lydia *apud* Diogenes Laertius, which he emended to “600 (and not 6000) years before Xerxes” (on this subject see Gnoli, pp. 43-94). With his next study, *I Magi a Betlemme e una profezia di Zoroastro* (1933a), Messina began an investigation in Zoroastrian eschatology and its relation to the Judaic and Christian tradition, which was to characterize the next few years of his life and led him to write some pertinent contributions that count among the best products of his scholarly activity. Within this same line of investigation, he studied the *Jāmāspi* tradition and edited the relative Pahlavi, Parsi, and Pāzand texts in his *Libro apocalittico persiano Ayātkār i Žāmāspik*, published in 1939, and wrote a few articles in the journals *Biblica* and *Orientalia*, which were published by the Pontificio Istituto Biblico (1932, 1933b, 1934, 1935). We know that already by 1938 his scholarly interests included New Persian, since in that year he published *Inizi di lirica ascetica e mistica persiana*, a short study on Persian religious poetry focusing on Abu Sa’id and Bābā Ṭāher. New Persian was to be his main field of study for the next few years. In fact, during the last years of his life Messina devoted himself to the study of the Persian Diatessaron as found in a manuscript belonging to the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence (Ms. Or. 81). On this subject he first wrote an introductory essay (1943), which was followed by a few articles (1943, 1949a and 1949b), and finally by the critical edition of the text contained in the volume “Diatessaron Persiano,” which appeared a few months before his death in 1951. According to Messina (1951, p. XX), the Persian translation should be dated between 1223 and the end of the 13th century, a position criticized by Angelo Michele Piemontese in his catalogue of the Persian manuscripts in Italian libraries (1989, p. 107), where he suggests that it may



have been written on the occasion of the meeting of the Armenian patriarch Stephanos V with Pope Paul III, in 1548. Here he also lists a second manuscript (Ms. Or. 399) containing the main body of the Evangelic Harmony and written by the same hand as Ms. Or. 81 (1989, p. 108). In the years 1930 to 1932, Giuseppe Messina diligently edited three important volumes from Markwart's *Nachlass*: these are *Das Erste Kapitel der Gāthā Uštavatī* (1930), *A catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Erānshahr* (1931), being an edition of the Pahlavi *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, and *Die Entstehung der armenischen Bistümer* (1932). He also wrote extensively for the general public, both by collaborating with journals such as *La Civiltà Cattolica*, *La Scuola Cattolica*, *Nuova Antologia*, etc. and by writing chapters in works of more general scope, such as Tacchi Venturi's *Storia delle Religioni* (1934, 2nd ed. 1939) or in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* and the *Enciclopedia Cattolica*. A few of his articles published in *La Civiltà Cattolica* were later put together with minor modifications and adaptations, and appeared as a volume under the title *Cristianesimo, Buddismo, Manicheismo nell'Asia Antica* (1947). His books, together with Markwart's library, were donated to the Pontificio Istituto Biblico, and are now housed in its library.

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