



ALCHASAI

ALCHASAI, a sectarian in the early Christian Church, 1st-2nd centuries A.D., in the time of Trajan. His historical existence is still disputed, but is certainly taken for granted by Manichean tradition. In Mesopotamia (Babylonia), then part of the Iranian empire of the Arsacids, Alchasai founded a Jewish Christian baptist community, a faction in the Ebionite movement. The baptists (Greek *sobiai*) were included, according to H. W. Bailey (*Revue des études arméniennes* N.S. 4, 1980, p. 7), in the sect name *mktk-* (“washers,” from the Iranian root *mak-* “moisten, wash”) in the 3rd century inscription of the *magupat* and *ēhrapat* Kartēr at the Ka’ba-ye Zartošt in Persepolis (Mid. Pers. version, line 10).

The sources on the doctrines and history of the Elchasaites are the *Philosophumena Refutatio (Elenchos) omnium haeresium* (tr. F. Legge, 2 vols., London, 1921) of Hippolytus (3rd cent.), the *Panarion* (“Medicine basket”) of Epiphanius of Salamis (4th cent.), a short note in the *Ecclesiastical History* (6.38) of Eusebius of Caesarea (3rd-4th cent.) quoting Origen’s *Homily on the 82nd Psalm*, Theodoret of Cyrus (*Haer. Fab.* 2.7, reproducing his predecessors; 5th cent.), and Ebn al-Nadīm’s *Fehrest* (tr. Dodge, II, p. 811) discussing the Moġtasela “Washers” (see references in Brandt, *Elchasai*, p. 3, and translations in J. Irmscher, *Das Buch des Elchasai*, Neutestamentliche Apokryphen 2, Tübingen, 1964, pp. 530ff.). The Syriac *Liber scholiorum* of Theodore bar Kōnai contains the important remark that their teaching was “in every respect like that of the Ebionites” (H. Pognon, *Inscriptions mandäites des coupes de Khouabir* II, Paris, 1894, pp. 122, 176; see also pp. 125 and 182 on the expulsion



of Mani from the Elchasaite baptist community).

The most notable primary source, however, is the “Cologne Mani Codex,” a miniature parchment manuscript (4.5 by 3.5 cm) containing a biography of Mani in Greek, translated from a Syriac original of the 5th century (based on paleographic grounds). The text is titled *Peri tēs gennēs tou sōmatos autou* “On the origin of his [Mani’s] body” and views the doctrine of Alchasai from a Manichean standpoint. It is concerned with Mani’s life from age thirteen to twenty-four, from his first through his second revelation. Mani’s youth is placed in an environment of Elchasaism, the religion of his father Pattikios (q.v.; on the name, see P. Gignoux in *Studia Iranica* 4, 1975, p. 142). Mani’s final breach with the sect came after his second revelation. (For a thorough exposition of the text, see A. Henrichs and L. Koenen, “Ein griechischer Mani-Codex [P. Colon. inv. nr. 4780],” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 5/2, 1970, pp. 97-216; edition, *ibid.*, 19, 1975, pp. 1-85; 32, 1978, pp. 87-199.)

The name of the founder of the sect is transmitted in various forms (*ibid.*, 32, 1978, p. 182): Elchasai (Hippolytus), Elksai (Epiphanius), ho Elkesaios (Methodius of Olympus, 3rd cent., in his *Symposion*), Elkesaios (in the *Anakephalaiōsis* of Pseudo-Epiphanius), Alchasaos (Cologne Mani Codex), *’lks’* (Theodore bar Kōnai), Alchasa (*’lxs’*, in the Manichean Parthian M 1344 + 5910; W. Sundermann in *Acta Orientalia* 36, 1974, pp. 130, 148f.). In the *Fehrest* he is al-Ḥasīḥ (*’lḥsyḥ*, but also *’lḥsh* and *’lḥsg*), referred to as the head of the Moḡtasela, a reference now proved by the Cologne Codex to be a genuine Manichean tradition. The word is usually explained (so already Epiphanius) as *el* (= Gk. *dýnamis*), *ksai* (= Gk. *kekalymménē-*), thus as Syriac *ḥayl(ā) kasyā* (*kāsē*, cf. C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 1928, p. 337b) “Hidden Power.” This expression is also found in the Pseudoclementine literature (*Recognitiones* 2.50.21, 51.6, ed. Frankenberg, p. 132.6, 6), in a spiritual climate closely related to that of the Elchasaite. But in the light of the new evidence, the derivation from Syriac *’alāhā kasyā* “Hidden God” could also be seriously considered.

The Elchasaite sect never gained great historical importance, although it attempted a push in Rome about A.D. 220 through Alkibiades from Apamea in Syria (Hippolytus *Ref.* 9.13.1-3). Thereafter it seems to have submerged into other baptist movements, and in that way survived into the 10th century.

The Cologne Codex as a whole indicates that Elchasaism was more important and widespread than hitherto known. It confirms and clarifies the patristic records, although it adds little to the general knowledge of the movement (or



movements): (1) ritualistic conception of piety, life “according to the Law” (*nomos*), (2) keeping of the sabbath, (3) repeated baptisms (violently attacked by Mani), (4) “baptism” of food, (5) ritual preparation and baking of bread, disapproved by Mani, (6) acknowledgment of the gospels (so also Mani), but rejection of St. Paul, to whom Mani was indebted, (7) vegetarianism (so Ephiphanius and the *Fehrest*), implied though not expressly mentioned by the Codex (accepted by Mani), (8) cyclic incarnation of the True Apostle (taken over by Mani). (See *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 5, 1970, pp. 158ff.; A. Henrichs, “Mani and the Babylonian Baptists,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77, 1973, pp. 47ff.; A. Henrichs and L. Koenien, “Der Kölner Mani-Codex . . .,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 32, 1978, pp. 183ff.)

The main purpose of the Codex is to demonstrate that Mani was the reformer of the original teaching of Alchasai, who had been violently misunderstood by his followers. This claim, no doubt, is a hagiographic *pia fraus*, a purely Manichean interpretation. But Mani did learn from the Elchasaïtes. To the evidences of the continuation or adaptation of Elchasaïte ritual theology in Manicheism listed above may be added the intense Manichean missionary activity and the terms used for the various grades of the Manichean priesthood (cf. Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Journal of Theological Studies* N.S. 32/1, 1981, p. 158).

The primary importance of the Cologne Codex is that it convincingly underlines the character of Manicheism as a religion rooted in a Christian (Judeo-Christian/Judeo-Gnostic [but the *anápausis* of Elchasaïsm, the eternal rest of the body, removes the latter far from gnosticism]) tradition and not primarily an Iranian mystery religion (R. Reitzenstein’s “iranisches Erlösungsmysterium”), although Iranian elements play no small part in the forming of Mani’s gnostic religion. The text also shows that the apparent “Mandean” influence on Manicheism (cf. the Psalms of Thomas) must be interpreted as indirect, stemming from the common general baptist milieu, out of which also the Mandaeans emerged.



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