



# CHRISTIANITY V. CHRIST IN MANICHEISM

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## CHRISTIANITY

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In Manicheism, as in earlier gnostic systems, the terms Christ (Gk. “the anointed”) and Jesus Christ were used in various ways, though less commonly than the name Jesus alone. The epithet Christ can be properly understood only in conjunction with the name Jesus, and the latter will therefore also be considered briefly here.

*Jesus in Manichean doctrine.* In the original Christian usage the proper name Jesus (traditionally interpreted as “Yahweh is help”) might or might not be accompanied by the epithet Christ or Messiah, but Christ was also used alone, as if it were a name in itself. Through the use of such epithets the fathers of the primitive church expressed their conviction that in Jesus Israel’s hope for an eschatological redeemer had been fulfilled. In gnostic teachings, on the other hand, there was a strong tendency to separate the earthly Jesus, that is, the man Jesus of Nazareth, from the heavenly Christ, the cosmic savior (Rudolph, pp. 148-71), a distinction that may already have been foreshadowed in the Jewish Christian Elchasaite community in which Mani grew up (see [alchasai](#)) by the idea of a cosmic Jesus suffering in earth and water (Koenen, 1978, pp. 181-90). In Manicheism the Christian notion of Jesus’s unique sacrifice is not



encountered, and it therefore seems that Jesus was not essential to Manichean doctrine. Actually, however, he was one of the most popular figures in Manichean writings, and at least six different aspects can be distinguished (cf. Puech, pp. 81-84; Boyce, *Reader*, p. 10), all of which were of great importance for Manichean belief and worship.

1. Jesus the Splendor (Aram.-Syr. Yišō' Zīwā in Parthian texts) is the savior who redeems the light imprisoned in man; the Redeeming Intelligence, the Great Nous, is his emanation (Polotsky and Böhlig, p. 35.18-24; Alexander of Lykopolis, p. 34.21, does not distinguish between the two). Jesus the Splendor is one of the redeeming deities of the "third evocation" (a series of deities evoked by the Father of Greatness for the purpose of salvation; see, e.g., Boyce, *Reader*, p. 10) and is regarded as an emanation of the Third Messenger, first member of the third evocation (Polotsky and Böhlig, p. 35.13-14), but, because of his great importance and multiple functions, his position in the divine hierarchy is sometimes represented differently, for instance, as Son of the Greatness (i.e., of the Father of Greatness) or Son of the first Man (second member of the "first evocation"; see, e.g., Boyce, *Reader*, p. 9).

2. The suffering Jesus (*Jesus patibilis*) is identical with the Living Self, that is, the light that is imprisoned in matter; like the historical Jesus he is depicted as crucified in the world.

3. The historical Jesus of Nazareth is believed to have appeared on earth as an apostle of light in human shape, proclaiming the truth and performing miracles. The belief that during his earthly existence he only seemed to submit to suffering and death reflects the common docetic christology of gnosticism, which is based on the assumption that Jesus had no human body but only a spiritual one. Many vivid descriptions of his passion and death seem to belie this claim, and it cannot be excluded that even Manicheans took them at face value. In other instances, however, the docetic character of the Manichean image of Jesus is unequivocally stated (cf. Rose, pp. 120-28). In one Parthian text Christ's changing of "form and appearance" is called a mystery (*rāz*; text M 24 in Henning, 1944, p. 112), which recalls Augustine's mention of Christ's *mystica passio* (*Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 33.1). Jesus's apparent corporeal existence allows the conclusion that Jesus on earth was no more than a transformation of Jesus the Splendor.

4. The risen, or eschatological, Jesus will rule over humanity for 120 years after his final judgment and before the great conflagration purifies the



remaining redeemable light. It is clear from the Coptic sermon on the Great War, in which Jesus the Splendor himself is depicted as rendering the Last Judgment, that this aspect was also closely connected with the first (Polotsky, 1934, p. 37.4).

5. Jesus the child is also described as an emanation of Jesus the Splendor (Polotsky and Böhlig, pp. 92.7-8, 35.27-30). He is best explained as the personification of the soul's will to redemption (*Mir. Man.* III, p. 878 n. 4; cf. Pedersen, pp. 177-78). There is clearly a link between Jesus *patibilis* and Jesus the Child, but the problem requires further investigation.

6. As Jesus the Splendor has his cosmic seat in the moon (Polotsky, 1935), at least in popular belief, the moon is identified with Jesus the Splendor. One Sogdian text contains the phrase "in the evening, when Jesus [the moon] rose" (Sundermann, 1981, p. 47.541 and n. 5).

All aspects of the Manichean Jesus image can thus be subsumed under the concepts of a redeeming and a suffering cosmic figure. Through them Jesus becomes almost omnipresent in Manichean cosmology and the classical type of the "redeemed redeemer," an idea ascribed to gnostic thinking (e.g., Rudolph, pp. 121-31). On the other hand, in most of his aspects Jesus may be replaced by more precise mythological entities: Jesus the Splendor is represented as the Great Nous, Jesus *patibilis* as the World Soul, Jesus the child as the Enthymesis of Life, Jesus the Moon as the moon (Mid. Pers. and Parth. *māh*, Sogd. *māx*), and so on.

*The epithets Christ and Messiah.* In the western Manichean tradition, represented principally by Greek, Latin, and Coptic texts, the Greek name *Khristós* is used for Jesus. There are several instances in the Greek Mani codex in Cologne (Cirillo et al., p. 227), though all but one (p. 66.4) are quotations from the letters of Paul. According to Alexander of Lykopolis (p. 34.18-21), the Manicheans called him *Khrēstós* (lit. "noble, excellent, good"; cf. van der Horst, pp. 91-92), but this form, though not completely without parallels in the original Manichean literature (Polotsky, 1934, p. 72.9; idem, 1935), was not the only one current in the Greek-speaking world. From the Greek came the Coptic *p-khristos* (see Allberry, p. 45) and the Latin *xpi* (for *Christi*) and *xpo* (for *Christo*; Merkelbach, 1988, pp. 255, 256). As in Christian usage, the epithet *Christ* can accompany the name of Jesus or stand alone.

In the Mesopotamian and eastern tradition of Manicheism, represented



principally by Iranian, Turkish, and Chinese texts, the original Aramaic form *mšyh'* (Mšihā) is preferred; it is attested as *mšy[h']* in an Aramaic inscription on a Manichean rock-crystal intaglio (Decret, p. 70). From Aramaic it passed into Parthian as *mšyh'h*, *mšyh'*, and *mšyh''* (Boyce, 1977, p. 58; Sundermann, 1981, p. 165; \**mšyx'* in Sogdian script in ms. 12398 l. 2), represented in the “cantillated” text M 53 (verso l. 12) as *m'-YG'-°šy-y-y-h'*, which points to the pronunciation Mašihā. These forms were adopted in Manichean Sogdian *mšy-x'* and *mšyx'* (Sogdian script) and *mšyh'(h)* (Manichean script; Sundermann, 1981, p. 185). In Old Turkish both \**mšyh'* (Manichean script) and \**mšyx'* (Sogdian script; Zieme, p. 76, ms. U 189, recto l. 6) appear. In Manichean Middle Persian Mšihā, like other Aramaic words, is very rarely used (cf. Sundermann, 1979, p. 103); only three exceptions are known (Henning, 1943, p. 58, text A l. 154; *ibid.*, M 325 l. 3 and M 6230 l. 10; the form *m'm wsyn* in M 28 II verso i l. 2 has been regarded as an abbreviation; cf. *Mir. Man.* II, p. 315 n. 7). Forms found in non- or anti-Manichean sources in other languages, for example, Arabic and New Persian Masih (Taqizāda and Afšār Širāzī, p. 580), can all be derived from these forms in the Manichean literature. As in Christian usage, the terms Christ and Messiah can accompany the name Jesus or stand alone.

In Middle Persian texts the term Aryāmān is also used for Christ and Xradišahr(-yazad) for Jesus or Jesus Christ. Aryāmān (lit. “friend”; cf. Pahl. *ērmān* “friend”) is one of the names that Mani borrowed from Zoroastrianism; the Zoroastrian Aryāmān (see [airyaman](#)) is the deity named at the beginning of the *ā Airiāmā īšiiō @* (see [airyaman išya](#)) prayer. It is quite likely that Mani chose this name partly because of the similarity in sound between the two phrases Aryāmān Yisō' (found beside Yisō' Aryāmān) and Airiāmā īšiiō (Schaeder, p. 129 n. 1; Wesendonk, p. 158). The equivalence of Aryāmān and Christ follows from the Greek and Middle Persian versions of the formula “I am Mani, the apostle of Jesus Christ [Gk.]/Jesus Aryāmān [Mid. Pers.].” Mani invented the name Xradišahr(-yazad) “(God of) the world of wisdom,” that is, of the Light Nous, in his *Šābuhragān* (the only book Mani wrote in Middle Persian, presumably in order to expound his teaching to Šāpūr I; cf. Sundermann, 1979, p. 132 n. 234); there is no evidence, however, to show that this term is also equivalent to Christ.

*Usage of the epithets.* Opinions about the significance of the name Jesus and the epithets Christ and Messiah have evolved with the growing body of original Manichean literature discovered in this century. In the early 19th century F. C. Baur surmised (pp. 71-77, 203-238) that the name Jesus was linked



with the suffering aspect and Christ and Messiah with salvation. The new material does not bear out such a clear-cut distinction, however. Recently Eugen Rose suggested (p. 57) that the two words are used interchangeably in the literature, though the savior is commonly referred to as Jesus; Rose's definition of Jesus Christ (based on that of Augustine) as the "cosmic" deity does not cover the whole range of usage, however, nor does J. Ries's definition of Jesus Christ as the "worldly Jesus" (1978, p. 323; cf. Boyce, *Reader*, p. 10). In fact the terms Jesus, Christ, and Jesus Christ were often used interchangeably, and none was reserved for any particular aspect.

In both Coptic and Iranian texts Christ and Messiah designate the first aspect of Jesus, Jesus the Splendor. Christ is one of the savior deities of the Manichean pantheon who are continually invoked in hymns (e.g., the Coptic psalm to Christ; Allberry, pp. 116-17). In a Parthian hymn (M 369, Waldschmitt and Lentz, p. 118; Boyce, *Reader*, p. 123) Jesus is called Yišō' Zīwā. In an unpublished Parthian manuscript (M 6598, ll. 3-4) the expression čyhrġ mšyh' "the appearance of Messiah" seems to refer to the Virgin of Light, another member of the "third evocation" and most closely associated with Jesus the Splendor (Waldschmitt and Lentz, pp. 55-56, 62; Polotsky, 1934, p. 86.10-11).

The designation of the second aspect of Jesus, the suffering Jesus (cf. Koenen, pp. 176-84; Rose, p. 92), as Christ or Messiah is known mainly from texts of Christian origin (Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 2.5, 20.11; Evodius, *De Fide* 36; cf. Baur, pp. 72-74). The original Manichean texts are less straightforward. There is clear evidence, however, that the suffering Jesus could be called Messiah (cf. the Parthian hymn "Worthy art thou of worship," in which the Living Self, Viva Anima, is called Messiah; Waldschmitt and Lentz, p. 105).

The use of Christ and Messiah to designate the third aspect of the Manichean Jesus, the historical Jesus of Nazareth, is perhaps the best attested. In the Middle Persian version of the *Book of the Giants* Mšihā is listed as the immediate predecessor of Mani in the sequence of prophets (after Seth, Zoroaster, and the Buddha) who revealed the truth to mankind (Henning, 1943, p. 58 ll. 152-55; tr. p. 63). In Parthian texts describing the last days and hours in the life of Jesus he is referred to as yyšw' mšyh'h (Sundermann, 1981, ll. 1013, 1126-27, 1134). In a Sogdian text relating miracles performed by Jesus he is called mšyx' (Sundermann, 1981, ll. 522, 528, 592).

In some passages the epithet Christ clearly designates the fourth aspect of



Jesus, the eschatological Jesus, who will rule over humanity for 120 years (unpublished Parth. ms. M 35 recto ll. 13-14). Probably also belonging to this category is the reference in a Parthian magical text in which “Lord Jesus Christ” (*xwd’y yyšw mšyh[’]*) is called upon together with Mani and the archangels to smite demons, sickness, and other evil (Henning, 1947, p. 50 l. 2). The name Aryāmān, which in Middle Persian usually replaces Christ, is used in the phrase *yyšw’ ry’m’n* Jesus Aryāmān (Jesus Christ), for example, in the Middle Persian version of the opening words of the Living Gospel (*’n m’ny prystg yg yyšw’ ry’m’n* “I am Mani, the apostle of Jesus Aryāmān”; Mid. Pers. ms. M 17 verso, i ll. 4-6; cf. Müller, p. 26; Cirillo et al., p. 66.4-5; Koenen and Römer, pp. 44-45: “I am Manikhaïos, the apostle of Jesus Christ”) and in the exordium of the Seal Letter (*m’ny prystg \*yyšw’ ry’m’n* “Mani, the apostle of Jesus Aryāmān”; Mid. Pers. ms. M 1313 recto ll. 7-8). The phrase is apparently an imitation of the opening words of the letters of Paul, whose theology was well known to Mani. Jesus Aryāmān thus most probably has the same significance as the name Jesus in Paul’s letters: the risen, or eschatological, savior. Less obvious is the reference in M 36 verso l. 7 (*Mir. Man.* II, p. 325), in which the “highest I” (*gryw bwrzyst*), the World Soul, seems to be called *pws ry’m’n yyš[w’]*; according to W. B. Henning, the phrase means “the son of Jesus Aryāmān,” but it is more probably to be interpreted as “the son [of god], Aryāmān Jesus” (P. O. Skjærvø, personal communication) or “the son [of man], Aryāmān Jesus,” that is, the son of the first Man in Manichean terminology. Aryāmān is sometimes represented as the friend of man, which is the literal meaning of the name. In this sense the translation corresponds precisely to the Manichean characterization of Jesus as “friend, beloved” (e.g., Parth. *fry’ng* “beloved”; Chinese *shàn zhī shì zhê*, lit. “he who knows and recognizes good,” corresponds to *kalyāṅṅamitra* “friend” in Buddhist texts; P. O. Skjærvø, personal communication), that is, Jesus the Splendor. Coptic *p-merit’* “the beloved” denotes the eschatological Jesus, as does especially Syriac/Aramaic *ḥaβīβā* “friend, beloved,” which in *The Book of Scholia* of Bar Kōnay (p. 317.20) also denotes Jesus the Splendor, who wakes Adam (Puech, p. 81).

In late Manichean texts Mani himself is glorified as the God Messiah returned (*bg mšyh*; Henning, 1937, p. 19 l. 46), and in the Parthian text M 5691 (ll. 3-4) *mšyh’n rwsn’n* “the bright Messiahs” are mentioned along with the *q’w’n hynz’wr’n* “the mighty Giants,” apparently as an indeterminate group of mythological figures.

The evidence culled from the many and varied Manichean texts suggests the



following development of the use of the terms Christ, Messiah, and Aryāmān in Manicheism. First, in texts based on precise Christian sources it was used as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as a title for Jesus of Nazareth or for the risen, eschatological Jesus. There are even texts in which Christ is still interpreted as a Jewish title for the king of the people of God (Sundermann, 1968, p. 395; idem, 1981, ll. 1188-91). Next, in general Manichean usage, it also became the highest title for Jesus the Splendor and less often for suffering Jesus. Only Jesus the child and Jesus the Moon are not called Christ in any of the known texts. Most often the term designated the active Jesus, the savior, in his various manifestations (aspects 1, 3, 4). In Middle Persian Manichean texts Messiah is almost completely replaced by Aryāmān. Finally, in eastern Manicheism it came to be used simply as a high honorific title that could be applied to Mani or even an unspecific category of divine beings.

On the whole, however, Christ and Messiah were used less often than Jesus and never in set expressions like the Middle Persian *yyšw' zyndkr* "Jesus the giver of life," *yyšw' 'spyxt'n* "Jesus the Splendor," Parthian *yyšw' fry'ng* "Jesus the friend," or Coptic *iēs p-papeau* "Jesus the magnificent." (There is no instance of Christus *patibilis*, as Baur assumed; see Rose, p. 95.) The contrast drawn by the 4th/10th-century writer Ebn al-Nadīm, in a passage allegedly quoted from Mani's *Book of Mysteries*, between ʿĪsā (Jesus) and *ḥabīb* "friend," on one hand, and Masīḥ (Messiah), the son of the widow who suffered crucifixion, on the other, has no parallel in the original Manichean literature (ed. Flügel, pp. 72, 102; tr. Dodge, pp. 797-98).

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