



IRAN IX. RELIGIONS IN IRAN

(1) PRE-ISLAMIC (1.2)

MANICHEISM

IRAN ix, continued

ix(1.2). Manicheism

Called after the founding prophet [MANI](#) (216-74 or 277), Manicheism was a syncretistic religion that, combining elements of the various religions current in Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau at the time, claimed to be the ultimate religion. Mani intended to secure the tradition of his religion by proclaiming his faith “in all tongues and in all lands” and by using a fixed written body of scripture. Mani was brought up in a baptizing Judeo-Christian community in Babylonia (see [ALCHASAI](#)), where he received mainly Christian and Gnostic traditions. Breaking with this community, Mani began ca. 240 to preach his own religion, which, by now, also included Zoroastrian and even Buddhist elements. Mani used Aramaic (Syriac) in his own texts but prepared at least one text in Middle Persian for presentation to the Sasanian king Šābuhr I, which was therefore called the *Šābuhragān* “the book for Šābuhr.” Šābuhr retained Mani in his retinue for an unknown period, according him certain privileges and thus allowing Manicheism to spread. Whether Mani ever intended to promote Manicheism as the religion of the Sasanian state at a time of expansion (particularly into Hellenized and partly Christianized Roman



areas) or if Šābuhr ever looked on Manicheism in that light, can only be speculated. It is clear that the Manichean mission addressed itself to people of influence and seems to have courted political support rather than to have been a ‘popular’ religion. However, Šābuhr’s support was not enough to protect Mani from the rivalry of the Zoroastrian hierarchy, and the Zoroastrian high-priest Kerdir ensured his downfall under Wahrām I (274-76/7), who had Mani imprisoned in such a manner as to cause his death.

While Mani himself does not seem to have left the Sasanian empire except for a year-long sojourn in India at the beginning of his public life, preferring to travel in the Aramaic- and perhaps Middle Persian-speaking areas of the realm, he sent missionaries to various areas both within and outside the Sasanian empire: in particular to the Parthian-speaking north and northeast but also apparently to Armenia and Georgia, to Palmyra in the west, and even further, to Alexandria in the Roman empire and to the Lakhmid kings to the south. These missions involved extensive translation work to make the Manichean teachings accessible in the local languages. The syncretistic component of Manicheism allowed the work of translation to become a transformation of Manicheism into each recipient sphere, creating local varieties of Manicheism in terms of terminology and, as the communities developed, even in terms of practices. Therefore Egyptian Manicheism adopted, in a Christian environment, a more extensive Christian form than elsewhere, while Manicheism in Central Asia adopted Buddhist monasticism. Manicheism promoted this as a central argument that it was capable of subsuming other religions; in times of persecution this also allowed the Manichean communities some degree of protection.

Manicheism is a dualist religion and, as such, has striking similarities with Zoroastrianism and Zurvanism (see Sundermann, 1995 and BeDuhn, 2005). The primal state consists of two opposing principles, light and darkness, or good and evil. Manicheism employs a central myth to explain the human predicament. This cosmogonical myth is preserved for the most part in Syriac by a detractor, Theodore bar Konai (see [BAR KŌNAY](#)), who obviously had a Manichean text in front of him to quote from, thus giving us nearly first-hand access to Mani’s words.

The myth relates how, in the beginning, the realm of light was invaded by the Prince of Darkness. To defend this kingdom, its ruler, the Father of Greatness, called forth the Mother of Life. She in turn evoked the First Man and his five sons: the elements air, wind, light, water, and fire. Together, the elements form



the Living Self. This is the first stage of the myth of Creation, which leads to a second and third stage.

The First Man was initially overwhelmed by the powers of darkness and lay in a deep sleep. His armor of light elements was partly devoured by the evil Archons of Darkness and therefore imprisoned in matter. To rescue the First Man a second phase of the creation took place: new divinities were evoked, including the Living Spirit and his five sons. The Living Spirit called out to the First Man, who was awakened by that and gave answer. Thus the Living Spirit saves the First Man. This is seen as a pattern for the salvation of the human soul.

Then, as part of the third phase, a complex structure is developed, through which the particles of light are redeemed from the bodies of the wicked Archons of Darkness. Ten heavens and eight earths are created, including our world. The various stations in this structure each have their own named guardians. Unpolluted light is gathered in the moon and the sun; slightly tainted light is gathered in the stars. Third Messenger sets about releasing the trapped light: he seduces the Archons, making them emit light particles. These fall on the earth and bring forth plants and animals. This trapped light has to be freed, and so the apparatus of the cosmos is set in motion by which freed light is brought to the moon, from there along the Column of Glory (the Milky Way) to the sun and then on to the New Paradise.

The Prince of Darkness creates a male and a female demon, who beget Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. Adam is trapped in his body and is unconscious. Jesus the Splendor comes to his aid, showing him the Father of Greatness on high and his own imprisonment in the world. Jesus makes Adam eat of the tree of life and makes him realize that his soul is divine, while his body is part of the wicked material world. Eve is seduced by a demon and bears Cain and Abel, thus perpetuating man's existence and the imprisonment of light in his body.

The Great Spirit (part of the pantheon of the Third Creation) sends prophets to bring knowledge to man. The soul is made of light and is essentially good and receptive to the prophets' messages. Sins occur through forgetfulness caused by matter. After death, the soul may need to be reborn many times before it reaches salvation and ascends to the New Paradise by the Column of Glory.

When most light particles have been redeemed, a Great War will occur. This



will be followed by the Second Coming of Jesus, after which heavens and earths will collapse and a Great Fire will break out, through which the last particles of light will be freed and ascend to the New Paradise. Matter will be imprisoned for all time. An ideal state will ensue, in which the inhabitants of Paradise will behold the Father of Greatness.

The cosmogony yields a large number of named figures, some of which are personified abstractions or functions and some mythical figures.

Much work has been done to elucidate the elements of the myth. Gnostic traditions are responsible for much of the hierarchy of the cosmos but also for the central theme of Call and Answer, which is the pattern for the awakening of the ordinary human to the Manichean truth and his recognition of his predicament and his response to this by applying himself to the task of saving the light imprisoned in the world. Side by side with this is the multi-faceted role of Jesus in the myth and in other Manichean texts, the self-sacrifice and the saving role of Jesus being of particular importance (also in the eastern Manichean texts). Apart from many similarities with the Zoroastrian cosmology, such as a period of dominance of evil followed by the final victory of good, the Iranian Manichean texts gave to many of the figures self-explanatory Iranian names and employ the names Zurwān (for the Father of Greatness) and Ohr-mezd (for the First Man). In the Iranian and Central Asian texts various Buddhist elements are to be found, including reference to Mani's Nirvana (just as, in Coptic texts, his death is referred to as a crucifixion) and to Jesus as Maitreya, the future savior of Mahayana Buddhism.

Of particular interest in the myth is the scene where First Man seems to go to defeat. In fact, this is portrayed as a ruse, a tactical defeat that enables the eventual victory of the good principle (BeDuhn, 2005).

The adherent of Manicheism learned that he had to remodel his entire life towards the aims of the religion: the salvation of imprisoned light and the salvation of the Manicheans. The two went together, since the Manichean saved the imprisoned light by abstaining from causing harm (not killing, not having sex, not drinking wine, not eating meat, but also not damaging plants or dirtying water) as well as by eating suitable food from which the pure Manichean thereby released the trapped light contained in it. Since the practicing Manichean could not prepare his own food for fear of damaging plants or polluting water, he was entirely dependent on the support of others. This made a two-tiered Manicheism necessary, in which the Elect, the pure



ones, lived strictly according to principle, but only with the assistance of the Hearers, who took the sin of the preparation of food upon themselves. The Elect became the embodiment of a distilling machine that started in their bodies (see BeDuhn, 2000), which were ritually prepared for the purpose of releasing the light particles from the carefully chosen, mostly light-colored vegetables and fruit they ate. The released light then started on its way upwards via moon and sun to the paradise of light.

Within the Elect there was a hierarchy: the leader presided over 12 teachers, 72 bishops, and 360 householders or priests (Tardieu, 1997, pp. 73-79). Al-Nadīm, writing in Arabic in the 10th century, reports that a schism split the Manicheans in Transoxania from the authority of the leader in Babylon during most of the 7th century; the schismatics were known as *dēnāwar* “the pious one” (see [DĪNĀVARĪYA](#)), but this may have been coincidental. Manicheism was dominated by men, but some female Elect are known.

Manichean practices centered around the sacred meal held once a day for the Elect to eat and thereby perform their work of freeing the light. The community also met on Sundays and Mondays, the former being important for the Hearers, the latter for the Elect. During the year, at regular intervals of the lunar calendar, *Yimki* days were celebrated, five two-day commemorations of the Manichean martyrs. The Bēma (“throne”) festivity was the highpoint of the Manichean year. Fasting and a confessional practice belonged to the community’s activities. Prayers, sermons, and, above all, hymns accompanied the gatherings and are well attested in the surviving literature. The hymns include two long hymn-cycles in Parthian and innumerable individual hymns. To secure the correctness of his tradition, Mani established a canon of his books, but these are nowhere attested in entirety. These are *The Living Evangel*, *The Treasure of Life*, *The Pragmateia*, *The Book of Mysteries*, *The Book of Giants*, Mani’s letters and prayers and Psalms. Mani also made a picture book, possibly to illustrate the cosmology. In addition to the texts already listed, there was a hagiographical biography of Mani (the Cologne Mani Codex, in Greek); fragments of a church history dealing with the missionary activities of Mani and others in his lifetime have survived in Parthian, Middle Persian, and Sogdian.

The actual extent of Manicheism at any given time is impossible to estimate. Opposition to, prohibition and persecution of Manicheans are primarily documented for Iran in the 3rd century, for Syria and the Roman/Byzantine empire in the 4th, 5th, and 6th centuries, which may reflect the greatest



impact of Manicheism from the opponents' point of view. Manichean texts are attested either directly or in quotation by detractors in the languages Syriac, Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Bactrian, Uigur, and Chinese as well as in Greek, Coptic, and Latin, which shows the great spread of Manichaeism eastwards and westwards (for maps, see Tardieu, 1997, pp. 122-24). Sogdian Manicheism was still vibrant enough to be capable of achieving its greatest political success in the conversion of the Uigur kingdom in Central Asia to Manicheism in 762. This patronage, which endured for about 250 years, is the main reason for the preservation of Manichean literature in Iranian and Uigur in the Turfan oasis on the Silk Road. The Sogdians and Uigurs also introduced Manicheism to China where it may have survived until the end of the 16th century (Lieu, 1992, p. 301).

The number of Manicheans in any given community at any particular time may not have been very great. Since Manicheism excluded marriage for the male and female Elect, Manicheism could not easily be passed on to the next generation except by teaching and presumably by persuading members of the Hearers to pass to the stricter form of the religion. The Hearers were, in this sense as in others, the mainstay of the community. The salient feature of Manicheism, its ability to couch itself in the terms and forms of other religions, will have allowed dwindling communities to fade into the religion they professed officially.

Judging by the vehemence with which Manicheans were persecuted, the closeness of Manicheism to the religions it claimed to subsume, in particular, Zoroastrianism and Christianity and at a time when the future orthodoxies had not yet attained unequivocal state support, possibly caused greater disturbance than the size of the Manichean communities alone would account for. As for the attractiveness of dualism and Manicheism on an intellectual level, it may be pointed out that even a man of such remarkable intellect as Augustinus (see [AUGUSTINE](#)), later bishop of Hippo in North Africa and a vigorous and caustic opponent of Manicheism, was for ten years a Manichean Hearer.

Manicheism hails initially from an era of emerging and changing religious ideas and structures that had not yet found their enduring forms. As an attempt at syncretism, Manicheism has its place in the history of ideas and helps define the contours of orthodoxies and their alternatives.

One of the legacies of Manicheism is the texts themselves, which testify to the



high regard for the written word and book illustrations that the Manicheans had. This certainly goes back to Mani himself, who was a painter and whose renown as such was to outlive his religion. The Manichean books found in Egypt are exceptional in size and presentation: the Coptic codices belong to the largest surviving books from antiquity, and the Greek Mani Codex is one of the smallest codices known. The surviving western Manichean books are not illustrated. In contrast, the fragments of Manichean books from Turfan contain quite a number of exquisite illustrations (see Gulácsi, 2001 and 2005).

Manichean influence on Islam can possibly be seen in the attention paid to the written word as a guarantee of authenticity and also in the number of daily prayers.

The possibility that the dualist Cathars of France and Italy were in some way indebted to Manicheism has often been suggested but not proven. This depends to some degree on the extent of links to the Bulgarian Bogomils, for whom a similar origin has been claimed. The Bogomils might have borrowed ideas from Paulicians, a group deported from Asia Minor to the Balkans in the 10th century who were known for heretical views close to Manicheism. An alternative to this line of transmission is the possibility that a general dualism in Christianity, especially in non-orthodox forms with Gnostic elements, may have been enough to give the impetus to form similar systems at various times without direct contact (see Decret, 2005, pp. 137-50).

The pragmatic approach of the Manicheans to language and script has given scholars in the field of Iranian studies material in the languages Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian and even Bactrian and early New Persian that is incomparable in its accuracy.

English translations of a range of Manichean texts from east and west are to be found in Gardner and Lieu, eds., 2004, and Klimkeit, 1993.

See also the *EIr.* entries (both printed and online at iranicaonline.org) in which W. Sundermann and others have dealt with many aspects of Manicheism: [BĒMA](#); [CHRIST IN MANICHEISM](#); [COLOGNE MANI CODEX](#); [COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY IN MANICHEISM](#); [DĪNĀVARĪYA](#); [ESCHATOLOGY](#), ii. [MANICHEAN](#); [FEHREST](#) iii. [THE REPRESENTATION OF MANICHEISM IN THE FEHREST](#); [FESTIVALS](#) ii. [MANICHEAN](#); [GIANTS, THE BOOK OF](#); [HERMAS, THE SHEPHERD OF](#); [JESUS IN MANICHEISM](#); [MANICHEAN ESCHATOLOGY](#); [MANI](#); [MANICHEAN LITERATURE](#); [MANICHEAN MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES](#); [MANICHEAN](#)



PANTHEON; MITHRA IN MANICHEISM, and other topics; as well as entries on scholars who studied Manicheism: [ASMUSSEN](#), [BAUR](#), [BEAUSOBRE](#), [CHAVANNES](#), and [HENNING](#).

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