



## MITHRA III. IN MANICHEISM

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The Iranian Manicheans adopted the name of the Zoroastrian god Mithra (Av. Miθra; Mid. Pers. Mihr) and used it to designate one of their own deities. Unfortunately, the representation of Mithra as a different god in languages has, for a long time, obscured the relation between the Zoroastrian and the Manichean concepts of the deity.

The name appears in Middle Persian as Mihr(*myhr*, which does not stem from the genuine Old Persian form *\*miça-*), in Parthian as Mihr(*myhr*) and in Sogdian as Miši(*myšyy*; Sundermann, 1979a, p. 10, sub 3/11.2). The spellings *mytr*, *mytrg*, however, are not variants of the name Mithra, they rather denote Maitreya.

The divine title of Mithra in Middle Persian and Parthian Manichean texts is invariably *yazad* (divinity), which differs from the Old Persian convention that regarded Mithra as a *baga-*, if a title was given to him at all. But it is in perfect agreement with the Avestan way of addressing Mithra as *yazata-* (only once called *baya*). In Manichean Sogdian, however, the name and title of Mithra are regularly *Miši βayi*, conforming to the Old Persian convention.

In Mani's *Šābuhragān* and in all later Middle Persian texts Mihr denotes the Living Spirit, the subjigator of the demons who had attacked the World of



Light and captured the First Man and his sons. He is also the builder of this world, and, when the world comes to an end, the powerful vanquisher of the demonic concupiscentia Āz, the Hyle(Sundermann, 1978, pp. 489-93).

In Parthian and Sogdian (Sundermann, 1979a, pp. 104, 109), however, Mihr/Mišiwas taken as the sun and consequently identified with the Third Messenger. As the sun god he is praised for his illuminative, light-giving deeds, for his expulsion of darkness, for his regular and reliable revolution in the sky, etc. As the Third Messenger he is a helper and redeemer of mankind, very much like Jesus the Splendor. His cosmogonical work remains in the background, as far as the hymns to Mihr are concerned.

The identification of the Zoroastrian Mithra with different Manichean gods in Middle Persian and Parthian has become the shibboleth that distinguishes between the two terminological systems. The Sogdians developed a terminological system of their pantheon that combined Middle Persian and Parthian components, but, in the identification of Mithra, they followed the Parthian model (Sundermann, 1979a, p. 104); thus it was probably in the texts in other East Manichean languages that the divine names were drawn on the Sogdian pattern or at least used in Sogdian form (for Old Turkish, cf. Tongerloo, pp. 175-6, 177-78; for Chinese, cf. Bryder, pp. 101, 106-9, 121).

In Middle Persian the name Mihr is used for the Third Messenger without exception. In Parthian, however, as in Sogdian, there is a second identification of the Third Messenger with the Zoroastrian god Nairiyōsaṅha (Av. *nairiōsaṅha*), called in Parthian Narisaf Yazad (*nrysfyzd*), adopted in Sogdian as *nr'y-sβ yzδ*, and rendered by the genuine Sogdian form *nryšnx βyy* (Sundermann, 1979a, p. 101, sub 3/11.1, pp. 105-6). The Third Messenger's name appears also in Parthian translation as *hrdyg fryštg*, in Sogdian as *'štykw pr'y-št'k* (Sundermann, 1979a, p. 100, sub 2/11.1; see Table 1).

The difference of the terminology between the Middle Persian and the Parthian Manichean theology has been explained in different ways. Walter Bruno Henning, who for the first time correctly solved the problem (as far as Mithra is concerned), maintained that the Zoroastrian Mithra in 3rd-century Persia had so few elements in common with the contemporary Parthian or Sogdian Mithra that identifications with different Manichean deities seemed inevitable (Henning, 1934, cols. 6-8, with col. 7, n. 3). Mary Boyce's more precise explanation leads to the same conclusion: It was among the Parthian Manicheans that Mithra as a sun god surpassed the importance of Narisaf as



the common Iranian image of the Third Messenger; “among the Parthians the dominance of Mithra was such that his identification with the Third Messenger led to cultic emphasis on the Mithraic traits in the Manichaean god” (Boyce, p. 49). The Manichean missionaries to Parthia consequently “abandoned” the earlier identification of the Living Spirit with Mithra (Boyce, p. 48).

The theory that Parthian and Sogdian Manicheans, in contrast to the Persians, called the Third Messenger Mithra, simply because their Mithra was already a solar deity, was decidedly disputed by Ilya Gershevitch, who justly pointed out that in Sogdian the sun god is called Mithra only and exclusively in Manichean texts. Therefore, the different identification of Mithra in Middle Persian on the one hand and in Parthian and Sogdian on the other was simply the result of a different interpretation of the nature of the Manichean gods, that is of the Living Spirit and the Third Messenger, by Mani on the one hand and by his missionaries to Parthia on the other (Gershevitch, pp. 69-74). The explanation of the present author (Sundermann, 1979, pp. 107-9) is that Mani, the creator of the Middle Persian terminological system, developed and completed his system in the course of his missionary career. The creator of the Parthian system, however, was most likely Mār Ammō, Mani’s apostle among the Parthians. He adopted Mani’s system at a very early and still imperfect state and completed it on his own. Since Ammō’s missionary field was far away from Mani’s, and since both were active in different linguistic areas, such a supposition seems to be justified.

An outcome of this diverging development was Ammō’s identification of the Third Messenger with the sun god Mihr, which was in agreement with the common popular Zoroastrian belief of his time, while Mani’s own identification of the Living Spirit with Mihr was based on a better knowledge of Zoroastrian theology which, in agreement with the Avesta, distinguished between the god Mithra and the sun (Sundermann, 1978, p. 499; idem, 1979a, p. 115).

Did the identification of two Manichean deities with the Zoroastrian god Mithra entail a certain influence from the Zoroastrian on the Manichean side, at least in the Iranian branch of Manicheism? A few characteristics of the Manichean gods that point to borrowings from the Avestan *Mihr Yašt* have been singled out by Mary Boyce for Mithra as the Parthian Third Messenger (pp. 49, 52-54), and by the present author for the Middle Persian Living Spirit (Sundermann, 1979b, pp. 777-87).



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