

MANICHAISM

Among the heresies that were spread in Egypt, Manichaeism played a prominent role. This is shown by the discovery of a library of seven volumes in the Asyut dialect of Coptic and of a historical work on Mani written in Greek. This religion spread, in the form of a church, over the entire Mediterranean basin and as far as central and eastern Asia. In the kingdom of the Uigurs, it even became a state religion, and after the decline of that kingdom it left traces in the remnant states of Kansu and Chotsko (Chotscho) down to the thirteenth century.

In the Roman Empire it suffered severe persecution soon after its emergence and, indeed, was regarded as a concentration of all heresy. Reflecting the number of cultures and peoples among whom it was proclaimed, the tradition has come down to us in many languages: Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Uigur, Tocharian, Chinese. Since the tradition is largely indirect, and in the original sources due attention must be paid to the peculiarity of literary forms often preserved by accident, in reconstructing the Manichaean system we must not be content with the knowledge derived from any one group of texts, not even from a group as comprehensive as the Coptic sources.

Mani (Manichaios, from *Mani hajja*, the living Mani) came from the Babylonian part of the Iranian empire. He was born on 14 April 216. His father, Pattek, had become a member of the Jewish- Christian Gnostic sect of the ELKASITES. Mani received two revelations, the first at the age of twelve, the second at twenty-four. His "twin" appeared to him and revealed to him the mystery in which the content of the faith was made known to him. He thereupon turned away from the Elkasites and began to proclaim his own teaching. When the Sassanid Ardashir I overthrew the Arsacids in Iran, Mani went to India.

He returned under King Shapur I and won his favor, since the king

wished to restore the Achaemenian empire and saw in Mani's syncretistic religion a common religion that could bind to his empire the regions of the eastern Mediterranean that he wanted to wrest from Rome. Mani prospered under Shapur's successor Hormizd I (273-274); but when Bahram I (274-276/277) came to the throne in 274, Mani was thrown into prison at the instigation of the Magi, and died after twenty-six days in custody. The year of his death is disputed (276/277). The period of his imprisonment gave him the opportunity to prepare his [disciples](#) for their task after his death.

The mystery revealed to Mani answered the question of the way to man's redemption. For this, in accordance with Gnostic theology, a knowledge of cosmology was necessary, and this again had to be traced back to its metaphysical roots (*Kephalaia* 15.3-24). As was usual in GNOSTICISM generally, Mani, on the Platonic model, made use of myth for his presentation.

The dualism of good and evil, light and darkness, is original in Mani. Over against the Father of Greatness, consisting of five members of light and surrounded by twelve aeons who dwell in the kingdom of light, stands the king of darkness, Hyle. While peace and joy prevail in the realm of light, the kingdom of darkness is full of unrest and mutual conflict. Hence Mani can apply to it the word of [Jesus](#) in Matthew 12:25ff. It is only with a view to winning the kingdom of light that any unity of purpose comes about. This brings the Father of Greatness into difficulty, since his kingdom is ordered for peace and not for war.

He, therefore, decides to take the field himself, in the person of his son the primal man, whom he has begotten of the Mother of Life (also called "of the living"). He puts on the five elements of light—air, wind, light, water, and fire—as souls of light. There is a battle in which the five elements of darkness—smoke, wind, darkness, water, and fire—bind the elements of light by uniting with them, and take the primal man captive. This defeat is, however, only apparent, for the mingling means the

binding of darkness, depriving it of its power.

The primal man turns for help to the Father of Greatness, who calls forth a new triad, the Friend of the Lights, the Great Architect, and the Living Spirit. The Living Spirit sends a call to the primal man, who gives an answer. Call and answer ascend and, clothed with them, the Living Spirit and the Mother of Life come down to deliver the primal man.

In order that the elements of light, too, may be delivered, the cosmos is created by the Living Spirit. Ten heavens and five earths are formed from the skins of the archons and their bodies. Sun and moon are produced from the best mixture of light. The archons are fixed as stars in the firmament in a wheel of the sphere. The dregs of darkness are swept down from heaven into three trenches. The order of the cosmos is maintained by five sons of the Living Spirit. The Splenditenens (Greek: *Phengokatochos*) oversees the tenth, ninth, and eighth heavens, and holds the world from above. The great King of Honor oversees the remaining heavens. The King of Glory is in charge of the paths on which the elements of light, wind, water, and fire ascend. Atlas (Greek: *Omophoros*) bears the cosmos on his shoulders. The Adam of Light casts down the sea monsters.

If in the creation of the world the Living Spirit effected a rough separation of light and darkness, and thereby set up a mechanism for the redemption of the elements of light, it is the task of the Third Emissary, who resides in the sun while the [Jesus](#) Splendor has his place in the moon, to set the machinery of purification into motion. In male or female form, by his beauty he provokes the archons of the opposite sex to emit secretions that lead to the formation of the sea monster, the plants, and the archons who move on Earth. In this way a part of the light is refined away. The way of purification leads via the Milky Way, “the pillar of glory, the perfect man,” to the moon, from which the light is handed on to the sun.

The archons now, in an obscene fashion, create a man and a woman after the likeness of the Third Emissary. They believe that God will do nothing against His image, and that they will be able to hide behind it. Moreover, the purification of the light is again and again delayed, and practically made impossible, by the multiplication of the human race, unless there is a counterattack on the part of the light. This occurs first of all through the coming of Jesus, who awakens the sleeping Adam and explains his existence to him.

By eating from the tree of life Adam becomes able to see, but falls into great affliction. This leads him to a search for deliverance, for which ways are repeatedly offered to him from the primeval age on. Ever new apostles, from Seth to Shem, are sent to mankind. Then appear the three founders of the world religions of the time: Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus. Their teachings are falsified soon after their deaths, but in accordance with John 16:7f. the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, comes, to appear as the seal of the prophets. The Paraclete, Mani's "twin," unites with him, so that Mani himself is regarded by the believing community as the Paraclete promised by [Jesus](#) Christ. In contrast with the majority of the Gnostic heresies, Manichaeism formed a church like those of the Marcionites or the Elkasites, from whom Mani derived much.

The anthropology of Manichaeism affirms that man in his present condition is the ancient man, who through the struggle of the light-*nous* with sin is purified into the new man. This light-*nous* is identical with the first soul-member of the Father of Greatness, so that through [Jesus](#) and Mani the illuminator God intervenes among men as an active participant. The purification of the community takes place through a division into two groups of believers, the elect and the catechumens. The designation *auditores* for the latter goes back to an expression used for them in the Syrian church.

The way of [sanctification](#) can be recognized from the relation between the two. Since the object of all that happens in the world is the final

purification of the light out of the world, the propagation of the human race must be ever more restricted. Hence the elect must be unmarried. In order not to harm the light, they may not work, but are supported by the catechumens. The elements of light that pass into their bodies with the food are thereby purified. This is the Manichaean Eucharist. In fasting, also, the elect have more to perform than the catechumens. The latter are under the obligation of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Here the catechumen may so enhance his performance, especially by additional sexual abstinence, that he is delivered in a single body. Otherwise the way leads through the transmigration of souls, and one must enter into the body of an elect in order to obtain salvation.

When finally the purification of the cosmos as a whole is almost complete, what is left is gathered into the last “statue” (*andrias*). Then the Splenditenens and Atlas cease their labors, so that the world collapses and passes into a universal conflagration lasting 1,468 years. There is, however, no *apocatastasis* of the original situation; darkness is forever chained in a prison erected by the Great Architect, so that it can never again be dangerous. Some souls, which have not fulfilled their task, are utterly lost. Here we can see the conflict between Fate and freedom of the will, which can also be recognized elsewhere in [gnosis](#).

To bring the purification to its completion, mankind must be gripped by Mani’s teaching, and the Manichaean church must sanctify all people more and more. Mani sent missionaries to every corner of the earth.

Egypt was early in his mind. Because of the uncertainties that the missionaries, like Mani himself, recognized in the traditions of the great religions, Mani believed that the situation could best be remedied by the creation of a canon of sacred writings that he had composed and authorized: (1) the Living Gospel; (2) the Treasure of Life; (3) the Pragmateia; (4) the Book of the Mysteries; (5) the Book of the Giants; (6) the Letters; (7) psalms and prayers. To these Mani added a further volume in which he presented the mythological events in pictorial form,

which earned him the name “the painter.”

For this he also composed an explanation, the Book of the Foundation (perhaps identical with the *Epistula fundamenti* assailed by Augustine). Alongside the canon composed in Syriac there is a work in Middle Persian, the *Shapurakan* (Book dedicated to Shapur). Since, however, Manichaeism was a living religious community, it did not rest content with the canon, but created additional new literature. From the Coptic Manichaean Psalm book we can see how a series of hymn collections was assembled, and beside it there is [abundant](#) Iranian, Turkish, and Chinese material. Historical texts in which mention is made of the life and sufferings of Mani served for the edification of the community (the Cologne codex in Greek, the passion of Mani in Coptic, Iranian fragments).

In Coptic, there is also a sermon on the great war, which begins from an Iranian mythological theme and deals with the last things, with considerable borrowing from the synoptic apocalypse. The *Kephalaia* literature is of extraordinary scope, harking back to the Master’s didactic discourses or expanding them, or answering new questions according to the same model.

Mani’s mission was concerned with making the message clear and comprehensible by adapting to the forms of expressing religious ideas that were in current use in the several mission fields. In the *Shapurakan* especially, these were Iranian ideas; farther east, other Iranian ideas, but especially Buddhist terms, are to be found above all in the Chinese texts. Rivalry with Christianity in central Asia gave a special prominence to the person of Jesus.

The same holds for the West, where Christ assumes the place of the Third Emissary and the figure of the Jesus *patibilis* is identical with the suffering Living Soul, the Cross of Light. This conception of [Jesus](#) is particularly strongly manifested in the West, but it is among the essential

ingredients of Mani's theology. This is shown by a passage in the Cologne codex and by the interpretation of the words of judgment in Matthew 25:34-46.

Manichaeism is a markedly syncretistic religion that claims to have taken into itself all that was good in earlier religions. It is not an Iranian religion, although Iranian elements—such as the great war, the ascent of the soul after death, and the motif of the fourfold God (God, Light, Power, Wisdom)—are used as vehicles for its expression. Also, one can hardly speak of any fundamental Buddhist constituent.

The transmigration of souls derives from the Hellenic heritage, and the rejection of work for the elect is a logical consequence of Mani's idea of the dispersion of the particles of light, which he found confirmed among the Buddhist monks on his journeys to India and eastern Iran. The central motive for the overcoming of dualism, however, derives from Christianity—redemption through [Jesus](#) Christ—[save](#) that Jesus' various functions are split into various mythological incidents. God appears in His son, the primal man, and suffers in Him and in His children, the elements of light. He is at the same time victorious in Him. The creative activity of God and of His son comes to the fore in the Living Spirit.

The [description](#) of the Pillar of Glory as a perfect man goes back to the ecclesiology and Christology of Ephesians 4:11ff., since the totality of souls aspires upward to the moon, where [Jesus](#) resides. The Milky Way is seen as the place where Jesus undertakes the purification; indeed, he is sometimes even identified with it. In addition to the Jesus Splendor, the primal man also has his place in the moon. After his return to the Kingdom of Light he is concerned, like the risen and exalted Christ of the Christians, for those who are to be redeemed. But alongside the cosmogonical and cosmological activity, we see Jesus also as a teacher of the first earthly man and in the form of *nous* in every man who is redeemed. Likewise, [Jesus](#) comes at the end of the world as its judge. As the means for its presentation, Manichaeism makes use, particularly in

speculative descriptions, of the astrological view of the world.

The mission probably gained a foothold between 244 and 260. While Manichaeism was being proclaimed in the Roman Empire, Addas came to Alexandria. Mani sent him the [Gospel](#) and two other writings, and at the same time gave him scribes. This shows the character of Manichaeism as a book religion. Papos and Thomas worked in Upper Egypt. The latter is probably identical with the author of the Psalms of Thomas; the former appears in Mani's letter book (unpublished). The main center in Upper Egypt was Lycopolis (Asyut).

Its dialect, in addition to Greek, became the language of the Egyptian Manichaeans. A few Syriac fragments have also been found in Upper Egypt (Burkitt, 1925, p. 111). However, translation of the literature appears to have been through the medium of Greek. Soon after its appearance, Manichaeism was attacked by the state. The edict of DIOCLETIAN in 297 prohibited it under severe penalties (death, penal servitude, expropriation). People saw in it a Persian superstition; perhaps Iranian agitation was suspected behind some revolts.

The Neoplatonic philosophy also, in the person of ALEXANDER OF LYCOPOLIS about 300, turned against Mani's doctrine. It was, however, the church especially that saw in Manichaeism an opponent so dangerous as to have it extirpated until the Arab period. There is a pastoral letter against it as early as the third century (Böhlig, 1980, pp. 194ff.). There are writings from the hands of Egyptian theologians, SARAPION OF TMUIS (d. 362) and DIDYMUS THE BLIND (313-398). ATHANASIUS also may have had a hand in this conflict, as he enrolled ANTONY in such a struggle (*Vita Antonii*, chap. 68). Use was also made of writings against Mani from outside, as Coptic translations prove (CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, 6th Catechesis, 21-24; *Acta Archelai*, cf. Polotsky, 1932).

In the fourth century the activity of Aphthonius as leader of the Manichaean community made it necessary for Aetius of Antioch to come

to Alexandria for a debate with him. The widespread impact of Manichaeism emerges also from the fact that both the Coptic Manichaean library—consisting of a work on the Living Gospel, letters of Mani, a psalm book, two volumes of *Kephalaia*, various *logoi*, and a historical book—and the Cologne Greek codex were intended for the laity.

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