

Mani

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Mani was not an Iranian, at least not in the sense of being from a Persian princely family as some traditions have made him to be. On this point certain European schools of interpretation (those following Reitzenstein in Germany, and Widengren in Sweden), have been wrong.¹ Since the discovery of the *Köln/Cologne Mani Codex* in Egypt, which was published in 1970,² we know better. Mani was a Jewish boy, who grew up in Babylonia, which strictly speaking was under 'the occupation' of Persia.³ We have from this codex a kind of biography which allows us to see that young Mani was a member of a Jewish-Christian sect, usually known as the Elkesaites. It is also known that Mani was a cripple. Mani reacted against the sect of his upbringing during his adolescence.⁴ His rejection was not just to do with the sect's Jewish ritual and focus, but more especially and personally with the Jewish-Christian group's views that deformity and disease were divine chastisements for people's sins. Mani was physically handicapped, but he could not accept that his condition was sent as a punishment from God.⁵ He nonetheless drew on the resources of his own background, and combined what he had from Elkesaitism with Gnostic and Hermetic tendencies percolating through the Jewish and Christian communities of his time. In drawing on the Valentinian expression of Gnosticism, however, and also Hermeticism, Mani does not show himself to be a distinctly Iranian (or Zoroastrian) thinker.

Mani was familiar with the Valentinian division of mankind into the *pneumatikoi*, the *psychikoi* and the *hylikoi* (or *somatikoi*), and discusses it in one of his discourses in the *Kephalaia* (CXV, 270, 13-23), as Samuel N. C. Lieu rightly observes in his seminal study *Manichaeism*.⁶ Valentinus and Mani have much in common. The kernel of their doctrine is that empirical man, his conscious ego so to speak, has to form a syzygy, a *mysterium conjunctionis*, with his guardian angel or transcendental Self: this is an amplification of the Greek and Jewish view that man has a (male!) daimon or guardian angel who resembles him as two drops of water and is called in Hebrew *iqonin*.⁷ And certainly Mani was familiar with the Valentinian interpolation in the *Acts of John* (94-102), according to which Jesus at the Last Supper danced the suffering of agonizing humanity and was said to suffer with suffering mankind. Mani picked that up and conceived the image of *Jesus patibilis, ex omni pendens ligno* and suffering in all men, animals and plants. The *Cologne Mani Codex* has finally proved that this awe-inspiring vision goes back to Mani himself.

It is no less certain that the *Hermetic* Gnosis influenced Manichaean beginnings. Faustus

¹ Cf., R. Reitzenstein, esp. *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, Bonn, 1921, pp. 13ff., 31ff.; G. Widengren, esp. "Manichaeism and its Iranian Background", in E. Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Cambridge, 1983, vol. 3, pt. 2, pp. 965ff. More recently, e.g., H.-J. Klimkeit, "Manichaean Kingship: a Gnosis at home in the world", *Numen*, 29/1 (1982): 17.

² For a description, analysis and partial publication of the *Köln Codex*, A. Henrichs and L. Koenen, "Ein griechischer Mani-Codex (P. Colon. inv. n^o. 4780)", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 5 (1970): 97-216.

³ As even Ibn an-Nadim, in recounting idealized traditions of his birth, has it; *Fihrist* (ed. Arabic text, C. Flügel), Leiden, 1871, pp. 327-8. Cf. also I. Grünwald, "Manichaeism and Judaism in the Light of the Cologne Mani Codex", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 50 (1983): 29-45.

⁴ F. Decret, *Mani et le tradition manichéenne*, (Maîtres Spirituels), Bourges, 1974, pp. 44-50 (with Patristic references to the Elkesaites = Mughtasila).

⁵ Cf. L.J.R. Ort, *Mani; a religio-historical description of his personality*, Leiden, 1967.

⁶ S.N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, Manchester, 1985, p. 50, n. 158.

⁷ For the references, Quispel, "Hermes Trismegistus and the Origins of Gnosticism", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 46/1 (1992).

plausibly argues that Hermes was an ancient prophet for us Gentiles, whereas the prophets of Israel spoke to the Jews who had accepted the Messiah.⁸ Ephrem Syrus mentions Hermes among the primeval sages of Manichaeism.⁹ And a middle Persian fragment (M 788, 2-8) enumerates Hermas the Pastor (Hermes the *Poimên* of Men?) among the apostles of true religion.¹⁰ Where East and West agree, we are on solid ground. But also indirectly Mani was familiar with Hermetic lore. He knew and loved the *Gospel of Thomas*, written about 140 CE in Edessa and reflecting the Encratite shade of Aramaic Christianity.¹¹ There Mani read:

Jesus says: Whoever knows everything, but fails to know himself, fails to know the All
(log. 67).

I am not at all sure that Jesus ever said this. It seems more probable that the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* found it in the above-mentioned Hermetic gnomology:

Who knows himself, knows the All.

The myth of the Self, as we all know, is of Greek origin. Hermes picked it up in the Greek quarters of Alexandria. But it had been integrated at an early date both by Catholic and by Encratite Christianity. The influence of Encratism on Mani was enormous.¹² And so the myth of the Self became an essential doctrine of Manichaeism:

“Jesus the Splendour approached sinless Adam and awoke him from the sleep of death, that he might be delivered of innumerable demons ... Then Adam examined himself and realized, who he was” (Theodor bar Konai).¹³

It has been argued that the concept of a spirit or Self in man has a tradition in Iran that goes back to Indo-Aryan times. But then, Mani did not live in Iran, he lived in Babylonia under Parthian and Persian occupation. One does not become automatically a member of the occupying nation when one lives for some time under a foreign oppressor, and Mani lived at a time of power struggles in the Persian empire, when the Sassanids replaced the Parthians.¹⁴

Mani was clearly not an Aryan. According to a trustworthy tradition his mother was called Miriam, a good Jewish name. At the age of four his father made him a kind of *puer oblatu*s (an Essene custom) in a *kibbutz* of Christian Jews. The Elkesaites, among whom he grew up, were Law-abiding Jews, who strictly kept the Sabbath and practised circumcision. Mani must have undergone this rite as a child. And the tradition about the encounter with his Twin and heavenly counterpart dramatises the historical fact that at the age of twelve he became a *bar mizwa*, like Jesus (cf Lk. 2:42).¹⁵ It was Manichaean propaganda in the East that later invented for him family ties with the royal house, but significantly the *Cologne Mani Codex*, a rather trustworthy biography of Mani, does not say a word about these. As often as not founders of a religion are said to be of princely origin, and that is not likely to be true in Mani's case. As Tardieu, among others, has already argued,

⁸ *Adv. Valentin.*, vii.

⁹ *Prose Refutations* (ed., Mitchell, vol. 2, p. 98).

¹⁰ Quispel, *loc. cit.*, p. 18, n. 22 on the commentary of L. Cirillo on this fragment.

¹¹ Encratism, which can be applied to certain Gnostic, Docetic and Ebionite texts, is a form of Christianity rejecting the consumption of wine and flesh, and also marriage. See esp. J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (The Development of Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea, vol. 1) (trans. J.A. Baker), London, 1964, pp. 369ff.

¹² U. Bianchi (ed.), *La tradizione dell'Enkrateia* (Atti del Colloquio internazionale, Milano, 20-23 aprile 1982), Rome, 1982, pp. 60, 70.

¹³ A. Adam (ed.), *Texte zum Manichäismus*, Berlin, 1954, p. 22.

¹⁴ Decret, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

¹⁵ For some relevant background passages, Matt. 18:10; *Evang. Thom.*, prolog. [80, 11]. See also *supra*, n. 7.

“l’attribution d’un haut lignage au fondateur d’une religion se vérifie également dans le bouddhisme et dans le christianisme”, and here once again it manifested in “la tradition manichéenne” with “le profil des origines de Mani.”¹⁶

Mani initiated a new form of Christianity that expanded rapidly, and spread affectively between north Africa and east Asia and was to become a world religion from the fourth to the sixth centuries. His Gnostical Christianity reflected his own encounter with his spiritual twin, or Higher Self, that amounted to his “call”. This encounter confirms what we already suspected, that among the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem there existed this concept of the Higher Self, that resembled exactly to the person whom he belonged (see ns. 7, 15). Mani, then, was reared and educated in a community of Jewish Christians in Mesopotamia, and he left the traces of his origins on his later doctrine, which became the basis of a world religion for more than a thousand years in Asia. We find with him a Trinity of God who is the Father, who is accompanied by a Mother, the Mother of Life, and then the Son, who is called archetypal Man. And that is exactly the concept that existed with the Jewish Christians. Christians know it, or ought to know it from the Apocalypse of John; there we find also a Mother, a Female Being, who is persecuted and saved in the desert (Rev.12:6), that is, that Holy Spirit who was conceived as a Mother by the Jewish Christians. And that Mani called the Saviour the Archetypal Man also has Biblical foundations. It comes from the first chapter of the prophet Ezekiel (1:26), about a vision in which God reveals himself in light - in radiant light - and that radiant light is glory, is God in the *demut k^emareh adam* (the figure as the Appearance of a Man). Thus in Ezekiel God is called a Man.

We have confirmed, then, that Mani still preserved the traces of his origin in a Jewish Christian community. The curious thing is this, that an Arabic author, an-Nadim never said anything else - he mentioned that Mani grew up in a community of baptists (*al-cheza'aides* as he calls them),¹⁷ but the scholars knew better - Widengren, Reitzenstein, etc. - explained that away. It is very important to realize what happens here. You see that tradition, in this case, is more important than reason. Reason can explain everything but an historical fact cannot be explained away. The whole theory of Reitzenstein, Bultmann and Widengren was based upon the idea that reason knew better than the tradition, and so they explained away what an-Nadim said; but now the result is that, owing to the discovery of the *Cologne Mani Codex*, tradition was right and reason was wrong. And that happens again and again.

But there is also one other aspect. We all know Mani opposed Light and Darkness. His religion was a religion of the opposition of Light and Darkness,¹⁸ and that is True of Good and Evil, and of Spirit and Matter. And of course we always thought, because we have already learned at grammar school about Zoroaster and both Ahriman and Ahura Mazda, that Mani must have learned these dualities from Iran. But now we are better informed. The Jewish Christians among whom Mani was reared, against whom he rebelled, said that Satan was the Left Hand of God, even that Evil was preordained by God. And Mani, who was a cripple, revolted against the idea that evil comes from God. Among them there was a saying attributed to Jesus that “It is the will of God that evil comes to him to whom it comes. Woe to him to whom it comes.”¹⁹ That is typically a theological concept of the Jewish Christians, and Mani did not want to admit that. His dualism was a rebellion against his Jewish origin; against the concept that evil comes from God. No, said Mani, that is not the case. So his dualism is not Iranian, or traditional, but is existential. It is based in his own life. If you are a cripple, as Mani was, it is not so easy to accept that your defect comes from God. So this changes completely the position that was held only a few decades ago, that Mani was Iranian, that

¹⁶ M. Tardieu, *Le Manichéisme*, Paris, 1981, p. 5.

¹⁷ An-Nadim, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-30.

¹⁸ Decret, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-89.

¹⁹ On dualism in Jewish Christianity, Daniélou, *op. cit.*, pp.56-57, 61-62, 73, 370.

Manichaeism is an Iranian religion, and we see now that the case is absolutely the opposite. Mani originated in a Jewish Christian community. Mani revolted against his Jewish background. And this is the origin of Manichaeism.

Now, we all know that, according to Mani, who was, as it eventuated, the founder of a world religion, both the Buddha and Zoroaster were the forerunners of this religion. He said that the Manichaeism was the “seal of the prophets”, but he admitted that Zoroaster and Buddha were forerunners who also had proclaimed the truth.²⁰ But we must not forget that he also counted a certain “Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice greatest Hermes” as his forerunner (see above, and n. 9). Remember that this was a legendary Egyptian sage who had revealed in ancient times the true religion, according to certain Greek books. In reality, it was a sort of a Lodge - very much like Lodge of the Freemasons that existed at the beginning of our era - and a lodge in Alexandria to which Egyptians and Greeks and Jews belonged. We can now detect the influence on Mani of the Hermetic tradition, which we know from Books of the Thrice Greatest Hermes recently uncovered. A collection of sayings in Armenian attributed to the Thrice Greatest Hermes now presents itself to scholars. Later on, also in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the same collection came to light - in Greek. It's very curious, you know. In Oxford, there lay this Greek collection attributed to Hermes and nobody really cared about it. The British are not very interested in Gnosis. And in Oxford at the beginning of this century, a professor who went by the name Walter Scott wrote enormous volumes about Hermes Trismegistus, but he never went to the Bodleian to see these fragments.²¹ That can happen only to an Englishman. New in this collection of sayings we find this wonderful *logion*: “Who knows himself knows the All”. This is a principle that is valid for all Gnostic or theosophical currents of the last 2,000 years. Be absolutely sure that these words are basic for all Gnostic or theosophical concepts. But, moreover, we find in that collection of sayings of Hermes - who is taken, by the bye, as the Egyptian god Thoth - that there are three types of Man - spiritual, psychic and hylic. You have materialists, you have people who have a soul, and moreover you have very few people who have a spirit, a divine spark in Man. And this is contained in that newly discovered collection of sayings in Armenia and in the Bodleian, and we find it again in Mani's *Kephalaia*.²²

So this proves decidedly that, not only was Hermes one of Mani's forerunners, but also that it is true that he knew the writings of Hermes Trismegistus. This explains also why Mani, in his myths, could say that the Archetypal Man went on to fight the power of Darkness, and succumbed to them, and was rescued from Matter. Exactly the same is said in one of the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, the *Poimandres*, for there again we find that the archetypal *Anthropos* falls into matter. And there is still a third element that is typically Hermetic, and it has nothing to do, as I see it, with Iran. In the writing called *Aesclypius* we find that, after death, some people will be submitted to eternal punishment, others will go through reincarnation, and still others will be saved and will experience bliss unutterable.²³ And Mani applied this to his system, where you have unbelievers, auditors (hearers, attenders), and you have the Elect (the chosen ones); and Mani says that the unbelievers go to the *bolos*, that is, a sort of hell under the earth, where they will be together with Satan or Ahriman, the spirit of evil; whereas, the auditors, or hearers, or simple believers, will have to go through reincarnation, and the Elect will inherit the realm of Light.²⁴

So you have crucial elements in Manichaeism which we can now explain, if you take it that Mani admitted Hermes Trismegistus as a third forerunner, and that he also knew these theories. All this

²⁰ *Shābuhragān*, quoted in Decret, *op. cit.*, pp 61-62.

²¹ See W. Scott (ed.), *Hermetica* [1924], Boston, 1985 edn., 4 vols.

²² See *supra*, n. 7, and cf. Quispel, review of J. Fantino, *La théologie d'Irenée*, in *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 411-13.

²³ [See Prof. Quispel's new comm. and trans. of *Asclepius* (Pimander 6), Amsterdam, 1996 (Eds.).]

²⁴ See J. Ries, “Mort et survie selon les doctrines de Mani”, in *idem* (ed.), *La mort selon la Bible, dans l'antiquité classique et selon le Manichéisme. Actes d'un colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1983, pp. 135ff.

has little to do with Iran. Mani owes virtually nothing to Iran; he owes everything to Jewish Christianity and Gnosis. And why is he then always called a Persian? For, please remember that Mani lived under Persian occupation; an occupation does not make you a Persian. There is no greater offence for a Dutchman than to be called a German; please excuse me, I lived for five years under a German occupation. So there is nothing sillier than to call Mani Persian, because he lived and wrote in Babylonia, not in Persia, under the Persian occupation. No. His books are resistance literature, like the Apocalypse of John. For Mani, as for the Apocalypse of John, the end of the world process would be the Second Coming of Christ. Mani was a Christian. He founded a Christian Gnostic church which became a world religion because it spread all over Asia and North Africa, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But he admitted, and writes so, in the books that are preserved, "the End will be when Christ will come back [the Second Coming] and will sit upon the *bêma* [the seat] of justice to express the last Judgement".²⁵

The founder of the Anthroposophic Society, Rudolf Steiner, worked during the last years of his life, until 1926, on an enormous sculpture of Christ and two figures. To the left he showed the Fall of Lucifer (that is the Christian Devil who once was good but turned out to be evil, and is in the air), and then, in a cave, he represented Ahriman, and he gave the explanation for this that Lucifer was the Spirit of Theosophy and Ahriman was the spirit of Materialism. So, Rudolf Steiner thought that he could explain the spiritual situation of mankind by these two forms of evil, 'the Spirit of Theosophy' as he called it (perhaps we would call it the Spirit of the New Age), and 'the Spirit of Materialism', and to represent materialism he represented Ahriman in a cave, whereas the central figure is Christ the representative of humanity in his Second Coming. Here we see Manichaeism having a continuing vitality, thus being able to inspire a remarkable man of modern times. That is correct. But we should not forget that, though touches of Zoroastrian thought infiltrate his conceptions, Mani's vision of the human condition was basically Christian Gnostic-cum-Hermetic. Concerning human beings' futures, the unbelievers go to the *bolos*, that is, a sort of hell, under the earth, where they will be together with Satan *or* - as naturally comes in - Ahriman, the (one) spirit of evil; whereas, the auditors, or attenders, or simple believers, as referred to in the *Cologne Mani Codex*, will have to go through reincarnation, only the Elect, the chosen ones, inheriting the realm of light.

So you have the basic elements in Manichaeism explained, once you admit Hermes Trismegistus among Mani's forerunners, and you are forced to concede that his religion does not have that much to do with Iran. Mani originally owed precious little to Iran; he owed almost all to Jewish Christianity and Gnosis. And why is he then always called a Persian? Well, without doubt he had important *effects* on Persia; and the Persian religio-cultural ambience was fertile soil for the further, if more secondary developments of his own thinking and for the spread of his religion. Besides, when it comes to imaging Mani in the West, right from the start it was the policy of the Roman emperors to stress his 'Persianness', and with Manichaeans spreading everywhere in the empire there was an official attempt to brand them as 'fellow travellers', a line also towed by Catholics, including Augustine.

²⁵ See Decret, *op. cit.*, pp. 101ff.



A Scene from the *Shahnameh*, and a Persian Greeting Card