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MANICHAEISM AND THE *REVELATION OF THE MAGI*:

SYRIAC "CHRISTIANITIES" IN LATE ANTIQUE MESOPOTAMIA

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ABSTRACT:

The recently published Syriac Revelation of the Magi has proven to be a remarkable addition to the corpus of early Christian apocryphal literature. This unique amplification of the traditional Nativity narrative recounts the Magi's encounter with a "star-child" who leads them from their homeland in the far east to the birth of Jesus at Nazareth, where the polymorphic nature of Christ is revealed along with his message of universal salvation. Interestingly, the Revelation of the Magi contains several important points of contact with early Manichaean texts. This paper will examine what those shared motifs might tell us about the common milieu out of which both Manichaeism and the Revelation of the Magi might have emerged.

INTRODUCTION

Over-familiarity with the biblical narrative often obscures the strangeness of the tradition, attested by the *Gospel of Matthew*, that the infant Jesus was visited by a group of Persian priests. Stranger still, if the term *magos* is interpreted as "sorcerer." Either way, the idea that the birth of Jesus was attended by a group of travelling magicians or Zoroastrian clergy is an odd detail to be included in the Christian foundation narrative. Unfortunately, Matthew's account is short on specifics, other than that they were led to Bethlehem from "the east" by some astral event—an equally exotic motif—and that they brought with them some rather impractical gifts. Over time, however, Christian tradition has tried to fill in the blanks. Centuries of commentary and apocryphal mythmaking have transformed the *magoi* of the gospel account into the "Three Wise Men" (or "Kings") prominently featured in nativity scenes and Christmas carols throughout many parts of the Christian world.

In fact, the tradition of the magi developed in two divergent directions. Whereas western Christian tradition saw them fashioned into Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspar—kings from Arabia, Persia, and India respectively—eastern Christians identified twelve kings from "beyond the land of Nod." One of the "apocryphal"[1] texts that attests to this eastern tradition is the Syriac *Revelation of the Magi*.[2] Although conventionally dated to

[1] While the utility of this term has been contested, it continues to be used (albeit reluctantly) by various scholars as a way to demarcate an important body of early Christian literature. For an extensive discussion see *New Testament Apocrypha: More Canonical Scriptures, Volume I*, ed. Tony Burke and Brent Landau (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), xxii-xxiii.

[2] Brent Landau has done a great service to the field of Early Christian Studies by bringing increased attention to this hitherto practically unknown Syriac text. Landau's Harvard doctoral dissertation, under the supervision of François Bovon, "The Sages and the Star-Child:An Introduction to the Revelation of the Magi, An Ancient Christian Apocryphon" (PhD diss.,

sometime between the late 2nd and early 4th century CE[3] and associated with the city of Edessa,[4] the origins of the *Revelation of the Magi* remain largely obscure. We find it preserved in the 8th-century Syriac *Chronicle of Zuqnin*,[5] as part of a world history.

Harvard University, 2008) contains a re-edited Syriac text along with English translation and contextual commentary. A "popular" translation was published in 2010 by HarperCollins, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*, while a summary of the text has appeared in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Canonical Scriptures, Volume I*, 19-38.

[3] The text appears to have undergone several redactional stages, such as the possible later addition of the Judas Thomas epilogue (*New Testament Apocrypha I*, 20-23). A much shorter version of the story is found in a 5th-century Latin commentary on Matthew, known as the *Opus Imperfectum*. While some scholars, such as Duchesne-Guillemin, believed that both works drew on a common source ("Die Magier in Bethlehem und Mithras als Erlöser?" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morganländischen Gesellschaft* 111, no. 2 (1961): 472), Landau has argued that the *Opus Imperfectum* is an abbreviation of a 4th-century Greek version of the *Revelation of the Magi*, with the original Syriac version dated even earlier to the 3rd or 2nd century CE (*New Testament Apocrypha I*, 21-22). Moreover, thematic affinities with other early Christian apocrypha texts also point to a 2nd-3rd century context (*New Testament Apocrypha I,* 22).

[4] Landau has asserted a partial Edessene association for the text (*New Testament Apocrypha I,* 23), but this is conjectural. It has become customary in scholarship to highlight the role of Edessa in the emergence of Christianity in Mesopotamia, largely due to the success of the Abgar legend, and to associate early Syriac literary traditions with that locale. This view, however, has been problematized by David Taylor ("The Coming of Christianity to Mesopotamia," in *The Syriac World,* ed. Daniel King [New York: Routledge, 2019], 68-87), who highlights the historical unreliability of the traditional apostolic origin stories and advocates for a more nuanced reconstruction of the origins of Syriac Christianity. As for the *Revelation of the Magi*, there is no internal evidence that specifically links its origins to Edessa, other than the emphasis on Thomas, which itself appears to be a later addition.

[5] The text was inserted into the world-chronicle by the author/compiler with no commentary (Landau, *Sages and the Star-Child*, 3-5).

This text is remarkable in several ways, not only does it offer an extensive and compelling amplification of a key part of the Nativity story, but it also presents a decidedly pluralistic concept of revelation, prophecy, and divine truth.

According to the *Revelation*'s account, the magi form part of a long lineage of initiates from "land of Shir" (2.4) in the far east,[6] who have preserved primordial revelations from Adam and Seth in a remote mountain retreat. Praying in silence, they await the appearance of a brilliant star that will outshine the heavens and lead them to further divine knowledge. When the star finally appears after many generations, it reveals itself as a polymorphic saviour and leads the magi on a fantastic journey westward to Bethlehem just in time for the birth of Jesus.[7] After their return home, the apostle Judas Thomas arrives and explains to them the true Christological meaning of their experience. The magi are then baptized and given an apostolic commission of their own.[8]

In-depth study of the *Revelation of the Magi* has only just begun and its relationship with other late antique religious traditions has yet to be fully explored. Who wrote it and for what sort of audience or community are questions that remain unanswered. As a starting point for further contextualization, it

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[6] For perceptions of the far east in late antique literature, including the *Revelation of the Magi*, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Beyond the Land of Nod: Syriac Images of Asia and the Historiography of 'The West'," *History of Religions* 49, no. 1 (August 2009): 48-87.

[7] Early Christians have put forward a variety of explanations for the appearance of a star at the birth of Jesus (see Nicola Denzey, "A New Star on the Horizon: Astral Christologies and Stellar Debates in Early Christian Discourse," in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World,* ed. Scott Noegel et al [Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003], 207-221), although none are as theologically developed as what is presented in the *Revelation of the Magi*.

[8] See Landau's full translation in *Revelation of the Magi* and summary in *New Testament Apocrypha* 30-38.

should be noted that there are a number of passages in the text that resonate with terminological and theological motifs found in the surviving corpus of Manichaean literature. As such, this article will argue that several key elements found in both the *Revelation of the Magi* and Manichaean discourse are indicators of their emergence from a shared historical and religious milieu within early Syriac Christianity.

THE MAGI IN MANICHAEAN LITERATURE

Even though the figure of Zoroaster (Zarathustra) is considered to be an important part of the Manichaean prophetic lineage—along with the Buddha and Jesus—and Mani is sometimes presented as debating Zoroastrian doctrines,[9] the figure of the *magus* is generally despised in early Manichaean texts due to the role played by members of the Zoroastrian priesthood in the execution of Mani[10] and the persecution of his early movement. According to the *Narrative of the Crucifixion*, from the Manichaean *Homilies* codex:

> When the Magi noticed how (people) asked: 'Who, indeed, is this person who has entered (the city)?,' [(and how others) answered] them: 'It is Manichaios,"—when they heard [these (words), they shook] and were filled with wrath. They went and accused [him] before Kardel (ⲕⲁⲣⲇⲉⲗ). Kardel himself told it to the assessor (ⲥⲩⲛⲕⲁⲑⲉⲇⲣⲟⲥ). Then Kardel and the assessor went [and proclaimed] the accusations to the counsellor

[9] See Paul Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra? Mani As Interpreter of the 'Law of Zarades'" in Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, and Paul Dilley, *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty "Kephalaia" Codex* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 101-135.

[10] See W. B. Henning, "Mani's Last Journey," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10, no.4 (1942): 941-953; see also Iain Gardner, "Mani's Last Days," in Gardner, BeDuhn, and Dilley, *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, 159-208.

> (ⲙⲁⲅⲓⲥⲧⲱⲣ). The counsellor himself told it to the king. When he heard these (words), … Then he sent and called for my lord. On the lord's day (ⲕⲩⲣⲓⲁⲕⲏ) he entered Belapat (ⲃⲏⲗⲁⲡⲁⲧ)" (*Homilies* 45.11-20).[11]

The "Kardel" mentioned in this Coptic text is none other than the (im)famous Zoroastrian high priest Kartir, who boasted about his persecution of various religious communities in the Sassanian Empire in Middle Persian inscriptions from the 3rd century CE, including the Manichaeans themselves.[12]

As a result, the Zoroastrian priestly class is subsequently portrayed in an extremely negative light by Manichaean authors, particularly those writing in the late 3rd and early 4th century CE Mesopotamian context, for whom the traumas of persecution were still deeply felt. For instance, in the Manichaean *Sermon on the Great War*, also from the Coptic *Homilies* codex, the biblical figure of Babylon is presented as the personification of Evil and as the enemy of righteousness in the world. Specifically, we are told, she has "reigned in the fire [of the] magi" (ⲁⲥⲣ̄ ⲣ̄ⲣⲟ ⲉⲛ̄ ⲧⲥⲉⲧⲉ ⲉⲛ [ⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲙ̄]ⲙⲁⲅⲟⲩⲥⲁⲓⲟⲥ) (*Homilies* 11.17-18),[13] who are also referred to as "rulers in the world" (ⲛ̄ⲣ̄ⲣⲟ ⲉⲙ̄ ⲡⲕⲟⲥⲙⲟⲥ) (*Homilies* 26.2) in the text's originally Sassanian context. Similarly, in the Coptic Manichaean *Psalm-Book*, the magi (ⲙ̄ⲙⲁⲅⲟⲩⲥⲁⲓⲟⲥ) are classed among the "lawless sects" (ⲛ̄ⲇⲟⲅⲙⲁ ⲛ̄ⲁⲛⲟⲙⲟⲥ)

[11] Nils Arne Pedersen, *Manichaean Homilies*, Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum, Series Coptica II (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

[12] D. N. MacKenzie, "A Zoroastrian Master of Ceremonies," in *W.B. Henning Memorial Volume*, ed. Mary Boyce, and Ilya Gershevitch (London: Lund Humphries, 1970).

[13] Pedersen, *Manichaean Homilies*.

(*Psalm-Book* 15.7) and are called "impious men, mad and godless" (ⲛ̅ⲁⲥⲉⲃⲏⲥ ⲉⲧⲗⲁⲃⲉ ⲛ̅ⲁⲧⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ) (*Psalm-Book* 15.11).[14]

Moreover, on a more scriptural level, Manichaeans had little to no interest in the Nativity story, since they generally denied the physical birth of Jesus. In the 4th century CE anti-Manichaean disputation known as the *Acts of Archelaus*, Mani is presented as writing to a pious Mesopotamian man named Marcellus in order to win him as a convert to his new religion, saying:

> I am completely amazed at how they can dare to call God the maker and creator of Satan and his evil deeds. Would that their vacuity had reached only this far and they did not say that the only-begotten Christ, 'who descended from the Father's bosom,' was the son of a woman called Mary, and was born of flesh and blood and all the other pollutions of women" (*Acts of Archelaus* V).[15]

This position is also affirmed by the "Psalms to Jesus" from the Manichaean *Psalm-Book*, which state that Jesus "was not born in a womb corrupted" (*Psalm-Book* 53.23).[16] As such, in surviving sources, Manichaean authors display no real interest in the magi as playing a role in the story of birth of Jesus,[17] other than for polemical purposes. For them, Jesus has a much larger function in their cosmogonic myth as an avatar of the ruler of

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[14] The *Psalm-Book* further castes them as "brothers of the Jews, the murderers of Christ" (*Psalm-Book* 15.11-12) in an effort to make the death of Mani more closely resemble that of Jesus.

[15] Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai* (*The Acts of Archelaus*), trans. Mark Vermes (Louvain: Brepols, 2001), 42; Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai*, GCS 16 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1906).

[16] C.R.C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938).

[17] On the origins of Jesus in the Manichaean myth see Majella Franzmann, *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 51-59.

the light realm and his chosen champion against the powers of darkness. Augustine, in fact, in his dispute with the North African Manichaean Bishop Faustus, referenced the Magi as he mocked this Manichaean notion of the cosmic Christ:

> You are not ashamed, however, to speak ill of the star by which the Magi were led to adore the infant Christ. And yet you do not locate your false Christ, the son of your false first man, under a star that bears witness to him, but you say that he is imprisoned in all the stars. For you believe that he was mingled with the princes of darkness in that war by which that first man of yours fought against the nation of darkness, with the result that the world was fashioned out of the very princes of darkness who were captured in such a mingling. Hence, these sacrilegious ravings also force you to say that Christ—no longer your savior but someone for you to save when you eat those things and belch—is confined and imprisoned not only in heaven and in all the stars but also in the earth and in all the things that are born from it (*Contra Faustum*, 2.5).[18]

Unbeknownst to Augustine, the astral messiah he ridicules here is not entirely dissimilar to the saviour figure portrayed in the *Revelation of the Magi*.

MANICHAEAN MOTIFS IN THE *REVELATION OF THE MAGI*

Given the apparent lack of interest that Manichaeans would have had in the Nativity story generally and the "magi" specifically, it seems surprising that a text such as the *Revelation of the Magi* which seeks to amplify and expand upon their story

[18] Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, trans. Roland Teske, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (NY: New City Press, 2007), 73-74; *Sancti Aureli Augustini,* ed. Zycha, CSEL 25.1 (Vienna, 1891), 258.

should contain elements that appear to resonate strongly with several important concepts[19] from Manichaean tradition.[20]

1. Father of Greatness

The first element that stands out is the terminology used by the author of the *Revelation of the Magi* to describe God. According to the text, as the magi reflected upon their ancient

[19] This comparative exercise is based on the fact that both the *Revelation of the Magi* and early Manichaean texts derive from the same geographic and linguistic milieu, as well as being more or less contemporaneous with each other. As mentioned above, the *Revelation of the Magi* is thought to have been composed originally in Syriac sometime during the 3rd-4th centuries CE, whereas the earliest expressions of Manichaean theological discourse would have been in Syriac (the language of Mani himself) during that same period. Some of the earliest surviving Manichaean literature in Greek and Coptic shows significant traces of this Syriac substratum (particularly the "Psalms of Thomas" and the *Cologne Mani Codex*, see below). In fact, the Manichaean material from Kellis contains multilingual texts including Coptic-Syriac glossaries (Iain Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts, Vol. I* [Oxford: Oxbow, 1996], 101-131). For these reasons, as well as the limits of the author's linguistic abilities, this study is restricted primarily to Manichaean texts in Coptic and Greek. Further work would be needed to trance these elements further afield in Manichaean literature from Central Asia.

[20] It should be noted, also, that this study seeks to compare a single text (*Revelation of the Magi*) to a parallel religious "discourse" attested by multiple (often fragmentary) sources. Even thought Mani went to great lengths to record his teachings in writing, this "canonical" tradition has been mostly lost. The theological framework articulated by Mani must be pieced together from a variety of sources, some of which show significant evidence of redaction and development by later Manichaean interpreters (see Timothy Pettipiece, *Pentadic Redaction in the Manichaean Kephalaia* [Leiden: Brill, 2009]), as well as a degree of regional variation (see Jason BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body in Discipline and Ritual* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000], 1-24). At most we can speak of early Manichaean tradition(s), as opposed to what Mani himself may or may not have specifically taught. Still the proximity of these sources to one another warrants juxtaposition.

ritual tradition, they knelt before the "Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries" (ܟܐܦܐ ܕܣܝܪܐ ܕܓܢܙܐ ܕܟܡܝܐ) and "prayed and worshiped in silence, without a sound, to the *Father of that heavenly majesty* that is ineffable and infinite forever" (*Revelation of the Magi* 5.7).[21] Aside from the (likely incidental) fact that Mani is said to have composed scriptural texts known as the *Treasure of Life* and the *Mysteries*,[22] the Syriac phrase translated by Landau as "Father of Heavenly Majesty"[23] can also be rendered as "Father of Greatness" (ܐܒܐ ܕܪܒܘܬܐ) (*Revelation of the Magi* 5.7). As it happens, the "Father of Greatness" is the primary name for the ruler of the Manichaean light-realm used in Syriac, Greek, and Coptic Manichaean texts.[24] A similar figure, the "Lord of Greatness," (*mara d-rabuta*)

[21] Landau, *Revelation of the Magi*, 43.

[22] According to John C. Reeves, terms like *treasury* and *treasure of life* "pepper the lexicon of Syro-Mesopotamian gnosis" ("Reconsidering the 'Prophecy of Zardūšt'," in *A Multiform Heritage: Studies in Early Judaism and Christianity in Honor of Robert A. Kraft*, ed. Benjamin G. Wright (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 167-182) as commonly shared motifs.

[23] A slight variant occurs at *Revelation of the Magi* 3.5: "Greatness of the Father" (ܐܒܐ ܕܪܒܘܬܐ).

[24] Sebastian Brock has already signaled the importance of this association in 2006 ("An Archaic Syriac Prayer over Baptismal Oil," *Studia Patristica* 41 [2006]: 12), although without further comment. See Theodore bar Khonai's Syriac account of the Manichaean cosmogony in *Book of Scholia* (*Liber scholiorum,* ed. Addai Scher; CSCO 69; [Louvain: Imprimerie orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1954], 313.15). Also attested in Greek as ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ μεγέθους in the *Seven Chapters Against Manichaeans* 3 (see Lieu, Fox, and Sheldon *Greek and Latin Sources on Manichaean Cosmogony and Ethics*, Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum, Series Subsidia VI [Turnhout: Brepols, 2010], 119), and as ⲡⲱⲧ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲧⲙⲛⲧⲁⲛⲁϩ in Coptic sources, including the (as yet) unpublished portions of Mani's *Living Gospel* from the *Synaxeis* codex (Wolf-Peter Funk, *personal communication*). See Aloïs van Tongerloo, "The Father of Greatness," in *Gnosisforschung und Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Kurt Rudolph zum 65. Geburtstag,* ed. Holger Preißler und Hubert Seiwert (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1994), 329-342 and Paul Van Lindt, *The Names of Manichaean Mythological Figures: A Comparative*

is also mentioned in Mandaean texts,[25] and as there is a close relationship between Manichaean and Mandaean literature, Geo Widengren suggested that there must be some link between the *Revelation of the Magi* and those traditions.[26]

While the use of the title "Father of Greatness" is most often associated with Manichaeism, it is not unthinkable that such an epithet formed part of a shared Aramaic religious vocabulary in late antique Mesopotamia, as it is also attested in a handful of post-Manichaean sectarian theologies.[27] Still, given the title's close association with Manichaean discourse it is difficult to imagine it being used by an author who wasn't sympathetic to Mani's ideas or seeking to appeal to them in some way.

Similarly, the *Revelation of the Magi* also refers to God as the "Lord of All" (ܡܪܝ ܟܠ) (32.3), a title which is found is found in Manichaean sources ("Lord of All" ([ⲡⲧⲁϊⲥ] ⲙⲡⲧⲣⲏⲣϥ) as an alternate name for the "Father of Greatness" (*Homilies* 47.13-14; *Kephalaia* 40.10; 156.6). Once again, it is difficult to determine if this reflects a distinctively Manichaean usage or is derived from a common theological lexicon.

Study on Terminology in the Coptic Sources (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 3-16.

[25] See Mandaean *Book of John* 66.13; 67.41 (Charles G. Häberl and James F. McGrath, eds., *The Mandaean Book of John: Text and Translation* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020]).

[26] *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960), 74.

[27] Theodore bar Khonai describes the teaching of a certain John of Apamea (not the influential monastic spiritual author), in which the sole God is referred to as the "Father of Greatness" (*Book of Scholia* 11.76) (*Théodore bar Koni: Livre des scholies* (*recension de Séert*) *I. Mimrè I-V,* trans. Robert Hespel and René Draguet, CSCO, Scriptores syri 187 (Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 248. He also presents the doctrine of the (5th cent CE?) sectarian leader Batai, who promoted a kind of modified dualism whereby Good and Evil were derived from the "Father of Greatness" (*Book of Scholia* 11.85 (*Théodore bar Koni*, 256-257).

2. Revealed Books and Primordial Prophets

The *Revelation of the Magi* also puts an important emphasis on revealed knowledge being recorded in books. Seth, we are told, set his wisdom "down in a book" and, in fact, "from him a book appeared in the world for the first time" (3.2-3). Noah, in turn, preserved the "books of Seth about the majesty (i.e. greatness) of the Father" (3.5 ⲛϩⲏⲩ ⲛϫⲁϩⲟⲩ) and took them into the Ark. These books were then subsequently preserved in the ancient tradition of the magi (3.6).

With this idea, too, we find parallels in Manichaean tradition. Whereas Mani is said to have included Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus in his list of prophetic predecessors, some early Manichaean texts also insert a pre-Noachid lineage going back to the biblical figure of Seth(el).[28] For example, in *Kephalaia* Chapter 1 "On the Coming of the Apostle" Mani is presented as articulating a sequence of apostolic predecessors "from Sethel [the first] born son of Adam up to Enosh, along with [Enoch]; [from] Enoch [up] to Sem [the] son of [Noah …" (*Kephalaia* 12.10-12).[29] Seth is also listed in the Manichaean *Psalm-Book* as part of a litany of biblical and apostolic figures

[28] This sort of biblical lineage is found in a wide array of Manichaean and anti-Manichaean sources, see Michel Tardieu, *Le manichéisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1981), 20-22. Moreover, the idea of "Sethian" *gnosis* is a well-established trope in apocryphal literature, see A. F. J. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). A discussion of a so-called "Prayer of Sethel" forms the basis of *Kephalaia* chapter 10 (42.24-43.21). This connection to Seth is particularly notable in light of the fact that the "abbreviated" version of the *Revelation of the Magi* story, found in the *Opus Imperfectum*, is said to be derived from an "apocryphal book in the name of Seth" (Alexander Toepel, "The Apocryphon of Seth," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 1, ed. Bauckham, Davila, and Panayotov [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013], 33-39).

[29] Polotsky, H.-J. and A. Böhlig, *Kephalaia* (*I*)*: 1. Hälfte* [*Lieferung 1-10*]. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1940. See also the litany from *Psalm-Book* 179.

embodying the ideal of "endurance" (ϩγπομονη) (142.4), and there is even a passage from a so-called Sethian book quoted in the hagiographical account of Mani's life preserved in the Greek *Cologne Mani Codex*, where Seth(el) recounts a vision of a luminous entity: "I opened my eyes and I saw before my face an [angel] whose [brightness] I could not describe [for he was] nothing other than lightning" (CMC 50).[30] Earlier in the same text Adam is quoted as receiving a command from "Balsamos, the greatest Angel of Light" to "receive from me and write these things I reveal to you on the purest papyrus which is not perishable or liable to worms" (CMC 49). A similar episode occurs in the *Revelation of the Magi*, where we are told:

> Adam instructed Seth his son about … [and about the revelation] of the light of the star and about its glory, because he [saw] it in the Garden of Eden when it descended and came to rest over the Tree of Life; and it illuminated the entire (garden) before Adam transgressed against the commandment of the Father of heavenly majesty (i.e. greatness) (ⲙⲡⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲛ̀ⲧⲙⲛ̀ⲧⲥⲙⲏⲩ ⲛ̀ⲧⲉ (6.2) "ⲡⲁⲗⲁⲙ.

As such, in both the *Cologne Mani Codex* and the *Revelation of the Magi* we have accounts of revelatory encounters with luminous beings in the Garden of Eden which are then recorded in primordial holy books. In both contexts these episodes are used as a means to establish their protagonists' divine authority as part of a chain of true prophecy traced back to the biblical forefathers Adam and Seth.[31]

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[30] Iain Gardner and Samuel Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 55; Albert Henrichs and Ludwig Koenen, *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex: Über das Werden seines Liebes* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1988), 32-33.

[31] Nicholas Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism: An Ancient Faith Rediscovered* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 50-51.

3. Polymorph Messiah

Mani's notion of prophetic succession was also linked to the periodic appearance of an entity he called the "Light-Mind" (essentially a sort of Manichaean Logos) via "apostles of light" in various times and places. Most notably, Mani is quoted as stating in a discourse given to Sassanian King Shapur I that "Apostles of God have constantly brought wisdom and deeds in successive times."[32] Similarly, the Manichaean *Kephalaia* equates "all the apostles who are on occasion sent to the world" to farmers" (9.24-25), comparing their periodic appearance with the agricultural cycle of sowing and reaping. According to John C. Reeves, Mani would have likely inherited this idea of a cyclical apostolate from the Elchasaites, a Mesopotamian sect among whom he is reported to have spent his early life.[33] According to the 3rd-century CE Christian heresiological treatise attributed to Hippolytus,[34] certain devotees of a *Book of Elchasai*:

> do not confess one Christ. Rather, they believe in a single Christ above who transmigrates numerous times into numerous bodies and was recently incarnated in Jesus. Likewise, he is sometimes born from God, while at other times he becomes spirit. Sometimes he is born from a virgin, at other times not. Later on, he continues his never-ending transmigration into bodies and is manifested in many different bodies at various times.

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[32] As quoted by 11th century Islamic scholar al-Biruni in his *Chronology of Ancient Nations* (see John C. Reeves, *Prolegomena to a History of Islamicate Manichaeism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 102.

[33] Tardieu, *Le manichéisme*, 9-12; Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism*, 47-48; Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 35-50.

[34] Hippolytus' authorship is disputed. See *Refutation of All Heresies*, trans. M. David Litwa, *Writings from the Greco-Roman World 40* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), xxxiii-xlii.

> They also use incantations and baptisms in addition to their confession by the elements. They plume themselves on their knowledge of astronomy, astrology, and magic; and they call themselves "knowers of the future" (*Refutation of All Heresies* 10.29.2).[35]

In the 4th cent. CE, Epiphanius similarly stated that the Elchasaites believed Christ "was created and that he appears time and again…he was formed for the first time in Adam and he puts off the body of Adam and assumes it again whenever he wished" (*Panarion* 53.1.8).[36] The same idea is also found in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies,* which state that Christ "changed his forms along with his names from age to age" (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αἰῶνος ἅμα τοῖς ὀνόμασιν μορφὰς ἀλλάσσων τὸν αἰῶνα) (3.20),[37] and where the idea of the polymorphic "True Prophet" is traced back to what some scholars have described as a "Jewish-Christian" source document from the 3rd century CE.[38]

The idea that the saviour has appeared periodically in many forms[39] also fits well with what we find in the *Revelation of the*

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[35] *Refutation of All Heresies*, 739. See John C. Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 8; A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 122-123

[36] Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 8; Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 196-197.

[37] Rehm, ed. *Die Pseudoklementinen I: Homilien* (Berlin: Akademie, 1992), 64.

[38] See *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 2,* ed. Schneemelcher, (Louisville: WJK Press, 2003), 488-492, where the resonances with Manichaean and Mandaean tradition are noted.

[39] Landau discusses the topic of the polymorphic Christ and universal revelation in his dissertation on the *Revelation of the Magi*, but only engages with a small sample of possible cognate traditions (mostly biblical) ("Sages and the Star-Child," 249-255). A survey of (the fairly extensive) evidence from both canonical and non-canonical sources is provided by Paul Foster, "Polymorphic Christology: Its Origins and Development in Early Christianity," *Journal of Theological Studies* 58 (2007): 66-99.

Magi, which states that Christ (the "star-child") has appeared "in the world in a body, and the forms with him are seen in every land, because he has been sent by his majesty (i.e. greatness) (ܡܫܬܝ) for the salvation and redemption of every human being" (23.4). The "star-child" himself states "I am everywhere, and there is no land in which I am not" (26.3). At the end of the text, when Judas Thomas has brought the gospel back to the homeland of the magi,[40] the apostle proclaims:

> We glorify your sweet majesty (i.e greatness) (ܝܫܬܝ), your singularity in many personifications (ܦܓܪ̈ܐ),[41] your glorious images (ܕܡܘܬܐ)[42] that you have shown us, and the clothes that you have put on for our sake, that we may be clothed in your powerful majesty. And by as many names as you have been called, you are not in any one of them, for you alone have known your great name and your majesty, and your exalted Father, and no one else. And all these forms in which you were clothed and appeared for our sake (ܘܐܬܚܙܝܬ ܒܟ ܠܥܠܡ ܕܝܠܢ ܒܟܠܗ̈ ܕܐܬܠܒܫ ܘܐܬܚܙܝ), that we might know you, were because you loved us with your great mercy (*Revelation of the Magi* 31.4-6).

This passage presents a remarkably open-ended Christology, even employing the term πρόσωπον for the savior's many manifestations and appearances. Such radical inclusivism has startled modern readers and has been used to

[40] Thomas was traditionally considered to have been an apostle to the east. Eusebius mentions him going to Parthia in particular (*History of the Church* 3.1).

[41] πρόσωπον in a Christological sense, but also "*appearance, likeness*" (R. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903], 464a).

[42] From Greek εἰκών.

market the text to the religiously interested reading public.[43] Yet is such a perspective really that unique or was it part of the text's original environment?

4. Thomas Twins

The apostle Thomas, it should be noted, is already well-known for his many Manichaean associations,[44] and the polymorphic Christ[45] is explicitly attested in Manichaean tradition. For example, the Manichaean *Psalm-Book* states: "You assumed different forms until you had visited all races" (42.31). In this context, Mani himself is understood as being the last of those

[43] The back of the dust-jacket to the mass-market edition published by HarperCollins includes quotations from well-known scholars of early Christianity such as Marvin Meyer and John Dominic Crossan about the "astonishing," "theologically sophisticated," "unique," and "radical depth" of the text. The work no doubt appeals to those seeking ancient precedent for an inclusivist and pluralist approach to Christianity in a modern context.

[44] Not only are there "Thomas Psalms" in the Manichaean *Psalm-Book*, but strong associations with both the *Gospel of Thomas* (Wolf-Peter Funk, "Einer aus Tausend, zwei aus Zehntausend: Zitate aus dem Thomasevangelium in den koptischen Manichaica," in *For the Children, Perfect Instruction: Studies in Honor of Hans-Martin Schenke*, ed. Bethge et al. [Leiden: Brill, 2002], 67-94; J. Kevin Coyle, "The Gospel of Thomas in Manichaeism?" in *Colloque international L'Évangile selon Thomas et les textes de Nag Hammadi, Québec, 29-31 mai 2003*, ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier [Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval / Louvain : Éditions Peeters, 2007], 75-91; Paul Allan Mirecki, "Coptic Manichaean Psalm 278 and the Gospel of Thomas 37," in *Manichaica selecta*, ed. A. van Tongerloo and S. Giversen [Louvain, 1991], 243-262) and the *Acts of Thomas* (A. F. J. Klijn, "The So-Called Hymn of the Pearl [Acts of Thomas ch. 108-113]," *Vigiliae Christianae* 14, no. 3 [1960]: 154-164).

[45] A list of sources for the polymorphic Christ is provided by Henri-Charles Puech, *EPHE Annuaire* 73 (1964): 122-125. See also Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Polymorphie divine et transformations d'un mythologème : L'Apocryphon de Jean et ses sources," *Vigiliae Christianae* 35, no. 4 (1981) : 412-434.

many forms, since the psalmist refers to Christ as Mani's "light-twin" (ⲡⲥⲁϊϣ ⲛ̄ⲟⲩⲁϊⲛⲉ) (*Psalm-Book* 42.22). The concept of the celestial "twin" is central to Mani's own prophetic and revelatory authority, as it is for all of his alleged predecessors.[46] Not surprisingly, the notion of divine twinship is also invoked in the hymn at the end of the *Revelation of the Magi*, where Judas Thomas describes Christ as "twinned (ܬܐܡܝܢ) with the Spirit" (30.5) and as soaring over the water "like your twin (ܐܚܝܟ ܕܪܘܚܐ) the Holy Spirit" (30.6).[47]

Paul-Hubert Poirier has argued that the "Thomas" to whom the "Psalms of Thomas" (ⲛ̀ⲯⲁⲗⲙⲟⲥ ⲛ̀ⲑⲱⲙ) are attributed in the Manichaean *Psalm-Book* could be based on a word-play involving the Aramaic/Syriac term for twin (ܬܐܡܐ),[48] which is cognate with the verb "twinned" used in the final hymn from the *Revelation of the Magi* (30.5). Similarly, the Greek term σύζυγος, used as a loan-word in the same passage (30.6), is used of Mani's celestial twin throughout the Greek *Cologne Mani Codex*. Moreover, of all the liturgical texts collected in the Manichaean *Psalm-Book*, the "Psalms of Thomas/Thōm" are the

[46] For a discussion of the widely attested tradition of divine twinship in Late Antiquity see Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[47] Brock has pointed out the early Syriac usage of the grammatical feminine for the Holy Spirit ("An Archaic Syriac Prayer over Baptismal Oil," *Studia Patristica* 41 [2006]: 9). See also Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (2004): 1-29.

[48] Paul-Hubert Poirier, "Une nouvelle hypothèse sur le titre des Psaumes manichéens dits de Thomas" *Apocrypha* 12 (2001) : 9-27. According to the 10th-century Islamic scholar al-Nadim, when Mani was twenty-four years old, he was visited by an angel named *"the Tawm*, which is a Nabatean word meaning 'Companion'" (Bayard Dodge, ed., *The Fihrist of al-Nadim*, Vol 2 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1970], 774).

ones that most clearly reveal traces of an Aramaic *Vorlage*,[49] and display striking thematic and compositional parallels with Mandaean liturgical texts.[50] Therefore, it is not surprising that we might observe various points of contact between the Manichaean Thomas-psalms and the *Revelation of the Magi*.

5. Little Child of Light

The *Revelation of the Magi* also presents an episode that is strangely evocative of Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. When the magi have their epiphany in the Cave of Treasures, they see "(something) like the hand of a small person draw near from the pillar and the star," (12.3) and a light-being "that appeared to us in the bodily form of a small and humble human, and he said to us: 'Peace to you'" (13.1). Surprised by this luminous appearance, the light-being reassures the sages: "(do not doubt that)... it appeared to you in the form of a small, humble, and unworthy human, because indeed, the inhabitants of the world cannot bear to see the glory of the only Son of the Father of majesty (i.e. greatness) (ܐܒܗܬܐ ܕܒܪ)" (13.2).

Once again, the Manichaean "Psalms of Thomas" provide an important parallel. There, the cosmic avatar of the heavenly father is described as the "the Little One" (ⲡⲕⲟⲩⲓ) who leaps into the abyss to do battle with the powers of darkness (*Psalm-Book* 204.22-27), and describe him as appearing as an "image of light" (ⲁⲩⲣⲓⲕⲱⲙ ⲛ̄ⲟⲩⲁⲓⲛⲉ)[51] to the powers of the world (*Psalm-Book*

[49] Peter Nagel, *Die Thomaspsalmen des koptisch-manichäischen Psalmbuches* (Berlin, 1980).

[50] For example, "Psalm of Thomas 13" (T. Säve-Söderbergh, *Studies in the Coptic Manichaean Psalm-Book* [Uppsala, 1949] 119-120). The relationship between Manichaean and Mandaean traditions is complex, as there are multiple points of context between both textual corpora. Säve-Söderbergh ultimately argued that the Manichaean "Psalms of Thomas" were based on Mandaean prototypes (161).

[51] See *Revelation of the Magi* 31.4 mentioned above.

214.1-12) who are driven mad by its brightness. In reverence, the powers then proclaim: "You have come in peace, O Child of Brightness, that you shall be the illuminator of our worlds" (*Psalm-Book* 214.12-14). In fact, "Jesus the Child" features prominently in the "Psalms of Thomas" as one important aspect of the polymorphic Manichaean Christ.

As might be expected, a similar motif is also found in the Mandaean *Book of John*, although with a somewhat different prophetological focus:

A child was transplanted from on high	a secret was revealed in Jerusalem.
The priests had dreams.	
An utter silence fell upon the Eulaeus,	an utter silence fell upon Jerusalem.
He opened his mouth for evil,	and his lying lips.
He opened his mouth for evil,	saying to all the priests,
	in my vision when I lay down—
"I saw in my night visions,	
I didn't sleep, rest or lie down,	*and sleep did not overtake me in the night.*
I didn't sleep and I didn't rest—	that a star came to Elizabeth, father Zechariah,
a fire rose, burning over elder	the sun set and the lamps shined forth.
three lamps appeared,	
… … …	
A shooting star burst over Judaea,	a shooting star burst over Jerusalem.
The sun appeared at night,	and the moon shined forth during the day."[52]

[52] *Book of John*, 18.1-15.

In this passage a divine child is reveled from the heavenly realm, holy silence is observed, just as the sages pray silently in the *Revelation of the Magi*, while a star appears, as well as light in multiple forms. Even though the focus may be different, the general contours remain the same.[53]

6. Darkness and Error

The theological hallmark of Manichaeism is its dualistic cosmological framework in which Light is radically opposed to Darkness as two pre-existent cosmic principles. This doctrine, more than any other aspect of Manichaean teaching, was the focus of fierce polemical backlash from a variety of quarters. Although not nearly as pronounced, traces of this sort of dualistic imagery can also be discerned in the *Revelation of the Magi*. For example, when the magi encounter Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, Mary is said to a have become "a gate for the great light (ܢܝܗܘܐ) that entered the world in grace to banish the darkness (ܚܫܘܟܐ)" (22.2). Later, in the Thomas hymn, the apostle asks Christ to "enlighten us and drive away darkness and error" (30.4 ܘܡܠܝܢ ܚܫܘܟܐ).[54] In Coptic Manichaean texts,

[53] Interestingly, the Mandaean *Book of John* presents Christ's polymorphy as a sign of his duplicity and untrustworthiness (Chapter 76) as one who "changes his appearance." See James McGrath, "Polemic, Redaction, and History in the Mandaean Book of John: The Case of the Lightworld Visitors to Jerusalem," *Aram* 25 (2013): 378-379.

[54] Sebastian Brock has suggested that this may indicated the influence of "Zoroastrian terminology" ("An Archaic Syriac Prayer over Baptismal Oil," *Studia Patristica* 41 [2006]: 8), whereas Geo Widengren perceived an Iranian background behind the text as a whole (*Iranisch-semitische Kulturbegegnung in parthischer Zeit* [Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960], 71-72). Hultgård, however, acknowledged criticisms of Widengren's interpretation, but nonetheless asserts that Iranian traditions were at play (Anders Hultgård, "The Magi and the Star—the Persian Background in Text and Iconography," in *"Being Religious and Living Through the Eyes": Studies in Religious Iconography* [Uppsala, 1998], 223).

"error" (ⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏ) is practically synonymous with the power of Darkness and evil in the world.[55] For instance, the Manichaean *Psalm-Book* states: "Let us bless our Lord Jesus who has sent us the Spirit of Truth. He came and separated us from the Error (ⲧⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏ)" (9.4-5). This "Error" is most often associated with the various sects to which Manichaeans were opposed, whereas the light-child in the *Revelation of the Magi* explains how "error has reigned in deceit over your generations" (21.9) and that only those who possess true knowledge belong to the "race of light" (21.9 ⲙⲛⲧⲙⲛⲓ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲙⲡⲙⲁⲓ ⲙ̀ⲡ). As we might expect, this last motif ("race of light") is also present in Manichaean *Psalm-Book* in a passage denouncing the "sects of Error" (ⲛ̀ⲗⲟⲅⲙⲁ ⲛ̀ⲧⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏ) (86.14).

The use of imagery contrasting light and darkness is certainly not unique to Manichaean discourse, as it appears to have been widespread in Mesopotamia. Not only were dualistic concepts important to various forms of Zoroastrian theology, but also to the teachings of Marcion and Bardaisan, each of whom were closely associated with Mani in early Syriac tradition.[56] Moreover, the Mandaeans too made extensive use of it in their own literature, which as we have already seen has some relationship with early Manichaean texts. It is not surprising, then, that the *Revelation of the Magi* should display at least some dualistic tendencies.

7. Final Fire

Fittingly, the final point that ought to be highlighted in this study is how the *Revelation of the Magi* imagines the end of cosmic history. As much as the text is focused on the beginning

[55] See *Kephalaia* 21.18; 28.31; 31.30; 33.24,30; 48.34; 90.20, etc.; *Psalm-Book* 4.22; 8.8,24; 52.31, etc.

[56] François De Blois, "Dualism in Iranian and Christian Traditions," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10, no. 1 (2000): 1-19.

of the Christian narrative, by highlighting the birth of Jesus, it closes with a (dualistic) vision of the end-time and an eschatological exhortation from the magi:

> Flee from the *darkness* (ܚܫܘܟܐ) and come to the *light* (ܢܗܝܪܐ) that does not pass away, so that you may live and have refuge under the wings of our Lord Jesus, our saviour and our great refuge on the last day, from the fearsome judgement of *fire* that will come suddenly to purify the entire earth from *error*, which has ruled over it in its deceit. And you shall be delivered by faith from the heat of the fire and shall enter that *rest* that is prepared for all the *chosen* and the believers who have believed in the *child of perfect light* (ܛܠܝܐ ܕܢܗܝܪܐ ܫܠܡܬܐ ܚܝܢܐ), and in eternal life, in the kingdom of my Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the *Lord of all* (ܡܪܝ ܟܠ), in his heavenly *majesty* (i.e. greatness) (ܪܒܘܬܐ), in his *new world* (ܥܠܡܐ ܚܕܬܐ), and in his heavenly and great and never-passing away light, and in his glorious rest (32.2-3 *emphasis added*).

Once again, we can observe numerous resemblances to Manichaean religious discourse. For its part, the Manichaean vision of the end times foresees the final appearance of Jesus the Splendor, avatar of the "Lord of All" (see above) who will vanquish the powers of darkness and purify the world by means of a "Great Fire." The chosen "Elect" will then be rewarded in a "New Aeon" of eternal light and rest.[57] As one Middle Persian fragment from Mani's *Book of Giants*[58] suggests:

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[57] Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism*, 116-118; Timothy Pettipiece, "Burn the World Down: Manichaean Apocalyptic in Comparative Perspective," in *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective,* ed. Kevork Bardakjian and Sergio La Porta (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 657-666.

[58] Counted among Mani's canonical scriptures, this work contains many points of contact with other apocryphal texts from an Aramaic background (see John C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony: Studies in the* Book of Giants *Traditions* [Cincinatti, 1992]).

> …on brilliant wings they (the righteous ones) shall fly and soar further beyond and above that Fire, and shall gaze into its depth and height. And those righteous ones that will stand around it, outside and above, they shall have power over the Great Fire, and over everything in it … they are purer and stronger [than the] Great Fire of Ruin that sets the worlds ablaze.[59]

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What, then, are we to make of all the apparent similarities between the *Revelation of the Magi* and Manichaean theological language? While some resemblances are perhaps more on the surface level, such as imagining God and the divine realm in terms of *life, light, treasure, splendor,* and *greatness*—all of which seem to have been part of a shared Aramaic religious vocabulary—others emerge as more deeply rooted themes. Most notably:

> *i*) *identifying God as the "Father of Greatness"*
> *ii*) *a chain of True Prophets traced back to Adam and Seth*
> *iii*) *a polymorphic messiah-figure who appears to all humanity*
> *iv*) *revelatory authority granted through divine twinship*
> *v*) *emphasis on Thomas traditions*
> *vi*) *opposition between Light and Darkness / Truth and Error*
> *vii*) *eschatological fire and rest*

As such, both the *Revelation of the Magi* and Manichaean literature construct the same basic soteriological storyline.

[59] T ii D ii 164 (trans. Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993], 247); W. B. Henning, "The Book of Giants," BSOAS 11 (1943): 68.

Namely, that the *Father of Greatness* reveals himself through a chain of *true prophets* extending back to *Adam and Seth* that have appeared in many times and places as manifestations of *divine twinship*. The message that these prophets deliver periodically to all humanity emphasizes the opposition between *light and darkness* and the *error* manifest in sectarian divisions. The forces of darkness and evil, however, will ultimately be defeated when Jesus returns in glory to set *fire* to the world and grant eternal *rest* to the *children of light*.

Does this mean that the *Revelation of the Magi* is a Manichaean text? I am not ready to go that far. Notably absent are a multiplicity of technical terms for the many well-defined figures from the Manichaean cosmogonic myth, other than the "Father of Greatness."[60] Nor is there any direct or implied references to Mani himself.[61] Even though Manichaean scribal activity has been observed in other pieces of Christian apocryphal literature, that does not appear to be happening here.[62] Moreover, as mentioned above, the magi and the Nativity story were of little intrinsic interest to Manichaean authors, who found the idea of an incarnated Jesus theologically offensive. It seems more likely that the presence of common thematic elements points to a common milieu out of which

[60] This in itself does not necessarily discount the idea of the *Revelation of the Magi* being a Manichaean text, as the specific technical language of the cosmogony appears to have been largely unknown to outsiders, with a few notable exceptions such as Theodore bar Khonai. Most polemical descriptions of the Manichaean myth make use of a generic template focused on its dualistic basis rather than a detailed narrative.

[61] There is a somewhat oblique reference to the "Paraclete Spirit" (14.8) in the text, although this does not appear to connect with the Manichaean notion of Mani as the Paraclete promised by Jesus.

[62] See Timothy Pettipiece, "Manichaean Redaction of the *Secret Book of John*," in *Fakes, Forgeries, and Fictions: Writing Ancient and Modern Christian Apocrypha: Proceedings from the 2015 York Christian Apocrypha Symposium*, ed. Tony Burke (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

both the *Revelation of the Magi* and Manichaeism emerged. More specifically, I would argue that both are building on a pre-existing soteriological narrative that appears to have been rooted in *variant*[63] forms of Christianity that developed in Aramaic/Syriac speaking Mesopotamia.[64] The exact origins of this narrative, however, remain difficult to define, as they appear tied to the notoriously complex and contested issue of "Jewish Christianity."[65]

As mentioned earlier, the *Revelation of the Magi* was likely composed in Syriac, possibly near Edessa in the 3rd or 4th century CE,[66] which was an important center of early Christian activity in Mesopotamia. We also know that Mani and his early disciples wrote and preached in Syriac in the same region around the same time. Mandaic, for its part, is an Aramaic

[63] By *variant* I mean streams of early Christian tradition that diverge considerably from emerging orthodoxy.

[64] This geographic area has been described as a "crucible of cultural creativity for Jews no less than Platonists, Christians, and Manichaeans in the first three centuries of the Common Era" (Han and Reed, "Reorienting Ancient Judaism," 148).

[65] The notoriously difficult puzzle of "Jewish Christianity" has been the subject of much debate and controversy. See Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Historicizing 'Jewish-Christianity'," in *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), xv-xxx. Typically, this hybrid term has been used to describe either an imagined segment of Jesus' earliest followers, or in reference to certain sectarian groups identified by patristic heresiologists as outliers. In spite of the term being "anachronistic, clumsy, fraught, and contested," (as Reed admits), it nonetheless points to a liminal historical, discursive, and even geographical space in which certain discernable expressions of late antique religious tradition and community connect themselves in important ways to both *Christianity* and *Judaism* while at the same time resisting those categorical constructs as they have come to be defined. As problematic as the term is, it nonetheless points to something that needs to be further explored and better understood.

[66] See note 4.

dialect, and communities of Mandaeans, or their predecessors, have in some form been (until recently) historically present long the Tigris and Euphrates since at least the 3rd cent. CE.[67] It is therefore not surprising that religious traditions emanating from the same time-period and geographical area would demonstrate some common characteristics and thematic concerns. In fact, as recent studies continue to demonstrate, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean traditions regularly engaged one another in late antique Mesopotamia and display significant degrees of overlap.[68]

Unfortunately, the story of early Christianity beyond the eastern borders of the Roman Empire is not one that is well-known or well-understood outside of specialized circles.[69] Thus modern readers' surprise at a text such as the *Revelation of the Magi*. While early missionaries would have arrived by the 2nd century CE, there was also a significant influx of Christians due to the forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of captives from the Roman Empire by Persian King Shapur I in the 3rd

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[67] The recent re-assessment by Kevin van Bladel suggests that a distinctive "Mandaean" identity only emerged in the 5th century CE out of competition among other "Syro-Mesopotamia" religious groups (*From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes* [Leiden: Brill, 2017]).

[68] See, for example, Adam H. Becker, "The Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism' in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians," *AJS Review* 34 no. 1 (2010): 91-113; Yishai Kiel, "Study Versus Sustenance: A Rabbinic Dilemma in Its Zoroastrian and Manichaean Context," *AJS Review* 38 no. 2 (2014): 275-302; Yishai Kiel, "Reimagining Enoch in Sassanian Babylonia in Light of Zoroastrian and Manichaean Traditions," *AJS Review* 39 no.2 (2015): 407-432 to name but a few.

[69] As Sebastian Brock has pointed out, the Eusebian model of early Christian history has linked that narrative so closely with the Roman Empire, that the development of Christianity in Persia is either omitted from that story or minimized (see Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, 2-3).

century CE.[70] Notably, an inscription by the Sasanian high-priest Kartir (mentioned above) points to an official differentiation between two groups known in Middle Persian as *nāsrāy* and *kristiyān*.[71] It has been suggested that the former group, the "Nazoreans"[72] represents local Aramaic-speaking Christians, many of whom were still strongly connected to non-rabbinic Jewish traditions, while the latter refers to relocated "western" Christians who had more in common with the Roman church.[73] Similarly, Persian authorities in Syriac martyr acts from the Sasanian period seem to make the same terminological differentiation when discussing interactions with Christian communities under their jurisdiction.[74]

While a more concrete history of the churches of Persia begins to take shape in the 4th century CE, prior to that, particularly in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Iranian territories appear to have been home to an eclectic mix of doctrines and sects associated with early Christian teachers such as Marcion,

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[70] Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 201.

[71] It is difficult to imagine that Kartir would use these terms in an official inscription without understanding that they implied some important distinction.

[72] Based on what we know from early Christian heresiological sources, the term "Nazorean" is used as a kind of catch-all to connect a cluster of sectarian groups that were all thought to derive from the so-called "Jewish-Christian" stream of early Christianity, such as Cerninthians, Elchasaites, and Ebionites. "Nazorean" is also attested as a term of self-designation found in Mandaean writings, although in a somewhat ambivalent sense, and is applied to Christians pejoratively in the Talmud (see François De Blois, "Naṣrānī [Ναζωραῖος] and ḥanīf [ἐθνικός]: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65, no. 1 [2002]: 4).

[73] Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, 3-6.

[74] De Blois, "Naṣrānī [Ναζωραῖος] and ḥanīf [ἐθνικός], 8.

Bardaisan, and Elchasai,[75] all of whom where later deemed "heretical" by proto-orthodox authorities, but whose doctrines were considered authoritative and foundational for the earliest forms of Aramaic/Syriac Christianity[76] in the region. As we saw above, several of the central themes and motifs common to both the *Revelation of the Magi* and Manichaean discourse, such as the chain of True Prophets and the polymorphic Christ, point back to such "Elchasaite" or "Nazorean" prototypes.[77]

The current model of the historical development of early Christianity has long had its own version of a "dark matter" problem. There are strong indicators of an important stream of early Christian tradition that exerted considerable influence on other contemporary trajectories and against which proto-orthodoxy defined itself, but whose exact nature remains obscure, since evidence of it has been almost totally erased.[78]

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[75] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 205. Later, Mani himself will be added to this list of founding figures.

[76] The work of Stanley Jones has helped further refine this understanding of early Christianity in Syro-Mesopotamia (see F.S. Jones, *Pseudoclementia Elchasaiticaque inter Judaeochristiana: Collected Studies* [Leuven: Peeters, 2012]).

[77] Cirillo, Luigi, "From the Elchasaite Christology to the Manichaean Apostle of Light," in *Il Manicheismo: Nuove Prospettive della Richerca. Atti del Quinto Congresso Internazionale di Studi sul Manicheismo* (*Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"; Napoli, 2-8 Settembre 2001*), ed. van Tongerloo, Aloïs and Cirillo, Luigi. Manichaean Studies 5. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 47-54. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen has referred to this idea as a distinctly "Syrian Christology" (see "The Baptists of Mani's Youth and the Elchasaites," in *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*, NHMS 58 [Leiden: Brill, 2006], 178-179).

[78] Nearly a century ago, Walter Bauer argued that the prevailing forms of "orthodox" Christianity that developed during Late Antiquity were often built against a pre-existing background of traditions later deemed "heretical." A key example of this phenomenon relates to the story of King Abgar and the introduction of Christianity to the city of Edessa

This tradition can only be vaguely decerned as a palimpsest read against the background of preserved early Christian discourse and is partly visible through heresiological labels such as Gnostic, Ebionite, Elchasaite, and Nazorean, as well as surviving early Christian and Jewish apocrypha traditions.[79] This evidence suggests that a well-developed and widespread *parallel* Christian tradition (or cluster of traditions) developed early on and largely independently in Aramaic-speaking Mesopotamia that presented a much different theological focus than what developed later into Nicene orthodoxy and therefore looks alien to ancient and modern commentators for whom Christianity in the Roman Empire is the primary point of reference. In particular, in these alternate traditions, a much stronger emphasis is placed on Christ's appearance (or rather appearances) in the world and his role as a revealer rather than the redemptive value of his embodiment, death, and resurrection, which were viewed as illusory. It is also differentiated by its assertion of an alternative Trinity emphasizing the femininity of the Spirit,[80] and a chain of "true prophets" periodically sent to humanity. I am suggesting, here,

(*Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1934]).

[79] Geo Widengren identified this as a form of "jüdisch-iranischen Gnosis" in specific reference to the *Revelation of the Magi* (*Mani und der Manichäismus* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961], 29).

[80] This too was a reflection of its Aramaic context, in which the word for "spirit" is grammatically feminine. See Timothy Pettipiece, "Many Faced Gods: Triadic (Proto-)Structure and Divine Androgyny in Early Manichaean Cosmogony," *Open Theology* (2015) 1: 245–254, where it is argued that the entirety of the early Manichaean cosmogonic myth is rooted in this alternate trinitarian framework of Father-Mother-Child. François De Blois has suggested that this type of trinity tradition was "widespread" on the periphery of the late-antique world, and in fact represents the form of Christianity likely engaged with by Muhammed and the early Muslims, adding to its historical importance ("Naṣrānī [Ναζωραῖος] and ḥanīf [ἐθνικός]," 27).

that the *Revelation of the Magi* and the teaching of Mani represent two closely related theological trajectories derived from this stream of early Mesopotamian Christianity.

What accounts for such theological differences? The fact that these alternate Christian traditions developed in Iranian territory, during the late Parthian and early Sassanian periods, is certainly key. Sebastian Brock has suggested that the *Revelation of the Magi* may have, at least in part, sought to provide "a foundation legend for the Iranian Christian community."[81] Although, if we imagine the considerable religious diversity *on the ground* in the early Sasanian Empire, as evidenced by the inscription of Kartir, which mentions Jews (*yahūd*), Buddhists (*šaman*), Brahmans (*brāman*), and "baptisers" (*makdag*) as objects of his derision,[82] then it is possible that the *Revelation of the Magi* (and the teachings of Mani for that matter) could be viewed as an attempt to bridge the gap between a diversity of communities and establish a unified soteriological framework. It is worth noting, however, that the *Revelation of the Magi* contains almost no overtly polemical elements, and its author does not seem interested in attacking other religious perspectives directly. Instead, a story is told of a saviour from the light-realm that appears in multiple forms throughout the ages to all people in an on-going effort to achieve universal salvation. Tellingly, at the end of the star-child's discourse to the magi a voice is heard saying: "Amen! The will of complete salvation, joy and peace to all the worlds!" (*Revelation of the Magi* 21.12). One has to wonder if the very focus placed on the magi as bearing witness to the appearance of Jesus is in some sense an attempt to appeal to the imperial Zoroastrian tradition and to validate Christianity's status as a

[81] Sebastian Brock, "An Archaic Syriac Prayer over Baptismal Oil," 5.

[82] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 199.

religious minority in the Sasanian Empire.[83] Moreover, if indeed the author of the text was attempting to build a bridge between various neighboring religious communities, then perhaps the use of the title "Father of Greatness" itself could similarly be seen as a deliberate theological overture to Manichaean sensibilities.

As Sebastian Brock has also pointed out, the history of early Christianity is often distorted by the overriding emphasis placed on the Roman context, which is seen as somehow essential to its early development. From this perspective, the experience of Christians has often been stereotyped as either persecuted minority or supremacist majority.[84] Imperial Roman Christianity, as reflected by post-Nicene orthodoxy, could afford to be supremacist and exclusive in orientation, as it had the full-force of the emperors to assert its theological and ideological agendas. But what about Christianity in other contexts? For the most part, Christians in Persian territory were

[83] See Hultgård, "The Magi and the Star—the Persian Background in Text and Iconography," 225. A similar point is made by Sergey Minov in relation to representations of the magi in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, which are said to "reflect the values and aspirations of a Christian minority group seeking to engage actively the dominant culture of the Sassanian empire" ("Dynamics of Christian Acculturation in the Sassanian Empire: Some Iranian Motifs in the *Cave of Treasures*," in *Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, ed. G. Herman, *Judaism in Context 17* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2014), 200). Even the names of the Magi, such as Hormizd, Atrahšišat, Merodak, appear designed to make allusion to figures from prior Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions (*Revelation of the Magi* 2.3).

[84] Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," 1-2. A similar issue has affected scholarly discussions of ancient Judaism, which until recently have placed emphasis on Graeco-Roman contexts as opposed to Parthian and Sassanian (see Jae Hee Han and Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Reorienting Ancient Judaism: Syrian, Mesopotamian, and Persian Perspectives," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 9 no. 2 (2018): 145-146).

tolerated as a recognized religious minority. Whereas Mani, in the 3rd century, sought to replace all existing religious traditions with his own universal church, his highly polemical efforts generated enormous hostility and resulted in his execution by the state. The *Revelation of the Magi*, however, appears to take an equally inclusivist approach, but a more conciliatory tone, in that it avoids overt attempts to antagonize other religious communities, while seeking to integrate them into a discourse of universal salvation. Such a universalizing soteriology might appear surprising and appealing to modern readers, but when viewed in its historical context and against a broader background of other related, early Christian traditions, it is perhaps not all that original. It is simply unfamiliar.

While enigmatic and exotic on the surface, the *Revelation of the Magi* and its Manichaean parallels appear to have inherited and integrated significant elements from a pre-existing tradition we know largely from fragments and hostile testimonies. Not only is it theologically compelling, but it also provides another important piece to the still incomplete puzzle of "early Christianities"[85] outside the Roman Empire.

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[85] I am not particularly fond of the plural coinage "Christianities." However, in the case of the earliest forms of the Christian movement in Syriac-speaking Mesopotamia it does seem as though we are faced with some fairly independent trajectories of development with unique characteristics.

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