

CHAPTER I

*Introduction to the Many Lives of Mani
Inter-Religious Polemic and Scholarly Controversy*

Mani, a third-century C.E. preacher, healer and public sage, lived at a pivotal point as regards both time and place for the development of many of the major religious traditions of the ancient world. In his life he interacted and debated with leaders of the rapidly developing Judaeo-Christian tradition, the varied gnostic sects, with Iranian religions such as Mazdayasnianism and those of India including Buddhism. The religion he founded spread from north Africa to south China and lasted for over a thousand years. Yet Manichaeism may be claimed as the only major worldwide religion to have completely died out. The memory of its founder, its teachings and rituals, was in good part lost until a spectacular series of discoveries over the last century began to transform our knowledge of the community, and its crucial role as a conduit for the spread of religious traditions along the trade routes of Eurasia.

The third-century teacher known as Mani has been praised, worshipped, caricatured, vilified, invented and reinvented. For his followers he was Lord Mani, the Apostle of Light, the Spirit of Truth, our God; for his opponents, he was that maniac, the arch-heretic and the vessel of evil. Each of these terms could easily be the subject of an elaborate disquisition: The meaning of apostleship; the recurring theme of the coming of the 'paraclete' in world religions; the complex etymologies and elaborate punning upon Mani's name across languages from Greek to Chinese. I will expand on many of these points in the chapters that follow; but the heat of religious polemic is only a starting-point. What I am really interested to explore here is the continuing subjective character of this historiography; how we as scholars not only inherit the discourse about truth and error but have tried to write our biographies of Mani when driven by chance discoveries and the fashion of the time, even as mediated through research funding and publication contracts and our precious academic employment opportunities. The search for Mani has been an obsession of mine ever since I first discovered the joy of research as a young graduate student now

almost forty years ago; and, since subjectivity is my theme, let me introduce the topic with something of my personal story.

Manichaean Studies is a rather small company of specialists. There is no obvious career-path or advantage in this work, for the topic falls between or to the side of established subjects of research. The required training is difficult and substantial, yet the details are often labelled esoteric. One needs to be charmed and invested. Yes, one can make a case for the religion's pivotal role between east and west, its passage along the trade routes of Eurasia and as a conduit for the spread of religious concepts, symbols and tales. We can argue that it was the Manichaean elect who brought the story of the Buddha to Europe; perhaps it was they who first took the worship of Jesus to China. It may be that Manichaeism is the vital link that in its emphasis upon the apostle and the book and the heavenly messenger leads from Judaism and Christianity to Islam. What I can say is that these themes of cross-fertilisation and influence have always fascinated me, and in them I can justifiably be placed as a person of my own time and romantic imagining: This is a field where you can traverse from ancient Alexandria to early modern Fujian, detour into Indian religions, follow byways of spirituality and vegetarianism, research a plethora of exotic gods, heavens, mountain sages and desert monasteries.

In truth, Manichaean studies has become dominated by textual work and there is much technical research in philology, papyrology and codicology. The reasons are clear: Advances in the topic have been driven for the past century (and earlier) by remarkable finds of new manuscripts, and many of these have pushed the boundaries of the knowledge of the time. There have been almost unknown languages and scripts, new dialects, some of the largest papyrus codices ever recovered and also the very smallest. In their way the discoveries have been spectacular, but their value not always easy to convey. Much of the work has been taken up with reconstructing, editing, just trying to read and understand writings that have frequently been unexpected and outside of the norm in one way or another. Here lies some of the fascination, but also the challenge. To work seriously across the subject you have to deal as well as you can with a bewildering array of languages, fragmentary remnants of otherwise unknown compositions, and a great deal of rather technical detail that is not always well-explained to those not specifically trained in the relevant expertise. Despite the manuscript finds and decades of serious study, many of the fundamental works required for a knowledge of the religion, including almost all of the actual canonical scriptures of Mani himself, remain lost or reduced to tattered fragments. Basic questions remain

Introduction to the Many Lives of Mani

3

unanswered. I must admit that this too is all part of what drives my own obsession: This is a discipline where new things can be learnt, where careful research can bring the most unexpected illumination, where there is a real sense of being the first person to read something for a thousand years.

Academic historiography in this field (that is, Manichaean Studies in the Western world) was born out of the confessional polemics of the Reformation. Catholic apologists accused the reformers of being the direct intellectual and spiritual heirs of medieval heresies such as the Waldensians and the Cathars. The latter group were themselves perceived to have a direct genealogy from the Manichaeism of the early church, very familiar to all sides of the struggle through the writings of Augustine of Hippo. In the famous words of the *Confessions*¹ he had told how he himself

... fell among men mad with pride, extremely carnal and talkative, in whose mouths were the snares of the devil, smeared with a sticky mixture of the syllables of your name and that of our lord Jesus Christ and of the paraclete our comforter, the holy spirit. These names never left their lips, but were no more than empty sound and the rattling of the tongue as their hearts were devoid of any truth whatsoever. They kept saying: 'Truth, truth'; and they had a lot to tell me about it, but truth was never in them.

Claim and counter-claim to the meaning of the gospel, and the familiar tropes of heresy, dualism, the dangers of pride and the evil of this world; this could all be replayed in the contemporary arena with the strident preacher taking shape as Mani himself renewed (*Manichaeus redivivus*).

The father of early modern Manichaean studies was Isaac de Beausobre.² Born into a reformed family in 1659, he fled France in 1685 and went first to the Netherlands and then to Berlin. In Brandenburg he became prominent both within and without the Huguenot population, and a year after he died in 1738 the second volume of his remarkable research on Mani and Manichaeism was published in French in

¹ Augustine, *Confessiones* III, 6.10; translation adapted from I. Gardner and S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004), 130–131.

² See G. G. Stroumsa, 'The Birth of Manichaean Studies', in *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2010), 113–123; *ibid.*, 'Isaac de Beausobre Revisited: The Birth of Manichaean Studies', in *Studia Manichaica. IV. Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus, Berlin, 14.–18. Juli 1997*, eds R. E. Emmerick, W. Sundermann and P. Zieme (Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2000), 601–612; also see J. Ries, 'Introduction aux études manichéennes. Quatre siècles de recherches', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 33 (1957): 453–482.

Amsterdam.³ The study of ancient heresies became one of the stalwarts of Protestant historiography. The first monograph on Manichaeism had actually appeared in 1578 by the Lutheran Cyriacus Spangenberg. At the turn of the seventeenth century the importance of the *Acts of Archelaus*, a fictionalised debate between Mani and a Christian bishop at the borders of the Roman empire, a text to which we will return repeatedly, had been discovered and demonstrated by Caesar Baronius.⁴ Other anti-Manichaean writings followed, often late-antique sources from Egypt and Syria, such as by Serapion of Thmuis and Titus of Bostra (published 1608).⁵

De Beausobre's work was in many ways still framed as an apology for Protestantism. He comments that he had been led to the study of Manichaeism though his own interest in the origins of the Reformation, antecedents of which he had identified in those medieval sectarians who had themselves once been accused of the ancient heresy. He was therefore anxious to free the Manichaeans of false accusations and to understand their beliefs and motivations. The principal thrust of his argument, on which much of its value lies, was to present Mani as an original thinker who sought the worship of the one God within the context of those religious traditions to which he was heir. Although Manichaeism remained a Christian heresy, this was a new approach to the extent that it rested on a rational and in its own way critical and exhaustive examination of the data available.

Guy Stroumsa has argued that the dramatic step forward marked by de Beausobre's research was prepared by two concurrent developments at the very start of the eighteenth century. The first was the new Protestant interest in apocryphal literature, exemplified by the pietist Gottfried Arnold who translated the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* and saw the early 'heretics' as witnesses to a purer and primitive Christianity fighting the process of Catholic corruption.⁶ The second was 'Orientalism', especially the birth of the modern study of the religions of ancient Iran that was attendant upon the learning and publications of Thomas Hyde.⁷ The trajectory of study represented here can then be traced through the church

³ I. de Beausobre, *Histoire critique de Manichée et du manichéisme, Tome second* (J. Frederic Bernard, Amsterdam, 1739).

⁴ Caesar Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, II (Rome, 1590).

⁵ Henricus Canisius, *Antiquae Lectiones*, V (Ingolstadt, 1608, with Latin translation by the Spanish Jesuit Franz de Torres); see R. P. Casey, 'The Text of the Anti-Manichaean Writings of Titus of Bostra and Serapion of Thmuis', *Harvard Theological Review*, 21 (1928): 97–111.

⁶ G. Arnold, *Unparteyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* (Thomas Fritsch, Franckfurt am Mayn, 1698–1700).

⁷ T. Hyde, *Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum* (Oxford, 1700).

historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, who finally detached the study of Manichaeism from the conflict between Catholics and Protestants,⁸ to the great work of Ferdinand Christian Baur in 1831 that (to quote Nils Arne Pedersen) is ‘generally regarded as the second and real basis of modern scholarship on Manichaeism’.⁹ It was the tendency towards emphasising the non-Christian elements that was progressed by Baur, who now proposed Buddhism and Iranian religion as the main sources for Mani’s inspiration. The way was open for Manichaeism to be freed from the category of heresy and presented as a major religion in its own right.

It was progress across multiple fronts in textual studies and philology that continued to drive the further development of Manichaeology. Through the twentieth century repeated new and unexpected manuscript discoveries enabled us to hear the voices of Mani’s followers themselves from locations as diverse as a Romano-Byzantine village in the Dakhleh Oasis, monasteries of medieval Central Asia and temples on the south China coast of Fujian. The latest discoveries include a large hanging scroll with an intricate depiction of the multi-layered universe, paint and gold on silk belonging to an anonymous collector in Japan.¹⁰ What was once categorised within the doctrinal controversies of the early Christian church has been revealed to have had a rich and long-lasting history across the trade routes of Eurasia, with a pivotal role in the transmission of religious ideas between east and west. It is now more of a ‘Silk Road’ religion than an early Christian heresy. The complexity and breadth of the manuscript tradition is itself a kind of curious reflection of the teachings of the religion. Mani stressed that this revelation must be made known in all languages, among all cultures and to all peoples. There was a conscious effort not just to translate but to engage with a multiplicity of conceptual worlds.

It has been discovered that the Manichaean community developed its own rich historiographical tradition, seeking to preserve a record of divine guidance and protection as illustrated in the life of the Apostle, the grateful acceptance of his message and the wonderful growth of the

⁸ J. L. von Mosheim, *De Rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum Commentarii* (C. F. Weygand, Helmstadii, 1753).

⁹ F. C. Baur, *Das Manichäische Religionsystem nach den Quellen neu untersucht und entwickelt* (C. F. Osiander, Tübingen, 1831); following here N. A. Pedersen, *Demonstrative Proof in Defence of God. A Study of Titus of Bostra’s Contra Manichaeos. The Work’s Sources, Aims, and Relation to Its Contemporary Theology* (Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2004), 69–78.

¹⁰ Z. Gulácsi and J. BeDuhn, ‘Picturing Mani’s Cosmology: An Analysis of Doctrinal Iconography on a Manichaean Hanging Scroll from 13th/14th-Century Southern China’, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 25, 2011 (2015): 55–105.

religion despite the many onslaughts of evil. Not only was the revelation of truth safeguarded in Mani's writings but instances of especial favour (demonstrated in miracles, visions and sudden conversions) were given credence by the quoting of sacred scriptures and the words or example of prior apostles in support of their veracity. The testimony of tradents was carefully noted down and provided to authenticate important episodes and events.

Mani was brought up within the Aramaic-speaking population of early Sasanian Mesopotamia. He must have been born a few years prior to the establishment of this new Persian dynasty by Ardashir I in 224 CE, consequent to the decline of the Parthian empire and overthrow of the Arsacid royal house. Mani's maturity coincided with the accession to the throne of Shapur I ca. 240 CE and the years of his apostolate came to be aligned in the memory of the community with that great king's long reign. The story of his martyrdom was played out in the courts of Shapur's successors, Hormizd I and Bahrām I, in the 270s CE. In the three following chapters we will take a close look firstly at Mani's background and early life; then at the years of his maturity and mission in the world; finally at his last days, trial, imprisonment and death. Each of these stages were consciously patterned as occurring before, during and after the rule of Shapur, so that the fortunes of king and apostle came to proceed in tandem. Our approach will also be historiographical, but without theological or evangelical intent such devices will require constant careful interrogation.

In this first and preliminary chapter it is helpful to take an overview of the subject. I want to think about what I have called 'the many lives of Mani', the multiple ways in which he has been depicted, imagined, presented and indeed utilised for the secondary purposes of others. What did he look like? This may seem an odd question as regards a figure from late antiquity, but there is a famous description in the polemical *Acts of Archelaus*. The setting is this: Mani has heard of the reputation of the pious Marcellus, a rich and distinguished Christian citizen of the city of Karchar in Roman Mesopotamia. He himself is 'on the run' having escaped from imprisonment by the King of Persia, and sees an opportunity whereby if he can convert Marcellus he can through the latter's standing and fame seize the entire province for his teaching. He therefore sends first a disciple of his own, with an introductory letter, and then crosses the border accompanied by twenty-two young men and women of his elect:¹¹

¹¹ *Acts of Archelaus* XIV, 3; Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai (Acts of Archelaus)*, M. Vermes, trans., S. N. C. Lieu, intro. and comm. (Brepols, Turnhout, 2001), 58.

Introduction to the Many Lives of Mani

7

When he saw Manes, Marcellus was first astonished at the garments he was wearing. For he wore a kind of shoe which is generally known commonly as the 'trisolium' [i.e. a platform-shoe], and a multi-coloured cloak, of a somewhat ethereal appearance, while in his hand he held a very strong staff made of ebony-wood. He carried a Babylonian book under his left arm, and he had covered his legs with trousers of different colours, one of them scarlet, the other coloured leek-green. His appearance was like that of an old Persian magician or warlord.

There are obvious features here: Mani as the charlatan, as the maverick, as the outsider, as the object of ridicule. He is depicted as a Persian magus¹² and a striking contrast both to the pious Marcellus and the steadfast bishop Archelaus.

When four distinguished men of the city of Karchar are appointed to be judges in the ensuing debate there is no doubt where the final decision will fall. But the *Acts of Archelaus* is a fascinating work because it always conveys more information than one would suppose. Authentic details are cleverly woven into the fabric of the text at every stage. Mani is allowed to introduce himself as the chosen Apostle, the paraclete foretold by Jesus who will convict the world of its sin (John 16:8). Why this surprising discussion of his shoes? The one thing we do hear from other sources about his physical body is that he was in some way crippled, or at least with a deformity of the foot. Ibn al-Nadīm recounts this tradition twice and notes earlier authorities.¹³ It would be easy to dismiss this as an obvious slur. John Reeves cites a Jewish polemical motif that branded false prophets with lameness or orthopaedic deformity. However, I am not so sure.

There is an unusual episode in the sub-canonical text known as the *Kephalaia*, entitled *Concerning the Man who is Ugly in his Body but Beautiful [in his Soul]*.¹⁴ The settings for many of the chapters in this work have a formulaic character; but on occasion there is something different, a reminiscence of a person or event that suggests an authentic tradition. This time we find Mani, 'the Apostle' (the fact that he is very rarely named is something I will return to later), in the midst of a congregation of his leading disciples and prominent citizens. One of the elect

¹² The description recalls known images of the priests of Mithras, e.g. H.-C. Puech, *Le Manichéisme. Son fondateur – Sa doctrine*, Civilisations du Sud (S. A. E. P., Paris, 1949), 22. The depiction of Mani as heresiarch throughout the *Acta* is also influenced by tropes associated with Simon Magus.

¹³ The texts are cited with further references and discussion by J. C. Reeves, *Prolegomena to a History of Islamicate Manichaeism* (Equinox, Sheffield, 2011), 36–37 (n. 115) and 39 (n. 134).

¹⁴ Chapter 83 in H. J. Polotsky and A. Böhlig, eds, *Kephalaia (I): 1. Hälfte* (W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1940), 200, 9–204, 23. This is the first volume of the work in its only extant redaction, i.e. the Coptic codex from Medinet Madi entitled *The Chapters of the Teacher*.

enters, ugly and deformed, and everyone laughs in ridicule; but Mani takes him to himself, gives him the kiss of greeting and makes him to sit beside him. Why do you laugh about this man in whom the light mind and faith dwells?

This is a very Manichaean theme. In letters between believers they talk of their most luminous souls.¹⁵ It is the essence of a most extraordinary vision of hell on earth (the dualistic basis is elaborated in Appendix A). All the animals of the world around us are themselves ultimate products of five demonic realms that have existed from before the beginning of time, namely, bipeds, quadrupeds, creatures of the air and of water, reptiles or crawling beasts. This world is fighting, snarling, scratching, biting, tearing flesh and sinew and bone. These are creatures of darkness, just as we are ourselves (the humans or bipeds) sexually generated from a cannibalistic orgy led by the chief archons and which brought forth Adam and Eve. And all these beasts are male and female, so that their lust and coupling and endless giving birth is itself the very nature of evil. It is no wonder that the Manichaeans prized above all plant life, especially the sweet and scented fruits and flowers where the entangled divine has its greatest concentration in our world. These are not just symbols of purity, they are in very truth the stuff of god hanging on every tree, weeping, being gnashed and torn by the teeth of those demonic creatures that roam this world, guzzled down these gaping throats. The suffering, living divine light in fruits and vegetables is the very same as our own most luminous souls. It is by prayerful partaking of the former that we grow the latter in ourselves, become more ethereal, and discard the stink and flesh from our hateful bodies.

I do not know if Mani was himself crippled; but one of the major projects I have been working on for several years is to try and recover as much as possible of Mani's own letters. We know that these were collected by the community and formed one book of the canonical scriptures, that is *The Epistles*. Fragments and quotations survive in a wide variety of languages, ranging from Latin and Greek through Coptic, Arabic, various Middle Iranian languages including Parthian and Sogdian, even Uighur and Chinese. Some of these may be apocryphal or pseudepigraphic, but there is genuine content here and a characteristic tone that one can come to recognise (and of course also imitate).

These survivals demonstrate the widespread and continuing use of the literature, as later believers preserved these writings not just as models for their own communication (i.e. by borrowing elements of epistolary style,

¹⁵ P. Kellis I Gr. 63, 26–27.

Introduction to the Many Lives of Mani

9

salutations, commendations and so on in their letters to each other) but as something on which to build their lives and social relations.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is a substantial task to try and collect and sort all this material together, especially as much of it has never been edited (notably the Coptic *Epistles* codex from the Medinet Madi library, only remnants of which now survive in Berlin and Warsaw). There is the added problem of the use of letters ascribed to Mani in the religious polemic of the fourth and fifth centuries. For example, in the *Acts of Archelaus* we have already seen how Mani announced his arrival in Karchar by first sending a letter to Marcellus. The text is provided in the *Acta* but has long been supposed to be spurious. However, it can be demonstrated that it in fact utilises authentic elements of Mani's epistolary style.¹⁷

At Ismant el-Kharab in the Dakhleh oasis of the eastern Sahara, an Australian-led archaeological team recovered in the early 1990s a large cache of papyrus documents in Greek and Coptic from the fourth century CE. This was the site of ancient Kellis, and it came as a total surprise to all concerned to find that a good number of the texts showed evidence of having been written by both Manichaean elect and catechumens. Most of the latter were personal and business letters representing the daily lives of the villagers, many involved in small-scale trade, textile manufacture and transport to the Nile valley (the details are explained and discussed further in Appendix B). What was remarkable was the first opportunity to contextualise Manichaean life and practice from late antiquity in its social, cultural, economic and even material setting. The houses of the villagers could be excavated, their possessions examined, the fabric of relations between different communities reconstructed. The same streets could be walked. Details of garments and pots provided in the household accounts, juxtaposed to discussion of the copying of psalms or the sharing of books in the letters, were made tangible by the presence of the very same categories of items found in the mud-brick buildings. Although the actual mass of Manichaean literature in the strict sense recovered was not itself great, what was more valuable in these circumstances was the way that the religion could be observed integrated (and sometimes hardly visible) within the most everyday of events, matters of health and family, squabbles and gossip, legal contracts, loans and the minutiae of village life.

¹⁶ See I. Gardner, 'Once More on Mani's *Epistles* and Manichaean Letter-Writing', *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, 17 (2013): 291–314.

¹⁷ I. Gardner, 'Mani's Letter to Marcellus: Fact and Fiction in the *Acta Archelai* Revisited', in J. BeDuhn and P. Mirecki, eds, *Frontiers of Faith: Encounters between Christianity and Manichaeism in the Acts of Archelaus* (Brill, Leiden, 2007), 33–58.

As regards Mani's *Epistles*: firstly, remnants recovered from different productions (i.e. codices) evidence their widespread utility in this context; secondly, in the personal letters we can read direct reference by named individuals to their personal use of *The Epistles*; thirdly, and in some ways most interestingly, in these individuals' letters we see how the thread of Mani's words and phrasing has been internalised by the believers and replicated in their own productions. This has opened up a new area of study, in that now we as scholars have the tools to begin to identify and correctly categorise other letters written by members of the community in Romano-Byzantine Egypt. Many thousands of papyrus letters survive from sites such as Oxyrhynchus, but prior to the Dakhleh discoveries there was hardly the means to identify any Manichaean authorship if it existed. This is because it is often betrayed in rather slight turns of phrase and terminology that largely overlaps with the broader Christian transformation of society that occurred at the same time as the Manichaean mission and success in the Mediterranean world. It has become possible to reassign previously known letters, categorised as Christian by their first editors but sometimes with features that had caused substantial scholarly debate in the past. Now these problematic features can be understood and explained; further, our understanding of the place and practice of the religion in the cities and countryside of late-antique Egypt has been considerably broadened and this remains an ongoing task. Rather similarly, a fragment of a religious hymn in Greek from Oxyrhynchus, long ascribed to Melito of Sardis' otherwise lost treatise *On Truth*, has been convincingly identified as a Greek Manichaean hymn and joins an expanding corpus of such literature in an increasing variety of formats and productions.¹⁸ There is still more to be achieved until the presence of the community becomes fully visible in the built environment as preserved, its members coloured within the fullness of their social and cultural lives, and identifiable even in the cemeteries.

The newly found or recognised documents give a clear picture of the movement of groups of elect up and down the Nile valley. There was a network of local believers or catechumens to house and support them. In both the archive from ancient Kellis, and letters of recommendation from Oxyrhynchus, we read the names of some of these bands and their leaders, and the localities where they were. Thus in P. Oxy. XXXI 2603 Paul writes (lines 25–28):¹⁹

¹⁸ G. S. Smith, 'A Manichaean Hymn at Oxyrhynchus: A Reevaluation of P. Oxy. 2074', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 24 (2016): 81–97.

¹⁹ The translation follows that of J. H. Harrop, 'A Christian Letter of Commendation', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 48 (1962): 134; see his notes at 135–136 on the text of lines 27f. and the difficulty of translating here the term *idiotai*.