

Manichaeism : Its Sources an Appraisal

Abstract

This is an important thing which has risen the interest in ancient Manichaeism is the discovery of actual Manichaean documents found amid sand-buried ruins in the Oasis of Turfan, in Eastern or Chinese Turkistan, early in the past century, which have thrown unsuspected new light on the whole subject. These finds included fragments of Mani's long lost Bible and considerable portions of once extensive Manichaean literature, written in Middle Persian [Pahlavi], Sogdian, Old Turkish, and even Chinese, particularly since they were discovered in Eastern, or Chinese, Turkistan.

Keywords: Mani, Manicheaism, Turfan, Silk Route, The Goshpel, Kaphalia.

Introduction

Mani endeavored, by making a synthesis of elements from various existing religions, to form a new religion, eclectic in character and inspired by the fervour of his own idealistic enthusiasm, one that should not be confined by national borders but be universally adopted. In other words, Mani's aspiration was to bring the world, Orient and Occident, into closer union through a combined faith, based upon the creeds known in his day.¹

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Aim of the Study

This paper is dealing with the discovery of new findings which will throw light on the subject of Manichaeism and its sources. This religion is a very important part of China and Central Asia and was responsible for the spread of many philosophical thought of east to the west.

From 1904-14, in four expeditions to central Asia, German archaeologists led by professors Albert Von Le Coq and A. Grunwedel brought back to Berlin at sites of ruined Manichaean monasteries at Turfan in Sinkiang (China) several thousand fragments of Manichaean texts. These ones constituted handsomely bound and beautifully illuminated manuscript codices but had been mutilated by zealous Islamic conquerors in the fourteenth century. The text are written in a number of Central Asian languages but Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian and Uighar predominate. In 1905 came the news of the discovery of a large hoard of manuscripts, mostly Chinese Buddhist texts, by Aurel Stein in the Temple of the Thousand Buddhas at Tun-Huang. Among them were three Manichaean texts in Chinese as well as a long confessional for the Manichaean Hearers in Uigher.³

Up to that time our knowledge of Mani's endeavor to form a world religion had been derived largely from the polemical writings against his creed by the church fathers, especially Augustine, who himself for nine years had been a Manichaean before adopting Christianity. The account of Muhammadan writers and the references made by some late Zoroastrian controversialists are valuable secondary sources from the Oriental side. The newly made finds now provide us with actual Manichaean texts, mostly in fragmentary form but sometimes in the shape of longer connected documents, so that we can combine and compare them as direct sources with the material previously known and thus obtain a more exact view of Mani's life and teachings.⁴

When we try to find out the main sources of Manichaeism we come to know that they are of different type with which we can trace the elements and features of this ancient religion which traveled from West to East with the silk route. The types of main sources are as follows :

1. Canonical works



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2. Semi Canonical works
3. Other works discovered in the West
4. Text discovered in Turfan
5. Text discovered at Tun - Huang
6. List of Chinese Manichaeism text

The another division which we can made of sources is :

1. Oriental Christian Sources
2. Zoroastrian sources
3. Western sources
4. Muhammadan sources

According to A.A. Bevan, Manichaeism, the religion of Mani or Manes, is one of those systems which are usually classed together under the name of Gnosticism. The Manichaeism religion arose in Babylonia about the middle of the 3rd cent. A.D., and during many generations exercised great influence both in the East and in the West.⁵ Manichaeism was long treated as a Christian heresy, but it is more clearly understood as an independent religion, drawing on the diverse resources of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism.⁶

In the Persian Empire of the Sassanids, Manichaeism was born. Its founder, Mani, was born in A.D. 215 on Babylonian territory and promulgated a creed which was a blend of Zoroastrian dogmas and Gnostic teaching. It held up an ascetic ideal of celibacy, poverty, and fasting.⁷ It emphasized the Antagonism of the two principles of light and darkness. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan states that "Manichaeism spread among all the Christian subjects in Persia who spoke Aramaic. Mani gave a large place to the teachings of Jesus, which caused him to be accepted as a Christian heresiarch. His creed, however, forbade the worship of images, disapproved the killing of animals for sacrifice, and so provoked the wrath of the Roman emperors. It became Buddhist in China and Christian in Europe."⁸

Manichaeism spread out over most of the known world from Spain to China. But the religion disappeared from the West in 10th century, and from China in the 14th century, and today it is not in existence. During the Roman Empire, Manichaeism got a strong position in North Africa- St. Augustine was a Manichaeism for 9 years before his conversion to Christianity. For about 80 years starting in 762, Manichaeism was the state religion of the Turkic people Uighurs.

The principal elements of Mani's teachings are contained in a canon of seven works which he wrote in the Aramaic dialect of southern Mesopotamia. They are :

1. The Living Gospel
2. The Treasure of Life
3. The Pragmateia
4. The Book of Mysteries
5. The Book of The Giants
6. The Letters
7. Palms and Prayers

The foreign origin of Manichaeism is duly emphasized by Eusebius in the brief notice which he devotes to this 'insane heresy'. Alexander of Lycopolis, the author of a short tract against Manichaeism⁹, was probably a contemporary of Eusebius. He deserves as being the only Western writer who treats the subject from a purely

philosophical point of view; though he speaks of Christianity with a certain respect, it is doubtful whether he ever become a Christian. Titus (d. 370 A.D.), bishop of Bostra in Syria, in geographical sense, must be reckoned among Oriental Christians, but his *Treatise against the Manichaeism*¹⁰ proves him to have been thoroughly Western in his education and habits of thought, deeply imbued with Greek philosophy, in particular with Stoicism, and full of contempt for 'barbarians'. He distinctly states that he derived his information from a Manichaeism book, but he tells us nothing definite as to its authorship. His words, however, seem to imply that the book was not composed by the founder of Manichaeism himself, for in quoting it he says, 'as is stated by the author who wrote down the doctrines of that Maniac'; and again, 'these are the very words used by him or else by one of his followers'. He afterwards mentions a Manichaeism work entitled *The Treasure* but whether this is identical with the book cited previously cannot be determined. In any case it is interesting to observe that, according to Titus, the Manichaeism made every effort to conceal from outsiders the writings of their founder, apparently in obedience to his express orders¹¹.

A more popular but a much less respectable authority is the *Acta Archelai*, a work which professes to record a disputation between Manes and Archelaus, bishop of Carchar¹² in Mesopotamia. Here for the first time we meet the remarkable theory that Manichaeism originated, not with its reputed founder, but with a certain Scythianus, from whom the system passed on to Manes. But it has been clearly proved that the narrative is partly fictitious. Even then, with some variations, the story contained in the *Acta Archelai* reappears in Epiphanius¹³, Socrates, Theodoret, and several later writers.

When we have a look on the writings of Augustine, many passages relating to Manichaeism are to be found in his work *Confessions*¹⁴. But, on the whole, the amount of positive knowledge which can be gathered from Augustine is much less than might have been expected. In the great majority of cases he confines himself to vague generalities, and when he descends to particulars, his statements seem mostly to rest on hearsay. It may be doubted whether even his Manichaeism informants were at all accurately acquainted with the history and writings of their founder.

One of the latest, but the least important, of the Western sources is the Greek *Formula of Abjuration*,¹⁵ which repentant heretics were required to pronounce before being admitted into the communion of the Byzantine Church. In present shape this document cannot be older than the 9th century. Yet, in spite of the uncritical manner in which it is compiled, the *Formula of Abjuration* contains a certain number of interesting facts.¹⁶

In addition, he made a summary of the main points of his teachings in Middle Persian which he presented to Shapur I, with whom he had a particularly cordial relationship.

This work, The Sabuhrgan, was so important that one sometimes finds it listed in the canon in place of Palms and Prayers. None of these works have survived in a complete form but a

considerable number of citations from them can be found in the writings of Church Fathers and in Syriac and Arabic writers who used them to demonstrate the absurdity of Mani's teachings.¹⁷

The west too made its contributions to this growing body of Manichaean texts. A Latin Manichaean manuscript was found in a cave near Tebessa (Teveste) in Algeria in 1918.¹⁸ More significantly, a sizeable collection of Manichaean codices in Coptic was shown to Professor Carl Schmidt in 1930 by Egyptian dealers in Cairo and their place of origin was eventually traced to Medinet Medi in the Fayoum near the former Hellenistic military settlement of Narmouthis. The find, totaling some two thousand leaves contained :

1. The Letters of Mani
2. The Palms Book
3. The Kephalaia
4. Commentary on the Living Gospel
5. a historical work which gave a life of Mani and the early history of the sect .
6. The Homilies
7. some unidentifiable leaves.¹⁹

Part of this find was acquired by the Chester Beatty collection in London (now Dublin) but the greater part of it went to the Prussian Academy in Berlin. The Letters and the historical work which were housed in Berlin were unfortunately lost in the chaotic aftermath of the second world war before they could be properly examined and studied.²⁰

However, the text from Turfan have so far yielded a number of fragments from the canonical works , especially from the Book of Giants and the quasi canonical Saburagan.²¹ No doubt when it is fully published, the commentary on the Living Gospel in the Coptic will shed a great deal of light on the text of the the Living Gospel itself.²² On the other hand, the new text, even if most of them are not of canonical status, are genuine writings of the sect and touch upon many fundamental aspect of its doctrine and history. The Kephalaia,²³ for instance, purports to be a Record of Mani's discourses with his inner circle of disciples and is listed by Epiphanius as one of the most important works of the sect . The Palms Book has furnished us with one of the finest anthologies of Manichaean poetry and The Homilies, contain much new information on the early history of the sect. These genuine Manichaean writings allow us to reconstruct many important aspects of the original teaching of Mani without fear of misrepresentation by the sects enemies. Surprisingly these text have shown that some of the polemicist, especially Augustine and Theodore bar Koni, have been remarkably accurate in their presentation of Mani's teachings.²⁴

There are some other sources which are important in the view of Mani's teachings. In which a collection of extracts from an unknown Manichaean work preserved in the Book of Scholia of Theodore bar Koni, Nestorian Bishop of Kashkar (al Wasit) in Bet aramaie in the eighth century.²⁵ As the extracts are in Syriac , they are the closest extant source we have to the original writings of Mani in the Aramaic of Babylonia. The other important extracts are from another unnamed Manichaean work, probably the Book of Giants, cited by Severus, the Monophysite patriarch of Antioch (c.640-708) in one of his

Cathedral Homilies. It was originally in Greek but have come down to us in a number of Syriac translation of Paul of Callinicum (Bishop of Edessa from 510) are the most easily available.²⁶

Evidence from Muhammadan literature dose not begin before the 9th cent. of our era. Nevertheless, the muhammadan accounts are, on the whole, the most instructive of all, much fuller than those by Oriental Christians and less misleading than those by Western writers. for this several causes may be assigned. In the first place, the Muhammadan scholars to whom we owe these descriptions wrote from a historical, rather than from a controversial, point of view. Moreover, some of them at least had access to very ancient and trustworthy sources of information; for Babylonia, the political center of the Muhammadan Empire, was also the ecclesiastical center of the Manichaean community, and accordingly, in that country the text and the traditional interpretation of the Manichaean scriptures were most likely to survive.²⁷

Almost all Muhammadan historians who treat of pre-Muhammadan or early Muhammadan times take some notice of Manichaeism, but the authors from whom we learn most on this subject are the following:

1. Ibn Wadib, also called al-yaqubi, who in A.D. 891 composed a History of the world,²⁸
2. Muhammadan ibn-Ishaq, who probably lived about the end of the 10th cent. of our era , and is known as the author of the Fihrist²⁹ ,i.e. 'Catalogue', a great storehouse of information respecting literary works of various kinds;
3. al-Beruni, who died a A.D.1048 , one of the most learned men of the author on the book on Chronology³⁰ and other important treatises; al-Shahrastani, who died A.D.1153 , the author on the work on religious and philosophical sects. All these authors wrote in Arabic, although the last two were of Persian nationality.

The story of Mani in Shahnama of Firdausi, the well known Persian epic poet, is almost entirely legendary, and the same may be said of nearly all the popular Muhammadan accounts, whether written in Persian or in Arabic.

Conclusion

When we have a look on the writings of Augustine, many passages relating to Manichaeism are to be found in his work Confessions¹⁴ .But, on the whole, the amount of positive knowledge which can be gathered from Augustine is much less than might have been expected. In the great majority of cases he confines himself to vague generalities, and when he descends to particulars, his statements seem mostly to rest on hearsay. It may be doubted whether even his Manichaean informants were at all accurately acquainted with the history and writings of their founder.

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Remarking

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