

Manichaeism in Iran in the Fourth Century

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1. Introduction

Four years ago I published an article¹ covering the main aspects of Manichaeism in the early Sasanian empire in the third century. My present contribution will continue this work for the fourth century. But let us start with the years after Mani's death in 277, which resulted in persecutions of the members of Mani's church reaching their climax with the martyrdom of Sisinnos the then leader of the religion in 286 during the reign of Wahrām II. In religious-political terms these years focus on Kerdīr's career and in his promotion of Zoroastrianism as the only religion of the state. He says in his inscription at the Kaaba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam²:

“And I was styled ‘Kerdīr by whom Wahrām's soul is saved’, mowbed of Ohrmazd. And in every province and place of the whole empire the service of Ohrmazd and the Yazads was exalted, and the Mazda-worshipping religion and its priests received much honour in the land. And the Yazads, and water and fire and cattle, were greatly contented, and Ahreman and the demons suffered great blows and harm. And the creed of Ahreman and the dews was driven out of the land and deprived of credence. And Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians and Baptisers and Manichaeans were assailed in the land. And images were overthrown, and the dens of demons were (thus) destroyed, and the places and abodes of the Yazads were established.”

We can deduce from Kerdīr's relation to other religions that he was convinced of the truth of his religion and that he favoured an idea of Iran which was apparently older—and which holds good to the present day. In the so-called Testament of Ardašīr, the first Sasanian ruler, we read³:

“Know that kingship and religion are twin brothers, no one of which can be maintained without the other. For religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship is the guardian of religion. . . . Know that there can never be in one kingdom both a secret chief in religion and a manifest chief in kingship without the chief in religion snatching away that which is in the hands of the chief in kingship. For religion is

¹ For details see Hutter 1993.

² Boyce 1984, 112; cf. the recent French translation by Gignoux 1991, 69sq.

³ Cited after Gnoli 1989, 170; cf. for the relationship between “church” and “state” *ibid.* 138sq. 168–72; a similar point of view is expressed in the Letter of Tansar, cf. Boyce 1984, 109.

the foundation and kingship is the pillar, and the possessor of the foundation has more claim to the whole building than the possessor of the pillar.”

As the idea of Iran was based on a political programme whose ideological strength stemmed from a religious factor there was no more place for Manichaeism after being ruled out as the possible religion of the state at the end of the third century. Thus, persecutions were the natural consequence. This not only led to an exodus of Manichaeans to Mesopotamia and the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire but they also found shelter with the Arab king Amaro from Hira, i.e. ‘Amr ibn ‘Adi, king of Hira, who is also known from the Paikuli inscription as paying homage to King Narses. In the nineties of the third century Amaro managed to convince Narses to put an end to the persecutions of the Manichaeans. Narses for himself also had good reason to stop suppressing the Manichaeans: as the Roman emperor Diocletian issued an edict⁴ against the Manichaeans in 297, Narses saw his chance to get the support from them for his military agitations against the Romans by stopping persecution.⁵ So for some years the Manichaeans managed to live calmly, but during the reign of Narses’ successor Hormizd II. (303–309) the Zoroastrian priests again voted for the extirpation of the Manichaean heresy. Again the kingdom of Hira gave shelter to the religion and helped many Manichaeans to flee further to the West. This abridged history of Manichaeism in Sasanian Iran⁶ is well known as Mani’s early success and the following persecutions can be illustrated from many different sources. But—as Samuel Lieu puts it⁷—“the history of Manichaeism in Mesopotamia for the remainder of the Sasanian period is still a largely unexplored field of study.”

The present paper tries to shed some light on the situation of Manichaeism in Iran during the reign of Šābuhr II (309–379). Despite Šābuhr’s long reign—he had already been crowned within the womb of his mother—there are relatively few extant sources concerning our topic. Among the middle Iranian Manichaean texts from Central Asia until now I have not found any text which with certainty sheds light on the situation of the religion in the fourth century in Iran. But the acts of the Christian martyrs from these years and the Pahlavi books of the Zoroastrians provide us with some information.⁸

⁴ The year 297 has not been unchallenged in current research (cf. Lieu 1992, 121–5, who votes for 302) but still holds good, cf. Wiesehöfer 1993, 373 with note 54.

⁵ Cf. Schmidt/Polotsky 1933, 28sq.; Seston 1939, 366–73; Frye 1983, 131; Skjærvø 1997, 342. A different position is held by Decret 1978, 162–173, who does not suppose that Narses lessened the Manichaeans’ burden to get their support against the Romans, cf. also Wiesehöfer 1993, 372sq.

⁶ Cf. Lieu 1992, 106–10.

⁷ Lieu 1992, 110; cf. Wiesehöfer 1993, 372.

⁸ de Menasce 1945, 227–45 gives the text and translation of a considerable number of Pahlavi texts which mention Mani or Manichaeism but he avoids drawing historical conclusions.

2. Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān and the Manichaeans

When Šābuhr came to power he was accompanied by the mowbed ī mowbedān, Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān. This priest was as influential at the royal court as his predecessors a century earlier—Tansar with Ardašīr or Kerdīr with both Wahrāms or in some other way Mani with Šābuhr I. The memory of this priest has been held high within the Zoroastrian community as the defender of the faith who proved his righteousness and orthodoxy by undergoing an ordeal. We need not refer to the fame of this priest within Zoroastrianism but we only mention the many writings attributed to him, the praise of his faith and the remembrance that the good religion flourished in his days. So there can be little doubt that Ādurbād was the main adversary of Manichaeism in the fourth century.

A relatively late text featuring apocalypticism and the times to come can be a starting-point; the text from the fifth book of the Dēnkard reads⁹:

“Devastators such as Alexander . . .; heretics and (wrong) reformers such as the Messiah, Mani, and others; periods such as the steel age, that mingled with iron and others; and restorers, organizers, and introducers of religion, such as Ardašīr, Ādurbād, Khosrow, . . . and others.”

Although this passage is no direct proof that Ādurbād can be held responsible for the persecution of Manichaeans in the fourth century it nevertheless shows that Mani was an arch-fiend of the good religion while Ādurbād was its restorer. For chronological reasons Ādurbād is the first restorer after Mani’s preaching according to this text.

Another well-known text from the third book of the Dēnkard brings to light Ādurbād’s refutation of Mani’s doctrine. The opening lines read¹⁰: “Ten injunctions which the crippled demon Mani clamoured against those of the restorer of righteousness, Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān.” The previous and the next chapters of the Dēnkard each show ten paragraphs, too, thus the number ten seems to be a stereotype pattern,¹¹ because Ādurbād lists twelve good things each one has to perform in order to oppose Mani’s doctrine:

- 1) not to keep vengeance in one’s thought
- 2) not to hoard things up greedily
- 3) to receive the good as guests
- 4) to take a wife from one’s own family

⁹ Dk 5,3,3; cf. West 1897, 127sq.; Molé 1967, 110–13.

¹⁰ Olsson 1991, 282.

¹¹ Cf. the Manichaean text M 5794 which also numbers “ten” paragraphs that show the supremacy of Mani’s faith over the other religions.

- 5) to conduct rightly prosecution and defence in lawsuits
- 6) to abstain from unlawful killing of cattle
- 7) to consider the material world as a basic cosmic principle
- 8) to leave the things of the material world to the gods
- 9) to seek things of the spiritual world by oneself
- 10) to chase the demons out of the body
- 11) to make the gods guest in the body
- 12) to make the world perfect

This list shows that the Zoroastrian world view is much more in agreement with the cosmos and not as anti-cosmic as Manichaeism. Thus we can conclude that these twelve theses of Ādurbād favour orthodox Zoroastrianism rather than Zurvanism. Ādurbād the upholder of the good religion has to act against Manichaeans although the historical connection given by the Dēnkard between Mani and Ādurbād is not correct on chronological grounds. But this text certainly gives an ideological justification for the persecution of Mani's religion so that we even may assume that the text faintly reflects the actual involvement of Ādurbād in the persecution of Manichaeans.¹²

3. Persecution during the reign of Šābuhr II and relations to Christianity

A Syrian text reflecting contemporary persecution of the Manichaeans dates from the end of Šābuhr's reign so that it is uncertain whether Ādurbād the mowbed ī mowbedān was still alive or not. One of the mowbeds who were engaged in the persecution is called Zardušt, but it remains uncertain whether he is to be identified with Ādurbād's son bearing the same name. The text mentions the martyrdom of the Christian Aitāllāh.¹³ The Sasanian authorities tried to persuade this Christian to abstain from his faith by referring to the example of a Manichaean who had also been imprisoned. After being tortured this Manichaean anathematized Mani, his faith and his doctrines. Then the mowbeds brought an ant before him so that he could kill it. The text of the Acts of the Christian martyrs further states that the Manichaeans regarded this ant as the Living Soul. After the Manichaean had killed the animal the Christian Aitāllāh rejoiced because he saw the triumph of his own religion over the Manichaean heresy.

¹² Tafazzoli 1985, 477.

¹³ Cf. Braun 1915, 131sq.; Köbert 1969, 129; Lieu 1992, 111sq.

In detail this text gives some important new aspects: the reference to an ant as the Living Soul can be seen as some kind of mockery by the Christian writer of the acts, but I think the killing of the ant must also be seen in a Zoroastrian context. Ants are animals which are—in Zoroastrian terminology—*xrafstra*, vermin, belonging to the creation of Ahreman. Each Zoroastrian is to partake in the cosmic battle against Ahreman and his creatures—thus also killing *xrafstra*. When the mowbeds compel the Manichaeans to kill the ant he is not only anathematizing Manichaeism but also confessing Zoroastrianism.¹⁴ Thus we see that persecution aimed to win back an apostate to the good religion. Another remarkable feature of this text from the acts of Syrian martyrs is—compared with other texts from the same genre—the absence of any notice about the adoration of fire, sun or water, which was not impossible in Manichaeism. This Zoroastrian practice was known to the Manichaeans as we read in the Middle Persian text M 95, a hymn to the Living Soul. In the following lines the Living Soul is the speaker¹⁵:

“I am the fire that Zarathustra kindled. And he bade the righteous to kindle me. From the seven consecrated, sweet-smelling fire bring to me, the Fire, purified fuel. (Come and) bring clean firewood and soft, sweet-smelling incense. Kindle me with knowledge, and pour on me pure libations. I am the water which (is) fit that you should give me the water-offering so that I may become strong.”

The hymn clearly shows that the cult of the Manichaeans made use of Zoroastrian rites and symbols—but with one important difference: it is necessary to kindle the fire with “knowledge” (*d’nyšn/gnosis*). Therefore the mentioning of fire or water in anti-Manichaean texts was—as opposed to the texts of the Christian martyrs—out of place.

Though Christians and Manichaeans alike suffered persecution during the reign of Šābuhr II there may have been some differences. The Manichaeans’ use of Zoroastrian symbols led to a conflict between them and the Zoroastrian community which was rooted in religious reasons. On the other hand Šābuhr’s stance against Christianity was more connected with political interests resulting from the age-long conflict between the Sasanian and the Roman empire.¹⁶ We do not know if Šābuhr’s persecution of the Manichaeans was as fierce as that of the Christians. Judging from the “Chronicle of Arbela”¹⁷ it seems to have been less fierce; otherwise it would not have been possible—as we read in the

¹⁴ Cf. further Scott 1989, 450, who does not refer to this Syrian text.

¹⁵ Boyce 1975, 112sq., no. be. Cited after Klimkeit 1993, 50; cf. also Scott 1989, 441.

¹⁶ Cf. Nyberg 1938, 419; Wiesehöfer 1993, 375. 379sq. also makes a difference between Šābuhr’s political stance against the Christians and the magi’s religious motifs as for them the Manichaeans were the main competitors in religion.

¹⁷ Widengren 1961, 133. Cf. the German translation of the chronicle by Kawerau 1985, 77sq. In the question of the historical reliability of the chronicle I side with Kawerau 1985, 11 and 1987 and not with Fiey 1986.

chronicle—that Manichaeans (and Jews) could easily interfere at the Sasanian court against the Christian *katholikos* Simon who had won over some Zoroastrians (maybe *mowbeds*) to Christianity. The religious conflict between Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism—as an Iranian religion—had to be solved by religious means.

4. The written Avesta as Zoroastrian reaction against Manichaeism

As Manichaeism had been seen as a real religious threat, it was necessary to react not only with royal strength but also with convincing arguments. Ādur-bād's theses quoted above about Mani's wrong teachings are one point. But there is an even more impressive episode within the history of Zoroastrianism, namely the history of the Avesta as sacred scripture which cannot be separated from the canonical Manichaean books. The stress which Mani laid on the existence of his holy books as the true form of his doctrine which cannot be altered is well known. In a Middle Persian text¹⁸ the prophet himself says that his religion is better than the older ones in ten ways; his religion will remain unchanged by virtue of his living scriptures; these scriptures are not only better than the former religions whose founders did not write books like Mani, but these scriptures also have gathered the wisdom and the parables of the former religions. Thus the Manichaean books are really a "treasure of life". Mani's teachings are written in his books and they can be shown materially to believers and unbelievers as a proof of wisdom. How great the importance of the text just quoted was for Mani's church is illustrated by two other Manichaean texts.¹⁹ We have a Coptic *Kephalaion* dating to the end of the third century or to the beginning of the fourth century which adapts the Middle Persian version by stressing directly that the other religions failed because Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus did not write books, but only their disciples remembered the teachings and later on wrote them down. The Sogdian parable of the religion and the great ocean also repeats the motifs from the Middle Persian to show the superiority of Manichaeism. From these three texts we must conclude that the written books held a high position not only within the prophet's lifetime, but also in the generations thereafter. In all theological debates with Zoroastrian priests Manichaeans therefore could refer to the writings of their prophet thus arguing that they did not add something new to their religion. On this level—without doubt—Manichaeans were in a better position than the Zoroastrians who could only rely on the oral Avesta.

¹⁸ M 5794, Boyce 1975, 29sq., no. 2; Klimkeit 1993, 216.

¹⁹ Cf. Sundermann 1985, 19–33; Klimkeit 1993, 178–81; cf. Oerter 1988.

This is the point where we have to refer to Ādurbād again. The Zoroastrian tradition gives him and his king Šābuhr the credit of restoring the Avesta, as we learn from the Dēnkard²⁰:

“Šābuhr, King of Kings, Son of Ohrmizd, induced men from all provinces to orient themselves towards God through disputation, and put forward all oral traditions for consideration and examination. After the triumph of Ādurbād, through his declaration put to trial by ordeal, in disputation with all those sectarian and heretics who studied the nasks, he made the following statement: ‘Now that we have gained an insight into the Religion in the worldly existence, we shall not tolerate anyone of false religion, and we shall be still more zealous.’ And thus did he do.”

We have already said that Ādurbād was zealous to promote Zoroastrianism, but the quoted passage from the Dēnkard within the Dēnkard’s history of the sacred scriptures is open to another proposal. As already suggested by H. S. Nyberg sixty years ago and now much better established with philological and linguistic arguments by K. Hoffmann, it is highly probably that the entire Avesta was written down for the first time in the fourth or fifth century.²¹ Due to the non-existence of a written “holy book” — St. Basil from Cappadocia e.g. mentions in 377 that the Zoroastrians have no “book” but preserve their religion orally from the father to the son — the Zoroastrian priests could not counteract the aesthetical and precious²² Manichaean books as a proof of the truth of Mani’s teachings. Therefore they invented the legend of the unimaginable old age of the written Avesta and the loss of that during the devastation brought to Iran by Alexander the accursed in order to get acceptance for their just recently written Avesta. There is no reason why we should not think that this is Ādurbād’s lasting contribution to the history of Iranian religion. With the written Avesta Ādurbād had not only a book at his disposal but he could also begin to claim that this book was much older — and better — than the Manichaean books, because Zoroaster was a predecessor of Mani. With the written Avesta now it was also possible for the Zoroastrian priests to work against Manichaeism on a new basis: with their book they could show that it was not Zoroastrianism that had failed but that Mani had falsified the teachings of Zoroaster and hence Mani was no reformer who had brought back the good religion but a zandīg, a heretic.

²⁰ Boyce 1984, 114.

²¹ Nyberg 1938, 426sq.; Hoffmann/Narten 1989. On problems concerning Zoroastrian writings in those centuries cf. Gignoux 1991, 30sq., Skjærve 1997, 320sq.

²² Cf. Hutter 1997.

5. Conclusion

The written Avesta made a double impact. It not only gave the Zoroastrian priests in dispute with Manichaean religious leaders a new position of strength, but also put means into their hands with which they could act against Manichaeism. From later times we know that during the reign of Yazdegird in the early fifth century the persecutions of Manichaeans had been renewed. A passage from the *Mādigān ī hazār dādistān* may throw some light on this situation. Within a paragraph concerning sorcery we read that the property of sorcerers is to be confiscated; and the same happens to the property of the heretics (*zandīg*), i.e. Manichaeans.²³ Also Mazdak's movement is in sources at our disposal not always exactly distinguished from Manichaeism. This shows that Mani's teachings later formed a part of the religious pluralism within the Sasanian empire. This is already beyond the scope of this paper. A history of Manichaeism in Sasanian and early Islamic Iran is still wanting but in the present paper I have tried to show some aspects of this history in the fourth century. In a similar way as Kerdīr in the third century Ādurbād ī Mahrspandān worked for his good Mazdayasnian religion by persecuting the Manichaean religion of light. Ādurbād—as one century earlier his predecessor Kerdīr—favoured the Sasanian idea of Iran with religion and state under one common shelter. Although Manichaeism has been styled as Iranian, it was not Sasanian in this sense; therefore no ideological place was left for it within the Sasanian empire.

Abbreviations

Boyce 1975	M. Boyce, <i>A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian</i> , Leiden 1975 (Acta Iranica 9).
Boyce 1984	M. Boyce, <i>Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism</i> , Manchester 1984.
Braun 1915	O. Braun, <i>Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer</i> , München 1915.
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Decret 1978	F. Decret, <i>L'Afrique manichéenne (IV^e–V^e siècles). Étude historique et doctrinale</i> , I, Paris 1978.
Fiey 1986	J. M. Fiey, "Compte rendu P. Kawerau, Die Chronik von Arbela", <i>RHE</i> 81 (1986), 544–548.

²³ MHDA 38,16–39,1; cf. Macuch 1981, 222. Lukonin 1983, 734 attributes this episode to the reign of Šābuhr II and to his high priest Ādurbād ī Mahrspandān but the text mentions neither the king nor the priest.

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