



A Church to Surpass All Churches Manichaeism as a Test Case for the Theory of Reception

Timothy Pettipiece

Volume 61, Number 2, juin 2005

La théorie de la réception

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011816ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/011816ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Article abstract

In order to test the utility of the theory of reception for the study of Manichaeism, this paper examines how Manichaean efforts to establish cultural and linguistic continuities in their various missionary environments were not enough to sustain the Religion of Light. Instead, the fact that Mani considered his revelation as superior to others ultimately seems to have hindered its reception by a variety of host cultures.

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pettipiece, T. (2005). A Church to Surpass All Churches : manichaeism as a Test Case for the Theory of Reception. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 61(2), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.7202/011816ar>

A CHURCH TO SURPASS ALL CHURCHES

MANICHAISM AS A TEST CASE FOR THE THEORY OF RECEPTION

Timothy Pettipiece

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses
Université Laval, Québec

RÉSUMÉ : En vue de tester la viabilité de la théorie de la réception pour l'étude du manichéisme, cette étude examine comment l'effort manichéen d'établir des liens culturels et linguistiques dans les milieux où s'exerça la mission manichéenne n'a pas suffi à assurer le maintien de la Religion de Lumière. Le fait que Mani considérait sa révélation comme supérieure aux autres a au contraire empêché sa réception par les cultures chez lesquelles elle voulait être accueillie.

ABSTRACT : In order to test the utility of the theory of reception for the study of Manichaeism, this paper examines how Manichaean efforts to establish cultural and linguistic continuities in their various missionary environments were not enough to sustain the Religion of Light. Instead, the fact that Mani considered his revelation as superior to others ultimately seems to have hindered its reception by a variety of host cultures.

While Hans Robert Jauss' theory of "reception" is useful as a tool of literary analysis, it is uncertain whether or not it holds any promise for the examination of ancient religious phenomena. Generally speaking, Jauss examined how works of literature are evaluated by a reader in relation to what has previously been read.¹ This can be compared to what some sociologists of religion have claimed about the individual's relation to or "reception" of new or previously unknown religious culture. Rodney Stark, for instance, has suggested that individuals are more likely to accept a new religion if it retains a degree of cultural continuity with the religion or religions with which they are already familiar.² Late antiquity, then, with its often bewildering array of innovative, syncretic, and traditionalist religious movements, is a period ideally suited for an attempted application of this particular method of analysis. This is to ask whether or not new religious movements in antiquity were better

1. Hans Robert JAUSS, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 22-25.

2. See especially Rodney STARK, *The Rise of Christianity*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 55.

received if they maintained a degree of cultural continuity with existing religions. Among the best possible candidates from the late antique period is Manichaeism, a movement that, based on the available evidence, seems to have achieved a certain degree of missionary success within a variety of cultural contexts, all within a relatively short period of time.

Born along the Fertile Crescent in 3rd century C.E. Mesopotamia, Mani (or Manichaeus) lived at the cross-roads of three great religious cultures of antiquity — Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. It was in this context that the “Prophet of Light” (as he came to be called) would found a new religion intended to supersede all previous revelations. It was a religion that proclaimed the existence of two eternally opposed principles, Light and Darkness, whose hostile relationship resulted in the creation of the world and the imprisonment of light particles within the dark elements of matter. This religion also proclaimed Mani as the final messenger of God, the Paraclete, or “Comfortor,” whom Jesus promised his Father would send to humanity. After his death in 277, Mani’s religion would spread westward into the Roman controlled areas of Egypt, North Africa, Italy, and Spain, as well as eastward along the Silk Road deep into Central Asia and eventually China.³ As the Manichaean message spread into new cultural areas, its carriers were quick to translate it into local languages and dialects, frequently absorbing many local cultural and religious characteristics in the process.

When viewed in terms of the concept of reception, the success of Manichaeism in Late Antiquity, however, raises a number of questions. First of all, did the incorporation of elements from previous religions by the “Religion of Light” make it adaptable and capable of being received by a diversity of regions and cultures? What elements were adapted by Mani from previous traditions in order to create this sense of continuity? And what impact did these elements have on the promotion and *reception* of the Manichaean movement? Such questions are some of the most controversial in the history of Manichaean Studies. In order to test the utility of the theory of reception for the study of Manichaeism, this paper will examine, in particular, whether or not the fundamental, prophetic continuity established by Mani between his revelation and all previous⁴ revelations helped or hindered the *reception* of Manichaeism in a variety of cultural and linguistic environments.

I. MANI’S PERCEPTION OF PREVIOUS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Mani’s relationship with other religious traditions was complex. While his early life as a member of the Jewish-Christian baptismal sect, known as the Elchasaites rooted him in Syro-Mesopotamian Christianity, the cultural and political environment into which he was born acquainted him not only with Zoroastrianism, the national

3. One of the most accessible historical accounts of Manichaeism in English is Samuel N.C. LIEU’s study: *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, revised ed., Tübingen, Mohr, 1992.

4. The term “previous” is meant to indicate religious traditions that both preceded and were contemporary with Mani and his movement.

religion of Persia, but also with the ideas of Buddhists. While what exactly Mani knew about these religious traditions is a notoriously thorny issue, one thing of which we are relatively certain is the degree to which he was convinced of the superiority of his own religious message in comparison with those to which he was exposed.

One of the most significant and fundamental aspects of Mani's religious worldview was the way in which he presented himself as the restorer of the revelations delivered by previous messengers such as Zarathustra (i.e., Zoroaster), Buddha, and Jesus.⁵ While on the one hand, Mani expressed what Ort has characterised as "a strong sense of continuity" with previous religious traditions,⁶ it is nevertheless a continuity that was coloured by a strong sense of superiority. In a surviving fragment from his *Shabuhragan*, a text composed by Mani in Middle-Persian for the Sassanid King Shapur I, the Prophet of Light proclaims: "Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to humankind by the messengers of God. So in one age they have been brought by the messenger called Buddha to India, in another by Zarādušt [i.e. Zarathustra] to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age, through me, Mani, messenger of the God of truth to Babylonia".⁷ These earlier revelations, he suggested, had been corrupted by the fact that their founders did not record their teachings in writing, but rather left them to be imperfectly preserved by their early followers.⁸ As a result, Mani decided to compose his own set of scriptures that would leave no room for dis-

-
5. Although the expression "Seal of the Prophets" is not attested in Manichaean literature, it was used by various medieval Muslim commentators such as al-Biruni, al-Mustada, and Shahrastani to describe Mani's claim of prophetic fulfillment. See H.-C. PUECH, *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979, p. 88, n. 49. See also Michel TARDIEU, *Le manichéisme*, Paris, PUF, 1981, p. 18-25.
 6. "In Mani's opinion the King of Light had never ceased to send his envoys into the world. Each era had its apostle. Four periods are mentioned explicitly by Mani: the period of Buddha; the era of Zarathustra; the period of Jesus; the era of Mani. From this enumeration we learn that Buddha, Zarathustra, Jesus and Mani do not differ essentially. Mani wants to say that they were all prophets and apostles. The names of Buddha, Zarathustra, and Jesus purposefully precede his own name. Mani does not dispute their authority. On the contrary, Mani even establishes the fact that Buddha, Zarathustra and Jesus were sent by the same King of Light as he was" (L.J.R. ORT, *Mani: A Religio-Historical Description of his Personality*, Leiden, Brill, 1967, p. 118).
 7. Sachau's translation cited by F.C. BURKITT, *The Religion of the Manichees*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1925, p. 37. This fragment from Mani's *Shabuhragan* is the earliest known witness to this proclamation.
 8. Such a sentiment is expressed in this fragmentary text from the *Kephalaia* 7.18-8.7: "At the time that [Jesus ...] walked [...] the land of the west [...] ...proc]laimed his hope [...] his disciples [...] which Jesus uttered [...] after him they wrote [...] his parables [...] ...] and the signs and wonders [...] they wrote a book concerning his [...] The apostle of] light, the splendrous enlightener, [...] he came to] Persia, up to Hystaspes the king [...] he chose d]isciples, righteous men of truf[h]... ... he proclaimed hi[s] hope in Persia; but [...] Zarathustra (did not) write books. Rather, hi[s] disciples who came a]fter him, they remembered; they wrote [...] that they read today [...] Again, for his part, when Buddha came, [...] about him, fo[r] he too proclaimed [his hope and] great wisdom. He cho[se] his chur[ches, and] perfected his churches. He unwe[iled] to them [his hope]. Yet, there is only this: that he d[id not] write his wi[sdom in bo]oks. His disciples, who came afte[r] him, are the ones who re[membered] the bit of the wisdom that they had heard from Buddha. They [wrote it in sc]riptures" (Iain GARDNER, trans., *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary*, Leiden, Brill, 1995, p. 13). See H.-J. POLOTSKY and A. BÖHLIG, ed., *Kephalaia: 1. Hälfte [Lieferung 1-10]*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1940, p. 7-8.

tortion and misrepresentation of what he believed to be the pure revelation of God of Truth to humanity.⁹

One of the most important statements outlining Mani's ambitious religious program can be found recorded in the recently edited *Kephalaion* 151, "On the Ten Advantages of the Manichaean Religion" :

[First :] He, who chose his church in the West, his church has not reached the East, and he, who has his church in the East, his choice has not reached the West [...]. But my hope is distinct, since it goes to the West and to the East. People hear the voice of her proclamation in all languages and they will proclaim her in all cities. My church surpasses in this first point the earlier churches. For the earlier churches were chosen in particular places and in particular cities, (while) my church is distinct, since she passes through [all] cities and her good message reaches every land. [Second :] My church is superior concerning the wisdom and the [mysteries] that I have revealed to you in her. This [immeasurable] wisdom I have written into the holy books¹⁰ — in the great [Gospel] and the other writings — so that it will not change after me. Just as I have written it in books, I have also commanded that it be depicted. For all [apostles], my brothers, who came before me, have [not] written their wisdom in books, as I have written it, and they [have also not] depicted their wisdom in the Image, as [I] have depicted it. My church surpasses [also in this point] the earlier churches.¹¹

Here Mani evokes the perceived historical disconnection of previous revelations and the need to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers in order to deliver his message. It is a striking sense of universality. His message will not be confined to a single land, a single city, or a single language, but will be brought to all lands, all cities, and proclaimed in every language. This startlingly *ecumencial* vision, however, would have major implications for the formulation and reception of the Manichaean missionary project.

II. MANI'S RECEPTION OF PREVIOUS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

In spite of Mani's strong sense of prophetic superiority, he does seem to have *received* a number of key elements of his teaching from previous religions. This situation raises a series of question that have long preoccupied scholars of Manichaeism :

9. See TARDIEU's discussion of the canonical works (*Le manichéisme*, p. 43-63).

10. Ironically, in spite of the fact that Mani did record his own revelation, little of this "canonical" Manichaean literature seems to have survived ; literature which included *The Gospel*, *The Treasure of Life*, *The Pragmaiteia*, *The Mysteries*, *The Book of Giants*, *The Letters*, and *The Psalms and Prayers* (TARDIEU, *Le manichéisme*, p. 64). Of Mani's own writings, we possess several fragmentary letters discovered at Medinet Madi and Kellis (forthcoming edition by Iain GARDNER and W.-P. FUNK), readings from his gospel (contained in the as yet unedited *Synaxeis* codex from Medinet Madi) as well as fragments of the semi-canonical *Shabuhragan* (discovered among the fragments from the Turfan excavations at the turn of the twentieth century). Most of the surviving original literature, such as the *Kephalaia*, *Homilies*, and *Psalm-book* from Medinet Madi, as well as the *Cologne Mani Codex* and more recent discoveries at Kellis, are works by some of his earliest disciples. The Turfan material, dated much later, is more difficult to evaluate in this regard.

11. *Kephalaia* 371.6-30 (Wolf-Peter FUNK, ed., *Kephalaia. Zweite Hälfte [Lieferung 15-16]*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2000).

1) What elements did he borrow or retain from other religions ? 2) Are they essential or superficial ?, and 3) How deliberate was the process of adaptation ?

As was stated above, Mani lived and preached in what was a cultural and intellectual cross-roads for Christians, Jews, Gnostics, Buddhists, and Brahmins.¹² A region which, according to Puech, constituted “le lieu de rencontre d’une prodigieuse variété de spéculations et de fois.”¹³ In response to such religious variety, Mani is reported to have undertaken a series of missionary voyages to India, Mesopotamia, and eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in order to learn the doctrines of various peoples.¹⁴ Surviving Manichaean literature records a number of incidents in which Mani encountered individuals from other religions and sects. For instance, in *Kephalaion* 89, Mani is questioned by a “Nazorean” who demands to know if the God to whom he prays is good or evil. This line of questioning, it seems, is apparently a trap intended to elicit a Marcionite response from Mani, since he responds that his god is a judge.¹⁵ Mani explains, however, that even though God is a judge, the punishment inflicted on the wicked is a result of their own evil deeds and not of God’s. In this case, the discussion occurs within explicitly Christian parameters. Mani even quotes Matthew 6:21 in support of his argument. In another incident, recorded in *kephalaion* 121, Mani encounters a representative from the obscure “Sect of the Basket (**NOBE**)” whom he somewhat obliquely chastises for calling himself a “son of the basket” even though he has not yet been plucked from the cosmic “tree.”¹⁶ An additional encounter can be found in *kephalaion* 341 from the unedited second volume of *Kephalaia*. In this incident, someone known as Pabakos, the “faithful Catechumen” asks Mani about issues of forgiveness and punishment by contrasting passages from the “Law of Zarathustra” in comparison with one of Jesus’ teachings he heard from Mani’s disciples.¹⁷ Episodes such as these suggest that Mani was less interested in discussion as in correction. Mani’s sense of the falsity of other religions is confirmed by a fragmentary passage from the (as yet unedited) *Synaxeis* codex, which likely contains liturgical readings from Mani’s own *Living Gospel*. In this passage, tentatively translated by W.-P. Funk and published by Karen King, Mani alludes to the

12. This diversity is witnessed by Kadir, Zoroastrian high-priest in the time of Mani, who records on one of his inscriptions how “the Jews, the Buddhists, the Brahmins, the Nazoreans, the Christians, the Baptists and the Manichaeans in the kingdom were struck down” (Richard N. FRYE, “Manichaean Notes,” in G. WIEBNER and H.-J. KLIMKEIT, ed., *Studia Manichaica II : Internationaler Kongreß zum Manichäismus. 6.-10. August 1989, St. Augustin/Bonn*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1992, p. 96-97).

13. H.-C. PUECH, *Le manichéisme : son fondateur, sa doctrine*, Paris, S.A.E.P., 1949, p. 42, 49.

14. LIEU, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 70 ff. See also TARDIEU, *Le manichéisme*, p. 26-32.

15. See GARDNER, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher*, p. 229. Marcion and his followers believed that the god of the Hebrew Scriptures was an inferior divinity of anger and judgement, in contrast with the transcendent God of love revealed by Jesus.

16. Gardner suggests that this may have been a sect of “fruitarians” (*ibid.*, p. 290).

17. This unpublished passage (2Keph 415:25-420:28) is cited by Wolf-Peter FUNK, “‘Einer aus tausend, zwei aus zehntausend’ : Zitate aus dem Thomasevangelium in den koptischen Manichaica,” in H.-G. BETHGE, ed. et al., *For the Children, Perfect Instruction : Studies in honour of Hans-Martin Schenke*, Leiden, Brill, 2002, p. 79-80.

many false religions in “the country of the sunrise,” i.e., the East, where he seems to have observed the practices “of the Brahmins.”¹⁸

What, then, was the result of such theological discussions? In light of the extremely rich religious milieu in which they occurred and in which Mani developed his ideas, it should not be surprising, especially if Mani considered himself to be the culmination of previous revelations, that the religious movement he founded appears to have inherited key elements from each of these religious traditions. Many scholars, however, have puzzled over which elements were essential and which were superficial. The thesis, particularly of Reitzenstein and later championed by G. Widengren,¹⁹ that Manichaeism was ultimately an Iranian religious phenomenon and, therefore, that Iranian elements constituted the core, was initially supported by the discovery at the turn of the twentieth century of primary texts from Turfan, written in a variety of Iranian dialects.²⁰ On the surface, these texts, with their use of Iranian religious vocabulary, create a strong impression that Mani’s movement was formulated in a distinctly Iranian milieu. Some deeper structures, however, do indeed appear to be of Iranian origin. For instance, the generally dualistic structure of Manichaean cosmology, i.e., the cosmic tension between the principles of Light and Darkness, is usually seen as being in continuity with prior Zoroastrian tradition.²¹ Yet when it comes to other apparently “Iranian” elements, the lines of influence could very well have been reversed.²² For example, as Skjaervo has pointed out, Mani was free to propagate his religious message for approximately thirty-five years, during which time Zoroas-

-
18. Karen KING, “A Progress Report on the Editing of the Manichaean *Synaxeis* Codex,” in M. RASSART and J. RIES, ed., *Actes du IV^e congrès copte : Louvain-la-Neuve, 5-10 septembre 1988*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Institut orientaliste, 1992, p. 287.
 19. Geo Widengren was the most outspoken advocate for the Iranian origin of Manichaeism. He considered any Buddhist or Christian elements to be mere “trimmings” overlain upon an essentially Iranian structure (See P.O. SKJAERVO, “Iranian Elements in Manichaeism: A Comparative Contrastive Approach. Irano-Manichaica I,” in *Au carrefour des religions : Mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux*, Bures-sur-Yvette (coll. “Res orientales,” 7), 1995, p. 264.
 20. See Julien RIES, *Les études manichéennes des controverses de la Réforme aux découvertes du XX^e siècle*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1988, p. 59-89.
 21. See also, I.M.F. GARDNER and S.N.C. LIEU, “From Narmouthis (Medinet Madi) to Kellis (Ismant el-Kharab) : Manichaean Documents from Roman Egypt,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 86 (1996), p. 147. See also Ugo BIANCHI, “Zoroastrian Elements in Manichaeism : The Question of Evil Substance,” in Peter BRYDER, ed., *Manichaean Studies*, Lund, Plus Ultra, 1988, p. 13-18. Werner SUNDERMANN, however, rightly cautions that the Zoroastrian influence on Manichaean doctrine has always been controversial (“How Zoroastrian Is Mani’s Dualism?,” in *Manichaica Iranica*, Rome, Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2001, p. 39). Nevertheless, Manichaean sources, especially the Iranian texts, displays an “intimate familiarity with the details of Zoroastrian doctrine” (“How Zoroastrian,” p. 40). It is certainly possible, as Skjaervo has stated, that Mani might have adapted the idea of dualism via an intermediary source such as Bardaisan or the *Paraphrase of Shem*, but in all likelihood this concept was derived from Zoroastrianism (SKJAERVO, “Iranian Elements,” p. 270-271). See, especially, Manichaean *Homilies* 70.2-9 : “[...] Zaradroušt, who [...] among the Persians [...] him before the king [...] how much on the part of the [...] he reveals [...] the two natures that fight [one another] (cited by SKJAERVO, “Iranian Elements,” p. 271).
 22. SKJAERVO has emphasis that when dealing with the question of (particularly Iranian) influence, some important considerations must be kept in mind such as defining “Manichaeism” not as a static construct but according to its stages of development. Also, he stresses that establishing a chronology of sources is paramount, since Zoroastrianism, although much older than Manichaeism, is known principally from later sources (“Iranian Elements,” p. 265-266).

trianism was experiencing a period of redefinition and consolidation.²³ It is, therefore, not impossible that the vivid myths of Manichaeism (which were proclaimed openly, especially under the supportive regime of Shapur I) might have had an impact on Zoroastrian discourse. In particular, W. Sundermann has shown that the demon Āz was borrowed by Zoroastrianism from Manichaeism.²⁴ In turn, the Manichaean figure of Āz was probably influenced by the Buddhist concept of Desire, as one of the passions. Thus, this example appears to be a case of a Buddhist element being integrated into Zoroastrianism via Manichaeism.²⁵ Other elements, such as the division between monk and lay person (if not the concept of monasticism itself), have been viewed as borrowings from Buddhism.²⁶

While the Iranian thesis held sway during much of the early twentieth century as an explanation of Manichaean origins, the discovery and publication of the famous *Cologne Mani Codex* caused a reorientation of the discipline. Even though F.C. Burkitt had suggested early on that “the living kernal of the Manichaean system” was ultimately derived from the Christian sensibilities of Marcion and Bardaisan,²⁷ the *Cologne Mani Codex* (“On the Origin of His Body”) depicts Mani as receiving

23. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. Werner SUNDERMANN, “Manichaeism Meets Buddhism: The Problem of Buddhist Influence on Manichaeism,” in *Manichaica Iranica*, p. 551. As for the concept of *metempsychosis* or the “transmigration of souls,” its origin has been debated. One important witness to this doctrine comes from the anti-Manichaean *Acta Archelai* 10, where it is described by Mani’s disciple and envoy, Turbo (HEGEMONIUS, *Acta Archelai*, ed. Charles Henry BEESON, Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung [coll. “Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller”], 1906, p. 15). For a catalogue of attestations of Manichaean metempsychosis see Giovanni Casadio, “The Manichaean Metempsychosis: Typology and Historical Roots,” *Studia Manichaica II*, p. 105-130. It is unclear, however, whether or not this doctrine was originally borrowed from Eastern thought, since it was also current among Pythagoreans in antiquity. The medieval Muslim scholar, Al-Biruni, states that Mani received the doctrine of *metempsychosis* as a result of his travels in India (cited by M.H. BROWDER, “Al-Biruni’s Manichaean Sources,” in Peter BRYDER, ed., *Manichaean Studies*, p. 21). Some modern scholars such as BURKITT (*The Religion of the Manichees*, p. 49) and A. BÖHLIG (“Zum Religionsgeschichtlichen Einordnung des Manichäismus,” in *Manichaean Studies*, p. 43-44) have seen little Buddhist influence on Mani himself, although the assimilation of Buddhist elements in later periods seems more probable. SUNDERMANN, who denies that this doctrine was derived from India (“Manichaeism Meets Buddhism,” p. 549), emphasises that Mani went to India *to teach* rather than to learn (“Mani, India,” p. 211). While LIEU suggests that Mani may have read about Buddhists in Bardaisan, he ultimately believes that Mani’s knowledge of Buddhism was superficial. The texts contain only “passing references and it is hazardous to argue from them that Mani had a deep knowledge of Buddhism” (*Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 72-73). Nevertheless, LIEU suggests that Manichaeism assimilated various features of Buddhism after its movement into Sogdian parts of Transoxiana (*ibid.*, p. 219-230), especially since the introduction of Buddhism into China greatly enriched its religious vocabulary, a vocabulary which Manichaeans would have no doubt adopted (S.N.C. LIEU, “From Parthian into Chinese,” in *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, Brill, 1998, p. 74). An interesting footnote to the question of Buddhist influence is the peculiar emphasis placed on Buddha as a prophetic forerunner in the passage from the unedited Dublin *Kephalaia* published by Michel TARDIEU, “La diffusion du bouddhisme dans l’empire Kouchan, l’Iran et la Chine, d’après un kephalaion manichéen inédit,” *Studia Iranica*, 17 (1988), p. 164. In this passage, Buddhism is described as “la loi de la vérité.” Does this mean that Buddhist teaching was viewed as somehow less contaminated?

27. F.C. BURKITT, *The Religion of the Manichees*, p. 14, 73-79.

his primary formation in the Judaeo-Christian sect known as the “Elchasaites.”²⁸ Add to this Mani’s self-designation as an “Apostle of Jesus Christ” in his surviving letters, as well as the many quotations from the New Testament in Coptic Manichaean literature, and the earliest stages of Manichaeism take on a particularly Christian hue.²⁹

Diverse elements such as dualism and the designation “Apostle of Jesus Christ” are present in the earliest sources and, thus, can reasonably be traced back to Mani himself. What, however, was at work behind the combination of these elements? Was it a deliberate synthesis formulated by a cunning missionary, or was it the unconscious product of a particularly creative religious visionary? K. Rudolph, for instance, has described this process as “conscious syncretism” and stated that the goal of Mani’s religion was “to be able to be amalgamated with other religions.”³⁰ This implies that Mani deliberately chose key elements from the religions which he knew and simply combined them into a new albeit highly adaptable frame. Skjaervo, however, has stressed that something less tangible was happening. Rather than merely combining disparate elements “into a composite structure,” Mani “melted (them) into an alloy in which the constituent elements are no longer separately identifiable.”³¹ This suggests that the process was somewhat more *organic* and that the quest to distil Manichaeism into its constituent parts is ultimately fruitless, since the elements which he might have borrowed were often altered beyond recognition. Skjaervo even goes so far as to tentatively suggest as an *axiom* that “whenever we detect Zoroastrian elements in Manichaeism we can be almost *certain* that their function in Zoroastrianism was different.”³² Yet in light of the definite sense of superiority with which Mani viewed his own revelation in relation to previous traditions, it seems to me that the development of Mani’s teaching was somewhere in between deliberate and instinctive. For instance, the fact that Mani believed that the revelations of Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus had been corrupted would seem to limit his desire or ability, as the restorer of authentic teaching, to borrow elements from previous traditions without substantial revision or, in his view, correction. On the other hand, his obviously intense desire to see his message receive as wide a distribution as possible (especially through translation)³³ suggests that he was open to deliberate adaptation. It may be impossible to accurately identify Mani’s true motivations for wanting to found a church for all lands and all peoples, although we can be relatively certain, particularly in light of the *Shabuhragan* fragment and the “Ten Advantages of the Manichaean

28. See A. HENRICHs and L. KOENEN, ed., *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex : Über das Werden seines Leibes. Kritische Edition*, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1988.

29. See *Epistula fundamenti* : “Manichaeus apostolus Jesu Christi...” (A. ADAM, ed., *Texte zum Manichäismus*, Berlin, Verlag Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969, p. 27) ; *Epistula ad Menoch* : “Manes apostolus Jesu Christi” (*ibid.*, p. 31). See also *Cologne Mani Codex* 66.4 ; and GARDNER and LIEU, “From Narmouthis,” p. 146.

30. Kurt RUDOLPH, *Gnosis : The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1987, p. 334.

31. “Iranian Elements,” p. 281.

32. *Ibid.*

33. The earliest example of this would be the composition of Mani’s *Shabuhragan* not in his native Syriac but in Middle Persian, the language of the Sassanid court.

Religion,” that as a religious teacher Mani had unusually broad horizons. Such horizons necessitated that he make his preaching as adaptable as possible, although without losing the core of his vivid prophetic vision.

As for the theory of reception, it may have some bearing on the formulation of Mani’s religious thought if it is slightly re-orientated. While people may be more likely to accept a new religion as long as it provides them with a sense of cultural and religious continuity, a new religion is just as likely to be formulated out of religious traditions to which the innovator is exposed. It just so happens that Mani was born into a particularly diverse historical and geographical context that enabled him to be exposed to a wide variety of religious ideas. These ideas were then forged into a new religious message aimed at restoring and fulfilling the previously revealed traditions.

III. MANI’S RECEPTION BY PREVIOUS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

While we have seen the ambiguity inherent in questions about how Mani formulated his religious message, the question of how this message was received by outsiders proves equally ambiguous.

Mission, it seems, was an essential facet of the Manichaean movement from the beginning.³⁴ Even during his lifetime, Mani not only organised his own missionary journeys, but is also reported to have dispatched missionaries such as Mar Ammo to the eastern regions³⁵ and Adda to Roman controlled areas.³⁶ While the Manichaean message seems to have evolved within a matrix of elements from several previous religious traditions, the missionary development of the movement appears to have deliberately made such elements even more acute. For example, when Manichaean missionaries penetrated into parts of the Roman Empire such as Egypt and North Africa (during the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E.), the Christian elements of the movement were highly emphasised as Manichaean writings were translated from their original Syriac into Coptic, Greek, and Latin.³⁷ For instance, a recently discovered Manichaean letter in Coptic from the so-called “Makarios family” states :

Our beloved daughter, the daughter of the holy church, the catechumen of the faith ; the good tree whose fruit never withers (Mt. 7:18), w[hi]ch is your love that emits [radian]ce every day. She has [gen]erated for herself her riches, [which] are stored in the treasures that are in [the] he[i]ghts, where moths shall not find a way, nor shall the thieves to go through to them to steal (Mt. 6:19-20) ; which (storehouses) are the sun and the moon.

34. For a discussion of Manichaean mission see LIEU, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, Chapter 3, “Mission and the Manichaean Church,” p. 86-120.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

36. *Ibid.*

37. The Coptic Manichaean *Psalm-book*, for instance, discovered in 1929 at Medinet Madi, is rich with Christian imagery and NT citations, especially the “Psalms to Jesus” (*A Manichaean Psalm-book*, C.R.C. ALLBERRY, ed., Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1938, p. 49-97). The decidedly Christian character of Manichaean communities in Egypt is evidenced by the Coptic and Greek documents recently recovered from the Manichaean community at Kellis. See Iain GARDNER, ed., *Kellis Literary Texts*, Vol. 1, Oxford, Oxbow, 1996 ; and Iain GARDNER, Anthony ALCOCK and Wolf-Peter FUNK, ed., *Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis*, Vol. 1, P. Kell. Vol. (P. Kell. Copt. 10-52 ; O. Kell. Copt. 1-2), Oxford, Oxbow, 1999.

She whose deeds resemble her name, [my] daughter, peace. I am your [fa]ther who writes to you in Go[d]. Greetings.³⁸

To an outsider, there is little in this portion of the letter to suggest anything other than Christian sentiment. Yet to the insider, key words such as “catechumen,” “treasuries,” “sun” and “moon” indicate the Manichaean authorship. In fact, this branch of the movement considered itself to be the authentic Christian church in opposition to the mainstream Christian churches, which Manichaeans viewed as perpetually mired in controversy and heresy. As early as the *Acta Archelai* and especially by the time of Augustine, the well-attested debates between mainstream Christians and Manichaeans in the West revolved principally around the exegesis of canonical scriptural texts such as the Genesis creation story or the New Testament corpus.³⁹ As Manichaeism spread into the east, and Manichaean literature developed in Middle Iranian, Turkish, and eventually Chinese,⁴⁰ the movement began to accumulate and assimilate more overt elements of, first, Zoroastrianism, and then Buddhism.⁴¹ For example, a bilingual (Tocharian B and Turkish) hymn to Mani discovered at Turfan integrates explicit elements from both traditions: “Like the diadem of the God Ohrmizd, / Like the garland of the God Zurvan, / Bright in appearance is my Father, the Buddha Mani / Therefore I praise and worship you so.”⁴² Similarly, a Parthian text from Turfan reads: “Awake, brethren, you chosen ones, on this day of the salvation of souls, the fourteenth (day) of the month of Mihr, on which Jesus, the Son of God, entered Parinirvāna.”⁴³ By way of contrast, Nestorian missionaries active in Central Asia and China tended to avoid the use of explicitly Buddhist terms in their efforts at translation, opting instead for newly coined vocabulary. It is perhaps not surprising then that, as Lieu has stated, the “missionary success of Nestorianism was ... limited.”⁴⁴ In light of this contrast, it may be asked whether the willingness by Manichaeans to adapt pre-existing terminology influenced their ability to succeed in ever more remote missionary contexts? The most common response would be Yes.

38. GARDNER and LIEU, “From Narmouthis,” p. 167.

39. See HEGEMONIUS, *Acta Archelai* (BEESON). See also J. ZYCHA’s edition of AUGUSTINE’s anti-Manichaean works CSEL 25.1-2 (1891-1892). For the degree to which Roman Manichaeans appeared Christian, see the excerpts from the Manichaean teacher Faustus in AUGUSTINE’s *Contra Faustum*.

40. The most easily accessible selection of texts from this highly specialised branch of Manichaean studies can be found in H.-J. KLIMKEIT’s *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from the Silk Road*, New York, HarperCollins, 1993. According to SUNDERMANN, the most important Buddhist influence on Manichaeism in later periods was the imitation of its confessional and parable literature (“Manichaeism Meets Buddhism,” p. 552-553).

41. Ort points out how the Chinese Manichaean *Compendium* “uses so many Buddhist terms that the Chinese readers thought that Manichaeism was a Buddhist sect” (*Mani*, Leiden, Brill, 1967, p. 155).

42. KLIMKEIT, *Gnosis*, p. 285. Peter BRYDER has examined whether the adaptation of names and motifs from other religions constitutes an actual “transformation” of the religion or merely its “translation” and “transmission” into a set of linguistic and religious equivalents (“Transmission, Translation, Transformation,” in *Studia Manichaica II*, p. 334-341). Bryder suggests that the exercise of translation between languages as distinct as Parthian and Chinese required a considerable amount of conceptual flexibility.

43. KLIMKEIT, *Gnosis*, p. 71.

44. LIEU, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 233.

Modern historical accounts of Manichaeism have tended to describe a highly successful religious movement, especially in light of sources from Central Asia. Sogdian traders active along the Silk Road are thought to have been particularly influential in the dissemination of the movement and facilitated the exchange not only of goods but stories and religious ideas between east and west.⁴⁵ Manichaeism, it is suggested, achieved its greatest success under the Uighur kingdom of Qocho, where it constituted the state religion until the coming of Islam. Ultimately, this modern Manichaean historical narrative ends in China where adherents discretely integrated themselves into Chinese society, taking on especially the appearance of Taoism. Our last records of the movement come from the south coast of China, where the followers of the “Buddha of Light” seem to have endured until the 15th or 16th centuries.⁴⁶

This account, however, is proving to be a somewhat romanticised version of Manichaean history. Perhaps it is the result of a latent sympathy for the underdog that seeks to cheer on the persecuted “gnostics” towards the successful formation of a gnostic “world religion,” but nevertheless the contention that Manichaeism ought to be “regarded as one of the four world religions known to the history of religions”⁴⁷ is sometimes overstated. To be sure, the “Religion of Light” was certainly influential in theological, literary, and even commercial history, although the *actual* extent of its success is gradually being re-examined. For instance, a recent study by Xavier Tremblay, suggests that in the Central Asian context Manichaeism influenced only a small elite of Sogdian merchants and part of the Uighur court, was less successful than Buddhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, and, in fact, of the four religions attested at Turfan, was “la dernière venue et la première disparue.”⁴⁸ A similar analysis could be developed for Manichaeism in the West, which seems to have drawn adherents primarily from elite intellectuals such as Augustine and Faustus in North Africa and Rome or literate merchants such as the “Makarios” family in Egypt.

A particularly telling example of how poorly Manichaeism seems to have been received is attested by *kephalaion* 76 (183.10-188.29), “Concerning the Lord Manichaos : How He Journeyed.” In this text, a disciple named Aurades, frustrated by the fact that Mani is continually being called upon by King Shapur, asks why there are not two Manis, one to remain with the disciples and one to deal with Shapur. In response, Mani essentially states that the world cannot even endure one Mani since he has been met with continual opposition throughout his travels through India, Persia, Mesene, and Babylon : “Indeed I, a single Mani, came to the world. All the cities

45. *Ibid.*, p. 225. For instance, the Christianised legend of the Buddha known as Barlaam and Iosaphat is thought to have passed through Sogdian, Armenian, etc., into its eventual Greek version. While a substantial amount of Manichaean literature survives in Sogdian, there are also Nestorian and Buddhist texts in this important Central Asian language. See LIEU, “Manichaean Art and Texts from the Silk Road,” in *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, p. 25.

46. LIEU, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 242-262.

47. RUDOLPH, *Gnosis*, p. 327.

48. Xavier TREMBLAY, *Pour une histoire de la Sérende : Le manichéisme parmi les peuples et religions d'Asie Centrale d'après les sources primaires*, Vienna, Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001, p. 15.

[of the] world stirred, they shook. (The world) did not wi[sh to] acce[pt m]e ; unless I humbled its rebelliousness [...]. And thus, if tw[o] Manis had [come] to the world, what place would be able to tolerate them, or [what land] would [be able] to accept them ?”⁴⁹ Whether or not these words come from Mani himself is not known, but they do indicate a certain lack of success on the part of the early Manichaean movement. Another example, which we may be able to attribute directly to Mani since it comes from the *Syanxeis* codex, comes from the passage cited above. Here, Mani describes how he attempted to establish his own teaching and practice in the East, although the Brahmins apparently could not let go of their own traditions.⁵⁰ This lack of success, however, seems to have had a re-enforcing value for members of the community, since it only served to confirm the wickedness of the cosmos and the need to endure adversity through fidelity to Mani’s teachings — a common theme of the *Kephalaia*. Indeed, as Mani counsels his disciples in *kephalaion* 76 : “Blessed are you i[f] you make yourselves strong in this truth that I have given to you ; so that you may be [confirmed] in it, in the life which continues for ever and ever.”⁵¹

Chronic persecution is perhaps the most decisive factor that limited reception of Manichaeism both East and West. Evidence suggests that the movement continually drew the wrath of the religious⁵² and political elite who sought to preserve their respective orthodoxies in the face of religious innovation.⁵³ Indeed as Stroumsa and Stroumsa have pointed out : “For more than half a millennium, from its birth in the third century throughout late antiquity and beyond, (Manichaeism) was despised and rejected with the utmost violence by rulers and thinkers belonging to all shades of the spiritual and religious spectrum.”⁵⁴ The result was continual persecution by Persian, Roman,⁵⁵ and Chinese imperial authorities,⁵⁶ and the eventual extinction of the “Religion of Light.” This situation does not quite fit the profile of a successful (“gnostic”) world religion. Rather, it bespeaks of a continuous rejection by those with whom Manichaeans attempted to make a religious and cultural connection.

49. GARDNER, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher*, p. 196. See POLOTSKY and BÖHLIG, *Kephalaia*, 187.27-29 ; 188.4-6.

50. KING, “Progress Report,” p. 287.

51. GARDNER, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher*, p. 197. See POLOTSKY and BÖHLIG, *Kephalaia*, 188.16-18.

52. For an account of Christian anti-Manichaean writings see S.N.C. LIEU, “Some Themes in Later Roman anti-Manichaean Polemics,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 68, p. 434-472.

53. In addition to the *Homilies*, a leaf from the so-called *Acts* codex, published by Nils Arne PEDERSEN, describes the situation of persecution experienced by the movement following the death of Shapur. See “A Manichaean Historical Text,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 119 (1997), p. 197-198.

54. Sarah STROUMSA and Gedaliahu G. STROUMSA, “Aspects of Anti-Manichaean Polemics in Late Antiquity and Under Early Islam,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 81 (1988), p. 37.

55. For western political reactions see LIEU, Chapter 6, “The Most Persecuted of Heresies,” in *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 192-218.

56. For an account of Chinese reactions see S.N.C. LIEU, “Polemics against Manichaeism as a Subversive Cult in Sung China (A.D. c. 960-c. 1200),” in *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, p. 126-176.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While the ability of Manichaeism to adapt to new missionary contexts could be considered as a “built-in” feature of the movement, the fact that Mani, in his fundamental proclamation, emphasised the superiority of his own revelation, over those received by Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus, seems to have contributed to the limited success of the movement. This means that the attempt (conscious or otherwise) to establish a cultural and religious continuity with other religious traditions was not enough to guarantee lasting viability for the “Religion of Light.” Nevertheless, the fact that the Manichaean message was formulated with such a far-reaching view of the world is utterly unique in late antique religious history and points to someone with a genius for mission and the foresight to see far beyond cultural and political borders.

As was stated at the outset, “reception” theory suggests that a new or previously unknown literary work or religious movement should be able to be gauged in relation to the individual’s “horizon of expectations.” In the literary context, this means that previous reading, understanding of genres and themes, etc., should impact an individual’s positive, negative, or indifferent reaction to a newly encountered work.⁵⁷ By extension to the religious context, people should be “more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they already are familiar.”⁵⁸ Stark, for instance, has argued that the early Christian mission to Jews of the Diaspora likely succeeded due to Christianity’s continuity with Judaism. Even though something innovative was being offered, the continuity established between the religious innovation and a previously existing tradition facilitated its acceptance. This case provides some interesting parallels to Manichaeism, since like Manichaeism the early Christian proclamation was eventually formulated in a way that emphasised its superiority to and fulfilment of Judaism, while at the same time insisting on a cultural and religious continuity through the acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures. This, according to Stark, certainly contributed to the success of Christianity among the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, yet what about other segments of late antique society? Here, it seems that other factors played an important role, such as the ability of Christians to more effectively respond to crises and epidemics,⁵⁹ as well as the wider range of social options initially afforded to women.⁶⁰ By way of contrast, the Manichaean abhorrence of the cosmos and the view of women as perpetrators of the imprisonment of light through procreation would have had less appeal.

In sum, it would seem that the utility of the theory of reception in gauging the success of Manichaeism is somewhat limited. While the movement certainly did have some appeal among literate and mercantile segments of the ancient populous, the

57. JAUSS, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 22-25.

58. STARK, “The Mission to the Jews : Why It Probably Succeeded,” in *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 55.

59. ID., “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion,” in *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 73-94.

60. See ID., “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” in *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 95-128.

cultural continuity it attempted to establish was ultimately insufficient to win a broader base of support. In addition, the fact that both Rome and Persia were at the same time formulating their own imperial religious ideologies meant that any movement attempting to supersede these orthodoxies could never achieve the government support necessary for widespread implementation. Nevertheless, in spite of its limited success “on the ground,” the dualistic message proclaimed by Mani continued to influence the development of various religious traditions by haunting the imagination of Christian, Zoroastrian, and Muslim theologians for centuries to come.