

Mani (prophet)

Mani (in Middle Persian *Māni* and Kurdish: *Manî*, Syriac *Mānī*, Greek *Μάνης*, Latin *Manes*; also *Μανχάιος*, Latin *Manichaeus*, from Syriac *ܡܢܝܗܐܝܝܐ ܡܢܝܗܐܝܝܐ* *Mānī ḥayyā* “Living Mani”, c. 216–274 CE), of Iranian origin,^{[3][4][5][6]} was the prophet and the founder of Manichaeism, a gnostic religion of Late Antiquity which was once widespread but is now extinct. Mani was born in or near Seleucia-Ctesiphon in Parthian Babylonia,^[1] at the time still part of the Parthian Empire. Six of his major works were written in Syriac Aramaic, and the seventh, dedicated to the Sassanid shahanshah, Shapur I, was written in Middle Persian.^[7] He died in Gundeshapur, under the Sassanid Empire.

1 Sources

Until the 20th century, no reliable information on Mani’s biography was known. Such medieval accounts as were known are either legendary or hagiographical, such as the account in *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadim, purportedly by al-Biruni, or were anti-Manichaean polemics, such as the 4th century *Acta Archelai*. Among these medieval accounts, Ibn al-Nadim’s account of Mani’s life and teachings is generally speaking the most reliable and exhaustive. Notable in this account is the near-complete absence of the “Third Ambassador”, who is merely mentioned with the name *bašīr*, “messenger of good news”, and the absence of the topos of “Mani the Painter” (which in other Islamic accounts almost completely replaces that of “the founder of a religion”).^[8]

In 1969 in Upper Egypt a Greek parchment codex dating to ca. 400 CE was discovered. It is now designated *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis* because it is conserved at the University of Cologne. It combines a hagiographic account of Mani’s career and spiritual development with information about Mani’s religious teachings, and contains fragments of his writings.

2 Life

This work and other evidence discovered in the 20th century establishes Mani as a historical individual.^[9]

Mani was born near Seleucia-Ctesiphon, perhaps in the town *Mardinu* in the Babylonian district of *Nahr Kutha*, according to other accounts in the town *Abrumya*. Mani’s father Pātik (Middle Persian *Pattūg*;^[10] Greek Παττικός,

Arabic *Futtuq*), a native of Ecbatana^[11] (modern Hamadan, Iran), was a member of the Jewish-Christian sect of the Elcesaites (a subgroup of the Gnostic Ebionites). His mother was of Parthian^{[12][13]} descent (from “the Armenian Arsacid family of Kamsarakan”^[14]); her name is reported variously, among others *Mariam*.

At ages 12 and 24, Mani had visionary experiences of a “heavenly twin” of his, calling him to leave his father’s sect and preach the true message of Christ. In 240–41, Mani travelled to “India” (i.e. to the Sakhas in modern-day Afghanistan), where he studied Hinduism and was probably influenced by Greco-Buddhism. Al-Biruni says Mani traveled to India after being banished from Persia.^[15] Returning in 242, he joined the court of Shapur I, to whom he dedicated his only work written in Persian, known as the *Shabuhrgan*. Shapur was not converted to Manichaeanism and remained Zoroastrian.^[16]

Shapur’s successor Hormizd I (who reigned only for one year) appears to have continued to patronize Mani, but his successor Bahram I, a follower of the Zoroastrian reformer Kartir, began to persecute the Manichaeans. He incarcerated Mani, who died in prison within a month, in 274 CE.^[17] Mani’s followers depicted Mani’s death as a crucifixion in a conscious analogy to the death of Christ; Al-Biruni says that Bahram ordered the execution of Mani. He was flayed alive and his skin stuffed with straw, was nailed to a cross and suspended over the main gate of the great city of Jundishapur as a terrifying spectacle for those who followed his teachings. His corpse was decapitated and the head placed on a spike. Bahram also ordered the killing of many Manicheans.^[18]

3 Works

The canon of Mani included six works originally written in Syriac, and one in Persian, the *Shapuraḡan*. While none of his books have survived in complete form, there are numerous fragments and quotations of them, including a long Syriac quotation from one of his works, as well as a large amount of material in Middle Persian, Coptic, and numerous other languages. Examples of surviving portions of his works include: the *Shabuhrgan* (Middle Persian), the *Book of Giants* (numerous fragments in many languages), the *Fundamental Epistle* (quoted in length by Saint Augustine), a number of fragments of his *Living Gospel* (or *Great Gospel*), a Syriac excerpt quoted by Theodore Bar Konai, and his *Letter to Edessa* contained in the *Cologne Mani-Codex*. Mani also wrote the

book *Arzhang*, a holy book of Manichaeism unique in that it contained many drawings and paintings to express and explain the Manichaeist creation and history of the world.

4 Teaching

Main article: [Manichaeism](#)

Mani's teaching is designed as succeeding and surpassing the teachings of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. It is based on a rigid dualism of good and evil, locked in eternal struggle.

In his mid-twenties, Mani decided that salvation is possible through education, self-denial, fasting and chastity. Mani claimed to be the *Paraclete* promised in the New Testament, and the Last Prophet. On what is known of Mani's theology, the following points are made regarding especially Christianity.

While his religion was not strictly a movement of Christian Gnosticism in the earlier mode, Mani did declare himself to be an "apostle of Jesus Christ", and extant Manichaean poetry frequently extols Jesus and his mother, Mary, with the highest reverence. Manichaean tradition is also noted to have claimed that Mani was the reincarnation of different religious figures including Zoroaster, the historical Buddha, as well as Jesus.

Mani's followers were organized in a church structure, divided into a class of "elects" (*electi*) and "auditors" (*auditores*). Only the *electi* are required to follow the laws strictly, while the *auditores* care for them, hoping to become *electi* in their turn after reincarnation.

5 Christian and Muslim tradition

5.1 Late Antique Christian accounts

The Christian tradition of Mani is based on Socrates of Constantinople, a historian writing in the 5th century. According to this account, one Scythianos, a Saracen, husband of an Egyptian woman, "introduced the doctrine of Empedocles and Pythagoras into Christianity"; that he had a disciple, "Buddas, formerly named Terebinthus," who travelled in Persia, where he alleged that he had been born of a virgin, and afterwards wrote four books, one of Mysteries, a second The Gospel, a third The Treasure, and a fourth Heads. While performing some mystic rites, he was hurled down a precipice by a daimon, and killed. A woman at whose house he lodged buried him, took over his property, and bought a boy of seven, named Cubricus. This boy she freed and educated, leaving him the property and books of Buddas-Terebinthus. Cubricus then travelled into Persia, where he took the name of Manes

and gave forth the doctrines of Buddas Terebinthus as his own. The king of Persia, hearing that he worked miracles, sent for him to heal his sick son, and on the child's dying put Manes in prison. Thence he escaped, flying into Mesopotamia, but was traced, captured, and flayed alive by the Persian king's orders, the skin being then stuffed with chaff and hung up before the gate of the city.

For this narrative, Socrates gives as his authority "The Disputation [with Manes] of Archelaus bishop of Caschar," a work either unknown to or disregarded by Eusebius, who in his *History* (vii.31) briefly vilifies Manes without giving any of the above details. In the *Chronicon* of Eusebius the origin of the sect is placed in the second year of Probus, AD 277.^[19] According to Jerome, Archelaus wrote his account of his disputation with "Manichæus" in Syriac, whence it was translated into Greek. The Greek is lost, and the work, apart from extracts, subsists only in a Latin translation from the Greek, of doubtful age and fidelity, probably made after the 5th century. By Photius it is stated that Heraclian, bishop of Chalcedon, in his book against the Manichæans, said the *Disputation of Archelaus* was written by one Hegemonius, an author not otherwise traceable, and of unknown date.

In the Latin narrative, "Manes" is said to have come, after his flight from court, from Arabion, a frontier fortress, to Caschar or Carchar, a town said to be in Roman Mesopotamia, in the hope of converting an eminent Christian there, named Marcellus, to whom he had sent a letter beginning: "Manichæus apostle of Jesus Christ, and all the saints and virgins with me, send peace to Marcellus." In his train he brought twenty-two (or twelve) youths and virgins. At the request of Marcellus, he debated on religion with bishop Archelaus, by whom he was vanquished; whereupon he set out to return to Persia. On his way he proposed to debate with a priest at the town of Diodorides; but Archelaus came to take the priest's place, and again defeated him; whereupon, fearing to be given up to the Persians by the Christians, he returned to Arabion.

At this stage Archelaus introduces in a discourse to the people his history of "this Manes," very much to the effect of the recapitulation in Socrates. Among the further details are these: that Scythianus lived "in the time of the Apostles"; that Terebinthus said the name of Buddas had been imposed on him; that in the mountains he had been brought up by an angel; that he had been convicted of imposture by a Persian prophet named Parcus, and by Labdacus, son of Mithra; that in the disputation he taught concerning the sphere, the two luminaries, the transmigration of souls, and the war of the *Principia* against God; that "Corbicius" or Corbicus, about the age of sixty, translated the books of Terebinthus; that he made three chief disciples, Thomas, Addas, and Hermas, of whom he sent the first to Egypt, and the second to Scythia, keeping the third with him; that the two former returned when he was in prison, and that he sent them to procure for him the books of the Christians, which he then studied. Accord-

ing to the Latin narrative, finally, Manes on his return to Arabion was seized and taken to the Persian king, by whose orders he was flayed, his body being left to the birds, and his skin, filled with air, hung at the city gate.^[20]

5.2 Medieval Muslim accounts



Painter Mani presenting king Bukhram-Gur (Bahram) with his drawing. 16th-century painting by Ali-Shir Nava'i, *Shakrukhiya* (Tashkent).

Mani is described as a painter who set up a sectarian movement in opposition to Zoroastrianism. He was persecuted by Shapur I and fled to Central Asia, where he made disciples and embellished with paintings a *Tchighil* (or *picturarum domus Chinensis*) and another temple called *Ghalbita*. Provisioning in advance a cave which had a spring, he told his disciples he was going to heaven, and would not return for a year, after which time they were to seek him in the cave in question. They then and there found him, whereupon he showed them an illustrated book, called *Ergenk*, or *Estenk Arzhang*, which he said he had brought from heaven: whereafter he had many followers, with whom he returned to Persia at the death of Shapur. The new king, Hormisdas, joined and protected the sect; and built Mani a castle. The next king, Bahram or Varanes, at first favoured Mani; but, after getting him to debate with certain Zoroastrian teachers, caused him to be flayed alive, and the skin to be stuffed and hung up. Thereupon most of his followers fled to India and China.

6 See also

- Mar Ammo
- *Cologne Mani-Codex*
- Mandaicism
- *Gospel of Mani*

- *The Gardens of Light*
- Arzhang

7 References

- [1] Taraporewala, I.J.S., *Manichaeism*, Iran Chamber Society, retrieved 2015-01-12
- [2] *SASANIAN DYNASTY*, retrieved 2015-01-12
- [3] Boyce, Mary (2001), *Zoroastrians: their religious beliefs and practices*, Routledge, p. 111, He was Iranian, of noble Parthian blood...
- [4] Ball, Warwick (2001), *Rome in the East: the transformation of an empire*, Routledge, p. 437, Manichaeism was a syncretic religion, proclaimed by the Iranian Prophet Mani.
- [5] Sundermann, Werner (2009), "Mani, the founder of the religion of Manicheism in the 3rd century CE", *Iranica*, Sundermann, According to the Fehrest, Mani was of Arsacid stock on both his father's and his mother's sides, at least if the readings al-ḥaskāniya (Mani's father) and al-as'āniya (Mani's mother) are corrected to al-aškāniya and al-ašgāniya (ed. Flügel, 1862, p. 49, ll. 2 and 3) respectively. The forefathers of Mani's father are said to have been from Hamadan and so perhaps of Iranian origin (ed. Flügel, 1862, p. 49, 5–6). The Chinese Compendium, which makes the father a local king, maintains that his mother was from the house Jinsajian, explained by Henning as the Armenian Arsacid family of Kamsarakan (Henning, 1943, p. 52, n. 4 = 1977, II, p. 115). Is that fact, or fiction, or both? The historicity of this tradition is assumed by most, but the possibility that Mani's noble Arsacid background is legendary cannot be ruled out (cf. Scheftelowitz, 1933, pp. 403–4). In any case, it is characteristic that Mani took pride in his origin from time-honored Babel, but never claimed affiliation to the Iranian upper class.
- [6] Bausani, Alessandro (2000), *Religion in Iran: from Zoroaster to Baha'ullah*, Bibliotheca Persica Press, p. 80, We are now certain that Mani was of Iranian stock on both his father's and his mother's side.
- [7] Henning, W.B., *The Book of Giants*, BSOAS, Vol. XI, Part 1, 1943, pp. 52–74: "...Mani, who was brought up and spent most of his life in a province of the Persian empire, and whose mother belonged to a famous Parthian family, did not make any use of the Iranian mythological tradition. There can no longer be any doubt that the Iranian names of Sām, Narīmān, etc., that appear in the Persian and Sogdian versions of the Book of the Giants, did not figure in the original edition, written by Mani in the Syriac language."
- [8] W. Sundermann, "Al-Fehrest, iii. Representation of Manicheism.", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 1999.
- [9] Böhlig, *Manichäismus*, 5ff.
- [10] D. N. MacKenzie. A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary. Routledge Curzon, 2005.

- [11] Encyclopædia Britannica. Mani (Iranian religious leader) (2011)
- [12] Henning, W.B., *The Book of Giants*, BSOAS, Vol. XI, Part 1, 1943, pp. 52–74: “It is noteworthy that Mani, who was brought up and spent most of his life in a province of the Persian empire, and whose mother belonged to a famous Parthian family, did not make any use of the Iranian mythological tradition. There can no longer be any doubt that the Iranian names of Sām, Narīmān, etc., that appear in the Persian and Sogdian versions of the Book of the Giants, did not figure in the original edition, written by Mani in the Syriac language.”
- [13] W. Eilers (1983), “Iran and Mesopotamia” in E. Yarshater, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 500: “Mani, a Parthian on his mother’s side, was born at Ctesiphon in the last decade of the Arsacid era (AD 216). ”
- [14] Sundermann, Werner (2009), “Mani, the founder of the religion of Manicheism in the 3rd century CE”, *Iranica*, ...his mother was from the house Jinsajian, explained by Henning as the *Armenian Arsacid family of Kamsarakan*.
- [15] Al-Biruni(translator:Edward Sachau) (1910). *Al Beruni's India*. London.
- [16] Marco Frenschkowski (1993). “Mani (iran. Mānī<; gr. Μάνιχαῖος < ostaram. Mānī ḥayyā »der lebendige Mani«)”. In Bautz, Traugott. *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon (BBKL)* (in German) 5. Herzberg: Bautz. cols. 669–80. ISBN 3-88309-043-3.
- [17] <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-the-name-of-six-sasanian-kings>
- [18] Al-Biruni. *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*.
- [19] the passage is attributed to Jerome by Tillemont and Lardner (Works, ed. 1835, iii, 256, 261).
- [20] John M. Robertson, *Pagan Christs* (2nd ed. 1911), § 14. The Problem of Manichæus, online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com>
- Asmussen, Jes Peter, comp., *Manichæan Literature: Representative Texts, Chiefly from Middle Persian and Parthian Writings*, 1975, Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, ISBN 978-0-8201-1141-4.
 - Alexander Böhlig, 'Manichäismus' in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 22 (1992), 25–45.
 - Amin Maalouf, *The Gardens of Light* [Les Jardins de Lumière], translated from French by Dorothy S. Blair, 242 p. (Interlink Publishing Group, New York, 2007). ISBN 1-56656-248-1

8 External links

- Manichæist art - University of Washington
- “Mani and Manichæism in the J.R.Ritman Library”

