Also Schrieb Zarathustra?
Mani As Interpreter of the ‘Law of Zarades’

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At the beginning of Kephalaion 341, the ‘faithful catechumen’ Pabakos, apparently a well-connected member of King Shapur’s court, poses a question to Mani, quoting three sayings from a written source that he refers to as the ‘law of Zarades’ (ⲡⲛⲟⲙⲟⲥ ⲛ̄ⲍⲁⲣⲏⲥ):

... I am asking you about what is written in the law of Zarades (The Law of Zarades?) like this: ‘Anyone who says that this law is not true [will (be excluded)] from the light’. And again, I (ask you about) the law of Zarades: ‘Whoever says that the land of light does not exist, he is one who will not see the land of light’. And again he says: ‘Whoever says that no end will come about, that is the one whom no end will befall’. So, these three sayings Zarades has proclaimed in the law.

This striking passage immediately raises questions about the nature of the ‘law of Zarades’. Was it an Iranian text recognized by Mani and his followers, perhaps in translation, analogous to their use of Jesus traditions? Is it a title (i.e., The Law of Zarades), or merely an interpretive gloss, based on the Manichaean understanding of nomos? The assertion that Zarades proclaimed the three sayings suggests that he was their original expounder; but when and how did they achieve written form? And what does the subsequent dialogue with Pabakos, as well as the role of the ‘law of Zarades’ in the decisive conflict with Kartīr and Bahram, contribute to our understanding of early Manichaeism?

After quoting from the ‘law of Zarades’, Pabakos next cites a saying of Jesus he has learned from Mani’s disciples, a warning that sins against the Spirit are

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1 2 Ke 416, 2–10 / g278.
unforgiveable. This is closest in form to Gospel of Thomas logion 44. In the ensuing discussion, Mani cites various other sayings of Jesus (‘the savior’), all of them with clear gospel parallels. He compares these to the ‘law of Zarades’, which, in contrast, is not readily identifiable with any surviving ancient literature. As I will argue in this chapter, although the Chester Beatty Kephalaia (hereafter 2 Ke) was produced in the Roman empire, there is no similarity in content with those Greek or Latin fragments attributed to Zoroaster, with whom Zarades is sometimes identified. The ‘law of Zarades’ has closer affinities to, but is not identical with, the surviving Pahlavi Zand, which is often attributed to Zarathustra, from whose name Zarades derives. The lack of an exact match is not surprising, as both the extant Avesta and its Zand were written down much later, in the fifth or sixth century. Mani’s rival Kartīr drew upon oral traditions in his inscriptions that similarly reflect, but do not correspond exactly to, the later Zand. The ‘law of Zarades’ is thus important evidence for a written compilation of Zarathustra-traditions predating the compilation of the Avestan canon by several centuries.

The quotation and subsequent discussion of the ‘law of Zarades’ in 2 Ke 416, including the related material in the following four chapters (2 Ke 342–345), also reveals a great deal about the background and strategies of Mani and his early followers. It is not the only evidence for Manichaean adaption of Mazdayasnian tradition, which has generally been recognized by classicists, historians of religion, and Iranists alike, though with varying estimations of its importance. There are even references to the Nask and the Gāthās in Manichaean literature, but only in Middle Persian and Parthian texts, (see below). The passage from 2 Ke suggests that this interaction with Zarathustra traditions can be traced back to the founder himself, or at least the early community in its Mesopotamian

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2 2 Ke 416, 11–16 / G278. On the connection of the Jesus tradition quoted by Pabakos to the Gospel of Thomas see Funk 2002.
3 2 Ke 416, 11–12 / G278. There is a lacuna where ‘[law] of Jesus’ is a possible restoration, but this phrase does not appear elsewhere in the Coptic Manichaica.
4 Agathias, Histories 2, 23–25 (Bidez and Cumont 1938: II 83–86, text D 11; Vasunia 2007: 48–51, text 5); see the discussion below, in Part II.
5 I use the term Zarathustra to refer generally to the Iranian sage first mentioned in the Avesta; Zarades when discussing the Coptic ‘law of Zarades’ and related literature; and Zoroaster when discussing Graeco-Roman pseudepigrapha. On the name Zarathustra and its various derivatives, see most recently discussion by Schmitt 2002.
6 Skjaervø 2011.
7 See e.g. Koenen 1986 and Merkelbach 1986 (Classics); Rudolph 1972 and Tardieu 1981 (History-of-Religions); and Skjaervø 1995(a) and Sundermann 2009(a) (Iranology).