Chapter 4

Primal Man, Son of God: From Explicit to Implicit Christian Elements in Manichaeism*

Fernando Bermejo

Probably every scholar will agree that among the main influences on Mani’s religion not only Zoroastrian but also Christian elements are to be detected.¹ We can draw this conclusion from Manichaean sources—even more after the publication of the writing entitled On the Origin of his Body (Cologne Mani Codex)—and also from non-Manichaean (Pagan, Christian, and Muslim) evidence.² If the possible influence of Buddhist and perhaps also Jain aspects in the formative period of Manichaeism is more controversial, the presence of the other aforementioned influences seems to be beyond doubt.

Of course, the extent and importance of that Christian influence is the real problem.³ For instance, Werner Sundermann has concluded not only the relevance of the Jesus figure in Manichaean sources—there following the path of other scholars—, but he has also pointed out that most of the aspects of Jesus could be replaced by more exact mythological entities, such as Jesus the Splendour by the Great Nous or Jesus Patibilis by the Living Soul.⁴ In this

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¹ For a recent overview of this last issue, especially from the perspective of the history of research, see F. Bermejo, “Factores cristianos en el maniqueísmo: status quaestionis (Christian-manichaica i)”, Revista Catalana de Teología 32/1 (2007) 67–99.

² The oldest preserved refutation of Mani’s doctrines, the treatise by Alexander of Lycopolis Πρὸς τὰς Μανιχαίου δέξεις, already described Manichaeism as a Christian trend.

³ Given the astonishing range of early Christianity’s diversity, the unspecified terms “Christian” and “Christianity” will mean in the following usually “the Great Church” (“die Grosskirche”), “Catholic”, “Proto-orthodox” or mainstream Christianity, namely, the historically successful trends of this religion. It is well-known that other Christian varieties and authors such as Marcionism, Bardaisan, Gnostic movements, and so on, have also influenced Mani’s beliefs and practices.

⁴ W. Sundermann, “Christ in Manichaeism”, Encyclopaedia Iranica (ed. E. Yarshater), vol. v, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1992, 535b–539a, esp. 536: “In Manichaeism the Christian notion of Jesus’s unique sacrifice is not encountered. All aspects of the Manichaean Jesus image can thus be subsumed under the concepts of a redeeming and a suffering cos-
sense, at the end of her careful monograph *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings*, Majella Franzmann has suggested that perhaps, in the end, the Manichaean Jesus is not essential to the function and coherence of the entire Manichaean myth as such, although it would provide an indispensable lens through which to view it and appreciate its working.\(^5\) This makes us think that the explicit references to Jesus could be not as important as they appear to be *prima facie*. Other scholars have been cautious in tendering agreement to the position according to which Jesus is absolutely essential to Manichaeism as such,\(^6\) sometimes judging that Christian elements within Manichaeism were rather a secondary concession resulting from Manichaean contact with Christianity through missionary activity, and in order to win over Christians to the new religion.

This conclusion, however, does not mean that we cannot be sure about the importance of the Christian elements—and specifically about the idea of Christ—in Manichaeism. In order to do that, we could try to discern, beyond the explicit references to Jesus or the usage of New Testament ideas in Manichaeism, and despite the obvious differences between Christian and Manichaean myths, also implicit, structural similarities between them. These implicit parallels could be even more revealing, striking and eloquent than the explicit ones.\(^7\)

An interesting example of these implicit parallels was offered several decades ago by Alexander Böhlig in several contributions, particularly in his arti-

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\(^7\) The question regarding the ways through which Mani could know Christian ideas cannot be tackled here. The knowledge of central Christian myths was already made possible through the (direct or indirect) influence of Paul’s letters, as shown in the inclusion of Paul in the prophetic line going from Jesus to Mani in Keph 1 (13, 205s), and in Mani’s *imitatio Pauli*; “Paul a joui auprès de Mani comme auprès de ses disciples occidentaux d’un prestige et d’une autorité analogues à ceux que lui avaient accordés Marcion et la plupart des écoles antérieures de gnose” (H.-Ch. Puech, “Saint Paul chez les manichéens d’Asie Centrale”, in: Id., *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais*, Paris: Flammarion, 1979, 153–167, esp. 154).