CHAPTER EIGHT

“ET SICUT REX…”:
COMPETING IDEAS OF KINGSHIP IN THE
ANTI-MANICHAEAEN ACTA ARCHELAI

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Recently, a great deal of renewed attention has been paid to the early anti-Manichaean text known as the *Acta Archelai*, or “Acts of Archelaus.” This fictional (or fictionalised) debate between the prophet Mani and bishop Archelaus of “Carchar”/“Kaskar”\(^1\) has proven to be an important witness to the early controversies between mainstream Christians and Manichaean along the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire. While much attention has been paid to the historical context and sources used by Hegemonius in the composition or redaction of the text, relatively little attention has been paid to its rhetorical or polemical strategies. For instance, during the debates between Mani and Archelaus a number of the similes and metaphors attributed to the bishop concern the nature of kingship. While on the surface such rhetorical figures may appear to be commonplaces in late antique literature, closer examination reveals that they serve a specific polemical function. By using such figures bishop Archelaus engages in a polemical discourse against the Manichaean “King of Light,” exposing him as weak and ineffective when compared to Jesus, the perfect and triumphant King. These contrasting conceptions of kingship, however, point to some more general theological debates. This paper will examine how the conflicting images of kingship found within the *AA* reflect divergent views among early Christians about issues such as relation to authority and the response to suffering and persecution.

\(^1\) For a discussion of the supposed location of the debate see Chapter One of this volume, and Lieu in Vermes, 16, 23.
Kingship According to Archelaus

The first invocation of the ideal ruler by Archelaus comes from his response to Mani’s suggestion that two unbegotten beings exist at the foundation of the cosmos. He demands to know who it was that established the division between the two first principles. The bishop responds to this limiting of divine power with an exemplum from Hellenistic history:

For Lysimachus and Alexander seized command of the whole world, and were able to subject all barbarian nations and indeed the entire human race, in such a way that during that period there was no one else in command under heaven apart from themselves. How shall anyone dare to say that God is not present everywhere, who is the unfailing true light, and whose kingdom is holy and eternal? Alas for this wretched man’s impiety; he does not attribute to God omnipotent even power to equal that of men².

In this way, in order to emphasize the absurdity he perceives in the limiting of God’s omnipotence,³ Archelaus alludes to the historical ideals represented by Lysimachus, one of Alexander’s successors,⁴ and Alexander himself, personalities who might have elicited a favorable response from the ethnically Macedonian colonial population represented as present in Carchar.⁵

In the remaining, non-historical examples, Archelaus sets up a contrast between the defensive activities of the Manichaean God and Christ. For instance, in AA 27, the bishop states:

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² AA 24 (Vermes, 75), Beeson 36: Lysimachus enim et Alexander totius mundi inperium tenuerunt omnesque nationes barbares atque omne genus hominum subicere potuerunt, ita ut non esset alius imperator per illud tempus praeter ipsos sub caelo. Et quomodo audebit quisquam dicere non ubique esse deum, qui est lumen verum indeficiens, cuius est regnum sanctum et sempiternum? Heu nequissimi istius inpietas, qui nec aequalem quidem cum hominibus potestatem omnipotenti deo tribuit!
³ Archelaus states: “If God is placed in his kingdom, and the wicked one similarly in his kingdom, who will have built the wall between the midst of them? For nothing can divide two substances without being greater than both…” (Deo in regno suo posito et maligno similiter in suo regno, quis inter medium ipsorum construxerit murum? Non enim potest dividere quid duas substantias, nisi quod sit utroque maius [AA 26; Vermes, 78]).
⁴ Lieu, n122 in Vermes, 75.
⁵ According to Samuel Lieu, the name Archelaus “well befits the inhabitant of a former Macedonian colony” (Lieu in Vermes 18; cf. 75 n122). The remark is made in the context of a hypothesis that “Carchar” is meant to be Carrhae, but conditions would have been similar in any number of Syro-Mesopotamian urban areas of the time.