“WE AND THOSE WATERS OF THE SEA ARE ONE”:
BAPTISM, BATHING, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
IDENTITY IN LATE ANCIENT BABYLONIA

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In the tumultuous third decade of the third century A.D., the four-year-old future prophet (or heresiarch) Mani came to live with his father, a Parthian aristocrat, among the Babylonian Jewish-Christian Gnostic sect now commonly called the Elchasites, after their founder, Elchasai[os] or Elxai.2 These Elchasites were termed ‘baptisers’ by the collator of the Greek Cologne Mani Codex, and may also be identified with the group known to later Arab observers as al-Mughtasila (The Cleansers).3 These designations point to the sect’s most defining practices, their constant ritual ablutions, which ranged from personal bathing up through baptisms for the vegetables they ate.4 It was these relentless baptisers who served as the central formative influence for Mani, who stayed among them for the next twenty years of his life.

According to the testimony of Mani’s companions recorded in the Greek Cologne Mani Codex, Mani ultimately broke with the Elchasites over ritual practice, especially the constant purification that defined them to

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3 Cologne Mani Codex 6–12, 94–99, the text appears to date to fourth century although it may be as late as the seventh-eighth centuries A.D.
outsiders. Responding to Elchasite critics after his split from the group, Mani told the story that the waters had themselves rebuked the founder of their sect for his ritual bathing. In Mani’s story, Elchasai’s bathing pool took the form of a man and said, “Is it not enough that your beasts abuse me? Yet you [yourself] maltreat [my home] and commit sacrilege [against my waters].” Elchasai’s efforts to find a more genial place to bathe were answered with further criticism: “We and those waters of the sea are one. Therefore you have come to sin and abuse us.” Like Elchasai, Mani claimed to have had his own visits from the waters, among other spiritual visitors who taught him the basic precepts of his new faith, Manichaeism. Mani’s fused the precepts of Iranian aristocratic religion with the personal religiosity and sense of mission common among contemporary Jewish and Christian sects into a potent syncretic doctrine, one which he clearly hoped would unite the entire world. In service of this goal, the prophet attempted, with significant successes, to spread this new faith among the aristocratic courts of Sasanian Iran under Shapur I (c. 240/242–70) and that king’s immediate royal successors.

Mani’s tale of Elchasai, along with his accounts of his own encounters with spirits of the water, presents a notable example of the mythologization of the ritual evolution of the doctrines of Manichaeism, this vigorous new world religion. However, this incident may be more significant in how it serves to highlight to the myriad ways in which the casual and ritual uses of water served to define social, political, and religious identities in Late Ancient Babylonia.

In this period, Mani, a son of Iranian aristocrats taught by Elchasites, stood between two broad religious and cultural traditions. The first of these was that of the Magian, Iranian ruling class, led by the Sasanian King of Kings, who set themselves apart from their Babylonian subjects and their Roman enemies, through their rejection of public bathing and baptism. Second were the traditions of the non-Magian popula-