MANICHAEAN KINGSHP: GNOSIS AT HOME IN THE WORLD

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From the beginning of his missionary activity, Mani, who himself was of royal Arsacid descent, attempted to win for his new religion not only people from a general public, but also the mighty and the powerful. The early missionary accounts make it clear that he often addressed himself to members of the ruling class, to kings and princes. And his disciples, too, attempted to win for their cause men from the nobility. How powerfully the image of kingship determined the thinking of Mani is reflected in the fact that he conceived of the world of light as a court, ruled by the King of Light, who is surrounded by five or twelve “Greatnesses” and many other divine beings. Herein he may have followed a Gnostic tradition as it is reflected in the “Song of the Pearl” in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas (§ 108-113), although this text, to be sure, was revised by Manichaeans. Yet the prominence of the image of the king and his court in his religious system is indicative of his esteem of the power of kingship. Especially in Eastern Manichaean texts the use of notions referring to kingship is striking. Thus the four aspects of the supreme deity, God, his Light, his Power and his Wisdom, referred to in Greek texts as the “Father of Greatness with four faces” (Ton tetraprósopon patéra toú megéstous) are called in Turkish texts “the four kings of heaven” or “the four princely gods” (tört ilig tängrilär) (e.g. in Turfan Text T II D 169) or the “four bright royal deities” (tört yaruq ilig tängrilär). The divine triad Jesus, Virgin of Light and Vahman (Great Nous) is repeatedly called “royal”, and the Great Nous himself is referred to as “the king of the whole law” (qamay nom ilig). The image of kingship also recurs in the promises to the just. Thus in a Parthian hymn (Huwidagmān) the saviour says to the soul yearning for salvation: “Thou shalt put on a bright garment and gird thyself with light. And I (the saviour) shall place on thy head the diadem of kingship.”
1. Manichaean kings in Iran and adjacent areas

In view of his esteem for kingship it is understandable that Mani approached the nobility from the very beginning of his missionary career. His first missionary journey led him to the courts of rulers within and beyond the Sassanian kingdom. Whereas the end of the Cologne Mani Codex, fragmentary as it is, refers to some travels in Iran and the boarders of the Roman Empire, Iranian fragments from Turfan throw light on his activity at courts in Sassanian Iran and adjacent kingdoms. His first major missionary journeys led him to India, specifically to the realm of the Tūrān Shāh, located in what is now Baluchistan. After performing a miracle in the air where he leads a discussion with a divine being, the king recognizes him as the Buddha returned to earth and together with his retinue accepts his religion. And Mani promises him: "Be blessed! For as you are rich in glory and honour among men now, thus shalt thou be glorious and noble in the eyes of the gods on the last day of the soul. Among the gods and beneficient just thou shalt be eternally immortal." Of course these words have to be seen as a personal promise rather than a legitimation of Manichaean kingship. Yet they throw light on how the king devoted to the "religion of light" could be assessed.

It is quite in accord with his endeavour to gain kings as followers when Mani goes to the Sassanian capital after the death of Artašir I to be present at the occasion of the enthronement of Shāhpur I and to preach his message there at that time. Sundermann points out: "This could have been the first opportunity Mani took avail of in Iran to speak to a large gathering of people. The day was chosen with deliberation. Everyone celebrated in the streets, and the coronation of a new ruler may have appeared to many as the beginning of a new political orientation." This coronation day, probably 9.4.343, marked the beginning of a rather successful missionary career in Iran. We do not know when Mani gained access to the court, but it is certain that the king was open to his cause, without, however, converting to his religion. In the fragments preserved of the Šāburagān, the book Mani wrote for Shāhpur I to introduce his religion to the ruler, we find no hints as to his assessment of the Sassanian king, but we can suppose that he did all he could to gain