In the Parthian Manichaean fragment M 104 from Turfan in Central Asia we read: "Awake, brethren, chosen ones, on this day of spiritual salvation, the 14th [day] of the month of Mihr, when Jesus, the son of God, entered into parinirvāna." It has been pointed out that this text must originally have been written in Syriac since the date given for the death of Jesus "is mechanically 'translated' from the 14th of the Syriac month Nisan to the 14th of the Iranian month Mihr." The use of the Parthian verb parinibrad, "went into parinirvāna" for Jesus' entry into the Realm of Light points to the marked tendency on the part of Eastern Manichaeism to adapt to Buddhist parlance and, moreover, to transpose Gnostic concepts into those of the Indian religion. This it could do with a good conscience, since the Manichaean religion had much in common with Buddhism. As opposed to the Nestorian Christians in Central Asia, the "resurrection" of Christ as well as the "resurrection" of the individual, i.e. his salvation, was to the Manichaens a spiritual matter. Hence, the day of resurrection, according to our text, is hailed as "this day of spiritual salvation" (gyānēn bōxtagīf). As we learn from the Sogdian Turfan fragment C I, the Buddhists in Central Asia had also found the Christian idea of resurrection objectionable, implying, as it does, a positive assessment of the body and of corporeality in general. The Sogdian and Turkish Nestorian texts from the silk road mirror a marked emphasis on the resurrection, and the Manichaens would have repudiated the Christians on this point as well as the Buddhists, as the body was not to be transformed, but to be relinquished, for it was full of negative powers, lead by greed and lust. In a Turkish text from Turfan (T M 298), reflecting in its own way the adoption of Buddhist imagery, it says: "This body in which you are clothed, regard it and estimate it thus: It is completely made and fashioned of deceit
and deception, falseness and treacherousness. Within it are many powers (kùcliglar), senses (kôngülär) and forces (biliglar) which bubble up and are in constant motion. They are like the great ocean samudra, where there is much turmoil and confusion.’ Not only the human body, but also the world, for which the Buddhist concept of samsāra could readily be used, is an ocean of distress which has to be crossed and left behind, in order to enter that World of Light which is the completely transcendent, true abode of the pure, divine spirit, and which is hence readily equated with nirvāṇa or parinirvāṇa. In Parthian Manichaeism there is a whole set of liturgical texts called the ‘parinirvāṇa-hymns’ (parnijšbrānig bāšāhan) which commemorate Mani’s death and entry into the Realm of Light and which were sung at the Bema-festival.7 As such hymns are dated in years after Mani’s passing away, probably a new hymn of this type was composed every year, indicating that the Buddhist notion remained alive and was not dismissed. And even in the so-called ‘crucifixion-hymns’ (dārušadagiftig bāšāhan) from which the first quotation was taken, as well as in a text entitled ‘the proclamation of the crucifixion’ (dārušadagiftig wifras; M4570), Mani’s death, termed his ‘crucifixion’ and likened to Jesus’ death on the cross, is also described as his entry into parinirvāṇa.8

A basis and justification for the identification of Manichaean concepts with Buddhist terminology is found in the way Mani perceived himself: namely as the final incarnation of the ‘true Apostle’ who had adopted flesh not only in specific personages of the Old Testament—as was widespread Gnostic belief, a belief also held by the Judaeo-Christian Elchasaite community where he grew up,9—but also in the great religious leaders Jesus, Zoroaster and Buddha.10 Though he termed himself ‘the Apostle of Jesus Christ’,11 he could also see in Buddha one of his predecessors and could regard his own teaching as a fulfillment of Buddhism as well as Christianity and Zoroastrianism. In the Middle Persian Turfan fragment M 5794 he claims that his religion is ‘more comprehensive and better’ than the other earlier religions because it includes ‘all scriptures, the wisdom and the parables’ of the former faiths.12 Hence the later inclusion of not only Buddhist concepts but also Buddhist textual and artistic material was legitimated. In a dialogue between the saviour, ‘Jesus the Splendour’, and his alter