Werner Sundermann (unter Mitarbeit von Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst)


For many years, the Berlin scholar Werner Sundermann (1935-2012) was the world's leading specialist in Manichaean studies. His illustrious scholarly career was, for the main part, devoted to the decipherment and editing of Manichaean remains once discovered in distant Turfan and now kept in Berlin. Here he succeeded in editing such important Manichaean texts as Der Sermon vom Licht-Nous (1992), Der Sermon von der Seele (1997) and, already many years earlier, Mittelpersische und partische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte der Manichäer (1973) and Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts (1981). The last mentioned book was part of the outcome of his second doctoral dissertation which he devoted to the historiographic traditions of the Manicheans, the other part being his fundamental Studien zur kirchengeschichtlichen Literatur der iranischen Manichäer, published in three long articles in Altorientalische Forschungen in 1986 and 1987 respectively.

Sundermann’s main specialism was the editing and interpretation of Iranian Manichaean texts, i.e. texts in Middle Persian, Parthian and Sogdian. His linguistic skills and specializations, however, were by no means confined to these texts and languages. In particular from the two volumes of Manichaica Iranica. Ausgewählte Schriften von Werner Sundermann¹ it becomes clear that he was acquainted with all sorts of Manichaean texts from East and West, and that, apart from a good knowledge of classical Greek, he had at least some working knowledge of Ancient Iranian, New Persian, Bactrian, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, Coptic and, for instance, Old Turkish. From my personal experience, I may add that he was well versed in Latin and modern languages such as English, French and Italian as well.

Most of these qualities are evident in Sundermann’s last book, Die Rede der lebendigen Seele. Already in 1985, in a long and specialized contribution to the Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce,² he provided an outline of the possibilities and difficulties in reconstructing the fragments of the hymns cycle. It is interesting to read already here his tentative remarks on the origin of the text. In particular, the claim that the work is a text revealed by ‘the Holy Spirit’,

‘bringt diese Schrift in unmittelbarer Zusammenhang mit den kanonischen Werken Manis’ (648). We will return to this issue.

Let us first consider the main contents of his final text edition. In an extensive introduction (9-50, the second chapter of the book after his brief ‘Vorbemerkungen’), the author deals with the title and subject of *Die Rede der lebendigen Seele*. As a rule, the title of the hymns cycle is passed down as *Gōwišn ī grīw zīndag*, i.e. The Speech of the Living Soul. Sundermann briefly explains how the World Soul or Living Soul or Self was both a central and a complicated topic in Manichaeism. It was not only at the centre of the Manichaeans’ theoretical reflections, but also part and parcel of their piety, cult, and ethics. In essence the Living Soul is God suffering in this world; it is also the whole of all human souls now in prison in their human bodies. Moreover, in texts such as the ‘Hymns to the Living Soul’, edited and analyzed by Ernst Waldschmidt and Wolfgang Lenz in 1926, the Living Soul is mentioned as Jesus Christ. Significantly also is Sundermann’s remark that Hans Jakob Polotsky already noted that the concept of the Living Soul seems to be modelled after the Pauline ψυχὴ ζῶσα (1 Cor. 15:45). Other subjects dealt with in the Introduction relate to the MSS (all Middle Persian fragments that could be detected were originally part of codices, and the same goes for one of the Sogdian fragments), their place of discovery (all codex fragments seem to have been found in Qočo during the first or the second Prussian Turfan expedition) and, for instance, their age. Sundermann describes quite extensively how the fragments may be ordered into 21 text parts, as well as what seems to be the main content of each section. Other technical matters, such as a detailed description of the MSS (measure, etc.) complete Sundermann’s ‘Einleitung’.

Ch. 3 provides the (reconstructed) critical text, first the Middle Persian fragments and after that the Sogdian ones (51-97). From many footnotes in this specialized chapter (and in the related ch. 5), it becomes clear (i) how many difficulties had to be overcome (and how many still remain!); (ii) how much help from colleagues was needed to complete this immensely difficult task (some of them are already mentioned in the 1985 study; in recent years help

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4 Against this background, one understands the North African Manichaean bishop Faustus’ speaking of *Jesus patibilis*. The term is by no means—as it was often stated in the past—an indication of a ‘christianized’ North African Manichaeism.