

The Religious Terminology in the Nag Hammadi Texts and in Manichaean Literature

by
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Alexandria, the city in the Nile Delta, founded by Alexander the Great, is considered the cultural centre of the Roman Near East in late antiquity. It was renowned for its philosophical schools, and the main scholars of Late Antiquity lived or studied there: Philo, Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, Clement, Origen: Alexandria was the focus of the ancient world.

Still, it was in the neighbourhood of the small town of Lycopolis – present-day Assyut – in Upper Egypt that the major innovating philosophical and theological texts of the third century were found. In Greek has been preserved the anti-Manichaean treatise by Alexander of Lycopolis, the neo-platonist. It is one of the earliest neo-platonic writings. He tried to defend his philosophical school against the undermining work of Manichaean missionaries who seemed successful in their conversion policy.

Although the Manichaean Coptic texts presented on the Cairo antiquity market in 1929, were discovered in Medinet Madi the dialect of these texts clearly indicated that their provenance – or at least the dialect of the scribe – could be traced back to the environs of Lycopolis; the dialect has been classified by Kasser as a form of *Lycopolitan*, *L^A*. Sixteen years later in the same region the 'Gnostic' Nag Hammadi library was found. The major part of which was written in the *L6* dialect.

In spite of the fact that clear differences can be distinguished between the solutions, which Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and Manichaeism

offered as answers to the social problems of late antiquity, the same basic interest can be extrapolated in the different roots and manners of exposition. In all three the accent is on the effort to reach true life through personal perception and on a clear distinction between good and evil, light and darkness. It is incredible how such a small region could host all these groups within such a short span of time, for the anti-Manichaean treatise dates from the end of the third century and the Medinet Madi and Nag Hammadi codices are from the fourth century. The problem of the dating of the texts will be enlarged upon later on.

Evidently, in such a limited space these different groups would have met and interacted. The only historical proof we have of this is the anti-Manichaean writing by Alexander in which he complains of the Manichaean missionaries troubling his students. There must also have been contacts between the Nag Hammadi-community and the Manichaeans, although these contacts have not yet been accounted for.

Since Manichaeism is sometimes defined as the 'ultimate' Gnostic religion², it would be of interest to compare these local sources of the same period and in almost the same dialect. However before making such a comparison, an agreement must be found as to which elements are to be compared. As such the very title of this paper involves a problem. The two proposed elements, on the one hand the Nag Hammadi texts and on the other hand the

Manichaean literature, are situated on two different levels: the Nag Hammadi texts are only a partial – and late – witness to the ‘Gnostic’ *tradition*³, while the Manichaean literature represents a complete theological *system* with sources which have been found in such various places as France and China and which date from the third until the fifteenth centuries.

Two levels of comparison could be considered: one could either compare the basic systems level of ‘Gnosticism’ and Manichaeism or focus on the Coptic tradition of both. Here we will focus on the Coptic Nag Hammadi texts and the Coptic Manichaica, giving consideration to the problems of dating, geography and language.

Dating

The fact that Manichaean literature was produced over a long span of time is not the only problem concerning the dating of the different texts. A precise dating of the Coptic Manichaica is not yet possible; perhaps the Kellis-texts will yield more information, but in the meantime we can only approximately date the Medinet Madi texts to the fourth century⁴. As they were composed at the end of the third century⁵ at the earliest, the Coptic manuscripts were written only a short period after.

This is certainly not true for some of the Nag Hammadi texts. While these manuscripts also can be said to date back to the fourth century, the origin of most of the texts must be found in the second or third centuries or even as early as the first century B.C.⁶. The manuscripts thus represent a long literary tradition.

In general we can state that both libraries were copied in the same century. It can not yet be determined which was the earlier. On the other hand most of the original Gnostic manuscripts are earlier than the Manichaean, but the possibility that some of them are contemporary can not be excluded.

Geographical aspects

Another problem connected with the terminological comparison is the geographical origin of the texts. Already within the Medinet Madi library different ‘terminological’ traditions can be observed. In my view, the differences between the Psalm-book and the Kephalaia, although the texts were translated into the same dialect, can only be explained by the fact that the writings were composed in different communities.

The Nag Hammadi library poses an even greater problem: While some texts seem to be of Egyptian origin, others refer to Syria, Jordan and other regions of the Near East. In most cases, however, a place of origin cannot be established.

Language

Both libraries consist mainly of translated texts: influences were possible either during the composition of the original texts, or during translation when terminology was borrowed from either tradition. Especially in Manichaeism this technique of transliteration was used for missionary activities⁷. We will elaborate this element later. The problem, however, is the difficulty in establishing the direction of the possible influence during translation, as we lack information on the manuscripts.

As regards the language of the libraries, the Coptic dialect of both the Nag Hammadi and Medinet Madi texts has been studied and compared in detail by Kasser and Funk⁸. Both examined the phonological and morphological data in particular. They reached, however, slightly different conclusions. According to Kasser, *L6* and *L4* are different evolutions of the same dialect through several generations⁹. Funk is more radical: according to him, *L6* and *L4* are separate dialects, and *L4* is not related any closer to *L6* than it is to Akhmimic¹⁰. Again, the Kellis texts will hopefully bring some new information.

A final element that complicates the comparison between the Nag Hammadi and Medinet Madi libraries is Mani's marked Gnostic-Christian formation, caused by his being educated by the Elchasaites. Earlier research has already established that Mani had knowledge of several 'Gnostic' works and that he borrowed many elements from Jewish-Christian literature. Considering all the above aspects, it is clear that a comparison of the religious terminology in general is a hazardous project.

Related terminology

The related elements between the Nag Hammadi library and Manichaeism have already been treated twice by Rudolph¹¹. He pointed out that most links were found in the so-called Sethian literature: "On the Origin of the World", "The Hypostasis of the Archons", "The Apocryphon of John", "The Sophia of Jesus Christ", "The Apocalypse of Adam", "The Three Steles of Seth" and "The Paraphrase of Shem"¹². He also commented on the similarity of terminology between Greek and Coptic: 'Auch die Gemeinsamkeit in der Verwendung der Terminologie ist auffällig, sei es im Griechischen oder sei es im Koptischen. Die benachbarten Übersetzerschulen in Mittelägypten sind dafür nicht allein verantwortlich zu machen'¹³. Rudolph then enumerates the different common concepts. Here we will discuss only those of terminological significance.

Although 'The Father of Greatness' is not attested as such in the Nag Hammadi library, several of his epithets are also found in the Gnostic texts. 'The Father of Truth' and 'The God of Truth' appear in Eugnostos the Blessed¹⁴. The God of Truth is also mentioned in the Apocalypse of Adam¹⁵. 'The Father, the Lord of the All' is found in Asclepius¹⁶. The Hypostasis of the Archons and the Teachings of Silvanus mention 'The Father of the All'¹⁷.

Rudolph discovers a resemblance of character between the Manichaean 'Mother of Life' and Barbêlo in the "Apocryphon of John" and the "Three Steles of Seth", the 'Sophia-Zoe' in the Sophia of Jesus Christ and the heavenly Eve in "On the Origin of the World" who is also called 'Mother of the Living'. The Light-Maiden resembles the Gnostic Sophia even more and she is also called thus, as well as 'Mother of all the Living'¹⁸.

From a terminological point of view one can observe that in the Coptic Manichaica the name "The Mother of Life" is predominantly employed rather than "The Mother of the Living" although the Syrian name 'm' dhÿ' can be translated both ways¹⁹. The former form is not found in the Gnostica. As I have already pointed out elsewhere, Mani might have been influenced by Gnosticism in his choice of the name, without favouring either the singular or plural form, but the Egyptian Manichaeans certainly wanted to establish their Goddess's own identity. The same goes for the relation between the Mother-goddess and the Spirit which is found in the Gnostic as well as in the Manichaean sources, but the terminology employed differs slightly²⁰. Still, the few examples of the plural form "The Mother of the Living", can be a result of Gnostic influence. The short form "The Mother", which is often used in Gnostic texts for the Mother-goddess appears only in the *Psalms-Book*.

Certainly of Gnostic origin is "The Maiden of Light", whose name also appears in the Pistis Sophia and the Books of Jeu²¹. In "On the Origin of the World" where "Eve is called the Mother of the Living" it is also said of her that she "is the first virgin"²².

Rudolph also compares the texts with regard to how ὕλη, or Darkness, functions as an abstract or personified entity. He connects the name of "Enthymesis of Death" in the Kephalaia with the "Epithymia of Death" in the Apocryphon of John. In most of the Gnostic texts a

personified ὕλη is absent. Still, although the Manichaean concept of ὕλη is not very developed, a similar function can be found in the Apocryphon of John: “the Mother of them all is the ὕλη!”²³

Giversen makes an interesting remark here: Oddly enough, from this part of the text onwards the Apocryphon of John proceeds to relate, not about angels, but about demons which rule over certain things; comparing this version with the other versions he concludes that it is particularly the second codex that teaches about demons²⁴.

The link between the “*Enthymesis* of Death” as an epithet of ὕλη in Manichaeism and *Epithymia* in the Apocryphon of John is not clear to me. The relation between ὕλη and desire in the Coptic Manichaica is still obscure but “The Fire of Death”, lust and desire seem more a result of the activities of ὕλη than ὕλη itself. In the Apocryphon of John ὕλη and desire are the same: “matter, that is the ignorance of darkness and desire”²⁵. This desire is again related to the Tree of death. In Manichaeism the bad tree is the ὕλη²⁶. The relation between ὕλη and desire and the related metaphor of the tree is part of the long Jewish-Christian tradition.

Rudolph naturally also draws attention to Saklas, who figures in both libraries. He also mentions Saklas’s companion Namraël as a misreading of Nebroël, found in the Gospel of the Egyptians²⁷. The question remains, however, why Saklas is mentioned only twice in the Coptic Manichaica and Namraël not at all. Most times the general terms of ‘abortions’ or ‘archons’ are used when the creators of Adam and Eve are mentioned. In ‘On the Origin of the World’ the term ‘abortion’ is used to designate Adam itself.

What is even more strange, as pointed out by Sundermann: neither a derivation from the Greek name Saklas nor the Aramaic explanation as ‘fool’²⁸ can explain the Syrian form *’sqlwn*. In the eastern sources the Syrian form is in-

directly attested in Parthian and Sogdian *’sqlwn*, the Greek form is not found²⁹. Saklas and Namraël are also mentioned in the Chinese tractate where their names are Lou-yi and Ye-lo-yang³⁰. Pelliot could not explain the etymology of Lou-yi and is rather diffuse whether Ye-lo-yang comes from Nebroël or Namraël. According to Bryder it is difficult to determine the origin, but a derivation from Namraël would be more likely³¹. Thus no unmistakable examples of Saklas and Nebroël can be found in the eastern sources.

Besides the two testimonia in the Kephalaia, Saklas appears only in the Anti-Manichaean writings. Still the function of the Manichaean *’sqlwn* and Namraël is the same as that of the two Gnostic names. Instead of Saklas Satan appears more often in the Coptic Manichaica. He is the God of the Old Testament and the persecutor of the Apostles and the Manichaeans³².

The theme of the seduction of Eve by the Archons and the creation of Adam and Eve has been sufficiently treated elsewhere. Attention must be drawn again, however, to the parallel between the Apocalypse of Adam³³ and the Kephalaia concerning the role of Eve³⁴. In both it is through Eve that Adam receives knowledge. Eve is, moreover, the mother of Seth³⁵.

The relation between the Gnostic Seth and the Manichaean has been discussed by Stroumsa and Pearson³⁶. Although there can be no doubt that Mani referred to the ‘Gnostic’ literature on Seth, it remains remarkable that in the Manichaean corpus the name $\text{CH}\Theta\text{H}\Lambda$ is consistently used³⁷, whereas in the Nag Hammadi literature $\text{CH}\Theta$ is found.

The concept of (Light-)Noûs in the Gnostic and Manichaean literature has been exhaustively treated on the occasion at the international symposium in Louvain³⁸. However, two interesting terminological details are worth noting: the occurrence of ‘voερόν’ in the Kephalaia and the equation of the Light-Noûs with Noah in the Psalmbook. Except for one

occurrence the plural form 'voερά' is always employed to designate the Sons of Primal Man. In the Apocryphon of John, voûς is used in a parallel context and also here the singular form voερόν is found³⁹. The identification of Noah with the Light-Noûς is not found elsewhere in Manichaean literature. Again a parallel is found in the Apocryphon of John⁴⁰. Rudolph rightly points out the Gnostic models Mani used in his christology. Of special interest is the liberation of Adam through Christ in the Apocryphon of John⁴¹, for the main function of Jesus the Splendour in the Kephalaia is the revelation of Gnosis to Adam. The role of redeemed redeemer is performed by Jesus the Child or Jesus Christ.

One of the few cosmological figures in Manichaeism whose name occurs in the Gnostic codices is the 'Adamas of Light'. A detailed discussion of this figure has already been given elsewhere so we can limit ourselves to the conclusions⁴². Adamas generally fulfils different functions in both systems. But the most characteristic feature that one finds in the Gnostic Adamas – or Adaman – is his middle position between the cosmological and the earthly worlds. It was undoubtedly for this reason that Mani adopted the name and changed it slightly into 'the Adamas of Light'.

Very different is the concept of Sophia: while Sophia is a mythic personification within several Nag Hammadi texts, this is not the case within the Medinet Madi library. Stroumsa's presumption that 'the Manichaean identification seems to have evolved from simpler (and therefore possibly earlier) stages of Gnosticism, in which a Sophia speculation was not known'⁴³, oversimplifies the Manichaean system. It is clear that Mani used Gnostic elements insofar as they fitted within his own radical dualistic system. This was not possible with the 'Gnostic' Sophia. It is my opinion that the Manichaean system is not an evolution of the Gnostic myth, but a radical new approach, combining and in-

corporating elements from Jewish apocalypticism, Gnosticism and Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.

A final observation: It is striking that the names of mythological figures found in the Syrian texts and which are not translated in the Coptic Manichaica are precisely those which are also found in Gnostic literature: Adamas, Jesus, Adam, Eve, Saklas, Seth and 'Υλη. It cannot be a coincidence that all are related to the Gnostic interpretation of Genesis and the creation of Adam and Eve. Also the Maiden of Light is found in both libraries. The name has not yet been found in any Syrian texts. Perhaps the Greek name was also used here?

When comparing the two libraries it seems that it is in the Apocryphon of John and in the Apocalypse of Adam that we find a terminology most closely related to Manichaean terminology. However, also *On the Origin of the World*, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *The Gospel of Truth* and *The Egyptian Gospel* have a religious terminology in common with Manichaean literature. In the other texts there are more isolated cases of terminological similarity⁴⁴.

Conclusions

In the research on the relationship of Gnosticism and Manichaeism the focus has mainly been on the fundamental influences of Gnosticism on Manichaeism. Mani adapted the Gnostic elements in a very cautious way: one could compare it – to a certain extent – to the Zoroastrian and Buddhist transliteration of Manichaeism: He used 'existing' mythological figures – and themes – that were suited to transmit his own message, thus evoking a feeling of 'déjà vu' in his audience.

Still, also local contacts must have existed. Even Manichaean influences in the Gnostic texts cannot be ruled out. From this point of view the rejection of baptism by the editor of

the Apocalypse of Adam is very interesting⁴⁵. Another possible influence is the designation of Adamas in the Gospel of the Egyptians as “the light that shines”⁴⁶, a possible reference to the Manichaean ‘The Adamas of Light’. Moreover, the construction “the light that shines” is often found in the Kephalaia⁴⁷. One should not forget the paragraph on ὕλη and the demons in the Apocryphon of John.

The problem remains: Due to the lack of comparable material it is difficult to prove the interrelationship of the texts. The only way forward is to make a comparison of terminology between texts of the same tradition and compare it with the terminology of the Eastern sources of Manichaeism.

As a result we can conclude that the religious terminology used in the Coptic Nag Hammadi texts and Manichaica for missionary purposes belongs to the same vocabulary inherent in the theological-philosophical subject. Still, in most instances Manichaeism deliberately avoided the existing names of mythological ‘Gnostic’ figures and systems although using Gnostic concepts. While it seems unlikely that there would not have been any cross-fertilization of the Manichaean and Gnostic communities, we shall have to wait for the results of the Kellis excavations or the discovery of yet another library to – perhaps – be able to prove this cross-fertilization.

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Notes

- Also Plotinus originated allegedly from Lycopolis
- Cf. Jonas, 1963, 206-209; Haardt, 1967, 328.
- Within the Gnostic tradition a coherent system is non-existent, therefore the interpretation can differ between the codices; on a definition of 'Gnostic' tradition, cf. now Gardner, 1994b, 225-246.
- Giversen, 1986, XVI-XVII gives an overview on the different datings proposed for the Medinet Madi library, from second half fourth century till fifth century. The dating of the Manichaean community at Kellis, – between 301 and 390 A.D., cf. Gardner, 1994a, 80, seems to favour an early dating.
- In the *Kephalaia*, in the *Homilies* and in the *Psalm-book* references are found to the passion of Mani who died in 273/274 A.D. The fragments of the other books from the Medinet Madi library, the so-called *Synaxeis*, the *Letters* and a historical book, are too fragmentary to be taken into account in this terminological comparison.
- Eugnostos the Blessed*, cf. Parrot, 1991, 5.
- Cf. Bryder, 1985.
- Funk, 1985 & 1988 and Kasser, 1984.
- Kasser, 1984, 274-275.
- Funk, 1985, 135.
- Rudolph, 1965 and 1988. On the relation between the Nag Hammadi texts and Manichaeism cf. also Böhlig, 1994, 113-242.
- Rudolph, 1988, 195-196.
- Rudolph, 1988, 196; a further elaboration can be found in Rudolph, 1965.
- NH III 73.2; 74.20-75.3.
- NH V 65.13; 83.28-29.
- NH VI 68.25.
- NH II 92.34 and NH VII 102.9.
- "When he(=Adam) saw her(=Eve) he said, "You shall be called 'Mother of the Living.' For it is you who have given me life." (NH II 89,15) (Layton, 1989, 67).
- Only four occurrences of "The Mother of the Living" are found against 32 testimonia of "The Mother of Life", cf. Van Lindt, 1992, 39-44.
- Van Lindt, 1992, 35-38.
- Schmidt, 1978.
- NH II 114.4-5. Layton, 1989, 63.
- NH II 18.5-6; Giversen, 1963, 81.
- Giversen, 1963, 250.
- NH II, 21.7-9; Giversen, 1963, 87.

26. Van Lindt, 1992, 204.
27. On Saklas in the Gnostic sources: Stroumsa, 1984 and Barc, 1981, 123-150.
28. Layton, 1987, 36d.
29. In Parthian and Soghdian Namraël is named *pysus*. Sundermann offers no etymology for this name, cf. Sundermann, 1979, 103. Could the Chinese form Ye-lo-Yang be a derivation from the Iranian?
30. Chavannes, 1911, 525.
31. dr. Peter Bryder, 1995, personal communication.
32. Van Lindt, 1992, 196-197.
33. NH V 64,12-13.
34. Villey, 1993, 218 did not notice the difference between the attitude towards Eve in the Psalm-Book and the attitude in the Kephalaia where parallels are found with the Apocalypse of Adam, cf. Van Lindt, 1992, 188-189.
35. In Manichaean literature very little information is found on the creation of Seth. It is only said that he is the first son of Adam as in the Gnostic tradition (Keph. I, 12.10-11).
36. Stroumsa, 1984, 146-152 and Pearson, 1988.
37. $\sigma\eta\omega\eta\lambda$ *PsB*. II, 142.4; 144.1; 144.4; 144.7; 146.13; 179.22. *Hom.* 61.23. *Keph.* I, 12.10; 42.26; 42.29; 43.11; 145.27.
38. Rudolph, 1995, 1-10 and Bianchi, 1995, 11-21.
39. NH II 8.28-9.5. cf. Van Lindt, 1995, 280.
40. NH II 29.1-4. cf. Van Lindt, 1995, 271-272.
41. Rudolph, 1988, 199.
42. Van Lindt, 1993.
43. Stroumsa, 1984, 163.
44. On the Kellis excavations and the Coptic Manichaean documents: Gardner 1993, 1994a and 1995. The fragments published until now offer no new material concerning the religious terminology in relation to the Nag Hammadi library. The hitherto published names of mythological figures have already been found in the Medinet Madi library.
45. Hedrick, 1980, 192-201 and 210. The similarity with the Manichaeans was already pointed out by Françoise Morard (Morard, 1977, 40) when considering – and rejecting a Manichaean authorship of the apocalypse. While indeed a Manichaean author is improbable, a Manichaean influence cannot be ruled out.
46. NH III 49.8-9.
47. *Keph.* I, 37.10; 64.29; 106.15.