In Search of “the Woman Within”: A Study of Manichaean Motherhood

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Introduction

Greet (for me my) daughter Drousiane. Greet for me my daughter Tshemnoute, and (my) daughter Kame. Greet warmly for me my sister Isi- (-) and my sister Kame, and my mother Talaphanti with her children. Greet “the woman within” and her children. Tell them that I myself am very grateful to them, and God is my witness that... all in my prayer and my supplications, I (remember) you very much, praying for your health.”

- Manichaean letter, House 3 at Ismant el-Kharab, c. 350s C.E.

The Manichaeans are enigmatic to scholars due to the complexity of their mythology, the geographical scope of the religion, and the fragmentary nature of the primary sources. What is certain is that the Manichaean religious movement founded in 3rd century C.E. Persia was once a true world-religion, spreading east all the way into China and west into North Africa and Western Europe. Manichaean missionaries followed the Silk Road and the Roman roads,

2 The village of Kellis in Roman Egypt was located in the Dakhleh oasis (Gardner and Lieu 272).
3 It should be noted that the use of the term “Manichaean” as a category is controversial. See Richard Lim’s "The Nomen Manichaeorum and Its Uses in Late Antiquity." *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity,* edited by Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism/Texte und Studien zum Antike Judentum, 119, pp. 143-67. Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term Manichaean is intentionally used as a heuristic category linking communities that would have been, in one way or another, followers of the Manichaean religion. I choose to consider “Manichaeism” as a broad category including all variations of the Manichaean religious movement — regardless of location or time. While it is questionable whether there is a single “Manichaeism,” I believe I am justified in using this term since the followers of this religion would in many cases have self-identified as Manichaeans and seen themselves as part of this larger body. I agree with Jason Beduhn’s approach in *The Manichaean Body in Discipline and Ritual:* “In talking about ‘Manichaeism’ as a unitary phenomenon, my task it to establish what in the diverse material output of
bringing the “good news” of Mani to the “ends of the earth.” Manichaeism was remarkably successful and long lasting. While it tended to be a minority religion, Manichaean communities could be found in cities all across the globe. Although these Manichaean communities tended to look similar to the communities that surrounded them, the Manichaeans held a radically dualistic view of the world as a mixture of divine light and darkness. The material world was a result of a cosmic battle between the good light and the evil darkness which resulted in light getting trapped in matter. Since the material world was mingled with evil, there was a premium on sexual renunciation. Procreation would result in more light being trapped in the material world. However, the majority of Manichaeans were not the celibate elite called the “elect,” but were simply auditors or “hearers” who supported the elect, providing them with food and financial support.

By the mid fourth century C.E., there was a thriving Manichaean community in the Roman village Kellis in Egypt. In the early 1990s, excavations directed by C. A. Hope under the Dakhleh Oasis Project produced a wealth of letters and personal documents, providing the first intimate glimpses into the real lives of Manichaeans. House 3 was discovered to contain a cache of texts, ranging from legal or economic material to personal letters. Until these finds, what was historical Manichaeism remains unnegotiated in local conditions, to demonstrate how the range of distinctive references used among these several regions reflects a unified Manichaean tradition of practice (5). I recognize that Manichaeism would have looked different from East to West over its long life span; yet, through comparing broader Manichaean texts it is possible to see patterns that indicate a truly “Manichaean” worldview.


5 Iain Gardner, ed., Kellis Literary Texts: Volume I. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1996): i. There is a great deal of evidence of Manichaean families in Kellis. Fragments of Manichaean texts have been found at this site; this, coupled with the cache of Copic and Greek personal letters, provides a unique case study of the real lives of Manichaeans. In particular, this discovery highlights the competition between Manichaeism and Christianity. Gardner and Lieu 259.

6 House 3, where many Manichaean texts were found, is dated to the fourth century based on the evidence of coins and ceramics. This suggests that Manichaeism entered the Oasis by the early fourth century. The dated Greek documents are all dated before the 390’s, suggesting an abandonment of this site. Gardner, Kellis I, x. Gardner suggests that: “It would be difficult to argue that House 3 was monastic, given the general types of legal and economic material found there, not to mention the clear family relationships apparent throughout the archive. Still, the personal letters do indicate a particularly close-knit set of
known of Manichaeism came primarily from religious texts or polemic sources, both of which were constructed intentionally to present Manichaeism in a favorable or unfavorable light. The discovery at Kellis gives an unfiltered picture of Manichaean life and raises new questions.

The letter from Kellis quoted in the introduction comes from a series of family letters written in Coptic. It is a correspondence between a father and son: the father Makarios begins by greeting his son Matheos (alternately spelled ‘Matthaios’) and continues to greet his many daughters and “the woman within.” Despite the formulaic nature of the letter, there seems to be a sense of genuine love of this man for his female family. What is initially most surprising about this letter is that it points to a large Manichaean family, made up of blood relations and spiritual “family.” This is a puzzling fact: these supposedly world-renouncing, reproduction-prohibiting Manichaeans seemed to have had many children.

This evidence is in conflict with other Manichaean and polemic sources: the Manichaeans were known for their reproductive prohibitions. This tendency towards asceticism and sexual renunciation found in Manichaean texts is contrasted to the spurious or at least exaggerated allegations of sexual indecency by their detractors. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, Augustine — the most famous Manichaean auditor — contrasts the prohibition of procreation with the sexually deviant lifestyle of Manichaean auditors. Augustine suggests that Manichaeans took care to use contraceptives or engage in measures to limit the possibility of conception (as in Augustine’s own case, where only one child was born out of his 12-13 year relationship with his mistress). Augustine suggests that the Manichaeans, while not requiring abstinence, promoted birth-control due to their cosmological beliefs: “They take wives, as the law declares, for the procreation of children; but from this erroneous fear of polluting the substance of the deity, their intercourse with their wives is not of a lawful character; and the production of children, which is the proper

family groups within the believing community. ... The question arises as to what this great mass of material was doing in House 3”. Gardner, *Kellis I*, viii-ix.

7 These family letters are considered Manichaean due to several facts. There are references to Mani as the ‘Paraclete.’ Makarios instructs his young son: “Now, be in worthy matters; just as the Paraclete has said: ‘The disciple of righteousness is found with the fear of his teacher upon him (even) when he is far from him.’” Gardner and Lieu, 273 In the letter from Matheos to his father, Matheos references the ‘Teacher’ who was the top of the Manichaean hierarchy in Egypt. Matheos writes: “...as for myself, the Teacher left me in Antinou, but my brother he took to follow after him... For he (the Teacher) loves him (Piene) very much, and makes him read in church.” Gardner and Lieu 275.

end of marriage, they seek to avoid.”\(^9\) Certainly Augustine’s reports may have been colored by his own theological views, but it is unlikely he would have been able to completely fabricate his allegations since he sought to convert other Manichaeans. Augustine’s descriptions of the Manichaeans came to be the standard view of the Manichaeans in the Roman world.

In contrast to the reproduction-avoiding Manichaeans painted by Augustine, we find evidence of large Manichaean families in Kellis. In another letter from the same family collection, the son Matheos writes to his mother: “(To) my mother, my loved lady, very precious to me, the beloved of my heart: The one whose memory and worthy motherhood are sealed in my heart every hour; the one whose kindnesses and goodness that she performs for me at all times are sealed in my inmost thought. My mother, very precious to me, Maria.”\(^10\) Even more shocking than the reality of large Manichaean families, the son — who has been educated in Manichaean teachings\(^11\) — has a reverence for the role of motherhood. Is it just a child’s fond tenderness for a mother or is there something within Manichaeism that can uphold the role of mother as something meaningful?

These letters certainly raise many questions concerning the everyday life of Manichaeans and make it possible to seek to determine the complex relationship between cosmological belief and real life. In this paper, I hope to stimulate discussion focused on the role of motherhood.

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\(^9\) Beduhn 61. Manichaean Body. Augustine’s C. Faustum 15.7. Intercourse “not of a lawful character” could imply sodomy or other forms of “illicit” sex. For other means of contraception common in the Greco-Roman world, see also John M. Riddle’s Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Augustine similarly writes in De mor. Man. 65: “Is it not you who regard the begetting of children, by which souls are bound up in flesh, to be a more serious sin than sexual intercourse? Is it not you who used to urge us to observe, to the extent that it was possible, the time when a woman after her menstruation is likely to conceive, and to abstain from intercourse at that time in order that a soul might not be entangled in flesh?” Jason Beduhn. The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000): 36.

\(^10\) Gardner and Lieu 275.

\(^11\) Matheos had been instructed by his father to: “Study (your) psalms, whether Greek or Coptic, <every> day (?)… Do not abandon your vow. Here, the Judgement of Peter is with you. (Do the) Apostolos; or else master the Great Prayers and the Greek Psalms. Here too, the Sayings are with you: study them! Here are the Prostrations. Write a little from time to time, more and more.” Matheos and his father were educated, literate, and even possessed or had access to books. “If my mother Kouria will give the great (Book of) Épistles, bring it with you. If not, bring the small one, with the Prayer-Book and the Judgement of Peter.” Gardner and Lieu 274.
How is it possible in a dualistic, anti-materialistic religion to create a space for “worthy motherhood”?

This taps into the larger question of the role of women in Manichaeism. Very little has been done in this area other than an introductory survey by Kevin Coyle in his article, “Prolegomena to a Study of Women in Manichaeism,” which raises more questions than answers and urges further investigation. This paper, in response to Coyle, will probe into the lives of female Manichaean mothers. The structure of the paper will be guided by four questions:

1) How is motherhood presented in the cosmology?
2) How is the female body understood?
3) What is the relationship between celibacy and agency for Manichaean women?
4) How is motherhood presented in Manichaean community texts?

In the process of attempting to answer these questions, we will come a step closer to discovering the elusive “woman within.”

Cosmological Foundations

Especially in the case of a dualistic religion such as Manichaeism, to understand how the religion is practiced, it is necessary to understand the cosmological underpinnings. As Jason Beduhn posits in The Manichaean Body in Discipline and Ritual: “what people take to be true, and the ends they value, have some impact on their behavior.” In a collection of Mani’s

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13 Of course, it is impossible to know to what degree the auditor in a given time and place may have had access to these mythologies. While there are Manichaean doctrinal texts found in Kellis, Gardner suggests that they “seem relatively limited and with an often catechetical purpose. This accords with the argument that the excavated context is predominantly that of the community of catechumens. The amazing detail of Mani’s teachings as regards the various worlds of gods and demons, although a feature emphasized by the heresiologists for polemical purposes, would seem in some senses to have been restricted knowledge into which the elect might only gradually draw the convert. The concerns of the mass of believers were necessarily more matter-of-fact, for whom Manichaeism would have been a kind of higher and more effective Christianity…Similarly at Kellis, where the believers, as represented by their own writing in the personal letters, evidence little interest in (and perhaps knowledge of) the fantastic worlds described in a text such as the Kephalaia.” Gardner, Kellis I, ix-x.
14 Beduhn, Manichaean Body, 19.
religious injunctions, the *Kephalaia*, Mani stresses the significance of cosmology for the actual practices of the Manichaean church. In *Kephalaia* 9, Mani responds to a follower’s questions concerning ritual actions. The apostle asks, “This peace and this greeting that occur in the world, from whom did they come forth? Or likewise, the right hand that occurs in the world, it being honoured by mankind, of whom is it? Or the mystery of the kiss that they embrace one another with . . .” Mani responds to the various questions: “The first right hand is the one that the Mother of Life gave to the First Man, when he comes out to the contest. The first kiss is this one with which the Mother of Life embraced the First Man; as he separates from her, coming down to the contest.” Gardner and Lieu suggest, here, that “the ritual actions that occur in human society, and which Mani has initiated in his church, are presented as reenactments of divine archetypes.” Mani deliberately connected his cosmology to the way things actually played out in the Manichaean communities. Manichaean cosmology is complex, gendered, and inconsistent geographically — making interpretation a difficult task. Yet, the cosmological stories all present mythological battles between good and evil.

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15 The *Kephalaia* is a Coptic version of early M. hymns.
16 Gardner and Lieu, 233.
17 Gardner and Lieu 233.
18 Gardner and Lieu 232.
19 Yet, it is important to note that Manichaean cosmology, no matter how deliberate Mani claimed to be, is not a consistent, perfectly constructed story. As W.B. Henning observed, “On whatever subject Mani was writing or talking, he was always lavish with details. Unfortunately he frequently failed to notice that the details he produced on the spur of the moment did not square with his teachings of the day before. His picture of the world is a case in point.” Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993): 223. Just as the cosmology itself is inconsistent, the activity of women would not look the same in different Manichaean communities. Yet, if themes reappear in multiple sources, there is a greater chance that there is significance that should be analyzed; however, due to the lack of sources, it is hard to know whether a text is a random outlier or represents a more common view.
20 These gendered cosmological stories raise questions about Manichaean conceptions of the “feminine.” In attempting to make sense of the gendered Manichaean cosmology, it is prudent to be cautious about how much these texts can tell us. Michael Williams raises four helpful questions in his “Variety in Gnostic Perspectives and Gender” which are helpful guides at the onset of this study:

1) To what extent does a text even use imagery that we would want to call gendered imagery?
2) When a gendered image is used, is it used primarily for the sake of its gendered character, or is it for some other reason?
3) Even where gendered imagery is being used for the sake of its gendered character, what is the nature of the relationship between the roles depicted in the imagery and the perspective of the author on social gender roles?
4) What perspectives on social gender are discernable among Gnostic sources?
To set a foundation for the conception of motherhood in Manichaeism, it is fitting to begin by looking at the mythological Mother of Life. The Mother of Life is evoked by the Father of Greatness who ruled over that period of pre-history, the “first-time.” The Coptic *Kephalaia* 70, 28-38 states: “He sculpted her like this. He established her in his inner storehouses in quiet and silence. When (they had) need of her she was called and came forth out of the Father (of Greatness). She looked at all her aeons of light!” In Theodor bar Khonai’s *Lib. Schol.*, a Syriac summary of Mani’s writings, this pre-historic “family” is described: “And he says that the Father of Greatness evoked the Mother of Life, and the Mother of Life evoked the Primal Man, and the Primal Man evoked his five sons, like someone who puts on armour for the fight.” The Mother of Life brings the First Man or Primal Man into existence. In the *Kephalaia*, the Living Spirit and Mother of Life together descend and “defeat the demonic powers and rules, and out of their bodies fashion the universe.” In these myths, the Mother of Life — a female emanation of God — plays a critical role in defeating evil and creating the material world. The Mother of Life has power to create life, but this creation is carefully constructed to be non-sexual. This is a positive image of the feminine and sets up a conception of motherhood that is life-giving but asexual.

The “mother” in Manichaean mythology is not always positive. A contrasting image comes from the Iranian myth of Az, known from a Middle Persian Turfan text (M 7980-84). Az is given credit for teaching demons how to procreate as well as instilling evil into the first human woman. Az is depicted as deceptive and dangerous, the origin of sexual desire, the mother of demons:

Manichaean cosmology is heavily gendered, with female forms of the divine and evil female demons. However, as Williams is careful to point out, this does not necessarily mean that every gendered reference is can tell us something about the feminine. This use of gender, the contrast of male and female, can be a useful device for getting a point across—one that could have nothing to do with gender. This will be an important distinction to consider in looking at the Manichaean texts. Williams’ third question concerning the relationship of gendered imagery to the author’s understanding of gender roles is relevant to this study; does a negative portrayal of a feminine character in Manichaean literature have application to Manichean gender roles?

23 Gardner and Lieu 15.
24 Klimkeit 224. This text was first published by Henning and then Boyce; the English translation that I quote comes from Klimkeit who uses Hutter’s German translation.
And like that lustful and lewd seed, Az fell down from heaven to earth, on that which is dry and that which is wet. And it was there together with all kinds of vegetation mixed itself into it and with the other monster demons of its own nature. Then the demons and she-devils, the demons of wrath, the monster demons and archdemons that were female, two-footed, four-footed, winged, poisonous and reptile-formed, all that were pregnant from the beginning in Hell and that were thereupon fastened to the eleven firmaments and had seen that radiance and beauty of the God Roshnshar and become desirous of him, losing their senses, they all aborted the fruit of their own loins. And the aborted offspring fell down to earth, and they began to crawl all over the earth. They devoured the fruits from the trees and grew bigger, more monstrous and more like archdemons. And from the fruits of the trees which they had devoured that Az who had entered the fruits, overcame them. And they were aroused by sensual lust and mated with each other.²⁵

Az would go on to fill the first human woman with “such a spirit, so that she would become even more thievish and sinful, lascivious, and covetous, and so that she the woman would deceive this man by lust.”²⁶ In this Iranian myth, the female demon Az and the first female woman seem to be equated with evil desire. It is through Az and the first woman that sexual desire and sin get passed down through the generations. Sexual desire, not procreation, is viewed as evil.

These feminine cosmological “mothers” represented the best and the worst forces at play in the world, symbols of the battle between good and evil. Thus, it seems that motherhood was a malleable symbol. While mothers were used symbolically, the issue at stake was the battle between light and darkness, not making a statement about gender or the role of motherhood. The vital issue in these cosmological texts was this struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.

The Manichaean Body

While human sexuality served to further entrap light into matter, the human body served an essential cosmological role in the act of redeeming the cosmos.²⁷ The body was

²⁵ Klimkeit 228-229.
²⁶ Klimkeit 234.
simultaneously a product of evil, of light entrapped in darkness, as well as the mechanism of
salvation through which the salvation of the world would come about. In the Mani Codex,28
Mani describes the body as “blood and bile and flatulence and excrement of shame.”29 Yet, as
Peter Brown suggests: “The bodies of believers, if kept holy by continence, could play a role in
nothing less than the redemption of the universe. The cosmic drama that had been revealed to
Mani was more optimistic than had been that of any previous Gnostic system.”30 While light is
entrapped in dark matter for a time, this will not always be the case; in fact, the process of
liberation of the light particles had already begun for the Manichaean. Humans and the universe
were intimately connected. As Brown suggests, “The human body was a microcosm of that
universe. A deep dungeon to the unillumined, it became an active agent of salvation, a crucible
in miniature, once the power of Mani’s message had descended upon it.”31 Through the
Manichaean elect’s body — through eating cultic meals and digesting the light particles in fruit
— the cosmos was being redeemed.

This understanding of the human body was connected to the Manichaean understanding
of sexuality and gender. Sexuality was viewed as powerful and dangerous as is apparent in the
cosmological stories. In the Acta Archelai,32 Mani reportedly suggests that “The intercourse of
men with wives comes from that sort of happening. When you are satiated with fleshly food your
concupiscence is excited. The fruits of generation are in this way multiplied.”33 But the sexual

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28 The Cologne Mani Codex is a historical text, similar to the Coptic Berlin Codex. Dated from the 4th-8th
centuries. Gardner and Lieu 40-42.
30 Brown 198.
31 Brown 199.
32 The Acta Archelai, attributed to Hegemonius, is a record of debates between Mani and Christian leaders
in the Roman Empire. It was composed in Greek in the 4th century; it is preserved in Latin. Gardner and
Lieu 182.
33 Gardner and Lieu 200.
drive could be overcome, as it was for the elect, through a careful diet of food high in light particles.\(^{34}\)

The Manichaean understanding of the female body was complex. In some texts, the female body seems to be equated with dangerous sexuality such as in the cosmological myth of Az. In the *Acta Archelai*, the first woman is equated with deceptive desire: “They created Eve in the same way and gave to her a share of their own desire, so as to deceive Adam.”\(^{35}\) In the letter presented by Julian of Eclanum, Mani allegedly suggests “women’s bodies” are tools of the devil to entice men to lust: “So just as God is the originator of souls, so the devil is the originator of bodies through lust, so that in the devil’s snare by means of the lust of a woman, whence the devil lies wait.”\(^{36}\) From the *Acta Archelai* and the account of Julian Eclanum, it seems that there was some connection at least between the cosmological myths and the way that women were perceived as a source of temptation for men to lust. This was a common belief in the ancient world, and certainly not unique to the Manichaeans.\(^{37}\)

Nonetheless, the female body had just as much salvific potential as a male body. Jason Beduhn notes that Ephrem “attests a distinctly feminine form of the title [a Manichaean called a righteous one (zaddiqa)], referring to ‘those idle women of the party of Mani, those whom they call zaddiqatha.’”\(^{38}\) Female elect could participate in the cultic meal in which light was liberated from matter. This seemed to be the case in all of Manichaeism, not just in one region or time period. Chinese Manichaean texts distinguish between male and female elect (*shih-seng fu/shi-seng mu*).\(^{39}\)

As the Manichaean body was the place in which salvation took place, despite the fact that the body contained light as well as darkness, the body could be used as a positive symbol in

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\(^{34}\) Gardner and Lieu 201.
\(^{35}\) Gardner and Lieu 186.
\(^{36}\) Gardner and Lieu 173. This letter is possibly spurious, but nonetheless matches other teachings of Mani.
\(^{37}\) Does this mean that equating the feminine with lust is a necessarily an essential element of Manichaean religion or is it just a “roll-over” from the societies in which these texts were produced? In any case, it seems that not only was the feminine often equated with lust but the actual female body as well.
\(^{39}\) Beduhn, *Manichaean Body*, 27.
Manichaean writings. The “body” symbol was also utilized to depict the fellowship of Manichaean believers as the “body” of the church. Another Kellis text, from House 3, room 3, preserves the exhortation of a religious leader to the community to love one another: “The [teachers] will love the teachers, the wise ones (love) the wise ones, the bishops (love) the bishops, the disciples (love) the disciples, the brothers (love) the brothers, also the sisters (love) the sisters; and you will all become children of [a] single undivided body.”\footnote{Iain Gardner, ed., \textit{Kellis Literary Texts: Volume II}. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007) 89. Jn 15:3.} The Manichaeans together make up one body in love, a common theme in Pauline Christian vocabulary, as well.\footnote{The Church as the body of Christ: Ephesians 5, Colossians 1.} The image of the body of believers is directly connected to the concept of kinship. In the Kellis letters, there are repeated references to mothers, fathers, and children which may have included the spiritual “family” including Manichaean elect.\footnote{Another letter from Kellis (P. Kell. V Copt. 31) is written to the daughters “of the Light Mind,” presumably catechumens: “My loved daughters, who are greatly revered by me: The members of the holy church, (the daughters) of the Light Mind, they who (are numbered) with the Children of God; the favoured, blessed, God-loving souls; my women children. It is I, your father who is in Egypt, who writes to you; in the lord, -- greetings!” The titles of “daughters” and “father” here represent spiritual kinship. Gardner and Lieu 278.}

The corporate Manichaean body as well as the individual’s body represented salvation. The physical body could be redeemed — both for males and females — as both could join the rank of the elect. What we can glean from this body imagery is that the Manichaeans were not totally opposed to the material world, for salvation would come through the body: even the female body.

**Female Celibacy and Agency**

As a result of the importance of the body, asceticism and celibacy were elevated in Manichaean communities. The bulk of Manichaean literature dealing with women makes reference to the small number of elect Manichaean women. In a fragmentary Turkish letter, we see that women could have positions of leadership: “May this letter reach the Majesty of the Mother Superior (qostiranc). We, Qutluγ Quaraγ Tāngrim, send this letter, asking about your
well-being. How are you? We are very glad to have heard that you are well . . .”

This title of “Mother Superior” suggests that this woman was a prominent Manichaean elect in charge of other women. We have no information as to how these female monastic communities were structured, and as Coyle notes, there are no references to women as playing any part in the “three-tiered Manichaean hierarchy of presbyters, bishops, and apostles.”

In the Iranian Book of Prayer and Confession read in divine services, female ascetics are exalted: “The pure and holy sisters, together with their convents and nunneries: May they be remembered as a pious deed. And all auditors, brother and sisters, in the East and the West, in the North and the South, who confess God, Light, Power and Wisdom: May they be remembered as a pious deed.” In this text, auditor men and women are also mentioned, reminding us of the interconnectedness of elect and auditor. Celibacy was not the only standard for piety.

Empowered female Manichaean may have drawn in other women into the Manichaean church. Early Byzantine opponents of Manichaeism stress the role of women as prominent Manichaean missionaries. In his Vita of Porphyry of Gaza, Mark the deacon tells the story:

About that time, a woman from Antioch named Julia arrived in the city, she confessed to the abominable heresy of those known as Manichaeans; now, discovering that among the Christians there were some neophytes who were not yet confirmed in the holy faith, this woman infiltrated herself among them, and surreptitiously corrupted them with her impostor’s doctrine, and still further by giving them money.

At the conclusion of this story, Julia dies as a result of her false beliefs; immediately, her misguided followers repent of their Manichaean ways. While the degree to which this story is rooted in historical truth cannot be measured, this text indicates that there may have been women

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43 Klimkeit 373.
44 Coyle 82.
45 Klimkeit 146.
46 Gardner and Lieu 126. Gardner and Lieu note that “Considerable doubt exists over the authenticity of the vita because of the numerous anachronisms and chronological and prosopographical errors which it contains; but the account of the debate fits well with our knowledge of public debates between Christian and Manichaean leaders of this period.”
acting as missionaries. These women may even have come from the upper class, possessing great financial resources.

Women, likewise, were understood to be the targets of Manichaean missionaries. Other polemical texts suggest that Roman women were “easy targets”: “They [the Manichaens] seek out women, who always want to hear something for sheer novelty, and persuade them through what they like to hear and do foul and illicit things.” In a society where men and women did not freely socialize under most circumstances, it seems probable that these “easily tricked” women were being visited by female Manichaean missionaries. But did female Manichaean missionaries also evangelize to men? Were the neophytes that Julia infiltrated all women? Were these female missionaries a part of the monastic elect or auditor women evangelizing to their friends?

Unfortunately, the available texts do not have answers to these questions. Nor can we determine with any certainty the degree of autonomy provided by the ascetic life. To what degree did Manichaean women have the freedom to choose the monastic life? Females could participate, through an ascetic lifestyle, in the sacred consumption of light-filled foods, freeing light from its bondage to the material world — and thus take part in redeeming the cosmos.

**Manichaean Brides and Mothers**

Yet most Manichaean women would not choose the chaste, ascetic life. While the Manichaean elect chose not to marry and to remain celibate, marriage was a part of everyday Manichaean auditor life — which likely constituted the vast majority of the Manichaean

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47 Madeleine Scopello. "Bassa la Lydienne." *Femme, Gnose et Manichéisme: De l’espace mythique au territoire du réel*. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, 53, pp. 293-315. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005. Scopello reconstructs the life of “Bassa La Lydienne” from an inscription found in Salon: *BassaParqhenosLudiaManicea* As a Manichaean “virgin,” Bassa was a member of the elect; that Bassa was a Lydian who died in another city suggests she may have traveled as a missionary.

48 Mani certainly sought to convert wealthy women. Mani converts Queen Tadī, the wife of the emperor, in a Parthian text. Klimkeit 208-9.

49 The same accusation was made about Christian missionaries.

50 Gardner and Lieu 119.
population. While there are very few references to Manichaean brides and mothers, a 9th c. Uighur Turkish Betrothal text celebrates a betrothal:

…If he takes a liking to her, the virgin will not be suitable for anyone else. Your Majesty (tangrim), may she be suitable for you. It will be very lovely when you seat yourself (with her) in all joy and blessedness. You two together will be as lovely as when the sun rises over the earth, lighting up everything with its splendor. And Anvam will be like a beautiful, green tree in summer filled with various fragrant, sweet-smelling [blossoms]… Look at Anvam; she has come for your sake. She loves you and cherishes you with her whole heart. Your Majesty, if you (so) will, become her husband, and Anvam shall be your wife…”

This text not only shows a Manichaean celebration of marriage, but seems to have political implications, praising the marriage of a political leader. The vibrant descriptive language employed to compare the beauty of nature to the beauty of the newly married couple is surprising on many levels: not only does it glorify the natural world which in many other places is understood to be filled with evil, but it also glorifies the institution of marriage. This certainly should remind us that Manichaeism was not always as world-renouncing as we would expect from the many texts focusing on the ascetic lifestyle of the elect.

Mother imagery emerges in Manichaean hymns. In a Parthian hymn, the description of “mother” is given to Jesus the Splendor: “You have come with salvation, our beneficent Father and our true hope. You have come like a father, our beneficent physician. You have arisen like a

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51 This fragment was found with others, blessing the Uighur King of Kocho and other dignitaries. Klimkeit 357, 360.

52 For political dimensions of Manichaeism, see Hans-J. Klimkeit’s “Manichaean Kingship: Gnosis at Home and in the World”. Numen, Vol. 29, Fasci. 1 (Jul., 1982), pp. 17032. Klimkeit suggests that, “The early missionary accounts make it clear that he [Mani] 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 Mani is reflected in the fact that he conceived of the world of light as a court, ruled by the King of Light” (17). See also Timothy Pettipiece, Timothy. "’Et sicut rex . . . ’ Competing Ideas of Kingship in the Anti-Manichaean Acta Archelai." In Frontiers of Faith: The Christian Encounter With Manichaeism in the Acts of Archelaus, edited by Jason BeDuhn and Paul Mirecki, pp. 119-29. Leiden: Brill, 2007. Pettipiece suggests a shifting noting of kingship in Manichaeism tailored to shifting political situations. See also Scott, David. "Manichaeism in Bactria: Political Patterns & East-West Paradigms." Journal of Asian History 41, no. 2 (2007): 107-30. Scott notes that, “there is a paradox appearing that this other-worldly/world-renouncing tradition was in a curious way more than ready to seek, and at times receive, temporal support” (108). As this paper argues, Manichaeism as a religious system was less world-renouncing than it first appears.
mother, (and) you are helpful like a brother.”\textsuperscript{53} This use of familial terms is found in cosmological texts as well as within Manichaean communities referring to one another. Yet, to describe the male Jesus the Splendor in female terms — in particular as a “mother” which alludes to procreative ability — is significant.

In a partially preserved Parthian hymn in honor of the hierarchy and the Dominions of Light, the different Light Dominions are called out: “Wisdom, you good teacher, our merciful Mother; in wisdom you are like the Mother of the Living, the most beloved of all gods, from whom all pious teachings issued forth. Thus you (the teacher) are also a living mother, who bears children by word-created wisdom. And you nurture them with spiritual milk and lead them to the maturity of godliness.”\textsuperscript{54} Teachers, as well, could be compared to mothers, as in this Middle Persian hymn: “And we praise you, blessed leader, our loving patron, our head and our good captain (our) merciful Father and our loving Mother.”\textsuperscript{55} In many of these texts, motherhood is associated with love and nurture. Presumably, women may have heard these hymns performed in church. What would it have meant to these auditor women to hear these hymns in praise of Jesus the Splendor or Wisdom as mother? While perhaps not written with the intention of praising motherhood, these hymns may have affirmed the Manichaean mothers who heard them.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The reality seems to be that Manichaean women could be brides and mothers, and even be praised for this. I propose two possible ways to understand this acceptance of the role of motherhood: 1) Perhaps there is a connection between these positive cosmological conceptions of “motherhood” as a positive, creative, non-sexual force and the favorable descriptions of real mothers. The understanding of the category of “mother” from the cosmology created space in the religion for real women as mothers to be respected and elevated. 2) Another explanation is that Manichaean anti-materialist, dualistic cosmology had little impact on reproduction in the actual day to day lives of Manichaean auditors, at least in certain times and places.

\textsuperscript{53} Klimkeit 64.
\textsuperscript{54} Klimkeit 79.
\textsuperscript{55} Klimkeit 96.
The dualistic Manichaean cosmology, long thought to be radically opposed to sexual reproduction and the idea of motherhood, actually seems to have provided a way for mothers and reproduction to be respected. An equally potent force, I suspect, would have been the traditional cultures or “everyday life” which silently opposed the world-renouncing tendencies of Manichaeism. It is critical to remember that, as Manichaeism was rapidly growing, most Manichaeans came out of other religious traditions and were deeply rooted in their traditional cultures. Certainly, the population of Kellis in the fourth century was an “unorthodox” mix of Christianity, Manichaeism, and paganism. Any conversion to a new religion and worldview takes some time before it is fully internalized — and the way that it is expressed or lived out varies between cultures. We should not underestimate the power of earlier religious views and especially earlier patterns of life, particularly in Egypt as Daniel McBride has argued.56

Perhaps we should imagine Manichaean auditors who listened to the teachings of the elect on the battle between light and darkness at church but came home and lived ordinary lives, just as they had always done — getting married, having sex, and raising families. Ordinary Manichaean women could marry and raise children and not be condemned, at least in certain times and places. Would Manichaean mothers have felt an internal conflict between their anti-materialist worldview and their large families? It is important to remember that these were real men and women. The Manichaean family that we encounter through the letters at Kellis was made up of men and women who held a radical worldview and lived ordinary lives. As is always the case in real life, there often are conflicts between ideology and practice.

Until more evidence is found, there is little we can know for certain about the “woman within.” The bulk of Manichaean literature deals with men and particularly the elect. Only through piecing together fragments of information and using the imagination can we begin to paint a picture of the lives of Manichaean mothers. We can, however, glimpse into the life of one Manichaean mother. Although often separated from her husband and sons, through the letters from Makarios and Matheos we are allowed access to Manichaean family life from within: we can enter into a world of love, separation and longing to be reunited. The Manichaean

56 See Daniel McBride. “Egyptian Manichaeism.” Journal for the Society of the Study of Egyptian Antiquities 18 (1988): 80-93. McBride proposes that Egyptian Manichaeism contained distinctive Egyptian elements, such as “negative confessions” (82), apocalypticism (83), and heliocentrism (83).
community in Kellis is one large family of natural and spiritual fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. This extended community may have provided support for the mother Maria as her husband and sons left to work in the Nile Valley. While we cannot hear Maria’s voice as she has left behind no letters of her own, it is easy to imagine a mother joyfully receiving a letter from her far-off son, carefully storing the precious letters for safekeeping. As a result of this mother’s love for her family, we are left with insights into the Manichaean community at Kellis that raise questions which shake the very core of our understanding of the Manichaean religion.
Bibliography


