

The emergence and spread of Manichaeism as a cultural phenomenon

Shaknoza Rakhmanova

Junior Researcher of the Institute, Uzbek Language, Literature and Folklore, Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article explores the literary tradition that developed on the basis of Manichaean teachings, tracing its evolution and cultural significance. It highlights how Manichaean-inspired poetry, while deeply rooted in early Turkic literature, transcended regional boundaries and became a notable part of ancient world literature. The study also examines the perspectives of the renowned scholar Al-Biruni on Manichaeism, emphasizing the credibility and depth of his insights. Through this analysis, the article sheds light on the spiritual, cultural, and historical impact of Manichaean literature across diverse civilizations.

Keywords: Literature, Manichaeism, Mani, doctrine, belief, Al-Biruni, Turkic poetry, religious movements.

Introduction: Sources covering the life and activities of Mani Mani, whose original name was Surayk and who became the spiritual leader of the Manichaeans, was born on April 14 in the year 216 CE. [1,24] His father, Fatak, was originally from Ecbatana (modern-day Hamadan), which was historically the capital of the Parthian Kingdom and later of the Sasanian Empire. Known for his remarkable voice, Fatak gained fame within the society of Ctesiphon, one of the ancient cities of the region. At the time of Surayk's (Mani's) birth, his father was a member of the Mesopotamian Baptists, a Judeo-Christian religious movement led by a prominent spiritual leader of that era named Elchasai. This figure succeeded in spreading his ideas across the Persian Empire, reaching even the borders of Rome.

There are several theories suggesting that Mani may have been inspired by Elchasai's fame to start his own path. In his mission to spread his beliefs, Mani not only traveled widely but also drew upon sources from Hebrew traditions. Additionally, he expressed deep reverence for their patriarchs – Adam, Seth, Enoch, Idris, and Shem.

The French scholar Isaac de Beausobre (1659–1738), in his comprehensive study *The History of Manichaeism and Its Destructive Influence*, presented several pieces of evidence suggesting that Mani considered himself an apostle of Jesus Christ. According to Beausobre, Mani

modeled his own mission after that of Nictheus and Paul. He had memorized the "New Testament" part of the Bible, but he rejected the "Old Testament" and denied the prophethood of Moses. [2, 37] According to available information about Mani's life, he lived with his mother, Maryam, until the age of four. Afterwards, his father Fatak entrusted him to the care of the clergy so that he could thoroughly study the teachings of the Baptists. Even before reaching maturity, Surayk began to oppose certain rules of the church. Eventually, at the age of 24, he left the temple. A year later, he declared himself to be Mani Hayya (in the Syriac language, "the Living Spirit").

It is known that during this time, the ruler of the Sasanian Empire, Shapur I (240–273 CE), supported Mani's activities. As a monarch, Shapur needed new ideas and a new religion to govern the empire effectively. In an effort to free the people from the long-standing influence of Zoroastrian clergy who had kept them under pressure, Mani managed to spread his teachings across vast territories. Facts related to the biography of the Manichaean leader are also found in three books published in ancient Egyptian (Coptic) language. The texts composed of praises and hymns primarily provide insight into the final years of the sect's leader. For example, in the *Kephalaia*, Mani does not go into detail about his missionary journeys, but he does recount the early years of his activity and his

relationship with Shapur I. In the Psalms of Mani, there is an elegy written from the perspective of his disciples, describing the tragic death of their spiritual guide.

Compared to Mani's other writings, *The Sermons of the Manichaeans* is more biographical in nature. According to this text, Shapur died in 273 CE and the throne passed to his son, Hormizd I. He, too, supported Mani's role as a religious leader in the empire. However, the young king's reign did not last long. Power soon passed to his brother, Bahram I.

Bahram, who disapproved of Manichaean ideology, began persecuting the followers of the faith as soon as he ascended the throne. By nature, Bahram was a man fond of hunting and warfare—both of which were prohibited under Manichaean law. To him, Mani appeared to be an insignificant man who neither hunted, nor fought, nor practiced medicine. The king ordered that Mani be thrown into prison. After Mani's execution, Zoroastrianism was able to restore its former dominance. Kartir, the chief of the Magi, was well aware that Mani's ideological views contradicted centuries-old Zoroastrian traditions and had the potential to completely disrupt Zoroastrian society. For this reason, the Magi supported Bahram's actions.

These events are extensively described in the chapter titled *On the Crucifixion* in *The Sermons of the Manichaeans*.

The Russian scholar E. B. Smagina, after studying the historical records of Mani's life, categorized the existing sources into three groups. She included in the first group numerous religious texts housed in Christian church libraries. According to her, the biographical information found in this group of sources is unreliable, as the evidence has been distorted or fabricated [2, 343].

The Arabic sources that contain more reliable biographical information about Mani are classified as the second group in Smagina's categorization. For example, relatively detailed accounts of his birth, childhood, and youth can be found in *Fihrist al-Ulum* by Muhammad ibn Ishaq, better known as al-Nadim.

Smagina also considers the works of al-Biruni to be trustworthy. In particular, *Al-Athar al-Baqiya* (*The Remaining Traces of Past Centuries*) provides a precise date and location for Mani's birth. [4, 119].

The teachings of Manichaeism

At the heart of Mani's worldview lies a central idea: prophets operated within the cultural and traditional frameworks of specific regions and peoples, which inevitably shaped their teachings. As a result, Mani concluded that earlier religious doctrines were one-sided and incomplete. This belief led him to attempt a

reformation of the core concepts found in Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism.

Mani sincerely believed that, following the spiritual paths of Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus, he was the final prophet for the last generation of humanity, proclaiming a universal religion that could unite all nations and values. He envisioned a single, all-encompassing faith adapted to the traditions and worldviews of different peoples and regions. This doctrine endured on Earth for a thousand years, functioning in some regions as a religion and in others as a movement.

Manichaeism emerged in Central Asia, particularly within the Uyghur-Turkic Khaganate, during the second half of the 8th century. Although it was declared the official religion of the Uyghurs, it did not remain dominant among them for long. According to Arab sources, after the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the influence of Manichaeism sharply declined across Iran and many other countries. However, the sources also note that in the 10th century, Samarkand became a center of Manichaean activity. Mani's disciple, Mar Ammo, was responsible for promoting the faith throughout Central Asia.

According to the syncretic system developed by Mani, the world around us is the scene of a relentless struggle between two opposing spiritual forces—Good and Evil, Light and Darkness. This concept mirrors Zoroastrian dualism, where Light and Goodness represent the spiritual realm, while Darkness and Evil belong to the material world. In Manichaean belief, the first realm is ruled by Light (God), and the second by Darkness (Satan). Humanity consists of two elements: the soul, a child of Light, and the body, a child of Darkness. Therefore, humans must aid the Light in its battle against Darkness. In this cosmic struggle, matter is ultimately doomed to destruction, and the spirit will triumph.

Manichaean doctrine regarded this world as a domain of evil, placing great emphasis on pacifism (nonviolence) and renunciation of material possessions. Followers were expected to donate one-tenth of their wealth as charity, pray four times daily, and abstain from lying, murder, theft, adultery, greed, sorcery and belief in it, and idolatry.

The faith spread widely among the lower classes, as they viewed the realm of Darkness as a metaphor for the oppression of the ruling elite. For them, worshiping the Light meant resisting tyranny and contributing to the ultimate victory of the spirit.

Because Manichaeism integrated elements from all previous religions, it was believed to be directly based

on the written commandments of the “Prophet” himself.

Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism

As previously mentioned, there are similarities between Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. For example, both teachings refer to Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) as the god of goodness, while the force of evil is called Ahriman in Zoroastrianism and Shemnu in Manichaeism. However, the differences between these two belief systems are far more numerous and significant than their similarities.

One key distinction lies in their attitudes toward the human body. Mani regarded the human body as a creation that serves evil and essentially declared war against it. In contrast, Zoroastrianism encourages prosperity through honest means, while Manichaeism considers a life of poverty to be the path to salvation.

Zoroastrianism promotes the idea that each person must choose between good and evil. One of the central symbols of the religion is the Faravahar, which embodies the phrase “I choose.” In Manichaeism, however, no such moral choice exists: a person can either unite with the Light or completely reject it. According to Manichaean doctrine, the soul—created from Light—is not responsible for human sins; only the body, born of Darkness, bears that burden.

This particular teaching contributed to the rapid spread of the movement, as unlike Zoroastrianism, Judaism, or Christianity, Manichaeism did not require deep repentance or lifelong confession of sins. In those religions, recognizing one’s transgressions and daily repentance are central practices. For the Manichaeans, the only true sin was forgetting the soul and failing to recognize the Light—essentially, refusing the path offered by Mani. Followers believed themselves to be free from guilt beyond that one transgression.

Manichaeism attracted many merchants, traders, and suppliers who traveled along the Silk Road. These individuals were typically clever, well-educated, and influential, and they deeply desired a way to be freed from their perceived sins. Thanks to their support, Manichaeism spread as far as the eastern territories of the Roman Empire during the 3rd century, where communities of Manichaeans emerged in major cities.

The movement’s clergy were highly adaptable to different cultures. Mani instructed his disciples to first learn the local languages, symbols, imagery, and cultural values of the people they were preaching to. In Eastern regions, they even adopted shamanic elements and deity figures to better communicate their message.

Al-Biruni’s studies on Mani and Manichaeism

According to Russian scholar E. B. Smagina, Al-Biruni

was well acquainted with the texts of the Manichaeans. In his book *India*, he refers to Mani multiple times and includes direct quotations from his works. Al-Biruni concluded that Mani, like Budasaf (a reference to Buddha), Zoroaster, and Jesus, claimed the status of a prophet. He supported this view by citing Mani’s own words from the *Shapuragan*:

“Wisdom and good deeds have always been sent down through (God’s) messengers at different times. At one time, they were sent to the land of India through the messenger named Buddha; at another, to the land of Iran through Zoroaster; and later, to the land of the West through Jesus. Finally, in this last age, the same revelation and prophethood were bestowed upon me, Mani—the true messenger of God—and sent through me to the land of Babylon...”[5, 94]

Thus, Mani proclaimed himself as the “Seal of the Prophets,” the final messenger of the divine.

In Al-Biruni’s view, Manichaeism was a doctrine that misled and diverted humanity from the true essence of life and the path of Truth. He shared these reflections in his book on *India*—a land where Mani’s teachings had long been propagated.

He wrote:

“Human beings are naturally prone to emotion and misguidance; thus, they tend to avoid rational understanding. Those who truly comprehend science and reason have always been a minority throughout history. People who avoid critical thinking are satisfied with symbolic images. Followers of many religions, in their scriptures and places of worship, began creating idols and images, thereby drifting away from true faith. This tendency is especially characteristic of the Jews, the Christians, and most notably, the Manichaeans.”

Through this, Al-Biruni emphasized that the Manichaean reliance on imagery and symbols reflected a departure from rational, truth-seeking faith. He saw such practices as a sign of intellectual laziness and deviation from the path of enlightenment.[6, 327]

When discussing the religions and cultures of the Indian subcontinent, Al-Biruni referred multiple times to Mani and the activities of his followers. He labeled those who followed Mani as *zindiqs* (heretics). According to his analysis, Manichaeans approached all matters from the perspective of justice and injustice, casting doubt on established beliefs. This, he argued, planted seeds of uncertainty in the hearts of those whose faith in the oneness of God was already weak.

Al-Biruni claimed that the ideas of the Manichaeans led people toward dualism—a view that stood in contrast to strict monotheism. Based on the evidence presented in *India*, it appears that during Mani’s time, his

followers portrayed his life and teachings in such a compelling and well-structured manner that they successfully spread his doctrine across vast regions. Eventually, some Hindus even began to seek refuge in his teachings.

However, Al-Biruni asserted that Mani not only used unfounded stories to promote his doctrine, but also spread speculative ideas about the structure of the universe. The scholar firmly dismissed all of these as fabrications and asked for God's protection from such misleading beliefs. Indeed, this doctrine initially took shape as a theology that seemed obscure and illogical. However, over time, its founder revised and adapted his ideas in accordance with the concepts of space and time. Indeed, this doctrine initially took shape as a theology that seemed obscure and illogical. However, over time, its founder revised and adapted his ideas in accordance with the concepts of space and time.

When we look at the period during which Mani and his teachings emerged and spread, it becomes clear that, to some extent, their appearance was a necessity for the society of that time and for the Sasanian state. Mani's ideas, in their own time, played a role in liberating the people from the oppressive grip of Zoroastrian clerics, who maintained tight control over both society and power. His movement elevated the concept of individual freedom, which may explain why it managed to spread across vast territories beyond the borders of the Sasanian Empire.

The Sasanian ruler himself supported Mani, likely in pursuit of forming a more independent and ideologically cohesive state, as Mani's teachings aligned with the broader interests of the empire. As for the body of literature that developed from Mani's teachings, it can be described as a unique form of universal human culture. Moreover, the poetry influenced by Manichaeism holds a distinctive place even in early Turkic literature.

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