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BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES: FEMALE CHARACTERS AND
IMAGERY IN MANICHAEAN COSMOLOGY AND STORY

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Unlike the intense scholarly interest over last century in the analysis of women characters and themes related to women in biblical texts (often dated from the publication of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Women's Bible* in 1895), and in classical, patristic, and Gnostic texts in general, scholars have been slow to attempt similar analysis of the texts of Manichaeism, the religion that represents the last and greatest flowering of the Gnostic systems of the early centuries CE, named for its founder Mani, a native of Babylonia in Persia, born in 216 CE.¹ Such a lack of interest is all the more surprising because there is general scholarly consensus that women fared rather well within Manichaeism by their eligibility to join the inner circle of the Elect, although at least in western Manichaeism they were not eligible for the higher administrative positions in the community.²

Recently there have been a number of studies on women in Manichaeism, the major contribution coming from the Canadian scholar Kevin Coyle who outlined an agenda for the study in 2001.³ Coyle had earlier produced a study on the figure of Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism in 1991⁴ – recently updated⁵ – and has also addressed the question of women's roles in Manichaeism including their missionary work.⁶ The Gnosticism scholar Madeleine Scopello has also published work on a

1 My thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation who supported three months of my research in Berlin (Institut für Turfanforschung, Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften) and Tübingen (Evangelisch-theologische Fakultät, Eberhard-Karls-Universität) in 2007 from which this paper emerges, and to the wonderfully generous colleagues at each of these institutions. My thanks also to the other members of the newly-formed Women in Manichaeism research team – Kevin Coyle (St Paul University, Ottawa) and Madeleine Scopello (Director, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Sorbonne, Paris).

2 A question remains whether women may have held the position of deacon/deaconess in Central Asia. A text (with archive number Zong 8782 T, 82 = Y 974 = K 7709 in the Museum for Chinese History in Beijing), dealing with housekeeping matters of a Manichaean monastery, lists the winter clothing and shoes to be given to certain people connected to the temple. It is possible that the persons referred to as female servants (aspanač – a term not known in the feminine form in Sogdian) might be understood as deacons/deaconesses. See T Moriyasu, *Die Geschichte des uigurischen Manichäismus an der Seidenstraße. Forschungen zu manichäischen Quellen und ihrem geschichtlichen Hintergrund*, trans. C Steineck, Studies in Oriental Religions 50, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2004, for the text (p. 46, lines 40–41) and reference to discussion on this point from Zieme, Yoshida and Lieu (p. 83).

3 J K Coyle, 'Prolegomena to a study of women in Manichaeism', in P Mirecki and J BeDuhn (eds), *The Light and the darkness: studies in Manichaeism and its world*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 50, Brill, Leiden, 2001, 79–92.

4 J K Coyle, 'Mary Magdalen in Manichaeism', *Le Muséon* 104 (1991): 39–55.

5 J K Coyle, 'Twelve years later: revisiting the 'Marys' of Manichaeism', in D Good (ed.), *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2005, 197–211.

6 J K Coyle, 'Women and Manichaeism's mission to the Roman Empire', *Mission* 13 (2006): 43–61.

number of individual women.⁷ I have added to this work on historical individuals and groups of women with two studies of the personal and spiritual lives of women from the Manichaean community at fourth century Roman Kellis on the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt, based primarily on the personal letters from that community.⁸

While undertaking the study of the Kellis women, I began to build databases of examples of female characters and imagery in key Manichaean texts, to provide part of the larger context within which to understand or situate the lives of Manichaean women. In my first use of some of the data thus assembled, I dealt with the range of female characters and female imagery in two major western Manichaean texts that were also influential in eastern communities – the teaching text of the *Kephalaia* and the liturgical text of the *Psalm Book*.⁹ In this lecture, I will look back to my earlier work, to critique that first attempt at analysis and suggest further steps towards forming a more nuanced understanding of female characters and imagery in Manichaean texts.

I. The study of female characters and female imagery in the Kephalaia and the Psalm Book

The initial investigation of these two major texts revealed nothing surprising. The most prevalent female imagery in the texts is either of birthing and motherhood on the one hand, or connected with women as creatures of lust and inspiring lust on the other. This polarisation of the imagery is mirrored in a division between cosmic and earthly female characters, or between spiritual females and those belonging to the world and the flesh. The imagery of birthing and motherhood is used in a positive way in association with certain female cosmic figures, or female-imagined figures like the soul or the church. On the other hand, when these two texts deal with ‘real’ women who live in the world of the flesh, the same female imagery is used negatively. Women produce offspring from corrupt and filthy wombs, and they are creatures of lust who inspire lust in men, according to the *Kephalaia*. For the *Psalm Book* women are of three types – virginal, continent or married. The ‘married ones’ are those who belong to the flesh and the world. Only those who are virginal and continent, like the martyrs, the Elect and catechumens, are worthy of spiritual praise.

7 M Scopello, *Femme, Gnose et Manichéisme. De l'espace mythique au territoire du réel*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 53, Brill, Leiden, 2005.

8 M Franzmann, ‘An “heretical” use of the New Testament: a Manichaean adaptation of Matt 6:19–20 in P. Kell. Copt. 32’, in C Breytenbach, J Thom, and J Punt (eds), *The New Testament interpreted. Essays in honour of Bernard C Latagan*, Novum Testamentum Supplementum 124, Brill, Leiden, 2006, 153–162; and M Franzmann, ‘Tehat the Weaver: Women’s Experience in Manichaeism in 4th Century Roman Kellis’, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 20/1 (2007): 17–26.

9 M Franzmann, ‘Manichaean Views of Women: A Study of the Teaching and Perspectives on Women from the Kephalaia of the Teacher and the Manichaean Psalm Book’, in P Allen, M Franzmann and R Strelan (eds), *I Sowed Fruits into Hearts’ (Odes Sol. 17:13). Festschrift for Professor Michael Lattke*, Early Christian Studies 12, St Pauls Publications, Sydney, 2007, 67–85.

At the conclusion of the study, I raised the question of how women in their ordinary lives as Manichaeans would have appreciated or understood these images, not the Elect in the rarefied inner spiritual circle but rather the catechumens who served them, many of whom were married and had children. Catechumens would have heard some of these texts in the communal liturgy, been instructed in Manichaean doctrine that made use of these images and concepts about women, and doubtless would have applied some, if not all, of these teachings to their own lives. What effect might the images and concepts have had on catechumens? The question arose in part from the very positive view of the spiritual lives of the female Manichaean catechumens that I had found in studying the personal letters from Kellis. How did the individual lives of catechumens and the texts fit together? Was there more to understanding the texts than I had first considered?

II. Further methodological steps, backwards and forwards

Manichaean women's actual experience, as far as one can know that from the Kellis letters at least, provides both another viewpoint to balance the imagery of these two major Manichaean texts, and an impetus towards questioning further my initial conclusion about the texts. In what follows, further steps in reading the texts are taken that go beyond the earlier basic but informative outline of key images and the rather simple divisions of cosmic and earthly, virginal/continent and married: first, stepping back and returning to the initial study of the imagery to ask what more can be learned or appreciated by a deeper look at the imagery; and second, stepping forward to include an investigation of other types of Manichaean texts that present women in a somewhat different way to the formal teaching and liturgical texts.

Step 1: Seeing more – digging deeper into the images

The first of the five steps involves digging more deeply into what has already been presented in the earlier study, taking as an example the character of the Mother of Life, a cosmic figure of great importance in the Manichaean drama of salvation and of creation, but who has not yet been the subject of any major scholarly study.¹⁰

The Mother of Life

In my study of the *Kephalaia* the figure of the cosmic character of the Mother of Life was important for her motherly qualities. I used the Mother of Life as an example of motherly care, as she kisses the Primal Man, her son (38.22–24), arms him and makes him mighty, lays hands on him and sends him forth to battle the powers of the darkness (39.3–7). There are strong themes in these passages of the protective and nurturing mother in relationship with her son. Yet, if one

¹⁰ See, however, the (unpublished) 2006 BA (Hons) thesis of my student Kristie Morrison, 'Images of the Mother in Manichaean Cosmogonical Texts: A Case Study of the Mother of Life'.

reads further in the Middle Persian texts, the Mother herself battles to have her son return when things go wrong and he is trapped in the darkness. The Mother and her warrior colleague, the Living Spirit/Virgin of Light, go out to the border of the Light to attempt to save her son, as he is beset by demons in the darkness below. They send out the god, 'Call', like a saving letter and an arrow that one shoots into a fortress. The 'Call' and 'Answer' return to the Mother of Life and the Living Spirit who bring up her son, the Primal Man, and then create ten heavens and the zodiac.¹¹

There are aspects of the warrior here in the portrait of the Mother that can be lost with too narrow a focus on her motherly activities. While the preparation and farewell scene is one of tenderness and blessing, it is also clear that the Mother of Life knows how to equip a warrior for battle. She is knowledgeable in the ways of war, giving him weapons before blessing him and sending him off to battle. Moreover, the imagery used of the Mother and her colleague as they send out the 'Call' – that it is like shooting arrows into a fortress – also associates the Mother with warrior attributes. There is also activity from the Mother that indicates her facility with planning and creative or crafting work; first, in the idea that the Mother and her colleague fashion the agent referred to as the 'Call' and work in this way to rescue her son; and second, in her later creativity in a mighty cosmic sense in fashioning earth(s) and heaven(s).

When investigated more closely, the activity of the Mother of Life goes beyond what might be considered particular to a mother, to attributes of a much more complex character. She is mother, warrior and adept at war, a person of ideas, and powerfully creative. Digging deeper makes more of what is offered in the text to provide a richer understanding of a character, especially where the name or title of the character exerts its own pressure towards approaching her in a more simplistic way.

Step 2: Seeing more – sharpening the images

The second step in revisiting the earlier study of imagery and characters involves seeing more in the text through sharpening one's gaze. The earlier study included an outline of a number of opposing images or concepts – light and dark, virgin and married, purity and lust, cosmic positive motherhood and earthly corrupt motherhood. The polarities can seem so strong that one cannot imagine that they can be brought together in any way. However, one might sharpen the image by attempting just that. The Virgin of Light is taken as an example, using the opposing concepts of virginity and lust.

¹¹ W Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte der Manichäer mit einigen Bemerkungen zu Motiven der Parabeltexte von Friedmar Geissler*, Berliner Turfantexte 4, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1973, pp. 51–52, lines 992, 1001, 1013 (M 211 + 500f + 2203 + 2205 + 3840). See also p. 55, line 1033 (M 351/R/5) and p. 56, lines 1054–1055 (from fragments M 384 and M 4517).

The Virgin of Light

The texts involving the Virgin of Light are redolent with polar imagery. One of the most powerful descriptions of the struggle between Light and Darkness, for example, involves the clash between the Virgin of Light and the female demons, in a great battle involving the forces of nature controlled by these female figures. In the description of the creation of the world through the Living Spirit in M 263 there is an excursus about the demons and the damage they do with weather, using dark destructive wind clouds billowing out like great pregnant women. Over against the demons is the Virgin of Light, who has angels at her command to overcome the destructive demons,¹² coming against them with clouds behind her rising up like a great tower.¹³ This scene of the furious battle between light and dark, virgin and demons, brings to mind other primeval stormy struggles between opposing gods like Baal and Tiamat, or Yahweh and the great void or dragon of the depths. Here the Virgin, backed by a great tower of light cloud, confronts and defeats the demons and their pregnant clouds. It would be difficult to find a stronger image built on these polar opposites.

I categorised the Virgin of Light in my earlier work as a warrior, and as a physically beautiful female character. She has ‘ineffable beauty’ which puts the powers to shame, according to *Psalm Book* 2.27–29. She is equipped with five powers to fight against and conquer the five abysses of the dark, in a later passage in the same text (10.6–19). The darkness that she fights against is characterised by corruption, hatred, lust and desire, anything that is related to the flesh and the entrapment of the light within it.

In including the Virgin of Light simply under the category of ‘Women’s Beauty/Ugliness’ and comparing her to the black goddess Erinys in *Psalm Book* 84.21–23, no attempt was made to investigate further the action by which her beauty put the powers to shame. However, other texts give greater detail of this action, as for example the hymn M 741, in which the Virgin of Light is named Sadwēs:

‘Bright Sadwēs shows her form to the Demon of Wrath. He cries out to her as his own (?), he thinks she is the essence (of Light).

He sows ... he groans when he no longer sees the form. Light is born in the sphere: she gives it to the higher Powers.

The dirt and dross flows from him to the earth. It clothes itself in all phenomena, and is reborn in many fruits.

The dark Demon of Wrath is ashamed, for he was distraught and had become

12 Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, p. 47, line 876 (M 292/R?/II/9). Sundermann also references passages from the Kephalaia (240.16–244.20; 80.25–29; 116.26–33).

13 Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, p. 49, line 919 (M 765i/1. S./II/3–4).

naked. He had not attained to the higher, and had been bereft of what he had achieved.

He left the body an empty shell and descended in shame. He covered himself in the womb of the earths, whence he had risen in brutishness.’ (M 741/R/3-z7)¹⁴

The event described here is generally referred to as the ‘seduction of the archons’, and is known from a variety of Manichaean texts from different cultural/language groups, some much more circumspect in their telling than others. In each version the Light or some agent of the Light uses the nature of Darkness against itself, to achieve a release of the Light, invariably involving some kind of sexual activity. Here the Virgin of Light uses her beauty to inspire lust in the Demon of Wrath who ejaculates the previously captured light as semen that falls to earth and is reborn in fruits.

In my earlier study of the *Kephalaia*, I outlined another version of this drama, in which the male cosmic figure called the Third Ambassador accomplishes the same seduction in order to free the Living Soul from Matter in which it is entangled. The text likens him to a great free woman who comes out of her seclusion and shows herself in her beauty in order to save her brother, despite the lustful gaze – or perhaps better understood now, *because* of the lustful gaze – of the men around her (*Keph* 134.13–135.14).

Both of these descriptions bring together the realm of Light and its agents and an aspect of darkness that seems to be wholly antithetical to them. Quite clearly in each case the end justifies the means, and in the story of the Third Ambassador the reader is told quite explicitly that there is no blame attached to the symbolic woman who represents him because she is not like wanton or proud women who inspire lust by exhibiting themselves. The difficulty with the passage concerning the Virgin of Light/Sadwēs is that she appears to be doing exactly that – exhibiting her beauty in order to inspire lust in the Demon of Wrath. The episode inevitably raises a question mark over the nature of virginity and the positive spiritual aspects usually associated with virginity in the Manichaean texts, when the text presents a powerful cosmic female virginal character who takes her revenge on the dark forces in just the same way as they have used lust as a weapon against believers and forced the light into further entrapment in the corrupt flesh and the dark world.¹⁵ Indeed, it is a very practical and pragmatic way of using the dark against itself. As the Sermon on the Light-Nous states, the wise and clever person is like the Virgin of Light.¹⁶ Surely the seduction as it is described here is the clever ploy of a clever character, a rather more complex character than her name would indicate, just as we have seen for the Mother of Life.

14 M Boyce, ‘Sadwēs and Pēsūs’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13 (1949–50), p. 912.

15 See, e.g., the activity of Āz in W Sundermann, *Der Sermon vom Licht-Nous. Eine Lehrschrift des östlichen Manichäismus. Edition der parthischen und sogdischen Version*, Berliner Turfantexte 17, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1992, pp. 63–65, lines 7–13.

16 Sundermann, *Der Sermon vom Licht-Nous*, p. 77, line 109.

Step 3: Seeing more – questioning generalisations

The third step in returning to the previous study is to put into question those general summaries that emerged from the work. Generalisations about women and lust will be used as an example.

Women and Lust

In the earlier study it was not hard to identify in the two texts the strong thread of imagery dealing with lust, and women as creatures of lust, who inspire lust in others. There are plentiful images and plentiful teaching about the danger. However, in reaching this conclusion, examples were used which predominantly included women as major actors inspiring lust or who were said to be inspiring lust.

M 572/V/2–19 contains a parable about a woman who allows a monk to put his alms into a storage space or vessel.¹⁷ Then he goes away. A hunter comes who has captured a wolf and wants to put the wolf into the same space and sees that there is a pretty girl in it already. He asks the woman what is in the space. She replies that a monk has put his alms in it. The hunter takes the girl out and puts his wolf in instead. The monk comes in the night, wanting to retrieve the girl. As he puts his hand in to do so, the wolf comes out and eats him. The story concludes with a moral about sin and hell and the final statement: ‘so it is with that monk who sought the girl and found the wolf’.

Interestingly, there is no guilt ascribed here to the pretty girl; the entire focus of blame is on the monk. The girl is used in an example of moral wrong-doing by a man but she goes almost unnoticed, in much the same way as she is hidden away physically in the story. Yet it is important to notice her, because this story at least proposes that a woman who inspires lust may not be guilty at all, as the teaching of the *Kephalaia* may lead believers to think. It is only one story, but it poses a small question mark over earlier generalisations about women and lust.

Step 4: Seeing more – broadening the range of examples or genres

The fourth step introduces a broader range of the types of texts under scrutiny. Parables or stories will be used as the example.

Female Characters and Imagery in Story and Parable

In teaching and liturgical texts, the simplest and most readily understood themes are often used to drive home an easily-learned and easily-reinforced message in an unsophisticated way. Stories, however, are different and less easily restrained in their imagination and the sweep of their drama and line of characters, even though the

¹⁷ Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, p. 93, lines 1806–1824.

morals or teachings drawn from these stories may mirror those in the more formal teaching and liturgical texts. It will not be surprising, therefore, that stories and parables turn up a larger number of roles and occupations for women than one finds in the rather more straightforward teaching or liturgical texts.

First, as expected, there are numerous examples of women as mothers and wives and daughters. However, care must be taken, as indicated above with the Mother of Life, because a woman who is identified as a mother may illustrate more than motherly characteristics by her behaviour. Some activity is obviously specific to motherhood, such as reproduction, or caring for one's children, or indeed grieving for a dead child (M 45 and M 382),¹⁸ but even in the latter instance in one story about a woman and her dead son, there may be more to the character than appears at first glance. The first of four stories in M 4576 deals with a hearer whose son has died. She does not weep for him, because weeping would be to grieve for the body that holds the soul back from salvation. Instead she performs spiritual works and gives alms generously. When what she has done is reported abroad, honour is given to Mani because of her great belief.¹⁹ This is not so much a story about motherhood as about a true believer, the story made more poignant by the fact that it is her son who has died.

Apart from familial roles, stories and parables include women as queens, singers and courtesans of the court, ordinary housewives, women in need of healing, women as victims of war, women as believers, and so on. There are some frequently used formulae, like queens who are described as those who produce diadem-bearing sons/princes,²⁰ or beautiful daughters who are married to kings as a way of gaining a better life for the daughters or their fathers.²¹ However, there are stories which break the formulae or go beyond them to present a particular individual quality about a certain character, such as the story of Mani's interrogation before the Persian king, Vahram I, in the Manichaean *Homilies*,²² which presents the royal woman Shapur-dukhtar, recently deceased sister of the king, obviously the object of great affection by the king, and so sorely grieved over that Mani's life is under greater threat, since he who was once highly regarded at the court as a faith-healer had not been there to be of assistance with the king's sister.²³

18 Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, pp. 90–91, lines 1742–82.

19 W Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts. Mit einem Appendix von Nicholas Sims-Williams*, Berliner Turfantexte 11, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1981, p. 58, lines 681–82 (M 4576/V/Ü–JR/Ü/ [title]) and 683–99 (M 4576/R/i/1–17).

20 See, e.g. Sundermann, *Der Sermon vom Licht-Nous*, p. 130 (M 133 v/ii/96–100).

21 See W B Henning, 'The Book of the Giants', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 11, 1943, pp. 63–64 (Middle Persian fragment f) and p. 64 (A. [Middle Persian] fragment d), which Henning references to *Keph.* 192.3. See also M 221/V/11–24 in Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, pp. 103–4, lines 2010–23.

22 I Gardner and S N C Lieu (eds), *Manichaean texts from the Roman Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 82 and 83–84.

23 Gardner and Lieu, *Manichaean Texts*, p. 82, note 95. Reference is also made to the account in M3.

In similar fashion there is a stereotypical way of referring to wives and children as a burden on a man's spiritual advancement,²⁴ but there are also stories where wives are of enormous help to their husbands, for example in the story in M 572,²⁵ where a man finds a treasure and wishes to retrieve it when it grows dark. The man is forced however to take a corpse out of the place where the treasure is located, instead of the treasure itself, and to put the corpse on his back and carry it to a grave. He cannot get the corpse off his back, no matter how hard he tries, so in the night he goes home to his wife and asks her to cut the corpse off his back. She is very afraid but she does so, and the corpse falls open to reveal treasures and pearls. Thus, the woman who would often be described as a spiritual burden, is in fact the one to lift the burden from her husband and help him find the spiritual treasure that he desires.

Stories involving sick girls or women are often used as a formulaic device to illustrate confrontation between Manichaeans and Christians, or the conversion of important rulers.²⁶ However there are also stories where women are involved in their own healing by the power of prayer, as in the story of the woman Nafsā who prays to Jesus and is healed.²⁷ The power of a woman's belief is possibly best described in a very brief story in M 4576, where Ahrmen (lord of the world of darkness) is jealous of a female Hearer/catechumen. He thinks about tempting her with treasure or making her become trapped with worldly concerns even for good works or for her husband and son and daughter.²⁸ The story is all the more significant as it refers to a catechumen as the object of Ahrmen's jealousy rather than a spiritually advanced member of the Elect.

The authors of the stories and parables use stereotypes and formulae that are known and understood or expected by their audience, but one must also look more closely to see beyond these formulae to appreciate mothers who are first and foremost believers, sick women who pray powerfully, ruling women who are beloved of brothers and husbands, and wives who help their husbands by practical means to gain spiritual treasure.

Step 5: Seeing more – reading against the grain

In the final step it will be suggested that although many parables and stories have a similar teaching theme of the struggle of the soul against the entrapment of the darkness, the narratives have a life of their own beyond the moral to be drawn from

24 See, for example, W Sundermann, *Ein manichäisch-soghdisches Parabelbuch mit einem Anhang von Friedmar Geisler über Erzählmotive in der Geschichte von den zwei Schlangen*, Berliner Turfantexte 15, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1985, p. 33, Text b, lines 198–201.

25 Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, p. 92, lines 1784–1803 (M 572/R/2–21).

26 Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, pp. 23–24, lines 112–29 (M 48 + M 1306 + M 566/I/V/1–18), and pp. 46–9, lines 517–84 (fragment 18224 = T M 389d/R/1–V/27).

27 Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, p. 42, lines 441–53 (fragment 18223 = T M 389c/I/R/1–13).

28 Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, pp. 59–60, lines 717–741 (M 4576/V/Ü–/R/Ü/ [title] and N/i/1–N/ii/8).

them and it is in 'reading against the grain' of the author's apparent intention that sometimes much more can be appreciated about female characters. The example is taken from a story from two Central Asian manuscripts, M 46 and M 652/R,²⁹ in which there are clear female stereotypes, but, at the same time, ways of reading the text that make more of the characters than perhaps the author intended.

In this story there are two women, clearly opposites – a love-sick young unmarried princess and a clever old woman. The story unfolds as follows. The daughter of a king suffers from her love for a wonderful boy who does not return her love. He takes refuge sitting up in a tree. The king sends horses and men to bring the boy in so he can give the boy to his daughter, but the boy slaughters the horses and men. There seems no way of resolving the impasse, and the daughter is near to death from her love-sickness, when an old woman appears before the king suggesting she knows another way to capture the boy. The old woman takes wine and a lamb and proceeds to the tree where the boy is sitting. She begins by pretending to try to kill the lamb, taking the lamb by its tail. The boy, watching on, suggests that she is going about it the wrong way and that she should be trying to kill the lamb at its neck not its tail. The boy thinks she is stupid and comes down from the tree to give her advice on how to carry out the killing. Once he is down, the old woman gives him wine to drink which is drugged, and then brings him back to the king on her donkey. The king gives the boy to his daughter, locking him up behind three doors (two made of copper and lead, and the innermost one made from iron and lead), from which the boy eventually escapes by playing on his flute and thereby calling a steer that breaks down the doors.

The story is a parable about the fate of the soul, represented by the boy, separated from its heavenly homeland. The parable ends with an outline of who the characters in the story represent, but in the damaged text one can only read that the king represents Ahrmen, the king of darkness. The old woman must be understood as an agent of the king of darkness and thus an evil force herself, and a character to be interpreted negatively. Read in this way, she is a character of little importance in the scheme of salvation for the soul, the most important characters being the king as the ruler of darkness and the boy as the soul who escapes his clutches.

However, if one reads against the grain of the moral of the story and its influence on how one ought to read the story, then the old woman is integral to the plot and the development of the story. While the love-sick princess initiates the action by her desire for the boy, it is the old woman who resolves the impasse and moves the action forward. She is indeed the most powerful character in the story, more powerful than the princess who would usually be understood to be above her by virtue of her royal status, more powerful than the king who is unable to dislodge the boy and bring him back with his own forces, and temporarily more powerful than the young man whom she tricks and overpowers and brings back to imprisonment. She is also clearly

29 Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte*, pp. 84–86, lines 1634–83.

the most intelligent character in the story: The girl we cannot comment upon, the king fails in his military strategy, and the boy so easily falls into her trap by assuming that an old woman is simply stupid and of no danger to him. The story deserves a fuller interpretation than can be given here, within the context of other stories about old women, but it shows what more can be appreciated about characters who seem unimportant in the scheme of things, when reading against the apparent intentions of the author.

III. Conclusion

We cannot deny that stereotypical female characters and imagery appear in Manichaean literature, even in stories and parables that may in other ways go well beyond the typically strong stereotypes found in teaching and liturgical material that are supported by the dualistic nature of the Manichaean system itself. Five steps were taken in this paper from earlier work, to try to break down and reach beyond the stereotypes to appreciate more about the female characters and imagery in Manichaean texts. We have found a more complex range of activities for the Mother of Life than simply motherhood; we have discovered the surprising case of the Virgin of Light who uses lust-inciting behaviour against the darkness; and a girl who inspires lust in a monk but does not share his blame. We have discovered a range of character types in parables and stories beyond the limited range of the *Kephalaia* and the *Psalm Book*, and a clever old woman, albeit an agent of the darkness, who exhibits power and intelligence beyond even the character who represents the Soul and the power of the Light.

When I outlined the key themes and imagery for female characters in my earlier work on the *Kephalaia* and the *Psalm Book*, I listed them one by one under categories such as birthing and pregnant women, lusting women, women martyrs, and so on. Collecting, listing and summarising major characters, images and themes is one place to start to gain an overall impression from the texts. It brings to the foreground important concepts about women, although it tends to dismiss less noticeable or less frequent images that could be of equal importance. Thus it is important to revisit, again and again, the various steps and interim conclusions of the research process in this large project on women in Manichaeism, treating that process as a spiral movement, reaching back and sharpening ideas and conclusions even as we push forward with the attempt to assemble and appreciate the entire network of female characters, imagery and themes in the Manichaean system.

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