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# PLAYING WITH LITERATURE FOR RELIGIOUS COMPETITION: MANICHAEAN CHARACTERS IN SYRIAC HAGIOGRAPHY

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## *Abstract*

Several Christian hagiographical texts written in Syriac from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century convey a conflicting religious worldview in narrative forms that depict the encounters between Christian saints and Zoroastrian authorities. Such texts include the so-called Persian Martyrs Acts, which are literary products of Syriac communities living as a minority within the predominantly Zoroastrian religious context of the Sasanian Empire, and which portray the vicissitudes of a Christian (or of a group of Christians) martyred at the hands of a Zoroastrian persecutor. They also include stories emanating from the Roman Empire that found the Syriac monastic tradition in Mesopotamia, such as the History of Mar Awgin. In these texts, the heroes and the heroines embody particular religious values and are constructed in 'dialogue' with their antagonists who, in turn, are portrayed through a specific and negative register which belongs primarily to the religious vocabulary of competition and violence. But Christians and Zoroastrians are not alone in these stories. Manichaeans, traditionally considered as religious opponents both by Christians and Zoroastrians, also feature as secondary characters in a number of texts (e. g. *The Martyrs of Karka d-Beth Slok*, *The Martyrdom of Aitallah*, *The Martyrdom of Anahid*, etc.). In this paper, I aim to study the construction of the Manichaean character portrayed in such hagiographical texts, looking at literary roles as well as narrative structures: How is this traditional heretic built within a narrative which mainly features a conflict between Christians and Zoroastrians? What is the role the texts give to him and why? According to which religious and literary models? In order to answer these questions, I will compare the Syriac texts with direct Manichaean literature, as well as with other contemporary Christian hagiographical sources in Greek and Latin that portray a Manichaean character in the Roman Empire, and Persian and Arabic anti-Manichaean texts. The paper claims that Syriac Christians played with specific literary roles and narrative patterns derived from both Manichaean and anti-Manichaean sources in a dynamic of sharing and replacement aimed at winning the competition with the Manichaean minority present in the Sasanian Empire. The paper also contributes to evaluate how narrations and motifs attached to Manichaean characters, either for apologetic or polemical goals, traveled across centuries and beyond geographical, religious and political frontiers, and were adapted to fit specific religious needs and propaganda.

Manichaeans were proficient readers and writers of stories: Acts of the Apostles, apocalypses, parables, hagiographical accounts are all texts and literary genres produced by Manichaeans or quoted in Manichaean sources. As it appears, their various religious opponents shared that predilection for narrative. This article focuses on anti-Manichaean, mainly Christian, literary output, and by doing so it will additionally offer a view onto the Manichaean literary production, which will be used for the sake of demonstration. More precisely, this paper looks at what we may interpret as religious competition through narrative weapons.

Scholars have already pointed to the shared literary language of some Manichaean texts and certain Christian, mainly Syriac, hagiographies.<sup>1</sup> Among the motifs that they have in common, a

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major one is the account of Jesus' death, which both traditions reuse in various ways.<sup>2</sup> For example, Christians used the structure of Jesus' trial as a model for the trial undergone by the martyrs, in order to present them as direct continuators of their reference figure,<sup>3</sup> while Manichaeans took the crucifixion as a model for describing Mani's own death, in order to invest him with the authority of a righteous prophet and founder of a new religion.<sup>4</sup> However, the literatures of both religious groups had ways of entering in competition with one another that are more complex than the use of shared literary motifs. In this article, I will elucidate such competition through narrative using the tools of narrative criticism combined with the hermeneutical view provided by Paul Ricoeur, especially in his 1969 volume of essays *The Conflict of Interpretations*, according to which the "others" play a major role in the construction and consolidation of a religious community's identity.<sup>5</sup> I intend to examine the portrayal of Manichaean characters as religious "others" in a number of Christian hagiographical texts written in Syriac from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century which depict the encounters between Christian saints and Zoroastrian authorities. To the best of my knowledge, Manichaean characters seem to appear indeed only in Syriac hagiography taking place in the Persian Empire and not in other Syriac hagiographical texts. In other words, I will deal with writings where the most important religious polarity does not concern Christians and Manichaeans, but Christians and Zoroastrians, yet where Manichaeans – traditionally considered as religious opponents by Christians and Zoroastrians alike – oftentimes feature as secondary characters. Hence, they appear within a triangular conflicting religious worldview in narrative form.<sup>6</sup> This examination aims first to offer a complete overview of the presence of Manichaean figures in late antique Syriac hagiographical texts, which is part of the anti-Manichaean polemical tradition attested in Syriac;<sup>7</sup> this overview may serve as comparative material for similar surveys in other

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, scholars have noticed the shared terminology and imagery between Manichaeism and early Syriac Christianity in particular: see for example Murray 1975 and Piras 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Brock 1968: 303-304 on the parallelism between the death of Simeon bar Šabba'e as recounted in his *Martyrdom* and the death of Mani as described in the Manichaean *Homilies*, both modelled upon Jesus' death. Brock hypothesizes that Simon's hagiographer emphasized the reference to Jesus' death "due to conscious Christian rivalry of Mani's martyrdom." (304) He also mentions other general motifs, such as the one of the king's oath to kill the protagonist, i.e. Mani in a Middle Persian fragment, Simon in the longer version of his *Martyrdom*, and Pusai in the *Martyrdom of Pusai*.

<sup>3</sup> For the martyrs as "other Christs", see Moss 2010.

<sup>4</sup> This is prominent in the Coptic *Homilies*, one of which bears the title *Sermon on the Crucifixion* with reference to Mani's death. For a thorough and recent discussion of the sources related to Mani's last days, see Gardner 2015. See also Gardner 2020: 59-82.

<sup>5</sup> For this, I am indebted to Padilla 2008, who has recently examined the speeches uttered by the outsiders in the Acts of the Apostles by adopting Ricoeur's methodological framework (see in particular Padilla 2008: 1-4). See also Ricoeur 1983 and 1990 for further developments of the theory of alterity for community-building, as well as Smith 2011 for another monograph dedicated to the literary role played by the "other" in the Acts of the Apostles.

<sup>6</sup> A similar approach has been taken by Herman 2014 in his collected volume, focusing on dynamics of identity formation and religious interactions among Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in the Sasanian Empire. See in particular the contribution by Kiperwasser and Ruzer 2014 for the depiction of Zoroastrians as religious "others" in Rabbinic and Syriac Christian sources.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from hagiography, Syriac anti-Manichaean tradition includes treatises, hymns, chronicles and catalogues of heresies, both originally written in Syriac and translated from other languages, mainly Greek: see Ruani 2013 for a preliminary list of sources and Ruani 2016 for a chronological overview. Despite the blurred frontiers between the two genres of hagiography and historiography and their mutual dependence in form and content (for Syriac, see Debié 2010a), I decided to leave out from the present discussion medieval Syriac chronicles that mention or devote episodes to Manichaeans, such as the *Chronicle of Khuzistan* and the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (see Harrak 2004 and Reeves 2004), by focusing solely on the literary representation of Manichaeans as religious opponents in explicitly narrative texts

linguistic Christian traditions and other religions altogether. Secondly, and following the previous purpose, it aims to contribute to our understanding of the relationships between Manichaean, Zoroastrian and Christian communities in the late antique and early medieval Sasanian context.

The Syriac hagiographical texts in which Manichaean characters appear include two kinds of narrative:

1) the so-called Persian Martyrs Acts (*PMA*), which are literary products of Syriac communities living in the oftentimes hostile Sasanian Empire, and which portray the vicissitudes of a Christian (or of a group of Christians) martyred at the hands of a Zoroastrian persecutor.<sup>8</sup> Those which feature Manichaean characters are: the *History of Karka of Bet Slok* (*BHO* 705, Brock 53)<sup>9</sup>, the *List of the martyrs of Karka of Bet Slok* (*BHO* 807, Brock 39), the *Martyrdom of Aqebšema and his Companions* (*BHO* 22, Brock 31), and the *Martyrdom of Anahid* (*BHO* 47, Brock 52).

2) stories that aim to found the Syriac monastic tradition in Mesopotamia, in areas that were historically under the control of the Persian Empire, such as the *History of Mar Awgin* (*BHO* 121).

Both groups of texts have been identified and studied by previous scholars, namely Samuel N. C. Lieu and John C. Reeves, on whose insights and analyses I build. Samuel Lieu, on the one hand, adopts a historical approach and takes these sources into account for tracing the history of Manichaeism in Mesopotamia. In doing so, he also highlights the fact that in these narratives the Manichaeans are given the role of the *vilains de la pièce*.<sup>10</sup> John Reeves, on the other hand, is interested in the textual transmission and points out that these writings are “satellites” of the *Acta Archelai*, the famous fourth-century Christian heresiological account on Mani, which stresses Mani’s failure as a healer.<sup>11</sup> Reeves’ concluding remarks about these Syriac texts state a fundamental point: in these texts, Mani and Christian saints are “narrative symbols competing for the elusive prize of Christian hegemony in the Sasanian Realm.”<sup>12</sup> It is indeed a question of competition between minority religious groups in a Zoroastrian territory who are fighting for the royal favor and against persecution. In fact, Christian sources tend to stress that Christians and Manichaeans were similar enough to be perceived as indistinguishable in the eyes of the Zoroastrians, and point out that it was vital for the Christian community to be able to differentiate itself from the Manichaean one whenever the latter was persecuted, either to avoid being persecuted

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whose protagonists are Christian holy men and women. Nevertheless, given that historiographical texts make use of narrative material and that they can be considered to some extent as literary products, it would be interesting in the future to explore the representation of Manichaean “characters” in these sources as well.

<sup>8</sup> See Brock 2008 for a repertoire of the *PMA*, including more than sixty stories, as well as Becker 2020, who examines the construction of *PMA* cycles in manuscripts and modern scholarship, and sums up previous approaches demonstrating that some *PMA* have been likely composed within the Roman Empire and according to the ideological coordinates of Roman ecclesiastical histories. For a presentation of this literature, see the reference survey by Devos 1966.

<sup>9</sup> In this article, the numbers that appear after the titles are the ones provided in the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* (*BHO*) and, whenever it applies, in Sebastian Brock’s *Guide* (Brock 2008). They will allow the reader to clearly identify each of them. I also refer the reader to these repertoires for reference editions and translations.

<sup>10</sup> Lieu 1992: 110-112.

<sup>11</sup> Reeves 2011: 80-84. On the portrayal of Mani in the *Acta Archelai*, see Scopello 1995 and BeDuhn & Mirecki 2007; on the success of this portrayal in Greek and Latin fourth-century Christian texts, see Piras 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Reeves 2011: 84.

as well,<sup>13</sup> or to avoid that the persecution against Manichaeism would cease.<sup>14</sup> (This is also why I am inclined to take the term “Manichaean” present in these sources at face value, instead of considering it as a label used to target a different religious opponent.<sup>15</sup> As we will see, these texts pepper the appearance of the Manichaean character with references to proper Manichaeism that suffice to claim that Manichaeans were the intended adversaries.)

I would like to endorse Samuel Lieu’s and John Reeves’ insights and conclusions by analyzing *how* this religious competition is articulated in the texts approached as literary compositions. As we will see, Syriac Christians played with specific literary roles and narrative patterns derived from both Manichaean and anti-Manichaean sources in a dynamic process of adopting and adapting.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, fifth- to seventh-century Persian Christians, who were Syriac but also Greek and Iranian speakers, probably knew and made use of Manichaean sources written in various languages, either directly, or via the polemics of their predecessors. Similarly, it would not be too farfetched to claim that Manichaeans, proficient in Syriac and admirers of Christian literature, were acquainted with these hagiographical texts, despite the lack of evidence for such a specific reception.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it cannot be excluded that the contents of these stories would circulate beyond the restricted circles of Syriac Christians and Manichaeans up to the ears of the Zoroastrians, given the actual contacts between these groups. Christians of the Church of the East,

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<sup>13</sup> The tenth-century Christian *Chronicle of Seert* states: “Finding that the Manichaeans declared themselves to be Christians and (that) they wore their garments in the same way and (that they) detested marriage and sexual procreation just as the catholicos and bishops (did), he [Bahram II, died in 293] wrongly concluded that the two faiths were in fact the same. He had decreed that the Manichaeans were to be killed and their churches demolished. The Zoroastrians now attacked the Christians without making any (doctrinal) distinctions. [...] The Christians lodged a complaint with Bahram the king regarding what was happening to them, and he wanted to know the distinction between them and the Manichaeans. [...] The king was satisfied with how they spoke, and he decreed the suspension of their (persecution), and what was taking place against them came to an end and abated”. (*Chronicle of Seert* I, 237-239; transl. Reeves 2011: 232-233; see also Hunter 2011). While it is attested that Christians and Manichaeans were often persecuted at the same time, together with other religious minorities, the confusion between them seems to belong specifically to Christian propaganda: according to Jullien & Jullien 2002: 285-286 and 313-314, texts like the *Chronicle of Seert* likely turned the Manichaean missionary practice consisting of adopting the habits of the targeted religious context into a heresiological trait, thus making the Manichaeans “fake Christians”. Indeed, apart from Christian texts, there is no other evidence in support of such confusion; on the contrary, Zoroastrian polemical sources, such as the third-century inscriptions of Kartir and the ninth-century treatise *Škand Gumanig Wizar*, clearly distinguish the two religions as they name and polemicize against Christians and Manichaeans separately.

<sup>14</sup> Lieu 1992: 112: “The Christians in the Sassanian empire tried to ensure that any relaxation of the imperial attitude towards the Christian church would not be applied to heretics like the Manichaeans.”

<sup>15</sup> This was a widespread practice in late antique and early medieval Christian sources, in Greek and Syriac alike, where the term Manichaeans was used to designate the miaphysites, but also the Mazdakites and the Sabians: see Lim 2008, Le Boulluec 2016, Debié 2016 and Lieu 1992: 110-111. The latter is thus cautious and warns: “One is, therefore, never entirely certain of the true identity of sects or individuals attacked as *mnyny*’ in Syriac sources.” While supporting this very legitimate warning, I believe that the context of competition from which these hagiographical texts emerged and the Manichaean and anti-Manichaean elements they contain are sufficient reasons to identify the *mnyny*’ mentioned in these writings as proper Manichaeans. At the same time, I endorse to some extent Lieu’s warning by considering these Manichaeans not much as historical individuals and groups, but rather as literary characters crafted for a specific goal.

<sup>16</sup> This double borrowing is highlighted by Reeves 2011: 81.

<sup>17</sup> Despite the historical Manichaean presence in the territory of the Church of the East in the sixth and seventh centuries (see Jullien & Jullien 2003: 72-102), we do not dispose of Manichaean or anti-Manichaean evidence allowing us to prove that Manichaeans were familiar with these Christian writings during these centuries. On the other hand, there is a lack of scholarship on the subject: in his 2014 introduction to the edition and translation of the Syriac *Martyrs of Mount Ber’ain*, Paul C. Dilley notes that “it is possible that there are connections between accounts of Mani’s trial before Bahram, under the accusations of Kartir and the ‘magouseans’ (*magoi*), and the later Persian Martyr Acts, but this topic has not yet been explored” (Brock & Dilley 2014: xxvi, n. 37). These connections include the transmissions, also left uncharted, from the *PMA* to Manichaean hagiographical texts.

who, as mentioned above, were also Iranian speakers,<sup>18</sup> could even hold important positions at the Sasanian court.<sup>19</sup> Literary interactions and rivalry between the three religious communities are attested: some *PMA* are permeated by the conventions of the Iranian epic tradition, which they intend to make their own;<sup>20</sup> the *Cologne Mani Codex*, containing the unique biography of the prophet, echoes the *Life of Zarathustra*, one of the most important narratives for Zoroastrians;<sup>21</sup> as exemplified by the competing accounts of Mani's death circulating in the Persian territory, Christians borrowed and subverted original Manichaean versions of this episode and, in turn, Perso-Arabic writers seized upon both the Christian and the Manichaean stories for rewriting this chapter in yet another fashion, more favorable to the image of the Zoroastrian clergy.<sup>22</sup> In sum, it is very likely that our Syriac hagiographies too, nourished by a Manichaean substratum, would reach Manichaeans and Zoroastrians alike, providing a narrative material available for reworking: the former could recognize in them the play with and the subversion of their doctrinal claims and sacred literature, the latter could hear the call for political protection justified by the demonstration of Christian religious superiority over the Manichaeans.

Furthermore, to this external audience, maybe intended by the hagiographers themselves, one should not fail to add the internal one, the Christian community itself. It seems undeniable that the primary function of this competitive narrative play was internal to the Christian audience. As such, through these stories, Christians aimed to legitimize themselves as winning the competition and gaining the support of the imperial house in the eyes of the Christian believers. By keeping in mind these additional internal dynamics, I endorse yet another aspect of the religious rivalry between Christians and Manichaeans in the Persian Empire already pinpointed by John Reeves, who writes: "The ideological utility of this kind of legend for the regional legitimacy of the Church of the East is transparent."<sup>23</sup>

In what follows, I will first analyze narrative roles in the selected sources and show that Manichaeans are made to play specific antagonistic characters, namely slanderers, apostates and defilers, which are stock figures in hagiography at large, as I will demonstrate by referring to other Syriac, not anti-Manichaean, hagiographical accounts. Second, I will examine plot structures and the use of narrative sequences specifically shared by Manichaean and anti-Manichaean sources, namely the "healing scene" and the "ordeal by fire scene". These analyses consider two interconnected levels: 1. the story-level, where I will look at competition as portrayed in the text, and 2. the narrative level, where the competition is accomplished "through" or "by" the text itself. Both levels appear to varying degrees in the different parts of the analysis. At the same time, my organization of the material displays an increasing presence of the second level.

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<sup>18</sup> There are also traces of Christian texts in Persian, which testify to the ancient richness, now almost completely lost, of such a literature, see Brock 1982: 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> Especially Christian converts from Zoroastrianism: for a brief presentation of Syriac Christians in the Sasanian Empire, see, within a vast scholarship, Brock 1982, which has a focus on church-state relation. See also Barbati & Berti 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Most prominently the *Martyrdom of Mar Qardagh*: see Walker 2006: 121-163.

<sup>21</sup> See de Jong 2014.

<sup>22</sup> This is the result of the current research of Matthew O'Farrell (Macquarie University), which focuses on the comparison of these sources dealing with Mani's death. See O'Farrell 2021. I thank him very much for sharing with me his article when it was still-unpublished.

<sup>23</sup> Reeves 2011: 82.

## 1. STOCK FIGURES: MANICHAEANS AS SLANDERERS, APOSTATES AND DEFILERS

a. Slanderers – The *History of Karka of Bet Slok*

A first typical role that is considered as suitable to create an antagonist in hagiography is that of the slanderer. More precisely, the role of the slanderer is a *topos* in martyrdom literature and it is given to characters belonging to a variety of religious affiliations.<sup>24</sup> Quite predictably in the case of the Persian Martyr Acts, this role is attributed to specific Zoroastrian individuals or groups, who denounce the saintly protagonist before other influential Zoroastrians or directly before the king. The *Martyrdom of Mar Qardagh* (BHO 556-6, Brock 26) is an example of the latter, where it is the highest-ranking Zoroastrian official who convinces king Shapur II (r. 309-379) that Qardagh, a former officer of the empire who converted to Christianity, is a threat for his kingdom and thus deserves to die.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Šabba ʿe* (BHO 1117, Brock 6), one of the first bishops to fall at the hands of Shapur II, lends this role to the Jews as a collective category: they are described as being fond of evil and as having thus accused Simeon and other priests in front of the Zoroastrian authorities so that they would be put to death.<sup>26</sup> More surprisingly, slanderers can be Christians, but in this case impious Christians who act enviously and out of revenge against the saintly protagonist. Thus, bishop ʿAbdišoʿ, in the account of his death at the time of Shapur II in the *History of the Forty Martyrs* (BHO 5, Brock 30), is denounced before the king by his nephew, a deacon, whom he previously suspended from his ministry for having sinned with a woman.<sup>27</sup>

The *History of Karka of Bet Slok* (modern Kirkuk, in the Bet Garmai region, central Iraq) takes place at the time of Yazdgard II (r. 439-457) but was probably written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In this text, Manichaeans are portrayed as slanderers:

And a persecution aroused in Karka – not only with murders, but also with plundering of possession, and with shackles and bitter blows, to such an extent that the Daughters of the Covenant, who had taken vows of chastity, who had come from the royal residence because of the persecution which was in the church and who were living in our town, were slandered by the Manichaeans who were in the city to the *paigansalar* [general of the infantry]; and the bloodthirsty villain ordered that they should be killed outside the town, at a place called Hora.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> To be sure, it also occurs that the slanderers are not qualified by their religion.

<sup>25</sup> *Martyrdom of Mar Qardagh* § 48: “And he [the magus] went and gathered all the nobles of the kingdom and incited them by his words to come together at once to denounce the blessed Qardagh before the king.” (transl. Walker 2006: 54). Other martyrdom accounts which feature Zoroastrians denouncing Christians are the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Bet Zabdai* (BHO 375, Brock 27), taking place during the reign of Shapur II, the *Martyrdom of Narsai* (BHO 786, Brock 46) under Yazdgard I (r. 399-420), and the *Martyrdom of Jacob Intercisus* (BHO 294, Brock 48) under Bahram V (r. 421-438).

<sup>26</sup> *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Šabba ʿe* § 13-14 (similar in the *History of Simeon bar Šabba ʿe* § 12-13): “Now our enemies, the Jews: as is their habit, they accused us and Simon. Indeed, they are usually fond to be for evil rather than good in a time such as this, just as they clamored against Pilate at the killing of Christ.” (transl. Smith 2014: 26). See also Smith 2014: 26, n. 20 for other accusations of Jewish persecution in Christian literature. In the Persian Martyr Acts, Tarbo, Simeon’s sister, and her companions, for example, are accused by the Jews in front of the queen for being responsible of the latter’s sickness, an accusation that leads to their trial and death (*Martyrdom of Tarbo and her Companions*, BHO 1149, Brock 11).

<sup>27</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 2: 325-347 and specifically 332-333.

<sup>28</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 2: 507-535, quote at 513; transl. Lieu 1992: 111.

The *History* is a sort of local chronicle of the city of Kirkuk and it first recounts its foundation at the time of the Assyrians and its expansion until the Seleucids, then its Christianization by the apostles Addai and Mari up to the persecutions by Shapur II in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and Yazdgerd II at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> When dealing with the first centuries of the Christian era, the text particularly denounces the heresy of Mani and his followers, who called themselves Christians and settled in the city, where, according to the text, they remained until the reign of Khosro, in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> The *History* thus displays a first level of anti-Manichaean polemic by mentioning the Manichaeans among the heresies historically present in the city. But it goes a step further by making of the Manichaeans active characters in the narrative, namely slanderers, as in the quoted episode: this denotes the recourse to a literary device that allows the text to effectively portray them as religious antagonists.

### b. Apostates – The *Martyrdom of Aqebšema and his Companions*

Another stock figure is the apostate. In Christian hagiography, apostasy can be either positive or negative, according to the religion which is abandoned. Indeed, apostasy from other religions than Christianity is praised, for example when Zoroastrians convert to Christianity struck by the valiance of the martyrs, a case widely represented in the Persian Martyr Acts.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of featuring this positive apostasy is to show that Christianity is superior to the religion in charge. Negative apostasy, on the other hand, is principally attributed to Christians who renounce the faith for a profane and vicious gain and seek the attention of the religious and political power to obtain favors. This can be a literary strategy that shows by contrast the spiritual and eternal reward obtained by the martyrs who stay steady in their faith, and is thus meant to encourage faithfulness to Christianity and prevent conversion. Therefore, apostate figures, while they do not directly oppose the saints, can be indirectly presented and used as antagonistic characters. The *History of Thecla and her Companions* (BHO 1157, Brock 25) contains a perfect illustration in its brevity: driven by greed, Pawle, the Christian priest of the village of Bekhashaz in northern Mesopotamia, readily apostatizes under Shapur II and even accepts to kill with his own hands his former coreligionists, Thecla and four other virgins, in order to keep his riches.<sup>32</sup> Pawle is just one among many other Christian apostates of which the texts speak: probably the most famous apostate in the Persian Martyr Acts is Jacob Intercisus, who was born from a Persian Christian noble family and converted to Zoroastrianism to enjoy the favors of king Yazdgerd I, before eventually returning to Christianity and dying a martyr (*Martyrdom of Jacob Intercisus*, BHO 394, Brock 48).

In the *Martyrdom of Aqebšema and his Companions*, which recounts the story of bishop Aqebšema and two other Christians, Joseph and Aithallaha, killed by Shapur II, the role of apostate is given to a Manichaean for the same purpose, i.e. endorsing the Christian martyr, who dies for his faith. This time, nevertheless, apostasy is not driven by worldly recompenses, but rather by exhaustion due to torments.<sup>33</sup> After the death of Aqebšema and Joseph, the priest Aithallaha

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of this text, see Payne 2015, ch. 4.

<sup>30</sup> See Bedjan 1890-1897, 2: 512 and 516-517. See Fiey 1964, Lieu 1992: 112 and Debié 2010b: 334-335.

<sup>31</sup> On the conversion of Zoroastrians to Christianity in the Sasanian Empire, see Debié 2010b.

<sup>32</sup> On this text, see also Ruani 2022: 167-170. Another role (impious) Christians are given in these texts is to kill the holy protagonists: this is the case of the noble Christian Aggai who slaughters Barhadbešabba the deacon (BHO 138, Brock 23), or Narsa, who beheads Badma (BHO 131, Brock 33); in the story of Aithallah (see below), it is even told that the king issued an edict which obliged Christians to be executed by fellow Christians.

<sup>33</sup> This is the case of tortured Christians as well: see for example the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, condemned to stay undressed on a frozen lake, until one of them does not resist, cedes and goes to the pool of hot water set up just nearby as a temptation to apostatize.





The third example of a stock figure embodied by a Manichaean in these texts concerns the desecration of a holy site. This role is attributed to Manichaeans just after the slander episode in the *History of Karka of Bet Slok* cited above:

And after the crowning of these saints a fig-tree sprang up out of their blood at the place where they were crowned and this tree had a healing effect on all who took refuge to it. But when the Manichaeans saw the miracle which was performed by that same fig-tree they cut it down and burned that place with fire. God, however, whose mercy cannot be put to shame, had them overcome by the disease of elephantiasis which made them so sick that they disappeared completely from the town.<sup>37</sup>

The anti-Manichaean charge of such an episode is less manifest and yet equally powerful as with the ants before. If previously the *Martyrdom of Aqebšema* used the denial of an authentic Manichaean doctrine for promoting Christian faithfulness (killing the “living soul” through the ants as a sign of apostasy), here the text features, in an indirect way, a complete reversal of Manichaean teachings and practices, by portraying some followers murdering a living being, the fig-tree, thus transgressing the commandment of not to kill which both Elects and catechumens must observe. More than that, we have a narrative play on Manichaean narrative material which recounts the origin of such a commandment, and not just a narrative play on Manichaean doctrines embedded in texts. The described event is reminiscent of the biography of Mani as contained in the *Cologne Mani Codex* (Greek, 5<sup>th</sup> c.), a hagiographical account of Mani’s infancy and youth within the Judeo-Christian baptist sect of the Elchasaites, and of the revelations and visions he received, which were followed by several clashes and debates with the members of the sect, leading to his exclusion and the foundation of his own religion. Not one, but three of such episodes of confrontation between Mani and the Elchasaites concern a tree which the latter want to cut but which they are refrained from cutting by the speaking tree itself, which explains that plants have souls and can feel pain:<sup>38</sup>

6 . . . to him: “Yet you neither take vegetables from the garden nor do you carry wood for his use.” Then that baptist rebuked me saying: ‘Get up and come with me to the place where there is wood, take it and bring it.’ We went to a palm and he climbed it (. . . 9 lines lost . . . 7 (The palm-tree spoke): “. . . ) If you spare us the pain, you will not die along with the murderer.” Then that baptist, overwhelmed by fear, leapt out of the tree in confusion and fell at my feet saying: “I did not know that this secret mystery is in your power. How was the (great pain of the palm) revealed to you?” (. . . 7 lines lost . . . 8 . . . (Mani spoke): “Why did you take fright and change colour (when the palm said) this to you? How much more should he, with whom all the (plants) speak, be disturbed?” He was then gripped by wonder and alarmed because of me. He said to me: “Guard this mystery, tell it to nobody, lest anyone becomes jealous and kills you.” Therefore someone (. . . 8 lines lost . . . One of the leaders of their law spoke to me when he saw that I did not take vegetables from the garden but was asking them for them as a form of alms. He said to me: “Why do you not take vegetables from the garden, but ask me in turn for them as a form of alms?” And after that baptist had said to (me . . . 7 lines lost . . . 10 (Part of another incident) . . . ) and it cried (lamen)ting just like human beings and like children. Alas, alas! Blood poured from the place which was cut by the sickle which he held in his hands. And they cried out with a human voice because of their blows. The baptist was greatly disturbed by what he saw and he came and fell before me.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 2: 514, 1-7; transl. Lieu 1992: 111.

<sup>38</sup> On this, see also Henrichs 1979.

<sup>39</sup> *CMC* 6-10, transl. Gardner & Lieu 2004: 48-49.



When these three accounts are compared, it appears that we are dealing with a stereotyped narrative pattern, characterized by the following sequence: the martyrdom of the saint/saints is followed by the growth of a tree with healing powers, which raises the envy of someone who uproots the tree, and either is punished or assists to another miracle. Either this plot usually came with a Manichaean character attached to it, and the author of the martyrdom of Aithallaha got rid of the Manichaeans, or the authors of the *List of the Martyrs of Karka* and of the *History of Karka* adopted the general plot where the characters are left anonymous and attributed the stereotyped role of the defilers to Manichaeans. The last option would be preferable since it would be justified by the historical Manichaean presence in that city already stressed by the text, which would be stronger than in other places of Mesopotamia at the time of composition, namely during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The author of that account would thus have a solid motivation for especially targeting the Manichaeans among other religious opponents. Moreover, the choice of this particular narrative episode (i.e. the fig-tree scene), among many others available in literature, may have been driven by the existence of similar scenes in Manichaean narratives, such as the tree scenes in the *Life of Mani* as contained in the *Cologne Mani Codex*: one scene, originally “neutral” but then appropriately modified with explicit anti-Manichaean contents, would indirectly mock other scenes cherished by the Manichaeans themselves in their own stories, and would thus achieve the polemical goal of making the Manichaeans the religious target.

In this first part, we have seen that the Manichaean characters present in the Persian Martyr Acts are not just given a negative role, but that they are consciously portrayed as religious “others” by being cast into playing specific stock figures – the slanderer, the apostate and the defiler – which, in this Syriac corpus, are usually attributed to religious opponents, be they Zoroastrians, Jews, or even impious Christians. We have also noticed that these stories ascribe these roles to the Manichaeans in ways that are charged with additional Manichaean content to lesser or higher degrees. In the case of the apostate, the *Martyrdom of Aqebšema* mentions an authentic Manichaean doctrinal notion, the one of the “living soul”, and makes the Manichaean character act in opposition to the Manichaean moral code, two details that show familiarity with Manichaeism as well as the willingness to render the attribution of this role to Manichaeans more verisimilar. In the case of the defiler, the *History of Karka* goes a step further and not only plays with Manichaean doctrines (the prohibition of killing living beings), but also with Manichaean narratives. It modifies the standard story of the uprooting of a tree, a “neutral” narrative sequence, by adding anti-Manichaean content. This episode is well chosen because it reminds of authentic Manichaean stories, such as the episodes of the tree in the *Life of Mani*.

The example of the *History of Karka*, in which a plot structure shared by other texts emerges, prompts me to turn to the second part of this article.

## 2. PLOT STRUCTURES: THE “HEALING SCENE” AND THE “ORDEAL BY FIRE SCENE”

### a. The “Healing Scene”

One recurrent plot structure where Manichaeans feature can be labelled as the “healing scene.” A number of texts present the following story-line: the son or daughter of a Zoroastrian authority is ill; Mani or the Manichaeans cannot heal him/her; the Christian saint, i.e. the protagonist of the narrative, shows up and heals him/her; the Zoroastrian authority offers wealth, but the saint refuses it and makes instead another request.

This scenario is contained in the *Martyrdom of Anahid*, daughter of the Zoroastrian ruler of the region of Balashfarr, which takes place under Yezdgard II in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Her

story begins with her sickness: no Jew, Manichaean or Zoroastrian “sorcerer”, the text says, can heal her, only the blessed Christian Pethion is able to bring her back to health. Anahid’s father offers Pethion “whatever he likes” and Pethion replies that he does not want gold and silver, and instead gives advice for a good rulership, such as “give upright judgment, do not show any favoritism, do not take bribes [...], liberate the exploited” from their oppressors and “ease the lot of the needy”.<sup>43</sup>

The first element of the plot, namely the inability of Manichaeans to heal, goes back to the *Acta Archelai*,<sup>44</sup> where, at § 66, 7-9, Mani himself claims that he would treat Shapur’s son, but fails, thus causing the boy’s death and his own imprisonment.<sup>45</sup> As for the part that follows – the offer and then the refusal of riches –, this plot echoes an episode contained in the *Cologne Mani Codex* (CMC 121, 6 – 123, 13), where Mani heals the daughter of the governor of Ganzak:<sup>46</sup> the latter offers wealth to Mani, Mani refuses and instead of “gold and silver”, asks for food for one day for him and his two companions.<sup>47</sup> This pattern is also found in almost identical terms<sup>48</sup> in the Latin story of Cyriacus, in the acts of Pope Marcel (*Acta Sanctorum*, 16<sup>th</sup> of January) datable to the

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<sup>43</sup> “One day Anahid was sore tried by an evil spirit that did not leave her alone or cease troubling her day and night. Numerous Jews, Manichaeans and Magian sorcerers came from all over the place, but none was able to help her; indeed she was tormented all the more. Then those who attended on the Magian Adurhormizd told him about the blessed Pethion, the holy man [...] Finishing his prayers, he laid his hands on her, and immediately the demon departed from her, complaining loudly. [...] When her father had been informed of his daughter’s recovery, he set off that very night and came to the blessed man. [...] He said, ‘I will give you whatever you like: quantities of gold and silver, and valuable presents.’ To this the holy man replied, ‘I will have nothing to do with gold and silver, for they only lead to perdition; nor with any transient possessions that would alienate me from our Lord and his kingdom. Nevertheless, if you want your daughter to be healed, give upright judgment, do not show any favoritism, and do not take bribes because (as our Scriptures say) ‘they blind the eyes of the wise in judgment’ (Deut. 16:19). Liberate the exploited from those who oppress them; ease the lot of the needy as far as your means allow’.” (transl. Brock & Ashbrook Harvey 1998: 82-83).

<sup>44</sup> On the conscious borrowing of several Syriac martyrological accounts from the *Acta Archelai* in order to present Mani’s healing failure, see Reeves 2011: 81-82.

<sup>45</sup> “7. So after they had departed, the king’s son was assailed by an illness, and wishing to cure him the king issued an edict, inviting anyone who could heal him to come, with the prospect of a large reward. 8. Whereupon Manes, just like those who like playing the cube, which is another name for dice, presented himself in person before the king, claiming that he would cure the boy. When the king heard this he received him with courtesy and welcomed him gladly. But to avoid inducing boredom in my listeners by narrating the many things Manes did, the boy died in his hands, or rather was killed off. 9 Then the king ordered Manes to be thrown into prison and bound with a large weight of iron.” (transl. Vermes 2001: 145-146). An analysis of this episode is offered by Scopello 1995.

<sup>46</sup> This parallel is suggested by Reeves 2011: 83, n. 386.

<sup>47</sup> “In (the land) of the Medes I went (to the brothers in) Ganzak. (There) was then a great famine. When we came into the town of Ganzak, the followers of our brothers were concerned for the fo(od-supply) [*lost lines*] ‘Who are you? (What power) do you have?’ (I replied) to him: ‘(A doctor) is what I am.’ He (answered) me: ‘Come, (if) you are willing, into my house; for my daughter is being tossed about by (an illness).’ I went with him and found that the girl was (unconscious) [*lost lines*] Although... other men were standing there too, (he fell) at my feet and said: ‘Ask of me what you will.’ I replied to him: ‘Of your treasures of gold and silver I ask for nothing.’ I took from him only food for one day for the brothers who were with me’.” (transl. Gardner & Lieu 2004: 69). See also transl. in Reeves 2011: 83, n. 386, slightly different: “‘Ask from me anything you want,’ the grateful governor offers, to which Mani replies: ‘I have no need for any of your goods – neither gold nor silver. I ask only for a daily allowance of provisions for the brethren of the (Manichaean) community’.”

<sup>48</sup> As suggested by S. N. C. Lieu in Vermes 2001: 145, n. 324, who qualifies this story as “a Christian counter-part of the polemical account of the last days of Mani’s life in the *Acta*”. See also Lieu 1999: 152.

end of the 6<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> After curing the daughter of emperor Diocletian, Cyriacus heals the daughter of king Shapur, refuses the offered riches and asks for food and water.<sup>50</sup>

In Syriac, this sort of “counter-narrative” to the Manichaean claim of Mani’s healing power is also found in the accounts related to Mar Awgin, the (probably legendary) father of Mesopotamian monasticism.<sup>51</sup> One of such accounts is the *History of Mar Daniel the Healer* (BHO 244), datable to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which recounts Daniel’s monastic journey from Egypt to the East, where he encounters Awgin and heals the son of the Zoroastrian governor of Bet Nuhadra, thus guaranteeing the Zoroastrian benevolence vis-à-vis the Christian community of that region. Embedded in the principal story of Daniel is a part directly dealing with Awgin which features the same plot outlined above. Here, we are at the court of Shapur II and are reminded of Mani’s failure to heal his sons (thanks to an intended conflation of time: Mani lived during the reign of Shapur I!); then, we are told how Awgin can heal them and, as a reward, asks for the permission to travel through the empire:

King Shapur heard about the holy man Mar Awgin who was dwelling among the mountains of Izla which were above Nisibis, for they said of him that he was a powerful man who could work miracles and produce signs. So he sent for him in order that he might come and heal two of his sons who were possessed by demons. Mani the heretic – the vessel of Satan – had introduced these devils into them, and because of this (error) they stripped him of his skin, stuffed him with straw, and hung his corpse upon the (city) wall.<sup>52</sup> Afterwards his carcass was (given) to the dogs in the same manner as that of the adulterous Jezebel. [...] When the holy saint Mar Awgin came to Shapur at Nisibis, the king told him about the affliction of his sons. Then that holy man, having put his trust in God, answered the king: “My God can heal them!” After he stood and prayed over them, he expelled the demons which Mani had introduced into them. When Shapur saw that the boys had been freed from the power of Satan, he said to the holy saint Mar Awgin: “Ask of me and receive for yourself anything which you might seek!” The holy saint said to him: “I ask for neither gold nor silver from you. Instead, grant my followers permission to travel throughout the land which you rule and to build (there) monasteries and convents.”<sup>53</sup>

Permission to travel freely is a new element in the plot. John Reeves points out that the account here “mimes the favorable reception that was given to Mani by the Sasanian ruler [i.e. Shapur I] in the extant Manichaean description of their initial encounter”.<sup>54</sup> He refers to Ibn al-Nadim’s *Fihrist*, an anti-Manichaean Arabic source of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, where the plot element of permission to travel (“Mani made a number of requests, including that [...] his companions [...] could enjoy freedom of movement”) follows the admired welcome of the prophet by the king (“And when Shapur saw him, he was impressed and Mani grew in his estimation”).<sup>55</sup> In the *History of Mar*

<sup>49</sup> On the date, see Dufourq 1910: 366-367 (signaled by Lieu in Vermes 2001), who says the acts are contemporary to the *Breviarium Apostolorum*.

<sup>50</sup> “[...] Eodem tempore multa dona vel pecunias obtulit Rex B. Cyriaco. Cui S. Cyriacus dixit: Nos gratiam Domini nostri Iesu Christi pretio non offerimus, [dona oblata respuit:] sed fide aestimamus. Et nihil accepit: sed tantum pane & aqua cum Largo & Smaragdo vsus est.” (*Acta Sanctorum [January 16]: 372*).

<sup>51</sup> On Awgin, see Fiey 1962 and Jullien 2008.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion on Mani’s death, see Gardner 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 3: 493, 14 – 494, 12; transl. Reeves 2011: 83.

<sup>54</sup> Reeves 2011: 83, who refers to the scene related in the Coptic *Kephalaia* p. 15, 28-33.

<sup>55</sup> “The Manichaeans say that when Mani came into his presence, there were on his shoulders two lights resembling lamps. And when Shapur saw him he was impressed and Mani grew in his estimation. (Indeed) Shapur had been resolved to having Mani slain, yet when he met him he was overcome by admiration and delight, asking Mani what had brought him to him and promising a further audience with him. So Mani made a number of requests, including

*Daniel*, then, thanks to a blatant anachronism aiming at favoring the juxtaposition of the two figures, Awgin becomes a sort of replacement of the character of Mani as portrayed both in the *Cologne Mani Codex* and in al-Nadim's account. It is not only the healing that echoes Mani, but also two other details: the welcome received by the king and the authorization to travel in the imperial territory. More precisely, Awgin represents a subversion of the figure of Mani, as he heals where Mani fails to heal (and this scheme comes from the *Acta Archelai*), and he, not Mani, is the one who is received with all honors and granted the freedom of movement. These two additional elements are recreated in this new context, in favor of the Christian holy man and at the detriment of Mani.

We can bring to the discussion the text on which most certainly the *History of Mar Daniel* depends, which is the very *History of Mar Awgin*, datable to the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> As expected, this *History* too features the episode where Awgin heals. The plot is the same: after delivering Shapur's son from a demon,<sup>57</sup> Awgin rejects the king's offer of gold and silver and asks for the permission to travel and to build on the way monasteries and convents.<sup>58</sup> Yet, there is a meaningful difference that concerns the request to travel: here, the request targets a precise destination, the city of Bet Lapat. This represents an extra sign of the anti-Manichaean charge of this account, since Bet Lapat is not only the location of the Sasanian royal court at the time of Shapur II, but also the place where Mani was imprisoned and killed.

Finally, the story of bishop 'Aqablaha recounted in the *History of Karka of Bet Slok* displays an even more explicit anti-Manichaean aim, as arguably one of the outcomes of the "healing scene" is persecution against Manichaeans.<sup>59</sup> As a reward for healing the daughter of Bahram V (r. 421-438)<sup>60</sup> from an unclean spirit, 'Aqablaha asks the king to cease destroying Christian churches and to rebuild the demolished ones. The text says that the king accepts and immediately after, as if he was complying to a second, implicit request, that he orders "to uproot and remove the two thorns

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that Shapur would show favour on his companions in the provinces and in the other lands governed by him, and that they could enjoy freedom of movement. Shapur granted all of Mani's requests. So Mani was able to spread his message in India, in China, and among the people of Khorasan. And Mani appointed a companion of his order in every place." (*Fihrist* 328) (transl. Gardner & Lieu 2004: 75-76). See also Reeves 2011: 26-27 for the first part of this account.

<sup>56</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 3: 376-480; German and English translation by Aydin & Garis 2012. For this early date, see Dyakonov 1918, who, through a thorough discussion of the textual tradition, convincingly argues that the earliest version of this story should date back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. I thank Sergey Minov for this reference. The parallel with the *History of Mar Awgin* is suggested by Reeves 2011: 83, n. 386, who, however, does not refer to the hagiographical text itself, but rather to the paraphrase of it offered by Ernest A. Wallis Budge in his introduction to the *Book of Governors*, a monastic collection written by Thomas of Marga in the 9<sup>th</sup> century: see Budge 1893, 1: cxxix-cxxx.

<sup>57</sup> The story of Mani "the magician" killing one of Shapur's sons and not being able to free the other possessed by a demon, which arches back to the *Acta Archelai*, is also recounted in detail as a background of Awgin's visit to Shapur and his healing of the king's son (see Bedjan 1890-1897, 3: 462-464 for the text and Aydin & Garis 2012: 63-64 for the translation). On this, and the subsequent description of Mani's death, see Reeves 2011: 82.

<sup>58</sup> "And the King said to the saint: 'Ask me whatever you desire.' And the saint replied: 'Us, my lord the King, we do not want neither gold nor silver, we only ask this, to the power of your kingdom, that you grant us small places on roads and paths where it could be possible to build monasteries and convents so that the strangers could find rest in them, and give us the permission to go to Bet Lapat and to the region of Bet Huzzaye and build monasteries and convents wherever we want.' And immediately the King ordered and gave them this permission and all the brothers went out of that holy dwelling in victory and great joy." (Bedjan 1890-1897, 3: 471, 9-19; transl. Aydin & Garis 2012: 68). See Jullien 2008.

<sup>59</sup> This passage is also quoted by Reeves 2011: 84, but he omits the mention of the anti-Manichaean persecution, underlined on the contrary by Lieu 1992: 112.

<sup>60</sup> Reeves 2011: 84 thinks instead that it is Bahram II, "the king historically responsible for the imprisonment and death of Mani" and further reads "this nomenclatural departure from the traditional cast of characters popularized by the invective of the *Acta Archelai*", namely from mentioning Shapur, as significant in the framework of the progressive replacement of Mani by the Christian saint for sake of competition.

of his time”, the teachings of “Mani and Zradhurst”.<sup>61</sup> By presenting the eradication of Manichaeism as a direct consequence of the promotion of Christianity, the text implies, and imposes, a mutually exclusive competition between the two religions: the king has to choose one or the other, only one of the two may have the imperial favor. By juxtaposing the success of the Christian bishop in healing the daughter of the emperor and the resumed anti-Manichaean persecutions, the text effectively presents the Christian as the winner, the one who obtains the favor of the king, and even becomes his counselor for managing religious minorities. Here, the replacement of Mani as a healer at the level of the narrative is aimed at justifying the destruction of Manichaeism at the story-level; the text shows that Christianity won the competition for the survival in the empire.

### b. The “Ordeal by Fire Scene”

Let us go back to the *History of Mar Awgin*. The interest of this text for our scope lies not only in the “healing scene” discussed above, but also in what precedes this scene: in fact, Awgin is deemed worthy of healing Shapur’s son only after he proves the value of his faith. This takes the form of an “ordeal by fire,” the second plot structure I will analyze here.<sup>62</sup> The text reads:

And when the saint arrived in front of the King and Shapur saw him, he was amazed at his view and greatly honored. At that moment, the *mawbed* and the Magians approached and inquired about the saint, since they saw that the King greatly honored him, and were struck by the arrows of envy. They resolved to dismiss the teaching of the Christians by the art of words. Thus they began to stir up a controversy with the old man. But the saint raised the sign of the cross over his mouth, while proclaiming the three names of the Saint Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then, (the saint) made a request in front of the King, saying: ‘Let us kindle a fire, and the god who can engage with the fire will be (proved to be) the true god.’ Shapur ordered it to be done. And they kindled a big fire in front of the King. The saint said to the Magians: ‘I know that you venerate the fire; so let one of you enter now and stand up in this fire!’ But the Magians were afraid and could not approach the fire. Then, the saint said to one of his brothers who were there with him: ‘Go in, brother, and stand up in this fire!’ And that brother immediately jumped into the fire and stood in the middle of it, while the flames were coming up from all sides. And the brother was not injured at all, even if his clothes were burnt up, and he stayed there for a long time. And when Shapur and all those who were gathered there saw (this), they glorified God for what He performed by the hand of the saint Mar Awgin.<sup>63</sup>

If we extrapolate the outline of the “ordeal by fire scene” in abstract terms on the basis of this scene, we observe the following constituent parts:

<sup>61</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 2: 516-517. Lieu 1992: 112 points out that by Zradhurst, the text probably does not mean Zoroastrianism, the very religion of the king, but rather Mazdakism, a movement considered as deviant and heretical by official Zoroastrianism.

<sup>62</sup> The “ordeal by fire” scene is a type of folktale motif indexed in folktale repertoires: for example, it is n° H221 in El-Shamy 1995. While being attested in various forms in the entire Mediterranean basin in antiquity, the “ordeal by fire” is particularly important in Zoroastrianism as a means of revealing innocence or culpability, not only against religious opponents, but also between Zoroastrian priests themselves: see Boyce 1979: 118-119, de Menasce 1986, Macuch 1987, and Jullien 2004: 257-258 (for its use against Christian martyrs in the *PMA*). On the fortune of this literary motif in the Latin Middle Ages, see Bougard 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Bedjan 1890-1897, 3: 466, 5 – 467, 13. My translation. See also transl. by Aydin & Garis 2012: 66.



- Protagonist's refusal to debate<sup>64</sup>
- Protagonist's suggestion to test the true faith through ordeal by fire
  - a. Fear of the opponent
  - b. Protagonist's entrance in the middle of the flames
  - c. Great length of the trial
- Outcome: protagonist's victory

Two other ancient texts at least parallel this plot structure. One is the originally Latin or maybe Greek *Life and Martyrdom of Eugenia* (5<sup>th</sup> c.),<sup>65</sup> which was soon translated into Syriac (*BHO* 282).<sup>66</sup> One cannot avoid noticing in the very first place the parallelism between the names of the holy protagonists, Awgin and Eugenia, the former being a Semitic rendering of the Greek name Eugenius. Here, in all the versions, the opponent of the Christian character, i.e. bishop Helenus, is not a Magian but a Pagan wizard, and yet the structure of the narrative remains the same:<sup>67</sup>

A short time ago a certain wizard who dwelt here, whose name was Iraus, approached the people of the Christians with the wicked artifice of magic [...]. But when the holy man saw the impudence of his wicked words, and knew that he could not reply to him about the truth in words, he said [...]: "Kindle a great fire in the midst of the city; and let us enter it together [...]. And the one of us whom his God shall rescue from the fire and who does not burn, his religion is true [...]" But the wizard answered: "Let it not be thus; but let us enter each of us alone. Now go thou in first [...]". The Blessed Helenus [...] signed himself with the sign of the cross and entered, and stood confidently exulting in the midst of the flame of the fire a long time, whilst in nothing was he hurt by that fire. Then when the people who were assembled there saw this great miracle which had happened they laid hold of Iraus the wizard and without his consent threw him into the fire. [...] he began to burn [...].<sup>68</sup>

The other is the story of Copres, in the *Historia Monachorum in Egypto* X, 30-35, written in Greek at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and translated in Syriac by 'Enanišo' in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, who integrated it, together with other Egyptian monastic tales, in his *Paradise of the Holy Fathers*.<sup>69</sup> Here Copres plays the role of Awgin/Helenus, whereas a Manichaean enacts the part attributed to the Magians in the Syriac account and to the Pagan wizard in the *Life of Eugenia*.<sup>70</sup> The story that follows develops in the same way: the Christian enters in debate with the Manichaean, but is unable to overcome him in this way ("As I was unable to make him change his mind by debating with him in public [...]") and thus suggests a trial by fire ("Light a large fire in the square and both of us shall enter the flames, and whichever one of us remains unharmed, shall be the one with the true faith"); he stands in the midst of it with flames from all sides, for half an hour ("The flames parted asunder this way and that and did not harm me for the half hour which I spent in the fire"); the Manichaean is afraid ("he dragged his feet as he was frightened"); the Christian wins ("He [the

<sup>64</sup> "Conflict between religions" is a plot attested in folktales: it receives the repertoire n° V350 in Aarne 1961; one registered variant of this plot is the "Duel (debate) to prove which religion is better" (n° V351).

<sup>65</sup> On the multilinguistic dossier of Saint Eugenia, see Delehaye 1936: 171-186; for the Latin version, see also Lanéry 2010. A recent textual and literary analysis of this story is offered by Whatley 2015.

<sup>66</sup> The earliest Syriac manuscript containing this text is a palimpsest from Sinai dated to 778 AD: see Smith-Lewis 1900, 1: ٤٠٠ (text), 2: 1-35 (English transl.).

<sup>67</sup> See Aarne 1961 for the registered folktale plot: "Magician overpowered in contest with saint" (n° V351.3). This is also a type, n° 776§ (*idem*).

<sup>68</sup> English translation of the Syriac version by Smith-Lewis 1900: 7-8.

<sup>69</sup> Budge 1904, 2: 416.

<sup>70</sup> Lieu 1999: 148 mentions this text in his discussion of the debates of the *Acta Archelai*. The parallel between Copres and Eugenia is noticed by Whatley 2012: 96-97.

Manichaeen] suffered serious burns all over his body and the crowd expelled him from the city in disgrace”).<sup>71</sup>

Another potential parallel is an anti-Manichaeen text where Mani appears in person: it is the account of the ninth-century Arabic author Ya‘qubi, who describes the final meeting between Mani and Bahram II. Similarly, the text speaks about a dispute between Mani (who plays here the role of the antagonist) and Kirdir, the Zoroastrian religious chief (in the role of the protagonist), but apparently (it is unclear in the text) this dispute does not take place or is not enough for the Magian, since Kirdir orders for what can be seen as a variant of the ordeal by fire<sup>72</sup>: pouring melted metal on the stomach of both opponents; Mani is afraid, refuses the challenge and is therefore condemned to death:

[...] Then Bahram summoned him and questioned him regarding his doctrine, and he recounted him his situation. Then he arranged a meeting between him and the mobadh who had disputed with him [= Kirdir]. Then the mobadh said to him, “Let him melt lead for me and for you and pour (it) on my stomach and on your stomach, and whichever one of us is unhurt by this (ordeal), he will be correct.” But Mani protested, “This is a deed of Darkness!” So Bahram ordered him fettered and said to him, “When morning comes I will summon you and execute you (with) a means of death like no one before you has been executed!” While it was yet night Mani was flayed, until his spirit disintegrated. And when it was morning, Bahram summoned him, but they found him already dead. He ordered his head to be cut off and his body to be stuffed with straw.<sup>73</sup>

We observe that the “ordeal by fire scene”, comprising of a specific narrative sequence, is, like the “healing scene” and the “fig-tree scene”, another widespread plot, used by various texts written in different languages, coming from different contexts, featuring different religious opponents, and aiming at different purposes. The *Life and Martyrdom of Eugenia*, displaying the clash between a bishop and a pagan magician in the Roman Empire, demonstrates that this particular plot structure was circulating and available for (re?)use in anti-Manichaeen terms and for anti-Manichaeen aims. The *History of Awgin* (in the Persian Empire) and the story of Copres (in Egypt) exemplify this dynamic of appropriation and replacement: they adopt this standard plot and introduce a Manichaeen character in the role of the saint’s adversary. The account by Ya‘qubi is less similar to the other texts in terms of plot, and nevertheless, by displaying the very figure of Mani

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<sup>71</sup> “On one occasion, I (Copres) went down to the city (Hermopolis Magna), and there I found a certain Manichaeen who had been leading people astray. As I was unable to make him change his mind by debating with him in public, turning to the crowd of listeners I said: ‘Light a large fire in the square and both of us shall enter the flames, and whichever one of us remains unhurt, the shall be the one with the true faith.’ At this point the crowd eagerly lit the fire and dragged us towards the flames. However, the Manichaeen said: ‘Let each of us go in by himself, and you should be the first one since you suggested it’. Then, having made upon myself the sign of the cross in the name of Christ, I went into the fire. The flames parted asunder this way and that and did not harm me for the half hour which I spent in the fire. At the sight of this miracle, the crowd made a loud acclamation and compelled the Manichaeen to go into the fire; but he dragged his feet as he was frightened, and the crowd took hold of him and pushed him into the middle of the fire. He suffered serious burns all over his body and the crowd expelled him from the city in disgrace, shouting: ‘The deceiver should be burnt alive.’ As for me, the crowd carried me with them to the church, ascribing praises to God as they went.” (transl. Gardner & Lieu 2004: 121). An analysis of this scene and of the role played by the Manichaeen is offered by Cain 2016: 190-193.

<sup>72</sup> It is thus n° H221.2 in El-Shamy’s repertoire (El-Shamy 1995).

<sup>73</sup> *Ta’rikh* I, 180-182; transl. Reeves 2011: 31-32.

undergoing a variant of the ordeal by fire from which the Zoroastrian protagonist emerges as victorious, keeps the same outline for a similar, this time Zoroastrian, anti-Manichaean goal.<sup>74</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The analyses presented above show that the examined anti-Manichaean texts featuring a Manichaean character are not just part of a “simple”, or at least linear, process of textual transmission, borrowing and rewriting. Syriac Christian authors would select, from a broad pool of narrative material, specific literary roles and plot structures which would suit their polemical agenda. We saw indeed that certain antagonistic roles, such as the slanderer, the apostate and the defiler, are widespread stock figures and, analogously, that some plots, like the fig-tree scene, the healing scene and the ordeal by fire scene, circulate in various epochs, places, and traditions, featuring a variety of religious antagonists. The three discussed roles and plots seem in fact to represent a privileged narrative space for the portrayal of the religious “Other”. Across time and space, authors would choose one or the other available role or plot and would adjust it to fit their own purposes, namely by defining the antagonist as a particular religious opponent significant for their specific context. Thus, in the case of Christian hagiographers from the Persian Empire, we observed that they adopted this shared material and sometimes adapted it to their anti-Manichaean aims, which are to be understood within the historical context of religious competition in which they found themselves. It is thus by controlling selected story elements and their form in a situation of religious rivalry through narrative, i.e. by playing with literary roles and narrative patterns, that they could present themselves as winning the competition with Mani and his followers. The latter are targeted not only at the story-level – they become the stock characters in the plot which tend to be used to represent religious opponents – but also at the narrative-level, since their own narratives are consciously appropriated and modified to be turned against them. This is achieved by recurring to a network of other narratives with anti-Manichaean contents already circulating (for example, episodes dealing with Mani’s healing power/failure). In this regard, it can be noticed that the preferred Manichaean and anti-Manichaean material to which Syriac Christian hagiography relates and with which it plays comes from the West side of the Manichaean territorial expansions, i.e. texts that are attested in the Roman Empire, in Greek, Latin and Coptic, then also made available in Syriac. Surprisingly enough, I was not able to identify any significant parallel with the rich Manichaean literature in Middle-Persian which includes narratives such as parables (for example the *Āzandnāmē*, the “Parable-Book”). Further research in the future may reveal such parallels, or it could just confirm the present results, which may be significant in themselves for the history of textual transmission and literary rivalry.

In a broader perspective, this study contributes to an understanding of how narratives featuring Manichaean characters both for apologetic and polemical goals, traveled across centuries and geographical, religious and political frontiers, and were adapted to specific religious needs and

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<sup>74</sup> Thus, the outline of the *History of Mar Awgin* features the juxtaposition of two detailed narrative plots, the “ordeal by fire” followed by the “healing scene.” Moreover, adding to the complexity of the whole account, both plots are framed at the court of Shapur who is amazed and in admiration in front of the Christian saint: this detail recalls the way in which Shapur received Mani at his court as recounted by the passage of al-Nadim’s *Fihrist* quoted above. See Appendix for a schematic outline of the two scenes and the parallel Manichaean and anti-Manichaean sources for each sub-scene. It is important to clarify that this outline does not intend to represent the textual sources used by the *History of Mar Awgin*, or to claim in turn that the *History* represented a source for the texts which are dated from a later period. It rather points to the fact that these two scenes, with their sequence, are widespread narrative material shared by a multiplicity of texts, varying in dates, context and religious affiliation.

propaganda. This offers in turn some insights in the strategies of narrative writing used by both anti-Manichaean and Manichaean authors, both resorting to a common pool of narrative forms, both playing with the same literary patterns, yet not in order to find a common ground for dialogue and encounter, but rather for strengthening their religious antagonism.

## APPENDIX

**Outline of the *History of Mar Awgin* and parallel sources for each narrative element<sup>75</sup>**

Narrative frame: at the court of an admiring Shapur	// <b>Fihrist</b>
Ordeal by fire scene	
1. Protagonist's refusal to debate	// <b>Copres</b> , Eugenia, <b>Ya 'qubi</b> (≠ Bahram)
2. Request of ordeal by fire	// <b>Copres</b> , Eugenia, <b>Ya 'qubi</b>
a. Fear of the opponent	// <b>Copres</b> , Eugenia, <b>Ya 'qubi?</b>
b. Entrance in the middle of the flames	// <b>Copres</b> , Eugenia
c. Great length of the trial with no injury	// <b>Copres</b> , Eugenia
3. Outcome: protagonist's victory	// <b>Copres</b> , Eugenia (≠ <b>Ya 'qubi</b> )
Healing scene	
1. Healing	// <i>CMC</i> , Cyriacus, <b>Anahid</b>
2. Offer of riches	// <i>CMC</i> , Cyriacus, <b>Anahid</b>
3. Refusal of gold and silver	// <i>CMC</i> , Cyriacus, <b>Anahid</b>
4. Other requests (permission to travel, etc.)	// <i>CMC</i> , Cyriacus, <b>Anahid</b>

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<sup>75</sup> Sources in italics are Manichaean texts; in bold, anti-Manichaean texts; in regular writing, sources not mentioning Mani or the Manichaean. The sign // means "parallel", the sign ≠ indicates a difference.

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