WOMEN IN THE COPTIC MANICHAEAN HOMILIES

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Abstract
This article examines the surprising role played by women in the Coptic Manichaean text known as *The Sermon on the Great War*. Even though Manichaean rhetoric often attributes feminine characteristics to cosmic evil, in this apocalyptic text female ascetics are awarded a special place at the end of time. This language is then situated in its historical context as a reflection of the ascetic priorities of a religious movement experiencing marginalization and persecution.

In his 2001 “Prolegomena to a Study of Women in Manichaeism,” Kevin Coyle noted the relative absence of scholarly interest in Manichaean women.¹ This in spite of the increased attention that has been paid to women in various bodies of early Christian literature² and the prominent role of female figures in both the ecclesiastical and theological architecture of the Manichaean movement. On the ecclesial level, we know, for instance, that women were part


of its church as both Catechumens and Elect and that certain specific women were highly venerated in the Egyptian liturgy.\(^3\) Whereas on the theological level, female beings play a central role in the unfolding of the Manichaean cosmic drama.\(^4\) It is indeed notable that unlike the gnostic myth of the fall of Sophia, in which a female entity is ultimately to blame for the cosmogony, in the Manichaean version, the female demiurge engineers the cosmos as part of an elaborate divine stratagem of light-purification and redemption. Moreover, as Kevin Coyle also noted, Manichaean literature has so far evidenced little of the overtly “misogynistic” tendencies we find in other types of early Christian writing. Still, in spite of all this, we cannot automatically assume that women were held in particularly high regard in a religious movement that operated in series of highly patriarchal societies.\(^5\) After all, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Nonetheless, I would like to explore this question further by examining one particular Manichaean text—*The Sermon on the Great War*—in which a unique emphasis does seem to be placed on women by the author, revealing some rather striking attitudes to the place of women in the Manichaean community and revealing clues to the text’s historical milieu.

**An Inclusive Apocalypse**

Contained within the *Homilies* codex\(^6\) of the Medinet Madi manuscripts, the Manichaean *Sermon on the Great War* presents a vivid, albeit fragmentary, vision of the end of days and the culmination of the great cosmic struggle between Light and Darkness. It begins with an invocation of Mani and the revealed wisdom he left to his disciples. How he gave them knowledge and taught them the mysteries of the final separation. This knowledge, or “his

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\(^3\) Nearly every doxology from the Manichaean *Pslam-book* ends with invocations of a woman referred to as “blessed” Maria. The identity of “Maria/Mary” has been much debated. Allberry, the original editor of the codex, assumed that they were the names of local Manichaean martyrs (*A Manichaean Psalm-Book* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938], xx) or missionaries. Coyle himself remained agnostic on this question (see “Women and Manichaism’s Mission to the Roman Empire,” in *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, 203-4, “Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?” in *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, 169-170, and “Rethinking the “Marys” of Manichaeism,” in *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, 203-204. The identity of this figure remains a mystery.


\(^6\) The present analysis is based on the excellent new edition of the text by Nils Arne Pedersen, *Manichaean Homilies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

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good” (παγάλως) as the homilist states, he has notably bequeathed to “the orphans and widows” (μορφαλος ην ηγηρα) (Hom 7.19). These terms could partly be meant to designate the followers that he is leaving behind. As the end time approaches, however, none will be spared as the common people flee from their villages and even the kings and nobles are brought low (Homilies 9.7-18). Both married and unmarried women will suffer on that day:

The virgins and those who have taken a husband [...] the women when they will come in slavery. That day of horror; this trial that [...] will come to everyone. Behold, therefore, that day will come and it will not lie by its coming (Homilies 9.18-22)

“Freemen” and “freewomen” will all be affected (Homilies 9.31), as will “pregnant women and those who are nursing” (Homilies 10.22). It is striking the degree to which the homilist seems to make a special effort to include references to women as well as men, instead of simply referring to the suffering of male subjects by default as we might well expect from an ancient author. This already alerts us that this author has taken a particular interest in the female members of the Manichaean community and is in stark contrast to a text such as the first volume of Kephalaia which presents numerous Elect and Catechumens as interlocutors, but never specifically identifies any as female.

In spite of this gender-inclusive rhetoric, the discourse takes a dramatic turn with a harsh condemnation of “the cruel goddess of the fire” (Homilies 10.27), which the homilist equates with the image of Babylon. In this context, Babylon, no doubt influenced by biblical paradigms, represents the manifestation of cosmic evil in the world. According to the

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7 Some page headings of the Homilies codex attribute the Sermon on the Great War to “Kustaios” (27, 31, 35, 39), a disciple of Mani known from the Cologne Mani Codex 114.6-7 and Mani’s Third Letter to Sisinnios from the unpublished letters codex (Pedersen, Manichaean Homilies, 27). Pedersen accepts this attribution (Studies in the Sermon on the Great War [Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996], 87-94), even though the work is not attributed to Koustaios in either the superscription or colophon.

8 In particular, Apocalypse of John 17-18.

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homilist, it was she who “instituted the Sabbaths, the festivals, and the fasts” of the Jews (Homilies 11.3-4). It was she who crucified Jesus and whose temple was destroyed in Jerusalem (Homilies 11.14-16). It is she who rules in the fire of the Magi (Homilies 11.17-18). Throughout history, we are told, the apostles of God have been at war with her:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{αἰαραδής ἅχε [ἀβα] ἔν τῆς Ἡλικίας:} & \quad \text{Zarathustra threw her out of Babylon, and} \\
\text{αιὴνε ὅλος ἀβαλ ἐν θερό[γκαλή]:} & \quad \text{Jesus threw her out of Jerusalem. And now,} \\
\text{ἡγοῦ ἐν γογγ[α] ἀγιών ἄνθρωπος ἀραλ} & \quad \text{too, has the third apostle been sent to her,} \\
\text{καρτος[λός ἂ]ποστόλος προεδώτε} & \quad \text{the savior (Homilies 11.21-24)}
\end{align*}
\]

In fact her wickedness has no bounds, as she murders the king’s builders and gardeners, warriors and messengers, wise-men and judges (Homilies 12.10-23). Worst of all, she

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ἀρατεία [ἀτ]ταπρὸ ἀπερίπηκε:} & \quad \text{closed [the] mouth of these truthful ones} \\
\text{νεππορξ' ἡγοῦ[αένε ἀβαλ ἐκέκε:} & \quad \text{who separate [light] from darkness. She} \\
\text{ἀρατείε' ἀναλεγέ' ἀκρὸ[τ] ἀβαλ} & \quad \text{killed the beautiful males (and) shed the} \\
\text{ἀπεστῆ ἀναλεγέ' ἀναλεγέ' ἀναλεγέ'} & \quad \text{blood of the beautiful females (Homilies} \\
\text{ἀπεστῆ ἀναλεγέ' ἀναλεγέ'} & \quad 12.24-27).}
\end{align*}
\]

It is she who wages the “Great War” against the Light by persecuting the Manichaean community. The use of Babylon as the archetype of evil is somewhat incongruous with the prestige which Mani is sometimes said to have attached to the city as his place of origin (cf Homilies 54.14; 61.17), yet less so in the wake of his execution at the hands of Sasanian authorities. In this apocalyptic context the homilist is building upon the imagery of the Apocalypse of John, as well as the Manichaean tendency to view the evil principle of Matter

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(ackbar) as a feminine entity. For instance, in the Berlin Kephalaiia, Matter is identified as “the Death-desire, which is [Mother] of them all” ([τργ]α[θ] ρως τεσσαρας ἤμιος ετε ὄτας πε τοῦ [με] τηροῦ) (26.33-27.6). It would seem then that there is a certain ambivalence in the homilist’s mind between making special mention of the fate of females on the last day and the essential femininity of the primordial evil that threatens them, manifest in the world as the Whore of Babylon.

After this polemical digression, the register then shifts back to a more humanistic focus. As the homilist laments the coming fate of Manichaean women.

Where will they go? [Where] will they […] [in this Great] War? I weep for my [female] virgins who have loved God in purity […] [their] beauty in his hope, where will […] I weep for my abstainers […] who have] purified themselves for their savior […] in this] great trouble that will come about. Who […] purity? I weep

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9 Matter (ὄλη) as the antithesis of God is somewhat harder to pin down in what remains of Mani’s own writings. In fact, it is so far unattested. Ephraim wrote that “if Mani and Bardaisan designate (their) creators as ‘god,’ perhaps the way is open for them to designate Matter as well, since it is the cause for creation, as they assert” (Reeves, “Manichaean Citations from the Prose Refutations of Ephrem” in Emerging from Darkness: Studies in the Recovery of Manichaean Sources, ed. Paul Mirecki and Jason BeDuhn [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 238) although this reads as somewhat hypothetical. For Serapion of Thmuis, the primary opposition is between “God” and “Satan” (Against the Manichaeans 12, 26, see Samuel Lieu, Greek and Latin Sources on Manichaean Cosmogony and Ethics [Turnhout: Brepols, 2010], 50-51), a dichotomy also found in the Letter of Mani to Menoch preserved by Augustine (Lieu, Greek and Latin, 12-13), as well as in the account of al-Nadim in which the ruler of the realm of Darkness is al-Shaytan (Bayard Dodge, The Fihrist of Al-Nadim: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture [New York: Columbia University Press, 1970], 778). Even one of Mani’s letters from the Kellis documents makes specific reference to Satan (P. Kell. Copt. 53 43.12; Gardner, Kellis Literary Texts Volume 2). Matter, however, does occur relatively frequently in the Coptic sources, where it is said to be the “bad tree” (1Ke 22.32) and the feminine power who created the King of Darkness (1Ke 27.13-18), as well as the “Mother of this world” (Ps 221.5-6). From the Kellis finds, P. Kell. Gr. 97 refers to “dark matter” (τὴν σκοτίνην ὄλην) (B.I v 9) (Iain Gardner, Sarah Clackson, and Malcolm Choat. eds., Kellis Literary Texts 2 [Oxford: Oxbow, 2007]. Kellis Literary Texts Volume 2) and T. Kell. Copt. 4 alludes to “deceitful matter” (ὄλην πραλῶν) (51, see Iain Gardner, Kellis Literary Texts Volume 1 [Oxford: Oxbow, 1996]).
In this way, the homilist fears for the female members of the community, in particular the “virgins,” “abstainers,” and “widows,” as opposed to the mothers and wives early said to suffer during the end times. The primary focus now appears to be on the threat that will be posed to their chastity in the coming crisis. A time when “[sisters] will lead their sisters astray” (Homilies 21.3-4) and “elect will lead astray elect” (Homilies 21.7). In this time, even they will cry “why were we born into the world?” (Homilies 21.17).

There is hope, however, as the Manichaean church huddles together amid the world’s collapse. At this moment, says the homilist,

They will be saved in every place. Multitudes [of] abstainers, numbers of virgins will appear—[the] leaders and the teachers, the presbyters [and all the deacons], the female virgins and the abstainers, the catechumens and their relatives (Homilies 22.3-7)

Here they will comfort one-another. “The virgin will cling to her fellow-virgin and explain [her] sigh to [her]” and “the abstainer will proclaim to [her fellow] abstainer all the sufferings she bore” (Homilies 22.14-17). Again, a special effort is made to suggest that male and female community members will come to their mutual aid and comfort.
Finally, we are given a utopian vision of the new age, when “the (female) elect will sleep and arise in [the house] of the queens and the noble ladies” (Homilies 24.9-10), singing songs of glory in every land and reading the scriptures of the Apostle of Light. Moreover, the homilist proclaims:

How greatly will they [love] the reader, since thousands will [come] (to) visit him, male and female, [masses] and masses in every city! The churches and [the] catechumen’s houses will be like schools.

You will find them singing psalms and […] hymns […] publically in the presence of […] … … … if they cease, and the […] of the Lord Mannichaios. You will find them [all], the great and the small, a large number of children of [the] catechumens, being given to righteousness [in every] city. You will find the little girls, [being] taught to write and singing psalms and reading” (Homilies 30.27-31.7)
This last detail is most striking in the homilist vision of the redeemed cosmos. Not only are Manichaean women given a special place in the new reality, but female literacy is offered as a hallmark of the final defeat of the powers of darkness.

As we can see, the homilist places a deliberate and particular emphasis on the fate of Manichaean females—Elect and Catechumens, Virgins and Abstainers, women and girls. The default masculine is studiously avoided in favor of an equal opportunity salvation, a time when “brother will look after brother, sister after sister” (*Homilies* 30.6). At the same time, however, the types of women who are highlighted—virgins, widows, abstainers, girls—are all figures that fall outside the procreative function. Yet, there seems to be a conscious avoidance of the complete negation of the feminine that we find in other ascetic contexts such as the much debated final saying of the *Gospel of Thomas*, where “every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (logion 114) or the *Dialogue of the Savior* were Judas calls for the “works of the female” to be destroyed (NHC III,5.145). Something here has shifted. In the Manichaean kingdom, the femininity of the redeemed women is preserved, valued, and even emphasized.

### The “Autonomy of Chastity”

Why would the homilist do this? What would have motivated him (or her!) to such a radical re-imagining of reality? While Kevin Coyle has elsewhere suggested that the Manichaean elect conceived of themselves as “ultra-sexual,”[10] that is beyond the constraints of gendered differences, the *Sermon on the Great War* seems intent on emphasizing and preserving gender distinctions. As already noted, women are highlighted elsewhere in Coptic Manichaean literature, not only in the *Psalm-Book* doxologies, but also in the litany of venerated women from the same collection (Ps 192.21-32):[11]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{οὐραγωγὴ ἤ τε Μαρία} & \quad \text{Mariam is a net-caster,} \\
\text{ἐγόρα ἀπεκεῖντος ἐτσάρτη} & \quad \text{hunting eleven other wanderers.} \\
\text{[refrain] There were.} & 
\end{align*}
\]

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A joyous servant is Martha her sister.
Obedient sheep are Salome and Arsenoe.
A despiser of the body is Thecla, the god-lover.
A serpent-shamer is faithful Maximilla.
A bearer of good news is Iphidama, her sister, imprisoned in these prisons.
A champion is Aristoboula, the enduring.
A light-giver is the noble Eubula, leading astray the governor.
A wise teacher-lover is Drusiane, the god-lover, confined [for 14] days, looking for the apostle.
Each of these figures, from both canonical and non-canonical traditions, are presented as paradigms of feminine virtue. Moreover, as in the case of Jesus himself, women are also key figures in the passion story of Mani. For instance, in the Section on the Crucifixion also from the Homilies codex, we have the three women who came to weep over the body of Mani (Homilies 59.2-10):

Then they came to him, three (female) catechumens of the Faith: Banak, Dinak and [Nushak?]. They sat beside him, wept, and [put their hands] on his eyes. They closed them so that they might not … For when his soul left [the body] … They kissed his mouth … weeping over him, and saying: “Our [Father, open] your eyes and look at us.”

Clearly modelled on the three Marys of the gospel tradition, the homilist then instructs the reader, “bless these women, thank and worship them!” (Homilies 59.21-23).

Aside from such literary and hagiographic presentations, we have ample evidence of “real” Manichaean women, especially in the documentary texts from Kellis—some of these letters even written by them. Here we have a number of women filling traditional ancient gender roles—mothers, daughters, wives, sisters—although the exact familial relationship between these individuals is sometimes hard to establish or distinguish from ecclesiastical ones.

One such letter (P. Kell. Copt. 31) is addressed to

My beloved daughters, who are greatly esteemed by me, the members of the Holy Church, [the daughters] of the Light Mind, they who [are also counted] among the children of God, the favored, blessed, God-loving souls, my daughters.

The anonymous “father” of the letter praises the women as “helpers,” “patrons,” and “pillars” before requesting some quantities of oil. Iain Gardner suspects that this oil may be some kind of offering and that its anonymity is due to it being a “circular” or “chain-letter.” It is difficult to say. The anonymity could also be a sign of danger. After all the author writes that he is “praying to God every hour that he will guard you for a long time, free from anything evil of the wicked world” and urges the recipients not to hold on to the letter, lest it “fall into

14 Iain Gardner, Anthony Alcock, and Wolf-Peter Funk, eds., Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis, Volume I, (Oxbow, 1999), 207.
somebody’s hands.” Another letter (P. Kell. Copt. 37), written by a certain Ammon, refers to the “grief that overcame me, and the heartbreak that seized me, when I heard about what happened; namely that they shook those of this word.”

It would seem then that at least some in the Manichaean communities of Egypt experienced a degree of anxiety and existed in a somewhat precarious state. In the early 4th century, certainly after Diocletian’s Edict of 302, Manichaeans were under increasing pressure from both state and ecclesiastical authorities. One of the perceived dangers, at least from proto-orthodox Christians, was in fact the prominent presence of women in the movement. Yet, the women of the Kellis community appear to be mostly Catechumens, while those praised by the homilist were Elect. Women who may have sought what Virginia Burrus has called the “autonomy of chastity” characteristic of the ascetic movement more broadly. It is this category of Manichaean women that attracted the most scorn from the church fathers. Jerome, for instance, in his 22nd Letter to Eustochium, compared Manichaean women to prostitutes, attempting to undermine their claims to ascetic chastity:

Et quam viderint tristem atque pallentem, miseram et monacham et Manicheam vocant, et consequenter; tali enim proposito ieiunium heresis est. Hae sunt, quae per publicum notabiliter incedunt et furtivis oculorum nutibus adolescentium gregem post se trahunt, quae semper audiunt per prophetam: ‘Facies meretricis facta est tibi, impudorata es tu.’

15 Brand contends that the Manichaeans at Kellis likely did not face persecution (Manichaeans of Kellis, 161), at least not on a frequent or sustained basis.
Similarly, Epiphanius portrayed Mani’s alleged forerunner, Scythianus, as a charlatan who married a prostitute (Panarion 66). An account clearly modelled on the heresiological legend of Simon the Magician and his consort Helen (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.23). Moreover, Epiphanius claimed that Mani (or rather, Cubricus, as he called him) was an orphan adopted by a foolish old woman (Panarion 66). These are just the sort of people that Mark the Deacon, in his account of a debate between a female elect named Julia and bishop Porphyry of Gaza, claimed were attracted to Manichaean teaching: 18

καὶ γὰρ τὸ μάθημα αὐτῶν τοῖς γε νοῦν ἐχούσιν πεπλήρωται πάσης βλασφημίας καὶ καταγνώσεως καὶ γραώδων μύθων ἐφελκομένων γυναικάρια καὶ παιδιώδεις ἀνδρας κοῦφον ἕχοντας τὸν τε λογισμόν καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν

For their teaching, at least for those in their right minds is full of every blasphemy, contemptuous opinion, and old wives’ tales, attracting only feeble women and childish men, light on reason and understanding.

Here, too, the rhetoric is telling in that Mark attempts to discredit his hero’s opponents by reference to two of antiquity’s most marginalized and disempowered groups—women and children. Precisely the two groups that the author of the Sermon on the Great War makes a place for in the eschatological age-to-come. The homilist seeks to re-assure the women of their importance to the movement and their right to secure a place within its apocalyptic narrative. In this our author is following the counsel of Mani himself, who in a letter also found at Kellis (P. Kell. Copt. 54) 19 instructs his followers, both male and female, to “love one another”:


19 Gardner, Kellis Literary Texts 2, 89.
The [teachers] will love the teachers, the wise ones (will love) the wise ones, the bishops (will love) the bishops, the disciples (will love) the disciples, the brothers (will love) the brothers, also the sisters (will love) the sisters — you will all become children of a single undivided body.

It is also interesting to note the dramatic tension evoked by this precarious situation in the mind of the homilist. On the one hand, the status and chastity of the Manichaean women is highlighted and valued, while on the other, the cosmic force that threatens to undermine that status and chastity is personified as the profoundly unchaste Whore of Babylon. Conversely, to opponents of the movement such as Jerome, the roles are reversed and it is the moral corruption of Manichaean women that is cast as a threat to women of his own theological faction. In both cases, the sexualization of evil is employed as a powerful rhetorical trope, as one early Christian group seeks to marginalize its rivals.

Enkratites in Context

While it is clear that the author of the Sermon on the Great War places a unique emphasis on women in the text’s apocalyptic vision, does this really tell us anything about the Manichaean community of Egypt? It is often tempting to view Coptic Manichaean texts as reflective of a specifically Egyptian milieu, but this approach is difficult to sustain. All we really know is that the Medinet Madi manuscripts were read and used as part of the liturgy of an otherwise obscure Egyptian community, but there is mounting evidence of a Syriac substratum to that community.²⁰ In fact, both Koenen and Petersen have identified elements

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²⁰ For instance, the Coptic-Syriac glossaries from Kellis (Gardner, Kellis Literary Texts I).
of the *Sermon* that point to a “Babylonian” environment,\(^{21}\) which is in fact the heartland of the original Manichaean movement.

Thus, the more likely context for the female-focused rhetoric of the *Sermon on the Great War* is the increased pressure and marginalization being experienced by the Manichaean church in the immediate aftermath of Mani’s execution in 277 CE. Moreover, the ascetic tone of the discourse bears many of the hallmarks of Syrian asceticism native to the region. After all, one of the key groups of women that the homilist describes are called ἐνκρατίτες, or *enkratites*, a label applied since the second century CE to a Syrian sect who, according to Irenaeus, “preached against marriage, thus setting aside the original creation of God, and indirectly blaming him who made the male and female for the propagation of the human race” (*Against Heresies* 1.28). Such anti-cosmic values and denial of procreation imbued the early Manichaean church, particularly the Elect, and drove its proto-monastic programme.\(^{22}\) As Mani states in *Kephalaia* Chapter 85 (212.22-28),\(^{23}\)

Thus, the Holy Church which the Apostle established in the world: without toil and suffering the Elect will not be able to be free from the world, but rather, by consideration of fasting and prayer and abstinence (*enkrateia*) and alms and only-begottenness and with-drawal (*anachōrēsis*), wounds and lashings, the

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\(^{23}\) With *addenda et corrigenda* by W.-P. Funk (personal communication).

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Such a statement, laced with ascetic terminology, evokes the need for the Elect to transcend the things that bind them to the cosmos, to tame the body, and to deny themselves even unto death—as their master had done before them. As a reward, our homilist has seen not a time when sexual difference will be definitely erased, as in other ascetic discourses, but permanently controlled. Namely, brought under the rule of enkrateia. This is a time, we might say, when the Elect will neither marry nor be given in marriage, but will find their rest like angels in heaven (Mt 22:30).

While on the surface, the Manichaean Sermon on the Great War presents yet another take on early Christian apocalypticism, the text can and should also be read as yet another testimony from the front in the late antique war over women, procreation, and sexual ethics, whereby the honor and/or shame attributed to the women of a religious community is seen to have profound cosmic and soteriological implications. The author’s perspective, however, is unique both in the amount of attention given to women in the eschatological narrative and the affirmation of women’s place in late antique ascetic ideology. Does this mean that the text could have possibly been authored by a female member of the Manichaean community and pseudonymously attributed to Koustaios? That is a tempting argument to make, but not one I will make here. Hopefully, further research will continue to uncover the important roles played by women in the wider Manichaean movement.

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