

Plato and Hermes in Mani's Prophetology: a possible adaptation to the theurgical milieu

Platão e Hermes na profetologia de Mani: uma possível adaptação
ao ambiente teúrgico

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to set forth conjectures that are likely to explain the inclusion of Plato and Hermes as heralds of Mani in the testimony of Ephrem of Syria. This incorporation should be set against the background of the Syrian religious milieu, which was influenced by both Hellenistic philosophy and Eastern religious traditions. Therefore, it would be better to seek a religious and philosophical environment wherein Plato and Hermes were associated.

Keywords: Manichaeism, apocalypticism, theurgy, hermetism, Merkabah mysticism, late platonism.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo a apresentação de conjecturas que possam explicar a inclusão de Platão e Hermes como arautos de Mani no testemunho de Efrém da Síria. Essa incorporação deve ser situada no contexto filosófico e religioso da Síria, que foi influenciado tanto pela filosofia helenística quanto

pelas tradições religiosas asiáticas. Portanto, seria melhor buscar um ambiente religioso e filosófico no qual Platão e Hermes estivessem associados.

Palavras-chave: Maniqueísmo, apocalipticismo, teurgia, misticismo de Merkabah, platonismo tardio.

Introduction

Given that theurgy was a widespread practice in late antiquity and we have documents that attest to the notorious relationship between Platonism and Egyptian wisdom in the syncretic context within which the Hermetic texts appeared, it might be possible to explain the incorporation of both Plato and Hermes into Manichaeism as a consequence of its association with theurgic spirituality.

In order to do so, this article will establish 1) the context of Ephrem of Syria and his theological ideas; 2) the prophetology of Mani, a system which allowed the incorporation of figures such as Plato and Hermes, as well as its relationship with Jewish pseudepigraphy; 3) the similarities between Gnostic and theurgical practices, focusing on a common heritage that would facilitate an adaptation of cultic terms 4) and, finally, the context of Syria, from which Ephrem wrote and where Hermeticism influenced Bardaisan of Edessa and where theurgy influenced the school of Iamblichus, the latter a plausible link for the incorporation of Plato and Hermes in Manichaeism.

1. Ephrem of Syria

Although there is no source for verification, there is scholarly consensus that Ephrem was born at Nisibis (or in the surrounding area) around 309 CE (McVey, 1994, p. 25). His parents were probably Christians, contrary to what the Syriac 'Life of Ephrem' claims, that his father was a priest of a 'pagan cult' and that both his parents were 'idol worshippers' (McVey, 1994, p. 25).

According to H. J. W. Drijvers, Ephrem fought all his life—as a monk, an ascetic and a prolific author—for the 'orthodox' cause, acceptance of which he tried to advance in Syria (Drijvers, 2014, p. 143). He left Nisibis in 363 when the city became part of the Sassanid empire and, after some wandering, arrived in Edessa, where he founded the famous 'School of the Persians' (Drijvers, 2014, p. 143). We will illustrate this process by quoting the essential source for this article, Ephrem's discussion of the incorporation of Hermes and Plato into Manichaeism, from which we will elaborate the hypothesis of a Manichaean adaptation to the theurgical environment.

According to the testimony of Ephrem of Syria (Eph. Mani 208, 17-29 [Reeves¹ #102]) the Manichaeans have the imprudence to claim that there existed ancient masters of (Manichaean) truth. In fact, they say that Hermes the Egyptian, Plato the Greek and Jesus were heralds of good in the world.

Ephrem of Syria's position can be explained by the concept of 'theological idealism'. Birger Pearson calls theological idealism a set of beliefs, such as those present in the work of Irenaeus of Lyons, grounded in a primordial orthodoxy whose unalterable diffusion is associated with the apostolic tradition. From his theological perspective, heresy would always be a violation of orthodoxy (Pearson, 2012, p.169-175). However, Pearson analyses this theological belief according to the Christian milieu in which Irenaeus lived, raising arguments that counter the heresiologist's stance (Pearson, 1997, p. 21).

This theological perspective, however, is not historically accurate. In fact, there were various groups of Christians in this period among whom the very idea of 'orthodoxy' had not been established; this

¹ Based on Gherardo Gnoli's (2013) edition of the Manichaean corpus, published in Italy.

theological projection onto history has been the reason for numerous misunderstandings regarding the early history of Christianity. Once Catholicism was established, this theological ideal came to be seen as the early history of Christianity. Riley sums up this scenario quite clearly:

For Eusebius and his source Hegesippus, heresy began with Gnosticism, the 'falsely named knowledge' that took its name from the Greek word for 'knowledge', gnosis. Up until that time, according to Eusebius, the apostle and their direct disciples had been alive and kept the doctrine of the Church true and 'orthodox', befitting the purity of the virgin Church. We still suffer under this false account of the origins of the Church (...). But at the time of the New Testament, the Church was not 'pure' in its doctrine: its doctrine had not yet been systematized and established into a theological whole; there was as yet no 'pure' doctrine, no orthodoxy (Riley, 1997, p. 100).

2. Prophetology and Visionary Experiences in Manichaeism

To understand the way in which Manichaeism adapted itself to different religions and environments requires a methodology that does not reduce it to its external elements, which could imply that syncretism is a passive process. We must take into account the internal logic of the Manichaean system, which includes the fact that, for Mani, his teachings were the consequence of a revelation—that is, of his experience with his Syzygos, the divine twin.

Henry Corbin discusses a serious problem that can beset the concept of 'syncretism': the term can be used in order to avoid further consideration of a project designed to restore, in the present, doctrines that belong to a distant past with which he associates the history of gnosis (Corbin, 1994, p. 13). Manichaeism surely reflects a similar conception in Mani's prophetology and his project of a universal religion.

As for Mani, his heavenly ascension needs further clarification, since his visions are associated with prophetology and, therefore, require a separate analysis. In doing so, we want to distinguish his ethos from other religious practices, especially theurgy of Iamblichus. As already emphasised, Hermetic/Platonic theology presents itself as the most plausible solution to Ephrem's testimony about Plato and Hermes in his prophetology.

Christian Jambet, a scholar of Henry Corbin's work, summarises well the Corbian positions about the prophetic phenomenon, which are, with some adjustments, well suited for Manichaeism. Furthermore, Corbin's approach is quite appropriate, for he was a scholar of gnosis, Iranian religions and Shiite Islam—in addition to Manichaeism itself.

Thus, the prophetic fact, according to Corbin, does not exclude philosophical practice, but it is the very basis of philosophy in prophetological contexts (Jambet, 2006, p. 215), such as the Islamic philosophy studied by the author. The philosophical enterprise is then a return to the 'foundation of evidence', to the agent intellect identified with the archangel of prophetic revelation (Jambet, 2006, p. 215). This is a fruitful perspective for scholars of Manichaeism, for it helps them to place prophetology within their anthropological horizon.

Moreover, Corbin situates the prophetic phenomenon within a cosmology in which the metaphysical locus of identity is the imaginative agent, a theophany (Corbin, 1998, p. 189). In Jambet's words, "concepts become manifestations of the angel, in which the figures of the spiritual world refer to the concepts of the divine intellect. In this way, the homologation of prophetology and ontology is an unfolding of the active imagination of the world *imaginalis*" (Jambet, 2006, p. 215).

Michel Tardieu argues that Mani, as a visionary and poet, developed his ideas about the nature of things—their causes and modalities—within a literary perspective of legends, the *Pragmateia*: for he was neither a philosopher nor a theologian (Tardieu, 2008, p. 75). Mani fits, in this case, into the apocalyptic tradition, in that revelation is the epicentre of his thought. Thus, the originality of Manichaeism,

according to Tardieu, is the construction of an ecclesiology based on a universal prophetology, in which we find, besides Jewish figures, Buddha and Zarathustra, to mention a couple (Tardieu, 2008, p. 17).

It is not in our interest to reduce all the phenomena studied here to a single source; on the contrary, the similarities, in this case, are important to understand precisely the aspects shared among different traditions that would facilitate the adaptation of one religion or philosophy to another. For this reason, it is appropriate to begin with a description of the relations between apocalyptic culture—that is, revelations and mysteries—and Jewish mysticism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism and Hermeticism.

According to Nathaniel Deutsch, the sources of Hekhalot and gnosis rely on the Hebrew apocalyptic traditions, thanks to a complex of motifs/themes linked to the deification or angelisation of the individual at the moment of the deifying vision (Deutsch, 2001, p. 92). Thus, continues Deutsch, these motifs not only confirm the parallel development in Gnosticism and Merkabah's mysticism of *topoi* originating in Jewish apocalyptic but also reveal the importance of the Hebrew apocalyptic paradigm of evangelisation or quasi-deification as an alternative to the Neoplatonic model of unified experience (Deutsch, 2001, p. 92).

Kurt Rudolph describes some apocalyptic themes that are similar to those found in Gnosticism, namely: the eschatological trend, the dualistic worldview and the notion that the present age—this aeon—is destined to perish and will be succeeded by an age of redemption. Furthermore, apocalyptic is esoteric revealed wisdom, the result of a knowledge that has an immediate relationship with redemption, so that knowledge and redemption are closely related (Rudolph, 1987, p. 278).

According to Collins, it is possible to observe the following features in apocalypticism (Collins, 1984, p. 5): 1) it is a narrative framework that describes the manner of revelation, and 2) its main means of revelation are visions and otherworldly journeys, supplemented by discourse or dialogue and occasionally by a heavenly book. The consistent element, according to Collins, is the presence of an angel who interprets the vision and serves as a guide for these otherworldly journeys (Collins, 1984, p. 5).

In the Cologne Mani Codex (CMC), the most important Manichaean text for the present purpose of understanding the relationship between heavenly ascensions, Jewish mysticism and theurgy, we find a passage concerning his experience with his divine Syzygos (CMC, I, 1-5):

1 (Perhaps the Syzygos in a vision spoke to Mani): '... the fellow believers ... prophets ... and saviour(s) ...' **1** [Mani appears to continue with his account after about thirty-nine lost lines:] ...this same (vision) (?) ...) to me...it(self?) ... **2** '...) little by little (I (i.e. the Syzygos)) have shown you (what is hidden (?) ...) from many [...]. You will be able to see that mystery in magnificence and complete clarity.' And then the angel was concealed from (me) [...about 13 lines lost...] **3** [...] I was protected through the might of the angels and of the powers of holiness which were entrusted with my protection. They also brought me up by means of the visions and signs they showed me, which were short and very brief such as I could bear. For sometimes (he came) like lightning, [...9 lines lost...] **4** [...] this I perceived with all exactitude. He also gave me a firm grounding in that power which remains steadfast in affliction. Very many are the visions and very great the marvels which he showed me throughout all that period of my youth. Yet I remained in silence, except [...10 lines lost...] **5** [...] whilst I with wisdom and cunning wandered in their midst and observed the 'rest' and did no wrong, neither did I cause distress or follow the rule of the baptists or engage with them in dialogue in the same way (as they do) (Gardner; Lieu, 2004, p. 47-48).

In the CMC, Mani's visions occur in the context of his upbringing among the Elchasaites; the text is theologically constructed in such a way as to emphasise the role of revelation and the angelic vision in Mani's break with his former coreligionists. All of the above descriptions have elements found in apocalyptic literature, especially the visions².

² ("‘little by little [i.e. the Syzygos] have shown you what is hidden from many [...]. You will be able to see that mystery in magnificence and complete clarity.’ And then the angel was concealed from me”; Gardner; Lieu, 2004, p. 47-48). [...κατ]ὰ βραχὺ β[ρα]χὺ [...]ον ασεβ [...] σοι ἐδειξ[...] | ἀπὸ πολλ[ῶν] ἐξέ[σ]τα[ι] δέ σοι μεγα[λο]π[ρε]πῶς | καὶ ὀφθαλμοφανέστα-| τα θεωπῆσαι τὸ μυστήριον ἐκεῖνο καὶ τότε ὁ | ἄγγελος ἀπεκρύβη | ἀ[π]ο [...] υ | [...].

In the above passage (CMC, I, 1-5) the relationship between the mystery (μυστήριον), the visionary experience with Syzygos and the angelophany (the contact with the angel, ἄγγελος) is clear; immediately afterwards, the function of vision in the unveiling of this mystery emerges: "they also brought me up by means of the *visions and signs* (ὀπτασιῶν καὶ σημείων) they showed me, which were short and very brief such as I could bear" (CMC, I, 3; Gardner; Lieu, 2004, p. 48; for the Greek text, see Gnoli 2003, 38). Concerning these visionary experiences, John Reeves says:

Each visionary experiences an angelophany, a vision of one or more angelic beings that is two of the instances are identified by name: Balsamos (Adam) and Michael (Enoch). Each ser is transported to heaven and views certain sights or is made privy to certain secrets (Reeves, 1994, p. 176).

The mention of biblical figures is interesting, as it points to Mani's relationship to the pseudo-epigraphic tradition and explains the ambivalent relationship between Manichaeism and Judaism, since Jewish motifs are found, in Manichaean writings, alongside a disdain for the Old Testament (Reeves, 1994, p. 173).

We read in CMC IX (48-50) that:

48 (Thus) Adam, first, 28 spoke with the clearest voice (in) his (apocalypse), 29 saying: 'I saw an angel revealed [...] 49 (in front of) your (shining) face, which I do not know'. Then he said to him: 'I am Balsamos, 30 the greatest Angel of Light. Receive from me and write these things I reveal to you on the purest papyrus which is not perishable or liable to worms.' (And he spoke) also of many other things which he revealed to him in the vision. For the glory round him was very great. And he also saw (the) angels and the commanders (-in-chief and the) greatest (powers [...five lines lost...]) 50 [...] and Adam became above all the powers and angels of creation. And many other things, like these, are in his writings (Gardner; Lieu, 2004, p. 54).

Historically, what is the root of this Manichaean conception? John Reeves argues that, in the transmission of the Gospel of Light, the 'official' texts had limited value. Therefore, in order to recover the original message of these divine emissaries, it was necessary to consult the literary testimony that allegedly stems from the apostles themselves—and here lies the significance of the pseudo-epigraphy in Manichaeism, namely the apostolic line (Reeves, 1994, p. 175).

Karel van der Toorn, in his *Scribal Culture and the Making of Hebrew Bible*, states that the new conception of prophecy affected the way the scribes viewed the prophets of the past. When prophecy became primarily a literary genre, the prophets were posthumously turned into authors (van der Toorn, 2007, p. 230).

Furthermore, continues van der Toorn, when the Hebrew scribes adopted this paradigm of revelation associated with prophetic literature, they took vision as the classic mode of prophetic revelation, which is why the ancient books of prophets use the terminology of visionary experience as a technical vocabulary for prophecy (van der Toorn, 2007, pp. 230-231).

We clearly observe in the CMC what Van Toorn describes as the construction of prophetic experience to legitimise written accounts in prophetic scrolls. The prophets' narratives (inserted as credentials) are related to visionary experiences in which the prophet communicated with god—a dogma of prophetic revelation (van der Toorn, 2007, p. 231). Thus:

There should be no mistake about the antiquity of the notion of revelation in connection with prophecy; prophets have always claimed to act as the mouthpiece of God. The novelty of the scribal construct of prophecy as a revelation lies in the reference to written texts. The scribes developed the notion of the prophet as a scribe, and of his message as a secret revealed by heavenly figures, to legitimize the fact that the prophets had become books. Prophets were men of the past; the scribes had taken their place. The only way in which God would now speak to human beings was through the written text (van der Toorn, 2007, p. 231).

The Semitic features underlying Mani's visions are quite clear and clarify the Manichaeism modus operandi, as well as the distinction of his ascension practices from those found, for example, in theurgy of Iamblichus or in a theurgy-oriented Gnosticism such as Marsanes.

In this way, Mani's own visionary experience became the interpretative paradigm for religious texts. Since he claimed that the strength of his religion lay in its angelic foundation—namely, his relationship with his angelic twin—he may have looked to other scriptures for a similar experience. We might say that, from Mani's perspective, the value of a text would lie in its angelic foundation.

In addition to the Mesopotamian aspect, the subsequent influence of which can be seen in Manichaeism, the emphasis on written testimony associated with Mani's angelophany can be seen, as David Frankfurter argues, with the specific purpose of writing down their revelations, as with Adam, Sethel and so forth; thus, "In a world replete with legends of prophets, oral teachings of prophets, and rumors of new prophets Mani placed special importance on the book as the guarantee of authentic and authoritative revelation" (Frankfurter, 1997, p. 62).

Therefore:

Their emotional call-narratives and glorious supernatural imagery echoed Mani's own intense religious experiences of his heavenly Twin. But even more, their self-conscious scribality with its intrinsic implication of heavenly authority presented itself as the quintessential way of establishing one's message in a competitive religious world (Frankfurter, 1997, p. 62).

The key to understanding this attitude lies in the chain of heavenly incarnations of the Apostle of Light, i.e., the apostle's periodic dispatch to humanity to proclaim the message of redemption, the series of which would have ended in Mani (Reeves, 1994, p. 174). This notion was already found in Elchasaite Christology, the group against which Mani rebelled (Cirillo, 2001, p. 51-52; Frankfurter, 1997, p. 64).

Equally important is the relationship between visionary experience and the symbolism of light; cosmologically, light is associated with the Father of Greatness, who exists in stillness and remains hidden in his land of Light (Ke. XVI, 49.13-35). The land of Light, notes Manfred Heuser (1998, p. 10), is structured as a kingdom, where the central figure is the 'Father'; moreover, he exists without beginning or end and is praised and worshiped as the first among all (Gardner, 2020, p. 87).

2.1. Prophecy and Gnosis in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism

The presence of the ascension in Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism is an important parallel between the two phenomena (Deutsch, 2001, p. 35). For this reason, says Nathaniel Deutsch, the heavenly ascent is not an adequate criterion for defining Gnosticism, as the term would then incorporate not only Merkabah mysticism but even Chaldean theurgy, Neoplatonism and many other religious movements (Deutsch, 2001, p. 35).

On the other hand, it is precisely for this reason that this parallel is useful for our purpose, since our intention is not to reduce all phenomena to a common cause but to observe how different religions have a similar horizon, which could be explained by the context of late antiquity.

Thus, there would be a fertile ground for one religion to adapt to another, like Manichaeism to the theurgical environment, without losing its particular characteristics. This is the proposition used by Jason M. Silverman to investigate the influence of Iran on Jewish apocalyptic, emphasising the active choice of elements that already had a Jewish counterpoint; Zoroastrianism could offer a hermeneutic for pre-existing issues in Judaism that are similar to those of Persian religion (Silverman, 2012, p. 97).

The development of these ascension practices in Jewish mysticism and Gnostic spirituality is interesting, since it seems to point to distinct paths within the Jewish religion; thus, Moshe Idel notes the biblical apprehension of revelation is based on the assumption that man as a psychosomatic entity

cannot transcend his worldly situation, so it is up to god to adapt to the human condition (Idel, 2005, p. 24). That is: in the case of Judaism, there is an emphasis on divine will rather than on individual mystical experience (Idel, 2005, p. 24-25).

According to Moshe Idel, the motif of the mythical rise of man was preserved and elaborated in Hebrew treatises written after the destruction of the Second Temple. In the treatises connected with the general literary title 'Hekhalot', the experience of celestial ascent has great importance, for it is here that the initiative of the mystic—as opposed to the 'descent' of god—provides the starting point (Idel, 2005, p. 29).

Perhaps this prominence of heavenly ascensions in Hekhalot literature might be the reason for the important role of biblical figures (essentially in their apocryphal developments) in Manichaeism and Gnosticism. For Jewish mysticism, on the other hand, Moshe Idel notes that the protagonists of these celestial ascensions are mainly post-biblical figures, some of whom are founders of the first phase of rabbinic literature, known as the Tannaitic (Idel, 2005, p. 30).

Algis Uzdaviny (2011, p. 19) asserts that the virtually unquestioned dogma of prophetic revelation as an epistemological category embodied in a book was a construct of Mesopotamian origin. Thus, continues Uzdaviny, "The post-exilic religious bureaucrats of Second Temple Judaism decided that the only way in which the divine Patron could speak to his vassals (the Israelites as his contractual slaves and warriors) was through the written text" (Uzdaviny, 2011, p. 19). These differentiations, as well as their distinct theological contexts, are essential to understanding the prophetic phenomenon in Hellenistic religion.

According to Gershom Scholem, the Great Hekhaloth shows in detail that these anonymous authors were eager to develop their gnosis through the perspective of halakhic Judaism, notwithstanding their partial incompatibility with the new religious spirit, as the religious impulse of these groups had sources distinct from those we find in orthodox Judaism (Scholem, 1995, p. 47).

Those who had passed the test, remarks Scholem, were considered worthy of making the descent to the Merkabah, which led them, after they faced numerous and dangerous challenges, through the seven heavenly palaces, for which there was a technical preparation. This preparation and the descriptions of what was perceived on the voyage were the subjects of mystical writings (Scholem, 1995, p. 49).

Hence, for Scholem, we are facing a Jewish variation of one of the main Gnostic and Hermetic concerns of the second and third century, namely the ascent of the soul that, from earth, traverses the hostile spheres of the planets and rulers of the cosmos in its return to its divine home where the completeness of divine light is found (Scholem, 1995, p. 49). These observations are associated with Scholem's thesis that Merkabah mysticism and Gnosticism were parallel movements developed in response to Rabbinic Judaism (Deutsch, 2001, p. 27).

Nathaniel Deutsch (2001, p. 42) observes that Scholem 'reads' Gnosticism through the prism of Merkabah mysticism and Merkabah mysticism through the prism of Gnosticism, a procedure which obscures the phenomenological differences between Gnosticism and mysticism. Nevertheless, Deutsch argues that although Scholem's identification is problematic, groups of 'Hebrew Gnostics' who are not Merkabah mystics may actually have existed, and these Hebrew Gnostics may have had an intermediary function between Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism (Deutsch, 2001, p. 50).

Moreover, Martha Himmelfarb (1988, p. 76) had already claimed that Scholem's explanatory scheme for the Hekhalot literature needs a drastic revision – even though there is absolutely no need to dismiss Scholem's thesis of a historical continuation between rabbinic literature and mystical ascent practices.

The relationship between symbols, cosmic structure, and specific ontological changes lies at the heart of the aforementioned mystical ascension practices; furthermore, the symbolic dimension may even have a ritual counterpoint. In the Hekhalot Rabbati (XVII, 219), for example, is mentioned the necessity of having, at the entrance to the first palace, two seals in hand. Despite the relationship between the apocalyptic tradition and Hekhalot literature, Himmelfarb states that unlike the apocalypses in which one finds mentions of the heavens, the Hekhalot texts speak mostly of palaces, and only occasionally of heavens (Himmelfarb, 1988, p. 77).

In Marsanes (2, 12-14) there is mention of a thirteenth 'seal' (σφραγίς; σφραγίς), which the author claims to have established with the apex of knowledge (ῥ[η]λωτικ/ γνῶσις). There are discussions concerning these various levels of reality ('seals') and the mystical meaning of the letters of the alphabet and their relation to the human soul and the names of gods and angels, in which Pearson notes a reflection of the kind of Platonism practiced by Iamblichus (Pearson, 1992, p. 263).

The thirteen seals may thus also be a reflection of the theurgic ascension praxis, in which case they would be understood as equivalent to what Iamblichus calls 'symbols', for "the reference to 'cosmic' and 'material' 'seals' indeed reminds us of Iamblichus's use of material synthemata and his recourse to material objects in theurgic ritual, such as stones, plants, etc." (Pearson, 1992, p. 265).

3. Prophets and Prophecies in Late Platonism: Iamblichus

So far, we have seen the notions of prophecy in Manichaeism—and, by extension, in Semitic cultures—and its relation to visionary experience and practices of spiritual ascent. Heavenly ascent is known to be an important feature of numerous religious movements of late antiquity, arising from the Platonic or apocalyptic traditions (Deutsch, 2001, p. 35). But what about the prophets? What differentiates a prophet in a Greek philosophical and religious context from that found, for example, in Judaism?

Algis Uzdavynys (2011, p. 17), commenting on Proclus' exposition of the Orphic and Platonic theory of reminiscence associated with the passage from *Phaedrus* (249c) "which forms a continual initiation into the perfect mystic vision", asks what it would mean to be possessed by a god, an experience identical to being a prophet in the context of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures.

First, the author comments on the association between the verb γιγνώσκω and the noun γνῶσις, the former being often combined with verbs designating vision—understood as an exceptional faculty (Uzdavynys, 2011, p. 17-18)—and establishes the visionary presupposition of the Gnostic experience.

But Uzdavynys (2011, p. 18) goes further: he then associates the visionary experience with a specific location, such as the sanctuary or meeting place where the gods are thought to be present and can offer advice. In Greek, a sanctuary of this kind was called μαντεῖον—translated by the Romans as *oraculum*—and "hence, a prophet, as an inspired seer, somewhat emptied of himself and 'filled with the God' (being a possessed *enthousiastes*), is a representative of the speaking deity" (Uzdavynys, 2011, p. 18).

Nevertheless, there is still a controversy, and it lies within the term prophecy itself, since it usually has a clear Judeo-Christian theological bias (Uzdavynys, 2011, p. 19). In order to understand these terms in Iamblichus in particular and in theurgical practices in general, we need to investigate this theological bias and determine how it had already manifested itself in late antiquity when Mediterranean religious practices were being demonised and discredited.

As scholars, we encounter here two problems: the controversies within Platonism and Christianity and the reception, maintenance and development of this view in academia. As stated by Gregory Shaw (1985, p. 2), the enigma of theurgy has unfortunately become more difficult for modern scholars, as they have proceeded in an anachronistic way, adjusting the practice to their own worldview. Within the Platonic tradition, the controversy began with Porphyry in his *Letter to Anebo*, in which he argues that theurgy is a means to "purify the lower soul"; Yet Iamblichus, as Shaw argues, had a distinct notion of what soul was (Shaw, 1985, p. 2).

In short, the 'Letter to Anebo' is an attempt to discredit theurgy: the influence of Aristotle and Plotinus appear in Porphyry's arguments, which are based on the physical world. This feature is essential to understanding the answer of Iamblichus in the *De Mysteriis*: he does not even accept the Porphyrian distinctions, orienting himself within the divine hierarchy and making use of what Peter Struck called hyperrationalism. From Iamblichus' perspective, he is not 'appealing' to the 'irrationality' as defended, for example, by Dodds, but to the supra-rational faculty and ontological superiority of the gods (Struck, 2004, p. 211).

Right at the beginning of the *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus provides information pertinent to our goal:

first, Hermes is considered the patron of all priests. He is the same everywhere and is the god to whom our ancestors—that is, the Egyptians (Iamblichus uses the figure of a Egyptian priest, Abammon)—dedicated their fruits and attributed their own writings (DM, I, 1.1).

Methodologically, Iamblichus also sets the tone with which he will answer Porphyry's criticisms, namely that he seeks to examine the problems from a theological or philosophical point of view depending on the topic (DM, I, 1.1). But what does he intend by this? He immediately rebuts Porphyry's formulation, which accepts the existence of the gods, something that, for Iamblichus, should not be discussed in these terms: for him it was not a matter of acceptance, since we have an innate knowledge about the gods (DM, I, 1.3).

Hence, for Iamblichus, the question cannot be put in this way, for innate knowledge of the gods co-exists with our nature and is superior to all rational judgments and choices (DM, I, 1.3). In the same way (DM, I, 1.4), it is not possible to distinguish the gods with dichotomies, and he once again corrects the very formulation of Porphyry's question: it is necessary first to keep in mind the essence, then the potency, and last the activity—the latter being, according to Porphyry, the main distinction between the gods.

Neither does Iamblichus accept, in relation to souls, the placement of activity/movement, because the soul has a special movement proper to itself and unrelated to anything else that transcends the opposition between acting itself and being acted upon by itself (DM, I, 1.4). Iamblichus' rejection of Porphyry's method is at the heart of his response, which, Daniela Taormina argues (1997, p. 101), attempted to solve an ontological problem with a physical explanation.

It is precisely this physical explanation in dispute in the philosophical and religious debates concerning divination and prophecies. For instance, Porphyry links divination to madness (*Letter to Anebo*, 2.5), in a perspective that was usual in the Hellenistic tradition: here *μαντική* acts according to physiological and physical issues (Struck, 2016, p. 230).

After exploring the relationship and differences between a plethora of heavenly ascents and visionary experiences in late antiquity, we can summarise our points as follows: 1) the visionary or prophetic experience in the Platonic tradition is distinguished from the Jewish tradition—and from Manichaeism—by its attachment to the written tradition, and 2) Iamblichus' arguments are grounded in a cosmology distinct not only from Manichaeism/Judaism but even from other Platonists, such as Porphyry.

In both prophetic traditions, the god of writing is closely associated with these visionary experiences. In the case of Iamblichus' Platonism, there is not that prophetological element proper to Semitic traditions. The key is precisely that god whose incorporation into Manichaeism we seek to understand: Hermes.

We have already quoted the passage from *De Mysteriis* in which Iamblichus emphasises the role of Hermes; what does it tell us about his religious environment? Christian H. Bull, following Fowden (1993, p. 135-138), for whom the authors of Hermetic texts—or at least of the main ones—were Egyptian priests, claims that the main testimony for this investigation are the writings of Iamblichus:

Iamblichus speaks here of ancient Egyptian books, and not the Greek Hermetica, but later he also claims that Hermes is responsible for Egyptian books written in the idiom of Greek philosophy (...) Iamblichus seems to counter an accusation of Porphyry, that the use of Greek philosophical terms disproves the alleged high antiquity and Egyptian provenance of the Hermetic treatises, by saying that this is due to the priestly translators' familiarity with Greek philosophy (Bull, 2018, p. 12).

4. Platonism and Popular Religion: A Conjecture for the Incorporation of Hermes and Plato into Manichaeism

In a phenomenon Shaw calls the Platonisation of popular religion, the practice of divination was an integral part of the Greco-Roman world and provided Iamblichus with strong evidence that divine pow-

ers existed beyond the human soul (Shaw, 2014, p. 259). By defending the philosophical legitimisation of divinatory rites in his theurgy, Iamblichus provided a theoretical justification for well-known religious practices in the Greco-Roman world (Shaw, 2014, p. 259).

This popular religion is well illustrated in the magical Greek papyri (PMG), which, alongside Hermetic texts, help the modern researcher to understand the dynamics of spirituality and syncretism in late antiquity. Thus:

The syncretism of the PMG, like that of other magical expressions, is much more than a soup of elements coming from different traditions. Obviously the Hellenisation of Mediterranean cultures is a factor fundamental to understanding this form of authentic ecumenism, in which several apparently distant gods meet in the same house. However, we are in front of something much bigger than a simple mixture, a simple melting pot, to use an expression dear to North American anthropologists³ (Cornelli, 2003, p. 71).

The religion that emerges from the PMG has a different orientation, perhaps even resulting in a 'new religion'—one that is popular and magical, metabolising gestures and words from the great Hellenic religions to both adopt the same attitudes and beliefs and take on characteristics of its own (Cornelli, 2003, p. 71). Himmelfarb (1988, p. 84) noted that, in the Hekhalot literature (Hekhalot Zutrat and Hekhalot Rabbati), instructions on ascension practices not only share the general schemas of magical texts, but they show the same technical terminology that one can find in Gnostic traditions and PMG – hence the scope and importance of this magical literature.

Hans Dieter Betz (1981, p. 157-160), on the other hand, realized that, unlike the philosophical tradition, the Delphic maxim had a ritual character in the PMG; hence, although the maxim is never quoted *in verbatim*, the 'consultation of the personal daemone' meant the invocation of the daemone by means of magical procedures. In the Hermetic text *Poimandres* (I, 1-5) a relationship is drawn between the state of drowsiness, self-forgetfulness, spiritual asceticism and visionary experience. Birger Pearson (1990, p. 146) places the Hermetic "creed" in the same Greco-Egyptian milieu as the PMG, with the difference that in Hermetism the interpretation of the Delphic maxim would bear a Gnostic accent.

For Gilles Quispel (1992, p.11-12), the Hermetic Gnosis probably influenced the beginnings of Manichaeism; Quispel defends his thesis on the basis of Faustus' statement, for whom Hermes was an ancient prophet of the "Gentiles." It is therefore not accidental that Augustine of Hippo, who had been a Manichaean, defended the primacy of Moses (*Contra Faustum*, XXII, 6) at a time of theological disputes over past prophets.

In a dialogue belonging to the Bardesanite school (*Book of the Laws of Countries*, 580-583), Bardaisan of Edessa and Awida argue about astrology; Awida, who claims to know the doctrine of the Chaldeans, states that he does not know which doctrines are Babylonian and which doctrines are Egyptian. Bardaisan answers him that both doctrines are the same. In late antiquity, the association between Chaldeans – a reference to astral cults (Bottéro, 2001, p. 218) – and Egyptians was not uncommon, because these books could present hermetic overtones.

The Hermetic teachings, according to Garth Fowden (1993, p. 203), were associated with Bardaisan of Edessa, which is not surprising, given that Edessa had a tradition of interest in Greek philosophy and a strategic location on the routes connecting Rome to Persia. A similar observation has been made by Steven K. Ross (2001, p. 122): the Bardaisan system illustrates the importance of Near Eastern cultures in the religious and philosophical systems that emerged in early Christianity.

³ The Portuguese original is as follows: "O sincretismo dos PMG, como de outras expressões mágicas, é muito mais do que uma sopa de elementos provenientes de tradições diferentes. Obviamente a helenização de culturas mediterrâneas é um fator fundamental para entender esta forma de autêntico ecumenismo, onde vários deuses aparentemente tão distantes, encontram-se na mesma casa. Mas estamos na frente de algo bem maior do que uma simples mistura, de um simples melting pot, para usar uma expressão cara aos antropólogos norte-americanos".

Ugo Bianchi (1976, p. 164) claims that Bardaisan, in his historical, religious and cultural context, looked at Iran—or Eastern religions in general—with a different perspective than that found in Mani. Thus, to understand the influence of Bardaisan on Mani and the subsequent impact of Manichaeism on the Bardaisanites, one must understand that Bardaisan's construction of gnosis was distinct from that found in classical Gnosticism, since the Syrian philosopher defended his positions based on another cosmology and the gnosis was acquired by intellectual insight, not revelation (Gillman; Klimkeit, 1999, p. 44).

It is possible to say, as Gillman and Klimkeit (1999, p. 45) have argued, that Bardaisan paved the way for Mani, but the grouping made by Ephrem between Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani as if these authors reflected the same ideas is mistaken and reflects the heresiological ethos. What unites the first two authors is the influence they both had on Mani, but Bardaisan had a number of contestations with the Marcionites (Drijvers, 2014, p. 252). In any case, some entered Manichaeism from the school of Bardaisan (Gillman; Klimkeit, 1999, p. 45), a movement that clarifies the religious dynamics of the period.

Concerning Manichaeism, Fowden (1993, p. 204) forwards the hypothesis that Mani's religion was perhaps one of the reasons why some authors of late antiquity had a reserved attitude toward Hermeticism, which could also be associated with Gnosticism. Fowden proposes that Manichaeism, which spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean, had a role in the spread of Hermeticism, paying special attention to Faustus, a Manichaean who invoked the supposed Christological prophecies of Hermes in late 4th-century Africa (Fowden, 1993, p. 204).

The aforementioned scholars have convincing arguments for the association between Manichaeism and Hermeticism; however, they do not explain the incorporation of Plato. It is hard to think of a philosophical-religious 'school' with Plato and Hermes among its illustrious figures without being associated in some way with theurgy.

The Emperor Julian is a seminal testimony, and a short study by Henri-Charles Puech on the role of Hermes in the confrontation between Hellenistic polytheism and Christianity leaves no doubt regarding the environment to which Platonism and Hermeticism belonged. Thus, Puech comments on a curious passage in which Julian defends the superiority of Hermes over Christ because the Greco-Egyptian god, heir to the titles of Thoth (Hornung, 2006, p. 20), would have been born not two, but three times (Puech, 1985, p. 147-148).

The above-mentioned studies give an account of the role of Hermeticism in the genesis of Manichaeism, but the testimony of Ephrem of Syria also presents a chronological issue: Ephrem is temporally closer to Iamblichus than to Mani, occupying a period that reflects years of Manichaean development after the death of its founder. The main prophetological lists, which we cite according to the table made by Michel Tardieu (2008, p. 15), do not even mention Hermes—let alone Plato!

The lack of sources, unfortunately, obliges us to explore various conjectures, which we have done so far according to certain guidelines of the history of religions, recreating the religious environment of late antiquity with a focus on some common features (visionary experiences, gnosis, magic, etc.) in order to show that different cosmologies and philosophies still shared an anthropological horizon. Syncretism, as recently argued by David Frankfurter (2018, p. 17), is not a 'passive' process: people look for precisely those characteristics that are close to their religion, facilitating dialogue and adaptation.

Now, Iamblichus had a school in Apameia of Ephrem's Syria; Puech (1985, p. 61) claims that Apameia was decisive in transforming Neoplatonic philosophy into gnosis and oriental theurgy. Moreover, he leaves no doubt about the importance of the city. It was the point of convergence of many other influxes—there were Hebrews there, as in the entire ancient kingdom of the Seleucids, and it was probably the place through which the first Christian missions passed.

Thus, it would not be impossible to imagine contact between a type of theology and philosophy associated with the influence of Iamblichus and Manichaeism, which quickly became associated with the Bardaisanites; the testimony of Ephrem, which reflects well-known heresiological strategies and their struggle for 'orthodoxy' that soon grouped Bardaisan, Mani and Marcion, could well be the echo

of another relationship: that between the theurgical environment and Manichaeism, which could explain the incorporation of both Hermes and Plato into Mani's prophetology.

It is possible, then, to reconstruct the path of theurgy and its development by Iamblichus in the syncretic milieu of late antiquity and its parallels with the mystical rise of other traditions; following these tracks we can reach Syria, a region that had close ties with both Manichaeism and the school of Iamblichus and theurgy.

Conclusion

A study of Manichaeism that simply reduces Mani's system to the figures that he incorporated into his religion is no longer possible. Ephrem's testimony about Plato and Hermes as prophets, for example, should not be seen as a mere concession to the religious environment in which it took place.

Since Mani's goal was the creation of a universal religion, it is not surprising that his disciples were equally committed to expanding the chain of prophets. Hence, by focusing on the philosophical and religious environment in Syria we can observe the confluence of Hellenistic and Hermetic elements, as well as the presence of Near Eastern cults and religions and testimonies such as those of Bardaisan regarding Indian religions.

By pursuing religious and philosophical movements based on Ephrem's testimony, we have seen that Syria—especially Apameia—was a fertile region for syncretism under the rubric of what Puech (1985, p. 61) called 'oriental theurgy'. Apameia was also the land of Numenius, whose echoes are found in the Platonism of Iamblichus.

In reconstructing philosophical and religious conjectures, the heavenly ascensions are essential to understanding soteriological aspects that an approach strictly focused on religious or philosophical discourse would not account for. Accordingly, the role of revelation—a concept that, as we have shown, must be elucidated lest it be swallowed up by a specific theological interpretation—and its association with ascensions and their presence in Jewish mysticism is of paramount importance in understanding the Manichaean ethos.

Therefore, the incorporation of Plato and Hermes does not seem to be fortuitous. Beyond the study of Manichaeism, this dynamic clarifies aspects of the cultural environment in late antiquity; it provides us with further information about the fortunes of Hermes and Hermeticism, as well as the divinisation of Plato.

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