

In limine

Esplorazioni attorno all'idea di confine

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The End of Time and the 'Laws of Zoroaster' A Zoroastrian Doctrine in the Manichaean Reception

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Abstract Zoroastrian theology clearly insisted on the assumption that historical time was limited and that in its borders 'evil' should be destroyed. Practically, 'time' and 'space' were a sort of weapon used by Ohrmazd in order to entrap Ahreman and his demonic army. In this spatio-temporal framework, the end of historical time involved also the end of Ahreman himself, so that one of the actions enacted by the 'Antagonist Spirit' would be that of trying to delay and stop its regular course. Recent studies on the Manichaean Coptic *Kephalaia* of Dublin confirm the importance of this Mazdean doctrine and present a direct witness of this theological dogma, which was presented in a way conveniently fitting for the Gnostic religion professed by Mani.

Keywords Zoroastrianism. Manichaeism. Manichaean Coptic *Kephalaia*.

The borders usually represent a geographic, sometimes material, limit with a double function, separation but also attraction. This kind of duality equally marks some intellectual divisions, which determine differences or antagonisms between various cultures and/or religions, but which also stimulates competitions, imitations, inspirations and transformations. In the Iranian area, the relations between Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism have represented a very difficult subject, on which opposite schools have debated, sometimes in a very polemical way. In the framework of a very important and recent investigation¹ dedicated to the Manichaean Coptic *Kephalaia* of the Chester Beatty Library, Paul Dilley² has fittingly dealt with a very intriguing text, where the continuous interrelation between these two spiritual traditions is shown in all its importance and deepness. Closeness and differences continuously overlap each other, making our investigation more intriguing.

At the beginning of *Kephalaion* 341, a respectable member of the Court of the Sasanian King Šābuhr I, named Pabakos (i.e. Middle-Persian Pābag),


1 I want to thank Prof. Dr. Paul Dilley (Department of Religious Studies, University of Iowa) for his kind remarks to this contribution. See on this point Gardiner; BeDuhn; Dilley 2015.

2 Dilley 2015, 101-35, for the text see in particular 101.

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asks Mani about three ‘sayings’ not only attributed to Zoroaster (Copt. *Zarades*) himself, but, as far as we can deduce from the Coptic passage, actually ‘written’ into a Mazdean text. At the moment, it is unclear whether the author was simply referring to an unnamed source or if he had in his mind precisely a book entitled *The laws of Zarades*, a question that Dilley has prudently left open to both possibilities in his translation.

In his approach to the problem, Dilley has treated the complex subject of the Zoroastrian *Realia* to which this Manichaean source was making reference with care and balance, showing the possible solutions without excluding even the existence of a textual *Vorlage*, of course transcribed with an alphabet which was not the one later introduced for the Avestan script.

In the present contribution, I do not intend to refresh the problem of the origins of the Zoroastrian Avestan texts, in particular that concerning the dark period before the two main final written editions, one for the liturgical needs of the Persian priests and one for the theological use in the Sasanian Church (with a Pahlavi commentary), from which the so-called Sasanian Avestan Canon derives.³ My interest in this case has been specifically attracted by one of the three mentioned Zoroastrian ‘laws’, which in any case show the genuineness of the Manichaean reference, because they really belong to the theological core of the Mazdean doctrine, as I will try to underline in the following pages.

These are the three ‘laws’ as presented into the Coptic text:

“Anyone who says that this law is not true (will be excluded) from light”. And again I ask you about the law of Zarades: “Whoever says that the land of light does not exist, he is one who will not see the land of light”. And again he says: “Whoever says that no end will come about, that is one whom no end will befall”. So these three sayings Zarades has proclaimed in the law. (Dilley 2015, 101)

The first ‘law’ is the less informative of the three; every religion, in fact, pretends to be ‘true’ and its statement has nothing of strictly and exclusively Zoroastrian in itself. This does not mean that it was false, but that it is difficult to develop any pertinent discussion about it, considering that the given statement contains a self-referential pretention of truthfulness.

The second one, concerning the ‘Land of light’, is much more interesting, because, in spite of the Manichaean colour, which, as stated by Dilley (2015, 135) patently results in the choice of the word ‘land’, uncommon in the Zoroastrian *Sprachgut* for the eschatological reign of the paradise or of the ‘future body’, reflecting the Zoroastrian idea of an afterlife dimension

³ See at this regard Panaino 2012, where this subject was discussed in detail and some proposals of historical interpretation of the facts have been offered; a pertinent bibliography on this particular subject was also given there.

of brightness and splendour. But one point more deserves a closer analysis, i.e. the fact that in the later Zoroastrian tradition the final liberation will be granted to all dead persons, included the worst sinners, after the necessary punishments received into the temporary Mazdean hell.⁴ This difference can be explained in two ways: the first is that in the third and fourth centuries the older idea that the damnation should be forever was still current, or, the second possibility, that the Manichaeans preferred to emphasize a Mazdean tradition in a version appearing more radical and similar to their own strict rigidity in these matters. We know, in fact, that the Zoroastrians eventually developed some Aristotelian principles attested in the *Nichomachean Ethics* insisting on the category of the correct and right 'Mean' (*paymān*, Zaehner 1956, 83-4; 1972, 251-3)⁵ so that a right God should not punish human historical faults and sins with eternal punishments, because this solution would turn out to be unequal. Such a juridical and philosophical concept marked Zoroastrian ethics, although the exact moment of its affirmation at the level of the eschatological doctrine of the afterlife remains unclear. Although it will become fundamental in the Zoroastrian texts of the ninth century, it might have entered the Iranian world even at the beginning of the Sasanian period, but this does not imply that such a 'principle' was immediately accepted or that it was endorsed by all the Mazdean theological schools. Another possible explanation concerns the fact that the second 'law' just denounces the people who refuse to accept the teleological perspective of the final Renovation of the world, so that their punishment will be that of exclusion for ever according to the most severe judgment, or simply for a very long period, as it was according to the optimistic point of view of Later Zoroastrianism. In fact, the impious ones will be condemned to a (temporary) hell for the centuries occurring before the manifestation of the third Saošyant (Pahl. Sōšāns), i.e. the third posthumous son of Zoroaster, who will come to resurrect all the dead, an action taking 57 years before the final eschatological sacrifice that will save all of humanity and destroy Ahreman and his evil forces.

These remarks fittingly open the way to the discussion of the third 'law', which, in fact, is strictly related to the preceding two. The Zoroastrian doctrine actually dedicated enormous attention to the role of time

4 According to later Pahlavi sources the Hell, the Purgatory and the Paradise are not eternal, but they host the dead until they are resurrected; of course, the Hell is a place of strong and distinctive punishments according to the different crimes, but also it is limited in time and it will be destroyed with the final Resurrection of all the dead. These, in their turn, will pass a river of molten metal, which will produce enormous sufferance only to the sinners, not to the right persons (Zaehner 1956, 147-8). The Zoroastrian doctrine on the final mercy of Ohrmazd towards all the human beings, pious or impious, is clearly stated in the *Škand-gumānīg Wizār* (The Doubt-dispelling exposition), chapter IV, 95-103 (de Menascé 1945, 45, 58-9).

5 About Aristotelian doctrines in the Pahlavi texts see Bailey 1971. Cf. Panaino 2016d.

in the cosmic tragedy.⁶ Ohrmazd is a real master of Time (Pahl. *zurwān* or *zamān*), because he has been able to interrupt the infinite course of time, when he had perceived the co-existence of his antagonist, Ahreman, in the infinity of the eternal space and time. After the mental (*mēnōg*) primordial creation, which corresponded to an emanation from his own ipseity of light (Gnoli 1963; Shaked 1971), Ohrmazd put Ahreman into a cosmic trap, convincing him to accept a combat in the spatio-temporal limit of the world and of the 'historical' time. The pillars of this doctrine, strongly rooted in a Mazdean version of the chiliasm (Kellens 2000, 2009; Panaino 2017 and forthcoming c), can be detected in the Young Avestan texts, but they appear confirmed in Plutarch and his original sources (which belong to the fourth century B.C.), (Panaino forthcoming c). One of the fundamental ideas of the Zoroastrian cosmology was that of establishing a temporal pact between Ohrmazd and Ahreman, so that the evil forces, compelled to fight in a realm in which they are deprived of a real 'living' (*gētīg*) dimension, have no hope (Panaino forthcoming b). The machine of the limited or historical time is organized in a way in which the destiny of Ahreman is inevitably fixed; he cannot escape from this dimension of 'mixture' after his aggression against the 'good creation' of Ohrmazd. The birth of the three sons of Zoroaster, the three Saošyañts, who will appear at the turn of each of the last three millennia of the whole cycle of 12,000 years, marks the final history of the world and announces not only the end of the conflict and of the limited time, but also the restoration of the infinite time of God and Light (Panaino forthcoming a).

Some later Zoroastrian texts, in particular two chapters from the third book of the Pahlavi *Dēnkard* (160, on which see Molé 1963, 440-1; de Menasce 1973, 171-2; and 407, on which see Molé 1963, 441-3; de Menasce 1973, 365-6) whose importance was emphasized by Molé (1969, 443; Timuş 2015, 219-23) and more recently by the present author (forthcoming a), concern the manifestation of a peculiar phenomenon occurring in connection with the meeting of each of the three eschatological future 'saviours', the Saošyañts, i.e. the stationary position of the sun at the Zenith, in the first case for ten, in the second occasion for twenty, and in the third for thirty nights and days. This event, usually considered as a good *omen* also in some Zoroastrian sources,⁷ contrariwise, represents a very bad sign. In fact, it is produced by a Druz, a tremendous demon, *alter ego* of Ahreman, who will try to stop the regular motion of the sun and to delay the right time of the end. In other terms, Ahreman's target

6 I have discussed this subject in some pertinent studies (see in particular Panaino 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2016b, forthcoming c). With close regard for the doctrine usually denoted in the scholarly tradition as Zurvanism, see Junker 1923; Scheftelowitz 1926, 1929; von Wesendonk 1931; Schaeder 1941; Zaehner 1955; Bianchi 1958; Raei 2010; Rezanian 2010.

7 Williams 1990, 2, 228; on the subject see again Panaino forthcoming a.

is that of opposing the ordinary course of time in order to avoid the final definitive battle.

I hope that after these considerations it should appear much more clear which kind of teleological and cosmological implications were behind the anti-Zoroastrian statement that ‘no end will come about’! This was a sort of blasphemy against one of the most important Mazdean doctrines, the one concerning the divine promise of the end of the limited time, the one determining the complete defeat of Ahreman and the Restoration of the ‘future body’ (*tan ī pāsen*), which can correspond, in a certain way, to the future ‘realm of light’. The negation of the end of time would represent, on the contrary, the rejection of the entire Zoroastrian theology and teleology, not only with regard to the historical target of the Good Religion, but also of the ontological meaning attributed to human life, in history as well as in the world. Thus, the whole cosmic trap fashioned by Ohrmazd in order to bind and destroy Ahreman would be completely deprived of value and consequently denied. Thus, it is not so strange that this particular ‘law’ was considered so remarkably significant also from a Manichaean perspective, in particular if we observe that the Manichaeans too developed their own idea of the end of the world and of its final burning (taking on a period of 1468 years), (Panaino 2016c). In this respect both religions, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, but also Christianity and later Islam, developed a common image of time as linear, so establishing the definitive end of Evil as the target of human history.⁸ Through the negation of the eternal return and of cyclical time,⁹ the finality of the creation, in spite of the different theological versions, was exalted in the strongest way, and it is for this reason that the Manichaeans too would have underlined the importance of this Zoroastrian doctrine, that in this respect was proposing a finalistic representation of the historical time reasonably compatible with that of Mani. The greatest discordance would have been visible in the radically different evaluation connected with the ontological value of the world in itself, which was absolutely positive in the Zoroastrian system, where the *gētīg* or ‘living’ state was attributed the most subtle superiority with respect to Ahreman, only accompanied by *mēnōg* creatures, incapable of any seminal power. The deprecatory consideration of physical nature,

8 On this subject see my detailed overview offered in Panaino 2016b.

9 I do not want to refresh an old discussion concerning the opposition between cyclical and linear time, about which I invite to read the very fitting methodological remarks offered by Stern (2003, 8-9, 61-4). Time, in fact, presents both aspects (linear and cyclical), because days, weeks, months, seasons, years regularly repeat their cycles according to fixed periods, but also time advances, and paradoxically the recurrence of the events, as also supposed in the so-called cyclical systems, implies a linearity. My focus is, contrariwise, strictly on the teleological meaning of historical time, which according to some religions has a final scope, the end of the presence of evil and the triumph of the divine kingdom, when the normal time will be transformed or resumed in another dimension.

earthly life and sex in the Manichaean system represented a strong point of division with the Zoroastrian vitalism.

But this radically different vision was not at all the subject of the 'laws' mentioned by Pabakos; on the contrary, a strong contrast would have exploded between the protagonists of the theological controversy at the Court of the Sasanian King. In this respect, we can say that the three Zoroastrian 'laws' were chosen and presented, as expected, in a way absolutely compatible with the self-promotion of the Manichaean Religion, and all the matters potentially dangerous were left aside, at least in that short presentation.

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