

MANICHAEAN TEXTS
FROM THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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existence of all things. In morality, also, they leave aside the most difficult questions, for example: what is moral virtue and what is intellectual virtue, also everything concerning attitudes and affections, in order to devote most of their time to commonplace moral exhortation; and, neglecting to put forward the elementary principles which govern the acquisition of each virtue, they haphazardly amass somewhat simplistic principles. The masses who listen to them make, as can be seen from experience, great progress in moderation, and their actions are stamped with a distinctive mark of piety; it rekindles the moral sense which such customs strengthen, and leads it progressively towards a desire for the good.

This philosophy being divided into several factions, impelled by those who came subsequently, the questions have multiplied, just as in sophistry:¹¹ some of these men have also become more skilful (p. 4) and, so to speak, more expert than the others in the art of raising difficulties. Certain of them were even founders of sects, this resulted in the decline of a moral teaching which had become unreliable. For, on the one hand, none of them who were ambitious to lead sects were in a position to give discourses of the requisite precision; whereas the masses demonstrated above all their inclination to indulge in confrontations with rival factions. There were no rules, nor any law which would have permitted a solution to these difficulties to be found; and, as with everywhere else, there is nothing that is not spoiled by an excessive desire for celebration. (II) Here also, the efforts of each person to out-do his predecessor through the novelty of his ideas meant that, in their hands, this very simple philosophy became something inextricable.

An example is given by the man known as Mani: He was of the Persian race, and, to my mind at least, he surpasses all his rivals in the extravagance of his proposals. His strange new ideas came to light very recently. The first person to interpret the doctrines of this man was named Pappus, after him came Thomas, and others still after these two. As for Mani himself, it is said that he lived in Valerian's time, that he accompanied the Persian King Shapur in his campaigns, and that he was put to death for having offended this prince in some way.

25. Edict (rescript) of Diocletian against the sect (AD 302)

This edict (in Latin)¹² was written in response to a petition from (Flavius?) Julianus, Proconsul of Africa. However, there is also intriguing evidence of the arrival of a

¹¹ Lit. 'the eristic school'.

¹² *Collatio Mosaicarum* xv.3, ed. and trans. Hyamson (1913), 131-3, revised by S. Lieu.

Manichaean missionary Bundos at Rome during the reign of Diocletian; this according to the much later Greek historian Malalas:¹³

During his (sc. Diocletian's) reign a certain Manichaean by the name of Bundos appeared in the city of Rome. He broke away from the teaching of the Manichaeans and put forward his own doctrine. He taught that the good God engaged in battle with the evil (one) and triumphed over him. One should therefore honour the victor. He returned to teach in Persia. The doctrine of the Manichaeans was called that of the Daristhenes by the Persians, which in their own language means that of the good (God).

The work of Ioannes Malalas was published sometime after 574. The material contained in this enigmatic passage is completely uncorroborated by other sources, and seems to contain references to the sect of the Mazdakites which caused a social revolt in Sassanian Persia in the early sixth century. However, a date for the arrival of Manichaeism in the capital city of the Roman Empire under Diocletian is entirely plausible.

The Emperors Diocletian and Maximianus (and Constantius) and Maximianus (i.e. Galerius) to Julianus, Proconsul of Africa. Well-beloved Julianus:

- (1) Excessive leisure sometimes incites ill-conditioned people to transgress the limits of nature, and persuades them to introduce empty and scandalous kinds of superstitious doctrine, so that many others are lured on to acknowledge the authority of their erroneous notions.
- (2) However, the immortal gods, in their providence, have thought fit to ordain that the principles of virtue and truth should, by the counsel and deliberations of many good, great and wise men, be approved and established in their integrity. These principles it is not right to oppose or resist, nor ought the ancient religion be subjected to the censure of a new creed. It is indeed highly criminal to discuss doctrines once and for all settled and defined by our forefathers, and which have their recognised place and course in our system.
- (3) Wherefore we are resolutely determined to punish the stubborn depravity of these worthless people.
- (4) As regards the Manichaeans, concerning whom your carefulness has reported to our serenity, who, in opposition to the older creeds, set up new and unheard-of sects, purposing in their wickedness to cast out the doctrines vouchsafed to us by divine favour in olden times, we have heard that they have but recently advanced or sprung forth, like strange and monstrous portents, from their native homes among the Persians – a nation hostile to us – and have settled in this part of

¹³ *Chronographia* XII, ed. L. Dindorf, CSHB (Bonn, 1831), 309.19–310.2; trans. S. Lieu. On this passage see esp. Christensen (1925), 97–9.

the world, where they are perpetrating many evil deeds, disturbing the tranquillity of the peoples and causing the gravest injuries to the civic communities; and there is danger that, in process of time, they will endeavour, as is their usual practice, to infect the innocent, orderly and tranquil Roman people, as well as the whole of our empire, with the damnable customs and perverse laws of the Persians as with the poison of a malignant serpent.

- (5) And since all that your prudence has set out in detail in your report of their religion shows that what our laws regard as their misdeeds are clearly the offspring of a fantastic and lying imagination, we have appointed pains and punishments due and fitting for these people.
- (6) We order that the authors and leaders of these sects be subjected to severe punishment, and, together with their abominable writings, burnt in the flames. We direct that their followers, if they continue recalcitrant, shall suffer capital punishment, and their goods be forfeited to the imperial treasury.
- (7) And if those who have gone over to that hitherto unheard-of, scandalous and wholly infamous creed, or to that of the Persians, are persons who hold public office, or are of any rank or of superior social status, you will see to it that their estates are confiscated and the offenders sent to the (quarry) at Phaeno or the mines at Proconnesus.
- (8) And in order that this plague of iniquity shall be completely extirpated from this our most happy age, let your devotion hasten to carry out our orders and commands.

Given at Alexandria, 31 March.

The edict of Diocletian may be compared with the first such one issued by Christian emperors (AD 372, Latin):¹⁴

Emperors Valentinian and Valens Augusti to Ampelius, urban prefect.

Wherever an assembly¹⁵ of Manichaeans or a crowd of this kind is found, after their teachers have been penalised by a severe punishment and also those persons who assemble have been segregated from the company of men as infamous and ignominious, their houses and habitations, in which the profane instruction is taught, should be appropriated undoubtedly to the fisc's resources.

Given on 2 March at Trier, Modestus and Arinthaëus being consuls.

¹⁴ *CT* xvi.5.3, p. 855; Eng. trans. Coleman-Norton (1966), I, 333.

¹⁵ The law targets the meeting-places of the sect where the authorities feared illicit and magical rites were celebrated. On this see especially Kaden (1953), 58.