

## Manichaeism and Lurianic Kabbalah: An Unlikely Pair

The foundational concepts of Manichaeism are in no small part related to fundamental Platonic and Gnostic ideas of “goodness” and of the relationship between souls and bodies. The influence of Platonism, Gnosticism, and related schools of thought on early Christian religions – many of which were offshoots of Jewish sects – is fairly unambiguous. However, what seems to have gone underexplored in modern scholarship is the influence not just Platonism and Gnosticism, but *Manichaeism in particular*, had on Jewish mystics even as late as the 16th century. Since Manichaeism persisted in the eastern Roman world through the 6th century and in China through the 1300’s, it is not altogether unlikely that its influence reached later Jewish scholars in the Middle East. Specifically, the similarities are curious between Isaac Luria’s version of Kabbalah (i.e. Jewish mysticism) and Manichaeism, despite the fact that Luria lived in Jerusalem in the 1500’s under Ottoman rule over a millennium after the death of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism (Freedman 2006).

According to Lurianic Kabbalah, the creation of the physical world was directly a result of God’s attempt to fill ten vessels (almost certainly metaphorical, at least to a degree) with his divine light. However, the vessels could not contain such a holy substance, and they cracked; the vessel shards fell and created what is now the earth, each of which contained some portion of the divine spark meant to be contained within them. Luria proposes that *Tikkun Olam* - the repair of the world - is a Jewish duty that one performs through acts of goodness, and in performing these duties Jewish people may repair these vessels and return the lost divine sparks to their rightful place in the universe (Drob 2000). While Luria lived and studied in the 16th century, Platonic and Gnostic thought had clear influences on many Jewish mystics throughout the centuries,

including Luria himself. Many modern scholars acknowledge Gnostic influences on Kabbalah, but most sources only cursorily – if at all – reference Manichaeism (Fine 2003).

The aforementioned tenets of Lurianic Kabbalah have a striking resemblance to specific Manichaean concepts. First, both depict a dualistic world in which a “divine spark” of some sort is trapped within matter; in Manichaeism, the soul is trapped in the body, while in Lurianic Kabbalah, the divine sparks are trapped in all matter derived from the shattering of vessels. In addition, both describe a chosen people’s duty to return those sparks to their divine origin through specific action; in Manichaeism, the *Electi* do so through vegetarianism, abstaining from sex, and other actions that limit the trapping of “good particles,” and according to Kabbalah, the Jewish people return the divine light to God through *mitzvot* or other charitable deeds (van Oort 2013; Gardner 1995). These similarities seem even less coincidental when noted that along with Hebrew, Luria may have spoken some combination of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian (the most common languages in that region of the Ottoman empire at the time), languages in which extant Manichaean texts were written. Although some scholars claim that Lurianic teachings were “highly original,” (Drob 2000), I will endeavor to draw connections between such teachings and Manichaeism - connections so uncanny that we are forced to reconsider the Platonic, Gnostic, Manichaean, and heretical Christian influences on later Jewish theology.

#### Bibliography

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