

## When Worlds Collide

### Manichaeism and Christianity in Late Antiquity

#### ABSTRACT

Trade and travel played a tremendous role in connecting Sasanian and Roman empires in late antiquity. Yet this exchange between Persia and Rome was not confined to the movement of peoples and objects; it encompassed the movement of religious ideas. Giving readers a front-row seat to the turbulent 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, this paper educates about the spread of religion between east and west—the reverberations of which are still felt today. The spread of Manichaeism, founded by 3<sup>rd</sup> century prophet Mani, is addressed. Manichaeism, because it did not survive as a global religion to the present, has often been overlooked by modern academia. Yet at its height, Manichaeism was one of the world’s most prominent religions. Additionally, this paper explores the spread of Christianity in late antiquity. Although Christianity’s diffusion has been widely studied, its penetration into the Arab world has often been overlooked. This paper explores the interchange between east and west.

## When Worlds Collide - Acknowledgements

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Manichaeism and Christianity in Late Antiquity

HIST 407: Roman Travel and Trade

June 5, 2018

*“Let your brightness shine upon us, sweet source and breath of life!”*

Manichaean Parthian Hymn<sup>1</sup>

*“For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,  
a light to enlighten the nations...”*

Luke 2:30-32<sup>2</sup>

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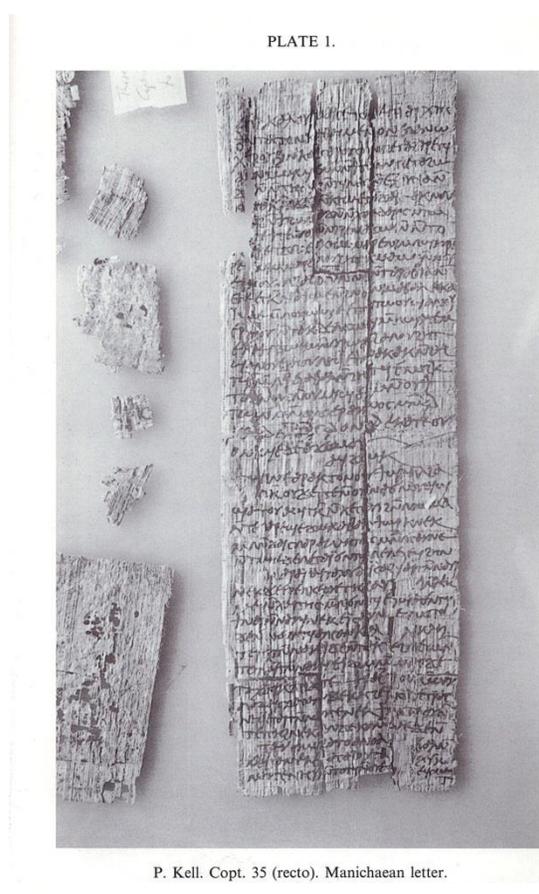
<sup>1</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:30-32, King James Version Bible.

“A thousand books will be preserved...  
they will come into the hands of the just and the faithful...”  
Manichaean Homilies 24:13<sup>3</sup>

When this prophesy was written down nearly two thousand years ago, its scribe could never have imagined that these sacred books would come into the hands, not of “the just and the faithful,” but of modern academics. A series of remarkable archaeological discoveries in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century propelled academics into the study of Manichaeism, once a great world religion from the Sasanian Empire.<sup>4</sup> Exactly *how* this and other major religions spread between the empires of late antiquity has too often been overlooked.

Late antiquity was marked, not only by religious fervor, but by the clash of empires. Persia and Rome had long been rivals. The story of east and west was as bloody as it was old. Yet as the Sasanian Empire<sup>5</sup> arose from the ashes of the Parthians, contact between the east and west increased—as did inter-empire



**Figure 1. Manichaean Letter**

<sup>3</sup> Mirecki and BeDuhn, *Emerging from Darkness*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The Sasanian Empire is also called the Sasanid, Sassanid, or Neo-Persian Empire, though it was known to its inhabitants as Ērānshahr in Middle Persian. It was named after the House of Sasan, reigning from 224-651 CE. Succeeding the Parthian Empire in Persia, the Sasanians were one of the greatest powers on earth, neighbors and arch-rivals to the Roman-Byzantine Empire for over 400 years.

exchange. Complex systems of trade and travel existed between Sasanian Persia and the Roman-Byzantine Empire.<sup>6</sup> This exchange was not confined to the movement of peoples and objects; it encompassed the movement of religious ideas. In the turbulent 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, in the face of rabid animosity between empires, how was exchange possible? How and why did the rivaling religious ideas of Manichaeism and Christianity spread? In spite of—and in some cases because of—the prolonged tensions between the Roman and the Sasanian empires, trade and travel between the rival powers fostered intense religious exchange, spreading Manichaeism west from Persia and Christianity east from Rome. Through exploring tensions, trade, and travel, the story of religious diffusion unfolds.

### CHRISTIANITY AND MANICHAISM

Before studying how religious ideas spread, it is essential to have a basic grasp on the religions themselves. An explanation of Christian doctrine is far beyond the scope of this work; but a cursory explanation of eastern Christianity is necessary. Although Christianity's diffusion has been studied from many angles, its penetration into the Arab world has often been overlooked. Christianity is typically thought of as “belonging largely to the Greco-Roman world and, eventually, to Europe. But this is to ignore the success of Christianity in regions far to the east of Europe...an extensive Third World of Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> Through Jesus of Nazareth and his followers, “the Christian movement initially erupted at the edge of the western, Roman side of the frontier.”<sup>8</sup> From its foundation, “Christianity spread east as well as west” – to Damascus,

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<sup>6</sup> The Byzantine Empire, also called the Eastern Roman Empire, was the continuation of the Roman Empire in the east, where Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) was the capital city. It was at its height during late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and continued to exist for a thousand years after the fall of the western Roman Empire.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Wealth, Work, and the Holy Poor*, 235.

<sup>8</sup> Mireki and BeDuhn, *Frontiers of Faith*, 1.

Edessa, Nisibis, Dura Europos, and Seleucia.<sup>9</sup> Surviving archaeological and textual sources chronicling the history of Christianity in Sasanian lands are limited,<sup>10</sup> nevertheless there are reliable sources documenting Christians beyond the Roman frontier, especially after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.<sup>11</sup> Christian doctrines and practices changed in their new eastern environment.<sup>12</sup> Christianity in Sasanian lands “took different forms in these places.”<sup>13</sup>

And who were the Manichees?<sup>14</sup> Founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE by the Gnostic prophet Mani, Manichaeism<sup>15</sup> sprang from Sasanian Iran. Because it did not survive as a global religion, it has often been overlooked by modern academia.<sup>16</sup> Yet at its height, Manichaeism was “for a thousand years one of the major world religions.”<sup>17</sup> It was perhaps the “most maligned religion in history” and “for centuries it was known only through the polemics of its worst enemies, such as Augustine of Hippo,” who was a Manichaean for 9 years before converting to Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Mani was born in Mesopotamia in 216 CE, descended from the royal house of Parthia. At the age of four, his father took him to the religious community of the Elchasaites.<sup>19</sup> There, he was exposed to many religions.<sup>20</sup> As a youth, he was inspired by visions; he claimed to be the last prophet and savior of mankind and set out to preach.<sup>21</sup> A syncretistic religion, Manichaeism

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity,” 33-34. Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Mireki and BeDuhn, *Frontiers of Faith*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Mireki and BeDuhn, *Frontiers of Faith*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Adherents to Manichaeism were called by a variety of names: Manichaeans, Manicheans, or Manichees.

<sup>15</sup> The words “Manichaeism” and “Manichee” are from a Syriac term, *Mani de hayye*, meaning “the Mani of Life”, named after the preacher of life. Byzantine writers coined the derogatory term “mania” for the religion, a pun on the founder’s name. For further information, read: Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The Elchasaites were a Jewish-Christian cult sect.

<sup>20</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Wood, *The Silk Road*, 70-73.

incorporated Iranian, Babylonian, Indian, Jewish, and Christian elements.<sup>22</sup> His doctrines focused on a dualistic cosmology—the ancient war between light and darkness, spirit and body, mind and matter.<sup>23</sup> Of the spirit who spoke to him, Mani wrote: “He revealed to me...the mystery of the Depth and the Height...the Light and the Darkness...the conflict and the great war which the Darkness stirred up.”<sup>24</sup> Manichaeans and Christians both considered themselves “people of the book.”<sup>25</sup> Like Christianity, the religion largely spread through texts, psalms, songs, and prayers.<sup>26</sup> And spread it did—to North Africa, Italy, Egypt, even to China.<sup>27</sup> Though Manichees were persecuted and Mani himself died in chains in 276, the religion continued to grow—and came head to head with its arch-rival, Christianity. How did these religious ideas, from enemy empires, collide?

## TENSIONS

The world of late antiquity—not unlike the world of today—had a long history of east-west conflict. Fraught with tensions and fueled by old hatreds, the empires collided in continual warfare and conquest. The Parthians, originally nomads who emerged in the third century BC, were fierce.<sup>28</sup> Rome viewed their successors, the Sasanian dynasty, as a serious threat.<sup>29</sup> Initially, tensions had little to do with religion. In fact, early Christians went to Persia willingly. They were often safer and happier in the Parthian Empire, whose religious policy of non-interference protected them, than they were in the Roman Empire, where they were sent to the

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<sup>22</sup> Mirecki and Beduhn, *The Light and the Darkness*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 277-78.

<sup>24</sup> Kephalaia, 14, 29-15, 24: cited by Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 3

<sup>25</sup> Dilley, *Religious Intercrossing*, 33.

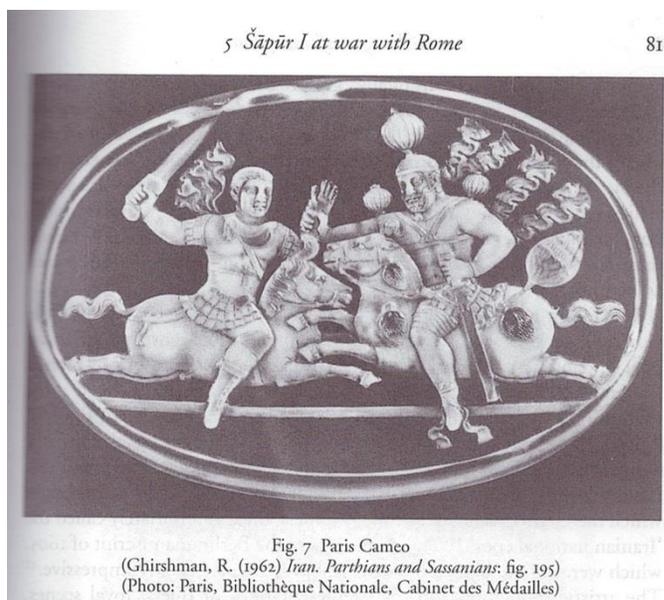
<sup>26</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 11-12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

arena to die in droves.<sup>30</sup> It was not until after Zoroastrianism<sup>31</sup> was adopted by the Sasanian government in the late third century CE that Christians were treated with suspicion and violence.<sup>32</sup> Yet wars between Rome and Persia were primarily territorial in nature.<sup>33</sup> From the start, “it was above all the military confrontations that characterized Rome’s relations with her Eastern neighbors.”<sup>34</sup> Roman-Sasanian conflict was fierce even at the top. In 363 CE, Emperor



**Figure 2. Shapur I captures Emperor Valerian**

Julian lost his life while advancing against Ktesiphon.<sup>35</sup> Many depictions exist of Valerian being captured by Shapur I.<sup>36</sup> From the top of society to the bottom, east-west conflict was fierce. Although most wars were territorial, religion became a greater source of conflict under Constantine. People came from far and wide to pay homage at Constantine’s court. Showering him with gifts, visitors came from every corner of the known world—some with red faces, some with complexions “whiter than snow,” and others “blacker than ebony or pitch.”<sup>37</sup> After his conversion to Christianity,<sup>38</sup> and with the Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity was legalized.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Zoroastrianism, founded by Zoroaster, was a monotheistic, pre-Islamic religion of ancient Persia.

<sup>32</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 107.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ktesiphon was the Sasanian capital.

<sup>36</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 81-83.

<sup>37</sup> Eusebius, “Life of Constantine.” Dignas, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> After his success at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which he believed he won by the help of God, Constantine converted to Christianity.

<sup>39</sup> Later, in 380 CE, Christianity was declared the official state religion.

What role did Constantine's conversion play in relations between Persia and Rome?

There are two major scholarly trains of argument on this subject. The traditional argument, espoused by such historians as Abraham Yohannan, Beate Dignas, T.D. Barnes, and Engelbert Winter, is that Constantine viewed himself as the protector of Christians everywhere,<sup>40</sup> and that the dramatic religious changes during his reign exacerbated tensions between Rome and Persia. Original sources claim that persecution of Persian Christians began immediately after the Edict of Milan. Persian rulers now viewed the Christians in their empire as a threat—as co-religionists and sympathizers with Rome, perhaps even as spies.<sup>41</sup> Christians in the Sasanian Empire were declared “enemies of the state,” inaugurating a bloody cycle of persecutions.<sup>42</sup> To this day, “many [eastern Christians] still believe that the emperor's conversion to Christianity inadvertently compounded the suffering of Christians in the East.”<sup>43</sup> Kyle Smith provides a dissenting historian's voice. Smith contends that “the narrative about a Christian Roman emperor and a persecuting Persian king does not seem to have emerged until the early fifth century,” and that the sources which exist are conflicting and written decades or even centuries later.<sup>44</sup> “There is little evidence that [Constantine] saw himself as a savior of the Christians in Persia,” Smith maintains.<sup>45</sup> The conversion of Constantine “did not, at a stroke, transform the Christians of Persia into a fifth column of the Roman Empire.”<sup>46</sup>

A more accurate viewpoint strikes a balance between these conflicting arguments. The traditional view places too much emphasis on unreliable primary sources. Yet Smith is too quick to dismiss the Constantine's impact. In one Syriac Christian account, Constantine is described as

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<sup>40</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and the Christians of Persia*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in late antiquity*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

the patron of all Christians everywhere.<sup>47</sup> This implies that at least some eastern Christians viewed Constantine that way. Additionally, Constantine wrote a letter to the Sasanian king Shapur II on behalf of eastern Christians. This letter was recorded by the Greek Church father Eusebius, a close companion of the emperor. To Shapur, Constantine wrote: "...I heard that also many fine areas of Persia are adorned with this group of people, I mean the Christians (for it on their behalf that I am speaking),...I now commend these to you, because you are so powerful, I place them in your care, because your piety is as eminent."<sup>48</sup> The letter held an undertone of threat.<sup>49</sup> Although it is unclear to what extent Rome's Christianization influenced the situation of eastern Christians, religious tensions intensified between the two empires.

Who was this Persian king to whom Constantine wrote a letter? Shapur II,<sup>50</sup> an ardent Zoroastrian, built a reputation both as Christian-persecutor and military leader. According to a fifth-century martyrdom narrative, Shapur "continually raided the land of the Romans,"<sup>51</sup> taking city after city. But Shapur's infamy comes mainly from his persecution of eastern Christians. Under Shapur, a series of *firman*s<sup>52</sup> were put in place. Christians were taxed exorbitantly; clergy were arrested; churches were burned to the ground; finally Christians were imprisoned and executed.<sup>53</sup> The hagiographical literature and martyrdom narratives documenting persecution must be weighed carefully for bias, exaggeration, and interpretation.<sup>54</sup> Even so, the number of accounts implies that the scope and intensity of persecution was great; "more than sixty narratives about Christian martyrs in Persia have survived;" two thirds are set in the fourth

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<sup>47</sup> Brock, "The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in." Smith, *Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac*, 33-34.

<sup>48</sup> Eusebius, "The Life of Constantine." Dignas, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 220.

<sup>49</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and the Christians of Persia*, 132.

<sup>50</sup> Shapur II, also spelled Sapur in earlier documents, reigned as king of Sasanian Persia for his entire 70-year lifespan, from 309 to 379 CE.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *The Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Sabba'e*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Firman: a Sasanian official edict or royal mandate

<sup>53</sup> Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

century; many are validated by non-Christian accounts.<sup>55</sup>

But Christians were not the only ones to face persecution. Manichaeans had their own enemies to confront. Mani's followers were hated and viewed as heretics. Manichaeism had great proselytizing success, extreme doctrinal positions, and powerful enemies—especially Zoroastrians and Christians.<sup>56</sup> Saint Augustine wrote many books against the Manichees.<sup>57</sup> “With what vehement and bitter sorrow was I angered at the Manichees!” he lamented, “...and again I pitied them, for they knew not those Sacraments, those medicines, and were mad against the antidote which might have recovered them of their madness.”<sup>58</sup> Others were less compassionate. Eusebius Pamphilus wrote a scathing denunciation: “In the meantime, also, that madman Mane,<sup>59</sup> as he was called, well agreeing with his name, for his daemonical heresy, armed himself by the perversion of his reason, and the instigation of Satan, to the destruction of many. ...hence the impious name of the Manichees is spreading among many, even to the present day.”<sup>60</sup> Diocletian's Edict against the Manichaeans in 297 not only sanctioned abuse, but encouraged it: “We are therefore intent on punishing the stubborn and deprived minds of the most useless people. ... The Manichaeans...have come into existence and entered our realm only recently from our enemy, the Persian people...”<sup>61</sup> This edict put forth an order – to punish them, steal their goods, seize their homes, burn their leaders.

Ironically, the oppression worked to strengthen and intensify religiosity, as often happens when religions are persecuted.<sup>62</sup> In fact, persecutions spurred on radical missionary efforts from

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>56</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 137.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 111.

<sup>59</sup> Mane : an alternative spelling of Mani

<sup>60</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*. Crus and Valois, 309.

<sup>61</sup> “Diocletian's Edict against the Manichaeans,” 297 CE, Dignas, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 217.

<sup>62</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 158.

both Manichaeans and Christians, and fostered greater connection between empires.<sup>63</sup> And although “the numerous military and religious conflicts between Rome and the Sasanian Empire impeded uninterrupted trade, both sides showed a strong interest in close economic relations.”<sup>64</sup>

## TRADE

In spite of tensions, Persia and Rome traded with one another, even during wartime. Briefly, a treaty of 298 made Nisibis the only place of exchange east and west. But this bore little impact on shipping, and soon widespread trade resumed.<sup>65</sup> Numerous treaties, diplomatic frameworks, and customs duties between the powers made for a “regulated exchange of goods.”<sup>66</sup>

Goods and ideas moved along major trade routes between the empires. In Sasanian lands, “these routes naturally avoided the difficult mountainous belt, and followed either the sea-coast, whether by road or ship, or the desert edge by caravan.”<sup>67</sup> Christianity spread via the major trade routes.<sup>68</sup> Manichaeism did likewise, pushing west.<sup>69</sup> People often traveled these routes “as merchants or missionaries, sometimes as both.”<sup>70</sup>

Along these trade routes, cities grew, “a string of seaports along the coast, and a string of



Plate 4 Sasanian coin a) Obverse b) Reverse

**Figure 3. Sasanian coins**

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 195.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>67</sup> Jones, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 227.

<sup>68</sup> Harrak, “Trade Routes and the Christianization of the Near East,” 46-61.

<sup>69</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 150.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 129.

what may be called desert ports along the desert frontier...linked by towns in the mountain passes.”<sup>71</sup> Under the Parthians and Sasanians, Persia underwent massive urbanization.<sup>72</sup> Dams were built, irrigation canals constructed, government structure centralized, nomads taxed.<sup>73</sup> The use of official coinage attests that the Sasanians were moving towards a monetary economy.<sup>74</sup> Urbanization allowed for further trade between east and west. Economic activity within and between the empires was vibrant, as evidenced by the Roman bullae and seals found in Persia.<sup>75</sup> Caravan cities, such as Hatra and Palmyra, served as junctions for caravan routes, protected the traffic of goods, and fostered intense interchange of ideas.<sup>76</sup> Cities were hot spots for exchange.

Within Persian cities, the main economic activity was done by *wazarganan*.<sup>77</sup> Foreign products entered the market via caravans, led by *sartwa*.<sup>78</sup> Bazaars were the main form of marketplace. In the Sasanian Empire, “merchants were looked down upon, below the three traditional classes of priests, warriors and farmers.”<sup>79</sup> Many Persians did not want to be viewed negatively; Sogdians and Christians settled in the Persian Empire to trade as merchants since they were already stigmatized and it made little difference to them.<sup>80</sup> This helped the spread of Christianity in Persia.

In the west, too, both in Mesopotamia and the Roman Empire, cities were hubs of exchange. A commercial-geographical survey written 350-362 vividly describes Nisibis and Edessa as cities “full of merchants and good hunters who are wealthy as well as equipped with all sorts of goods. For they acquire their goods directly from the Persians, sell them throughout the entire

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<sup>71</sup> Jones, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 227.

<sup>72</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 135.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>74</sup> Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 145.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>76</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 163.

<sup>77</sup> Wazarganan: Persian merchants

<sup>78</sup> Sartwa: caravan leaders

<sup>79</sup> Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 143.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Roman Empire and then engage in trade with the goods they purchase there.”<sup>81</sup>

The exchange of goods and ideas between the rival powers was not limited to regional trade. One of the greatest trade veins was the Silk Road. A misnomer, the “Silk Road” is a blanket term for the many trade routes that crisscrossed Central Asia.<sup>82</sup> Trade relations between the Far East and the Graeco-Roman world had existed for centuries, but intensified in late antiquity.<sup>83</sup> Luxury goods were imported from the Far East – spices, incense, gems, precious stones, ivory, wild beasts, even enslaved Indian eunuchs.<sup>84</sup> In exchange, glassware was imported from the Roman Empire.<sup>85</sup> Glassware “has been excavated at sites in Iraq, Nineveh, and Veh Ardashir, and compositional analyses of several of the pieces” prove they were of Late Roman make.<sup>86</sup> The Sasanian kingdom, between China and Rome, “held the key to trade.”<sup>87</sup> Continually, and especially during wartime, Rome sought alternative routes to the Far East, hoping to circumvent the Sasanians.<sup>88</sup> But both empires depended on one another. And wherever an exchange of goods occurred along these vast routes, there followed an exchange of ideas. Manichaeism spread via traders and travelers all the way to China.<sup>89</sup> Collections of Manichaean texts in multiple languages have been uncovered in Algeria, Egypt, Italy, and China in what were once major trade depots.<sup>90</sup> Clearly, trade and religion were interconnected. But trade was not the only kind of travel which facilitated exchange.

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<sup>81</sup> “Expositio totius mundi et gentium.” Dignas, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 197.

<sup>82</sup> Rezakhani, “The road that never was,” 420.

<sup>83</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 196.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>85</sup> Simpson, *Sasanian Glassware*, 95.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>87</sup> Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 149.

<sup>88</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 202.

<sup>89</sup> Wood, *The Silk Road*, 66.

<sup>90</sup> Mirecki and Beduhn, *Emerging from Darkness*, viii.

## TRAVEL

Perhaps the most obvious way in which religion travels is through the movement of missionaries. Manichaeism spread through missionary activity from the start. Mani himself traveled extensively and “engaged in missionary activity.”<sup>91</sup> He sent out missionaries east and west to preach and found monasteries.<sup>92</sup> The *Acta Archelai* recorded the first known encounter of Manichaeism on Roman soil, when Mani went to spread his “heresy” under the rule of emperor Probus.<sup>93</sup> Throughout the eastern provinces, “the spread of Manichaeism coincided with a wave of wandering, begging monks and missionaries.”<sup>94</sup>

Christianity, too, spread through missionary activity. The Biblical book of Acts records people present at the Pentecost<sup>95</sup> – “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”<sup>96</sup> Undoubtedly, many returned to eastern homelands to tell of their experiences. Missionary bases and bishops spread over vast regions—Arbela,<sup>97</sup> Edessa,<sup>98</sup> Bactria.<sup>99</sup> Sixty Christian tombs and a monastery-church were excavated on the small island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf, dated to 250 CE.<sup>100</sup>

Another, governmental type of missionary activity involved diplomatic missions sent between

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<sup>91</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>93</sup> “Acta Archelai.” BeDuhn and Mirecki, *Frontiers of Faith*, 9.

<sup>94</sup> Brown, *Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor*, 242.

<sup>95</sup> Pentecost: the Christian festival day celebrating the Ascension of Jesus to heaven, and the immediately subsequent descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples

<sup>96</sup> Acts 2:9, New International Version.

<sup>97</sup> Arbela: a city, now called Irbil, in modern-day Iraq

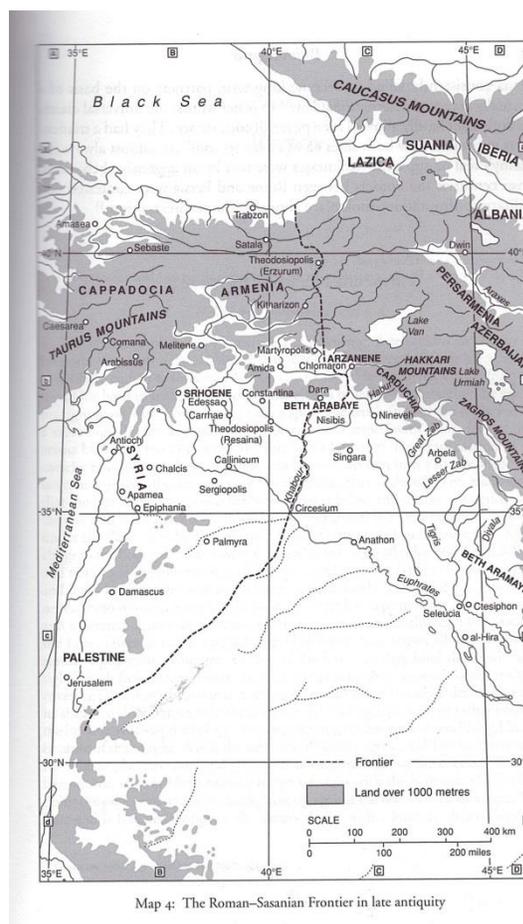
<sup>98</sup> Edessa: now Urfa in southeastern Turkey

<sup>99</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 107.

<sup>100</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 107.

rivaling courts. Mani and his followers attempted to win over rulers, both in Persia and Rome.<sup>101</sup> Christians sent embassies of state-sanctioned missionaries to the east. Socrates of Constantinople, an ecclesiastical historian, described an incident in which two Roman Christians healed the son of Yazdgard,<sup>102</sup> the Persian king. These Christians, he wrote, “drove out a demon that was torturing the king’s son.”<sup>103</sup> Yazdgard did not convert to Christianity; yet he was now tolerant of Christians.

Yet most religious intermixing happened on the frontier. Border regions “were not only major economic centers in their own right, but also zones of cultural interaction, mediation, and frontier control” where ideas were shared.<sup>104</sup> “The political frontier offered no obstacle” for the exchange of ideas; “designed to stop armies, it took little notice of small groups of travelers.”<sup>105</sup> The Tigris and Euphrates served as land markers, but the borderlands were diverse, geographically and culturally. The borderland people shared “a common language, customs, and a way of life



Map 4: The Roman-Sasanian Frontier in late antiquity

**Figure 4. The frontier.**

<sup>101</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Yazdgard, a Sasanian Persian king, ruled 399-420 CE.

<sup>103</sup> Socrates of Constantinople. Dignas, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 380-440.

<sup>104</sup> Simpson, *Sasanian Glassware*, 78.

<sup>105</sup> Mirecki and BeDuhn, *Frontiers of Faith*, 6.

[which] furthered close relations among the population... a link between trade and religion can be observed.”<sup>106</sup>

In the spread of Christianity, the most influential means of travel involved deportations. Historians Daryaee, Dignas, and Winter argue that the spread of Christianity into Sasanian lands was largely a result of the mass deportations of Christians that took place after Persian conquests. Under numerous Persian kings, Roman POWs were deported to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>107</sup> Deported skilled laborers were given homes and brought into the Sasanian Empire for their western know-how. “The capture of Roman engineers and skilled workers and craftsmen and their deportation into newly built or older cities brought in new workforces which could augment the shortage of population and train the Persian population,” and wherever these workers were brought, the Christian population significantly increased.<sup>108</sup> The Nestorian *Chronicle of Se’ert* explained: “When Sapur left the Byzantine lands he brought with him captives whom he settled in Iraq, Ahwaz, Persia and in the cities founded by his father. ... distributing among them lands to cultivate and houses to live in, and because of this the number of Christians in Persia increased.”<sup>109</sup> As a result, “Western ideas and culture reached Iran.”<sup>110</sup> Travel—whether by missionaries, diplomats, or humble laborers—helped to spread religion between east and west.

### SIGNIFICANCE AND LEGACY

Tensions, trade, and travel between the Roman and Sasanian empires fostered intense religious exchange. The spread of Christianity and Manichaeism were large in scope and even

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<sup>106</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 201.

<sup>107</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 23.

<sup>108</sup> Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 135.

<sup>109</sup> “Chronicle of Se’ert.” Dignas, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 255 .

<sup>110</sup> Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 254.

larger in legacy. Christianity penetrated deeply and widely into the east in late antiquity.<sup>111</sup> In fact, “the first Christian missionaries who brought their faith to China in the seventh century were from Iran, and for the next hundred years, Chinese sources continued to refer to Christianity as “the Persian religion.”<sup>112</sup> Whatever the actual numbers of Christians in Sasanian Persia, “their importance was disproportionately high, especially in the realm of higher learning; ...Christians, with their cosmopolitan influences and knowledge of languages, were in a position to act as transmitters of culture.”<sup>113</sup> For example, the most important academic institution of the Sasanian era was the school at Gondešapur in Skuzestan.<sup>114</sup> The academy was established as a Nestorian seminary in 260, was built by Roman POWs, and “the original curriculum included biblical exegesis, theology, and Greek medicine.”<sup>115</sup> Although in centuries to come, Islam would pose a threat to Christianity, the roots which Christian religion established dramatically altered the Middle East in the Sasanian era and beyond.

Manichaeism too was large in scope and profound in legacy. It was “virtually stamped out in the Roman Empire and vigorously persecuted by the Sasanians.”<sup>116</sup> Because it did not survive into the modern age, “Manichaeism has not received the attention due a world religion.”<sup>117</sup> What is the legacy of a ‘dead’ religion? Its first importance is that it was once one of the largest religions on earth.<sup>118</sup> But above all, “the major importance of Manichaeism in the history of religions may be precisely this: it compelled other religions to defend and articulate themselves, eventually resulting in their taking the forms by which we know them today... it was by

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<sup>111</sup> Payne, PhD diss. “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500-700 C.E.” Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia*, 129.

<sup>112</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 106.

<sup>113</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 111.

<sup>114</sup> Skuzestan: a southwestern Iranian province

<sup>115</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 111.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>117</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, xiv.

<sup>118</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 137.

engaging in polemics primarily with Manichaeism that Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam staked out their own orthodoxies.”<sup>119</sup> By its own death, Manichaeism strengthened other faiths.

When twentieth century archaeologists unfurled the ancient sheets of papyrus in Manichaean texts, they were amazed to rediscover the religious world of late antiquity. Manichaeism and Christianity, spreading east and west and sprawling over multiple continents, irrevocably altered the world of late antiquity—and their legacies continue to be felt to the present day.

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<sup>119</sup> Foltz, *Religions of Iran*, 151.

## Figures

[Images]

**Figure 1:** Mirecki and BeDuhn, *Emerging from Darkness*, 295.

**Figure 2:** Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 81.

**Figure 3:** Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 108.

**Figure 4:** Dignas and Engelbert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 61.

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