

# Seventh International Conference of Manichaean Studies Dublin 2009

## Abstracts

### Some Notes On Manicheism, Islam, the Essenes

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1) Will Durant, in the Story of Civilization cites an overlooked etymology for the Essenes. He says that the word comes from Chaldean, that is, Eastern Aramic, aschai, meaning "bather," or "baptist." He does not cite his source. Yet this etymology is extremely compelling because it so clearly explains the name. Moreover, by a simple metathesis, it becomes the name of the head of the "Baptizing sect" al-Khasai, that is, "The Baptist," in other words, the successor to John the Baptist.

2) There is a reference to the Bema in the Thousand and One Nights. This is the so-called "Barmecide Feast" that is, a feast where the food is imaginary. Not a very funny joke, until one realizes, that everyone in the Islamic Middle Ages (well, everyone who was literate) knew that the Barmecides were Manicheans. (One believes an-Nadim in his history of Mani; an-Nadim also says that most of the Barmecide ministers of Harun ar-Rashid were Manicheans.) The family came from Balkh, that is, Mazar-i Sharif in today's Afghanistan, where they were Manichean priests in a collective farm. After the Islamic conquest the head of the family, Barmak, went to Syria to find out what was going on; there he said that "He was a physician/philosopher from the East." The name Barmakid is said to come from Par-Mukhi, or Manichean priest. Mukhee is still the title of priest in Isma`ilism today. The Barmecides or Barmakids allied themselves to the `Abbasids and became their advisors; they picked Baghdad as the site of the new capital, returning the center of the world to the Archegos.

So the joke is not the invisible food of the "Barmecide Feast" but actually a reference to the invisible guest; that is, the invisible guest of the Bema. Mazar-i Sharif today, where the Barmecides originated, is one of several famous, yet imaginary tombs of `Ali in Central Asia, and probably the resting place of a Manichean notable. Like the Barmecide Feast, where there is no food, in the Barmecide tomb there is no `Ali, but there is someone else buried in these sumptuous tombs, and that someone else is a Manichean VIP.

3) The Verse of Light in the Koran, talks of the likeness of "His Light" which is as a niche wherein is set a Lamp, or rather, a wick; the wick is in a glass; light upon light:

"Allâh is the Light of the heavens and the earth.  
The likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is set a lamp [a wick].  
The lamp [wick] within a glass and the glass like a shining star.  
Lit is that light of a blessed tree,  
an olive neither of the East nor of the West,  
of which the oil would almost utter light  
though no fire touched it.

Light upon light!  
God leadeth whom He will into his light,  
He speaketh in allegories to men,  
whilst Himself is the Knower of all things.

This lamp is found in houses  
which God hath allowed to be exalted  
and that His name shall be remembered therein.  
Therein do offer praise to Him at morn and evening,  
men whom neither merchandise nor sale  
beguileth from the remembrance of God  
and constancy in prayer and paying the poor their due;  
who fear a day when hearts and eyeballs shall be overturned.

This is in all likelihood an enunciation of a Manichean doctrine. Jalaladin Rumi later spoke of himself as "neither of the East of the West." The shining star appears elsewhere in the Koran. Is this a metaphor for Mani? Where in Manichean literature are there references from which this Koranic text arises?

4) Why do some Sassanid coins have the Star and Crescent on the obverse?