

THE BAPTISTS OF MANI'S YOUTH AND THE ELCHASAITES*

The so-called *Cologne Mani Codex (CMC)*¹ and the *Fihrist* (“Catalogue”) of al-Nadim, a tenth-century Islamic encyclopaedia,² report that Mani spent his youth in a southern Babylonian community of baptists.³ In the *CMC*, the members of the community are just called $\exists\forall B\theta 4\Phi\theta\forall$ ∴, in the *Fihrist* they are referred to as *Mughtasilah*, “those who wash themselves”. The baptists regarded Alchasaïos or *al-Hasih* as their $\Delta\Pi\theta(\bar{H}$ or *ra'is*. The Greek and the Arabic word can mean “founder” but also “leader”. In the *CMC*, some legendary stories about this $\Delta\Pi\theta(\bar{H}$ of the baptists are put into the mouth of Mani.

The editors of the *Mani Codex*, Albert Henrichs and Ludwig Koenen, argued that “Alchasaïos” is a variant of the name “Elchasai” or “Elxai” mentioned in patristic sources,⁴ and, furthermore, that the baptists considered this Elchasai/Alchasaïos to be the very founder of their sect. Indeed, in the editors’ opinion, these southern Babylonian baptists were Elchasaites.⁵ In *The Revelation of Elchasai* (1985), I expressed serious

* Appendix in: *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, 58), Leiden 2006, 170-184.

¹ L. Koenen and C. Römer, *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex. Abbildungen und diplomatischer Text*; R. Cameron and A.J. Dewey, *The Cologne Mani Codex, “Concerning the Origin of his Body”*; excerpts in English transl by J.M. and S.N.C. Lieu in I. Gardner and S.N.C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, chap. 2.

² G. Flügel, *Kitab al-Fihrist*; B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm*.

³ The community, that is, in which his father Pattikios or Futtuq lived.

⁴ Hippolytus, *Ref IX* 13-17; Epiphanius, *Pan* 19, 30, and 53.

⁵ A. Henrichs and L. Koenen, “Ein griechischer Mani-Codex”, 135-60. In later studies they are somewhat more prudent. See esp. A. Henrichs, “Mani and the Babylonian Baptists”, 46f, and “The Mani Codex Reconsidered”, 356f.

doubts about the Elchasaite connection of the Babylonian baptists and proposed that in the *CMC*, ΔΠΙΘ(Ḥ means “leader”, as in other Manichaean texts. In addition, I pointed out that references to the Book of Elchasai do not occur in the *Mani Codex* and the *Fihrist*, and that there is nothing in the information about the baptists that reminds us of the contents of this book.⁶

In this paper, I would like to come back once again to the question of whether or not the baptists of Mani’s youth were Elchasaites. I am challenged to do so by Reinhold Merkelbach’s article, “Die Täufer, bei denen Mani aufwuchs”.⁷ His article is very much in line with the position of the editors of the *CMC* and highly representative of the current approach to the sources for Mani’s baptists and the Elchasaites.⁸ It will therefore not be necessary to discuss more reactions to my source-critical investigation.

Merkelbach’s treatment of the relevant sources deviates from my approach, and leads to substantially different results. I would like to find out where our ways part and will try to explain why they do so. After observing that my assessment of the baptist sect seems fallacious, Merkelbach states:

Ich habe versucht, die Probleme anhand des von Luttikhuisen so bequem bereitgestellten Materials neu zu durchdenken und bin zu dem Schluss gekommen, dass an dem Zusammenhang der Baptisten Manis mit Elchasai kein Zweifel möglich ist. Die Argumente hierfür scheinen mir geradezu überwältigend: ich möchte sie hier zusammenfassend darstellen.⁹

Merkelbach’s working method is as follows. First, he examines the patristic reports of the Elchasaites, searching for parallels with Manichaean teachings

⁶ Pp. 162f. Cf. the discussion of my arguments in I. Gardner and S.N.C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, 33f.

⁷ In: P. Bryder (ed.), *Manichaean Studies*, 105-33. I. Gardner and S. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts*, 35, n. 50, refer in assent to Merkelbach’s contribution.

⁸ Cf. J. van Oort, “Manicheïsme: nieuwe ontdekkingen”, *NTT* 47 (1993), 21-36, esp. 30f; S.N. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994, 84-7; K. Rudolph, “Jüdische und christliche Täufertraditionen im Spiegel des Kölner Mani-Kodex”, in id., *Gnosis und spätantike Religionsgeschichte* (NHMS 42), Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996, 686-713; id., “The Baptist Sects”, in W. Horbury et al., *The Cambridge History of Judaism, III, The Early Roman Period*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999, 471-500, there 483-92; S.C. Mimouni, “Les elkasaites: états des questions et des recherches”, in P.J. Tomson and D. Lambers-Petry, *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 209-29. F. Stanley Jones, “The Book of Elchasai in its Relevance for Manichaean Institutions”, *Aram* 16 (2004), 179-215.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

or customs. Where he finds a parallel, he argues that the baptists of Mani's youth must be the link between the Elchasaites and the Manichaeans, even if there is no evidence that these baptists were familiar with the doctrine or custom in question.¹⁰ Merkelbach concludes:

Wenn man also die direkten Nachrichten über die Mugtasila zusammennimmt mit jenen Lehrstücken, die man für sie erschliessen kann (aus dem Vergleich der Nachrichten über die Elchasaiten mit denen über die Manichäer), dann kann man sich ein viel runderes Bild über die Mugtasila machen: dann werden sie eine der am besten bekannten christlichen Gemeinden aus der Zeit vor Konstantin; und vor allem, dann können wir viel deutlicher sehen, von wo Mani gekommen ist.¹¹

Indeed, Merkelbach's thesis agrees with the position held by the editors of the *CMC*. For instance, Henrichs and Koenen argued that Mani must have become acquainted with the concept of the cyclic incarnation of the True Prophet when he lived among the baptists as a young man, and that he developed his idea of being the last incarnation of the Apostle of Light from this allegedly baptist concept.¹² Note that this conclusion is not based on the two reports of Mani's baptists since these reports are completely silent about their Christology.

The first part of this essay will be concerned with two questions: 1. can Mani's concept of the repeated manifestation of the True Prophet be traced back to the Book of Elchasai, and 2. did Mani become familiar with this concept through the Babylonian baptists? In the second part of the essay, I will focus on the water rites of the baptists and the extent to which these rites can be defined as Elchasaite.

The cyclic incarnation of the True Prophet

Was Mani's concept of the cyclic incarnation of the light-messenger inspired by an Elchasaite type of Christology? My answer is twofold. I do not doubt

¹⁰ According to Merkelbach, *ibid.*, 110, we often ("manchmal") face the following situation: "(a) Ein einziges Lehrstück oder ein Ritus ist für Elchasai bezeugt, entweder für sein Buch oder auch durch Nachrichten über die von ihm abhängigen Sekten. (b) Über die Mugtasila ist in dieser Hinsicht nichts bekannt. (c) Bei den Manichäern ist dasselbe Lehrstück aufzufinden, welches auch für Elchasai bezeugt ist. In einem solchen Fall ist der Schluss praktisch sicher, dass die Mugtasila dasselbe Lehrstück vertreten haben: denn sie bilden ja das Bindeglied zwischen Elchasai und dem Manichäismus."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹² *ZPE* 5 (1970), 139f.

that the relevant Manichaean idea developed from a Jewish Christian background. What I do doubt, however, is that this originally Jewish Christian idea was included in the Book of Elchasai. This is not an unimportant issue, because Merkelbach explicitly states that he considers a tradition as Elchasaite if it can be traced back to the Book of Elchasai.¹³ The question at stake, therefore, is whether we have evidence that speculations about repeated appearances of Christ were part of the book's message.

Our primary sources for the Book of Elchasai are Hippolytus of Rome and Epiphanius of Salamis (above, n. 4). In addition, Eusebius's *Church History* includes a brief report by Origen which to an extent agrees with Hippolytus.¹⁴ These sources are far from transparent and consequently it is useful to preface the discussion of the relevant Christological ideas with some brief source-critical observations.

1. *Hippolytus*

Hippolytus deals with a contemporary Elchasaite missionary, Alcibiades, who came from Apamea in Syria. Apparently, Hippolytus had no first hand knowledge of Elchasai or the mysterious book connected with this name.¹⁵ The heresiologist reports that Alcibiades came to Rome with a book that he claimed had been revealed by a huge angel:

It had been revealed by an angel whose height was 24 *schoeni* – that is 96 miles – and whose girth was 4 *schoeni*; from shoulder to shoulder he was 6 *schoeni*; his footprints were three and a half *schoeni* long – that is fourteen miles –, the breadth being one and a half (...) With him was a female whose dimensions, he said, accorded with those mentioned, the male being the Son of God and the female was called “Holy Spirit”.¹⁶

According to Hippolytus, Alcibiades stated that a certain Elchasai, had received the book somewhere in Parthia, and that this “righteous man” had transmitted the book to someone called Sobiai. As far as the name “Sobiai” is concerned, we might be dealing with a misunderstanding on the part of Hippolytus. It is not unlikely that what Alcibiades actually stated was that

¹³ *Ibid.*, 109: “Nur wenn für einen speziellen Zug ausdrücklich bezeugt ist, dass er im Buch des Elchasai gestanden hat, dann wird man annehmen dürfen, dass alle elchasaistischen Gruppen in diesem Punkt zusammentrafen, da sie ja alle die Offenbarung des Elchasai zugrundelegten.”

¹⁴ *HE VI* 38. All other patristic sources are dependent on Hippolytus, Epiphanius and/or Eusebius. Cf. *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 152.

¹⁵ Alcibiades treated the book as a secret text. Cf. *Ref IX* 17.1.

¹⁶ *Ref IX* 13.2-3.

Elchasai had transmitted the book to *the Sobiai* or “baptists”¹⁷ (to the Syrian baptists represented by Alcibiades?).

It is highly significant that following his introduction of Alcibiades and the mysterious book, Hippolytus immediately draws attention to the second baptism which “he” (obviously Alcibiades) decreed for Christians who had committed a grave sin.¹⁸ Hippolytus’ report does not give us any reason to assume that this second baptism for Christian sinners was part of the message of the book. On the contrary, the heresiologist suggests that the rebaptism of Christian sinners was an innovation introduced by Alcibiades when he was in Rome.

At the time of Alcibiades’ arrival in Rome, the Roman church did not yet have an institutional possibility for the remission of grave sins committed by baptised Christians (the later sacrament of penance). In the preceding sections of his book IX, Hippolytus speaks at length of a controversy about the position of Christian sinners in the Roman church. Alcibiades’ promise of remission of sins even to notorious sinners was seized upon by Hippolytus as an opportunity to continue his polemics against Calixtus, his former rival in the bishop’s see of Rome. In his refutation of Calixtus, Hippolytus tries to explain why the Catholic bishop’s church had so many members compared to his own community. He charges Calixtus with having admitted sinners into his “school” by promising them remission of their sins.¹⁹ In the subsequent refutation of Alcibiades, Hippolytus states that the idea of a baptism for the remission of grievous sins was suggested to this “heretic” by the teachings of Calixtus. In this way Hippolytus made the Catholic bishop accountable for what he considered the most objectionable aspect of Alcibiades’ heresy. Actually, the refutation of Alcibiades is nothing more than a digression added to Hippolytus’ bitter polemics against Calixtus.

In the second part of his report, Hippolytus summarises what he designates as “some main points of *his* statements”.²⁰ Although most scholars suppose that the heresiologist refers to statements made by Elchasai in the mysterious book, there can be no shadow of doubt, in my opinion, that the reference is to Alcibiades.²¹ The problem is that the names of both

¹⁷ W. Brandt, *Elchasai*, 42, and the literature mentioned in *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 61, n. 28.

¹⁸ *Ref IX* 13.4.

¹⁹ *Ref IX* 12.20-26.

²⁰ *Ref IX* 14, introduced in 13.6.

²¹ See *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 47, n. 7, and my essays “The Book of Elchasai: A Jewish Apocalyptic Writing, not a Christian Church Order”, *SBL Seminar Papers* 38

Elchasai and Alcibiades are only mentioned at the beginning and end of this refutation. However, because the heresiologist speaks about a contemporary of his and because the heresy refuted in this chapter is closely related by Hippolytus to the “tenet” of Calixtus mentioned before (Calixtus’ allegedly indulgent attitude towards sinners),²² we must assume that he means Alcibiades. It is in this connection – his account of some of the main teachings of Alcibiades – that Hippolytus mentions the relevant Christological ideas:

He says that Christ was a man like all (others), and that he was not born for the first time when he was born of a virgin, but that already earlier and many times again, having been begotten and being born, he appeared and came into existence, thus going through several births and transmigrating from body to body.²³

In the third and last part of his report, Hippolytus comes back to the second baptism introduced by Alcibiades and also reports the therapeutic water rites prescribed by Alcibiades. I will discuss these passages below.

As to Alcibiades’ Christology: are we to trace the relevant ideas back to the Book of Elchasai?²⁴ This is at least open to discussion. Why should we assume that everything taught by Alcibiades in Rome came directly from this book?²⁵ It is quite possible, as we will see below, to connect these ideas with the Syrian type of Jewish Christianity represented by Alcibiades.

(1999), 405-25 (esp. 410, n. 17) and “Elkesaites and their Book”, in P. Luomanen and A. Marjanen (eds), *A Compendium to Second-Century “Heretics”*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, 335-64 (esp. 338f).

²² Ref IX 13.4-5: “He ventured to achieve these knaveries starting from the already mentioned tenet which Calixtus had brought forward. For perceiving that many were pleased with such a promise, he understood that the time was ripe to make the attempt. Yet we resisted this man too, and we did not permit many to be deceived for long, demonstrating that this was the work of a spurious mind and the invention of a bumptious heart, and that he, like a wolf, had risen up against many stray sheep which Calixtus by his misguidance had scattered abroad.”

²³ Ref IX 14.1. Cf. the parallel report in Ref X 29.2. For the relationship between book X and the main reports in I-IX see J. Frickel, *Die “Apophasis megale” in Hippolyts Refutatio*, 49-74. Curiously enough, the second baptism is not mentioned at all in Ref X 29, although Hippolytus considered it the most dangerous and objectionable aspect of the heresy in question.

²⁴ Merkelbach, *ibid.*, 116: “Diese Vorstellung ist auch für das Buch des Elchasai bezeugt”.

²⁵ At least the second baptism for Christian sinners was introduced by Alcibiades (see above).

2. Epiphanius

In Epiphanius' reports we encounter several trans-Jordan sects allegedly influenced by "Elxai" or "Elxaios": Ossaeans (Ossenes), Nasaraeans, Nazoraeans, Sampsaean (Sampsites, Sampsenes) or Elkesaeans, and Ebionites (Ebionaeans). It is, however, questionable to what extent we can trust the connections which Epiphanius finds between the Elchasaite book and these Jewish and Jewish-Christian sects. For Henrichs and Koenen, and also for Merkelbach, however, this problem does not exist for they take Epiphanius' reports for granted. I do not intend to discuss systematically the rather complicated issue of the relationships detected or hypothesised by Epiphanius.²⁶ I will try to focus on the Christological ideas which the Church Father attributes to Elxai and to some of the aforementioned sects, notably the Ebionites and the Sampsaean/Elkesaeans. I start from two passages in Epiphanius' report on the Ebionites:

At first this Ebion (the putative founder of the sect), as I said,²⁷ determined that Christ was from the seed of a man, Joseph. But from a certain time up to now among his followers different things are told about Christ, since they have turned their minds to chaotic and impossible things. *I suppose* that perhaps after Elxaios joined them – the false prophet <whom I mentioned before> in connection with the so-called Sampsenes and Ossenes and Elkesaeans – they tell some fantasy about Christ and about the Holy Spirit, in the same way as he did.²⁸

For some of them say that Christ is also Adam, the first man created and breathed into by God's inspiration. But others among them say that he is from above and that he was created before all (...) that he comes into the world whenever he wishes, as he also came in Adam and appeared to the patriarchs putting on a body (...)²⁹

Epiphanius writes that the Ebionites used to endorse the well-known adoptionist idea of Christ as the son of Joseph, and that *he supposed*

²⁶ Following several predecessors, F. Stanley Jones rightly characterizes Epiphanius as "doctor confusus" ("The Genre of the Book of Elchasai", in A. Ötzen, *Historische Wahrheit und theologische Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996, 87-104.)

²⁷ *Pan* 30.2.2: "First he (Ebion) said that Christ was born from human intercourse and the seed of a man, Joseph."

²⁸ *Pan* 19.4.1-2: "Next he (Elxai) describes Christ as some power, of whom he also indicates the dimensions: his length is twenty-four *schoeni*, approximately ninety-six miles, and his breadth is six *schoeni*, twenty-four miles (...) And (he says) that there is also the Holy Spirit, a female being, similar to Christ, as a statue extending above the clouds, and standing between two mountains." Cf. *Pan* 30.17.6-7 (quoted below); 53.1.9; Hippolytus, *Ref IX* 13.2-3.

²⁹ *Pan* 30.3.1-6.

(ϠϙΠ∇ *∞ ≡∃:∇4) that they changed their ideas about Christ under the influence of Elxai, and that since then they had been telling fantastic stories about Christ. Later on in his report on the Ebionites, the heresiologist writes something similar:

After some time, when his (Ebion's) followers had joined Elxai, they retained from Ebion circumcision and the Sabbath and the customs, but from Elxai the fantasy, so as to suppose that Christ is some man-like figure, invisible to men, ninety miles long, that is twenty-four *schoeni*, the breadth is six *schoeni*, twenty-four miles, and the thickness is of some other dimension. Opposite to him stands also the Holy Spirit, invisible, in the form of a female, and having the same size.³⁰

How could it occur to Epiphanius that the Ebionites changed their opinion about Christ after Elxai joined them? In agreement with other scholars,³¹ I assume that the Church Father combined two groups of sources: early heresiological reports about the Ebionites (mainly Irenaeus and Eusebius³²), on the one hand, and authentic documents which *for some reason or other* he considered to be Ebionite. The greater part of the documents to which Epiphanius himself refers, first of all the *Periodoi Petrou*,³³ do not survive but they must have been closely related to the extant pseudo-Clementine writings.

Obviously, Epiphanius detected striking differences between the beliefs of the Ebionites in his patristic sources and those in his new documents, notably with regard to Christ. According to his patristic sources, the Ebionites believed that Christ was a man, the son of Joseph, whereas in his new sources, Christ came from above into Adam and others, and so appeared at different times. The latter idea, the concept of the True Prophet Adam-Christ, can indeed be found in the pseudo-Clementine writings.³⁴

Indeed Epiphanius states in *Pan* 30.3.2 that he just believed or supposed that the Ebionites changed their opinions about Christ after they

³⁰ *Pan* 30.17.5-6.

³¹ A.F.J. Klijn and G.J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish Christian Sects*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973, 28-38; G.A. Koch, *A Critical Investigation of Epiphanius' Knowledge of the Ebionites*.

³² See Irenaeus, *AH* III 11.7 and 21.1; Eusebius, *HE* III 27.

³³ *Pan* 30.15.1-3.

³⁴ Cf. esp. *Hom* III 20.2: "no other possesses the spirit but he who from the beginning of the world, changing his forms and his names, runs through universal time until, anointed for his toils by the mercy of God, he comes to his own time and will have rest for ever". See the detailed discussion by G. Strecker, *Das Judenchristentum in den Pseudoklementinen*, 145-53.

came under the influence of Elxai. If this supposition were correct, it would mean that it was Elxai who taught the Ebionites about the True Prophet who first appeared in Adam. It will become increasingly clear, however, that this is a highly questionable hypothesis, *pace* Merkelbach. For the time being I note that we do not find any reference to Elxai/Elchasai in the surviving pseudo-Clementine texts.³⁵

Because Epiphanius supposed that the Ebionites adopted these Christological speculations from Elxai, he further hypothesised that all the groups which *in his opinion* were influenced by Elxai must be familiar with these speculations. *This might be the reason why we find a quite similar report of Christological speculations in his report on the Transjordan Sampsaeans or Elkesaeans.*³⁶ Epiphanius was convinced that the Sampsaeans/Elkesaeans regarded Elxai as their teacher *and that this teacher was the author of the mysterious book.* With respect to this issue Merkelbach states: “An mehreren (...) Stellen des Epiphanius wird über die Ebionäer und Sampsäer, die beide mit den Elkesäern zusammenfielen, berichtet: Christus sei zum erstenmal in Adam erschienen”.³⁷ In reality, as we have seen, it was just Epiphanius’ conjecture that at some time Elxai had joined the early Ebionites, and that these “later” Ebionites (“pseudo-Clementine” Jewish Christians) owed their speculations about Christ to him.

3. A Syrian Christology?

To return to the Christology of Alcibiades reported by Hippolytus – the idea of the repeated incarnation of Christ – I have already mentioned that there is no decisive reason to assume that this Christology stems from the Book of Elchasai. It is likewise possible that these speculations developed in the Syrian Jewish-Christian environment represented by Alcibiades. The latter solution would mean that the partial (!) agreement between Alcibiades’ Christological ideas and those of Epiphanius’ new documents (early versions of the pseudo-Clementine writings) can be explained in a different way: the common background is not the book of Elchasai but a Syrian type of Jewish Christianity.

In my hypothesis it is still possible that Mani borrowed his idea about the cyclic incarnation of the Apostle of Light from the Babylonian baptists of his youth. However, in this case, the Babylonian baptists were familiar with this Christological speculation not through the Book of Elchasai but

³⁵ G.A. Koch, *A Critical Investigation*, 294.

³⁶ *Pan* 53.1.8-9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

rather through their affiliation with the Syrian Jewish Christianity represented by Alcibiades and early versions of the pseudo-Clementine writings. But I repeat that the *CMC* and the *Fihrist* are silent about this doctrine and, for this reason, we cannot exclude more direct connections between Mani (or his early followers) and the Syrian Jewish Christians in question.

It might be more difficult to determine the source or background of the Manichaean doctrine of the cyclic revelations of the light-messenger than Merkelbach and the editors of the *CMC* believe. The possible historical and literary connections between the Syrian Jewish Christianity attested by the pseudo-Clementines, and early Manichaeans deserve more scholarly attention than they have had so far.

Water rites

Now I turn to what was apparently the distinct feature of the community in which Mani was reared. The members of the community – probably celibate men³⁸ – washed themselves daily because, as the *CMC* informs us, they expected the resurrection of the body.³⁹ Moreover, they washed their food before it was consumed.⁴⁰ Compare this to the patristic reports about the water rites of Alcibiades and those of the trans-Jordan sects which according to Epiphanius were influenced by the author of the mysterious book.

I argued above that the greater part of Hippolytus' report does not relate to the contents of the book connected with the name of "Elchasai" but to doctrines and prescriptions of the Syrian Jewish-Christian missionary Alcibiades. But whether or not the water rites were quoted by Alcibiades from the Mesopotamian book or belonged to his Syrian Jewish Christianity, the point is that *we do not find specific agreement between the rites mentioned by Hippolytus and the rites of the Babylonian baptists*. On the one hand, Hippolytus reports a second baptism for the remission of grievous sins, first of all sexual trespasses (not mentioned in the two sources about the community of Mani's youth). On the other hand, Hippolytus quotes therapeutic water rites: any man or woman, boy or girl who was bitten or touched by a rabid dog, had to go down fully clothed into a river or a

³⁸ A. Henrichs, "Mani and the Babylonian baptists", 54; id., "The Cologne Mani Codex reconsidered", 365.

³⁹ Cf. *CMC* 87.2-6.

⁴⁰ *CMC* 80.1-3; 80.23-83.13; 87.2-6; 88.13-15. Cf. *Fihrist* transl. Dodge II 811: "They observe ablution as a rite and wash everything which they eat."

spring.⁴¹ It is possible that the bite or touch of a rabid dog was understood as a metaphor of sexual desire,⁴² but we are obviously not dealing with a daily water rite (a regular bath to be taken by every member of the community). Hippolytus adds that sufferers of consumption and demonic possession were summoned by Alcibiades to immerse themselves in cold water up to forty times during seven days.⁴³ Considering the wide spread use of all kinds of water rites in the ancient world and elsewhere, we can hardly assume a specific connection between the second baptism for grievous sinners and the therapeutic immersions reported by Hippolytus, on the one hand, and the daily ritual ablutions of the Babylonian baptists, on the other.

Epiphanius reports ritual immersions, but he does so in his account of the Ebionites. As we have seen, the heresiologist surmises that the supposed later (pseudo-Clementine) Ebionites were influenced by Elxai, but it is significant that he does not hold Elxai responsible for their water rites. In *Pan* 30.2-4 he writes:

He (Ebion!) says that a man has to wash himself with water every day, after he had intercourse with a woman and left her, if there is enough water available either of the sea or of other waters. And likewise when he meets someone⁴⁴ when he comes up from the immersion and the baptism with water, he returns to wash himself in the same way, several times and fully clothed.

Apart from the fact that Epiphanius does not trace these water rites to Elxai but to Ebion, they do not seem to presuppose the celibate life which was probably practiced by the baptists of Mani's youth. Incidentally, the fact that Epiphanius does not attribute the Ebionite water rites to Elxai suggests that he did not find a prescription about daily baptisms in his source on the book.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ref* IX 15.4-6.

⁴² E. Peterson, "Die Behandlung der Tollwut".

⁴³ *Ref* IX 15.4-16.1.

⁴⁴ From the preceding context it appears that someone from the Gentiles is meant.

⁴⁵ In *Pan* 19.3.7, Epiphanius quotes a metaphorical saying: "Children, do not go toward the sight of fire, for you shall err. This is an error, because you see it quite near and it is far away. Do not go toward the sight of it but rather go to the voice of water." It is possible to explain this ambiguous saying in the light of the anti-cultic ideas of some trans-Jordan sects and their introduction of water rites in substitution for burnt offerings, as Epiphanius does (for a polemical reason, see *Pan* 19.3.6), but other explanations are also possible: a rejection of martyrdom? an allusion to sexual desire (cf. ps.-Clem. *Hom* XI 26.4: "Flee to the water, for that alone can extinguish the violence of fire. He who will not come to it, still bears the spirit of passion")?

Interim conclusion

What did the convent-like community in southern Babylonia have to do with Elchasai and the Elchasaites? First of all, their ritual ablutions are hardly comparable to the second baptism and the water rites prescribed by Alcibiades to Christian sinners and to sufferers of various diseases, respectively, and we noted that the ritual immersions of the Ebionites are not traced back by Epiphanius to “Elxai” but to “Ebion”.

In my opinion, the Christological ideas held by Alcibiades and some Transjordan sects do not stem from the book⁴⁶ but have their background in a Syrian form of Jewish Christianity (indirectly attested by the surviving versions of the pseudo-Clementines⁴⁷). It should also be observed that the *CMC* and the *Fihrist* are silent about the Christological beliefs of the Jewish-Christian baptists.

It is possible that Mani owed his idea of the cyclic incarnation of the light-messenger to the Babylonian baptists but this hypothesis cannot be based on the extant sources. If (!) the baptists were familiar with this Christological speculation, we could explain this on the assumption that they were remotely related to the Syrian Jewish Christianity attested by Alcibiades (in Hippolytus) as well as by the pseudo-Clementines. There is nothing in the extant sources that warrants the assumption that they borrowed their possible (!) Christological ideas from the book of Elchasai.⁴⁸

Elchasai and Elxai-Alchasaïos/al-Hasih/'lxs'

Strikingly, both the *CMC* and the *Fihrist* mention a baptist leader (the founder of the sect?) Alchasaïos/al-Hasih. The discovery by W. Sundermann of the name 'lxs' in an Iranian papyrus fragment of what seems to be an

⁴⁶ Epiphanius must be right in stating that the author of the book was a Jew. He quotes the book in the first part of his voluminous work devoted to the Jewish “heresies” (*Pan* 1-20); in *Pan* 19.1.5 he writes: “He was of Jewish origin and his ideas were Jewish, but he did not live according to the Law”.

⁴⁷ Indirectly, because the Jewish Christian sources and/or early versions of the pseudo-Clementine books are lost. Their contents can only hypothetically be reconstructed from the surviving texts.

⁴⁸ With reference to Merkelbach, I. Gardner and S. N.C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts*, 34f, state: “if the search for Elchasaite influences on Mani is widened (...) there is much to be found. Both sects (the Elchasaites and the Babylonian baptists) for instance placed great emphasis on (...) the cyclical reappearance of Christ.” This might be true but the question is whether we should explain these possible agreement from the book of Elchasai.

autobiographical account of Mani's youth makes this even more intriguing.⁴⁹ How should we relate the three versions of this name to our patristic reports about the Elchasaites⁵⁰ and their book? It might be helpful to distinguish three historical phenomena:

1. The book of Elchasai.⁵¹ In all likelihood it was a Jewish apocalyptic book written in Aramaic in Mesopotamia-Parthia in 116 C.E. The book was translated into Greek before 230.⁵²

2. Two groups of Jewish-Christian missionaries (probably baptists⁵³) who possessed a Greek version of the book. They appeared in the Gentile-Christian churches of Rome and Palestine.⁵⁴ Their Jewish-Christianity (minus the book of Elchasai!) is indirectly attested in the pseudo-Clementine books and more directly by Epiphanius who used earlier versions or sources of the pseudo-Clementines for his reports of the Ebionites (*Pan* 30) and some other Transjordan sects.⁵⁵

3. Baptist communities in Transjordan regions and in Southern Babylonia who referred to a teacher Elxai/Alchasaïos/al-Hasih ('lxs'). In the *CMC* and the *Fihrist*, Alchasaïos/al-Hasih is mentioned as a leader (or the founder?) of the third-century Babylonian sect of baptists in which Mani was

⁴⁹ "Iranische Lebensbeschreibungen Manis", 129f; *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, 19. Note, however, that the text is badly mutilated and that the relevant letters occur without readable context.

⁵⁰ "Elchasaites" is a modern designation. Origen's sermon in Eusebius speaks of "Helkesaites"; Epiphanius mentions a (fourth-century) sect of "Elkesaeans" (another name of the "Sampsaeans").

⁵¹ In the early sources (Hippolytus and Epiphanius), "Elchasai" and "Elxai" are spelled with an *etha*, not an *epsilon*, as Gardner and Lieu seem to assume (*Manichaean Texts*, 34; cf. S.N. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia*, 86). I endorse the well-known hypothesis that the name "Elchasai" originally belonged to the huge male angel (*hayil kesay*, "Hidden Power") who in Epiphanius' source on the book was described as a "power" (*Pan* 19.4.1), "invisible to men" (30.17.6).

⁵² Cf. *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 194-208.

⁵³ *Sobiai*? Cf. Hippolytus, *Ref.* IX 13.1 (discussed above). Alcibiades prescribed several therapeutical immersions apart from a second baptism for the remission of grievous sins committed by Christians. The brief report of Origen-Eusebius (*HE* VI 38) does not report baptist rites.

⁵⁴ According to Hippolytus (*Ref* IX 13.1), the leader of the group in Rome, Alcibiades, came from Apamea in Syria.

⁵⁵ That the the group of Alcibiades was related to the Jewish Christianity of the pseudo-Clementines (Epiphanius' "later Ebionites") is suggested first of all by a comparison of the Christology of the pseudo-Clementine books and Epiphanius' new sources for the Ebionites with that of Alcibiades and his group (see above).

reared. Epiphanius informs us that Elxai was the teacher of a fourth century Transjordan baptist⁵⁶ sect of Sampsaeans/Elkesaeans.⁵⁷

It is very difficult to decide whether Alcibiades in mentioning “a certain righteous man, Elchasai”, who would have received the book from Seres in Parthia⁵⁸ (Hippolytus, *Ref* IX 13.1), refers to the same religious authority. First of all, for Hippolytus, Elchasai was a wholly obscure figure.⁵⁹ Who Elchasai was in the mind of Alcibiades, is likewise unclear. At least Alcibiades did not regard him as the author of the book. In his view, Elchasai “received” the book, apparently in its complete form. It is quite possible that Alcibiades thought of the origin and the character of the book in essentially the same way as the Helkesaites did who, according to Origen, claimed that the book had fallen from heaven.⁶⁰ We have no indication that Alcibiades referred to teachings of “Elchasai” which were not contained in the book connected with this name.

The religious authority Elchasai-Elxai-Alchasaio/al-Hasih emerges from the extant sources as a completely legendary figure. It is even unclear whether the various names refer to the same figure. According to Alcibiades, “Elchasai” received the book somewhere in Parthia. According to Epiphanius, the book was written by the Transjordan teacher “Elxai”. He reports that the fourth-century Sampsaeans/Elkesaeans appealed to this teacher, and he “supposed” that Ebionites changed their ideas about Christ after Elxai joined them. Furthermore he writes that “Elxai” had a brother, Jexai, who also wrote a book (*Pan* 53.1.3; cf. 191.4) and that two female descendants of Elxai were worshipped as goddesses in his (Epiphanius’) own days (53.2 and 5-6; cf. *Pan* 19.2.4-5). In the *CMC*, “Alchasaio” is polemically presented by Mani-Baraies as an authoritative baptist leader (the sect’s founder?) who converted to essential Manichaean insights. Alcibiades-Hippolytus, Origen-Eusebius and Epiphanius refer to the book and quote from its contents but – like the *CMC* and the *Fihrist* – the patristic

⁵⁶ *Pan* 53.4: “They pretend to honour God by using certain baptisms”, 53.7: “Water is revered by them and they take it for a god, asserting more or less that life comes from it”.

⁵⁷ The heresiologist was probably wrong in hypothesizing that this Transjordan teacher was the author of the Mesopotamian-Jewish book (see above).

⁵⁸ Cf. *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 60.

⁵⁹ In IX 4, he characterizes Alcibiades’ activity in Rome as “the recent appearance of the strange demon Elchasai”; in IX 17.2 he qualifies Alcibiades as “the most amazing interpreter of the wretched Elchasai”; here he also considers the possibility that Elchasai lived at the time of the Egyptian sages; in X 29.1 he suggests that the heretics in question composed the book and called it after “a certain Elchasai”.

⁶⁰ In Eusebius, *HE* VI 38.

sources are silent about the specific ideas of a teacher “Elchasai”/ “Elxai”/ “Alchasaïos”.

Above, I proposed that the Syrian Jewish-Christianity represented by Alcibiades in Rome might be related to the Jewish Christianity of the early pseudo-Clementines and Epiphanius’ “Ebionites”. This hypothesis is mainly based on a comparison of the Christology of Alcibiades and his group with that of the pseudo-Clementines and the “later Ebionites” (who did not possess the book!). It is quite possible, as we have seen, that the baptists of Mani’s youth were somehow related to this Syrian- Transjordan Jewish Christianity, and, furthermore, that Mani borrowed his idea of the repeated manifestation of the Apostle of Light from these Jewish Christians. But this does not make them Elchasaites.