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P. HARR. 107: IS THIS ANOTHER GREEK MANICHAEAN LETTER?

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## P. HARR. 107: IS THIS ANOTHER GREEK MANICHAEAN LETTER?

This article argues that P. Harr. 107, long considered one of the earliest Christian letters on papyrus from Egypt, has been both misdated and misclassified as regards the religious affiliation of its writer. We will contend that the letter should be dated later; and that Manichaean authorship of this piece is probable, which marks an important expansion of the ‘archive’ of such personal letters in Greek.<sup>1</sup> A by-product of the argument could be the identification of the earliest known Manichaean text from Egypt.

P. Harr. 107 was originally published in 1936, as part of the Rendel Harris volume of papyri edited by J. Enoch Powell.<sup>2</sup> He dated it to the 3rd century, with a query. Subsequently H. I. Bell opted for a date, unusually precise for a papyrologist, around 200.<sup>3</sup> The papyrus has attracted some degree of interest, not least because it was considered possibly the earliest Christian letter; though the absence of any reference to the Son (alongside the prayer to the Father and Spirit) did call for some explanation. Origenist thinking, gnostic speculation and a Jewish background were all considered.<sup>4</sup> The Manichaean possibility could not be seriously explored, though the phrase ‘Paraclete Spirit’ was noted from the beginning, because of the considered opinion that the papyrus was at least to be placed in the first half of the 3rd century; and because of the lack of comparative material.<sup>5</sup> New discoveries have challenged both of these assumptions.

The papyrus itself is an individual sheet, 8.3 (B) x 21 (H) cm.; its provenance is unknown, and the text is complete.

Greek text:<sup>6</sup>

Pl. III

	Τιμιωτάτη μου μητρὶ	To my most honoured mother
	Μαρία Βησᾶς	Maria, Besas,
	ἐν θεῶι πλῖστα χαίρειν.	many greetings in God.
	πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχῶ-	Before everything: I pray
5	μαι τῷ πατρὶ θεῶι τῆς ἀλη-	to the Father, God of
	θείας καὶ τῷ παρακλήτῳ	Truth, and to the Paraclete
	πνεύματι ὅς σε διαφυλά-	Spirit, that they may preserve you
	ξωσιν καιτὰ τε ψυχὴν κα<ι>	in soul and

<sup>1</sup> Two Manichaean letters on papyrus in Greek are so far known: P. Kell. I Gr. 63 and P. Oxy. XXXI 2603 (ed. Harrop, *JEA* 48, 1962, 132–140; cf. M. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli ii–iv*, #47 2nd ed. Florence 1998, 212–215); S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East*, Leiden 1994, 98 n. 316; I. Gardner, Personal letters from the Manichaean community at Kellis, in *Manicheismo e Oriente Cristiano Antico*, L. Cirillo, A. van Tongerloo (edd.), Louvain 1997, 77–94, at 87.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo*, op. cit., #5, pp. 76–78, 427.

<sup>3</sup> H. I. Bell, Evidences of Christianity in Egypt during the Roman period, *Harvard Theological Review* 37, 1944, 197. This date, and the judgment that the papyrus was Christian, was endorsed by C. H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, London 1979, 1 n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Nobbs has previously discussed (with a bibliography) the reasons for considering a Christian attribution, cf. A. M. Emmett (Nobbs), The concept of spirit in papyrus letters of the third and fourth century: problems posed by P. Harr. 107, *Prudentia*, suppl. 1985, 73–79. Acquaintance with this newly discovered Manichaean material would now lead her to a different conclusion. She has also discussed some gnostic influences in: *Gnosticism and the Greek papyri from Egypt*, *Phronema* 14, 1999, 53–9.

<sup>5</sup> See however the discussion by Choat in a Macquarie dissertation, suggesting that a later date was possible, and (on the basis of literary parallels) that Manichaean influence could be seen: *Christian Laity and Leadership in Fourth Century AD Egypt* (Diss. Macquarie 1999, 83–4).

<sup>6</sup> We reproduce, with minor adjustments, the text of the ed. pr. (P. Harris I 107 ed. J. E. Powell, 1936); Naldini’s edition includes several errors.

	σῶμα καὶ πνεῦμα· τῷ μὲν	body and spirit; for the
10	σώματι ὑγίαν, τῷ δὲ πνεύ- ματι εὐθυμία, τῇ δὲ ψυ- χῇ ζωὴν αἰώνιον. καὶ σὺ, ὃν ἐὰν εὔρησ τὸν ἐρχώμαινον πρὸς	body health, for the spirit joy, and for the soul life eternal. And you, if you find someone coming to
15	ἐμέ, μὴ ὀκνήσης γρά- φειν μοι περὶ τῆς υἰγίας σοῦ ὅπως ἀκούσας χαρ<ῶ>. μὴ οὖν ἀμελήσης πέμψαι μοι τὸ ἱμάτιον	me, do not hesitate to write to me concerning your health so I might hear and rejoice. Do not neglect to send me the cloak
20	εἰ<ς> τὴν ἑορτὴν τοῦ Πάσ- χα, καὶ πέμψον μοι τὸν ἀδελφόν μου. ἀσπάζω- μα<ι> τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου.	for the Pascha festival, and send to me my brother. Greet my father and my brothers.
25	ἐρρῶσθαι ὑμᾶς εὐχαιμαι πολλοῖς χρ(όνο)ις).	I pray for your health for many years.

Back (in the same hand):

. . . . X πα(ρὰ) Βησάτος from Besas

3 l. πλείστα 4 and 26 l. εὐχομαι 8 καιτα: l. κατά 10 l. ὑγίαιαν 11 l. εὐθυμίαν 14 l. ἐρχόμενον 17 l. υἰγείας  
22 l. ἀσπάζομαι

The possibility of Manichaean authorship is most obviously raised by the prayer where the Paraclete Spirit is given unusual prominence together with the Father. However, as we shall see below, the weight of cumulative evidence for Manichaean authorship is rather more extensive than this. On the other hand, the date earlier ascribed to the piece on palaeographic grounds would certainly render a Manichaean context impossible. Also, the inclusion of ‘Christian’ features in the text (most noticeably the reference to the *pascha*), might be supposed to count against such an authorship; but this is to misrepresent Manichaeism and Manichaean-Christian relations in late antique Egypt. We shall deal with these various questions in our commentary, but first we must discuss the dating.

It is generally accepted that Manichaeism would first have reached Alexandria in the lifetime of Mani himself, by ca. 260 C.E.;<sup>7</sup> and there is a variety of evidence to suggest that the religion had achieved some success through Egypt by the late third to early fourth century.<sup>8</sup> Clearly then, a palaeographic dating of P. Harr. 107 to the late third century is the earliest result with which one could feel comfortable if the writer is to be considered a Manichaean. As noted above, Bell suggested a date ca. 200 for the letter. In his collection of Christian letters, Naldini gave the date as early III,<sup>9</sup> a dating repeated by subsequent commentators.<sup>10</sup> However, we feel that this date should be reconsidered.

<sup>7</sup> On this, and also on the question of the direction of Manichaean missions to Upper Egypt (through Alexandria or by sea to the Red Sea coast), see L. Koenen, *Manichäische Mission und Klöster in Ägypten*, in *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten. Aegyptiaca Treverensia*, Mainz am Rhein 1983, 95–101; and the references given by I. Gardner in P. Kell. II (= *Kellis Literary Texts*, I, Oxford 1997) x, n. 20.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of the available evidence re a history of Manichaeism in Egypt, see Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East*, op. cit., pp. 89–105.

<sup>9</sup> Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo*, op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C. Tra paganesimo e cristianesimo*, Milan 1979, 6 (III in.); J. van Haelst, *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens*, Sorbonne 1976, no. 1194 (‘début de III’)

The letter is written in a shaky, unsure hand,<sup>11</sup> described by Powell as ‘boyish’ but which perhaps better merits the description ‘untutored’. Powell’s description of the letter as ‘illiterate’ is misleading; while the characters themselves are poorly formed, in terms of grammar and orthography the letter compares favourably to many contemporary compositions. However, the hand is clearly that of an unskilled writer, conforming in its features to the ‘student hands’ discussed by Raffaella Cribiore, especially in the shaky formation of individual letters, the gradually increasing left margin and the irregular inclination at which the lines are written.<sup>12</sup> Besas’ style of writing is unmistakably that which he has recently been taught. Documentary hands from the second and third centuries which resemble that of Besas can be found to support the dating of Bell and Naldini. However, we do not believe that the parallel for Besas’ hand should be sought in this area, as he is basically mimicking the formal hand of his teacher, rather than using an established documentary style. Instead, parallels should be sought from among models of the kind from which he may have learnt. School hands, both those of teachers and students, being by nature conservative and slower to reflect change than everyday scripts, are difficult to date.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, of those models for copying which Cribiore has collected, the letter of Besas resembles most closely several from the late third or early fourth century, such as P. Lit. Lond. 207 (Psalms = Cribiore 297) and the back of this piece, P. Lit. Lond. 255 (Isocrates, *Ad Demonium* = Cribiore 298). This formal style of hand is also reflected in well written private letters of the early fourth century, such as P. Herm. 6 and P. Ryl. IV 624, both written in the same practised hand.<sup>14</sup> Although Besas displays a far less skilled hand than these, the similarities are sufficient to suggest that P. Harr. 107 should be assigned a date in the late third or early fourth century. As a consequence, the evidence as regards date cannot be used to preclude Manichaean authorship.

#### Commentary

1–2 Maria: Jewish in origin (Mariam, Mariamne), and increasingly used (along with other biblical names) by Christians from the mid- to late third century onwards,<sup>15</sup> as papyrus documents attest.<sup>16</sup> It would be extremely unusual for Christian use of a biblical name to be in evidence from before the second half of the third century.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the characteristically ‘Christian’ name Maria may be used as supporting evidence for re-dating this piece to the late third or early fourth century (if a Jewish context be ruled out, as we think it must). With regard to Manichaean onomastic usage in late antique Egypt, members of the Manichaean community in Kellis bear both ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ names, including, fortuitously (though no doubt

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s siècle’). Van Haelst did not mention the letter in his *Les sources papyrologiques concernant l’Eglise en Egypte à l’époque de Constantin*, *Proc. XII Congr. Pap.*, Toronto 1970, 497–500; whether through oversight, or a determination that the letter was not certainly Christian, is unclear.

<sup>11</sup> See the plate, P. Harr. I, pl. I.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1996; esp. the discussion of ‘student hands’ on 102ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students*, 117–8.

<sup>14</sup> On the similarity between teachers’ hands and those of ‘formally written epistles’, see Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students*, 100, with n. 21.

<sup>15</sup> See the remarks on the practice by Dionysius of Alexandria, *apud* Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.25.14.

<sup>16</sup> Examples of such biblical names for women, attested as Christian rather than Jewish usage in papyri from this period, are Esther, Susanna and Anna. Unpublished compilations made by E. A. Judge have been invaluable in forming these opinions.

<sup>17</sup> The only Maria in Greek documentary papyri before the middle of the third century, who is not almost certainly Jewish, is the Μαρίας listed in P. Prag. I 14. 16, a liturgical list dated III<sup>1</sup>. After that the next Maria is the mother of Sarmates in P. Oxy. XLIV 3184 (another liturgical list from 9.1.297), r., b, 17, who was presumably given her name around the middle of the third century. Instances of the name Maria increase dramatically in the fourth century.





In the light of this new material, the elements of a distinct Manichaean formula can be clearly discerned and are apparent in P. Harr. 107. The Pauline original (and subsequent Christian amplification) can be distinguished from the Manichaean, in that the latter shows extension and development with the following elements:

- invocation of ‘the Father, the God of Truth’ (this extended to the Paraclete in P. Harr. 107, and to the ‘trinity’ [but with a distinctive Manichaean twist, i.e. the ‘light angels’] in P. Kell. V Copt. 25);
- the trichotomy of body, soul and spirit associated with the qualities of health, joy and gladness etc (the slight variations do not obscure the basic unifying pattern);
- prayer to be kept safe from Satan;
- hope for life eternal.

If the distinctiveness of the pattern be accepted, as we believe it must (we can find no parallels in documentary material outside of the Kellis examples and the Greek piece under present discussion), then the question arises as to why the Manichaeans utilised their particular formula. Unfortunately, with the present state of knowledge one can only speculate. The most obvious option, as for Christian usage, is a liturgical archetype. Another possibility, especially as all these examples fulfil the same function in personal correspondence (i.e. as an introductory prayer after the first greetings, but before the body of the letter), is that the authors were consciously copying Mani himself from his canonical *Epistles*. Unfortunately, although this seems plausible (Mani modelled his own style on that of Paul, and may well be supposed to have made such an adaptation of IThess. 5: 23), no proper parallel is apparent from the extant remains of such. In sum, we believe that we have here uncovered a valid and important indicator of religious belief, but the full significance of the usage remains uncertain at the present.

20–21 This reference by Besas to the paschal festival, with the clear implication that he will celebrate it, must not be thought incompatible with Manichaean belief. This is apparent not only from general principles, i.e. the narrative of Jesus’ passion provided the model for that of Mani himself;<sup>34</sup> but the Manichaean celebration of Easter is indeed explicitly stated by Augustine,<sup>35</sup> from personal experience. Admittedly, Augustine berates his former co-religionists for their lack of enthusiasm (in comparison to their celebration of the *bema* festival);<sup>36</sup> but this must certainly be read in terms of his polemical purpose, and his rhetorical style in service of that purpose.

Furthermore, there are direct references to the *pascha* in Manichaean texts from Egypt; although (at the present stage of research) their exact implications are not known. The original index to the Medinet Madi Psalm-Book lists: ‘Five paschal hymns by lord Herakleides’<sup>37</sup>; but, unfortunately, the relevant part of the codex has not yet been edited. Also, in what is a kind of direct parallel to the reference in the present text, a known Manichaean author (Makarios writing a letter to Maria and others) refers to

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<sup>34</sup> Thus Mani’s own death in prison can be categorised as a ‘crucifixion’ (e.g. *Manichäische Homilien* 44, 18 [ed. H.-J. Polotsky, Stuttgart 1934]); but, more than this, the entire textual tradition of his passion came to be shaped by that of Jesus, gathering elements such as the prophecy of his death, the final journey, the betrayal, the faithful women with the body, etc. Cf. The Report about the Crucifixion, *passim* (*Manichäische Homilien* 42, 9ff.).

<sup>35</sup> *C. Epist. Fund.* 9.

<sup>36</sup> On the *bema* festival see the study by G. Wurst, *Das Bemafest der ägyptischen Manichäer*, Altenberge 1995. The implications of Augustine’s comments about the two festivals are not entirely clear to us, i.e. does he suggest that they were in some way assimilated by the Manichaean community in their practice? The *bema* festival was held in remembrance of Mani’s death, which is given in the Psalm-Book (*PsBk2* 17, 26; 18, 7) as on the fourth of Phamenoth according to the Egyptian calendar, and should generally have fallen somewhat earlier in the season than the *pascha*. However, in view of the parallelism established between the two events, it does not seem to us unlikely that some linkage could have been established. Further to this, see the tantalising reference in the Kellis agricultural account book (1717) to a ἑορτὴ Φαρμούθι (‘festival of Pharmouthi’). R. S. Bagnall calculates that in the most likely year to which this refers (364 C.E.) Easter fell on Pharmouthi 9 = April 4. That date would appear to be too late for the *bema* celebrations.

<sup>37</sup> *PsBk2*, 231b1. See also M. Krause, *Zum Aufbau des koptisch-manichäischen Psalmenbuches*, in A. van Tongerloo, S. Giversen, *Manichaica Selecta*, Louvain 1991, 183 (177–190).

various commodities needed (?) ‘for the *pascha*’<sup>38</sup>; but the papyrus text is mutilated, frustratingly, at this point.

Previous treatments of P. Harr. 107 have provided patristic parallels for the various parts of Besas’ prayer, e.g. the ‘God of Truth’, the ‘Paraclete Spirit’ or the Pauline trichotomy, largely with a view towards proving the ‘orthodoxy’ of Besas.<sup>39</sup> However, given that the ultimate source of these phrases is Judeo-Christian Scripture, it is neither difficult nor surprising to find all of them used by writers from a variety of backgrounds within the broader Christian tradition. However, P. Harr. 107 presents us with something more than an *ad hoc* amalgamation of various phrases. In order for the milieu to be identified, lines 4–12 must be treated as a unit, and parallels sought on this basis. In the Kellis Manichaean papyri discussed here, a suitable parallel has at last been found. We believe that there can be no doubt that P. Harr. 107 and the Manichaean letters from Kellis are reflecting the same source, although whether this be liturgy or a canonical epistolary style cannot yet be certain. Although one of the major effects of the Kellis material has been to demonstrate how insecure the criteria are on which many letters have been judged to be ‘Christian’; in this case, a high degree of probability seems warranted. P. Harr. 107, rather than being classed as the earliest Christian letter, should be seen as the earliest Manichaean letter from Egypt. It is now, also, the third such letter written in Greek, as at present identified.

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<sup>38</sup> P. Kell. V Copt. 22, 18. There is also another passing reference to the *pascha*, by a certain Ploutogenes, in the text P17Vi. Nothing in this particular letter evidences Manichaean belief; but in A/5/1, almost certainly by the same author, there are found elements of the characteristic Manichaean epistolary style.

<sup>39</sup> See the bibliography given in Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo*, op. cit., p. 76; and the overview provided by Emmett, The concept of spirit in papyrus letters, op. cit.

