Iain Gardner – Alanna Nobbs – Malcolm Choat

P. Harr. 107: Is this another Greek Manichaean Letter?


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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.¹ 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.² He dated it to the 3rd century, with a query. Subsequently H. I. Bell opted for a date, unusually precise for a papyrologist, around 200.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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:⁶

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek text</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Τιμωτάτη μου μητρί</td>
<td>To my most honoured mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Μαρίνα Βεσάς</td>
<td>Maria, Besas,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἐν θεῷ πλάστα χαίρειν</td>
<td>many greetings in God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχώ</td>
<td>Before everything: I pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 μαί τῷ πατρί θεῷ τῆς ἀλής</td>
<td>to the Father, God of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>θείας καὶ τῷ παρακλήτῳ</td>
<td>Truth, and to the Paraclete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>πνεύματι ὡς σὲ διαφάλα</td>
<td>Spirit, that they may preserve you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ξοσίν κατὰ τὸ ψυχήν κα &lt;Δ&gt;</td>
<td>in soul and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ 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.
⁴ 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.
⁵ 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).
⁶ 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.
sw'ma kai; pneu'ma: tw/' me;n

body and spirit; for the

sw vmati uJgivan, tw/' de; pneuv-

body health, for the spirit

mati eujqumiva, th/' de; yu-

joy, and for the soul

ch/' zwh;n aijwvnion.

life eternal.

kai; su;, o}n eja;n eu{rh/

And you, if you find

to;n ejrcwvmainon pro;

someone coming to

fein moi peri; th'

write to me concerning

w'

your health so I might hear

<

and rejoice. Do not neglect

w'

to send me the cloak

w'

for the Pascha festival,

<

and send to me

w'

my brother. Greet

w'

my father and

w'

my brothers.

<

I pray for your

health for many

years.

Back (in the same hand):
.X. πα(ρά) Βησάτος
from Besas

3 l. πλείστα 4 and 26 l. ευχόμαι 8 κατά: I. κατά 10 l. ἱερεῖαν 11 l. εὐθυμέαν 14 l. ἐρχόμενον 17 l. ἱερεῖας
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.;7 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.8 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,9 a dating repeated by subsequent commentators.10 However, we feel that this date should be reconsidered.

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7 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.

8 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.

9 Naldini, Il Cristianesimo, op. cit., p. 76.

10 See e.g. G. Tibiletti, Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C. Tra paganismo e cristianesimo, Milan 1979, 6 (III in.); J. van Haelst, Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens, Sorbonne 1976, no. 1194 (‘début de IIIe
The letter is written in a shaky, unsure hand, 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. 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. 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 Demonicum = 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. 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, as papyrus documents attest. 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.

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
coincidentally) a ‘mother Maria’, who is the recipient at Kellis of a series of the most distinctively Manichaean letters that have been identified. 18

3 The Manichaean personal letters found at Ismant el-Kharab show conclusively that the standard epistolary greetings ‘in the lord God’ and similar (with χαίρετε) provide no means for distinguishing Christian and Manichaean authors. 19 This particular formula (whether as Coptic χαίρετε or Greek εὐχαίρετε) is repeatedly found in letters of certain Manichaean authorship (see P. Kell. V Copt. 32, 16–17; 36, 6; P. Kell. I Gr. 63, 4).

4–7 Besas begins his letter with the common formula πρὸς μὲν πάντων (Coptic ἐκαθόριζεν πᾶς ὁ οἶκος) and a prayer to ‘the Father, God of Truth and to the Paraclete Spirit’. Gardner has argued before 20 that the ‘God of Truth’ can be regarded as distinctively Manichaean phrasing in the Kellis letters. Whilst in itself the formula might not have occasioned much notice, it repeatedly appears in Kellis letters which for other reasons can be classed as Manichaean; but does not otherwise occur in letters from Kellis nor Greek personal letters from elsewhere in Egypt (excluding P. Harr. 107). It has thus itself become an indicator of such authorship. Indeed, in the remains of an Epistles codex 21 found in House 3 at Ismant el-Kharab, Mani himself uses the formula (Coptic ἐκκαθόριζεν θεὸς τῆς τιμῆς), as he does also in his Living Gospel. 22 The formula is characteristic of the Coptic Manichaica from Egypt, being found repeatedly in the Medinet Madi codices as well as texts from Ismant el-Kharab. 23

As regards ‘the Paraclete Spirit’, this is the most obviously unusual feature of P. Harr. 107. Despite this term having its origin in the Gospel of John, it does not occur in Greek papyrus letters as a religious term outside this instance and P. Kell. I Gr. 63. 24 If this letter is indeed Manichaean, then there is an obvious explanation for the prominence here of the Paraclete, whom we can understand as Mani himself in his spiritual persona (and thus not as the Holy Spirit of Christian tradition). In Manichaean belief, the apostle received revelation from his heavenly ‘twin spirit’, who is the Paraclete foretold by Jesus, and with whom Mani became ‘one body and one spirit’. 25 In the Kellis personal letters there are three parallels: P. Kell. V Copt. 19,9 where Mani is quoted according to the formula ‘as the Paraclete has said . . .’;

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18 See the ‘Makarios family’ letters in P. Kell. V (edd. I. Gardner, A. Alcock and W.-P. Funk, Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis, I, Oxford, 1999) 19–29. Indeed, there are at least two Manichaean women with the name Maria in the Kellis documents. One might also note that the psalms in the Medinet Madi Manichaean Psalm-Book habitually end with ‘victory to the soul of the blessed Maria’ or suchlike, this person probably being an Egyptian martyr for the faith or perhaps the patron for the production of the codex. See further: C. R. C. Allberry, A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II, Stuttgart 1938, xx; J. Kevin Coyle, Mary Magdalene in Manichaism, Le Muséon 104, 1991, 51–53; and (with a different interpretation) E. B. Smagina, Die Formel »Seele Marias« in den Doxologien der koptischen manichäischen Psalmen, Coptology: Past, Present and Future, edd. S. Giversen, M. Krause, P. Nagel, Leuven 1994, 139–149.


20 E.g. Personal letters, op. cit., p. 91.

21 This codex (ex P93C et al’) is in the process of being edited by I. Gardner and W.-P. Funk.

22 As quoted in the Greek Cologne Mani-Codex p. 66: ἐγὼ Μανιχαῖος Ίησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἠπόστολος ἀληθινός Πατρὶ καὶ Θεῷ τῆς ἀληθείας (L. Koenen, C. Römer [edd.], Der Kölner Mani-Kodex. Über das Werden seines Leibes, Opladen 1988, 44).


24 The only other two instances of παράκλητος (BGU II 601.12 (II) (a speculative restoration) and P. Oxy. XXXIV 2725 (AD 71)), use the word in its secular sense of ‘supporter’.

25 Thus Kephalaia 15, 19–24: ‘This is how everything that has happened and that will happen was unveiled to me by the Paraclete [. . .] everything the eye shall see, and the ear hear, and the thought think, and the [. . .] I have understood by him everything. I have seen the totality through him! I have become a single body, with a single Spirit!’ For further references to the Paraclete Spirit in Coptic Manichaean texts, see Dictionary of Manichaean Texts, comp. S. Clackson, E. Hunter and S. N. C. Lieu, vol. I, Turnhout 1998, 78.
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35, 26–28 where the author writes, ‘I swear to you by our Lord Paraclete and the knowledge of truth . . .’; and P. Kell. I Gr. 63, 28–29, ‘For only our Lord the Paraclete is competent to praise you . . .’

7–12 Besas twice calls on the trichotomy soul, body, spirit, as found in IThess 5: 23; though the order is varied from the Pauline which has the body first.26 As the editio princeps pointed out, referring to a treatment of the Egyptian liturgy by Brightman,27 the order giving the body as the middle one of the three is found in Origen, in the Greek liturgy of St. Mark,28 and frequently in the Egyptian liturgy generally. Beyond mere invocation, however, it is the new Manichaean texts from Ismant el-Kharab that provide striking evidence for a developed form of the Pauline trichotomy as a feature of epistolary style in that religious community; and it is indeed this, rather than the invocation of the Paraclete (although it be more immediately apparent), that has convinced us that we have at last found the true religious milieu for P. Harr. 107. The most obvious parallels yet identified follow:

P. Kell. V Copt. 25, 12–22 (Matthaios to his mother Maria): ‘This is my prayer to the Father, the God of Truth, and his beloved Son the Christ, and his Holy Spirit, and his light angels: That he will watch over you together, you being healthy in your body, joyful in heart and rejoicing in soul and spirit, all the time we will pass in the body, free from any evil and any temptation by Satan and any sickness of the body.’29

P. Kell. V Copt. 29, 7–13 (Piene to his mother Maria, the same as above): ‘This is my prayer every hour to the Father, the God of Truth, that he may preserve you healthy in your body, joyful in your soul and firm [in] your spirit; for all the time that you [will] spend in this place. Also, after this place, you may find life in the kingdom for eternity.’30

P. Kell. V Copt. 32, 19–24 (unnamed male author to the catechumen Eirene): ‘I am praying that you may continue in health of the body, and gladness of the spirit, and joy of the soul, until we see you again.’31

P81C, ll. 4–9 (Pamour to his sister Partheni):32 ‘Before everything I pray to the Father, the God of Truth, that you will live for me a long time and a great period; being healthy in body, flourishing in soul, and rejoicing in spirit, safe from all the temptations of Satan . . .’33

26 The trichotomy (in various orders) occurs in several other papyrus letters: SB XII 11144 (VI/VII); P. Oxy. VIII 1161 (IV); and P. Neph. 17 (mid-IV). See also P. Coll. Youtie II 91 (VI/VI), an amulet. For the latter, see now O. Montevecchi, Amuleto cristiano, Bibbia e papiri. Luce dai papiri sulla Bibbia greca, Barcelona 1999, 149–153, esp. the discussion of the trichotomy, with further references, on 150–1. In none of these documents, however, is there any trace of the more developed liturgical reminiscence which features in P. Harr. 107.

27 Soul, Body, Spirit, Journal of Theological Studies 2, 1901, 273–4; and see the references quoted there. Classical antecedents of this and similar trichotomies are discussed by Naldini (Il Cristianesimo, op. cit., p. 427) who cites examples from Plato, Aristotle and Stoic writers.


29 See J. G. D. Dodds, The Holy Spirit in Early Christianity, Oxford 1964, 197 fn. 16 (where ‘trichotomy’ is treated as a term of art). The trichotomy is, however, a more ancient concept than this.参见G. J. Cuming, The Liturgy of St. Mark, Rome 1990, 48 (Doxology), 50 (Prayer of the Lord’s Prayer).

30 See J. G. D. Dodds, The Holy Spirit in Early Christianity, Oxford 1964, 197 fn. 16 (where ‘trichotomy’ is treated as a term of art). The trichotomy is, however, a more ancient concept than this.参见G. J. Cuming, The Liturgy of St. Mark, Rome 1990, 48 (Doxology), 50 (Prayer of the Lord’s Prayer).

31 Provisional text: ἀνέσπευδεν ὅ, ἑνὶ ἡμῶν ἴδων προσευχή ἐνίκησεν καὶ τεταμήσθη ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἐς ἡμᾶς ἀπεικόνισεν ἐπίθεσιν ἐργάσσετο ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀκρότητα ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀρετῆσεσσαί ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀκρότητα ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀκρότητα ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀκρότητα ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀκρότητα ἑνὶ ποιήσει ἀκρότητα.
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; but the Manichaean celebration of Easter is indeed explicitly stated by Augustine, from personal experience. Admittedly, Augustine berates his former co-religionists for their lack of enthusiasm (in comparison to their celebration of the bema festival); 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’; 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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34 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.).

35 C. Epist. Fund. 9.

36 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 Manichean 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 Ἐορτή Φορμουθί (‘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.

37 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’; 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. 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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38 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.

39 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.
P. Harr. 107 (published by courtesy of the Woodbrooke Trustees);