

A MANICHAEAN 'BLOOD-LIBEL'?

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Within the multi-volume *Kitāb al-Aghānī* ('Book of Songs') of Abū'l Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, there is preserved for us a curious anecdote featuring a sharp exchange of verbal barbs between the eighth-century litterateurs and satirists Baššār b. Burd¹ and Ḥammād 'Ajrad.² Neither Baššār nor Ḥammād were renowned for their orthodox piety, and both figures enjoyed a reputation for dissoluteness and irreverence that contemporaries and later commentators often branded as *zandaqa*. 'Abd al-Jabbār numbers both of them among 'the leaders of the dualists,' a list of whom he found in al-Nawbaḥṭī and al-Misma'ī.³ It remains unclear whether either bard merited such a charge in terms of an actual religious affiliation or sympathy,⁴ but the allusions made by both interlocutors suggest they were not ignorant of dualist rhetoric. Here is the passage:⁵

It was related to me by Aḥmad b. al-'Abbās al-'Askarī what al-Ḥasan b. 'Ulayl al-'Anazī – Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Muḥallabī – Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh Ibn Abī 'Uyayna reported about Ḥammād 'Ajrad when Baššār recited a saying about him (Ḥammād 'Ajrad):

O Nabataean (?), one 'head' is (already) heavy for me;
Carrying two 'heads' is an even weightier matter!
Charge someone other than me with the worship of two (lords),
And I will occupy myself with the One!⁶

¹ R. Blachere, "Baššār b. Burd, Abū Mu'adh," *EF* 1.1080-82.

² C. Pellat, "Ḥammād 'Ajrad," *EF* 3.135-36. See also G. Vajda, "Les zindīqs en pays d'Islam au debut de la période abbaside," *RSO* 17 (1937-38) 203-206; M. Chokr, *Zandaqa et zindīqs en Islam au second siècle de l'Hégire* (Damas: Institut française de Damas, 1993) 265-72.

³ 'Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī, *Al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa'l-'adl* (ed. T. Husayn, et al.; Cairo: Al-Shirkah al-'Arabīyah lil-Tibā'ah wa'l-Nashr, 1958-66) 5.9-12.

⁴ Note however the statement found in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* 13.71: 'Abū Nūwās said: I had thought that Ḥammād 'Ajrad was accused of *zandaqa* only on account of the shamelessness of his poetry until (the time) when I was imprisoned in a jail with *zanādiqa*. Then (I learned) that Ḥammād 'Ajrad was an *imām* among their *imāms*, and that he had composed poetry which combined verse couplets (which) they would recite in their prayers!' Text translated from S.H. Taqīzādeh and A.A. Šīrāzī, *Manī va din-e u* (Teheran: Ānjamān-e Irānshīnāsī, 1335 A.H./1956) 141 (§24); see also Vajda, *RSO* 17 (1937-38) 205; F. Gabrieli, "La «zandaqa» au I^{er} siècle abbaside," *L'élaboration de l'Islam: Colloque de Strasbourg 12-13-14 juin 1959* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961) 25-26.

⁵ Abū'l Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* 13.73 *apud* Taqīzādeh-Šīrāzī, *Manī va din-e u* 142.

⁶ Note the slightly variant texts supplied by Vajda, *RSO* 17 (1937-38) 205.

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(Ḥammād replied): By God, I do not care for this saying, for he truly irritates me with his ignorance of *zandaqa*. People who believe that the *zanādiqa* worship a head are mistaken. He must think that fools do not know it, since this saying is spoken by the vulgar – there is no truth to it. What's more, he, by God, knows *zandaqa* better than Mānī knew it!

Of particular interest in this repartee is the deliberate wordplay involving the word 'head' (رأس) and its contextual association with an accusation of adherence to Manichaeism. On the one hand, the locution 'heads' is being used here in the connotative sense of 'first principles': Muslim thinkers were quite aware that Manichaeism professed the ontological priority of the two 'principles' Light and Darkness.⁷ At the same time, Ḥammād's indignant retort invokes and then disdainfully dismisses a popular rumor that *zanādiqa*, more particularly disciples of Mani, 'worship a head' (تعبد رأسا). Whose head? From whence stems this latter allegation?

Some light is shed on this topic from two relatively early reports found in the Syriac chronicle tradition. The first account appears in the *Chronicon Anonymum de ultimis regibus Persarum* ('Khuzistan Chronicle'),⁸ a work which focuses on events transpiring under the final Sasanian rulers, and it occurs immediately after an intriguing notice about a Jewish messianic disturbance in Mesopotamia:

Again, in the region of Bih Quwadh⁹ some Manichaeans were caught in a town by the name of Štrw (Shushtar?). They say that they (Manichaeans) quarantine a man within an underground chamber for a year for the sake of his head. They feed him anything he wants for an entire year, and then they slaughter him (as) a sacrifice to the demons, and use his head for divination and magical spells during the whole of that year. Every year they slaughter such a one.

⁷ Vajda, *RSO* 17 (1937-38) 205. The Manichaeans themselves seemed to favor a different terminology for these 'principles'; namely, 'root' (اصل) and 'nature' (كون). See H.-C. Puech, *Le manichéisme: Son fondateur – sa doctrine* (Paris: Civilisations du Sud, 1949) 159-61 n.285; G. Monnot, *Penseurs musulmans et religions iraniennes: 'Abd al-Jabbār et ses devanciers* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1974) 153 n.1.

⁸ Regarding this important chronicle, see J.B. Segal, "Syriac Chronicles as Source Material for the History of Islamic Peoples," *Historians of the Middle East* (ed. B. Lewis and P.M. Holt; London: Oxford University Press, 1962) 252; S.P. Brock, "Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History," in idem, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984) VII 23-24; idem, "Syriac Historical Writing: A Survey of the Main Sources," in idem, *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (Hampshire: Variorum, 1992) I 25. Brock suggests as a date of composition circa 670-680 CE.

⁹ ܒܝܗܩܘܘܕܗ. Presumably this is the district meant: it connotes the region between the ruins of ancient Babylon and the southern marshlands. See G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the Time of Timur* (Cambridge: University Press, 1905) 81; M. Gil, "The Babylonian Encounter and the Exilarchic House in the Light of Cairo Geniza Documents and Parallel Arab Sources," *Judaeano-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies* (Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations 3; ed. N. Golb; Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997) 154.

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¹⁵ C. Brockelmann, *I*
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Moreover they bring (to him) maidens who have known no man, and they all have intercourse with him. Any child who is engendered from one of these (unions) they immediately boil until its flesh and bones become as (soft as) oil. Next they pound it in a mortar and mix it with flour and make little cakes from it. They feed each of their adherents one of these cakes (so that) he might never renounce Mānī. All of them (in this instance) were caught by divine providence when a certain student whom they sought to quarantine managed to escape from them. They were hung along with some whores who were sequestered among them and who engaged in their misconduct. They were in all about seventy individuals.¹⁰

A second, much fuller testimony to this macabre practice is found in the so-called *Chronicle of Zuqnin*,¹¹ a Christian work in Syriac which dates from the latter half of the eighth century,¹² a period roughly contemporary with the activity of both Baššār and Ḥammād. The report reads as follows:

At that time¹³ the religion of the Manichaeans in Ḥarrān, a city of Mesopotamia, became an object of scorn. (It transpired thusly): They happened to have a monastery to the east of Ḥarrān, removed about one mile from the city.¹⁴ They would celebrate in that monastery once every year a great and horrible festival ...

When their festival was drawing near, they had a custom of kidnapping a man and sequestering him from year to year. At (the time of) the festival they would sacrifice him, sever his head, and place a coin in his mouth. They would put it (the head) in a niche,¹⁵ worship it, and practice divination by means of it.

Now as the day of their impious festival approached, they wanted to bring a man whom they could prepare for quarantine so that he might serve as their sacrifice for the festival (the year) after the one which was approaching. The leaders of the Manichaeans wrote a letter and went to the market-place in Ḥarrān. When a man was found whom they wanted, they took hold of him and said to him: 'Whatever wage you want (you will) receive: go and convey this letter from such-and-such a monastery to the head of the monastery; i.e., the (head) of (the Manichaean) monastery.' Due to the cleverness of the diabolical plan, he was unaware that it (the letter) was about the murder of the unfortunate fellow (i.e., his own). He made haste and departed, like a lamb to the slaughter. When he speedily arrived at that monastery, he approached the gate and asked those who were present before him for the head of their monastery and requested that they summon him. They quickly went in and informed him, and when the head of the monastery heard, he quickly came out and welcomed that man with honor and great rejoicing. He said

¹⁰ *Chronica Minora I* (CSCO I; ed. I. Guidi; Paris, 1903; reprinted, Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1960) 33.14-34.2.

¹¹ Attention was already directed to this curious report by J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* (3 vols. in 4; Romae: Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719-28) 3/2.612-13. See also I. de Beausobre, *Histoire critique de Manichée et du manichéisme* (2 vols.; Amsterdam, 1734-39; reprinted, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984) 2.743-44.

¹² See Brock, "Syriac Sources" 20; idem, "Syriac Historical Writing" 10-13.

¹³ The year previously mentioned was 1076 S.E., corresponding to 764-65 CE.

¹⁴ Note the Sabian sanctuary named 'Dayr Kādī' mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* (cf. B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm* [2 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1970] 2.757 n.54; 764: 767).

¹⁵ C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum* (2d ed.; Halle, 1928; reprinted, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1982) 320 offers options like 'window, shelf, recess, niche.'

to him, 'Come, enter (the compound) and relax for a short time: eat some food, and then you may take away an answer for your letter and depart in peace.' When they brought the man in, they passed from one room into another, and a second, and a third, more than six or seven (in all), until they reached the man who had been previously quarantined since last year and who was destined to serve as sacrifice for the approaching festival. He (the leader) instructed him, 'Sit here next to this man.' And after he sat down, that man (the imminent victim) said to him, 'You poor guy! How unfortunate for you!' Then that (other man) responded, 'Why so?' That (first) one continued, 'I acted the same (as you), and when I came here I found another man who was seated (here). During their festival they sacrificed him, and his head is now in that niche, before which they light a candle. They worship it and perform divination by means of it. Now they are preparing to kill me at this festival, and then you will sit here in my place until the next festival, when you yourself will become the sacrifice. However, if you want to escape from here, listen to me and prepare yourself. Watch for when they are ready to kill me (and) stand by my side. When my head falls upon the ground, snatch it up quickly while scattering my blood and directing (it) toward the door. (Even) if they cry out to you, or if they plead with you, or if they promise you numerous gifts, do not set it down; and if they want to seize you, shake some of the blood at them and they will flee from you.'

The man silently received (this advice) and then did and performed (it) with a noble passion just like he had said to him without omitting anything. When they killed him, he grabbed his head and ran toward the door. They for their part were pleading and shouting for him to put (it) down, but that (man) was not willing (to do so) for any (of their) gifts or promises, nor did he lose his nerve out of fear of them. They were unable to get close to him.

With swift feet he took it (the head) and came before 'Abbas,¹⁶ the 'Emir of Jazīra¹⁷ at that time. When 'Abbas learned what had happened, he dispatched (police), arrested, and imprisoned all of them – men, women, and children. After subjecting them to various types of torture, he impounded everything which they owned, and (thereby) acquired from them more than four or five hundred thousand *minas*.¹⁸

These peculiar allegations clarify the insults leveled by Baššār and Ḥammād against one another. The 'head' which Manichaeans reportedly 'worship' was the product of a gruesome human sacrifice which supposedly took place on an annual basis. An unsuspecting victim, lured within a Manichaean temple complex on some false pretext, was held captive there until he could be ritually slaughtered. His severed head was then installed in a niche, candles were lit before it, and adoration was directed toward it. The reason for this attentive service was that the head possessed divinatory powers which were highly val-

¹⁶ The brother of the caliph al-Manṣūr (754-775 CE).

¹⁷ Syriac ܩܙܝܪܐ is Arabic الجزيرة, the district of upper Mesopotamia in which Ḥarrān was located. See Le Strange, *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* 86-114.

¹⁸ Translated from *Incerti auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum* (CSCO 91, 104, scrip. syri 43, 53; 2 vols.; ed. J.-B. Chabot; Paris: Reipublicae, 1927) 2.224.1-226.3. See also *Chronique de Denys de Tell-Mahré: Quatrième partie* (ed. J.-B. Chabot; Paris: Librairie Émile Bouillon, 1895) 80.1-82.2 (text); 68-70 (translation).

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¹⁹ I am deliberately em der'; strictly speaking, it is procurement and manipulat *Blood Libel Legend: A Ca* Press, 1991); also R. Po-c Press, 1988) 1-12. A fund E. Bickerman, "Ritualmorc *Studies in Jewish and Ch.* J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil. Modern Antisemitism* (New lishing Company, 1961) 12

ued by the Manichaeans, an endowment whose precise mechanics remain unexplained by these Syriac testimonia. The statements of Baššār and Ḥammād clearly presuppose their audience's familiarity with these scandalous rumors. Moreover, Baššār's wordplay with the term 'head' is eerily echoed in the dark humor visible in the narrative movement of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* account. The youth who is in danger of losing his 'head' (ܒܫܝܢ) asks to see the 'head' (ܒܫܝܢ) of the monastery,' and his request is in fact granted on two separate levels of meaning. Not only is he received by the abbot, the 'head' who supervises the daily operations of the establishment, but he also eventually sees the severed 'head' which he himself is destined to replace when he takes his turn in the niche as the ceremonial 'head of the monastery.'

It is of course ludicrous to suppose that Manichaeans actually engaged in the scurrilous behavior that is sketched in these chronicles. Prohibitions against bloodshed, sexual activity, and the consumption of flesh are fundamental components of the Manichaean worldview. Ḥammād himself admits its absurdity: it is instead a slander spread by the vulgar classes, among whom of course Baššār (by implication) should be numbered for his egregious perpetuation of this simple-minded stereotype. The accusation is in fact an easily recognizable version of the infamous 'blood-libel' charge periodically leveled against Jews and Judaism by certain factions of the Gentile world since late antiquity.¹⁹ One might compare the general outline of the Christian reports supplied above with the structure of the tale repeated by the first-century Egyptian anti-Semite Apion regarding what the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV supposedly discovered when he entered the Jerusalem Temple. Therein, the tale relates, Antiochus encountered a Greek prisoner, who upon beholding the monarch piteously beseeched him and implored his aid. Responding to the king's request for an explanation, the captive informed him that he was a Greek traveler who had been kidnapped by the Jews and then held *incommunicado* in the Temple. Although treated to sumptuous feasts by his captors, he grew suspicious of their attentions and finally learned the purpose of his quarantine:

The practice was repeated annually at a fixed season. They would kidnap a Greek foreigner, fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they

¹⁹ I am deliberately employing the label 'blood-libel' in the very broad sense of 'ritual murder'; strictly speaking, it is usually limited to a specific type of ritual killing whose intent is the procurement and manipulation of human blood. See the introductory remarks in A. Dundes, *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); also R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 1-12. A fundamental study of this specific type of ritual murder remains that of E. Bickerman, "Ritualmord und Eselskult," *MGWJ* 71 (1927) 171-87, 255-64; reprinted in idem, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1976-86) 2.225-55; see too J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven, 1943; reprinted, Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1961) 124-55.

slew him, sacrificed his body with their customary ritual, partook of his flesh (lit. *uiscera*), and, while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks. The remains of their victim were then thrown into a pit. The man (Apion continues) stated that he had now but a few days left to live, and implored the king, out of respect for the gods of Greece, to defeat this Jewish plot upon his life-blood and to deliver him from his miserable predicament.²⁰

One can easily discern that several details of the atrocities attributed to the Manichaeans by the Syriac Christian reports provided above are modeled on this Antiochus legend. These include the murder's synchronization with an annual festival, the involuntary 'selection' of an appropriate victim, his sequestration within a 'sacred' precinct, and at least with regard to the excerpt from the 'Khuzistan Chronicle,' the sensory privileges accorded the victim and a communal consumption of human flesh.

J. Rives has lately supplied a convincing analysis of the ways in which classical and early Christian writers exploit the motif of ritual human sacrifice in their descriptions of social behavior.²¹ For Greek and Roman authors of the pre-Christian era, 'human sacrifice' serves as a marker of distance from what is accepted as 'normative' culture. This distance may be physical, as in the geographic separation of a certain people or tribe from the lands inhabited by Greeks or Romans, but it is more often than not conceptual and hence cultural in nature. From that latter perspective, those peoples or sub-cultures (e.g., Jews; Christians) described as practicing human sacrifice are quintessentially 'other': they share neither 'our' values nor even 'our' humanity, even though they may inhabit the same provinces or cities which 'we' do. Manipulation of the motif of 'human sacrifice' thus becomes a rhetorical strategy which highlights questions of identity and difference *vis-à-vis* the dominant (in this case educated Greco-Roman) social and cultural patterns of behavior.

Although emanating centuries later out of a different cultural milieu, the previously cited Syriac Christian testimonia to Manichaean atrocities clearly exploit this same complex of ideas. The identities of the primary actors in this drama change in tandem with the rising (or falling) fortunes and agendas of various political and religious bodies. The triumph of Christianity – and eventually Islam – provides fresh opportunities for an adoption and revision of the older ritual murder discourse in order to combat ideologies and practices perceived to be aberrant, such as Manichaeism. Even though Manichaeans may

²⁰ Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.95-96; translation is that of H.St.J. Thackeray from *Josephus in Nine Volumes I: The Life, Against Apion* (LCL; Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1926) 331; note also M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974-84) 1.411-12. For discussion, see P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997) 62-65.

²¹ J. Rives, "Human Sacrifice Among Pagans and Christians." *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995) 65-85.

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from it, this has been long established in their book entitled *Kitāb al-Ḥātīfī*.²⁷ In it are their marvels resulting from incantations,²⁸ spells, knots, figures, pendants (?) made from the body parts of various types of animals like the pig, donkey, raven, and other such (animals), fumigations, and likenesses of animals engraved on the stones of their signet-rings, which in their opinion are held to work well for a variety of purposes. I myself have seen a number of them engraved on the stones of their signet-rings ... (?) and I have asked them about it, and they maintain that they obtain them in the ancient tombs of their dead and receive blessing through them.²⁹

Although Ibn al-Nadīm strays rather quickly from the 'divinatory head' to other types of Ṣābian sorcery, it is clear that this is the same 'head' which we met in the testimonies rehearsed above, here prepared and revered by the pagan inhabitants of Ḥarrān. Confirmation for the intimate relationship of these curious accounts is supplied by two separate 'recipes' contained in the quasi-Hermetic *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* ('Goal of the Sage') of Pseudo-Majrīfī, an Arabic compendium of magic and occult lore allegedly excerpted from earlier Chaldean, Persian, and Indian sources which later achieved some renown in medieval Europe in its Latin guise as the *Picatrix*.³⁰ The initial discussion of the Ṣābian 'head' reads as follows:

They (the Ṣābians) do some odd things which were we to introduce them here would prolong the book. *Among them is the head which some people believe can prophesy.* This is what they do: they place it opposite the head of a boy (?).³¹ And for this (head) they use a fair-haired man with blue eyes (and) joined eyebrows (and) abundant hair. They trick him using something he craves until they can lure him into a chamber of the temple – there his clothing is removed and he is seated in a basin previously filled with sesame oil of sufficient quantity to come up to his throat. (The basin) is then covered with its lid – his head sticks out – and they fasten down the lid and tighten the connection with lead. Only his head remains (visible), for his body is in the oil. Then they feed him a certain quantity of dried

²⁷ M.J. de Goeje suggests an emendation to *كتاب الحنفى* or *كتاب الحنفاء* 'Book of True Religion'; see his *Mémoire posthume de M. Dozy contenant de Nouveaux documents pour l'étude de la religion des Harraniens* (Leiden: Brill, 1884) 15-16; also T.M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 180.

²⁸ On this word, see Chwolsohn, *Ssabier* 2.138; F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London, 1892; reprinted, London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 1441.

²⁹ Compare the translation of Dodge, *Fihrist* 2.753-54. For further texts and discussion, see Chwolsohn, *Ssabier* 2.130-32, 137-55; de Goeje, *Mémoire posthume* 13-16; Green, *City of the Moon God* 178-80.

³⁰ See L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (8 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-58) 2.813-24; *Picatrix, The Latin Version of the Ghayat al-hakim: Text, Introduction, Appendices, Indices* (Studies of the Warburg Institute 39; ed. D. Pingree; London: Warburg Institute, 1986); R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 133. F.E. Peters terms the book 'Islam's most considerable piece of Hermetica ...'; quoted from his "Hermes and Harran: The Roots of Arabic-Islamic Occultism," *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson* (ed. M.M. Mazzaoui and V.B. Moreen; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990) 202.

³¹ See de Goeje, *Mémoire posthume* 85 n.2. A better reading is perhaps 'facing the head of the Dragon' (التنوين); see W. Hartner, "Notes on *Picatrix*," *Isis* 56 (1965) 448-49.

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³² 908-932 CE.

³³ Text translated from Magrīfī, *Das Ziel des V B.G. Teubner, 1933) 135 Weisen von Pseudo-Mag: tute, 1962) 146-47 (trans*

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Warburg Institute 39; ed.
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onor of Martin B. Dickson
Utah Press, 1990) 202.

perhaps 'facing the head of
5) 448-49.

figs which have been soaked in sesame oil every day and burn incense near his nose and his face (for the group terms it 'incense') and they utter their verbal incantations without ceasing (these actions) for forty days. They give him no water to drink, and whatever he excretes remains in that oil. (He remains in this condition) while his sinews soften, his joints are loosened, and his veins swell, and due to his 'softening' he can be shaped like wax. Then on the day when he is (deemed) ready, they gather there, recite their verbal incantations, burn their incense, take hold of his head, and pull it away from his first vertebrae. It (the head) stretches with their (tugging) and the veins adjacent to it until it completely separates from his spinal column, while all his torso remains behind in the oil. Then they situate it in a window-niche on a pile of cinders which they prepare from the residue of olives mixed with the ashes produced from when the rest of his corpse is incinerated, and they drape it with a fluffy cotton cloth. They then burn their incense, and that head communicates to them (information regarding) whether articles will be expensive or cheap, whether there will be a change of government, and what will take place in the world. Its eyes do not lose the power of sight; however, they no longer blink. Should they sometimes neglect some astral devotions, it (the head) will demand restitution from them. It rebukes them about things and informs them about what is enclosed in their minds. Sometimes they question it about science or technology, and it answers them. When they are disposing of the remains of its body from the basin, they extract its liver, dissect it, and obtain omens from it as to what they need to do; similarly, the bones of its hands and the position of the joints furnish evidence regarding what they need to do. They do not cut their hair, nor do they eat or drink anything except in its (the head's) name. They were exposed during the reign of Muqtadir:³² he issued orders to enter their temple, and inside it they discovered the head. After expelling them from the temple, he saw to its burial.³³

The second description of the Šābian 'head' in the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* reads as follows:

They (the Šābians) had a 'serpent-chamber': it was a temple which the public could not enter and into which no one could come. In it there was an artificial pit which had been excavated and made empty. When the sun entered (the sign of) the lion (i.e., the constellation Leo), they would procure a fair-haired youth from Cyprus, as we have described, for the making of the 'head.' He was clothed, decorated, and made to enter and wander about within it (the temple) among places where he could enjoy himself, as there were present there trees, flowers, and fragrant plants, and he could drink until he became intoxicated. When night fell he was carried to that temple and placed in that pit. He was soaked in sesame oil and received some dried red rose petals which were picked for him, being fed them in a soup that combined within it seven ingredients: mustard, lentils, chickpeas, rice, Indian peas, lupine, and wheat. And when it was the twenty-eighth day of the month Iyyār, they made him sniff and sneeze; afterwards, he was blind-

³² 908-932 CE.

³³ Text translated from de Goeje, *Mémoire posthume* 59.1-60.10; compare the text of Pseudo-Mağrīī, *Das Ziel des Weisen* (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 12; ed. H. Ritter; Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1933) 139.3-140.7 (text); H. Ritter and M. Plessner, "Picatrix": *Das Ziel des Weisen von Pseudo-Mağrīī* (Studies of the Warburg Institute 27; London: The Warburg Institute, 1962) 146-47 (translation).

folded and they brought him out at night to a deserted road and severed his head from his body. They buried the body, carried the head to Dayr Kādī,³⁴ and set it on top of an idol, where it would emit an unpleasant howl. From its howl they derived information as to whether the number of Šābians would increase or diminish, and whether they would enjoy favorable fortune or not. This (practice) was prescribed for them by a certain sage known as Barham al-Barhamī. He died in the land of India, and this name now designates a clan in India; namely, the Barāhima.³⁵ They have very many practices which were we to introduce them here would prolong the book and carry us away from our purpose.³⁶

It seems obvious that the testimonia surveyed thus far, whether directed against Manichaeans or Šābians, exploit a common formula. They feature a number of stock components: the 'head' allegedly revered by the sect is an actual human head; it is procured by deception from a 'foreigner' (i.e., stranger to the sect); its preparation for cultic use is usually coordinated with the sect's festal and/or astral calendar; the head supposedly 'prophesies' by emitting certain sounds or even intelligible speech; and it is customarily housed in a secret place of honor where certain prescribed devotional practices are rendered to it. On at least three separate occasions³⁷ the government intervened in order to put a stop to the horrible practice. Government interest in the suppression of the gruesome rite is also signaled by the eleventh-century Muslim polymath Bīrūnī within his own otherwise exemplary and sober discussion of Šābian religiosity: 'Likewise the Christian 'Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī in his response to the book of 'Abdallāh b. 'Ismā'il al-Hāšimī reports that they are famous for sacrificing human beings, but that they are unable today (to do so) openly.'³⁸ Does this last clause imply that the Šābians persisted in doing so

³⁴ See Ibn al-Nadīm above.

³⁵ F. Rahman, "Barāhima," *ET* 1.1031. For a careful discussion of the conflicting testimonies surrounding this curious group, see N. Calder, "The Barāhima: Literary Construct and Historical Reality," *BSOAS* 57 (1994) 40-51, together with the response of S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 145-62.

³⁶ Text translated from de Goeje, *Mémoire posthume* 58.2-17; compare the text of Pseudo-Maḡrībī, *Das Ziel des Weisen* (ed. Ritter) 228.7-20 (text); Ritter-Plessner, "Picatrix" 240-41 (translation).

³⁷ Assuming the sources are relatively accurate in their chronological notices. The *Chronicle of Zuqnin* and Pseudo-Maḡrībī name specific officials who can be dated to the late eighth and early tenth centuries respectively. While the *Khuzistan Chronicle* does not name a particular figure, the compilation of the *Chronicle* itself is not likely to be later than 680 CE, and if its narrative juxtaposition alongside the aforementioned Jewish messianic disturbance can be used for relative chronological sequencing, then the alleged attempt to decapitate the student transpired during the seventh century. With regard to the messianic disturbance, see S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (2d ed.; 18 vols.; New York and Philadelphia: Columbia University Press and Jewish Publication Society, 1952-83) 5.184; 375 n.46; also S.M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 22, although it is unclear why he dates the uprising 'around the year 720.'

³⁸ Bīrūnī, *Āthār* (ed. Sachau) 205.7-9: وكذلك حكى عبد المسيح بن اسحق الكندي النصراني عنهم في جوابه عن كتاب عبد الله بن اسمعيل الهاشمي انهم يعرفون بذبح الناس ولكن ذلك لا يمكنهم اليوم جهرا

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⁴⁰ Māturīdī, *Kitāb al*
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Arabica 13 (1966) 31.

⁴¹ K. Kessler, *Mani*:
370-72; Taqīzādeh-Šīrāz

⁴² Bīrūnī, *Āthār* (ed.
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⁴³ See P.E. Walker, *A*
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⁴⁴ S.M. Stern, "Abū l
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in private? The notices examined thus far expose precisely this kind of secret, conspiratorial activity on the part of both Šābians and Manichaeans!

It is of course absurd to suppose that either religious community engaged in ritual murder for the sake of a divinatory 'head.' As we have seen, accusations of this sort serve a rhetorical purpose in establishing the social boundaries among the constituent groups of a particular culture or civilization.³⁹ What is most intriguing about the present case is that an identical unusual and abhorrent practice is ascribed by both Christian and Muslim writers to two very different yet contemporaneous Mesopotamian religions. This perplexing circumstance is surely related to the apparent synonymy between the labels 'Manichaeen(s)' and 'Šābi'ūn' for a number of post-ninth century Muslim authors. For example, a recently discovered tractate from the tenth-century Ḥanafī theologian al-Māturīdī flatly states that 'the doctrine of the Šābi'ūn is the same as the doctrine of the Manichaeans';⁴⁰ a similar assertion is made by Abū'l Ma'ālī in his eleventh-century *Bayān al-Adyān*.⁴¹ Bīrūnī remarks that the Manichaeans living in Transoxania 'were known as Šābi'ūn.'⁴² Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī,⁴³ apparently following the lead of the early Ismā'īlī authority al-Nasafī, considers the Šābi'ūn to be the disciples of Mani, Bardaiṣan, and Marcion,⁴⁴ the preeminent representatives of dualist theology in the Islamicate realms.⁴⁵ However, S.M. Stern has persuasively shown that the key determinant for this synonymy is not an identity of doctrinal or behavioral *substance* (as some scholars have mistakenly concluded) but rather an identity of ideological *relation*: Manichaeism and Šābianism, viewed through the spectacles of the sanctioned Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), are simultaneously 'polytheist' aberrations and deviant heresies. Stern has also sug-

³⁹ In addition to the important article of Rives cited above, see now D. Frankfurter, "Ritual as Accusation and Atrocity: Satanic Ritual Abuse, Gnostic Libertinism, and Primal Murders," *HR* 40 (2001) 352-80.

⁴⁰ Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* 171.7: وقول الصابئين مثل قول المنانية. Text cited from the edition prepared by F. Kholeif, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd: Abū Mansūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī al-Samarqandī* (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq Éditeurs, 1970); see also G. Vajda, "Le témoignage d'al-Māturīdī sur la doctrine des manichéens, des dayṣānites et des marcionites," *Arabica* 13 (1966) 31.

⁴¹ K. Kessler, *Mani: Forschungen über die manichäische Religion* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1889) 370-72; Taqīzādeh-Šīrāzī, *Mānī* 492.

⁴² Bīrūnī, *Āthār* (ed. Sachau) 209.2: إلا الفرقة التي يسمروند بالمعروفة بالصابئين. See J. Pedersen, "The Šābians," *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne* (Cambridge, 1922; reprinted, Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1973) 389; F.C. de Blois, "The 'Sabians' (Šābi'ūn) in Pre-Islamic Arabia," *Acta Orientalia (Copenhagen)* 56 (1995) 52-53.

⁴³ See P.E. Walker, *Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī: Intellectual Missionary* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

⁴⁴ S.M. Stern, "Abū Hātim al-Rāzī on Persian Religion," *Studies in Early Ismā'ilism* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983) 33-36.

⁴⁵ On the archetypal status of this dualist triumvirate which was taken over from Christian writers like Ephrem, see F. de Blois, "Dualism in Iranian and Christian Traditions," *JRAS* series 3.10.1 (2000) 1-19.

gested a plausible cultural locale for this particular development. According to historical sources, it is in the city of Ḥarrān in northern Mesopotamia where the name 'Šābian' acquired its association with polytheist paganism. It is surely not accidental that the same city serves as the most common setting for the testimonies about human sacrifice, whether Šābian or Manichaean, examined above. The toponym 'Ḥarrān' would thus seem to be of some importance in the generation of a matrix of intertwined images involving ritual murder, talking 'heads,' and pagan depravity.

Confirmation for the crucial significance of the locale of Ḥarrān in this chain of imagery is supplied by a series of Jewish sources whose dating is roughly contemporaneous with the first two centuries of Muslim hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean world; i.e., the seventh and eighth centuries of the Common Era. These sources are concerned with the exegetical explication of a peculiar term occurring in one episode within the narrative cycle of the biblical patriarch Jacob. According to the biblical text, when Jacob suddenly effects his unannounced departure from his father-in-law Laban's estate in Ḥarrān, his wife Rachel seizes that opportunity to steal 'her father's *teraphim*.'⁴⁶ The Hebrew word *teraphim*, usually glossed in early translations and commentaries as 'idols' or 'images,' apparently denotes some type of material accessory to cultic activity and would seem to have a function in the context of divination. At this point in the Genesis narrative, it is exceedingly unclear why Rachel would take these objects. Although there are other biblical references to *teraphim*, the precise meaning of the term remains unknown, and hence later interpreters are not shy in suggesting possible explanations of the enigmatic word and motivations for Rachel's theft. One group of these exegetical sources is particularly pertinent for the present investigation.⁴⁷

Midrash Tanhuma, a homiletic collection of scriptural interpretations keyed to the weekly Torah readings, will serve as our first example of this current. The text is cited as it is rendered in the standard printed edition;⁴⁸ manuscript versions examined by the present author do not differ substantially from what is given here:⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Gen 31:19: 'ובן הלך לנו את צאנו ותנעב רחל את התרפים אשר לאביה' 'Now while Laban had gone to shear his flock, Rachel stole her father's *teraphim*.'

⁴⁷ For a detailed examination of these sources from the perspective of the history of biblical interpretation, see J.C. Reeves, "Talking Heads and *Teraphim*: A Postbiblical Current in Interpreting Genesis 31:19," (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ *Editio princeps* Constantinople 1522. I have used *Midrash Tanhuma 'al ḥamišah ḥumšey Torah* (Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, n.d.).

⁴⁹ See, for example, J. Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue, Volume I: The Palestinian Triennial Cycle: Genesis and Exodus* (repr. New York: Ktav, 1971) 320 (Hebrew section). Mann uses primarily a manuscript from the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in conjunction with previous publications of fragments by Poznanski and Wertheimer and another manuscript in the Sasoon Collection in London (*ibid.* 270).

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Yet these latter sources display no discernible interest in either Manichaeans or Šābians as avatars of a sinister Mesopotamian underworld of religious depravity. Instead, their primary intent is to shed light on the nature of the enigmatic *teraphim* appearing in this biblical narrative. The crucial equation effected by these Jewish sources between the divinatory *teraphim* of Laban and the disembodied heads allegedly revered by Manichaeans and Šābians hinges upon the cultural valence of the toponym Ḥarrān. 'Pagan' Ḥarrān (cf. Josh 24:2) after all is the locale where 'Laban the Aramaean' (לבן הארמי)⁵⁵ lived and from which Jacob wished to flee. Ḥarrān's stubborn allegiance to its 'pagan' roots assumed a legendary status in the textual universe of late antiquity, and it is ultimately responsible, as Stern has shown, for its inhabitants' eventual (post-ninth century) identification with the cryptic 'Šābians' of the Qur'ān (Q 2:62; 5:69; 22:17). Finally, as signaled above, Ḥarrān is the city most prominently associated with both the Manichaean and Šābian veneration of the 'head.' It is thus hardly surprising that Laban, one of the two biblical characters traditionally typecast as exponents of foreign idolatry,⁵⁶ should be eventually associated with this ancient slur and also portrayed as a devotee of the 'head.'

One final issue which will require further careful investigation involves the establishment of a plausible sequence of sources and influences for the ancient construction and application of this 'blood-libel' in its various stages. Rumors about ritual murder within exotic eastern cults are already circulating during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but precisely how and under which circumstances does this unusual form of the 'blood-libel' emerge? Why a disembodied talking head?⁵⁷ From the literary-critical standpoint, our extant sources are thoroughly interlocked and yield ambiguous answers. Nevertheless, the peculiar motif of a 'head' which 'talks' and offers guidance to a religious community may point to a possible resolution of this conundrum.

According to several sources, Manichaeans as part of their annual *Bema*-festival commemorating the death and ascension of their founder would install

⁵⁵ See Gen 25:20; 31:20, 24; cf. 28:5. The gentilic 'Aramaean' eventually functions in Jewish literature as a semantic marker for 'pagan.' See T. Nöldeke, "Die Namen der aramäischen Nation und Sprache," *ZDMG* 25 (1871) 113-31, esp. 115ff., where a number of examples are provided. Compare also the Hebrew text of Deut 26:5 with its Aramaic renditions in the targumim; note also *Gen. Rab.* 74.7.

⁵⁶ Laban and Balaam are frequently linked in medieval Jewish literature as malevolent sorcerers and idolaters. See, for example, *Zohar* 3.207b-208a and the lengthy list of citations supplied by J. Theodor in *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* (3 vols.; ed. J. Theodor and H. Albeck; reprinted, Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965) 2.618.

⁵⁷ The idol 'Baphomet' (an apparent distortion of 'Muhammad') allegedly venerated by the medieval Knights Templar is sometimes described as a skull or a human head. See P. Partner, *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and Their Myth* (Oxford, 1982; reprinted, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993) 34-35, 77-78, 138-44. I am grateful to Mr. Tudor Sala for calling this item to my attention.

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⁵⁹ A. Adam, *Texte zu*
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an icon or portrait of Mani upon the festal dais to serve as the focal point of their communal praise and adoration.⁵⁸ A few portraits of Mani have in fact been recovered,⁵⁹ although it is unclear whether these surviving images had an internal ritual function. At any rate, what is certain is that portraits of Mani – 'Mani-heads,' if you will – had a role in the Manichaean cult within the context of a festival which was celebrated just once a year. 'Mani-heads' were also ritually manipulated by his community's opponents. The tenth-century Muslim historian Mas'ūdī informs us that in order to escape execution by the state, prisoners arrested under the suspicion of being Manichaeans were compelled 'to spit upon a picture of Mānī,'⁶⁰ a repudiation calculated to expose the committed adherent who would presumably recoil from committing such impiety. Images of Mani were even employed for the purposes of proselytization, as the following anecdote recounted by Abū 'I Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, the tradent with whom we began this investigation, demonstrates:

'Alā' b. al-Bandār said: Al-Walīd⁶¹ was a *zindīq*. There was a man from Kalb who was advocating the doctrine of dualism. I visited al-Walīd one day and that Kalbī was with him, and between them there was a basket whose top was fastened with what appeared to me to be green silk. He (i.e., the caliph) said, 'Come closer, O 'Alā', and so I approached and he lifted up the silk. Inside the basket was a human image. Because mercury and ammonia had been applied to its eyelid, it would blink as if it were moving. He said, 'O 'Alā', this is Mānī! God sent no prophet prior to him, nor has He sent a prophet after him!' I replied, 'O Commander of the Faithful! Fear God and do not allow this charlatan to mislead you from your faith!' The Kalbī said to him, 'O Commander of the Faithful! Did I not warn you that 'Alā' could not tolerate this tradition?'⁶²

This seeming proliferation of 'Mani-heads,' whether produced for the purposes of adoration or of legal entrapment, perhaps points us in the right direc-

⁵⁸ See M. Tardieu, *Le manichéisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981) 92-93; and especially the sources collected by H.-C. Puech, "Liturgie et pratiques rituelles dans le manichéisme (Collège de France, 1952-1972)," in *idem*, *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) 257-58; 389-94, esp. 391. Puech therein calls attention to Eusebius's report about the adherents of Simon Magus who similarly 'prostrate themselves before pictures and images of Simon himself and of Helena, who was mentioned with him, and undertake to worship them with incense and sacrifices and libations' (*Hist. eccl.* 2.13.6; translation cited is that of K. Lake of the Loeb Classical Library edition).

⁵⁹ A. Adam, *Texte zum Manichäismus* (2d ed.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969) 105-106; Puech, "Liturgie" 257-58; W. Sundermann, "Ein übersehenes Bild Manis," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 12 (1985) 172-74.

⁶⁰ Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādīn al-jawhar: Les prairies d'or* (9 vols.; ed. C. Barbier de Meynard and P. de Courteille; Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1861-77) 7.15; Taqīzādeh-Šīrāzī, *Mānī va dīn-e-ū* 131 (§21). Reference cited from G. Strohmaier, "Hunayn b. Ishak as a Philologist," *Ephram-Hunayn Festival: Baghdad 4-7/2/1974* (Baghdad: Al-Ma'arif Press, 1974) 537; note also the references supplied by Vajda, *RSO* 17 (1937-38) 185.

⁶¹ The caliph Walīd II (743-744 CE).

⁶² *Kitāb al-Aghānī* 6.131-32. Text translated from Taqīzādeh-Šīrāzī, *Mānī va dīn-e-ū* 138 (§24). See also Chokr, *Zandaqa* 254; T. Fahd, "Šābi'a," *ET* 8.676.

tion for uncovering the origin of the Manichaean 'blood-libel.' Descriptions of the ritual attention annually lavished on portraits or busts of Mani by his devotees during the *Bema*-festival, after being maliciously distorted by the religion's intolerant opponents, become fanciful tales of idolatrous service, criminal mischief, and ritual decapitation.

آرام من جامعة أكسفورد.

The

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(رد)، الدكتور سبستيان بروك
ين - الولايات المتحدة
مايكل غوليوكوسكي (جامعة
ر بيتر ماشينست (جامعة
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