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# Religion and the everyday life of Manichaeans in Kellis: beyond light and darkness

Mattias Brand, *Religion and the everyday life of Manichaeans in Kellis: beyond light and darkness. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean studies*, 102. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022. Pp. 383. ISBN 9789004508224

## Review by

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Lived religion has emerged in recent years as an important theme in ancient and late ancient studies, finding its way into several monographs, collected volumes, essays, and even projects funded by the European Research Council.<sup>[1]</sup> This quotidian turn in pre-modern studies has overlapped considerably with the material turn, drawing on documentary papyri, archaeological finds, and visual evidence in order to challenge long-standing ecclesiastical/scholarly narratives and assumptions about cultural or religious identity and interaction in everyday life based primarily on literary texts.

The subject of lived religion—along with the twin emphasis on material culture—stand at the analytical center of Mattias Brand's *Religion and the Everyday Life of Manicheans in Kellis*. Brand highlights the implications of a lived-religion approach to Manichaeism through seven chapters that are supplemented by an introduction, a concluding chapter, two useful appendices (in addition to several charts/appendices that appear within chapters), an extensive bibliography, and three helpful indices (sources, names, and subjects).

The book's Introduction not only provides a basic overview of Manichaeism and summarizes the chapters that follow, but it also

details his Everyday Groupness Model, which constitutes a synthesis of diverse theoretical perspectives (e.g., Roger Brubaker’s warning against *groupness* and the heuristic distinction between religiously “marked” and “unmarked” language) that together create a middle-ground hermeneutic between simplistic and harmonized large-scale narratives of religious interaction and conflict during late antiquity, on the one hand, and deconstructionist or individualistically oriented readings of late antique religion, on the other hand.

In Chapter 1, Brand analyzes the letters of Makarios and Pamour (and those of their families), situating these letters within their archaeological contexts in Kellis. This papyrological material simultaneously reflects concerns of everyday life in late antiquity for two families (e.g., the intersecting domains of travel and business) and the complex—and often context-specific—ways religious language engaged with those quotidian concerns; the letters boast idioms that might go back to specifically Manichaean liturgical conventions (e.g., “Father, the God of Truth”) as well as those that would be at home among Christians of various stripes (e.g., the tripartite division of body, soul, and spirit). Chapter 2 focuses on late antique Kellis, emphasizing through archaeological and visual-cultural analysis the village’s embeddedness in the worlds of the Nile Valley and the Roman Empire, more generally. As part of this discussion, Brand challenges simplistic notions of a persecution of the Manicheans, underscoring that, while small-scale abuse might have occurred, there is little evidence for the massive persecution of the group that has characterized traditional scholarly narratives.

Brand then turns to a series of themes, which have figured prominently in Manichean studies, and which can be illuminated by (new) finds from Kellis (e.g., wooden boards, archaeological records, and documentary papyri). Chapter 3 focuses on self-designation. Brand argues here that, while writers deployed specifically Manichean self-designators (e.g., “light mind”), they largely used more common self-identifiers associated with village, family, and the like (e.g., [fictive] kinship language, such as father). In an excursus, Brand addresses the relationship between the Coptic language and Manichean identity, stressing in close dialogue with the larger thesis of the chapter that “Coptic...did not correlate with a clearly demarcated religious group, but with a local social network that included family, village, and religious connections” (153). Chapter 4 underscores how gifts, almsgiving, and economic transaction in Kellis transgressed our tidy borders between

economy, village support, and religious obligation. Brand emphasizes that the letters from Kellis do not typically frame gift-giving and similar activities (e.g., the *agape* meal) in distinctively Manichean (theological) terms, but organize such exchanges around “everyday domestic support, economic interaction, and charitable distribution” (196).

The theme of group identity looms large in Chapter 5. Drawing on the work of sociologists, such as Richard Jenkins, Brand notes how the daily, weekly, occasional, and annual gatherings of the Manicheans in Kellis (e.g., the annual Bema festival and daily communion with the elect)—which, according to Brand, reflect a “congregational group style”—supported their group identity. Brand argues that, despite the gaps in the extant evidence (e.g., a dearth of information about the buildings in which these gatherings took place), the attendant ritual performances (esp. singing and praying) and gestures (e.g., prostration) would have intensified a sense of Manichean belonging while simultaneously creating the possibility for conflicts and social tension. In Chapter 6, Brand focuses his attention on the funerary practices in Kellis, highlighting how the textual evidence (e.g., the letter of Matthaïos to Maria and the so-called “Seven Stages hymn” found on a wooden board) shows the presence of grief over the death of loved ones and the activation of Manichean groupness in rituals at the end of life and after death. Such sources stand in marked contrast to the archaeological evidence for funerary practice in the western and eastern cemeteries of (late) antique Kellis, which not only raises probing historical questions (e.g., how did people in Kellis treat corpses?), but also suggests that Manicheans more or less followed the funerary trends and developments in their local environs. The seventh and final chapter is dedicated to scribal activity in Kellis (especially in Houses 1–3). Brand demonstrates that Manichean scribes (consisting of both the elect and certain catechumens) copied a range of texts—including specifically Manichean texts and non-Manichean materials (e.g., classical literature, spells, and biblical texts)—on different materials (papyrus and wooden board), in diverse languages (Greek, Coptic, and Syriac), and for various purposes (e.g., for education, divination, and liturgical performance). This chapter not only underscores how the Manicheans in Kellis participated in a robust scribal culture, but it also hints once again at how Manichean everyday practice was formed at the intersection of distinctively Manichean traditions and elements taken from local and global (religious) worlds. The Conclusions highlight how an emphasis on quotidian religious

practices can illuminate the complexities and diverse constructions of Manichean groupness in late antiquity.

Brand has produced a well-informed and highly nuanced analysis of late antique Manichean life in Kellis. The image of Manichaeism in late-antique Kellis that emerges from this book is one of a complex and ever-shifting relationship between Manichean religious identity or “groupness,” on the one hand, and the exigencies of quotidian existence across a range of social contexts (e.g., family, economy, and scribal culture), on the other hand. As part of this portrait, Brand engages critically with a broad and diverse collection of sources (both material and textual), noting their intrinsic ambiguities and the difficulties they present for historical reconstruction (e.g., the actual persecution of Manicheans and the Manichean treatment of corpses). Brand’s effective use of theories drawn from sociology, religious studies, and adjacent disciplines has allowed him to develop a robust hermeneutic through which he is able to reread Manichean daily life. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is his emphasis on the implications of embodiment in practices, such as prayer, signing, and prostration, for the construction of Manichean groupness.

Although Brand’s promotion of a scholarly approach to late antiquity that appreciates “the more mundane reality of everyday life” (298) is commendable, the theoretical model that informs his perspective at times presents religious identity in rather discrete terms. Brand’s isolation of late antique religion is largely based on his synthesis of Bernard Lahire’s notion of plural identities and Ann Swidler’s distinction between “integrated” and “segregated” modes, the latter of which refers to the different ways people approach the respective fusion or separation of “cultural repertoires and personal experiences.” According to Brand, while the elect were able to integrate Manichean ideas into their everyday situations, catechumens by and large operated within a quotidian existence characterized by the segregated mode in which “[m]ost situations could be navigated without the activation of a religious identity” (300). To be sure, there is analytical utility in isolating late antique expressions, rites, and practices that we would regard as specifically “religious” to interpret and assess Manichean texts and thought. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced that it is productive to characterize “religious identity” in late antiquity as segregated or that “religious identity” has the heuristic power to serve as a discrete antithesis to the intricate conceptions of daily experience implicit behind the seemingly “mundane” language of late antique

sources.

Such quibbles over taxonomy notwithstanding, Mattias Brand has produced a well-conceived and nuanced study of Manichean life in late antique Kellis that usefully brings theoretical insights to bear on textual, material, and visual evidence. I would strongly recommend this book to any historian or student interested in Manichaeism or lived religion in late antiquity.

## Notes

[1] E.g., Kristina Sessa, *Daily Life in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Valentino Gasparini, Maik Patzelt, Rubina Raja et al. eds, *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020); Nicola Denzey Lewis, “Ordinary Religion in the Late Roman Empire: Principles of a New Approach,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021): 104–18. At least two European Research Council projects have an emphasis on lived religion during (late) antiquity: LAR (Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘Cults’ and ‘Polis Religion’ [2012–2017]; Grant agreement ID: 295555); EJCM (Early Jewish and Christian Magical Traditions in Comparison and Contact [2020–2025]; Grant agreement ID: 851466).