

# Succession of Prophets: Mani's Innovation and Earlier Traditions

## Mani's Doctrine of a Corrupted Succession of Prophets

**Mani (216–276 CE)** – the founder of Manichaeism – explicitly taught that he was the **final messenger** in a long succession of prophets. He revered figures from multiple older religions as genuine **“messengers of God”** who brought truth to different regions of the world, but he claimed their teachings became limited or corrupted over time <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. For example, Manichaean sources (preserved by later writers) quote Mani declaring: *“As once Buddha came to India, Zoroaster to Persia, and Jesus to the West, so now in this last age the prophecy has come through me, Mani, the messenger of the God of truth, in the land of Babylonia”* <sup>3</sup> <sup>2</sup>. In Mani's view, these earlier revelations of the true religion were **partial and localized** – taught in one language to one people – and “later adherents lost sight of the original truth” <sup>4</sup>. He saw his own revelation as a **universal message** destined to **supersede** all previous religions <sup>5</sup>. In fact, Arabic heresiographers record that Mani called himself **“the completion and the seal”** of the prophets (a claim strikingly similar to Islam's later concept) <sup>6</sup>. To prevent the corruption that befell earlier teachings, Mani took the novel step of writing down his scriptures and giving them canonical status in his lifetime <sup>5</sup> – a measure intended to **ensure doctrinal purity** (a strategy the Islamic prophet Muhammad would also later adopt <sup>7</sup>).

Manichaean texts and reports make clear that Mani's **“succession of prophets” trope** was central to his teaching. He taught that **divine wisdom** had been imparted repeatedly throughout history: *“Wisdom and [knowledge] have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God. So, in one age by the messenger called Buddha to India, in another by Zoroaster to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down in this last age through me, Mani”* <sup>2</sup>. According to later accounts, Mani even traced this chain back to **Adam** as the first recipient of divine knowledge <sup>8</sup>. In Mani's telling, each great prophet (Adam, and more prominently Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus) had taught essentially the same truth of the **“Religion of Light,”** but their followers either misunderstood or distorted those teachings over generations. For instance, Manichaean tradition held that Christians had corrupted Jesus's pure message – e.g. by deifying Jesus or abandoning strict asceticism – and that Mani's new revelation would restore the original truth <sup>9</sup>. In short, Mani portrayed **history as a progressive revelation**: each epoch had a prophet suited to a people, and **Mani himself was the final prophet** who came to **universalize** and **perfect** the earlier messages <sup>1</sup>.

## Earlier Jewish and Christian Views (Pre-3rd Century)

Prior to Mani, **mainstream Jewish and Christian traditions did not embrace any similar “chain of world-prophets” narrative** in which each new prophet founded a new religion due to the last one's corruption. In Jewish scripture, there is of course a series of prophets (from Moses and Isaiah to Jeremiah, etc.), but these prophets were seen as **calling Israel back to their existing covenant**, not inaugurating wholly new religions with each appearance. Each biblical prophet affirmed the same monotheistic faith and laws rather than rendering the previous message void. Importantly, **Jewish thought rejected the notion that the Torah was ever corrupted or needed replacement** – it taught that God's law given to Moses was eternally valid (any deviations were due to human disobedience, not a flawed revelation) <sup>10</sup>. Later, when some religions (like Islam and Manichaeism) accused Jews of

corrupting or losing their scripture, Jewish scholars vehemently denied this, asserting that **the original revelation had been preserved** in Judaism <sup>10</sup>. In short, the Second-Temple and early Rabbinic Jewish worldview did **not** anticipate a sequence of new prophets each abrogating the previous; instead, prophecy was viewed as a series of inspired figures within one covenantal framework, ending (for many Jews) with prophets like Malachi or for some sects with the expectation of a single future messianic figure.

Early **Christianity** likewise did not promote a recurring trope of successive, universal prophets correcting one another. Christians saw **Jesus Christ as the fulfillment** of the Hebrew prophecies – **the Messiah** – and **“last” in a sense of completing God’s revelation** (Hebrews 1:1-2, for example, says God spoke through the prophets “but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son”). After Jesus, the mainstream Christian expectation was **not** for a new prophet with a new law, but rather the **Second Coming** of Christ himself to consummate history. The Church did recognize the gift of **prophecy** continuing in a limited way among Christians (e.g. prophets in the Book of Acts and in 2nd-century movements), but these were not viewed as founders of new religions or bearers of a new, superseding revelation. In fact, the emergence of **Montanism** in the mid-2nd century – a movement whose leaders claimed prophetic inspiration to give new directives – was largely condemned by the Great Church. Montanists believed the Holy Spirit was providing fresh prophecy, but even they did not claim that previous messages were “corrupted” or that they were starting a different religion; they operated within a Christian context (awaiting Jesus’s return). There was no concept that Buddha or Zoroaster (figures outside the Biblical world) were prophets — such an idea would have been foreign to Jews and Christians of the first few centuries. **Salvific truth in Judaism and early Christianity was seen as singular and continuous**, not as a series of distinct dispensations sent to different nations.

It is telling that **no Jewish or Christian writings before Mani explicitly outline a serial prophet-schema** like Mani’s. For example, while Second Temple Jewish literature and apocrypha do lament periods of sin or predict future restorations, they envision restoration through **one awaited Messiah or a renewal of Israel**, not a recurring global pattern of new religions. Gnostic sects contemporary with early Christianity did sometimes posit multiple revealers or incarnations of divine figures (e.g. some Gnostic texts speak of prophets like **Seth, Enoch, or Jesus as bearers of secret wisdom in different ages**). However, those ideas remained esoteric and were not a public “trope” of successive world prophets in the way Manichaeism advertised. **Mani’s synthesis was unprecedented** in that he consciously **linked diverse religious heroes into one lineage** of truth. Historian Jason BeDuhn observes that *Mani’s thought represents a milestone in the development of the very concept of “religion” as a global phenomenon* – Mani treated religions as historically separate yet fundamentally related revelations, something novel for that era <sup>11</sup>. In short, neither the Jewish prophets nor Jesus’s early followers articulated the idea that God sends one prophet after another, each founding a new dispensation because the previous one was spoiled. That trope **cannot be found in any robust form before the 3rd century**; it appears essentially **with Mani**.

## Mani’s Possible Influences and Innovations

Why did Mani conceive this bold idea of a **universal succession of prophets**? Scholars suggest that Mani’s historical context in **3rd-century Sasanian Persia**, at a crossroads of civilizations, was crucial. He was exposed to **a diversity of religious traditions** – Judaeo-Christian baptist groups (like the Elkasaites or Mandaeans) in Mesopotamia, Zoroastrian dualism in Persia, and reports of Buddhism from India. This milieu may have inspired Mani to integrate multiple histories of revelation into a single framework. Notably, some **Eastern traditions had their own notions of sequential revelation** that could have influenced Mani. For instance, **Buddhism** by Mani’s time taught that **multiple Buddhas** appear across the ages: Gautama Buddha was simply the latest in a series of enlightened ones (with past Buddhas before him and the future Buddha Maitreya to come). This is conceptually similar to a succession of

revealers, though in Buddhism each Buddha's teaching is seen as a **renewal after the previous Dharma is forgotten**, rather than explicitly saying each was "corrupted" by followers. **Jainism** likewise spoke of a sequence of 24 **Tirthankaras** (ford-makers) reviving the path in different eras. Mani, traveling as far as northwest India, was likely aware of the idea that spiritual truth had multiple inaugurations over time.

However, **Mani's formulation was distinct** in that he *synchronized* prophets of **different cultures into one lineage** and emphasized deliberate **corruption of teachings** as the reason new prophets were needed. Zoroastrianism, for example, revered **Zarathustra (Zoroaster)** as its single great prophet and anticipated future saviors (the *Saoshyants*), but it did not suggest Buddha or Jesus were among them. Early Christians saw **their faith as universal**, but still rooted in the line of Israel's prophets fulfilled by Christ – they did not include sages of India or Persia in that line. Mani's genius (or audacity) was to say **all these figures – Adam, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus – were agents of the same God** and that he, Mani, was their **successor and the final "seal."** This grand integration essentially **invented the concept of a world religion that unifies prior traditions** <sup>1</sup>. It also implicitly **criticized those earlier faiths**: if Mani's revelation was needed, it meant Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., each preserved only fragments of the truth and had deviated in various ways. For example, Mani taught that **Jewish and Christian scriptures had been altered** and that Jesus's original teachings (e.g. about asceticism and the rejection of matter) were not fully followed by the Church <sup>9</sup>. In a similar vein, he likely held that **Zoroastrians and Buddhists** misunderstood aspects of their founders' messages (perhaps by not recognizing the ultimate dualism of light vs. matter that Mani preached).

One possible precursor to Mani's idea within his own land was the **Elchasai/Elkesai sect**, a Jewish-Christian baptist movement in Mesopotamia. They claimed a **Book of Elchasai** with new revelation around the early 2nd century and respected multiple prophets (including perhaps **Zoroaster and Buddha** in some fashion) <sup>12</sup>. Some scholars think Mani's father was associated with such baptist groups <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>, which might have opened Mani's mind to the existence of other holy men outside the Biblical tradition. But even the Elchasaites did not construct a clear chain of world prophets as Mani later did; Mani's vision was more **expansive and systematic**. He consciously **united elements from Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism** into a single system <sup>15</sup>. In dedicating his holy book *Šābuhragān* to the Persian king, Mani explicitly named **"Zarathustra, Buddha, Jesus, and Mani"** as a succession of prophets <sup>16</sup> – effectively canonizing this trope in scripture. This universality was **Mani's own innovation**, born from the pluralistic environment of the late antique Near East.

## Influence on Islam's Prophetic Paradigm

Just a few centuries after Mani, the rise of **Islam (7th century)** brought a strikingly similar doctrine: Muhammad taught that **God sent messengers to every nation** in the past, bringing essentially one faith, but that their messages became altered or were partially forgotten, necessitating renewal – and that **he, Muhammad, was the final Prophet** confirming and correcting the previous revelations. The Quran explicitly lists many earlier prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc.) and emphasizes that humans **"changed the words"** or failed to uphold God's previous scriptures. This Islamic view of history as a **progression of prophetic missions culminating in the Qur'an** parallels the Manichaean trope (though Islam's list of prophets is largely Semitic/Biblical and does not include figures like Buddha or Zoroaster by name). Some scholars have wondered whether the concept of the **"Seal of the Prophets"** in Islam was influenced by Manichaeism. Notably, Mani's followers had reportedly **called him the "Seal of the Prophets"** centuries before Muhammad was given that same title (*khātam an-nabīyīn*) in the Quran <sup>6</sup>. Scholar G. Stroumsa points out that Mani is one of the only figures before Muhammad to so explicitly claim final prophethood in a lineage of past messengers, suggesting a **possible precedent** that early Muslims in Mesopotamia or Persia might have known <sup>11</sup>. At the very least, the **theological logic** is alike: later Islamic tradition (in a **hadith**) even says that previous

communities “altered” their scriptures, whereas the Qur’an would be preserved – an idea directly analogous to Mani’s critique of previous religions and his effort to prevent textual corruption <sup>5</sup> .

Intriguingly, the Quran mentions a mysterious group called the **Sabians (al-Ṣābi’ūn)** alongside Jews and Christians as rightful “People of the Book.” The exact identity of the **Sabians** was already “an unsolved Quranic problem” in early Islamic times <sup>17</sup> . Modern scholars have variously speculated that “**Sabians**” **could refer to Mandaean, Harranite star-worshippers, or even Manichaeans** <sup>18</sup> . One theory is that Muslim Arabs might have used *ṣābi’* (literally “bather” or “convert”) to denote **Manichaeans**, whom they also called *zanādiqa* (heretics) in later times <sup>19</sup> . While no consensus exists, it’s suggestive that some early Muslim commentators thought of Sabians as a sect with **prophetic teachings reminiscent of Manichaeism** (e.g. possessing a mixture of Jewish, Christian, and possibly gnostic elements). If indeed **Manichaeans were among those labeled “Sabians,”** it means Islam’s formative milieu was aware of Mani’s religion as one of the **Book-bearing faiths**. In any case, Islam absorbed the general principle that **God’s revelation is progressive and had repeatedly been sent** – an idea first systematically articulated by Mani. Islam did narrow the scope (acknowledging mainly the Hebrew lineage plus Jesus and Muhammad), but conceptually it made **Muhammad the restorer of a message that earlier communities had partially lost** – very much in spirit with Mani’s narrative <sup>4</sup> .

It’s worth noting that **Islam did not overtly incorporate Buddha or Zoroaster into its prophetic line**, likely because these figures were outside the Abrahamic milieu of early Muslims. (Some Islamic traditions, however, later debated whether figures like Luqmān, Dhu’l-Qarnayn, or others in the Quran might correspond to Eastern sages, and some Muslim scholars from Persia did speculate that Zoroaster or Buddha could have been unmentioned prophets to their peoples.) **The Bahá’í Faith** (founded in 19th-century Persia) would later *explicitly* extend the Islamic concept of progressive revelation to include **Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad**, and its own founders in one single chain <sup>20</sup> . In fact, the Bahá’ís teach almost the identical idea Mani did: “*Throughout the ages, God has sent Divine Messengers... among them Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muḥammad...*” – all culminating in Bahá’u’lláh as the latest Manifestation <sup>20</sup> . Similarly, the **Ahmadiyya Muslim movement** (19th c.) interprets Quranic prophecy to conclude that **Krishna, Buddha, and other founders** of non-Abrahamic faiths *were* prophets of God, whose teachings were later distorted into independent religions <sup>21</sup> . Ahmadiis teach that God’s plan was always to unify mankind under Islam, but that mission was enacted in stages through various prophets worldwide <sup>22</sup> . This remarkably mirrors Mani’s ancient claim that Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus each brought **one truth in different languages** before him <sup>4</sup> . Indeed, Ahmadiyya literature explicitly says **Krishna and Rama were human prophets** who preached the One God, but “*Hindus... distorted this view into polytheism over many thousands of years.*” <sup>21</sup> – virtually the same trope of **original purity and subsequent corruption** that Mani applied to prior religions.

**In summary**, the trope of a **succession of prophets with progressively corrupted messages** was *absent from early Judaism and apostolic Christianity*, but it appears **full-fledged in Manichaeism** in the 3rd century. Mani’s unique historical position – at the nexus of multiple religious traditions – allowed him to formulate this grand theory of progressive revelation. He regarded himself as the final **world-renewing prophet**, and that idea proved influential. The **Islamic worldview** adopted a comparable paradigm (though with its own distinctive list of prophets and emphases), and **later religious movements** like Bahá’ís and Ahmadiis carried the concept even further by explicitly embracing prophets of all major cultures. Modern scholarship tends to agree that Mani was a **pioneer of this idea** of religious history as a series of dispensations <sup>11</sup> . There is **no solid evidence** that any Jewish or Christian sect **before** Mani had already articulated such a universal succession-of-prophets model. If anything, Mani’s idea may have drawn on **scattered analogies** (like Buddhist cycles of Buddhas or Gnostic chains of enlighteners), but **Mani synthesized it into a coherent doctrine** for the first time. From the oasis of 3rd-century Babylon to the Quran and onward to new religious movements, Mani’s **vision of**

**progressive prophecy** left a lasting, if often unacknowledged, legacy in the way many people understand the unfolding of religious truth in history.

**Sources:** Manichaeism and Šābuhragān in *Encyclopædia Iranica* <sup>2</sup> <sup>6</sup>; *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Manichaeism) <sup>1</sup>; Biruni's citation of Mani's teachings <sup>2</sup>; Catholic Encyclopedia (1913) <sup>3</sup>; *Wikipedia: Sabians* <sup>18</sup>; *Wikipedia: Ahmadiyya and other faiths* <sup>21</sup>; Official Bahá'í Faith website <sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> Manichaeism | Definition, Beliefs, History, & Facts | Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Manichaeism>

<sup>2</sup> <sup>6</sup> <sup>8</sup> <sup>16</sup> ŠĀBUHRAGĀN - Encyclopaedia Iranica

<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sabuhragan/>

<sup>3</sup> <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia: MANICHAISM

<https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/manicheism.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad and the Qur'an

[https://www.bu.edu/mzank/Jerusalem/cp/Muhammad\\_Quran.htm](https://www.bu.edu/mzank/Jerusalem/cp/Muhammad_Quran.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Prophet Mani who claimed he is the seal of ... - EgyptSearch Forums

[http://www.egyptsearch.com/forums/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=next\\_topic;f=10;t=005276;go=newer](http://www.egyptsearch.com/forums/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=next_topic;f=10;t=005276;go=newer)

<sup>10</sup> Why Judaism Remains True: The Eternal Torah and the Islamic ...

<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-judaism-remains-true-the-eternal-torah-and-the-islamic-claim-of-corruption/>

<sup>11</sup> [PDF] Seal of the Prophets: the Nature of a Manichaean Metaphor - Almuslih

<https://almuslih.org/wp-content/uploads/Library/Stroumsa,%20G%20-%20Seal%20of%20the%20Prophets.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> Sabians - Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabians>

<sup>15</sup> Shabuhragan - Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shabuhragan>

<sup>19</sup> Sabians - Brill - Reference Works

<https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/entries/EQO/EQSIM-00362.xml?language=en>

<sup>20</sup> Revelation | God and His Creation | What Bahá'ís Believe

<https://www.bahai.org/beliefs/god-his-creation/revelation>

<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> Ahmadiyya and other faiths - Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadiyya\\_and\\_other\\_faiths](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadiyya_and_other_faiths)