Introduction

> It is a peculiarity of the various communities and religions classed together as 'minorities' in modern Iraq that, for the most part, they 'keep to themselves', associating only with co-religionists and rarely marrying an outsider. Especially is this true of the Jews, the Yazīdīs, and the Ṣubba.
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> E.S. DROWER (1937: 1)

These Ṣubba are the Mandaeans, a reclusive religious group whose ceremonies—administered largely by specially trained priests paid in fees—bestow purity through ritual immersion in water and ensure post-mortem heavenly reward, and who maintain a body of scriptures in an otherwise scarcely known ancient southeastern dialect of Aramaic. Although this group has existed since the period of the Sasanid dynasty (223–651), today they number only in the tens of thousands, a figure dwindling rapidly in the diaspora that is the outcome of the flight of many Mandaeans from severe ongoing sectarian violence in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent civil war. Some Mandaeans remain in Iran, too.[1]

The central ritual practice of the Mandaean religion is baptism by immersion in free-flowing water, called "living water" and "Jordan," *yardnā*. It must not be "cut," or stagnant, water. Every Sunday, Mandaeans are supposed to assemble for the administration of this ritual immersion by the priests, called Nāṣoraeans. The priests have been consecrated and initiated after long training and are expected to maintain a high degree of purity. They must watch assiduously to ensure that every ritual is conducted without fault. Ideally, they conduct immersions of the laypeople at a hut called *maškā* ("tabernacle") or *bet mandā* ("Manda-house") before which a channel has been dug that diverts free-flowing water from the nearby stream or canal into a baptismal pool and out again to rejoin the stream. The Mandaeans evidently have their name from this house of worship. At the time of baptism, the priest has planted a white banner, *drabšā*, and wears white robes, including a scarf drawn over his mouth called *pandāmā*. Also dressed in white robes, the Mandaean laypeople, after leaving a mone-

1 On the present demography of the Mandaeans see Häberl (2009: 7–11).

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tary offering for the priest at a usual place nearby, are each in turn individually baptized by the priest through a ritual of threefold whole-body immersion, receiving the "sign" or *rušmā* of water splashed upon the forehead, and sipping the water. The layperson's head is daubed with sesame oil and crowned with myrtle leaves. Then he or she proceeds to dry land to receive a communion of ritually-prepared biscuit called *pihtā* and water and a prayer of protection from evil called "sealing," *hātamtā*. A ritual handshake called "truth," *kušṭā*, is given between priest and layperson to conclude the ritual. Throughout these procedures, the priests intone chants in an ancient dialect of Aramaic, called today Mandaic after the group that preserved texts in the dialect. The baptism safeguards purity both physical and moral. The priests offer many other religious services, too. Perhaps most important after the regular baptism is the funeral mass called *massiqtā* or "ascent" of the dead to the World of Light. It is the priests who, with hymns and with careful management of the funeral procedures, ensure the journey of the dead Mandaean's soul to the good afterlife. In order to return to the World of Light, the soul must ascend past the celestial guardhouses (*maṭṭartā*) of the planets and through levels of existence presided over by divinities that had emanated from the Great Life before our world was created. Without the priests' work, incantations, and ritual operations, a good afterlife is not accessible.[2]

The theology and mythology of the Mandaeans posit a World of Light, home to a godhead called the Great Life, and a fundamental murky, wet darkness fashioned into this world by an errant demiurge. The demiurge is named Ptahil, who formed the body of Adam, the first man. Because of Ptahil's error (in some accounts because he was seduced by Ruhā, "Spirit," a female entity), our world turned out to be the imperfect site of the woes we experience. It is inhabited by invisible demons of different kinds. Our bodies, which also belong to this world, are merely vessels for our souls, which belong to the World of Light. The Great Life (also known as the King of Light, the Lord of Greatness, and other names) has agents and messengers called *ʿUṯre* (*ʿwtry'*), "Riches" or "Powers," and *Ziwe* (*zywy'*), "Radiances," divine beings that work his will.[3] Adam has a heavenly counterpart, the "Hidden Adam," as do Adam's offspring, Seth, Abel, and Enos, who are also prototypical Nāṣoraeans or priests. Mandaean texts are, however, quite hostile to Judaism, Christianity, and other religions. Abraham

2 Much more detailed descriptions of the Mandaean rituals, including many not mentioned here, are presented by Drower (1937), Rudolph (1961), and Buckley (2002: 57–109). An album of color photographs vividly portrays the Mandaean baptism and other rituals as conducted in contemporary Iran (Tahvildar, Fourouzandeh, and Brunet 2001).

3 On the ancient background of the *ʿUṯre*, see Gardner 2010a.

and Moses are reviled. Similarly, Jesus is considered to be a demon, but John the Baptist is regarded as a great Mandaean teacher. A few Mandaic texts are attributed to John. Those other religions, thus, are conceived as derivative from a pristine Mandaeism. The very simplified account of Mandaean doctrine just presented occurs in different complicated versions in Mandaic texts, with many elaborations and details omitted here. The foregoing is merely brief introduction.

The priests have preserved dozens of texts in their Aramaic dialect. Many of them have been published and subjected to scholarly analysis. One such text is the *Qullāstā* (or *Qolasta*), known sometimes today as the *Canonical Prayerbook*, full of the hymns and incantations used in common rituals. There is also a large and important anthology of texts called the *Ginzā Rabbā*, "The Great Treasure," or *Sidrā Rabbā*, "The Great Book." The *Ginzā* is divided into two parts, called Right and Left, which face outward toward the opposite covers in a single codex. The Right side contains a variety of treatises on cosmogony, myth, aetiology, and moral exhortations. These are compositions of various ages, and they include several rather different versions of the creation. The Left side of the *Ginzā* contains funeral texts and hymns for the dead. Some scholars consider these latter hymns to include some of the most ancient Mandaic textual material. Numerous other Mandaic texts have been published, preserved in manuscripts, codices as well as scrolls, and including treatises and esoteric commentaries on ritual practice, astrology, magic spells, and other subjects. Many Mandaic texts have yet to be published.

How the Mandaeans and their religion evolved has been a difficult question to answer, exercising European and American scholars for generations. As readers of the brief descriptions just presented will immediately recognize, their practices and materials bear striking resemblance in different respects to those of Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, including Manichaeans, of antiquity, but they appear to be blended together along with much novelty into something new. Many scholars have sought to trace the pre-modern history of the Mandaean religion by elucidating contact with and borrowing from different groups on the basis of these common features.[4] I do not deny such contact, borrowing, or imitation, and I accept the promise of such comparative approaches; I too will touch upon such phenomena in the pages that follow here. Generally, however, in this study I will emphasize rather the creativity and innovation of the makers of the Mandaean religion and seek to contextualize the Mandaeans

4 Rudolph's book on "das Mandäerproblem" (1960) is perhaps the most important landmark representing this approach.

not in terms of the other religions to which theirs is assuredly related somehow, but rather with respect to larger social contexts situated in specific times. My approach is mostly historical and not comparative.

The pre-modern history of the Mandaeans has always been obscure and is likely to remain so. In the past, as a group they have assiduously shunned close contact with outsiders as impure.[5] They have practiced endogamy strictly to the point of becoming an ethnic group unto themselves,[6] without ever having become numerous relative to the surrounding population, comprised of a limited number of extended families or tribes. Many of them have resided in inconspicuous backwater villages in Ḫūzistān and the Marshes of southern Iraq, away from the close interference of the states that ruled them. Muslims avoided them in return. As the British traveler Wilfred Thesiger reported about them after spending long periods of the 1950s among Muslims of the Marshes, the Ṣubba "were generally despised and no Moslem would eat or drink with them," although small numbers of Mandaeans "lived in Moslem villages round the Marshes."[7]

These observations must explain how the Mandaeans, under the rule of Muslims, went for centuries with only a few short notices about their existence written by outsiders. This is despite a substantial number of prolific Muslim scholars interested in cataloguing every sect in the world and expounding their respective doctrines. It was only when scholars from Europe published studies describing the doctrines of the Mandaean books that had previously been kept secret, and when the modern Iraqi state began to conduct detailed census, that the Mandaeans and their religion have become more widely known. This has made them clear targets for sectarian violence when the opportunity arose. They were hitherto protected, though only partially and intermittently, by their inconspicuousness and their sometime legitimation by a qurʾānic term, as *Ṣābiʾūn*, from which their modern name Ṣubba apparently derives.

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5 Arabestani (2012) emphasizes the assessment of purity as a decisive factor in the Mandaeans' construction of ethnic boundaries. Of course, real Mandaeans did not and do not always observe the strict ideals of separation from non-Mandaeans expressed in the texts or in descriptions of the community derived from authorities who wanted to emphasize their separateness.

6 The anthropometry of Henry Field (1949: 309–310), based on fieldwork he conducted in 1934, claimed that the Ṣubba were often visibly physically distinct from other Iraqi ethnic groups, which is to say they allegedly had a distinctive Mandaean appearance and that they could sometimes be distinguished by sight. Similarly, Drower (1937: 2) was of the opinion that the priestly families "can be distinguished by their unusual physical type."

7 Thesiger 1964: 126.

The Ṣābians (Arabic *Ṣābiʾūn*, known from the ninth century onward collectively as *Ṣābiʾa*)[8] were people first mentioned alongside the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians in the Qurʾān (2:62, 5:69, 22:17) and were granted the status equivalent to those other groups as a protected, if subordinate, community. Within a short time after Muḥammad's death, however, the identity of the *Ṣābiʾūn* intended in the Qurʾān was obscured or forgotten, opening the way for several different groups to claim the name in self-legitimation under Muslim authorities, and for Muslim scholars of later centuries to speculate about them.[9] That the Mandaeans came to be regarded as Ṣābians does show that there must have been local contacts between Mandaeans and their Muslim neighbors.[10] Otherwise the term would never have been applied to them. This is just one example of how the rule of Muslims, which was explained in Islamic terms, increasingly fitted the world to its own expressions, in this particular case a qurʾānic word that was available for adoption.

This present work sheds light on the obscure early history of this small and reclusive group of baptizers, which originated under the Persian Sasanid dynasty and are popularly but misleadingly construed today as "gnostic" or even as "the last Gnostics." Using a variety of early textual sources, including some which have either partly or entirely escaped the attention of previous scholarship on the Mandaeans, I am able to offer firm testimonia to their conspicuous existence in Sasanian Mesopotamia in the sixth century and their status as a distinctive religious group before Muslim rule. I present for the first time in modern scholarship a substantial and sympathetic tenth-century Muslim secretary's account of Mandaean villagers and their social life, which is also the earliest unambiguous witness to the application of the Qurʾānic name "Ṣābian" to the Mandaeans. It is an early illustration of the process by which the Mandaeans came to be regarded, at least sometimes, as a legitimate group by Muslims. Together these sources show how the Mandaean religion had its origin under Sasanid kings, during the time in which the Persian rulers exercised variable religious policies that have been the subject of ongoing debates. Mandaeans under that name came into existence only in the fifth century, and not in the second or third centuries as a number of leading specialists have thought, although their religion did draw upon pre-existing materials and traditions, as all agree. Though I can shed only limited light on that pre-Mandaean

8 Ullmann 1980.

9 See van Bladel (2009: 66–70) and S. Stroumsa (2009: 84–105) for fuller discussion of the complicated evolution of the term "Ṣābian" in early Arabic scholarship.

10 European scholars have regarded the Mandaeans as the Ṣābians of the Qurʾān since the seventeenth century (Chwolsohn 1856.1.104; see also Lupieri 2002: 84–85).

stage of development, the forerunner tradition on which the religion was built went under the name "Nāṣoraean," Nazoraean, a name that Greek Christian heresiographers apply to one or several "Jewish Christian" sects. The idea of an Ur-Mandaeism is not new. But what is new here is my argument that Mandaeism was developed by self-described Nāṣoraeans in the late fifth century during a period of vigorous religious innovation among Iraqi Aramaic-speakers who were deprived of the institutional bases of their traditional paganism: their temples. Many new religious movements then arose in Sasanian Iraq, inspired by and reacting to Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, but only Mandaeism survives today from among them. These are the basic arguments presented here.

Equally important are the specific data that emerge in the investigation, shedding some light on the premodern history of this otherwise scarcely-documented community.