From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes

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From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes

By

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Cover illustration: Penrith, New South Wales, Australia. Holy men of the Mandaean faith purify themselves on the Nepean river in Penrith, New South Wales Australia to administer the five day *maṣbutā* (baptism) ceremony for their followers. March 16, 2014. Photo Credit: David Maurice Smith.

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Preface

On October 28, 2013, a one-day conference was convened at the University of California, Los Angeles, honoring the now recently deceased Patricia Crone (1945–2015) with the award of the Levi Della Vida Award for Excellence in Islamic Studies. The theme she chose was "Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya and late antiquity in the Qur'an and Tradition." Having been invited along with several others to present a paper, I prepared by resuming my studies of the Ṣābians mentioned in the Qur'ān. The research, however, took on a life of its own, merging with other previously existing threads of my studies, and followed its own course to the point that it scarcely corresponded with the honoree's intentions for the event. Then, in the subsequent months, as I brought the project to a close, it had grown much too extensive to be included in the volume of articles proceeding from the event, which are to be published together in due course. With apologies to the organizers of the event and the editors of that volume, and with their acquiescence and encouragement, I decided to publish it separately. Now it has grown from short essay to monograph. I dedicate it, with gratitude for her intellectual guidance, support, and friendship, to Patricia Crone on the occasion of her Levi Della Vida Award, and to her memory.

I wish to thank especially Charles Häberl and Matthew Morgenstern for the careful attention they gave to nearly complete drafts of this work. They both made a number of suggestions that prompted me to make distinct improvements and pointed me to published research that I had missed. John C. Reeves provided a number of comments on an early draft, generously sharing his own research in progress so that we could reduce duplication of effort, while our related theses are directed at different ends. David Larsen shared material regarding Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb. I am grateful to three anonymous reviewers whose remarks helped me to improve details and prompted me to try to clarify some of the argument, despite, in the case of one reviewer's disapproving comments, some basic differences in our assumptions about the material, which are not reconcilable without discussion. Special thanks also go to Sean Anthony, Kayla Dang, and Parker Selby, who read near-final drafts and made valuable corrections and pointers. The errors and faults remaining are all my won.

My transliteration of Mandaic words does not adhere to the widespread practice of minimizing diacritic marks by using unadorned Latin letters. Perhaps once this was commendable for the ease of typesetters, but today fonts

with numerous useful diacritics are available to all. Furthermore, although transliterating a Mandaic word letter by letter as *'wtry'* instead of now-common *eutria* (for what is pronounced as *'uϑrē*, *uϑri*, and the like) may be, for some, unaccustomed or less pleasing to the eye, I think it will be easier for scholars with experience in other Aramaic dialects, and even with Arabic, to follow an old-fashioned transliteration. It is my hope that the present work will cut away rather than increase obfuscation about the Mandaeans' early history for those potentially interested audiences. Specialists in Mandaic can do more to make their materials accessible to scholars working in closely related fields. One way to do this is to make the character of Mandaic as a species of Aramaic more discernible.

The rendering of Middle Aramaic, Syriac and sometimes Mandaic, in vocalization with Latin letters here assumes that vowel length distinctions were no longer phonemic by the time of the period under discussion. Therefore, I use almost no indications of vowel length in transliterating that language. The exception is the etymologically long *ā*, which had lost its phonemic distinction of length but remained qualitatively distinct from etymologically short *a* (in this case, possessing "backness" and "roundedness," thus being something like IPA ɔ).[1] For this qualitative difference I use *ā* without intending the macron to indicate vowel length—although this distinction happens to correspond mostly with etymological vowel length. In short, I treat Syriac (and ancient Mandaic) as having had six vowels, three lax and three tense, like New Persian: *a o e ā u* and *i*. This simplifies the reality slightly, but this is not a study of Aramaic historical phonology and it will suffice for transliteration here. Etymological consonant doubling in any dialect of Aramaic is, however, always indicated in transliteration, regardless of the attested pronunciation in modern times. Thus, for example, the Mandaic book usually called conventionally *Qolasta* in modern scholarship is rendered here *Qullāstā*. Indicating doubling eliminates the need to indicate the otherwise mostly predictable spirantization of simple *bgadkpat* consonants to Aramaic specialists, and I dispense with graphic indications of spirantization in most cases.

I use "Sasanid(s)" when referring to the kings and their dynasty, "Sasanian" as a more general term referring to the period of Sasanid rule, their state, or their subjects and events under their rule.

All dates are of the Common Era unless otherwise indicated.

This work is not an introduction to the Mandaeans. Those wanting one have several available with different emphases. I recommend the works of

1 Nöldeke 1904: 9 § 11. Cf. Häberl 2009: 59–60.

Buckley (2002), Lupieri (2002), and above all, for those who want to know what Mandaeans in the twentieth century were actually doing in the Iraqi marshland, the old-fashioned, relatively untheorized anthropology of Drower (1937).

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.
>
> 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.

CHAPTER 1

Early Contacts between Arab Muslims and Aramaean Mandaeans and the Date of Zazay

Mandaeans have lived under the domination and rule of Muslims since the seventh century, the time of the Muslim conquest of the Sasanian kingdom, and it is under these circumstances that Mandaeism developed into the form known to modern researchers. There is well-known evidence in the Mandaic textual tradition that the Mandaeans encountered their Arab rulers and obtained recognition from them at some time as legitimate. The question is when this recognition occurred. The account that has drawn the most attention is the one given in the Mandaic text called *Haran Gawaita* (*Hʾrʾn Gʾwʾyt*ʾ), published in 1953 on the basis of a single scroll of recent centuries that contains the text. This work has as one of its main purposes to urge the "disciples (i.e. priests) at the end of the Arab age," *tʾrmydʾ ḏ-hʾnwn b-dynbʾ ḏ-dʾrʾ ʾrbʾyyʾ*,[1] who are its direct addressees, to persevere in their religion and to retain the correct scripture through the vicissitudes of changing dynasties and sectarian schisms. This scroll-text, which has been transmitted badly with numerous textual problems, must have been composed well after the eighth century, because it repeatedly refers to Baġdād, and projects Baġdād into the distant past, where it stands perhaps for Babylon; Baġdād was founded in 762. The text describes the Muslim conquest vaguely and some of the sentences in the narrative are hopelessly corrupt. It refers, though, to their conquest of places such as "the city of Syria," *mdynt*ʾ *ḏ-šʾm* (translated by Drower simply as "Damascus"), and "the mountains of the Persians who are called Hardabaeans (*hʾrdʾbʾyy*ʾ)",[2] the pre-Arab

1 Drower 1953: scroll facsimile of DC 9 (copied 19th century), line 104. See also the facsimile of manuscript DC 36 (dated 1677) accompanying Drower 1960a, which contains at its end another copy of the *Haran Gawaita* bearing similar textual problems.

2 The Mandaeans' Hardabaeans (also Hardubaeans, Hardbaeans, Hirdbaeans) were apparently the Sasanids (Drower 1953: 14n7), although it seems that the author of the text has only the vaguest concept of pre-Islamic history. The strange name follows the usual Mandaean pattern of using cryptic terms for proper names of other sects and peoples. There is a remote chance that it is derived from Middle Persian *ardā*, Parthian *ardāw*, "righteous (Zoroastrian)," being connected with the Sasanids' Zoroastrian identity. (The *b* in the name would be spirantized to *β* or *w* in its postvocalic position.) But this is only an improbable guess. Another guess is Macuch's derivation, suggested by F. Altheim, from *hērbad* (a kind of

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rulers. The text then states, "Then, after this had taken place, on an occasion"[3] (*hʾyzʾk mn hʾwyʾ hʾzyn b-ʿdʾn*ʾ),[4] one of them, Anoš bar Danqā, went to Baġdād and Baṣra and is supposed to have informed the Arabs of their status as a people endowed with a scripture. The scripture is called "The Great Revelation." It says, "Thus did Anoš bar Danqā explain and speak so that, through the power of the lofty King of Light—praised be his name!—it was not permitted to the son of slaughter, the Arab, to harm the congregation of souls, owing to the protection afforded by these explanations of the Great Revelation."[5]

The same event is mentioned in another important work, occurring in one of several colophons of the manuscripts of the *Qullāstā* or so-called *Canonical Prayerbook* of the Mandaeans.[6] Drower translates it as follows (with all parenthetical and bracketed remarks being her own):

> And Ramuia son of 'Qaimat said "From the day on which [this text] fell from (was written by) Zazai-ḏ-Gawazta son of Hawa till now, the years in which I wrote it, is (a space of) 368 years in the ages." And Ramuia son of 'Qaimat said "I wrote this Diwan [scroll] in the town of Ṭib in the years when Anuš son of Danqā departed with the heads of the people (ethnarchs), in the years when the Arabs advanced."[7]

Evidently this refers to the same Anoš bar Danqā named in the *Haran Gawaita*, who presented information about the "Great Revelation" to Muslim authori-

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Zoroastrian priest) (Macuch 1965a: 166–167n217; Macuch in Rosenthal 1967 II/2.71). I consider this even less likely. In any case, the Mandaic text *Dīwān Abatur* details a celestial guardhouse (*maṭṭartā*) of Mercury for the *Hirdbāye* who "murdered souls and shed blood" (Drower 1950: 29). Drower notes that "souls" here means Mandaeans. The Hirdbāye apparently murdered some Mandaeans.

3 If the same time was intended, it should have been accompanied by a demonstrative pronoun.

4 Drower 1953: facsimile line 141.

5 Trans. Drower 1953: 16, slightly modified.

6 The title *Qullāstā* normally appears in modern scholarship with the rendering *Qulasta* or *Qolasta* (with one l). Following the basically etymological transliteration of consonants adopted here, I render it rather as *Qullāstā* (with two l's) because I regard it as a deverbal noun from *qalles* ("to praise") on the pattern *puʿʿāl* (a pattern often apparently misconstrued in modern scholarship as **puʿal*) with the feminine suffix. Had the consonant *l* been simple rather than doubled, the preceding short vowel should have been reduced. See Nöldeke 1875: 122–123 § 105, Macuch 1965: 185 § 131. Cf. Nöldeke 1904: 30 § 43B, 72 § 117.

7 Drower 1959: 71.

ties. It has commonly been assumed, on the basis of this widely-cited translation from the *Qullāstā*, that the Arabs' "advance" means the initial Arab conquest of Iraq itself around the year 640 CE. This requires one to ignore the statement in the *Haran Gawaita* that Anoš bar Danqā went to Baġdād, a city founded more than a century later. Zazay d-Gawaztā, son of Hawa, mentioned in the colophon passage above, is an especially important figure. He occurs as the earliest copyist in a number of different detailed colophons, covering hundreds of years of copyists' activities, appended to several centrally important Mandaean scriptures.[8] This would make Zazay the oldest known copyist of many basic Mandaean scriptures. Zazay is said in these colophons to have transcribed his copies "from the scroll of the First Life." All scholars have seen in this Zazay one of Mandaeism's earliest figures. Macuch held that this refers just to an anonymous earlier source, making Zazay merely a copyist of a still older tradition.[9] Lupieri has taken this to refer to a supposedly divine source; accordingly, he has been tempted to see in Zazay the early founder or at least a codifier of Mandaeism.[10] For Buckley, Zazay is supposed to have represented the religion in a "fully developed" state.[11] Since the publication of this text, several attempts to find the origin of the religion have focused on Zazay. This makes his date especially important, because establishing it could provide an anchor for the early chronology of the Mandaean religion.

Rudolf Macuch was the first to derive Zazay's date by subtracting the 368 years mentioned in the colophon cited above from the year 640. He chose the year 640 because of the idea that this was "when the Arabs advanced," roughly the time of the Muslim invasion of Iraq. By this calculation, Zazay is supposed to have written about the year 272.[12] This accorded with the conclusions drawn by earlier scholars, such as Kurt Rudolph, who posited the exis-

8 For a list of these texts derived from Zazay's copies, see Buckley (2005: 294).

9 Macuch 1965a: 159.

10 Lupieri 2002: 165–172.

11 Buckley 1992: 34. One of her goals in making this argument is clear from her later research (2005: 295–313), where the idea is found in the context of a sound argument against earlier scholars who posited a gradual "degeneration" of Mandaeism from a "pure" Gnosticism into priestly ritualism.

12 Macuch 1965a: 158–162; 1965b: lix. It seems that hardly anybody critically scrutinized the grounds of Macuch's argument since he published it. The dating of Zazay to *circa* 270 is cited by, e.g., Gündüz (1994: 55–58), Buckley (2002: 157; 2005: 192), and Häberl (2012: 266). The exception is Rudolph, who first regarded it cautiously (1969: 226), and then (1970: 414) recognized that Anoš bar Danqā may have lived in the eighth century; this would put Zazay in the fourth century, if the 368-year figure is correct. In a prospectus for the

tence of Mandaeans in Iraq in the third century.[13] In some colophons, copyists perhaps slightly earlier than Zazay are mentioned, whom Buckley has "tentatively" estimated as living decades earlier, *circa* 200.[14] This would give the Mandaean religion a relatively early origin, earlier than Manichaeism. (Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, began preaching only in 240.) Putting this passage about Zazay together with the previous passage cited from the *Haran Gawaita*, Macuch argued that the arrival of the Arabs was a time in which it was necessary to for Mandaeans to compile a canon of texts immediately in order to acquire the status of *ahl al-kitāb*, "People of the Book," in the eyes of the Arab Muslims, and that this was accomplished by Anoš bar Danqā.[15] In this view, the Mandaic scriptures surviving today are supposed to be the result of codification carried out in response to the arrival of the Muslims in the early seventh century.

These conclusions have formed one of the bases for scholarship on the origins of Mandaean religion since Macuch's essay on the subject published in 1965. Mandaeism is accordingly supposed to have been fully formed by the third century. Remarkably, however, this argument based on Zazay's date falls apart with only a little probing. Scrutiny of the facsimile of the manuscript of the *Canonical Prayerbook* on which the translation above is based, published together with Drower's translation, shows that neither she nor Macuch translated the last sentence accurately. It says, rather, "in the years when Anoš bar Danqā departed (blank space with two pen-marks) the [Mandaean] ethnarchs in the years that the Arabs have accepted," *b-šny' ḏ-np'q 'nwš br d'nq'* [blank space with two pen-marks] *ryš 'myn b-šny' ḏ-q'bylywn 'rb'yy'*.[16] The expression "in the year *x* that the Arabs have accepted" occurs in Mandaic colophons as a term regularly designating the Muslim *hiǧrī* era of lunar years, which counts forward from 622 CE, often denoted by itself in English as "AH" (for

field, Rudolph (1974: 125–126) seems unready to accept the theory as it is, finding other grounds for assigning third- to fifth-century dates to Mandaic texts, but he regards the "mandäische Zeitrechnung" as "noch unklar." Taqizadeh (1938: 611) seems to have been a forerunner of Macuch's in assuming the year corresponds to the time of the "invasion of the Muslims."

13 Rudolph 1960: 254. I critically review some of the reasons proposed for this early chronology in Chapters 3 and 9.

14 Buckley 2005: 281.

15 Macuch 1965a: 116–117 and 61–162. He is followed by, e.g., Buckley (1995: 22).

16 Drower 1959 (facsimile side) 99.6–7. For the *pa"el* form *q'bylywn*, see Nöldeke (1875: 223–224). Macuch (1965b: 262 §199) identifies the suffix as a later form, which becomes the normal 3.m.pl. perfective suffix in Neo-Mandaic (*-yon*). Cf. Häberl 2009: 202, 261.

Latin *anno hegirae*, "in the year of the *hiǧra*").[17] It appears that the passage is referring not to the advance of Arab armies but to an unspecified time in the *hiǧrī* era. The time in question could be hundreds of years after 640, but it is not given.

I present here two comparative examples of this dating phrase, which occur in colophons of manuscripts of the Mandaic *Ginzā* as edited by Petermann. These colophons list the activities of copyists and sometimes indicate the dates of their work. One gives this formula: *šn'ṯ 'lp' w-m'* [blank space] *ḏ-q'bylywn 'rb'yy'*,[18] meaning "the year one-thousand one hundred [*blank space*] years that the Arabs have accepted." Assuming that the blank space was intended to be filled with a figure in tens and ones, this is converted to sometime in the twelfth century of the *hiǧrī* calendar, corresponding to the period 1688 to 1785 CE. Another example states, *l-šn'ṯ ḏ-ḥd' w-tšyn 'b'ṯ'r 'lp' ḏ-q'bylywn 'rb'yy'*,[19] "in the year ninety-one after a thousand that the Arabs have accepted," or, apparently, 1091 AH, which corresponds to 1680/1 CE. It would be of interest to have a compilation of the *hiǧrī* dates occurring in Mandaic with this expression, to gain a sense of the period in which this sort of dating came into use. What is practically certain, however, is that the *hiǧrī* dating formula was adopted among Mandaeans long after the advent of Islam.

In the passage just cited from the *Canonical Prayerbook*, a specific date is missing. It says only that Anoš bar Danqā departed sometime "in the years that the Arabs have accepted," which may mean simply "during the *hiǧrī* era." Perhaps a specific date has been lost in the manuscript transmission, which in general leaves much to be desired in this text. There is, as indicated above, a lacuna in the manuscript where one would want such clarification.

If, for some reason, one refused to accept that this is a real *hiǧrī* dating formula because of the lack of a numerical indication of a date, then in any case the sentence still could not be interpreted as Drower and Macuch have interpreted it. If we regard it not as a dating formula but literally, it would mean most naturally, "in the years in which they received the Arabs."[20] There is a big difference between the advance of a conquering Arab army, as supposed by the misinterpretation, and a meeting with Mandaean village representatives. Nevertheless, as just explained, the phrase probably refers to a now-unspecified

17 I thank Matthew Morgenstern (personal communication) for informing me of this important fact.

18 Petermann 2007: 2.186.22.

19 Petermann 2007: 2.184.14.

20 The relative particle *ḏ-* can mean "in which" in expressions time in Mandaic (as in related dialects of Aramaic): Macuch 1965b: 454 § 311.

time well after the Muslim conquest. The passage just cited from the *Canonical Prayerbook* states that Anoš bar Danqā went to Baġdād. If it were accepted as the text states the matter, he could not have presented Mandaean doctrine to Muslim authorities before the late eighth century at the earliest, after that city was founded.

In any case, the year designated by the passage must be reinterpreted, because it clearly does not refer to the very moment of the Muslim conquest, the basis for Macuch's calculation of Zazay's date. It refers merely to an eventual, unspecified time in which Anoš bar Danqā set out and explained the doctrine of his religion to some Muslims. The passage is not more precise than that.[21] It is crucially important to realize how unlikely it is, moreover, that the Muslim conquerors would have surveyed the beliefs of the conquered Aramaic-speaking villagers immediately upon entering Iraq, while in the midst of a war with the Persians and then civil wars, not to mention further outward conquests. Arabic and Syriac sources suggest that the Muslim conquerors specifically did not do so then, nor did they for a very long time.[22] The inhabitants of southern Iraq were all regarded as *ḏimmī*s, subordinate protected peoples who were obliged to pay the *ǧizya* tax. The Muslims mostly wanted only taxes and subordination from them. By way of comparison, there is no sign that the pagans of Ḥarrān, living in plain sight while attending their ancient temples and shrines in an important Syrian town, had to explain themselves and their religion to a demanding Muslim authority until the time of al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–833), when they adopted the name Ṣābian.[23] Therefore, Anoš bar Danqā's presentation of Mandaean doctrine to an Arab authority (if indeed it happened) must have occurred many decades or even centuries after the initial Muslim conquest. It must not be assumed, either, that Anoš bar Danqā was responsible for the first encounter of Arabs with Mandaean doctrine, but only that it

21 Macuch (1965a: 161) renders the relevant sentence somewhat differently: "Ich habe … in den Jahren geschreiben, in denen Annoš bar Danqā mit den Ethnarchen hervorkam, (d. h. schon) in den Jahren der arabischen Ära." It is not clear why both Drower and Macuch translate *q'bylywn* as "advanced." The dictionary that they themselves co-authored (Drower and Macuch 1963: 404) shows by its many examples that the primary sense of the verb *qabbel* is "to receive" and "to accept," as it is in Syrian and Babylonian Aramaic. They also include a specific entry for the actual function of the word here: "*qabiliun* (often in coloph. after the year of compilation) they accepted, adopted." The term *Arabāye*, *'r'b'yy'*, "Arabs," was probably not used generally for the Arabian conquerors for at least some decades after the conquest.

22 Hill 1971: 99–118; Hoyland 1997: 196; Harrak 1999: 272.

23 van Bladel 2009: 66.

was a decisive and therefore memorable event in garnering for themselves the status of a group tolerated in a lasting way, or an event that later Mandaeans continued to refer to in order to maintain their legitimized status. The account of the *Haran Gawaita*, a work full of fantastic reports, gives only the sequence of two events—the Arab conquest and Anoš bar Danqā's delegation—without any further usable chronological detail.

This realization in turn has major ramifications for the attempts over the last half century to derive the date of the origin of the Mandaeans from the colophons in their manuscripts. In light of the foregoing analysis, the 270s represent not the time of Zazay, but the earliest remotely conceivable *terminus post quem* for Zazay's activities. He is almost certain to have worked later, because the date of Anoš bar Danqā's delegation, from which Zazay's date was estimated, is *not* linked to the very year of the Arabs' arrival, supposedly 640, and indeed that date is an exceedingly unlikely time for Anoš bar Danqā's encounter.[24]

There is, moreover, reason to doubt the figure of 368 years itself.[25] It may be textually corrupt; it may be just an error; it may be an invented number. We are dealing, after all, with a manuscript tradition that in one case gives 382 years to the Sasanid dynasty from the beginning of Ardašīr's rule to the end of Šērōya's (a period considered today to run from 223/4 to 628, or 424 years),[26] and in another, in the *Haran Gawaita*, an even 360 years are counted for the Sasanid dynasty.[27] Unknown ideological factors or astrological calculations—such as those that influence the chronology of the Mandaic *Ginzā* (*Right* 18), a fantastic Mandaic world chronicle with astrological elements in its framework—rather than real timekeeping over three and a half centuries may have prompted the chronology given for Zazay in the *Canonical Prayerbook*.[28] Buckley's studies of Mandaic colophons do not state whether this passage occurs in other mostly

24 Gündüz (2008: 71–72) recognizes this, too, and argues cogently that the Mandaeans would not have been called to justify their status until the later Umayyad or the 'Abbāsid periods, but does not follow these observations by reconsidering Zazay's date.

25 Lupieri (2002: 172n73), who wants the Mandaeans to have arisen in the pre-Sasanian period of the Arsacid dynasty, thinks that the 368 years between Zazay and the Arab advance around 640 are not long enough, so that the reported figure must be "lacking." Buckley (2005: 192) calls it "remarkable historical precision."

26 Lidzbarski 1925: 411.

27 Drower 1953: 15. Shapira's remark (2010: 138) is noteworthy in this connection, that "Jewish accounts of Iranian kings as found in the Talmudic and Gaonic [Aramaic] literature can hardly be regarded as any better" than the year-figures found in Mandaic historical texts.

28 In the fourth colophon of the *Canonical Prayerbook* (Drower 1959: 171), the chain of copy-

identical Mandaic prayer collections, such as scroll F2 at the Bodleian, used by Lidzbarski in his *Mandäische Liturgien*.[29] It seems, for now, that the passage is known uniquely in one late manuscript. Under these circumstances, it is too much to ask historians to disregard all the evidence of external witnesses pointing to a late fifth-century origin of the Mandaeans, to be reviewed below, and to favor instead this otherwise unattested figure, which is only relative to another, undetermined date, in order to push two hundred years earlier to find a third-century Mandaean copyist of still earlier materials. Only Rudolph showed admirable caution about dating Zazay to *circa* 270, saying that would be possible only "in the event that the statements are correctly handed down and if Macuch's interpretation of the Mandaean specifications of the date, which are not always intelligible to us, proves to be true."[30]

The problems with using Mandaic sources, on which scholars have relied uncritically, to pinpoint the chronology of Mandaeans make it necessary to consult sources external to the Mandaean tradition. One would expect early Arabic sources to mention the Mandaeans, but they do not do so clearly. The Qur'ān does not explain the identity of the Ṣābi'ūn intended there, and it remains an open question how soon the Mandaeans came to acquire that name (though new materials bearing on this question are presented below). Şinasi Gündüz has surveyed a number of brief reports from Arabic sources deriving from the eighth century, cited by later authors, referring to Ṣābians who lived in southern Iraq, but these references are not at all precise. One cannot tell exactly which sect is intended in each report. Certainly the tenth-century Arabic sources (some to be discussed later) consider several clearly different religious groups in southern Iraq, and not just Mandaeans, all to be Ṣābians.[31] In different cases these reports liken the Ṣābians to, or contrast them with, the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. These accounts conflict with each other in some important details.[32] So, while it seems likely that in a few cases these eighth-century reports are in fact referring to Mandaeans, in others they may refer to some of the other little-known sects of the region also called Ṣābian

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ists ends with the earliest copyists Ramoya, who copied from Šgandā, who copied from Zazay. Only one intermediary separates the two. Were these just very old copies, have names been omitted, or was there not really so much time between the two individuals?

29 Buckley 2005; Lidzbarski 1920: vi.

30 Rudolph 1969: 226.

31 Thus also Hämeen-Anttila (2006: 50): "The term 'Sabian' in Arabic sources may be seen as an umbrella term …"

32 Gündüz 1994: 23–28.

(some of which I discuss in Chapters 4 and 11, below). In light of these vague testimonia, we may guess that Arab governors may have had to decide on the status of the Mandaeans among others in the eighth century, and that a *modus vivendi* was achieved by calling them Ṣābians, but it is also conceivable that this took place later, or that some Arabs considered them Ṣābians and therefore legitimate and that others did not. It is important to emphasize how scarce the evidence for this is. It remains possible that Anoš bar Danqā visited Baṣra to account for his religion (if that is what happened) in the eighth century, but it may just as well have happened later.[33]

It appears that only one early Arabic source mentions anything specifically and unquestionably to do with the Mandaeans, and it is a source from Baṣra. This isolated occurrence about a century after the conquest of Iraq and its obscurity demonstrate how little known the Mandaeans were to the Arabs. The poet Ru'ba (Rūba) ibn al-ʿAǧǧāǧ (d. 762), famous for his unusually long panegyrics in *raǧaz*-verse deliberately loaded with difficult and rare words, makes a murky reference to Mandaean lore in one of his many poems. He inherited this style from his father, the poet al-ʿAǧǧāǧ at-Tamīmī (d. 715) of Baṣra.[34] Ru'ba traveled in Iran before settling down in his home city. Somewhere he had heard a bit of Mandaean mythology, because he mentions the Mandaean demiurge Ptahil (*Pt'hyl*) in a single verse in one of his poems. This was first mentioned in print by Brandt in 1893, who indicates that he had learned it from the Arabist De Goeje, and it was accepted by the poem's modern editor, Wilhelm Ahlwardt in 1903.[35]

> So I said, were I made to live a lizard's age, or the lifespan of Noah in the time of the Fiṭaḥl,
> When the rocks were wet like clay of mud (*ka-ṭīni l-waḥli*), I'd have succumbed either to decrepitude or to murder.

33 If we accepted the period of 368 years within the framework of evidence presented from Christian sources reviewed below, and assign Zazay to the mid-fifth century, roughly 450, when Bar Konay says that the Kentaean religion began, then Anoš bar Danqā did not persuade the Arab authorities to tolerate them until about 818. This is not impossible.

34 "Ru'ba b. al-ʿAdjdjādj," W.P. Heinrichs, *EI*[2].

35 Brandt 1893: 60–61n3; Ahlwardt 1903: xiii–xvi, 128 (poem 46, lines 13–14). In his review of the edition, De Goeje, who apparently discovered the connection, naturally accepted the reading as referring to the Mandaic Ptahil (1904: 768–769); he furthermore suggested that Ru'ba did not communicate with Mandaeans directly, getting the name rather from Bedouin intermediaries. Besides these early notes, it seems that only Kraeling (1933: 156–157) and Cottrell (2010: 532) have repeated the Arabic reference to Ptahil.

fa-qultu law ʿummirtu sinna l-ḥisli / aw ʿumra Nūḥin zamana l-Fiṭaḥli
wa-ṣ-ṣaḫru mubtallun ka-ṭīni l-waḥli / ṣirtu rahīna haramin aw qatli

For the present purpose, the poetic context does not really matter so much as the fact of the purposefully obscure reference to the Mandaic figure Ptahil, here called "the Fiṭaḥl." From this line, which attracted the attention of medieval Arabic philologists, the strange Fiṭaḥl went on to enter Arabic proverb literature (*amṭāl*) to signify an extremely ancient or long-lived person.[36] Its meaning was already lost on early Arabic language experts like Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb (d. 860), who wrote an extensive commentary specifically on the poetry of Ruʾba. Ibn Ḥabīb could only cite al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 828), who had heard a bedouin explanation of what Ruʾba meant by "the time of al-Fiṭaḥl," to the effect that it means "the time of moist herbage" (*zaman ar-riṭāb*).[37] Despite their perplexity over the term, no Arabic author of the manuscript age knew or mentioned a "Ṣābian" connection with Fiṭaḥl. The real reference, which Ruʾba somehow knew, was so obscure that nobody was able to identify it until de Goeje mentioned it to Brandt. Even then, as Ahlwardt rightly noted, Fiṭaḥl occurs in the poem merely to represent a soggy primordial time ("Urwelt"), through which he is linked here to the aged Noah and his flood-myth. Although the Arabic phonology of al-Fiṭaḥl (if transmitted exactly as intended, which is doubtful)[38] does not correspond exactly with the sound expected of the Mandaic name, there can be little doubt of the connection with the myth of Ptahil who built the world from muddy clay. As the Mandaic collection of scriptures called the *Ginzā* (*Right* book 3) describes the scene before Ptahil shapes the earth,[39]

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36 Brandt 1893: 60–61n3; Brockelmann, "Mathal," *EI*[1]; Sellheim, "Mathal," *EI*[2]; El Tayib 1983: 33.

37 I consulted Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb's *Šarḥ Dīwān Ruʾba* in the manuscript kept in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Yale University), Landberg 742, f. 342 *verso*, lines 10–12, where it says in regard to these verses, *wa-ammā qawluhū l-fiṭaḥlu qāla l-Aṣmaʿīyu iḏā qīla li-l-aʿrābi mā arāda bi-l-fiṭaḥli qālū zamana s-salāmi riṭābun yurīdu zamana l-ḥaǧārati ḥīna kāna raṭbatun*, "As for his word *al-Fiṭaḥl*, al-Aṣmaʿī said, 'When the bedouin are asked what he intended by *al-Fiṭaḥl*, they say "moist herbage in the time of peace." He means "the time of [sojourn in] stony places when there is fresh herbage."'" These explanations are clearly based only on the context of the word, not on any real knowledge of its intended significance.

38 Bar Konay (ed. Scher 1954: 344.23) records the name as *Ptḥyl*, with *ḥ* not Mandaic *h*. (Assuming that the name is built on the root *p-t-ḥ*, the *ḥ* is etymological and it must have been a transparent part of the name's composition to be restored from Mandaic *h*.)

39 Petermann 2007: 1/1.94.1–3 (ed.); Lidzbarski 1925: 98.22–26 (German trans.); Rudolph 1974: 171 (English trans., reprinted with modifications in Lupieri 2002: 183).

> Ptahil-ʿUtra stood and went. / He descended beneath the Abodes (*škinātā*), / a place where there was no world. / He stood in the clay of mud; / he stood in the turbid waters.
>
> *qʾm ptʾhyl ʿwtrʾ w-ʾsgyʾ / w-nhyt lʾtwtʾywn ḏ-škynʾtʾ / dwktʾ ḏ-lykʾ ʾlmʾ / qʾm b-kytʾ d-syʾnʾ / w-qʾm-bwn bmyʾ tʾhmyʾ*

Beyond the unusual name Fiṭaḥl, the correspondence between the Arabic *ṭīn al-waḥl* and Mandaic *kitā ḏ-syānā*, both meaning "clay of mud," or "mud-clay," is remarkable.

Ruʾba's source of information remains a matter of speculation. Perhaps he heard something from a Mandaean convert to Islam. The sources are almost completely silent about such individuals, but there is the case of the famous renunciant (*zāhid*) Maʿrūf al-Karḫī (d. 815), who converted to Islam from another religion. One report has his parents as Christians (*Naṣrānī*s, just possibly Nāṣoraeans), but another report, allegedly going back to a relative of his, states a few more specific details. He is supposed to have had a "Ṣābian" father from the country villages of Nahrabān around Wāsiṭ, the city near which Mandaeans and other little-known sects all dubbed "Ṣābian" would survive.[40] Maʿrūf's father was reportedly one al-*Fyrzʾn*, evidently the Western Middle Iranian patronymic Pērozān, "son of Peroz," misinterpreted as his father's actual name. Maʿrūf's ascetic wisdom was renowned in his own time. His tomb near Baġdād became a site visited by those hoping for healing and intercession,[41] maintaining his fame for centuries.[42] Perhaps his successful example as a Muslim encouraged other contemporary Ṣābians, including Mandaeans, to convert to Islam, too. In any case, such converts to Islam from small, local religious groups like the Mandaeans have left little trace in Arabic sources.

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40 Ibn al-Ǧawzī (1985: 49–51) and al-Ḫaṭīb al-Baġdādī (1931: 13.200.3–4): *kāna abūhu Ṣābiʾan min ahli Nahrabāna min qurā Wāsiṭ*.

41 Karamustafa 2007: 131.

42 See also al-ʿAdawī (2012: 125–126).

CHAPTER 2

Theodore Bar Konay's Account of Mandaean Origins (*circa* 792)

While Muslim scholars relate little of substance about the Mandaeans until well into the ʿAbbāsid period, their existence had long vexed bishops and teachers of the Church of the East, the chief Christian church organization earlier under Sasanid rule, the heartland of which was especially the fertile territory along the length of the Tigris and its tributaries and canals. The account of the Mandaeans known best today, and the only surviving outsider's account of their origins, was preserved by an author in the same century as Ru'ba, but in Syriac. Theodore bar Konay was a bishop of the Church of the East at Kaškar, in his time one of the three major cities near the edge of the Marshes of southern Iraq (the other two being the Arab cantonment cities Baṣra and Kūfa, on the southern and western sides of the Marshes, respectively). The town had long been the seat of an important bishopric in Sasanian times; its importance grew greatly when al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ, the governor of Iraq, founded Wāsiṭ (founded *circa* 702–703), as an Arab Muslim city and garrison of Syrian soldiers, across the Tigris from Kaškar, on the northeast side of the Marshes. Around 792, Bar Konay wrote his *Book of the Scholion*, an extensive explanation of the beliefs of the Church of the East in the form of a running commentary on the Old and New Testaments followed by a defense of East-Syrian Christianity against Islam and a heresiographical supplement.[1] Preserved in this last section, *memrā* 11 of the book, is the earliest extant outsider's description of the Mandaean religion as such. A section on the Mandaeans, along with a few other related groups, is inserted into his big chapter on heresies, otherwise based largely (at some removes) on the *Panarion* of Epiphanius (wr. 370s). D. Kruisheer has noted that the section on Mandaeism and related sects has its own literary unity, a clear beginning and end.[2] It appears therefore that this section is borrowed or adapted from an unknown, lost, earlier source available to Bar Konay. That source was familiar with the reigns of individual Sasanids and so probably wrote under that dynasty's rule, perhaps in the late sixth or early seventh century. Certainly it was a work by an earlier East-Syrian churchman.

1 Griffith 2008: 43–44 and 81–82.

2 Kruisheer 1993: 152.

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For the convenience of the reader, I present a translation of the whole account in Appendix 1 at the end of this work.

The Mandaeans come about, in Bar Konay's account, as a derivative movement, arising only after another, related group called the Kentaeans, who in turn emerge from a Babylonian pagan background. It is the Kentaeans, in fact, who receive more attention in this passage than the Mandaeans. According to Bar Konay, the Kentaean (*knty'*) sect began during the reign of the Sasanid Peroz (457–484). That king's persecutions of idolaters are supposed to have been a factor in the career of Baṭṭay, Bar Konay's Kentaean heresiarch.[3] Reportedly, the Kentaeans claimed that their teaching came from Abel (*Hābel*). Bar

3 Yazdgird II and his son Peroz both persecuted non-Zoroastrian groups; see MacDonough (2006) on the former king's persecutions. As for Peroz, two apparently independent tenth-century sources suggest that it was not only idolaters with whom this king conflicted, but also Jews of the sort claimed as antecedents by medieval Rabbanites. Šarrirā Ga'on, the head of the yeshiva of Pembudita (in the tenth century located in Baġdād), in his *Iggartā*, or epistle, on the history of the Jewish schools in Babylonia (generally known as the "Iggeret of Rav Sherira Gaon"), reports punishments leveled by Peroz against Jewish leaders in the 460s and 470s, following the persecution of Jews by his father Yazdgird II in the 450s. Šarrirā mentions the arrest of specifically named rabbis and the son of the Jewish Exilarch (head of the Jewish community in Iraq) in 468/9, and seven years later the execution of some of these along with the Exilarch himself. He also says that "in the year 785 (Seleucid = 474–475 CE), all the Babylonian synagogues were closed and the children of the Jews were seized by the Magi," *w-bšnt 785 'tsrw kl by knšt' d-bbl w-'tnqyṭw bny yhwd'y l-'mgwšy* (Rabinowich 1988: 118). The second of the two reports is similar, occurring in the *Kitāb Sinī mulūk al-arḍ wa-l-anbiyā'* (*bāb* 1, *faṣl* 4) of Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (wr. 961), who says of Peroz that he "ordered the killing of half the Jews of Iṣfahān and the submission of their children in the House of Fire of Srōš-Ādurān, of the village of *Ḥrw'n*, as slaves, because they skinned the backs of two of the Herbads and then tied them together and treated them to hide-tanning," *wa-amara bi-qatli niṣfi Yahūdi Iṣfahāna wa-islāmi ṣibyānihim fī bayti nāri Surūš-Ādurāna min qaryati Ḥrw'n ʿabīdan ḥayṭu salaḥū ẓuhūra raǧulayni mina l-harābiḍati ṭumma alṣaqū aḥadahumā bi-l-āḫari wa-stamaʿlūhumā bi-d-dibāġa*. See also Gafni (2006: 800) (who seems to prefer Šarrirā's to Ḥamza's account when he paraphrases the enslavement of Jewish children as "forced conversion"); the uncritical account of Widengren (1961: 143); and Neusner (1983: 915–916), who hypothesizes Jewish messianism as the background to Persian suppression. It is, in any case, important to note that other religious groups besides idolaters were affected under Peroz' reign. And as Wood (2012: 70) notes, this was also an era during which the nascent Church of the East was persecuted, and that "there were no central synods between the years 424 and 485." We should expect that religious entrepreneurs advocating new movements like those of the Kentaeans and Mandaeans would find followers during a period of decentralization and suppression of existing institutions among the religious organizations of Iraqi Aramaeans. I develop this idea in Chapter 11, below.

Konay, however, is more concerned with polemic than plain exposition, and so begins by launching into a story claiming that their progenitor was not Abel but Goliath, so that the Kentaeans are just the offspring of heathen Philistines.[4] He describes their original religion as a variety of idolatry. Its worship entailed a festival in which men and women assembled and lamented the fall of the figure represented in their idol, a mighty man, which is actually made to fall over in the ritual. To prove the invalidity of this cult, he euhemerizes its idol as a representation of Goliath, the mighty man who fell to David in the biblical account (1 Samuel 17). Although his interpretation comes through the lens of biblical scripture, he is clearly claiming that the Kentaeans derive from an Aramaean pagan background and not from biblical patriarchs, as the Kentaeans claim.[5] This is clarified when says that the Chaldaeans (pagan Aramaeans of Babylonia) call this sect after Nergal. Nergal was the Babylonian god identified with Mars and Heracles, Aramaic Nergol and Nerig, who had his chief temple in Mesopotamian Kutha.[6] For Bar Konay, Nerig is a euhemerized Goliath. He provides remarkable details about the idolatry of this religious group not explicable as pure polemical invention. Whatever the validity of his claims, it is important to note that he deems the first Kentaeans to have come from a local, pagan, idolatrous background.

After backtracking in this way confusingly into the prehistory of the Kentaeans, Bar Konay relates a story of Kentaean origins that cannot be regarded

4 Kruisheer 1993: 152–153.

5 Bar Konay's account is presented in an obscure way, so that it has been misunderstood as saying the Kentaeans as such existed before Peroz' persecutions (e.g. Kruisheer 1993: 164, for whom Baṭṭay's master was already a Kentaean). But the text does not state this. Instead Baṭṭay responded to a persecution of the pagans, indicating that he had belonged to an idolatrous cult. This pagan origin is, for Bar Konay's source, an element of the case for condemning the Kentaeans.

6 Nergal/Nerig was a god of Sumerian antiquity who presided over the underworld, whose chief temple was at Kutha (Tell Ibrahim) (2 Kings 29: 30), but who was revered widely by Aramaic-speaking pagans. Eventually he was identified with Mars, Heracles, and the Iranian Vərəθraγna/Bahrām, and is characterized at times as having dogs. It is easy to imagine that a statue of the muscular god, in the style of Heracles, could have been likened to Goliath as well. Nergal's cult persisted late. See Müller-Kessler and Kessler (1999: 78–80). He is mentioned in inscriptions from Ḥaṭra (ca 100–240 CE; Beyer 1998: 149, in index) and until at least the middle of the first millennium CE is named as a maleficent entity in incantation texts inscribed on clay bowls. One of these bowls was discovered at the site of Kutha itself, in the "Mandaic" script: "bound be Nerig of the bee …" (Segal 2000: 116–117 [088M]). See also the story related by Ibn Waḥšīya from his Aramaic sources about the magician from Kūṯā who saved a lion "for the idol of Mars," which must be Nergal (Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 302–303).

as fully reliable, although it cannot be entirely dismissed, either, not because it is our sole source of information on the matter, but because it contains numerous non-polemical details otherwise unnecessary and even cites Kentaean scriptures from the southeastern Aramaic dialect we know as Mandaic. His account says that in the days of Peroz there was a chief of "this religion"—the Mesopotamian idolatry which he had been discussing, making him a priest of Nerig—from Goḫay (roughly the Diyala region between the Tigris and the mountains, Arabic Ǧūḫay/Ǧawḫā), named Pappā. He had a slave named Baṭṭay, also of Goḫay. This Baṭṭay fled from his master and hid first with Jews and then with Manichaeans. He apparently wrote some books, borrowing from those groups ("he borrowed and arranged a little bit of their words and the mysteries of their sorcery"). For under Peroz there was a decree against the idols and their priests, and Baṭṭay saw that "his religion" (*deḥlteh*) was ineffective (*bāṭlā*).[7] This clearly shows again that Baṭṭay is supposed to have come from a community of idolaters who worshipped Nerig. Baṭṭay is said to have created the Kentaean religion by introducing the worship of the luminaries and the veneration of fire in order to please the Zoroastrians. The implication of the polemical account is that this was a pagan apostate who created a new religion using elements from Judaism and Manichaeism with a veneer of characteristics resembling those of Zoroastrianism. There is nothing implausible about a new religion using materials from established groups; these are constantly being created even today, especially where the intervention of regulating powers is minimal. Bar Konay briefly describes the cosmology of the followers of Baṭṭay and quotes a passage from a lost book of theirs, in which the "Son of Light" addresses the souls trapped in the world. The text relates how the Son of Light tells the souls imprisoned in the world that they will be free at a time of change in the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates (on which see Chapter 7 below). Pognon noted long ago that the Syriac passage is full of words and usages peculiar to the southeastern Aramaic dialect known from Mandaic texts, although conveyed through the Syrian script used in the work generally.[8] It is clearly adapted from a text in the dialect we call Mandaic. Pognon furthermore demonstrated that the text attributed to the Kentaeans is actually a very close paraphrase of verses actually preserved in Mandaean *Ginzā* (*Left* 3.11).[9] This is a crucial observation. It proves that the Kentaeans and Mandaeans shared not just a claim to

7 On *deḥltā*, "fear," meaning something approximating "religion" in Syriac, see Becker (2009).

8 Pognon 1898: 234–237.

9 Passage in Lidzbarski 1925: 524–525. See also Duchemin (2012: 178–183), who usefully presents the verbal parallels between the Syriac and Mandaic in tabular form.

have the transmitted teaching of Abel, but also a common scriptural background of some kind. Its accuracy also vouches for a degree of reliability in the account that Bar Konay has transmitted, despite the polemical purpose of the text.

Next in the account are the Mandaeans, although they are known in the heading as Dostaeans (a name that will recur in this study). The Mandaeans are specifically characterized as unemployed rabble, coming from a poor and implicitly uneducated background. This is the sect of a founder called Ado, who was a vagrant from Adiabene who wandered with his family to the Ulay river of Ḫuzestān (the Kārūn or Duǧayl river).[10] Ado was unable to work, so he settled in a booth built for him by a landowner near his palm orchard. Crowds gathered there, jangling cymbals and begging from passers-by. We are not told more, and we ought to be skeptical of all the details given, but the text may be correct in conveying the impression that the sect achieved a following at first among lowly people or vagrants. Whatever their social origin, however, they must soon have acquired some formal doctrines and practices and carried them into neighboring lands, because the source says they are called by different names in different regions. In Mesene (Mešān, southern Mesopotamia near where the Tigris reaches the Gulf) they are known as Mandaeans or Mašknaeans. In Bet Arāmāye (the region of central Babylonia around Ctesiphon) they are called Nāṣrāye (cf. Mandaic *Nāṣorāye*), Adonaeans (or Adoites) and Dostaeans. Bar Konay then renders clear citations of Mandaean texts and mythology, amply discussed by Pognon and Kruisheer.[11] Their doctrine is said to be a composite of those of the Marcionites, Manichaeans and Kentaeans. In particular, the source delivers accounts of Mandaic teachings known from close parallels in extant Mandaic texts:

– First is the story of the divine entity Abatur (also known in Mandaic as the Third Life) and his son Ptahil, the world-fashioning demiurge, and Ptahil's error, after which he was bound by a chain and enclosed in a rampart, occurring in the *Ginzā* (*Right* 15.13).[12]
– At the end of Bar Konay's account of Ptahil's binding, Abatur declares that Ptahil will remain there until judgment day, when the messiah will return and a brick in a wall will speak and confess the messiah. This last event

10 On this river and its environment, see Verkinderen (2015: 111–213).

11 Pognon 1898: 233–244; Kruisheer 1993.

12 Petermann 2007: 1.1.336.21–340.18; German trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 348–353. Numerous variant accounts of Ptahil occur in the Ginzā but this seems to be the closest extant parallel to Bar Konay's account.

regarding the speaking brick is mentioned in another context, the prophetic world-chronicle in *Ginzā Right* 18, where it is connected with the disastrous avulsion of the Tigris (on which see Chapter 7 below).[13]

– A brief reference to Dinanukt (here *Dynnws*), the knowledge-seeking scribe or anthropomorphic book, known from *Ginzā Right* 6.[14]

Part of this Christian account seeks also to explain the central ritual of Mandaeism. It states a Mandaean doctrine that the prototype (*ṭupsā*) of the Mandaean baptism (designated by its Mandaic term rather than the normal Syriac term for baptism) was Abel's baptism of his father Adam to relieve him from the ills brought by demonic sorceresses. These evil entities are designated by various exotic names and countries of origin. Several of them are obviously pagan gods. If there is any truth in this passage, it suggests that early members of the Mandaean community were motivated by the hope that the baptism administered by the priests would undo injury and heal harm wrought by pagan gods.

Lastly, Bar Konay's source briefly mentions a sect that allegedly comes from Cain, Abel's murdering brother, and this leads him back to the Kentaeans. These people say that Cain is wandering over the earth and so leave food at an altar for him where they lament for him. It seems that the Nerigaeans, the people of Nerig, occur here just as a Babylonian pagan community who present ritual meals at an altar of Nerig now euhemerized by the Christian interpreter as Cain. Even the ancient name of Nerig is given an Aramaic folk etymology as "he desires rest (*nyāḥā rā'eg*)." This cult of Nerig-Cain seems not to be mentioned in other sources. The account closes by likening the house of worship of the Kentaeans, called "kentā" (*kenṯā* or *kennṯā*), to that of the assembly place of the worshippers of Nerig, again emphasizing that they derived customs from Babylonian paganism.[15]

Bar Konay's account asserts in effect that the Kentaeans and the Mandaeans as a group bearing that name did not antedate Peroz. That accords with what

13 Petermann 2007: 1.1.387; German trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 414. It is likely that the prophetic history of *Ginzā Right* 18 ended with this event at some stage in the history of the text, only to be augmented later with the immediately following material concerning the Arab kings.

14 Petermann 2007: 1.1.204.20–213.6; German trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 205–212.

15 It is worth mentioning here the modern thesis that the church architecture of the Church of the East follows a model pioneered by Babylonian temples (Potts 1997: 200–206). It is not implausible that new sects like the Kentaeans repurposed familiar architectural models, and that this would contribute to the impression of a derivative character in their religious practice.

the later medieval Syrian Orthodox patriarch, Michael Rabbā (d. 1199, also known as Michael Syrus), reports in his *Chronicle*: that the Dostaeans appeared along with the Kentaeans in the time of the Sasanid Balāš (r. 484–488), Peroz' successor.[16] As noted, Dostaean was another name for Mandaean.[17] Like the heresiography of Bar Konay, Michael's chronicle is based on earlier sources, many of them now lost. Bar Konay and Michael Rabbā both place the origin of the Kentaeans and Mandaeans in the mid- to late-fifth century. The very fact that specific Persian kings are mentioned in these accounts strongly suggests a provenance for this information that dates to the reign of the Sasanids, during which historical references to individual kings of that dynasty and their policies would be more meaningful.

Bar Konay, or rather his anonymous source, provides the only extant external account specifically about Mandaean origins. While his tale is charged with polemic, positing a lazy vagabond from Adiabene as the founder of the Mandaean (Dostaean) community, it would be strange if he were entirely inventing his chronology, for it had to be plausible to others in its basic details. The fact that Bar Konay's source could cite Kentaean and Mandaean scriptures matching Mandaic texts which are extant today shows that it incorporated substantial intelligence about them. Some scholars have recognized that there is no reason to doubt Bar Konay's account of fifth-century Mandaean origins[18] while others ignore this part of Bar Konay's account and accept Macuch's interpretation of the Mandaean chronology according to which Zazay the Mandaean copyist worked around 270. The two claims conflict. Both cannot be true simultaneously.[19] Buckley attempts a compromise when she argues that Bar Konay's

16 Chabot 1899–1924: trans. 2.151, facsimile 4.255.right column.3–5: "In this time, in the Persian Empire, the sect of the Kentaeans and of the shameless Dostaeans appeared." *w-beh b-zabnā hānā etḥazyat b-Pārs eresis d-Kentāye wa-d-Dostāye zalli*[*l*]*e*.

17 These are not to be confused with the Samaritans who followed Dositheus, as several scholars have done: e.g., Schaeder 1950: 295; Adam 1959: 77; Rudolph 1960: 33, 75n4; Jullien and Jullien 2002: 307–308. Dostay was a normal name among Aramaeans of the Sasanian Tigris region, as shown by the Rabbi Dostay in the Babylonian Talmud (Giṭṭin 14), the occurrence of the name Xwaršed-Gušnas bar Dostay in an Aramaic magic bowl (Müller-Kessler 2001/2002: 123–124), and possibly also the story of Mar Mari's healing of the boatman Dostay in the vicinity of Adiabene and Bet Garmay (Jullien and Jullien 2003b: 1.38.10, 2.43 § 27; though see Jullien and Jullien 2003a: 32–34 and Duchemin 2012: 195–196, who suggest that the story of Mar Mari and Dostay is related to the account of Bar Konay). I analyze the name as an Aramaic hypocoristic from Middle Persian *dōst* "dear, friend."

18 Burkitt 1932: 102; Kruisheer 1993: 161–163.

19 Thus also Gardner (2010b: 321), who is too optimistic that this fact "is a conclusion that has hardly been questioned."

account "has nothing to do with the beginnings of Mandaeism, but deals with a time of heresies *within* Mandaeism."[20] This is because she already accepts other arguments for the early date of the Mandaeans, and in particular the dating of Zazay to *circa* 270. Bar Konay's account, however, is clearly intended to describe the origin of the sect about two hundred years later, so the compromise does not work. Therefore, the early copyist Zazay remains a problem, especially if one insists on the very unlikely third-century date proposed for him by Macuch, which, as I have shown above, has no real basis. I will return to Zazay later in this study. First, more evidence external to the Mandaean textual tradition requires closer attention.

20 Buckley 2005: 329–330 (emphasis in the original).

CHAPTER 3

Three Sixth-Century Syriac References to Mandaeans by Name

Three separate sixth-century references to the Mandaeans *by that name* occur in Syriac texts preserved by scribes of the Church of the East. These clearly indicate the existence of Mandaeans of some kind two hundred years before Theodore bar Konay's account, under the rule of Sasanid kings. One of these references may even point to Bar Konay's source on the Kentaeans and Mandaeans. Although all three of these references have long been noted in scholarly publications, they have practically escaped serious discussion in the literature on the origin of the Mandaeans.[1] The recognition of the value of these references has not been helped by the distortion of the rare name *Mandāye* (written correctly as *mndy'*) in some of the manuscripts where the references occur and in the editions based on them. In any case, none of them has been adequately contextualized. Therefore, more remains to be gained from these sources of information. While Bar Konay's account has sometimes been considered as the earliest real specific external reference to the Mandaeans, these earlier testimonia push the history of the Mandaeans, as a group by that name, back securely by two hundred years into Sasanian times. Given the difficulties posed by the Mandaean traditions themselves, it is very important for the investigation here to have such references external to the Mandaean community.

All three references to the Mandaeans occur in short lists of heretical groups, in each case including also the Manichaeans among others, but the different lists were written for different reasons and appear in different contexts. In each case the Mandaeans appear side by side with the Kentaeans, whom Theodore bar Konay described closely along with the Mandaeans, saying that they were one of the sects from whom the Mandaeans borrowed. The regular collocation of the Mandaeans with the Kentaeans already in the sixth century lends credibility to Bar Konay's source, which relates the two groups together in their doctrine and origins.

1 Duchemin (2012: 202) alone notes all three references, but then considers them too allusive to be usable. On the contrary, these are the earliest historical references to a group bearing the name "Mandaeans" and their contexts are meaningful, as I will show. For more on Duchemin's account, see chapter 4, below, on the Kentaeans.

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1. I begin with the latest of these three Syriac references to the Mandaeans. It occurs in the title of a lost work of Nathaniel of Šahrazur (Syriac *šyrzwr*)[2] (d. 611/12).[3] Around 580, he became the bishop of this town below the Avroman Mountains, part of the Diocese of Bet Garmay. His two reported works, known just by title as listed in the *Catalogue* (*Menyānā*, lit. "*Tally*") of East-Syrian authors and their works composed by ʿAbdišoʿ bar Brikā of Nisibis (d. 1318),[4] were a commentary on the Psalms (called *Nuhhār Dāwid*) and a "polemic against the Severans (Jacobites), Manichaeans, Kentaeans, and Mandaeans" (called *Drāšā haw d-luqbal Seweryāne w-Mənenāye*[5] *w-Kentāye w-Mandāye*).[6] Both works appear to be lost today. Another version of these two titles is reported in Išoʿdnaḥ of Baṣra's *Book of Chastity* (or *Book of Monasticism*, *Ktābā d-nakputā*, wr. *circa* 850), which includes Nathaniel among the luminaries of monasticism in the Persian kingdom. Here again two works are attributed to Nathaniel: a commentary on the Psalms, bearing the slightly different title *Puššāqā d-Dāwid*, and a "Book against the Zoroastrians," *Ktābā d-luqbal mguše*.[7] The two pairs of titles are sufficiently similar that they must be referring to the same works by different names. The question here concerns the targets of Nathaniel's refutation, which are different in the two reported titles: was it a variety of sects including the Kentaeans and Mandaeans, or just the Zoroas-

2 See V. Minorsky, "Shehrizūr," *EI*[1], 7.344–346; Minorsky 1970: 132 and 383. The name Syārzūr seems to occur in the Paikuli inscription of Narseh ca 293 (Skjærvø 1983: 42–42, 124).

3 Vööbus 1965: 292–293; Baumstark 1922: 129–130; Fiey 1968: 69. This Nathaniel's name appears attached to the Synods of A I (year: 585) and of Gregory I (year: 605) (Guidi 1889: 413). He lived during the great war of Ḫusrō II with the Romans. An official named Rād *rʾd* (a name that may be either Middle Persian or Parthian) persecuted the Christians of Šahrazur under his episcopate in 605. Rād was presumably the *šahrab*, or local governor, of Šahrazur (Gyselen 1989: 59–60)—unless the name is really the Zoroastrian priestly title *Rāđ* (leaving unexplained the unusual ʾ in the Syriac spelling). The people threw Rād out. In response, Ḫusrō II summoned Nathaniel, had him imprisoned for six years, and finally had him crucified. See the *Khuzistan Chronicle* in Guidi 1903: 21:16–24; English trans. Greatrex and Lieu, 2002: 232; and Išoʿdnaḥ's *Liber castitatis* in Chabot 1896: 258 (on this last book see most lately Wood 2013: 150–154).

4 Assemani 1719–1728: 3.224.

5 On the vocalization of this word for "Manichaean," see de Blois in de Blois and Sims-Williams 2006: 75n11.

6 Assemani's text reads *w-mndry*ʾ but clearly, especially in the immediate context of the Kentaeans, the Mandaeans are intended. The additional *reš* is an error by a copyist encountering an unfamiliar name. Walker (2006: 170) notes this work and its title but does not recognize the groups named ("… Cantāye, and Māndrāye").

7 Chabot 1896: 66a, 39 (Syriac), 34 (French trans.).

trians? ʿAbdišoʿs report of the title is much more specific, using rare names, making it less likely to have been invented. Therefore, it is in all likelihood a correct representation of the book's contents. There is no reason to think, in any case, that his refutation may not have included the Zoroastrians with the other groups such as the Mandaeans, so that both titles represent the contents of the work accurately while naming different groups treated within it.

Nathaniel of Šahrazur's refutation of heresies is an early and unambiguous outside reference to the Mandaeans, written about 600 CE, approximately two hundred years earlier than Bar Konay's *Book of the Scholion*. Perhaps because the name of the Mandaeans was slightly corrupted as it occurs in Assemani's edition of ʿAbdišoʿs *Catalogue*, its appearance in the title of Nathaniel's work has been noticed only rarely, and then with scarcely any comment.[8] The title of this work alone should now lay to rest any doubts, if anyone still harbors them, that a group called Mandaeans, with that name, had a pre-Islamic origin. There are a few data about Nathaniel's career to contextualize Nathaniel's anti-heretical treatise to an extent. It was probably written in the wake of the Nestorian synods of 576 and 585 (in the latter of which Nathaniel was himself a participant). These events, in Wood's recent analysis, represented a "major development in the self-definition of the theology of the Church of the East," including "the definition of orthodoxy against a series of heretical opponents."[9] In the synod of 576, some of these opponents were recognized as internal to the church, such as Arius, Eunomius, and Apollinarius, and others were clearly construed as beyond the church, and thus belonging to their own organizations, as among the "mad assemblies of the followers of Mani, Marcion, and Bar Dayṣān, and the rest of their heretic colleagues."[10] In the synod of 585, in which Nathaniel participated, the external foes are designated as Manichaeans and Simonians.[11] The latter term is used to discredit other unspecified groups by their alleged affiliation with the prototypical heresiarch Simon Magus of *Acts of the Apostles* 8:9–24, who is here apparently as a cipher for all heretics, from the Marcionites onward. Although the Mandaeans are not singled out by name in the collection of documents known as *Synodicon*

8 Scher 1906: 12–13; Baumstark 1922: 130n1; Duchemin 2012: 202.

9 Wood 2013: 128–131.

10 Chabot 1902: 114.21–22 (French trans.: 373): *l-kollhon puḥre ktiše d-bet Māne w-Marqyon w-Bar-Dayṣān w-šarkā d-heresyoṭe ḥabrayhon*. The term *puḥre*, "assemblies, mobs," evokes a Babylonian pagan background (Harrak 2005: xxii–xxvi; McEwan 1981: 154 and 192).

11 Brock 1985: 136–137.

Orientale, which summarizes the outcomes of the synods of the Church of the East, Nathaniel did name them in his treatise, as its title shows, and it is the earliest known work, it seems, to recognize the Mandaeans as a group requiring extensive comment. This suggests that the Mandaeans at the end of the sixth century were organized enough and conspicuous enough to call for a refutation. This in turn makes it likely that the Mandaeans had already existed for some years. Although his refutation is apparently lost, Nathaniel's treatise may even have been Bar Konay's source of information on the Kentaeans and Mandaeans. Bar Konay's passage is conceivably a direct excerpt from Nathaniel's work, but this hypothesis is impossible to test, as far as I can see.

2. Another direct reference to the Mandaeans and Kentaeans together occurs in Syriac a half century earlier. The scholiarch Cyrus of Edessa mentions them along with other sects in his *Explanation for the Fasts*. There is an adequate chronological context. In the 530s, Cyrus was a student of the leading teacher Mar Abā (soon to be Catholicos of the Church of the East, 540–542). Later Cyrus built a monastery at al-Ḥīra, where he was the head of a school.[12] Al-Ḥīra (Aramaic *Ḥirtā*) was the capital for the Arabian Naṣrid kings, clients of the Sasanids, on the lower Euphrates near to the site where Kūfa would later be established by the Muslims as a garrison city. Macomber, who edited Cyrus' extant treatises, dates the text to the period 538–543.[13] The method that Cyrus follows to explain fasting is the scholastic treatment of "causes."[14] In the case at hand, Cyrus is at pains to distinguish the valid fasts of Christians against those of other religious groups, whom he deals with through a mechanical process of division. For him, religious groups are of four kinds: pagans, Jews, Christians, and heretics. It is the heretical sects who fast that interest us here: "[fasting] appears with the Manichaeans, the Marcionites, Macedonians, Valentinians, and Katharoi (*qtrw*),[15] together with all of the Man-

12 Macomber 1974: 2.x–xi.

13 Macomber 1974: 2.vii–ix.

14 See Becker (2006: 101–104) on the genre of Cyrus' explanatory treatises.

15 This is clearly a rendering of a Greek word, as its ending shows (Nöldeke 1904: 61 § 89.1). It corresponds with Καθάρ(ι)οι, a term known from the Coptic Manichaean *Kephalaia*: ⲛⲕⲁⲑⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ, "the Pure Ones (or Purified Ones)" (Gardner 1995: 50). In the damaged Coptic passage, Mani teaches about the doctrines of a group called "Baptists" (ⲛⲃⲁⲡⲧⲓⲥⲧⲏⲥ) who share some beliefs with these "Pure Ones." These beliefs include reference to entities called "First Life" and "Second Life." This in turn calls to mind the First Life, Second Life, and Third Life of the Mandaeans (as noted by Gardner, *ibidem*). For translations of that passage of the *Ginzā*, see Rudolph 1974: 155–156; Lupieri 2002: 175–178. Two Syriac texts

daeans, the Kentaeans, and those like them."[16] Here the Mandaeans and Kentaeans seem to be new additions to an established list of older heresies.[17] Later in the text, Cyrus returns to heretics to reiterate the invalidity of their fasting, where he refers to "the heretics, the Manichaeans, I say, the Marcionites, the Bardesanites, and so on."[18] Here he provides an explicit rationale for his making a single category of heretics out of these sects. Among other reasons, it is that they attribute creation to a demiurge. This is Macomber's translation:

> These, since they deny the Maker of all and of themselves, introduce matter into the divine creatorship, rave against the salvific economy of Christ our Lord as an illusion and reprobate the creature of the Maker

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make it clear that these "Purified Ones" are to be identified with the Elchasaites, among whom Mani was raised. First, Bar Konay states that Mani came from a community called in Aramaic *mnaqqde*, lit. "the Purified." This identifies the *mnaqqde* as the Elchasaites, for it is known that his community followed Elchasai; see note 27 below. Second, the further identification of the *qtr'* with the Mnaqqde/Elchasaites seems assured by a short, anonymous heresiographical Syriac tractate with its brief entry "Another heresy, which is the *qtr'*, translated into Syriac as *nqd'*" (Rahmani 1904–1909: 4.102 [Syriac], 4.79 [Latin trans]). They are said to keep the scriptures intact and unchanged, while being especially severe with sinners, all of whom are immediately cast out. The *naqde* here must be the same as the *mnaqqde*, so that all these names apply to the same group. Nyberg (1931: 85) guessed the date of the composition of this Syriac heresiographical text, known from a single ninth- or tenth-century manuscript, to the fourth or fifth century, probably too early. In any case, it is clear from Cyrus here that these "Pure Ones" are not Mandaeans per se, thought it may be inferred from the wording that the Mandaeans and Kentaeans were considered to be related to them.

16 Macomber 1974: 1.11.17–19: *metḥawwe ger ba-Mənenāye wa-b-Marqyone wa-b-Maqdonino wa-b-Walenṭanino wa-b-Qataro ʿam šarkā d-Mandāye wa-d-Kentāye w-d-akwāthon*.

17 Syriac *šarkā* occurring here is like Arabic *sāʾir*, referring not to "the rest of" the Kentaeans and Mandaeans, but to the lot of them. It should not be misunderstood as "the rest of them," indicating that the names of the Kentaeans and Mandaeans are terms for a general category including the Manichaeans, Marcionites, and the other aforementioned groups. To suppose that "Kentaean" and "Mandaean" are generic terms encompassing Manichaeans, Marcionites, etc., goes against all the evidence about these various groups. While it is true that the modern Mandaeans are not especially known for fasting, a subgroup of the Kentaeans were distinguished by their arduous fasting (see chapter 4 below), and an Arabic source around the year 900 attributes some kind of fasting to the Mandaeans (discussed in chapter 5 below).

18 Macomber 1974: 1.20.14–15: *hereṭiqo, āmar-nā den Mənenāye w-Marqyonāye w-Dayṣānāye ʿam šarkā*.

> that he created with wisdom for the sake of *those who believe and know the truth* [Heb 2:10], these indeed we reprobate and their fasts we account as defiled.[19]

It is not just that they allegedly believe "in the evilness of matter," as Macomber explains in a note. In Cyrus' view, they render the plan of salvation upheld by the Church of the East incoherent by removing God from a direct relationship with creation as its creator. I interpret this as a claim on Cyrus' part that they attribute the creation of our world to a created demiurge or intermediary, such as the Mandaean Ptahil or the Kentaean "Lord God,"[20] or to a pre-eternal substance besides God and thus, as Cyrus has it, "deny the Maker of all." There can be no doubt that Cyrus has the Mandaeans and Kentaeans in mind here, too, as he introduces this passage with a reference back to the passage in which the Mandaeans are specifically named: "as I mentioned above."[21]

3. The third reference occurs in a text to which it is harder to assign a date within even a decade's range, although it must have been written in the mid- to late-sixth century. It occurs in the longer and later account of the *Acts of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe*. Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe was the bishop of Ctesiphon and, at least in hindsight, the Catholicos of the Church of the East from 329 to 341. His life ended in what was commemorated as "the Great Persecution" of Christians by the Persian king Shapur II (r. 309–379). His story became a pivotal one for the formation of the identity of the Church of the East, providing an ideal model for a Catholicos who was also a martyr. An early account of his martyrdom, now lost, was the common source of two accounts of his *Acts*. In recent scholarship these are called Version A and B, or the *Acts of Symeon* A (properly entitled the *Sāhdutā* or *The Martyrdom of Symeon*) and *Acts of Symeon* B (properly entitled the *Taššʿitā* or *The History of Symeon*). The most recent studies place the authorship of *The Martyrdom of Symeon* (i.e. version A) either in the mid-

19 Macomber 1974: 2.17.11–16.

20 Bar Konay reports the name of the Kentaean demiurge in Syriac script as *Māryā Alāhā* (see Appendix 1; also Scher 1954: 344, trans. Kruisheer 1993: 165), a term clearly from an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew words *yhwh ʾlhym*, as in Genesis 2. The Syriac Pšiṭṭā text of Genesis has *Māryā Alāhā* for this expression.

21 If my interpretation of this passage is correct on this point, it is interesting indeed to note that Cyrus singles out the issue of the demiurge to distinguish these sects as a group of heresies. It calls to mind Williams' argument (1999) to do away with the category of "gnostic" and to replace it with "biblical demiurgy."

fifth century[22] or between 363 and 443,[23] and the authorship of the *History of Symeon* (i.e. version B) in the 530s.[24] Here it is the second, longer version (B) that is of interest. This text elaborates the story of Bar Ṣabbāʿe to suit concerns that developed in the sixth century.[25]

In one passage of version B, the Catholicos Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe is described as addressing an assembly of priests and deacons. He exhorts them at length, and one of his commands is to maintain the social boundaries established by their orthodoxy. He says, "Moreover, keep your distance from the religions of the vessels of Satan: the Manichaeans, the Marcionites, the *gly*ʾ [read **gngy*ʾ = *Gangaeans],[26] the Purified [= Elchasaites],[27] the Kentaeans, the Mandaeans,

22 Wood dates the composition of this text apparently using the date of the earliest manuscript as a *terminus ante quem*. That oldest manuscript of *Acts of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe* version A is in the codex Vaticanus Syrus 160, which also contains the earliest version of the *Life of Symeon the Stylite*. The latter states that it was copied in 473. This appears to be the basis for Wood's assigning the composition of the *Acts of Symeon bar Ṣabbaʿe* A to the mid-fifth century at the latest: he says it exists in a manuscript dating from the late fifth century (2013: 55 and 266). In fact, however, the *Life of Symeon the Stylite* is clearly an older manuscript bound together with other materials in Vatican Syriac 160 including the *Acts of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe* A and other acts of Persian martyrs. These were copied later. Brock (2008: 88) dates the second manuscript bound together in the same codex to the sixth century. Therefore, the *terminus ante quem* for the *Acts of Symeon bar Ṣabbaʿe* in its A-version needs to be moved at least a half century later: it was written during or before the sixth century.

23 K. Smith 2014: xxix–xxxiii.

24 Wood 2013: 60–64. K. Smith (2014: xlii–l) suggests only a *terminus post quem*, stating that it "was not composed prior to the fifth-century synods that formally established the Church of the East and delineated the hierarchy of the Church's episcopal sees."

25 Wood 2013: 60–64.

26 The name of this sect has evidently been distorted in transmission, like those of the others listed here. Their identity has evaded previous commentators (e.g., Kmosko 1907: 709–1710, corrupting the letters further as *ʿly*ʾ ܥܠܝ; Braun 1915: 1911; Schaeder 1950: 298; Kreyenbroek 2015: 501). I propose that the spelling *gly*ʾ ܓܠܝ represents a copyist's corruption of the letters **gngy*ʾ ܓܢܓܝ (perhaps by way of **gyly*ʾ ܓܝܠܝ), given that the letters for *g* and *l* are particularly susceptible to confusion in the traditional Syriac bookhand in the Church of the East. This name refers to the followers of Gangay of Goḫay, a group discussed alongside the Manichaeans, Dostaeans (Mandaeans), and other similar groups in the *Fihrist* of Ibn an-Nadīm. I discuss the Gangaeans and present Ibn an-Nadīm's report on them in Chapter 11.

27 The editors have read *mnqr*ʾ, or dismissed the word. or confused it with the Mandaeans. But it is clearly to be corrected by a misplaced dot to *mnqd*ʾ, *mnaqqde*, "the Purified," a term clearly indicated by Bar Konay (Scher 1954.2.311, lines 14 and 16) as referring to the sect from which Mani came: they are the Elchasaites.

and the rest of the pagans (*ḥanpe*)."[28] He also urges them to separate themselves from the Jews, who are the enemies of God, murderers of the prophets, and crucifiers of the Messiah.[29]

There are two editions of this text, both problematic in this passage. Nevertheless, the Mandaeans have been identified here correctly before, by Schaeder, Rudolph, and Macuch.[30] None of them, however, critically investigated the date of the text containing this important reference. The first edition, by Bedjan, is quite unclear about which readings come from which manuscripts, and he has not carefully identified his selection of words according to those manuscripts, either.[31] But the reading of "Mandaeans," *mndy'*, is quite clear and cannot be accidental.[32] Their identity as Mandaeans is corroborated by their collocation with the Kentaeans, *knty'*. Kmosko's subsequent edition, with his adjacent Latin translation, treats the line in which the heresies are listed with a heavy editorial hand, producing something quite different and omitting two of the six religious groups listed, including the Mandaeans.[33] I have identified all of the six groups named in the text as represented in Bedjan's edition, which appears to be based on a copy collated with what was allegedly a very old Iraqi manuscript.[34]

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28 On this word, see de Blois (2002: 18–19).

29 Vat. Syr. 161 (ninth century: Brock 2008: 88), 24b29–30 omits *deḥlātā* to *'enyānā* (as those words appear in Kmosko's edition). In other words, all the sects mentioned before the Jews are left out. This is perhaps a haplography centered on *men* or perhaps it was deliberately omitted on account of the obscurity of the names.

30 Schaeder 1950: 297–298; Rudolph 1960: 35; Macuch 1965a: 159; Rudolph 1975: 132.

31 On the manuscripts, see Bedjan 1890–1897: 2.vii and ix (edition of text 2.131–207); Kmosko 1907: 714. Bedjan used a manuscript copied in 1879 in Mosul but collated with a manuscript from a Chaldaean church in Diyarbakır that is supposed to be of the seventh or eighth century. I cannot identify that manuscript.

32 The word appears in Bedjan's edition (1890–1897: 2.150.20) as *mydy'*, the original letter *n* obviously shortened by mistake, making it into a *y*. Bedjan reports a variant in a footnote as *mbdy'*. Kmosko read *mnry'* (with *syāme* points) in British Library MS Add. 12,174 (his MS E), which my reading of the MS (360 recto.a.3) verifies. This is identical to *mndy'* but for the dot differentiating the *d* and *r*, but Kmosko relegates *mnry'* to the apparatus.

33 K. Smith (2014) just reproduces Kmosko's text (note on p. l). His English translation therefore has only "Manichaeans and Marcionites, *Kattaye* and *Manqare*," with a note (100–101n32) tentatively (and correctly) identifying the Kattāye as Kentaeans and suggesting an emendation (correctly again; see note 27 above) to *mnaqqde*, "suggesting a baptismal sect of some sort."

34 See note 31 above on the manuscripts. Kmosko (1907: 824 and note 2) suggested that the *mnqr'* were Novatians (highly unlikely in this context, but apparently following, without

This passage should not be thought to represent the actual words of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe; it is a fictional, idealizing account.[35] Nothing like this passage appears in the earlier recension, *Acts of Symeon* A (*Martyrdom of Symeon*). Wood's tentative hypothesis that the *Acts of Symeon* B (*History of Symeon*) was composed in the 530s is better but seems to me still too early, because he does not provide enough secure contextualization to ascertain such a date.[36] He must, however, be right to place it in the sixth century. Indeed, Wood states that "Symeon's demands [in this text] that monks be protected from taxation probably represents an addition of the sixth century or later, following the explosion of monastic foundations under Abraham of Kashkar (c. 560)." I see no reason to regard this as a separate addition, so I accept it as part of the original composition of this recension. I would add that the concern with Manichaeans, Marcionites, Kentaeans and Mandaeans represents a concern perhaps dating the text to around the time of the synods of 576 and 585, discussed above.[37] Therefore I assign it, like Nathaniel's treatise, to the second half of the sixth century, in any case not at a more precise date.

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citation, Bar Bahlul on the *mnaqqde*, who makes the identification; in fact, they are the *mnaqqde*, Elchasaites), and that the *gly'* were Christians of the province of Gelan, on the Caspian coast (again highly unlikely). Kreyenbroek (2015: 501) interprets the passage as referring to local Iranian groups, attributing the text to the fourth century and suggesting that the *gly'* are people of Gelan, the Kentaeans are "Kutāyē," taking them as "the ancient inhabitants of what is now Iraqi Kurdistan," and the *mnqd'* are "Mukrē," associating them with "the modern speakers of the Mukri dialect of Central Kurdish." This is all based on misreadings of the manuscript and misinterpretations of its context, but it is used to support the idea that "a distinct Iranian, but non-Zoroastrian religious system, in which the demiurge Mithra played a central role, must have existed in pre-Islamic Iran" with traces surviving in modern religions among Kurdish speakers. The Syriac evidence cited certainly does not support Kreyenbroek's argument here. Although Schaeder (1950: 298), on firmer ground, recognized the Kentaeans here, the *gly'* were obscure to him. For my interpretation of the latter name, see note 26 above.

35 Rudolph 1960: 35; 1975: 132. He attributed a fifth-century date to the *Acts of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe* B, using this to push the origin of the Mandaeans still earlier. Macuch (1965a: 92–93, 159), by contrast, seems to think that the passage actually reflects Bar Ṣabbāʿe's real words in the early fourth century, from which he concludes that the Mandaeans must have been around since at least the third century. This would be a naïve approach to saints' lives.

36 Wood (2013: 60–61) may be right to interpret the text's concern with "bad, 'tyrannical' catholicoi" as reflecting the division of the catholicosate in the 530s, but this is only a *terminus post quem*.

37 In fact, Wood's *terminus post quem* of the fifth century for the text's composition rests partly on the obscurity of the sects mentioned in the line under examination here. The reasoning for this is not evident to me. It is clearer when he says that "The text's anti-

The effort spent to provide a historical context for these works is rewarding, for these three testimonia from the sixth century are critically important in their references to the Kentaeans and Mandaeans. Cyrus of Edessa, writing around 540, is probably the earliest known external witness to the existence of groups by those names.[38] This makes Bar Konay's and Michael Rabbā's claims that they came into existence in the second half of the fifth century quite plausible. Their origin in the later part of the fifth century seems even more likely when we consider still earlier Syriac authors who complain about the same cluster of heretical sects for the same reasons without ever mentioning Kentaeans or Mandaeans. For example, Cyrus's *Explanation of the Fasts* is likely to have been informed, in writing the passage related above, by Aphrahaṭ's *Demonstration on Fasting*, which, in explaining the true meaning of fasting, states that the fasts of the Marcionites, Valentinians, and Manichaeans are not valid because of the errors of these sects about the creator.[39] Aphrahaṭ, though writing within the kingdom of the Sasanids *circa* 325–350, did not mention Kentaeans and Mandaeans on this point, despite their being sects with fasts that were distinctive in Cyrus' view (and fasting was especially important for the Kentaeans, as I will show). Cyrus thus names the same heretical groups and adds new ones that had come into existence since Aphrahaṭ's time. Another negative witness is Ephraem (d. 373), who spent his life on the Roman side of the frontier shared with the Persian kingdom. His *Epistles to Hypatius against the Erring Doctrines* are an extended attack on the teachings of Mani, Bar Dayṣān, and Marcion,[40] but he never mentions Kentaeans or Mandaeans. Ephraem is an author who makes sure to mock obscure sects like the Quqites,[41] but Mandaeans seem never to appear in his works. Ephraem's contemporary Titus of Bostra wrote a refutation of Manichaeism in Greek that survives complete in a Syriac translation found in a famous manuscript copied in 411. Titus

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Theopaschite theology also gives a late fifth-century terminus post quem" (Wood 2013: 60n40). In any case it is Wood himself who draws attention to the late sixth-century synods as events for the official self-definition of the Eastern Christians against these very sects, and it is these synods that should provide a historical context for this text.

38 Rudolph (1975: 132), who was unaware of Cyrus' text (published in 1974), considered the *History of Bar Ṣabbā'e* to be the earliest external witness, but assigned it to the fifth century.

39 *Taḥwita* 3 (*d-ṣawmā* / *de ieiunio*), ed. Wright 1869: ﻉ; ed. Parisot 1894: 115–116 § 9.

40 Mitchell 1912: text 125.27, English trans. xcii. He lists Valentinus (*Wlnṭyns*) with Marcion and Bar Dayṣan as sharing a doctrine and forming a common background to Mani's teaching.

41 Drijvers 1967: 107–108. Buckley (2005: 337–338) has suggested that the Mandaean report about a Mandaean heretic named Qiqil refers to Quq of the Quqites, but this seems very unlikely (see chapter 12, note 2 below).

explicitly connects Valentinians, Marcionites, and Manichaeans together, but never mentions Kentaeans or Mandaeans.[42] These are the very groups alongside of which the Kentaeans and Mandaeans are mentioned by the three sixth-century East-Syrian authors who cited the name of the Mandaeans, all three being readers of these earlier Christian authors. It may be objected that silence on the Mandaeans before the sixth century fails to disprove that they were there before that time. To this I would respond that silence on the Mandaeans certainly does not prove that they *were* there. The positive attestations should be the guide. From that approach, the picture is clear. The Kentaeans and the Mandaeans, as such, came into existence after Aphrahaṭ and Ephraem but before Cyrus of Edessa and the author of the *History of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe*. Bar Konay and Michael Rabbā are thus probably right in giving the Kentaeans and Mandaeans an origin in the mid- to late-fifth century.

42 In the Syriac translation, Titus puts Valentinus together with Marcion and Mani (ed. Lagarde 116.25, new ed. by Poirier and Crégheur 111.68.18 [p. 317]); he clarifies (111.71) that the followers of Valentinus (*wlnṭynws*) are called Valentinians (*ẅlnṭnyn'*).

CHAPTER 4

On the Kentaeans and Their Relationship with the Mandaeans

It is remarkable how consistently four authors of the Church of the East (Cyrus of Edessa, the author of the *History of Symeon bar Ṣabbāʿe*, Nathaniel of Šahrazur, and Theodore bar Konay) and the later chronicle-compiler, Syrian Orthodox patriarch Michael Rabbā, connect the Mandaeans with the Kentaeans. Both sects are supposed to have arisen in the fifth century, and Bar Konay says that the Mandaeans derived doctrines from the Kentaeans, implying that the latter group was deemed to be prior. Presumably this reflects at least some outward similarity between the two sects, if not the dependency of the Mandaeans on the Kentaeans proposed by Pognon, who followed Bar Konay's account on this point.[1]

A recent article by J.-M. Duchemin (2012) suggests that the Kentaeans were not a group known to Bar Konay separate from the Mandaeans, but are effectively the same as the Mandaeans, mentioned rather as the product of a heresiographic muddle synthesized from different sources by Theodore bar Konay. I will argue here that this is mistaken in effectively writing the Kentaeans out of existence and supposing that reports about them and the Mandaeans refer to one and the same group. In order to arrive at this view, Duchemin has to regard the three sixth-century references to "Kentaeans and Mandaeans" together, just reviewed, as "too allusive to be usable."[2] On the contrary, however, the direct designation by three different authors of the Kentaeans and the Mandaeans together by name as two groups is critical, and the passages, just reviewed, are positive references to both groups that help to establish their chronology. Duchemin also sees the later Arabic Muslim accounts of the Kentaeans, to be discussed presently, as mere stereotyped heresiographical reports with little authentic information. He does not explain how those Muslim authors came to possess the reports that they do relate, or on what basis their descriptions of the Kentaeans rested, or why the Arabic descriptions of the Kentaeans sound nothing like the Mandaeans. As I will show here, the existence of the Kentaeans as a separate but related group is confirmed even by

1 Pognon 1898: 245–255.

2 Duchemin 2012: 202: "trop allusive pour être exploitable."

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Mandaic sources. Mandaic texts themselves clearly refer to a group bearing uncomfortable similarities to the Mandaeans and sharing specific characteristics with the Kentaeans of the Muslim accounts, making their identification decisive.

In fact, I can identify three extant Mandaic passages that reproach the Kentaeans, although they do so in deliberately cloaked terms.[3] One is a passage in the *Canonical Prayerbook* of the Mandaeans; the second is from a passage in the *Ginzā* (*Right* 9) called "The Downfall of the Seven Planets," attacking other religious groups under categories by planet; and the third is a short passage, also from the *Ginzā* (*Right* 3), using similar planetary terminology to attack other religious groups.

1. The passage in the *Canonical Prayerbook* of the Mandaeans mocks a series of sects. The list runs as follows: Jews, the Kewānāye (people of *Kewān*, i.e. Saturn / Saturday), Yazoqāye, Idumāye, Zandiqe, Arabs, and Nāṣoraeans (this last sect being the good one with which the Mandaeans' priests identify themselves).[4] The identity of most of these groups is obvious or nearly so from their brief and polemical descriptions: the Yazoqāye revere fire, and so are apparently the Zoroastrians;[5] the Idumāye destroy their manhood and worship death, and so are apparently Christian ascetics; the Zandiqe withhold their seed and stand on "pillars of falsehood," and so are Manichaeans (identified here directly by their usual name *zandiq*), whose Elect abstain from intercourse and who identify the Milky Way as a cosmic "pillar of glory;"[6] and the Arabs occurring here are remarkably a sign of relatively late composition, if not a later addition. This leaves unidentified the people of Saturn, the Kewānāye, who "cut (the offering) in flames of fire and eat (it)." As I will show, these unidentified people are the Kentaeans.[7]

2. A clue about their identity comes from another Mandaic passage, found in the canonical collection of Mandaic scriptures, the *Ginzā Rabbā* (*Right* 9.1), from a section called "The Downfall of the Seven Planets."[8] This is the

3 The strategy is similar to that used by Zoroastrian authors. As Crone remarks (2012: 371), "we would not recognize Manichaeism in the Pahlavi [i.e. Zoroastrian Middle Persian] accounts if we did not know it in advance."

4 Drower 1959: 251 (prayer 357).

5 Shapira (2004: 251–252) very tentatively suggests that these were rather the Kentaeans if not at least some kind of unusual Zoroastrian sect.

6 Gardner and Lieu 2004: 19.

7 The identification was first intuited by the insightful Pognon (1898: 247n1), as also noted by Madelung (1981: 224n52), who pointed to their custom of assiduous fasting.

8 Petermann 2007: 1.1.222–230; German trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 223–231. Transcription in Hebrew

second Mandaic text reviewed here to blame the Kentaeans under the name Kewānāye. To understand the reference one needs to understand the character of the text. In some Mandaic texts in the *Ginzā*, the Seven, or Seven planets, are clearly the late Babylonian astralized gods, now demonized in the Mandaean religion. The Mandaic incantation bowls are inscribed with abjurations of these very gods. By contrast, "The Downfall of the Seven Planets" in the *Ginzā* associates the Seven not with the gods of idolaters but with later sects with which the Mandaeans had to compete. For example, the Arabs (Muslims) are said to be from Nerig (Mars), who apparently had, by the time of composition of this text, lost his primary significance as a pagan god but remained associated with war and conquest. So this text expands on the heresiographical list given in the hymn just mentioned with many more details and new groups added in, vehemently condemning each of the sects with allegations of filth and depravity and impurity in general. This is the typical way for Mandaean texts to deal with outside groups. There is no need to relate the entire passage here, because it has been presented in detail by Shapira,[9] but let it suffice to mention some of the more revealing traits of the people of Kewān. First of all, it says that "he" (meaning apparently Kewān, Saturn), "founded his *kynṭ'* and perverted (reversed?) the daily ablution prayers (or unction: *rušmā*, lit. "sign"),"[10] *kynṭḥ k'n w-'p'k rwšm'*. The word *kynṭḥ* ("his *kintā* or *kentā*") has several homonyms in Mandaic meaning "altar (or altar tray)," "covering," or "community." I take this here rather as a direct reference to the house of worship of the Kentaeans.[11] An Arabic source, cited below, testifies that the sect took its name from their

characters with English translation in Shapira 2004: 265–276. English translation in Lupieri 2002: 204–210.

9 Shapira (2004: 256) supposes that the people of Kewān are some kind of Christians.

10 Segelberg (1958: 135–138) discusses the various meanings of *rušmā* in Mandaic texts.

11 Because their name is apparently from *kynṭ'*, they are therefore perhaps more correctly called Kentaeans or Kintaeans rather than Kantaeans, as modern scholarship has had it on the basis of unvocalized Syriac and Arabic texts. I have adopted the form "Kentaean" provisionally here, reflecting the likely vowel in Syriac. Drower and Macuch (1963: 199b) do, however, attest to this word's occurrence spelled as *k'nt'*. For the etymology of the word, one may perhaps look to Akkadian *kimtum*, *kintum*, "family," as in *bīt kinti*, "family house" (Black, George, and Postgate 2000: 158a); see also Duchemin 2012: 193–194. Burkitt (1932: 102) suggested that the name *knty'* should be vocalized as Knātāye ("Knāthāyē"), meaning "something like 'the Colleagues.'" Macuch (1965a: 171) and Häberl (2013b: 590n7) cite this interpretation, but the Arabic sources reviewed in this section invalidate that vocalization. Bar Konay tells us, however, that the name is related to their word for a house of worship, which Ibn al-Malāḥimī (see below) clearly shows was called *kinṭā* or *kanṭā*. See also van Ess 2011: 2.887n184.

house of worship, which they called [*m*]*knṯ'*. Bar Konay refers to the *knt'* as an edifice used by the Kentaeans. The Syriac and Arabic sources show that this Mandaic sentence means, effectively, that "Kewān founded his Kentaean house of worship."

The same *Ginzā* passage says that this group derived a following from "the sons of the great stem of life," *lygyṭt' ḏ-lg'ṭ mn bny' šwrb' rb' ḏ-hyy'*.[12] This indicates either recruitment from among Mandaeans or an offshoot from a common source with which the Mandaeans identified themselves, and which they believed they maintained correctly. It adds further sense to the expressed idea that the ablution prayers (*rušmā*) were distorted by the Kentaeans. If their rites really had nothing to do with each other's, the Mandaeans could not have accused them of distorting them. Moreover, the divine Mandā of Life (an exalted Mandaean divinity) says that "they perform *massiqtā* (funeral ceremony) and *dukrānā* (commemoration of souls) like my disciples (i.e. my priests, *tarmiday*)," again indicating a close similarity to Mandaean ritual practice of eating meals in commemoration of dead. The description ends with a warning to the disciples not to greet the people of Kewān or to take their hands, implying that they were similar enough to socialize comfortably. It may also be a reference to the ritual hand-clasp (called *kušṭā*) with the priest after baptism. The people of Kewān, however, are described as different from the Mandaeans in their handling of water, for example, which the Mandaic source regards as impure, in having different scriptures from false prophets, and, importantly, in putting the sign of the cross on their left shoulder. The cross on the left shoulder is clearly and specifically associated by Bar Konay in Syriac with Baṭṭay's Kentaean religion. This precise, unusual feature, mentioned both in Syriac and Mandaic sources, contributes greatly to the identification of the "people of Kewān" as the Kentaeans. Lastly, this Mandaic passage says that Kewān (Saturn) appears to the people of this sect calling himself "Lord of Lords God," *m'ry' m'ryw'n 'l'h'*, who exhibits mighty feats (*g'b'rw't'*) in the heavens and on earth. Bar Konay's account of the Kentaeans says that their good demiurge was called "Lord God," *māryā alāhā*, who was bound in the heavens by the Seven, and eventually refashioned Adam after his initial creation by the demons. The identity is again clear.

3. The people of Kewān in the *Ginzā* are also distinct in their arduous fasting. In another tractate of the *Ginzā* (*Right* 3), the third Mandaic text referring to the Kentaeans under this name, a similar list of sects arranged by planet is given in much more abbreviated form. Here the people of Kewān are described in these

12 Petermann 2007: 1.1.223.18–19; Lidzbarski 1925: 224; Lupieri 2002: 204–205.

terms: "every day in fast they sit, every day they sit in fast," *w-kwl ywm' b-ṣ'wm' y'tby' kwl ywm' y'tby' b-ṣ'wm'*.[13]

Beyond these three Mandaic passages, there are also several works in Arabic written by Muslims that mention the Kentaeans, and their data further secure the identification of the Kewānāye of the Mandaic sources with the Kentaeans. The Baġdādī heresiographer Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq (d. 861 or later) wrote a lost work dealing with "dualists," roughly those sects that modern scholars misleadingly call "Gnostic." This work was a common source for several of the reports still extant in Arabic on this group.[14] These include notices in the *Kitāb al-Muʿtamad* of Ibn al-Malāḥimī (d. 1141) and the *Kitāb al-Milal wa-n-niḥal* of aš-Šahrastānī (d. 1153). Ibn al-Malāḥimī reports specifically that the *bīʿa*, "church," of the "Kintānīya," the building for which they are named, was called [*m*]*knṭ'*.[15] He says that that some people count them as Christians and that some people count them as Ṣābi'a. The likening to Christians is not surprising if they bore the sign of the cross, and their being included among the Ṣābians is also not unexpected, either. Aš-Šahrastānī says (putting them in the past tense as a bygone group) that the Kentaeans (*Kintawīya*) believed fire to be the source of all good and water of all bad.[16] This may be related with the Mandaean complaint that they "cut (the offering) with flames." Presumably they used their revered fires in their rituals. It matches Bar Konay's data about the Kentaeans of Baṭṭay, who are supposed to have assimilated to the Zoroastrians to the point that they put fire in their dwellings or temples (*b-ʿumrayhon*), and who believe in two primordial principles. This may also be what the *Ginzā* (*Right* 9.1) refers to when it says that the people of Kewān "make a house of mysteries and worship inside,"

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13 Petermann 2007: 1.1.120–121; Lidzbarski 1925: 134–138; Shapira 2004: 276–279.

14 S.M. Stern, "Abū ʿĪsā Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Warrāḳ," *EI²*; David Thomas, "Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq," *EI³*; van Ess 2011: 1.167–179.

15 Madelung and McDermott 1991: 589. See also de Blois (2012: 18–19) for notes sorting out the Muslim heresiographers' account of the Kentaeans. Madelung (1981: 221), one of the text's editors, notes that the poorly copied manuscript has *m-k-n-ṭ-'*, with the *nūn* unpointed, but he is probably right to correct it to *knṭ'*; a copyist has added the *mīm* to turn it into a *nomen loci* on the Arabic pattern. Against this, Duchemin (2012: 195) dismisses the occurrence of the word as part of a "heresiographical tradition" to derive the name of a Kentaean sect from their cult-site. This skepticism is excessive, as demonstrated by the Mandaic references to "people of Kewān" who have a *kynt'* and who share other characteristics with the Kentaeans as described in different sources under discussion.

16 aš-Šahrastānī 1.196.15–197.3. "They are fierce partisans of Fire (*yataʿaṣṣabūna li-n-nāri šadīdan*), on the grounds that it is lofty, luminous, and subtle; existence (*wuǧūd*) is by it alone, and remaining (in the world, *baqā'*) occurs only by means of sustaining it." Cf. Madelung 1981: 223.

w-byt r'zy' 'bdy' w-b-g'w' s'gdy'. When Bar Konay relates the tale about the Nerigaeans who make an offering house to Cain, he mentions that the sons of Seth made a house of assembly (*bet ṣawbā*) for their uncle Abel. "And they called it *kuwwānā* ("admonition") because he is an admonition to us." "This," adds Bar Konay, "is the *kentā* of the foolish Kentaeans." It appears that the aetiology of the Kentaean church or temple was that it was built by sons of Seth for Abel, whom Cain killed, and whose teachings they retain. It also suggests that the Kentaeans claimed to be from the sons of Seth, a significant detail.

Furthermore, aš-Šahrastānī names a subgroup of the *Kintawīya* called *aṣ-Ṣayyāmīya*, a collective noun meaning "(the group of) Those Who Fast." He says that the fasters "abstained from the benefits of livelihood, devoted themselves to worshipping God, and faced the fires in veneration of them. They also abstained from sex and sacrifices."[17] The *Ginzā* too says that the Kewānāye have "male and female fasters," *w-ḥwn ṣ'y'my' w-ṣ'y'm't'* (masculine singular *ṣayyāmā*, the Aramaic word behind the Arabic name) and that they are celibate.[18] We are furthermore reminded of Cyrus of Edessa's condemnation of the fasts of the sects including the Kentaeans, discussed above. It is apparently an ascetic subgroup of the Kentaeans who fast arduously, probably their religious leaders, parallel to the Manichaean elect.[19] In the thirteenth-century abridgment of the *Kitāb al-Awsaṭ* by the Muʿtazilī theologian an-Nāši' al-Akbar (906), there is a brief, cryptic report on the Ṣayyāmīya under the heading of "Dualists": "They held the doctrine of the Manichaeans except that they fasted all the time. They roamed the wasteland (*al-qafr*)."[20] This tells us too little but we can identify the group now as Kentaeans.

In three passages of his encyclopedic *Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab*, al-Masʿūdī (wr. 943/956) mentions the Kentaeans with the designation *Kinṭāwīyūn*. The rare name

17 aš-Šahrastānī 1.197.2–3. *wa-ṣ-Ṣayyāmīyatu minhum man amsakū ʿan ṭayyibāti r-rizqi wa-taǧarradū li-ʿibādati llāhi wa-tawaǧǧahū fī ʿibādātihim ilā n-nīrāni taʿẓīman lahā wa-amsakū ayḍan ʿani n-nikāḥi wa-ḏ-ḏabā'iḥ*.

18 Shapira 2004: 278. These Aramaic nouns of frequent agency on the pattern *paʿʿāl* indicate probably that al-Warrāq's Arabic would have intended the vocalization *aṣ-Ṣayyāmīya*.

19 One is reminded of the fasting attributed to the Mazdakites in the Zoroastrian *zand* of the *Videvdad* (de Blois 2012: 20–21). Although the chronology of Mazdak and his followers is unclear (Crone 1991; de Blois 2012: 23n37), Mazdak's movement had its roots in the time of Kawād, not long after the time of the beginning, as argued here, of the Kentaean movement.

20 van Ess 1971: (Arabic) 73.13. Were they itinerant holy men? And does the wasteland here refer to the territory of Goḫay that became dry and fruitless after the avulsion of the Tigris? See Chapter 7 on this phenomenon.

has been transmitted by copyists unfamiliar with it in a distorted form as *Kīmārīyūn* through a combination of mispointing and slight alterations of the *rasm* of the letters.[21] He names his source of information on this sect, a book by the philosopher and physician Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī (d. 925 or 935), without specifying which book. In one passage he mentions "the *Kinṭāwīyūn (*al-Kīmārīyūn*)—this type of Ṣābian differs from the Ḥarrānians in their sect. Their abodes are between the countries of Wāsiṭ and al-Baṣra, in the land of al-ʿIrāq, near the marshes and the swamps."[22] In the second passage, in which he reveals his source of information as ar-Rāzī, he describes the doctrines of the Ṣābians including the Ḥarrānians and the doctrines of the *Kinṭāwīyūn (*al-Kīmārīyūn*), but he says he will not repeat the lengthy passage because it contains objectionable material.[23] The third passage relates no substantial information.[24] Unfortunately, he does not give the title of ar-Rāzī's work dealing with the subject. While al-Masʿūdī does not relate much concrete information about the sect, at least he confirms that Kentaeans lived in the same region as the Mandaeans.

Sometimes al-Bīrūnī has been cited in modern scholarship as a source on the Mandaeans, but probably he knew about the closely related Kentaeans instead. As just mentioned, al-Masʿūdī indicates that Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī had discussed the Kentaeans (**Kinṭāwīyūn*) living between Wāsiṭ and Baṣra in one of his works. For his part, al-Bīrūnī had a comprehensive knowledge of ar-Rāzī's works, having devoted a treatise of his own to enumerating them, his *Fihrist kutub ar-Rāzī*. Thus, it is likely that, when al-Bīrūnī makes remarks in his *Kitāb*

21 What was once written كنثاويون has turned into كيماريون. The fact that the name "Kīmārīyūn" occurs in no other work supports my interpretation of the word as a corrupt spelling. The first to comment on the name appears to be Chwolsohn (1856.1.105–108), who rightly regarded the name as corrupt. He took into account the manuscript variations, unreported by Pellat's edition and other editions of al-Masʿūdī's *Murūǧ*, in which his Manuscript C (which he consulted in the Oriental Institute of St. Petersburg) has الكنشاريون (1856.2.643); here the three dots of the original *ṭā'* remain, the *rasm* having been corrupted into that of a *šīn* instead of a *mīm*. For another example of a copyist's confusion between *šīn* and *mīm* in the tenth century, see de Blois (1992: 55). Although Chwolsohn's speculative interpretations of the name were not correct, he was surprisingly close to the truth in identifying al-Masʿūdī's *Kīmārīyūn* as Mandaeans. Rudolph (1961: 46) likewise assumes that the Kīmārīyūn were Mandaeans. Vallat (2015: 204) translates *al-Kīmārīyūn* as "Mandaeans" without comment or explanation, but they are the Kentaeans.

22 *Murūǧ* 1.263.11–14 (§ 535) = *bāb* 21.

23 *Murūǧ* 2.394.13–395.1 (§ 1397) = *bāb* 67.

24 *Murūǧ* 2.415.3 (§ 1433) = *bāb* 69.

al-Āṯār al-bāqiya (wr. *circa* 1000) about a group of Ṣābians similar to the brief statements of al-Masʿūdī on the Kentaeans, he has his information from ar-Rāzī, too.[25] He distinguishes sharply between two groups of Ṣābians, those of southern Iraq (*Sawād al-ʿIrāq*) who trace their lineage from Anoš son of Seth, and the Ḥarrānians, who are not properly Ṣābians and are entirely different from them. He claims the Sābians of the Sawād derive from Babylonian Jews while bearing influence from Zoroastrianism. These traits could characterize both the Kentaeans and the Mandaeans, but the resemblance to Zoroastrianism is perhaps especially likely for the Kentaeans, given their reverence of fires. Al-Bīrūnī adds that they live in the Sawād and in Wāsiṭ (evidently not the town but the district), around Ǧaʿfar, al-Ǧāmida, and the two canals called Nahr aṣ-Ṣila.[26] Ǧaʿfar is the name of one of the canals leading from the Tigris south of Wāsiṭ;[27] al-Ǧāmida is a well-known town in the Marshes of Iraq; just one Nahr aṣ-Ṣila is mentioned by al-Balāḏurī and Yāqūt as a canal built near Wāsiṭ by the order of al-Mahdī (r. 775–785).[28] Al-Ǧāmida is a place in which Mandaeans lived, too, as I will show.

The identity and persistent existence of the Kentaeans becomes somewhat clearer through all these references. The Mandaeans who compiled the *Ginzā* and the *Canonical Prayerbook* were well aware of the Kentaeans and their mutual similarity. They were at pains to differentiate themselves from them. Again, as Pognon showed, at least a small portion of the Mandaic scriptures was shared with the Kentaeans, who used the same southeastern dialect of Aramaic.

The Mandaean *rušmā*, "sign," can refer to the prayer recited by all Mandaeans at daily ablutions. This may be what the Kentaeans are supposed to have "distorted." The received text of the *rušmā* prayer states "My sign (*rušmā*) that is on me is not by fire, not by oil, not by the oil that anointed the Messiah (anointed one). My sign is the great Yardnā (Jordan) of living water."[29] The statement of Mandaean affiliation is also one of dissociation with Christianity

25 Hämeen-Anttila (2006: 49) rightly cautions against automatically identifying al-Bīrūnī's Ṣābians of the Marshes with the Mandaeans.

26 Sachau 1878: 206.12–13 (*nāḥiyat Ǧaʿfar wa-l-Ǧāmida wa-Nahray aṣ-Ṣila*) and 318. Trans. Sachau 1879: 188 and 314. One would have thought that the name meant "link-canal," but al-Balāḏurī says that "its produce was designated as *grants* to the people of Mecca and Medina," *ǧuʿilat ġullatuhū li-*ṣilāti *ahli l-ḥaramayn*.

27 Le Strange 1919: 207.

28 al-Balāḏurī 291.17–19; Yāqūt 4.841.6–7.

29 Drower 1959: 103, Mandaic text 140a–b. See also Drower (1937: 103) and Rudolph (1961: 106) for the use of this statement in the ordinary, ideally daily, lay ablution called *rišāmā*.

and with another group whose sign is by fire. This may refer to the Kentaeans, or to Zoroastrians, or perhaps to both.[30]

Another passage that seems to hint at separation from the Kentaeans occurs in the *Canonical Prayerbook*. This is the prayer recited by the priest while the just-baptized approach to receive a sign in sesame before returning to the river to splash water on their right arms. The prayer describes the speaker's vision of an assembly (*k'n'*) of souls surrounding "our father Sethel (*Šytyl*)." Sethel agrees to go to the Jordan with the souls but wants a witness (*s'hd'*). The souls propose as a witness the sun, the moon, and fire, each in turn, but Sethel calls them each completely invalid (*mybṭ'l b'ṭyl*). He accepts only the Yardnā ("Jordan," i.e. freely running fresh water) as his witness, along with other features of the Mandaean environment of worship such as the *maškn*ā or cult-hut.[31] Bar Konay says that the Kentaeans revered the luminaries (sun and moon) and fire.[32] If this is true, one may suppose that the Kentaeans called on the sun, moon, and fire as witnesses in their rituals, and that this Mandaean prayer is a statement of differentiation and dissociation.[33]

Lastly, I wish to note that the *Ginzā* passages adduced above state that the Kewānāye (Kentaeans) "called themselves the prophets of the lie," *q'ryn l-n'pš'yhwn nbyhy' ḏ-k'db'*, "teach them the wisdom of the lie," *w-m'lpy-lwn hwkwmt' ḏ-k'db'* (*Right* tractate 9)[34] and "cause the prophets of the lie to prophesy," *m'nby' nbyhy' ḏ-k'db'* (*Right* tractate 3).[35] I think it is fair to assume that the Kentaeans would not call themselves prophets of the lie. Rather the Mandaic

30 Drower (1937: 103) takes it as reference to the Zoroastrians.

31 Drower 1959: 16–18, Mandaic text 26–29 (prayer 21). Abbreviated English translation in Rudolph 1974: 279–280.

32 Buckley (2002: 81–85) describes the baptism ritual in detail, indicating which prayers are recited at which times. She notes the "polemical" tone the text.

33 At first this may seem likely to owe something indirectly to the teaching of Elchasai, whose book is cited by Epiphanius as saying to avoid fire and the sight of fire, but to go to water and the sound of water. But the Mandaic prayer considered here also refers to the heavenly luminaries (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 19.4.7; Jones 2004: 195), which had something to do with the Kentaean religion. Elchasai's teaching about avoiding fire probably reflects the deliberate turn from sacrifice and burnt offerings toward baptism, and is not concerned with the witnesses to baptism itself. For Elchasai, the witnesses invoked at baptism are supposed to have been seven: water, earth, heaven, ether, and wind, as well as salt and bread apparently consumed after baptism (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 19.1.6, 19.6.4; Jones 2004: 195–196; the parallel adduced by Jones from the Pseudo-Clementine *Adjuration* 3–4 makes some sense of these seven).

34 Shapira 2004: 265–266.

35 Shapira 2004: 278–279.

word for "lie" here may be an example of the Mandaeans' deliberate distortion of the names of other groups to turn them into derogatory terms. For example, Mandaic texts regularly call the Jews by the invented name *Yahuṭāye*, which connects them by spurious etymology with *yahṭā*, "abortion," and *ḥṭā*, "to sin," instead of their Aramaic proper name, variously Yəhudāye, Yudāye, or Hudāye. So perhaps the prophets of the *Kentā* are made by the Mandaeans to call themselves prophets of *kadbā*, "lie," instead. The recurrent word "lie" here would then be a play of *Kentā*, the word used explicitly in *Right Ginzā* 9.1, like "Kewānāye" for Kentāye. Similarly, Bar Konay appears to have explained the term *Kentā* with a particularly strained etymology (if that is what it is) or play on words as a *kuwwānā*, "admonition."

To sum up, the picture of the Kentaeans that emerges from Bar Konay's Syriac text and the Arabic heresiographers is that of a sect whose members revered fire in special places of worship called *kentā* (Syriac) or *kinṭā* (Arabic), believed in a divine figure called Lord God, wore the sign of the cross on their left shoulder, and who included a class of ascetic arduous fasters known by the name *ṣayyāmāye*/*ṣayyāmīya* ("fasters"). The people of Kewān in the Mandaic texts were non-Mandaeans who had a *kynt'* established for them, believe in a divine figure called Lord of Lords God, wear the cross on their left shoulder, have people among them who fast all the time (*ṣayyāme*), and are also implicitly recognized as having some shared elements of cult and having common origins with the Mandaeans. The identification of the group is therefore clear from three separate groups of sources: Bar Konay's Syriac, the Arabic Muslim heresiographers, and Mandaic references to Kewānāye. Any doubts about the existence of a distinctive Kentaean sect with this name and these characteristics must be abandoned.[36] The correspondences between the Mandaic, Syriac, and Arabic sources cannot be due merely to a Christian heresiographical or literary construct and cannot be the result of two separate traditions about the Mandaeans that have been combined into one by Bar Konay. The Mandaic sources themselves make it clear that they oppose the Kentaeans. The Kentaeans were, however, just one of the religious groups that competed with the Mandaeans for a while in their southern Iraqi environment. I will return to the discussion of that environment in Chapters 7 and 11.

36 *Pace* Duchemin 2012.

CHAPTER 5

The Account of al-Ḥasan ibn Bahlūl (Bar Bahlul), Second Half of Tenth Century

The Syriac sources reviewed so far shed light on the origins of the Mandaeans. The earliest source to describe their social life, however, is an Arabic work of al-Ḥasan ibn Bahlūl (fl. *circa* 950–1000), another learned member of the Church of the East.[1] His work is also the earliest to identify the Mandaeans unambiguously as Ṣābians, marking their transition to a status legitimate under Muslim rule. From the Ṭirhān diocese north of Baġdād, he is perhaps better known today by his Aramaic name, Bar Bahlul. His famous work is his bilingual Syriac and Arabic *Lehksiqon* (*Lexicon*). Less well known is his Arabic compendium *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* (*Book of Indications*), a book of astronomical, astrological, and calendrical lore that is a treasure of citations of ancient sources. It survives complete in only one known manuscript, today in Istanbul's Hekimoğlu Library, MS 572, copied in 1160 CE (556 AH). It was reproduced in a facsimile in 1985 and published in typeface by Yūsuf Ḥabbī in 1987. Two other manuscripts of later date preserve short sections of the work but not the one under discussion here.[2]

One of the chapters of his *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* presents an extraordinary, detailed, and detached (if not sympathetic) description of sectarian villagers, deriving from the first half of the tenth century, cited from an author whom Ibn Bahlūl names as "Abū ʿAlī." The people described in this excerpt are not called Mandaeans, but rather "Ṣābians," but it will be clear that they were antecedents of the modern Mandaeans. This is, I believe, the single most informative text about Mandaean life and custom written by a non-Mandaean before modern times, and is all the more important in that it derives from *circa* 900.

It has never been discussed before in scholarship on the Mandaeans.[3] I begin with a translation. Explanatory additions are given in [brackets], and the Arabic

1 Baumstark 1922: 241–242; Graf 1944–1953: II.157; *GAS* VI.231, 332–333.

2 Lamoreaux 1999.

3 When I presented this translation at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Boston, 20 March 2016, I was informed by a colleague present there that Stefanie Rudolf, whom I have not met, is preparing a German translation and commentary of this text, too. I then corresponded with her and we agreed to proceed with our own publications in different languages, which we have not shared with one another.

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original, where illuminating, is given in (parentheses). My discussion of the text is contained in footnotes to the translation and in commentary immediately following, after which I present a proposal for the identification of the author of the passage cited here by Ibn Bahlūl.[4]

> Chapter 41: The Sect of the Ṣābians Residing in al-Ǧāmida and al-Ḥawānīt and Sitrāyā, of the Districts of Wāsiṭ
>
> Abū ʿAlī—may God have mercy on him—said:
>
> They are the ones by whose epithet the Ḥarrānians are called. They are the ones mentioned in the Qurʾān. Their status as *ḏimmī*s is sound. There is no relationship between them and the Ḥarrānian pagans (*ḥunafāʾ*), nor is there any point of comparison in any aspect of their religious laws (*aš-šarāʾiʿ*). Rather they are distinct from them in every way.[5]
>
> A few of them came into my presence in the City of Peace [Baġdād] in the days of my employment as secretary (*kitbatī*) for Sāra, the daughter of al-Muʿtaḍid billāh [the caliph, r. 892–902]—may God have mercy on him—and my employment as secretary for her mother and for her sister Ṣafīya. I had requested for Sāra's mother as an administrative land grant (*istaqṭaʿtu*)[6] [the site of] Bayādir,[7] known as "the Jewish" (*al-Yahūdī*), in al-Ǧāmida, and ad-Dūl in aṣ-Ṣalīq, all of whose inhabitants are Ṣābians (*Ṣābiʾūn*).[8] So I investigated their situation and queried them about it thoroughly. I found that they profess the religion of Seth (*Šīṯ*) son of Adam, peace be upon him. They say that he is their prophet. They acknowledge John son of Zachariah [*Yaḥyā ibn Zakarīyāʾ*, i.e. John the Baptist].

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4 Ibn Bahlūl, ed. Ḥabbī, 257–260.

5 On the pagans of Ḥarrān, see van Bladel 2009: 64–114.

6 See De Goeje 1866: 91 (introduction), followed by Dozy 1881: 2.378b. The contemporary secretary Qudāma ibn Ǧaʿfar (fl. 902–938) specifies in his *Kitāb al-Ḫarāǧ* (Shemesh 1965: 35) that the Marshlands (*al-Baṭāʾiḥ*), once cleared, were suitable to be granted as *iqṭāʿ*.

7 *Bayādir*, plural of *baydar*, was a local Iraqi word for places where grain is gathered for threshing or where fruit is gathered for drying (Lane 1863–1893: 1.166a). The name here appears to designate a specific site called "the Jewish" (singular), just as al-Ḥawānīt, lit. "the Stalls," discussed below, also designates a specific settlement. Presumably Bayādir was named for granaries there. It could be argued that the word ought to be translated as "the granaries" and not as a proper name.

8 Note the use here of the original Qurʾānic participle rather than the heresiographers' collective *Ṣābiʾa*.

They have writing and ancient Aramaic (*Nabaṭīya*) letters in the *abǧad*-order. They do not have *alif*, *bāʾ*, *tāʾ*, *ṯāʾ* [the Arabic order of the alphabet]. They have a book that they call *The First Psalter* (*az-zabūr al-awwal*), being one hundred and twenty *sūra*s, short and long. They pray with it. Their direction of prayer is Jerusalem (*Bayt al-Maqdis*). They have books of precepts (*kutub aḥkām*), one of which is attributed to John son of Zachariah, and another to Seth son of Adam.

They make offerings of bread, water, beverage (*šarāb*), and raisin water.[9] They worship on Sunday. They fast eighty days in the year, in the Persian month called Daymāh and in the winter. The day of their fast-breaking is a feast on which they raise a long banner of white *ḫazz* [silk and wool blend]. The devout (*al-mutadayyinūn*) among them celebrate and make offerings every Sunday. But the majority of them have six festivals that they will not fail to attend. They are: the first Nayrūz, the second Nayrūz,[10] the first Mihrağān, the second Mihrağān,[11] Daymāh in its first part,[12] and the Unleavened Bread (*faṭīr*). No foods, animals, or anything else is forbidden to them in a [period of] fast.[13]

They do not believe in the resurrection of the body (*al-aǧsād*) but of the spirit (*al-arwāḥ*). They have the recompense of the Garden and the recompense of the Fire. When one of them passes away, the chief and his disciples (*ar-raʾīs wa-talāmīḏuhū*) bury him together with his close relations. His legacy belongs to his heirs, though the chief has one third of

9 Drower (1960: 12) notes that the *hamrā* (Mandaic *hʾmrʾ*, Aramaic for "wine") "drunk at [modern] Mandaean sacraments is not fermented; as used at a marriage ceremony it is water into a cup of which, just before the ceremony, the ganzibra macerates raisins and dates … Four raisins or grapes are placed in a small bowl of water and macerated."

10 On the modern Mandaean celebration of these Nawruz days, see Drower (1937: 86–87), Taqizadeh (1938: 607–608), and Rudolph (1961: 331–333).

11 See de Blois (1996: 47–48) on the duplication of festivals like Mihragān in the wake of a Sasanian calendar reform *circa* 500.

12 See Drower (1937: 91) and Rudolph (1961: 335) on the "Dehwa Daima" or "sacrifice of Daymāh."

13 It may seem pointless to have a fast during which no edibles are forbidden. If there is not an outright error here, this may be Abū ʿAlī's misunderstanding, for Drower (1937: 91–92) notes that "Abstention from animal food is the only form of Mandaean fasting," but during one fast, that of Panja, "No meat may be eaten except the flesh of sheep sacrificed in the ritual meals for the dead." When Abū ʿAlī says that they may eat even animal food during the fast, perhaps he has in mind some exception like this.

it, which he spends on the house of worship (*al-masǧid*).[14] They call it *ʾbʾ ʾlḥbʾ* or "the temple" (*al-haykal*). The consistency of their fast in the winter indicates that they intercalate as the Persians used to intercalate of old a month every one hundred and twenty years.[15] They burn frankincense and other aromatics in their prayer-places (*muṣallāhum*). They light lamps at night, but do not light lamps in the day. They have no special place for the offering. As for the chief and his disciples, they enter the temple every day; the common people (*al-ʿawāmm*) among them enter it every Sunday after they have immersed themselves in the water and cleaned themselves.

They do not eat anyone's bread, nor do they associate with him, because they avoid the menstruating woman, nor do they employ her.[16] When the condition befalls her, she retires until she is purified and washes herself; then she can mingle with them. When the condition befalls her on some path, she sprinkles water behind her until she reaches the room in which she retires. They do not trust that anybody can be healthy after mingling with the menstruating woman and that she can bake bread or cook for them, so they avoid them[17] for this reason. When they attend a social gathering (*maǧlis*) and the home of a stranger (*raǧul ġarīb*) who has no wife nor any woman together with him, he [*sic*] cleans himself and bakes bread right in front of them, or slaughters a chicken or a goat or something else, and they eat of it with him quickly [supply: and drink] with him in a new clay vessel.[18]

They do not circumcise[19] nor are their women excised. Their prayers are in ancient Aramaic (*an-Nabaṭīya al-qadīma*) as is their ordinary speech. They see fit to wear the white girdles (*al-zanānīr*) on their midsection, and call them *hamāyīn*, singular *himyān*. They are entirely white.

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14 *Byt mʾzgdʾ* is attested in Mandaic (Drower and Macuch 1963: 64), though it is perhaps based on Arabic *masǧid*.

15 De Blois (1996) has analyzed the legend of ancient Zoroastrian intercalation; the present text is an early witness to the medieval scholarly discussion, which became acute from the reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil to that of al-Muʿtaḍid (847–902). See also Drower 1937: 89. The Mandaeans who persisted until today did not intercalate (Taqizadeh 1938).

16 The text as it stands thus attributes the Mandaeans' shunning of outsiders to the pollution brought on by menstruating women in the midst of non-Mandaeans.

17 Correcting *yataǧannabūnahum* to *yataǧannabūnahunna* with Ḥabbī.

18 Thus Ricoldo de Montecroce *circa* 1290 (Puech 1949: 251): *factum panem ab homine alterius ritus non comedunt*.

19 Ricoldo de Montecroce (Puech 1949: 251): *detestantur Abraam propter circumcisionem*.

> Often they are broader than the girdles of the Christians (*an-Naṣārā*). They wash themselves clean of ritual impurity. They do not clasp hands upon meeting. They do not approach anyone affected by ritual impurity until he washes. Their months are the same as those of the Persians. When one of them is traveling away from home (*fī ġurba*), and is compelled to eat bread [eat a meal], he does not eat it unless he has washed it with water first.
>
> These are the letters of their alphabet: *ʾ b g d h w z ḥ ṭ y k l m n s ʿ*—and its pronunciation is that of the lightened glottal stop (*hamza maysūra*)[20]—*p ṣ q r š t*. And they have a separate *tāʾ*, for the one illustrated is conjoined, but it [not illustrated, apparently] is the image of the separate one. Their total is twenty-two letters apart from the separate *tāʾ*. [This community's letters are illustrated with their corresponding Arabic letters in the manuscript.]

Besides the references to John the Baptist and Seth as two of their authorities, and the clear rendition of their script letter for letter, the description of their rituals and beliefs almost exactly matches what is known from the modern Mandaeans. They have Sunday services for the laypeople; they have holidays corresponding at least in part to those of the modern Mandaeans; they baptize assiduously; their women require purification after menstruation, which causes enough pollution to be disruptive to religious rites and regular social intercourse. Almost every sentence of the passage matches something already known about Mandaean practice in the twentieth century. There are two glaring exceptions that may indicate that the group mentioned here is a sect of Mandaeans slightly different from the group ancestral to all modern Mandaeans. One exception is the report that these Ṣābians pray facing Jerusalem, whereas the Mandaeans in modern times pray toward the north.[21] The other is that Abū ʿAlī claims that his Ṣābians used intercalation, but the Mandaeans, at least those surviving today, have never used intercalation, retaining the 365-day year of the Sasanian kingdom, without intercalation, apparently without interruption until the twentieth century.[22] The author observes their painstaking observance of purity regulations, which attracts much of his attention. Prob-

20 Al-Ǧāḥiẓ of Baṣra (wr. in the 840s) remarks on the Arabic accent of the "pure Nabaṭī man" (*an-nabaṭī al-quḥḥ*) of as-Sawād, who pronounces *ʿayn* as the glottal stop, or *hamza* (*al-Bayān wa-t-tabyīn* 1.70.17–19).

21 Lupieri 2002: 15. Al-Bīrūnī's Ṣābians of the Marshes, who, I suggested above, were the Kentaeans, prayed facing the north, too.

22 Taqizadeh 1938: 606–607.

ably this is because he had to interact with these visitors as a host in Baġdād. Much of the information about purity, with the questions about the status of menstruating women, reflects not his actual experience with Mandaeans but merely the probing curiosity of the author about the practicality and limitations of their observances, which seem to have made a distinct impression.

Another point of the account that reduces doubts that these were very close cousins of direct ancestors of the modern Mandaeans is the description of their script. The letters of the alphabet of these Ṣābians are given at the end of the passage with their Arabic equivalents written beneath them. Ḥabbī's edition includes a reproduction of the relevant part of this page in the unique manuscript (also available in Sezgin's facsimile). Though the manuscript was copied two hundred years after Ibn Bahlūl, and he cited it from another, lost work, one can see at a glance that the letters given are more or less exactly the Mandaic ones, distorted in a few cases but collectively recognizable and clear. Even the twenty-third letter, known in Mandaic as *dušenna*, is mentioned, though not by that name. It is not illustrated in the manuscript but there can be no doubt that this is the special Mandaic character for the Aramaic relative particle, rendered today in transliteration as *ḏ-*. Although the manuscript illustrates only the shape of the "conjoined *tā*'," the normal letter for *t*, the characterization of the letter *ḏ-* as a "separate" letter is not inappropriate because that letter is not conjoined with a ligature to another (except in the word *kḏ*), as the proper letter for /*t*/ is. Interestingly, this twenty-third letter is described as a "separate" *t*, indicating its perceived voiceless sound. Although the inherited Aramaic word would have been pronounced as a voiced consonant *d-* or *ð-*, this passage indicates that already around the year 900 the pronunciation was on its way, in this dialect, at least, to the voiceless modern pronunciation of that grammatical particle (which is not used in vernacular Neo-Mandaic).[23] The voiceless pronunciation is securely attested in Aramaic magic bowls of the late Sasanian period.[24] It is also attested in Neo-Aramaic pronunciations, as in the modern Aramaic of the Jews of Irbil (Arbela), the chief city of ancient Adiabene.[25] (By contrast, Häberl's learned informant on the Neo-Mandaic of

23 Macuch (1965b: 11) describes it as a velarized *ṭ*. As Charles Häberl remarks to me (personal communication), Macuch may have heard the consonant as velarized, but this is probably a misperception due simply to its being unaspirated (velarized and glottalized voiceless consonants in Semitic were and are not aspirated, unlike their plain voiceless counterparts, which are aspirated).

24 Ford 2012.

25 Khan 1999: 386–396.

Khorramshahr [al-Muḥammira] pronounces it as *d*.[26]) In any case, as the Arabic source under analysis here says, both the scriptures and the everyday speech of these Ṣābians were Aramaic.

Abū ʿAlī notes the distinction between the religious experts, who consist of a chief (*raʾīs*, which may refer to the Mandaic *ryš ʾmʾ*, *reš ammā*, "ethnarch") and "disciples" (*talāmiḏa*, clearly Mandaic *tarmide*), and laypeople, some of whom are more devout than others. They have a special house of worship, before entering which one must wash. These are not called *be-mandā* as one might have expected but the word may be corrupt in the transmission. A remotely possible interpretation of their term for their "temple" is as *ʾbʾ ʾlḥyʾ* = **əbē al-ḥayyē*, i.e. Mandaic *by*(*t*) *ḥyyʾ*, "House of Life" with the Arabic definite article inserted anomalously into the construct. The first word seems certain: *bē*, *əbē* for construct *bet* (*bēϑ*), "house," is common to Aramaic of this period, particularly in the Southeastern dialects. The prothetic initial vowel, represented here by the *alif*, at the beginning of words, even those that do not begin with consonant clusters, is a known phenomenon in Mandaic.[27] A problem with this proposal is that, although the phrase *byt ḥyyʾ* is common in Mandaic texts, it usually refers to heaven. The word *al-ḥayye* here is much less certain and it may be best merely to acknowledge that it is a corrupt rendering of an unknown word.

As this passage states, these people, whom I take to be antecedents of the modern Mandaeans, lived in villages on the northern side of the Marshes of southern Iraq, toward Wāsiṭ. They spoke and worshipped in Aramaic, and they had books in Aramaic attributed to John (Yaḥyā) and Seth. Their scriptures are explained in qurʾānic terms: *zabūr* means Psalter; *suwar* (singular *sūra*) is the term for sections of the Qurʾān.[28] Their psalmbook had 120 *sūras*; this is almost certainly one of the component sections of the *Qullāstā* ("*Canonical Prayerbook*") or a different anthology of some of the same material. The passage would seem to suggest that the *Qullāstā* as we know it had not yet been fully assembled in the community with which he came into contact. There is no mention of anything like the *Ginzā*, but the books of John and Seth may refer to parts of it or rather to what would eventually be collected as parts of it. If in this time they had an authoritative *Ginzā* collection, which Macuch and others supposed to have been collected precisely to turn the Mandaeans into "People of the Book," then it is really remarkable that this source, concerned as it is

26 Häberl 2009: 153.

27 Nöldeke 1875: 33 § 32; Macuch 1965b: 131, § 84.

28 So also the Ḥarrānian Ṣābians also produced *suwar* of Hermes in the tenth century (van Bladel 2009: 92–94), using the Qurʾānic term.

with their legitimacy, does not mention it. In all likelihood the anthology that is the *Ginzā* was gradually compiled rather for reasons internal to the Mandaean community, and not to show it off to Muslims who could not, in any case, read it. This suggests that the *Ginzā* as we have it was compiled well after the advent of Islam.

So these Ṣābians were clearly Mandaeans. Nothing suggests that they were a related group, such as the Kentaeans: there is no reference to a sacred fire or to constant fasting or to signs of the cross borne on the shoulder. The encounter described took place around 900, but the account was composed after the death of the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (902), because mention of his name in the text is followed by a benediction for the deceased. Some Mandaeans came to Baġdād to meet the accountant in charge of their villages, the author of the passage. He noticed that they were not Jews, and after his inquiry they impressed him enough to declare them to be the true qur'ānic Ṣābians. We do not know whether this was originally their claim or his. The Ḥarrānian pagans, who were the better-known Ṣābians in Baġdād at that time, are dismissed as false and entirely different. Much of the information reported is concerned with the Mandaeans' interaction with nonmembers of their group. These aspects of their conduct must have been quite evident during their visit with the author in Baġdād.

A specifically Aramaic word is cited for the girdle or belt worn by these people: *hmy'n*.[29] The *hemyānā* of the Mandaeans is a well-known garment. For the author of this text, it merely signifies these Ṣābians' participation in the *ġiyār* restrictions, that is, the requirement for non-Muslims to distinguish themselves publicly with distinctive attire and conspicuously deferential conduct. In this case, these marsh-dwelling Ṣābians wear the belt called *zunnār* willingly, although they make it distinctively white (rather than the prescribed yellow) and unusually broad. The Mandaean practice of wearing such belts surely antedated Arab Muslim rule, as indicated by discussions about them in early Mandaean texts. The *Thousand and Twelve Questions*, a collection of scrolls imparting technical knowledge to Nāṣoraeans, or Mandaean priests, in a passage that may be pre-Islamic, urges one not to forget to tie the *hemyānā*, an event given ritual significance.[30] Pre-Islamic Zoroastrians and Babylonian

29 Mandaic *hymy'n'*. On the style in which it is worn, see Drower 1937: 31. Cf. Syriac *hemyānā* ܗܡܝܢܐ, *Thesaurus Syriacus* 1.1020; New Persian *himyān*, *hamyān*, "girdle, belt" (Steingass 1892: 1512b).

30 Drower 1960a: 177; Buckley 2005: 283. The *m'lky' hwd'yy'* mentioned in the passage are not "Khuzistani rulers" (thus Buckley) but Jewish kings. On the design of the *hemyānā* see Drower (1937: 31).

Jews also wore belts expressing religious commitment called by the same name, *hamyānā* (Aramaic) (or *kustīg* in Middle Persian).[31] Under Arab Muslim rule, however, the Mandaeans came to have an additional reason to don the belt, as it signified their *ḏimmī* status and might thus dispel doubts that they were indeed true Ṣābians. It is also interesting to note that the belts that they wore made them resemble Christians at the time. Nevertheless, some Muslims recognized the questionable status of the Mandaeans and could identify them by their distinctive belt. A passage in the Mandaic *Book of John* relates complaints about ill-treatment by Muslims. They are said to have destroyed Mandaean houses of worship and built mosques instead. Sometimes the harassment was personal. As the text says,[32]

> When [Muslims] see the man bound with the girdle (*hemyānā*), a great trouble envelops their entire body. They stand and ask them questions, saying, "Who is your prophet? Tell us, who is your prophet? And tell us, what is your book? Tell us, who is it that you bow down to?" The shameful and accursed ones do not know and do not understand. They do not know and understand that our lord is the King of Light on High. He is one.
>
> *kḏ hʾzy-lh l-gbrʾ ḏ-ʿsyr-lḫ hymyʾnʾ qyrsʾ rbʾ lʾbyš-lḫ l-kwlḫ qwmtʾyhwn qʾymyʾ w-mšʾyly-lwn wʾmry-lwn nbyhʾk mʾn ʾmʾr-lʾn mʾn ʾnbyhʾk w-ʾmʾr-lʾn kdʾbʾk mʾn w-ʾmʾr-lʾn l-mʾn-w sʾgdʾt-lḫ lʾ yʾdyʾ w-lʾ pʾršyʾ lyṭyʾ w-bhytyʾ lʾ yʾdyʾ w-lʾ pʾršyʾ ḏ-mʾrʾyʾn mʾlkʾ ḏ-nhwrʾ b-ʿtrwtʾ hdʾ hw*

In this Mandaic text John is known as Yahyā-Yohannā. The name Yaḥyā is the qurʾānic Arabic form of the name, which, along with explicit references to Muslims such as this one, has rightly led scholars to posit a date of composition after the Arab conquest. This book may or may not be the "book of precepts

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31 On these regulations, see Levy-Rubin (2011, esp. 154–157). On the *zunnār* see also Dozy (1845: 196–198) and Ahsan (1979: 61–63). Ibn Bahlūl's own Syriac-Arabic dictionary (2.637) glosses *hemyana* with *kuštīz* (= *kuštīž*) adding in Syriac, "Persian, it is called *kuštig*, and it resembles the Galilaean *zunnārā*," *Pārsāyā kuštig w-dāme zunnārā glilāyā*, and then in Arabic, "the *kuštīj* of the Zoroastrians, also *himyān*," *kuštīj al-majūs wa-ayḍan himyān*. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaici* 3.7.2: "… having learned [the term] from the Babylonians, we call [the girdle of the priest] ἐμιᾶν (*hemian*)." The term was originally Iranian (Ciancaglini 2008: 162–163). See further on the Mandaean *hymyʾnʾ* and its parallels Rudolph (1961: 54–56). On the Babylonian rabbinic and Zoroastrian context, see Mokhtarian 2016: 56–57.

32 Lidzbarski 1905–1915: 1.86.4–10 (text), 89–90 (German trans.). English trans. by Rudolph (1974: 310, via German) and Lupieri (2002: 256, via Italian).

(*aḥkām*) attributed to John" mentioned by Abū ʿAlī. That reference here seems to me more likely to point to one of the books of John found in the *Ginzā*. One of these, *Right Ginzā* Book 7, which is a collection of wisdom attributed to John, under the name of Yahyā, is introduced as "the wisdom and teachings that John son of Zachariah taught, revealed, and spoke," *ḥwkwmtʾ w-ʾprʾšʾt̲ʾ d-ʾpryš w-gʾlyl w-ʾmʾrʾyʾyhyʾ brʾzʾkryʾ*.[33] The Mandaic word *ḥukumtā*, "wisdom," may have been interpreted here with the Arabic word *aḥkām*, "precepts," using its cognate root. One would have expected Arabic *ḥikam* instead, a term for wise sayings. If the identification is correct, we should expect Book 7 of the *Right* part of the *Ginzā* to have been composed after the Arab conquest but before the reign of al-Muʿtaḍid: roughly 640–900.

33 Petermann 2007: 1/1.213.9–10.

CHAPTER 6

Identifying Abū ʿAlī

Ibn Bahlūl cites the passage treated in the preceding chapter as written by a certain Abū ʿAlī, who gives the account based on a personal acquaintance with some of the Ṣābians whom he met in Baġdād. Our understanding of the circumstances around its composition will be enhanced by identifying this author. This will in turn provide some insight into the history of the Mandaeans. Two modern scholars have attempted to identify Abū ʿAlī, but neither of their guesses can be correct. The text's modern editor, Joseph Ḥabbī, suggests that he was the astrologer Abū ʿAlī al-Ḫayyāṭ, but this is ruled out by the fact that he must have died decades before the reign of al-Muʿtaḍid.[1] Sezgin, who published the facsimile of the sole complete manuscript, assumes that Abū ʿAlī is to be identified as one Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim al-Sinnī.[2] The latter name occurs as the author of an otherwise unknown book called *al-Fihrist* ("*The Register*" or "*The Catalogue*"), named in the table of contents original to Ibn Bahlūl's *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* as the source of the immediately preceding, fortieth chapter, on the calendar of the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān. It is the immediately subsequent chapter, the description of the Mandaeans translated here, which is attributed in the text to Abū ʿAlī. Sezgin apparently has assumed that the two different incomplete names referred to the same person, and that the two consecutive chapters came from the same source. In fact, Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī is not quite completely unknown: he is cited by name in Syriac and Arabic about nineteen times in Ibn Bahlūl's Syriac-Arabic *Lexicon* (in Syriac as *Bar Ḥātem*). Ibn Ḥātim was a source for Ibn Bahlūl on several ancient Greek as well as Syriac words.[3] The medieval geographers tell us that Sinn, near the confluence of the Lower Zab and the Tigris, was a primarily Christian town in this period.[4] Thus he must have been like Ibn Bahlūl: an educated member of the Church of the East bilingual in Arabic and Aramaic.

1 The astrologer al-Ḫayyāṭ was a student of Māšā'allāh, who died *circa* 815.

2 *GAS* VI.231.

3 Duval 1901: 3.xv. Duval adds, "I have no idea who this Syrian was" (*Quis fuerit hic Syrus nescimus*). Now we know from the *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* that Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī, also known as Bar Ḥātem, was a bilingual East-Syrian scholar who wrote a work known as a *Fihrist*. Presumably this otherwise unknown book was the source of the words cited as from him by Ibn Bahlūl in his *Lexicon* as well as the Ḥarrānian calendar he provides in chapter forty of his *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il*.

4 Le Strange 1895: 35; 1905: 91. See also Fiey 1968: 93–97.

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The identification, however, of this Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī with the Abū ʿAlī who wrote the passage on the Mandaeans cannot be correct. Although there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that an East-Syrian secretary could have worked for some female members of the family of the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, as the author of the reported account says that he himself did, this description of the Mandaeans bears several signs of having been written by a Muslim who did not speak any dialect of Aramaic. He begins by stressing that the status of the Ṣābians of these villages as *ḏimmī*s is sound (*ḏimmatuhum ṣaḥīḥa*), not something that one would expect a Christian to judge or to wish for on behalf of these non-Christians. Abū ʿAlī also compares the belts of the Mandaeans to those of the Christians as a removed observer. He does not say "their belts resemble our belts," for example. He even feels the need to report the Mandaeans' word for their belt, although this is an ordinary Aramaic word, as Ibn Bahlūl's Syriac-Arabic *Lexicon* shows.[5] An author like as-Sinnī, already fluent in Aramaic, would not have been likely to report an ordinary word for a common item of clothing as if it were a remarkable fact, nor would he have been likely to be impressed by the Mandaeans' Aramaic speech and letters. Finally, the preceding chapter on the Ḥarrānian calendar, which we can connect definitely with Yaḥyā ibn Ḥātim as-Sinnī's *Fihrist*, is entirely schematic, just a list of months along with the religious festivals that take place in them. It is the sort of thing that one might expect to derive from a work named *Fihrist* (meaning "catalog" or "register") whereas the subsequent chapter on the Mandaean Ṣābians of the Marshes has a different character, being a lengthy retrospective anecdote enlivened by a spirit of curiosity. The two chapters of Ibn Bahlūl's book must have different sources.

We should expect, therefore, that this Abū ʿAlī was a Muslim secretary, not a Christian. He was, however, also well-known enough that Ibn Bahlūl would expect his readers to recognize him by his *kunya* Abū ʿAlī alone rather than by a fuller name. If he was someone who was formerly a minor secretary in the house of the caliph, as implied by the introduction to the passage ("in the days of my service as secretary to Sāra …"), then he probably wrote the passage later in life from a higher rank. There is just one well-known secretary named Abū ʿAlī from the early tenth century that fits this description: the famous vizier Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad ibn Muqla (885/6–20 July 940), who lived in the midst of the decline of the caliphs' power during a period of intense court intrigue in which he and many other secretaries were involved.[6] As the more illustrious

5 Duval 1901: 1.637.

6 On his career see Sourdel (1959–1960: 2.448–456 and 2.471–476).

of two brothers both of whom were secretaries, he was distinguished by the *kunya* Abū ʿAlī from his brother Abū ʿAbdallāh ibn Muqla. Abū ʿAlī ibn Muqla was the vizier of al-Qāhir (r. 932–934) when that caliph condemned the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān as astrolaters in 933.[7] On the hypothesis that the Abū ʿAlī cited by Ibn Bahlūl is Ibn Muqla, the vizier's presence in the midst of these events can be related to the vehement denial of the Ḥarrānians' status as Ṣābians and *ḏimmī*s at the beginning of the passage under discussion here. The author's peculiar interest in the script of the Mandaeans, which led him even to write their letters at the end of his own account, can perhaps also be connected with Ibn Muqla's fame as a calligrapher who devised a system of standard proportions for Arabic letters, for which his contemporary Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (860–940) described him as "he whose handwriting is characterized by perfection."[8] Ibn Bahlūl introduces Abū ʿAlī as having died before the composition of the *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* with the words *raḥimahū llāh*, "May God have mercy on him," an expression that may in some circumstances suggest personal acquaintance or familiarity. Ibn Muqla died in prison in 940, his right hand and his tongue both having been cut off. Ibn Bahlūl is supposed to have written his *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* between 942 and 968.[9] The chronology is therefore fitting. In conclusion, the sum of circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that Ibn Muqla was the author of the report. The alternative is to suppose it was somebody unknown, with whom modern historians are unacquainted. That seems unlikely because innumerable courtiers and secretaries are known by name. I think that the vizier Ibn Muqla was this Abū ʿAlī, our most important premodern source on the Mandaeans' social life.

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7 van Bladel 2009: 105–106. Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (d. 1323), cited by Buckley (2005: 9), wrongly contextualizes al-Qāhir's persecution, making it to apply to the "idol-worshippers" of al-Wāsiṭ (rather than those of Ḥarrān). Ibn al-Fuwaṭī may have been citing the report tendentiously to condemn his contemporary Mandaeans; in any case the real event involved al-Qāhir and the Ḥarrānians.

8 Abbott 1939: 73.

9 Lamoreaux 1999: 187n1.

CHAPTER 7

The Marshes of the Ṣābians

Abū ʿAlī states that his Ṣābians lived in the marsh districts of the regional capital al-Wāsiṭ. The specifics are important because they locate real Mandaean populations around 900. Of the sites he mentions, I have not been able to identify Sitrāyā.[1] It was probably a small village. Ad-Dūl, another village of these Ṣābians, is also unknown, but, being connected with aṣ-Ṣalīq, located on a lake deep in the Marshes, it may have been quite remote. The site called Bayādir, "known as 'the Jewish'" (*tuʿraf bi-l-Yahūdī*), "all of the inhabitants of which were Ṣābians," appears to be identical with a village mentioned by aṭ-Ṭabarī in the context of the Zanǧ rebellion a few decades earlier "known as the Village of the Jews'" (*tuʿraf bi-qaryat al-Yahūd*).[2] Perhaps the Mandaean inhabitants had claimed to be Jews to maintain their security under Muslim rule; perhaps a formerly Jewish village had become entirely Mandaean. In any case, the Village of the Jews to which aṭ-Ṭabarī refers was at the Tigris near the canal of as-Sīb (*sēb*, Persian for "Apples"), which ran south of Wāsiṭ away from the Tigris, meandering through the drained lands (*al-ǧawāmid*) into the Marshes.[3] Better known is the bigger nearby town mentioned, al-Ǧāmida, and the river station of al-Ḥawānīt, where some Mandaeans were also to be found according to the heading of the report. All these places were in and around the northeastern edges of the great Marshes of southern Iraq, off the Tigris.

The presence of Mandaeans in the region of these towns and villages will make more sense when the history of the Marshland itself is taken into account

1 Perhaps the name is mispointed and to be read with initial *by-*, from Aramaic *be*(*t*).

2 aṭ-Ṭabarī 3/3.755.5. The village may be associated with the canal leading from the Tigris known also as "al-Yahūdī"; on this canal and its location see Verkinderen 2015: 58, 76–77, 186.

3 Le Strange 1895: 20 and 271. Al-Balāḏurī (291.11–13) notes that the excess waters of "the swamps of as-Sīb" merge with waters of the Euphrates in an "ancient" canal called al-Bazzāq, which, he states, is the popular pronunciation of Aramaic (*an-Nabaṭīya*) *bassāq* (properly Babylonian and Mandaic Aramaic **passāq*, less likely *psāq-*), "the cutter," or as al-Balāḏurī explains, "that which *cuts* (*yaqṭaʿu*) the water connected with it and draws it to itself." The verbal root *psq* for "cutting" is coincidentally the same used in Mandaean texts to refer to water that is "cut," that is stagnant and "dead," not flowing and "living," and unusable for ritual purposes. If this is the sense of the word here, then the proper name given to the canal into which the Sīb canal's waters flow, having passed through turbid swamps (*āǧām*), may attest to the presence of Mandaeans in the vicinity, specifically upstream on the Sīb above the cutting-off of the waters' free flow.

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as a context. The wetlands were ancient, but they spread widely and submerged previously settled and cultivated land in the later Sasanian period, when the Tigris catastrophically shifted its course in the reign of Kawād (r. 488–496 and 498–531). Despite the efforts of Ḫusrō I (531–579) to avert the waters, a second major avulsion of the Tigris and perhaps of the Euphrates, too, occurring under Ḫusrō II (590–628), caused disastrous and permanent further changes to the landscape.[4] The formerly wet and rich regions of Goḫay and the eastern part of Mesene became desiccated (in Ibn Rusta's terms, *ṣaḥārā* and *mafāwiz*, "deserts" and "wastes") as the course of the waters moved away.[5] Eastern Mesene became known henceforth as Dašt i Mayšān (Arabic *Dast Maysān* or *Dastumaysān*, Mandaic *Dašt Mesān*),[6] Persian for "the Desert of Mesene." Now the Tigris merged with the Euphrates' waters higher upstream to form a great wetland-producing flood which grew progressively wider after the Arab conquest as dykes decayed without repairs, to the point that it reached about 180 km (112 miles) in breadth in every direction, at least doubling the size of the wetlands on the Tigris before Kawād's time.[7] Several former Sasanian irrigation districts (Arabic *ṭasāsīǧ*) of Mesene were submerged, at least one of them completely. Ruins could be seen under the still water deep in the Marshes as late as the tenth century.[8] From the point of view of a modern archaeologist studying settlements in the lower floodplain of the Euphrates from the late Sasanian period and thereafter, the region becomes a blank on the map, with no traces of new construction for a thousand years.[9] It is striking that this ruinous change in the environment is supposed to have occurred just about the time that the

4 al-Balāḏurī 292. See also Eger 2011: 57–62 and the exemplary study of Verkinderen (2015: 50–55).

5 Ibn Rusta 94.21–96.3.

6 Yāqūt 2.574.9–13; *Ginza* (*Right*) 18: 390.12, trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 417.2 (where the Mandaic final *nun* is transmitted incorrectly as *qop*, giving *d'šṭ mys'q*).

7 Ibn Rusta 94.4–6; Hinz, "Farsakh," *EI*²; Le Strange 1895: 297–299; Le Strange 1905: 25–30, 41–44. Cf. Pliny, writing in 77 CE, *Historia Naturalis* 6.31, on the course of the Tigris south of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, where he says that the Tigris "flows into the Chaldaean lakes, and fills them up to sixty-two thousand *passus* (~89.9 km or 55.2 miles) in extent," *in lacus Chaldaicos se fundit eosque LXII p. amplitudine implet*. If this figure is correct, then between the first century and the end of the ninth, the "Chaldaean Lakes" had expanded 56 miles in extent, at least in one direction, on its way to becoming the great Marsh. In other words, it had doubled in extent in that period. Given the likelihood that it had been drained progressively after Pliny's time, through cultivation under late Arsacid and Sasanid rule, before the flood of Kawād's reign, then the loss through flooding at the end of the Sasanid dynasty must have been even greater.

8 Ibn Rusta 95.9–10; Verkinderen 2015, esp. 50–55.

9 Adams 1981: 205.

Mandaeans became a recognizable group. Michael Rabbā preserves the only chronologically specific statement linking their origin, together with that of the Kentaeans, to the reign of Balāš (484–488), immediately before Kawād. Does this connect the genesis of the Mandaean community to the floods of southern Iraq? It suggests at least that the earliest Mandaeans had to deal with these floods.

The transformation of much of Mesene into a broad wetland is noted in two passages of the Mandaic collection of scriptures called the *Ginzā*. The first reference (*Ginzā Right*, book 18) to the flooding of Mesene is securely connected with the great deluge of the Euphrates of the time of Ḫusrō II. The passage alludes, in a prophetic fashion, to an astrologically determined time when the "Great Euphrates will pour into the Tigris and the land of Babel."[10] Goḫay, the text says, would go to waste thereafter; famine follows.[11] This is just what the later Arabic sources describe. In the reckoning of the Mandaic text, the Euphrates' flood was to happen in the year 802 of the last millennium of Pisces. An indirect key to this date appears earlier in the same book, when the year 594 of this period of Pisces is given as the inception of the reign of Yazdgird son of Bahrām.[12] Both Yazdgird I and Yazdgird II were sons of a king Bahrām; their accession dates are respectively 399 and 438. By this reckoning, the Euphrates' flood and merger with the Tigris' waters should have happened in 608 or 647. According to al-Balāḏurī, however, the great flood of the Euphrates that decisively formed the Marshes was in 6 or 7 AH, i.e. in 627/8 or 628/9. This last date appears to be the correct one as it would coincide with a known climatic cooling disaster brought on apparently by a major volcanic eruption somewhere in the world in 626, having severe effects on the weather and environment in the immediately subsequent years as far as China.[13] The Mandaic figure, derived in a relative way from the date of a king two centuries

10 Petermann 2007: 1.1.386–387 (Mandaic text); Lidzbarski 1925: 414 (German trans.); Shapira 2010: 142 (English trans.).

11 *ibidem*. It also refers to Dast Maysān, the rendering corrupted in manuscript tradition to *d'št mys'q* (Petermann 2007: 1.1.390.13; Lidzbarski 1925: 417).

12 Petermann 2007: 1.1.384.14–16; Lidzbarski 1925: 412.

13 al-Balāḏurī 292.14–15. Also, in 626–627, the sky was darkened for nine months, apparently by volcanic ash which darkened the sky as far as Ireland (Schove and Fletcher 1984, 120; Hoyland 2011: 73). It is probable that such a climatic change contributed to flooding in 628, and the flood and chill may both have contributed to the "Plague of Šērōya" (r. 628) of 628 (Bosworth 1999: 399n984). Simultaneous with the Euphrates' flood and the plague in Mesopotamia, in 627–629 the Eastern Turk Khanate north of the Tang experienced "sudden and very severe disasters of snow and frost as well as ensuing great famines and plagues," collectively leading to widespread death, and the crops of the Tang empire

earlier, is probably wrong, perhaps having been affected by the expediency of astrological calculations or simple error, but it is at least close to the date provided by al-Balāḏurī, and ought to be regarded as an authentic reference to the great river floods just described.

The second Mandaic scriptural reference to the flooding occurs in a poem in the *Ginzā* (*Left* 2.11), in which the unidentified first-person speaker says how he went to all the souls (*nyšm'ṯ' kwlhyn*); they address him as the "son of the good (pl.)," and ask him to speak to his Father about the time of release from bonds. Without going to his Father, he tells them immediately that "everyone who has done hateful things will stay here in the stocks until the Euphrates goes dry at its mouth and the Tigris flows out of its course, until the lakes go dry, and all the streams, gullies, and springs overflow;" *kwl ḏ-'b'd ʿwb'dy' s'yny' h'k' b-s'd'dy' y'tyb 'lm' ḏ-pr'š y'byš mn pwmḫ w-dygl't š'hl' mn šyhlḫ 'lm' ḏ-y'bšy' kwlhwn y'm'my' w-kwlhwn z'by' n'hly' w-'yn'ny't' myšṯ'py'n*. Then, says the prophecy, the bound ones will be released and relief will arrive for souls.[14]

In short, these verses promise that a real terrestrial event involving a change in both rivers would signal a redemption of souls. The passage must refer to one of the events that led to the rapid growth of the Marshes. The Euphrates ceased to reach its old mouth at the Persian Gulf, drying up there while its waters now pooled in the swelling Marshes and fed the Tigris further, which changed its course. Some lakes, presumably those fed by channels from the old watercourses, went dry, while streams, gullies, and springs now overflowed, probably referring to the welling of water in the former cultivated land, where the Marshes now would develop further. Reason dictates that the passage was not an actual prophecy but must have been composed at the time of the flood referred to or not many years thereafter. The consolation of promised salvation that is the main point of the text would have been truly meaningful especially to those who suffered through that very time. But which of the catastrophic floods of the plain of Mesene is meant here? Our main source, al-Balāḏurī, refers to an earlier flood of the Tigris in the time of Kawād I,[15] which has been linked to the change in course of that river. The Tigris' relocation is the most specific event noted in this Mandaic passage.[16] But the flood of the Euphrates *circa* 628 seems to have been a much greater disaster with more profound effects.

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were devastated by frosts (Fei, Zhou, and Hou 2007). A climatic flooding disaster in Iraq should put the surprisingly successful campaign of Heraclius into Iraq from the north into a different perspective.

14 Petermann 1.11.87–88; Lidzbarski 1925: 524–525; Pognon 1898: 233–237.

15 al-Balāḏurī 192.9–11.

16 Le Strange 1905: 27.

To one living near the coast of the Persian Gulf, the results of the flood of the Euphrates may have seemed to be a drying up of the mouth of the Euphrates and a corresponding spreading and "change of course" of the Tigris. In light of these considerations, either event may be the point of reference here, which suggests a time of composition approximately either 530 or 630.

As it happens, this is the very Mandaic passage that Bar Konay, around 792, cites, with some variations, as an example of a *Kentaean* text, which I have translated in Appendix 1. This would mean that in the sixth, seventh, or eighth century (before Bar Konay, or rather before *his* source), a Kentaean text had found its way into Mandaean books, or the reverse, or a text originally proper to neither group was taken up by both. The fact illustrates the permeability of Mandaic literature to and from related outside groups in the same area. In any case, Bar Konay's polemical motive for citing this particular passage is now revealed: living near the Marshes many years after the change in environment described, he appears to be drawing attention to the fact that the redemption of souls did not occur at the time promised. The passage itself constitutes a clue to the heartfelt and urgent spiritual expectations of some zealous Aramaean people living in the early days of Kentaeism and Mandaeism. In the face of disaster, they did not place hope in the veneration of idols and in the local gods of their ancestors but in a new religious movement cast in terms resembling the biblical prophecy of Jewish sages and alluding to the sort of spiritual salvation promised by Christian preachers of all varieties.

The Marshes resulting from the change in the rivers' courses, called in Arabic al-Baṭīḥa (singular) or al-Baṭā'iḥ (plural), formed swampy chains of submerged mud, brackish pools, channels, and lagoons, and were lined with little villages and homesteads inhabited by people producing salted fish, cultivating rice and other crops, and raising water buffalo.[17] The marsh-dwellers facilitated and profited from transit up and down the Tigris between Baṣra and Baġdād, which had to pass through the broad waterways that were shallow in places. Cargo sometimes had to stop to be transferred from big boats to flat swamp barges to cross the wide wetland. But the great extent of the Marshes was inaccessible to outsiders. They became the refuge of brigands and renegades, including Ḫāriğites. It was home, too, to the restive Zuṭṭ (Indic *Jhat*/*Jat*), who had been transplanted from western India by the early Arab conquerors.[18] In and around this environment, several Aramaic-speaking religious communities, including the Mandaeans, survived with relatively little attention from the outside, but

17 M. Streck, "al-Baṭīḥa," *EI*[1]; Popovic 1999: 10–13.

18 C.E. Bosworth, "al-Zuṭṭ," *EI*[1].

with plenty of access to running streams, just the sort of "living water" required for the Mandaeans to maintain their daily and weekly rites.[19]

The event that first brought these Marshes into the main narratives of Arabic historians was a major revolt of slaves, many of them originally brought to Iraq from East Africa: the Zanǧ. The revolt lasted from 869 to 883. The Zanǧ, who had hitherto been used to drain marshland, to dig up salty earth and mine useful salts, and to create arable land, retreated deep into the Marshes for their defense and as a base for ferocious military excursions against Baṣra, Wāsiṭ, and al-Ahwāz.[20] Aṭ-Ṭabarī refers in one instance to the rebels' massacre of Marshland inhabitants at al-Ǧāmida and "all the neighboring villages,"[21] which must have included many Aramaic-speaking Mandaeans and others. There can be scarcely any doubt that the local peoples' adherence to poorly-known or unsanctioned religions such as Mandaeism put them at greater risk of such violence, then as today.

Abū ʿAlī's attention to the Mandaeans seems to be connected with the aftermath of this war and the contemporaneous centralization of the administration. The Zanǧ rebels eventually were defeated by al-Muwaffaq (d. 891), the powerful brother of the caliph al-Muʿtamid (r. 870–892). It was for female family members of al-Muwaffaq's son, the succeeding caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 892–902), that the text's author, Abū ʿAlī, was administering lands of the Marsh region apportioned as *iqṭāʿ*s.[22] Al-Muwaffaq must have claimed some of the reconquered land for his own family's use. Sources testify to his attention to the development of the area. As Adam Silverstein has noted, "al-Muwaffaq is repeatedly described as having to repair the roads and highways in order to mount an effective defense against the [Zanǧ] rebels."[23] This is part of the centralization of the communications and transit systems of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs from the time of al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861), al-Muwaffaq's father. It is likely that the villages in the area that had scarcely been heard of in Baġdād previously were now surveyed and reapportioned after the extirpation of the Zanǧ rebels.

Abū ʿAlī must have recognized when the representatives of these villages came to meet him that they belonged to a religion with which he was unfamiliar. This prompted his interest in them. If this is correct, it is because the caliph

19 An anthropological sketch of the inhabitants of the Marshes in the 1930s is provided by Drower (1949).

20 Nöldeke 1892: 146–175; Popovic 1999.

21 aṭ-Ṭabarī 3.3.1858.10–11 (end of year 257).

22 Cl. Cahen, "Iḳṭāʿ," *EI*[2].

23 Silverstein 2007: 92.

had seized lands in and around the Marshes after the Zanǧ rebellion, taking some villages for his own family's income, that the Mandaeans, living inconspicuously in remote sites until that time, came to the attention of an important secretary in the metropolis of Baġdād, and so to the attention of his readers in the city. This context explains the appearance of this unique description of the Mandaeans. It is striking that Abū ʿAlī has to introduce the Mandaeans to an audience who knew not even the basic details of their religion, and that he had to argue for their status as the true Ṣābians. This strongly suggests that Muslims not living in the vicinity of the Marshes really knew nothing about them at all. It is not inconceivable that Anoš bar Danqā, mentioned in Mandaean sources as the figure who won recognition and protection for the Mandaeans, was among the men whom Abū ʿAlī met, but it would be too great a coincidence to insist upon it. The point is that the identification of the Mandaeans as Ṣābians was not automatic around 900, and that the Mandaeans were not known to educated people in the central government in this time even in their basic characteristics.

Assuming that the author Abū ʿAlī is Ibn Muqla, he evidently found it useful to make an account of the Mandaeans, because it allowed him to dismiss the prominent Ḥarrānian pagans in Baġdād as "false Ṣābians." Whether this was because of jealousy, court intrigue, or just interest in gain at their expense, Ibn Muqla was the vizier presiding at the time of the condemnation of the Ḥarrānian Ṣābians by the caliph al-Qāhir (932–934), who obtained a legal ruling from a Muslim jurisconsult that the Ḥarrānians were polytheists, in the end extracting a large sum of property from the Ḥarrānians in return for allowing them to exist.[24] The question remains whether the agent behind this momentary persecution of the Ḥarrānians was not al-Qāhir himself but the vizier Ibn Muqla, who knew some Mandaeans personally and deemed them to be the real Ṣābians, making the Ḥarrānians into false Ṣābians and therefore an unsanctioned group. Perhaps his encounter with the Mandaeans earlier in his career is what induced him to malign the Ḥarrānians later on. Perhaps the excerpt under examination here, preserved by Ibn Bahlūl, was part of an otherwise lost essay against the Ḥarrānians for that occasion around 933.

Whatever the answers to these problems may be, I propose that this exceptional report on the Mandaeans exists because of the combination of events and opportunities just described, particularly the scrutiny of the Marshland area by members of the caliph's administration after al-Muwaffaq's war against the Zanǧ there.

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24 van Bladel 2009: 104–105.

The reports of Arabic geographers contemporary with Ibn Muqla offer some insights into the conditions of life for the Mandaeans at the time. Al-Muqaddasī, in the late tenth century, describes al-Ǧāmida ("Dried [Land]") and aṣ-Ṣalīq as the biggest towns in the Marshland. He complains about the heat and dirt there and the "ugly" language of its inhabitants, presumably the local Aramaic or a local nonstandard Arabic.[25] As for al-Ḥawānīt, another site reported here as a place of Mandaean residence, it appears in the works of the geographers writing on the region *circa* 900—Ibn Serapion,[26] Ibn Ḫurradāḏbih,[27] and Ibn Rusta[28]—and in the historical narrative of the contemporary aṭ-Ṭabarī. The name of the place is an Arabic plural of the Aramaic *ḥānutā*, referring to an inn, tavern, or market stall. The place was thus known as "The Stalls," and it was the site, Ibn Rusta explains, where cargo was halted on the Tigris for the assessment of a toll for the government before shipment down through the Marshes to the Gulf or up to Baġdād. No doubt the Stalls arose as locals found opportunities to provide services to the boatmen and merchants who had to stop there. Probably Mandaeans, whom Abū ʿAlī places specifically at this site, were among the locals who profited from the traffic going past this station. The site was strategically important: not much farther downstream from al-Ḥawānīt, where the waters dispersed into the broad wetlands with different navigable channels, beginning at al-Qaṭr, it would not be feasible to control and assess the transit of cargo.[29]

The earliest contextualized reference to al-Ḥawānīt that I have found is in aṭ-Ṭabarī's annals under the entry for the year 870/1 in the early period of the Zanǧ revolt. From this I assume it to have been a station established under al-Mutawakkil during the centralization of communications under his rule. After the revolt, al-Ḥawānīt was established or reestablished as a toll station for river traffic. Ibn Rusta says that cables called *al-maʾṣir* (sing.) were drawn between two boats moored on either shore of the Tigris. These prevented other boats from passing at night without paying fees. Those in charge of this arrangement were called "officers of the travelers and the cables," *aṣḥāb as-sayyāra wa-l-maʾāṣir*, who worked for the government (*min qibal as-sulṭān*). There was probably a postmaster there, too. Another cable-station like this one was created upstream, at Dayr al-ʿĀqūl, ten leagues south of al-Madāʾin.[30] The

25 al-Muqaddasī 1887: 119. See also Verkinderen 2015: 63.

26 Le Strange 1895: 33 (Section 1).

27 Ibn Ḫurradāḏbih (d. *circa* 911) 59.12.

28 Ibn Rusta 1892: 174–175.

29 Le Strange 1895: 33 (Section 1); Verkinderen 2015: 56.

30 Ibn Rusta 186.18.

word for "cable," written *m'ṣr*, is not originally an Arabic word. Ibn Rusta has to explain it to his readers.[31] In fact, it is the local Aramaic word, amply attested in Mandaic as *myṣr'*, a word whose exegesis now offers a bit of insight into the life and environment of the Mandaeans. The Mandaic lexicon of Drower and Macuch comes very close in its tentative definitions: "(a) limit, boundary or separating line, demarcation, (b) means of crossing a river, a rope stretched over a river to propel a ferry?, a bridge? ..."[32] An English word that captures several of these senses is cordon.

In Mandaean ritual, a *myṣr'* can refer to a cordon or barrier of molded clay found on an altartop to form a reserved area or to a furrow in the ground.[33] Ibn Rusta's explanation reveals that *myṣr'*/*m'ṣr* was also ordinarily a cable stretched across a river. For Mandaeans living along rivers, streams, and channels, this was a normal object that made sense as a concrete reference in literary analogies. One of the functions of such a cable was as a cordon or boundary to movement. Thus in the priestly exegeses of the *Thousand and Twelve Questions*, the Mandaeans' girdle or *hymy'n'* is described as a great *myṣr'* dividing the light from the darkness.[34] Being a cable stretched out, however, a *myṣr'* could also be used to pull oneself across a river on a raft. The late Mandaic *Teachings of Yahyā* (*Johannesbuch*) urges Mandaeans not to stint in their pious donations to the priests. Those donations were like a cable ensuring passage to a good afterlife across the metaphorical river separating this world from the World of Life:[35]

> Who has no fee and offering, has no **cable** stretched for him on the rivers; who has no fee and offering, has no ferry[36] on the lake; who has no fee and offering, has no eye to behold Abatur [the entity standing in judgment in the soul's afterlife journey toward the World of Light].
>
> *ḏ-'gr' w-zydq' lyt-lh l'mṣyrlh b-z'by' **myṣr'** ḏ-'gr' w-zydq' lyt-lh by'm' m'br' ḏ-'gr' w-zydq' lyt-lh 'yn' b-'b'twr l'm'l'*

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31 Le Strange 1895: 46; C.E. Bosworth, "Ma'ṣir," *EI*[2], resorts to Akkadian parallels.

32 Drower and Macuch 1963: 269.

33 Drower 1937: index under *miṣra*.

34 Drower 1960a: 177 (1.250).

35 Lidzbarski 1915: 1.102.4–7 (text), 2.102 (German trans.). On the wages of priests, see Rudolph (1961: 285). Note also Drower's remark (1937: 53–54) about Mandaean priests she knew: "Some priests, I fear, often think more of their fees than of their flock," because it was the basis of their livelihood.

36 Cf. the ferry, Syriac *ma'bartā*, which the evangelist along the Tigris, Mar Mari, required in his story (Harrak 2005: 60–61; Jullien and Jullien 2003b: 1.38.3).

Al-Ḥawānīt does not appear to have survived through the tenth century.[37] During this time, the depredations of the Shīʿite Qarāmiṭa caused havoc in the region of southern Iraq. Also, the three sons of the postmaster (*ṣāḥib al-barīd*) of Baṣra, the Barīdī brothers, after having been appointed as tax farmers of Ḫūzistān under Ibn Muqla's administration, eventually became independent warlords fighting the caliph until 947.[38] Furthermore, the advent of the Būyid warlords is associated with the collapse of the postal system; probably other networks of caliphal control disintegrated along with it.[39] Al-Muqaddasī, later in the 980s, mentions a station at the Marshes where commodities were assessed and inspected (*wa-kaḏālika bi-l-Baṭāʾiḥi tuqawwamu l-amtiʿatu watufattašu*), but it was only one of several such stations established by the different powers competing for control of that area.[40] He never mentions al-Ḥawānīt by name; that particular settlement probably disappeared in the armed struggles of the period. The disruption of the administration of the region around the Marshes can only have contributed to the Mandaeans' entering into a new period of obscurity during which little further was known or reported about them.

37 Mustawfī, about 1340, mentions al-Ḥawānīt on a river itinerary but this appears to derive from an earlier source.

38 D. Sourdel, "Barīdī," *EI*[2]; Jere L. Bacharach, "al-Barīdī," *EI*[3].

39 Silverstein 2007: 131–132.

40 al-Muqaddasī 133.17.

CHAPTER 8

Other Reports on the Mandaeans after Abū ʿAlī

The oldest known and extant dated Mandaic manuscript, Bodleian Marsh. 691, was finished on September 5, 1529, in Ḥuwayza, a city in Ḫūzistān.[1] The copyist invokes a blessing on the Muslim ruler of the town, Badrān ibn Falāḥ (r. 1514–1541) of the local Muša'ša'id dynasty. A manuscript of the *Ginzā* copied in 1560 in a village near Ḥuwayza, known from the edition of Petermann as manuscript A, includes a prayer for the protection of Sayyid Saǧǧād ibn Badrān, that sulṭān's son.[2] It appears that the Mandaean community there enjoyed the protection of these rulers.[3] Perhaps favorable policies on the part of local governors were what made Ḥuwayza and neighboring towns into important centers where the Mandaeans were able to flourish. Most of the extant Mandaic manuscripts derive from copies made in and around Ḥuwayza in the sixteenth century. But what about the centuries between Abū ʿAlī ibn Muqla and Badrān ibn Falāḥ, the tenth to the sixteenth centuries? Allusions to Ṣābians in the vicinity of Wāsiṭ demonstrate that the Mandaeans were not completely unheard of during this long period, but that they definitely kept to themselves on the margins of the awareness of other communities. In this section I will survey some of the scarce references to Mandaeans from this period.

One of the best known of all early Arabic works, the *Fihrist* or book-catalogue of Ibn an-Nadīm, usually dated 987, contains information on a sect of the Mandaeans. Ibn an-Nadīm devotes the first section (*fann*) of his ninth chapter (*maqāla*) to a description of the Ḥarrānian Ṣābians and the doctrines of the dualists (*maḏāhib aṭ-ṭanawīya*). After dealing with the Ḥarrānians and the Manichaeans at length, he lists a number of other sects, mostly Iraqi, with brief descriptions evidently based on very little information. These include slightly better known groups such as the Dayṣānīya (followers of Bar Dayṣān's sect) and Marcionites, as well as otherwise very obscure sects including Māhānīya (a splinter-group of the Marcionites); the Ǧanǧīyūn (followers of Ǧanǧay of Goḫay [al-Ǧawḫānī], another former idolater who founded his own religion of light and darkness); the secretive sect of Ḫusraw al-Arzūmaqān (?) of Goḫay; the Kušṭīyūn (plainly an Arabic rendering of southeastern Aramaic "people of

1 Buckley 2005: 235–238, 268–270.

2 Buckley 2005: 270.

3 V. Minorsky, "Musha'sha'," *EI*[2].

 | DOI: 10.1163/9789004339460_010

truth");[4] and several others. (Some of these are discussed further in Chapter 11, below.) Ibn an-Nadīm calls one of these sects "the Bathers" or "the Washers," *al-Muġtasila*. He says that they are numerous in the regions of the swamps and that they are called the Ṣābians of the Marshes (*Ṣābiʾat al-baṭāʾiḥ*). The leader and founder is called *ʾlḥsǧ*,[5] probably a scribal error for *ʾlḥsyǧ*[6] or *ʾlḥsy*. This has long been recognized as Elchasai, who founded a "Jewish Christian" sect devoted to baptisms and washing. Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, spent years among them until he experienced his own revelation. Ibn an-Nadīm repeats himself in his entry on Mani, when he says that the remainder of the Muġtasila (the Elchasaites) are still in the regions of the swamps in his own time.

This Arabic passage has led to some misunderstanding among modern scholars. The Mandaeans have been assumed regularly to be the people known as Ṣābians of the Marshes. The problem is that the term Ṣābians was applied to Marshland people of various religions. The claim that Elchasaites were living in the late tenth century and were known as the Ṣābians of the Marshes has therefore caused confusion between the Elchasaites and the Mandaeans. Some scholars still persist in thinking that the Muġtasila mentioned by Ibn an-Nadīm are Mandaeans, another baptizing group, but this is not correct.[7] This is clarified by the subsequent passage in the *Fihrist*, which states that yet another group was known as the Ṣābians of the Marshes: a pagan people "who follow the doctrines of the ancient Aramaeans" (*ʿalā maḏāhib an-Nabaṭ al-qadīm*) and venerate the stars, and who are "the common people of the Ṣābians called the Ḥarrānians."[8] This clearly means Babylonian pagans of some sort, of the kind

4 The southeastern Aramaic (Mandaic) form *kušṭā* exhibits the dissimilation of emphatic or glottalized consonants characteristic of this dialect, a feature also exhibited by Akkadian. Compare the word as it appears in other contemporary forms of Aramaic (Palestinian, Syrian, and Babylonian): *qušṭā*, "truth."

5 Thus in the new and generally more reliable edition of Ayman Fuʾād Sayyid, as opposed to the more widely accepted reading *ʾlḥsyǧ*.

6 See de Blois (1995: 56) on the Middle Persian orthography underlying the ending *-īg* in its Arabic rendering.

7 Sayyid 11/1.411.5–11. This was rightly contested already by Nöldeke (1869: 484). See de Blois (1995: 42–47 and 60–61) for an overview of the mistake about the identification of the Mandaeans as the Ṣābians of the Marshes mentioned in these sources.

8 It seems to be reports like this that lead Morony (1984: 409) to conclude that "Pagans in Iraq had definite affinities in matters of sacrifice and astrology to the great cult center at Harran in Byzantine Mesopotamia." Note that it is not astrology but star-worship that is described here. Morony's idea that the Ḥarrānians "exerted important religious and intellectual influences" that "were being felt in Iraq in the seventh century" is quite doubtful.

represented also by the Ḥarrānian pagans of Syria.[9] These people worshipped Mesopotamian gods that had been astralized already in ancient times. In other words, Ibn an-Nadīm reports two groups as the Ṣābians of the Marshes, one apparently Elchasaite and one just idolatrous Aramaeans, but neither one of them is Mandaean.

This illustrates clearly the utility of the term "Ṣābian" for the people in the Marsh region as well as its inutility for historians today. The name came to be applied to practically any little religious group among the Aramaic-speaking villagers, no doubt as a convenience to Arabic-speaking outsiders who perhaps could not easily discern the differences between them or even communicate with them. But Mandaeans, or rather a sect of them, do appear in Ibn an-Nadīm's *Fihrist*. They show up as an obscure group under a name not widely known. A sect called the *Daštīyūn* occurs in two entries of this section of the *Fihrist*. This is to be read *Dustīyūn*, correcting the diacritical points; these are the Dostaeans described by Bar Konay. As far as I can tell, this has not been noticed before, except in a long-forgotten note in a book review by Theodor Nöldeke.[10] Ibn an-Nadīm reports that Dostay (*dsty* [*dšty*]) was a follower of the master of another sect, called the Mārīyūn after their master Mārī "the bishop" (*al-usquf*). "They hold the doctrines of the dualists but without forbidding animal slaughters (or sacrifices) (*aḍ-ḍabā'iḥ*)."[11] As brief as this is, it is not inappropriate for a description of the Mandaeans as they are known from modern reports. They indeed require the ritual slaughter of any animal by a specialist before it is eaten, rather than forbidding in principle any slaughter of animals.[12] That he calls them Dostaeans (*Dustīyūn*) may reflect their being present in the vicinity of al-Madā'in, for Bar Konay said that they were called by that name (rather than by the name Mandaeans) in Bet Arāmāye, the region of the former Sasanian metropolis that included Goḏay to its east.

Ibn an-Nadīm also relates some of the cosmogony of the Dustīyūn. It includes typically Mandaean expressions like "the living water" and "the son of life."[13]

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9 On the Ḥarrānian pagans see van Bladel (2009: 64–114).

10 Nöldeke 1898: 357. Editors and translators have vocalized and pointed the name as *daštīyīn*, but this is accidental. I am glad to report also from correspondence with John C. Reeves that he independently made the same identification.

11 Sayyid 2009: II/1.412.9–11. It is just possible that *al-Mārīyūn* is a corruption of **al-Mandīyūn* and that the rest of the sentence is a misunderstanding of some kind.

12 Drower (1937: 47–49) remarks on modern Mandaean attitudes toward the consumption of animal flesh and animal slaughter.

13 Sayyid 2009: II/1.410.11–16.

> They claim that there was nothing other than the darkness only, and the water was in its hollow, and in the hollow of the water was the wind, and in the wind was the womb, and in the womb was the placenta, and in the placenta was the egg, and in the egg was the living water, and in the living water was the *Great Son of the Living Beings (sic: *ibn al-aḥyāʾ al-ʿaẓīm*). It rose into the heights and created the creatures and things and heavens and earth and gods. They said, "His father, the darkness, did not know. Then he returned."

The expression "Great Son of the Living [Beings]" appears to be a mistranslation or mis-rendering of what would be in Aramaic "Son of the Great Life." We would expect the original to have been the Southeastern Aramaic (Mandaic) phrase "Son of the Great Life," *br ḥyyʾ rbyʾ*. Arabic *aḥyāʾ* "living beings" is in all likelihood a mistranslation of *ḥyyʾ* (*ḥayye*) "life." The mistake would be due to the fact that the word for "life" is grammatically plural in Aramaic and can mean also "living beings," whereas the corresponding word for "life" in Arabic (*ḥayāt*) is singular, as in English. The rendering of Aramaic *ḥayye* (Mandaic *ḥayye*), "life, living beings," with the Arabic *aḥyāʾ*, "living beings," is not unique here. It occurs also in the doctrine of another sect from Sasanian Mesopotamia, described by Ibn an-Nadīm, that of Ḫusraw al-*ʾzrmqʾn*, wherein the godhead, a living light, sends its son to confront the darkness and names it "Son of the Living Ones" in Arabic, reflecting an Aramaic original **bar ḥayye*, "the son of life."[14] The phrase also appears in the Arabic translation of the title of Mani's book *The Treasure of Life*, **simat-ḥayye*,[15] rendered in Arabic as *Kanz al-aḥyāʾ*, "Treasure of the Living [Beings]." This corresponds also with the Middle Persian translation of the title, *Niyān ī zīndagān*, "Treasure of the Living [Beings]."[16] If the phrase found in Ibn an-Nadīm's text were correct Arabic, the adjective "great" would have to

14 Sayyid 2009: II/1.409.16–17.

15 Although it could have been inferred from the translations of the title, the original Aramaic name of the book is known from a slightly corrupt Sogdian rendering (Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst 2012: 176a) as *smtyhʾ*—and the Chinese rendering (from the Sogdian) *xintihe* 尋提賀 (Mikkelsen 2006: 108b)—for Aramaic **symt-ḥyʾ*. See Haloun and Henning 1952: 205–207. The expression *symt-ḥyyʾ* is amply attested in Mandaic, too, where it represents a divine entity.

16 de Blois in de Blois and Sims-Williams 2006: 73a. De Blois is right that the reading *iḥyāʾ* (rather than *aḥyāʾ*) proposed by some scholars cannot be correct (as given, e.g., by Tardieu 2008: 37). Compare the more correct sense in the Greek and Coptic translations as *Treasure of Life*, Θησαυρὸς τῆς ζωῆς and Coptic ⲡⲑⲏⲥⲁⲩⲣⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲱⲛϩ (Clackson, Hunter and Lieu 1998: 37a and 70a). For another apparent ancient misrendering of Aramaic "life" as "living beings," see the remote parallel noticed by Säve-Söderbergh (1949: 133) between

modify the word "son," as I have translated it above, but either this is an error in translation from Aramaic, whereby the translator intended a singular adjective to describe the entity Life (ungrammatically but according to sense), or a copyist dropped the appropriate plural marker, a single letter (*tā' marbūṭa*) at the end of the adjective "great," in an attempt to make sense of this. The error in translation triggered a subsequent scribal error, obscuring the original Mandaic expression.

While the Dostaean sect was known in sketchy and sometimes mistranslated terms to specialist scholars in tenth-century Baġdād, there is evidence that the name "Mandaean" was also known, although even more obscurely, as the surname of a family of Muslim scholars descended from a convert from Mandaeism around the late tenth century. A family of eminent medieval Muslim jurisconsults from Wāsiṭ bore the name al-Mandā'ī / al-Māndā'ī.[17] Aḍ-Ḍahabī's *Siyar aʿlām an-nubalā'*, a major biographical dictionary compiled in the first half of fourteenth century, relates on the basis of earlier sources that the *qāḍī* Abū l-Fatḥ Muḥammad al-Mandā'ī (1123/4–1209), "was asked about the meaning of [his name] 'al-Māndā'ī.' He said, 'My forefathers were a non-Arab people who converted to Islam late. That is what they were called. It means "the one who remains" in Persian.'"[18] The folk etymology, relying on Persian *māndan*, "to remain," is clearly false. This al-Mandā'ī was born in Wāsiṭ, the capital of the region in which Mandaeans persisted in the countryside. The name clearly must be traced to the Aramaic term for Mandaeans. It is notable that no connection is drawn in the anecdote with the term Ṣābian, and that this Muslim jurisconsult seems to think that many of his ancestors had converted. His father, the *qāḍī* Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Baḫtiyār ibn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Māndā'ī was born in the country districts (*aʿmāl*) of Wāsiṭ in 1084, dying in Baġdād in 1157.[19] He wrote a number of works including a history of Muslim

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a verse in the Manichaean Coptic Psalms of Thomas and a couplet from the Mandaic *Qullāstā* (Lidzbarski 1920: 96.8; Drower 1959: 53.4), where "life," *ḥyy'*, corresponds with "the living ones," ⲛⲉⲧⲁⲛϩ̄. For some more Manichaean examples, see Lieu (2004: 135). See also Shapira (1999: 127).

17 Chwolsohn 1856: 1.136–137n3; Nöldeke 1869: 487; apparently rediscovered by al-ʿAdawī 2012: 126.

18 aḍ-Ḍahabī 21.439.9–10 (biography #231, al-Mandā'ī): *wa-suʾila ʿan maʿnā l-Māndā'īyi fa-qāla kāna aǧdādī qawman mina l-ʿaǧami taʾaḫḫara islāmuhum fa-summū bi-ḏālika wa-huwa l-bāqī bi-l-Fārsīya*. Cf. al-ʿAdawī 2012: 127. Aḍ-Ḍahabī's source for this passage has a long *ā*; it is unclear whether this is to sustain the false Persian etymology or merely reflects variations in pronunciation.

19 Rosenthal (1968: 427) notes interestingly that his autograph copy of az-Zubayr ibn Bakkār's *Nasab Qurayš* is extant in the Bodleian.

judges and a *History of the Marshes* (*Kitāb Tārīḫ al-Baṭā'iḥ*).[20] From the genealogy, it is evident that his great-grandfather was a Muslim named Muḥammad, perhaps the very paternal Mandaean ancestor of his who converted to Islam, taking a Muslim name. That would have been in the late tenth century, if we reckon a generation at 30 years. This represents the earliest known attestation of the term "Mandaean" in Arabic. It shows that some Mandaeans, just like members of other religious groups, were giving up their family traditions and communities and converting to Islam.

Mandaeans are mentioned in several thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sources. The prolific scholar Yāqūt, writing in the years leading up to 1228, alludes to the Mandaeans or Kentaeans in his entry on the village of aṭ-Ṭīb:[21]

> a little town between Wāsiṭ and Ḫūzistān. Its people are Aramaeans (*Nabaṭ*) to this time and their language is Aramaic (*Nabaṭīya*). Dāwūd ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd of aṭ-Ṭīb, the merchant—may God have mercy on him—said, "It is common knowledge among us that aṭ-Ṭīb was founded by Seth son of Adam—peace be upon him—and its people continued to follow the sect (*milla*) of Seth, which is the doctrine of the Ṣābi'a, until Islam came; then they converted to Islam."

The town of Ṭīb is where one part of a Mandaic colophon, encountered in Chapter 1, was written. This geographical entry strongly suggests that Mandaeism had ceased to exist at Ṭīb, or nearly so, by the thirteenth century. But, of course, the Mandaeans were not all gone from the region.

Some Mandaeans appear to have persisted in the area of Wāsiṭ in the thirteenth century. An anecdote preserved in the geography of Ibn ʿAbdalmunʿim al-Ḥimyarī (wr. 1461) recounts a story about the secretary Faḫraddīn ʿAlī ibn ad-Dāmaġānī, who had been promoted to the office of comptroller (*dīwān az-zimām*) by the caliph al-Mustanṣir (r. 1226–1242). Once he traveled from Baġdād to Baṣra. Near Baṣra he had his camp set up between the canals of Maʿqil and Ubulla, where representatives of different religions sent delegations to him, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Magians, and, unexpectedly, Ṣābians.[22] These Ṣābians were probably Mandaeans, the only Marshland Ṣābian sect known to survive into later centuries.

As far as I have seen, aš-Šahrazūrī's history of the philosophers, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa-rawḍat al-afrāḥ*, written in the second half of the thirteenth century,

20 Yāqūt, *Iršād* 1.379–380.

21 Yāqūt, *Muʿǧam* 3.566.11–15.

22 al-Ḥimyarī 1975: 8 (entry: *al-Ubulla*).

uniquely exhibits familiarity with the account that I have attributed here to Ibn Muqla in Chapter 6. E. Cottrell deserves credit for intuiting that aš-Šahrazūrī's account of the ancient Seth includes details originally connected with Mandaeism.[23] While I do not accept much of her analysis, which claims to find references to Mandaeism in a passage that has a variety of sources, not all of which dealt with the Mandaeans, several lines of aš-Šahrazūrī's description of Seth's religion are in fact borrowed verbatim from the same Arabic account treated above. It is not clear whether aš-Šahrazūrī's own source was Ibn Bahlūl's *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il*, or the original work by Abū ʿAlī, from which Ibn Bahlūl cited, or some other intermediary. In any case, the exact word-parallels, selectively rearranged and omitting much interesting matter, indicate that the earlier account of these Ṣābians of the Marshes from *circa* 900 had not completely disappeared from view. There is little likelihood that aš-Šahrazūrī knew Mandaeans personally; he merely employs Abū ʿAlī's account.[24]

The next report comes from the traveling Dominican Ricoldo da Montecroce (1243–1320). Though better known for his refutation of the Qur'ān, Ricoldo met some Mandaeans near Baġdād around 1290 and wrote a description of them based upon his encounter. The notes of this Ricoldo strikingly echo what Abū ʿAlī reported about four centuries earlier, no doubt because they remark upon the most unusual features of the Mandaeans, especially those that distinguish them from their neighbors.[25] Another report, in Persian, from about 1340 confirms the presence of Mandaeans several decades later in their ancestral homelands in the region between Ḫūzistān and Babylonia. In the geographical book of his *Kitāb-i Nuzhat al-qulūb*, Ḥamdallāh ibn Abī Bakr al-Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī[26] reports that "Ṣābians" were numerous in Ḥuwayza.[27] This was

23 Cottrell 2010: 534–546.

24 Cottrell's conclusion (2010: 546–547) that aš-Šahrazūrī had direct knowledge of and "probably" personal familiarity with Mandaeans must be abandoned because the relevant words now demonstrably derive from the much older first-person account already discussed. Similarly, I do not think it likely that Abū ʿAlī's reference to the *suwar* of the scripture of the Marshland Ṣābians is a reference to the Mandaic *Ginzā* as such. The source says that they "pray with" these *suwar*, and the *Ginzā* is not a prayerbook. See my discussion in Chapter 5.

25 Puech 1949. See also Lupieri 2002: 61–67, with an English translation of the passage by Ricoldo.

26 B. Spuler, "Ḥamd Allāh b. Abī Bakr b. Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Mustawfī al-Ḳazwīnī," *EI²*.

27 Mustawfī, on Ḥuwayza (trans. Le Strange 1919: 109, modified slightly): "It was built by Sapor II, and is a city of medium size, of the hot region, with a better climate than that of any other town in Khūzistān. Its crops are corn, cotton and sugar-cane, which last grows here abundantly. Many Ṣābians live therein." Cf. Le Strange 1903: 60; 1905: 241. The relevant

a town on the road from Wāsiṭ to Ahwāz and thus not far from either Ṭīb or the Marshes, both places where earlier reports place Mandaeans. Given the rarity of references to the Mandaeans throughout their history, these last two independent reports within a half century of one another, one in Latin and one in Persian, may be taken to suggest that Mandaeans flourished and perhaps became more conspicuous in contact with Muslims under Ilkhanid rule (1256–1353). Ḥuwayza was to remain a major habitation of Mandaeans for centuries. Buckley has illustrated some sort of efflorescence of Mandaean cultural production there, punctuated by occasional grievous persecutions, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.[28] The colophons of the earliest extant Mandaic manuscripts in many important cases indicate that they were copied in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Ḥuwayza.[29] A future study of the history of Ḥuwayza and Šuštar in these centuries may contribute to an explanation for the survival of the Mandaeans to the present.

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words are *va-dar-ū qawm-i Ṣābiyān bisyār-and* (Mustawfī 1915: 111.3). Compare Mustawfī's equally brief remark about the Ṣābians in Ḥarrān, in his sketch of the geography of Syria: "In Ḥarrān the Ṣābian people *were* numerous" (emphasis added), *dar Ḥarrān qawm-i Ṣābiyān bisyār būdand* (Mustawfī 1915: 104.2–3). This indicates that they were no longer there—but then Ḥarrān was a ruin (cf. van Bladel 2009: 104–113).

28 Buckley 2005: 249–271.

29 This includes at least three of the four manuscript copies of the *Ginzā* used in Petermann's edition (Buckley 1995). The fourth was probably copied nearby in Ḫūzistān. Buckley (1995: 35) suggests that further research may indicate how long the Mandaeans had been in Ḥuwayza; remarkably, they were numerous there already in the first half of the fourteenth century.

CHAPTER 9

Back to the Question of Origins

Specific reports that can be chronologically fixed and historically contextualized, such as those reviewed above, provide a frame of reference to delimit the unchecked historical speculation that has been normal in the study of the Mandaean religion. Modern scholars have posited widely varying scenarios for the origins of the Mandaeans ranging from as early a time as before Jesus to as late as after the Arab conquest, and in locations ranging from Palestine to Media. Mandaic manuscript sources themselves refer to events in the early history of the religion, but these are often allusive and blended into a myth of origins of the religion and of the entire cosmos. The effect is baffling, resulting in a long-standing historical problem: how to explain this religion's existence and its relationships with other religions with which it manifestly shares basic characteristics? While recent research on the Mandaeans has dealt successfully with the Mandaic incantation bowls and the historical data bound up in the extensive colophons in Mandaic texts, and has reevaluated the meaning of Mandaean rituals, not to mention numerous summaries of the state of the field by Rudolph, the field has not yet recovered from Macuch's often problematic arguments, published in his monograph-length essay "Anfänge der Mandäer" in 1965, about the Mandaeans' origins, because they have not been subjected to a sufficiently critical reassessment. Scholars who disagreed with Macuch were subjected to his emotionally charged attacks in print, which used a sharp tone of outrage that obscured the weaknesses of his argument.[1] Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that the direction of subsequent research changed and his conclusions became the basis for a tacit consensus.

There are a number of solid anchors in establishing the history of the Mandaeans. Scholars have rightly been inclined to accept as valid the Mandaic textual references to specific events that are known also from other sources. For example, explicit references to times of Arab domination and corresponding loanwords from Arabic, which occur in some obviously later texts, can be accepted and used as a chronological anchor for the history of the Mandaic textual tradition. Equally importantly, the extensive colophons accompanying Mandaic texts have provided crucial data about the history of the religion.

1 Notable examples include Macuch 1965b: xlvi–liv; 1971; 1973. See also the remarks of Häberl (2009: 27).

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Using them, Buckley has been able to discover and elucidate events in the later history of the Mandaeans. She has also shown that all of the extant manuscripts of the *Ginzā* go back to the copies produced by just a few copyists around 1500.[2] These are examples of the important findings that her study of the Mandaic colophons has revealed. By contrast, when it comes to accounts of the origin of the religion, Mandaic sources are more difficult to handle because they represent an ideal and imaginary past which has as one of its purposes self-validation through implicit claims of chronological priority and narration that is polemically charged against outsiders.

The sources external to the Mandaean tradition, reviewed above, strongly suggest that Mandaeism as such came into existence in the Sasanian kingdom in the late fifth century. Nevertheless, other arguments have been used to support an earlier date of origin, with which most scholarship in recent decades has agreed, but none of these arguments stands alone. To separate the issues, which are often mixed together, I will deal with them here by rubric. I will not repeat the arguments already made, addressing the early dates erroneously derived by Macuch from the Mandaic colophons (discussed already in Chapter 1) and the assignment of mistaken early dates to the sixth-century Syriac texts that mention the Mandaeans (discussed already Chapter 3).

Supposed Arsacid connections. Several scholars have attributed pre-Sasanian origins to the Mandaeans through association with the period of rule by the Parthian Arsacid dynasty. The main reference is from the late text called *Haran Gawaita*, already introduced in Chapter 1, in which a king Artaban is said to have protected the Mandaeans in their early history. There were several Arsacid kings by that name, including the last Arsacid king, but such a reference need not be taken as truly historical, as Rudolph, Macuch, Buckley, and others have done.[3] This is all the more the case in a late text full of manifest myth and legend, as even Macuch had to admit.[4] Anybody under Sasanid rule and for long thereafter is likely to have known that Artaban was a common royal name of the Parthian Arsacids who preceded them, in particular that of the king overthrown by the Sasanids. The last Artaban features in practically every ancient account of the origins of the Sasanids. Therefore, the name must have had an appeal for somebody wishing to endow his sect with pre-Sasanian antiquity.[5]

2 Buckley (2012: 89) presents a schematic chart.

3 Macuch 1965a: 126–127; Rudolph 1970: 446–447 and 1975: 120–121; Buckley 2005: 315–326.

4 Macuch 1963: 263–264.

5 Zellweger (1999: 267) is similarly skeptical.

The reference to Artaban has been related suggestively to another fact to establish origins in the Arsacid period. That is the manifest close genetic relationship between the script used for late Arsacid-period inscriptions of Elymais (close to Ḫūzistān) and its vicinity on the one hand and for writing the Southeastern dialect of Aramaic that we call Mandaic on the other. The scripts are of one type, really two sorts of the same script at different stages of development and used on different media.[6] But one cannot use this connection to make a substantial argument about the date of the Mandaeans, for there is no evidence whatsoever to indicate that the script we call Mandaic was the exclusive property of the Mandaeans, originally designed for their purposes.[7] If anything, the use of the script in state-sponsored inscriptions proves that the script was not special to the Mandaeans. Macuch's view that the local government adopted the script brought by Mandaeans from Palestine is highly implausible and has nothing to support it.[8] Instead, Häberl's view that the "Mandaic" script was an adaptation of a Parthian chancery cursive is probably correct.[9] This does not indicate, as Häberl further suggests, that the Mandaeans' literary tradition must have begun no later than the end of the second century.[10] It shows only that when the Mandaeans came eventually to possess books, they used the local form of the Aramaic script, which is otherwise poorly attested (as Häberl emphasizes). Probably their Aramaic-speaking neighbors, including members of other sects (and not only the Kentaeans), used the same script for normal purposes. The Mandaeans did not invent a new script but, as Naveh rightly puts it, used and standardized a cursive form of the South Mesopotamian branch of the Aramaic script.[11]

Lupieri has suggested that the figure Bihram, in whose name the Mandaean baptism takes place, indicates that the baptism was supposed to have been "in some way initiated by Bihram, who is the Semitic outcome of Verethraghna, the name of an Indo-Iranic divinity who protected the Hyspaosinnidic dynasts … This means that the Mandaeans considered the one who established their baptism to be the protector deity of the sovereigns of Characene during the

6 Klugkist 1986: 116.

7 Thus Rudolph, "Mandaeans ii. Religion," *EIr*.

8 Macuch 1965a: 146. See on this Naveh (1970: 37): "… palaeographic criteria support neither the theory of a western origin of the Mandaeans nor the existence of the sect in Khuzistan in the second century A.D." See also Naveh 1987: 136.

9 Häberl 2006.

10 Häberl 2012: 266. Häberl reached this conclusion by regarding the *terminus ante quem* of the third-century date for the early copyist Zazay as established.

11 Naveh 1987: 135–137.

Arsacid Empire … It also means that the Mandaeans must have been living in Characene in such a very ancient epoch of their history that they could choose Bihram as an eponymous deity of their baptism."[12] This is convoluted and farfetched. Mandaean texts contain no reference to the Iranian divinity Vərəθraγna/Bahrām. Bihram or Bahram was a common name for mortal men, including the Sasanid Bahrām IV under whom Michael Rabbā says the Mandaeans had their genesis[13] as well as of many Mandaeans.[14] While this does not explain the adoption of the name Bahram for a supernatural entity (and I have no explanation for it),[15] it does not constitute evidence to suggest that the satrap Hyspaosines or the Hellenistic kings who ruled Characene after him had anything to do with the Mandaeans, providing a link between the origin of the Mandaeans and the "Parthian period."

Geo Widengren compiled a list of putative Parthian loan-words in Mandaic.[16] Some of them may be falsely identified as such,[17] whereas others may be loanwords from other Iranian languages. Some are loan-words to Aramaic more broadly, found in other dialects, and not just to the southeastern dialect used by the Mandaeans. Nevertheless, these Parthian loan-words in Mandaic may lead somebody to suppose that the Mandaean religion had its genesis under Parthian rule, but this does not hold. Parthian loan-words in Mandaic texts indicate only contact between speakers of Parthian and a speakers of a southeastern dialect Aramaic at some stage. This may have occurred even under Sasanian rule, for the Parthian language did not go out of existence at the moment in which the Sasanid dynasty overthrew the Arsacids.[18] Nor do early loan-words into the dialect eventually used by Mandaeans indicate that the religion itself had origins under Arsacid rule. Therefore, Parthian loan-words in Mandaic texts cannot be used to claim pre-Sasanian origins for Mandaeism.

Supposed Palestinian origins. A single Mandaic text of the Islamic period, again the one known as *Haran Gawaita*, seems to say that the Mandaeans orig-

12 Lupieri 2002: 163–164.

13 Justi 1895: 361a–365b.

14 Buckley 2005: 347.

15 There is the remote possibility that this name has a place in the Mandaean religion because of the roots, alleged at least by Bar Konay, of its Kentaean antecedent in a cult of Nerig, a god identified with Bahrām under unknown circumstances. See Chapter 2, note 6 above.

16 Widengren 1960: 89–108.

17 See the cautionary remarks in the review by MacKenzie (1961).

18 Gyselen 2016.

inated in Palestine. Incredibly, many of the leading researchers have credited this Mandaean myth of their own origins with simple truth and have sought to find for them pristine origins around Jerusalem.[19] Probably this is due to the influence of the earliest stage of the modern European study of the Mandaeans, when scholars sought to show that the *Gospel of John* could be understood better when contextualized by Mandaeism.[20] As McGrath has argued, however, one might expect to find a legend of Palestinian origins in any sect having any sort of Jewish background.[21] If he is correct, the myth of a Palestinian background should just revive the unresolved question of the relationship of Mandaeism to Judaism (or Jewish Christianity).[22] There have been a number of attempts to locate the Inner *H'r'n* mentioned in the text, the putative place of refuge of the ancient Nāṣoraeans, as a real place by that name,[23] despite the regular Mandaean use of deliberately cryptic names (some perhaps ciphers, some mythological) for different peoples and places. Researchers must give a reason for assuming that this place was a real, historical location while other sites in Mandaean legend not treated in the same way.

More decisively, as Müller-Kessler has pointed out, Palestinian origins are ruled out by the linguistic evidence. Mandaic is a dialect of Aramaic local to Mesopotamia with no traces of Palestinian Aramaic and plenty of traces of Babylonian background.[24] Rudolph, normally cautious, responds to this problem by relying on a theory of "oral tradition" that led to the reformulation of putatively original Palestinian texts in a Mesopotamian dialect.[25] Oral tradition

19 Macuch 1965a; Buckley 2005: 315–326. Lupieri is one of the few more recent scholars to argue against it (2002: 127–165).

20 King 2003: 80–90.

21 McGrath 2010.

22 See G. Stroumsa (2015) for some historical contextualization of the controversial term "Jewish Christianity," and a survey of recent scholarship relying on it. My working use of the term is roughly that of Zellentin's (2013: xiii, who speaks of "Judaeo-Christianity"), as "the concomitant endorsement of Jesus and of a discrete set of observances of ritual purity *beyond* the requirements of the Decree of the Apostles" (emphasis in original). A useful collection of patristic texts describing such sects is that of Klijn and Reinink (1973).

23 Most recently, Buckley (2005: 317–320).

24 Müller-Kessler 2004: 51–52. Also, *eadem*, "Mandaeans v. Language," *EIr*: "there exist no Western Aramaic linguistic traces in the Mandaic idiom which could be convincingly proven." Gzella (2015: 365–366) supports the same point. See further Rochberg (1999), who demonstrates clearly that the astrology of the Mandaic *Sfar Malwāše* has specific Babylonian sources, although they must date to later Sasanian times.

25 Rudolph, "Mandaeans ii. Religion," *EIr*: "The script of the texts was probably developed in the second century or earlier in order to preserve the more ancient religious tradition,

seems always to be the last resort of historians who have insufficient evidence. The data that do exist point to origins of the Mandaeans as Mandaeans in southern Iraq and Ḫūzistān.[26]

Putative Gnosticism. The persistent characterization of the Mandaeans with the problematic label "gnostic" is connected with the insistence on an origin of the Mandaeans in the second and third centuries (or earlier), when other sects lumped together as "gnostic" existed. In Mandaean studies the term continues in use without regard for the rest of the field of study of "gnosticism." This is to a great extent due to the role of Kurt Rudolph, who is both the author of major works on Mandaeism of lasting importance and also one of the major proponents of the idea of an independent "Gnostic religion." "Gnosticism" is therefore a part of the framework by which Mandaeism has been explained. Several important studies, however, have made it clear that "gnostic" is a term of dubious analytical utility, even as a tool for typological comparison, and is based on Christian polemical categories. This fight has been fought successfully, in my view, so there is no need to reenact the arguments here.[27] In any case, calling them "gnostic" by itself does nothing to elucidate the history of the Mandaeans or their origins. If anything, it misleads by prompting unsupported presuppositions. At the very least, specialists in Mandaeism who insist that Mandaeism is the last remnant of "Gnosticism" ought to engage with the now long-ongoing critical discussions of the category central to their analysis of the religion. I doubt that anything in the serious study of Mandaeism is lost by dropping the label "gnostic," nor do modern Mandaeans lose any dignity when scholars improve the terms of analysis applied to their religion. Mandaean connections with other sects, gnostic or not, must be demonstrated not by vague similarities but through close textual and historical analysis.

Early dates proposed for magical texts. The oldest material remains of Mandaean texts are clay bowls and rolled lead strips inscribed with apotropaic

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which probably originated in Palestine and Syria and was brought orally to Mesopotamia."

26 See also Schaeder (1942: 876).

27 Two types of scholarship need to be taken into account: the research calling into question the usefulness of the term Gnosticism as an analytical category (e.g. Williams 1996; King 2003 and 2005) and the research that historicizes the term as it was used in antiquity (e.g. Layton 1995, Brakke 2011, G. Smith 2015). Marjanen deals with Rudolph's role in the idea of Gnosticism, concluding (2005: 51) that "Gnosticism, as Rudolph delineates it, allows so much variety that it begins to become a meaningless concept." See also K. van Bladel, "Gnosticism," *EI*^{3}.

incantations. Modern scholars usually date the bowls, always roughly, to the period from the fifth to the eighth century.[28] Magic bowls like these were not inscribed only in the Mandaic dialect of Aramaic but also in several other regional Aramaic dialects and scripts (the "Jewish" "square" script misleadingly called just "Aramaic," the Syriac or "Manichaean" scripts, as well as the Mandaic script).[29] The relative uniformity of form and content between regional varieties of Aramaic incantation texts plausibly indicates their development from a shared Babylonian heritage of apotropaic ritual texts used with less durable materials.[30] This gives them a very ancient appearance, but some caution is required in using these materials as witnesses to early Mandaean communities. Some of the Mandaic magical bowls bear substantial indications of the Mandaean religion as it is known from the manuscript tradition, and can therefore be said to be Mandaean in that sense. Others, however, while written in the "Mandaic" script, do not bear any clear indication of the Mandaean religion. These are merely magical texts written in the script used along the lower Tigris and its neighboring regions; only modern scholars have made them "Mandaean." Some are pagan products.[31] Perhaps some of the "Mandaic" incantation bowls were made by members of another, similar sect, such as the Kentaeans.

One connected matter is the relationship between the writing on the Mandaic incantation bowls, the Mandaic incantations scratched on the surviving lead lamellae amulets (small rolls of lead leaf inscribed with tiny characters) and the Parthian-era inscriptions of Elymais and Characene (discussed above). Scholars who have already assumed an early origin for the Mandaeans have pointed to the manifestly undeveloped sort of Mandaic script used in the lead lamellae (as compared with the incantation bowls). The jump, however, from the observation that the script of the lead lamellae is less fluent to an estimation of the century in which the lead was inscribed is too hazardous. Lidzbarski, the first to deal with one of these lead lamellae, estimated that the ones that he had studied belonged to a period about two hundred years before the inscribed bowls. This was a tentative guess based only on the observation that the script used in it seemed more primitive and less developed than that of

28 Morony 2003 and 2007: 414. Montgomery (1913: 102–105), dealing just with the bowls at Nippur, put them in the sixth and seventh century.

29 Morony 2007: 416–417. All these bowls are written in dialects of Aramaic. For clarification about the "Manichaean" sort of Syriac script, see Shaked (2000.) For a clearer exposition of the relationship of the late Aramaic scripts, see Naveh (1987: 125–174).

30 Hunter 2000: 176–180.

31 Drower (1934: 172–174) had a similar assessment of some of the magical texts transmitted by living Mandaeans on paper.

the bowls.[32] Scholars after Lidzbarski have persistently moved from his rough estimation to an assertion that Lidzbarski established a date of about 400 as a certain fact. It is not that. A limited corpus of texts such as this, written with the different techniques required by different media, and presumably with regional variation, necessarily inhibits the development of a palaeographic science of Aramaic incantation texts. Matthew Morgenstern, who is conducting a comprehensive study of Mandaic magic texts, informs me of his view that the lead lamellae contain the same formulae as the inscribed magic bowls, suggesting that they actually belong to the same era, and that the difference in the ductus of the writing is due precisely to the different media and tools for making the letters and the different scale of their size.[33] Archaeological data about the finds of these texts, which might otherwise prove more decisive, is often poor or non-existent. On such shaky terrain, Macuch and those following him ventured confidently to assign dates of the third[34] or fourth century to some of the lead-roll texts, thereby assigning a fully-developed Mandaeism to that period. From this comes the assertion of even earlier origins. It is clear, however, from the study of Macuch's argument that his previous assessment of the age of Zazay (the late third century), derived from the mistaken analysis of Mandaic texts analyzed in Chapter 1 above, was the basis for his secondary estimation of the age of the lead lamellae, which he assumed to be earlier still.[35] In fact, the age of these materials cannot be assigned to a century on the basis of the analysis of script alone because their dates are at best merely estimated as relative to one another.

In an important contribution, Müller-Kessler and Kessler have argued that these Mandaic magical texts attest to the survival of the belief in late Babylonian gods until such a time that they could be known by the earliest Mandaeans.[36] This would account for the references to Babylonian gods in incantation texts in the "Mandaic" script. Their case is strong, but they unnecessarily propose that the cuneiform culture associated with the temples of these gods must have reached the time of living Mandaeans. They resort to a minority view among Assyriologists that cuneiform persisted as late as the second or third centuries, apparently in order to connect them chronologically with the

32 Lidzbarski 1909: 350.

33 Morgenstern, personal communication.

34 Macuch 1961 and 1971: 271. His argument, such as it is, is obscured by the combative tone. On the assertion of a third-century date for this lead roll, see Naveh (1970: 33): "… such an early date cannot be based on palaeographic evidence."

35 Macuch 1969: 97.

36 Müller-Kessler and Kessler 1999.

Mandaeans, following the second- and third-century dates assigned to the earliest Mandaeans by other scholars. In fact, their argument does not require the Mandaeans to have come into existence so early, nor does it require the use of cuneiform to have persisted so long. An earlier (i.e. pre-Mandaean) Aramaic intermediary can readily be assumed. David Brown makes just such a case about the transition from writing in Akkadian to writing in Aramaic in Babylonia. He argues that the lore of cuneiform experts was gradually translated into the vernacular Aramaic, which was written on perishable materials rather than more durable clay tablets and therefore is mostly unknown to us. He points to the second and first centuries BCE as the main period of transition, with a few cuneiform texts being written still in the first century CE.[37] The appearance of the late Babylonian gods in later incantation bowl texts in different Aramaic dialects shows that some knowledge of these gods, eventually demonized, persisted much later. Babylonian paganism and idolatry survived into the Sasanian period and even, in different permutations and in very small pockets, in both Syria and Babylonia well into the period of Arab rule,[38] so one does not require the Mandaeans to exist already in the second or third century to retain the Babylonian survivals observed by Müller-Kessler and Kessler.[39] These gods persisted among Aramaean polytheists of the early centuries of the Common Era, until they were compelled by pressure and circumstances, and kings like Peroz who allegedly banned idolatry, to become Jews, Christians, Mandaeans, and members of other new religions similarly demanding exclusive devotion not based on the older forms of Babylonian idolatry. I discuss this further in Chapter 11.

Mandaic Material in Common with Manichaean Psalms. In a generally excellent study published in 1949, Torgny Säve-Söderbergh showed that some Mandaic psalms and prayers of the *Left Ginzā*, the *Canonical Prayerbook*, and the *Teachings of Yahyā* ("*Johannesbuch*") were known also to Manichaeans.[40] More specifically, he showed that some of the very same verses, and in some cases just the striking collocation of certain specific ideas, preserved in Mandaean scripture survive also in translation in a Coptic Manichaean manuscript dating to the fourth century. This was an important discovery and it was accompanied by other significant insights into both Coptic and Mandaic languages and liter-

37 Brown 2008.

38 Morony 1984: 384–400; Hämeen-Anttila 2006; van Bladel 2009: 64–114. See also Dirven 2014.

39 Morony (2007: 424) on Müller-Kessler and Kessler 1999: "This early dating for Mandaeans is speculative and perhaps too neat."

40 Säve-Söderbergh 1949. Adam (1959: 40–41) presents the parallels in tabular form.

atures. In his conclusion, however, Säve-Söderbergh interpreted his remarkable findings, with hesitation, in a rather simplistic and unlikely way that has been surprisingly widely and uncritically accepted.[41] He thought that the parallels which he had correctly adduced between hymns from the Mandaean *Left Ginzā* and the hymns of Mani's disciple Thomas (if that is the Thomas named), which survive in Coptic translation in a manuscript of the fourth century, were all connected with "the nucleus of the Mandaean tradition—the *massiqtā*," or funeral ritual.[42] They may indeed be ritual texts for use in funerals; I do not dispute this. But on this basis he stated that the existence of hymns held in common in texts belonging to the two religious groups indicated that the Mandaean religion must have antedated Manichaeism—that is, antedated the third century—and that Mandaeism was accordingly one of the roots of Manichaeism. This would put Mandaeans in the second century, astonishingly early, but a date widely endorsed. Since then, however, it has been ascertained from the discovery of the "Cologne Mani Codex," a tiny Manichaean Greek manuscript treating Mani's life, that Mani was raised among Elchasaites (not Mandaeans),[43] a fact not adequately acknowledged in the subsequent scholarly literature on the Mandaeans. At the same time the important details of Säve-Söderbergh's argument have been somewhat neglected.[44]

His conclusion about the dependence of the Manichaeans on the Mandaeans is quite unnecessary if we allow these religious groups to have originated in a common Aramaic-speaking society in which certain prayers and ideas were not the exclusive property of one group. That said, knowing now as we do that Mani's early doctrine took its initial shape in the context of an Elchasaite community of baptists, one may pose the hypothesis instead that Mandaeism too owes something to Elchasaism, if not to another closely related Jewish Christian sect. In fact, this has been proposed already many times on the

41 Gardner (2010a: 92) is exceptional in his reasonable skepticism of this conclusion, and he also carries further the analysis begun by Säve-Söderbergh.

42 Säve-Söderbergh 1949: 157.

43 See the summary of this research presented by Gardner and Lieu (2004: 25–35).

44 Among specialists in Mandaean religion, I have found only Rudolph (1975: 116–117) and Shapira seriously rethinking the relationship of the Mandaeans to Manichaeans posited by Säve-Söderbergh in light of the research on Mani's Elchasaite origins. Shapira (1999: 126) puts it well: "Säve-Søderbergh 1949 proved that the Manichæan *Psalms of Thomas* in Coptic were translated from a text whose primitive form is preserved in Mandaic writings," not that the Mandaic writings are the source of the Manichaean psalms. Buckley (2005: 308) mentions the problem but still holds, without explanation, that the Manichaeans used still older Mandaean texts.

basis of the striking shared characteristics between the baptizing Elchasaites (such as are known) and the Mandaean religion.[45] In any case, the suggestion that Mandaean scriptures derive in part from a stock of texts held in common among different religious groups of related origins has been proved already by Pognon, who demonstrated that a passage in the *Left* part of the *Ginzā* was also used by the Kentaeans. This is one of the two Mandaic passages on the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, discussed above. Säve-Söderbergh's discovery remains critically important, but it does not prove chronological priority of Mandaeism over Manichaeism. It shows rather that Mandaic texts draw materials from earlier sects, just as the Manichaean texts did. This is an ordinary phenomenon in many textual traditions curated by priestly scribes. In view of this, one should consider the Mandaean-Manichaean textual parallels identified by Säve-Söderbergh as owed to a common source. The Elchasaites are the most conspicuous candidate for that common source. It is possible that the Mandaean funeral verses, found in both published Mandaic prayerbooks as well as the *Left Ginzā*, and the almost identical verses found among the Manichaean *Psalms of Thomas*, in a Coptic translation from Aramaic, attest to a funeral prayer used by Elchasaites.[46] It is here that we find very early, perhaps even second-century, materials. This avenue, if explored further, may yield important results for the study of early Christianity and Judaism, but convincing conclusions will be impossible without observing the relative chronology of the different groups involved.

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45 Thomas 1935: 252 ("Une communauté baptiste elchasaïsée serait donc à l'origine de la secte mandéene."); Drower 1960b: 97; Henrichs 1973: 45–46; Henrichs 1979: 367 ("Both groups, Mani's baptists and the Mandaeans, were offshoots of the same baptist movement …"); Koenen 1981: 746–747 ("Mandaeans and Mani's baptists [the Elchasaites] have common ancestors."); Greenfield 1981: 31; Mimouni 1998: 211n9 and 261; de Blois 2002: 4; Shapira 1999: 127; Shapira 2006: 696–699; McGrath 2010: 12. See also Kruisheer (1993: 161–162). Rudolph (2000: 495) sums up his view after several decades of research on the topic: "Even if the Mandaean religion developed in a way totally antipathetic to Judaism and Christianity, it is nevertheless an example of how what was initially a heretical Jewish baptist sect has developed into a quite distinct form of religion." Segelberg (1976) argued that "the Mandaean ordination of a tarmida is derived from late Jewish or Rabbinic traditions" of ordination of rabbis, finding also some "Christian influence" in the ritual at the same time.

46 Säve-Söderbergh 1949: 132–137. The Mandaic prayer is published by Drower (1959: 100); Lidzbarski (1920: 98); Petermann 2007: 1/11.82 (trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 516). Säve-Söderbergh's accumulated parallels are presented as a table by Adam (1959: 40–41).

CHAPTER 10

Pre-Mandaean Nāṣoraeans

This brings us back to Zazay, the earliest named copyist of many of the Mandaean scriptures, apart from a few others noted by Buckley who may be slightly earlier.[1] The date attributed to Zazay, addressed in Chapter 1, appeared until now to be a bit of evidence from Mandaic texts that could contradict the fifth-century origin of Mandaeism (as such), posited by the reports of Bar Konay and Michael Rabbā discussed in detail above. As explained, the idea that Zazay worked so early as 270 is definitely not sustained by the argument first brought by Macuch, which hitched his date to the time 368 years before the first arrival of the Muslims in Iraq. I showed in the foregoing that such a chronological connection is more or less impossible. But saying that the texts must have originated later than 270 does not *disprove* the possibility that Zazay antedated 450–500, the period around which the Mandaeans must have come into being, according to the East-Syrian sources reviewed. He may have worked later than 270, though we do not know exactly when. If we have no clear idea of Zazay's time, we must admit that he may have flourished before 450. What makes the matter much more complicated is a troubling proposition: that Zazay may have antedated the Mandaeans under that name, though his works were maintained by Mandaeans. This line of inquiry runs into a long-standing theme in the modern study of Mandaeism: the notion that strata of Mandaean texts derive from an earlier, pre-Mandaean stage. The hypothesis has much to support it.

Here I turn to Viggo Schou-Pedersen's dissertation of 1940, which offered an important model for the study of the origins of the Mandaean religion that has not been emulated. He intended it explicitly as a foundation on which other researchers could build, but its publication in Danish has limited the audience. Its disagreement with the main subsequent currents of research on the Mandaeans has further deprived it of attention. One of Schou-Pedersen's main theses is that Mandaeism had evolved out of an earlier Nāṣoraeanism. He calls the earlier stage "a Jewish-Christian Mandaeism" ("en jødekristelige

1 Buckley 2005: 51–54, 181, 281. Buckley shows the colophon of the *Left* part of the *Ginzā* is traced through a son of Zazay (but not through Zazay himself) to "Šlama, daughter of Qidra." In fact, the words in the colophon here are unclear, as Buckley records: "the scroll of the father Šlama daughter of Qidra" (*sic*). Clearly the text is problematic. Buckley inserts "(of)" between "father" and "Šlama" to make sense of it.

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mandæisme"), which he identifies as the *Nāṣiruta* or "Nāṣoraeanism" repeatedly mentioned in the Mandaic texts. Having a Jewish-Christian origin of some kind, the religion came to be Mandaeism as we know it only at a later stage.[2] Schou-Pedersen's argument was based on extensive close analyses of passages in Mandaic texts in which he tried to determine early and late strata, with early strata being connected to a form of Jewish Christianity. He ends by leaving it to historians to figure out the relationship of this pre-Mandaean sect to the Nāṣoraeans known by name from other sources such as Epiphanius.

The question still deserves attention because it does seem that Mandaeism is an accretion onto an earlier Nāṣoraeanism. This appears likely simply from the great rarity of the name Mandaean in "Mandaic" texts and the pattern of its occurrence; by comparison, Nāṣoraeans are mentioned throughout Mandaic texts and appear to be integral to the ideas expressed in Mandaic texts. For example, the forefather Anoš appears as a prototype "Nāṣoraean" in the first book of the *Right Ginzā*.[3] By contrast, the term "Mandaean(s)," *m'nd'yy'*, appears to be a later addition to the corpus of Mandaic texts,[4] for outside of the colophons (which are not integral to the original texts but only records of their copyists), the term "Mandaean" occurs only in a few places in the *Right Ginzā*. Specifically, in the first thirteen books of the *Ginzā*, which seem to form an earlier unit because they share one colophon collectively, the term "Mandaean" appears only in editorial passages introducing and closing some sections.[5] The fifteenth book of the *Right Ginzā* is an anthology unto itself with twenty sections, the first of which alone contains two references to "Nāṣoraeans, Mandaeans, and Elect." Otherwise there are no other Mandaeans mentioned the *Right Ginzā*. The *Left Ginzā* has no references to the Mandaeans at all outside of the colophons. The *Qullāstā* or so-called *Common Prayerbook* published in facsimile and translated by Drower—a collection of liturgies for different rit-

2 Schou-Pederson 1940: 18, 225–226.

3 Lidzbarski 1925: 50.

4 Lidzbarski 1925: 610, index under "Mandäer."

5 "Mandaeans" occur in the introductory benediction and the final, concluding passage of the first book, mentioned alongside disciples (*tarmide*) and Nāṣoraeans; in the introductory and concluding passages of the tenth book, mentioned alongside disciples and Nāṣoraeans; and five times in the short, thirteenth book, "ein junges Stück" (Lidzbarski 1925: 283), which is clearly a "priestly prayer addressing … the community" (Häberl in Petermann 2007: 1/1.xii), appended to the collection of the first twelve books. This is followed immediately by the first colophon of the *Right Ginzā*, indicating the end of the early anthology onto which the rest of the books of the *Right Ginzā* were added. This colophon does not go back so far as Zazay, but only to Ram Šilay son of Daymir (Buckley 2005: 51).

uals and events—has only one prayer referring to "the whole congregation of souls, of Nāṣoraeans and Mandaeans." Otherwise Mandaeans by that name do not occur. This prayer does not appear in the related prayer collection edited by Lidzbarski; no reference to Mandaeans occurs in that entire text.[6] Again, references to Nāṣoraeans are fairly frequent in all these texts.[7] It is well known that among the Mandaeans, the term Mandaean refers to laypeople as opposed to priests, who are called *tarmide* and *Nāṣorāye*. Bar Konay (or rather his source) tells us that in the region of Bet Arāmāye, the Mandaeans were called *Nāṣrāye*. It is highly strange, though, that the very word for the Mandaean community, those to whom the Nāṣorāye provided religious services and the guarantee of a good afterlife, whose name is attested by about 540 with Cyrus of Edessa as the name for a community, should not be mentioned at all in a way integral to these texts. This strongly supports the idea that the Mandaean community formed around a pre-existing group of initiated experts called Nāṣoraeans. This in turn reopens the question of *the age of the texts in the Southeastern or Mesenian dialect of Aramaic called Mandaic by modern scholars, preserved among Mandaeans*, as contrasted with the age of the Mandaean religion. The distinction is crucial. For even if the Mandaean religion began, with that name, only in the fifth century, some of the texts they used may well be older. Unless we imagine that the fifth-century Mandaeism was created *ex nihilo* as pure novelty—which would contradict both Bar Konay's account and all modern scholarship on the matter—then it is only common sense to suppose that it did develop from earlier materials, and was based on earlier practices. What is distinct in this case, however, is that we have a name for it preserved in the sources: Nāṣoraeanism appears to be just that earlier basis.

This hypothesis has been posed in various forms several times before. The recognition necessitates an attempt down the "slippery road of speculation," in the expression of Drower.[8] The fact that many scholars venturing down this road have disagreed so fundamentally about the origins of the Mandaeans shows just how slippery it is. No historian wants to speculate, but the study of the Mandaean tradition requires at least a hypothesis. If my argument here is correct, then we are at least not speculating blindly, for there are now two

6 Drower 1955: 138n2 and 139.

7 See the similar case by Schou-Pedersen (1940: 225). In the priestly text *Thousand and Twelve Questions*, with its colophon reaching to Zazay, the word "Mandaean" is used once, not to describe people but as an epithet of ordinary days in contrast to days of commemoration (Drower 1960a: 20 and 116 § 15). The sense is not clear but it is not a reference to Mandaeans as such.

8 Drower 1960b: xi.

basic parameters that must always be taken into consideration in studying the question of Mandaean origins: they came into being *as Mandaeans* only in the mid- to late-fifth century (at least there is no evidence whatever for their existence as Mandaeans by that name prior to that time), and their existence presupposes a prior group called Nāṣoraean.

It is necessary therefore to take into consideration the history of the name Nāṣoraean, which is certainly not unknown, to provide a historical context. De Blois has summarized it well.[9] It did not mean "observant" (not being from the root *nṭr*), as some have proposed.[10] It was a term used first for Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth (*Nāṣərat*), based on his epithet. An early hint that it had come to refer to a non-Pauline Christian sect may be in the inscription of the Zoroastrian archpriest Kerdīr near the end of the third century, in which he reports his persecution of the "Nāṣ(ə)rāy and Christians" as a pair among others.[11] This may already distinguish Jewish Christians from other Christians,[12] but the interpretation is a matter of longstanding debate. It would appear that, in Syriac, the term *Nāṣrāyā*/Nazoraean did designate Christians of various kinds early on, and perhaps particularly those associated with Judaism, but the term *Kristyānā* was increasingly adopted by the Church of the East for its self-designation to distinguish them from other sects. This is in line with what Eusebius, around 377, reports about Christians in the Roman Empire: "we, who are now called Christians, were formerly called Nazarenes."[13] The Manichaean *Kephalaia* that survive in Coptic, in which Mani's disciples relate reports about their third-century teacher, present an anecdote about "the Nāṣoraean" (ⲡⲛⲁⲍⲟⲣⲉⲩⲥ and ⲡⲛⲁⲍⲟⲣⲁⲓⲟⲥ) who confronted Mani. He challenged Mani with the suggestion that the God to whom Mani prays is cruel, perhaps suggesting a belief in a demiurge on the part of the Nāṣoraean.[14] After that, it is not until

9 See de Blois (2002: 5–8) for much of the following, as well as Mimouni (1998). Jullien and Jullien (2002) also provide many examples of the terms under discussion, ultimately reaching a conclusion like that of Brock and others, emphasizing the Iranianness of the *nāṣrāye* and the foreignness of the *kristyāne*, so that the latter are Christians from the Roman Empire. De Blois (2002: 9–11) gives reasons to doubt this.

10 Schaeder 1942.

11 MacKenzie 1989: 54 and 58, §11: Inscriptional Middle Persian *n'cl'y W-klstyd'n*; de Blois 2002: 5–7.

12 Thus Mimouni 1998: 256–260.

13 See de Blois 2002: 2 for details. This explanation suits the Syriac acts of martyrs under Persian rule which, written in hindsight, may characterize Zoroastrians as calling them Nāṣrāye out of a wish to emphasize that their Zoroastrian accusers do not even understand rightly what to call them.

14 Gardner 1995: 229–231. If *Nāṣrāyā* was a normal term for Christians in an earlier period,

Epiphanius, in the 370s, that we have specific references to the Nāṣoraeans as a sect like the Jews who have their own Aramaic gospel and who believe that Jesus was the son of God.[15] In any case, these data make it exceedingly unlikely that Zazay or anybody else was addressing scriptures that demonized Jesus Christ, as Mandaic texts do, to "Nāṣoraeans" as early as 272, a time when the epithet Nāṣoraean is not yet clearly attested even for a Jewish Christian sect that deemed Jesus to be central to salvation. The inescapable conclusion, now from this second approach, is that Zazay could not have been writing the Mandaic texts which he is supposed to have composed or copied as early as the third century, because the Nāṣoraeanism it refers to would make no sense in such an early context.

It would be incredible to suggest that the Mandaean name Nāṣoraean was merely fortuitously identical with that of the Jewish Christian Nāṣoraeans. The Mandaean priests must have adopted the name Nāṣoraean for themselves from Jewish Christians, or they were just a divergent sect of those Jewish Christians called Nāṣoraeans. The priests of the Mandaeans are thus called Nāṣoraeans only in a way that is historically derivative, for it is inconceivable that the ones who condemned Jesus as a demon were the first to name themselves after Jesus' home town. Instead, an intermediary stage, during which the name belonged to another group that revered Jesus, is required for the Mandaeans' use of the name to make sense.[16] That group appears to be the Nāṣoraean one first described by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 19.5.4) in the 370s as a sect of the Jews who believed in Jesus as the son of God, related, he says, to the Ossaeans, Ebionites, and Elchasaites. Here again we must recall the common, possibly Elchasaite, background of Mani and the Mandaeans. All this necessitates a renewal of the approach taken by Schou-Pedersen, in which Mandaic texts

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until *Kristyānā* was adopted by the leaders of the Church of the East as their preferred self-designation, then this "Nazoraean" (characterized in the fourth century belonging to the third century), may have been a Christian of practically any kind, even a Marcionite. Mimouni, however, suggests (1998: 251) that the term here refers to an Elchasaite.

15 Klijn and Reinink 1973: 160, 168–174 (*Panarion* 19.5.4, *Anacephalaeosis* 2.29).

16 De Blois' different, and not mutually incompatible, hypothesis (2002: 4) warrants consideration. He suggests that the Mandaeans "are descendants of an ancient Jewish Christian community who, presumably in the aftermath of some catastrophe, lost most of their own religious writings and subsequently adopted those of a rival community, indeed writings that contained polemics against their own former beliefs," while "retain[ing] its old self-designation as 'Nazoraeans,'" and many of their former practices such as baptism. I would add that such a catastrophe, purely hypothetical as it is, could include persecution or even the fifth-century and later floods that reshaped the southern Iraqi landscape.

require close scrutiny for Jewish Christian elements. It means that the corpus of Mandaic texts may contain important material unrecognized as deriving from pre-Mandaean Jewish Christians such as Elchasaites. This is an old observation, but it can be approached more clearly with a sounder relative chronology of these sects in mind, avoiding the tendency to catalogue mere similarities between Mandaic texts and those of a variety of better known traditions, or to explain common elements as being due to an alleged "Gnostic" current or religion.

My hypothesis—and it is only that—is that the Mandaean sect arose from within a Jewish Christian sect already known as Nāṣoraean when one or more teachers, or perhaps even originally pagan laypeople who observed Nāṣoraean baptisms, fostered a new esoteric form of religion requiring special initiation and having its own secret texts, but for which they retained the name Nāṣoraean. They had qualms with the way certain rituals were being performed, particularly the baptism, and they claimed to be correcting them to the ritual practices as conducted in the time of ancient patriarchs such as Anoš. At first perhaps like the Manichaeans, who regarded themselves as the true Christians initiated into the real mysteries and the rest of the Christians as misguided and ordinary,[17] and like the Ismailis of later centuries, whose originators were from Ḫūzistān, who initiated ordinary Muslims into their "true religion," regarding the rest of Muslims as ignorant,[18] these Nāṣoraean priests eventually went further to regard their uninitiated colleagues not only as misguided but also unclean, to the point that they formed a physically separate community. They condemned other Jews and Christians while being engaged in the creative production of new revelations, nevertheless insisting that they themselves were the real Nāṣoraeans, descendants of the first Nāṣoraeans Sethel, Hibel, and Anoš (biblical Seth, Abel, and Enos), who antedated even Moses, making the religion of other Jews something derivative (rather than the reverse). As Aramaic-speaking people sought and paid for the services of these Nāṣoraeans, for the protection from evil forces, sanitation from sin, and the assurance of a good afterlife, gradually pagans and perhaps Jews and other inhabitants of Iraq formed a community around them, increasingly dependent on them and the purity and passage to a good afterlife they conferred by baptisms and abjurations of from evil on Sundays. These became the Mandaeans, those known for the edifices where ceremonies were conducted by the Nāṣoraeans, their *bet mandā* or *maškna* (the Mandaeans

17 For ancient testimonia to this see Gardner and Lieu (2004: 121–125, 126–127, 186).

18 Halm 1996: 16–22.

and Mašknaeans of Bar Konay, like the Kentaeans named after their church-house called *kentā*).[19] As one Mandaic priestly scroll teaches, the one who becomes a disciple (*myt'rm'd*)—that is, a priest—on earth, leaving Mandaeism (*m'nd'ywt'*) behind for discipleship (*t'rmydwt'*), is like "the vessel that leaves Judaism (*y'hydwt'*) for Mandaeism."[20] Priesthood meant participating in a grade of religion higher than Mandaeism, and Mandaeism meant participating in a grade of religion higher than the default of Judaism. This in turn says something about the social environment in which the Mandaean author of this passage lived. But they must also have had substantial contact with Kentaeans. They held some ritual meals that appeared very similar to those of the Kentaeans, and the Mandaeans were eager to distinguish themselves from the Kentaeans (as seen in Chapter 4).

At some stage in this process, all earlier—Jewish and Christian—scriptures were abandoned, not without leaving substantial traces, some of which have been studied in detail by Schou-Pedersen. Perhaps this was a deliberate choice on the part of a generation of Nāṣoraean teachers to exclude the texts of rival Jews; or it may suggest a scenario of plain "borrowing" as posited by Bar Konay's polemical source; or it may reflect the recruitment of new priests from people who had little prior familiarity with Jewish texts at all, or at least who did not possess them, such as apostates from idolatry. What is certain is the outcome: Mandaeans have no texts we regard as biblical, while those they do have are sprinkled with biblical lore turned to new purposes. A similar phenomenon may be seen with early Manichaeism. Mani clearly had studied the Diatessaron and Enochic material, for example, but neither of those was maintained directly in the Manichaean canon, unless perhaps rewritten somehow by Mani. The same occurs with Islam. The new scripture, the Qur'ān, expects its audience to be quite familiar with numerous biblical and para-biblical tales, while the subsequent community itself did not maintain those biblical texts. This phenomenon, in which a new religion inspired by biblical material abandons biblical texts, deserves further study.

We do not know how early the Mandaeans began to shun others. There is no hint of this shunning in the references to the Mandaeans by the writers of the Church of the East in the sixth century. Those three Syriac references suggest rather that the Mandaeans had contact with non-Mandaeans. They

19 Schou-Pedersen 1940: 225. The word *mandāye* has been interpreted by some modern scholars as meaning "gnostic," based on the Mandaic verbal noun *manda*, "to know," but that interpretation is based on their preconceived modern notion of a Gnostic religion having various manifestations.

20 Drower 1960a: 100 and 276 (§ 358).

include a warning specifically to stay away from the Mandaeans, an argument that their fasts were invalid (perhaps so that a Christian should not join them in fasting or participate in the celebratory breaking of their fasts), and the idea expressed that they were sorcerers (thus offering services), all suggesting that the Mandaeans and their priests were proselytizing in the sixth century. By 900, however, when Abū ʿAlī described their customs in Arabic, the Mandaeans had come to avoid contact with outsiders strictly, as he clearly describes. Outsiders knew little about them.

It is conceivable that Zazay, from whom, according to their colophons, many of the early now-canonical Mandaic books seem to derive, was a pre-Mandaean Nāṣoraean of the kind I am imagining here. In this way it is possible that he antedated the fifth-century genesis of the Mandaeans by that name, although no solid evidence for this chronology is apparent. He may have lived in the fourth century, but there is no source to support this. He may have lived later. He cannot, however, antedate the Nazoraeans known from non-Mandaic sources. What is clear is that the texts that Zazay is alleged to have copied are presented as secret mysteries for the consumption of other Nāṣoraeans. This implies a group already in existence. Mandaic texts frequently urge their readers to keep them as secrets. This was a guild of priests tied together through shared mysteries.

Movements like the one I am proposing by way of hypothesis were known in the fourth century. It is in this period that Gnostics[21] and Manichaeans[22] offering secret or esoteric teachings lived surreptitiously among other Christians, while many leaders of the church regarded their doctrines as false and heretical and sought to uproot them. Their texts from which we know them taught that this world is the product of a demiurge and that the true god was outside of it. It is conceivable that a tendency of this type—not a "Gnosticism," but a recruitment strategy offering privileged and exclusive access to a higher truth—existed among the Nāṣoraeans, those who followed a form of Jewish law, who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and the son of God, and whose beliefs were related to those of the baptizing Elchasaites. But their innovative esoteric teaching repudiated Moses and Jesus and promoted patriarchs like Anoš and Abel (Hibel) as models instead. These patriarchs were hitherto fairly uncharacterized in their biblical accounts, giving much room for new scriptural material about them or attributed to them. To call this Nāṣoraean

21 Either a group properly so called (following Layton 1995: 335–337) or persons of this tendency (following G. Smith 2015: 146–171).

22 Gardner and Lieu (2004: 115–150) for examples.

teaching Gnostic is only to cause confusion where we require instead careful parsing of different movements.

Whether or not this hypothesis, necessarily vague as it is, proves to be correct in any part, and regardless of the real origins of the Mandaeans, none of the criteria used to attribute the origin of the Mandaeans *as such* to the first four centuries of the era is certain or secure. The only evidence that seems irrefutable, in this case, is the one established by the external witnesses in the sixth century adduced above. Mandaeans called by that name existed by the end of that century alongside the Kentaeans. The two reports, preserved by Bar Konay and Michael Rabbā from earlier sources, stating that the Mandaeans arose as a sect in the second half of the fifth century, are rendered more credible by the fact that Christian complaints about them appear only in the sixth century whereas they do not exist before. The earlier existence of a Nāṣoraean splinter sect from the fourth or early fifth century, which may have appeared to outsiders as composed of baptizing Jews of a sort, and which attracted followers who became Mandaeans, by that name, in the fifth century, would also account for much of the evidence. In any case, these were religious movements under the rule of the Sasanids, not earlier.

CHAPTER 11

The Religious Environment of Sasanian Iraq

If Mandaeism came into being in Sasanian times, as the sum of the preceding investigations demonstrates, then it is in the context of Sasanian Iraq that we must understand its origin and growth. The report transmitted by Bar Konay states that the Kentaean religion was founded by an idolater of the region of Goḫay who abandoned his idolatry in response to an edict by the Sasanian king Peroz against idols and their priests (*ʿal ptakre w-kumrayhon*). According to the same account, the Mandaeans were a group partly derivative from the Kentaeans, at least in their doctrine. As seen in Chapter 4, Mandaean authors themselves saw the Kentaeans as uncomfortably similar to themselves and as a group to be shunned. If Kentaeism and Mandaeism are no older than the time of Peroz, it will be worthwhile to attempt to discern whether the Sasanian context of the origin of the Mandaean religion is meaningful for our understanding of it, or whether the Kentaean, Mandaean, and other related cases have anything to offer our understanding of the Sasanian period in Iraq. I will argue here that, although Mandaeism was built by Nāṣoraeans of some kind (admittedly not well understood), it was also the product of a social environment characterized by religious innovation in Sasanian Iraq that arose after the dismantling of the local institutional bases of Babylonian paganism. It is from this population of dispossessed idolaters that many early lay Mandaeans must have been recruited by the baptizing priests. Mandaeism is apparently the longest-lived example of several new movements in a period of religious innovation among the Aramaeans of Sasanian Iraq, triggered as their old religious communities lost their material foundations and priestly leadership. The major fact to be reckoned with is that at the onset of Persian rule in the third century, there were numerous Aramaean pagans worshipping gods represented in statues in established, sometimes wealthy, temples. By the end of the Sasanid dynasty, in the seventh century, these temples seem mostly or entirely to have disappeared. The primary sources shed limited light on the causes and circumstances of this, but it is necessary to extrapolate from what is known to suggest an explanation into which the Mandaeans fit as one part of a larger phenomenon. Without this attempt, the Sasanian context of Mandaean origins is less meaningful.[1] I shall not argue that Mandaeism is an outgrowth

1 This argument has undeveloped forerunners. Schaeder (1950: 288) briefly connected the rise

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of Babylonian paganism. That idea, suggested in an early stage of modern research on Mandaeism, was convincingly discredited long ago by Rudolph.[2] Instead, I aim to shed light on the social environment in which Mandaeism came into being alongside several other relatively obscure religious groups.

The region of Goḫay (Arabic Ǧawḫay, normalized as Ǧūḫā), east of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and populated by Aramaic-speakers, was a fertile land by the Tigris under Sasanid rule until the westward shift of the Tigris around 628.[3] In the first century, Pliny the Elder reported that the region was watered by a divergent channel of the Tigris that eventually rejoined the main stream that passed through Mesene to the south.[4] By late Sasanian times, the name Goḫay designated a diocese of the East-Syrian ecclesiastical province of Bet Arāmāye.[5] The historian al-Masʿūdī reports in the tenth century that it had been "the most prosperous part of the Sawād (i.e. southern Iraq), and its people were the foremost of those in the region."[6] After the disastrous shifting of the Tigris, culminating in 628, however, it dried up and became a wasteland,[7] though Syriac sources mention a bishop of Goḫay in 790 and in 830.[8] During its populous efflorescence under the Persian kings, Goḫay appears also to have been fertile ground for new religious movements. Mani (d. 274), the founder of Manichaeism in the third century, was reportedly from Goḫay; his father abandoned idol-worship and joined an Elchasaite group, eventually summoning his son Mani, who therefore must have also been an idolater as a child, to join him.[9] Only later, in early adulthood, did Mani become a religious innova-

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of new religions in Mesopotamia like Kentaeism with the demise of "Babylonian Hellenism" in the face of state support for "the Zoroastrian church." Schaeder characterized this is a matter of "spiritual life"—das geistige Leben im Lande—but I think it is sounder to address the institutional and social foundations of the demise of Babylonian paganism in temple life, as I will do here. I agree with Schaeder, of course, that Christian proselytism was also a factor in the erosion of Iraqi paganism.

2 Rudolph 1960: 195–222.

3 On its geography, see fundamentally Henning (1942: 945–947).

4 Pliny the Elder (6.31) describes this part of the Tigris' course: *citra seleuciam babyloniam cxxv p. divisus in alveos duos, altero meridiem ac seleuciam petit mesenen perfundens, altero ad septentrionem flexus eiusdem gentis tergo campos cauchas secat.*

5 Van Rompay 2011: 70.

6 al-Masʿūdī, *Tanbīh* 40.16–17: *wa-kānat* [*Ǧūḫā*] *aʿmara s-sawādi wa-ahluhā l-mutaqaddimūna ʿalā ahlihā.*

7 Verkinderen 2015: 51, 54, 108 (analysis including citations of Ibn Rusta).

8 Fiey 1968: 257.

9 Sayyid 11/1.389.2; Henning 1942: 945–947 and esp. 947n2; Reeves 2011: 36; W. Sundermann, "Mani," *EIr* (under "Childhood and youth"); Jullien and Jullien 2003a: 91–92.

tor. Baṭṭay, the founder of the Kentaean religion in the fifth century, was from Goḫay, and his former master was a pagan priest there. Like Mani and Mani's father, Baṭṭay allegedly abandoned idolatry, in this case during a royal persecution of idols and their priests and after experiences with Jews and Manichaeans. Ibn an-Nadīm mentions several other little-known religious groups that fit a similar profile and some of whose originators came from Goḫay as well. He treats them together in the same section of his *Fihrist* alongside the Dostaeans (Mandaeans), Manichaeans, and other "dualists." Without this source we would know scarcely anything about them. There were the followers of Ḫusraw al-*'zrwmq'n*[10] of Goḫay, a group that believed in a primordial conflict between the Darkness and the Light and who "would take ostentatious pride in clothing and fancy attire, because he [Ḫusraw] ordered them to do so."[11] Another was Ǧanǧay al-Ǧawḫānī, which would be in Aramaic Gangay Goḫānāyā, "Gangay of Goḫay." Ǧanǧay was apparently a ritual expert or priest worshipping the idols. He played a tambourine or a bell in an idol-temple, perhaps in something akin to the widely attested ancient "kettledrum ceremonies" of ancient Mesopotamia.[12] Eventually he abandoned idolatry and created his own, new religion. Besides the reference to his followers as *Gangāye that I proposed to

10 The obscure name here is interpreted anomalously by Dodge (1970: 2.808n356) as *al-az-Rūmagān* "the-from-the-people-of-Rūmagān [a village in the region of Babylon]." I know of no parallel to the proposed use of an Arabic definite article on a Persian prepositional phrase, which makes this interpretation seem unlikely. Rather the name is either transmitted in a corrupt for or refers to a place or people as yet unidentified.

11 Sayyid 11/1.409.13–410.10: *wa-kāna aṣḥābuhū yatafāḫarūna bi-l-libāsi wa-z-zīyyi wa-kāna ya'muruhum bi-ḏālika*. The followers of Ḫusraw of Goḫay are probably the same as the obscure religious group mentioned in the Mandaic *Ginzā*, identified there with the planet Jupiter/Bel, who are characterized as interested in gold and silver and are censured for their love of "images and dyed stuffs," *ṣylmy' w-ṣybwny'* (Shapira 2004: 274–275).

12 The term for the instrument *znǧlyǧ*, if it is not corrupt, is apparently the Persian word *zangulīg* or *zangulīča*, a kind of bell or tambourine. (Dodge 1970: 2.808 guesses at a different Persian etymology to make it into a drum.) Musical instruments were played along with lamentations and supplications to Babylonian gods, as in the ancient "kettledrum rituals," in which a special drum covered with the hide of a ritually slaughtered bull was beaten to accompany sacrifices and to divert divine anger at times such as lunar eclipses (Linssen 2004: 92–100). A priest called *kalû* in Akkadian, conventionally "lamentation priest" in English, carried out ritual songs connected with the kettledrum performance (McEwan 1981: 11–13; Linssen 2004: 99). One may suppose that Ǧanǧay was a late example of a lamentation priest of some sort, playing a percussion instrument as he "worshipped the images" "in the house of the idol." At least he is characterized in such a way in the source.

identify in the Syriac *History of Šemʿon bar Ṣabbāʿe* (in Chapter 3),[13] the report of Ibn an-Nadīm is the only known notice of the existence of this group, but it bears clear points of resemblance to the tales related by Bar Konay on the origin of the Kentaeans and the Mandaeans. Here is what Ibn an-Nadīm has to say.[14]

> The Ǧanǧaeans (*al-Ǧanǧīyūn*).
>
> These are the followers of Ǧanǧay al-Ǧawḫānī. This man used to worship the images (*al-aṣnām*) and beat the *zanǧulīǧ* in the house of the idol (*bayt al-waṯan*). Then he abandoned that doctrine and turned toward a doctrine that he invented. He claimed that there was a thing that existed before the Light and the Darkness, and that in the Darkness were two forms, male and female. He said, "He was together with his wife in the Darkness." He said, "Light appeared to the female and he stole a bit of the Light, the world of life (*ʿālam al-aḥyāʾ*). Then she moved like a worm and rose up, and the Light accepted her and dressed her in a bit of its light. Then she went away from him and stole light from him and returned to her place. From the light that she had stolen, from that in which the Light had dressed her, she created the sky, the mountains, the earth, and the rest of the things." They claim that the fire is queen of the world and other things that I beg God's pardon from mentioning. I know of no book of theirs.

Mani, Baṭṭay, Ḫusraw, Gangay—all four from Goḫay, all founders of new religions in which fire or light represent a fundamental, good force. At least three created their religions after quitting idolatry. Mani went from childhood paganism to join an Elchasaite group with his father and then created Manichaeism. Baṭṭay's story alleges an interim spent with Jews and Manichaeans between his paganism and his elaboration of Kentaeism. Each of these four new religions was based on a myth of primordial light and darkness. Mani is clearly the forerunner of them all, and the later innovators show signs of inspiration from Mani's doctrine or Elchasaism. As for their chronology, three of these groups are mentioned in sixth-century Syriac sources. If all four originated in Goḫay, they must have begun under Sasanid rule, and not later under Islamic rulers, because that region, from which their heresiarchs originated, became increasingly empty after the westward shift of the Tigris' course. Mandaeism,

13 See Chapter 3, note 26.

14 Sayyid II/1.409.3–12.

according to Bar Konay's report about it (which is admittedly unusual and polemical), originated in neighboring regions. Bar Konay's source makes the original Mandaeans to be immigrants from Adiabene, north of Goḏay near the Tigris, to Ḫūzistān, southeast of Goḏay, but he does state that they were found in Bet Arāmāye (which included Goḏay), where they were called Dostaeans and Nāṣraeans (i.e., Nāṣoraeans). Ibn an-Nadīm mentions a number of other small sects also from the region that seem quite odd because we know so little about them. There were splinter groups of Elchasaites, like the followers of Šīlay and of Malīḥ al-Ḫawlānī. There were the "People of the Religion of Heaven," living in the neighborhood of Ctesiphon, whose founder, named Arīday (uncertain reading), is said to have been a rich man who used biblical books acquired from a Jew in creating his religion.[15] These and other such groups were apparently all from the same Babylonian environment.

We must ask why idolaters in the same populous region were abandoning their temples and founding new religions each offering a revelation of a primordial conflict between light and darkness and offering a way to post-mortem salvation for the individual. Where did these people find their recruits? The answer requires some speculation because very few sources have anything to say about paganism in Sasanian Iraq. No pagan institutions persisted to preserve a manuscript tradition of their own for us today.[16] It is clear, however, that at the onset of Persian rule in the third century CE, Iraq was, like every other country, including the Roman Empire, full of idolaters who celebrated many differing local cults as a part of their civic life. Paganism was integral to their economy. Four hundred years later, at the advent of Islam, Iraqi idolatry appears to have disappeared almost entirely. Early Arabic sources do not mention it, with the exception of Ibn an-Nadīm's hint that some Marshlanders still had idols[17] and the tantalizing traces of the ancient astralized gods revered

15 The group is called in Arabic *ahl ḫīfat as-samā'* (Sayyid II/1.412.12–413.2). Literally this is "People of the Fear of Heaven," but it must represent an Aramaic expression like **d-bet deḥltā da-šmayyā*, where *deḥltā*, fear, means "religion" (Becker 2009).

16 The exceptional survival is the work or collection of works translated into Arabic by Ibn Waḥšīya in the tenth century. See Hämeen-Anttila (2006). Ibn Waḥšīya explains that the old man from whom he gathered secret manuscripts written in "ancient Aramaic" (*an-Nabaṭīya al-qadīma*) refused to divulge the books of their religion, and Ibn Waḥšīya considered this their concealment appropriate (Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 96).

17 Sayyid II/1.411.12–14. The passage is not perfectly clear, and may indicate confusion with the Ḥarrānians: "Another account of the matter of the Ṣābians of the Marshes. They are a people who follow the doctrines of the ancient Aramaeans (*an-Nabaṭ al-qadīm*), worshipping the planets. They have images and idols. They are the common people of

in secret by the Aramaean Kasdānī community from which Ibn Waḥšīya converted to Islam.[18] Arabic accounts of the Islamic conquests mention idols captured on raids into India and in Central Asia, for example, but there is no more hint of public idols in Iraq. Because so much of our knowledge of the Sasanian period depends on sources from the later kingdom, pagans of Sasanian Iraq have been little noticed in modern scholarship. This is by contrast with the Roman Empire, for which sources are much more abundant. The demise of Roman paganism has long been a major subject of investigation. The situation in Iraq is comparatively obscure. For many centuries the gods in ancient Iraq had enjoyed comfortable habitation in their rich temples, tended by teams of priests and venerated by masses of people in exchange for terrestrial benefits and as a part of an annual calendar of holiday ceremonies and celebrations.[19] What, then, drove these ancient Mesopotamian gods out of existence in the course of the four Sasanian centuries?

The most likely culprit is, ultimately, the Sasanid kings themselves. Aided and abetted by the Zoroastrian priesthood, who had no love of idols and "demon worship," and by Christian bishops who were loyal subjects and who hated idols perhaps even more, the Persian kings had much to gain financially and socially in extirpating temples and dispossessing the priests who staffed

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the Ṣābians known as the Ḥarrānians, though it has been said that they are different from them generally and specifically." The entry mentions Ḥarrānians but the heading designates Marshlanders.

18 Hämeen-Anttila (2006) presents many passages from Ibn Waḥšīya's voluminous translation attesting to idolatry in temple settings, in which gods representing the sun, moon, and five planets were worshipped. Ibn Waḥšīya's village of origin, Qussīn (if the name is transmitted correctly), was in the vicinity of Kūfa and on the Euphrates-side of the Marshlands (Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 88), perhaps sheltered from the proselytism of so many groups on the Tigris-side. Shenkar (2014: 31) cites Hämeen-Anttila's study as evidence that "pagan temples and shrines, which undoubtedly contained idols, continued to exist in the Babylonian countryside even into the Islamic period." On the contrary, there is exceedingly little evidence for such survivals. Ibn Waḥšīya's text is based on earlier pagan books guarded in secrecy, not on public practices of idolatry, and representing a tradition that Ibn Waḥšīya clearly regards as in its extreme senescence. However remarkable, Ibn Waḥšīya's work is an isolated case.

19 As Rochberg puts it (1993: 33), "the continuation of the Babylonian temple in most of its capacities remains one of the remarkable features of late Babylonian culture," by which she means up to the year 75 CE approximately. She adds that "despite administrative turnovers and individual differences between cities, as between Babylon and Uruk …, deterioration of those native Mesopotamian cultural traditions which served the concerns of the temple is not in evidence."

them. The Persian kings had no stake in these cults and were not patrons of them as earlier ancient kings of Babylon had been, including at least some Parthian Arsacids. When the Sasanids needed money for major expenses, then the ancient gods and their temples were doomed. The temples were conspicuously wealthy but relatively defenseless because of their strictly regional institutional foundation. In response to the end of their temple cults, the former followers of the old gods created new ways to meet their needs that were now unmet. It is important to note that no source states this directly, but that is the argument I will elaborate briefly here.[20]

I begin with the temples themselves. Scholars have tracked the history of the workings of Babylonian temples until the beginning of the Common Era. It is then that cuneiform records preserved on durable materials finally ceased to be produced, with the result that the administration of the temples disappears from our view. The shift to Aramaic as a vehicle for all sorts of writing in Babylonia had been preparing the way for this change for centuries, preceded by a shift to Aramaic in the vernacular of the general population. Aramaic texts were written mostly on perishable materials such as leather, and are therefore almost entirely lost. This means that we are in the dark about temple life in the first centuries of the Common Era, after cuneiform, written on relatively durable clay, went out of use.[21] Cuneiform records have been recovered, however, for the larger, and hence better-known, Babylonian temples of the Seleucid and early Arsacid period, especially Babylon and Uruk, giving researchers some materials for reconstructing the role of the temples in society and the economy up to the first century CE. The administration and social roles of Babylonian temples in the Seleucid and early Arsacid period appear not to have been very different from those of much earlier times, and we may suppose that what was true of these temples at the onset of the Common Era was still basically true, to an extent, in the third century and at the beginning of the Sasanid dynasty. This is justified in light of the sources, to be mentioned below, that refer in hostile ways to Babylonian idolatry under Sasanid Persian rule. Assuming that the institutions and practices of Iraqi idolatry remained relatively stable, as they had been through many earlier changes of government and dynasty before, we may venture a general description of their functioning.

Even with the royal patronage they enjoyed under Assyrian, Babylonian, and other ancient dynasties, the temples and the gods who dwelled in them were

20 This argument that the kings enriched themselves through the despoliation of non-Zoroastrian cult sites accords with a similar argument made by de Jong (2006: 232–238); see also Shenkar (2015: 478–479), who recognizes but minimizes this factor.

21 On this shift see Brown (2008); also Gzella (2015: 134–139).

primarily local or regional entities. Each town or city had one chief god or a small number of gods special to it. Few of the gods of ancient Iraq, if any, had worshippers across broad regions. Several gods, such as Nergal and Nebo, were evidently known interregionally but their worship was based on idiosyncratic local establishments and customs.[22] In general, all their cults were based on a relationship of exchange centered around the physical sites of temples and shrines: mortals worshipped them, venerated their images, served their houses, and made substantial offerings to them, and they hoped for prosperity and protection from evil in return. Their communities also enjoyed public festivals and assemblies connected with the temples. The larger temples, at least, were endowed with expensive buildings, agricultural land that was leased out for income, and even slaves, and they received offerings of goods and produce. Temple priests of various kinds, chanters and omen specialists, workers including many kinds of craftsmen for the upkeep of the god's estate, and temple officials received rations as payment for their work in the god's household.[23] No doubt there was a scale of greatness according to the god's wealth—or, rather, according to the wealth of those who presided over the gods' affairs—and the size of the population involved in each god's support.

In short, the temples fulfilled important social functions and played a major role in the regional economies of Iraq.[24] The gods had long possessed large and productive landholdings. Their wealth and property must have been enticing to kings in time of financial crisis. The Sasanid kings, devoted to Ohrmazd's cult and his magian priests, had no special interest in these Babylonian gods as kings of earlier times did. The basically local character of the gods' cults must have made their property more vulnerable. Christianity, by contrast, constituted a group of followers claiming an identity that transcended local identities and ethnicity, who were capable of fostering shared interests across regions and sometimes of supporting Christian groups in other locales. It seems that no

22 Haider (2008) demonstrates that in Assyria (northern Mesopotamia), in the cities Assur, Nineveh, and Nisibis, local worship of the same gods varied greatly from city to city, despite mutual proximity, even with respect to temple architecture. As Kaizer elaborates on this point (2008: 9), "Only 50 km to the west of Assur Hatra, a city that used a similar, nearly identical Aramaic dialect, suddenly burst on the stage at around the same time [the first centuries CE], but despite the similarity in language and their close proximity to each other the two had only a few deities in common." The same variety goes for the architecture of the temples throughout the region (Downey 1988).

23 McEwan 1981.

24 van der Spek 2005.

group of followers transcending ethnicity existed to rally and defend local temples facing despoliation or demolition by agents of the king.

Numerous textual sources indirectly attest to and describe Babylonian paganism in the Sasanian period. In the account of Mani's early life preserved by Ibn an-Nadīm, Mani's father went to an idol-temple in Ctesiphon along with "the entirety of the people" (*sā'ir an-nās*), again suggesting that these temples were sites enjoying great popular support in the third century. The first commandment for Manichaean laypeople was to abandon idolatry, an indication of its widespread practice in third-century Babylonia.[25] Several fragmentary Manichaean Middle Persian texts discovered at Turfan rail against worshippers of idols (*uzdēs*), one referring to their temples called "houses of the gods."[26] Bar Konay's source characterizes the cult of Nerig in Goḫay with ritual offerings of meals at an altar and an assembly of people participating with shouts. The sixth- or seventh-century author of the *Acts of Mār Māri* describes the temples of Babylonia and their gods at the dawn of the Christian mission in Iraq as sites of great wealth. "Much money (*npaqtā saggi'tā*) used to be spent on the idols and on the priests, who said that the idols ate and drank." In the narrative, Māri the evangelist went to a temple called "house of idols" (*bet ptakre*) and chastised the priests as deceivers, referring to the ancient practice of serving ritually prepared meals to the gods' statues.[27] He is characterized as challenging them with bold questions: "When did these idols, which you call gods, ever eat? Are you not ashamed? Have you not enough of eating and drinking whatever is offered to them? Though you say that these are deities, they are not deities as you claim, but statues of wood and bronze inside which the demons speak!"[28] A whole gang of priests is imagined to have responded in outrage. Because the sun was not man-made, they fall back on a defense of sun-worship, here the sun-god, Šamšā "the great judge," *dayyānā rabbā*. Ibn Waḫšīya's Arabic translation from pre-Islamic Aramaic books records an unusual report in which a dissimulating "follower of

25 Tardieu 2008: 68. The *Book of Elchasai*, by contrast, allowed Christians to participate in idolatry by dissimulation (Jones 2004: 190).

26 Andreas and Henning (1933: 20–21); Skjærvø (1995: 241–242); Shenkar (2014: 38). Shenkar (2015: 485) suggests that such passages address anybody who worships the "wrong gods," perhaps Sogdian pagans. Maybe such passages were copied and reused to address various polemical needs in different times and places, but in their original composition, perhaps in Aramaic, they must have reflected the Babylonian environment of the early Manichaean mission. *Kadag ī yazdān* probably translates Aramaic *bet alāhe*.

27 Linssen 2004: 129–166.

28 Trans. Harrak 2005: 57.

Seth" attends a pagan temple in Babylon and pretends to have a nose-bleed to make an excuse not to bow down to the statue of Dawānāy commemorated on that day.[29] These texts attest to the persistence of Babylonian paganism into the Sasanian period and verify the temples' popularity and wealth, especially early in the period.

As emphasized already, though, this sort of religion did not outlast the Sasanian period except perhaps in small and isolated sites. Archaeological investigation has discovered remains of Babylonian and Assyrian temples during the long Arsacid period, including a few examples of new temple construction as late as the first century CE, possibly even the second century CE.[30] For the subsequent Sasanian period, by contrast, almost no studies have been conducted on temples of Babylonia.[31] It is not clear whether this is because the temples were destroyed or repurposed under Sasanid rule, or because the goals of archaeologists of the Sasanian period have overlooked such material out of overwhelming interest in royal and military sites and material remains conducive to a history of Zoroastrianism. If epigraphy constitutes an indication, it does appear that attrition of the Babylonian cults coincides with the onset of Sasanid rule in 224. Approximately 600 Aramaic inscriptions from Assur, Ḥaṭra, and the northern Tigris are known for the period about 44 BCE to 238 CE.[32] Later dated inscriptions in Aramaic from this region are as yet unknown. The known ones commemorate individuals and dedications to many ancient Mesopotamian gods whose worship persisted from distant antiquity. They attest to many specific gods and the widespread use of theophoric names based on these gods among men and women. The Aramaic epigraphical efflorescence of the first centuries of the common era understandably came to an end at major sites of inscriptions like Hatra and Palmyra after their destruction in war (Hatra by the Persians in 241 and Palmyra by the Romans in 273), but why would dedicatory inscriptions along the Tigris, away from the devastation of war, apparently cease so soon after the advent of the Sasanids?[33] The cessation of new inscriptions, combined with the non-survival of temples, is suggestive. Perhaps it is merely that the epigraphic habit changed,

29 Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 171.

30 Downey 1988: 137–173.

31 Babylonian temples do not appear in the recent summary of Sasanian-period archaeology by Mousavi and Daryaee (2012).

32 Beyer 1998.

33 Taylor's chronology of Palmyrene inscriptions (2001) shows that the production of inscriptions at Palmyra did not undergo a gradual decline but suddenly dropped off at the city's destruction.

but it may be rather that certain Persian kings frowned upon the public expression of veneration for Babylonian gods.

One way or another, Persian kings and Zoroastrian priests oversaw the demise of the temples. Perhaps the most important testimony about government opposition to idolatry comes from the inscriptions of Kerdīr in Fārs, high Zoroastrian priest in the late third century. These inscriptions are dated approximately 280–290.[34] Kerdīr boasted, famously among scholars today, that under his supervision of religion in the kingdom the other organized religious groups such as Jews, Christians, and Manichaeans were "struck."[35] The identity of the religious groups named in the inscription and the nature of the "striking" have been debated extensively. It has attracted less attention that Kerdīr also followed this statement with another that "idols were destroyed and the abodes of the demons disrupted and made into thrones and seats of the gods."[36] This indicates that idols were demolished and at least some of the same sites became Zoroastrian shrines. We are not informed about the scale of these activities, but Kerdīr attests to at least some idol-destroying and he claims credit for it. In his inscription he also states about the worshippers of demons (*dēw*) that "many men who were unbelievers became believers, and many were those who held the doctrine of the demons, and on account of me they left that doctrine of the demons."[37] Historians who deemphasize state-sponsored pressure to convert to Zoroastrianism under the Sasanids tend to overlook this passage. It is true that this testimony presents an idealized career, but the claim of anti-idolatry is not likely to have been simply a lie. Although the whole message of the text boasts of the prosperity and growth of adherence to Zoroastrianism, strictly speaking Kerdīr does not state that the demon-worshippers became Zoroastrians. If we insist on his precise words, he says only that many people quit worshipping demons. "Demons" in the earlier passage, just discussed, refers to the divinities represented in idols.

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34 P.O. Skjærvø, *EIr*, "Kartīr."

35 MacKenzie 1989: trans. 58, ed. 54. "Were struck" here is Middle Persian *zad bawēnd*, an expression the precise significance of which here has exercised all historians interested in Sasanian religion and governance. One should remember that he also says he "punished" and "tormented" them (*awēšān-im puhl zad ud nixrust hēnd*) until they were "made better." It is important to note that MacKenzie must argue, to some degree from context, that *nixrust* here means "tormented" and not "reproached" (1979: 523).

36 MacKenzie 1989: trans. 58, ed. 54: *ud uzdēs gugānīh ud gilist ī dēwān wišōbīh ud yazadān gāh ud nišēm akirī*.

37 MacKenzie 1989: trans. 59, ed. 55: *ud was mardom ī anastawān būd ān astawān būd ud was ān būd kē kēš ī dēwān dāšt u-š az man kerd ān kēš ī dēwān hišt u-š kēš ī yazadān grift*.

Michael Shenkar's thoroughgoing studies of religious images and figures in the Sasanian kingdom and to its east dispute a straightforward interpretation of Kerdīr's statement about destroying idols. As part of a larger argument that Sasanian Zoroastrians had no animus against images of gods, he insists that when Kerdīr mentions idols, he just means "false religion," and that "idols" (*uzdēs*) served as a vague polemical term not literally referring to statues and images. For Shenkar, Kerdīr would probably not have been capable of what he calls a "theological distinction" between the temple-based Mesopotamian worship of the gods and groups like the Christians and the Jews.[38] I think that no theology would have been necessary to make this distinction and that the modes of worship between these groups and the sorts of social and economic organization supporting them would be manifestly unlike each other. The followers of these different religions were vocal about the distinctions between them. Kerdīr's inscription itself makes such distinctions, as already mentioned. We know well from the Christian and Jewish sources that they themselves condemned idolatry. Moreover, the Middle Persian word for idol, *uzdēs*, is attested in both Zoroastrian and Manichaean Middle Persian to mean "idol, image," and not metaphorically. Shenkar adds a further suggestion that Zoroastrians such as Kerdīr borrowed this alleged usage from Christians, who are apparently supposed not to have used the term "idol" to refer to real idols in the third century, either, but merely to "false religion." This further step is not convincing, either. On the contrary, one of the early obsessions of Christian literature is the demonic character of statues of gods and of the inefficacy of the worship of created things. This is because they were busily trying to convert gentiles who venerated gods in the medium of statues made of wood, stone, bronze, and clay. Christians were talking about real temples and idols, not the theoretical "Mosaic distinction" coined by Jan Assmann and applied here by Shenkar to further his main case (against Boyce, who argued that Sasanian Zoroastrians were "iconoclastic"). The Zoroastrian texts condemning idol-worship cited in the discussion do not exhibit other Christian terminology, leaving little support for the case that Zoroastrians borrowed a discourse about idols from Christians already in the third century. Shenkar is surely right that the Sasanian Zoroastrians did not have a principled opposition to anthropomorphic representation as such of their own gods or perhaps of any gods, but they did have a furiously stated opposition to some idolatrous cults, as some of the sources Shenkar cites

38 Shenkar 2015: 479–483; also Shenkar 2014: 183. Payne (2015: 24), by contrast, sees "important distinctions" made between idolaters and other groups in the same lines of the inscription.

make quite clear.[39] Richard Payne has recently assembled from Zoroastrian works several references to policies against pagan idolatry enacted by Zoroastrian authorities. Payne and Shenkar cite most of the same primary sources, but Payne rather accepts what the texts state, and holds that Sasanian Persians sometimes actually destroyed sites of idol-worship.[40]

Another important testimony comes from Bar Konay's account of the origin of the Kentaeans, already discussed. The Persian king Peroz (r. 457–484) issued an edict against idols and their priests, "so that only the religion of the magi remain." The report survives in a heresiographical work, but it bears no hint in itself of Christian invention or bias. A Christian author is reporting the Zoroastrian persecution of paganism. I accept it as non-fiction. Peroz faced difficult challenges that may provide us with a context to make sense of it. In particular, Peroz ruled during a period of intense drought that lasted six or seven years, so severe that it was recorded as one of the major events of his reign.[41] Aṭ-Ṭabarī's account of it states that he released people from taxes during this period. This must have greatly reduced his royal funds. He also led a major military campaign against the Hephthalites, but in this he died. Such losses of income and high expenditures may provide a practical motive behind the edict against the idols and their priests. Even small idol-shrines must have been adorned or endowed with some wealth. The control by temple priests of substantial agricultural land, owned by the Babylonian gods, must have been intolerable during a period of prolonged dearth, especially if idols and their priests continued to receive ritual meals while ordinary people went hungry. It must have been convenient that Zoroastrian priests were already prepared to condemn idolatry, because it would justify the royal seizure of property. Jewish, Christian, and Manichaean subjects will not have complained at this development. Pointing to a practical, financial motive does not remove the fact that Kerdīr's inscription and Peroz' edict were both stated in religious terms and fit the ordinary meaning of persecution.

Beyond incidents mentioned by Kerdīr, Bar Konay, and a few other sources, we do not know the whole history of the demise of the Babylonian temples, but only that they did disappear. I assume that there must have been other,

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39 Shenkar 2014: 31–38; 2015: 474–475.

40 Payne 2015: 32–35; Shenkar 2014: 35–37. Payne's own argument that Zoroastrian intolerance is a modern "myth" evidently does not apply to the ancient heathendom of Iraq, for his own evidence indicates that the idols and cult centers of these gods were sometimes destroyed and were therefore not tolerated, at least sometimes.

41 aṭ-Ṭabarī (trans. Bosworth 1999: 111–112); Middle Persian *Bundahišn* as cited by Shapira (2010: 156 and 160 [§ 17]).

unrecorded acts by powerful Zoroastrians and perhaps kings themselves that reduced the temples and seized their wealth. I assume also, however, that it was not a general, pervasive policy, but that it was sporadic, like most policies of the Sasanid kings and their appointees, arising along with reactions to circumstances and immediate financial needs. Nevertheless, the Persian kings are probably the ones ultimately responsible in that they at least allowed the closure of the temples, the destruction of the idols, and the seizure of temple wealth, if they did not specifically order it in every case. The pagan priests lost their jobs. Perhaps Zoroastrian priests or local governors were permitted to conduct this sort of persecution independently, too. The commodities and rents hitherto gathered by Aramaic-speaking priests on behalf of Babylonian gods now would go to other ends.

I am well aware of the limited evidence for this argument, but it is at least based on specific sources attesting as clearly as one could expect to state involvement in destroying idols. Skeptics should suggest an alternative to explain the demise of Babylonian paganism in the Sasanian period and not before. Conversion to other religions, especially Christianity, must have played a large role, but it cannot suffice as a complete explanation, or we should expect Christianity to have become overwhelmingly pervasive by the seventh century, and we would not find so many new non-Christian religions in the same region. An alternative explanation may be to suppose that paganism in Babylonia was not so much persecuted as impoverished, faring similarly to traditional Egyptian paganism in the same period. Roger Bagnall argues that the decline in state funding for Egyptian temples by the Roman government was instrumental in undermining the vitality of paganism there. Without state subsidies, Egyptian priests had an increasingly difficult time in making a living. By the third century, the Egyptian temples had been slowly starved for funding for so long that the signs began to show just as Christianity began to compete vigorously for commitments from Egyptians.[42] It is possible to imagine a situation in Babylonia parallel to that which Bagnall proposes for Egypt, but Babylonian temples, unlike their Egyptian counterparts, apparently subsisted on large endowments. This would have made them less vulnerable in times of disinterest from the government. What is critically missing, of course, is a clearer account of the Babylonian temples in the first two and a half centuries of the common era. That said, the evidence just reviewed suggests that at least some Sasanid kings

42 Bagnall 1993: 261–309. For another comparison with the Roman Empire, one may consult Watts (2015), who has numerous literary and material sources available to create a lively narrative of pagans in the fourth century at a time when paganism was under attack.

and priests were actively ill-disposed toward Babylonian idolatry, whereas the early Roman rulers of Egypt were not. The testimony of Kerdīr's inscription, near the end of the third century, suggests that the Sasanian state was well ahead of the Romans in dismantling pagan institutions over which they ruled.

Whether my hypothesis of the cause is right or wrong, the temples did disappear. Idolaters deprived of idols and temples needed other means of fulfilling the needs of theirs that were no longer met, be they feelings of security, community, hope and consolation against the ills of the world, miracle cures, or otherwise. Meanwhile, temple priests without temples were deprived of their standing as masters of their cults, not to mention their salaries from the gods' estates and meals eaten on behalf of the gods. One expects that they would try to preserve their social capital, religious status, and special cult-related income and food supply in another form.[43] Some of them may have converted to Zoroastrianism, according to the wishes of Kerdīr, Peroz and other anti-pagans, but we have no idea of how welcome non-Iranian converts to Zoroastrianism were in practice in that time, or what means, if any, were provided for their integration among Zoroastrians. Some idolaters must have turned to Christianity, including its varieties such as Marcionism or Manichaeism. Perhaps some converted to Judaism, although the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia were apparently cautious about admitting newcomers of unknown lineage.[44] Conversion to existing religions must have varied according to the closeness of individuals to these different religious communities. On the other hand, some former idolaters, whatever their rank in their old religion, evidently put their human ingenuity to use. They generated new religions offering services to interested persons in their vicinity. Former heathens now without the benefits provided by the old temples eventually joined them. The reports about new religions founded by men from Goḫay and its neighboring regions effectively state as much. As conversion follows networks of close social relationships and ceases at their limits, however, village-based Aramaeans must have generated some new religions that seldom transcended their local social groups and villages.[45] With the exception of Manichaeism, which was presented as a higher grade of Christianity rather than a substitute for it, and traveled far abroad, the new religions of the Sasanian Aramaeans remained the practice of local communities.

43 Stark and Finke 2000: 118–124.

44 Paz, forthcoming. The caution expressed in the Babylonian Talmud about the purity of lineage of Jews of Mesene may mean, in part, that Mesenian people were converting to Judaism, but that these converts were not accepted among the Babylonian Jews who produced the Talmud.

45 Stark and Finke 2000: 116–118.

In the East Roman Empire from the third to the seventh century, legal restrictions and a thickening network of exclusively committed Christians made Christianity increasingly the only option for all. The religious economy of Sasanian Iraq was clearly more open and unregulated than that, despite the efforts of the likes of Kerdīr and Peroz. The Persian kings and their chief Zoroastrian priests do not seem to have made it a general policy to persecute any particular religious group in a lasting way. Their persecutions were launched in reaction to ostentatious disloyalty and special threats to their authority, and they were applied selectively.[46] Whatever Kerdīr actually did with the other religious groups that "were struck" under his high priesthood, everyone should be able to agree at least that all, or nearly all, of those groups persisted in the Sasanian kingdom. The exception was idolaters, who were vulnerable because they were relatively local and held old wealth without means to defend it. None of the leaders of those new religions wanted idolaters in the vicinity, unless as converts to their own religion. When the wealth of the Babylonian gods was appropriated by the Zoroastrian kings or high priests, their worshippers apparently were not simultaneously forced to join any other existing group. Although Peroz' edict in the fifth century is supposed to have intended that only Zoroastrianism remain, many of the idolaters deprived of idols must have had no immediate reason or perhaps even opportunity to convert en masse to Zoroastrianism, let alone to Christianity or Judaism. Baṭṭay is supposed to have added some elements to his religion that would appeal to Zoroastrian authorities but, whether that is true or not, he never became a Zoroastrian as Peroz' edict intended. Instead he created a religion in which fire played a special role, superficially like Zoroastrianism. Ḫusraw of Goḫay taught that fire was "the queen of the world," but he had his own religion, not Zoroastrianism. Some pagans, no doubt, continued to worship their old gods on a scale much less grand, but along with the disruption of the annual cycle of festivals, the dispersal of established priests, and the suspicion, as Baṭṭay saw it, that their "religion was defunct (*bāṭlā*)," it should be expected that many such people would innovate, copying what had worked for others instead of struggling through persecution.

This is my explanation for the appearance of so many new religious movements in Sasanian Iraq. These religions were generated as a supply to meet a new demand among people who had been deprived of their ancestral cults.

46 Payne (2015: 23–58) makes the case that Sasanian Zoroastrians never had a general policy of persecution, and he seeks to undermine the notion that Zoroastrians were intolerant by explaining the causes of their persecution of Christians with respect to their ideology and political economy.

Their innovations were, not surprisingly, cast in forms familiar from religions that had already been able to flourish—Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism—and bore the imprint especially of the Manichaean example, which must have had many followers already in Goḫay. The Manichaeans were pioneers in disavowing idolatry and in having holy teachers supplied by laypeople with ritual meals (where before idols received meals and the priests ate them).[47] The Sasanian Aramaean innovators created new scriptures of their own in their own vernacular, revelations explaining the genesis of the world, borrowing to an extent from other groups that were not consistently persecuted and which had the organization to survive persecution. Unlike the gods whom they now abandoned, their new religions promised their followers a personal salvation in a specific happy afterlife attainable through committed participation. At the same time, they knew that they faced well-organized competition and they disparaged their competitors. Therefore, some of them cursed Jesus, like the followers of Ḫusraw al-*'zrwmq'n* of Goḫay,[48] or demonized Jesus and Moses and the Holy Spirit, like the Mandaeans. Some groups made a competitive bid for authenticity and chronological priority over Jews and Christians. Kentaeans and the Mandaeans claimed as teachers the earliest biblical patriarchs, such as Seth and Enos, who were scarcely characterized in biblical texts and therefore provided blank slates for new myths. They borrowed demiurges, such as the Lord God of the Kentaeans, or invented new ones, like Ptahil of the Mandaeans. They undertook elementary philosophical thinking about light and darkness, male and female, mixture and separation, and the elements to describe a cosmos that made sense of worldly woes and insisted on the need for individual salvation. In a sense, however, they did not abandon all relations with the ancient gods of their grandfathers, as the spells inscribed on Aramaic magic bowls attest. Now they abjured those gods as demons in order to keep ills at bay, hoping that those powers would not interfere in their efforts to achieve the reward of a heavenly afterlife.[49]

If Iraqi idolatry had not been suppressed by the Persian kings, we should expect to find more evidence of temples and of paganism. Instead, it practically disappeared in the four centuries of Sasanian rule. In its place were many groups, several of them new, all of which condemned idolatry. I have argued

47 BeDuhn 2000: 144–162.

48 Of their founder Ḫusraw, Ibn an-Nadīm reports (Sayyid 11/1.410.5–6), "He would defame Jesus and call him weak. He would conceal his doctrine, not publicize it. He had no book," *wa-kāna yaṭ'anu ʿalā ʿĪsā wa-yuʿaǧǧizuhū wa-yaktumu maḏhabahū wa-lā yuḏīʿuhū wa-lā kitāba lahū.*

49 Morony 2007: 419–420.

that the suppression of idolatry was probably in the first instance a matter of practical utility and finances, not part of a well-organized plan of Zoroastrian proselytism. Aramaean folk whose temples were despoiled or destroyed and deprived of working priests were required by circumstances to innovate, and they clearly did so before the proselytizing efforts of Christians or other outsiders could reach them. What had changed was the sort of religious firms offering services. Before the change, Aramaeans could visit a god's house in person and ask for worldly assistance, with the intercession of priests who had been trained in ritual performances by their own fathers, and to deliver offerings of goods in exchange for the hope of good returns. Now they had a small guild of initiated religious experts purveying mysteries and initiations and purification, along with the peace of mind and in-group social acceptance that came with it. The notion of a permanent salvation, something the Babylonian gods do not seem to have offered, must have been appealing, too. The new experts did not require land endowments or riches to adorn a place of worship, but they did need flocks of supporters to provide their sustenance. Those flocks were to be had when the temples became defunct.

A recent bounty of substantial studies has devoted attention to the status of Christians, Manichaeans, and Jews under Sasanid Persian rule, their relationship to the Sasanian state, and their relationship to their Zoroastrian contemporaries.[50] Among the major issues that several of these works share is the question of Zoroastrian (or Persian, or royal Sasanian) tolerance or intolerance of other organized religious groups and the representation of one group by the other. The discussions also include important speculation about the role of Sasanian society in the genesis of religion as a category.[51] The Mandaeans, however, have scarcely come under discussion in these studies, perhaps because of the uncertainty hitherto surrounding their chronology and origin, but also perhaps because they fit within these issues awkwardly. Mandaeism, along with its local cousins from Goḏay and from along the Tigris generally, represents a development different from Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, one that should further inform our understanding of the varieties of religion in Sasanian times. In Mandaeism we find a new religious movement that appears to have had almost nothing to do directly with the Sasanian state at all, and which never became separable from ethnicity.[52] It is rather the relative lack of regulation of religion, particularly as compared with the East

50 A sampling includes Walker 2006, Herman 2012, Wood 2013, Secunda 2014, Mokhtarian 2015, Payne 2015.

51 Gardner, BeDuhn, and Dilley 2015.

52 Herman (2012: 53n178), discussing "Religion and State" in the Sasanian kingdom, notes

Roman Empire, that distinguishes the Sasanian kingdom. That is what facilitated the appearance of new religious movements. The Sasanian state seems to have been successful in stopping paganism—agents of the king could easily wreck temples—but they were not successful in compelling others to be Zoroastrians. That was an altogether more difficult undertaking. It is the lack of a discernable relationship with the Sasanian state, rather than integration into networks of royal power, as with the Church of the East[53] and the Jews of Babylon,[54] that characterizes the movements under discussion here. The old mode of temple-religion was effectively doomed, presumably because of its conspicuous unprotected wealth. Despite the stated wishes of authorities at specific times that everybody should become Zoroastrian, subjects of the Sasanids were apparently mostly free to practice and innovate so long as they did not infringe on the public authority of the Zoroastrianism of the ruling class. In this environment, new local movements having little to do with the state flourished and continually formed new splinter groups which adopted the characteristics of other successful organizations. These groups would be a bane to the Church of the East, an organization with much higher aspirations, and it is largely through authors of the Church of the East that we know about them.

Probably not all of the groups mentioned were at high tension with their social environment, but Mandaeism survived because it was, or it became, such a group. It maintained clear group boundaries along with relatively high demands on its members, including requirements of ritual bathing just to maintain social relationships with one's own family and friends in the community. Clear boundaries and high demands together are conducive to high levels of participation and strong feelings of solidarity.[55] Early Mandaeism seems always to have been addressed to people of a limited range of backgrounds, coming from the southern Aramaean village environments of Mesene, Ḫūzistān, and Bet Arāmāye. There is no trace of early Mandaean practice or teaching in another language besides the dialect of Aramaic called Mandaic. Even Bar Konay's Syriac source has to cite texts from that southeastern dialect. All this suggests that the community became endogamous and exclusive fairly early in its history. Certainly this was the case from the time of Abū ʿAlī's report around 900, when the community still used a local form Aramaic, and it

correctly that "There is no solid information on the leadership of the Mandaeans in this period." That is because they had little to do with the state, which is an important fact in itself.

53 Payne 2015.

54 Herman 2012.

55 Finke and Stark (2005: 250–251) discuss modern American parallels to this phenomenon.

remained so until modern times. The survival of a relatively conservative form of Neo-Aramaic among small pockets of modern Mandaeans in Ḫūzistān and Ḫurramšahr supports this by itself; other species of neo-Aramaic show radical differences with classical Aramaic along the same typological lines, whereas neo-Mandaic, for example, alone among Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages preserves the perfective suffix-tense of the verb.[56] Such conservatism is typical of languages spoken by people who do not admit new outsiders.[57] Unlike the Church of the East, which both negotiated royal recognition and elicited conversion of new members with increasing success through an expanding, open network of social relationships, the Mandaeans appear to have created a sort of social bubble for themselves, concerning themselves with their own and with their inviolable purity. That is how they persevered as a community.

Mandaeism offered its early followers a religious identity that could, in theory, have transcended regional identity in the way that early Christianity did, but instead became a new local Aramaean subgroup ethnicity in competition with other religious groups. This was determined when endogamy became the rule and proselytism was not pursued. The baptism offered by the early Nāṣoraean priests promised purity to those who came to their waterside *mandā*-huts, but that purity eventually became a sanction against outsiders. This encouraged endogamy, and endogamy gave the community clear boundaries and reinforced the priests' monopoly over their flock. This was an advantage on which the priests depended, not least for their income, and so they had every reason to emphasize still more the necessity of purity, which their rituals imparted, and social exclusivity. The cycle of ritual, exclusivity, and authority delimited the new community, endowed its members with a strong sense of solidarity, and rendered it highly durable so long as the priesthood remained strong. The dearth of priests in recent times has probably brought the cycle to an end, and along with it, soon, the religion itself, unless a transformation occurs and a new mode of Mandaean authority is created and accepted.

56 Häberl 2009: xxv and 265.

57 McWhorter 2007.

CHAPTER 12

Mandaeism as a Changing Tradition

It can be tempting to regard a tradition like that of the Mandaeans as a fossil from antiquity that has been relatively preserved from change by its isolation. To some extent this is true, but Mandaic texts amply attest to numerous challenges to maintaining a consensus about orthodoxy over many centuries.[1] Clearly there were serious schisms about which we know little. According to the *Haran Gawaita*, there was the schism of a certain Qiqil that is supposed to have occurred eighty-six years before the time when Anoš bar Danqā explained his religion to Arab authorities. By the hitherto common (and erroneous) modern conception of this chronology, that would put Qiqil in the middle of the sixth century, in the reign of Ḫusrō I (r. 531–579), but it was probably much later, because Anoš bar Danqā was probably later. In southern Mesopotamia, we are told, in the town of Ṭīb, a Nāṣoraean named Qiqil was deceived by the Spirit (*Ruhā*), wife of Adonai (an evil figure), into writing false scriptures. He later recanted but, despite efforts to burn all the false writings, some of these texts survived among those belonging to "the root of the Jews." So the priests are warned to rely only on the Great Revelation and to avoid these novelties.[2]

The heterogeneity of Mandaean myth and doctrine is another symptom of innovation and change in the tradition over time. The internal discrepancies of the texts are only barely obscured by the passage of the Mandaic manuscript traditions through several bottlenecks and times of constraint during which priests approved and anthologized some texts of various origins while discarding others. At least one of their goals in later times included adaptation to the

1 This was observed by Buckley (2005: e.g., 192 and 196).

2 Buckley (2005: 337–338) suggests that this account of the "heresy" of Qiqil is actually a reference to the Quqite sect known from sources dating back to the third century. The sect's founder was known as Quq, Aramaic for "vessel, pot." (On the Quqites see Drijvers 1967.) Presumably this name is related to the concept that the body is merely a vessel as expressed in other contemporary sects among the Aramaeans. It is probable that Qiqil, whose name means "excrement, dunghill" (Mandaic *qyql'*, *qyqylt'*; Syriac *qiqaltā*), is a word deliberately distorted from some unknown original name in the effort to discredit the repentant author of these heretical books. As seen in the discussion of the Kentaeans above, Mandaean texts are full of puns and folk etymologies, some of which are used to discredit other sects. But the founder of the Quqite sect, otherwise almost unknown, is supposed to have lived in the second century, whereas the innovations of Qiqil appear to belong to a time occurring centuries later. Qiqil and the Quqites cannot be related.

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sovereignty of Muslims who demanded that they have a prophet, a book, and one god. Modern scholars have remarked on the heterogeneity of the doctrine and mythology of Mandaic literature with bafflement. In my view this may well represent what were really sectarian innovations, new beginnings, and local Mandaean compositions written without the vetting power of a central authority. The narrator of the late text *Haran Gawaita* describes the very process:[3]

> That which I found in these commentaries of the Great Revelation I did not find in all the copies, cordons, and scrolls of the First Life that were in the libraries (or collections, *ginze*) and in my presence. I went around to all the Nāṣoraean ethnarchs (*reš-amme*) that there were. I saw many books, and books that were scrutinized (*mhaqqar*), and books of the Great Revelation, and I did not see the likes of this source firmly-established from the beginning forever …
>
> *w-l-mʾhw ḏ-ʾškyt b-hʾzyn ʾprʾšʾtʾ ḏ-gʾlʾltʾ rʾbtyʾ lʾ-škyt b-kwlhwn sygyyʾ w-myṣryʾ w-dywʾnʾn ḏ-hyyʾ qʾdmʾyyʾ ḏ-hwn b-gynzyʾ wʾ-ʾlwʾtʾy ḥydrʾt l-kwlhwn ryš ʾmyʾ nʾṣwrʾyyʾ ḏ-hwn hzyt kdʾbyʾ nʾpšyʾ w-kdʾbyʾ ḏ-mhʾqʾr w-kdʾbyʾ ḏ-gʾlʾltʾ rʾbtyʾ w-lʾ-hzyt ʾkwʾt hʾzyn šyršʾ ḏ-mtʾqnʾ ḏ-mn qdym w-l-ʾlʾm …*

The passage is followed with a warning that "Any Nāṣoraean man in whose library these explanations are found should beware lest he reveal" its contents to fools. The expression here for "library" is *ginzā* (*gynzʾ*), literally "storehouse" or "treasure." The chief collection of Mandaic texts that has been handed down, the *Ginzā Rabbā* or "Great Treasure," can be understood in just the same terms. These are not large "libraries" and perhaps not more than anthologies of scriptures. There were evidently Nāṣoraean men with different idiosyncratic collections, or proto-canons, of their own, even as late as the author of the *Haran Gawaita*. Only one of these collections has reached us from the sixteenth-century copyists in Ḫūzistān, and it is so internally heterogeneous that it contains no fewer than seven differing accounts of creation.[4] One can only wonder what other sorts of collections may have existed at one time, and what regional variation there may have been among the Dostaeans of Bet Arāmāye, the Maškanaeans of Mesene, and other closely related Mandaic groups, not to mention

3 Drower 1953: scroll facsimile of DC 9 (copied 19th century), lines 152–155. See also the facsimile of manuscript DC 36 (dated 1677) accompanying Drower 1960a, has an identical text. Cf. the translation of Drower (1953: 16).

4 Häberl in Petermann 2007: x.

the Kentaeans and other sects in contact with Mandaic groups over time. Without external regulation or any Mandaean general authority, we should expect a state of constant local divergence to have existed. The extant Mandaean corpus seems to attest to this sort of history through its internal heterogeneity.

In one priestly scroll of ritual prescriptions, there is a note that errors of the Nāṣoraeans in performing rites can lead to mutual recriminations and establish schism (*plwgt'*). Therefore, ritual texts should not be augmented or abbreviated.[5] A similar indication of the ongoing negotiation of the orthodoxy of texts comes from a long colophon to the *Qullāstā* or *Canonical Prayerbook*. The late copyist Adam Šabur wrote:[6]

> I went to Bet Huǧaye (*Byt Hwrdš'yy'*, Ḫūžistān) and travelled a great deal but found no reliable *massiqtā* [funeral service] equal to this *massiqtā*. When I saw that it was reliable, I wrote this *massiqtā* as it was. Any priest or Mandaean who prays shall hold on to this *massiqtā*. … But anyone who does not agree to it, we will abandon and we will not approach him.

The copyist Adam Šabur is declaring his copy the sole orthodox version of the funeral ceremony and that anyone who does not use it will be shunned. It also acknowledges implicitly that variations to the *massiqtā* were known in his time. How many times did processes like this unfold in the history of the transmission of the Mandaic texts? It is even conceivable that schismatic material had been rejected from a local canon at one time only to be reincorporated decades or centuries later by successors who, unaware of the decisions of priests in prior generations, struggled to collect and preserve ancient resources from the libraries of coreligionists in other locales. We will always be ignorant of the practical matters that may motivate schisms articulated in theological terms, from feuds between priestly families to financial disputes.

Mandaic literature, as it reaches us today, therefore, may represent a range of closely related local movements that existed in the south of late Sasanian and early Arab Iraq, distilled, studied, authorized, and preserved in a continuous tradition that has been as strong or as fragile at any given time as the priesthood. It is an amazing survival. But what comes down to us is Mandaean only by virtue of a long and changing process of defining and redefining the criteria of Mandaean ritual, authority, membership, and purity. We are unlikely ever to know many individual details of this process. What has been preserved as Man-

5 Drower 1960a: 100 and 274 (§ 355–356).

6 Buckley 2005: 190, 203.

daeism probably represents a synthesis of various local origins. The Mandaean religion does preserve many valuable ancient artefacts, but it can never have been a static and unchanging tradition. One must study their materials with this fact foremost in mind.

APPENDIX 1

Bar Konay on the Kentaeans, Dostaeans, and Nerigaeans, in English

I provide here a translation of Bar Konay's passage on the Kentaeans and the Mandaeans. It is a difficult passage in that it deals with obscure subjects, contains corrupt passages, and cites doctrines from the southeastern or Mandaic dialect only partially rewritten as Syriac, including words normal in Mandaic but not normally used in Syriac. At least two editions and several modern translations of the text exist, including detailed commentaries of different kinds.[1] Given its extensive coverage in previous scholarship, I would not have felt the need to make a new translation here. Nevertheless, because the account is central to the investigation of the Mandaeans and Kentaeans and I make reference to it frequently in this work, I provide a translation here for the convenience of the reader, drawing on the efforts of all the earlier translators. I have not intended to provide a full commentary beyond what I mention in Chapter 2. For more details, one should consult especially Pognon and Kruisheer.

Numbers in brackets refer to the page and line numbers of Scher's edition, which was my basis.

[p. 342.6] **On the Kentaeans**. About the stupid Kentaeans, then, they report that their teaching is transmitted from Abel. It is necessary to demonstrate from where it actually is.

When Goliath, the hero (*gabbārā*) of the Philistines, was killed by David, then, because they were embarrassed to say that their hero died by a sling stone, they lied and said, "A warlike man carrying a staff of iron came from the camp of the Hebrews, struck him, and killed him." They made a statue (*ṣalmā*) of him [i.e., of Goliath]. Annually they would make a festival of the murder in the manner of a battle. Marshalled and standing opposite each other in troops, the priests of Dagon, who were the priests of Goliath, would scratch their bodies with irons, strike each other with the staves, and run after each other with the battle standard. Then one of them, carrying a staff of iron, would approach, and he would strike that statue and knock it down, in the likeness of the

1 Syriac text ed. Pognon 1898: 151–156; ed. Scher 2.342–347. Translations: French, Pognon 1898: 220–228, Hespel and Draguet 1981–1982 2.255–259, Duchemin 2012: 203–207; German, Rudolph 1960: 255–259; English, Kruisheer 1993 (with detailed analysis).

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fall of Goliath. At the time of its fall, they would shout, "Thus the wretch has killed the hero, and the weak the strong!" For a long time, this was how they acted in their country.

But when Nebuchadnezzar captured the Philistines, he broke the statue of Goliath, and when the priests of Dagon came to Babylon, they carved a great piece of wood in the likeness of Goliath and set iron on its head as the helmet of Goliath. They lined up and one of the priests knelt before it and ostentatiously struck himself with a knife. They would break a great, thick stick, and hang on it nuts and edible things. One of the priests, stripped naked, would carry it, and would tie a girdle of [343] dyed cloths on his loins. They would go forth on the path, shooting arrows and shouting, saying, "Arrow, fly!" And the men would shout together with the women, "The mysteries have been killed, but I am silent! The heroes have been put to death, but I am silent!" like one weeping over the killing of Goliath. They would carry out this madness in the month of Āb and in the autumn.

But the Chaldaeans, according to their findings in their horoscopes, named this religion from the name of an old, false devil (*šedā*), called by them Nergal. Thus this religion remained until King Yazdgird. In the days of Peroz, Baṭṭay of Goḫay[2] introduced into it another change.

On where Baṭṭay was from. The members of this religion (*deḥltā*) had a chief called Pappā bar Klilāye, from Goḫay. This Pappā had a slave named Baṭṭay. He, because of his laziness, fled from his slavery and hid himself among the Jews. From there he passed to the disciples of Mani. He took and arranged a little bit from their words and the mysteries of their sorcery.

In the days of King Peroz, when the decree against the idols and their priests went out, so that only the religion (*deḥltā*) of the magi should remain, when Baṭṭay saw that his religion (*deḥltā*) was defunct, he sought favor with the magi and worshipped the luminaries. Also they received the fire and established it in their temples (*b-ʿumrayhon*). He changed his name from Baṭṭay and was called **Yazdān-ahāz* (?), meaning "He is the gods" [or "The gods brought him."][3]

For he stole from the Jews that they not eat pork, and [he stole] the name "Lord God" (*Māryā Alāhā*) from the Pentateuch. From the Christians he stole the sign of the cross

2 Emending *gwnḥ'* ܓܘܢܚ̈ܐ to *gwkny'* ܓܘܟܢ̈ܝܐ with Nöldeke (1898: 360).

3 Three forms are attested by the editors: *yzdn'nyz*, *yzd'ny*, and *yzdn'ny*. The Syriac translation given in the text here clearly shows that *Yaz*(*a*)*dān* (the plural) is correct for the first part of the name, indicating also that the words must come from an Iranian language. The distorted second part of the name must correspond to the Syriac, but the Syriac word is formally ambiguous. It could be *itaw^{hy}*, "he is," perhaps corresponding to Parthian *ahāz*, "was," or, as suggested by Shapira (2004: 251), *aytu^{hy}*, "they brought him." In any case, it is clear from the word *yazdān* that he adopted a name from an Iranian language.

which he set upon the left shoulder of his catechumens. They say that the cross is the symbol of the boundary between the Father of Greatness and the place below. [p. 344]

Some of his teaching. For he says: Before everything, there was one godhead. This divided into two, and from it were Good and Evil. The Good took the lights and the Evil took the darkness. Then the Evil perceived [the Good] and ascended to make battle with the Father of Greatness. The Father of Greatness recognized that it was a calamity and he called a Word from himself. From this Word, Lord God was created by him. Lord God called seven Words, and seven powers were from him. Then seven demons (*daywe*) ascended and bound Māryā Alāhā and the seven powers that were from him. They took the nature of the soul (*nšamtā*) captive from the Father of Greatness. Seven and twelve devils (*šede*) and demons (*daywe*) stood up. They made Adam, the first man. Lord God came and destroyed Adam and made him anew—also they say that there are ten heavens; they call them by foul names: *ʾrdy*, *mrdy*, *ʾrdbly*, *sprsgl*, *hrbbl*, *qwdy*, *mqdy*, *lḥsy*, *mḥsy* and Life (*ḥyʾ*)—saying about him that he brought the offering from the garden of Adam: seeds from the pomegranate and blossoms of figs and dates.

Also they say in the voice of the one they call the Son of Light: "I am hastening and going to the souls. When they saw me, they assembled before me. They greeted me a thousand times and wailed and said to me, 'O Son of Light, go and say to our Father, "When will those in bonds be set free? When will relief come to the pained who are in pain? When will relief come to the souls who bear difficulty in Tibil?'" I spoke and said to them, 'When the Euphrates goes dry at its mouth, and the Tigris dries from its stream, and all the rivers dry up,[4] and all the stream-beds are leveled, then relief will come to the souls.'"[5]

This is enough of the plentiful wickedness of this man. [p. 345]

The Heresy of the Dostaeans that the beggar Ado taught. Ado, as they say, was of Adiabene. As a vagrant he came with his family to the land of Mešān. His father's name was Dabdā, his mother's name was Emm-Kušṭā, and his brothers' names were Šilmay, Nidbay, Bar-Ḥayye, Abi-zkā, Kušṭay, and Sethel (*Štʾyl*). When they came to the Ulay River, they found a man named Pappā bar Tinnis and they asked alms from him according to their custom. They persuaded him to take lazy Ado in, because, on account of his infirmity, he could not go about [begging]. Pappā handed him over to the guards of the date-palms. When the guards of the date-palms complained and said, "He is of no use to us," Pappā built for him a booth at the roadside so that he might beg for sustenance from the wayfarers. In the end, his companions gathered and came to him. There they would bang on cymbals as vagrants do.

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4 I accept here emendations proposed by Pognon (1898: 233–235) on the basis of comparison with the close Mandaic parallel.

5 This paragraph has been partly but incompletely adapted from Mandaic to the standards of Syriac. Numerous Mandaicisms remain.

In Mešan they are called Mandaeans and Mašknaeans, and the Followers of the Benefactor; in Bet Arāmāye, they are called Nāṣrāye and the Followers of Dostay (*d-bet Dostay*). But the name that suits them is Adonaeans. Their doctrine is composed of [those of] the Marcionites, the Manichaeans, and the Kentaeans.

A bit of their doctrine. For they say that before the heavens and the earth existed, there were great powers. They settled on the water. They got a son and they called him Abitur. Abitur got a son and he named him Ptaḥil. They say that Abitur commanded him, "Go thicken the earth [without] rennet. Draw up the heavens [without] a pillar.[6] Create and make humans, one son of another. Wash their heads with a handful of what is in the water and their beards (?) with fish of the ocean. Let them live and eat, two hundred and seventy-two years." And Ptaḥil went [p. 346] and did not do as his father had commanded him. Rather he created and made ten peoples [lit. gates] and twelve peoples [lit. gates].[7] He cast trembling[8] in them. He did not cast the spirit and the soul in them. As Abitur sat in the seven firmaments, he lifted his eyes and he saw Ptaḥil and said to him, "There will be a bond for you, Ptaḥil![9] I said to you, 'Go make one son of another!' He did not heed anything that I commanded him."

They also say: The ʿUṯre and Ptaḥil stood[10] and they said to Abitur, "Do not make this bond upon Ptaḥil your son!" He said to them, "This bond will be upon Ptaḥil until the day of judgment and the years of redemption! When the resurrection is a day and a half, the Messiah will go forth and come to the world. The brick will speak from the foundation and say, 'I confess the Messiah!' " When he did not listen to him or to the ʿUṯre, the sons of light, he went and fell silent, and he accepted the bonds of his father. And he says, "He threw upon him the chain which is the rampart of the world. He struck into him a stake that is from the earth up to the heavens. And even now he sits in bonds until the day of judgment and the years of redemption, until the brick speaks from the foundation and says, 'I am of the Messiah!' "

They say in their hymn which they call the *ʾdrkt'* against the sorceresses: Thus the evil spirit called Hamgay and Hamgagay[11] from the leprous chain, and Mardiq and Labrānitā and Tatay of Ḫuzestān (*Huzāyā*), and ʿAnay and Nanai, and Bel and Belti

6 Pognon 1898: 239.

7 As noted by other translators, the preceding sentences here are difficult and certainly corrupt in some respects. The term "gates" is polysemic in Mandaic (Duchemin 2012: 185) and is used sometimes in Mandaic to refer to sects or peoples.

8 See Pognon (1898: 240) for attempts to understand the difficult word here.

9 Pognon (1898: 241) related *qwṭ'* to Mandaic *gywṭ'*, "malediction." I follow Nöldeke (1898: 359) who connects it with *qawdā*, "bond, tether."

10 Emending the verb to plural.

11 Hamgay and Hamgagay are light-entities, apparently not demons, mentioned in some Mandaic texts. See references by Drower and Macuch (1963: 123b).

from the land of the Romans, and Diq and Mardiq and Guztanay from India, and Arnaṭ and Aphrodite (*Prwḏyṭ*) from the west, the Remover of His Rest from the East, Mother and Mammanay from Ḥirtā of the Ṭayyāye. And at their head sits Emm-Bayo the old woman.[12] All these are sorceresses. With their sorcery they have gone and killed bulls, rams, horses [p. 347], camels, and sheep, and dried the seeds and plants as far as unto Adam the first man. They incited Adam and he washed their leprosy and they made sorceries for Adam. They threw upon him harsh difficulties until Abel came and bound Adam and washed him. And in that symbol (*ṭupsā*) they give that which they call baptism (*mṣbw'yt'*).

Also they speak concerning Dinanus, the scribe of religions, and Little Diṣā.

Also these. Of this fantasy [we go only] up to this point.

The Heresy of the Nerigaeans. Their heresy derives from Cain. After the death of Cain, his sons gathered together and said, "The spirit of Cain, our father, has no rest on the earth, because he was shaking and trembling on account of Abel's murder." They made an altar and arranged a meal upon it, so that, as it were, the spirit of Cain would come and dwell upon it. The sons of Cain gathered together at that altar, as for mourning. They named their father Cain "Nerig," because they would say of their father that "he desires rest (*nyāḥā rā'eg*)." The sons of Seth gathered together too and said, "We too will make a meeting house for Abel, our uncle." They made it and called it "Reprimand (*kuwwānā*)," because they said "It is a reprimand for us." This is the *kentā* of the stupid Kentaeans.

12 It is almost needless to say that all the sorceress' names here and their interpretations are obscure and tentative. See most recently Duchemin (2012: 186–188).

APPENDIX 2

Ibn Waḥšīya on Aramaic Dialects

Ibn Bahlūl's source, Abū ʿAlī, uses the expression "ancient Aramaic," *an-Nabaṭīya al-qadīma*, to describe the language of the community that he describes, whom I have identified as Mandaeans. The very same expression was used by Ibn Waḥšīya to describe the language of his own ancestral community, from which he translated his massive compendium *Aramaean Agriculture*, *al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭīya*, a work transmitted by his student Ibn az-Zayyāt (d. 951) approximately in the same period as Ibn Bahlūl's source.[1] *Al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭīya* was a compilation of ancient works in the dialect of Ibn Waḥšīya's ethnic subgroup, the Kasdān of the Nabaṭ. It is worth rendering his remarks on the character of the Aramaic language in the tenth century.[2]

> Abū Bakr [ibn Waḥšīya] said: The dialects (*luġāt*) of the Aramaeans (*an-Nabaṭ*) differ greatly according to their mutual proximity (*ʿalā taqārubihim*). The people of each area inhabited by the Aramaeans give names to things different from those used by people in the other areas. Whoever translates their language needs to understand all their dialects and their differences. Some people think that translating it [Aramaic] into Arabic is easy because of its closeness to Arabic, but that is not the case, because of the differences between them and the differences in the idioms (*ʿibārāt*) of their people between them. There are very many differences in their pronunciations of what they are expressing and in their nomenclature.

Ibn Bahlūl himself attests to the truth of this statement in that he registers numerous Aramaic words in his *Lehksiqon* as deriving from local dialects.[3] In any case, the terminology used suggests that the language of Ibn Waḥšīya's Kasdānī Nabaṭ was close to the dialect we call Mandaic. Probably it was essentially the same dialect.

1 Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 93–99; Cottrell 2010: 546.

2 Fahd 1993–1998: 1.124.6–11. For a similar translation, see Hämeen-Anttila 2006: 89.

3 Duval 1901: 3.xxiv–xxv.

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