



All About
Mandaeism and Kurdish Religions

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Revised Edition: 2014

ISBN 978-81-323-3846-8

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Published by:
University Publications
4735/22 Prakashdeep Bldg,
Ansari Road, Darya Ganj,
Delhi - 110002
Email: info@wtbooks.com

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction to Mandaism

Chapter 2 - Sabians

Chapter 3 - Prophets in Mandaism

Chapter 4 - Kurdish Religions

Chapter- 1

Introduction to Mandaism

Mandaism or **Mandaeanism** (Mandaic: **Mandaiuta**, Arabic: مندائية *Mandā'iyya*, Persian: (نایئادنم) is a monotheistic religion with a strongly dualistic worldview. Its adherents, the **Mandaeans**, revere Adam, Abel, Seth, Enosh, Noah, Shem, Aram and especially John the Baptist. They are sometimes identified with the Sabian religion, particularly in an Arabian context, but actually Mandaism and Manichaeism seem to be independent – to some degree opposing – developments out of the mainstream Sabian religious community, which is extinct today.

Mandaism has historically been practised primarily around the lower Karun, Euphrates and Tigris and the rivers that surround the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, part of southern Iraq and Khuzestan Province in Iran. There are thought to be between 60,000 and 70,000 Mandaeans worldwide, and until the 2003 Iraq war, almost all of them lived in Iraq. Many Mandaean Iraqis have since fled their country (as have many other Iraqis) because of the turmoil of the war and terrorism. By 2007, the population of Mandaeans in Iraq had fallen to approximately 5,000. Most Mandaean Iraqis have sought refuge in Iran with the fellow Mandians there. There has been a much smaller influx into Syria and Jordan, with smaller populations in Sweden, Australia, the United States, and other Western countries.

The Mandaeans have remained separate and intensely private—reports of them and of their religion have come primarily from outsiders, particularly from the Orientalists J. Heinrich Petermann, Nicholas Siouffi, and Lady Drower. An Anglican vicar, Rev. Peter Owen-Jones, included a short segment on a Mandaean group in Sydney, Australia, in his BBC series "Around the World in 80 Faiths."

Origin of the term "Mandaean"

The term comes from Classical Mandaic *Mandaiia* and appears in Neo-Mandaic as *Mandeyānā*. On the basis of cognates in other Aramaic dialects, Semiticists such as Mark Lidzbarski and Rudolf Macuch have translated the term *manda*, from which *Mandaiia* derives, as "knowledge" (cf. Aramaic ܡܢܕܐ *manda* in Dan. 2:21, 4:31, 33, 5:12; cpr. Hebrew: ܡܕܐ *madda* without the nasal insert). This etymology suggests that the Mandaeans may well be the only sect surviving from late Antiquity to identify themselves explicitly as Gnostics. Certainly, the Mandaean religion shares much with the ensemble of sects labelled as Gnostics, which date to the 1st century AD and the

following centuries; however, there are crucial differences, particularly in the realm of the behavioral ethics of the laity.

Note that this identification results largely from western scholarship, and was not current in the Mandaean community itself until comparatively recently. Other scholars derive the term *mandaiia* from *Mandā d-Heyyi* (Mandaic *manda ḏ-hiia* "Knowledge of Life", reference to the chief divinity *hiia rbia* "the Great Life") or from the word (*bi*)*manda*, which is the cultic hut in which many Mandaean ceremonies are performed (such as the baptism, which is the central sacrament of Mandaean religious life). This last term is possibly to be derived from Pahlavi *m'nd mānd* ("house").

Other associated terms

Within the Middle East, but outside of their community, the Mandaeans are more commonly known as the *Ṣubba* (singular *Ṣubbī*). The term *Ṣubba* is derived from the word *muṣbattah* (Arabic: مصبته), the baptism ritual of the Mandaeans. In Islam, the term "Sabians" (Arabic: الصابئون *al-Ṣābi*) ^{ʿūris} used as a blanket term for adherents to a number of religions, including that of the Mandaeans, in reference to the Sabians of the Qur'an (see below). Occasionally, Mandaeans are called Christians of Saint John, based upon preliminary reports made by members of the Discalced Carmelite mission in Basra during the 16th century.

A *mandá* (Arabic: مندى) is a place of worship for followers of Mandaism. A *mandá* must be built beside a river in order to perform maṣbattah because water is an essential element in the Mandaic faith. Modern *mandás* sometimes have a bath inside a building instead.

Mandaean history

The evidence about Mandaean history has been almost entirely confined to some of the Mandaean religious literature. But their origin seems ultimately have been with the Ebionite Elchasai, who preached to an Abrahamic community called "Sobiai" in "Parthia".

Arab sources of early Qur'anic times (7th century) make some references to Sabians. They are counted among the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book), and several hadith feature them. Some scholars hold that these Sabians are those currently referred to as Mandaeans, while others contend that the etymology of the root word 'Sabi'un' points to origins either in the Syriac or Mandaic word 'Sabian', and suggest that the Mandaean religion originated with Sabians who came under the influence of early Hellenic Sabian missionaries, but preferred their own priesthood. Contemporary authors mention that they were generally considered to be of western ("Greek" or Levant) origin in one way or another. The Sabians believed to "belong to the prophet Noah"; similarly, the Mandaeans claim direct ancestry from Noah.

Early in the 9th century, a group in Harran declared themselves Sabians when facing persecution; a Christian writer said that the true 'Sabians' or Sabba lived in the marshes of Lower Iraq. The earliest account we have about the Mandaeans is that of the Syriac writer Theodore Bar Konai (in the Scholion, A.D. 792). In the *Fihrist* ("Book of Nations") of Arabic scholar Al-Nadim (an c.987), the *Mogtasilah* (*Mughtasila...*, "self-ablutionists") are counted among the followers of *El-Hasaih*. Called a "sect" of "Sabians", they are located in southern Mesopotamia. No reference to Mandaeans, which were a distinct group by then, seems to have been made by Al-Nadim; *Mogtasilah* is not that group's self-appellation and the few details on rituals and habit are similar to Mandaeans ones, but they may merely have been related sects.

Elchasai's religious community seems to have prospered but ultimately splintered; early on already, the prophet Mani renounced Judaism and departed with his followers. Likewise, the Mandaeans may have originated in a schism where they renounced the Torah, while the mainstream Sampsaeans held on to it (as Elchasai's followers did); this must have happened around the mid-late 1st millennium AD. Al-Biruni (writing at the beginning of the 11th century AD) said that the 'real Sabians' were "the remnants of the Jewish tribes who remained in Babylonia when the other tribes left it for Jerusalem in the days of Cyrus and Artaxerxes. These remaining tribes...adopted a system mixed up of Magism and Judaism." It is not clear what group he referred to exactly, for by then the Elchasaite sects may have been at their most diverse. Some disappeared subsequently, the Sampsaeans for example are not well attested in later sources.

Around 1290, a learned Dominican Catholic from Tuscany, Ricoldo da Montecroce, or Ricoldo Pennini, was in Mesopotamia where he met the Mandaeans. He described them as follows:

“A very strange and singular people, in terms of their rituals, lives in the desert near Baghdad; they are called Sabaeans. Many of them came to me and begged me insistently to go and visit them. They are a very simple people and they claim to possess a secret law of God, which they preserve in beautiful books. Their writing is a sort of middle way between Syriac and Arabic. They detest Abraham because of circumcision and they venerate John the Baptist above all. They live only near a few rivers in the desert. They wash day and night so as not to be condemned by God, ...”

Some Portuguese Jesuits had met some "Saint John Christians" or Mandaeans around the Strait of Hormuz in 1559, when the Portuguese fleet fought with the Ottoman Turkish army in Bahrain. These Mandaean seemed to be willing to obey the Catholic Church. They learned and used the seven Catholic sacraments and the related ceremonies in their lives.

Mandaean beliefs

Mandaeism, as the religion of the Mandaean people, is based more on a common heritage than on any set of religious creeds and doctrines. A basic guide to Mandaean theology does not exist. The corpus of Mandaean literature, though quite large, covers topics such

as eschatology, the knowledge of God, and the afterlife only in an unsystematic manner, and, apart from the priesthood, is known only to a few laypeople.

Fundamental tenets

According to E.S. Drower, the Mandaean Gnosis is characterized by nine features, which appear in various forms in other gnostic sects:

1. A supreme formless Entity, the expression of which in time and space is creation of spiritual, etheric, and material worlds and beings. Production of these is delegated by It to a creator or creators who originated in It. The cosmos is created by Archetypal Man, who produces it in similitude to his own shape.
2. Dualism: a cosmic Father and Mother, Light and Darkness, Right and Left, syzygy in cosmic and microcosmic form.
3. As a feature of this dualism, counter-types, a world of ideas.
4. The soul is portrayed as an exile, a captive: home and origin being the supreme Entity to which the soul eventually returns.
5. Planets and stars influence fate and human beings, and are also places of detention after death.
6. A saviour spirit or saviour spirits which assist the soul on the journey through life and after it to 'worlds of light'.
7. A cult-language of symbol and metaphor. Ideas and qualities are personified.
8. 'Mysteries', i.e. sacraments to aid and purify the soul, to ensure rebirth into a spiritual body, and ascent from the world of matter. These are often adaptations of existing seasonal and traditional rites to which an esoteric interpretation is attached. In the case of the Naṣoreans this interpretation is based upon the Creation story (see 1 and 2), especially on the Divine Man, Adam, as crowned and anointed King-priest.
9. Great secrecy is enjoined upon initiates; full explanation of 1, 2, and 8 being reserved for those considered able to understand and preserve the gnosis.

Mandaeans believe in marriage and procreation, and in the importance of leading an ethical and moral lifestyle in this world, placing a high priority upon family life. Consequently, Mandaeans do not practice celibacy or asceticism. Mandaeans will, however, abstain from strong drink and red meat. While they agree with other gnostic sects that the world is a prison governed by the planetary archons, they do not view it as a cruel and inhospitable one.

Mandaean scriptures

The Mandaeans have a large corpus of religious scriptures, the most important of which is the *Genzā Rabbā* or *Ginza*, a collection of history, theology, and prayers (German translation available here). The *Genzā Rabbā* is divided into two halves—the *Genzā Smālā* or "Left Ginza" and the *Genzā Yeminā* or "Right Ginza". By consulting the colophons in the Left Ginza, Jorunn J. Buckley has identified an uninterrupted chain of copyists to the late 2nd or early 3rd c. AD. The colophons attest to the existence of the

Mandaeans during the late Arsacid period at the very latest, a fact corroborated by the *Harrān Gāwetā* legend, according to which the Mandaeans left Judea after the destruction of Jerusalem in the 1st c. AD, and settled within the Arsacid empire. Although the *Ginza* continued to evolve under the rule of the Sassanians and the Islamic empires, few textual traditions can lay claim to such extensive continuity.

Other important books include the *Qolastā*, the "Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans", which was translated by E.S. Drower (much of it is found here and here). One of the chief works of Mandaean scripture, accessible to laymen and initiates alike, is the *Draša d-Iahia* "The Book of John the Baptist" (text; German translation), which includes a dialogue between John and Jesus. In addition to the *Ginza*, *Qolusta*, and *Draša*, there is the *Dīvān*, which contains a description of the 'regions' the soul ascends through, and the *Asfar Malwāshē*, the "Book of the Zodiacal Constellations". Finally, there are some pre-Muslim artifacts which contain Mandaean writings and inscriptions, such as some Aramaic incantation bowls.

The language in which the Mandaean religious literature was originally composed is known as Mandaic, and is a member of the Aramaic family of dialects. It is written in a cursive variant of the Parthian chancellory script. The majority of Mandaean lay people do not speak this language, though some members of the Mandaean community resident in Iran (ca. 300–500 out of a total of ca. 5,000 Iranian Mandaeans) continue to speak Neo-Mandaic, a modern version of this language.

Cosmology

As noted above (under Mandaean Beliefs) Mandaean theology is not systematic. There is no one single authoritative account of the creation of the cosmos, but rather a series of several accounts. Some scholars, such as Edmondo Lupieri, maintain that comparison of these different accounts may reveal the diverse religious influences upon which the Mandaeans have drawn and the ways in which the Mandaean religion has evolved over time.

In contrast with the religious texts of the western Gnostic sects formerly found in Syria and Egypt, the earliest Mandaean religious texts suggest a more strictly dualistic theology, typical of other Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism, Zurvanism, Manichaeism, and the teachings of Mazdak. In these texts, instead of a large pleroma, there is a discrete division between *light* and *darkness*. The ruler of darkness is called *Ptahil* (similar to the Gnostic Demiurge), and the originator of the light (i.e. God) is only known as "the great first Life from the worlds of light, the sublime one that stands above all works". When this being emanated, other spiritual beings became increasingly corrupted, and they and their ruler Ptahil created our world. The similarity between the name Ptahil and the Egyptian Ptah should also be noted—the Mandaeans believe that they were resident in Egypt for a while.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that Ptahil alone does not constitute the demiurge but only fills that role insofar as he is the creator of our world. Rather, Ptahil is

the lowest of a group of three "demiurgic" beings, the other two being Yushamin (a.k.a. Joshamin) and Abathur. Abathur's demiurgic role consists of his sitting in judgment upon the souls of mortals. The role of Yushamin, the senior being, is more obscure; wanting to create a world of his own, he was severely punished for opposing the King of Light.

Chief prophets

Mandaeans recognize several prophets. Yahya ibn Zakariyya, known by Christians as John the Baptist, is accorded a special status, higher than his role in Christianity and Islam. Mandaeans do not consider John to be the founder of their religion but revere him as one of their greatest teachers, tracing their beliefs back to Adam.

Mandaeans maintain that Jesus was a *mšiha kdaba* "false messiah" who perverted the teachings entrusted to him by John. The Mandaic word *k(a)daba*, however, might be interpreted as being derived from either of two roots: the first root, meaning "to lie," is the one traditionally ascribed to Jesus; the second, meaning "to write," might provide a second meaning, that of "book"; hence some Mandaeans, motivated perhaps by an ecumenical spirit, maintain that Jesus was not a "lying Messiah" but a "book Messiah", the "book" in question presumably being the Christian Gospels. This seems to be a folk etymology without support in the Mandaean texts.

Likewise, the Mandaeans believe that Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad were false prophets, but recognize other prophetic figures from the Abrahamic traditions, such as Adam, his sons Hibil (Abel) and Šitil (Seth), and his grandson Anuš (Enosh), as well as Nuh (Noah), his son Sam (Shem) and his son Ram (Aram). The latter three they consider to be their direct ancestors.

Priests and laymen

There is a strict division between Mandaean laity and the priests. According to E.S. Drower (*The Secret Adam*, p. ix):

[T]hose amongst the community who possess secret knowledge are called *Našuraiia*—Našoreans (or, if the heavy 'š' is written as 'z', Nazorenes). At the same time the ignorant or semi-ignorant laity are called 'Mandaeans', *Mandaiia*—'gnostics'. When a man becomes a priest he leaves 'Mandaeanism' and enters *tarmiduta*, 'priesthood'. Even then he has not attained to true enlightenment, for this, called 'Naširuta', is reserved for a very few. Those possessed of its secrets may call themselves Našoreans, and 'Našorean' today indicates not only one who observes strictly all rules of ritual purity, but one who understands the secret doctrine.

There are three grades of priesthood in Mandaeism: the *tarmidia* "disciples" (Neo-Mandaic *tarmidānā*), the *ganzibria* "treasurers" (from Old Persian *ganza-bara* "id.", Neo-Mandaic *ganzebrānā*) and the *rišamma* "leader of the people." This last office, the highest level of the Mandaean priesthood, has lain vacant for many years. At the moment, the highest office currently occupied is that of the *ganzebrā*, a title which appears first in

a religious context in the Aramaic ritual texts from Persepolis (ca. 3rd c. BCE) and which may be related to the *kamnaskires* (Elamite <qa-ap-nu-iš-ki-ra> *kapnuskir* "treasurer"), title of the rulers of Elymais (modern Khuzestan) during the Hellenistic age. Traditionally, any *ganzebrā* who baptizes seven or more *ganzebrānā* may qualify for the office of *rišamma*, though the Mandaean community has yet to rally as a whole behind any single candidate.

The contemporary priesthood can trace its immediate origins to the first half of the 19th century. In 1831, an outbreak of cholera devastated the region and eliminated most if not all of the Mandaean religious authorities. Two of the surviving acolytes (*šgandia*), Yahia Bihram and Ram Zihrun, reestablished the priesthood on the basis of their own training and the texts that were available to them.

In 2009 there were two dozen Mandaean priests in the world, according to the Associated Press.

View of Jerusalem

In **Mandaicism, Jerusalem** is considered a city of wickedness, dedicated to the god of Judaism, whom they call Adunay (*Adonai*) or Yurba (possibly *YHWH*) and consider to be an evil spirit. According to Sidra d-Yahia 54, Jerusalem is "the stronghold that Adunay built ... [he] brought to it falsehood in plenty, and it meant persecution against my *tarmidia* (Manda d-Hiia's disciples)." In the Ginza Rba (15.11), it is said to have come into being as a result of the incestuous union of the seven planets with their evil mother Ruha d-Qudsha, who "left lewdness, perversion, and fornication in it. They said: 'Whoever lives in the city of Jerusalem will not mention the name of God.'" (Elsewhere, however, it more prosaically says the city was built by Solomon.) However, Yahya (John the Baptist), an important figure in the religion, is said to have been born there.

Later on, in the days of Pontius Pilate, it states that the good spirit Anush Utra went there, healed the sick and worked miracles, and made converts, confronting Jesus (whom they consider a false prophet) and refuting his arguments; but its inhabitants opposed him and persecuted the converts, 365 of whom were killed (GR 15.11) or forced out (GR 2.1.) Miriai, a Jewish princess, was converted, and fled to the shores of the Euphrates. This angered Anush Utra, who received permission from God to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, smash the "seven columns," and slay the Jews who lived there, after bringing out the remaining "believers." Elsewhere, the Ginza Rba (18) prophesies that Jerusalem "must flourish for a thousand years, remain a thousand years destroyed, and then the entire Tibil (material world) will be destroyed."

In the Abahatan Qadmaia prayer, repeated during baptism of the dead, the Mandaeans invoke blessings upon the 365 who were killed or forced out of Jerusalem:

“ Those 365 priests who came forth from the city of Jerusalem, the city of this *masiqta* and *dukhrana*, a ”