



## BAṬṬAI YAZDĀNĪ

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**BAṬṬAI YAZDĀNĪ**, the founder or reformer of the Kantheans, a sect related to the Mandeans. According to the account of the Nestorian heresiographer Theodore Bar Konai, Baṭṭai was originally a slave of a chief of the Kanthean sect, Papa, son of Klilaye, from Gaukai in Babylonia. He ran away and went into hiding first among the Jews and then among the Manicheans. Later he returned to the Kantheans and reordered some of their discourses and mysteries of their magic. When the Sasanian king Pērōz (r. 459-84) proscribed all religions aside from Zoroastrianism, Baṭṭai reformed the Kanthean religion, “flattering the Magians and worshiping the stars.” His followers adopted the worship of fire and placed it in their homes. Baṭṭai changed his name to the Persian Yazdānī, or Yazdānīz. He borrowed from the Jews the prohibition on eating pork, from the Pentateuch the name of the Lord God, and from the Christians the sign of the cross, which he placed on the left shoulders of his followers. His adherents say that the cross is the secret of the border between the Father of Greatness and the lower world. Bar Konai goes on describing their doctrine and quotes a Kanthean text agreeing almost literally with a passage of the Mandaean Ginza. Michael the Syrian reports among the events of the reign of Pērōz’s successor Balāš (r. 484-88) that the sect of the Kantheans appeared in Persia (*Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, ed. J.-B. Chabot, Paris, 1899-1910, IV, p. 255, tr. II, p. 151).

In Bar Konai’s account, the Kanthean sect, named after their temple Kanthā, existed before Baṭṭai, and the Mandeans, named Maškenaye after their temple Maškenā, split off from it. It is evident, however, that the Mandaean religion, as



represented in the Ginza, is closer to the early baptist religion known to have existed centuries before Baṭṭai than the reform movement of the latter influenced by the Magians. If indeed there was a Kanthean sect which was reformed by Baṭṭai, it would have to be the result of an earlier schism. While the opinion of H. H. Schaeder that the sect of the Kantheans was merely a concoction of Christian heresiography is no longer tenable since its survival until the early 'Abbasid age is attested by Islamic sources, the person and activity of Baṭṭai are mentioned only by Bar Konai. An alternative reading of the name of Yazdānī as Yazwānī has been proposed by S. H. Taqizadeh, who has suggested that the name of the Yazūqean sect attacked in the Ginza for its fire worship may be derived from it.

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