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MANDAEANS I. HISTORY

The Mandaeans first became known in the West in about 1290 through the Italian monk, Ricoldo da Montecroce. The learned Dominican traveled at length in Palestine, Armenia, Turkey, Persia, and Mesopotamia, on the orders of Pope Nicholas IV and is the first European known to have contacted a Mandaean community, in the desert area around Baghdad. The last chapter of his *Itinerarium* (or *Book of Peregrinations in Eastern Parts*) is entitled *de monstris* and there, among the strangest things he had ever seen, Ricoldo describes the Mandaeans. His description is exceptionally accurate when compared with Arabic sources, and with the oldest known Syriac testimony, the *Scholion* of the 8th/9th-century monk Theodore Bar Konai (see Théodore bar Koni, Mimrā XI, 86, pp. 257-59; cf. Pognon, pp. 231-55), in which Mandaeans are usually confused with other religious minorities. According to Ricoldo's report (Dondaine, p. 161), the Mandaeans were not Muslims, Jews, or Christians; however, they venerated John the Baptist; they were antagonistic towards Abraham because of his practice of circumcision; they practiced different kinds of immersions in water; they had priests with specific religious attire; they had beautiful books; and they were faithful to their wives. To sum up, they were the strangest population he had ever encountered in the East.

Unfortunately, Ricoldo's chapter *de monstris* was not transcribed in most manuscripts of his *Itinerarium*, nor was it printed; as a result, his narration went unnoticed until 1949 (Puech), and the Mandaeans were only officially "rediscovered" in the mid-16th century, when two of them, from the area around Basra, reached the Portuguese outpost at Hormuz and from there went

to Goa (Wicki, pp. 371, 429). The first known written testimony is a report by the future Provincial of the Jesuits of the Indies, Antonio de Quadros, to his Provincial in Portugal, sent from Goa on 6 December 1555, in which he expresses his hope for a mission among them (Wicki, p. 353). At that time, the Portuguese were attempting to penetrate into Islamic lands, particularly the Persian Gulf region, through military as well as religious intervention. In Africa, they were seeking an alliance with the Christian king of Abyssinia, the Negus, whom they considered to be the fabulous Prester John.' In India, they were most happy to discover a Christian minority group, the "Christians of St. Thomas," who only needed to be brought back to the Roman Catholic fold. This people, according to their own traditions, had been converted by St. Thomas the Apostle who had reached India as a missionary. Therefore, the Portuguese Jesuits were not at all surprised to discover the "Christians of St. John" in lower Iraq, at the head of the Persian Gulf.

The Mandaeans, at times under fierce pressure from Muslim Arab, Turkish, and Persian rulers, told the Portuguese that they were true Christians, originally converted by John, the Apostle and Evangelist, who had reached Mesopotamia as a missionary, and that, allowing for their unfavorable circumstances, they had managed to remain as orthodox as possible. Some went so far as to say that in the past their "bishops" were sent to them by the patriarch of the Syrian (Nestorian) church (Wicki, p. 429).

It took decades for outsiders to comprehend that the Mandaeans were not really Christians. It was Augustinian monks who realized for the first time, in 1609, during an official mission in Persian Khuzestan, that the John of the Mandaeans was not the Evangelist, but the Baptist (Gouvea, pars III, cap. xix; Alonso, p. 23). Therefore, the "Christians of St. John (the Evangelist)" now became identified as the "disciples of St. John (the Baptist)." However, John the Baptist was killed in Palestine by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee (r. 4 BCE-39 CE), some time before the death of Jesus (Matt. 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29; cf. Luke 9.7); thus it was most unlikely that he had reached Mesopotamia as far as to convert its people to Christianity. Therefore, it was thought that the Mandaeans, as his disciples, must have originated in Palestine and had left it later with their families.

During the 17th century, the missionary efforts were left to the Augustinians and to the Discalced (Barefoot) Carmelites (see CARMELITES). After a bitter struggle between the two orders, the Carmelites undertook the bold campaign of the mass conversion and relocation of the entire Mandaean ethnic group to

other places in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean that were still under Portuguese control. The monk most involved in the attempt was the Italian Carlo Leonelli, or Fr. Ignatius à Iesu, who wrote the first scholarly book on Mandaeanism in 1652. In his work, designed as a "handbook" for Christian missionaries involved with Mandaeans, we find the first systematic, though still self-contradicting, attempt to explain the Mandaeans both as a Christian schismatic group (from the Nestorian Church of Syria), and as descendants of the disciples of John the Baptist, who were obliged to abandon Palestine due to Muslim persecution. There we also find a first-hand report of the events. In 1633 one Mandaean, baptized with the Christian name of Luis de Souza, was knighted and along with hundreds of his kinsmen joined the Portuguese army. Later on, two Mandaean brothers were sent to Rome where they were baptized and given the Christian names of Isidoro Pamphili and Giovanni Battista Orsini, with members of the most influential and noble Roman families acting as godfathers. (See Lupieri 2002, pp. 89-105; besides Ignatius à Iesu's book, primary sources are unpublished letters by Discalced Carmelite missionaries, from the Roman archives of the Order's General House.)

The whole plan soon collapsed. The Portuguese were not able to relocate the Mandaeans, and the Mandaeans did not convert. The learned Maronite Abraham Ecchellensis, through conversations with the two Mandaeans sent to Rome and by reading their books, disproved the Ignatius thesis that the Mandaeans were schismatic Christians and instead considered them as members of a dualistic group, connected to Manicheism rather than to John the Baptist (Abraham Ecchellensis, note no. 10, pp. 310-36).

Increasingly disillusioned reports by the missionaries, struck by the "stubbornness" of the Mandaeans, reached the Vatican and the General House of the Carmelites in Rome, until the very idea of converting them was abandoned at the end of the 18th century. By that time, European travelers and scholars were making extensive journeys throughout the Middle East in search of curiosities, lost civilizations, and other treasures. Given their Arabic name of Ṣubba (the "Immersers"), the Mandaeans were confused with the Sabaeans of Ḥarrān, or even connected with the biblical queen of Sheba. During the 19th century, these misunderstandings were gradually cleared up and, in the second half of that century, we finally have the first reliable reports on them by Petermann and Siouffi (the former more scholarly). In the first half of the 20th century, and especially in the 1920s, the converging interests of (mostly German) New Testament and history of religion scholars led to an

explosion of Mandaean studies in Europe. The possible historical connection with John the Baptist, as seen in the newly translated Mandaean texts, convinced many (notably R. Bultmann) that it was possible, through the Mandaean traditions, to shed some new light on the history of John and on the origins of Christianity. This brought about a revival of the otherwise almost fully abandoned idea of their Palestinian origins. As the archeological discovery of Mandaean incantation bowls and lead amulets proved a pre-Islamic Mandaean presence in southern Mesopotamia, scholars were obliged to hypothesize otherwise unknown persecutions by Jews or by Christians to explain the reason for Mandaeans' departure from Palestine.

The "Mandaean Question" had a brief but intense life. Christian theologians and New Testament scholars rejected the idea that Mandaean lore could possibly be traced back to Palestinian traditions contemporary to John the Baptist and Jesus. As a result, New Testament scholarship lost interest in Mandaean literature and traditions, and the "Mandaean fever" (as it had been nicknamed) was over before the beginning of World War II. In 1937 Ethel S. Drower wrote the most extensive and in-depth analysis of living Mandaean communities in Iraq and Iran. Lady Drower also acquired the most impressive collection of Mandaean manuscripts (now at the Bodleian Library in Oxford) and began their translation and publication.

The 1960s were crucial for a new understanding of Mandaeanism. The pivotal works by Kurt Rudolph finally allowed a critical comprehension of Mandaean theology and thinking, while Rudolf Macuch steadfastly resurrected the theory of the Palestinian origins of the Mandaeans as disciples of John the Baptist, and of their early migration to southern Mesopotamia, and passionately defended it against opposing views (Yamauchi). In more recent years, many Mandaean scholars have accepted the Palestinian origin and early migration theory (Buckley, Gündüz), while those who have their major interests in other fields (mostly biblical scholars) do not. It is difficult to find a historical foundation for such a theory, as the historical John the Baptist was an observant Jew, probably with apocalyptic expectations, who had developed his own interpretation of the Law (as we can understand from his food and way of dressing), which was not too different from the *halakhah* of the Pharisees (Lupieri, 1997). As an alternative to the Jewish temple cult, and possibly convinced that it was a sort of "last chance" offered by God before His final intervention in history, John invented an immersion in running water which was different from any other existing Jewish purificatory practice, since it was

considered effective for the remission of sins. This is why he, and no other Jew, was called "the Baptist." According to Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.2), before John's movement could become politically meaningful and dangerous, Herod Antipas had him killed some time prior to 35 C.E. Josephus knows of no further persecution of John's followers, although he is interested in reporting any repressive action by Jewish and/or Roman authorities before 70 C.E. According to the synoptic Gospels, the disciples of John, possibly after his death, appear to be integrated in their Jewish context and to share religious practices, like that of fasting, with the Pharisees (there is much discussion concerning the original historical setting of Mark 2:18, and its synoptic parallels in Matthew 9:14 and Luke 5:33, which presuppose John's absence or death). Traces of antagonism crop up between the disciples of John and the followers of Jesus by the end of the first century (as one might infer from the emphatic depiction of John as precursor, in John 3:22-30, 4:1, 5:36, 10:41), and during the second and third centuries (Pseudo-Clementine literature: *Homiliae* 2.23 f.; *Recognitiones* 1.54, 1.60, 2.8). From the Acts of the Apostles (19.1-5) and the Pseudo-Clementines we may deduce that there were small groups or communities of followers of John the Baptist in Ephesus and somewhere in the province of Syria (less plausibly in Egypt: Acts 18:24 f.; cf. Lupieri, 1988, pp. 51-96). They do not seem to have been interested in migrating elsewhere, nor were they forced to.

What we next find is a Mandaean culture, rooted in southern Mesopotamia, with its own distinctive language, from the eastern (not western) Aramaic group, and its own alphabet, closely related to that found in inscriptions of Elymais and coins of Characene. What is striking is that the Mandaeans appear to be a distinct, endogamic religious and *ethnic* group, with neither proselytism towards, nor conversions from, the outside. While the disciples of John the Baptist were Baptist Jews who kept us to the biblical reading among radical anti-nomistic Christian and post-Christian Gnostic groups, whose hatred for the Jews is well explained as originating in Christian circles. If we add that the Mandaean traditions on John the Baptist cannot be directly connected to the historical John, but are developments of Christian apocryphal legends (Lupieri, up with the reading of the Torah and its observance, the Mandaeans appear to be defiantly anti-Jewish, to abhor circumcision as the worst impurity, and to propose an "inverted" reading of the little they still use of the Jewish Bible: the Jews and their God are the villains, and the Egyptians with their Pharaoh, the enemies of the Jews, become the ancestors of the Mandaeans (Drower, 1937, pp. 261-66; Lupieri, 2002, pp. 133-42). This brings

1988, pp. 195-395), and that even those pertaining to Miriai (a Jewish girl of priestly stock who is said to have converted to become a Mandaean in some early stage of its history) are constructed on other Christian apocryphal stories about Mary, the mother of Jesus (Buckley, 1993), any direct physical connection with first-century Palestine becomes historically unnecessary.

The Mandaean history of salvation is a creative conflation of biblical lore and the theory of the four ages of the world. After the biblical flood, which ends the third age of the world, the Mandaeans are the only descendants of the "pure seed" of Adam on earth, but are subjected to periodic extinctions during the present fourth age. Following each extinction, one of the Mandaean saviors or revealers brings new Mandaeans to Mesopotamia from a fabulous realm in the mountains of the North, a sort of paradise on earth where their pure seed survives. This is where the inventor of Mandaean baptism, Birham the Great (and not John the Baptist), resides. This semi-divine entity has the same name as a Semitic divinity, which in the Mesopotamia of Late Antiquity was identified as the Greek demigod Heracles and became the protecting god of the Hyspaosinnidic dynasty of the rulers of Mesene-Characene under the Arsacid empire (roughly from 165BC.E. to 222 C.E.). The Arsacids were followed by the Sasanians, who took full control of Mesopotamia in the years 224-27 C.E. and adhered firmly to Zoroastrianism. They initiated a period of religious persecution, which reached its climax in the second half of the third century under the guidance of the leading Zoroastrian priest and imperial dignitary Karter (or Kirdir). He was responsible for the imprisonment and death of Mani (ca. 275 C.E.), and in his Kaʿba-ye Zardošt inscription (Back, pp. 414-16) he boasts that he persecuted Jews, Buddhists, Christians, Brahmins, *zandik*s (usually regarded as Mazdean heretics), the mysterious Makdaks (Manicheans or maybe Mandaeans), and the Nasuraeans (possibly Mandaeans or some Jewish-Christian groups).

This inscription could offer the *terminus ante quem* for the existence of an independent Mandaean religion in Mesopotamia. The Sasanian persecution also seems to provide the best explanation for a peculiar Mandaean legend about a "king Artabanus" who was "the king of the Mandaeans." In recent versions of the story, he becomes the brother of "king Pharaoh," who survives the crossing of the Red Sea and flees Moses and his Jewish army. The story has many versions, one of which may be present in the very fragmentary *Haran Gauaita* (Drower, 1953); this book possibly contained a whole Mandaean world history, from the mythical beginning to the apocalyptical end. Unfortunately

the beginning is missing and the present title reproduces the first two words of the surviving text, alluding to the "Interior Harran" which welcomes Artabanus after his defeat. It appears that both Pharaoh and Artabanus are Mandaean kings and both are defeated by the Jews. This could be a historical memory of the figure of Artabanus V (r. ca. 213-24 C.E.), the last and defeated Arsacid king. During the Sasanian period of persecution, the last king of a previous tolerant dynasty could have been "adopted" as a Mandaean, in the same way as the Pharaoh, the enemy of the enemies (the Jews), was. If this is true, Mandaeanism must have already existed at the beginning of Sasanian rule.

The richness and variety of the second- and third-century Mesopotamian religious milieu is well documented and is evident in the *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*, which shows Mani growing up as a member of a community of Mesopotamian Baptists (all men dressed in white). According to the *Codex*, their leader was Elchasai, the apparent author of a Jewish-Christian apocalypse with strong Gnostic traits written around 115 C.E. (Cirillo, Luttikhuizen).

Mandaeanism is very likely a splinter group of southern Mesopotamian, post-Christian Gnosticism, possibly originating in the late second century. The connection with Old and New Testament Palestine is cultural, not ethnic or geographic, as there is no need to explain a migration of ideas in terms of the migration of an entire population. What remains unique is that, if we consider the ethnic conscience of the Mandaeans as original to them, we must accept that a whole ethnic group collectively adopted a Gnostic form of religion. If this is true, we may presume there occurred some form of mass conversion as a consequence of the preaching of some religious missionary or reformer.

Although the full study of Mandaean text colophons has yet to be completed, we may still find in them some indication of the possible founder of Mandaeanism. Most of the colophons repeat the same series of names, which constitutes a list of the oldest scribes and religious leaders. With some exceptions, which are possibly a reaction to the more common tradition, the oldest name is that of a certain Zazai. In some colophons he appears to have received the book directly from a divine figure and even to be a semi-divine person himself. In the *Haran Gauaita* he is the first of seven Mandaean king-archers who destroy Judaism, is appointed by Anuš ʿUtra, one of the Mandaean revealers, as the Mandaean king in Baghdad (which is usually identified with Jerusalem), and finally ascends to heaven, where he spends sixty-two days (to

receive a special revelation?). Therefore, this Zazai seems to be the historical founder of Mandaeanism, possibly a second-century Mesopotamian Gnostic teacher who considered himself the bearer of direct, divine inspiration.

From the numerous names listed in prayers, colophons, and the *Haran Gauaita*, it is possible to identify some other important religious authors and leaders in early Mandaean history. After Zazai, but before the Islamic era, a certain Šganda, or Ašganda, was so famous that the Mesopotamian city of Ṭib, where he resided, was, for the Mandaeans, "the city of Ašganda." In the years of the Muslim Arab conquest of Mesopotamia (639-42 CE), we are told that a certain Anuš bar Danqa, a layman, considered to be a descendent of King Artabanus, was able to convince the new rulers that the Mandaeans, like the Christians and the Jews, were "People of the Book" (Arabic: *Ahl al-Ketāb*), and therefore should not be persecuted. In those years, a certain Ramuia was the leading figure among the scribal and religious authorities, possibly the person in charge of (re)writing the Mandaean religious texts, so that they could be shown to the Muslim rulers. In early Islamic times, we find the recurrent name of a person who must have standardized most Mandaean texts: Baian. It is tempting to consider his activity as a reaction to a religious schism, of which we have both written and oral accounts, the schism of Qiqil. This Mandaean religious leader resided in T'ib, is said to have taken the wrong path, but in the end to have repented. According to Mandaean sources his activity is chronologically connected to John the Baptist (several centuries after him), since all the Mandaeans who accepted Qiqil's teachings are considered to be the descendants of those Jews who were converted by John the Baptist, and therefore not ethnically Mandaeans. But this is heresiological acrimony, not historical reconstruction.

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