



## MANDAEANS III. INTERACTION WITH IRANIAN RELIGION

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The assimilation and corresponding processing of Iranian (Persian) components within the Mandaean religion can be demonstrated on different levels: in the vocabulary, in the mythology or theology, in the cultic-ritual realm, and in the calendar. Apart from the widespread heritage of Old and Middle Iranian culture in ancient Oriental history of religion, evidence of which has mainly been preserved in the history of Aramaic linguistics, including Mandaic (see below, sec. v), the Mandaeans had sufficient opportunities for a direct encounter with the Iranian religious world, especially with Zoroastrianism. For several centuries (from about the 3rd to the 6th century CE), they lived under the rule of the Sasanians. Perhaps they even lived under the late Arsacids, insofar as an Artabanus (whom they called *Ardvan*), under whom they separated from the Jews and wandered to Media (?), has remained a historical memory (see, on the *Haran Gawaita* legend, Drower, 1953; cf. Rudolph, 1960, pp. 133 ff.; 1996, pp. 381 ff., 409 ff.; Lupieri, pp. 137 ff.). This could only be true of Artabanus II (r. 10/11-38 CE), III (r. 79-81 CE) or IV (213-24 CE), perhaps most probably Artabanus II or III. Otherwise the Mandaean texts (e.g., perhaps the Right *Ginza*) had no special information about the Parthian period (Rudolph, 1960, pp. 134 ff., 136, n. 3).

Polemics against Iranian ideas (e.g., the cult of fire) and the persecution by the



Sasanians, when the Zoroastrian state religion was being built up under the Head Magian Kirder (ca. 276-93), somewhat clarify the varied story of the encounter between Mandaeans and Iranians (Rudolph, 1996, pp. 422, 551, 585, n. 42, 620 f.). The view, once represented by J. J. Modi that the Mandaeans were “Semi-Zoroastrians” or an “offshoot of Zoroastrism” (1932), which Lady E. S. Drower (1938-39) also adopted, does not correspond with the facts (Rudolph, 1960, pp. 132 f.). The subject, however, requires further investigations. What follows can merely be a survey of the present state of research.

First of all, the Middle Iranian (Parthian) stock of loanwords in Mandaean is considerable, as Widengren (1960) understood. It amounts to about 130 words, many of which concern almost all the realms of religious tradition, for example: Parts of the “ritual dress” *rāsta* (Pers. *rāst* “true, straight”), the sacred “girdle” *himyāna* (MPers. *himyān*) or *qamar* (MPers. *kamar*), the scarf for the mouth *pandāma* (MPers. *pandām*), the “crown” of the priest *tāgā* (MPers. *tāg*), the turban *burziṅqa* (MPers. \**barzang*). Cult symbols: the “banner” *drabša* or *drapša* (Pers. *derafš*), the ritual “staff” *margna* (MPers. *mārgan*) or *gawāza* (Av. *gavāza*, MPers. *gavāz*). The cult hut (temple): *mandi* (MPers. *māndan*, “to remain,” *mān* “house, temple”; the older, classical term is *maškna*, Hebr. “place of worship”). Ritual actions: *pasuk* “response, answer” (MPers. *passux*, Pers. *pāsoḵ*), *pugdāma* “word,” “bidding” (MPers. *padgām* or *pagdām*). Proper names of celestial beings (see below) *Abāthur*, *Bihrām*, *Rām*, *Yāwar*, or of the legendary figure *Dīnānūkh* (Av. *daēna naoxda*, MPers. *dēnānūxt* “talking in according with religion”). Special terms: “redeemer, savior” *parwanqa* (MPers. *parwānag*, Pers. *parwānak*), “helper, assistant,” *adyaura* (MPers. *adyāvar*), “messenger” *padibra* (MPers. \**pādēbār*, *padgam* “walking on foot,” Pers. *peyām-bār*, *peygam-bār*, “messenger, prophet”), “spirit, mind” *mānā* (Av. *mainyu*, MPers. *mān*, *mānag* “mind”). Demons: “evil spirit” *daiua* (Av. *daiva*, MPers. *dēv*), “idol, demon” *patikra* (OPers. *patikara*, MPers. *patkar*). Mythological concepts: *rāzā* “mystery” (MPers. *rāz*), *rwāz* “vine, light-being” (Av. *urvāza*), *zaina* “weapon, fetter” (Av. *zaēna*, MPers. *zēn*), *zīwa*, *zīwana* “light, radiance, radiant” (Pers. *zib*, *ziba*), *margānīta* “pearl” (MPers. *margārit*, Pers. *morwārid*), *zandīqa* “heretic” (MPers. *zandīk*). Sacred feasts: *naurūz*, *parwanaiia*, *panša* (see below). It must, of course, be considered that some of these words are also used in Aramaic more generally, especially in East Aramaic, so that they have found their way into Mandaean. In the realm of cult their existence is instructive regarding certain borrowings from Zoroastrianism (see below). Of fundamental importance is the mythological-theological tradition regarding theogony, cosmogony, and anthropogony.



*Cosmogony.* An analysis of these subjects leads to the conclusion (Rudolph, 1965; 1996, pp. 362-69) that the older, strictly dualistic conception was later amended by a more monistic doctrine which considered the creation of the world (*tibil*) and man (*adam*) as an act of the “king of light” (*malka d-nuhra*). The classic, dualistic doctrine consists of the opposition between a world of life (*hiia*) or light (*nuhra*) and one of darkness (*hšuka*), each of which arose by itself and whose hostile relationship determined the future history of the world. This corresponds with the Iranian Zoroastrian concepts, once we disregard Zarathustra’s older views in the Gathas and in more recent Zurvanism. It was therefore not wrong of Hans Jonas to describe Mandaism as a special form of the Iranian type of gnosis, which also had characteristics of the so-called “Syrian-Egyptian type” (Jonas, 1934, 1988, pp. 380 ff.). Its difference from the Iranian concept was, however, that it attributed creation to the act of a fallen demiurge (Ptahil) and his evil sons, the planets and zodiac creatures, so that the world became a part of darkness. The human being (Adam) is also part of the world in his material form. Only the “soul” (*nišimta, mana*; also called “hidden Adam,” Adakas), sent by the “Great Life” or “Great Mana,” enables Adam to live; the liberation of the soul from body and world then becomes the aim of the entire subject of redemption, an idea which corresponds with the Iranian one and is altogether typical of Gnosis.

The manifold Mandaean tradition contains passages which, like the Iranian Zoroastrian one, speak of impure and pure or evil and good creatures; the former are traced back to the “twelve” (*trisar*, the zodiac signs) or have come into being through their fall from the world of light—for instance, the “living water,” which alone is ritually pure, unlike the “still, dark water” (Rudolph, 1965, pp. 180 f., 208). In the above-mentioned “king of light” doctrine, which was conceived either under Manichean or under Iranian influence, the higher being acquires five qualities (light, fragrance, a charming voice, eloquence, and a beautiful aspect), suggesting the five qualities of Ahura Mazdā (Rudolph, 1960, pp. 118 f.).

This area of influence, that of symmetrical dualism, includes, at the opposite pole of the “king of light,” the “king of darkness” (*malka d-hšuka*). The position of the “king of darkness” varies in the context of cosmogony, insofar as a special underworld emerged which is dominated by ‘Ur (“fire”), a snake-like being which is reminiscent of Aži Dahāka (MPers. Azdahāk/Aždahāk, NPers. *Aždahā*, *Žahḥāk*). Similarly, as in the case of the Iranian Thraētaona (MPers. Frēdōn, NPers. *Ferēdun*), the Mandaic version describes him as having been



defeated on the course of a “road to hell” before the creation of the world, by a creature of light (Manda d-Haiya, Hibil; Rudolph, 1965, pp. 242 f.). Even his final role under the name of Leviathan (*liwiatan*), who then devours the evil powers, is evidently conceived from an Iranian model (Rudolph, 1965, pp. 343 f.). Just as, together with ‘Ur, the evil world spirit Ruha represents the evil side of the cosmos, so the Iranian representatives of this side have a female figure near them: Ahriman has Az, Azdahāk has Otak. The king of darkness has also become the ruler of the world in the Mandaic religion, just as in Zurvanitic Zoroastrianism Ahriman became the lord of the universe (after the agreement with Ohrmazd and until the end of time). The Mandaeans had no theory of temporal ages measuring from the cosmogony up to the end of time; only for the primeval time of the Adamites (Adam and his sons) was there a chronology with three periods (Rudolph, 1965, pp. 299 ff.).

*Anthropogony.* Mandaeism has provided scarcely anything in this area that is typically Iranian apart from the strictly dualistic idea of the varying origin of body and “soul.” The fact that the soul which had entered into the body (of Adam) was also described as “radiance” (*ziwa*) naturally suggests the “glory” (*xvarr*, *xwarrah*; see [FARR\[AH\]](#)) which entered the first human couple (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, chap. 14). We must also remember the negative view of the first woman in both religions: in one of the Mandaic traditions, Eve (Hawa) was created according to the image of Ruha, the main representative of darkness, while in Zurvanism she is identical with the whore Jeh, and thus belongs to Ahriman’s side of the cosmos (Rudolph, 1965, pp. 283 ff. with references). By emphasizing Adam’s function as a model for the process of salvation, for the liberation of the soul from the body, we may also recognize an Iranian component, but in essence the Jewish and Gnostic parallels are more obvious.

More remarkable, on the other hand, is the Iranian contribution to *soteriology*. W. Brandt (1892) already investigated the ideas regarding the ascent of souls in this connection. Apart from the basic idea that the “soul” (Mand. *nišimta*, not the “spirit,” *ruha*) abandons the body on the third day after death, and starts its journey into the hoped-for realm of light, while the body falls into disregard (in Zoroastrianism the corpse is publicly exposed to decay; in Mandaeism traditionally there is no sign of a grave), there are few correspondences in the description of the journey of the soul (Rudolph, 1960, pp. 122 ff.). While the Mandaean soul has before it a difficult journey through the daemonic “stations” of the “seven” (planets) and “twelve” (signs of the



zodiac), which only the pious withstand, the Zoroastrian soul has before it only the “bridge of the judge (Činvat),” which separates the good from the evil, and a judgment of souls. For the stars and planets belong to the good creation of Ohrmazd. Parallels exist in the assumption of a court in the shape of a scale: *Rašnu razišta* (*Rašn i rāst*), the “just judge,” judges over the Zoroastrians, the “scale man” *Abatur* (from Iranian \**aba* \**tura* “the one who has the scales”: Drower and Macuch, 1963, p. 2, s.v.) judges over the Mandaeans. Both are expressly placed on an equal level (Ginza rect. Lidzbarski, p. 284.10 f.; ed. Petermann, p. 286.7; Mubaraki, p. 276.30 f.).

There is also an angel of death, who in both traditions has the task of separating the soul from the body (Mand. Šauriel; Av. Astō.vidōtu, MPers. *Astwihād*; later, Av. Vīzarəša/MPers. Vīzareš has this function). The “messengers” of the world of light who assist the soul on its way bear Iranian names in Mandaic, such as “assistants” (*adyaura*), “messenger” (*padibra*), “savior, companion” (*parwanqa*). Hibil (Abel), Šitil (Seth) and Anōš (Enosh) are identified in the Ginza as Muht(u)r (Mihir), Ruš (Srōš), and Rast (Rašnu) (Ginza, rect. Lidzbarski. p. 284.14; Petermann, p. 286.11 f.; Mubaraki, p. 277.4 f.) That the soul is accompanied by its good deeds or encounters them corporally is commonly admitted, and so is the idea of the heavenly image (*dmuta*) of the trusting soul, with which it unites after its ascent. In Iranian this is expressed by the old ideas of Daēna (see *DĒN*) and *Fravaši*, the relationship between the single earthly soul and the collective heavenly soul, of which the former is only a part.

The Mandaean idea of paradise, which is called “those carried away by truth” (*msunia kušta*; Rudolph, 1960, pp. 124 f.), may refer to the garden of Yima, although there are also early Jewish parallels with the *Pardes Kušta* (from the Greek *paradeisos tēs dikaiosunēs* “paradise of the just”; see Scholem, 1960, pp. 16 f.). Of course, the old Iranian conceptions about a general Last Judgment also play a part in Mandaean religion, even if they diminish in importance in view of the destiny of the soul and are clearly of secondary importance (Rudolph, 1960, pp. 124 f.). The “(great) day of the end” is connected with a “resurrection” (only rarely), the raging of the ruler of hell ‘Ur (see above), a trial of the evil powers (including the planets and the demiurge) and the infidels, who suffer their “second death” in a blazing fire; for the pious, it is the “day of salvation” (*yom purqana*). The primal condition before the origin of the earthly world and the fall of the soul is reinstated; as for a paradisiacal life on earth according to the Iranian Zoroastrian faith, nothing is mentioned



about it in Mandaeanism.

*Cult and ritual.* The Iranian or specifically Zoroastrian elements in this area relate to the two major Mandaean ceremonies, the Sunday baptism (*mašbuta*) and the mass for the souls, called “ascent” (*masiqta*); the remembrance meals (*dukrana*) also are prominent. We shall first point out that many parts of the Mandaean white sacral robe (*rasta*), especially that of the priests, bear Iranian names (see list, above). These include, above all, the “belt” (*himyana*), “head band” (*burzinqa*), priestly “crown” (*taga*), and “mouth band” (*pandama*). The last-mentioned definitely goes back to the Zoroastrian priestly garment, which was intended to protect the holy fire from being polluted by the breath. Among the Mandaeans, it is only worn during baptisms in water (Rudolph, 1961, pp. 54 f.). The outward similarity between the Zoroastrian and Mandaean priestly vestments is indeed striking, but upon closer observation each has its own background (*ibid.*, pp. 60 f.). The title of the Mandaean high priest, a kind of bishop, is *Ganzibra*, meaning in Persian “treasurer” (see [GANZABARA](#)). The inevitable “banner” needed for all ceremonies (*drabša*, Pers. *derafš*) is also of Persian origin; it symbolizes the world of light (Rudolph, 1961, pp. 31 ff.). An act often carried out during ceremonies is to extend one’s right hand—a gesture called *kusta*, i.e., “truth, justice” (*ibid.*, pp. 144 ff.). A ritual greeting and handclasp (*hamāzōr*) was equally common among Iranians, and the like was also an old sign of faith and solidarity among Greeks, Romans, and Celts.

In the Mandaean water ceremonies, the repeated immersion (*mašbuta*) in running water (called *Yardna* “Jordan”) has no parallel in Iranian custom. What Mandaeans and Zoroastrians share is merely the praise of clean, bubbling, and running waters (*Yasna* 38.3). The 10th day of the month was devoted to water (see [ĀB i](#); day name: Av. Apām, MPers. Ābān). The traditional great purification (Pers. *barašnom*) is carried out with cattle urine; modern ritual ablutions (*pādyāb*) are done with water and resemble both the Islamic *ḡosl* or major ablution (of the whole body) and the daily ablutions (*rišama*) of the face, hands, arms, and feet of pious Mandaeans (Rudolph, 1961, pp. 105 ff., 407 f.). It is striking that an old Iranian deity (*yazata*) has ended up in the Mandaean formula of baptism: namely *Bihram* (Av. Vərəθraϥna, MPers. Vahrām, Pers. [Bahrām](#)), the god of victory (equivalent of the [Greek Heracles](#)), a name widely used in the post-Achaemenid period. The etymology of the Mandaean name is sometimes incorrectly traced back by Mandaeans to Abraham/Ebrāhim: aside from references to him in a Jewish context, Abraham



plays no part among the Mandaeans. Bihram is occasionally mentioned together with *Rām* (Pers.) and is considered as an entity of light and provided with “brilliance” (*ziwa*). A further figure of light, who acts as a redeemer and is identified with Hibil (Abel), is Yāwar-Ziwa; perhaps originally an attribute (Pers. *yāvar* “helper, savior”).

The rituals devoted to the souls of the dead are more closely connected with Irano-Zoroastrian parallels than are the water ceremonies (Modi, 1937, pp. 72 ff.; Drower, 1937, pp. 222 f., 225 ff.; Rudolph, 1961, pp. 411 ff.). Both the purpose (“to assist the ascent [of the soul]”) and, in part, the execution of the Mandaean *Masiqta* (“ascent” of the souls) corresponds with the Zoroastrian requiem mass (Pers. *Yašt-e Gāhān*, Guj. *Gēh-sārnā*, the recitation of *Yasna* 28-34; Modi, 1937, pp. 62-63; Boyce, 1994, p. 283; Stausberg, 2004, pp. 458 f.). Prayers (*āfrinagān*) are recited and meals (*bāj*) are offered to serve the support of the soul. Sraoša (Srōš) is to escort the soul; the evil spirits (Ahriman and the Dēvs) are to be vanquished, and the soul is to reach Ahura Mazdā/Ohrmazd by means of its good deeds (see the Parsi treatise *Aogemadaēča*, Jamaspasa, 1982; Boyce, 1975, pp. 325 ff.; Stausberg, 2004, pp. 461 f.). The correspondence with Mandaean ideas is here quite obvious: the dead are washed and dressed in their sacral clothes, the sacrament (*dran*) is offered, prayers or hymns and remembrance meals (Mand. *zidqa brika*; *dukрана*; Pers. *yād*, Guj. *namgrahān*) begin on the third day and are continued during the following weeks, as well as on the anniversary of the death. The great age of the Iranian ceremonies is confirmed by their being mentioned in *Vīdēvdād* 10.1-2. In the Mandaean literature, the hymns of the Left Ginza which serve the souls apparently belong to the oldest period, together with the corresponding ritual texts of the Canonical Prayerbook. There were similar ceremonies in Manicheism for the dead and their souls (Rudolph, 1961, pp. 415 ff.; Richter, 1997, pp. 60 ff.; see also Funk, *Kephalaia* 1.2, Lfg. 13/14, pp. 346 f. = chap. 144).

There are further striking correspondences between Mandaean and Persian traditions in regard to prayer times, repentance and confession disciplines, and marriage ceremonies. While there is evidence that the Mandaeans had different daily prayer hours in the course of their history (three, five, and seven times), the Zoroastrians have five (*gāhān*; see [GĀH](#); Modi, 1937, pp. 219-20; Stausberg, 2004, pp. 488 ff.; concerning the relation between *gāh* and *gāthā*, see *ibid.*, p. 59), as more or less constantly witnessed, which were evidently a model for the five Mandaean ones (Rudolph, 1961, pp. 224 ff.). It may also be assumed that the three possibilities of penance before an



excommunication were a Persian legacy to the Mandaeans; the two religions shared a common formula for confessions (MPers. *patīt*), by which the (mainly ritual) sins were atoned for through repentance (*ibid.*, pp. 243 ff., 252 f.). The marriage ceremonies include ablutions, the drinking of wine, and a curtain between the bridal couple during the rituals (*ibid.*, p. 321).

An old interrelation can be noticed when one looks at the Mandaean calendar of festivities; it is connected with the Sasanian and Zoroastrian solar calendar (see Drower, 1962, pp. 83 ff.; Rudolph 1961, pp. 331 ff.), although nowadays it is integrated within the Islamic lunar year. Of the six principal feasts, two are devoted to the New Year; the other four are connected with Mandaean events, but in part also involve Persian customs. The “great New Year’s feast” (*Dihbarba* or *Nauruz rba*) is celebrated on the first day of the first winter month; the “little New Year’s feast” (*Nauruz zuṭa*) is on the 6th and 7th day of the same month, when the gates of heaven are open and the souls of the deceased are commemorated. The major feast is the *Parwanaiya* or *Panja*, which is celebrated in the last 5 days of the 8th month (*šumbulta*) and corresponds with the Persian *farvardagān* (MPers. *frawardīgān* “feast of the Frawahrs [Fravašis]”). The latter is divided into two five-day periods, the *Panj-e keh* “Lesser Five” and *Panj-e meh* “Greater Five.” The common features of the *Panja* are ablutions and baptism (among the Mandaeans a favorite occasion for celebration) and ceremonies (prayers, hymns, and meals) for the deceased or their souls, who are believed to visit their relatives at this time (the text of the *Panja* ritual is now published by B. Burtea, 2005). It is assumed that the Mandaean *Panja* replaced the Babylonian-Assyrian spring festival, the *Akitu*, under Persian influence and thus lost its old seasonal connection. This may have occurred under Yazdegerd III (r. 633-51), to whom a calendar reform is ascribed, according to [Biruni](#) (973-after 1050; see [CALENDARS i.](#)), and who set the leap days at the end of the 8th month, *Ābān*.

A survey of demonstrable Persian (Iranian or Zoroastrian) elements in the Mandaean religion clearly shows that the Mandaeans had, in the course of their history, diversely adapted to their greater surroundings without losing their identity. The correspondences with Zoroastrianism in practice and ritual are more prominent than any in mythology or theology. Mandaean mythology and theology, with its basic dualistic orientation, did not distance itself from the original Gnostic task for reflection, that is, an anti-cosmic view. This attitude, however, did not manifest itself in ascetic practice, and therefore the religion comes closer to the Iranian Zoroastrian view of the world as split into



good and evil.

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