



MANDAEANS V. MANDAIC LANGUAGE

Introduction. Mandaic is the term for the Aramaic dialect of the last remaining non-Christian Gnostics from Late Antiquity, the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran (Ḳuzestān). It belongs to the Southeastern Aramaic dialect group with Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic (Babylonian Jewish Aramaic) and Koiné Babylonian Aramaic. Mandaic and Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic have been formerly classified with Syriac as Eastern Aramaic, but this Southeastern Aramaic branch has now to be kept separate on account of clear isoglosses in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicography according to the latest insights on both dialects. The roots of the Mandaic language go back to the early Parthian period (not Sasanian: Rosenthal, 1938, pp. 238-54). Its users and speakers, the Mandaeans, recruit from a former Babylonian Aramaean population. Leaving aside the constant debate on the origin of their religious doctrine and their background (see above sections), there exist no Western Aramaic linguistic traces in the Mandaic idiom which could be convincingly proven. However, Mandaic can be considered with its pre-classical text corpus (magic literature) as one of the purest Late Aramaic dialects of the Southeastern branch (Nöldeke, 1875, p. VI) comparable to Christian Palestinian Aramaic of the Western branch (see [ARAMAIC](#)).

So far no dialectal forerunners of Mandaic are known, since the Aramaic relics of the pre-Parthian times and Parthian period in Babylonia and neighboring Ḳuzestān are rather limited (a few scattered inscriptions, Middle Iranian



ideograms, an incantation in syllabic cuneiform script and in Eastern standardized Aramaic from Uruk [Warka]). Nevertheless, Mandaic inherited abundantly phonetic, grammatical, and lexicographic features from Akkadian (Late Babylonian) that point to the fact that the Mandaean origin cannot have been anywhere else than in Mesopotamia (Kaufman, 1974, pp. 163-64; Müller-Kessler, 2004). Only in the matter of loanwords Iranian had an impact on Mandaic. Pre-Pahlavi lexemes and, in the late literary period and Modern spoken Aramaic, contemporary Modern Persian words were integrated. With the growing corpus of early magical texts, Mandaic can be now subdivided into three language stages: pre-Classical Mandaic (incantation literature), 4th-7th centuries C.E.; Classical Mandaic (religious literature; astronomical omens, late incantations), from the 7th-8th centuries onwards, and Modern Spoken Mandaic or Neo-Mandaic (idioms of Ahvāz). According to the archeological data of the written artifacts on clay and metal (4th-7th centuries), certain topographical, cultural, and historical information indicate that Mandaic was a spoken dialect in the Central Babylonian cities (Babylon, Borsippa, Kutha, Khuabir, Nippur, Uruk), in the South Babylonian localities (Abu Shudhr, el-Qurna, Kashkar, Kish, Mesene), and in the province of Khuzistān (Shush, Shushtar, Matiene), Gedrosia, Media, and Persia (Müller-Kessler, 1999a, p. 201). The magic bowl and metal amulet texts, in part, have been found *in situ*, and some of them contain large demon accounts with geographical names. These magic text sources have turned out to be far more representative than the mythological accounts of scribes in colophons of late manuscript copies and the Haran Gawaitha myth. The latter story has often been used to claim Harran (Upper Mesopotamia) as an intermediate homestead of the Mandaean (Müller-Kessler, 2004).

Orthography. Mandaic is written in a special alphabet of 23 graphemes, which are considered to be based on the script appearing in the Elymaean rock inscriptions (Tang-e Sarvak, Shimbar) and in legends of tetradrachm coins from Elymais and of coins from Characene (Mesene) dating to the 2nd-3rd centuries C.E. The sequence of the alphabet follows the Hebrew and other Aramaic ones (e.g., Syriac; cf. *EIr.* II/3, p. 255), except that the grapheme *ḥ* takes the place of *h* and vice versa. Each letter has a name, and the complete alphabet is called *abāgādā*. Frequently, the alphabet is written at the beginning of a text in a manuscript with magic content, since writing a Mandaic text is taken as a sacred, magical art in itself. The total breakdown of the pronunciation of the gutturals in the Mandaic phonemic inventory has reduced the consonant signs to seventeen plus two half consonants /w/ and /y/,



and three graphemes ʾ, ḥ (former /h/), and ʿ, which only serve as *matres lectionis*, as do *w* and *y*. In this respect the sound system of Classic Mandaic is more completely represented in writing than are those of contemporaneous Aramaic dialects and its own pre-Classic texts, but there exists no distinction between the quality and quantity of the vowels. An extra ligature *d̄* for the relative/genitive particle *dy* is taken as one grapheme. The second ligature *kḏ* serves as the conjunction “when, as.” Inscriptional writings on metal strips and earthenware bowls show less regular signs, whereas the letters in standard manuscript script can be considered quite consistent in form. On pre-Classic epigraphic writing material (clay, metal) the letter *ṣ* is a descender and is never connected to the right. The other writing rules have been fully observed in all periods up to the present with the exception of the final vowel marker *ḥ*, used for /ē/ and [ī], which tends to become confused with the letter ʾ in late manuscripts.

Phonology. In phonemic inventory and phonetic laws, Mandaic holds an isolated position within the range of Late Aramaic dialects. Typical is the non-existence in Mandaic of the Semitic guttural phonemes /ʔ/, /ħ/, /h/, and /ʕ/, which are, however, fully represented by the Mandaic script. These signs are also well known in the Middle Persian (Inscriptional and Pahlavi) ideograms (see [IDEOGRAPHIC WRITING](#)): Mand. *šwb* “seven” = Pahl. ŠB’ /haft/ < *šb’, *tyn* “fig” = TYN’ /anjīr/ < *t’n’, *t’l* “fox” = T’LH /rōbāh/ < *t’l’; but they are not written [?] in the dialects closely related to Mandaic, such as Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic and koiné Babylonian Aramaic. The former etymological glottal /h/ and pharyngeal /ħ/ are conventionally transliterated by *h*, but they are written in the script with the grapheme *h*—a practice comparable to the usage in Pahlavi ideograms, e.g., ḤYMN-WN /wurrōy-/ “believe, trust” < hafel **hymn*; ZḤB’/DḤB’ /zarr/ “gold” < *z’hb’ < *dhb*’; LḤT-WN /daw-/ “run” < **rhṭ*. Spelling conventions show preservation of the Proto-Semitic interdental */d̄/ in *h’zyn* “this (masc.),” *h’z’* “this (fem.)” and in the ideograms, e.g., *zyqn*’ = Pahl. ZYQN’ /rēš/ “beard.” In a secondary stage, */d̄/ induced pseudo-spellings in Mandaic and Middle Persian: e.g., *z’hb*’ “gold” = Pahl. ZḤB’/DḤB’ < **dhb*’, *zm*’ “blood,” < **dm*’ or *dm*’ = Pahl. DM(Y)’ /xōn/. This effect is not seen in the relative/genitive particle *d̄*- < **zy*.

Another archaizing spelling represents as *q* (rarely as *g*, in *ghk* = *hk* “to laugh”; Greenfield, 1962, p. 290) the still undefined Aramaic phoneme /ʔ/ from Proto-Semitic */d̄/ in *ʾrq*’ /arā/ “earth” = Pahl. ʾRQ’ /zamīg/ < *ʾrd, *qmr*’ /qamrā/ “wool” < **dmr*, and *ʾqn*’ /aqnā/ “small cattle” = Pahl. KYN’ /gōspand/ and Parth. QYN <



*d'n. Two other examples are only attested in the Pahl. ideogram 'LKT' /pahlūg/ "rib" = *lqt' < *lq̄ and in the Eastern Aramaic Uruk incantation iq "wood" < *'d (Müller-Kessler, 2002, pp. 196-98). Frequently the voiceless phoneme /t/ is dissimilated to the voiced /d/ in hdm "to seal" < *h̄tm, kdš "to fight" < *k̄tš, or kdp' "shoulder" < *k̄tp'. The interchange of /n/ and /l/ as positional variants in the imperfect prefix regularly occurs only in the pre-Classic literature. A Late Babylonian phonetic relic is the intervocalic shift of /w/ to /m/ or /b/ in the emphatic plural forms of dmwm't' "images" < *dm'w't' and 'wm'w't' "oaths" < *'wm'w't', and in the Hebrew loan šb'bw̄t, šb'bt' "Šebaot" < *šybw't (Müller-Kessler, 2002b, p. 98). The opposite shift occurs as well: /b/ > /w/ in 'wyl "to bring," < *'wbl, šwš "to confuse" < šbš; /m/ > /w/ in šw'ly' "servant" < Akk. šamallû. Characteristic is the regressive influence of labials on vowels (< Late Babylonian): hwm̄y'n' < Mid. Pers. himiān- "belt"; hwt'm', hwd'm' "seal" < *hātāmā; pwḡd'm' "word, instruction" < Old Pers. *patigāma-; šwb' "seven" < */šab'ā/; šwm' "name" < /šemā/. Another sound shift inherited from Babylonian (Geer's law) is the dissimilation of the first emphatic consonant (in a root with two emphatic phonemes) to a phoneme, which may be voiced (gtl "to kill" < *qt̄l) or unvoiced (kwš̄t' "truth" < qwš̄t'; cf. Pahl. KḤM' /ard/ "flour" = Mand. q'hm' < *qm̄h). Further, the Late Babylonian tendency to dissimilate the double consonants /dd/, /bb/, and /zz/ has been retained as phonetic law in Mandaic: to /nd/ in m'nd' "knowledge," to /nb/, /mb/ in zrn/mby "to shake" and hmb̄l "to destroy," to /nz/ in m'nzy' "hair" The dissimilation of consonants in reduplicated roots is a feature that Mandaic partially shares with Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic: /r/ < /l/ in grgl' "wheel" < *glgl' •gll, /r/ < /q/ in drdqy' "small children" < *dqdqy' •dq̄q, /r/ mrm̄sy' "sucklings, infants" < *mrm̄sy' •m̄s̄s. Regressive assimilation occurs in the composite noun byzr' = Pahl. BZR' < *brzr' "seed" (Utas, 1988, p. 65).

Based on the loss of the gutturals, Mandaic tends to frequent metatheses in words with former pharyngeal /hg/ as third radical: wrh' "way" < *'whr', qhd "to scream" < *qd̄h, mhl' "salt" < *ml̄h' (Malone, 1971, pp. 407-9); this also occurs in cases of former /h/ as second root consonant: hmy "to strike" < *m̄hy (Müller-Kessler, 2002c, p. 206). Similar metatheses are attested in the Middle Persian ideograms, e.g., Pahl. MḤŠY' /rōyn/ "oil" and Parth. MḤŠ' = myš' < *myh̄š', or KḤM' "flour" = q'hm' < *qm̄h' (Nyberg, 1978, p. 64; Voigt, 1989, pp. 381-83). It can be observed also in other metatheses: ydl "to give birth, beget" = Pahl. YLYDWN /zāy-/, but in pre-Classic texts mostly yld, yld't' or yld't' "a woman giving birth" (Müller-Kessler, 2001-02, pp. 131-32), myl'd y'ldy' "to give birth." Epenthesis of /y/ is a specific feature of Mandaic roots and nouns, e.g.,



kwyht “blindness” < **khywt* •*khy*, *s’yn* “hateful” < **sny* •*sny*, and *qyn*’ < **qny*’ “reed.” Elision of consonants between vowels occurs in *trn’wl* “rooster” < **trn’gwl*, *zyw*’ “spouse” (Gk. *zugos*) < **zwg*’. Characteristic for Central Southeastern Aramaic, therefore for Mandaic, is the loss of the final short unstressed vowels in the pronouns of 2nd singular, in the perfect suffixes of the 3 person plural masculine, and in the imperative suffixes of the masculine plural form.

Morphology. Classical Mandaic shows individual forms for the pronouns. The modern dialect forms diverge and are indicated below in brackets. The independent personal pronouns are: *hw* [hay, hūy] “he”; *h’(y)* [hid] “she”; *’nt/’n’t* [at, at] “you (masc./fem. sing.)”; *’n* [ana, an, ān] “I”; *hynwn* [honnī] “they (inanimate)”; *’nyn*, *hynyn* [hanni/ī] “they (fem.)”; *’n(’)twn* [a/āton] “you (masc./fem. plur.)”; *’nyn*, *’n’n* [a/āni/ī] “we.” The enclitics based on the independent pronouns are employed with the active and passive participles or adjectives: [-ye/a] (3rd sing. masc.); [-ī] (3rd sing. fem.); -*t*, -*t*’ [ya/āt] (2nd sing. masc.); -*yt* [-yet] (2nd sing. fem.); -*n*’ [-nān] (1st sing. common); [-nān, -no/ōn] (3rd plur. masc.); [-nen] (3rd plur. fem.); -*twn* [-(o)xon] (2nd plur. masc./fem.); -*nyn* [-an] (1st plur. com.). The possessive and object pronominal suffixes are: -*h* [ī/i] “his/him”; -*h(’)* [-a/ā] “her/her”; -*k* [-ax] “your/you (inanimate sing.)”; -*yk* [-ex] “your/you (fem. sing.)”; -*y’ny*’ [-e/ē/ey] “my/me”; -(*h*)*wn* [-ū/u] “their/them (masc.)”; -(*h*)*yn* “their/them (fem.)”; -*kwn* [-(o)xon] “your/you (masc.)”; -*kyn* “your/you (fem.)”; -*n* [-an] “our/us.”

Mandaic has one set of demonstrative pronouns to denote the near object: *h’zyn* “this (in.)”; rarely *h’dyn*, *h’z*’ “this (fem.)”; rarely *h’d*, *h’z’y d-* “this, which (fem.)”; *h(’)lyn* “these (plur. common)”; only late *h’y* “this (in.)” There are three sets for the far deixis: (1) the near demonstrative augmented by -*k*, *h’z’k* “that (in.)” and the shortened classical form *h’k* “that (inan.)”; *h’zyk* “that (fem.)”; *hnyk* “that (plur. com.)”; (2) the near demonstrative augmented by -*h*’ plus the independent pronoun, *h’hw* “that (in.)”; *h’h*’ “that (fem.)”; (3) a set which is only restricted to Mandaic without any comparable forms in other Aramaic dialects, *h’n’tḥ* “that (sing. com.)”; *h’n’twn* “those (plur. masc.)”; *h’n’tyn* “those (plur. fem.)”.

The interrogative pronouns are the common Aramaic ones: *m’n* [ma/ān] “who” and *m*’ [ma/ā, mo/ō/u] “what.” The reflexive pronoun is derived from the noun *npš-* [nāḥš-, nāšš-] “soul.” The indefinite pronouns are *’nš* [enšī] “someone” and the dissimilated form *m’ynd’m* [me/indī, ḥād, ḥādī] = Pahl. ideogram MND’M /tis/ “something.”



As in Aramaic in general, there is no evidence for cases. The article is suffixed to the noun: -' /-ā/. For the noun one distinguishes between three states: absolute (undetermined), construct (dependent), emphatic (determined); two numbers: singular, plural, very rarely in fixed forms dual; two genders: masculine and feminine which are indicated by endings accordingly (TABLE 1).

An exception to the above is the feminine ending -ty' for the emphatic state of certain adjectives and, rarely, nouns: *rbty'* "large" (sing.), *hd'ty'* "new" (plur.), *sbty* "old women."

The Mandaic verbal system is based on the Semitic trilateral root and distinguishes the following stems: peal = basic stem *qt'l* /*qtal*/, pael = intensive *qtyl* /*qattel*/, afel = causative *'qtyl* /*aqtel*/, šafel = causative *šqtyl* /*šaqtel*/, the rare safel = causative *sqtyl* /*saqtel*/, and their respective passive-reflexive stems: itpeel *'yqtyl* /*itqtel*/, itpaal *'ytqtl* /*itqattal*/, ittafal *'tqtl* /*ittaqtal*/, and the even rarer ištafal *š'tqtl* /*ištaqtal* and istafal *'stqtl* /*istaqtal*/.

Mandaic has three finite verbal conjugations: perfect (past), imperfect (present-future), and imperative, three non-finite forms, an active and a passive participle, and one infinitive form (verbal noun; see TABLE 2).

The two participles are active participle *g'tyl* "killing" and passive participle *gtyl* "killed." On the base of the two participles, two new tenses are formed, respectively active participle present (present future) *g'tln'* "I kill, I am going to kill" or as historical present "I killed." and the passive participle present (past action) *gtyln'* "I am/was killed." Later the last two developed into a complex tense system in Modern Mandaic.

The infinitive of the ground stem is *nzygt'l* "to kill," and those of the derived stems: pael *lhrwby'* "to destroy," afel *'whdwry'* "to return," itpeel *'w'dkwry'* "to remember," itpaal *'ytgrwby'* "to rob."

Noteworthy is the particle of existence *'yk'*, *'k'*, mod. *ext-* "there is" and the negated variant *lyk'*, mod. *lexa-* "there is not." Mandaic shares this feature with Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic, and **it** was retained in some Iraqi colloquial Arabic dialects (Müller-Kessler, 2003).

In the group of Central Southeastern Aramaic, the number of prepositions, adverbs, and conjunctions is very small. They did not increase as in Western Aramaic. The prepositions are the enclitics: *b-* "in, with, by," *l-* "to," and the



independent ones: *kw't* “as, like,” *byny'*, *byt* “between,” *lw't* “with,” *mn* “from, with” (*)mnṭwl*, *l mnṭwl* “on account,” *l*, *'l* “on, upon, against,” *l'w'* “on,” *q'd*, *q'd* “with, to,” *qwd'm* “in front of,” (*)twt'y'* “under, beneath,” *b't'r* “after”. The most frequent adverbs are: *h'st'* “now,” *h'yz'k* “then,” *twin* “again,” *k'* “here,” *lhwry'* “behind,” *tyty'* “beneath,” *h't'm* “there,” *hd'dy'* “one another,” *š'pyr*, *ṭ'b* “well” or the ones combined with *l-*, e.g., *lbyš* “evilly,” The coordinating conjunctions are *w* “and,” *w'* “or,” *p'* “also”; subordinating conjunctions: *d-*, *'lm'd-* “until,” *hyn*, *yn* “if,” *k'm'd-* “as, how,” *kd* “when,” (*)m(y)nṭwl d-* “since.”

Syntax. In Mandaic and its related dialects, differentiation between the absolute state and the emphatic state (e.g., “the king”) is given up; therefore the marked (emphatic) form *m'lk'* /*malkā*/ can express “a king/the king,” *m'lkt'* “a queen/the queen.” This applies also to the genitive construction, which is replaced by the use of the genitive particle *d-*, as in *m'lk'd-bbyl* instead of *m'lk bbyl* “the king of Babel.” In Mandaic, Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic, and Syriac, the syntactical passive construction *qtyl l-* is employed in the sense of the past tense, and it later developed into a complete tense system in the Northeastern Neo-Aramaic dialects. Its Iranian origin stays doubtful, since it is only attested in the mentioned Late Aramaic dialects and not in the earlier ones, Imperial Aramaic and Biblical Aramaic. This construction is not restricted to the verbs of saying and hearing (*h'zylh* “he saw”) but can be employed with all kinds of verbs: *pryql'* “she rescued,” *gtyrl'* “she killed,” *mtn'lh'* “she placed,” *'syrly'* “I bound,” *mly'ly'* “I filled.” Another syntactical feature is the use of the active and passive participles with the enclitic pronouns. The active participle present often continues the regular perfect as a historical present in sub-clauses. Restricted to Mandaic and Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic is the use of the shortened form of the active participle *q'ym*, *q'* before the active participle; it is hardly noticeable in pre-Classic Mandaic texts, but in the later religious corpus it can express a state or present time or the process of doing something. Modern Mandaic employs it regularly for the present-future (Macuch, 1993, p. 69). The position of the verb in pre-Classic Mandaic is not free. In general, the verb precedes the subject, but in later Mandaic this is given up.

Lexicography. The lexemes in Mandaic and Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic form a distinct group within the Late Aramaic vocabulary. Both dialects show rare and specific verbs. Some of them are early loans from Iranian, e.g., *'hndz* “to measure, to overlap,” *bšqr* “to search, discern,” *prhz* “to avert, turn away,” *šhrz* “to tremble.” Others are restricted to Mandaic only, and some are of



unknown origin: *pndl*, *pdl* < **pld* < Syriac *plhd* “to separate” or *zrm/nby* and *sndr* “to quake, tremble.” The *safel* stem *sštm* “to shackle a demon” is typical for the magic texts of Mesopotamia.

In the area of loanwords, Mandaic inherited from Akkadian an abundance of *termini technici* concerning religion, but also many words in other areas. Despite the limitation in its attested lexicon, due to the loss of texts, Mandaic shows more Akkadian borrowings than any other Aramaic dialect. The Mandaean gnostic sect recruited from a Babylonian population, and a stock of Akkadian words had belonged to the idiom of that geographical area for some centuries. Particular borrowings in Mandaic are: priest classes, cult, divination, and magic terms: *br’y* < *bartū* “diviner,” *z’b* 2 “esoteric priests,” *gyny* “sacrifice,” *kwr* < *ekurru* “temple,” *pryk* < *parakku* “altar, shrine,” *pyšr* < *pišru* “dissolving of a magic bond,” *šp* < *ašāpu* “to bewitch,” *š’pt* < *šiptu* “incantation”; terms concerning the gnostic doctrine and cult: *gyny* < *ginū* “sanctuaries,” *zyw* < *zīmu* “brilliance,” *n’ndby* < *nindabū* “offering,” *n’šwr’y* “watcher of secrets,” *n’šyrwt* “secrecy” < *niširtu*; architectural terms: *ngr* < *agāru* “wall,” “roof,” *kšwr* < *gušūru* “beam, post”; body parts: *gys* 2 “side”; *kt* < *qātu* “hand, handle,” *š’yry’n* < “vein, artery”; directions of the wind, name of winds, astronomical terms: *š’r* < *šārū* “direction of the wind,” *st’n* < *ištānu* north(wind), *ywni* 2 < *ūmu* 3 “storm,” *t’ly* < *attala* “eclipse.”

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