



## MANDAEANS VI. NEO- MANDAIC LANGUAGE

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*Introduction.* Neo-Mandaic or modern Mandaic is the contemporary form of Mandaic, the language of the Mandæan religious community of Iraq and Iran. As such, it is the only known form of any of the classical literary dialects of Aramaic to survive to the present date, but it is severely endangered today. While the members of the greater Mandæan community, numbered at roughly 60,000 adherents throughout the world, are familiar with the classical dialect through their sacred literature and liturgy, only a few hundred Mandæans, located primarily in Iran, speak its contemporary form as a first language. As late as the 19th century, it was spoken by the Mandaeans of several cities in northern Khuzestan, including Šuštar, Dezful, and Šāh Wali, but during the reign of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (1848-96) these communities departed for Khorramshahr (Kōrram-šahr) and Ahvāz in southern Khuzestan, as well as the cities of southern Iraq which were then under Ottoman rule.

All Neo-Mandaic speakers are bi- or even tri-lingual in the languages of their neighbors, Persian and Arabic, and the influence of these languages upon the grammar of Neo-Mandaic is substantial, particularly in the lexicon and the morphology of the noun. Nevertheless, when compared to Classical Mandaic (see [MANDAEANS v. MANDAIC LANGUAGE](#)), Neo-Mandaic appears remarkably conservative, and most of the features that distinguish the two stages of the language (in particular, the restructuring of the nominal morphology and the verbal system) are the result of developments already



attested in Classical and Postclassical Mandaic. Even the lexicon preserves the vocabulary of Classical Mandaic to a large degree; in a list of 207 of the most common terms in Neo-Mandaic collected by Häberl (2009, pp. 39-44), over 85 percent were also attested in the classical language, the remaining 15 percent deriving primarily from Persian and Arabic.

Two surviving dialects of Neo-Mandaic have thus far been documented, that of Ahvāz (in Macuch, 1965a, 1965b, 1989, and 1993), and Khorramshahr (in Häberl, 2009). These dialects are mutually intelligible to the extent that speakers of either dialect will deny that there are any substantive differences between the two.

*History of scholarship.* The first attempt at documenting Neo-Mandaic, a polyglot glossary including a column of lexical items from the now extinct Neo-Mandaic dialect of Basra, was produced in the mid-17th century by a Carmelite missionary whom Roberta Borghero (2000, p. 318) has identified with Matteo di San Giuseppe. This Glossarium was to have a perennial influence upon future Mandæologists; it was consulted by Theodor Nöldeke (1862, 1875) and Rudolf Macuch (1965a) in the preparation of their grammars, and the contents of its Neo-Mandaic column were incorporated into Drower and Macuch's dictionary (1963). No complete Neo-Mandaic text was published until the beginning of the twentieth century, when Jacques de Morgan published facsimiles of five such texts in the fifth volume of his *Mission scientifique en Perse* (which were subsequently transliterated and translated in Macuch, 1989). The last few decades have seen a marked increase in the number of Neo-Mandaic texts available to scholarship (Macuch, 1965b, 1989, 1993) and a descriptive grammar (Häberl, 2009).

*Orthography.* Neo-Mandaic is generally unwritten. On the rare occasions on which it is written, in personal letters and in the colophons that are attached to manuscripts, it is rendered using a modified version of the classical script. With the exception of /ə/, all vowels are represented, but without any indication of length or quality. The letter <ϣ> consistently represents an epenthetic vowel, either /ə/ or /ε/. Additionally, the Arabic letter ڤ has been adopted to indicate the voiced pharyngeal fricative as well as the glottal stop in loanwords. The letters , , ,

, and may represent stops (/b/, /g/, /k/, /p/, and /t/) or fricatives (/v/, /β/, /χ/, /f/, and /θ/). Formerly the fricatives were not distinctive segments but merely allophones of the stops after a vowel; the sound rule governing this alternation



is now defunct. Neo-Mandaic orthography differs from that of Classical Mandaic by using to represent /w/ even when it is a reflex of Classical Mandaic /b/. As Neo-Mandaic contains several phonemes not found in Classical Mandaic, several letters from the original script have been modified with two dots placed below to represent these phonemes: <š> may represent /tʃ/, /ʒ/, or /dʒ/, <d> represents /ðʕ/, and <h> represents /ħ/. The private Mandaic schools in Iran and Australia employ a version of this same script with a few further pedagogic modifications (Choheili, 2004, pp. 312-14).

*Phonology.* There are 28 phonemic consonantal segments in Neo-Mandaic: eight stops (*p* /p/, *b* /b/, *t* /t/, *d* /d/, *ṭ* /tʰ/, *k* /k/, *g* /g/, and *q* /q/), ten fricatives (*pʃ* /f/, *b* /v/, *ṭ* /θ/, *s* /s/, *z* /z/, *ʃ* /sʰ/, *š* /ʃ/, *k* /χ/, *ḡ* /ʁ/, and *h* /h/), six sonorants (*m* /m/, *w* /w/, *n* /n/, *l* /l/, *r* /r/, and *y* /j/), and four loan-phonemes: the postalveolar affricates *č* /tʃ/ and *j* /dʒ/ and the pharyngeal fricatives *ʕ* /ʕ/ and *ħ* /ħ/, which are found only in vocabulary of foreign origin, particularly Arabic and Persian. The glottal stop /ʔ/ and two pharyngealized segments (a voiced alveolar stop *ḏ* /ðʕ/ and a voiced alveolar fricative *ḏ* /zʕ/) are found in a few Arabic loanwords. They have been excluded from the phonemic inventory of Neo-Mandaic due to their marginal status. The fricatives /f/, /χ/, and /ʁ/ are assigned the values *f*, *x*, and *ḡ* when they appear in loan words rather than *p*, *k*, and *ḡ* as they are not subject to the same phonotactic constraints in words of foreign origin.

The vowel system in Neo-Mandaic is composed of seven distinct vowels, of which six (*i* /i/, *u* /u/, *e* /e/, *o* /o/, *a* /a/, and *ā* /ɑ/) are principal phonemes, and one (*ə* /ə/) is marginal. The vowels are distinguished by quality rather than quantity. Three of the principle vowels, the “tense” vowels *i*, *u*, and *ā*, are lengthened in open accented syllables to [i:], [u:], and [ɑ:] or [ɔ:]. /i/ and /u/ are realized as [ɪ] and [ʌ] whenever they occur in closed syllables, either accented or unaccented. The other three principle vowels, the “lax” vowels *o*, *e*, and *a*, appear only exceptionally in open accented syllables. *e* is realized as [e] in open syllables and [ɛ] in closed syllables. *a* is realized as [ɑ] in closed accented syllables, and as [a] or [æ] elsewhere. Schwa (*ə*) has the widest allophonic variation of all the vowels. It is regularly fronted, backed, raised, or lowered in harmony with the vowel of the following syllable.

There are also five diphthongs, *ey* /ɛɪ/, *ay* /aɪ/, *aw* /aʊ/, *āy* /ɑɪ/, and *āw* /ɔʊ/. The diphthongs /aɪ/ and /aʊ/, which had already collapsed in closed accented syllables to /i/ and /u/ in the classical language, have collapsed in all accented syllables in the dialects of Ahvāz and Khorramshahr, apart from those in words of foreign origin.



Word stress typically falls upon a tense vowel within a closed syllable. The placement of the stress is determined from the final syllable. Any final syllable (or ultima) that is closed and contains a tense vowel automatically receives the accent, e.g. *qəmahṛəbāt* [qə.mæh.rɛ.'wɔ:t] “you destroy.” If the final is open or contains a lax vowel, the accent will fall upon the penultimate syllable, provided that it is closed or contains a tense vowel, e.g. *gabrā* ['gæv.rɔ] “man.” Otherwise, the stress will fall on the final syllable, e.g. *əχal* [a.'χal] “he ate.” In words of three or more syllables, if neither the ultima nor the penultima is closed and contains a tense vowel, then the accent recedes to the antepenultimate syllable, e.g. *gaṭelnākon* [ga.'tʰɛl.nɔ.χon] “I will kill you.” Several morphemes automatically take the accent, such as the negative morpheme *lá*, which (like Pers. *ná-*) causes the stress to shift to the first syllable of the verb. As is typical for Aramaic dialects, vowels in open pretonic syllables are regularly subject to reduction or even deletion.

*The Noun Phrase.* The morphology of the noun has been greatly influenced by contact with Persian. The classical system of states has become obsolete, and only vestiges of it survive in some frozen forms and grammatical constructions. As a result, the most common inflectional morphemes associated with the states have been replaced by morphemes borrowed from Persian, such as the plural morphemes *ān* (for native and nativized vocabulary) and *(h)ā'* (for words of foreign origin), the indefinite morpheme *i*, and (occasionally in the dialect of Ahvāz, but not that of Khorramshahr) the *ežāfa*. This last morpheme indicates a relationship between two nouns (substantive or adjective) corresponding to a variety of functions (generally attributive or genitive). In Neo-Mandaic, the contextual form of the noun combines the functions of both the Persian *ežāfa* and the Classical Mandaic construct state. Whenever a noun bearing the nominal augment *-ā* is immediately followed by another noun or adjective expressing a genitive or attributive relationship, the augment is regularly apocopated, e.g. *rabbā* “leader” but *rab Mandayānā* “leader of the Mandæans” and *kədābā* “book” but *kədāḥ Mandāyí* “a Mandaic book.”

Despite the collapse of the system of states, and the obsolescence of the most common classical plural morpheme *-ia*, much of the morphology of the noun has been preserved. While most nouns, masculine and feminine alike, are marked with the plural morpheme *ān*, a number of other morphemes exist, which can indicate other distinctions beyond number. The feminine plural morpheme *(w/y)āt-* most commonly appears on nouns marked explicitly with



the feminine singular morpheme *t*, although it can also be found on the plural forms of many feminine nouns not marked as such in the singular. Most loan words take the plural morpheme (*h*)*ā'*, although a few retain the plural forms of their source languages (e.g. *waxt* “time,” pl. *awqāt*). Additionally, many of the heteroclite plurals attested in the classical language have been retained (e.g. *ettā* “woman,” pl. *enšā*).

*Pronouns.* Personal pronouns are illustrated in [Table 1](#) (all forms are listed from first to third person, singular [sg.] followed by plural [pl.]; masculine [m] and feminine [f] forms are distinguished where they exist). The independent personal pronouns are optionally employed to represent the subject of a transitive or intransitive verb. Whenever the singular forms appear before a verb, their final vowel is apocopated. The enclitic personal pronouns are in complementary distribution with them; they may represent the object of a transitive verb, a nominal or verbal complement or adjunct in a prepositional phrase, or indicate possession on the noun. On nouns of foreign origin, they are affixed after the morpheme *-d-* (see Häberl, 2007). On the noun *napš-* “self” they also serve to form the reflexive pronouns. Neo-Mandaic also has two reciprocal pronouns, *ham* “each other” and *hədādā* “one another.”

The demonstrative pronouns are *āhā* “this,” *aḵu* “that,” and *ahni* “these; those.” When modifying a noun, these pronouns precede it. In this position, the final vowel of the singular demonstratives is regularly apocopated. Note that the plural demonstrative never appears in this position; instead, the singular forms are used before plural nouns (the plural morpheme indicating plurality on the whole noun phrase, e.g. *ā šeršānā* “these religions”). Neo-Mandaic also has two locative demonstrative pronouns, *hənā/ehnā* “here” and *ekkāk* “there.”

The interrogative pronouns are used to elicit specific information beyond a simple yes or no answer (which can be elicited simply by employing a rising intonation, as in English). Of these interrogative pronouns, only *man* “who” and *mu* “what” may substitute for either the subject or the object of a verb, obligatorily appearing at the beginning of the interrogative clause. Other interrogatives in Neo-Mandaic include *elyā* “where,” *hem* “which,” *hemdā* “when,” *kammā* “how,” *katkammā* “how much/many,” *mujur* “how, in what way,” and *qamu* “why.”

*The Verb Phrase.* The Neo-Mandaic verb may appear in two aspects (perfective and imperfective), three moods (indicative, subjunctive, and imperative), and



three voices (active, middle, and passive). The imperfective indicates habitual actions, progressive or inchoative actions, and actions in the future from a past or present perspective. The perfective indicates not only the preterite but also resultative-stative, which is most apparent from the verbs relating to a change of state, e.g. *meḵtat eštā* “she has died/is dead *now*.”

The indicative is used to make assertions or declarations about situations which the speaker holds to have happened (or, conversely, have not happened), or positions which he maintains to be true. It is also the mood used for questions and other interrogative statements. The perfective, by its very nature, refers to situations that the speaker holds to have happened or not to have happened, and thus generally indicates the past indicative, apart from explicitly counterfactual conditional clauses, e.g. *agar an lāhwit, lā-aṭṭat əl-yanqā* “if I hadn’t been there, she wouldn’t have brought (=given birth to) the baby.” The imperfective, on the other hand, is used to describe situations which are ongoing, have yet to happen, or about which there may exist some uncertainty or doubt. When marked by the morpheme *qə*, it is used to express the indicative, but when it is not thus marked, it expresses the subjunctive. The subjunctive is most commonly used to indicate wishes, possibilities, obligations, and any other statements which may be contrary to present fact. As in the other Semitic languages, the subjunctive must be used in the place of the imperative for all negative commands and prohibitions.

As in other Semitic languages, the majority of verbs are built upon a triconsonantal root, each of which may yield one or more of six verbal stems: the *G*-stem or basic stem, the *D*-stem or transitivity-denominative verbal stem, the *C*-stem or causative verbal stem, and the *tG*-, *tD*-, and *tC*-stems, to which a derivational morpheme, *t*-, was prefixed before the first root consonant. This morpheme has disappeared from all roots save for those possessing a sibilant as their initial radical, such as *eṣṭəḥā ~ eṣṭəḥi (meṣṭəḥi)* “to be baptized” in the *G*-stem or *eštallam ~ eštallam (meštallam)* in the *C*-stem, in which the stop and the sibilant are metathesized. A seventh stem, the *Q*-stem, is reserved exclusively for those verbs possessing four root consonants.

Verbs that begin with a vowel rather than a consonant are called I-weak. When the liquids *w* and *y* appear as the second or third radical of a triconsonantal root, they are susceptible to the general collapse of diphthongs described above. The verbs that are thus affected are known as II-weak and III-weak verbs. Those roots in which the second and third radical consonants were identical have been reformed on the analogy of the II-weak verbs; this



process had already begun in Classical Mandaic.

The principal parts upon which all inflected forms of the verb are built are the perfective base (represented by the third masculine singular form of the perfective), the imperative base (represented by the masculine singular form of the imperative), and the imperfective base (represented by the masculine singular form of the active participle). In the *G*-stem, the second syllable of the perfective base can have one of three thematic vowels: /a/, /e/, and /o/. Transitive verbs predominantly belong to the first, which is the most common of the three, whereas the latter two typically characterize intransitives and stative verbs. Examples of the principal parts for all seven verbal stems are given in [Table 2](#). Transitive verbs also commonly yield a passive participle, which in the *G*-stem takes the form CəCil, e.g. *gəṭel* “killed (m. sg.),” f. sg. *gəṭilā*, and pl. *gəṭilen*.

Alone among the surviving dialects of Aramaic (save for a cluster of dialects spoken in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains of Syria), Neo-Mandaic continues to employ the old Semitic suffix conjugation in the perfective. Apart from the imperative forms, the prefix conjugation (the Classical Mandaic imperfect) has been replaced by imperfective, a process which had already begun in Classical Mandaic. The inflected forms are produced by appending the inflectional suffixes introduced in [Table 1](#) to the principal parts introduced in [Table 2](#) (e.g. *gəṭalton* “you [pl.] killed,” *gəṭolyon*, *qəgəṭletton* “kill!” [pl.]). The addition of these morphemes often causes the stress on the verb to shift, provoking the sound changes described in Phonology above (note the form *qəgəṭletton* “kill” (pl.), which combines the indicative morpheme *qə-*, the imperfective form *gəṭel*, and the inflectional suffix *-etton*). In transitive verbs, these inflectional suffixes may in turn be followed by an enclitic object suffix, which can have the same effect upon the syllables preceding it, including the personal suffix. All third person imperfective forms take the enclitic object marker *l* before the object suffix. The final consonant of the third plural personal suffix *en* regularly assimilates to this enclitic object marker, producing the form *el(l)*. Additionally, the second singular and first plural morphemes assume the forms *āt* and *nan(n)* respectively before object suffixes.

A very large and productive class of verbs in Neo-Mandaic consists of a verbal element and a non-verbal element, which form a single semantic and syntactic unit, corresponding to (and in many cases directly calqued upon) Persian compound verbs. The non-verbal element is most often a noun such as *əḥādā* “deed” in the compound *əḥādā əḥad ~ əḥod (āḥed)* “to work or to do something”



(lit. “to deed-do”), or an adjective such as *həyānā* “alive” in the compound *həyānā tammā* “to survive” (lit. “to alive-stay”), although prepositions such as *qār* “at,” in the compound *qār tammā* “to be born to someone” (lit. “to at-become”), are attested. As in Persian, the verbal element is often a “light” verb, which serves only to indicate verbal inflections such as person, tense, mood, and aspect. The most common light verbs are *əḥad* ~ *əḥod* (*āḥed*) “to do,” *əḥab* ~ *əḥob* (*āḥeb*) “to give,” *məḥā* ~ *məḥi* (*māḥi*) “to hit,” and *tammā* “to become.” Although compound verbs similar to these are attested in Classical Mandaic, most Neo-Mandaic compound verbs are calqued upon Persian compound verbs, and many non-verbal elements are Persian or Arabic loan words.

*Syntax.* Neo-Mandaic generally preserves SVO word order despite its longstanding contact with Persian, although topic-fronting (which is typical of both languages) tends to obscure the word order. Simple sentences consist of a subject, which may be implied in the verb, and a predicate, which is headed by a verb or the copula. Compound sentences combine two or more simple sentences with coordinating conjunctions such as *u* “and,” *ammā* “but,” *lo* “or,” and the correlative conjunction *-lo... -lo* “either... or.” Complex sentences consist of a main clause and one or more dependent clauses introduced by a relative pronoun, provided that the referent of the antecedent of the clause is definite—if it is indefinite, no relative pronoun is used. The Classical Mandaic relative pronoun *d-* has not survived, having been replaced by *illi*, an Arabic loan that introduces non-restrictive relative clauses, and *ke*, a Persian loan that introduces restrictive relative clauses, both of which appear immediately following the antecedent of the clause. The antecedents of restrictive relative clauses are marked with the restrictive morpheme *-i*, which resembles the indefinite morpheme in form but not function, e.g. *ezgīt dukkāni ke həzitu awwāl* “I went to the places which I saw (them) before.” If the antecedent is the object of the relative clause, it will be represented within the relative clause by a resumptive relative pronoun, as in the example above (*həzitu* “I saw them”).

*The Copula.* Neo-Mandaic expresses various types of predication, including equation, attribution, location, existence, and possession, by means of independent and enclitic forms of the copula (in the simple present tense) and a copular verb (in all other tenses). The enclitic (or “short”) forms of the copula found in [Table 3](#) introduce attributive predicates, and the independent (or “long”) forms of the copula introduce equational predicates. The base of the independent form is ultimately derived from the Classical Mandaic existential particle *‘it* but due to several regular sound rules (Häberl, 2009, pp. 76-77,



89-90) it only appears in two allomorphs, *ekt-* (before a vowel) and *eh-* (before the preposition *l-* “to; for”), and indeed its original role in existential constructions has been assumed by the demonstrative pronoun ‘ka *ekkā* “there.”

To express possession, Neo-Mandaic employs a predicate locative construction. In the simple present tense, this construction is derived from the existential particle *\*eṭ* and the preposition *l-* “to/for,” which takes the enclitic pronouns introduced in Table 1. As noted above, the existential particle assumes the allomorph *eh-* before *l-*, yielding *ehli* “he has” (“there is for him”), *ehla* “she has,” and so forth. For all copular constructions in tenses other than the simple present, the copular verb *həwā ~ həwi (hāwi)* is used in the place of the independent or enclitic forms of the copula, e.g. *agar pərāhā həwāle, turti zabnit* “if I had money, I would have bought a cow.”

[Table 1.](#) Personal Pronouns and Inflectional Suffixes on the Verb.

[Table 2.](#) The Principal Parts of the Seven Stems.

[Table 3.](#) The Copula (Enclitic and Independent Forms).

Video. A short animation based upon the Neo-Mandaic story “Histoire de Chah Adel” in de Morgan, Jean-Jacques. 1904.

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