

THE VINES OF JOY

Comparative Studies in Mandaean History and Theology

By

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Now comes the time and the end,

comes the end and the time.

Years vanish like shadows

and months fly away like the mist.

Years, days, months, seasons, hours, and minutes

sink away and pass as if they had never been.

The vines of joy are torn out

and their songs depart and lose themselves,

~ From the Mandaean *Left Ginza* Book III

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INTRODUCTION

This study treats of the Mandaeans, often traditionally identified as the Sabians of the Qur'ān. I begin by tracing Mandaean history and its development from out of the matrix of Jewish baptizing groups exhibiting various esoteric or gnosis¹ orientations that manifested themselves in a variety of ancient sects, Jewish as well as Christian, such as Essenes, Ebionites, Elkesaites, Therapeutae, Sampseans, etc. I contend that it is likely that John the Baptizer, known in Mandaism under the two names Yahia and Yuhana, emerged out of the same general Jewish gnosis-oriented baptizing matrix, and although we must not view John as the founder of Mandaism, he is nevertheless one of their most respected prophets, indeed the final prophet to humanity, and he is distinctly honoured by having a Mandaean sacred book extensively devoted to his person and biography.

While Mandaeans reject the Virgin Mary, nevertheless she arguably appears indirectly under the name Miriai in the Mandaeans' literature, and is described in various of their scriptures as a foundational figure in the Mandaeans' history, suggesting that their historical genesis is to be traced back to around the turn of the Common Era in Palestine. I say "historical" in order not to create unnecessary tension with the Mandaean belief that holds that spiritually considered the group's existence can be traced back to Adam and his righteous offspring Seth. In a comparable sense, *mutatis mutandis*, Muslims trace their history back to Abraham, and then ultimately to Adam, the first prophet.

What is particularly noteworthy with regard to the Qur'ānic promise of salvation to the Mandaeans, if, as according to some traditional and modern scholarly authorities, they are indeed to be identified in some sense with the Sabians,² is that they accept neither Jesus as messiah nor the

¹ One could use the term "gnostic" in lowercase to emphasize its ambiguity and qualified sense in this context.

² As I will point out later, this identification cannot be taken in an exclusive sense, given that in the Qur'ān "Sabians" is likely a catch-all term for (esoterically inclined) religious groups not covered by the labels "Jews" and "Christians."

prophet of Islam as messenger of God. In fact, the theology and mysticism of the Mandaeans are gnostic in the classical sense. The Qur'ān also promises salvation to Jews and Christians; the former do not believe in Jesus as the messiah, and the latter do not believe in the apostleship of Islam's prophet. This all suggests that from at least one Qur'ānic point of view the core of religion lies not so much on the dogmatic plane as in the domain of the heart, a point often forgotten by some representatives of post-Qur'ānic Islamic theology, i.e., *kalām*.

The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, as well as in the many lands of their diaspora, maintain Gnosticism, in the sense of knowledge-orientation, as a living religion that has by no means died out. Indeed, the *Ginza*, *Qulasta*, *Book of John*, and similar texts are read regularly or recited liturgically daily by Mandaeans across the globe. The Mandaean writings are in some cases strikingly similar to many passages of the Nag Hammadi texts. It is my suspicion that there may be a possible historical relationship between the Mandaeans and various ancient Christian Gnostics, and that some of their gnostic theology may have overlapped with Mandaean channels.³ The Mandaeans themselves are likely the descendants of John the Baptizer's original disciples, and his and their mysticism or esotericism would naturally have flowed via Jesus into the Jerusalem community under James the Just, and also have given rise on a separate trajectory to later classical forms of Mandaeism.

Lurianic Kabbalah, the present form of mainstream mysticism within Orthodox Judaism's Hasidic movement, is likewise a living tradition and contains several "gnostic"-like components as well, attributable to the fact that some of Luria's doctrines represent a living continuation of ideas documentably paralleled in ancient Gnosticism, especially in Basilides' teachings. Gershom

³ I discuss this subject in more depth in the introductions to Samuel Zinner, *The Gospel of Thomas: Exploring the Semitic Alternatives* (forthcoming), and idem, *The Praeparatio Islamica: An Historical Reconstruction with Philological-Exegetical Commentary on Selected Qur'ān Āyāt Based on Ancient Hebrew, Syro-Aramaic, Mandaic, Samaritan and Hellenistic Literatures* (in progress).

Scholem points out some of the striking correspondences between medieval Lurianic Kabbalah and ancient Gnostic texts, but he unfortunately underestimates the likelihood of their at least partial direct line of historical and conceptual continuities.⁴ Still, Scholem's guarded tone is justified, given that many qualifications are necessary when proposing the relevant comparisons.

There is a fundamental social-structural difference between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and Mandaism on the other. All three of the Abrahamic faiths constitute religions of civilization, that is, city-based societal structures. By contrast, although Mandaism had its roots in the civilizational phenomenon of the Jewish religion, nevertheless this was from an offshoot branch of Judaism that was centred around the Jordan river out in the desert rather than in any ancient city. Remaining true to their roots, the later Mandaeans were what might be called river dwellers, living near rivers in order to maintain their baptismal-oriented spirituality and sacred rites. This resulted in the curious phenomenon of a group that had basically elected to remove themselves from civilization who nevertheless retained the symbols of civilizational religion in their own prayers and oral traditions, which were recorded in writing only at later stages under the pressure of secondary encounters with civilizational groups, both Christian and Islamic. Mandaean texts thus highlight theological symbols such as the celestial "king," supernal "thrones," phenomena that originate in city-based societies, and which are, by contrast unknown among indigenous peoples, that is, mobile or at least semi-mobile hunter-gatherer groups.

Thus there is what might be called an indigenous-like aspect to the Mandaeans, despite their inherited use of civilizational religious symbolism. One curious Mandaean usage of a civilizational symbol inherited from Judaism is the trope of "book," be that earthly or celestial. Because the Mandaeans wrote down their own traditions only at a rather late date, they consequently for quite a long period of their existence possessed an oral culture, as have so many indigenous groups. This

⁴ See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 264.

indicates that the mention of “book/s” in their various traditions could have functioned sometimes as a symbol rather than implying physical books. The indigenous-like oral dimension of Mandaean culture is illustrated by their initial contact with Islam, which led to the following exchange, as documented in the *Book of John* 86: “They stand there and interrogate you, and say to you: ‘Who is your prophet? Tell us who is your prophet, tell us what is your scripture, tell us to whom you pray.’ Those cursed and shameful ones neither know nor understand, they neither know nor understand that our Lord is the King of Light on high, he, the Only One.” This reminds us of the many initial encounters between Christian missionaries and Native Americans in past centuries, when indigenous peoples would be asked, “Do you believe in God?” The missionaries would inevitably project onto the indigenous idea of the Great Spirit, which they would invariably hear about in the Native Americans’ responses to the interrogation, all the convoluted accretions of their civilizational notions about the Abrahamic religions’ monotheistic God.

Because of the ignorance and prejudice of outsiders, tragically the plight of Mandaeans continues into the present day, perpetrated and perpetuated by radical Muslims, whose persecution of Mandaeans intensified after the Iraq war and the removal of Saddam Hussein. Although scholars must cultivate an emotional detachment when carrying out research, at the same time scholars are humans and must not be silent about any present and ongoing acts of persecution against a group whose traditions are the subject of serious study.

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CHAPTER ONE

Early Mandaean History

As I shall attempt to document in this study, the Mandaeans originated on the borders of Judaism, that is, as a sectarian baptizing group, possibly shortly before the time of the appearances of John the Baptizer and Jesus, which is not to deny the Mandaean belief that on a theological plane the first Mandaean was the prophet Adam. In a similar essentialist mode, Islamic *kalām* holds that Adam was the first Muslim, that is, one who is resigned to God. The Qur'ān calls Jesus and Moses muslims in this wider symbolic sense, yet the Qur'ān explicitly traces Islam back to Abraham, not to Adam. For all we know, the emphasis on Adam found in later Islamic sources might in part represent an indirect integration of Mandaean thought. There are even Islamic traditions from Ibn Hishām and Bukhārī that intriguingly state that the Prophet and the first Muslims were at times called Sabians,⁵ whom some traditional authorities identify as the Mandaeans.⁶ That certain people called the Prophet “the Sabian” might (or might not) indicate that the Mandaeans and nascent Islam shared more in common than just ritual purifications involving water, although one must guard against reading the Islamic canonical narrations in a principally historical sense, given the theological motivations behind and functions of these traditions.

⁵ For references see Johs. Pedersen, “The Ṣābiān,” in T. W. Arnold, Reynold A. Nicholson, eds., *A Volume of Oriental Studies: Presented to Professor Edward G. Browne* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 386-387.

⁶ On the identification of the Qur'ānic Sabians as the Mandaeans, see Sinasi Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relationship to the Sabians of the Qur'ān and to the Harranians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994). While Seyyed Hossein Nasr correctly notes that the Qur'ānic Sabians are not to be identified with the Harranians whose beliefs were in part “Gnostic,” and while Muḥammad Asad refers to the Harranians as “a gnostic sect” distinct from the Qur'ānic Sabians whom he identifies as the Mandaeans, neither of these authors informs us that the Mandaeans themselves are gnostics in the classical sense; indeed, the very word Mandaean comes from the Mandaic-Aramaic word for “knowledge.” See Muḥammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, 2003), p. 21, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 113. The Qur'ānic reference to the Sabians could encompass the Mandaeans, but would include an implicit general allusion to gnosis-oriented groups such as the Manichaeans.

Though some scholars suggest that the Mandaeans may be a quite ancient sect from Babylonia,⁷ the evidence would appear to support Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley when she writes that “it still seems premature to view Mandaism as pre-Christian.”⁸ The Mandaeans were from the beginning in contact with Jewish “gnosis”; Gilles Quispel gathered more than enough evidence to enable one to speak confidently of “[t]he Jewish Gnostics who were the ancestors of the Mandaeans.”⁹

Nevertheless, I am not confident that these “Jewish Gnostics,” or at least some of them, may not have been related to early Jesus movements. Alternatively, some members of early or proto-Mandaeans may have stemmed from circles of “Jewish Christians” (an admittedly problematic label), i.e., Jewish followers of Jesus, while others may have been followers of John the Baptizer.

Some researchers have traced back the Mandaeans to the Transjordan area, specifically in the region of the Hauran mountains.¹⁰ M. Lidzbarski held that early Mandaeans likely joined John the Baptizer’s movement, and that sometime before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, on account of conflicts with Jewish authorities they migrated to Babylon.¹¹ Some of the most recent scholarship on this religion leaves open the possibility that it may have arisen originally as a group of followers attached in some degree to John the Baptizer.¹² Lidzbarski describes the earliest form of the religion as follows: “Above all was the requirement of baptism in living water. . . . Next came the sacraments, the sacramental food and the sacramental drink (*phita* and *mambuha*), sincerity and

⁷ See, for example, Lawrence Zalcman, “Christians, Noserim, and Nebuchadnezzar’s Daughter,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 81 3/4 (1991): pp. 411-426.

⁸ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, review of “*The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relationship to the Sabians of the Qur’ān and to the Harranians* by Sinasi Gündüz,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116/2 (1996): p. 301.

⁹ Gilles Quispel, “Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 34/1 (1980), p. 12.

¹⁰ See Kurt Rudolph, Dennis C. Duling, John Modschiedler, “Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion,” *History of Religions* 8/3 (1969), p. 213.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See, for example, the magisterial study of Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005).

cohesion among the brethren (*kugta* and *laufa*), and, especially accentuated, alms (*zidqa*).¹³ These rituals and values could very well reflect theological impulses from early Jewish baptizing circles associated with John the Baptizer and Jesus.

From even a cursory reading of their sacred literature it becomes apparent that Jewish components of gnosis would have been circulating among Mandaeans from the beginning of their formation.

Early Mandaean contacts with Syro-Palestinian groups of the Jewish Jesus sect may arguably have left traces in various passages of the Gospel of John, the letters of Deutero-Ignatius (all the Ignatian letters generally held to be authentic probably date from ca. 170-200),¹⁴ and the ca. 100 CE *Odes of Solomon*.¹⁵

The *Psalms of Thomas* are deeply congruent with Mandaean thought as well. Contrary to prevailing opinion, although these psalms were used in Manichaean circles, a good case can be made that they are earlier than Mani, and that the Thomas who composed the psalms was not originally understood as a reference to Mani's disciple of that name, but to Jesus' disciple Thomas. The *Psalms of Thomas* would consequently emanate from the same communities that preserved the *Gospel of*

¹³ M. Lidzbarski, *Ginza: Der Schatz oder das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1925), p. 10.

¹⁴ See Walter Schmithals, "Zu Ignatius von Antiochien," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13/2 (2009): pp. 181–203. Whereas Schmithals places the composition of the Ignatian letters shortly before Irenaeus' time, I find no evidence that Irenaeus actually knew them or that they even existed then. I do not exclude the possibility that Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies* may have in part motivated the creation of the Ignatian letters. Additionally, even though the letters could have been composed in Rome, I detect in them authentic earlier traditions from Syrian churches. I prefer the parlance Deutero-Ignatius rather than Pseudo-Ignatius because the latter suggests modern notions of forgery that do not necessarily apply to ancient contexts.

¹⁵ See Kurt Rudolph, Dennis C. Duling, John Modschiedler, "Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion," p. 213. On the dating and provenance of the Solomonic odes, see Michael Lattke, *The Odes of Solomon: A Commentary*. Translated by Marianne Ehrhardt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 6-14. Lattke would place the *Odes* later than ca. 100, though not too much later, based on what he interprets as the *Odes*' reflection of influence from New Testament writings. I am not so confident that such parallels cannot be explained as independent witnesses to quite early non-literary, that is, oral and liturgical, traditions.

Thomas, the later *Acts of Thomas*, and other early Syrian Thomasine literature.¹⁶ I would place a redaction of the *Psalms of Thomas* sometime in the second century at the earliest when various Mandaean and Jewish Jesus sect members may still have been in some degree of amicable contact with each other.

The Mandaean elements in the Thomasine literature raises the question as to whether the founders of Thomasine groups could have originally been followers of John the Baptizer, or if they could have absorbed such elements from others who had been John's disciples. That Mani was born into a family that belonged to the Elkesaites, which in at least certain respects may have exhibited Mandaean-like Jewish Jesus sect ideas,¹⁷ might help explain how the *Psalms of Thomas* could have made their way into Manichaean circles. This also indicates that it is possible that the earliest Mandaean responses to Jesus were not necessarily monolithic, but that they could have varied, which may have caused dissensions that led to the formation of various offshoot groups. This would seem a plausible explanation of the continuing Mandaean parallels in Christian literature in the early centuries of the Common Era. Many of these groups may have been absorbed into Christian movements, principally among the diaspora Jewish Jesus sect communities.

A relationship between Mandaeans and Samaritans has been noted in the literature.¹⁸ There are also Islamic *aḥādīth* that state, as I noted above, the earliest Muslims were in some instances called

¹⁶ This is the tendency in the basic argument of F. Forrester Church and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Mani's Disciple Thomas and the Psalms of Thomas," *Vigiliae Christianae* 34/1 (1980): pp. 47-55.

¹⁷ See Albert Henrichs, "Mani and the Babylonian Baptists: A Historical Confrontation," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973): pp. 23-59. Henrichs wisely avoids identifying the group Mani was raised in as the Mandaeans. Similarly I argue only that the two groups, along with most of the other Jewish Jesus sect and gnosis-oriented baptizing groups, descend from a common constellation of ancient esoteric baptizing groups and their shared theological concerns. These groups, which include the Essenes, James' Jerusalem Jesus community, Ebionites, and Mandaeans, while not identical are nevertheless all related as to their historical origins via a common esoteric *tendenz*.

¹⁸ See Lawrence Zalcman, "Christians, Noserim, and Nebuchadnezzar's Daughter," pp. 422-423; Moses Gaster (tr.), *The Asatir: The Samaritan Book of the Secrets of Moses together with the Pitron or Samaritan Commentary and the Samaritan Story of the Death of Moses* (London: Royal Asiatic

Sabians, whom al-Bīrūnī identifies as the Mandaean. Of course, the *aḥādīth* may use the term Sabian in a different sense than does al-Bīrūnī. In any case, some degree of connection between Mandaism and Samaritanism, which may have been theological rather than historical, might help explain some of the Samaritan elements of early Islam that were perhaps mediated via Arabian Ebionite-like groups whose own faith could have absorbed Mandaean traditions at an earlier stage, elements that may remain unrecognized as such by current scholarship. For example the designation of the Prophet of Islam as “the apostle of God and seal of the prophets” (see Qur’ān *sūra* 33:40) reflects Samaritan prophetological language, as I documented in a previous monograph.¹⁹ The titles of “apostle” (or “messenger”) and “seal of the prophets” are assigned to Moses in the fourth-century Samaritan work *Memar Marqa* (“The Teaching of Marqa”) 5:3, where we read of Moses: “By your life, O Apostle of God, remain with us a little longer! By your life, O Seal of the prophets, stay with us a little longer!”²⁰ Granted, manuscripts of *Memar Marqa* postdate the rise of Islam, but merely to presuppose that the Islamic titles in question were later borrowed by Samaritans and then interpolated into the text of *Memar Marqa* would arguably reflect either a conscious or unconscious “canonical bias” against Samaritanism in favour of Islam.

This Samaritan connection opens up intriguing possibilities, for example, concerning the Samaritan work *Molad Moshe*,²¹ whose doctrine of the pre-existent, primordial Mosaic light does not necessarily have to be seen as derivative of the Islamic concept of the *nūr Muḥammadī*, for the

Society, 1927), pp. 128-134; E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. xv, 88-102.

¹⁹ See Samuel Zinner, *The Abrahamic Archetype: Essays on the Conceptual and Formal Relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Archetype, 2011), p. 24.

²⁰ Quoted in Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998), p. 304. Gieschen does not point out the parallels to Muḥammad’s titles. I give the original Samaritan text in Samuel Zinner, *The Praeparatio Islamica: An Historical Reconstruction with Philological-Exegetical Commentary on Selected Qur’ān Āyāt Based on Ancient Hebrew, Syro-Aramaic, Mandaic, Samaritan and Hellenistic Literatures*. (In progress).

²¹ See Selig J. Miller, *The Samaritan Molad Mosheh. Samaritan and Arabic texts edited and translated with an introduction and notes* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).

reverse could be the case, through various intermediations naturally.²² The fact that later Samaritan literature contains the *basmala* could also not inconceivably imply a possible mutual praxis rather than a simple Samaritan borrowing of Islamic practices, especially since we find some of the components of the *basmala* in Mandaean literature, not to mention the simple fact that the *basmala* is composed completely of pre-Islamic Jewish terminology. Although the divine title *al-Raḥmān* is attested as a non-Jewish pre-Islamic Arabian divinity, nevertheless, in the Qur'ān, especially in *al-Fātiḥa*, it is used in conjunction with other traditional Jewish phrases and tropes, most naturally indicating a Jewish provenance for the title *al-Raḥmān* as well.

Regarding analogues to Islamic-sounding phrases and ideas that are present in what may perhaps be some of the earliest Mandaean literature, I would argue that these might best be explained as representative of Mandaean influence on Islamic sources rather than the reverse scenario. The Mandeans would have had little incentive to imitate the sacred scripture of Islam when so many of its members had brutally persecuted and humiliated the Mandeans. Phraseology strikingly similar to that of the Qur'ān can be illustrated by the introductory sections of the Mandaean *Ginza Rba*, which opens with various formulae such as “In the name of the Great Life,” which is the usual Mandaean name of what Muslims would call God. The standard Mandaean scriptural opening is *bšuma d hiia*, “In the Name of Life.” The *Ginza Rba* then continues with “May you be praised, Lord of all the worlds (*maraihun d kulhun almia*),” who is then given the names “the Compassionate, the Forgiving, the Clement, the Merciful (*haiasa utaiaba uriuana umrahmana*),” which correspond with the divine names of the *basmala*, names that are repeated throughout the *Ginza Rba* as well as other Mandaean texts (e.g., *Qulasta* 171). The *Ginza Rba* opening then continues by assigning to the Lord of all the worlds other divine names found throughout the Qur'ān, including “The Mighty, the Wise (*aziza hakima* = Qur'ānic *‘azīz ḥakīm*, see *sūra* 2:129,

²² The *nūr Muḥammadī* doctrine was mediated to Sunni orthodoxy via sufis who, however, derived it from Shī'ī “gnostic” (i.e., esoteric) teachings regarding the Imāms.

209, 220, 228, 240, 260, and elsewhere throughout the Qur'ān), the Knower, the Seer (*uiaduia hazaia* = Qur'ānic *ḵhabīr baṣīr*, see *sūra* 35:31; 42:27),” and “Lord of all the worlds of light” (*maraihun d kulhun almia d nhura*).

The same *Ginza Rba* opening continues with a statement reflected in another of the central Qur'ānic tropes, that of the warning against *shirk*: “The Great Countenance of the Glory, invisible, limitless, without partner in the crown, without sharer in the rule.” Later in section 27 we read: “Firmly founded is the throne (*kursia*) of the Great (*rba*), the Sublime (*'laia*), which for all eternity will never be moved from its place. . . . From the primordial beginning he is king (*malka*), whose kingdom (*malkuta*) stands for eternity and passes not away.” Interestingly, the famous Qur'ānic Throne Verse (*al-kursiyy*, *sūra* 2:255), “His throne is extended over the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both is no burden to him. And he is the exalted (*al-'alīyy*), the mighty (*al-'aẓīm*),” ends with two equivalent divine names that are found in the opening of what could be called the *Ginza Rba* “throne verse,” which I have just quoted.

In *Ginza Rba* 2,2 we find the following invocation: “O Mighty, O Wise (*aziza ḥakima*)! Remove wrath from your friends (*batil rugza mn rahmak*). . . . Lord of all worlds (*maraihun d kulhun almia*), in your compassion destroy all wrath (*btiabutak batlh lkulh rugza*).” Here we see not only the Qur'ānic pairing of the two divine names *'azīz ḥakīm* (see e.g., *sūra* 5:118), but also the Islamic teaching on the priority of the divine mercy over wrath found in the well-known *ḥadīth qudsī*: “Verily, my mercy prevails over my wrath.”

Pedersen calls into question the identification of the Qur'ānic Sabians with the Mandaeans by averring that “nothing suggests that this sect was of any special importance in Western Arabia.”²³ Pedersen continues by presenting evidence which indicates that the term Sabian means “Gnostic,” but in a larger sense that encompasses not only classical Gnosticism, which would embrace

²³ Johs. Pedersen, “The Ṣābians,” p. 390.

Mandaeism and Manichaeism, but which would not be restricted to them, and would include neoplatonism as well, and even Buddhism. Thus “Sabian” would be a “comprehensive term for gnostic sects.” There is much merit in Pedersen’s identification of “Sabian” with “Gnostic,” but that these “Gnostics” could have included the Mandaeans is suggested by more than one piece of evidence. Above all would be the extensive apparent adoption of Mandaean phraseology in the Qur’ān, and this alone calls into question Pedersen’s claim that the Mandaeans had no “special importance in Western Arabia.” Additionally, more recent research indicates that part of nascent Islam’s background/s is to be traced beyond Western Arabia.²⁴

Arguably, Mandaean ideas could have found their way onto the Arabian peninsula in the time of Islam’s birth. If the Mandaeans themselves did not carry their doctrines and formulations to Arabia, then who might possibly be identified as such a channel? Could it be the Quraysh Manichaeans, whom François de Blois identifies as the Qur’ānic Sabians?²⁵ Manichaeism, like Mandaeism, is also an ancient group with early Jewish Jesus sect associations in their origins, and although Manichaeism is quite unique and in many respects different from Mandaeism in ideology and articulation, nevertheless the Manichaean use of the profoundly Mandaean-like *Psalms of Thomas* remains intriguing and must be explained somehow, not explained away. In a separate study I examine the possibility that the Quraysh Manichaeans may have had among their members former Mandaeans who had converted to Mani’s faith and relocated to the Arabian peninsula.²⁶ In any event, the Manichaean faith in Arabia may have possessed more Mandaean elements than obtained elsewhere in Manichaeism.

²⁴ See Robert M. Kerr, “Aramaisms in the Qur’ān and their Significance.”

<https://www.academia.edu/7684935/Aramaisms_in_the_Qur_%C4%81n_and_Their_Significance>. Retrieved 14 Feb. 2016.

²⁵ François de Blois, “The ‘Sabians’ (sābi’ûn) in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” *Acta orientalia* LVI (1995): pp. 39-61.

²⁶ See Samuel Zinner, *The Praeparatio Islamica*, chapter 2.

François de Blois has argued for the presence in the Arabian peninsula of “Jewish-Christian” Nazoraeans, whom he identifies with the Qur’ānic *naṣārā*,²⁷ and I would suggest that some of these Nazoraeans may have had Ebionite ancestors who may have been in contact with Mandaeans, either in Mesopotamia, or not inconceivably stretching back to the earliest days of Mandaean origins in Palestine. Even though the term *naṣārā* was a general term for all Christians,²⁸ it is apparent that in various cases (though not all) the Qur’ānic *naṣārā*’s beliefs coincide specifically with those of the Jewish followers of Jesus known from early sources as Ebionites and Nazoraeans. According to de Blois, the Qur’ān attests to knowledge of both the Semitic speaking members of the Jewish Jesus sect as well as to the Hellenistic Melchites, which has relevance for the fact that the Ebionites in some way rejected the prophets between Moses and Jesus, which is also reminiscent of Samaritanism:

The Qur’ānic names of the Old Testament patriarchs and of the protagonists of the gospels [Jesus, Mary, John, Zachariah etc.] all derive from Semitic [Hebrew or Aramaic, though occasionally restructured] forms. By contrast, the Qur’ānic names of the post-Mosaic prophets [e.g. Yūnus/Jonah] derive from the Greek forms found in the Septuagint. This suggests that Muḥammad’s awareness of these figures derives not from the Nazoraeans but from Melchite Christians.²⁹

²⁷ François de Blois, “Elchasai - Manes – Muḥammad,” *Der Islam* 81 (2004): pp. 31-48.

²⁸ See Jon Olav Ryen, *The Tree in the Light World: A Study in the Mandaean Vine Motif* (Oslo: Unipub forlag, 2006), p. 22-23. Ryen writes here as follows on the term “Nazoraean”: “In Syrian territory, this seems to have been the common term for all Christians. In the Koran, the same Semitic root is used about Jesus’ followers or ‘helpers.’” Additionally, Ryen refers to “the parallel use of the Syriac terms *kristyone* . . . and *nasraye* in the Syrian East.”

²⁹ See François de Blois, “Islam in Its Arabian Context,” <<http://www.orientalistics.com/news.php?item.26.1>>. See also in greater depth, François de Blois, “Islam in Its Arabian Context,” in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, eds., *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 615-624. That there may be exceptions to de Blois’ claim does not explain away the general trend at work in the pattern he identifies.

Regarding the possible Samaritan connection with John the Baptizer, the Jewish Jesus sect, Mandaism, Gnosticism, etc., all of the components of the relevant constellation need to be pondered afresh in relation to the question of the *praeparatio islamica*. This leads me to observe that whereas scholars have long identified Qur'ānic parallels in Christian and Jewish scriptures, it apparently has not occurred to academia to search the Mandaean scriptures with an open mind for Qur'ānic and Islamic parallels. The reason for this could be largely an historicist prejudice that interprets anything Islamic-sounding in Mandaism as reflecting Islamic influence rather than a primitive Mandaean element that may have been later integrated into Islam. From an Islamic theological perspective there need be no problem with such integrations, for they can be understood theologically as providential confirmations of elements from other heavenly revelations. Since the Qur'ān repeatedly emphasizes that it is precisely a confirmation of the earlier revelations, it would be incongruent if elements from other religions were not present in the Islamic sacred text. In the two chapters that follow, on John the Baptizer and the Virgin Mary respectively, I present some of the parallels between the Qur'ān and Mandaean scriptures in order to pursue this previously neglected line of research, a situation that is regrettable both historically and exegetically.

That the earliest Muslims were at times called Sabians may suggest both a similarity and a contact with a form of gnosticism in the sense of gnosis-orientation. If this refers principally to Manichaeism, as de Blois argues, this still may pertain to Mandaism if, as I suggest, Arabian Manichaeism may have possessed a deeper Mandaean complexion than was the case elsewhere geographically. The Mandaean as well as Qur'ānic association of John the Baptizer with the Virgin Mary (under the guise of Miriai) again brings us to the question of the historical John the Baptizer as a formative figure for early Mandaism.

To recover to a very limited degree something of the beliefs of John the Baptizer might be accomplished with recourse to several Mandaean sources that include the *Book of John (Sidra*

d'Yahia, or *Drashe d'Malke*, “Narrations of the Kings”), the *Haran Gawaita*, *Ginza Rba* 5,4 (this contains the story of the theophany of Manda d-Haiia to John under the name Yuhuna), and *Ginza Rba* 7 (which consists entirely of traditional wisdom aphorisms by John under the name Yahia). I am not suggesting that individual details of John’s teaching can be reconstructed from these late sources, but rather that it is not inconceivable that the general paradigms or orientations of the Baptizer’s doctrine might be evident to some degree in these texts. The combination of esoteric doctrine and practical wisdom aphorisms would eminently accord with what we know of first-century Jewish thought in general.

In addition to the Mandaean sources it is possible that works such as the *Revelation of Dositheos*, discovered among the Nag Hammadi codices, has been undervalued by scholarship as a witness to nascent Samaritan-Baptizer ideology (again, not so much as regards details as overarching paradigms and concerns), though there are of course many qualifications that would have to be made in this context. There is a Mandaean-Samaritan connection in the admittedly garbled accounts of the early patristic heresy hunters, and that connection is precisely John the Baptizer.³⁰ The Qur’ānic endorsement of John and the Sabians (who we are suggesting may be inclusive of both Manichaeans and Mandaeans, although the latter in an indirect mode) and the Qur’ānic adoption of the Samaritan Mosaic titles Apostle of God and Seal of the Prophets, all of this needs to be pondered afresh.

Moreover the Samaritan criticisms of the Hebrew Torah, the charges of textual corruptions (“false pericopes”), all of this coincides with Jewish Jesus sect, specifically, Ebionite paradigms. The Islamic “Seal of the Prophets” trope seems to coincide with the Ebionite mytheme of the True Prophet, who is manifested in a series of prophets beginning with Adam, a concept mirrored in

³⁰ See E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, pp. 88-102; James Alan Montgomery, *The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect. Their History, Theology and Literature* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1907), pp. 252-269; Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York: MJF Books, 1986), pp. 189ff.

various Islamic *ahādīth* concerning the Prophet of Islam.³¹ Additionally, there is the tendency in Shem-Tob's Hebrew version of the Matthew gospel to magnify John the Baptizer as saviour of the world, and to delete all traces found in the canonical Greek Matthew that minimize John.³² Shem-Tob's Matthew also adds to the familiar title "Son of Man" the phrase "Son of the Virgin," parlance attested not only in Waldensian sources,³³ but also in some degree or form in Islamic texts such as *Biḥār* 10, 299-310, 1: "It is written in the Gospel, Verily, the son of the good woman will leave, and the paraclete will come after him. . . ." ³⁴

Christoph Burchard speculates on whether John the Baptizer's message contained an esoteric doctrine concerning a celestial entity whose earthly counterpart might be John himself: "It is unlikely that John had a [human] person in mind when he said, 'One who is more powerful than I is coming after me. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Matt. 3:11-12); presumably he was thinking of a heavenly creature, God himself or, more likely, an authorized angel of judgment—perhaps the Son of man. Possibly John viewed himself as the earthly counterpart of the one to come."³⁵ The Mandaeans might heartily affirm such a view of John. Burchard also refers to John's belief in a crime "that caused all Jews to be lost,"³⁶ which somehow reminds one of the bitter anti-Jewish strain in Mandaeism, perhaps partly caused by Jewish persecution of the original Mandaean community under Mariiai, Jaqif, and Beni Amin.

³¹ See Henry Corbin, "Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis," in *Man and Transformation. Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*. Bollingen Series XXX. Vol. 5 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), pp. 76-93.

³² See George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2002), p. 219.

³³ See Arnold Meyer, *Jesu Muttersprache: Das galiläische Aramäisch in seiner Bedeutung für die Erklärung der Reden Jesu und der Evangelien überhaupt* (Freiburg i. B./Leipzig: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1896), pp. 161-162.

³⁴ *Jesus through Shi'ite Narrations*. Selected by Mahdi Muntazir Qaim. Translated by Al-Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2005), p. 166.

³⁵ See Jürgen Becker (ed.), *Christian Beginnings: Word and Community from Jesus to Post-Apostolic Times* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 22.

³⁶ *Ibid.* There are serious doubts that this gospel wording can be attributed to the historical John the Baptizer.

Burchard notes that according to the Gospel of John, the apostles Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael had originally been disciples of John the Baptizer, and then writes that “[m]any scholars presume that the Johannine movement was absorbed by the Mandaean sect, which still has a few members in Iraq; in the extensive literature of this sect, John is highly esteemed. All of this can be interpreted as proof that John’s disciples carried on after John’s death, assuming that they indeed existed, but it is insufficient to establish the fact.”³⁷ Burchard’s speculations on a celestial Son of man who may have an earthly counterpart bring us back again to the question of the possible esoteric, “gnostic”-like components in John the Baptizer’s message.

Samaritanism’s Gnostic elements, including what may even loosely be called kabbalistic in a much later and qualified sense, have been discussed and disputed.³⁸ Objections have been raised repeatedly against the existence of an esoteric trajectory within Samaritanism. For example, James Alan Montgomery argues as follows:

We thus find some interesting points of connection with early Jewish Gnosticism, but withal little positive development in the way of hypostatization; [the Samaritan philosopher] Marka’s trend, doubtless dependent upon incipient Kabbalism, was not pursued by the unimaginative Samaritan mind, which was influenced much more by the hard Deism of Islam. Despite the traditions and opinions of Simon Magus, there is little to show that Samaritanism was ever Gnostically minded.³⁹

There are a number of problems with Montgomery’s claims. First, to refer to “the unimaginative Samaritan mind” strikes one as somewhat insensitive and also ignores the evidence for an esoteric

³⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁸ See M. D. Goulder, ed., *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (London: SCM, 1979), pp. 247-250; John Macdonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (London: SCM Press, 1964).

³⁹ James Alan Montgomery, *The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect. Their History, Theology and Literature*, p. 210.

tradition in Samaritanism—they even have an archangel named “Kabbalah.”⁴⁰ Second, to refer to “the hard Deism of Islam” without mentioning Islamic sufism is almost derogatory in the typical mode of so many of the older western Orientalists. Even Montgomery presents enough evidence that would for some counter his own claims; for example, a few pages later, specifically on page 213, he refers to Samaritan traditions on the divine name involving gematria techniques. On page 219, he observes concerning the angel Kabbalah that he seems to be paralleled in many respects by the Jewish Metatron, and the Samaritan angel Anusa “appears in the Kabbalistic literature as a form of Enoch (Enosh) who was the Demiurge, the Prince of the Presence, and even identified with God Himself.” The angel Anusa may also be paralleled in some ways by the Mandaean Anush-uthra. Montgomery then discusses the Samaritan belief in the pre-existence of Moses and the Samaritan cognate doctrine of the pre-existent light of Moses on page 227.

Scholars who argue against a “Gnostic” dimension of Samaritanism often do so first by conceding that there are gnostic or esoteric elements in certain Samaritan authors, especially in Marqa, but then they assert that such authors or esoteric strains do not represent authentic Samaritanism, or that they do not belong to the integral Samaritan faith.⁴¹ However, this is equivalent to the argument put forward by various overly dogmatic-minded Muslims who insist that sufism is not authentically Islamic, that Islamic mysticism is some sort of “deviation” from a rather reified notion of “true Islam.”

Similar esoteric notions to those that circulated among Samaritans were shared among various ancient Jewish Jesus sect baptizing groups, and may have been mediated through possible Essenic traits of John the Baptizer, which, however, would not require positing a direct relationship between John and Qumran. Qumran appears to have been a radical schismatic branch that broke away from

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 219, 223.

⁴¹ See for example the argumentation of Simeon Lowy, *The Principles of Samaritan Bible Exegesis* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), pp. 245ff.

mainstream orthodox Essenism, a movement that was widespread in ancient Syro-Palestine, so that one must not identify Qumran with the Essenes *en toto*. John the Baptizer could have been inspired by Essenes (as well as other Jewish groups) who resided in Palestinian villages rather than at Qumran. Essenic or Essenic-like traditions could have been transmitted by John to his disciples, some of whom might have become forerunners of the later Mandaeans, that is, a particular branch of “Gnostics.”⁴²

Many of the Samaritan esoteric traditions, which often coincide with Jewish esoteric beliefs that circulated in approximately the same era and later times, apparently found their way into early Jewish Jesus sect groups both through the channels of Pharisaic mysticism and Essenic esotericism on the one hand, and early Mandaeans who may have been descendants of disciples of John the Baptizer on the other hand. The Nag Hammadi James documents, which exhibit a doctrine of a dual Sophia, are to a degree paralleled conceptually in the later kabbalah’s dual Shekhinah doctrine. Jewish esoteric traditions were not promoted by Paul, who felt they would be dangerous for Gentile converts to his Christ movement.⁴³ As the Gentile converts became more or less the majority of the early Church, Jewish esoteric traditions were banned and then finally forgotten or defamed as heretical for the most part in mainstream Christianity.

The Mandaeans accepted John the Baptizer as a promised prophet and as a sort of manifestation of the primordial light, and his coming had been predicted in the *Ginza Rba*. Though the Mandaeans may have existed previously, it is likely that the appearance of John the Baptizer may have solidified their group cohesion and their doctrinal system, which may be indicated by the very

⁴² This is not to say that Mandaism is to be restricted to a group of John’s followers, for not all early Mandaeans had to have been disciples of John.

⁴³ See, for example, Colossians 2:18 where Paul (or Deutero-Paul) refers negatively to the role of angelology, asceticism, and Torah observance in what is likely an allusion to some proto-form of *merkabah* mysticism. Such traditions have the approval of both the Jewish sacred scriptures and sacred traditions, so that Paul’s comments could be viewed as unacceptable from a Jewish perspective. Paul’s position might be more charitably interpreted as implying merely that such Jewish practices are not necessarily beneficial for Gentiles.

existence of their *Book of John*. This latter text demonstrates that while John by no means constitutes the centre of Mandaean life and thought, nevertheless he cannot be relegated to the fringes of the religion either. While not accepting Jesus as a true prophet (for “Jesus” to a certain extent functions in Mandaean texts as a symbol of Byzantine ecclesiastical accretions), Mandaeans nevertheless arguably at one time revered his mother Mary, given the central role of Miriai, a positively transformed specialization of Mary, at least according to Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley.

In the *Book of John* it is Mary (Miriai) and not John who functions as a theological centre, and the fact that in this text Mary, under the name Miriai, is the heart of what could be called the Mandaean “foundation myth,”⁴⁴ is a further indication that the time of Mary/Miriai and John constitutes an important stage in the formative period of Mandaeism. That is to say that while the *Book of John* portrays the Mandaeans as already existing before Miriai’s/Mary’s exposure to the group, nevertheless the text describes the group’s encounter with Mary (Miriai) as being a formative factor in their self-identity.

That the *Book of John* preserves early traditions paralleled in ancient Jewish Jesus sect esoteric (“gnostic”) texts is a further indicator that the Mandaeans may in fact have been closely associated with some of the early wings of the Jewish Jesus sect. As Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley has noted, this particular text’s Jaqif would seem to be Jesus’ brother James (Jacob), who in the company of Mary-Miriai appears together with a Beni Amin, i.e., Benjamin, a name Hippolytos mentions in connection with what some scholars might call the “Jewish-Christian” Naassenes. In the same account Hippolytos mentions a tradition that James imparted secret teachings to Mariamne, most likely meaning either the Magdalene or Jesus’ mother.⁴⁵ A Mariam also appears in *I ApocJas* 40-41

⁴⁴ Mary “became the focal point for the [Mandaean] community in the East.” See Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “The Evidence for Women Priests in Mandaeism,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 59/2 (April, 2000), p. 105.

⁴⁵ See Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus’ Mother, Miriai,” *Novum Testamentum* 35/2 (April, 1993), pp. 190-191.

among the Nag Hammadi codices, a text that contains the doctrine of the dual Sophia which is of a piece, *mutatis mutandis*, with the Mandaean doctrine of the ambiguous Ruha. According to Buckley, the figures Jaqif, Beni Amin, and Miriai “clearly” symbolize the persecuted Mandaean community in first-century Jerusalem, and these three appear together both in the *Book of John* as well as in the *Ginza Rba* 15,11.⁴⁶

As Israel Knohl has explained, Jesus’ parables and general teachings can be characterized as being more or less in accord with those of other contemporary Galilean rabbis. Other charismatic miracle workers were also known in the same region. Jesus’ parables and miracles therefore fit in well with what is known of first-century Galilean Pharisaic piety and religion. What is on the other hand unique in Jesus with regard to being a first-century Galilean rabbi are his specific messianic ideas, which are not Pharisaic, but rather agree more with the messianic theology of the Essenes.⁴⁷ A case can be made for the argument that John the Baptizer had either been an Essene or had been influenced by Essenes, though not of the schismatic Qumran type.⁴⁸ Moreover it was John who initiated Jesus into his public ministry, and this raises the possibility that John could have transmitted esoteric Essene messianic doctrines to Jesus.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

⁴⁷ Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Translated by David Maisel (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 46.

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 122. The equation Qumran = the Essenes is to be rejected, for Essenes lived in other places besides Qumran, and furthermore Qumran was a schismatic Essene group not representative of the larger Essene trajectory. On this question, see Philip R. Davies, “The Essene Revolution,” <<http://www.canonbury.ac.uk/lectures/essenets.htm>>; retrieved 10 November 2011. This short piece by Davies was previously published in 2002 by the Charles Strong Memorial Trust of Bellvue Heights, South Australia. See further, Eyal Regev, “From Enoch to John the Essene—An Analysis of Sect Development: 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and the Essenes,” in Esther G. Chazon, Betsy Halpern-Amaru, eds. In collaboration with Ruth A. Clements, *New Perspectives on Old Texts* (London/Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 67-93; Leslie W. Walck, “The Social Setting of the Parables of Enoch,” in Eric F. Mason et al., eds., *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam*. Vol. Two (Leiden/Boston; Brill, 2012), pp. 669-686.

It is intriguing that one of the etymologically disputed self-designations of the Mandaeans overlaps with one of the titles for an early group of Jewish Christians, namely, Nasoreans, as we find in *Ginza Rba* 6,214 where the following *merkabah*-like ascension account is preserved:

When the measure of Dinanukt was completed for him and he left his body, they brought him to the door of the House of Life. And Dinanukt spoke: Open for me the door of the House of Life. Then they opened for him the door of Life and lifted up for him the Bar Goda (= Hebrew *Pargod*, Veil) of Security. They rose, clad him in a garment of splendor, brought him a garland of the vine Ruaz and put it on his head. And Dinanukt stood in the abode of Life, in the abode that is all splendor and in the abode that is all light. And he stood in great strength, praised the Mighty Life and (him whose) epithet (title) is honored and exalted like himself. And Dinanukt spoke: With this ascension (*masiqta*) with which I have ascended, all truthful, faithful and goodly Nasoreans shall ascend and attain.⁴⁹

This text also reveals the integration of Jewish esoteric traditions within Mandaeism, and this suggests an early contact with Judaism before the Mandaeans severed themselves from such ties.

There can be little doubt that at one stage the Virgin Mary was accepted by the Mandaeans under the name Mariai, and was later rejected under the name Mary. Similarly, the figure of Jesus seems to lurk behind the Mandaean Enosh-Uthra, although the person of “Jesus” is rejected explicitly under that name. This seems to be borne out by the passage below from the *Ginza Rba* that transparently assigns to Enosh-uthra the following well-known portrait of Jesus from classical Gnostic texts and the Christian gospels:

Anush-uthra came and walked about in Jerusalem after he had donned a robe of clouds of water in the likeness of a body. This clothing was not a corporeal garment, and there was no

⁴⁹ Quoted, modified, from Hugo Odeberg, *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1928), p. 76.

bodily temperature or disequilibrium within him. He departed and arrived in the era of the worldly king Pilate. Anush-uthra arrived in the world in the power of the mighty Light-King, and he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, cleansed the lepers, raised up the broken and those who drag themselves on the ground instead of walking with their feet, he made the deaf [to hear] and the dumb to speak, the dead to live, and he won adherents among the Jews and taught them that there is death and life, that there is darkness and light, there is error and truth, and he converted Jews by the name of the mighty Light-King. 360 prophets emigrated then from the district of Jerusalem and bore witness to the name of Mara-d-Rabutha.

And Anush-uthra ascends on high and abides in Mshunia-Kushta [the celestial light-world].

In view of the above, one may tentatively conclude that despite the undeniable fact that Mandaeans do not accept the “Christian” Mary and Jesus, nevertheless there seems to be an indirect though explicitly rejected theological opening to Mary and her son by means of the Mandaean Mariai and Enosh-Uthra. In a separate study I suggest that this integration reflects the Mandaean concept of the *dmuta*, as elucidated by J. J. Buckley.⁵⁰ And in some respects it may be that the figure of Jesus has been assimilated also to John the Baptizer, whom the Mandaeans call both Yahia, similar to the Qur’ānic form Yaḥyā, and Yuhana, the Aramaic form of the biblical Hebrew name behind John. For example, Mandaean literature often refers to “Yahia-Yuhana son of Enishbai” (i.e., Elizabeth) without mention of his father Zachariah, which reminds us of the traditional designation “Jesus son of Mary,” which leaves out any mention of a father.

I am not attempting here to revive C. H. Dodd’s or Burkitt’s particular theses of Mandaean origins in mainstream Christianity, for what I posit instead is a relationship between the Mandaeans and the Jewish Jesus sect, which is not the same as “Christianity.” It would arguably be prudent to leave

⁵⁰ See section 2.5 of Samuel Zinner, *The Praeparatio Islamica*..

open the possibility that later traditional Mandaeism might not represent all possible branches of the earliest Mandaean movement. It might also be argued that Christianity itself could represent an offshoot form “Mandaeism,” in a loose sense (more symbolic than historical) that correlates the latter with John’s movement, since Jesus and many of his disciples themselves had been John the Baptizer’s followers.

If we take Mandaean scriptures seriously, the Mandaeans arose historically in the time of Mary and John the Baptizer, and the founding figures of the movement were Miriai (Mary), Jaqif, and Beni Amin. Jaqif, that is, Jacob, is likely Jesus’ brother James. In the *Ginza Rba* 15,11 we read of the original 365 Mandaean disciples:

From Miriai the Perfect

Jaqif and Beni Amin have gone forth.

From Jaqif and Beni Amin

365 disciples have gone forth;

365 disciples have gone forth

In the district of Jerusalem.⁵¹

This leading role of Jaqif = James might suggest that the Jesus rejected by the Mandaeans is not Jesus as such, but the Pauline or later ecclesiastical understanding of Jesus (which is also rejected by traditional Islam), a possibility supported by the Mandaean scriptural titles of Jesus as “Christ the Roman.” From the New Testament it is clear that there were sharp tensions between Paul and the circle of James. Paul’s face-to-face denunciation of Peter on account of the latter’s attachment to the circle of James is well known from Paul’s epistle to the Galatians. I must emphasize, however,

⁵¹ The Mandaean prayer *Tab taba Itabia* speaks of “those 360 priests who went forth from the district of the city of Jerusalem.”

that Miriai functions not only as a founding mother in Mandaism, but as its theological centre, at least in the *Book of John*. Her pivotal role therefore seems to be more central than that of John the Baptizer's, for he is neither the mythic centre of Mandaism, nor is he presented in the role of a founding father. Yet John's exalted spiritual status in Mandaism must not be minimized, for the fact that Mandaism possesses an important sacred book named after the Baptizer, or devoted largely to him (the text is also known as the *Book of the Kings*), is not without far-reaching significance. Moreover, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the *Book of John* presents Miriai and Yahia-Yuhana as intimately, indeed, inseparably, joined as spiritual figures.

Besides the work of J. J. Buckley, who "has lately taken up again V. Schou-Pedersen's more than 60 years old proposal that the Mandaean religion was linked to early Christianity,"⁵² one of the most balanced and comprehensive investigations into nascent Mandaism has been undertaken by Jon Olav Ryen. According to Ryen, the importance of viticulture in Mandaean texts is just one of many pieces of evidence pointing toward a Syro-Palestinian origin for the Mandaeans.⁵³ Further evidence pointing in the same direction can be detected in Mandaean epithets, such as *nasuraiia*, which "may be traced back to the common Syrian name for Christians, 'Nazoraeans.'"⁵⁴ Regarding the claim for a Babylonian origin of the Mandaeans based on comparative linguistic data, "these linguistic parallels may be due to early influence on Mandaic after the settlement of the Mandaeans in the east."⁵⁵ Similarly, "the *masiqta* ceremony is most easily to be explained by presupposing Iranian influence on Mandaean cult after their settlement in the marshlands of Southern Babylonia."⁵⁶ Several Mandaean rituals and beliefs are unusually reminiscent of Syrian-Christian, especially "Jewish-Christian," practices and doctrines. These include the Mandaean

⁵² Jon Olav Ryen, *The Tree in the Light World: A Study in the Mandaean Vine Motif*, p. 39.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 27; see also p. 32.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

coronation ritual, the Mandaean attitude about circumcision, Mandaean baptism and the meal that follows it.⁵⁷

As Ryen remarks, the extant evidence is subject to varying interpretations:

The Christian elements could point to a Jewish-Christian environment of Gnostic type when searching for the proto-Mandaeans, or the Christian elements could have influenced Mandaism later, although at a fairly early stage. If the last possibility is accepted, the origins of the Mandaeans may be Jewish-Gnostic, but not necessarily of Christian type. The Christian elements in Mandaean cult and belief may say something about early Mandaean history, but not necessarily about the origin of the Mandaeans.⁵⁸

Ryen expands on his research results in this area by raising the following points: “These Jewish parallels, together with the clear Semitic characteristics of the Mandaic language, are strong arguments in favour of an origin in Palestine (the Jordan valley?) or maybe Syria around the beginning of the Christian era. The role of John the Baptist and the purification and baptismal ceremonies are perhaps the most obvious Jewish traits, together with the importance of marriage.”⁵⁹

Ryen also presents a helpful summary of research on the question of the possible historical relationship between Mandaism and John the Baptizer. To begin with, “Rudolph’s arguments against any historical value of the Mandaean traditions of John are problematic,” because “even if the literary traditions about John are from the Islamic era, this does not necessarily mean that these traditions are of no historical value.”⁶⁰ In any case, “all these [Mandaean] traditions cannot be dismissed as post-Islamic compositions. Some materials point back to the 1st century (centuries) AD, reflecting the importance of the movement(s) connected to the famous John in the Jordan

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

valley. The great theological importance of 'Jordan' in Mandaean writings can hardly be explained only by later influence either."⁶¹ Furthermore, "The easiest way of explaining the importance of John the Baptist and Jordan in Mandaeism is to consider these traditions as reminiscences of some historical connection to Jewish baptismal groups in the Jordan valley around the beginning of the Christian era."⁶² As Ryen informs us, even Rudolph's conclusions with regard to Mandaeism and the historical John underwent development: "In one of K. Rudolph's latest contributions, he takes a new position in this issue. Rudolph writes: 'This debate may yet establish that there was a historical connection between John and the Mandaeans.'"⁶³

Ryen concludes with the following overview of Mandaean history:

The many Jewish traits and allusions in Mandaean cult and literature suggest that the Mandaeans originally (1st century AD?) belonged to a Jewish baptismal group somewhere in Palestine or Syria, perhaps in the Jordan valley. Later this religious group became heretic from the orthodox Jewish point of view, and moved north-eastwards to Adiabene (modern Kurdish Iraq, Armenia, and Northern Iran), and from there to Southern Babylonia (today's Southern Iraq and South-Western Iran). The present Arabic epithet *subba* also points . . . to an old understanding of the Mandaeans as a baptismal group (cf. the Sabaeans in the Koran). The designation *nasuraiia* fits into this image of the Mandaeans as a former Jewish group in the Palestine or Syria area around the beginning of the Christian era.⁶⁴

According to the Qur'ān, the Sabians, who may represent among others the Manichaeans and Mandaeans simultaneously although in different modes, possess a parallel covenant beside those belonging to Judaism, Christianity (especially its Judaic-complexioned variant/s), and Islam. Each group necessarily emphasizes the uniqueness of their respective prophets. That the Mandaeans

⁶¹ 59 Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

believe in John the Baptizer as one of the many representatives of divine life and light may suggest the existence of an early Baptizer religion with a gnosis-oriented esoteric theology and praxis. That the Mandaean have a decidedly more polarized posture (of outright rejection) towards Jesus than the Church has towards John is entirely understandable given the Mandaean's status as a minority group that was marginalized by the international success of Christianity throughout the ancient world. For the Church to polemicize against the Baptizer for the entirety of its existence since the first century, as indirectly evidenced in the New Testament, may give us a clue to just how much of a "competition" the nascent Church perceived in the Baptizer's followers. In light of the Mandaean theology of the Baptizer, it appears that the Church's "higher" christology profoundly accords with much of the Mandaean Baptizer paradigm of the Prophet Yahia as the light of the world. Although the Mandaean John is a fully human prophet, nevertheless the terminology of celestial light is undeniably applied to him.

These alternating theological complexities suggest a paradigm according to which the various religions simultaneously coincide at a meta-theological point of unity that nevertheless diverge on the various dogmatic levels. Jews, Christians, Manichaeans, and Mandaean reject the prophethood of the Final Messenger of Islam, yet the Qur'ān grants salvation to these same Jews, Christians, and Sabians, whose doctrinal systems certainly are not subject to reconciliation. This situation is indicative of the fragrance of generosity that permeates much of the spirit of the Qur'ān, which unfortunately has been poorly represented by various Muslims throughout history with regard to the Mandaean. After the American overthrow of the Saddam Hussein government, Islamic extremists in Iraq have perpetrated rape, murder, and forced conversions upon members of Mandaean communities, and this has led to an ongoing exodus from their traditional homeland that threatens this religious minority with outright extinction, especially with regard to their traditional forms of life and expression.

CHAPTER TWO

John the Baptizer in Mandaean, Christian, and Islamic Contexts

In the ancient *Apocryphon of James*, a treatise recovered in the Nag Hammadi library, Jesus denominates John the Baptizer as the “head of prophecy,” and John’s beheading marks the end of a particular cycle of prophecy. I understand “head of prophecy” to mean “summit of prophecy.”⁶⁵ The import here is not that prophecy passed away definitively with John, but that a decisive era of the spirit culminated with and in him. Christian theology, basing itself on the Lukan gospel, recognizes a familial relation between John the Baptizer and Jesus. The Qur’ān, however, integrates a further and more fundamental relationship between the two, namely, one of a spiritual Marian complexion, for according to the Qur’ān John the Baptizer was conceived in answer to a prayer Zachariah offered, a prayer moreover that had been directly inspired by an encounter with Mary. As we read in *sūra* 3:

And Zachariah took care of the child [Mary]; whenever Zachariah went into the sanctuary to her, he found food with her, and he said: “O Mary, from where do you have this food?” She answered, “This is from God; surely God provides without measure for whom he pleases.” There Zachariah called upon his Lord, and said, “My Lord, give me a good offspring from you, for you are the hearer of prayer.” And the angels called to him, while he stood praying in the sanctuary, saying, “Verily God promises you a son named John, who shall bear witness to the word which comes from God, an honorable person, chaste, and one of the

⁶⁵ I am not convinced by J. Van Der Vliet’s argument that the *Secret Book of James*’ phrase “head of prophecy” post-dates Origen’s term *kephalē tēs prophēteias*, and that the *Secret Book of James* is an anti-Montanist work. See J. Van Der Vliet, “Spirit and Prophecy in the *Epistula Iacobi Apocrypha* (NHC I,2),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 44/1 (1990): pp. 25-53.

righteous prophets.” He answered, “Lord, how shall I have a son, when old age has overtaken me, and my wife is barren?” The angel said, “Thus God does what he pleases.”

Immediately following this narrative one finds the Qur’ānic account of the annunciation to Mary. In light of the above verses, it is transparent that the conception of John the Baptizer is ultimately of Marian inspiration. Moreover, Zachariah’s sterility from old age and Elizabeth’s barrenness mirror precisely the situation faced, according to the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, by Mary’s parents Joachim (= Qur’ānic Imran) and Anna.

The towering spiritual nature and pervasive influence of John the Baptizer were so imposing in nascent Christianity that the spiritual state embodied by this prophet led to dissensions among Jesus’ followers. As early as the canonical gospel accounts, especially that of John, the Baptizer’s exalted prophetic stature and role in salvation history were de-emphasized, and to a certain extent even silenced. Nevertheless, not all traces of John’s original sublime status were extinguished during the gospel redaction process.

One of the more startling literary survivals in this respect is Jesus’ Matthean parable of the two sons in Matthew 21, a chapter that also contains the parable of the husbandmen (*Gospel of Thomas logion* 65), as well as the rejected cornerstone saying (*Gospel of Thomas logion* 66). Read in context, the entire Matthean passage can be seen to centre around John the Baptizer; the Baptizer is the son who obeys, he is the one who is slain, he is the rejected cornerstone. This parable strongly implies that both Jesus and John in some sense possessed a similar status, that together they were two “sons of God,” that is, “near ones,” or “friends of God” in Qur’ānic terms. I am reminded of the prophet Zechariah who spoke of “two sons of oil,” or of two sons of anointing, that is, of two messianic sons (see Zechariah 4:12-14). I also recall here the celebrated two messiahs expectation among some Pharisees and Essenes in the first century CE. A priestly messiah and a royal messiah

were expected by some Jews, and this would accord well with John, son of Zacharias the priest, and Jesus, who was said to be of royal, Davidic descent.

Some scriptural prophecies that Christians in general apply to Jesus may actually at an earlier stage have been understood as referring to John the Baptizer instead. Malachi 3:23 (Eng. Malachi 4:5) calls the Elijah who will return “the angel of the covenant.” Since the synoptic Jesus identified John as the return of Elijah (openly contradicted, however, by the Johannine gospel), early Christians would have seen a reference to John when Malachi asks “Who shall abide the day of his coming?” Elijah will come as a light (Sirach 48), as the sun of righteousness (see Malachi 3:20=Eng. Malachi 4:2 and Luke 1:78-79). Sirach 48:10: “Elijah is registered in the judgments of times to appease the wrath of the Lord, to reconcile the heart of the father to the son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.” This verse has its source in Isaiah 49:6: “And he said: It is a small thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to convert the dregs of Israel. Behold, I have given you to be the light of the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation even to the farthest part of the earth.” If John is Elijah returned, then to be consistent, the Baptizer would be the prophesied light of the Gentiles as well, despite the fact that the Church has always detected in Isaiah 49:6 a prophecy of Jesus.

If some of the ancient Mandaeans (not necessarily under that name explicitly) had been John’s disciples, then modern Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran might be called the remnants of the descendants of the Baptizer’s followers. Under the Qur’ānic rubric “Sabians” the Mandaeans may be recognized (at least indirectly or loosely as I suggested in chapter one) as a people assured salvation. Similar to the downplaying of the Baptizer’s role in the gospels, the Mandaean scriptures downplay the role of Jesus to the point of outright censure and rejection, although possibly only relatively, and not

absolutely if we apply the Mandaean concept of *dmuta* to Jesus and Anush-uthra.⁶⁶ For if one reads the Mandaean texts with a discerning eye, it becomes apparent that what might be condemned there is not Jesus himself, but rather a non-Jewish, Hellenistic understanding of him, one which has been censured in varying modes also by Islamic and Jewish authorities. Alternatively we could say that not Jesus as such, but rather his portrayal in Hellenistic Christian dogmatic terms, is condemned in Mandaism. However, that the condemnation is pronounced under the rubric of Jesus Christ is indicative of the rivalry between followers of John the Baptizer and Jesus, which is already apparent in a different modality in the early Christian scriptures.

It would seem, based on quite early evidence, that from the beginning John the Baptizer was viewed by at least some of his followers as possessing a certain messianic or salvific status. The reader should bear in mind that in early Jewish thought all prophets shared in the holy spirit's "anointing," which is the basic meaning behind the term "messiah." Jewish texts also held that a martyr's suffering had expiatory value for the people of Israel (see 2 and 4 Maccabees). The violent death of the Baptizer naturally would have been interpreted, in accord with the prevailing Jewish theology of the salvific value of martyrdom, as expiatory for God's people, which of course would not have been seen as being incompatible with the continued temple sacrificial system.

Early Jewish Jesus sect traditions preserved in ancient and medieval literature reveal that John the Baptizer was held by some of his devotees to be a messiah. The Hebrew version of Matthew known as Shem-Tob preserves a highly exalted view of the Baptizer that does not appear in the canonical

⁶⁶ This downplaying of different prophets has both theological and more mundane motivations. Theologically viewed a purely human basis behind the de-emphases in question would be incompatible with the status of both Christian and Mandaean religions as celestial revelations. The same situation applies to the canonical gospels' de-emphasis of Mary Magdalene in deference to Peter. Finally, I would refer to the well-known rivalries of the Jerusalem church under James and Peter over against Paul.

Greek gospels. Consider the following verses relating to the Baptizer from this medieval Hebrew version of Matthew:⁶⁷

17:11: He answered them and said: “Indeed Elijah will come and will save all the world.”

(The Greek reads “restore all things” rather than “save all the world”).

11:11: “Truly I say to you, among those born of women, none greater than John the Baptizer has arisen.” (Absent from the Hebrew version is the following line found in the corresponding Greek text that qualifies and diminishes the superlative status of the Baptizer: “But whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”).

11:13 “For all the prophets and the law spoke concerning John” (the Greek text reads “prophesied until John”).

What these texts exhibit is a belief in John the Baptizer as a messiah and saviour. This posture arguably compliments rather than contradicts the Christian and Islamic theologies of Jesus Christ. Not only do the Zoroastrian scriptures designate all prophets as “saviours,” but also the Jewish scriptures speak of “saviours” in the plural (see Obadiah verse 21).

Matthew 11:11 is paralleled in the *Gospel of Thomas* logion 46: “Jesus said: ‘From Adam to John the Baptizer, among those born of women no one is higher/greater than John the Baptizer, so that he should lower his eyes to anyone. But I have said this, that he who will be an infant among you will know the kingdom and will be exalted above John.’” Of course, this saying combines both an exaltation and a humbling of John. The version of this saying in Hebrew Matthew does not contain the second part that humbles John, and thereby places John uncompromisingly at the summit of prophetic honour without a rival. The Mandaean *Book of John* emphasizes John’s unparalleled status as well; in chapter 21, Elizabeth addresses her son John: “Who is the equal in Judaea, who is

⁶⁷ See George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, p. 219.

the equal in Jerusalem, that I should look on him [cf. *Thomas* logion 46, “that he should lower his eyes to anyone”] and forget you?” In chapter 27, John agrees with his mother’s assessment: “Is there anyone greater than I [cf. *Thomas* logion 46, “no one is higher/greater than John”]? They measure my works; my wage is assayed and my crown, and my praise brings me on high in peace.”⁶⁸

Roman Catholic theology holds that John the Baptizer was “conceived in original sin,” but was cleansed of all impurity before his birth, at the moment when, according to Luke, Mary visited the pregnant Elizabeth. We should also recall that Luke’s hymn of Zachariah concerning his son takes on added significance when we integrate its contents into the background of evidence we have presented on John’s followers’ exalted view of their master. Verses in the hymn that Christians have traditionally viewed as allusions to the activity of Jesus (such as the bringing of salvation and forgiveness) now reveal themselves as possible allusions to gifts bestowed directly by the Baptizer himself. I quote here from Luke 1:76-79: “And you, child, shall be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare a way for him, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God since the rising sun has come from on high to visit us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow dark as death, and to guide our feet into the path of peace.” The fact that the Tanakh and extracanonical Jewish writings identify the returning Elijah with the image of the sun and light, the “rising sun” of Luke 1:78 would most likely refer to John, not to Jesus. Accordingly, the one who is “to give light” in verse 79 would also likely be the Baptizer.

The Qur’ān’s statement that John “shall bear witness to the word which comes from God” is almost universally interpreted by Islamic exegetes as referring to the Baptizer’s bearing witness to Jesus as the word of God. There is no reason to call into question the veracity of this hermeneutical claim,

⁶⁸ Modified G. R. S. Mead version.

but there may be additional meanings inherent in the statement, one of them possibly being that the Baptizer in himself instantiates the divine word. According to Islamic paradigms, all prophets participate in the celestial word of God. Ultimately, neither the Qur'ān nor the gospels simplistically equates Jesus (or any prophet for that matter) with the eternal uncreated word of God. From this angle, one could posit that both Jesus and John, each in their own unique modes, shows forth the pre-existent word; in Islamic terms, one might say that each is a *tajallī* of the divine word. Such an intimate relation between John and Jesus is also hinted at in a certain Arabic etymology of the names of Jesus and John, both of which are ultimately related to the concept of “being” or “life.”

By exploring various gospel verses we may, by reading between the lines, and with the aid of Mandaean sacred texts, reconstruct what might have been some of the beliefs of the early followers of the Baptizer, if not in detail, then at least according to overarching paradigms and general concerns. Based on such a methodology we can deduce, for example, from the Johannine prologue (John 1) that the followers of the Baptizer apparently held him to be an embodiment of the *logos* as well as of the pre-existent light that enlightens the cosmos in general and every human being in particular. Moreover, the gospels “intensify” the Baptizer’s promotion of Jesus by means of the portrayal of John’s preaching of the baptism of the holy spirit, linked with Jesus’ ministry of baptism, which the gospels emphasize as superior to John’s. Yet according to the Book of Acts, the followers of the Baptizer in Ephesus had never heard of any such teaching regarding spirit baptism. This suggests that the gospel sayings about this doctrine possess more of a theological than an historical character. Such a theological statement would of course be quite valid within the parameters of traditional Christian discourse. Compare the pronouncements of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ instructions to the apostles to go preach to all nations, whereas the Book of Acts reveals that during the time of the nascent Church the apostles had no knowledge whatsoever of a mission to the nations as having been the desire or mandate of Jesus.

Of Yaḥyā God states in Qur'ān *sūra* 19:7 that “We gave this name to no one before.” On one level this means, as is clarified by the account of Luke, no one had been given the name Yōḥānān, that is, John, in Zechariah’s family before. Yōḥānān had been a traditional Hebrew name borne by countless men since biblical times. However, the unique form of John’s name in the Qur'ān may presuppose the presence of an esoteric undercurrent. Yaḥyā literally means in Arabic “he lives,” and thus may form an allusion to various ancient interpretations of the sacred Tetragrammaton YHWH. In this manner, the Qur'ān stresses that no one was ever like or equal to John the Baptizer, and as we have seen the same point is made by Jesus in the gospels: “Truly I say to you, from the time of Adam until now, no one was greater than John.” In the Qur'ān the Hebrew form of John’s name is apparently present, but in a concealed manner. Yaḥyā corresponds to the *yōḥ-* of Yōḥānān, and the final *-ḥānān* is present in Qur'ān *sūra* 19:13 where it is said concerning God’s gifts to Yaḥyā that he was vouchsafed “grace from us, and purity; and he was mindful.” “Grace,” or “favour,” in the Arabic text is *ḥanān*, a word that has puzzled traditional Arabic authorities; the reason for this is that the word is not Arabic but Hebrew. In fact *ḥanān* matches the second part of John’s Hebrew name, Yōḥānān. Interestingly, the name is somewhat reminiscent phonetically of the Hebrew name Joachim, the traditional name of the Virgin Mary’s father, and *ḥanān* is certainly cognate to the name Hannah, the traditional name of Mary’s mother. *Pace* many Qur'ānic interpreters *ḥanān* does not primarily mean “mercy,” “compassion,” or “pity,” though these are present on secondary levels, but it is instead a Hebrew term for “grace,” which certainly overlaps with the conventional Arabic interpretations. Thus it may be that Yaḥyā is thought of as a public name, while Ḥanān is a private or esoteric name of John the Baptizer. Immediately before the word *ḥanān* is given in *sūra* 19:13, we read at the end of *āya* 12 that God gave Yaḥyā wisdom, *ḥukma*, or judgment (authority) while a child, *ṣabiyyā*. The word *ṣabiyyā* is curiously reminiscent phonetically, although not etymologically related to, the Qur'ānic word for the Sabians, namely, *ṣābi'ūn*. If the term Sabians at least indirectly includes the Mandaeans, then the similarity between *ṣabiyyā* and Sabians would be intriguing,

especially since the word *ṣabiyyā* is with but a single exception found nowhere else in the entirety of the Qur'ānic text.

In *sūra* 2:62 we read: “Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews and Christians (*naṣārā*) and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good, their reward is with their Lord, and fear shall not be upon them and neither shall they grieve.” Just as the Qur'ān (*sūra* 3:52 and *sūra* 61:14) suggests a relationship between the words *ʿanṣāra*, “helpers,” and *naṣārā*, “Christians,” “Nazoraeans,” two words that are unrelated etymologically, so it may be that there is a subtle allusion in the word *ṣabiyyā* to Sabian, which again are unrelated etymologically. François de Blois argues that the term Sabian means “convert,” but given the ancient proclivity for wordplay and word association between terms unrelated etymologically, may it not be possible that although Sabian could mean “convert,” it could also possess a simultaneous allusion to the baptizing practices of groups such as the Mandaeans?

We now turn to the Mandaean account of John the Baptizer's life. The Mandaean *Book of John* chapter 18 refers to the Baptizer's conception in these words: “A child was planted out of the height, a mystery revealed in Jerusalem.” In the same chapter, a priest has the following dramatic dream-vision announcing the coming birth of John:

In my vision of the night I beheld, [I beheld] in my vision. When I lay there, I slept not and rested not, and sleep came not to me by night. I slept not and rested not, [and I beheld] that a star appeared and stood over Enishbai [= Elizabeth]. Fire burned in Old Father (Aba Saba) Zakhria; three heaven-lights appeared. The sun sank and the lights rose. Fire lit up the house of the people (synagogue), smoke rose over the temple. A quaking quaked in the throne-

chariot, so that earth removed from her seat. A star flew down into Judaea, a star flew down into Jerusalem. The sun appeared by night, and the moon rose by day.⁶⁹

The dream-vision is subsequently interpreted as follows to the father-to-be by the Jerusalem authorities:

Old Father Zakhria, be at peace, firm and decided, for the child will be planted from out of the most high height and be given to you in your old age. Yuhana will be born, Yuhana will receive Jordan and be called prophet in Jerusalem. We will be baptized with his baptizing and with his pure sign [will we] be signed. We will take his bread and drink his drink and with him ascend to Place of Light.⁷⁰

Chapter 18 ends with the line: “They have taken the child out of the basin of Jordan and laid him in the womb of Enishbai.”⁷¹ In chapter 32, John explains the miraculous setting of his birth by using the metaphor of the heavenly Jordan as the matrix of his origin and existence. From that celestial state, divine powers implanted him in the womb of his mother Enishabi, who explains that his name, Yahia, John, was given to him “by Life’s self,” which refers to that component of John’s name that alludes to life and being, in agreement, incidentally, with traditional understandings of the Tetragrammaton YHWH, and with the traditional Arabic understanding of John’s name.

Yahia proclaims in the nights, Yuhana on the night’s evenings.

Yahia proclaims in the nights and speaks: “The [heavenly] wheels and chariots quaked.

Earth and heaven weep and the tears of the clouds flow down.”

⁶⁹ I am following Mead’s version, with occasional modifications based upon the Mandaic original edited by M. Lidzbarski. G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book* (London: Watkins, 1924), p. 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 40.

“My father,” says Yahia, “was ninety and nine and my mother eighty and eight years old. Out of the basin of Jordan they took me. They bore me up and laid me in the womb of Enishbai. ‘Nine months,’ said they, ‘you shall stay in her womb, as do all other children’.” “No wise woman,” said he, “brought me into the world in Judaea, and they have not cut my cord in Jerusalem. They made for me no picture of lies, and for me hung up no bell of deceit. I was born from Enishbai in the region of Jerusalem.”

The region of Jerusalem quakes and the wall of the priests rocks. Elizar, the great house, stands there and his body trembles. The Jews gather together, come unto Old Father Zakhria and they speak to him: “O Old Father Zakhria, you are to have a son. Tell us now, what name shall we give him? Shall we give him for name ‘Yaqif of Wisdom’, so that he may teach the book in Jerusalem? Or shall we give him for name ‘Zatan the Pillar’, so that the Jews may swear by him and commit no deceit?”

When Enishbai heard this, she cried out and she said: “Of all these names which you name, will I not give him one; but the name Yahia-Yuhana will I give him, [the name] which Life’s self has given unto him.”⁷²

Chapter 32 goes on to relate how as a child John was raised on Mount Parwan where he was educated with “holy drink.” He departed the mountain when he reached the age of twenty-two years, a number perhaps originally inspired by the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet:

When Anush, the treasure, heard this he took the child and brought it to Parwan, the white mountain, to Mount Parwan, on which sucklings and little ones on holy drink are reared up.

[There I remained] until I was two and twenty years old. I learned there the whole of my wisdom and made fully my own the whole of my discourse. They clothed me with vestures

⁷² Ibid., pp. 56-57.

of glory and veiled me with cloud-veils. They wound round me a girdle, of [living] water a girdle, which shone beyond measure and glistened. They set me within a cloud, a cloud of splendor, and in the seventh hour of a Sunday they brought me to the Jerusalem region.⁷³

After being placed in Jerusalem to begin his public ministry, through a celestial agency Elizabeth is informed that her son has returned; in shock, delight, and amazement she leaves her house without her veil, which upsets her husband to the point of his contemplating divorce, and he is subsequently corrected by a supernatural intervention to remain with her. John subsequently comforts his mother, and then the angelic *uthra* Anosh confides him to heavenly care until the end comes:

Who told Battai to go and say to Enishbai: “A youth has come to Judaea, a prophet come to Jerusalem. A youth has come to Judaea; his guardian angel stands by him. His mouth is like you and his lips [like] his father, Old Father Zakhria. His eyes are like you and his brows [like] his father, Old Father Zakhria. His nose is like you and his hands [like] his father, Old Father Zakhria.”

When Enishbai heard this, she hurried out veil-less. When Old Father Zakhria saw her thus, he wrote her a bill of divorcement. The sun down-murmured from heaven and the moon from its place mid the stars. The sun opened his mouth and spoke to Old Father Zakhria in Jerusalem: “Old Father Zakhria, you big dotard, who has grown old and lost his wits, like an Arab whom his kismet has forsaken. A youth has come to Judaea, a prophet come to Jerusalem. A youth has come to Judaea; why do you send Enishbai away?”

When the youth saw her alone, he set himself free and fell down from the cloud. He set himself free and fell down from the cloud and kissed the mouth of Enishbai. When Anosh, the treasure, saw him [do this], he spake unto Yahia in Jerusalem: “Stands it for you written in your book, is it declared unto you on your page, to kiss her alone, on the mouth?”

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 57-58.

Thereon answered Yahia and spake unto Anosh, the treasure, in Jerusalem: “Nine months I abode in her womb, so long as all other children abide there, without any reluctance on her part; therefore is it no charge against me now to kiss her alone, on the mouth. Nay, hail and again hail to the man who repays father and mother in full. A man who recompenses father and mother has not his like in the world.”

When Yahia said this, Anosh, the treasure, knew that Yahia is wise. Thereon Anosh, the treasure, spake to the sun in Jerusalem: “Take for me care of the youth, the Man, who is sent by the King. Take for me care of the youth, until we ask for him.” Then Anosh, the treasure, spake to the moon in Jerusalem: “Take for me care of the youth, the Man, who is sent by the King. Take for me care of the youth, until we ask for him.”⁷⁴

According to chapter 33, John’s proclamation has repercussions even in the celestial realms. The two orders of angels known as wheels (cf. *ofanim*) and the chariots “quake and capsize” at his voice: “Yahia proclaims and speaks: ‘Stand I not alone? Because of my voice the [heavenly] wheels quake and the chariots capsize. The tempest became silent and settled down in the world’s deserts. Sun and moon wail, and earth and heaven mourn.’”⁷⁵ Further narrations of John’s teaching are found in chapter 19, in which he proclaims: “Through my Father’s discourses I give light and the praise of Adam, my creator.⁷⁶ I have freed my soul from the world and from the works that are hateful and wrong.”⁷⁷ The text continues:

“I stand in the strength of my Father and with the praise of the Man, my creator. I have built no house in Judaea, have set up no throne in Jerusalem. I have not loved the wreath of the

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷⁶ See Wisdom 10:1 according to which Adam is “the father of the cosmos,” a common Middle-Platonic title of the creator-demiurge; see A. Dupont-Sommer, “Adam: ‘Père du Monde’ dans la Sagesse de Solomon 10, 1.2,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 119 (1939): pp. 182-203. Similarly, Enoch calls himself “the father of the earth” in 2 *Enoch* 39:8 in the J recension.

⁷⁷ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, p. 40. Mead renders “the Man” rather than “Adam.”

roses, not commerce with lovely women. I have not loved the defective, not loved the cup of the drunkards. I have loved no food of the body, and envy has found no place in me. I have not forgotten my night-prayer, not forgotten wondrous Jordan. I have not forgotten my baptizing, not [forgotten] my pure sign. I have not forgotten Sunday, and the Day's evening has not condemned me. I have not forgotten [the Jordan overseers] Shilmai and Nibdai, who dwell in the House of the Mighty. They clear me and let me ascend; they know no fault, no defect is in me."

When Yahia said this, Life rejoiced over him greatly. The Seven [planets] sent him their greeting and the Twelve [constellations of the zodiac] made obeisance before him. They said to him: "Of all these words which you have spoken, you have not said a single one falsely. Delightful and fair is your voice, and none is an equal to you. Fair is your discourse in your mouth and precious your speech, which has been bestowed upon you. The vesture which First Life did give unto Adam, the Man, the vesture which First Life did give unto Ram, the Man, the vesture which First Life did give unto Shurbai, the Man, the vesture which First Life did give unto Shum bar Nu,⁷⁸ has He given now unto you. He has given it to you, O Yahia, that you may ascend, and with you may those ascend. . . . The house of defect will be left behind in the desert. Everyone who shall be found sinless, will ascend to you to the Place of Light; he who is not found sinless will be called to account in the guard-houses."⁷⁹

In chapter 20 we find a description of John's Ship of Light, a metaphor that describes the prophet's ministry:

⁷⁸ The first four ages of the present world cycle are represented by 1) Adam; 2) Ram; 3) Shurbai; 4) Shem son of Noah = Shum bar Nu.

⁷⁹ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, pp. 41-42.

Yahia proclaims in the nights and says: “In the name of Him who is wondrous and all-surpassing! The sun sat in his Court (Corona?), and the moon sat in the Dragon. The Four Winds of the House get them gone on their wings and blow not.”

The sun opened his mouth and spake unto Yahia: “You have three [head-] bands [and] a crown which equals in worth the whole world. You have a ship of mashklil, which sails about here on the Jordan. You have a great vessel which sails about here betwixt the waters. If you go to the House of the Great [One], remember us in the Great One’s presence.” Thereon Yahia opened his mouth and spake to the sun in Jerusalem: “You enquire about the [head-] bands, may the Perfect (pl.) watch over your crown. This mashklil-ship they have carpentered together with glorious splendor. On the vessel that sails betwixt the waters, the seal of the King has been set.”⁸⁰

In chapter 21 we encounter a scene where Mary (Miriai) and Elizabeth (Enishbai) weep in the context of John’s preaching of repentance:

Yahia proclaims in the nights and speaks: “Stand not I here alone? I go to and fro. Where is a prophet equal to me? Who makes proclamation equal to my proclamations, and who discourses with my wondrous voice?”

When Yahia thus spake, the two women weep. Miriai and Enishbai weep, and for both tears flow. They say: “We will go hence, and do you stay here; see that you dost not bring us to stumble. I (Miriai) will go hence, and do you stay here; see that you do not bring me to stumble. I (Enishbai) will go hence, and do you stay here; see that you do not fill me with sorrow.”

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

Then Yahia opened his mouth and spake to Enishbai in Jerusalem: “Is there any who could take my place in the height? Is there any who could take my place in the height, so that you may pay for me ransom? If you can pay for me ransom, then bring your jewels and ransom me. If you can pay for me ransom, then bring your pearls and ransom me. If you can pay for me ransom, then bring your gold and ransom me.”

Thereon Enishbai opened her mouth and spake to Yahia in Jerusalem: “Who is your equal in Judaea, who is your equal in Jerusalem, that I should look on him and forget you?”—“Who is my equal, who is my equal, that you should look on him and forget me? Before my voice and the voice of my proclamations the Torah disappeared in Jerusalem. Before the voice of my discourse the readers read no more in Jerusalem. The wantons cease from their lewdness, and the women go not forth. . . . Hither [to me] come the brides in their wreaths, and their tears flow down to the earth. The child in the womb of his mother heard my voice and did weep. The merchants trade not in Judaea, and the fishers fish not in Jerusalem. The women of Israel dress not in dresses of colour, the brides wear no gold and the ladies no jewels. Women and men look no more at their face in a mirror. Before my voice and the voice of my proclamations the water rose up to the pillars. Because of my voice and the voice of my proclamations the fish brought to me their greetings. Before my voice and the voice of my proclamations the birds made obeisance and said: “Well for you, and again well for you, Yahia, and well for the Man whom you do worship. You have set yourself free and won your release, O Yahia, and left the world empty. The women have not led you away with their lewdness, and their words have not made you distracted. Through sweet savors and scents you have not forgotten your Lord from your mind. You have not made yourself drunken with wine and have done no deeds of impiety seized on you in Jerusalem. You have

set yourself free and won your release and set up your throne for you in the House of Life.”⁸¹

Chapter 25 contains an example of John’s preaching against sin, the inevitability of the day of judgment, and the promise of salvation to those who follow him:

Yahia proclaims and speaks: “You nobles, who lie there, you ladies, who will not awaken, you who lie there, what will you do on the day of the judgment? When the soul strips off the body, on judgment day what will you do? O you distracted, jumbled-up world in ruin! Your men die, and your false scriptures are closed. Where is Adam, the First Man, who was here head of the aeon? Where is Hawwa (Eve), his wife, out of whom the world was awakened to life? Where is Shit-il (Seth), son of Adam, out of whom worlds and aeons arose? Where is Ram and Rud, who belonged to the Age of the Sword? Where are Shurbai and Shar-hab-el, who belonged to the Age of the Fire? Where is Shum bar Nu (Shem, son of Noah), who belonged to the Age of the Flood? All have departed and have not returned and taken their seats as Guardians in this world. [The last day] is like a feast-day, for which the worlds and the æons are waiting. The planets are [like] fatted oxen, who stand there for the day of the slaughter. The children of this world are [like] fat rams, who stand in the markets for sale. But as for my friends, who pay homage to Life, their sins and transgressions will be forgiven them.”⁸²

Chapter 26 narrates an episode wherein a celestial epistle descends to the Jewish authorities; the intriguing text reads as follows:

The Gnosis of Life who is far from the height [writes]:

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁸² Ibid., p. 45.

“I have come unto you, O Soul, whom Life has sent into this world. In robes of the Eight went I into the world. I went in the vesture of Life and came into the world. The vesture I brought of the Seven, I went as far as the Eight. The vesture of the Seven I took and took hold of the Eight with my hand. [I have taken them] and I take them, and I will take them and not let them go. I have taken them and hold them fast, and the wicked spirits shall change into good.

“Wherefore do you weep, generations, wherefore weep you, O peoples? Wherefore fades your splendor? For you have I brought my Image, I betook myself into the world.”⁸³

The authorities carry the epistle to John the Baptizer, who upon reading it enters into a visionary trance. Celestial messengers then explain the contents of the divine epistle to James (Jaqif), Benjamin, and Samuel:

They took the letter and put it in the hand of Yuhana. “Take, Rab Yuhana,” say they to him, “Truth’s letter, which has come here to you from your Father.” Yuhana opened it and read it and saw in it a wondrous writing. He opened it and read in it and became full of life. “This is,” says he, “what I would, and this does my soul will.”

Yuhana has left his body; his brothers make proclamations, his brothers proclaim unto him on the Mount, on Mount Carmel. They took the letter and brought it to the Mount, to Mount Carmel. They read out of the letter to them and explain to them the writing, to Yaqif and Beni-Amin and Shumel. They assemble on Mount Carmel.⁸⁴

Chapter 27 seems to imply that James and Benjamin leave Jerusalem to follow John the Baptizer, and this apparently generates tension and conflict between John and the authorities:

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

Yahia proclaims in the nights and speaks: “Is there anyone greater than I? They measure my works; my wage is assayed and my crown, and my praise brings me on high in peace.” . . .

Yaqif leaves the house of the people, Beni-Amin leaves the temple, Elizar, the great house, leaves the dome of the priests. The priests spake unto Yahia in Jerusalem: “Yahia, go forth from our city! Before your voice quaked the house of the people, at the sound of your proclamations the temple did quake, at the sound of your discourse quaked the priests’ dome.” Thereon Yahia answered the priests in Jerusalem: “Bring fire and burn me; bring sword and hew me in pieces.” But the priests in Jerusalem answered to Yahia: “Fire does not burn you, O Yahia, for Life’s Name has been uttered over you. A sword does not hew you in pieces, O Yahia, for Life’s Son rests here upon you.”⁸⁵

Chapter 30 relates the details of Jesus’ baptism by John. Jesus is explicitly called a “pupil,” or “disciple” of John. This chapter will be controversial for Christians, for the Baptizer challenges Jesus, claiming that he has relaxed the requirements of the Torah of Moses. However, it was not Jesus who relaxed the Torah (see Matthew 5:17-18), but arguably Paul for the sake of Gentiles. This is but one piece of evidence suggesting that the Mandaean Jesus largely coincides with the Pauline portrayal and interpretation of the messiah, a suspicion strengthened by the Mandaean Jesus title “Christ the Roman.” Furthermore it must be borne in mind in this context that Mandaeism itself does not accept the Mosaic Torah; indeed, in the very same *Book of John*, the Baptizer himself says that in the presence of his voice the Torah was silenced. I would suggest, therefore, that this is textual evidence for an early stage in Mandaeism when the Torah was accepted and obeyed. After John challenges Jesus to demonstrate his wisdom, John is then commanded by a celestial intervention to accept Jesus as a baptismal candidate, although the present state of the text does not imply that John’s baptism of Jesus means that the latter is a prophet acceptable to Mandaeans:

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

Who told Yeshu (Eshu)? Who told Yeshu Messiah, son of Miryam, who told Yeshu, so that he went to the shore of the Jordan and said [unto Yahia]: “Yahia, baptize me with your baptizing and utter over me also the Name your wont is to utter. If I show myself as your pupil, I will remember you then in my writing; if I attest not myself as your pupil, then wipe out my name from your page.” . . .

Thereon Yeshu Messiah answered Yahia in Jerusalem: “If I have lied to the Jews, may the blazing fire consume me. If I have deceived the priests, a double death will I die. If I have cut off their seed from the men, may I not cross over the End-Sea. If I have cut off from the women birth and being pregnant, then is in sooth a judge raised up before me. If I have relaxed the sabbath, may the blazing fire consume me. If I have lied to the Jews, I will tread on thorns and thistles. If I have spread disgrace abroad with horn-blowing, may my eyes then not light on Abathur. So baptize me then with your baptizing, and utter over me the Name your wont is to utter. If I show myself as your pupil, I will remember you then in my writing; if I attest not myself as your pupil, then wipe out my name from your page.”

Then spake Yahia to Yeshu Messiah in Jerusalem: “A stammerer becomes not a scholar, a blind man writes no letter. A desolate house mounts not to the height, and a widow becomes not a virgin. Foul water becomes not tasty, and a stone does not with oil soften.”

Thereon Yeshu Messiah made answer to Yahia in Jerusalem: “A stammerer a scholar becomes, a blind man writes a letter. A desolate house mounts unto the height, and a widow becomes a virgin. Foul water becomes tasty, and a stone with oil softens.”

Thereon spake Yahia unto Yeshu Messiah in Jerusalem: “If you give me illustration for this, you art [really] a wise Messiah.”

Thereon Yesu Messiah made answer to Yahia in Jerusalem: “A stammerer a scholar becomes: a child who comes from the bearer, blooms and grows big. Through wages and alms he comes on high; he comes on high through wages and alms, and ascends and beholds the Place of Light.

“A blind man who writes a letter: a villain who has become virtuous. He abandoned wantonness and abandoned theft and reached unto faith in almighty Life.

“A desolate house who ascends again to the height: one of position who has become humble. He quitted his palaces and quitted his pride and built a house on the sea [-shore]. A house he built on the sea [-shore], and into it opened two doors, so that he might bring in unto him whoever lay down there in misery, to him he opened the door and took him within to himself. If he would eat, he laid for him a table with Truth, If he would drink, he mixed for him [wine-] cups [with Truth], If he would lie down, he spread a bed for him in Truth. If he would depart, he led him forth on the way of Truth. He led him forth on the way of Truth and of faith, and then he ascends and beholds the Place of Light.

“A widow who a virgin becomes: a woman who already in youth has been widowed. She kept her shame closed, and sat there till her children were grown. If she passes over, her face does not pale in her husband’s presence.

“Foul water that is made tasty: a girl wanton who has got back her honor: she went up a hamlet and she went down a hamlet without taking her veil from her face.

“A stone with oil softens: a heretic who has come down from the mountain. He abandoned magic and sorcery and made confession to almighty Life. He found a fatherless and filled him full and filled full the widow’s pockets.

“Therefore baptize me, O Yahia, with your baptizing and utter over me the Name your wont is to utter. If I show myself as your pupil, I will remember you in my writing; if I attest not myself as your pupil, then wipe out my name from your page. You will for your sins be called to account, and I for my sins will be called to account.”⁸⁶

A celestial epistle is then delivered to John commanding him to carry out the baptism of Jesus; the epistle is described in the following terms: “Then Ruha made herself like to a dove and threw a cross over the Jordan. A cross she threw over the Jordan and made its water to change into various colors. ‘O Jordan,’ she says, ‘you sanctify me and you sanctify my seven sons.’”⁸⁷ Yet the celestial command confirms that Jesus is a “deceiver” with respect to the Torah; again, however, I remind the reader of my comments above on the fact that the Mandaeans themselves presently do not accept the Mosaic Torah, and that John himself caused the Torah to be silenced, and that the Mandaeans display a negative posture towards Judaism in an even more polarized way than does Christianity. One suspects that the real dialogue going on beneath the surface of the present text has to do with what theology would call providential tensions between the Jewish matrix of the historical John the Baptizer and the apostle Paul’s theology that relaxed the Mosaic Torah for the sake of non-Jewish converts to the Church. Perhaps the limited or nuanced scope of the portrayal of Christ as “deceiver” according to this text might also be supported by the curious fact that in the immediately following chapter a celestial letter calls John the Baptizer a “false prophet,” although this would be impossible for the Mandaeans to take in a strict sense. It must, on the contrary, be understood as a typical example of Semitic hyperbole employed for the sake of exhortation rather than an absolute condemnation. This all occurs in chapter 31, the first part of which relates the story of John the Baptizer’s marriage:

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 48-50.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

Yahia proclaims in the nights, Yuhana on the night's evenings. Yahia proclaims in the nights and speaks: "The [heavenly] wheels and chariots quaked. Sun and moon weep and the eyes of Ruha shed tears."

He says: "Yahia, you are like to a scorched mountain, which brings forth no grapes in this world. You are like to a dried-up stream, on whose banks no plants are raised. You have become a land without a lord, a house without worth. A false prophet have you become, who have left no one to remember your name. Who will provide you with provision, who with victuals, and who will follow to the grave after you?"

When Yahia heard this, a tear gathered in his eye; a tear in his eye gathered, and he spake: "It would be pleasant to take a wife, and delightful for me to have children. But only if I take no woman, and then comes sleep, desire for her seizes me and I neglect my night-prayer. If only desire does not wake in me, and I forget my Lord out of my mind. If only desire does not wake in me, and I neglect my prayer every time."

When Yahia said this, there came a letter from the House of Abathur: "Yahia, take a wife and found a family, and see that you do not let this world come to an end. On the night of Monday and on the night of Tuesday go to your first bedding. On the night of Wednesday and on the night of Thursday devote yourself to your hallowed praying. On the night of Friday and on the night of Saturday go to your first bedding. On the night of Sunday and (? yes) on the night of the Day devote yourself to your hallowed praying. On Sunday, take three and leave three, take three and leave three. See that you do not let the world come to an end."

Thereon they fashioned for Yahia a wife out of you, O Region of the Faithful.⁸⁸ From the first conception were Handan and Sharrath born. From the middle conception were Birham and R'himath-Haiye born. From the last conception were Nsab, Sam, Anhar-Ziwa <and Sharrath> born. These three conceptions took place in you, O Ruins, Jerusalem.

Yahia opened his mouth and spake to Anhar⁸⁹ in Jerusalem: "Instruct your daughter, that she may not perish; and I will enlighten my sons and teach [them], that they may not be hindered." Thereon Anhar opened her mouth and spoke to Yahia in Jerusalem. "I have borne sons in this world," said she to him, "yet have I not given birth to [their] heart in the world. If they let themselves be instructed, then will they ascend to the Place of Light; if they let not themselves be instructed, then will the blazing fire consume them."⁹⁰

The second section of chapter 31 preserves a dialogue between Yahia and Anhar concerning the Baptizer's imminent passing from the world:

Yahia opened his mouth and spake to Anhar in Jerusalem: "If I leave the world, tell me, what will you do after me?"—"I will not eat and will not drink," she answered him, "until I see you again."—"A lie have you spoken, Anhar, and your word has come forth in deception. If a day comes and goes, you will eat and drink and forget me out of your mind. I asked you rather, by Great Life and by the eve of the Day whose name is dear: If I leave the world, tell me, what will you do after me?"—"I will not wash and I will not comb me," says she to him, "until I see you again."—"Again have you spoken a lie and your word has come forth in deception. If a month comes and a month goes, you will wash and comb you and

⁸⁸ A wife is made for John from "Region of the Faithful," Mshune Kushta, a personified feminine entity. This suggests that John's marriage is a spiritual union with a celestial entity who is nevertheless entirely human. The children resulting from this union bear the names of celestial entities encountered throughout the Mandaean scriptures. None of this, however, implies that John, his wife, or his children are not fully human.

⁸⁹ "Anhar," meaning "the Illuminator," also known as the Hidden Light.

⁹⁰ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, pp. 52-54.

forget me out of your mind. Again did I ask you, Anhar, by the first bed in which we both lie: If I leave my body, tell me, what will you do after me?”—“I will put on no new garments,” she answers him, “until I see you again.”—“Again have you spoken a lie, Anhar, and your word has come forth in deception. If a year comes and a year goes, you will put new garments on you and forget me out of your mind.”

“Why do you not tell me all, Yahia,” says she to him; “and how sorely you bruise the whole of my body! If you do depart, when will you return, that my eyes may fall upon yours?”—“If a woman in labor descends into Sheol and a bell is hung up for her in the graveyard. If they paint a picture in Sheol, and she then goes forth and they give a feast in the graveyard. If a bride parades round in Sheol, and they celebrate marriage in the graveyard. If the wedding-companions borrow in Sheol, and the paying-back takes place in the graveyard.”

Then answered she him: “My lord, how shall it be that a woman in labour . . .” [and so on, repeating the above].

“If you know,” he makes answer unto her, “that this does never happen, why do you press me with asking: When do you return? I go hence and return not. Happy the day when you do still see me. If there were a going-away and returning, then would no widow be found in this world. If there were a going-away and returning, then would no fatherless be found in the world. If there were a going-away and returning, then no Nazoraeans would be found in the world.”

Thereon Anhar opened her mouth and spake to Yahia in Jerusalem: “I will buy you for dear gold a brick grave and have a boxing of wood joined together for you in the graveyard.” But Yahia opened his mouth and spake to Anhar in Jerusalem: “Why will you buy a brick grave for dear gold and have a boxing of wood joinered for me in the graveyard? Are you sure that I am returning, that you do say: No dust shall fall on him? Instead of buying a brick grave

for dear gold, go rather and share out for me bread. Instead of getting a boxing joinered together, go rather and read for me masses for the departed.”

Thereon Anhar opened her mouth and spake to Yahia in Jerusalem: “You do go hence and forget me, and I shall be cut off in the Sinners’ Dwelling.”

[But Yahia answered her:] “If I forget you, may the Light Dwelling forget me. If I forget you, may my eyes not fall on Abathur. If I ascend to Life’s House, your wailing will arise in the graveyard.”⁹¹

In chapter 33 there is a discussion between the Baptizer and Jesus about the angel of death, Sauriel; this chapter most likely functions as a link between the other chapters centering on John’s imminent departure from the world. The first part of the chapter reads:

Yahia proclaims and speaks: “Stand I not alone? Because of my voice the [heavenly] wheels quake and the chariots capsize. The tempest became silent and settled down in the world’s deserts. Sun and moon wail, and earth and heaven mourn.”

Messiah opened his mouth and spake to Yahia in Jerusalem: “I asked you, Yahia, by the Great Life and by Sunday, whose name is dear. I asked you Yahia, by the Way, whereby the men of piety put to the test go without hindrance. Tell me: To what is the shape of Sauriel’s knife like? Tell me: If the soul leaves the body, with what is it clothed, and to what is it like in the vain body? Surely the soul is not possibly like the blood, that it should become heated in the body and come to a stop in it? Surely the soul is not possibly like the wind, that it should fare to the mountains, be lost there and come to a stop? Surely the soul is not possibly like the dew, that it should fall on the fruit and be lost?”

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

When Messiah said this, Yahia cries aloud; tears come to him without ceasing, and he speaks: “[God] forbid that the high King of Light should look for lot in deceivers. The soul is not like the blood, that it should become heated in the body and come to a stop. The soul is not like the dew, that it should fall on the fruit and be lost. The soul is not like the wind, that it should fare to the mountains and come to a stop. Firmly developed has the soul been brought into the vain body. If the soul has kept herself perfect, she ascends in a garment of glory.”⁹²

The *Book of John* chapters 36-39 describe a transcendent fisher of humans; it is not stated explicitly who this fisher is, but because chapter 20 contains the imagery of John riding in a ship of light, the fisher of souls in chapters 36 and following might most naturally overlap with John’s person in some way. This enigmatic fisher travels in a “boat of glory” accompanied by the prophets Abel, Seth, and Enosh, who all visit the world of contingency and transience. The three patriarchs address the fisher as “the Good Fisher.” He is the “Chief Fisher; the head of the race of the living, the best of all catchers of fish.” The fisher says of himself: “A fisher am I of souls who bear witness to Life.” He crowns his followers with divine light, granting them celestial thrones: “I bear them thither and raise them aloft.” Here we present selections from chapter 36:

In the Name of the Great Life may hallowed Light be glorified.

A fisher am I, a fisher who is elect among fishers. A fisher am I who among the fishers is chosen, the head of all catchers of fish. I know the shallows of the waters, the inner . . . and the . . . I fathom; I come to the net-grounds, to the shallows and all fishing-spots, and search the marsh in the dark all over. My boat is not cut off [from the others] and I shall not be stopped in the night.

⁹² Ibid., pp. 59-60.

I see the fish in (? on) the dike. I pressed forward on the way with a . . . that was not of iron. I covered (?) the . . . which was for us an obstruction. Aside did I push the swimmers who hinder Life's way. On my head I set up a . . . in whose shadow the fish sit. The fisher-trident which I have in my hand, is instead a magna select, a staff of pure water, at whose sight tremble the fishers.

I sit in a boat of glory and come into this world (Tibil) of the fleeting. I come to the water's surface; thither to the surface of the water I drew, and I drew to the crossing's surface. I come in a . . ., in slow, steady course. The water by my boat is not ruffled, and no sound of my boat is heard. Before me stands Hibil (Abel), at my side Shitil (Seth) of sweet name is to be seen, close by me, close in front of me, Anosh (Enoch) sits and proclaims.

They say: "O Father, Good Fisher, hallo! O fisher of loveable name!"

When the chief fisher, the head of the race of the living, the highest of all catchers of fish, heard this, he said to him (Anosh?): "Bring me my . . ., hand me the squbra, that I may make a call sound forth into the marsh, that I may warn the fish of the depths and scare away the foul-smelling birds that pursue after my fish. I will catch the great sidma, and tear off his wings on the spot. I will take from him * * * and will blow into my squbra. A true squbra is it, so that the water may not mix with pitch."

When the fishers heard the call, their heart fell down from its stay. One calls to the other and speaks to him: "Go into your inner ground. For there is the call of the fisher, the fisher who eats no fish. His voice is not like that of a fisher, his squbra not like our squbra. His voice is not like our voice, his discourse not like to this world."

As the chief of the fish-catchers thus spake, the fishers made answer unto him and said:

"Blessed be you, a fisher, and blessed be your boat and your bark. How fair is your cast-net,

how fair the yarn that is in it. Fair is your cord and your lacing, you who are not like the fishers of this world. On your meshes are no shell-fish, and your trident catches no fish. Whence are you come hither? Tell us! We will be your hired servants. We will bake and stir about broth and bring it before you. Eat, and the crumbs which fall from your hand, these will we eat and therewith be filled.”

But I made answer unto them: “O ye fishers, who lap up your filth, no fisher am I who fishes for fish, and I was not formed for an eater of filth. A fisher am I of souls who bear witness to Life. A poor fisher am I who calls to the souls, collects them together and gives them instruction. He calls to them and bids them come and gather together unto him. He says unto them: If you . . . come, you shall be saved from the foul-smelling birds I will save my friends, bring them on high and in my ship make them stand upright. I will clothe them with vestures of glory and with precious light will enwrap them. I will put a crown of aether upon them and what else for them the Greatness erects on their head. Then sit they on thrones and in precious light do they glisten. I bear them thither and raise them aloft; but you Seven shall stay here behind. The portion of filth and of filthy doings shall be your portion. On the day when the light ascends, the darkness will return to its region. I and my disciples will ascend and behold the Place of Light.”⁹³

Chapter 37 continues the theme of the Good Fisher by emphasizing his light-ship, the same image ascribed to John in chapter 20, once again suggesting that chapter 37 might represent a discourse of the Baptizer: “A fisher am I of the Great Life; a fisher am I of the Mighty; a fisher am I of the Great Life, an envoy whom Life has sent.” The fisher is “the Son of Life,” and inasmuch as he possesses an imperishable ship of glory, he may proclaim concerning himself: “All ships that sight me, make obeisance submissively to me. Submissively they make me obeisance and come to show their

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 71-74.

devotion unto me.” The fisher’s discourses lead souls “out of the regions of darkness unto the Place of Light”:

In the Name of the Great Life may hallowed Light be glorified.

A fisher am I of the Great Life, a fisher am I of the Mighty; a fisher am I of the Great Life, an envoy whom Life has sent. It (Life) spake unto me: “Go, catch fish who do not eat filth, fish who do not eat water-fennel and reek not of foul-smelling fennel. They do not come nigh to devour bad dates and get caught in the nets of the marsh.”

Life knotted for me a noose and built for me a ship that fades not, a ship whose wings are of glory, that sails along as in flight, and from it the wings will not be torn off. It is a well-furnished ship and sails on in the heart of the heaven. Its ropes are ropes of glory and a rudder of truth is there to it. Sunday takes hold of the pole, Life’s Son seized the rudder. They draw thither to the shkintas and dispense light among the treasures. Thrones in them (the shkintas) they set up, and long drawn out come the Jordans upon them. On the bow are set lamps that in the wildest of tempests are not put out. All ships that sight me, make obeisance submissively to me. Submissively they make me obeisance and come to show their devotion unto me.

In the bows stands the fisher and delivers wondrous discourses. [There are] lamps [there], whose wicks shift not hither and thither, and a . . . is not by him. He wears no ring of deception, and with white robes is he clad. He calls to the fish of the sea and speaks to them: “Give heed to yourselves in the world! Beware of the foul-smelling birds who are above you. If you give heed to yourselves my brothers, I will for you be a help, a help and a support out of the regions of Darkness unto the Place of Light.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 75-76.

Chapter 38 reaffirms that the fisher emanates from Truth, which ensures effectiveness in his leading souls to celestial glory: “I and my friends of the Truth will find a place in Life’s shkinta. Into the height will I bear them on thrones surrounded with standards of glory.” Once again, the Mandaean text bears spiritual affinity with the Jewish *merkabah* throne-chariot visionary ascent.

Chapter 38 gives an account of the true fisher’s victorious combat with false fishers of deception; here I offer some representative selections from this passage:

The fisher clad him with vestures of glory, and an axe hung from his shoulder. . . . When the fishers caught sight of the fisher, they came and gathered around him. . . . When the fisher heard this, he stamped on the bows of the ship. The fisher stamped on the ships of the fishers; the fishers lie in the shallows close crowded together, tied up together like bundles of wheat, and cannot rise up. The reeds swish . . . , and the fish of the sea lie over the fishers. They snarl in the marsh and the water rings them round in its circle (?).

Then shrilling he spake with his voice. He discoursed with his voice sublime and spake to the catchers of fish: “Off from me. . . .”

I and my friends of the Truth will find a place in Life’s shkinta. Into the height will I bear them on thrones surrounded with standards of glory.

The Seven are vanquished and the Stranger-Man stays victorious. The Man of piety put to the test was victorious and helped the whole of his race unto victory.

Life is exalted and is victorious, and victorious is the Man who has come hither.⁹⁵

Chapter 39 tells of the submission of the false fishers to the true fisher of souls, and concludes the four chapters on the theme of the Good Fisher:

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 76-79.

In the Name of the Great Life may hallowed Light be glorified.

It is the voice of the Pure Fisher who calls and instructs the fish of the sea in the shallows.

He speaks to them: "Raise your . . . up, on the surface of the water stand upright; then will your force be double as great. Guard yourselves from the fishers who catch the fish and beat on the Jordan. Shilmai and Nidbai curse them, and they depart and settle themselves down behind me a mile off. The fish curse their casting-net in their place."

When the fisher thus spake, warning all [of the fish, when] the fishers his voice heard, they came up and gathered around him. They put themselves forward to ask of him questions, and knew not whence he came. "Where were you, fisher," they ask him, "that we heard not your voice in the marsh? Thy ship is not like our ship, and your . . . is not. . . . Your ship is not tarred over with pitch, and you are not like the fishers of this world."

The fishers see him, become scarlet for shame and remain standing in their places. They say to him: "Whence comes it that you do fish without finding? Thy ship is not like our ship; it shines by night like the sun. Your ship is perfected in æther, and wondrous standards are unfurled above it. Our ship sails along in the water, but thy ship between the waters. Our reeds (? rods) grumble at one another and break into pieces. Among them is the fish-trident of wrath, on which . . . and . . . are not. Your . . . O fisher, is such that when the fish see it, they take themselves off. We have not yet seen any fishers which are like unto you. The wind wafts your ship on, the mast . . . for the fisher and a rudder that gleams in the water-shallows. On your cast-net is no cord, and they have not laid . . . round it. There are no . . . in it, which are a cunning device against the fish of the. . . . You keep your yarn and have no clapper and no hatchet. Your yarn (= net) fishes not in the water and is not coloured for catching fish."

When the fishers thus spake, the fisher made answer unto them: “Have done, you fishers and fishers’ sons; off, get you gone from me! Off, go up to your village, the Ruins, Jerusalem. Ask about me of your father, who knows me, ask of your mother, who is my maid-servant. Say to him: There is a Fisher in the boat, in which are four [There is] a rudder, and it stands there, and a mast . . . and redemptions. They lay waste the land of Jerusalem.”

When they heard this from the fisher who has come hither, and understood, they spake to him: “Have compassion, forbearance and mercy on us and forgive us our sins and transgressions. We are your slaves, show yourself indulgent towards us. We will look after your fish that none of them fails. We will be the servants of your disciples, who name your Name in Truth. We will continue to look after all who name your Name.”

Life is exalted and is victorious, and victorious in the Man who has come hither.⁹⁶

The Mandaean *Book of John* preserves further passages that strikingly recall well-known discourses and phraseology of Jesus enframed in the Gospel of John, especially those that scholarship has labeled Jesus’ “I am” discourses. Perhaps most startling are the Mandaean texts in which an unidentified figure portrays himself as “the Good Shepherd.” There is really no sufficient or convincing reason beyond a defensive polemical plane to posit a dependence here on John’s gospel. At this point I present various excerpts from the Mandaean *Book of John*, chapter 11, on the Good Shepherd; because this dialogue is preserved in the *Book of John* in proximity to the story of the Baptizer, the Good Shepherd is arguably Yahia (although perhaps not in an exclusive sense), especially since this Good Shepherd possesses a ship reminiscent of Yahia’s previously encountered Light-ship:

In the Name of the Great Life may hallowed Light be glorified.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 79-80.

A shepherd am I who loves his sheep; sheep and lambs I watch over. Round my neck [I carry] the sheep; and the sheep from the hamlet stray not. I carry them not to the sea-shore, that they see not the whirl of the water, may not be afraid of the water, and if they are thirsty may not drink of the water. I bear them away [from the sea], and water them with the cup of my hand, until they have drunken their fill. I bring them unto the good fold; and they feed by my side. From the mouth of Euphrates, from the mouth of Euphrates the Radiant, things of marvelous goodness I brought them. I brought them myrtle, white sesame brought them and brought them bright standards. I cleansed them and washed them and made them to smell the sweet odour of Life. I put round them a girdle, at sight of which the wolves tremble. No wolf leaps into our fold; and of no fierce lion need they be alarmed. Of the tempest they need not be frightened; and no thief can break in upon us. A thief breaks not into their fold; and of a knife they need not be anxious. When my sheep were quietly laid down and my head lay there on the threshold, a rift was rent in the height and thunder did thunder behind me. The clouds seized hold one of another, and unchained were the raging tempests. Rain poured down in sheets and hail that smites elephants low, hail that shatters the mountains. And the tempests unchain themselves in an hour. Seas burst forth; they flooded the whole of the world. There, under the water, no one escaped, once he sank from the height as into a gulf. The water swept off everyone who had no wings or no feet. He speeds on, and knows not he speeds; he goes, and knows not he goes. Thereupon I sprang up and I entered the fold to bear my sheep forth from their place. I saw my eyes full. I saw the sea, I saw the fierce-raging tempest, I saw the storm-clouds that send forth no [friendly] greeting the one to the other. Ten-thousand times ten-thousand dragons are in each single cloud. I weep for my sheep, and my sheep weep for themselves. The little lambs are lamenting who cannot come out of the fold's door.

When then . . . I entered the house, I mounted up to the highest place [in it], and I call to my sheep. To the sheep in my care do I call. I pipe to them; I get them to hear, so that they come unto me. To them I pipe on my pipe, and beat on my tabour (?), [leading them] to the water. I call to them: “My little sheep, little sheep, come! Rise up at my call! Come, rise at my call; then will you escape the cloud-dragons. Come, come unto me! I am a shepherd whose boat is soon coming. My boat of glory is coming; and I come with it, and bring my sheep and lambs in aboard it. Every one who gives ear to my call and heed gives unto my voice, and who turns his gaze unto me, of him take I hold with my hands and bring him unto me inboard my boat.” But every lamb, male and female, that suffered himself to be caught, the water-whirl carried away, the greedy water did swallow. Whoever gave no ear to my call, sank under. To the highest part of the vessel I went. The bows stand up with the bow-post. I say: How woeful am I for my sheep who because of the mud have sunk under. The water-whirl sank them away from my reach, the swirling whirl of the water. How grieved am I for the rams whose fleece on their sides has dragged them down into the deep. How grieved am I for the lambkins whose bellies have not [yet] been filled full of milk. Of a thousand, one I recovered; of a whole generation I found again two. Happy is he who [stood up?] in the water, and in whose ears no water has entered. Happy the great rams who have stamped with their feet. Happy is he who has escaped from the Seven and Twelve, the sheep-stealers. Happy is he who has not couched down, has not lain down, has not loved to sleep deeply. Happy is he who in this defective age of Bishlom has stayed whole. Happy are they who free themselves from the snares of Ruha, from the filth and the shame and the bondage that have no end. My chosen! whoever shall live at the end of this age of Nirig (Mars), for him let his own conscience be a support. He will come and mount up to the Radiant Dwelling, to the region whose sun never sets, and whose light-lamps never darken.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 81-83.

In chapter 12, the Good Shepherd invites other shepherds into his service of caring for the sheep:

In the Name of the Great Life may hallowed Light be glorified.

A Treasure calls from without hither and speaks:

“Come, be for me a loving shepherd and watch me a thousand out of ten thousand.”

“So then will I be a loving shepherd for thee and watch you a thousand out of ten thousand.

But how full is the world of vileness and sown full of thorns and of thistles!”

“Come, be for me a loving shepherd and watch me a thousand out of ten thousand. I will bring you then sandals of glory, with them can you tread down the thorns and the thistles. Earth and heaven decay, but the sandals of glory decay not. Sun and moon decay, but the sandals of glory decay not. The stars and heaven’s zodiacal circle decay, but the sandals of glory decay not. The four winds of the [world-] house decay, but the sandals of glory decay not. Fruits and grapes and trees decay, but the sandals of glory decay not. All that is made and engendered decays, but the sandals of glory decay not. So then be for me a loving shepherd and watch me a thousand out of ten thousand.”

“I will then be a loving shepherd for thee and watch thee a thousand out of ten thousand. But if a lion comes and carries off one, how am I to retrieve him? If a thief come and steals one away, how am I to retrieve him? If one falls into the fire and is burnt, how am I to retrieve him? If one falls into the water and drowns, how am I to retrieve him? If one stays behind in the pen, how am I to retrieve him?”

“Come, be for me a loving shepherd and watch me a thousand out of ten thousand.”

“So will I then be for thee a loving shepherd and watch you a thousand out of ten thousand. I will watch a thousand of thousands, yes of ten thousand those who adore him.”

“But some of them wander from me. I went up into high mountains and went down into deep valleys. I went and found him where he can crop nothing. Of each single sheep I took hold with my right hand and on the scale did I lay him. A thousand among ten thousand have the [right] weight.”

Life is exalted and is victorious, and victorious is the Man who has come hither.⁹⁸

The Gospel of John states that the Baptizer was not the light that enlightens all creation. The very existence of such a statement seems to imply that there may have been individuals who indeed held such an exalted view of the Baptizer as the light of the world, and that John the evangelist felt the pressing need to combat this claim.

Regarding the death of John the Baptizer, according to Mandaean tradition this occurred after a vision he received of Manda d-Haiia, the “Gnosis of Life.” *Ginza Rba* 5,4 preserves a narration of this theophany of Manda d-Haiia, who appears in the form of a small boy to Yuhana. Before Manda d-Haiia reveals his true identity to Yuhana, we read: “Yuhana spoke to Manda d-Hiia: ‘Come, come small boy of three years and one day, smallest among your brothers and oldest among your fathers, you who are small, but whose speech is meaningful.’”⁹⁹ After Yuhana learns who the boy actually is, we read: “Yuhana then spoke to Manda d-Hiia: ‘You are the Man, in whose name I baptize in the living baptism. . . . Be gracious to me and reveal to me concerning the Mysteries of the Kings, concerning the great fruit of the light.’” Here we see the startling divine name “the Man,” which, however, is not incongruent with the theological mytheme that God created humanity in the divine image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27), or as an Islamic *ḥadīth* phrases it, humanity was made “in the form of the Merciful.” Thus, from an Abrahamic theological perspective to say “human” is consequently to imply the God who created humanity in the divine image. This is the justification

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 83-85.

⁹⁹ My translation from the Mandaic available online at <<https://sites.google.com/site/ginzarba/ginza-rba-download>>.

for what Reynold A. Nicholson has referred to as the sufi martyr al-Ḥallāj's "doctrine of personal deification," which he discusses in the following terms:

According to Ḥallāj, man is essentially divine. God created Adam in His own image. He projected from Himself that image of His eternal love, that He might behold Himself as in a mirror. Hence He bade the angels worship Adam (Qur'ān *sūra* 2:32). . . .

"Glory to Him who revealed in His humanity (i.e. in Adam) the secret of His radiant divinity,

And then appeared to His creatures visibly in the shape of one who ate and drank (Jesus)."

"Your Spirit is mingled in my spirit even as wine is mingled with pure water.

When anything touches You, it touches me. Lo, in every case You are I!"

And again:

"I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I:

We are two spirits dwelling in one body.

If you see me, you see Him,

And if you see Him, you see us both."¹⁰⁰

The Algerian sufi Shaykh 'Aḥmad al-'Alawī teaches that the Gnostic "sees the Merciful [God] in the shape of man," and refers to the *ḥadīth*, "I saw my Lord in the shape of a beardless youth," and subsequently gives the following pertinent caution: "Do not understand by that either body or

¹⁰⁰ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1914), pp. 150f.

resemblance or part.”¹⁰¹ In Ezekiel 1:26, the prophet saw God in the “likeness of a human being” seated upon the divine throne. The image of God as the Ancient of Days who is accompanied by “one like a Son of man” (the latter phrase is reminiscent of Ezekiel 1:26’s language), known from Daniel 7 and the *Parables of Enoch*, developed into the later *hekhalot* traditions concerning Enoch as the transfigured Metatron, who is called “the Youth.” The Youth is the counterpart of the divine Ancient One. Thus Metatron the Youth is the mirror image of the Ancient of Days. In Mandaean texts, the Ancient of Days would perhaps correspond to “the Ancient Radiance,” *ziua hatiqa*, “the Primordial Light,” *nhura qadmaia*, “the Ancient, Supernal, Esoteric, and Guarded, the Man who is high, abiding deep and esoteric,” *atiqa rama kasia untira gabra d ram uiatib amuq ksia* (*Qulasta* 8). We also read of “Abathur the Ancient, Supernal, Esoteric, and Guarded, who is high, esoteric, and guarded,” *abatur atiqa rama kasia untira d ram uksia untir*, “whose Throne (*kursia*) is erected at the House of Life’s Gate,” *baba d bit hiia* (*Qulasta* 9). *Abathur Atiqa*, that is, Abathur the Ancient, would then be paralleled in the Aramaic Zohar’s “the Ancient One,” *Attiqa*, who “is the highest rung within the Godhead,” and who is also called *Attiqa Qadisha*, “the Ancient Holy One,” derived from Daniel 7’s *atiq yomin*, “the Ancient of Days.”¹⁰²

In the zoharic *Idrot* texts, the ten *sefirot* are replaced with five divine faces that denote ways that “God looks at the world.”¹⁰³ The first face corresponds to *Keter*, Crown, and is called *Attiqa*; the second and third faces are *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, Wisdom and Understanding, who represent the supernal Father and Mother. The fourth face (integrating six of the traditional ten *sefirot*) is the male Youth, while the fifth face is *Malkhut*, the Kingdom, who is called *Nuqva*, “the Female.” *Attiqa* is the *Arikh Anpin*, “Long Face,” meaning “long-suffering” or “patient.” The Youth is the

¹⁰¹ Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi, *Knowledge of God: A sufic commentary on al Murshid al-Mu’in of ibn al-‘Ashir*. Edited by ‘Abd as-Sabur al-Ustadh; translated by ‘Abd al-Kabir al-Munawarra and ‘Abd as-Sabur al-Ustadh (Norfolk, UK: Diwan Press, 1981), pp. 237-238.

¹⁰² Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 67, 154.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Ze'ir Anpin, “Short Face,” meaning “impatient.” *Malkhut* as *Nuqva* “is the female counterpart and mate of *Ze'ir Anpin*.”¹⁰⁴ These five faces constitute the *Adam Qadmon*. Arthur Green notes that the figures of the elder and youth in this context are derived from the *midrash Mekhilta Shirta* 4, which explains that God appeared as an “‘elder’ at Sinai and as a ‘youth’ at the splitting of the [Red] sea.”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, in a passage on Metatron as Prince of the World, *bYebamoth* 16b states: “No one but the Prince of the World [Metatron] could have uttered Psalm 37:25: ‘I have been young and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.’ Who else could have said this? Could God have said it? Does old age apply to God? Could David have said it? Was he advanced in years? No one else but the Prince of the World [Metatron] could have said it.”

These texts are sometimes neglected in scholarly investigations of the Ancient of Days-Son of Man traditions, as well as of the Metatron Youth texts. In any event, the *Idrot* doctrine of the five faces may be compared to the Mandaean *Ginza Rba* opening (19): “From him issue forth five mighty, great attributes. The first is his light (*nhurh*) which ascends over them. The second is his fragrance (*riha*) which wafts over them. The third is the sweetness of his voice through which they rejoice. The fourth is the speech (*mimra*) of his mouth, through which he creates and generates. The fifth is the beauty of his form (*dmuth*), through which they become great like fruits under the sun.” The second divine emanation, *riha*, might conceivably be related allusively to the figure of Miriai (the Virgin Mary), who according to the Mandaean *Book of John* becomes the Tree of Life whose *riha* “diffuses and spreads over all the worlds.”

Regarding Daniel 7’s phrase *Atiq yomin*, “Ancient of Days,” by contrast, the phrase as found in the Ethiopic *Parables of Enoch* is *r’esa mawaw’el*, literally “Head of Days.” This might indicate that the Enochic and Danielic traditions in this regard may have partially arisen independently of each other, possibly based upon a common oral doctrinal source related to the traditions of the lost *Book*

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

of Noah. *Ginza Rba* 10,245 contains the phrase *rishia adakas*, Head of *Adakas* (*Adakas* is a contracted form of *Adam-Kaisa*, the Concealed Adam), who in the *Ginza Rba* appears at times as a “youth.” *Qulasta* 49 refers to the *kursia d abatur atiqā*, “the throne of Abathur the Ancient.”

Enoch’s specification of the supernal “Head” is curiously reminiscent of the much later kabbalistic speculations on the divine head with its white hair, beard, eyes, etc., speculations that reached their apex in the second and third books of the *Zohar*. According to *Zohar* III,288a, “The Holy Ancient One is utterly hidden, and the most exalted Wisdom resides in his skull. Verily, nothing of this Ancient One is manifest except the head, which is the supreme head of all heads.”¹⁰⁶

With regard to *Zohar* III,288a’s “skull,” *gelgotha*, Gregor Mather’s comment in his translation of *Sifra de-Tseni ‘utha* drawing attention to the parallel of the hill of Golgotha, the place of crucifixion in the gospels, has been perhaps unjustly neglected, for if, as Robert Sagerman has demonstrated, kabbalah could integrate an element of the Christian cross via the concept *sheti va-‘erev*, then there would seem to be little reason why the Christian image of the hill of Golgotha could not somehow and to some degree lie behind the (supposed Jewish Jesus sect) traditions later used and doctrinally altered by the zoharic speculations on the supernal skull or cranium.¹⁰⁷ This would be congruent with the evidence gathered by Yehuda Liebes that indicates Jewish esoteric literature had access to various “Jewish-Christian” texts that the *Zohar* and similar literature has naturally edited for specifically Jewish purposes.¹⁰⁸

Regarding the Ancient of Day’s Crown, the Hebrew *Keter* could be theologically correlated with the Mandaic *taga* (crown) and *klila* (myrtle wreath), while the zoharic *parzuf*, countenance (plural

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*. Translated from the German by Joachim Neugroschel (NY: Schocken Books, 1991), pp. 45-55.

¹⁰⁷ See Robert Sagerman, *Ambivalence toward Christianity in the Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia*, PhD dissertation, Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies New York University May 2008, p. 406.

¹⁰⁸ Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*. Translated from the Hebrew by Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, Penina Peli (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993).

parzufim), corresponds to the Mandaic *parsupa*, which is the *parsupa rba d 'qara*, the Great Countenance of Glory, which is *d 'qara d lamitahzia*, invisible, infinite. Just as *Keter* is a concept involving the most arcane kabbalistic mysteries, so the *taga* and *klila* conceal some of the deepest esoteric secrets of Mandaeism. In the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* we read: “The Crown is the mystery of the Father, and its name is Radiance; the myrtle wreath is the mystery of the Mother, and its name is ‘Let there be Light.’”¹⁰⁹ The same document contains the following profound declaration: “And Mara-d-Rabutha placed himself above the all, because he is the head, the sign, the crown, and the wreath. Indwelling him are the word, vision, aromatic perfume, and the ear that hears all.” This treatise also teaches a fourfold dimension of the Crown: “The Crown consists of four mysteries; these are [1:] the wellspring and date palm, [2:] fecundation, [3:] glory, and [4:] light.” The *Diwan Makuta 'laita* reveals that the Crown possesses a further aspect of twenty-four dimensions that perhaps resemble to a degree what Christian theology would call the *logos*: “He answered: ‘The alphabet’s twenty-four letters are twenty-four crowns which are worn by twenty-four kings fashioned of light.’” In *Qulasta* 3 we read: “Enlightened and enlightening is the mighty secret of radiance, Zihrun, a Crown of radiance, light, and glory from whom issued forth a flowing of living water reaching the shkintas.”

Qulasta 9 includes the following in its description of Abathur Atiq (Abathur the Ancient): “There he sits, the scales [of judgment] in front of him, weighing deeds and rewards.” In Jewish traditions Enoch or Metatron holds the scales of justice; we therefore see that in Mandaean texts the equivalent figures of the Ancient of Days and the Enochic-Metatronic Son of Man are apparently merged into a unity. And this might confirm the suspicion that in Daniel 7 and in the *Parables of Enoch* the “one like a Son of Man” is none other than the Ancient of Day’s reflected self, that is, the Son of Man is God appearing in the form of a human being, the precise mode in which God was

¹⁰⁹ The references in this paragraph are derived from E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*. I offer my own translations from the Mandaic text supplied in E. S. Drower, *The Thousand and Twelve Questions (Alf Trisar Šuialia)* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960).

witnessed by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:26). As we have already seen, the *midrash Mekhilta Shirta* 4 might also support such a contention, for according to this *midrash*, both the Ancient One and the Youth are theophanies of God. That Manda d-Hiia appears to John the Baptizer in the form of a youth of three years and one day perhaps agrees with Enoch's title "the Youth," and in fact Lady Drower writes that the *Corpus Hermeticum*'s Hermes corresponds functionally with the Mandaean Manda d-Hiia.¹¹⁰ I have only to add that traditional Islamic scholars have identified Hermes with the prophet Enoch (traditionally identified with the Qur'ānic Idrīs, although the latter in several respects is closer to Ezra than Enoch). Thus the Ancient of Days and the Youth theologically correspond to the Great Life (*hiia rbia*, paralleling the God of Abrahamic texts) and the Knowledge (Gnosis) of Life (*manda d-hiia*, God's "hypostatic" self) of Mandaean texts. When John the Baptizer addressed Manda d-Hiia, "You are the Man, in whose name I baptize in the living baptism," this might theologically correspond more or less to God's proclamation to Enoch in the *Parables of Enoch* chapter 71: "You are the Son of Man."

Incidentally, another commonality shared between the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* and Mandaeanism is the common Mandaic term "elect righteous," *bhir zidqa* (plural *bhiria zidqa*), paralleled in the Ethiopic term *heruy sadeq*. While occurring predominantly throughout the *Parables of Enoch*, the configuration is found already in the very first verse of *I Enoch*. I will here list all the relevant *I Enoch* verses (R. H. Charles version) containing some form of the Mandaean-attested term "elect righteous":

1:1: "The words of the blessing of Enoch wherewith he blessed the elect and righteous."

1:8: "But with the righteous he will make peace, and will protect the elect."

38:2: "And light shall appear to the righteous and to the elect who dwell upon the earth."

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 112.

38:3: “The presence of the righteous and elect.”

38:4: “The Lord of spirits has caused his light to appear of the face of the holy, righteous, and elect.”

39:6-7: “Mine eyes saw the Elect One of righteousness. And the righteous and the elect shall be without number before him. And all the righteous and elect before him shall be strong as fiery lights.”

40:5: “The righteous whose elect works hang upon the Lord of spirits.”

48:1: “Their dwellings were with the righteous, holy, and elect.”

50:8: “the garden where the elect and righteous dwell.”

51:5: “And the earth shall rejoice, and the righteous shall dwell upon it, and the elect shall walk thereon.”

53:6: “the Righteous and Elect One.”

56:6-7, “the land of his elect ones; the city of my righteous.”

58:1: “the third parable concerning the righteous and elect.”

58:2-3: “Blessed are ye, ye righteous and elect. For glorious shall be your lot. And the righteous shall be in the light of the sun. And the elect in the light of eternal life.”

61:13: “His works and all that He has created He has revealed to the righteous and elect in the name of the Lord of Spirits.”

62:12-13: “a spectacle for the righteous and for His elect. And the righteous and elect shall be saved on that day.”

62:15: “And the righteous and elect shall have risen from the earth.”

70:3: “the angels took the cords to measure for me the place for the elect and righteous.”

93:2: “the children of righteousness; the elect of the world.”

93:10: “And at its close shall be elected the elect righteous of the eternal plant of righteousness.”

94:4: “But seek and choose for yourselves righteousness and an elect life.”

Lastly, the divine title “Lord of spirits,” *’egzi’a manafest*, found throughout the *Parables of Enoch*, may be paralleled in the Mandaean phrase *maraihun d kulhun nishmata*, “Lord of all souls,” found in *Ginza Rba* 2,2,20. When we recall that already in Jewish sources *neshamah* and *ruah* are used more or less as synonyms,¹¹¹ just as they are in Mandaic literature, then we would be justified if we render *maraihun d kulhun nishmata* as “Lord of all spirits.” In *1 Enoch* 39:13 we read: “Those who sleep not bless you they stand before your glory and bless, praise, and extol, saying: Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Spirits; He fills the earth with spirits.” This is closely paralleled in Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Of course the word “holy” may be associated with “holy spirit.” In the Dead Sea scrolls, IQHa X.8, we find the title “Lord of every spirit,” אֲדֹנָי לְכָל רוּחַ , which is curiously similar to the Mandaic *maraihun d kulhun nishmata*, one of several possible indications of an indirect link of sorts between Mandaeism and the Essenes.

¹¹¹ See Hugo Odeberg, *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch*, p. 177.

CHAPTER THREE

The Virgin Mary in Mandaean and Islamic Sources

In the Mandaean *Book of John*, the story of Miriai (Mary) begins in chapter 34. One day she departed from her parents' house and wandered into a meeting of the Gnostics (i.e., Mandaeans):

I went and I found my brothers and sisters, how they stand and carry on proclamations. My brothers carry on proclamations and my sisters throw out explanations. With the voice of their proclamations and with the voice of their explanations I became drowsy and laid me down on the spot. My brothers went forth and did not wake me, and my sisters withdrew and roused me not. But you, my sister in Truth, do rouse me from sleep and do say: "Arise, arise, Miriai, before the day breaks and the cock lets crow his morn-call, before the sun shines and his glory rises over the worlds, before the priests and the priests' sons go forth and sit them down in the shade of the Ruins, Jerusalem, before your father comes and brings upset upon you such as you never have had."¹¹²

This passage contains several phrases that seem to be reminiscent of the Song of Songs, especially the following verses: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4); "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" (2:10, 13); "Until the day breathes and the shadows flee" (2:17; 4:6); "I slept, but my heart was awake" (5:2); "Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun?" (6:10).

A variant of the above passage from the *Book of John* reads as follows:

At the door of the house of the people her mother came upon Miriai. Her mother came upon Miriai and questioned her: "Whence come you, my daughter, Miriai, whose face gathers

¹¹² G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, pp. 62-63.

roses? Roses gathers your face and of sleep are your eyes full. Full of sleep are your eyes, and upon your forehead lies slumber.”

Thereon she made answer: “It is two,—three days to-day that my brothers sat down in the house of my Father. In my Father’s house sat down my brothers and let wonderful proclamations be heard. Because of the voice and the ringing of the proclamation of the treasures, my brothers, there comes no sleep over my eyes. Sleep comes not over my eyes, nor slumber upon my forehead.”¹¹³

In chapter 35 Miriai appears at the Euphrates River¹¹⁴ and is transfigured into the form of a vine (*gupna*), and a date tree, which is in fact the Tree of Life, and in this arboreal form she is visited and inhabited by birds. The tree’s leaves and fruits are jewels, and Mary’s scent (*riha*) diffuses throughout all the worlds. The birds eat *zirqa* (beams of light) and drink *hamra* (wine) from the tree who is Miriai:

Miriai am I, a vine, a tree, who stands at the mouth of Euphrates. The tree’s leaves are precious stones, the tree’s fruits pearls. The vine-tree’s foliage is glory, its shoots precious light. Among the trees its scent (*riha*) it diffuses, and it spreads over all the worlds. The birds of the air scented it; a flock settled down on the tree. A flock alighted on it, and they would build their nest there. They flutter about in it and settle not down in it firmly. Of its foliage they eat . . . from its inner part they drink wine. They eat what is not to be cast away, and drink what was not wine.¹¹⁵

A tempest then assaults the tree. A representative from the light world in the form of a glorious eagle visits the tree, and he speaks with the birds who have managed to survive the storm by

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 64.

¹¹⁴ According to a *ḥadīth* of ‘Alī related in Kulaynī, God “took in his hand some fresh *fūrāt* [‘sweet’ or ‘Euphrates’] water,” and then said to it: “From you shall I create the prophets and messengers.”

¹¹⁵ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, p. 66.

clinging tenaciously to the tree. The eagle exhorts the birds to become a “companion” (*sauta*) or “companionship of Miriai, the vine”:

While the birds sat on the vine, winds and tempests broke loose. They shook the good birdlets awake, they smote against the tree; on all sides they scattered the leaves of the vine-tree and scared the birds out of their place. Many a bird there was who flew not away, but held on fast with claws and with wings, till the winds and the tempests were over. Many again held not on fast and were hurried away. . . . Woe unto those who did not hold fast, but were dashed from the tree and flew off. How fair is the tree of Life and fair the birds who dwell on it!

The winds and the tempests passed and rest came over the world.

As the birds sit there and chirp and would be building their nest, as the birds sit on the vine, an eagle wheeled and flew hither. A white eagle-bird came, looked down and caught sight of the birds. Round wheeled he, sped down on them with his wings, and came and sat on the tree. In converse with him joined the birds, and said to him:

“By your life, Eagle! On this tree were we birds without number. But there broke loose against them the winds, and on the tree came raging tempests. They shook them off from the tree, so that they tore their wings from them [nearly]. Many a one held fast, whom the winds and tempests could not tear away; but many a one flew off at top speed. We speak to you, therefore, O Eagle, we ask you respecting the birds, because you are sharp of sight and do see all in this world: What have the winds and the tempests done with those birds, our brothers? What spy you out (?) over them?”

Then made he answer unto them: “You had better not to have known, my brothers, what has become of those birds. Slingshots drove them far from me; their wings broke; torn off were

they, broken off; they went hence and relied on the bird-catchers. The harrier and hawk wheeled round them, tore pieces out of their flesh and fed on those who were fat. Woe to those who fell prey to the water, if there was no portion for them at the crossing. Well for you, you birds, who hold fast to this vine [here]; you became a companionship of Miriai, the vine, who stands at the mouth of Euphrates. See and satisfy yourselves, you birds, that I have come to you. I have come to my brothers to be a support for them in this world. I have come to heal Miriai, [come] to bring water to the good, beloved plants, to the vines, who stand at the mouth of Euphrates. In a white pail I draw water and bring it to my plants. I bear and I hold [it] on the arms of glory which are my own. I bear and I hold [it] and give [them] to drink. Well for him who has drunk of my water. He drinks, finds healing and confirmation, and grows to double [his stature]. The vines who drank water, brought forth good fruit. Their leaves turned on high and made a brave show. The branches which drank no water, brought forth bitter herbs and worm-wood (?). Woe to those who have not gone forward upon the Way; woe to those who have not passed on by the way-stone! They hated Life's Treasure-House (Simat Hiia), Miriai, the precious Truth (kushta).

“My brothers, hold fast, be a companionship of Miriai. I will look round in the world, let Life's call sound forth and rouse the sleeping and wake [them].” The eagle flew off from the tree; he wheeled round and instructed his friends. He speaks to them: “Give ear to me, my brothers! Stay fast and endure persecution. Be a companionship to Miriai.”¹¹⁶

Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley notes a parallel in the *Apocryphon of John* where Christ in the form of an eagle visits the tree of life to awaken those languishing in the sleep of ignorance.¹¹⁷ The birds as supernal angel-like entities in the *Book of John* represent vestigial traces of a pre-historic

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 65-67.

¹¹⁷ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus' Mother, Miriai,” p. 187. The parallel of the eagle in the story of Miriai with the Christ-eagle in the *Apocryphon of John* may be yet another indication of a veiled presence of Jesus in earlier Mandaicism in a positive mode.

indigenous experience of physical birds as being literally angels; only later after these groups made the transition to civilization (city-dwelling life) did birds then become mere physical symbols of invisible spiritual angels. This illustrates the schizophrenic-like fracturing that typifies some of civilizational cognition, for what the indigenous person experienced as an undivided and inseparable whole, later civilized thinking has split into a dualistically separated matter and spirit. The indigenous birdangel (a single word) has been fractured into a separate physical bird and a separate spiritual angel. The indigenous mindset typified by wholeness shines through clearly enough in the *Book of John*'s birds.

The narration continues with a transformation of Miriai into a priest, a status indicated by her portrayal as one seated upon a priestly throne (*kursa*) near a priestly standard (*drabsha*), and she is outfitted with a priestly staff (*margna*) and priestly girdle (*himiana*) as well:¹¹⁸

They went and found that a throne was set up for Miriai on the bank of Euphrates. A white standard (*drabsha*) was for her unfurled and a book stood upright on her lap. She reads in the books of truth and rouses all worlds from their sleep. She holds in her hand the staff (*margna*) of Life's water; the girdle (*himiana*) is bound round her loins. Miriai in humbleness prays and proclaims with wondrous voice. The fishes gather out of the sea, the birds from the mouth of Euphrates. They come to hear Miriai's voice, and no more long to lie down to sleep. They breathe in the sweet scent (*riha*) around her and forget the world.¹¹⁹

The account continues with a scene of lamentation and yearning of the Jews for Miriai's return to them, which Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley notes is curiously reminiscent the Jewish Sabbath tradition of waiting for Shekhinah as the Sabbath Queen:¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ That these four items indicate priestly status is pointed out in *ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

¹¹⁹ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, pp. 67-68.

¹²⁰ See Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus' Mother, Miriai," p. 188.

Lo, the brides weep in Judaea, the women and men in Jerusalem. Their beloved gold have they cast from them, and they give themselves up to wailing and mourning for thee. They say: "We will make away with our goods, until Miriai returns. Gold forge we [? no longer], and cast away fair raiments of silk and bracelets (?)." They stand on the roofs and look out, that they may see you again in Jerusalem. For you they make vows, if you come to me and we go hence. My daughter, arise, come back to your dwelling-place, the city Jerusalem. Come, light up your lamps, which have been put out from the day when you withdrew yourself.¹²¹

Next, the eagle returns to Miriai and the two are assured that they will ascend to the region of supernal life:

As the priests stand there and speak with Miriai at the mouth of Euphrates, there came a pure eagle-bird, whose wings are the fullness of worlds. . . . He descended unto her (Miriai), folded before her his wings, settled down by her, narrated and proclaimed to her; and they held out the loved hand of Truth to each other. He embraced her in potent embracing, forced her down and set her on the throne.

"Miriai," he speaks to her, "with favor look upon me, remember me in the Life's presence. I am your Good Messenger, the Man, who gives ear to your discourse. I beseech you for the high Truth, the Truth which the Jordans have chosen."

"O Good Treasure," she makes answer unto him, "Treasure whom Life has sent! Your glory and your light have risen upon us, and your honour is approved in the Place of Light. Everyone who gives ear to your voice, will be included in the pure region. In Life's Treasury will he be included and thy rays will rise [over them] twofold. . . . I and you will

¹²¹ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, p. 68.

circle aloft and victoriously mount to the Place of Light.” May Life be our pledge, and Life is victorious.¹²²

That the eagle saves Miriai from persecution and sets her on a throne curiously brings to mind Revelation 12:1’s vision of a celestial queen whose crown is adorned with twelve stars. In Revelation 12:14 this queen is “given two wings of the great eagle that she might” escape from the devil’s persecution.

J. J. Buckley refers to Miriai’s “‘founding mother’ role,” to her status as a “founding mother figure,” and “a Mandaean female community-consolidating figure” in the passages from the *Book of John* (and in the *Ginza*), texts that also present her “as active priest, in full regalia” and that identify her “with the female Lightworld beings Simat Hiia and Kushta.”¹²³ Both the eagle and Miriai are “‘*utria*, Lightworld beings,” and as the eagle saved Miriai from persecution, so Miriai promises that both she and the eagle will mount aloft together to the region of light.¹²⁴ Miriai also appears in her foundational Mandaean role in the weekly priestly prayers for the beginning and ending of what theologically coincides, *mutatis mutandis*, with the Jewish Sabbath,¹²⁵ and here again we may sense a connection between Miriai and the Jewish Shekhinah as Sabbath Queen.

In chapter 35 we find the phrase “Life’s Treasury House, Miriai, the dear Truth.” The Mandaeans call the Treasury House of Life (Mandaic Simath Haiye), the “Mother of all the Kings of Light,” and she is thus a feminine entity of the light world, which is not incompatible with her simultaneously being fully human. In chapter 57 we find a discourse spoken by Simath Haiyea in which we encounter several elements highly reminiscent of the Gospel of John, including chapter 15 of the latter in which Jesus proclaims: “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Here in the

¹²² Ibid., p. 70.

¹²³ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus’ Mother, Miriai,” pp. 189, 192, and idem, “The Evidence for Women Priests in Mandaism,” p. 105.

¹²⁴ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus’ Mother, Miriai,” p. 190.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 193.

Mandaean *Book of John*, the Treasury of Light proclaims of herself that which the Christian gospel applies to Jesus: “The Vine who bears fruit ascends; who bears none will here be cut off.

Whosoever lets himself be enlightened through me and instructed, ascends and beholds the Place of Light; whoever does not let himself be enlightened through me, is cut off and falls into the great End-Sea [= death]”:

In the Name of the Great Life may hallowed Light be glorified.

The Treasury am I, Life’s Treasury; the Treasury am I, the Mighty One’s Treasury; the Treasury am I, Life’s Treasury. A crown was I for the Mighty from everlasting. The Treasury am I, Life’s Treasury. Ever did I give light to the treasures and to the shkintas, and was for adornment to Jordan. For adornment became I to Jordan, who was from everlasting, through whom the treasures give light. Great [Life] made me limpid and lucent and made me into a vesture. He made me into his vesture, which day in and day out sings measureless praise of the aether.

The Treasury am I, Life’s Treasury. To the King of the Splendor became I a crown. The treasures shine through my glory and praise my form beyond measure.

The Treasury am I, Life’s Treasury—I who as adornment settled down on the King of the Splendor, so that he shone in his mind, that he became bright and shining, and his form glittered more than the [light-]worlds. As I (lit. it) gave light and enlightenment unto the treasures and to the shkintas [even] in the aether, the King laid me as vesture round Nesab the Radiant. Nesab the Radiant then took me, brought me and laid me as vesture over Jordan. As vesture over Jordan he laid me, through whom the treasures shine beyond measure.

The Treasury am I, Life's Treasury. The wicked are blind and see not. I call them unto the Light, yet they busy themselves with the Darkness. "O you wicked," I unto them cry, "you who sink down in the Darkness, arise and fall not into the deep." I cry unto them; yet the wicked hear not and sink into the great Sea of the Ending. Therefore was Jordan made a bridge for the treasures; a bridge for the treasures became he, while he cut off the wicked and hurled them into the great Sea of the Ending.

The Treasury am I, Life's Treasury. A crown I became for Life's Gnosis. He bestowed on me the rulership over the treasures and the shkintas which are there [yonder].

The Treasury am I, Life's Treasury. Of the light-worlds was I the enlightener. Day in and day out they sing praise to Great [Life], and through me they mount upward and behold the Light's region.

The Treasury am I, Life's Treasury. A vesture for the light-worlds became I.

[The Treasury] am I, Life's Treasury. A King¹²⁶ for the Nazoraeans became I. I became a King for the Nazoraeans, who through my Name find praise and assurance. Praise and assurance they find through my Name, and on my Name they mount up and behold the Light's region. For the Men of purity put to the test—[for them] their eye became full of Light. Full of Light was their eye, and in their heart Life's Gnosis took seat. Whoever of me, Life's Treasury, makes his investment, loves not gold and silver, loves not gold and possessions, [loves not] food of the body, and envy with him has no place. Envy found with him no place, and he did not forget his night-prayer. He forgot not the discourses and writings, and he forsook not his Lord's word. He forsook not the prayer of his Father, Life's Gnosis; wherefore into the great End-Sea he falls not. He forgot not Sunday, nor did he

¹²⁶ Note here that a feminine personified entity exhibits a masculine mode; this agrees with the Jewish kabbalistic paradigm according to which the tenth *sefirah*, the feminine *Malkhut*, Kingdom, is identified as both the masculine King David and as the feminine Shekhinah.

neglect the Day's evening. He forgot not the way of Great [Life, the way] of wages and alms. He will be rapt away in the night-prayer, he will be rapt away in shining vestures which have come from Great [Life]. Treasures for him fill up what falls short, and what is empty they load for him full. If he bears a pure load, he is counted with the Men of piety put to the test who separate themselves [from the world] in the Name of Yawar. Life's Treasury rested upon them, to their form it gave light, and for them a way to Great [Life's] House has been established.

I have called with clear voice and directed hereto the disciples: "The vine who bears fruit, does ascend; who bears none will here be cut off. Whosoever lets himself be enlightened through me and instructed, ascends and beholds the Place of Light; whoever does not let himself be enlightened through me and instructed, is cut off and falls into the great End-Sea."¹²⁷

As J. J. Buckley notes, in Mandaicism the usual form of Mary's name in passages where she appears without her son Jesus is Miriai. When Mary appears together with Jesus, then "both are negatively evaluated" and Miriai appears in the form Miriam, with the sole exception of *Haran Gawaita* 3.¹²⁸ With the shift from Miriai to Miriam we discover that Mary is an ambiguous figure in Mandaicism. This ambiguity has profound theological implications, for it agrees structurally with the classical Gnostic paradigm of the dual Sophia and with the later Jewish kabbalistic Upper and Lower Shekhinah. It is curious that whereas J. J. Buckley has demonstrated that the Ruha in Mandaean thought is both good and evil, indeed even beyond such a dualistic construct,¹²⁹ she does not emphasize that the very same paradigm could apply to Mary in Mandaicism. And more importantly, Buckley does not seem to note that the Mandaean Mary apparently overlaps in various ways with

¹²⁷ G. R. S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book*, pp. 86-88.

¹²⁸ See Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus' Mother, Miriai," p. 194.

¹²⁹ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "A Rehabilitation of Spirit Ruha in Mandaean Religion," *History of Religions* 22/1 (1982): pp. 60-84.

the Mandaean Ruha (spirit, holy spirit). But before exploring the co-incidence between Mary and the Ruha, we will examine the characteristics of the Mandaean Ruha as so ably established by Buckley.

Ruha exhibits many features in common with the fallen Sophia of Gnosticism.¹³⁰ With regard to Ruha's erstwhile dwelling in the underworld, it seems that the ultimate purpose of her presence there was to function as a covert spy who would at the appropriate time destroy the forces of darkness, a sort of Trojan horse strategy, and in these texts, it is apparent that her true origin is in actuality in the light world.¹³¹ Once she has ascended from the underworld, she "will furnish the earthly world as well as the human being with her own essence," which is the spirit necessary "for earthly life."¹³² (One thinks of the rabbinic "evil inclination" necessary for the perpetuation of humans). According to Mandaean belief there is an unavoidable imbalance in creation that manifests in forms of diversity that are basically positive, such as the necessary distinction between the human sexes.¹³³

Ginza Rba 6 records the story of Dinanukht who is part human and part personified book.

Dinanukht has a vision of Ruha that he narrates in the following terms:

Ewath the holy spirit came to me in my shkina and spoke to me: Why did you lie there, Dinanukht, and why do you enjoy sleeping? I am the Life who was from the beginning. I am the Brilliance, I am the Light, I am Death, I am Life. I am Darkness, I am Light. I am Error, I am Truth. I am Destruction, I am Creation. I am Injury, I am Healing. I am an exalted Man who is more ancient and who was present before the constructor of the heavens and the earth.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 64.

¹³² Ibid., p. 65.

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

Among Ruha's names in the *Book of John* and *Diwan Abatur* is "Drop (Nitufta), an epithet of Simat Hiia ('Treasure of Life')." ¹³⁴ Importantly, the "polemical" use of the title Ruha d-Qudsha (holy spirit) is not found in "the 'esoteric writings' most treasured by the Mandaean priests." ¹³⁵

Additionally, positive traditions on Ruha are found in the *Diwan Abatur*, the *Ginza Rba*, the *Book of John*, and in Mandaean oral traditions. One such oral tradition states that "Ruha is the breath of Life in the created world, and our breath is from her," and that she has a sister named Zahariel, or Zahari'il, who has been identified with Simat Hiia, ¹³⁶ and which incidentally coincides with the Arabic title of the Prophet of Islam's daughter Fāṭima, namely, Zahra, the Lady of Light.

J. J. Buckley refers to "the Mandaean term *dmuta* ('ideal counter-part,' 'upper image')," used to describe the celestial archetypes whose worldly counterparts, however, may be morally ambiguous by necessity of their very ontic structure, and suggests that the concept of the *dmuta* might help explain some of the unavoidable ambiguity involved in the image of Ruha. ¹³⁷ Buckley does not draw a parallel here between the idea of *dmuta* and the Mandaean version of Mary, yet this might help explain Mary's ambiguity as portrayed in Mandaean literature. Such a parallel may be legitimately drawn because Mary and the Ruha are in fact related in various ways in Mandaean scriptures, as Sinasi Gündüz has pointed out: "[T]he Mandeans consider the Holy Spirit, Ruha d-qdusha, as the mother of Jesus. . . ." ¹³⁸ The Mandeans furthermore call Jesus "the son of the Holy Spirit," ¹³⁹ a precise title of Jesus found in the likely Syrian Nag Hammadi text *Apocryphon of James* and by implication in the Syro-Palestinian *Gospel of the Hebrews* that records Jesus referring to "my mother the holy spirit."

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

¹³⁶ See E. S. Drower, *The Mandeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), pp. 271, 46.

¹³⁷ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "A Rehabilitation of Spirit Ruha in Mandaean Religion," p. 81.

¹³⁸ For the references, see Sinasi Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandeans and Their Relationship to the Sabians of the Qur'ān and to the Harranians*, p. 104.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

The intimate connection between John the Baptizer and the Virgin Mary/Miriai in the Mandaean *Book of John* is paralleled by the essentially Marian character of John in the Qur'ān. We read in *sūra* 19, which bears the title Maryam, that it was precisely in response to the discovery of God's miraculous feeding of Mary (at angelic hands according to the *Protevangelium Jacobi*) that Zechariah prayed for offspring, and this in the end culminates in the story of the conception of his son John. If Mandaean traditions are indeed integrated within the Qur'ānic text, then it may be no coincidence that *sūra* 19 goes on to narrate the birth of Jesus in the midst of the story of the palm tree and the miraculous spring, for these two images along with the theme of fecundity or birth are joined together inseparably in Mandaean thought. As is well known, the story of Jesus' birth beneath a palm tree near a stream is not paralleled in Christian tradition.¹⁴⁰

Here I give the account of Jesus' birth from Qur'ān *sūra* 19:

22 And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him [in her womb] to a remote place (*makānañ qaṣiyyā*).

23 And the pangs of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of the palm tree (*nakhlah*). She said: "O, would that I had died ere this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten!"

24 Then (one) cried unto her from beneath her, saying: "Your Lord has placed a spring beneath you,

25 And shake the trunk of the palm tree toward you, you will cause ripe dates to fall upon you.

26 So eat and drink and be consoled (lit., cool your eyes). And if you meet any mortal, say: 'Lo! I have vowed a fast unto the Merciful, and may not speak this day to any mortal.'"

¹⁴⁰ The closest ancient Christian parallel is a story involving the holy family long after Jesus' birth, a story also attested in Muslim legends.

That Mary gives birth by a palm tree recalls the association of this particular tree with parthogenesis and androgyny; as W. F. Albright explains: “In lands where the date palm flourished, as in Babylonia, there was a sharp differentiation between unisexual and bisexual vegetation. Consequently, the sense of the sexuality of plant life, common everywhere, was very strongly accentuated. Bisexual plants, which bore their own seed, were regarded as androgynous or parthenogenetic.”¹⁴¹ As Lady Drower so ably documents, in Mandaicism the date palm is the Tree of Life, and in Zoroastrianism it is obligatory that in every fire temple there must be present a date palm and a wellspring.¹⁴² The images of wellspring and date palm open the Mandaean baptismal prayers: “May the Name of the Mighty occult primordial wellspring (aina) be invoked upon you; the Names of the Mighty primordial date palm (sindirka) be invoked upon you.”¹⁴³

In the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* we read:

May the primordial Mighty Light be praised, the wellspring of Light, the Mother of the twenty-four letters of the Alphabet who is my Spouse. May the Mighty primordial wellspring and the date palm be praised, because the date palm is the Father, and I Mara d-Rabutha was made by him. The hidden Tanna¹⁴⁴ is praised which inhabits the mighty hidden primordial wellspring, because from that secret of the seed implanted in the Jordan come forth all the worlds and aeons: fruit trees, vines, trees, fish winged birds, creatures that swarm, and sprouting growth. They all drank of it and became male and female; they grow pregnant, increase and multiply. May Shishlam-Rba¹⁴⁵ be praised, who reclines upon the

¹⁴¹ See: W. F. Albright, “The Goddess of Life and Wisdom,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 36/4 (1920), pp. 262-263.

¹⁴² E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 8.

¹⁴³ My translation; cf. *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ *Tanna* is a quite mysterious word, but it seems to mean something like “matrix” or “formative centre”: cf. *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ Shishlam-Rba, the prototype quintessential symbol of bridegrooms.

shore of the wellspring and palm tree. . . .¹⁴⁶ Four mysteries comprise the Crown, which constitute the wellspring and the date palm, fecundity, glory, and light.¹⁴⁷

The dyad of wellspring and date palm occurs in additional passages of the *Alf Trisar Shuialia*, which I will revisit in more depth below:

Thus the Great Mother rose up and she proceeded to the wellspring and date palm and concealed herself. And she looked and saw the vines next to the wellspring, and their fruit was beauteous, and their shade was a dome above the flowing stream. . . .

Next he gave instruction concerning the mighty concealed wellspring, explaining that she is the Womb, the Door of secrets through which kings have entered. Next he gave instruction concerning the mighty primordial date palm comprised of light and of the body.¹⁴⁸

Another prayer involving the wellspring and date palm is found in the *Shal Shulta* from the *Qulasta*:

In the Name of Life (*bshuma d hiia*)

Praised be the primordial mighty Radiance (*mshaba ziua rba qadmaia*)

And praised the primordial mighty Light (*umshaba nhura rba qadmaia*).

And praised be the wellspring (*umshaba aina*)

And the mighty primordial date palm (*usindirka rba qadmaia*).

Praised be the occult Tanna (*mshaba tana kasia*),

¹⁴⁶ My translation; for an alternate rendering, see *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁷ My translation; for an alternate rendering, see *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ My translation; for an alternate rendering, cf. *ibid.*, p. 10.

Who inhabits the mighty occult primordial wellspring (*d bgu aina rabtia kasita qadmaita shria*).

Praised be the mighty Shishlam (*mshaba shishlam rba*)

Sitting on the shore of the wellspring and date palm (*d lkiph d aina usindirka iatib*).

Praised is the mighty 'zlat.¹⁴⁹

Praised is the mighty Yawar¹⁵⁰

Fashioned from the loins of Radiance.

Praised is Simat Hiia,¹⁵¹

Mother of all kings,

For from them all the worlds have emanated,

For she was chosen on account

Of concealed mysteries.¹⁵²

As Lady Drower explains the celestial Mother in Mandaeanism is the Wellspring (Aina), the “spouse of the great principle of divine enlightenment,” and she is also called Nasirutha, that is, the personified Nasorean faith.¹⁵³ In the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* the wellspring is identified with the Spouse

¹⁴⁹ 'zlat is the prototype or quintessential symbol of brides.

¹⁵⁰ Yawar is the primordial emanated light, and although there would be many qualifications to be made, Yawar theologically corresponds in some respects to the personified *logos* and *memra* of Christian and Jewish sources respectively; compare also the Islamic sufi trope of the *nūr Muḥammadī*, the “light of Muḥammad.”

¹⁵¹ Simat Hiia, “Treasure/Treasury of Life,” spouse of Yawar.

¹⁵² My translation; for an alternate rendering of a portion of these verses, cf. E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 11.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

of the Lord of Might: “I am Mara-d-Rabutha’¹⁵⁴ [Lord of Might], Father of ‘uthras; and the wellspring is my Spouse. . . . May Life’s Treasury be praised, the mother of all the worlds, She from whom the upper, middle and lower worlds emanated.”¹⁵⁵ And a final passage from *Alf Trisar Shuialia* reads: “Turn your sight and behold the wellspring and date palm from whom Shishlam and ‘zlat went forth. Behold, they took each other in marriage.”¹⁵⁶

With regard to the Qur’ānic account of Jesus’ birth by the spring and date palm, we can detect an interpenetration of the mystico-erotic categories of the masculine and feminine coordinates that renders it problematic to interpret the scene’s imagery in any one-sided mode with regard to symbolic genders. For example, while the date palm can function as a symbol of masculine fecundation, it may simultaneously also reflect a feminine symbol of the Virgin herself as the tree of life. And while the spring can be a masculine symbol of the infant Jesus who issues forth from the feminine tree, the water can operate at the same time as a feminine symbol of the maternal water of life, which conceivably might allude to an undifferentiated matrix of gnosis that is androgynous. One should note also that the date palm could arguably contain some implicit reference to the word of God, since at the time of the Islamic revelation, palm-bast was already a traditional medium used for writing.¹⁵⁷

The fecund and reproductive import of the masculine and feminine symbolism involved in the images of the wellspring and date palm must be guarded in the strictest secrecy according to the esoteric books of the Mandaeans; we read, for example, in the *Diwan Malkuta ‘laita*: “And be cautious, be cautious, be cautious 360 times, as I have admonished you, when it comes to the

¹⁵⁴ As Lady Drower notes (*ibid.*), *rabutha’* can also mean “teaching.”

¹⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ F. Krenkow, “Writing for the preservation of Ancient Arabic Poetry,” in T. W. Arnold, Reynold A. Nicholson, eds., *A Volume of Oriental Studies: Presented to Professor Edward G. Browne* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 265.

explanation of the wellspring and palm tree.”¹⁵⁸ This may shed light on the Qur’ānic account of Mary’s fast of silence enjoined on her at the scene of the date palm and spring. Furthermore, a line from the Mandaean text cited above, “Thus the Great Mother rose up and she proceeded to the wellspring and date palm and concealed herself,” is strikingly reminiscent of *sūra* 19 *āya* 16 from the account leading up to the birth of Jesus: “And make mention of Mary in the Book, when she had withdrawn from her people to a place in the east.” The “place in the east,” *makānañ sharqiyyā*, and *āya* 22’s “a remote place,” *makānañ qaṣiyyā*, remind me somewhat of the Mandaean terms “a secret place,” *atra kasia*, “a hidden place,” *atar ksia*, descriptive titles of the centrally important Mandaean concept of the “Place of Light,” *atra d nhura*, which occurs repeatedly throughout perhaps every Mandaean scripture. The east is the place of sunrise, and therefore a place of light, and hence one of Mary’s traditional titles is Lady of Light, a name shared, as I noted previously, with the Prophet of Islam’s daughter Fāṭima, not to mention Mandaicism’s own Zahriel (sister of the holy spirit) whose name is also Fāṭima’s most beloved title. Even if under a modified name, Mary is also, as we documented extensively earlier in this chapter, a simultaneously fully human and celestially luminous being in the Mandaean *Book of John*.

Regarding the place in the east to which Mary withdrew, the Hebrew word *qedem* can mean either “east” (or “eastward”) or “beginning; origin.” The most well-known example of the word’s ambiguity occurs in Genesis 2:8, which the Latin Vulgate translates as *plantaverat autem dominus deus paradisum voluptatis a principio* (“And the Lord God had planted a paradise of pleasure from the beginning”), but which most versions understand as “And the Lord God had planted a paradise of pleasure in the east” or “eastward.” The Arabic cognate of Hebrew *qedem* principally means “ancient,” whereas in the Arabic language the word for “east” is *shar*. But the Qur’ānic notice of Mary’s eastern place may still denote “origin,” or “ancient origin” in the sense that the east stands for the place of the sunrise, the beginning of light; by contrast, the west denotes the ending, for the

¹⁵⁸ See E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 10.

sun sets and finishes its course in the west. Thus the Light Verse, *sūra* 24:35, states that the divine light is neither of the east nor of the west, that is, it has no beginning or end. Moreover the Aramaic word *atiq* can mean both “ancient” and “removed,”¹⁵⁹ so that Mary’s withdrawal to a remote place (*sūra* 19:17, “she secluded herself away”; 22, “She withdrew to a distant place”) may also subtly allude to the ancient or eternal aspect of her celestial counterpart of which she is an earthly manifestation (Arabic *tajallī*, Mandaic *dmuta*). Her heavenly counterpart is the supernal Lady Wisdom, who according to Philo originates in the east; as he explains in his *Allegorical Explanation* I:43:

“And God planted a paradise in Eden, in the east (Heb. *qedem*); and there he placed the human whom he had formed,” for he called that divine and heavenly Wisdom by many names; and he made it manifest that it had many appellations; for he called it the Beginning, and the Image, and the Vision of God.

A straightforward meaning of the “eastern place” to which Mary retired is the Jerusalem temple, which itself, however, also represents the primordial beginning, for it was constructed symbolically to represent and “sacramentally” so to speak to re-enact the Genesis story of creation.¹⁶⁰

The Marian account of the date palm and spring might shed some light on why dates were of such importance for the Prophet of Islam. According to a report from his wife Aisha it would seem as if the Prophet applied dates in an almost sacramental manner to new-born infants. She narrates that he “used to chew dates and with them he would anoint the mouths of the Companion’s children when

¹⁵⁹ See Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, p. 46.

¹⁶⁰ On the temple as a re-presentation of creation, see Margaret Barker, “Belonging in the Temple” (2007): <<http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/BelongingintheTemple.pdf>>. Retrieved 18 April 2013.

they were born.”¹⁶¹ Should we see in this a sort of reenactment of the scene of Jesus’ birth at the date palm as described in *sūra* 19? Muslims still feed new-born infants date paste.

The Mandaean wellspring and date palm constitute a key to deeply esoteric and erotic mysteries, secrets that are essentially unspeakable, an ineffability alluded to in Mary’s fast of silence that began at the spring and date palm as narrated in Qur’ān *sūra* 19, as well as the three-day silence of Zachariah as narrated in *sūra* 3 in relation to his son John the Baptizer. This once more indicates, incidentally, that there is an intimate theological relationship between Mary and John, and this is also illustrated by the fact that they are spiritual “siblings,” for Zachariah was a kind of foster-father or caretaker of Mary in the Jerusalem temple.

Yawar, the first emanated personified Light in Mandaean texts, has his origin in the wellspring and date palm; we read the following statement made by Yawar in the *Alma Rishaia Rba*: “I was fashioned from the wellspring and date palm.”¹⁶² In the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* the newly created Adam addresses the wellspring and date palm: “O date palm, you are my father, and O wellspring, you are my mother from whom I have existence.”¹⁶³ According to the same text, the wellspring emanated from the well Sharat, which means “overflowed” (cf. Plotinus’ concept of the inward tendency of the divine singularity to overflow into multiplicity, a process that gives rise to the emanations).¹⁶⁴

The *Alf Trisar Shuialia* further states that at the wellspring Mara d-Rabutha learned the alphabet and recited all sacred books.¹⁶⁵ In this passage at least, the wellspring would correspond with the Qur’ānic *umm al-kitāb*, mother of the book, and Mara d-Rabutha would coincide with the *kitāb*, the revealed book. The well Sharat is also called Zahriel, the sister of the Ruha d-Qudsha, and in the

¹⁶¹ See Arthur Jeffery, *A Reader on Islam* (S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1962), p. 365.

¹⁶² Cf. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 24.

¹⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19.

Ginza Rba we read of a “Well of Darkness” in a story relating to Zahriel and Ruha d-Qudsha.¹⁶⁶ *Alf Trisar Shuialia* speaks of “the well of the [divine] alphabet,”¹⁶⁷ and this also corresponds symbolically with *umm al-kitāb*. A masculine dimension of Sharat is known as Bihrām, the Victor.¹⁶⁸ The *Alma Rishaia Rba* relates that before Adam was created, a “seed formed within the wellspring which is designated the womb.”¹⁶⁹ This seed would correspond to the masculine Logos-Mimra, or the divine Book/s. The “well of darkness” might conceptually be compared to the Solomonic Song of Songs’ statement of the virgin maiden: “I am black, but beautiful” (1:5).

According to Mandaean faith, God as such, who is called “Life,” does not create the cosmos; in the words of Lady Drower, “creation is delegated to emanations,” and Yawar and Mana, Light and Mind, are “the two great creative forces which are the first manifestation of” the Great Life.¹⁷⁰ According to the *Ginza Rba*, “By means of your Word (*mimra*) all came into existence”; this suggests that Yawar and Mana are modes or manifestations of the Mimra, the personified Word. However, this Word who is Light and Mind, emanates from the wellspring and date palm, which in turn emanates from Sharat, that which has “overflowed.”¹⁷¹

In Mandaic, God’s Name “Life” is an abstract plural, neither masculine nor feminine, and is thus referred to with the plural pronoun “they.”¹⁷² This is somewhat reminiscent of the Hebrew grammatical plural form Elohīm, which is nevertheless traditionally understood to be semantically

¹⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 12-20.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁷¹ The Mandaean Light (Yawar) and Mind (Mana) correspond to the Light (Phōs) and Logos (Word, or better, Discourse; cf. Mind) of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, a chapter and gospel replete with parallels to Mandaean terminology and thought. Although one should guard against Bultmann’s hasty identification of Johannine thought with Mandaean theology, nevertheless not all of his evidence can be brushed aside without further ado. I cannot help but suspect that many of the older attacks against Bultmann’s thesis in this regard were motivated in part by canonical bias and by more or less unconscious fears rooted in a perceived threat to Christian claims of absoluteness and exclusivity.

¹⁷² See Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 1.

singular. However, kabbalists see in the plural form Elohim an esoteric allusion to the plurality of the divine emanations, the *sefirot*. I would suggest the possibility that the plural aspect of the Mandaic term “Life” may allude to a plurality, or duality, of the feminine (cf. Zahriel) and masculine (cf. Bihram) dimensions of Sharat, from which emanate the feminine wellspring and masculine date palm.

We have seen that the occult Tanna is concealed in the wellspring and date palm, and that Tanna seems to be an undifferentiated matrix that at one point “dissolves” in order for creation to issue forth into manifestation. It may be that Tanna as matrix is itself the origin of Sharat. Could it be that the wellspring, Aina, represents the feminine in the status of mother; and that prior to the mother is Sharat as bride (of Bihram); and that prior to Sharat the bride, might be Tanna as maiden or virgin?¹⁷³ Tanna might then represent the virginal propensity towards emanational overflow; Sharat would be the first bridal emanation that has “overflowed” through her union with Bihram, a “victory” of union that results in the “dissolution” of the Tanna matrix; and the wellspring would represent the mother of emanations and mother of all divine books.

We have seen from the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* how the plenitude of sacred books was acquired at the primordial wellspring (*aina*), and that this corresponds functionally to the Qur’ānic *umm al-kitāb*, the mother of the book, who in *sūra* 43:4 is portrayed in terms equivalent to the personified Lady Wisdom known to us from Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24. In his *Meccan Revelations*, Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets *sūra* 43:4 by identifying the mother and the book with Mary and Jesus.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ With such a triadic mother, bride, maiden/virgin we might compare the kabbalistic triad of mother, bride/spouse, and daughter derived from Song of Songs 3:11, as examined in Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 39-40.

¹⁷⁴ For specific reasons of mystical exegesis Ibn al-‘Arabī in this passage transposes the natural identification of mother with Mary and book with Jesus, but here is not the place to examine the motivations behind this reversal, which is in any case matched by contemporary medieval Christian descriptions of “Mother Jesus.”

The first *sūra* of the Qur'ān is called the *Fātiḥa*, meaning literally, the Opening, but a well-known *ḥadīth* calls the *Fātiḥa* the *umm al-kitāb*, the mother of the book. This is usually understood as meaning “the essence of the Qur'ān” as a written text. While there is no reason to contest this straightforward idiomatic interpretation, there may be a more subtle level of meaning implied in the tradition that could include an allusion to Mary, just as Ibn al-‘Arabī sees an allusion to Mary in the title “mother of the book.” How could the *Fātiḥa* as mother of the book contain an allusion to Mary? The answer may lie in the *basmala*, the *Fātiḥa*’s first line, which contains the two divine names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, the Merciful, the Compassionate, for both are etymologically derived from the Arabic word for “womb,” *raḥm*. Moreover, in Qur'ān *sūra* 19, named after Mary, the divine name *al-Raḥmān*, the Merciful, occurs more times than in any other *sūra* of the Qur'ān, hinting at a possible significant doctrinal connectivity between Mary and the term *al-Raḥmān*. The 55th Qur'ānic *sūra* is called *al-Raḥmān*, the Merciful, and according to a disputed *ḥadīth*, this *sūra* is the Bride of the Qur'ān, *‘arūsa al-Qur'ān*, a phrase that reminds us of the Christian Marian title “Spouse of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁵

In light of these feminine and maternal (*raḥm*) relationships in the Qur'ān between Mary and the name *al-Raḥmān*, we can now discern how there could be a concealed implication alluding to Mary in the *Fātiḥa* understood as mother of the book. We can also now appreciate why the Qur'ān would glaringly avoid mention of any woman’s name except that of Mary, for her concealed presence in the very opening line of the Qur'ān would indicate that she is of central symbolic significance in the Islamic revelation. Yet there is a curious interplay at work here, for whereas Mary is the only name of a woman present explicitly in the Qur'ānic text, her presence in the *Fātiḥa* would be hidden in implication, and this could seem to denote a most exalted yet mysterious status for Mary in Islam. This implicate quality of Mary is also indicated by *sūra* 21:91 that curiously refers to Mary but

¹⁷⁵ Our first discussion of these points is found in Samuel Zinner, *Christianity and Islam: Essays on Ontology and Archetype* (London: Matheson Trust, 2010), pp. 212, 219.

avoids giving out her name: “And she who was chaste; therefore we breathed into her of our spirit and made her and her son a sign for all the worlds.”¹⁷⁶

It would seem that one of the reasons the Qur’ān conceals the mystery of Mary is that it is related to the secret of the divine personified *amr*, and according to Ibn Abbās, if the Prophet’s interpretation of the personified *amr* (which on one plane is equivalent to Mary’s son Jesus as God’s word, *kalima*) were spoken aloud, the speaker would be killed or be called a *kāfir*. In theological parlance this indicates that Islamic *kalām* cannot openly accept or allow the arcane secret of Mary; in the Islamic dispensation this can only be accomplished at the level of mysticism or esotericism. And indeed among sufis such as Rūzbihān Baqlī we find the recognition that Mary is the very substance of the *fiṭra*, the primordial human nature consisting of pure sanctity. Mary’s Qur’ānic centrality is therefore of a carefully concealed nature, and thus it is not surprising that her central status in the text goes unrecognized by traditional Islamic theologians. Similarly, the average Mandaean is not aware of Miriai’s possible underlying identity as Miriam the mother of Jesus, although J. J. Buckley’s work on Miriai as an appropriation of Mary has been promoted by some modern Mandaean cause groups.

Having laid this introductory foundation regarding the Qur’ānic *Fātiḥa* with its various hidden layers, perhaps our understanding of the very term *Fātiḥa* can now be deepened with reference to the Mandaean tradition. Like Genesis 1:1’s Hebrew word *reshit*, “(the) beginning,” the Arabic word *fātiḥa* has profound mystical implications in tradition, and is thus far from being a title that simply functions in the sense of “Introduction,” or “Preface,” as it is usually understood. In fact, *Fātiḥa* implies “Beginning” and as such it parallels the first line of the Torah, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). According to Jewish tradition, the word “beginning” here denotes Lady Wisdom. In Mandaeism the sacramental bread of life is called

¹⁷⁶ “A sign for all the worlds,” *‘ayatal-lil-‘ālamīn*; we read similarly in the Mandaean *Book of John* that Mary’s *riha*, fragrance, diffused itself throughout “all the worlds,” *kulhun almia*.

pihta, whose root means “to open,” “to originate,” “to break open,” “to break apart,”¹⁷⁷ and because the sacramental bread is broken during Mandaean rituals, *pihta* thus becomes the actual Mandaic word for “bread.” Mandaic *pihta* is in fact cognate with Arabic *fātiḥa*. By virtue of its etymological root, *pihta* as bread also functions in Mandaean texts, as Lady Drower explains, as a symbol for creation, which is a beginning, and an “opening” in the sense of an unveiling, a revelation, a breaking forth of the unmanifest onto the plane of cosmic manifestation. As the *Ginza Rba* 238 proclaims: “This is the Mystery and Book of the Luminosity that burns in the *pihta* that is radiant within its self-radiance and mighty in its light.” As Lady Drower further elucidates, *pihta* here denotes “the opened” in the sense of “revelation.”

In Mandaic the word *mana* means both “mind” and “garment,” so that in a text such as “He opened his Garment” (to issue forth the first divine emanation), although “garment” is in this instance *lbusha*, it nevertheless is semantically associated with the word *mana*’s sense of “garment,” so that “He opened his Garment” can mean “He revealed his Mind.”¹⁷⁸ And thus, as Lady Drower observes, the text continues with the statement: “For the Primordial Mind (*mana*) began (*pta*) and dwelt therein.”¹⁷⁹ In the *Ginza Rba* 238 we read in an account of creation: “Radiance emerged from the *pihta*; light alighted upon the *pihta* and issued forth therefrom. It created an emanation for itself, the radiance and light which was self-emanated. Radiance shone, the light shone; the *tanna* heated, the *tanna* melted.”

In the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* we read of the faithful who will dwell in the world of Light: “Whenever they desire to prepare *pihta* they simply divide the wheat from the ear and in this manner it is already finished. And the beings who escorted them into the celestial worlds open walnuts and

¹⁷⁷ See E. W. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

quince and prepare the *pihta*.”¹⁸⁰ Here we are reminded of the importance of the “garden of nuts” (*ginnat egoz*) verse from the Solomonic Song of Songs 6:11 that plays so important a role in kabbalistic texts: “I descended to the garden of nuts, to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom.” The kabbalistic understanding of the breaking of the nuts to obtain the kernel or seed is explained deftly in Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla’s treatise *Ginnat Egoz*. We may note also that according to *āya* 68 of the Bride of the Qur’ān, *sūra* 55, in the celestial “gardens” (*jannatān*) there will be “fruits and date palms and pomegranates (*rummān*).” According to a *ḥadīth* in Kulaynī, the angel Gabriel gave to the Prophet two pomegranates that represented prophethood and knowledge (*‘ilm*) respectively. For a kabbalistic interpretation of the celestial pomegranates, one may consult Moses de Leon’s treatise *Sefer ha-Rimmon* (*Book of the Pomegranate*).

To summarize, *fātiḥa* as *pihta* is the opening of the supernal *raḥm* (womb) of *al-Raḥmān* (the Merciful), the opening of the emanations and revelations of the divine in the mode of the supernal feminine, who according to Christian doctrine manifests herself on the earthly plane as the opening of the Virgin Mary’s womb that brought forth the word and spirit of God, i.e., Jesus.

In Ṣaffār’s *Kitāb Baṣā’ir* we find the following *ḥadīth*: “Be mindful of the insight of the faithful, because they see with the light of God. Because God created the faithful out of his light (*nūr*) and immersed them in his mercy (*raḥma*), and then he acquired their covenant with us through loyalty. In this way the faithful is the brother of the faithful, on both sides, of the mother and father. The father (*ab*) is the light (*nūr*) and the mother (*umm*) is the mercy (*raḥma*).” It should be clear at this point why the mother is equated with *raḥma*, namely, the fact that the abstract word *raḥma*, “mercy,” derives from the concrete word *raḥm*, “womb.” Whereas according to this *ḥadīth*, light (*nūr*) is the father, if we divide the light into its two modes of emanation and stasis, then *nūr* will

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

become the mother; cf. the following from the Mandaean esoteric text *Alf Trisar Shuialia*:

“Splendour (Ziwa) is the Father and Light (*nhura*; // Arabic *nūr*) is the Mother.” According to *Zohar* III,65, “Light is the celestial Mother.” In the following beautiful Jewish liturgical piece from the Authorized Daily Prayer Book (edited by Singer), we find a reference to the supernal “lustre,” in Hebrew *ziv*, equivalent to the Mandaic *ziwa*, which alludes to the lustre of the Shekhinah, indicating that the masculine and feminine modes of divine light interpenetrate:

God, the Lord over all works, blessed is He, and ever to be blessed by the mouth of everything that hath breath. His greatness and goodness fill the world; knowledge (*da‘at*) and understanding (*tebunah* = *binah*) surround Him. He is exalted above the holy Hayot, and is adorned in glory (*kabod* = *hod*) above the celestial chariot (*merkabah*); purity and rectitude are before his throne, loving-kindness (*hesed*) and tender mercy before his glory. The luminaries are good which our God hath created: He formed them with knowledge, understanding, and discernment; He gave them might and power to rule in the midst of the world. They are full of lustre (Hebrew *ziv*), and they radiate brightness; beautiful is their luster throughout all the world. They rejoice in their going forth, and are glad in their returning; they perform with awe the will of their Master. Glory and honor they render unto his name, exultation and rejoicing at the remembrance of his sovereignty (*malkut*). He called unto the sun, and it shone forth in light; He looked and ordained the figure of the moon. All the hosts on high render praise unto Him, the Seraphim, the Ophanim, and the holy Hayot ascribing glory (*tif‘eret*, “beauty”) and greatness.¹⁸¹

Based upon these various textual insights, we can discern that the divine light as described in the Qur’ānic Light Verse (*sūra* 24:35) may manifest in a dual mode: “God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of his light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (*miṣbāḥ*). The lamp is in a

¹⁸¹ Cited in J. Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), pp. 153-154.

mirror (*zujājah*); the mirror is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow forth though no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guides to his light whom he will. And God speaks to mankind in allegories, and God knows all things.” God is the light, the *nūr*; the imagery is that of a lamp, and therefore we can compare the Arabic *nūr* here with the Hebrew word *ner*, a “lamp”; the *Zohar*’s Aramaic equivalent is *botsina*.¹⁸² According to one author, “lamp” in the Light Verse means “a wick,”¹⁸³ and this would accord with our recognition of “lamp” already inherent in the word *nūr*, by means of its similarity to the Hebrew *ner*, “lamp.” The word for “mirror,” *zujājah*, is generally rendered as “glass,” but what is meant is a glass mirror with its reflected and/or refracted multiplication of light, leading to the phrase that follows, “light upon light,” indicative of a mirrored multiplication of light. In the Greek New Testament, the word “glass” (*esoptron*) similarly denotes a mirror, as in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a glass darkly, but then face to face.” 2 Corinthians 3:18 contains an equivalent image as found in the Light Verse: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding/reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from glory to glory.” The meaning of the Greek verb *katoptrizomai* fluctuates in the manuscripts between the senses of “to behold” and “to reflect,” with the latter more clearly indicating that what is implied here is a mirror reflecting the divine glory, which traditionally is described as a brilliant supernal light. “From glory to glory” implies, as does the Light Verse’s phrase “light upon light,” a mirrored multiplication of the glorious divine light.

Based upon the above considerations, we can understand the first part of the Light Verse as follows: “God is the lamp of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of his lamp is as a niche wherein is a wick. The wick is reflected in a mirror (*zujājah*); the mirror’s reflected image of light is as it were a shining star.”

¹⁸² See the comments in Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar*. Pritzker Edition. Vol. 1 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 283.

¹⁸³ Frithjof Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, p. 91.

According to the *Zohar* I:51a, the light of the Sabbath lamp or candle (which is always lit by the Lady of a Jewish household) is divided between a masculine white light, representing the divine emanation Beauty (*Tif'eret*), and a feminine light “tinged” with blue or black, who is Shekhinah. The almost tenuous or fragile quality suggested by the *Zohar*’s word “tinged” accords well with the Light Verse’s oil that “almost” shines of itself. The “black” tinge can be explained, as we shall see below, by Song of Song 1:5. The “blue” tinge is reminiscent of the traditional colour of the Virgin Mary in Christianity, and this colour symbolism may be ultimately derived from Ezekiel 1:26’s description of the divine throne as of sapphire.¹⁸⁴ Recall further Mary’s traditional title *sedes sapientiae*, the throne of wisdom, and Lady Wisdom’s utterance in Sirach 24:4: “I dwelt in high places, and my throne was in the pillar of a cloud.”

However, what is decisive, at least in ancient ways of thinking, concerning the feminine aspect of the divine light in the Qur’ānic Light Verse is that the light “would almost glow forth” of itself; this fragility, as we have already explained, implies that the source of the light does not actually manage to shine by itself, for it merely “almost” shines. This could be comparatively explained by the *Zohar*’s teaching that the Shekhinah is a glass or mirror (Aramaic *ispaqlarya*) “which shines not,” which for the *Zohar* is in accord with Song of Songs 1:5: “I am black, but beautiful” (see *Zohar* I:49b). The Shekhinah’s light derives from the other divine emanations, alluded to in the Light Verse as “light upon light.” Therefore in the Light Verse, the oil that does not shine forth of itself is the Shekhinah, in Arabic the feminine celestial Sakīna, whereas the Light is the masculine *ab* (father). The olive tree neither of the east nor of the west is Lady Wisdom, the Shekhinah, who speaks of herself in Sirach 24:14: “I grew tall like a palm tree . . . , like a beautiful olive tree in the

¹⁸⁴ See Alexander Golitzin, “The Image and Glory of God in Jacob of Sarug’s Homily: ‘On that Chariot that Ezekiel the Prophet Saw,’” <<http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/Serug.html>>. Retrieved 18 April 2013.

field. . . .”¹⁸⁵ Again, she is “black, but beautiful.” The oil of this Tree who is Lady Wisdom is the undifferentiated, concealed, and unmanifest womb (*raḥm*) of mercy (*raḥma*) from which issues forth the emanational lights of manifestation; as the Latin version of Sirach 24:6 has Lady Wisdom say of herself: “I made that in the heavens there should arise light that never fails.” And the mirror, *zujājāh*, is again the personified Lady Wisdom whom the Book of Wisdom 7:26 praises in the following terms: “For she is a radiance (or ‘reflection,’ *apaugasma*) of the eternal light, a spotless mirror (*esoptron*) of the energy (*energeias*) of God, and an image of his goodness.”

The Light Verse’s “light upon light” can also imply multiple lamps, and could therefore have been inspired by the Jewish menorah, especially given the same verse’s mention of the olive tree, for in Jewish religious iconography the menorah is often equated with the olive tree as a symbol for the tree of life. As Rachel Hachlili writes: “The tree of life, such as the olive tree, is substituted by the menorah. . . .”¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, “Some sources equate the (olive) tree with the menorah. In some instances the menorah replaced the Tree of Life. The menorah lights meant the seven planets and were an astral symbol.”¹⁸⁷ The Light Verse’s mention of a star might thus further strengthen the possibility of a connection with the menorah. Additional confirmation might be detected in the glass lamp suspended from the menorah; as Hachlili informs us: “A hanging lamp is depicted as a single glass lamp (*kos*) in the form of a cup with a high or pointed base, hanging from a single or triple chain from a menorah. On several synagogue mosaic pavements and architectural elements it is shown suspended from the lower branches of the menorah. . . .”¹⁸⁸ If more evidence were needed, we could mention the fact that in ancient synagogues the menorah was placed in an aedicule or

¹⁸⁵ This Sirach verse interestingly gives us the Mandaean symbol of the palm tree as well as the Qur’ānic symbol of the olive tree.

¹⁸⁶ Rachel Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form & Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 36.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

niche.¹⁸⁹ The traditional Jewish understanding of the menorah's light as a symbol of God accords well with the Light Verse; again we learn from the pen of Hachlili: "the menorah light signifies a great light from God, and the whole lamp is an image or symbol of God himself."¹⁹⁰

Having previously analyzed the Qur'ānic account of Jesus' birth, we should now investigate the annunciation to Mary and the mytheme of Jesus' virginal conception. Before approaching the Qur'ānic account, we supply here the relevant narrative from the Gospel of Luke 1:26ff. in those verses that most closely resemble the Qur'ānic analogue:

Luke 1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,

27 to a virgin . . . whose name was Mary.

28 And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you."

29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

30 And the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?"

35 And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy. . . .

37 For with God nothing will be impossible."

¹⁸⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 180-185.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

38 And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

We now turn to Qur’ān *sūra* 19:16ff.:

16 And make mention of Mary in the Book, when she had withdrawn from her people to a place in [the Jerusalem Temple in] the east,

17 And had taken a curtain [of the Temple to work on] from them [i.e., the Temple priests]. Then we sent unto her our Spirit and it assumed for her likeness of a basharañ sawiyyā.

18 She said: “Lo! I seek refuge in the Merciful from you, if you are mindful [of God].”

19 He said: “I am but a messenger of your Lord, that I may bestow on you a faultless son.”

20 She said: “How can I have a son when no mortal (bashar) has touched me, neither have I been unchaste?”

21 He said: “Thus says your Lord: ‘It is easy for me; and that we may make of him a sign for all the worlds and a mercy from us, and it is a decreed Word (*amr*).’”

22 And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a far place.

A second annunciation account is found in Qur’ān *sūra* 3:

42 And when the angels said: “O Mary! God has chosen you and made you pure, and has preferred you above all the women of the worlds.

43 O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself and bow down like¹⁹¹ those who bow.”

45 When the angels said: “O Mary! Lo! God gives you tidings of a Word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God).

46 He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous.”

47 She said: “My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal has touched me?” He said: “Thus God creates what he will. If he decrees a Word (amr), He says to it: Be! and it is.”

A review of the three textual passages supplied above demonstrates that the Qur’ān does not specify that the spirit sent to Mary was the angel Gabriel. This is an identification that later Islamic tradition made under the influence of the Gospel of Luke 1:26-27: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin whose name was Mary.” Compare Qur’ān *sūra* 19:17: “Then we sent unto her our spirit and it assumed for her likeness of a *basharañ sawiyyā*.” Whereas Luke 1:35 has the angel Gabriel explain to Mary that her son will be conceived by the holy spirit, “The holy spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy,” Qur’ān *sūra* 19:19 records the divine spirit as explaining: “I am but a messenger of your Lord, that I may bestow on you a faultless son.” A comparison of Luke 1:35 with *sūra* 19:19 would at first seem to indicate that for the Qur’ān the spirit is equivalent to the angel Gabriel of Luke 1:35. Upon further reflection, however, it will be seen that the exegetical situation is not so straightforwardly simplistic as Gabriel = the holy spirit, as should become apparent below as we proceed.

¹⁹¹ Mary was in seclusion, so that this passage must be translated “like those who bow,” and not “with those who bow.” See Aliyah Schleifer, *Mary, the Blessed Virgin of Islam* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1997), pp. 56-57.

At this point it might help to revisit W. H. T. Gairdner's comments on the identification of the supernal being who appeared to the Prophet of Islam as recorded in Qur'ān *sūras* 53 and 81:

At the very outset we are struck by the fact that the word *Muṭā* [which is theologically synonymous with the word *Rūḥ*, "Spirit"] occurs in the Qur'ān (*sūra* 81:21), and not only so, but it occurs as an attribute of the mysterious Agent of Revelation, the vision of whom Muḥammad saw at the first (*sūra* 53:5-16). . . . In later Islam the commentators, with their arid tameness, made a stereotyped identification of this Figure with the Angel Gabriel. But the Qur'ān gives no warrant for this. . . . No one can read those two Qur'ānic passages (in *sūra* 87 and *sūra* 53) without feeling that Muḥammad's awful visitant on those two occasions was the One of absolute supreme rank in the heavenlies: not a spirit but the Spirit.¹⁹²

Yet, as we shall discover from an examination of the sacred texts themselves, neither Gairdner's nor the Islamic interpreters' sometimes arid comments to which he refers are expressing the profoundly multi-layered complexity inherent in the identity of, and implied by the figure of, the divine spirit who appeared to the Prophet (*sūras* 53 and 81) and to Mary (*sūras* 3 and 19).

We can begin unravelling some of these complex intracacies by following the texts closely and carefully and by letting them guide us rather than being directed by entrenched preconceptions. In *sūra* 3:45 we read that "the angels" announce Jesus' conception to Mary. Some of the traditional Islamic interpreters have all too simplistically brushed aside this clear plural, claiming that it must in any case be understood in the singular as a reference to Gabriel. Yet in *sūra* 3:47 Mary does not respond to a group of angels, but rather "she said: 'My Lord!'" And in response to her subsequent question, we read: "He said: 'Thus God creates what he will. If he decrees a word (*amr*), he says to it: Be! and it is.'" It is clear from *sūra* 19:21 that the "he" who speaks in *sūra* 3:47 is none other

¹⁹² *Mishkāṭ Al-Anwār: The Niche for Lights*, by Al-Ghazālī. Translated by W. H. T. Gairdner (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1924), pp. 35-36.

than God. Whereas “he” in *sūra* 3:47 refers to God in the third person in the statement: “If he decrees a word (*amr*), He says to it: Be! and it is,” in *sūra* 19:21, the same “he” makes this statement in the first person: “It is easy for me; and that we may make of him a sign for all the worlds and a mercy from us, and it is a decreed word (*amr*).”

How then can the spirit say to Mary in *sūra* 19:19, “I am but a messenger of your Lord, that I may bestow on you a faultless son,” if it is none other than God who caused Mary to conceive by breathing his spirit (via a personified intermediary) into her *farja*, which she guarded in chastity (*sūra* 66:12)?¹⁹³ Strictly speaking, since God caused Mary to conceive by creating Jesus in her womb through the creative word, which coincides with the breath of the spirit—for a word is necessarily breathed forth—then it would be God who “bestowed” on Mary “a faultless son,” though of course not in a biological mode.

A central key to resolving some of the theological convolutions involved in these matters could be that of the well-known paradigm found throughout the Torah according to which God appears to humans in the form of an angel, usually called “the angel of the Lord.” This naturally does not imply that God is an angel, but rather that God does not reveal himself directly to humanity, but rather indirectly through the divine spirit, i.e., the holy spirit. That the holy spirit is called an angel, indeed “the” angel of the Lord, again does not imply that the holy spirit is an angel in a strict sense; even traditional Qur’ānic interpreters have recognized that in Qur’ān *sūra* 70 the spirit is distinguished from the angels, and that the created angels are in fact emanations from the uncreated (though not necessarily eternal) spirit.

A solution to some of the perplexities that mark the three annunciation episodes in the Gospel of Luke chapter 1 and in the 3rd and 19th *sūras* of the Qur’ān may be that it is the eternal God himself who is appearing through the personification of the uncreated spirit, and that the latter is in turn

¹⁹³ On the *tafsīr* traditions on the word *farja*, see Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*. Edited by Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), p. 119.

appearing under the personification of the created angel Gabriel. God is Light, and there is light upon light, or the spirit who emanates the angel. We arrive therefore at a threefold-layered theophany. Indeed, this is the tendency of Rūmī's interpretation of the account of the annunciation to Mary in his *Mathnawī* III (lines 3700 ff.). After seeking refuge in God from Gabriel, Rūmī records these lines from the angel: "'I seek refuge' is my origin and my essence, the luminosity of that 'I take refuge' that pre-existed the spoken word. You seek refuge from me with God, yet I am eternally the image of the refuge. I am the refuge. . . . You seek refuge, and I myself am that refuge."

According to one stream of Sunni thought, the spirit is uncreated yet not eternal; Shī'ī theology, by contrast, teaches that the spirit is created, but since this is done in order to safeguard the unity of God, both postures may be equivalent as to their underlying intention. Thus although Shī'ī theology accentuates the created status of the spirit, it nevertheless insists, in a commonly occurring phrase, that the holy spirit "is a spirit greater than Michael or Gabriel," and according to Imām Ja'far, "God did not create anything more intimate to himself than the holy spirit, and nothing exists in his creation that is more noble than the holy spirit." Just as it was not a spirit but the spirit who appeared to the Prophet of Islam in *sūra* 53, so R. H. Charles writes of the celestial being who appeared to the prophet Daniel in chapter 10 of that particular book: "Not only does the description of this unnamed angel transcend immeasurably that of Gabriel in chapters 8 and 9, but the effect of his appearance on the Seer is far more profound." A. Jeffery concludes similarly that this celestial entity is "superior to Gabriel and Michael. . . ." ¹⁹⁴ The passage in Daniel 10:5-7 reads as follows:

I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with gold of Uphaz. His body was as beryl, his face as the appearance of lightning, his eyes

¹⁹⁴ Charles and Jeffery as quoted in Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), p. 279.

as flaming torches, his arms and legs as the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words as the noise of a multitude.

To return to the Qur'ānic accounts of the annunciation, *sūra* 3:45's plural "angels" can after all be interpreted in a singular sense that, however, integrally preserves an aspect of plurality, for as is well known, in Hebrew the word God, *Elohim*, is grammatically plural yet semantically singular, and *elohim* can also be translated in some biblical passages as "angels," and this fact will likely help us in interpreting *sūra* 3:45's "angels."

I now address the question of the meaning of the Arabic phrase *basharañ sawiyyā* that occurs in *sūra* 19:17: "Then we sent to her our spirit in the form of *basharañ sawiyyā*." The word *bashar* presents no problem, for it literally means "flesh," and by extension simply signifies "a mortal," that is, a human being. The *tafsīr* authorities, however, are divided over the word *sawiyyā*, which usually means "all," "complete," "full." Based on this, the term has been translated as "a perfect man," "a perfected man," "a well-formed man," "a man in all respects," "a man without a fault," and other similar formulations based on what are really only various educated guesses. What all these versions primarily miss is that the main contrast is not between Mary as a woman and the spirit appearing in the form of a masculine "man," but the contrast is rather between the spirit, *rūḥ*, and flesh, *bashar*, that is mortals in general; this is the famous spirit-flesh (*pneuma-sarx*) contrast found throughout Paul's epistles. The *rūḥ* therefore appears to Mary in the form of a mortal, but the theological gender of the *rūḥ* is not specified. Even any grammatical masculinity one may detect in the phrase *basharañ sawiyyā* cannot be decisive, for the Qur'ānic word *rijāl*, literally "men," as found in *sūra* 12:109, can also denote "human beings" regardless of sex.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Aliah Schleifer, *Mary, the Blessed Virgin of Islam*, pp. 74-75.

The usual Muslim assumption that the *rūḥ* in this instance was masculine is based upon the later traditions that identify the spirit with Gabriel in a restrictive or reductive sense, but this equivalency is not implied by the Qur'ānic text taken by itself. There is nothing explicitly present in the two Qur'ānic annunciation accounts that prevents us from holding the possibility that the spirit appeared to Mary in the form that as a Jew she would have been familiar with, namely, that of the feminine Shekhinah, the celestial mother, or the Sabbath Queen. Indeed, when Gabriel announces to Mary in Luke 1:35 that “the holy spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,” he would have been speaking to her in either Hebrew or Aramaic/Syriac, in which languages the word for “spirit,” *ruah* or *ruḥa*, is grammatically as well as theologically feminine. It is well known that the terms Luke uses for the holy spirit's descent upon (*epeleusetai*) and overshadowing (*episkiasei*) of Mary allude to the Shekhinah's descent and overshadowing of the Jerusalem temple as described throughout the Torah.

Keeping in mind that God and the spirit as such are beyond the literal categories of the masculine-feminine polarity, nevertheless we might ask if the spirit indeed appeared to Mary in the traditional Jewish form of the celestial mother, would this not involve at least an incongruent symbolism? After all, a woman does not bestow a child on a woman, as the Nag Hammadi *Gospel of Philip* famously avers. The answer is that such thinking presupposes a carnal or biological understanding that is not germane in this context. The late 1st-century Syrian 19th *Ode of Solomon* contains a scene which in fact has the holy spirit appearing as the celestial mother to the Virgin Mary at the annunciation. According to this text, “The holy spirit opened her bosom” (verse 4) and “offered” the Virgin “a cup of milk” that she “drank . . . in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness” (verse 1). Verses 6-7 then state: “The womb of the virgin took it, and she received conception and gave birth. So the virgin became a mother of great mercies.”

We find repeatedly throughout the *Zohar* references to Genesis 25:27's Hebrew phrase *ish tam*, "simple man," rendered in the Aramaic Targum Onqelos as *gevar [gebar] shelim*, "perfect man." Although the term is grammatically and conceptually masculine (in Genesis 25:27 it refers to the patriarch Jacob), the *Zohar* nevertheless interprets tam/shelim as the feminine Shekhinah.¹⁹⁶ Whether or not we interpret the Qur'ānic phrase *basharañ sawiyyā* as theologically masculine or feminine (or as androgynous, which is another perfectly legitimate possibility, for Gabriel as a manifestation of the celestial perfect human would integrate both male and female coordinates), we must now determine the meaning of *sawiyyā*. Although the translation "perfect," therefore "perfect human," is not the most accurate rendering of the Arabic, it nevertheless points us in the right direction, that is, it is equivalent to the later kabbalistic Adam Qadmon speculations mirrored, *mutatis mutandis*, in the sufi doctrine of the *al-insān al-kāmil*, the perfect human, who as the *logos* is the pre-existent image of God and prototype after which the entirety of the cosmos was fashioned.

A more correct meaning of *basharañ sawiyyā* is to be found in a little-known yet quite significant ancient Syriac-language document from the fourth century known as the *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. According to this text's account of the annunciation (manuscript p. 20a) it is said that "Gabriel, the Angel of the Lord, appeared unto Mary in the form of a venerable old mortal, so that she might not flee from him."¹⁹⁷ The same imagery and phraseology in the context of the annunciation appears in St. Ephrem's sermons, so that in all likelihood this tradition stems from somewhere within the confines of the general Syro-Palestinian region. Note here that Gabriel is called "the Angel of the Lord," the precise term for the divine personification in the guise of which God appears during theophanies throughout the Torah.

¹⁹⁶ See the notes in Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar*: Pritzker Edition. Volume 4 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 421-422.

¹⁹⁷ See E. A. Wallis Budge, *I: The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary. II: The History of the Likeness of Christ*. Vol. 1 (London: Luzak and Co., 1899), p. 22. Budge translates "a venerable old man." For the Syriac text, see vol. 2, p. 39.

In this context I must stress once again that despite the impressions based upon a first reading, this Syriac text does not require a simplistic, restrictive interpretation of Gabriel = the holy spirit. Moreover the male imagery implied by the name Gabriel does not exclude the femininity of the celestial mother the holy spirit of whom Gabriel can function as an emanational reflection and messenger, for as kabbalists teach, the theological categories of masculine and feminine—which are by no means biological—ever interpenetrate each another. This is the reason why kabbalists can portray *Hokhmah* as both the celestial Lady Wisdom and as the supernal father; and for the same reason Ibn al-‘Arabī can identify Jesus as the mother and Mary as the book in the Qur’ānic phrase “mother of the book.”

I should also clarify the etymology of the name “Gabriel.” Muslim interpreters who were ignorant of Hebrew and clueless to the fact that Gabriel is a Hebrew name came up with several rather fanciful definitions, as they similarly did for the Hebrew name Miriam (Arabic Maryam). Gabriel has the straightforward Hebrew meaning of “mighty man of God,” from *geber*, “mighty man/person” and *el*, “God.” Immediately we recognize that such a name could quite naturally involve traditions related to the theomorphic doctrine of the Adam Qadmon.

In *sūra* 53:5-6 the one who appeared from the sky to the Prophet of Islam is described as *shadīdul-quwā*, “powerful shadīdu” and *dhū mirra*, “possessor of strength.” In Arabic the name Jibrīl is etymologically related to the divine name al-Jabbār, the omnipotent. The fact that the one who appears to the Prophet is described by synonyms of Jabbār rather than the word Jabbār itself suggests that the personification involved may not be restrictively limited to Jibrīl. This may in fact be indicated by the term *shadīdu* in the phrase *shadīdul-quwā*, for *shadīdu* is cognate with the archaic Hebrew divine name *el shaddai*, derived from the word *shad*, “breasts,”¹⁹⁸ and only later was used with the meaning “powerful,” “mighty.” In Genesis 49:25 we see an explicit wordplay

¹⁹⁸ See David Biale, “The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible,” *History of Religions* 21/3 (1982): pp. 240-256. As Biale remarks, in Egyptian, *shdi* means “to suckle.”

association between *shaddai* and *shadayim*: “And El Shaddai will bless you with blessings . . . blessings of breasts (*shadayim*) and blessings of wombs (*rahem*).” David Biale explains with regard to El Shaddai as the Breasted God: “In fact, this ‘androgynous monotheism’ can already be discerned in the first chapter of Genesis where we learn that ‘God created Adam in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.’ If the first man was androgynous—as the Jewish midrash thought—so must be the God who created ‘him.’”¹⁹⁹

To return to the etymology of Gabriel, the Mandaic equivalent of Hebrew *geber* is *gabra*, and as Lady Drower reminds us: “The word *gabra*, ‘man,’ applied to any non-material being does not mean a human being, but a being anthropomorphically visualized; whenever the term *gabra* is applied to such a being in Mandaean literature it must be understood in this way.”²⁰⁰ Gabriel therefore appears in the “form” of a human to Mary, just as the prophet Ezekiel saw God in the “form” of a human being seated upon the divine throne. A correct rendering of *basharañ sawiyyā* is consequently “old” or “ancient mortal/human.” What immediately strikes us about this term is that it could possibly overlap with the trope of God as the Ancient of Days, Atiq Yomin, whose well-proportioned form, as we have already learned above, is so meticulously celebrated by the medieval kabbalists. We have now only to remind ourselves that the Human or the Man is a divine title not only among the kabbalists, but among the Mandaeans as well (consider their use of the divine title “the Man”). As I have already had occasion to remark, for Abrahamic theologies, to say “human” implies the God who created humanity in the divine image.

To tie all of these observations together with the subject of the annunciation and Jesus’ conception, commenting on *sūra* 4:171’s statement that Jesus is God’s “word which he cast into Mary,” Mahmoud Ayoub asks, “what is God’s role in the conception and birth of Christ? Commentators

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

²⁰⁰ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, p. 56.

unfortunately have not pondered this question.”²⁰¹ Ayoub notes that the Qur’ānic descriptions of God breathing his spirit into Mary “suggest God’s direct involvement in and control of the conception, birth, and life of Jesus.”²⁰² There can be no question of a sexual-biological mode of God’s creation of Jesus in Mary’s womb, for Jesus was created simply by the divine *kun!* “Be!” Yet in the gospels, whose status as revealed scripture is affirmed by the Qur’ān, described the divine word with the metaphor of “seed.” Beyond this point it is unnecessary to further delve into such a recondite subject.

To continue with parallels of a different nature between the Qur’ān and Mandaean portraits of Mary, the former designates her as a sister of Musa (Moses), while the latter alludes to her in the *Haran Gawaitha* as “a daughter of Misa (Moses).” It is perhaps often overlooked that just as Mary and Jesus are doctrinally inseparable in the Qur’ān, so John the Baptizer almost never appears in the Qur’ān apart from Mary. In *sūra* 3 John is conceived in response to an inspiration Zachariah receives from the Virgin; in *sūra* 19, the story of John immediately precedes that of the Virgin. This agrees with the paradigm of the Mandaean *Book of John*, in which the stories of Mary (Miriai) and of John the Baptizer appear interwoven together.

A final parallel I will refer to has to do with the fact that in the two Qur’ānic accounts of the Baptizer and Mary, after the story of Jesus is given there then follows a denunciation of the belief that “God is Jesus.” This is curiously paralleled in the Mandaean *Book of John*’s rejection of what the Mandaeans call “Christ the Roman,” which obviously implies more of a symbolic rejection of the Roman-Pauline church’s understanding of Christ than of Jesus himself. However, although the figure of Christ is largely a symbol and not a historical personage in Mandaean texts, it cannot be denied that this symbol is energetically denounced in the Mandaean scriptures, whereas in the

²⁰¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, p. 129.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Qur'ān the historical Jesus is accepted as the messiah in a positive sense, while at the same time a certain over-accentuation of his celestial character is forcefully rejected.

In the end one is reminded of the mercy of God as narrated in the Qur'ān's promise of salvation to Jews, Christians, and Sabians (Manichaeans, Mandaeans, and other similar groups), followers of different and differing religions, none of which acknowledges the Prophet of Islam. Viewed theologically, this stance is in deepest accord with the undifferentiated matrix, the celestial mother of the book, which constitutes the heart of the Abrahamic civilizational religions on a level of supernal silence more primary than the level of the manifest and distinctive word. This silence is in turn a vestigial trace of the pre-historic indigenous heritage preserved, even if in an obscured mode, within the heart of the civilizational religions. Through the Mandaean Miriai and the songs of her birds who upon the branches of her tree of life seek refuge from the storms of various civilizations' hatred and persecution, we recover something of the silence, the beauty, and the wholeness of the indigenous. Behind all of the complex mystical gender/sex symbolism of Mandaean texts we can still recognize the simplicity of the indigenous devotion to Father Sun and Mother Earth.

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