Mandaean Polemic against Jews and Christians as Evidence about the Origins and Setting of Early Mandaism

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The Mandaeans have fascinated scholars with a wide range of different interests, and in a wide range of disciplines, and this is not surprising. No one who has engaged in the academic study of the Gospel of John, for instance, will have failed to encounter the intriguing (not to mention problematic) attempts made in the 20th century to appeal to Mandaean sources as background to the Fourth Gospel. Likewise students of Gnostic sources cannot but be impressed by the survival of this Gnostic group down to the present day. But on the whole this fascination, in particular among English-speaking scholars, observes and wonders from a significant distance. Only a very small number of scholars have observed and interacted with the living Mandaean communities, and had the opportunity to observe their rituals as practiced in the present (although YouTube allows the rest of us an opportunity to get at least a glimpse). And although the Canonical Prayerbook, some key priestly sources and commentaries on rituals, and some magical texts and bowl inscriptions have been published in English, there is still no complete scholarly translation in English of two highly significant Mandaean texts, the *Great Treasure* (or *Ginza Rabba*) and the *Book of John*. And even when it comes to the texts that are available, many puzzles remain. Do the references to “jordans” and the mentions of John the Baptist and Jesus indicate a genuine historical connection with the Jordan valley in the first century CE? If there is a genuine historical recollection in the text known as *Haran Gawaita*, which king named Ardban or Artapanus is it referring to?
The origins of the Mandaeans is a historical puzzle that, if we are honest, may never be definitively solved unless new evidence comes to light. Even the modern scientific tool of DNA testing could only tell us about the ancestry of today’s Mandaeans, but obviously a similar study of Christians alive today would not demonstrate Christianity’s connection, at the time of its origin, with first century Palestinian Judaism. There are, however, some relatively neglected clues in Mandaean literature which, unlike some of the more overtly polemical “historical accounts” (which seem to contain legends that have been refashioned more than once), take for granted a particular background, in a way that can at least shed some light on the history of the Mandaeans, if not definitively resolving questions about the geographical setting that provides the background to that history.

Jorunn Buckley wrote in a recent book that “The polemical parts of the [Mandaean] literature, as religious-political evidence, are still in need of a thorough scholarly examination”.1 The aim of this paper is to investigate some relatively neglected passages in the Mandaean literary corpus, ones that polemicize against Jews or Christians, and conversely, those places where a reference or allusion to the Mandaeans by Jews or Christians is possible. Of particular interest are passages which are “indirectly polemical”, referring to opponents in passing. It is the anti-Jewish polemic that will be our primary focus, not only because of constraints of time, but also because, as Drower points out, “In earlier Mandaean books and in priestly commentaries there is little polemic, indeed usually none whatever, against Christianity, and the main tide of venom flows against the

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1 Buckley 2005:311. There are only two studies I am aware of specifically focused on polemic. One, Drower’s, “Mandaean Polemic” (1962), addressed a number of important points, but obviously a study of such short length (only 10 pages) could not be comprehensive. The other is Rudolph’s “Die Dämonisierung des ‘Anderen’ in der Mandäischen Überlieferung ein Kapitel des Umganges von Religionen Untereinander” (published in Rudolph 1996).
Jews.” Presumably this polemic takes us closer to the heart of the process of early Mandaean self-definition.

Reading the Story of Miriai on Two Levels

Although for many the question of Mandaean origins is the most fascinating, the only way to make progress on that subject is to work backwards, beginning with an attempt to ascertain the period in which a given work was written, and then seeking to discern earlier sources and earlier contexts that may have shaped the traditions incorporated into these later texts. Those of us who have worked on Jewish and/or Christian sources using these methods know just how painstaking such investigations can be, and how uncertain the results of our efforts.

On the one hand, the use of Mandaean sources by scholars interested primarily in the Gospel of John and early Christianity may have done more harm than good to the study of both. On the other hand, an approach that has been applied to the academic study of the Gospel of John may also shed light on one of the better-known stories in the Mandaean corpus, that of Miriai. Just as the conflict narratives in the Gospel of John, read on two levels as J. Louis Martyn suggested, allow us insight into the interaction of one group of Christian Jews as they found themselves at odds with the leaders of a local synagogue of which they had once been a part, perhaps the Miriai story, read in a similar way, may provide some clues about a comparable stage in Mandaean history.

3 Having come to my own interest in the Mandaeans via a similar route, and having done my PhD on the Gospel of John, perhaps I can offer a token gesture seeking, if not to undo the damage, at least suggest a better way to proceed. See further King 2003:107-109, 137-139, on the positive and negative contribution of early 20th century scholarship.
The story of Miriai is found in the Book of John, as well as being alluded to in the Canonical Prayerbook. In the former, it occurs immediately after the chapters about John the Baptist. The story tells of a girl named Miriai, descended from the “priest-kings” of Judea, who had as one of her duties cleaning in the “temple”. They live in or near the ruins of Jerusalem. One day, Miriai’s parents leave her at home and go to the synagogue. Rather than listening to her parents’ instruction that she stay at home with the door bolted, instead she goes out, and does not end up going to the “house of the people” (a way of referring to the synagogue that is polemicized against in the Rabbinic corpus). Instead, she ends up at a Mandaean place of worship (maškna) and finds both men and women (referred to as her brothers and sisters) engaged in instruction. She falls asleep and as a result is late getting home, and so her parents discover her absence. Her father castigates her (calling her some colorful names) and insinuates that she has fallen in love with a man and is sneaking out to meet him. Whether her illicit love affair is literal or metaphorical (or both) becomes ambiguous, since reference is soon made to Miriai having forsaken Judaism for her lord, and phylacteries for a man with a headband. In the chapter that follows, Miriai is depicted as a tree flourishing along the Euphrates, one that attracts birds to dwell in it. Eventually she is presented as a Mandaean priest and teacher.

Let us set aside questions about whether this story may have a basis in history, and ask instead what it tells us about the understanding of the relationship between “Judaism” and “Mandaism” in the time in which it was written. On the one hand, if we

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4 In actual fact, it says that her father goes to the synagogue, and her mother to the temple, but this may be synonymous parallelism.
5 On this and other linguistic points of contact with Rabbinic literature see Scheftelowitz: 221
6 One gets the sense that this egalitarianism may have been a point of appeal about the Mandaens.
read the story against the backdrop of Mandaeism as we know it today, it appears plainly to be a story about conversion. Miriai is drawn to Mandaeism and this is understood to involve the forsaking of Judaism. Yet it is important to not jump too quickly to the conclusion that the story assumes that Mandaeism and Judaism are independent, clearly defined and inherently separate religious communities. The Mandaeans are, at the very least, clearly located in close proximity to this Jewish community in the story, and by definition are in Judaea. One possible understanding of the story is that the Mandaeans’ gathering is an alternative meeting to the synagogue. And just as there is a tendency to read the Gospel of John as the story of two distinct religious communities in conflict, a closer inspection of that Christian text, as perhaps also of the Mandaean story of Miriai, may prove to reflect instead a story about two communities that are in bitter conflict because they were not long before partly or entirely overlapping circles.

If we turn our attention briefly to the text known as The Thousand and Twelve Questions (Alf Trisar Šuialia), we find intriguing references that complement the depiction of Miriai (to whose story we shall return). The Thousand and Twelve Questions is an esoteric text containing teachings that were not supposed to be given to the laity (and thus presumably not meant to be divulged in conference papers, so I’ll try to be

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Drower 1962:282-288 gives an oral retelling in Drower’s time of the story of Miriai. In it, Miriai is Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter, as well as a Jewess (Jews and Chaldeans are not distinguished). The Mandaeans have a place of worship in Jerusalem, yet it is secluded and kept a secret. Miriai rents the house next door, makes a hole in the wall, and learns the secret knowledge the Mandaeans read from their texts. The story of conflict between Jews and Mandaeans because of Miriai’s conversion (which the former assume was forced) follows, and then a story of Jews killing Mandaeans in an attempt to get them to reveal their secret knowledge. Perhaps most interesting is that, when the king of Babylon asks the Jews about the murders, he asks them why they killed “these people of your own blood” (p.286). On the close contact between Jews and Mandaeans in Babylonia in a later period see Deutsch 1999:3.
careful what I tell you). It is largely technical, but for that reason the polemical references made in passing are all the more useful for our historical investigation.8

For our purposes, the most significant passages are the following: First, in II,6b:358 (Drower 1960: 276), the layperson who becomes a priest is compared to the soul that *forsakes Judaism for Mandaism*. Given the frequent use in Mandaean literature of a pun between “Judaism” and a similar-sounding word meaning abortion or embryo, it is perhaps not surprising to find “Judaism” thought of as an “embryonic state”.9 The same sort of language is found in *The Scroll of Exalted Kingship*, another work in the same genre of esoteric priestly commentaries.10 One might be inclined to regard these too as referring to *conversion* from Judaism to Mandaism.11 Yet, as in the case of the apostle Paul, here too we must ask whether “conversion” is the best term. The relationship between “Judaism” and “Nasirutha” or Mandaean Gnosis seems to be one that can be taken for granted as progressive stages, perhaps ones that are considered normative. Just as priesthood tends to be hereditary but is open to the pure from outside hereditary priestly families, Mandaism seems here to draw from Judaism in a comparable way. And to my knowledge there is no similar comparison made between Mandaeans and any other group. So, rather than indicating that these groups were separate religions with separate

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8 It is worth noting that the text distinguishes Mandaeans from Magians and Christians, but makes no references to Muslims, and thus is most likely to be dated before the time of the rise of Islam in the region (Drower 1960:161-162,177). Nathaniel Deutsch warns against jumping to this conclusion too quickly (*Guardians of the Gate* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999) p.80. However, the willingness of other Mandaean works to engage in criticism, however veiled, of Muhammad and Islam, makes the absence of such criticism more likely to indicate an early date than cautious reticence.

9 That is, in fact, how Drower translates the word in question. See *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* II,4:198. Here, however, the term used is not only yahuţaia but also yahiduta (twice). The reference is thus explicitly and unambiguously to Judaism.

10 See further Deutsch 1999:123, who gives the relevant quotation: “The first, outer casting off (is) when he leaves from the isolation (or: ‘ban’) of the Jews to be clothed with mandaeism [here understood as Mandaean lay status and therefore Buckley puts it in lower case. The second casting off is the casting off of mandaeism [lay status] to be clothed in priestly status (*tarmiduta*)”.

11 In II,4:198 this is explicitly connected with baptism. It is important to note that baptism is not symbolic of conversion in Mandaism, but a repeated act.
institutions, on the contrary, these texts seem to assume that the natural way one became
a Mandaean, unless one grew up in a family of Mandaeans, was by “graduating”, as it
were, from Judaism. Does this not suggest that, far from being separated, the
communities of the Mandaeans and Jews in the context in which this text was produced
were at the very least adjacent to one another, and most likely at least partly overlapping?

Before returning to the story of Miriai, we may note another passage in *The
Thousand and Twelve Questions* I,2:251 (Drower 1960: 177) where there is reference to
the “circle of isolation” (miṣra) separating the Nasorean from impurity. In this context
there is an appeal addressed to the following audience: “O priests and Mandaeans (i.e.
laypeople), righteous, believing ones who have picked yourselves out from the peoples,
nations and tongues!” The language used seems to imply that conversions had taken
place from other religious backgrounds. 12 This is all the more striking when one
considers the fact that Mandaeans today do not accept converts. In view of the literary
evidence for conversion, it is best to regard the move to not accept converts as having
taken place after the time of the composition of *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*. 13

In this earlier stage in the development of Mandaism, the progression from Judaism to
Mandaean Gnosis is still taken for granted, and yet there appear to be adherents from
other backgrounds as well. It may be that this influx of non-Jews, as in the case of the
development of early Christianity, may also in the case of Mandaism have served to
solidify a developing sense of distinct and separate identity, resulting ultimately in their
separation into clearly distinct communities.

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12 The transliterated text (Drower 1960:51) reads: ya tarmidia umandaiia kšiṭia umhaimnia ubhiria ḏ
naʃaiṇun mn binia amamia taumia ulišania.
13 Given the harsh reprisals that can ensue in an Islamic context if one forsakes Islam, it makes sense to
seek this change in that period. For our present purposes, we need not be more precise than that.
Let us return to the story of Miriai with the questions raised by *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* in mind. The *Canonical Prayerbook* complements the depiction of the story of Miriai found in the *Book of John*. Prayer #162\(^1\) depicts Miriai as rebuffing her questioners rather than “evangelizing” them. The Jews are said to wear “tunics” and are criticized for this.\(^1\) Presumably differences in clothing customs between Mandaeans and Jews are reflected here, but it is unclear how ancient such distinctions are and how they developed. Contrasts are also drawn in *Canonical Prayerbook* #149 between phylacteries (*ţuţita*) and wreaths, and between refraining from work on Saturday or on Sunday. Most of our minds probably immediately begin to wonder about what connection there might be with Christianity in terms of the observance of Sunday, but it is worth recalling that the meeting of Christians on Sunday resulted at least in part from the fact that most of the earliest Christians would attend synagogue and in other ways observe the Sabbath. Perhaps, as in the case of Christianity, so too the Mandaeans initially met on Sundays because they were part of a Jewish community otherwise occupied on Saturdays. Be that as it may, Miriai is also said to reject the law (*nimusa*) that the seven imposed on Jerusalem, i.e. the Torah. The rejection of Torah is itself a key defining characteristic of the Mandaeans, and it will be important to keep this in mind when we look for possible references to the Mandaeans in Jewish and Christian sources.

Before proceeding, it is worth observing that Miriai’s separation from Judaism results in her becoming a tree that welcomes the birds of the air, potentially a symbol for an influx of Gentiles. *Canonical Prayerbook* #35\(^1\) includes the words “For you open

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\(^1\) Drower 1959: 140.

\(^1\) *qulab*, from Greek χολόβιον.

\(^1\) Drower 1959: 36.
doors of truth and reveal mysteries and show forth mighty deeds in Jerusalem”. 17

Intriguingly, earlier in the same prayer it refers to the congregation whom the speaker represents as having “forsaken pictures, images and idols of clay, gods (made) of blocks of wood, and vain rites...” 18 This statement is as interesting for its implication that the Mandaens included people who had once done these things, as for the fact that it affirms the aniconic outlook found in the Jewish Scriptures. 19

Jews as Apostate Mandaens and Concerns about Mandaean Apostasy

Although it may be implied in the attribution of gnostis to Seth or other figures in pre-history, the Mandaean claim that Jews are apostate Nasoraeans, rather than vice-versa, seems to be distinctive of this particular group. Canonical Prayerbook #353 refers to two generations that ate pihta in good faith, and then in the third Adonai arose and built a house. 20 And so the Mandaens claim at this point that they are adherents to a tradition from which the Jews departed. Elsewhere, in the Haran Gawaita, there is an acknowledgment that Mandaens worshipped Adonai until the time of Jesus. Neither of

17 This may or may not be an allusion to the story of Anos-Utra, told elsewhere as a contrast to the story of Jesus.
18 Drower 1959: 34.
19 Mandaean opposition to Judaism may perhaps have focused on the artistic depictions of the sun and the zodiac and of various figures in synagogues of this period. The same contrasts focused on Miriai are found in Mandaean prayers offered on Friday and Saturday evening (and thus perhaps consciously polemicizing against the Jewish Sabbath at its beginning and end), in Canonical Prayerbook #149. See further Buckley, “Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus’ Mother” 193
20 The possibility that the Mandaens could have some connection with pre-exilic Israelite ideas should be considered, albeit with appropriate skepticism. On the one hand, Margaret Barker’s attempt to connect Gnosticism with pre-exilic Israelite ideas has failed to persuade most scholars. On the other hand, an Arab author Al-Biruni, writing at the beginning of the 11th century C.E., connected the Mandaens to those Jews who never returned from exile in Persia (Drower 1962:xvii).
these statements can be taken at face value, and may reflect at least in part the tendency in most religions to claim as extensive an antiquity as possible.21

Anti-Jewish Polemic and Jewish Origins

The aforementioned considerations have prepared the way to deal with one of Yamauchi’s most forceful, and at the same time most unpersuasive, arguments against a Jewish origin for the Mandaeans. Yamauchi declares himself puzzled by the Mandaeans’ shedding of some key elements of Jewish identity (monotheism, circumcision, and the Sabbath) while retaining others.22 He fails to mention in this context the closest parallel we have to such a situation, namely Christianity. Here too we find a Jewish movement that rejected circumcision, changed its day of worship, and experienced an influx of non-Jews into the movement, who eventually came to predominate. There is a significant likelihood that something similar happened in the case of later Mandaeanism. Indeed, there are particularly striking parallels to the phenomenon of Johannine Christianity, which Wayne Meeks famously characterized as being most Jewish precisely at those points at which it is most anti-Jewish.23 What we find in both sets of writings is the language of polemic between sibling rivals claiming a common heritage or seeking to occupy the same space, not of distant cousins, much less of unrelated neighbors.24

21 Modern oral storytelling includes further such material. For instance, Abraham is viewed as having been a Mandaean forced to circumcise himself because of a sore (Drower 1962:265-269).
22 Yamauchi 1973: 138-139.
23 Wayne A. Meeks. See also King 2003:185 on Jonas’ inability to envisage “Jewish anti-Judaism”.
24 How well Yamauchi’s appeal to Islam as similar deserves further consideration. Was it his acceptance of Jewish stories, while not adopting their Scriptures and being critical of them, that led some to think Muhammad might himself be a Sabian, i.e. a Mandaean?
In short, no group that was simply in close proximity to the Jews would have reason to identify so closely with their traditions, and yet at the same time so adamantly repudiate them.\textsuperscript{25} The identification of leaders of the Mandaean community and copyists of its texts with the title \textit{Rabbi} also indicates the community’s Jewish connection. For a group that was anti-Jewish, without also being in some sense Jewish, to adopt a distinctively Jewish title would be quite surprising.\textsuperscript{26}

If we do not find evidence of the Mandaeans clearly identified by Christians, Zoroastrians and others as a distinct group, until the very clear references in Thodore bar Konai’s \textit{Scholion}, one plausible explanation is that the group continued to be considered part of the Jewish community in Mesopotamia for many centuries. Rabbinic literature encourages us to draw such a conclusion: where Gnostics are referred to, they are considered \textit{minim}, i.e. \textit{heretics}. There were attempts to eliminate such elements, to curse them from the podium in places, but the ongoing references and allusions to them in rabbinic texts over a number of centuries suggest that the rabbis were unsuccessful. The

\textsuperscript{25} King 2003:188, addressing the more general issue of Gnostic origins, thinks proximity and exposure to Judaism would be enough. On the contrary, the only two scenarios that seem capable of explaining both the Jewish content and the anti-Jewish are (1) Gentiles ruled over by Jews developing a polemical identification of the Jewish God, blaming the ills in the world on him, or (2) educated Jews responding to criticism (perhaps from Greek philosophical sources) of the depiction of God in their Scriptures. The former does not fit the Mandaeans, who seem to be conscious of Jewish origins. It is also worth asking whether we would \textit{recognize} proto-Mandaean sources if we found them, and whether such sources might not indeed be included within the corpus of Gnostic literature we now have. See for instance Rudolph 1957 on Apocryphon of John and Mandaeans; Yamauchi 1973: 135-136. Yamauchi is of course right to emphasize the importance of the input of ideas from its Mesopotamian context for Mandaism as we know it (Yamauchi 1973: 140-142). Likewise we are to expect ongoing interaction between Jews and Mandaeans to have taken place even after the separation, as also occurred in the case of Christianity.

\textsuperscript{26} The names attributed to the rabbis mentioned, for instance, in \textit{The Thousand and Twelve Questions} are not typical of Jewish rabbis of the Talmudic era, and some are characteristic Mandaean names. There is one interesting exception, however. The name Hiyya is not at all surprising in a list of Mandaeans, but it is also the name of a famous Jewish rabbi of the Mishnaic period. In Pesikta Rabbati, a saying is attributed to him about a “whoreson” who claims there are two gods. See Alan F. Segal, \textit{Two Powers in Heaven} (Leiden: Brill, 1977) p.34. It also deserves to be mentioned that the use of the root QDS to mean “infernal” rather than “holy” may be more than mere polemical inversion of Jewish language. It may also have allowed Mandaeans to be part of a Jewish community and “speak its language” while secretly changing the meaning. For another list of rabbis in a Mandaean text see the \textit{Book of the Zodiac} 1949, pp.155-157.
text we mentioned in the *Thousand and Twelve Questions* suggests that, when that work was produced in Mesopotamia sometime prior to the rise of Islam, the Mandaeans continued not merely to be conscious of historical connections with Judaism, but continued to understand themselves (or at least the typical identity of most members of their group) as *Jewish Gnostics*, as those who have “graduated” from their earlier Jewish understanding, but whose background in Judaism was not simply historical but personal.

Finally, if we ask why there seems to be so much *confusion* in the historical references in Mandaean sources, perhaps one reason is the shift that eventually took place from being a community within Judaism (even if on the fringes) to a community outside of Judaism. Here too we can consider the development of Christianity as a parallel phenomenon. What if Christianity had, perhaps following Marcion, rejected the Jewish Scriptures and set them aside? After several centuries had passed, would not Christians’ knowledge of Jewish history prior to and apart from the time of Jesus have diminished significantly? Would not comparable confusion have been evidenced?

We need to come up with a scenario that enables us to make sense of three key features of Mandaean literature: (1) the presence of elements that presuppose a Jewish background; (2) anti-Jewish polemic; and (3) highly obscure and at times confused historical allusions. Connecting the Mandaeans with Judaism – whether Palestinian, Babylonian, or both – may account for the first and second. But to account for the third, we must suppose that the Mandaean tradition was continued by others than its Jewish originators. Grafted into the community, but lacking the personal experience of migration, connection with the communal memory of the synagogue, and the Jewish Scriptures, those converts to Mandaism who continued the tradition failed to accurately preserve and
hand on historical information that in a Jewish context would not have become so confused:, for instance, the combination of Miriam the sister of Moses with the mother of Jesus. It seems best, therefore, to suppose that the Mandaens remained a Jewish sect within Babylonian Judaism for some time, and that in a manner comparable to the development of Christianity, this Jewish Gnostic sect engaged in polemics against other forms of Judaism, separated from the Jewish community of which it had once been a part, and evolved into a largely non-Jewish religious community, one that nevertheless retained evidence of its origins in its sacred texts, its customs and its practices.

Bibliography


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27 The identification of the Dome of the Rock with the Jewish temple may reflect confusion, or may be intentional mockery, recalling the presence of the mosque on the site towards which Jews turn to pray.


