

## **The Mandaean Book of John**



# **The Mandaean Book of John**

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Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary

Edited by  
Charles G. Häberl and James F. McGrath

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The Mandaic text in this book was set in the font *Ardwan Lidzbarski*, the forms of which preserve characteristics of the handwriting of its pioneer translator, Mark Lidzbarski, but improve upon their legibility. Ardwan Alsabti designed the font for this edition of the Mandaic Book of John in 2018, after careful study of the original manuscript.

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# Prefatory Remarks

## 1 Mandaean

Given the degree of popular fascination in recent decades with the religious communities identified by scholars as “Gnostic,” it is surprising how many people remain unaware that a single such group has survived from antiquity until the present day: Mandaean. Mandaean, like other such Gnostics, distinguish between a supreme benevolent being who dwells in the world of light and an inferior one who is responsible for creating the mortal world. According to their sacred texts, a savior descends from the world of light and reveals to humanity the way to salvation (to return to the lightworlds), with repeated ritual baptisms being an important component of this process. Mandaean, and in particular their priesthood, believe that this crucial knowledge is entrusted to and passed on by them.

There are many unanswered questions about Mandaean origins. Their sacred texts mention figures known from the biblical tradition, including Adam, Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus, and their history clearly intersects with that of Jews and Christians in places around the Near East. The question of whether the Mandaean faith or some antecedent emerged within the Jordan valley in the first century, in the immediate geographic and historical context in which Christianity arose, continues to be contested by scholars even today. One reason for the lack of scholarly progress on these issues is the lack of a complete English translation of the two most central Mandaean religious texts, the *Genzā Rabbā* (‘Great Treasure’) and *Dārāšā d-Yaḥyā* (‘Teaching’ or ‘Doctrine of John’), as well as a number of other shorter works known to exist but as yet unpublished and untranslated.<sup>1</sup>

Since antiquity, Mandaean have occupied the region of southern Iraq and southwestern Iran, their traditional homeland. Mandaean have often faced discrimination of various sorts throughout their history. Increased unrest in these countries has led a growing number of Mandaean in recent decades to flee to Jordan, Syria and Sweden, as well the United States, Australia, the UK, and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. This diaspora has put the preservation of their heritage at risk, and their scriptures are an important component of that heritage.<sup>2</sup> Scholarship on these texts, which have the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of Mandaean and related religious movements, has been limited by linguistic and disciplinary constraints as well as lack of access to either original texts or English translations. Therefore, both scholars and Mandaean will benefit enormously from the proposed volume, which will include a translation of one of their most important texts into English, and a commentary that will enable scholars and other readers to place the work and Mandaean tradition within its broader ancient context.

The content of these Mandaean works is of great importance for our understanding not only of Mandaean themselves, but also the other communities deemed Gnostic, as well as other interconnected religious communities such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It was the translation of the Coptic Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi into English and other modern languages that is largely responsible for the current surge of interest in and improved understanding of Gnosticism.<sup>3</sup> The Mandaean texts are the only Gnostic works transmitted exclusively in a Semitic language. They are also the only Gnostic texts from antiquity associated with a surviving religious community. The translation and further study of Mandaean texts has the potential to improve if not revolutionize our understanding not only of Mandaean but also of other related traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Short excerpts from the *Book of John* have been translated and published in English. At the time of publication, the only complete translation directly from the original Mandaic is Lidzbarski’s, about which more will be said below.

<sup>2</sup> C.G. Häberl, “The Cultural Survival of the Mandaean,” *ARAM Periodical* 22 (2010): 209–226.

<sup>3</sup> There is a helpful account of the impact of the Nag Hammadi discoveries in B.A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 19–24. One of the earliest English translations of multiple works from Nag Hammadi was E. Hennecke, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1959), which was published in English in two volumes as E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963). A translation directly into English of all the Nag Hammadi texts was first published by J.M. Robinson (Ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library* (Leiden: E. J. E.J. Brill, 1978), building on its series of volumes providing facsimiles of the Coptic texts and English translations, which appeared in print over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the last of the Coptic facsimiles appearing as recently as 1996.

## 2 The Book of John

The *Book of John* is one of the most important and frequently copied texts in the Mandaean tradition, second only to the *Great Treasure* (*Genzā Rabbā*) in terms of its popularity, and rather different from it in terms of both its form and its content, even though there are many points of intersection and overlap as well. The *Great Treasure* takes the form of a codex, written in two directions so that when one finishes reading one side, one flips it and continues reading on the other. The *Book of John* is also a codex, but with a much more traditional format. Both works represent compilations of oral and written traditions on various subjects, but it is the inclusion of a major liturgical component in the *Great Treasure* that gives it primacy of place in Mandaean literature. These two represent the works which Mandaeans are likely to show or mention to others, while other works have more esoteric content and are both less well known among Mandaean laypeople, and less openly shared with anyone outside of Mandaean priestly circles.<sup>4</sup>

The *Book of John*, like other Mandaean texts, mentions figures familiar from the Bible, such as John the Baptist and Jesus. If their texts were discovered today for the first time, they would make international news headlines, the way the Nag Hammadi texts did. If Mandaeans themselves were discovered for the first time in some obscure corner of the globe, as a genuine example of Gnosticism persisting to the present day, it would seem too sensational to be true. Thus it is difficult to explain the relative scholarly neglect of Mandaean sources in our time. The relative obscurity of the Mandaic language does not seem to be a sufficient explanation for the lack of attention, and if there has been less scholarly attention because of the relatively recent scholarly belief that the familiar figures are late additions to the Mandaean tradition, that is doubly problematic. On the one hand, even if it were the case that Mandaeans picked up John the Baptist in the post-Islamic period, that would not make their tradition any less interesting or worthy of study. On the other hand, the scholarly claim that Mandaeans created their literature from scratch in response to the rise of Islam, and simultaneously adopted John the Baptist, simply in order to be able to claim to be “a people of the book” with a prophet of their own, is difficult if not impossible to square with their texts. The material in the *Book of John* presented and discussed in this volume offers abundant counterevidence to this widely held but untenable view.<sup>5</sup>

## 3 Manuscripts

The Mandaean *Book of John* has never before been translated directly from Mandaic into English in its entirety. When it was translated into German by Mark Lidzbarski a century ago, the number of manuscripts available through libraries was not very different from what it is today, with the notable exception of the Drower Collection at Oxford’s Bodleian Library, such as Drower Collection (DC) 30, which we have designated as MS G. Our translation incorporates manuscripts currently in the possession of Mandaean priestly and lay families, who have given us permission to scan and use them. In the list that follows, we use the same letter designations that Lidzbarski adopted for the manuscripts then available to him, and then add the others which were consulted for the present edition:

- A. Code Sabéen 8 (previously numbered as “6”) in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), copied by Ādam Zehrun bar Zāki Shitel in Khalafābād, Iran, on a Thursday, in the “fullness” of the month *Heṭyā*, in the “Year of Saturday,” which he equates to AH 1039. That year began on October 20, 1629 CE, so *Heṭyā* fell 305–334 days later, between August 21 and September 19, 1630 CE. During that period, the moon was full on Thursday, August 22, 1630 CE / *Muḥarram* 13, AH 1040 [sic].
- B. Code Sabéen 10 (previously numbered as “12”) in the BnF, copied by Zehrun bar Ādam in al-Mīnā’, Basra, on Thursday, *Āxer Pāyez* 21 in the “Year of Saturday,” which he equates to AH 1026 (1617 CE). That year began on Saturday, October 24, 1615 CE; *Āxer Pāyez* corresponds to *Ṭābiṭ* / *Gadyā*, which means he was writing 355 days later, on Thursday, October 13, 1616 CE / *Shawwāl* 2, AH 1025 [sic].

<sup>4</sup> E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 22.

<sup>5</sup> See also J.J. Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls: Reconstructing Mandaean History* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 299, on the presence of John in texts with colophons which in her view trace their scribal lineage back to the third century.

- C. Code Sabéen 9 (previously numbered as “7”) in the BnF, copied by Ādam Zehrun bar Məhattam in Dawraq (Shādegān), Iran, in the year AH 1102, beginning in the month of *Ādār / Nunā* and concluding on Thursday, *Ayār / Towrā* 15. That year began on Thursday, October 5, 1690 CE, so *Ayār / Towrā* 15 corresponds to Thursday, January 18, 1691 CE / *Rabīʿ al-Thānī* 17 AH 1102.
- D. MS Hunt. 71 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, copied by Ādam bar Sām in Basra, Iraq, on a Thursday, “the day of Splendid Hibel,” in the month of *Kānun / Heṭyā*, which he calls “the trunk of autumn” (*eṣṭuni d-Pāyez*), in the “Year of Saturday,” which he equates to AH 1069, a “Year of Sunday.” During the preceding year, a “Year of Saturday,” *Kānun / Heṭyā* lasted from August 14 to September 12, so he most likely finished on Thursday, August 15, 1659 CE / *Dhū al-Qaʿdah* 25, AH 1068, which was the first Thursday of that month, or on one of the following four Thursdays.
- E. Folia 76–98 of Add. 23,602 A, listed as VIII in Wright’s *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. III, p. 1217.
- F. Folia of 99–101 Add. 23,602 A and 15–18 of Add. 23,602 B, listed as IX in Wright’s *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. III, p. 1217.

To these we add:

- G. DC 30, part of the Drower Collection at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Copied by Rām Yuhānā bar Rām in Shushtar, Iran, on *Rəhāṭī* (Friday), *Tammuz / Šarṭānā* 28, in the ‘Year of Wednesday,’ which he equates to AH 1166. That year began on Wednesday, September 20, 1752 CE, which means that he finished copying the manuscript on Friday, March 16, 1753 CE / *Jumādā al-Ūlā* 11, AH 1166.
- H. MS Flushing. Manuscript from ‘Amārah, Iraq, privately owned. Copied by Sheikh Məhattam, son of Yaḥya Behram, and completed on Saturday, *Tišrin / Qeynā / Āxer Geyṭā* 22 in the ‘Year of Saturday,’ which he equates to AH 1328. That year began on Saturday, August 14, 1909 CE, so he must have completed his work on Saturday, April 9, 1910 CE / *Rabīʿ al-ʿAwwal* 28, AH 1328.
- I. MS Colonie. Photocopy of manuscript from ‘Aḥwāz, Iran, privately owned. Copied by Bayān, son of Šārāt (Salem Choheili), and completed on “Wednesday, *Qeynā* 17 in year 1991 of John the Baptist, *Farvardīn* 23 of the *Šamsi* year 1368, and *Ramaḍān* 5 [sic] in the *Hijrī* year 1409,” which is to say April 12, 1989 CE. This photocopy is heavily annotated with marginalia reflecting several different manuscript traditions, including Lidzbarski’s 1922 critical edition.
- J. MS San Diego. Manuscript from Nāširiyah, Iraq, privately owned. Copied by Məhattam Zehrun bar Ādam, and completed on Saturday, *Āxer Geyṭā / Qeynā* 30 in the year of *Rəhāṭī* (Friday) / *Embərā* (‘Aries’), AH 1341 which is to say May 13, 1922 CE / *Ramaḍān* 16, AH 1340.
- K. Drower’s transcription of the “Soul Fisher” chapters (36–39), one of several texts that she collected from one of her primary informants, Sh. Negm bar Zehrun. The text is undated, but may have been collected as early as 1933 CE.

Mandaeans often copy from two or more manuscripts of a given text, and not uncommonly share their work with another copyist for the purposes of proofing. For these reasons, it would not be particularly meaningful to subject the *Book of John* manuscript tradition to a stemmatic analysis. Nonetheless, these eight manuscripts and three manuscript fragments fall into two obvious groups, each with subdivisions that resemble the branches of a traditional stemma. The first major diagnostic feature concerns chapter 75. This chapter consists of 50 lines in three of the oldest manuscripts (A, C, and D), but only 21 in all of the other manuscripts and those manuscript fragments that contain this chapter (B, F, G, H, I, and J). This second group includes the most recent manuscripts as well as our oldest extant manuscript, all of which share lines 1–15 and 45–50 of the longer composition, but lack lines 16–44. Furthermore, these same three manuscripts all include lines 63–67 in chapter 36, which are lacking in the second group of manuscripts.

The first group of manuscripts, which have the long form of chapter 75, may be further subdivided by the disposition of chapter 41. This chapter is entirely missing from the two older Iranian manuscripts, A and C. It appears in D, but in that manuscript it has switched places with chapter 42. This same chapter is found in all of the complete manuscripts of the second group, prior to chapter 42. Fragments E, F, and K unfortunately do not

preserve this chapter, so it is impossible to assign them to one group or another on the basis of this diagnostic, but in most other respects they consistently agree with the second group.

The manuscripts of the second group share the short form of chapter 75 as well as chapter 41 in its most common position, and lack the five lines from chapter 36 that are found in the first group. Within this group, our oldest manuscript (B) clearly stands apart from the more recent manuscripts (G, H, I, J), which together form a coherent group. We have registered an astonishing 1,248 unique variants with respect to the other manuscripts, a number of variants that is eclipsed only by MSS I (1,365) and J (2,637), which are the two most recent manuscripts. Many of these differences are substantial, including the absence of numerous lines that are attested by all other manuscripts, including lines 31, 48, and 49 from chapter 11, line 20 from chapter 12, line 50 from chapter 14, line 7 from chapter 15, line 67 from chapter 18, line 18 from chapter 21, line 94 from chapter 28, line 17 from chapter 29, lines 43 and 44 from chapter 33, lines 7, 43, and 44 from chapter 34, line 49 from chapter 36, line 62 from chapter 38, line 10 from chapter 51, lines 18 and 66 from chapter 59, and many other words and portions of lines throughout the composition. Most, but not all, of these variants can be explained as examples of parablepsis. The most aberrant manuscript, J, resembles H, I, and the fragment K in most respects, but its copyist Məhattam Zehrūn has consistently deviated from the common and accepted orthography of the other Mandaic manuscripts, resulting in a massive number of unique variants. As Buckley notes, the copyists recorded in its colophon differ from those of any other manuscript of the *Book of John*,<sup>6</sup> which might explain its unusual orthography, but even though the orthography is deviant, the text that it encodes is remarkably consonant with these other manuscripts.

From the limited evidence of the manuscripts at our disposal, it would appear that the second group of manuscripts is much more coherent and widespread, both in terms of geography and chronology, whereas the smaller 17<sup>th</sup> century group of manuscripts available to Lidzbarski are not representative of the tradition as a whole. This explains some of the eccentricities of his edition which, nonetheless, have been incorporated back into the manuscript tradition, at least in the case of our MS I. Lidzbarski nonetheless recognized that ACD and B belonged to different branches of the stemma, and produced his eclectic edition of the text on that basis. We have improved his eclectic edition by adopting features common to our oldest manuscript (B) and the younger manuscripts (GHIJ), while at the same time acknowledging variants from the discrete group of manuscripts that are not shared with the larger group, and at times improving upon the reading with those variants. Why the considerable diversity of the surviving manuscripts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century is not reflected in those of the last quarter millennium, and what happened to the tradition or traditions represented by the ACD group, remain unresolved questions.

## 4 Date of Composition

The earliest manuscript of the *Book of John* is Codex Sabéen 10, which was copied by Zehrūn bar Ādam in Basra, on October 13, 1616 CE. That copy was already in its thirtieth generation, according to Zehrūn's reckoning. Lidzbarski notes that the hand of the first 16 pages (from the dedication to ln. 24 of chapter 4) and the last 4 pages (lns. 35–51 of chapter 76) is different from that of the remainder of the manuscript, which he claims to be older.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the original text on which these copies were based must have been much composed much earlier, but how much earlier? Jorunn Buckley's study of these colophons (lists of scribes who had made previous copies of the manuscript) suggests that the transmission of the text can be traced back to the early Islamic period.<sup>8</sup>

It may be that the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts led to the current relative neglect of Mandaean sources. When one has manuscripts from the fourth century, manuscript copies which date from the seven-

<sup>6</sup> Buckley, *Great Stem*, 219.

<sup>7</sup> Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch* II, viii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 227. For the history of the acquisition of these manuscripts, see now also M. Morgenstern, "New Manuscript Sources for the Study of Mandaic" in V. Golinets et. al (Eds.), *Neue Beiträge zur Semitistik. Sechstes Treffen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Semitistik in der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft vom 09.–11. Februar 2013 in Heidelberg* (AOAT, Ugarit Verlag, forthcoming).

teenth century—more than a millennium more recent—may seem less significant. Yet the *Book of John* is clearly much more ancient than our oldest manuscripts. This would seemingly fit the claim that Mandaeans produced a *book* (as opposed to scrolls, the format of many other Mandaean texts) around the time of the rise of Islam in the region, in order to secure their status as a “people of the book.”

The contents of the *Book of John* cannot, however, have been composed in a single time period. The text itself is eclectic, bringing together materials from multiple sources.<sup>9</sup> Three bodies of evidence argue in favor of this interpretation:

**Literary Parallels and Contextual Cues.** Some of its chapters, such as 46 and 48, reproduce material from other Mandaean texts such as the *Great Treasure*, pp. 358 (=366) and 370 of its right-hand volume, according to Petermann’s 1867 edition, or Book 15, Section 19 (= Book 16, Section 4) and Book 16, Section 9, according to Lidzbarski’s 1925 edition. The placement of these two chapters already demonstrate some degree of redaction; Lidzbarski claims that these two chapters originally belonged together, just as they are found in the *Great Treasure*, but that Chapter 47 was inserted between the two. Similarly, chapter 67 reproduces material from Book 16, Section 2 of the right-hand volume of the *Great Treasure*, or “Right Genzā” (p. 364, ln. 21 to 365, ln. 14 according to Petermann’s edition), and chapter 53 parallels Book 15, Section 7 of the Right Genzā as well (p. 311, ln. 13 to 313, ln. 19 according to Petermann). Regardless of whether the *Book of John* borrowed from the *Great Treasure*, or whether both incorporated material from one or more other sources, the presence of these parallel passages confirms the eclectic nature of the texts in which they are found. Two chapters, 22 and 54, directly reference Islam and were therefore either entirely composed or partially redacted after the advent of Islam.

**Historical Syntax.** At first, this observation would appear to indicate that the entire text must have been composed or at least redacted in medieval times, were it not for the fact that the language of the text is far from homogenous across all of its constituent chapters. Charles Häberl has shown that the sequence of tenses in some chapters and passages within chapters is similar to that of other Late Aramaic languages such as Syriac, while others resemble Neo-Mandaic in this regard.<sup>10</sup> The relative chronology of these chapters can be ascertained by the gradual replacement of the inherited imperfect (ipfv) with a new present-future conjugation based upon the participle (ptc), which assumes more and more of the functions of the imperfect, driving it out of simple indicative contexts until is restricted purely to irrealis constructions and frozen formulae. This development occurs across five stages:

Stage	Indicative	Interrogative	Conditional	Irrealis
a	ipfv	ipfv	ipfv	ipfv
b	<b>ptc</b>	ipfv	ipfv	ipfv
c	<b>ptc</b>	<b>ptc</b>	ipfv	ipfv
d	<b>ptc</b>	<b>ptc</b>	<b>ptc</b>	ipfv
e	<b>ptc</b>	<b>ptc</b>	<b>ptc</b>	<b>ptc</b>

This linguistic evidence correlates with the other data, such as the references to Muslims, which are found primarily in stage d or e material.

**Opening and Closing Formulae.** The chapters of the *Book of John* appear to belong to at least four different literary genres. Some chapters are exclusively mythic in their focus, exclusively involving lightworld beings in the lightworld, whereas others concern legends about historical figures in the mortal world. Some contain explicit instructions to humanity concerning moral and ethical conduct, whereas many others are seemingly unconcerned with humanity. Each chapter is framed with one of four basic sets of formulae, which correspond roughly to its content and genre.

<sup>9</sup> E. Lupieri (*Giovanni e Gesù. Storia di un antagonismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2013), 171) describes it as an anthology.

<sup>10</sup> C.G. Häberl, “Tense, Aspect, and Mood in the Doctrine of John,” in *Neo-Aramaic and Its Linguistic Context*, eds. Geoffrey Khan and Lidia Napiorkowska, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2015), 397–406.

**Type:** A (x36)  
**Opening:** *In the name of the Great Life, may the sublime light be magnified!*  
**Closing:** *The triumphant Life speaks, and the man who went here triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 18, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 48, 49, 54, 57, 61, 66, 67, 74, 76 (x19)

Nearly half the chapters in the Mandaean *Book of John* open and close with this frame, or with some variation upon it. All of the chapters that use the prefix conjugation in indicative clauses (save for 72) and interrogative clauses (save for 25 and 31) belong to this group, as do those that use the innovative participial present tense for irrealis moods and conditional clauses, such as chapters 1 and 18, suggesting that this frame enjoyed perennial popularity throughout the composition and subsequent redactions of this text. Even though it appears to be the default frame, the chapters that open and close with these formulae do share some commonalities in terms of their content. These include nearly all of the mythical material dealing with supernatural beings in the worlds of light and darkness, the creation of the mortal world, extended allegories such as those of the Good Shepherd and the Soul Fisher, and dialogues between two lightworld beings.

Of these 36 frames, slightly fewer than half (17) reflect minor variations upon their closing formulae, their opening formulae, or both:

**Type:** A.1  
**Closing:** *And Life triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 2, 4, 5, 7, 14, 16, 17, 55, 55, 64 (x9)

**Type:** A.2  
**Closing:** *And Life is praised!*  
**Chapters:** 13, 15, 60, 62 (x4)

**Type:** A.3  
**Closing:** *And Life is praised, and Life triumphs!*  
**Chapter:** 35 (x1)

**Type:** A.4  
**Opening:** *In the name of the Great Life, may the sublime precious light be magnified!*  
**Closing:** *And Life triumphs!*  
**Chapter:** 75 (x1)

**Type:** A.5  
**Opening:** *In the name of the Great Life!*  
**Closing:** *And Life triumphs!*  
**Chapter:** 52 (x1)

**Type:** B (x20):  
**Opening:** None  
**Closing:** *The triumphant Life speaks, and the man who went here triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 10, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 50, 53, 56, 70, 71 (x11)

After type A and its variants, the most common “frame” consists of a closing formula but no opening formula. The chapters that are so framed almost exclusively contain moral and ethical instructions for humanity, often delivered directly in Life’s own voice (42–47) or by other supernatural beings such as Splendid Hibel. The sole exception appears to be two chapters from the section Lidzbarski named “Abator’s Lament” (70–72), which concern Abator’s relationship with the lightworlds, without any explicit instructions for humanity. The third chapter is more appropriately framed by Type D, described below, and resembles the other chapters that belong to this frame. Several sections that fall within other sections also adhere to this pattern, but appear to have

been redistributed for contextual reasons; for example, 10 is included with the other chapters on the fall of Yushamen, even though Yushamen is not specifically referenced within that chapter. It is possible that the lack of an introductory formula also indicates that a given chapter was intended to be a continuation of the previous chapter. Chapters 43, 45, 47, 48, and 49 share the same incipit as the previous chapter, and belong to this frame; chapters 2, 15, 16, and 17 share the same incipit as the previous chapter, but do not.

Of these 20 frames, slightly fewer than half (9) reflect minor variations upon their closing formulae:

**Type:** B.1  
**Closing:** *And Life triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 5, 7, 26, 45, 59, 63, 65 (x7)

Chapter 26 appears in the midst of the chapters of John the Baptist's section (which are generally framed by Type C, described below). This chapter, which is unfortunately fragmentary in all of the attested manuscripts, refers exclusively to John as *Yuhānā*, rather than with the Arabic moniker *Yahyā*, and is almost certainly derived from a different, older source than the surrounding chapters.

**Type:** B.2  
**Closing:** *And Life is praised, and Life triumphs!*  
**Chapter:** 51 (x1)

**Type:** B.3  
**Opening:** None  
**Closing:** None  
**Chapter:** 58 (x1)

**Type:** C (x14):  
**Opening:** *John teaches in the night, Johannes in the evenings of the night.*  
*John teaches in the night and says,*  
**Closing:** *And Life triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27 (x7)

The chapters framed by Type C belong exclusively to one section, that concerning the life and teachings of John the Baptist. This is the largest section in the entire manuscript, and together with the following tractate on Meryey, it differs from most of the other tractates in its focus on historical figures rather than supernatural ones. It is also one of the most diverse sections within the manuscript. Two of its constituent chapters, 18 and 26, are framed by Type A and Type B.1, respectively, rather than Type C, suggesting that they may have originally belonged to different compositions before being redacted together with the surrounding chapters. Chapters 18 and 22 both contain direct or oblique references to Islam, and make almost exclusive use of the participial present tense in all non-past contexts, but chapters 25 and 31 employ the inherited West Semitic prefix conjugation in interrogative clauses, unlike the two clearly post-Islamic compositions.

Of these 14 frames, half reflect minor variations upon their closing formulae:

**Type:** C.1  
**Closing:** *And Life is praised!*  
**Chapters:** 20, 33 (x2)

**Type:** C.2  
**Closing:** *The triumphant Life speaks, and the man who went here triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 28, 32 (x2)

**Type:** C.3  
**Closing:** *And Life is praised, and Life triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 30, 31 (x2)

**Type:** C.4  
**Opening:** *In the name of the Great Life, may the sublime light be magnified!*  
*John teaches in the night, Johannes in the evening of the night.*  
*John teaches in the night, and says,*  
**Closing:** *Your name is praised, my Lord,*  
*the light that will not be cut off from those who love his name.*  
**Chapter:** 29 (x1)

**Type:** Type D (x6):  
**Opening:** *In the name of the Great Life, and in the name of the precious Truth.*  
**Closing:** *The triumphant Life speaks, and the man who went here triumphs!*  
**Chapters:** 40, 41, 68, 69, 72, 73 (x6)

This is the least common frame, and also the most compact in terms of its distribution within the manuscript. These chapters share with those bracketed by Type A and its variants an exclusively mythic focus, but their content is much more restricted. They primarily contain dialogues between two supernatural beings, generally Splendid Hibel or Manda d'Heyyi on the one hand and various fallen beings such as Spirit or Abator of the scales on the other.

The *Book of John* is clearly a compendium, with some material being truly ancient in language and thus in content, while other parts may still preserve older traditions even if written down at a later time. The present translation draws attention to evidence of redaction, and indications of likely date and context of composition, but it remains for future studies to offer an analysis section by section that attempts to assign likely dates to material with even greater precision.

## Contents and Characters

There is no simple way to summarize the *Book of John*. Its traditional name, the *Book of John* or the *Teaching of John* is not entirely inappropriate, as more attention is given to John the Baptist than any other figure. This material tends to be introduced with a different introductory formula, and so it is possible that a separate collection of material about John has either been supplemented over time, or that more than one independent texts were combined at some point. On the other hand, if it is the case that a greater number of chapters are devoted to John the Baptist than to any other figure, it is also true that the majority of the chapters are about figures other than John, with particular attention to lightworld beings called *otri*, 'excellencies,' who are the equivalent of the entities referred to as "aeons" or "emanations" in other Gnostic literatures, and who play a role akin to that which "angels" do in some Jewish and Christian systems of thought. A common feature running through the work is that there are many instances of important figures—human or celestial—speaking in the first person. Because this is reminiscent of the distinctive way Jesus is depicted as speaking in the Gospel of John (albeit with much less narrative framework), there was significant interest in the past in the possibility that the Mandaean sources might offer a basis for establishing the existence of a revelatory discourse genre.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Most famously R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 225–226, fn. 3. See also P. Perkins, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), ch.9; D.M. Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13–14; D.M. Ball, *I Am in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 40–41, 163–166.



Geographical references in a work can often provide clues about the setting and the history of those who produced and read that literature. Apart from locations that are celestial or symbolic, the two most noteworthy and frequent geographical references are to Jerusalem and the Euphrates. The latter reflects the historic location of Mandaeans in Mesopotamia. The former is hard to explain except in terms of the earlier presence of Mandaeans or their antecedents in the Levant.

The John the Baptist of this text is easily recognizable as the figure mentioned in the New Testament and by Josephus. He is not characterized as the founder of Mandaism, but simply as a great prophet of this religion, which existed before him. He is never called “the Baptist”—and this may be because he is thought of as simply being one of this group of “Baptists,” a possible meaning of the term Sabians (Arabic *ṣābiʿun*) that is used to refer to Mandaeans in the Qurʾān and other Islamic texts.<sup>12</sup> The possibility that this is what ancient authors meant when they referred to him as “John the Baptist” merits consideration. John is referred to by both his Mandaic name *Yuhānā* and his Arabic name *Yaḥyā*. The combination of these two is particularly difficult to render into English, since both are versions of the name ‘John.’ John’s parents are recognizable as well, although they are as different from their New Testament counterparts as their son is. The name *Zakriyā* is used for Zechariah, and the rendering of Elizabeth’s name as *Enešbey* is noteworthy. The difference from the way the name is rendered in the Peshitta and other sources suggests that these characters have not simply been borrowed from those texts at the time of composition but emerged independently of Christian sources and evolved for long enough for the name to undergo development in this way.

Other figures whose names may not at first glance be recognizable are nonetheless often related to characters familiar from the Bible. Adam is the first man, and the name Hibel is cognate with that of his son Abel (Hebrew *hébel* ‘breath, vapor’), even if Hibel never appears as Adam’s son in this work. In his place appears Shitel, whose name belongs to the same pattern and derives from a root meaning ‘scion’ but stands in relation to Adam and the rest of humanity as the biblical Seth (*Šēt*, ‘placed’). The name of the third member of this triad of excellencies, Ennosh, may reflect Enosh or perhaps Enoch, and Nu and his son Shem are transparently Noah and Sem. Figures whom Mandaeans portray negatively are also often familiar from the Jewish and Christian traditions, occasionally in a more positive light. Among these are Jesus (viewed as a deceiver), *Adunay* (the Jewish God, from Hebrew *ʾādōnāy*), and Spirit (*Ruhā*, sometimes more fully as *Ruhā d-Qodšā*, which means ‘Holy Spirit’ in other forms of Aramaic), who is a denizen of the darkworlds and whose relationship with the excellencies is complicated). The names Yurba and Yushamen appear to derive from ‘Yāw the great’ and ‘Yāw of heaven’ respectively. The name Ptahil seemingly combines the name of an Egyptian god with the *-il* ending given to lightworld figures (compare the ending *-ʿēl* in Jewish angel names). In some manuscripts, the name of this figure is given not as Ptahil but as Gabriel.

The very fact that the preponderance of names in this work derive from the Hebrew tradition is noteworthy, and provides important clues about Mandaeans and their context, perhaps even their origins. The stories told about another figure, Meryey (whose name is related to that of figures known from the biblical tradition—Mary or Miriam—but who is not identical to either), are also extremely relevant to this question. A key question in the study of Gnosticism is the question of Gnosticism’s origins and its relationship to Judaism. Gnostic texts from antiquity often combine a negative view of the creator God depicted in Genesis with a clear focus on and indebtedness to the very Jewish texts against which their polemic is directed. The Nag Hammadi discovery has offered some new evidence with regard to this matter, in the form of texts that lack any obvious or explicit Christian elements.

The Coptic evidence nevertheless remains somewhat ambiguous, and thus a study of the Mandaean texts, and the *Book of John* in particular, has more solid evidence to offer those who are studying the relationship between Gnosticism and Judaism. The *Book of John* tells the story of Meryey, a Jewish woman living in the vicinity of Jerusalem who finds her way to a Mandaean gathering when her parents go to the synagogue, and eventually converts to Mandaism. This depiction suggests that even if the synagogue and Mandaean gatherings may have become distinct ‘institutions’ by the time this text was written, their adherents were at one time

<sup>12</sup> The best of the few academic treatments of this topic is Ş. Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relation to the Sabians of the Qurʾān and to the Harranians*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement, 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15–52.

part of the same Jewish community. The *Book of John* allows insight into the process of Mandaeans becoming a distinct religious community in much the way that the New Testament's Gospel of John offers a window into the process of the church becoming distinct from the synagogue.

### Format of the Volume

The volume begins with April deConick's introduction, which situates the material that follows within a broader context. This introduction is followed by a critical edition of the original Mandaic text, together with a translation provided on the page directly opposite the Mandaic. The following commentary is divided into chapters following the precedent of Lidzbarski, which reflects for the most part the divisions indicated by the text itself through the use of introductory and concluding formulas. The commentary illustrates elements that are of linguistic, historical, or comparative significance. A series of indexes follows the commentary, and finally a comprehensive bibliography related to the Mandaean *Book of John*, and Mandaeans more broadly, follows after that.

### A Note on Transliteration and Transcriptions

This commentary contains words from diverse languages encoded in different scripts, all of which have been romanized in order to enhance comprehension and facilitate their comparison. Greek words, and all Hebrew and Aramaic words originally written in the square script, are romanized according to the standards of the Society for Biblical Literature Handbook of Style. Syriac is romanized according to the standards of the Library of Congress. Arabic is romanized according to the conventions of the German Institute for Standardization (*Deutsches Institut für Normung*).

Simple transliterations of Mandaic-script text appear in **bold type**, following the system first proposed by Stefana Drower and Rudolf Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford 1963), xii, with the notable exception of the letter therein transliterated ' , for which we substitute **e**. The Mandaic script includes five vowel letters (**a**, **i**, **u**, **h**, and **e**), which more or less fully indicate the presence of vowels in each word. Unfortunately, it does not regularly indicate finer distinctions in consonant length or vowel quality. Therefore, wherever possible, Mandaic words are transcribed phonemically, in *italic type*, following their reconstruction from the spoken language, the evidence of other forms of Aramaic, and the traditional pronunciation of the text as transcribed by Drower and the researchers who have followed her. The direct transliterations in **bold type** are exclusively reserved for situations in which the classical orthography of the language must be illustrated or for vocabulary whose underlying phonemic structure cannot immediately be reconstructed and for which no traditional pronunciation has survived. A table of the correspondences between the original characters, their transliteration, transcription, and their values in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), may be found below:

Letter	Transliteration	Transcription	IPA	Name
◌			<b>a</b>	<i>a, ā</i> #, <i>a, ʔ a</i> / <i>halqə</i> 'circle'
◌	<b>b</b>	<i>b</i>	<i>b, w</i>	<i>ba</i>
◌	<b>g</b>	<i>g</i>	<i>g, ɣ</i>	<i>ga</i>
◌	<b>d</b>	<i>d</i>	<i>d, ð</i>	<i>da</i>
◌	<b>h</b>	<i>h</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>ha</i>
◌	<b>u</b>	<i>o, u, w</i>	<i>o, u, w</i>	<i>wa</i> / <i>fennə</i> 'tooth'
◌	<b>z</b>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>za</i>
◌	<b>h</b>	<i>i</i>	<i>-i</i> (3SG)	<i>i</i> (e in Iraq)
◌	<b>t</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>tʰ</i>	<i>tʰa</i>
◌	<b>i</b>	<i>e, i, y</i>	<i>e, i, j</i>	<i>ja</i> / <i>aksə</i> 'reverse'
◌	<b>k</b>	<i>k</i>	<i>k, χ</i>	<i>ka</i>
◌	<b>l</b>	<i>l</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>la</i>

ܡ	<b>m</b>	<i>m</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>ma</i>
ܢ	<b>n</b>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>na</i>
ܣ	<b>s</b>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>sa</i>
ܥ	<b>e</b>	<i>e, i</i>	<i>#, e, i</i>	<i>i</i>
ܦ	<b>p</b>	<i>p</i>	<i>p, f</i>	<i>pa</i>
ܦܥ	<b>š</b>	<i>š</i>	<i>s<sup>ʕ</sup></i>	<i>s<sup>ʕ</sup>a</i>
ܩ	<b>q</b>	<i>q</i>	<i>q</i>	<i>qa</i>
ܪ	<b>r</b>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>ra</i>
ܫ	<b>š</b>	<i>š</i>	<i>ʃ</i>	<i>ʃa</i>
ܬ	<b>t</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>t, θ</i>	<i>ta</i>
ܕ	<b>d</b>	<i>d-</i>	<i>(ə)d</i>	<i>du fennō ‘du tooth’</i>
ܐ	<b>a</b>		<i>-#</i>	<i>halqō ‘circle’</i>

There is one specific area in which our transcription deviates from the traditional pronunciation, as illustrated in the table above. Both the spoken language and the traditional pronunciation furnish evidence for a historical rule in Mandaic just as in other forms of Aramaic, according to which non-emphatic singleton stops (*b*, *g*, *d*, *p*, *k*, and *t*) became fricatives in a post-vocalic environment. These fricatives therefore constitute allophones and are consequently not reflected in the normalized transcription system, save for transcriptions in the section Lidzbarski named “the Soul Fisher” (chapters 36 to 39). These transcriptions were collected by Stefana Drower from one of her chief informants, Sheikh Negm of Qal’at Šālīḥ, Iraq, and were deemed to be of sufficiently historical interest to include as MS K.

This is an English-language translation, and one that strongly privileges the target language. As a consequence, the practice of the translators has been to substitute English-language equivalents for proper nouns when their referent corresponds to a specific entity in both languages, or its meaning would have been easily accessible to a native speaker at the time the text was written. Consequently, we translate “Jerusalem” instead of transcribing *Urašlam*, “Elizabeth” instead of *Enešbey*, “Life” instead of *Heyyi*, and so forth. Additionally, Mandaic names are built upon a commonplace verbal stem, such as *Nəṣab* ‘he planted,’ are rendered with the equivalent English verbal stem, such as “Plant.” This often allows for some of the wordplay of the original language to emerge from the translation. Since figures like Manda d’Heyyi could neither be analyzed by a native speaker nor have any direct analog in English, they are left transcribed and untranslated. The Mandaean prophet John has two names, *Yahyā* and *Yuhānā*, which appear not only singly but also paired; to maintain this original distinction, the former is rendered by John, and the latter by the older English variant Johannes. All other proper nouns not regularly encountered in English are transcribed from their original Mandaic forms, but in deference to the target language, their transcription omits diacritics and substitutes digraphs wherever possible, writing for example *Yushamen* rather than *Yušāmen*.

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# Introduction: The Gnostic Flip in the Mandaean *Book of John*

April D. DeConick

The *Book of John* is a Mandaean text compiled in the early Islamic period.<sup>13</sup> However, it does not appear to have been written as a consistent narrative by a single author. Rather it is better characterized as a compilation of narratives, some earlier than others, arranged and recomposed to sustain and empower Mandaeans at a time when they were religiously vulnerable. There is evidence that the *Book of John* was written in order to secure Mandaeans' status as a "People of the Book" when Islam was on the rise in their locale in the Seventh century. To this end, the book capitalizes on the prophethood of John, who is one of the twenty-five prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān. Such propaganda went a long way to provide legitimacy for Mandaeans, who lived in Muslim controlled territories and were known for their baptisms. That said, ultimately the *Book of John* was written for Mandaeans themselves. Someone from within their community wove into this book disparate narratives, dialogues and prayers in order to persuade them to maintain their unique gnostic identity within an environment of competing religious identities, especially Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

## What is in a Category?

The designation Mandaean derives from the Aramaic word *mand'ā* or knowledge. So Mandaeans are self-designated "Knowers" or "Gnostics." The gnostic currents preserved in the *Book of John* are quite varied and may appear startling at first glance to those who might be more familiar with gnostic movements from the second and third centuries as evidenced in the heresiological literature and old Coptic codices like those from Nag Hammadi. The same can be said about fourth-century gnostic sources like the *Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia*. Even Manichaean materials do not strike easy literary parallels, although Mandaeans appear to have known that Manichaeans existed nearby in the mountains.<sup>14</sup>

While the *Book of John* may have no direct literary dependency on these other brands of gnostic literature, the *Book of John's* gnostic system is oriented in ways that are similar to their gnostic programs. How might this similar orientation but remarkable difference be explained?

While I do not advocate for an essentialist academic typology to define gnosticism, I have promoted in my essay, 'Crafting Gnosis,' that we try to understand the meaning of the word *gnostic* as it was used in the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>15</sup> My construction is founded in cognitive linguistic analyses of how humans create and use mental categories, which are general enough to have ideal structures but flexible enough to accommodate for innovation, situation dependence, and cultural difference.<sup>16</sup> This means that mental categories do not reflect prescriptive defining properties but distinguishing features that can adjust to accommodate new experiences and situations. Such an approach explains and values difference, while also recognizing similarities that structure and secure the mental category.

In terms of a common household example, we might use the mental category CHAIR which helps us identify objects we encounter, assisting us to know how to interact with these objects. While the cognitive

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<sup>13</sup> Buckley, *Great Stem of Souls*, 227.

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 30.

<sup>15</sup> A.D. DeConick, "Crafting Gnosis: Gnostic Spirituality in the Ancient New Age," in *Gnosticism, Platonism, and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honor of John D. Turner*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 82, eds. K. Corrigan and T. Rasimus (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2013), 285–305. For earlier attempts: M. Smith, "The History of the Term Gnostikos," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the Conference at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, Vol. 2: *Sethian Gnosticism*, Studies in the History of Religion 49, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 796–807; B. Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L.M. White and O.L. Yarbrough. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 334–350.

<sup>16</sup> G. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987); S. Coulson, *Semantic Leaps: Frame-Shifting and Conceptual Blending in Meaning Construction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

frame CHAIR has distinguishing or ideal features (platform functional for seating a person; legs; arms; back), these features are very flexible. So chairs can have different numbers of legs, including some that have no legs, but are beanbags on the floor. Chairs usually have arms, except when they are don't, in which case they are special "armless" or "slipper" chairs. Chairs come in different sizes, although they usually seat one person, unless it is extra wide and can accommodate two. The extra wide chair, however, is different from a couch, which is another mental category altogether.

### Distinguishing Gnostics

Starting with the fact that the ancient people used the word *gnostic*, I interrogated the ancient literature to see how they were using the word, what it meant to them as a mental category, and when shifts in its distinguishing or ideal characteristics took place.<sup>17</sup> What I found is that GNOSTIC does not describe for the ancient people a single overarching gnostic religion, but a metaphysical orientation that we might best characterize today as a countercultural spirituality.<sup>18</sup> The word itself is associated with an innovative countercultural spirituality that flips conventional theology, advocating for the direct knowledge (gnosis) and worship of a transcendent God who lives in a transcendent realm beyond the cosmos and the traditional gods, including the biblical God YHWH. This gnostic orientation turns the tables hermeneutically, disparaging and consuming conventional scriptures in ways that were anything but traditional. It severely criticizes traditional religions including Judaism and Christianity, even representing their gods as demons, and humans as better than the Gods, as substantially connected to the transcendent God. To make this gnostic flip, they appropriated and reversed everything at their disposal culturally, from Homer and Plato to magic and astrology to ancient brain science and philosophical speculations about multiuniverses.

When this gnostic countercultural spirituality met and blended with traditional Mediterranean religions, gnostic new religious movements emerged in great variety, reformatting the traditional religions in stunningly unique directions. The Nag Hammadi codices display this difference at least in terms of Valentinian, Sethian, Simonian, and Hermetic movements. The heresiologists give accounts of many other gnostic movements, including most prominently the Basilidians, Carpocratians, Peratics, Naassenes, Ophians, and Justinians. In the third century, Manichaeism took shape as a gnostic movement in response to the visions and genius of Mani and Mani's many collaborations with his first followers.

Mandaeism is no exception, although it is not to be found at Nag Hammadi or Medinet Madi. While its exact origins are disputed, it is evident that Mandaeism emerges out of a distinct time and place, when gnostic spirituality met and flipped specific established religious knowledge and etiquette, reformatting this traditional religious wisdom in such a way that a new gnostic religious movement emerged.

When it comes to Mandaeism, what specific religious knowledge and etiquette are flipped along gnostic lines? Narratives in the *Book of John* support what can be gleamed from other Mandaean texts, that a baptismal gnostic group who called themselves the Nazoreans met up with Zoroastrianism. This initial fusion and reformatting produced a new religious movement from which Mandaeism grew, identifying itself over and against Judaism and Christianity, and eventually even Islam.

<sup>17</sup> DeConick, "Crafting Gnosis."

<sup>18</sup> A.D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); A.D. DeConick, "The Countercultural Gnostic: Turning the World Upside Down and Inside Out," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 1 (2016): 7–35.

## Reimagining Origins

There is dispute in the scholarship over the origins of the Mandaean movement and the identity of the Nazoreans. Some early scholars favored a pre-Christian, Palestinian origin.<sup>19</sup> The Danish scholar V. Schou Pedersen argued that there has to be a Christian stage within the early development of Mandaism.<sup>20</sup> After World War II, the view that Mandaism has Jewish origins again gained momentum, with Edwin Yamauchi as the outlier.<sup>21</sup> He thinks that their origins are Babylonian and can be traced to a non-Jewish sect, similar to the Elchasaites, who took their form of gnosticism to Mesopotamia and blended with a Mesopotamian cult of magic at the end of the second century CE.

My own reading of the Mandaean literature has led me to reimagine that this fusion of Nazoreans with Zoroastrians is to be dated to the aftermath of the Jewish War, when the eastward movement of refugees took place, and a group of disaffected Nazoreans settled on the banks of the Euphrates among Zoroastrians.<sup>22</sup> From their stories and liturgies, I identify this particular Nazorean group with a group of gnostic baptizing Christians who relocated from the Jordan valley to the Euphrates. While Mandaeans take Nazorean as their self-designation, meaning ‘guardian’ or ‘possessor’ of knowledge, it is also the name that some of the first Christians used for themselves.<sup>23</sup> This particular Nazorean group relocated to the Euphrates under the leadership of a woman seer and priest named Meryey, who was herself a disaffected Jew and convert to the Nazorean faith.<sup>24</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that this group of Nazoreans may have had some connection to the baptizing gnostic Christians known to the Fourth Gospel, who were already critical of Jews and their faith in a God described as the father of the devil.<sup>25</sup> According to my reconstruction, this particular community of Nazoreans identified the heavenly Jesus with a great angel of light they called Manda d’Heyyi or the Knowledge of Life.<sup>26</sup> Within a few decades, however, Meryey’s group began suffering severe persecution at the hands of other Christians in the east for their distinctive views that Jesus was the great angel Manda d’Heyyi. This animosity caused the Nazoreans to distance themselves from the Christian Jesus whom they began thinking was actually a fraud and deceiver, not an angel of light after all. While Jesus might have once known the truth, he had lapsed and turned the truth into something deplorable.

## Flipping the Story

Such historical particulars shaped the formation of the Mandaeans’ unique gnostic movement, which was highly critical of Jews and Christians to the extent of flipping the Jewish and Christian Gods into demons. So, in the *Book of John*, the Jewish God, Adunay is identified with Jerusalem and both are characterized as evil.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> M. Lidzbarski, *Ginzā, der Schatz oder das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1925), vi-xvii; R. Bultmann, “Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannes evangelium,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 24 (1925): 100–146.

<sup>20</sup> V.S. Pedersen, *Bidrag til en Analyse af de Mandaeske Skrifter, med henblik paa bestemmelsen af Mandaernas forhold til Jødedom og Kristendom* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget, 1940).

<sup>21</sup> R. Macuch, “Alter und Heimat des Mandäismus nach neuerschlossenen Quellen,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 82 (1957): 401–408; R. Macuch, “Anfänge der Mandäer,” in *Die Araber in der Alten Welt*, Volume 2, ed. F. Altheim and R. Stiehl (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 76–190; K. Rudolph, “Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion,” *History of Religions* 9 (1969): 210–234, esp. 228; E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 140–142.

<sup>22</sup> DeConick, *Gnostic New Age*, 326–339.

<sup>23</sup> J.E. Fossum and P. Munoa, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction to Gospel Literature and Jesus Studies* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2004), 156–157.

<sup>24</sup> Chapters 34–35.

<sup>25</sup> DeConick, *Gnostic New Age*, 135–161, 332. Cf. John 8: 44 and A.D. DeConick, “Why are the Heavens Closed? The Johannine Revelation of the Father in the Catholic-Gnostic Debate,” in *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic*, ed. Catrin H. Williams and Christopher Rowland (London: Tandt Clark, 2013), 147–179.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. cp 162–163, E.S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959), 141. Cp. Chapter 34.

<sup>27</sup> Chapter 54.

Adunay is also linked to the sun, which renders him an evil planet engineered to trap humans in an astrological nightmare of human existence and endless purgatories after death.<sup>28</sup> Adunay is responsible for commissioning his demonic Spirit (*Ruhā*, related to the Hebrew word for spirit, *ruḥ*) to write the Torah, which is characterized as an evil and false book. The *Book of John* insists that the Torah did not come from the light and has no revelation in it. The false worship of Adunay among Jews is contrasted with the worship among Mandaeans of the true transcendent God, who is the Knowledge of Life.<sup>29</sup> If Jews knew the true God, the Mandaean text says, they would not attend synagogue and read the Torah, which is all a lie anyway.<sup>30</sup> Jews are viewed as credulous slaves to a God who is really a demon.<sup>31</sup>

Christianity fares no better in the *Book of John*. Jesus is flipped. In a series of chapters highlighting the teaching of John, Jesus is made out to be the ultimate religious deceiver.<sup>32</sup> He is remembered as a disciple of John who came to know about the truth through John's gnostic teachings, only to hijack the truth for fraudulent purposes. John accuses Jesus of lying to Jews and deceiving the priests, abolishing procreation, and undoing the Sabbath. He is characterized as mute, deaf, blind, and downright rotten. His baptism by John only happens after Jesus relentlessly begs for it, and then, when the spirit finally descends upon him, it is the evil Spirit not the holy one from the Christian story. Spirit is said to be behind everything Christians consider precious, including the cross, their baptisms, the Eucharist, and the ordination of their priests.

The historical and social realities of religious animosity among Jews, Christians, and Mandaeans helped to shape this distinctive Mandaean mythology, one that did not depend upon the literature of the gnostic groups represented by Nag Hammadi or the heresiologists, or even Manichaeism for that matter. That said, their mythology intersects with Zoroastrian beliefs in a way comparable to Manichaean gnosis, so that there are dual primordial kingdoms of light and darkness that become embattled.<sup>33</sup> The *Book of John* contains an old narrative about Yushamen, whose name may be related to YHWH, the God of Heaven. He and his twenty-one sons initiate the war with the King of Light, which leads to creation.<sup>34</sup>

This old war story, however, does not stand alone, but has been blended with an even earlier gnostic narrative about the unfolding of being from the supreme God in a series of aeons or emanations. In this case, Yushamen is the second emanation from the original supreme being, First Life. He, along with Abator the third emanation and Ptahil the fourth emanation, fall or defect. Abator becomes humanity's judge and Ptahil humanity's creator. Both these deities are drawn from Egyptian lore, where Anubis judges the dead with his scale and Ptah forms humans from clay on his potter's wheel. In Mandaean mythology, Ptahil creates Adam and animates him with a soul from the world of light. The soul exists in a physical body embattled against the evil tendencies of the human spirit.

Ur (possibly related to the Hebrew word for light, *'ôr*), the King of Darkness is described as a dragon or monster. He builds up his kingdom by relying on these defections of the light beings. Spirit, in fact, appears to be a light being gone bad, who creates the planets and the Zodiac signs to imprison and influence humanity to do evil as she does.<sup>35</sup>

Needless to say, a hostile relationship exists between the light and the darkness, the transcendent world filled with rivers of light and the dark cosmos below. While creation and its laws cannot be undone once they are established, the powers of the Kingdom of Light limit the fallen powers by binding some of them and sending down 'messengers,' special light beings or *otri* who instruct and enlighten humanity about the way out of this cosmic mess. The *Book of John* contains many powerful dialogues, admonitions, and narratives of significant *otri* who have important messages to pass on to the chosen Gnostics.<sup>36</sup> The baptismal knowledge that the *otri* bring allows Mandaeans, when they die and their souls rise, to escape the astrological demons and their

<sup>28</sup> Cf. chapters 15–17.

<sup>29</sup> Chapter 34.

<sup>30</sup> Chapter 18.

<sup>31</sup> Chapter 35.

<sup>32</sup> Chapters 30, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Chapter 13.

<sup>34</sup> Chapters 3–10.

<sup>35</sup> Chapter 15.

<sup>36</sup> Chapters 1–2, 40–53, 55–56, 61, 63–67, 68–76.



purgatories. The repetitive baptisms performed by their priests teach Mandeans how to call upon their guardian light beings to assist their ascents and how to locate the best waterways connecting our world with the transcendent world of light beyond.

## Mandaean Strategies of Resistance

While the Mandaean flip of Jewish and Christian religious truth signals a history of animosity between Jews, Christians, and Mandeans, the story is bigger than this. The story is about the emergence of Nazoreans and then Mandeans as a new religious movement with a countercultural message characteristic of gnostic idiom and spirit. Their story reflects well what can be gleaned from sociological literature modeling the survival and extinction of minority religions, especially those with countercultural orientations that appear deviant to outsiders. This literature recognizes that their survival can hinge on certain strategies that the movements use to lower the tension between themselves and the religious and cultural expectations of the surrounding society. To alleviate the tension, some groups will try to accommodate to some of these expectations, reducing or altering their deviance to become more socially acceptable. Other movements will resist changes to their countercultural program, and instead privatize to camouflage their deviance.<sup>37</sup> Such a countercultural orientation, if maintained by the new religion, can spur sanctions and other pejorative actions on the part of the dominant religious groups and the larger society who perceive them to be deviants. This dangerous situation results in pressure on the new religious movement to reduce its countercultural cache and accommodate to the larger society or to reconfigure socially in such ways that make their deviance less visible or at least less threatening.

Survival strategies become even more essential for minority religions that exist within a culture where there is a dominant state-sponsored religion, as was the case for Mandaism when Islam was ascendant politically. Arguably the *Book of John* was written as a survival guide.

On the one hand it was written to accommodate Mandaism to Muslims' expectations for 'People of the Book.' These were expectations that Muslim authorities had for local monotheistic religions they felt could be tolerated, like Judaism and Christianity which had ancient scriptures and prophetic leaders like Moses and Jesus. To this end, Mandeans capitalized on the prophethood of John who was a famous prophet and baptizer already approved by the Muslims.

On the other hand, Mandeans resisted altering their countercultural program. They are commanded in the *Book of John* to separate themselves from society and maintain their unique lifestyle, dress, and religious etiquette. To make this deviance less threatening socially, in the *Book of John*, they veil it within the rhetoric of religious devotion and piety. It helped that they lived together within more or less isolated communities in the southern marshes of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, reducing the visibility of their deviance.

## Accommodating John

The *Book of John* contains the kinds of questions that Mandeans faced as members of a minority religion, whose potential dangers were being sussed out by the dominant religious authorities. At a time when Islam was on the rise in their locale, Mandeans were being asked by Muslims, 'Who is your prophet?' Muslim neighbors demanded to know what scriptures Mandeans used and what God they worshiped.<sup>38</sup> Mandeans admit to

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<sup>37</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), esp. 19–20; 100–108; R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 25; R. Stark and R. Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 205. This is a recurring topic in the sociological literature: cf. B. Johnson, "On Church and Sect," *American Sociological Review* 28 (1963): 539–549; B.R. Wilson, "An Analysis of Sect Development," in *Patterns of Sect Development: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements*, ed. B.R. Wilson (London: Heinemann, 1967), 22–45, esp. 32–33, 36–37; D.G. Bromley, "As It Was in the Beginning: Developmental Moments in the Emergence of New Religious Movements," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, Volume 2, ed. James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tøllefsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 98–113.

<sup>38</sup> Chapter 22.

having a difficult time explaining to the Muslims that their God is transcendent beyond the cosmos. The Muslims, they complain, “neither know nor understand, accursed and disgraceful, they neither know nor understand that our Lord, the Light King, He is the one on high.” So while the Muslims understood that Mandaeans were devout monotheists, they did not seem to recognize that the Mandaean God is a transcendent God, and not the God of the Bible or Qur’ān. This confusion was probably to the advantage of Mandaeans, even though they did not seem to have recognized it at the time.

As for their prophet, Mandaeans turned to John, recrafting his story into a religious book that carried his name. John in this Mandaean narrative has very little in common with John the Baptist in Christian stories. Like Jesus, he is flipped. He is presented in the *Book of John* as a man like no other person.<sup>39</sup> He originates from the Kingdom of Light as a light being sent down from the upper heights. He enters Elizabeth’s womb when she is overshadowed by a star.<sup>40</sup> John himself confirms that he (or his soul) has been transplanted from the realm of Light by primal Man.<sup>41</sup> On his descent, he is challenged by the Seven planets to explain his origins and teachings. He tells these cosmic powers that he is related to the great Father and primal Man and that he does not intend to set up shop in Judaea among Jews, nor does he plan to settle among the Christians with their rosaries. The dark cosmic powers cannot detain him because, he explains, he has never been sexually promiscuous, a drunkard, or a glutton. Instead he has been a model Mandaean, participating in his evening devotionals, immersing in Jordan baptisms, and remembering his pure sign. His truthfulness gives him a pass from the planets’ interrogation and he descends into Elizabeth’s womb.

John is presented as the great prophet in Jerusalem who takes to the Jordan and teaches Mandaeans the proper way to baptize.<sup>42</sup> His teaching is said to challenge and make void the Torah.<sup>43</sup> His voice and lessons shake the synagogues, quake the Temple, and agitate the Dome of the priests.<sup>44</sup> This is in stark contrast to John’s portrayal in the Christian narrative where he is said to turn the hearts of Jews to the Lord their God and help them remember the holy covenant.<sup>45</sup> The gnostic countercultural message of John is clear in this Mandaean book. Jews who observe the Torah are being deceived, John says. They have been corrupted and will not fare well on judgment day when they stand before the planetary powers as fattened cows ready for slaughter.<sup>46</sup>

His gnostic teachings mirror those presented by other light messengers in the *Book of John*. He calls to those who are caught in wickedness, vanities, and luxuries, ‘Come, buy a path before you!’<sup>47</sup> They must come to the Jordan for baptism and the sign, in order to rise up to the world of light. If the elect give rewards and love Sunday, they will be carried into the Place of Light.<sup>48</sup> Always they must beware of impurities, especially those surrounding women who are ritually unclean and who reveal the Mandaean mysteries to outsiders.<sup>49</sup> John warns Mandaeans that they must distinguish themselves from outsiders who engage in fortune-telling, consultations with bad astrologers, drunkenness, prostitution, usury, tattooing their bodies with henna, wearing colorful clothing, and having sexual relations that are ritually unclean.<sup>50</sup> They are the righteous elect who bear witness to their God, Life, by refusing to engage in such torrid deeds.

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<sup>39</sup> Chapters 21, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Chapter 18.

<sup>41</sup> Chapter 19; cf. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Chapters 18, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Chapter 21.

<sup>44</sup> Chapter 27.

<sup>45</sup> Luke 1: 14–17, 72.

<sup>46</sup> Chapter 25.

<sup>47</sup> Chapter 22.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter 29.

<sup>49</sup> Chapter 23.

<sup>50</sup> Chapter 28.

## Resisting Assimilation

Clearly the *Book of John* was written to deal with the religious crisis facing Mandaeans as they lived among Muslims. How much should they assimilate to Muslim society, and how much should they resist? To put it another way, how do the Gnostics, who live by largely countercultural rules, reside in this world and interact with people who are not Gnostics? This was a particularly imperative question for them to answer as members of a minority religion, since they were facing persecution, forced conversion, and even death at the hands of dominant Muslim authorities.

In the *Book of John*, the light-being Ennošh (likely Enoch) asks the question outright, ‘How can disciples and Gnostics rise to the light, when they eat what the Twelve’s sects eat, and drink what they drink, and Spirit has heaped much filth upon them?’<sup>51</sup> He expresses deep concern that Nazoreans and Gnostics have been trapped in the world, caught in Spirit’s snares and imprisoned in Ur’s house. Ennošh laments that the Gnostics are persecuted and even slain because of their belief in the transcendent God, Life.

The world described here is not some existential realm, but the Muslim society, which is presented as a putrid domain.<sup>52</sup> Even though reform was needed, reform did not happen after Muhammad. While synagogues were torn down, mosques were built to replace them. Sin and deceit only increased. Adultery, theft, usury, economic fraud, and personal hygiene only became worse. The Muslim world of hennaed beards and shaved heads had become septic for Mandaeans.

*Otri* like Shem and Adam teach them that they are God’s perfect chosen people living in a world that they must resist by maintaining their prayers, gifts, and sexual purity.<sup>53</sup> To do so means that they need to constantly set their eyes on the place of the Light.<sup>54</sup> They are admonished to always keep their heart focused on the Great God.<sup>55</sup> They must endure the world’s persecution by maintaining a strong heart, worshiping the true God with sincerity.<sup>56</sup>

They must learn to distinguish themselves from everyone else, especially the wicked and sinners.<sup>57</sup> To do so means that they resist adultery, refuse to steal, hate magic, and never lie.<sup>58</sup> They must not be drawn into the worship of false gods or idols.<sup>59</sup> Pagan chapels and wicked music should be avoided.<sup>60</sup> As the chosen people, the Gnostics, they must guard against the pull of the world, which encourages them to stop their prayers and devotionals, and makes them forget who they really are and who God is.<sup>61</sup>

Even though they are the chosen Nazoreans whose name is from Life’s house, they are told that they will enter the Place of Light only by resisting assimilation, by being pious, by performing devotionals, rewardsgiving, and communion.<sup>62</sup> Baptism, which gives them the sign of life, must be performed regularly.<sup>63</sup> In fact, the ascension of Mandaeans to the Place of Life after death is linked to their ability to separate themselves from the world. If they lapse, they are told that their final destination will be in the belly of Leviathan.<sup>64</sup> Abator’s judgment is held over them.<sup>65</sup>

But the Gnostics are promised help. They are encouraged to call upon their light guardians and assistants who are soul-fishers gathering together the chosen who call upon them.<sup>66</sup> The soul-fishers will raise the

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<sup>51</sup> Chapter 74.

<sup>52</sup> Chapter 22.

<sup>53</sup> Chapters 15; 54, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Chapter 13.

<sup>55</sup> Chapter 56.

<sup>56</sup> Chapter 50.

<sup>57</sup> Chapter 13.

<sup>58</sup> Chapters 47; 51.

<sup>59</sup> Chapters 15, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Chapter 15.

<sup>61</sup> Chapters 16–17.

<sup>62</sup> Chapter 74.

<sup>63</sup> Chapter 74.

<sup>64</sup> Chapter 56.

<sup>65</sup> Chapter 55.

<sup>66</sup> Chapters 17, 36.

Gnostics up, place them in their ships, deck them in luminous garments, crown them, and cover them with light. In the end, the *Book of John* declares, it is only the Nazoreans who remain sincere and faithful in their faith that will stand on the boundary between this cosmos and the transcendent world, and will rise into the Kingdom of Light.<sup>67</sup>

### People of the Book

The Mandaean movement, like other gnostic movements, is oriented toward the direct knowledge and worship of a transcendent God who lives beyond our universe in realm of light. The *Book of John*, like other gnostic texts, contains echoes of serious speculations about this transcendent God. It strives to explain how this God is connected to the traditional gods and conventional religious systems, the world, and human beings.

But more importantly the Mandaean stories as presented in the *Book of John* reveal for us the art of religious improvisation, a moment in Mandaean history when their gnostic story about a transcendent God had flipped and reformatted Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian stories into a narrative that legitimized them before Muslim authorities as the Sabians or Baptizers mentioned in the Qur'ān.<sup>68</sup> The fact that they possessed an old holy book, the *Genzā Rabbā*, was appealing to the authorities as well. Nevermind that the God of their devotion was not the traditional God of the Abrahamic faiths or that their interpretations of Jewish and Christian scriptures cut against the grain of their standardized readings. It is a remarkable story about how a gnostic countercultural religious movement that demonized Jewish and Christian mythology and flipped their scriptures used strategies of accommodation and resistance to remake itself into a movement of “People of the Book,” pious devout monotheists who esteemed the prophethood of John as told in the book that bore his name.

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<sup>67</sup> Chapter 55.

<sup>68</sup> Quran 2: 62; 5: 69; 22: 17.

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**Edition and translation**

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## Dedication

*May God be Praised!*<sup>1</sup>

In the name of the Great and Strange Life from the countless worlds of light, who is above all works, may I,  
\_\_\_\_\_, my wife, \_\_\_\_\_, my father, \_\_\_\_\_, and my  
mother, \_\_\_\_\_ have healing and innocence, power and strength, speech and hearing, a  
joyful heart and absolution from sins, by virtue of these teachings of the kings.

*In the name of the Great Life,*

*may the sublime light be magnified!*

1. Truth stands by the worlds' entrance,

asking questions to the world.

He says,

"Tell me, how wide is the earth?

How high is it from the earth

to the vault of heaven?

5 Whence came Adam?

Whence came his wife, Eve?

Whence came Pitcher-Wine and Spring-Water,

who transcend the worlds?

From whose settlement has this Oil,

White Sesame's son come to me?

From whose headwater

do these rivers of living water come?

Tell me, how many thousands of excellencies

sit beneath the vine Yusmir?

10 Tell me, how many thousands of excellencies

sit beneath the vine Shar?

Tell me, how many thousands of excellencies

sit beneath the vine Pirun?

Who called out a great cry,

and roused Intellect from its place?

Who set into motion the great conflict,

which will not be resolved for an eternity?

Who caused the high breach,

which will not be plugged for an eternity?

15 Who will be the guardian of the house,<sup>2</sup>

as far as the enclosure of the worlds?<sup>3</sup>

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**Sigla:** A found in manuscript A;

>A missing from manuscript A;

word present but deleted by copyist;

<sup>word</sup> added by copyist in margin;

[word] reconstructed by editors;

{word} interpolated

**1** Literally "may my lord be praised."

**2** The house is a metaphor for the material world.

**3** The term "enclosure of the worlds" here refers to the lightworlds rather than the material world ("the house").

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Tell me, upon what is the bed  
 Tell me, how many thousands of excellencies  
 Tell me, how many thousands of excellencies  
 Tell me, how many thousands of excellencies  
 20 Tell me, what are the names of the three robes  
 Tell me, who revealed speech and hearing  
 Tell me, who among the excellencies  
 and brings it before Intellect?  
 Tell me, who among the excellencies  
 25 and takes them to store in his treasury?  
 Tell me, when the fetus is formed,  
 When its mother has it,<sup>4</sup>  
 Who among the liliths<sup>5</sup>  
 {Tell me, who is the guardian of the house,  
 30 Ptahil spoke, saying to him,  
 “I shall tell you the truth,  
 Twelve thousand leagues is  
 Twelve thousand leagues is  
 Adam was made from clay.  
 35 This Oil, White Sesame’s son,  
 These are living waters;  
 Twelve thousand excellencies  
 Twelve thousand excellencies

of the great and powerful Intellect supported?  
 sit to the right of the great and powerful Intellect?  
 sit to the left of the great and powerful Intellect?  
 stand before the great and powerful Intellect?  
 of splendor, light, and glory?  
 to the excellencies in their settlements?  
 takes the incense holder,  
  
 accepts prayer and praise,  
  
 in whose bosom is it formed?  
 whose scent does it inhale?  
 dwells in the beds of pregnant women?  
 as far as the enclosure of the worlds?}”<sup>6</sup>  
  
 and explain to you just as it was.  
 the width of the earth.  
 the distance from the earth to the vault of heaven.  
 His wife Eve came from her own source.<sup>7</sup>  
 came from the settlement of Splendid Yusmir.<sup>8</sup>  
 they come from the reservoir of the Jordan.<sup>9</sup>  
 sit beneath the vine Yusmir.  
 sit beneath the vine Shar.

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<sup>4</sup> GHJ: “a child”

<sup>5</sup> Liliths are female demons, who steal children.

<sup>6</sup> Line 29 repeats line 15. The term “enclosure of the worlds” once again refers to the lightworlds rather than the material world (“the house”).

<sup>7</sup> Literally “her own vessel.”

<sup>8</sup> GHJ: of Splendid Yukabar

<sup>9</sup> The word *yardanā* in Mandaic is used as a place name, but more often refers generically to the free-flowing streams or rivers of water in which it is permissible to conduct a baptism.



Twenty-four thousand excellencies  
 40 Yushamen set in motion the great conflict,  
 Abator caused the high breach,  
 I, Ptahil, am the guardian of the house,  
 The bed of the great and powerful Intellect  
 To the right of the great and powerful Intellect  
 45 To the left of the great and powerful Intellect  
 Before the great and powerful Intellect  
 As for the names of the three robes  
 they are self-explanatory.<sup>11</sup>  
 Excellent Shunglan  
 50 and brings it before Intellect.  
 Excellent Samandirel  
 and brings them to store in his treasury.  
 When the fetus is formed,  
 It is taken from its father's loins,  
 55 While the child is within its mother's womb,  
 The lilith Zahriel<sup>12</sup>

*The triumphant Life speaks,*

*In the name of the Great Life,*

2. Truth stands by the worlds' entrance,  
 He said,  
 "Who revealed the secret of the Great,

sit beneath the vine Pirun.  
 which will not be resolved for an eternity.  
 which will not be plugged for an eternity.  
 as far as the enclosure of the worlds.<sup>10</sup>  
 is supported upon the word of Life.  
 sit twelve thousand excellencies.  
 sit twelve thousand excellencies.  
 stand twenty-four thousand excellencies.  
 of splendor, light, and glory,

takes the incense holder

accepts prayer and praise,

it is formed in the bosom of its father.  
 and moved into its mother's womb.  
 it inhales the scent of Life.  
 dwells in the beds of pregnant women."

*and the man who went here triumphs!*

*may the sublime light be magnified!*

asking questions [to the world].

and started the fight with the Light?

<sup>10</sup> The term "worlds" here refers to the lightworlds rather than the material world ("the house").

<sup>11</sup> Literally "each is explained in its place."

<sup>12</sup> AC "Zarniel"



Who shook the settlements,  
 5 Who bound Ur?  
 Why did they make Abator a judge?  
 Who told Spirit,<sup>14</sup>  
 Who brought calm,  
 Who corrupted the great justice,  
 10 Who caused the works to be destroyed,  
 Who disturbed settlements,  
 Who brought a great weapon,  
 Who seized praise,  
 Who offered praise,  
 15 When Truth had said this,  
 and he said,  
 “I shall tell you the truth,  
 Yushamen revealed the secret of the Great,  
 Hibel shook the settlements,  
 20 He caused the rumbling in Senyawis,  
 Ur was bound by Life’s word  
 Yushamen was cast down  
 and start a fight with the Mighty’s house.  
 He hatched wicked schemes and was bound,  
 25 He cast down his own mouth,  
 He had no concern and was not humbled,  
 They<sup>16</sup> made Abator a judge,

and caused the rumbling in Senyawis?<sup>13</sup>  
 Who cast Yushamen down from his place?  
 Why was inequality created in the world?  
 and who revealed the truth to the world?  
 and who created strife on high?  
 and who declared war against the world?  
 and who revealed the secret of the Light?  
 and who spoke the word when it did not exist?  
 and waged war against the world?  
 divided it up, and put it in each place?  
 and recited it to Life’s voice from start to finish?”  
 my son<sup>15</sup> Yukashar searched his memory,  
  
 and I shall explain to you just as it was.  
 and started the fight with the light.  
 and caused the rumbling in Senyawis.  
 and revealed darkness’s secret.  
 with the ties that are endless.  
 because he wanted to make an attack  
  
 so Yushamen might stay put for eternity.  
 because he was not orderly.  
 and was not called forth like the excellencies.  
 because Excellent Hibel cast him down.

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<sup>13</sup> One of the darkworlds.

<sup>14</sup> In place of *lā-ruhā men emrā* ‘to Spirit from speaking,’ read *lā-ruhā man ʾamar*.

<sup>15</sup> GI “Yukashar shone by himself,” HJ “Yukabar shone by himself”

<sup>16</sup> The Life.



- He saw his son in the black water,  
and he said,  
30 “I am a king’s son,<sup>17</sup>  
and he said,  
“I shall place a seal on my settlement,  
He summoned his son Ptahil,  
Abator wronged his ancestors and my house,  
35 and he went to become the scales.  
Abator weeps and wails,  
“Whoever does good finds what is bad,  
I said that I would be great,  
I said that I would be a king,  
40 I said that I would be distinguished,  
When I was gentle and meek,  
Manda d’Heyyi told Spirit,  
Gubran revealed the truth,  
Yukabar brought calm,  
45 Ptahil caused works to be destroyed,  
Transplant disturbed the settlements,  
Ptahil brought a great weapon,  
Excellent Hibel<sup>20</sup> caught praise,  
This was taken<sup>21</sup> to the voice.  
50 *And Life triumphs!*
- he summoned him to his settlement,  
so therefore I shall be called a king’s son,”  
so that my strength will be doubled.”  
and raised him to sit in his settlement.  
he was humbled and vanquished from his throne,<sup>18</sup>  
and it rises up and reaches heaven,  
whoever does evil finds good.  
who has made me so small on Earth?  
who has set me up at the end of the worlds?  
who has placed the scales in my hand?  
why did they call me one who is rebellious?”  
and started the fight with Life’s house.  
and shook all the rivers.  
and Yushamen started a fight and tumult.<sup>19</sup>  
and the Cloud revealed the light’s secret.  
Behram said a word when it did not exist.  
and Sprout waged war against the world.  
divided it up, and cast it about in many places.  
He called on high, and the voice rose up<sup>22</sup>.”

*In the name of the Great Life,*

*may the sublime light be magnified!*

<sup>17</sup> H “I am a king, son of kings.”

<sup>18</sup> Unclear. The text reads “Abator wronged his ancestors and the house of the lowly (GHJ ‘lowland’) and weak (C ‘they vanquish him’) from his throne.” For *šāplā* ‘descending,’ possibly read *šapli* ‘they humbled him.’

<sup>19</sup> The text adds here {in the world}.

<sup>20</sup> CGHJ “Excellent Helbun.”

<sup>21</sup> In place of *etenseb* ‘it was/they were planted,’ read *etenseb*.

<sup>22</sup> J adds “to the House of Life.”





3. Splendor has come to me in plenty,  
 The plot is the first  
 The man who cast me down from this place of mine  
 Do not destroy the excellencies' construction,  
 5 Do not tear up the great foundation,  
 Do not toss those who disturb in the Jordan,  
 Do not destroy the abode that I built.  
 The day they start a fight with you,  
 They came to wander around the settlements,  
 10 The brothers will rally to one another.  
 and they will say,  
 "Our father has left the realm of Air;  
 Their elder brother Sam came,  
 and says,  
 15 "If I start a great fight,  
 You, however, go start  
 you are still immature<sup>25</sup> excellencies.  
 "They will say they are immature excellencies,"  
 Come,<sup>27</sup> start a great fight,  
 20 Arise, forge a great weapon,  
 Gird a sword, bring wrath,  
 Go down to the realm of Air,  
 this one whose land is destroyed,<sup>28</sup>  
 Yushamen's son spoke  
 25 "Come, air king!

and that which abounds in the world is light.  
 that the excellencies undertake to relate to me.  
 to the earth<sup>23</sup> [...] you will destroy them.  
 and do not drive the clouds from their places.  
 because it is to your right.  
 lest anyone attain its strength.  
  
 your sons were taken<sup>24</sup> to Glory's Pride.  
 wandering and seeking their father but not finding.  
 The wicked will be instructed by one another,  
  
 how shall we start a fight with him?"  
 apprises himself of the situation,  
  
 they will say the eldest is ill-raised.  
 the great fight, since  
 If you do it,<sup>26</sup> you will succeed, and they will say,  
 and not take your mistakes up on high.  
 and destroy the works of the Creator!  
 and wage a war for which there is no end!  
 take the deadly arrows that do not fail!  
 to your father's settlements,  
 and for whom there is no throne to occupy."  
 to Great Sprout, saying,  
 Let us take<sup>29</sup> swords unsheathed

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<sup>23</sup> HJ "to my land."

<sup>24</sup> In place of *etenseb* 'it was/they were planted,' read *etenseb*.

<sup>25</sup> Literally "unweaned."

<sup>26</sup> GHJ "you say [it]."

<sup>27</sup> CHGJ "you."

<sup>28</sup> BI "who destroyed his land."

<sup>29</sup> ABC "let us kill."



against Sprout, the air king!”

“Who bound Yushamen before you,

The air king spoke to Splendid Transplant, saying,

“The king commanded, and bound Yushamen.

30 Splendid Transplant opened his mouth, and raged.

“You are not fit, and neither is

Your father is not a powerful excellency.”<sup>30</sup>

Great Sprout spoke

“Damn you, and damn the clan

35 You, who would end a fight with a king,

Splendid Transplant drew a sword

Splendid Transplant struck him once,

Splendid Transplant struck him twice,

Splendid Transplant struck him three times,

40 Great Sprout spoke

“You son of a disgraceful father,

When Great Sprout said this,<sup>31</sup>

The eldest had put on the weapon,

Shouting a challenge to Life,

45 The sound of their weapons

their sounds reached

“How did Yushamen cut through

Who started a fight

Excellent Gubran saw,

50 “It is the twenty-one sons of Yushamen,

Then the light king said to Gubran,

and he says to him,

to end the fight with him?”

Who ends a fight with the kings?”

He summoned Great Sprout, and said to Great Sprout,

the clan from which you came.

to Splendid Transplant, saying,

of your father, the agitator!

are not fit for the Great Life’s house!”

and fell upon great Sprout, the Air king.

but his sword did not cut through his splendor.

but his sword did not cut through his splendor.

but his sword did not cut through his splendor.

to Splendid Transplant, saying,

the likes of me are not afraid of you!”

the twenty-one sons of Yushamen drew their swords.

and the youngest was battle-clad.

they set weapons upon one another.

and the sound of their gear:

the great light king, and he says,

and ruin the prison?

with the excellencies and hid himself?”

and said to the light king,

they are starting a great fight that won’t be resolved.”

<sup>30</sup> Explicitly indefinite in J.

<sup>31</sup> GHJJ “so.”



“Arm yourself  
 Take and set out for the realm of Air.  
 Then Gubran took a great weapon,  
 55 and went to the realm of Air.  
 Then Gubran opened his mouth,  
 “Yushamen’s son, do not start  
 and go seek forgiveness for your father, my son.  
 If he accepts your request, how beautiful it is!  
 60 Splendid Transplant, your father spoke  
 See how sublime  
 Now, you will destroy the earth  
 if you start a conflict with  
 Then Splendid Transplant let loose an arrow,  
 65 Splendid Transplant let loose two arrows,  
 Splendid Transplant let loose three arrows,  
 The fourth arrow  
 Pahriel shouted out loud,  
 Then the light king opened his mouth,  
 70 He cast his voice to the 444,000  
 calling them and saying,  
 “Arm yourselves, take hold of your gear,  
 Grab the blade,  
 Grab the sword wrathfully,  
 75 The light king summons and orders them  
 saying to them,

and mount the great scorpion Parahiel!<sup>32</sup>  
 See whether they are the sons of Yushamen.”  
 mounted the scorpion Parahiel,<sup>33</sup>  
  
 and said to Splendid Transplant,<sup>34</sup>  
 a war with the Mighty’s house,  
  
 If he doesn’t, become a servant before the king!  
 to your eldest brother and was not heard.  
 is the chinstrap<sup>35</sup> he has given me!  
 with the king’s word,  
 the lightworlds and frighten them.”  
 and Gubran caught them in his right hand!  
 and Gubran caught them in his right hand!  
 and Gubran caught them in his right hand!  
 settled in Pahriel’s<sup>36</sup> paw.  
 and his shout reached the light king.  
 with endless light and splendor.  
 excellencies that stand beyond,  
  
 and mount your steeds!  
 and destructive arrows<sup>37</sup> forcefully!  
 and mount your steeds!”  
 with a splendor and light that never wane,

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32 C “Parahiel.”

33 AC “Parahiel.”

34 J “Plant.”

35 This is the *kanzālā*, or cloth strap that wraps around the turban and is secured beneath the chin.

36 AC “Parahiel.”

37 GHJ “destructive arrows that do not fail.”



“When you arrive at the realm of Air,  
 in the bosom of his mother, Lady<sup>38</sup> Shine.  
 Stage the attack in their midst,  
 80 Then 440,000 excellencies  
 From the peak of Air’s realm, Intellect’s enclosure,<sup>39</sup>  
 With a lofty weapon, the excellencies  
 like a sword borne wrathfully  
 Then Splendid Yawar slew with his sword  
 85 Behram took as many as they have,<sup>41</sup>  
 One of the brothers, Yukabar,<sup>42</sup>  
 to his father Yushamen  
 it reached his father Yushamen,  
 “Who has killed my son,  
 90 With the shout that Yushamen shouted,<sup>44</sup>  
 Broken were the bonds and the chains  
 He took to the great conflict,  
 From the Nether Gate,  
 all the settlements he reached,  
 95 When he reached the realm of Air,  
 The excellencies fell upon their faces,  
 Their swords fell from their hands,  
 The swords of the excellencies were broken off,  
 They threw themselves down upon their faces.  
 100 grabbed 24,000 excellencies, and threw down those  
 Then 360 realms arrived

fetch the head of Splendid Transplant,  
 so they say, “The excellencies have been sent!”  
 went down to the realm of Air.  
 they reached Yushamen’s settlement.<sup>40</sup>  
 fall upon the realm of Air,  
 or deadly arrows forcefully.  
 twelve sons of Yushamen.  
 nine sons of Yushamen, with his sword.  
 Yushamen’s most precious son, shouted out loud,  
 he shouted and his shout went forth,  
 and Yushamen said,  
 and who has held my beloved<sup>43</sup> behind?”  
 he lifted the bonds from his hands and feet.  
 that the light king had commanded upon him.  
 and remembered the great rage that was in his heart.  
 to the realm of Air,  
 he destroyed them.  
 he shouted to the lady.<sup>45</sup>  
 and did not take to the heights from their steeds.  
 and they did not hold tight to their steel arrows.  
 and their bowstrings snapped.  
 Yushamen dismounted his steed,  
 who were still standing upon their feet.  
 before the Great king, saying,

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<sup>38</sup> Literally “cloud.”

<sup>39</sup> HJ “the enclosure, from it.”

<sup>40</sup> ACGJ “settlements.”

<sup>41</sup> Unclear. According to line 42, Yushamen had twenty-one sons, of which these are the remainder.

<sup>42</sup> Or “his brother.” D has Yukashar instead of Yukabar.

<sup>43</sup> C “my heart’s beloved.”

<sup>44</sup> BGHJ “Yushamen shouted with a shout.”

<sup>45</sup> Literally “cloud.”

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