

The problems of the nature and date of Mandaean sources

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The Mandaean/Sabian community of southern Mesopotamia has had a significant role in western scholarship for one and half centuries, mainly because of its Gnostic characteristic and its interesting religious literature. This tiny community has been considered by some scholars as the last living representative of the Gnostic cults (1).

Although they are small in number the Mandaeans have an extensive though fragmentary literature which has long been the subject of discussion among scholars who study Gnosticism and the New Testament. It has been "sed by scholars such as R. Reitzenstein, H. Jonas, R. Bultmann and K. Rudolph (2), to solve the problems of the nature and origin of the Gnostic cults and of the Fourth Gospel. These scholars believed that Mandaean material was quite important for the understanding of the Gnostic features of the Fourth Gospel and for the formulation of the essential characteristics of Gnosticism. However, other scholars, particularly New Testament scholars, such as F.C. Burkitt, H. Lietzmann and C.H. Dodd (3), criticized those who emphasized the importance of Mandaean literature for the New Testament studies, opposed the idea that Mandaeanism was one of the sources of the New Testament and argued for a quite late date for the Mandaean tradition. The focus of argument between the two groups of scholars concerns the nature and date of Mandaean material. Before examining this issue we give a brief account of the material.

Mandaean material is in three categories: (i) magical bowl texts and lead amulet, (ii) literary writings and (iii) Mandaean oral tradition(4). From the second half of the nineteenth century a number of Mandaic bowl texts and lead amulets were published by scholars, such as H. Pognon, M. Lidzbarski, J.A. Montgomery and R. Macuch. (5) More than 50

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1. See Sox, H.D., "The Last of the Gnostics", King's Theological Review, 6, 2, 1983, pp. 43-44.
 2. See Jonas, H., *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Hill (1958), Bultmann, R., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, tr. G.R. Beasley-Murray, Basil Blackwell (1971); Rudolph, K., *Gnosis, the Nature and History of an Ancient Religion*, translation edited by R. McL. Wilson, trs. P. W. Coxon and K.H. Kuhn, T.T. Clark (1983). also see Yamauchi, E.M., *Pre-Christian Gnosticism. A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, Tyndale Press (1973), pp.117ff.
 3. See Burkitt, F.C., *Church and Gnosis. A Study of Christian Thought and Speculation in the Second Century*, Cambridge (1932); Lietzmann, H., "Ein Beitrag zur Mandäerfrage", SPAW, Phil.-Hist.Kl., 1930, pp.596-608; Dodd, C.H., *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge (1954), pp.115-30.
 4. For Mandaean literature see Rudolph, K., "Die mandäische Literatur", in *Studia Mandaeica*, ed. R. Macuch, Band I, Berlin, New York (1976), pp. 147-70.
 5. Many of the Mandaic bowl texts and lead amulets can be found in the following studies: Yamauchi, E.M., *Mandaic Incantation Texts*, New Haven (1967); Macuch, R., "Altmandäische Bleirohlen", in *Die Araber in der Alten Welt*, eds. F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, Berlin, v.IV (1967), pp.91-203, 626-31; v.V/1 (1968), pp.34-72, 454-69.

bowl texts and 8 lead amulets have been published (6). These texts contain white magic, incantations and invocations of the light-spirits against the evil spirits and the powers of darkness. Bowl texts and lead amulets are quite important for the study of the early character and development of the Mandaean tradition. They contain many essential Mandaean concepts and ideas.

Another important first-hand source for Mandaean studies is literary texts, and these consist of mythological, cosmological and liturgical treatises and of songs and hymns. Among them we have the big collections, such as **ginza rba**, "the Great Treasure", **drasia d iahia**, "the Teaching of Yahya" and **qulasta**, "the Teachings, "the Collection". There are also the Diwans, such as **diuan nahrauata**, "Diwan of the Rivers", **diuan maṣbuta d hibil ziua**, "Diwan of the Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa", and **diuan haran gauatia**, "Diwan of Haran Gawaita (Inner Haran)", the priestly documents, such as **alf trisar Suialia**, "One Thousand and Twelve Questions" and **alma risaia rba**, "the Great First World", and astrological and magical texts, such as **sfar maluasia**, "the Book of the Zodiac". Mandaean literary texts play a central role in the Mandaean studies.

Among the first-hand sources we also have the oral Mandaean tradition collected and published by Lady Drower in her outstanding book on the Mandaeans (7).

Besides the first-hand sources there are secondary sources for the Mandaean studies which are important for the study of the history and development of the Mandaean sect and its language (8). We have three groups of such sources (i) Iranian sources like the **kartir** inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam, (ii) Manichaean sources, such as **Psalms of Thomas** and **Kephalaia**, and (iii) Syriac and Arabic sources from medieval times which give information on the Mandaean community, its cults and rituals.

Scholars often complain about the difficulty of getting a clear idea of the nature of Mandaean beliefs and rituals from the Mandaean sources. The same is also true for the dating of these sources. The problem is closely connected with the legendary, confused and sometimes contradictory characteristics of Mandaean literature. We can examine the problems of the nature and date of the Mandaean sources under two headings.

6. Besides these published texts, E.C.D. Hunter states that there are still some incantation bowls in the museums of Istanbul which were unearthed during the excavations in Nippur in 1888-1889. See Hunter, E.C.D., "Incantation Bowls from the 18th Nippur Season", Paper (unpublished) read at the 4th Annual Conference of the British Association of Near Eastern Archaeology. 9-11th November, 1990, Birmingham University.

7. See Drower, E.S., *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran. Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore*, (hereafter MID Oxford (1937)), pp. 251-399.

8. For the origin, history and development of Mandaeanism see Gündüz, Ş., *The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relation to Sabians of the Qur'an and to the Harranians*, (Ph.D. Thesis) Manchester University (1991)

1. The nature of the Mandaean sources

To an outsider Mandaean literature does not appear to represent a single united system of beliefs and rituals. The Mandaean literature is confused and self-contradictory. In fact, it consists of many parts which belong to different historical periods and contains both old and new elements. Even within one single document we can find various religious concepts and ideas which seem, at first sight, contradictory to each other. We can also find different approaches to some and figures in different texts. In one part of the literature a figure or concept may be mentioned positively, but in another it is considered evil and the power of Darkness. It is therefore often quite difficult to get a clear picture from this literature of the religious ideas and figures. We give some examples on this problem.

In Mandaean literature the Jews and ideas and figures connected with Judaism are generally abhorred and treated with hostility. The Jews are called "an evil nation" and "the powers of Darkness" (9). They are believed to be the source of every wickedness, sin, confusion, blasphemy and disagreement (10). In the literary texts the main reason for the Mandaean's hate against Judaism seems to be the belief that the Jews persecuted their ancestors in Jerusalem, killed some of them and forced the rest to flee from Palestine (11). Adonai and Moses are regarded as evil. For example, Adonai is seen as false, evil God or a demon and identified with the sun and hence the Jews are described as the worshippers of sun (12). Moses is described as "a false prophet" and an evil ruler who persecuted the ancestors of the Mandaean in Jerusalem (13). On the other hand we sometimes see positive statements about Jewish figures and concepts. Of Adonai we read for instance, in **haran gauaita**:

"And they (the Mandaean) built cult-huts (**bimandia**) and abode in the Call of the Life and in the strength of the high King of Light until they came to their end. And they loved the Lord, Adonai, until in the House of Israel there was created something which was not placed in the womb of Mary, a daughter of Israel" (14).

This statement obviously indicates that at some historical period the Jewish divine name, Adonai, had a positive role in Mandaean tradition. Also in Mandaic magical bowl texts and lead amulets the name of Adonai is sometimes used in a positive way to remove curses (15)

9. See Drower, E.S., *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean, (hereafter CP) Leiden (1959), p.251; Ginza Right, (hereafter GR) in Lidzbarski, M., Ginza der schatz oder das grosse Buch der Mandaer übersetzt und erklärt, Göttingen (1925), p.341*

10. See GR, p. 25.

11. See *ibid*, p. 341; *Haran Gawaita and the Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa Vatican City (1953), p.8.*

12. Cf. GR, pp.25, 43.

13. See *ibid*, pp.43,46.

14. HG, p.3.

15. See Yamauchi, E.M. *Mandaic Incantation Texts, New Haven (1957), pp. 155, 159,165, 167.*

Moses too appears as a positive figure in the bowl texts. He is called "Moses of the myriads" (16)

Moreover we cannot see the evidence of strong hostility towards Judaism, such as that which appears in the literary texts, in the bowl text sand lead amulets where, on the contrary, many Jewish figures and ideas, such as the names of the Jewish angels, kings and some Jewish legal laws, are used positively.

Another example is the figure of Ruha (**ruha d qudsa**), whom J.J. Buckley describes as "a most complicated figure in Mandaeism" (17). Ruha, who is sometimes called Ewath (18), is mentioned as an evil being, the power of Darkness in Mandaean literature. She is the mother of the seven evil planets and twelve evil zodiac-signs. She acts as a symbol of Darkness and brings calamity, destruction and wickedness to the world (19). She is the one who led the evil prophets, Abraham and who gave the order the Jews, her nation, to destroy the followers of Light and Life in Jerusalem. She is also the one who brought forth Ur, the evil giant of the underworld, and all other evil beings such as demons, monsters etc. (20) She therefore represent the world of Darkness against the world of Light, death and deformity against Life and evil and bad against good.

On the other hand Mandaean literature also includes passages where she behaves and speaks in ways not at all congruent with one's expectations of a force hostile to the world of Light. She displays ambiguous qualities, suffers, and at times utters revelatory speeches unsuited to a power of Darkness (21). For example we find some passages in the **Ginza** and **Qolasta** which mention Ruha's lamentation over her separation from her parent in the world of Light, in which she seeks to be saved from the world of Darkness.

"Spirit (ruha) lifted up her voice,
She cried aloud and said, 'My Father, my Father
Why didst Thou create me? My God, my God,
My Allah, why hast thou set me afar off
And cut me off and left me in the depths of the earth
And in the nether glooms of darkness
So that I have no strength to rise up thither?' (22)

A positive description of Ruha in the Ginza follows:

16. cf. Mc Cullough, W.S., *Jewish and Mandaean Incantation Bowls in the Royal Ontario Museum*, Toronto (1967), pp.32,40.

17. See Buckley, J.J., "Two Female Gnostic Revealers", *Hist. Rel.*, 19, 1980, p.260.

18. Drower, E.S. and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, Oxford (1963), pp.428-29.

19. See GR, pp. 80-81.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 98 ff.

21. Buckley J.J., "A Rehabilitation of Spirit Ruha in Mandaean Religion", *Hist. Rel.*, 22, 1982, p.60

22. CP, p. 74. Also see GR, p.162..

"Then came Ewath, the Holy Spirit (Ruhal, to me in my ukina and says to me, Why are you lying there, Dinanukht? Why are you like to sleep? I am the Life that was from the beginning, I am the Kusta which was even earlier in the beginning. I am the rediance, I am the radiance, I am the rediance, I am the light. I am death, I am life, I am darkness, I am light..." (23)

Such descriptions of Ruha seem to contradict the rest of the literature which mentions Ruha as a leader of the forces of Darkness opposing the world of Light, It is obvious that the positive statements about Ruha describe her as a figure fallen from the world of Light to the world of Darkness. Hence she originally belongs to the Light-world and is not purely evil.

Another complicated figure in Mandaean tradition is Hawwa (Eve of the Bible) In Mandaean literature she appears in both positive and negative aspects. Mandaean Literature she appears in both positive and negative aspects. Mandaean tradition generally mentions Hawwa with great respect. According to the **Ginza** she was given to Adam as a wife by the powers of Light (24) and is given a high place.

"I made Eve equal with Anana-d Nhura (cloud of Light).
mistress of the whole world.
when I (Manda b Haiye) installed Adam
I appointed three uthras over him.
I set myself at the head
of the uthras whom I set over Adam and Eve." (25)

Of the creation of Hawwa the **Ginza** states that Ptahil, the Mandaean demiurge, created Adam after his own image and Hawwa after Adam's image (26). In another chapter of the **Ginza**, however, it is stated that Hawwa was created in the image of the evil Ruha. In this passage Ptahil says to Ruha and her angels:

"I will form my image as man and your image as woman. We shall call the man Adam and the woman Hawwa." (27).

Some other passages in Mandaean literature also indicate the relationship between Hawwa and Ruha. At the death of Adam, Ruha, for instance, tempts Hawwa into noisy mourning for him, behaviour which is strongly repudiated in Mandaeanism (28). According to the **Ginza**, at the death of Hawwa Ruha shows great sorrow. (29).

23. GR, p. 207.

24. See *ibid.*, p.115.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19. Also see CP, p. 67.

26. cf. GR, p. 242.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

28. See *Ginza Left*, (hereafter GL) in Lidzbarski, M., *op.cit.*, p.438. Also see *Mil. PP.* 180f.

29. See GL, p. 442.

A final example of the complexity of Mandaean tradition is in the history of the Mandaeans. Mandaean tradition on their origin and history is legendary and full of fantasy. Although this tradition refers to some historical events and persons from which we can reconstruct the history of the Mandaean people, it sometimes gives quite contradictory information. For example, of the story of dispute with the Jews and migration to the East we have two different traditions in Mandaean sources. According to one tradition the Jews and their leader Moses, who was against Mandaism, quarrelled with the Mandaeans were consequently ordered by the world of Light to migrate from Egypt. So many of them went out of Egypt by passing through the sea which became shut off, leaving a road with mountains of sea on either side. However, some Mandaeans stayed behind, fought with the Jews, but were finally forced to flee. When this group came to the sea they saw the road through the sea and went upon it, but the water closed upon them and they were all drowned (30). On the other hand according to another tradition the place of struggle between Mandaeans and the Jews is Jerusalem. This tradition states that the Jews have slaughtered many Naṣoraeans (an ancient self appellation of the Mandaeans) and forced others to Parthia (31). **Haran Gawaita** gives another version of the Red Sea crossing story in which those who passed through the sea were not the Mandaeans but Ruha and her people, the Jews (32)

2. The problem of dating the Mandaean sources

The date of Mandaean Literature has long been discussed by scholars such as M. Lidzbarski, R. Macuch, K. Rudolph and E.M. Yamauchi. Although the Mandaeans claim that their religious literature, particularly the main texts like the **Ginza** and **Qolasta**, has a long history beginning with the first man Adam, the extant Mandaic manuscripts carry quite late dates, the earliest, of which goes back to the sixteenth century A.D. Because of this quite late dating of the manuscripts some scholars, especially New Testament scholars, such as F.C. Burkitt and H. Lietzmann, who opposed the idea that the Mandaean Gnostic doctrines were among the sources of the Fourth Gospel and of New Testament concepts like that of "The Redeemer Figure", argued for a quite late date for the beginning of Mandaism and its literature. On the other hand other scholars, particularly those whose special subject, is Mandaism such as R. Macuch and K. Rudolph, argued for an early date for the production of the Mandaean writings.

As far as bowl texts and lead amulets are concerned, it is widely accepted by scholars that the dating of such texts is quite difficult. They do not bear any explicit date. However, these writings have been dated by the publishers of the texts, such as M. Lidzbarski, J.A. Montgomery and R. Macuch, by using palaeographical and historical considerations. Almost all of these texts have been dated to the pre-Islamic period, mainly because

30. See Mill, p. 261.

31. See GR, p. 341.

32. See HG, p.8.

they do not bear any reference to Islamic times. Some lead amulets, published by M. Lidzbarski and R. Macuch, have been dated to the third or fourth century A.D. at the latest (33), but this dating was later criticized by the others who argued for a late beginning of Mandaeanism.

The problem of the dating of other Mandaean writings, the literary texts, is much wider. We find many references to the Islamic period in these texts, even in collections like the **Ginza** and **Drasta d Yahia**. For example, we read a passage in the eighteenth book of the **Ginza Right**:

"after the Persian kings there will be Arabian kings. They will reign seventy-one years"(34).

This statement shows that at least this particular passage has been written under the Muslim rule in south Mesopotamia, in the first Islamic century. In the texts like the **Ginza** and **Drasia d Yahia** we also find many references to Muhammad.

"Then comes Ahmat, son of the demon Bizbat, and makes a cry, which is no (true) cry, brings about widespread wickedness in the world, and leads the family of souls (**kanna**) astray into error (35).

We also find many Islamic concepts and ideas, such as references to the Qur'an and the names Allah and Yahya, which are generally accepted by scholars as Arabic influences in Mandaean literature (36).

The references to Islamic times have played a central role in support of the idea that Mandaic literary texts must be dated to the post-Islamic period. But, can we, simply because of these references to Islamic times, really accept that all of these texts were written in the Islamic period? In order to answer this question we have to look at some other points. The colophons of the literary texts usually play a crucial role in solving the problem of the dating of such texts since they give some important clues. In the colophon of **Qolasta** one of the earliest copyists, Ramuia br qaimat, states that he copied this book in the town of Tib in the years when the Muslims advanced (37). It is therefore quite clear that Ramuia wrote his copy in c. 639 A.D. Ramuia also continues:

33. See Macuch, R., "The Origins of the Mandaeans and Their Script". JSS, 16, 1971, p. 185.

34. GR, p. 414.

35. Ibid, p. 30. Also see *ibid*, pp. 54, 300.

36. See Mead, G.R.S., *The Gnostic John the Baptizer*, London (1924), p. 31; Drower, E.S., *The Secret Adam*, Oxford (1960), p. 101.

37. cf. CP, p. 71.

"From the day on which it fell from (was written by) Zazai d-Gewazta son of Hawa till now, the years in which I wrote it, is (a space of) 368 years in the ages" (38).

In this statement Ramuia remarks that he copied from a copy which was written by Zazai d Gawazta in c.272 A.D. Consequently, according to this colophon, **Qolasta** was edited in the third century A.D. by a certain Zazai who also appears as the earliest copyist of some other priestly documents, **Alf Trisar Suialla, Alma Risaia Zuta and Diwan** Naşbuta d Hibil-Ziwa. At this point we face the question whether we can accept this date as an exact date of composition of this text. Although we are not absolutely sure about this, one thing is certain, that the texts traced back to Zazai must have been edited before the Islamic period because, quite apart from the colophon, they do not contain anything about Islamic times.

Some external sources may contain clues for the dating of the Mandaean writings. For example a remarkable comparative study between the liturgical text of the **Ginza Left** and the Coptic Manichaean **Psalms of Thomas** made by Swedish scholar T. Save-Söderbergh has demonstrated that the **Psalms of Thomas**, which go back to the third century A.D., were adaptations (or almost translations) of Mandaic hymns (39). Hence it is certain that at least this part of the **Ginza** goes back to the third century A.D.

Finally we may summarize our suggestions about the use of the Mandaean literature while dealing with the problems over its nature and date. First of all it is necessary to examine every fragment of Mandaean literature in order to reach a decision about the characteristics and nature of Mandaean concepts, ideas and figures. Comparative study between the texts is absolutely necessary before making a judgement. It may read the researcher to wrong results if he makes any comment based on one part of the literature only. Secondly comparative study between internal and external sources of Mandaeism should be made in order before we can say anything about the origin and history of the Mandaeans and the date of their literature.



38. İbid

39. See Save-Söderbergh, T., *Studies in the Coptic Manichaean Psalm-Book Prosody and Mandaean Parallels*, Uppsala (1949).

Özet

Saygıca az olmalarına rağmen Mandenler/Sabiiler olağanüstü genişlikte bir dini literatüre sahiptiler. İçinde bulunduğumuz yüzyılda Gnostisizm ve Yeni Ahit üzerine yapılan hemen hemen bütün çalışmalarda, bu literatür hemen her bilim adamının başvurduğu bir kaynak durumuna geldi. Madeizmi Hıristiyanlık öncesi Gnostisizmin günümüze kadar ulaşan bir örneği olarak kabul eden bazı bilim adamları, Manden literatüründen hareketle Gnostik öğretinin temel unsurlarının şekillendirilmesi yoluna gittiler. Bu arada bunlar Hıristiyanlıktaki, özellikle dördüncü incil olan John İncilindeki Gnostik öğretilerin kaynağını bu literatürde aradılar. Buna karşın özellikle Yeni Ahit üzerine çalışan kilise orijinli bir kısım bilim adamı buna karşı çıktılar. Bunların temel dayanakları Manden literatürünü oluşturan yazmaların oldukça geç olan tarihleriydi.

Günümüzdeki haline uzun bir tarihi süreç sonucu ulaşan Manden literatürüne, çeşitli kavram ve fikirlerin tabiatı ile ilgili zaman zaman birbirine zekat gibi görünen farklı açıklama ve yorumlara rastlamak mümkündür. Örneğin bu literatürde genellikle negatif bir yapıya sahip olan Ruha, Adona ve Musa gibi figürlerin bazen pozitif ifadelerle anıldıklarına rastlanabilir. Benzer problem Manden literatürünün tarihi ile ilgili olarak da görülür. Çeşitli İslami figür ve kavramlarında zaman zaman yer aldığı bu literatüre ait erken yazma 16. yüzyıldan kalmadır. Bununla birlikte literatürün bazı kısımlarının MS.3. yüzyıl gibi çok önceki devirlerde edit edilmiş olduğu bu literatürün bazı bölümlerinde vurgulanmaktadır. Nitekim Mecusi ve Mani kaynakları gibi Mandenlerle ilgili bazı dış kaynaklar, bu literatürün edit tarihiyle ilgili Manden kaynaklarını desteklemektedir.

Manden kaynaklarının sadece bir bölümüne müracaat edilerek Manden literatürünün tarihi ve bu literatürde yer alan çeşitli figür ve kavramların tabiatı ile ilgili açıklamalarda bulunmak her zaman doğruyu yansıtmayabilir. Literatürün bir bütün olarak incelenmesi ve kaynaklar arası karşılaştırmaların yapılması sağlıklı bir çalışma için şarttır. Ayrıca çeşitli dış kaynaklara da müracaat etmek özellikle Mandenlerin ve Manden literatürünün tarihi açısından oldukça önemlidir.