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Reading the Story of Miriai on Two Levels:

Evidence from Mandaean Anti-Jewish Polemic about the Origins and Setting of Early Mandaeism

James F. McGrath

ABSTRACT

New Testament scholars, drawing on Mandaean sources to shed light on the Gospel of John, may have done more harm than good to both Johannine and Mandaean studies. Nonetheless, approaches to the Gospel of John developed over the past 50 years have shed light on the Gospel's Jewish context and the clues its polemical emphases can provide about the time and setting in which it was written. J. L. Martyn's suggestion that the Gospel of John can be read on "two levels", telling us about the context in which it was written while telling a story set in the time of Jesus, has the potential for fruitful application to Mandaean literature as well. As in the case of the Gospel of John, there is good reason to think that the anti-Jewish features of some Mandaean literature may ultimately provide evidence of the Jewish origins, or at the very least *context*, of the community that produced it. This article examines the story of Miriai, and what it presupposes about the relationship between Jews and Mandaeans and the nature of conversion at the time of its writing.

The Mandaeans have long fascinated scholars with a wide range of different interests, and in a wide range of disciplines, and this is not surprising. No one who has engaged in the academic study of the Gospel of John, for instance, will have failed to encounter the intriguing (not to mention problematic) attempts made in the 20th century to appeal to Mandaean sources as background to the Fourth Gospel. Likewise students of Gnostic

sources cannot but be impressed by the survival of this Gnostic group down to the present day. But on the whole this fascination, in particular among English-speaking scholars, observes and wonders from a significant distance. Only a very small number of scholars have observed and interacted with the living Mandaean communities, and had the opportunity to observe their rituals as practiced in the present (although YouTube allows the rest of us an opportunity to get at least a glimpse). And although the Canonical Prayerbook, some key priestly sources and commentaries on rituals, and some magical texts and bowl inscriptions have been published in English, there is still no complete scholarly translation in English of two highly significant Mandaean texts, the *Great Treasure (Ginza Rabba)* and the *Book of John*. And even when it comes to the texts that are available, many puzzles remain. Do the references to “jordans” and the mentions of John the Baptist and Jesus indicate a genuine historical connection with the Jordan valley in the first century CE? If there are genuine historical recollections in the text known as *Haran Gawaita*, how are they to be identified; and which king named Ardban or Artapanus is it referring to?

The origins of the Mandaeans is a historical puzzle that, if we are honest, may never be definitively solved unless new evidence comes to light. Even the modern scientific tool of DNA testing could only tell us about the ancestry of today’s Mandaeans, but obviously a similar study of Christians alive today would not demonstrate Christianity’s connection, at the time of its origin, with first century Palestinian Judaism. There are, however, some relatively neglected clues in Mandaean literature which, unlike some of the more overtly polemical “historical accounts” (which seem to contain legends that have been refashioned more than once), take for granted a particular background, in a

way that can at least shed some light on the *history* of the Mandaeans, if not definitively resolving questions about the *geographical setting* that provides the background to that history.

Jorunn Buckley has written that “The Mandaean polemical traditions against Judaism and Christianity (and other religions) have not been sufficiently studied”.¹ This paper seeks to contribute to this neglected area. It is the anti-Jewish polemic that will be our primary focus because, as Drower points out, “In earlier Mandaean books and in priestly commentaries there is little polemic, indeed usually none whatever, against Christianity, and the main tide of venom flows against the Jews.”² Presumably this polemic takes us closer to the heart of the process of early Mandaean self-definition.

Reading the Story of Miriai on Two Levels

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

¹ Buckley 2008a:41; she makes the same point in Buckley 2005a:311. There are only three studies I am aware of specifically focused on polemic. Drower 1962b addressed a number of important points, but obviously a study of such short length (only 10 pages) could not be comprehensive. Rudolph’s “Die Dämonisierung des ‘Anderen’ in der Mandäischen Überlieferung ein Kapitel des Umganges von Religionen Untereinander” (published in Rudolph 1996) and Shapira 2004 are the other two. Much remains to be done.

² Drower, 1962b: 441. See too Rudolph 1996: 483.

On the one hand, the use of Mandaean sources by scholars interested primarily in the Gospel of John and early Christianity may have done more harm than good to the study of both.³ On the other hand, an approach that has been applied to the academic study of the Gospel of John may also shed light on one of the better-known stories in the Mandaean corpus, that of Miriai. Just as the conflict narratives in the Gospel of John, read on two levels as J. Louis Martyn suggested, allow us insight into the interaction of one group of Christian Jews as they found themselves at odds with the leaders of a local synagogue of which they had once been a part, the Miriai story, read in a similar way, provides some clues about a comparable stage in Mandaean history.⁴

The story of Miriai is found in the Book of John, as well as being alluded to in the Canonical Prayerbook. In the former, it occurs immediately after the chapters about John the Baptist. The story tells of a girl named Miriai, descended from the “priest-kings” of Judea, who had as one of her duties cleaning in the “temple”. They live in or near the “ruins of Jerusalem”. One day, Miriai’s parents leave her at home and go to the synagogue.⁵ Rather than listening to her parents’ instruction that she stay at home with the door bolted, instead she goes out, and does not end up going to the “house of the people” (a way of referring to the synagogue that is polemicized against in the Rabbinic corpus).⁶ Instead, she ends up at a Mandaean place of worship (*maškna*) and finds both

³ Having come to my own interest in the Mandaeans via a similar route, and having done my PhD on the Gospel of John, perhaps I can offer a token gesture seeking, if not to undo the damage, at least suggest a better way to proceed. See further King 2003:107-109, 137-139, on the positive and negative contribution of early 20th century scholarship.

⁴ For Martyn’s approach to John see Martyn 2003.

⁵ In actual fact, it says that her father goes to the synagogue, and her mother to the temple, but this may be synonymous parallelism.

⁶ On this and other linguistic points of contact with Rabbinic literature see Scheftelowitz 1929: 221

men and women (referred to as her brothers and sisters) engaged in instruction.⁷ She falls asleep and as a result is late getting home, and so her parents discover her absence. Her father castigates her (calling her some colorful names) and insinuates that she has fallen in love with a man and is sneaking out to meet him. Whether her illicit love affair is literal or metaphorical (or both) becomes ambiguous, since reference is soon made to Miriai having forsaken Judaism for her lord, and phylacteries for a man with a headband. In the chapter that follows, Miriai is depicted as a tree flourishing along the Euphrates, one that attracts birds to dwell in it. Eventually she is presented as a Mandaean priest and teacher.

Let us set aside questions about whether this story may have a basis in history, and ask instead what it tells us about the understanding of the relationship between “Judaism” and “Mandaism” in the time in which it was written. On the one hand, if we read the story against the backdrop of Mandaism as we know it today, it appears plainly to be a story about *conversion*. Miriai is drawn to Mandaism and this is understood to involve the forsaking of Judaism. Yet it is important to not jump too quickly to the conclusion that the story assumes that Mandaism and Judaism are independent, clearly defined and inherently separate religious communities. The Madaeans in this story are, at the very least, located in close proximity to this Jewish community in Judaea.⁸ One

⁷ One gets the sense that this egalitarianism may have been an appealing (as well as controversial) characteristic of the Madaeans.

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

possible understanding of the story is that the Mandaeans' gathering is an alternative meeting to the synagogue, attended by other members of the Jewish community, or perhaps even some of the same members who also frequent the synagogue. Just as there is a tendency to read the Gospel of John as the story of two distinct religious communities in conflict, a closer inspection of that Christian text, as perhaps also of the Mandaean story of Miriai, may prove to reflect instead a story about two communities that are in bitter conflict because they were, or had been until very recently, partially or entirely overlapping circles.

If we turn our attention briefly to the text known as *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* (*Alf Trisar Šuialia*), we find intriguing references that complement the depiction of Miriai (to whose story we shall return). *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* is an esoteric text containing teachings that were not supposed to be given to the laity. It is largely technical, but for that reason the polemical references made in passing are all the more useful for our historical investigation.⁹

For our purposes, the most significant passages are the following: First, in *ATŠ* II,6b:358, the layperson who becomes a priest is compared to the soul that *forsakes Judaism for Mandaeism*.¹⁰ Given the frequent use in Mandaean literature of a pun between “Judaism” and a similar-sounding word meaning abortion or embryo, it is perhaps not

⁹ It is worth noting that the text distinguishes Mandaeans from Magians and Christians, but makes no references to Muslims, and thus is most likely to be dated before the time of the rise of Islam in the region (Drower 1960:161-162,177). Nathaniel Deutsch (1999: 80) warns against jumping to this conclusion too quickly. However, the willingness of other Mandaean works to engage in criticism, however veiled, of Muhammad and Islam, makes the absence of such criticism more likely to indicate an early date than cautious reticence.

¹⁰ Drower 1960: 276.

surprising to find “Judaism” thought of as an “embryonic state”.¹¹ The same sort of language is found in *The Scroll of Exalted Kingship*, another work in the same genre of esoteric priestly commentaries.¹² One might be inclined to regard these too as referring to *conversion* from Judaism to Mandaism.¹³ Yet, as in the case of the apostle Paul, here too we must ask whether “conversion” is the best term. The relationship between “Judaism” and “Nasirutha” or Mandaean Gnosis seems to be one that can be taken for granted as progressive stages, perhaps ones that are considered normative or typical. Just as priesthood tends to be hereditary but is open to the pure from outside hereditary priestly families, Mandaism seems here to draw from Judaism in a comparable way. And to my knowledge there is no similar comparison made between Mandaeans and *any other group*. So, rather than indicating that these groups were separate religions with separate institutions, on the contrary, these texts seem to assume that the natural way one became a Mandaean, unless one grew up in a family of Mandaeans, was by “graduating”, as it were, from Judaism. Does this not suggest that, far from being separated, the communities of the Mandaeans and Jews in the context in which this text was produced were at the very least adjacent to one another, and most likely at least partly overlapping?

Before returning to the story of Miriai, we may note another passage in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* I,2:251 where there is reference to the “circle of

¹¹ That is, in fact, how Drower translates the word in question. See *ATS* II,4:198. Here, however, the term used is not only *yahuṭaia* but also *yahiduta* (twice). The reference is thus explicitly and unambiguously to Judaism.

¹² See further Deutsch 1999:123, who gives the relevant quotation: “The first, outer casting off (is) when he leaves from the isolation (or: ‘ban’) of the Jews to be clothed with mandaeism [here understood as Mandaean lay status and therefore Buckley puts it in lower case. The second casting off is the casting off of mandaeism [lay status] to be clothed in priestly status (*tarmiduta*)”.

¹³ In II,4:198 this is explicitly connected with baptism. It is important to note that baptism is not symbolic of conversion in Mandaism, but a repeated act.

isolation” (mišra) separating the Nasorean from impurity.¹⁴ In this context there is an appeal addressed to the following audience: “O priests and Mandaeans (i.e. laypeople), righteous, believing ones who have *picked yourselves out from the peoples, nations and tongues!*” The language used seems to imply that *conversions* had taken place from other religious backgrounds. This is all the more striking when one considers the fact that Mandaeans today do not accept converts. In view of the literary evidence for conversion, it is best to regard the move to not accept converts as having taken place after the time of the composition of *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*.¹⁵ In this earlier stage in the development of Mandaeism, the progression from Judaism to Mandaean Gnosis is still taken for granted, and yet there appear to be adherents from other backgrounds as well. It may be that an influx of non-Jews, as in the case of the development of early Christianity, may also in the case of Mandaeism have served to solidify a developing sense of distinct and separate identity, resulting ultimately in their separation into clearly distinct communities.

Let us return to the story of Miriai with the questions raised by *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* in mind. The *Canonical Prayerbook* complements the depiction of the story of Miriai found in the *Book of John*. Prayer #162¹⁶ depicts Miriai as rebuffing her questioners rather than “evangelizing” them. The Jews are said to wear “tunics” and are criticized for this.¹⁷ Presumably differences in clothing customs between Mandaeans and Jews are reflected here, but it is unclear how ancient such distinctions are and how they developed. Contrasts are also drawn in *Canonical Prayerbook* #149 between phylacteries

¹⁴ Drower 1960: 177.

¹⁵ On conversion in Mandaeism in the 8th century see Buckley 2008b: 286-288.

¹⁶ Drower 1959: 140.

¹⁷ *Qulab* from Greek kolobion.

(*tuṣifta*) and wreaths, and between refraining from work on Saturday or on Sunday. Most of our minds probably immediately begin to wonder about what connection there might be with Christianity in terms of the observance of Sunday, but it is worth recalling that the meeting of Christians on Sunday resulted at least in part from the fact that most of the earliest Christians would attend synagogue and in other ways observe the Sabbath. Perhaps, as in the case of Christianity, so too the Mandaeans initially met on Sundays because they were part of a Jewish community otherwise occupied (or rather resting) on Saturdays. Be that as it may, Miriai is also said to reject the law (*nimusa*) that the seven imposed on Jerusalem, i.e. the Torah.

Miriai's separation from Judaism results in her becoming a tree that welcomes the birds of the air, potentially a symbol for an influx of Gentiles. *Canonical Prayerbook* #35¹⁸ includes the words "For you open doors of truth and reveal mysteries and show forth mighty deeds in Jerusalem".¹⁹ Intriguingly, earlier in the same prayer it refers to the congregation whom the speaker represents as having "forsaken pictures, images and idols of clay, gods (made) of blocks of wood, and vain rites..."²⁰ This statement is as interesting for its implication that the Mandaeans included people who had once done these things, as for the fact that it affirms the sort of aniconic outlook found in the Jewish Scriptures.²¹

¹⁸ Drower 1959: 36.

¹⁹ This may or may not be an allusion to the story of Anos-Utra, told elsewhere as a contrast to the story of Jesus.

²⁰ Drower 1959: 34.

²¹ Mandaean opposition to Judaism may perhaps have focused on the artistic depictions of the sun and the zodiac and of various figures in synagogues of this period. The same contrasts which are here focused on Miriai are also found in Mandaean prayers offered on Friday and Saturday evening (and thus perhaps consciously polemicizing against the Jewish Sabbath at its beginning and end), in *Canonical Prayerbook* #149. See further Buckley 2005b: 193.

Anti-Jewish Polemic and Jewish Origins

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

In short, no group that was simply in close proximity to the Jews would have reason to identify so closely with their traditions, and yet at the same time so adamantly repudiate them.²⁴ The identification of leaders of the Mandaean community and copyists

²² Yamauchi 1973: 138-139.

²³ Wayne A. Meeks 1975: 172. See King also 2003:185 on Jonas' inability to envisage "Jewish anti-Judaism".

²⁴ King 2003:188, addressing the more general issue of Gnostic origins, thinks proximity and exposure to Judaism would be enough. On the contrary, the only two scenarios that seem capable of explaining both the Jewish content and the anti-Jewish are (1) Gentiles ruled over by Jews developing a polemical identification of the Jewish God, blaming the ills in the world on him, or (2) educated Jews responding to criticism (perhaps from Greek philosophical sources) of the depiction of God in their Scriptures. The former does not fit the Mandaeans, who seem to be conscious of Jewish origins. It is also worth asking whether we would *recognize* proto-Mandaean sources if we found them, and whether such sources might not indeed be included within the corpus of Gnostic literature we now have. See for instance Rudolph 1957

of its texts with the title *Rabbi* also indicates the community's Jewish connection. For a group that was anti-Jewish, without also being in some sense Jewish, to adopt a distinctively Jewish title would be quite surprising.²⁵

If we do not find evidence of the Mandaeans clearly identified and referred to by others as a distinct group until surprisingly late,²⁶ one plausible explanation is that the group continued to be considered part of the Jewish community in Mesopotamia for many centuries. Rabbinic literature encourages us to draw such a conclusion: where Gnostics are referred to, they are considered *minim*, i.e. *heretics*. There were attempts to eliminate such elements, to curse them from the podium in places, but the ongoing references and allusions to them in rabbinic texts over a number of centuries suggest that the rabbis were unsuccessful. The text we mentioned in the *Thousand and Twelve Questions* suggests that, when that work was produced in Mesopotamia sometime prior to the rise of Islam, the Mandaeans continued not merely to be conscious of historical connections with Judaism, but continued to understand themselves (or at least the typical identity of most members of their group) as *Jewish Gnostics*, as those who have “graduated” from their earlier Jewish understanding, but whose background in Judaism was not simply historical but personal.

on Apocryphon of John and Mandaeans; Yamauchi 1973: 135-136. Yamauchi is of course right to emphasize the importance of the input of ideas from its Mesopotamian context for Mandaeism as we know it (Yamauchi 1973: 140-142). Likewise we are to expect ongoing interaction between Jews and Mandaeans to have taken place even after the separation, as also occurred in the case of Christianity.

²⁵ The names attributed to the rabbis mentioned, for instance, in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* are not typical of Jewish rabbis of the Talmudic era, and some are characteristic Mandaean names. There is one interesting exception, however. The name Hiyya is not at all surprising in a list of Mandaeans, but it is also the name of a famous Jewish rabbi of the Mishnaic period. In *Pesikta Rabbati*, a saying is attributed to him about a “whoreson” who claims there are two gods. See Segal 1977:34. It also deserves to be mentioned that the use of the root QDŠ to mean “infernal” rather than “holy” may be more than mere polemical inversion of Jewish language. It may also have allowed Mandaeans to be part of a Jewish community and “speak its language” while secretly changing the meaning. For another list of rabbis in a Mandaean text see the *Book of the Zodiac* (Drower 1949:155-157).

²⁶ Although there are *possible* earlier references, the earliest *unambiguous* one is in Theodore bar Konai's *Scholion*, dating from the 8th-9th century. Space prohibits a discussion of this important source here.

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

To offer a plausible historical hypothesis about Mandaean origins, a scenario is required that makes sense of three key features of Mandaean literature: (1) the presence of elements that presuppose a Jewish background; (2) anti-Jewish polemic; and (3) highly obscure and at times confused historical allusions. Connecting the Mandaeans with Judaism – whether Palestinian, Babylonian, or both – may account for the first and second. But to account for the third, we may have to suppose that the Mandaean tradition was continued by others than its Jewish originators. Grafted into the community, but lacking the personal experience of migration, connection with the communal memory of the synagogue, and the Jewish Scriptures, those converts to Mandaeism who continued the tradition failed to accurately preserve and hand on historical information that in a Jewish context would not have become so confused (for instance, the combination of Miriam the sister of Moses with the mother of Jesus).²⁷ It seems probable, therefore, that the Mandaeans remained a Jewish sect within *Babylonian* Judaism for some time, and that in a manner comparable to the development of Christianity, this Jewish Gnostic sect

²⁷ The identification of the Dome of the Rock with the Jewish temple may reflect confusion, or may be intentional mockery, recalling the presence of the mosque on the former site of the temple.

engaged in polemics against other forms of Judaism, separated from the Jewish community of which it had once been a part, and evolved into a largely non-Jewish religious community, one that nevertheless retained evidence of its origins in its sacred texts, its customs and its practices.

This is not in any way to negate the possibility that the Mandaeans trace their origins to Palestine or its vicinity at some earlier point. But it is important to note that *the same could be said of most Jews who lived in Mesopotamia in later centuries*: in almost all cases either they or their ancestors ultimately came from Palestine. Therefore merely positing a Western origin for the Mandaeans does not, in and of itself, tell us all that much. The important questions include not only *if* but also *when* they migrated; whether they remained a part of a broader Jewish community for some time before, during, and/or after their migration; when, where, and why the split with Judaism occurred; and whether others with similar views remained within Jewish synagogues even after the split that resulted in the separate identity of the group we know today as the Mandaeans. In order to answer such questions, we must work backwards, beginning with the time in which Mandaean texts were written, and through careful analysis of evidence for underlying sources and echoes of earlier periods in history, follow the trail of clues that may allow us to get a glimpse of their experiences in, and connections with, earlier times and places.

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