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Revisiting the Mandaeans and the New Testament

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Revisiting the Mandaeans and the New Testament

The Mandaeans have been known to scholars for as long as there has been modern scholarship. Thanks to advances in technology, you can now find some of their ancient texts online, and videos of their baptismal rituals on YouTube. Yet as fascinating as the Mandaeans are, and as much as modern technologies can facilitate greater familiarity with them, the amount of attention that they receive is surprisingly sparse – although there are encouraging signs that that is at least beginning to change.

By James F. McGrath

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Imagine that someone today unearthed previously unknown scrolls, written in a dialect of Aramaic, and in a unique alphabet, reflecting the beliefs and practices of a Gnostic religious group. That alone would suffice to make them headline news.

But imagine if, on further investigation, the texts had other interesting characteristics. Like other Gnostic texts, they mentioned Biblical characters – but while these texts appreciate John the Baptist, they regard Jesus negatively.

And imagine if, seeking the origin of those texts, it turned out that the texts were connected not with an extinct religious group, but one that still exists in small isolated communities in Iraq and Iran. Their rituals could then be observed, allowing us to understand the texts in ways that might otherwise be impossible – as well as their religious rituals in the present day being of interest in their own right.

All of this would result in sensational headlines, worldwide media attention, and a concerted scholarly effort to study and make sense of the data.

As it happens, only two things were fictional in what I described above: the texts being previously unknown and recently discovered, and the scholarly and media attention.

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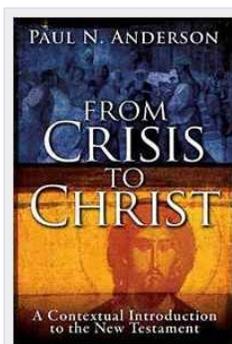
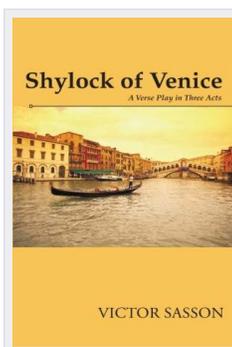
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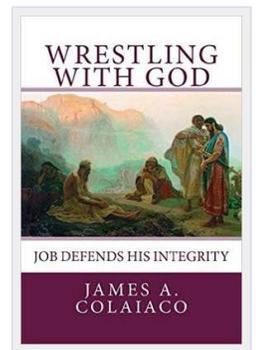
there are encouraging signs that that is at least beginning to change.

Things were different in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Heinrich Petermann published a copy of the Great Treasure, the *Ginza Rba*, in 1867.¹ In 1875, Theodor Nöldeke published a grammar of Mandaic in German, which was followed by German translations of the *Ginza*, the *Book of John*, and other texts, in particular by Mark Lidzbarski. By the middle of the 20th century, no less a scholar than Rudolf Bultmann explored the possibility that the Mandaeans could be surviving followers of John the Baptist, with the corollary that New Testament texts such as the Gospel of John might have them in view, and thus be illuminated when read in light of Mandaean sources.² In the English speaking world, that same period saw the publication of numerous texts of the Mandaeans, as well as a large volume about them, by E. S. Drower, who lived in Iraq and who got to know the Mandaeans better than any other native English speaker in history thus far. Many of these works, because of their age, are now in the public domain and available online.

And yet despite the exciting progress that was made, and the fact that new discoveries of Gnostic texts were made at Nag Hammadi which deserved to be correlated with the Mandaean texts already known, interest in the Mandaeans appears to have dwindled rather than increased.

Some of this is presumably due to a backlash against the speculative scenarios woven by Richard Reitzenstein and Rudolf Bultmann. C. H. Dodd, in his book *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, devoted a complete chapter to the Mandaeans – in order to argue against the reading of these later texts into the New Testament.³ Dodd suggested that, since the Mandaean texts took their present form sometime after the rise of Islam, the Mandaeans might have adopted John the Baptist from Christians, in order to make the case to Islamic authorities that they deserved the status of “people of the book.”

There was definitely a need for a critical response to what was being done at the intersection of the study of Mandaeism and the New Testament. But Dodd’s proposal simply does not fit the evidence. The Mandaeans, also known as Sabians (“baptizers”) in Arabic, are mentioned in the Qur’an. It is extremely unlikely that the Mandaeans responded to the appearance of Islam at such an early period by adding John the Baptist and other Biblical figures to their tradition and frantically creating texts that mention him. The use of John’s Aramaic name, Yuhana, in addition to his Arabic name Yahya, suggests that John’s importance to the Mandaeans predates the spread of Islam to the regions where the Mandaeans lived. And the fact that some Mandaean texts show extensive evidence of the influence of Arabic, while others show little or none, considered together with the evidence that at least some mentions of Islam in Mandaean texts are later additions, all point to the conclusion that the Mandaean tradition existed in something akin to its present form before the rise of Islam.



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How much earlier it is hard to say. Jorunn Buckley's study of scribal colophons in Mandaean manuscripts suggests a key moment in the production of Mandaean texts occurred around the late second or early third century CE.⁴ The difficult text Haran Gawaitha makes reference to a move from the region of Jerusalem to Mesopotamia during the reign of a King named Ardban (Artabanus). Unfortunately there have been several of those, making dating the period when this is supposed to have occurred difficult. Nevertheless, it is likely that, whenever it occurred, the Mandaeans did emigrate from Judaea or its vicinity. Mandaean texts refer to Jerusalem more frequently than any other Gnostic texts do – indeed, more frequently even than many Jewish texts do, proportionally speaking. Their use of the term “jordans” to refer to baptismal waters likewise points to a historical connection with the Jordan valley. These are not details which it is likely that a group originating in Mesopotamia would have crafted.

And so a historical connection with the context of Jesus and John the Baptist, and perhaps with the individuals themselves, is not at all implausible. Indeed, even if the texts are late enough that historians find they cannot be relied upon to provide any independent historical information about John the Baptist or his first century context, that does not mean that historians of religion cannot conclude that they most likely did so. If our only sources related to Christianity were from several centuries after the time of Jesus, we might not be able to use them to say much, if anything, about the historical figure of Jesus. But we might still conclude that the religious texts, and the movement that produced them, related ultimately – if at a significant temporal distance – to that first century figure.

Edwin Yamauchi commented in his 1966 article about the state of Mandaean studies, “In the earlier period of interest, exaggerated claims for the bearing of the Mandaeans on the New Testament and on Christianity were made. Today together with the Coptic Gnostic codices from Chenoboskion the Mandaean texts can give us an insight into the evolution of Gnosticism. They are of considerably less value for the interpretation of the New Testament itself.”⁵ That seems to me to put the situation well. But many have proceeded as though the Mandaean texts are of *no* value for the study of the New Testament and early Christianity. As someone who now works in both areas, I have the very strong impression that they are of *some* value to those who study the New Testament.

But unless we have a more concerted effort to make sense of the Mandaean tradition and its literature in their own right, and on their own terms, rather than allowing a driving interest in early Christianity to skew our impression of the relationship between the two and thus of both phenomena, it may be a long time – much longer than it needs to be – before we find out what their value is for those studying other ancient religions.

It is almost 50 years since Yamauchi wrote his article on the state of the field. That so little has happened in that time is disheartening, but a number of recent publications, and a move to create a Society for Mandaean Studies, give reason to hope that at long last things are moving again, and in the right direction.

But it will inevitably remain the case that few will work primarily in Mandaean studies, since most universities will not hire professors to focus their research and teaching in this area.

And so I want to close this article with an invitation. If you are a scholar, and find the Mandaeans as interesting and as worthy of study as I do, then I hope you will consider branching out from your own primary field, whether it be New Testament, Talmud, Semitic linguistics, Coptic Gnostic texts, or something else at least tangentially related, and devoting some attention to Mandaean studies. As someone who came to Mandaean studies by branching out from New Testament, I can tell you that there is something wonderfully refreshing about participating in a field of study in which, rather than struggling to find something new to say about familiar texts, there are literally more interesting questions that have been raised than there are people working on finding the answers to them.

Notes

- 1 It has been reissued by Gorgias Press, with a new introduction by Charles Häberl.
- 2 See for instance his commentary on the Gospel of John.
- 3 C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge University Press, 1953) ch.6.
- 4 Jorunn Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls* (Gorgias: 2010).
- 5 Edwin Yamauchi, "The Present Status of Mandaean Studies" JNES 25:2 (Apr., 1966), p. 88.

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I don't think I qualify for your proposed society, my background being mainly in philosophy. Don't we just run up against a blank brick wall?
It's more than likely that there were several revivalist or heretical religious movements in Pilate's Palestine, and one of these may well have been called John and have liked the ceremony of baptism. He may have been a very prominent individual - he may also be a symbol or representative for the NT writers of a larger, perhaps more amorphous group of preachers. The NT generally makes John, perhaps symbolically for a whole group, salute Jesus as best of the bunch: one has an uneasy feeling that this acknowledged superiority for Jesus may be asserted a bit too strongly and that there may have been quite a few unresolved tensions among the teachers and preachers of that time and place. This is indeed hinted at in some places. The Mandaean texts may be genuinely the record of a group somehow or

other continuous with John's original circle or they may be mainly an imaginative construct by someone writing much later and wanting to appeal to historic authority, much as people now unblushingly present their own opinions over the internet as quotes from Einstein or Churchill. But it's all maybes and I don't see how we get any kind of firm grip or even begin to get one. So I have a sort of feeling that the Agenda of the Mandaean Studies Society would be No.1 'Statement of Regret that we know nothing about the subject' to No.100 'Statement of Dismay that we have made no progress'.

#1 - Martin - 08/31/2013 - 13:00

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