


2013

Polemic, Redaction, and History in the Mandaeen Book of John: The Case of the Lightworld Visitors to Jerusalem

James F. McGrath

Butler University, jfmcgrat@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGrath, James F., "Polemic, Redaction, and History in the Mandaeen Book of John: The Case of the Lightworld Visitors to Jerusalem" *ARAM Periodical* / (2013): 375-382.

Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/886

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

POLEMIC, REDACTION, AND HISTORY IN THE MANDAEAN BOOK OF JOHN:
THE CASE OF THE LIGHTWORLD VISITORS TO JERUSALEM.

JAMES F. MCGRATH
(Butler University-USA)

Abstract

It is unclear whether there is anything of historical usefulness that can be gleaned from the details of the depictions of figures such as John the Baptist, Miriai, and Jesus in the Mandaean Book of John. This does not mean, however, that the text cannot provide useful information about the history of the Mandaeans, and of their interactions with other religious communities. By analyzing the evidence for redaction in certain key sections, and by distinguishing between core elements and peripheral additions to the stories recorded in it, it is possible to draw conclusions about the tradition history of the material, which provides evidence of a chronological development in the focuses of its polemic. In so doing, it will be shown that the Mandaean Book of John reflects a tradition which originates within a Jewish context, with either a tangential or chronologically later interest in Christianity, and only later still does an interest in interacting with Islam become a focus.

There are multiple instances in Mandaean literature of a story about a lightworld figure visiting Jerusalem. Two detailed versions of such a story are found in the Book of John, chapters 54 and 76. Other versions, summaries, and echoes of the motif abound, and can be found in the Great Treasure (Ginza Rba), the Great Revelation (Haran Gawaita), and elsewhere. This article traces the relationship between the various stories and the history of the traditions contained in them, utilizing the clues found within the various accounts to evaluate what that tradition history can tell us about the broader subject of the history of the Mandaeans.

The popularity of versions of this tale, and the very fact that Jerusalem is mentioned so frequently in Mandaean sources, is in itself a crucial piece of evidence about ancient Mandaeanism and Mandaean origins. There are some 45 mentions of Jerusalem in the Ginza Rba and 84 in the Book of John. It is not self-explanatory that a religious group in Mesopotamia should take such interest in this particular city in the Levant, including significant focus on its construction and destruction. The only other religions where we see a comparable interest are ones that have a historical connection to Jerusalem of some sort. The name Jerusalem occurs 274 times in the Babylonian Talmud, for instance, and that is a lower frequency of mention per page than we find in Mandaean literature. The distinctiveness of the Mandaean focus on Jerusalem persists when their literature is compared with that of other groups in other locations as well. For instance, there are 13 mentions of Jerusalem in the Nag Hammadi corpus. The distinctiveness of the Mandaean focus on Jerusalem is also highlighted when one makes an internal comparison. No other city is given nearly as much attention in Mandaean literature as Jerusalem is. This article focuses on only one set of traditions among the many in which Jerusalem is mentioned: the set of passages about a lightworld visitor coming to the city.¹

¹ Anush-Uthra makes one brief appearance in the story of John the Baptist, to rescue the infant from those who would murder him and his mother (Book of John, ch.32). It is striking that the stories about John the Baptist and Miriai do not feature these lightworld visitors to Jerusalem. And so there may already be an interesting line of future inquiry for research in this very fact. Although in the stories we are going to examine in this article, the mighty deeds of a lightworld figure is often connected with the winning of disciples among the Jews, in the stories about some of those named disciples, such details are not present. And so the relationship between the story or stories that are the focus in this paper, and the other stories in which Jerusalem is mentioned, deserves further investigation. There is plenty of room for further research to offer a more comprehensive study of the full spectrum of Mandaean stories set in or near Jerusalem, and other texts which mention the city.

Before proceeding, a word of clarification is in order regarding the use of these traditions in relation to the task of reconstructing Mandaean history. It is not being suggested that the accounts of the construction, destruction, or other aspects of the history of the city of Jerusalem in these texts incorporate independent historical data, of the sort that would be useful to a historian investigating the history of Jerusalem. There are different ways in which texts may relate to history, and different sorts of historical material that may come to be embedded in them. If we consider the Gospel of John, for instance, there is good reason to conclude that the words attributed to Jesus in that Gospel are, for the most part at least, not the words of the historical figure of Jesus. There is also significant debate about the location and ethnic makeup of the Christian community within which that Gospel was composed in its present form. Nevertheless, the focus on Jesus in that text, and its discussions of being expelled from the synagogue, tell us something about the origins and earlier experiences of that community, even if neither the words nor the incidents depicted are themselves a record of actual events. In much the same way, the question this article investigates with reference to the Mandaean sources is not ‘Are these stories about actual events in the history of the city of Jerusalem and/or the history of the Mandaeans?’ but rather ‘Given the focus on Jerusalem in these stories, what do these strands of their cultural memory indicate about the relationship of the Mandaeans to that city?’

The first account of a lightworld visitor to Jerusalem in the Mandaean Book of John is found in chapter 54.² The chapter begins with an unnamed speaker indicating that he did not want to go to Jerusalem, a city which the speaker described as being full of sinners and as having been built by Adunai. The construction of Jerusalem is itself a focus of attention elsewhere in Mandaean literature. Whether this story is a ‘sequel’ composed after those stories already existed, or those stories are a ‘prequel’ further exploring something alluded to here, or both came to exist at the same time, is a question that we shall return to later.³ Reference is made in the chapter to the persecution of the speaker’s disciples in Jerusalem, a frequent feature in these stories. Upon the speaker’s arrival, Adunai addresses him as ‘Alien/Foreign Man’ (also a regular feature in these stories), and emphasizes that it was not by that visitor’s will that the city was built, and so he ought not to try to take control of it. The speaker responds that he has Jacob, Benjamin, and Miriai – implicitly living in the city. Adunai then consults with Spirit (Ruha) and warns that someone from Life is trying to take over, and suggests that there may have been a previous infiltration of the city by a lightworld visitor. Adunai proposes as a response the composition of a book of iniquity and falsehood that can ‘captivate generations and worlds.’⁴ Spirit then speaks a word, and Mercury and the Seven are said to have written and compiled the Torah. They place it in the hand of the Sun, who is Adunai. And Adunai ‘through his mighty works’⁵ calls Moses, son of Amram onto Mt. Sinai, where he is made to fast for 40 days. There the book is given to him.⁶

At that point in the chapter, the quasi-narrative form is abruptly abandoned, and the speaker addresses the readers directly, saying that the elect have been warned about the Jews, and that the book of the

² The order of the material in the Book of John, or even its occurrence in this text as opposed to another, in no way can be allowed to prejudge the date of this particular form of the tradition, or of possible earlier versions thereof.

³ See for instance GR 2:1.103-104 (Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1915) p.43) and also 136-152 (Lidzbarski pp.48-50).

⁴ This idea is echoed in GR 3.122.5-18 (quoted Haardt, *Gnosis: Character and Testimony* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) pp.380-381), where the ‘house’ is claimed by the powers of darkness, but the Stranger has done things within it and founded a party within it. See also GR 3.532-534 (quoted Haardt pp.388-390, where a Man is said to rescue the soul from Tibil, smashing and making a breach in the Citadel of the Seven. This is not specified to be Jerusalem, and indeed seems to be the world and not a literal city (cp. the focus on the world and the Jews in the Gospel of John). GR 1.166-167 (Lidzbarski p.25) says, “Adonai chose a people and founded a synagogue. The place Jerusalem is built, the city of the Jews, the circumcised with the sword, with their blood to sprinkle the face and so worship Adonai. The men leave their wives go out and lie with each other. The women who are in their menstruation, lie in the lap of the men. They turn away from the first teaching and make for themselves a “book”.”

⁵ “Mighty works” are one of the themes that seem to be perennial in this sequence of traditions. See the chart below. Usually it is the mighty works of a lightworld visitor that are in view.

⁶ See GR 2.1.103-104, where Moses is made responsible for creating the Jewish people and the Temple/house of prayer. Abraham is also mentioned in that context, and said to be called to be a prophet in Jerusalem. This version, with no interest in Islam, confirms the argument here that there is an earlier version of the tradition focused solely on Judaism.

Arabs derives from the Torah. The speaker, who had apparently visited Jerusalem, is here said never to have managed to dwell in the world, from the time Jerusalem was built to the time of Muhammad.⁷ Concern for disciples living in the Arab era is expressed. Towards the end, the speaker identifies himself as Manda d-Hiia and then again as Hibil-Ziwa.⁸

In the first conclusion, in which Manda d-Hiia is the speaker, there is reference to a phrase which Drower and Macuch render ‘abominations of pagan temples’ (ginia d-‘kuria).⁹ There is no explicit mention of Christianity anywhere in the chapter, only of Judaism and then of Islam.¹⁰ Islam is discussed only in the final section, which no longer focuses on the visit of the Lightworld figure to Jerusalem. Since the story begins with no indication that Islam is in view, and there is an abrupt shift in both style and focus, it seems logical to conclude that the material concerned with Islam is a secondary addition.

If identifying the latter part of the chapter as the result of later redaction is, in this instance, relatively straightforward, significant puzzles nevertheless remain. The figures of Miriai, Jacob, and Benjamin appear on multiple occasions in the Book of John, and indeed throughout this complex of related stories and traditions. But they are sometimes depicted as disciples of John the Baptist, and sometimes as members of an already-existing Jewish community in John’s time. For the author to here place them in Jerusalem prior to the composition of the Torah makes no chronological sense in relation to those other accounts. Of course, Mandaean texts are famous for chronological and historical difficulties of this sort, and so this might be just one more example.¹¹ The authors of these texts have a strong interest in Judaism and in Jerusalem, and yet cannot seem to keep basic historical details about Jewish history straight – which may tell us something important about the history of the Mandaeans.

It could perhaps be suggested that the trio of Miriai, Jacob, and Benjamin was inserted into the story at some point subsequent to its first composition. However, it is the presence of these Mandaeans in the city of Jerusalem that sparks the response of Adunai and the composition of the Torah. And so even if these are stock names that enter the story later, the presence of Mandaean disciples or priests in Jerusalem seems to be an original part of the tradition. If we did not have prior familiarity with the stories about these figures set in the first century, we might notice that the names could just as easily refer to earlier figures – Jacob and Benjamin, the Jewish patriarchs, and Miriam the sister of Moses. Looking to the Biblical literature, one can see how these names could have been useful choices for symbolizing subversion of the mainstream Jewish tradition that came to dominate and be defined as orthodox. Miriam criticized Moses. Jacob is the name of the patriarch prior to his receiving the name Israel, and the ancestor of all the tribes rather than just Judah and the Jews. Benjamin was the tribe of King Saul (the predecessor to David), and that tribe may have been included in the kingdom of Judah not because of willing allegiance but because of geography. And so the use of these names could have additional resonances, and need not indicate either that the author was unimaginative or was completely clueless about Jewish history.

Yet even if these names could refer to individuals in earlier times, prior to the first century, it is far from self evident that those patriarchs were the intended reference. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that there may be more to consider when exploring the traditions about these figures than simply positing confusion, or that they are a set of stock characters who are inserted to represent Mandaeans in a wide

⁷ This echoes something that is said of Wisdom in 1 Enoch 42:1-2.

⁸ Manda d-Hiia is mentioned in GR 5.177-178, where it says, ‘Manda d-Hiia was revealed in Judea, a vine appeared in Jerusalem, before which is no wrong.’

⁹ Also found in two slightly different forms in G.R. XV, as well as in other places. The phrase is not uncommon in Mandaean literature, and can refer to the demons thought to inhabit these shrines or high places, as well as the temples themselves. The possibility that these are “gardens of high places” is worth considering, and its relevance to the relationship of Mandaism to Judaism. Even while taking such a negative view of Judaism, Mandaism seems to share the negative assessment of “high places” found in Jewish literature.

¹⁰ References to Jesus: 9 in the Book of John, 10 in the Ginza; References to Christ: 23 in the Book of John, 73 in the Ginza.

¹¹ See the blog post by Charles Häberl suggesting a possible misarrangement of fragments in the Haran Gawaita. <http://philologastry.wordpress.com/2013/07/03/legends-and-lore-in-the-great-revelation-cont/>

array of stories, with no respect for chronology. It may be, for instance, that the prominence of individuals with these names in a later period led to the adoption of earlier Israelite figures with the same name to be representatives of Mandaeism in earlier eras as well. If we leave the puzzle of these names to one side for a moment, and take seriously the remainder of the story, we find that we are dealing with a depiction of a situation which scholars of ancient Israel and early Judaism will recognize, but which is at odds with the depiction of events in Jewish literature. It depicts Jerusalem as already existing as a Jewish city, where the sun, planets, and stars are worshiped. Within this context the Torah is first composed, and then introduced, in an effort to exclude other religious viewpoints and exercise control over the Jewish population.¹²

If we combine the interest in Jerusalem, the depiction of Torah as a late innovation and an attempt to control and bring about religious change, the lack of precision about details that would be familiar to those steeped in Jewish Scripture and orthodox tradition, and the Mesopotamian location of the development of the Mandaean tradition in its present form, a possible answer to the question of Mandaeism's early history and roots becomes apparent. They might have a connection with those Israelites who resisted the post-exilic imposition of Torah as defining Jewish religion. I use the term 'Israelites' intentionally, since one may envisage this resistance being found among non-Jewish Israelites such as Samaritans, inhabitants of Transjordan, and those in the Mesopotamian Diaspora, as well as people in or from Judah proper who rejected these post-exilic religious innovations. Indeed, if we ask where Gnosticism seems to have thrived, the answer corresponds quite closely to the regions where there were significant Jewish and/or Israelite populations on the one hand, while on the other, ones that were located quite far from the attempt to introduce and impose Torah, and its vision of a single God and centralized worship, in Jerusalem and Judaea.¹³ And so it may be that, just as there is a close link between events in Mesopotamia (the Babylonian exile) and the emergence of Judaism in the form in which we later come to know it, so too for the Mandaeans, it may be that an explanation that focuses exclusively on Mesopotamia or on Jerusalem may be missing part of the picture.¹⁴

But these considerations, as intriguing as they are, cannot be explored here. We must be content to raise these issues for future discussion and return to the primary focus of this article, which is on a set of related stories and their tradition history. The story in chapter 54 refers to the lightworld figure having previously done mighty deeds in Jerusalem, which apparently resulted in the attraction of Miriai, Jacob, and Benjamin to Mandaeism. We in fact have a story about a lightworld figure performing mighty works in Jerusalem, in chapter 76 of the Book of John. That chapter likewise begins with an unnamed speaker talking in the first person. He describes activity that has a vast spatial and temporal reach, 'to generations and worlds.' It includes wielding what appear to be magical weapons, and destroying idols. The figure appears, upon reaching Jerusalem, to set up a throne, which results in the city opening to him (contrast

¹² Note also the focus on Adonai building Jerusalem, and the reference to a pre-Israelite king of Jerusalem named Adonai-Zedek (Joshua 10:1-3).

¹³ Presumably the redaction/composition of the Torah in the context of the Babylonian exile, and thus a Mesopotamian setting, is also to be considered. But what sources would have been available in that context? And what controversies might there have been over that emerging vision for Judaism in that setting? See also Karl Günther, "Ein mandäischer Schöpfungsbericht und Genesis 1" in »*Und das Leben ist siegreich!*« ed. Rainer Voigt (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008) p.107, where he writes, "Es bleibt der Schluss, dass die Vorlage fuer den mandäischen Schoepfungsbericht, wie so manche anderen mythologischen Vorstellungen, unabhængig vom Judentum uebernommen und den mandäischen Glaubensvorstellungen angepasst wurde. Im mandäische Kontext ist damit eine Vorlage erhalten geblieben, die fuer den priesterschriftlichen Schoepfungsbericht von Genesis 1 bisher vermutet und auch rekonstruiert wurde, aber nicht zu belegen war." Author's translation: "It is concluded that the template for the Mandaean creation account, like so many other mythological ideas, was taken over from Judaism and adapted to the Mandaean beliefs. In the Mandaean context therefore a template has been preserved, which had previously been assumed and reconstructed for the Priestly creation account of Genesis, but was unable to be proven."

¹⁴ This could conceivably be envisaged in multiple ways. For instance, a group of Baptists fleeing persecution by Jewish authorities could have merged with an already-existing (and baptizing?) Gnostic group in Mesopotamia. But there is no reason to think that a Gnostic form of Baptist movement could not have emerged in Palestine, in Samaria if not Judaea. See Jorunn Buckley, 'Once More: Mandaean Origins and Earliest History,' in »*Und das Leben ist siegreich!*« ed. Rainer Voigt (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008) p.43.

the previous story, in which it does not seem as though the figure gains entry).¹⁵ The lightworld visitor then proceeds to perform works which will ring a bell for readers of the New Testament: the blind and lame, and people with speech disorders and skin diseases, are said to be healed.

While normally it would be advisable to avoid rushing to make comparisons with the New Testament, in this story such cautions seem unnecessary, as we are immediately confronted with a reference to Christ. There is a repeating phrase which asks ‘Where is Christ?’ and then says that ‘He changes his appearance, he perverts his tongue when he speaks with me in various ways.’ Christ is depicted as asking the identity of this lightworld visitor, and as claiming to have written a book about living water.¹⁶ Christ also challenges the figure to present a letter from the lightworld as evidence of having come from before Life. The letter is read, and it depicts key patriarchs (including Adam, Seth, and Shem, who are comparably important in other strands of Gnostic tradition in other parts of the world) as having believed in Anush-Uthra. Anush-Uthra thus seems to be revealed as the lightworld figure who visited Jerusalem on this occasion, although it is theoretically possible that Anush-Uthra could be the author of the letter.

Unlike in the previous example, there is no obvious evidence of later redaction. This is not to say that there may not be more subtle redaction, and/or earlier tradition utilized in the composition. There certainly are some aspects that are awkward. But the passage as a whole works and makes sense as a unified piece of anti-Christian polemic, without the sort of obvious intrusion that the polemical material about Islam represents in chapter 54. The reference to Christ changing his appearance is interesting. We have literal depictions of Christ changing his appearance in some literature, in particular Gnostic texts.¹⁷ Here, it is treated as an indication not of Christ’s power, but of his duplicity. There is a closely related passage towards the end of the first book of the *Ginza*, 1.199-200. In that version, Anush-Uthra is likewise offered explicitly as a contrast to Jesus, and is said to arrive in the same time period as him – while Jesus himself is depicted as claiming to be Hibil Ziwa, as well as all the members of the Christian Trinity! The same miraculous healings are mentioned as in chapter 76 of the *Book of John*.

In the *Book of John*’s version of this story, a number of details deserve further consideration, and a number of intriguing possibilities arise, just as in the case of chapter 54. Could this reference to Anush-Uthra coming to Jerusalem, performing healings, and sparring with Christ over who really came from the lightworld, have in mind some historical figure? Given the emphasis on Jesus not being one of the Mandaean lightworld figures, it would not be surprising if the claim being made was that someone else was the ‘incarnation’ or appearance on Earth of such a figure.¹⁸ But if so, we would need to address why the individual thought to incarnate or embody Anush-Uthra would remain unnamed, when other figures such as Yahia-Yuhana are named. Or perhaps the earlier figure of Enoch, so important in later Jewish mysticism when identified with Metatron, and so easy to contrast with Jesus when one reads the books of Enoch, is meant? What connections were intended with other figures, literary or historical, is at best hard to pin down, but deserves further investigation, which once again it is impossible to provide here.

While it is not explicitly stated that there is a contest of miracles, the emphasis that a lightworld figure performed precisely the healings that Jesus is said to have performed in the Christian Gospels makes such a competition implicit. Actual dueling miracle-workers are depicted in other literature, such as the *Pseudo-Clementines*, with Peter representing the power of Jesus against Simon Magus. Simon, of course, is alleged to have had a connection with John the Baptist via Dositheus, whose name is in turn associated with the Mandaeans by Theodore bar Konai. The *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* makes Jesus the sun with twelve disciples, and John inferior as the moon with 30 disciples representing the

¹⁵ In BJ 19, John does not get an earthly throne, and elsewhere he is promised one in the lightworld.

¹⁶ See the account of Jesus’ baptism by John, which makes reference to his ‘written decree.’

¹⁷ One such instance was recently discovered, in a pseudepigraphal work written in the name of St. Cyril of Jerusalem. But there are many others, including the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Gospel of Philip*.

¹⁸ This, of course, is a point made in interpreting the *Gospel of John* (in particular by scholars like Bultmann who made use of the Mandaean literature): in emphasizing that John the Baptist was *not* the Light, the author was concerned to emphasize that another individual *was* the Light, i.e. Jesus.

lunar month. Mandaean texts referring to 360 or 365 disciples in Jerusalem may be related to these solar and lunar themes, whether directly or indirectly. And, completing the circle, in the *Toledot Yeshu*, Jesus is the villain who engages in an aerial battle with a Jewish miracle-worker. And so, even if it is not fleshed out in the same manner, and perhaps does not envisage a historical human Mandaean outperforming Jesus on the miracle front, nevertheless the Mandaean tradition represented here fits within a wider context of competing miracle claims between Jews, Christians, and others.

GR 2.135-136 also parallels this story in the *Book of John* (as well as the variant in GR 1.199-200 mentioned earlier). It repeats some details quite closely, such as in the statement that Anosh-Uthra 'heals the sick, makes the blind see, cleanses the lepers, straightens the crippled that they may go, and makes the deaf to speak. With the power of Exalted King of Light, he revives the dead. He wins believers among the Jews, and shows them there is life and there is death, there is light and there is darkness and blazing fire, there is truth and there is error.' GR 15(part 11).328-333 also deserves to be mentioned. There, Anosh-Uthra and Ruha spar over the building of Jerusalem. The same disciples are mentioned, and towards the end there is a great relishing in the destruction of Jerusalem, which is viewed as being just retribution for the persecution of Mandaean disciples there. It is hard to imagine that this has no historical basis of any sort. If the Mandaeans (or proto-Mandaeans, or whatever one may wish to call them) did not exist as a coherent group prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, and did not suffer persecution from some sort of Jewish authorities, can we imagine them inventing in a later time an account which blames the destruction of Jerusalem on the persecution of Mandaeans? Christians certainly viewed the destruction of Jerusalem as retribution for persecution of Jesus and then his followers. But is it at all feasible to imagine the Mandaeans borrowing this motif from Christians, or any other group, in a later time, and making it the focus of stories such as these? Would it make sense to claim that an earlier event was retribution for persecution that was actually experienced only subsequent to that event? That certainly seems less likely than that the Mandaeans experienced persecution in some way connected with Jerusalem, prior to that city's destruction, and came to view the turning of that city into a ruin (a word which regularly prefaces mentions of Jerusalem in the *Book of John*) as retributive justice.

In concluding, the relationship between the texts can be summarized by placing them in a chart:¹⁹

¹⁹ In the chart, HZ stands for Hibil-Ziwa and AU stands for Anush-Uthra. BJ is *Book of John* and GR is the *Great Treasure* (*Ginza Rabba*), Right section, as throughout the article. A check mark indicates that a feature is present in the work in question.

Element	BJ54	BJ76	GR1.199-200	GR 2.135-136	GR15.11.328-333
Lightworld figure visits Jerusalem	√ HZ	√ AU	√ AU	√ AU	√ AU
Origin of Jerusalem mentioned	√			√	√
Disciples/priests persecuted	√				√
Miraj, Benjamin, Jacob	√				√
City filled with evil	√				
Foreign/alien/strange man	√				√
Mighty deeds accomplished there	√	√	√	√	
Torah composed	√				
Moses mentioned	√				
Jesus/Christ mentioned		√	√ (& Pilate)	(Pilate)	
Muhammad mentioned	√				
Destruction of Jerusalem			√	√	√

If we compare the three main narrative versions, it becomes clear that, apart from some details which suggest that they are *related*, these are not all to be viewed as simply variants of the same tradition.²⁰ Some of them do need to be viewed in that way: the greatest similarities are between GR15 and BJ54, which seem to be variations of the same tradition. We may say the same of GR1.199-200 and GR 2.135-136, both of which are reduced summaries of a tradition, and which seem more closely related to one another than they do to Book of John chapter 76. But some of the stories appear to be accounts of different incidents, connected with the construction of Jerusalem, the composition of the Torah, the conversion of Jews to Mandaism, persecution of Mandaeans, and the destruction of Jerusalem.

And so we are dealing with variant versions of the same tradition, or summaries of a story, in only some instances. Viewing all visits of lightworld figures to Jerusalem as variants of the same story seems clearly to be a mistake. We have visits prior to the building of Jerusalem, and subsequently, including but not limited to the time of Jesus and Pilate. And so whatever one might be inclined to say about the lack of concern for chronological plausibility in Mandaean sources, even internal considerations alone make it preferable to view some of these stories as prequels or sequels to others. They form a sequence which stretches from the building of Jerusalem to its destruction. They are not told as a single story in progression, but this is also true of other stories in Mandaean literature. This suggests that we are dealing with a genuine collection of oral stories, rather than the sort of extended and cohesive sequential narrative that might be expected if a story were composed for the first time as literature.

This collection of stories, and the overarching narrative which they form, envisages repeated outreach from the lightworld to Jerusalem, first to draw disciples, and then to vindicate them after they have been persecuted and killed there. This suggests that the Mandaeans who composed and told these stories were not merely interested in a few isolated incidents in the history of Jerusalem, perhaps out of some polemical interest related to the other traditions with which they interacted and from which they might have borrowed. The stories, taken as a whole, and in conjunction with other stories such as those about

²⁰ Contra Edmondo Lupieri, 'The Mandaeans and the Myth of their Origins' in »Und das Leben ist siegreich!« ed. Rainer Voigt (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008) p.132.

John the Baptist and Miriai, presume and demonstrate great interest in the presence of Mandaeans in Jerusalem over an extended period of time.

While there may be elements of authentic cultural memory in the *details* of some stories, as I have occasionally hinted, in no sense have I suggested that any individual story or incident depicted is itself “historical” in any meaningful sense, nor is that sort of conclusion necessary in order for these Mandaean texts to be historically useful. The Mandaean literature does not preserve actual independent details about the construction, destruction, or intervening history of Jerusalem. But the focus on Jerusalem itself indicates significant Mandaean interest in the city, and that datum cries out for an explanation in historical terms.

Towards the beginning of the article, I provided some statistics about the number of mentions of Jerusalem in other groups’ literature. Does that comparison, considered in light of an examination of the stories themselves, allow us to conclude with a high degree of certainty that the Mandaeans’ origin is in the vicinity of Jerusalem, rather than in Mesopotamia? I believe that the evidence does indeed allow us to draw such a conclusion, since it seems to me that none of the proposed scenarios for a Mesopotamian origin of Mandaeism can plausibly account for the focus on Jerusalem and Jordan(s), on figures from Jewish Scripture and individual Mandaeans all of whose backgrounds were within Judaism and who are connected with Jerusalem. Can we envisage a group with its origins in Mesopotamia focusing so much interest on Jerusalem, simply because they lived in close proximity with Jews who considered the city important? Why should a group with origins in Mesopotamia have a greater interest in Jerusalem than a tradition which is named for the territory in which Jerusalem is found (Judah), and which had its historical origins there?²¹ And so I believe this set of traditions provides significant evidence, not for the precise details of things that may have happened when the Mandaeans were located in Jerusalem or its vicinity, but *that* they were at some point in their history so located.

We can probably go further: their experiences included aspects that left a traumatic mark on the Mandaeans’ collective memory. The extent of the glee at Jerusalem’s destruction suggests that the cultural memory of Mandaeans meeting with hostility there reflects some actual experience. Even persecution by a Jewish community in Mesopotamia would not have led them to focus on that event as appropriate retribution, not least because it would have preceded the persecution itself. We see that, despite some hostility and pressure from Christians, there is no comparable glee about the crucifixion of Jesus, or the persecution of Christians by the Roman or Parthian authorities, or anything else of that sort.²² And so I propose that, whatever one may say about the details, the focus on Jerusalem and its destruction in Mandaean literature testifies to the profound impact of earlier events and experiences on the cultural memory of the Mandaeans, ones which occurred within, in the vicinity of, and/or under the auspices of authorities located in the city of Jerusalem.

²¹ These questions apply equally to Lupieri’s proposal that the Mandaeans developed the story as anti-Christian propaganda. See his ‘The Mandaeans and the Myth of their Origins’ p.141. The absence of interest in Jesus in certain parts of this complex of stories is also against Lupieri’s interpretation.

²² Holger Zellentin, drawing on the work of Peter Schäfer, notes that, in Rabbinic literature, we likewise have stock motifs rather than recollection and preservation of details of specific actual events when it comes to the treatment of the destruction of Jerusalem. And so we should not be surprised that, in the absence of written records, we do not find precise details preserved. See Zellentin, ‘Rabbinic Historiography as Response to Christian Triumphalism: The Temple’s Destruction in Aramaic, Syriac and Greek Discourse’ available online at:

http://cas.uchicago.edu/workshops/medievalstudies/files/2012/09/Holger_Zellentin_Oct4_20121.pdf; Peter Schäfer, ‘Die Flucht Yohanan b. Zakkais aus Jerusalem und die Gründung des ‘Lehrhauses’ in Jabne’ (ANRW II, 19.2, Walter de Gruyter: 1979), 43-101.