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THE LAST OF THE Gnostics

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The site of much of the Iraqi-Iranian conflict has been around the Shatt-al-Arab, Iraq's oil route to the Persian Gulf. One of the casualties of the war is virtually unknown to the public – the last remaining Gnostic sect in the world, the Mandaeans who dwell near the battle-zone, in the swampy marshes of the Tigris-Euphrates delta, and in Khuzistan along the Karun River.

The war has exacerbated an already difficult situation for the remaining practitioners of the faith. Modern education and communications have already taken their toll, as has the incentive to move to Baghdad and Basra because of opportunities to earn money and raise themselves socially. Many Mandaean men are expert boatbuilders, gold and silver-smiths, and few of the young people have any interest in the complicated religion and culture of their ancestors. Candidates for the priesthood are almost nonexistent, and it is no exaggeration to suppose that Mandaeanism may disappear as a practising sect in our day.

Unlike other religious minorities of the Near East, such as the Armenians, Copts or Jews, the Mandaeans have no influential spokesmen or champions in the West to publicise their condition. Ethel Stefana, Lady Drower, the indomitable researcher of the sect until her death in 1972, referred to them as “a case of arrested development” and this is increasingly true. By all odds, the last of the Gnostics should have vanished long ago. Potentially more destructive than the war is the awareness of the Iraqi government that the bitumen-laden swamp homeland of the Mandaeans and the ‘Marsh Arabs’ sits upon rich petroleum deposits.

After the publication in the 1920s by Mark Lidzbarski of three books of the Mandaean canon, they were pounced upon with eagerness by scholars who saw in them evidence of a pre-Christian Gnosticism illuminating the religious environment of several books of the New Testament. Rudolf Bultmann, the great ‘demythologiser’, based his contention for a pre-Christian Gnostic Redeemer (from which the Christian idea evolved) almost solely upon evidence from the Mandaean literature. Rudolf Macuch asserted, “The Gospel of John is so saturated with Mandaean elements that these can be unperceived only by one who is blind”. Enosh-Uthra, the Mandaean messenger from heaven, was seen as the prototype of the New Testament doctrine of the Son of Man. Much of this discussion has abated with the passage of time, and today the Mandaean influence receives minimal notice in most theological disputation.

Few English-speaking scholars have taken an interest in the sect; the notable exception was Lady Drower who, after the Second World War, obtained the most reliable information about present-day Mandaeans. Lady Drower was in the best tradition of Englishwomen archaeologist/scholars, teaching herself the intricate Mandaic language and gathering the largest collection of Mandaean literature that exists. It is now kept in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Mandaic is an East Aramaic dialect, and some scholars feel it is the long-sought-after connecting link between Nabataean and Elymaean writing. Similarities have also been noted between Mandaean magical bowls and some from Knossos.

Both Mandaean and Minoan bowl inscriptions begin spirally from the centre, and contain a lilit (Semitic evil spirit) in the centre.

The origin of the Mandaeans is disputed, and since they believed their religion was primordial and founded by “the world of light”, they were not concerned with the history of this world. The publications by Lady Drower in 1953 of the Mandaean *Haran Gawaita* scroll gave the interesting narration of a first century exodus of Mandaeans from Palestine to Mesopotamia (via Abraham's town of Harran).

Scholars who argue for a Syro-Palestinian origin also point to Mandaean affinities to Judaism – familiarity with Old Testament writings; parallels to Jewish ethics (especially the high value placed on marriage and procreation); a stress of cultic purity, and the use of Hebrew angelology and symbols on their magic bowls. The familiar antagonism toward orthodox Judaism among such sects as the Ebionites and Elkesaites is also present in Mandaeanism. That odd collection of sects which developed in Transjordan following the Jewish revolts against the Romans in AD 66-70 and AD 132-135 has much in common with the Mandaeans. Some scholars have suggested links with the Essenes of Qumran and there has been a wide assumption that the Mandaeans were important in the history of early Christianity. Due to their practice of oft-repeated immersions, early observers supposed them to be the descendants of John the Baptist's followers. Portuguese missionaries who went to Iraq in the 17th century called the Mandaeans “followers of St. John the Baptist” or “St. John's Christians”.

Another view of Mandaean origin has stressed its Babylonian and Persian affinities. These proponents note the Babylonian elements in Mandaean magical texts, the use of the Iranian calendar and the incorporation of Persian words into their language. The father of Mani has been viewed as a member of the Mandaean cult, but the recent discovery of a tiny fifth century Greek Manichaean codex (the Cologne Codex) indicates that Mani belonged to the Elkesaite sect. This second century group insisted on the observance of the full Jewish ritual, but recognised Jesus as Son of God. Elxai reportedly had first-hand experience with Jesus, since it is said he had seen him in a vision in which Christ appeared as a mountain 96 miles high! The Cologne Codex, rather than disposing the close relationship between the Mandaeans and the Manichaeans, may be indicating an influence of the Elkesaites upon both sects, and further strengthening the argument for a Palestinian origin for the Mandaeans. The studies of Torgny Säve-Söderbergh of a Coptic Manichaean psalm-book have indicated a firm dependence of Manichaeism on Mandaean writings.

The Mandaeans' strong Gnostic characteristics and possible relationship to the origins of Gnosticism have been widely debated by scholars; almost overlooked is its position in Islam. The Mandaeans are called the *Subba* by Arabic-speaking peoples which means something like ‘dippers’. This is also probably related to the Koranic term, *Sabian*, the mysterious other “people of the Book”, who with the Christians and Jews were granted special religious toleration by Islam. The appellation *Sabian* has not been exclusively identified with the Mandaean sect; there are also the famous Harranian ‘pseudo-Sabians’ who translated so many classics into Arabic. The latter group, according to Lady Drower, are probably related to their simpler and more primitive

brethren of the marshes, and this relationship is possibly indicated in the *Haran Gawaita* 'exodus'. The word *Sabian* also has a relationship to Muhammad's idea of revelation; he believed that his monotheism was a pure faith from Abraham, before Jews and Christians.

Even more intriguing is the earliest name the Mandaeans have for themselves, *Nasoraean*. It means 'observants' and has come to designate those "adept in the mysteries of the religion" while 'Mandaean' which is 'Gnostic' in derivation now signifies 'layman'. The relationship of *Nasoraean* to the Koranic term for all Christians, *Nasara*, is an interesting possibility especially since there seems no answer as to what that word originally meant or why it was chosen. It is Syriac in origin like so many religious terms in the Koran. (It has been estimated that of the 'foreign' linguistic influences in the Koran, 70% are attributable to Syriac – including Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac). A great deal of scholarly ink has been spent indicating that the Syriac root has no affinity, as might be supposed with 'Nazarene' (Nazareth). It remains a mystery, unless it has a meaning similar to the idea of the Mandaic *Nasoraean*.

The fourth century heresiologist, Epiphanius of Salamis, precluded an identification of two Jewish groups he described with seemingly similar names, the Nazoraioi and the Nasaraioi (Panarion 1:18). The former were Jewish Christians; the latter pre-Christian Jews dwelling along the Jordan River, rejecting sacrifices, but observing much of the Jewish Law, and possessing a concept of revelation which seems similar to that of Muhammad. The Nasaraioi, like the Elkesaites, entertained the notion of revelation and prophecy as being living and actual; ongoing. It has often been stated that Muhammad's doctrine of revelation could not have come from orthodox Judaism or Christianity. His concept of the scriptures was dynamic, not static. Like Mani, he excluded the writing prophets from consideration. We also know the Book of Elxai alludes to a concept of Christ as being often born on the earth, at different times, in different forms. Muhammad's idea of a particular revelation for each people seems related to this current of thought. Orthodox Jews and Christians were only groups among many exper-

encing Divine guidance and revelation. Muhammad realised that every people had its prophet – where was the one for the Arabs? Islam would become a religion going back to the pure monotheism of Abraham which was neither Christian nor Jewish.

The Mandaeans were careful in their history to distinguish themselves from the Byzantine Christians, the *Kristiyane*, whom they despised for practising baptism with non-flowing water. An ancient inscription at Naqsh-e-Rustam enumerating the non-Zoroastrian sects persecuted by the Zoroastrian authorities, shows the same distinction between *Kristiyane* and *Nasoraye*. One is tempted to speculate that Muhammad may have been perpetuating an important distinction by his choice of *Nasara* in the Koran.

The Mandaeans with their combination of Babylonian and Persian cultic practises, bizarre Gnostic mythology plus Christian and Jewish affinities possess a truly unique culture. They are a remarkable link to the genic days of both Christianity and Islam. Their rich traditions provide us with an opportunity of studying the inner life of a Gnostic community, but as East German Mandaean scholar, Kurt Rudolph, has said, "It is tragic that this is happening at a time when this exceptional religion is moving towards its end, a movement which, according to the Mandaean religion itself, is towards the Kingdom of Life and Light, for which Mandaeans have always longed".

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