

THE MANDAEAN GNOSTIC RELIGION

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Chapter 1

Introduction

After a long and arduous journey through time, the Mandaeans arrived at the twenty-first century scattered, tired, and bruised. Yet, they are still holding on tightly to their beloved texts and ancient practices that they need to understand and preserve, before it's too late. As the last surviving representatives of Gnostic traditions, the Mandaean people and their religion are presently facing cultural and religious extinction. However, their plight is largely, ignored by scholars and world organizations. Followers of John the Baptist, the Mandaeans are a small, persecuted baptismal religious community. Their total population is currently around seventy thousand, including one- two thousand who have remained in their homeland, Iraq, and about the same number remaining in Iran. As a result of killing, kidnapping, and forced conversions that are carried out by the people around them (i.e. Muslims) in Iraq and Iran, the Mandaeans have been forced to leave their ancestral homelands and have spread around the world. The diaspora gave rise to a fractured community that started to lose its roots and knowledge of the religion, which originally had preserved their unique identity.

The Mandaeans have been identified under different names, including "Sabeans" a name given them and adopted by them due to the spread of Islam since the seventh century. They have also identified themselves as "Nasoraean" a name given to the Mandaeans who strictly observe all the religious purity rituals and possess secret knowledge. The Mandaeans are not allowed to perform circumcision. They have strict purity laws for the body, food restrictions, and special practices for food preparation. Marriage is also considered to be an obligation for each Mandaean, including priests. Their religion is monotheistic with Gnostic features and teachings, all of which are preserved in a large textual corpus that is written in

the dialect of Aramaic called Mandaic. It is essential to present the Mandaean Gnostic tradition through an in-depth scholarly study of their religious theology and, more importantly, their baptismal practices, a study that is seriously lacking at the present time.

As a Mandaean who was born and raised in Baghdad until the age of twenty-four, my Mandaean community was my refuge from the hostile world around me. The memories of gatherings, baptisms, and the sounds and tastes of the Mandaean holidays celebrations are etched in my memory and soul forever. The sounds of my grandmother's prayers in Mandaic clothed me with warmth and comfort, despite not knowing the language. For me, being a Mandaean comes with all the blessings of belonging to a community that holds long and ancient tradition. At the same time, its heart wrenching to be a witness to the slow demise of my ancestor's tradition that is facing the prospect of the disappearance from the face of the earth soon.

My approach to this thesis is to examine some Mandaean primary texts that reflect the Gnostic elements, the female soul, and the practice and theology of baptism. The focus is on defining the theology of those aspects. These three aspects of the Mandaean religion represent the core Gnostic elements and practices that gives the religion and the tradition its unique characteristics. Furthermore, I will examine the link between the theology of the Gnostic aspects and the central ritual of baptism. During the process, I will utilize the Mandaean texts that are translated into English as well as the scholarly research on Gnosticism in general, and the small-scale research on the Mandaean religion. In addition to scholarly analysis, concerns, and views concerning the Mandaean religion and practices. Furthermore, I will translate some passages of some of the Mandaean texts from Arabic to English, when needed. Finally, I will offer a theological explanation that demonstrates the

connection between the Gnostic elements, the soul, baptism, and the how they together, play an important role in the redemption of the Mandaean individual.

Who are the Madaeans?

Present Situation in Diaspora and How They Got Here (History)

In their struggle to survive, the Madaeans in diaspora are trying to hold on to their ancient traditions in the best way they know how, with little or no help from world organizations, institutions, or scholars. In her book, *What is Gnosticism?* Karen King honestly answers the nagging question I have been asking for a long time, which is why there is a severe lack of relevant research on the Mandaean religion? She asserts, “Once the Mandaean materials were no longer thought to provide the key to the problem of Christian origin, Western scholars shifted their attention decisively away from Mandaean materials. It is as though the Madaeans disappeared from the face of the earth, so completely have they slipped from the notice of scholarly literature.”¹ This sad fact, along with the prospect of the looming death of the Mandaean tradition, propelled me, as a Mandaean, to raise attention to their dire situation through presenting the beauty of their religious teachings and practices.

According to the 2017 United States Commission on International Freedom report,² presently, the Mandaean community population in Iraq is reduced to 1000- 2000 persons, down from tens of thousands prior to 2003. In addition, The World Directory of Minorities, explains, “Sabian Madaeans, who practice an ancient Gnostic faith, face extinction as a people. Around eighty percent of the population has been expelled or killed since 2003....

¹ Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2003),141.

²refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=search&docid=59072f3d130&skip=0&query=mandaeen%202017&coi=IRQ#hit3 Accessed on 9/16/2017.

Sabian Mandaean women have been targeted for rape and death for refusing to cover their heads. In Baghdad, Mandaean goldsmiths, silversmiths, and jewelers have been targeted for theft and murder at much higher rates than their Muslim colleagues.”³

In diaspora, however, the Mnadaeans are facing a different danger, because of their adaptability and assimilation into the western societies. They are facing the danger of the extinction of their religion and the Gnostic tradition, due to marrying people from outside the religion and abandoning their ancestral religion and practices. Furthermore, presently, the Mandaean community are scattered around the globe without any central governing body or religious authority. In each region in the world in which the Mandaean community reside, they have a community organizer and one, few priests, or non. However, these groups do not communicate with each other to create a cohesive large organization to keep the Mandaean community and the religion intact. For example, there are three community organizations in the United States, some in Canada, others in Australia, and more in many of the European countries. Each of those organizations function as a separate entity and they often, along with their members, lack in-depth knowledge of the Mandaean religious texts and the meaning of the practices, coupled with the lack of places of worship, the dwindling number of priests, and no schools in which to teach the Mandaic language. All those factors are becoming the new reality that might contribute to extinction of the religion and gnostic tradition.

The Mandaean history and origin have been a subject of contention since the beginning of scholarly interest in the religion. Some believe to the Mandaean eastern (Mesopotamian) origin but many others believe that they came from the west (Jerusalem),

³ www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/02/19/Overview_15.pdf accessed on 9/16/2017.

and then migrated to Mesopotamia⁴. Throughout their history when they were persecuted and massacred the remaining Mandaeans, as a group, escaped to different areas in the region to establish new communities and start over again. This cycle is evident in the Mandaean recorded history through the colophons⁵ and one of their own texts that was translated by Drower and is known as *Haran Gawaita*. This text provides an overview of the Mandaean history from the period before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 to the spread of Islam in the seventh century and beyond. In her introduction of the book, Drower, states, “I venture to think that it may contribute to the solution of the problem of the origin and religious background of this most interesting people.”⁶ The text contains a geographical description of the route the Mandaeans (Nasoraean) took after hundreds of their priests were killed in Jerusalem before the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem.

According to the text, after the massacre in Jerusalem, the Mandaeans migrated to Harran (the Median hill country) in the northeast during the rule of the Parthians. They then, moved south to Mesopotamia and established a community in Baghdad until the coming of the Sassanid in 241-272, when one of the Sassanid’s kings persecuted the Mandaeans and ordered the destruction of many of their temples. After the Muslims conquered Iraq in AD 636, the Mandaeans were identified with the name, “Sabeans,” and considered to be one of the “people of the book,” but that did not save them from Muslim persecution. Since that time the Mandaean persecution and relocation became such a common occurrence that its painful effects are still embedded in the Mandaeans psyche and souls. Kurt Rudolph summarizes the Mandaean history in one insightful sentence. He states, “At all events, the

⁴ E. S. Drower, *The Haran Gawaita and the Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa the Mandaic Text Reproduced Together with Translation, Notes and Commentary*. Città Del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1953.

⁵ Colophon “is a list of scribes stretching from current copyist back to the first recorded one. Almost all Mandaean manuscripts contain colophons.” Buckley, *Great Stem of Souls*, 2.

⁶ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*,viii.

history of the sect was always one of oppression and persecution, not least, from the often deeply affecting references of the copyists in their colophons.”⁷ Rudolph and Drower believe in the western origin (Jerusalem) of the Mandaeans, based on the Mandaean recounting of their own history in addition to the mention of Jerusalem in most of their texts, as well as their connection to John the Baptist.

The Mandaean Language and Texts

The large number of the Mandaean religious texts are written in the Mandaic language. It is an east-Aramaic language with its own Mandaic alphabet. “ In terms of sheer bulk, their enormous literary canon—which exists in a verity of forms, and in their own language, Mandaic—has no rival among Gnostic groups.”⁸ That alone should be an incentive for scholars to conduct serious research, but, sadly, to date, there is no significant interest other than few conscientious western scholars such as Buckley and Häberl. To do so, Professor James F. McGrath of Butler University eloquently expressed the lack of scholarly interest in the Mandaean texts and religion:

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

⁷Kurt Rudolph, and R. Mcl. Wilson, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983,364.

⁸Jorunn J. Buckley, "Mandaic Literature." *The Oxford Handbook Of The Literatures Of The Roman Empire* (n.d.): Oxford Handbooks Online.

scholarly effort to study and make sense of the data.

The Mandaic language, according to Charles Häberl, a professor at Rutgers University NJ, is the “only surviving dialect of Aramaic directly descended from any of the attested dialects of late antiquity.”⁹ He states that even though other Aramaic dialects do exist in the Middle East, it is not clear that they descended from the “attested literary dialects”. While Häberl acknowledges that it is impossible to save all the languages that are facing extinction, including Mandaic, he stresses the need to study and document them (as he did) before “they disappear without a trace”¹⁰.

The Mandaean texts cover a wide range of religious subjects: they include the holy book, the teaching of John the Baptist, liturgies, and priestly commentaries in forms of books and scrolls. Good numbers of them are accompanied with illustrations. Some of the large numbers of the Mandaean religious texts are translated to English and other languages. Others are still unknown to scholars and are owned by Madaeans in Iraq, Iran, and people in the diaspora. “Europeans collections of Mandaean texts in academic or museums collections exist, but some documents (scrolls or codices) may not yet be identified as indeed being *Mandaic*”.¹¹ Mandaean priests still transcribe the texts following the same ancient rules. The list of texts below includes the names of the texts followed by a brief description of some of them, based on Buckley’s article.¹²

The *Ginza Rubba*

⁹ Charles Häberl, 2009. "The neo-Mandaic dialect of Khorramshahr." HathiTrust, Preface.

¹⁰ Häberl, "The neo-Mandaic dialect of Khorramshahr.", XXVI.

¹¹ Jorunn J. Buckley, "Mandaic Literature." The Oxford Handbook Of The Literatures Of The Roman Empire (n.d.): Oxford Handbooks Online.

¹²If you are looking for more detailed descriptions of the texts, please check, Buckley, "Mandaic Literature." Oxford Handbooks Online.

The Mandaen holy book, *Ginza Rubba* means the great treasure. The *Ginza* is divided into two inverted sections, side by side: the right *Ginza* (GR) and the left *Ginza* (GL). The GR contain blessings, the creation story and moral instructions. The GL main focus is the destiny of the soul after the death of the body through Adam's story as well as prayers. "Most of the content seems almost 'generically' Gnostic."¹³

The *Book of John, Drašha d-Yahia*, also named, *Drašha d-Malkia*

The first name refers to the teachings of John the Baptist, and the second, perhaps was the older name that refers the teachings of kings. This book is the second in importance to the Mandaean after the *Ginza*. An English translation and commentaries by Häberl and McGrath will be available in November of 2017. The book covers the birth, life, teaching, and death of John the Baptist, along with other materials. It also offers a rare perspective on the historical, cultural, and political life in the first-century Palestine. Buckley notes, "No other late antiquity text offer as much information on John the Baptist as does this Mandaean source (early Christianity pales in comparison)".¹⁴

The Canonical Prayer Book of the Mandaean (CP)

This prayer book is a liturgical text in the form of hymns. It covers the daily prayers, baptisms, priests' initiations, and marriage prayers as well as mass prayers for the dead, and more. Again, Buckley expresses her appreciation for the bulk of the material, "No other Gnostic liturgies can match the Mandaean ones for sheer bulk."

¹³ Buckley, "Mandaic Literature."

¹⁴ Ibid.

Priestly commentaries

The next eight texts are designated for priests, “The commentaries constitute a special category of highly intellectual texts, often delving into esoteric meanings of letters, words, actions, and gestures. Speeches by light-world figures, mystical creation doctrines, alphabet speculations, teachings on secret correlation, and Kabbalistic-type esoterica abound”¹⁵. The texts include the following:

The Thousand and Twelve Questions (Alef Tirsar Šuialia, ATŠ)

The Scroll of Exalted Kingship (Diwan Malka ‘Latia, DM’L)

A pair of Nasoreans commentaries

Šarh d-Parwanaiia

Zihrun Raza Kasia

Šarh d-Qabin d- Šišlam Raba

The baptism of Hibil Ziwa

Haran Gawaita

The next three texts are illustrated scrolls; they cover a variety of subject and the illustrations have not received any serious scholarly studies.

Diwan Abatur

Diwan Nahrawata

Diwan Qadaha Rba d-Dmut Kušta

The book of the Zodiac (Sfar Malwašia)

¹⁵ Ibid.

This book contains borrowed materials from a variety of Near Eastern traditions and religions including those of the Babylonian, Sassanian and even Greek and, noticeably fewer Mandaean materials.

In addition to the books and scrolls listed above, there are a number of lead scrolls, incantation bowls, and more texts in museums and universities that could be subjects of scholarly studies.

The Mandaean Relationship to John the Baptist

The Mandaean texts present John the Baptist as a great Mandaean high priest and teacher. The Mandaean corpus contains many references to John the Baptist in many of their books but the Book of John contains details about his life and John's teachings, and recounts a full conversation between John and Jesus, prior to his baptism, as well as John's last days and death.

The dates and contents of the Mandaean writings about John the Baptist are not agreed upon in the scholarly sphere. Ryen suggests, "Some of them were composed in the 7th century. But all these John traditions cannot be dismissed as post- Islamic compositions. Some materials point back to the 1st century (centuries) CE, reflecting the importance of the 'Jordan' in the famous John in the Jordan valley."¹⁶ Even though Ryen's book was published in 2006, it still echoes Meads' words that he wrote in the 1920s criticizing the German scholar Brandt when he writes: "because Yohana¹⁷ is mentioned only once in the Ginza,¹⁸

¹⁶ Jon Olave Ryen, *The Tree in the Lightworld: a Study in the Mandaean Vine Motif* (Unipub/Oslo: Unipub/Oslo Academic Press, 2006.), 39.

¹⁷ Yohana means John in Aramaic.

¹⁸ The Ginza is the Mandaean's Holy Book,

Brandt supposes that the John-book pieces must be later. But surely this is not scientific conjecture.” He then suggests, “it is rather to be supposed that the John-pieces were naturally gathered together from the general mass of material when the collection process started.”¹⁹ In addition, Jorunn Buckley, a Mandaean scholar, she is retired professor at Bowdoin College in Maine, argues that, “If John the Baptist was known in Babylonia, even as early as the late 30s CE, we must ask whether the Mandaeans are the ones who had brought John’s tradition eastward.”²⁰ She argues that it is possible because, according to their historical books, they immigrated to Babylon before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

From the two translations of Mead to English and El Deheasy²¹ (Mandaic to Arabic) of the Mandaean Book of John, a new picture emerges of John who was born and became a teacher, a baptizer, and a prophet in the region of Jerusalem. Like some ancient prophets of Judea, his story in the Mandaean Book of John, starts with his miraculous birth to elderly parents and a barren mother in Jerusalem, it is also similar to that of the New Testament. But the story takes a different turn when his mother insists on naming him, *Yohana* (Aramaic for John). When she refused to give him one of the Hebrew names that was suggested by her Jewish community’s priests, the priests then threatened to kill her child. To save his life, a Mandaean light being (angel) took the new born, John, and hid him for twenty-two years in, “the white mountain, to mount Parwan, on which sucklings and little ones on holy drink are reared up.”²² That was where he learned wisdom and became a baptizer, and was returned to Jerusalem on a Sunday. Soon, John began his teaching and generated followers, which he

¹⁹ Mead G. R. S., *The Gnostic John the Baptizer; Selections from the Mandæan John-book, Together with Studies on John and Christian Origins, the Slavonic Josephus' Account of John and Jesus, and John and the Fourth Gospel Proem*,. London: J.M. Watkins, 1924,139.

²⁰ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls: Reconstructing Mandaean History* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2005.), 332.

²¹ Sabah El Dehaesy, *The Mandaean's Second Book: In The Book of John*. 1st ed. (Amman, Jordan: Dar Al Adeeb, 2013.)

²² Mead, *The Gnostic John the Baptizes* 58.

addressed as “my students, my brothers, and my beloveds”²³ The Mandaean *book of John* and the *Ginza* presents John’s death after a long life, with the arrival of light being to the Jordan River to lead John’s soul to the light world. Clearly, there is no mention of Herod, imprisonment, or beheading in the Mandaean sources. These sources state that he died a natural death at age eighty.

The Mandaean *Book of John* underscores that the city of Jerusalem as John’s birth place and where he later had disciples. Yet, in the same book, after John’s death, his disciples delivered a message to a Jewish temple in Mount Carmel, east of Galilee. Most likely John the Baptist lived and travelled between Jerusalem and other towns and villages around the Jordan River and Galilee. According to the New Testament and Josephus accounts; Antipas killed him because of his activities against the temple and the religious leaders. John lived through a time of unrest and revolt against the Roman Empire and the Jewish high priests that supported its rule; in fact, he was one of the agitators against their unjust treatment to the local population. Gregory Jenks suggests that the political context of the time of uprising created a situation that “both Jesus and his mentor, John the Baptist were executed by official representatives of Roman power in Palestine as suspected rebels”²⁴ Similar to the two accounts, Mandaean *book of John*, reflects the dismay of the Jewish priests of John’s activities against the authorities. (The following is my translation from the Arabic):

John spoke to the priests in Jerusalem, and they said to him,
John, leave our country, John, leave our city.
your voice shook the house of the nation.
And the sound of your teachings shook the holy house.
From the sounds of your prayers the priests’ dome trembled.²⁵

²³ Sabah El Dehaesy, *The Mandaean's Book of John*, 184.

²⁴ Gregory C. Jenks, *Jesus then and Jesus now: looking for Jesus, finding ourselves*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2015), 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

Similarly, the three accounts agree that John the Baptist was well-loved and respected prophet, priest, teacher, and a baptizer with large following.

Moreover, in the Mandaean holy book the *Ginza R*, John's death and his souls ascend to the light is told in an enchanting story. It opens with, "There are sayings of Yuhana Masbana, John the Baptist, who baptized in the name of the Great Hayyi, in the Yardni of the living water, the river of life." That is when the second life, Manda d Hayyi, came in a figure of a young boy to John and asked to baptize him, it was late in the day and John was tired and hungry, he told him to come the next day. Anxious to be baptized by him, the boy asked Hayyi to speed up the time, so, the boy's wish was granted and the night passed in one hour. The story started with the young boy asking to be baptized and it ended with him being reveled as Manda d Hayyi, who then, lead John's soul in its ascent to the light after, "Yuhana stood and took off his clothes in the Yardna, the garment of flesh and blood. In their place, he put on a garment of light and a turban of light upon his head, to ascend with Manda d Hayyi to the Place of Light." After their journey, they arrived to the please of light and John was greeted by the angels:

The *Uthri* said, "let us go and see the one of remarkable honesty, who is coming from the material world beneath the ancient throne of Abathur²⁶. He was righteous in the world of injustice and darkness. He was a faithful believer despite evil and sin."²⁷

Textually, John the Baptist tradition runs deep throughout the Mandaean corpus, yet, in my view, the Mandaean practice of baptism, theology and rituals, present the deepest connection between the Mandaeans and John the Baptist. It is well known that John called for repentance through baptism that he performed by full immersion in living water (the

²⁶ "Abathur is the celestial being who weighs souls after death in his balance against the soul of Seth." Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 29.

²⁷ Qais Mughashghash Al-Saadi and Hamed Mughashghash Al-Saadi,trans., *Ginza Rabba: The Great Treasure: An Equivalent Translation of the Mandaean Holy Book* (S. L.: Drabsha, 2012),GR 99-105.

Jordan River). Likewise, the repeated Mandaean baptism's main purpose is for the salvation or repentance from guilt and sin for the body, spirit, and soul. It is also preformed by full immersion in living water. This ancient form of baptism is preserved by the Mandaeans to our present day.

Chapter 2

Gnostic elements and theology

The essence of the Mandaean Gnostic tradition is represented by the belief that salvation can be achieved by esoteric knowledge of the divine and, by the central ritual of baptism. Like the word, *gnostic*, the word, *manda*, means knowledge. Notably, almost all the categories that scholars use to describe Gnosticism are present in the Mandaean religion. Lupieri asserts, “The religious idea of the Mandaeans shows some remarkable similarities to the ancient doctrines of the Gnostics, and they also share a similar mode of expression, through myth.”²⁸ However, Pearson suggests that Mandaean Gnosticism “differs from other varieties of ancient Gnosticism” in its ritualistic role that the priests play in the community. They are considered being the “representatives of the world of light here below,” and during the rituals, they assume the role of the intermediary between this world and the world of light.²⁹ Furthermore, Yamauchi takes us back to the issue of the Mandaean origin but in the following passage, he presents his view by looking at it through the gnostic ethics prism:

The fundamental cleft between Gnostic theology and the Mandaeans and their non-Gnostic ethics can best be explained as the result of the assimilation of Gnostic ideas from the west into an eastern mythology, accompanied by the reinterpretation of an indigenous Mesopotamian cult – all of which did not transform the original eastern ethics and mores. If such fusion resulted in the creation of Mandaean religion, it could have been accomplished without exodus of a sizable Mandaean community from Palestine.³⁰

²⁸Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 38.

²⁹Birger Pearson, A. *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007, 323-324.

³⁰Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, 3rd ed. (London: Tyndale Press, 1973), 140.

One question presents itself at this juncture: Is the Mandaean Gnosticism the oldest or is it the first, and what is its origin? After reviewing other scholarly writings, King suggests, “Scholars saw in Mandaism an early form of Gnosticism, if not precisely its sole or most pristine origin.”³¹ Buckley goes a step further by suggesting that we view “the Mandaeans as the earliest example of a wide-ranging group—possibly moving from Palestine to Media... creating our first evidence for Gnostic religiosity.”³² In spite of these and other clear statements by scholars on the origins of Mandaean Gnosticism, the only scholar who performed a study on the Mandaean form of Gnosticism was Drower. In her book, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis*, she covers the aspect of secret teachings based on the hidden or mystic Adam, along with the gnostic elements in the Mandaean religion.

E. S. Drower devoted approximately thirty- five years of her scholarly career studying and translating the Mandaean texts. In one of her translations of an important religious book entitled, *The Canonical Prayer Book of the Mandaeans*, (1959), she expresses her amazement at the survival of this sect with their entire corpus intact. She states, “That an ancient gnostic should have survived to our time is remarkable.” Drower continues, “that so many of their writings, their magical texts, their secret doctrines in the ritual scrolls and their liturgical literature have been preserved, is little short of a miracle.”³³ There is no disagreement among scholars in classifying the Mandaean religion as Gnostic. Therefore, scholars in the Gnostic field of study used the Mandaean texts for comparison with other ancient Gnostic groups, composed of Christians, Jews, and independent Gnostic sects, such as the Mandaeans, who have the largest corpus of their own. Among those groups are some

³¹King, *What Is Gnosticism?* , 84.

³²Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls: Reconstructing Mandaean History* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2005), 341.

³³E. S Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959, VIII.

Christian gnostic sects that were declared heretics by the early Church Fathers, who's some of their writings have survived to the present time. Despite of the Mandaean's largest gnostic corpus, it's the least studied, yet, the most studied texts are the Coptic Christian Gnostic texts that were discovered in Egypt in 1945, which are known as the Nag Hammadi library.

In his book, *Gnosis* (1977), Kurt Rudolph, a well-respected Gnostic scholar, classified, examined, and compered many of the gnostic traditions, including that of the Mandaeans. He concluded, "The essential basic features of Gnosis can easily be extracted from the gnostic traditions, even if they belong to teachings of different schools."³⁴ As to what Gnosis is, he adds, it means "knowledge"; it is the religious knowledge that is "liberating and redeeming". This knowledge:

Circles around the background of man, the world and God, but also because it rests not upon one's own investigation but on heavenly mediation. It is a knowledge given by revelation, which has been made only to the elect who are capable of receiving it, and therefore has an esoteric character. This knowledge freely bestowed can extend from the basic insight into the divine nature of man, his origin and his destiny, up to complete system.³⁵

Coupled with this theological explanation, Rudolph creates a structure for Gnosticism based on the discussions and findings of the Congress on the Origins of Gnosticism held in Messina in 1966. This structure comprises elements such as dualism, cosmogony (the creation of the world), soteriology (the doctrine of redemption), eschatology (the doctrine of the last things), as well as cult and community.³⁶ Similarly, Drower developed nine elements of gnostic structure based on the Mandaean Gnosticism, in which, many elements overlaps with Rudolph's elements. Furthermore, Hans Jonas' (1958), a German Gnostic scholar, considers

³⁴ Kurt Rudolph, and R. Mcl. Wilson. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983, 55.

³⁵ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 55.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 57-59.

that structure consisted of theology, cosmology, anthropology, eschatology, and morality.³⁷ Again, his elements resemble those of Rudolph.

Paradoxically, Mandaism is the only living part of the entire gnostic ancient traditions. Yet, scholars rarely examine the gnostic elements and the practices in the Mandaean religion. For example, despite the title of his book *The Mandaeans: The last Gnostics*, Lupieri's book was unsuccessful in clearly developing the Gnostic features he consistently referred to throughout his book. That fact applies to most of the books on Gnosticism used in this study.

On the other hand, Drower developed and discussed to some length the Mandaean gnostic elements in her book, *The Secret Adam* (1960). Those elements are summarized in nine points: "a supreme formless entity, dualism, counter-types, the soul portrayed as an exile, planet and star influence, a savior spirit, cult language, mysteries, and great secrecy."³⁸ I will focus on the first three points and the savior spirit expressed in the Mandaean's holy book, *Ginza Raba*, since Rudolph and Jonas examined them in their studies. The first of those elements is the supreme formless energy of God, Drower identifies the principle characteristic of the Mandaean God, *Hayyi*, or Life through the creation story. Other than the two sources mentioned above (Rudolph and Drower), it was difficult to find more sources regarding the Mandaean theology in general.

The Transcendent God

³⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 42-44.

³⁸ E.S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), xvi.

Hayyi (Life) is the Transcendent Mandaean God who emanated from the light and resides in the light world. In my attempt to develop a basic Mandaean Gnostic theology starting with the transcendent God Hayyi, I will be relying on two translations of the creation story in the *Ginza* into English. To clarify the word, theology, it means the study of the nature of God in relation to religious beliefs. Due to the length of the creation story, I chose to alternate between using excerpts from the story and summarization when it is needed. The creation starts with:

In the name of the great Hayyi³⁹

This is mystery. It is the first book of the first doctrine, which has existed from the very beginning.

When the fruit was still inside the fruit⁴⁰, and ether was still inside the ether, the glorious Great *Mana*⁴¹ was there. From him emerged the great big *manas*, whose radiance is extensive, and whose light is immense⁴²

Before *Mana*, nothing existed inside the fruit but after the *mana*, from the fruit emerged countless fruits and dwellings. *Yardna*⁴³ came out of the great *Mana*, “from the great *Mana* lesser *Yardni* (plural) come forth without limits or measures.” The great *Yadna* of the living water was “poured out over the surface of the ether”.

Hayyi formed himself in the likeness of the Great *Mana*, from which he emerged, and made request to Himself. From this first request, an *Uthra*⁴⁴ whom Hayyi named the Second life was created. Then limitless countless *Uthri* (plural) were also created.⁴⁵

At the beginning, “creation is delegated to emanation, and appeals are addressed to it by the two great creative forces which are the first manifestation of Itself, namely mind—the

³⁹ *Hayyi* is the living one. The Mandaic term for the supreme and primal deity, who caused the creation, in other contexts, the word refers to “Life” (Al-Saadi, *Ginza Rabba*, glossary, 208)

⁴⁰ Fruit, *pira*, is used often as a Gnostic term (καρποός) as an expression of emanation. (‘MD’ A Mandaic Dictionary by Drower and Macuh, 371)

⁴¹ *Mana*, means, a vessel, garment. It could also mean intelligence, mind, thought, heart, spirit, or being.

⁴² Qais Mughashghash Al-Saadi and Hamed Mughashghash Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba: The Great Treasure: An Equivalent Translation of the Mandaean Holy Book* (S. L.: Drabsha, 2012), GR 27.

⁴³ *Yardna*, Jordan, running water, river, flowing stream (MD, p. 187)

⁴⁴ *Uthra* (pl. *Uthri*), angels, heavenly spirit of the light and life (MD, 347)

⁴⁵ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, 28.

instrument of evocation—and personification of active light.”⁴⁶ Along with the emanation from the light, God is depicted as an ‘alien’ from this world in the Mandaean theology as well as in the rest of Gnostic traditions. “The great life is described as *nukraia*, literally ‘alien’, meaning ‘remote, incomprehensible, ineffable’.”⁴⁷ To this point, after analyzing the writing of the Church Fathers and many of the Nag Hammadi texts, Rudolph, mentions briefly that the Mandaean writings, “show that the gnostic conception of God dictated by a contrast to all previously existing conception and so has thoroughly revolutionary character.”⁴⁸

Elsewhere in the *Ginza*, the Mandaean God, is named Hayyi, Life, the Great Life, First Life, the Great Mind, the lord of greatness, the King of Light, and many other names. Hayyi is depicted as “the all-seeing, the all- powerful, the all-knowing, the almighty, and the wisest of all”⁴⁹ Thus, the nature of God in the Mandaean religion can be described as the transcendent, alien, unseen, and the all-encompassing God. As to the history of the development of the transcendent God in Gnostic traditions, Birger Pearson highlights the Mesopotamian and Greek influence on the development of the God that came to bring order to chaos, in the first, and existence of God and the word at all times, in the second. In time, the Hebrew Bible presented the concept of transcendent God. “As the biblical view of the transcendence of God developed in the postbiblical times, various devices came to be utilized to underscore this transcendence. By the turn of the era the Jews had developed an elaborate angelology and demonology, inherited by Christianity and reinterpreted by Gnostics.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁸ Kurt Rudolph, and R. Mcl. Wilson. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983, 64--65.

⁴⁹ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, R1.

⁵⁰ Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.

Unlike God in the Hebrew Bible who is involved directly with creation in all its forms, the Mandaean God, Hayyi, delegates the creation to the head of the light beings *uthri* Manda d Hayyi (knowledge of life) that God created, “The great One created and charged you, equipped you, charged you, sent you forth, and gave you authority over everything”⁵¹ This is one of the differences in the creation story. The second is that Hayyi, like the Gnostic theology, is beyond and transcends the creation process because it involves being outside the light realm and entering the realm of darkness, which is imperfect, polluted, and evil. A task, that could be performed by lesser divine beings, the *uthri* (demiurge), they are the creators and the controllers of the material world.

Demiurge

The division between the realms of light and darkness (duality) in the Gnostic traditions and the transcendence and the perfection of God in the light realm, made it necessary to subordinate to God, heavenly beings (the demiurge) to execute the creation of the earth, plants, animals, and humans. However, they rebel against God and make mistakes during the creation process. “Why would God create angels he presumably knew would rebel against him?” Pearson asks. His response is that the Gnostics equated the material creation with evil. Therefore, the transcendent God cannot be the creator of the material imperfect world; this task would be given to a “lower divine being.”⁵² This process is demonstrated in the continuation of the Mandaean creation, after the task of creation the earth out of the stagnant water to was delegated to *Ptahil uthra*, who failed. Then, with the right prayer,

⁵¹ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, GR 32.

⁵² Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 106.

invoking God, Manda d Hayyi set him on the right path to creation:

Lost in his own thoughts, Ptahil pondered,
he took stock of his own wisdom, and said:
“I will go up to the great Hayyi,
bow and abase myself to the Great one.”
As Ptahil acted in accordance with his wise plan....
He received a garment of living heat,
and walked about in the stagnant water.
As the living fire mingled
with the stagnant water,
On the account of the scent of the garment of living heat,
dust from the land of Siniawis was stirred up....
and landed everywhere.
All the seas were clogged,
all pits were filled.
A dry spot took shape,
a solid substance and fell into water.
A curtain rose up high,
it rose up and stood at the center of heaven.
As the firmament was stretched out,
He bowed down and praised his creator.⁵³

The Mandaean creation demonstrates that the light being could make mistakes during the process and they might fail or rebel but they will be forgiven and will be guided along the way. It also illustrates that the transcendent God is beyond trial and errors and above all. In addition, throughout the creation story the significance of the knowledge, intelligence, wisdom, and secret knowledge is evident.

Dualism

Two opposing forces that create dissimilar conditions in the world identify Gnostic dualism. In Mandaean dualism specifically, light and darkness, good and evil are regulated by the relationship between God (in the light) and the world (darkness)⁵⁴. Delving more

⁵³ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, R55-56.

⁵⁴ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 65.

deeply into the essence of this basic Gnostic concept, we find that dualism, according to Rudolph, involves cosmological and anthropological views of the world. The cosmological view is apparent in the creation of the world (cosmogony) by a remote God in the divine realm: “The side of this dualistic world view which is opposed to the divine pole—often described as ‘light’ – is ‘darkness.’” This duality in Gnosticism governs the concepts of a transcendent god, the world, and humanity by the negative means of the imprisonment of the soul in the body in the world of darkness. Consequently, liberation (from an anthropological standpoint) of this soul comes from God and his helpers. This liberation is depicted in the doctrine of redemption through the soul’s transcendence of the body and its heavenly journey to the light world, and thereby its deliverance.⁵⁵

The light world, in the Mandaean religion, is pure without darkness; it is the dwelling place of the king of light as it is described in the Mandaean holy book, the *Ginza*, “a world of mildness without rebellion, a world of righteousness without turbulence, a world of eternal life without decay and death, a world unmixed with ill.”⁵⁶ The creation story in the *Ginza* describes how the light world was created:

Even before the world came into being,
the great fruit existed.
Even when the great fruit was still within the great fruit,
the great glorious king of light came into being.
From the great and glorious king of light,
the great luminous Ether came into being.
From the great luminous ether,
the living fire came into being.
From the living fire,
light came into being.
By the power of the king of light,
the great fruit came into being.
The great fruit came into being,

⁵⁵Ibid, 58-59.

⁵⁶Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 57

and within it was the Yardna.
The great Yardna came into being,
and the living water came into being as well.⁵⁷

This concept of the living God who emanated from the light is echoed by one of Jesus's sayings in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas:

Yeshua says,
If they say to you, "Where have you come from?"
say to them, "We have come from the light,
from the place where the light came into being by itself,
established itself, and appeared in their image."
If they say to you, "Is it you?"
say, "We are its children and chosen of the living father."⁵⁸

On the opposite side is the world of darkness, "full of falsehood and deceit . . . a world of turbulence without steadfastness . . . a world of death without eternal life."⁵⁹ The creation story in the *Ginza* depicts darkness as lower than, and separate from light; it cannot be mixed with light, nor ever be illuminated or expanded. When darkness took shape, it reviewed its army.

Because of the wickedness it has in mind,
it is trapped within its own container.
It is trapped within its own container,
and all of its work will perish,
The children of darkness will perish,
but the children of the Almighty will survive.⁶⁰

The Mandaean religion considers evil to be synonymous with darkness and to be unable to be united with light and good. At the same time, they are considered to be the two sides of one coin, as illustrated by excerpts from the Mandaean book, *Alf Trišar Suialia* (The Thousand and Twelve Questions):

⁵⁷ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, GR 35-36.

⁵⁸ Barnstone and Meyer, *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*, 31.

⁵⁹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 57.

⁶⁰ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, GR 43.

Behold and learn that betwixt darkness and light there can be no union or pact: on the contrary, hatred, enmity and dissension, although we are aware of all that taketh place and seeketh to take place. For darkness is the adversity of light. They are Right and Left, they are *ruha* (vital spirit) and *nišhimta* (soul); moreover, they are called Adam and Eve.⁶¹

Light and darkness, good and evil, and the transcendence of God are not Gnostic inventions; they are ancient beliefs that were found in many religions including Judaism. However, Duality in Mandaeanism is imbedded in its theology, mythology, and rituals. Like Gnostic duality, in general, Mandaean duality functions as a frame structure that holds together all the building's components, thereby giving it character and shape. In this structure, the Savior keeps the residence safe and connected to the world of light.

Redemption and the Redeemer (Savior) Spirit

The Gnostic and Mandaean concept of redemption is that of salvation from the physical world and the body; the Savior is the redeemer who is depicted as descending to the world of darkness and ascending to the light with the redeeming knowledge. According to Lupieri, salvation in the Gnostic traditions happens when physical death leads to the rise of the soul to the world of light.⁶² By the same token, the redeemer (savior), as in ancient religions, acts as a liberator or deliverer: “They are those who for the first time show men in general the way to liberation from the cosmos. One may call them just as well revealers or emissaries or messengers who, at the command of the supreme God, import the saving message of redeeming knowledge.”⁶³

Like the Gnostic redeemer, Hibil-Ziwa, meaning the “light-bearer,” is the Mandaeans’

⁶¹ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 6.

⁶² Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 30.

⁶³ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 119.

savior spirit who descended to the underworld (world of darkness) to free the imprisoned souls and brought back the *gimra*, or “pearl,” from the “well of darkness.” Hibil- Ziwa had to go through purifying rites (baptism) before he was admitted back to the celestial realm.⁶⁴ Passages from the creation story in *Ginza Rubba* tell of the savior’s journey to the world of darkness. Hibil-Ziwa, on the order of God (Hayyi), announced: “Now my great fathers, with your powers, with the power of the great mystery, with the two assistants accompanying me, I will descend into the world of darkness. When I arrived at the walls, I immersed my foot in the murky water between darkness and light, and soon the wall retreated before me. I passed one thousand leagues into the world of *Ruha*, the first world of gloom.”⁶⁵ After descending to the world of darkness, he battled the forces of darkness in each of the worlds he passed through, at the last one retrieved the “Great Pearl,” and started his ascent to the world of light. As for the redeemers, “some of them indeed are active as ‘helpers’ in the accomplishment of the ascent of the soul.”⁶⁶

The ascent of Hibil-Ziwa to the world of light was marked by his being baptized by seven *Yardni* (living water), whereupon he announced, “My father baptized me in the great *Yardni* of white and bright water in which he baptized all the *Uthri*, so they would ascend to the summit where they stayed on the banks of the living water.”⁶⁷ A Mandaean hymn from the collection of daily prayers depicts the role the redeemer of the emissary of light has “in bringing life, joy, and repose” to the believers:

You came from the house of life
You came: what did you bring?
I brought you, that shall not die,

⁶⁴ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 36.

⁶⁵ Al-Saadi, trans., *Ginza Rabba*, GR 71.

⁶⁶ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 119.

⁶⁷ Al-Saadi., *Ginza Rabba*, 75-76.

That your souls shall not be restrained (in the ascent).
I brought you life for the day of death
And joy for the day of gloom.
I brought you repose,
In which the disquiet of nations is not to be found.⁶⁸

Though the concept of the redeemer or the savior holds significant importance in Christianity, especially to the (vanished) Gnostic Christian sects and the Gospel of John. They hold some striking similarities to the Mandaean depiction of the savior. Examples of the Christian Gnostic redeemer presented in the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas (in the “Hymn of the Pearl”) resemble the Mandaean texts in which a prince leaves his father’s house to go in search of the pearl. On his way back, he announces,

Therein I clothed and ascended.
To the gate of salutation and adoration.
I bowed my head and adored
The majesty of my father, who sent it to me.
I have fulfilled his commands.⁶⁹

The savior Jesus in the Gospel of John, is distinguished from the other Gospels with his announcement beginning with, “I am”, he descends into the world to save it, and then ascends completely framed in the duality of light and darkness. Many of Jesus’ statement that begin with “I am” in the Gospel have strikingly similar statement uttered by the Messengers of Light in the *Ginza*. To illustrate, the followings are comparison of few passages starting with the Gospel and, then, followed by the *Ginza*;

John 8.12:

Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’

Ginza R, pg. 24⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 119.

⁶⁹ Barnstone, Willis and Marvin Meyer. *Essential Gnostic Scriptures*. Boston: Shambhala, 2010,150.

I am the Messenger of light. I illuminated the darkness and the gloom. I called forth with a summons and proclamation for this world, from beginning to the end.

John 14.6:

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Ginza R, pg. 24

I am the messenger of light. I am the truthful messenger, who is without guilt, deceit, or imperfection. Those who smell my fragrance receive life.

John 15.1:

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.

Ginza R, pg. 177

I am the vine, exalted and humble. I am the grapevine sown at the heart of glory.... The Almighty sowed me.

The passages above demonstrate the similarities between the Gospel of John and the Ginza in the use of “I am” and the context of the rest of the passages. The “I am” had its ancient use in the Babylonian Hammurabi’s laws when he introduced his laws by “I am.” Thus, in such similar way, Yahweh introduced himself in the Hebrew Bible as well⁷¹. Comparably, it is used in the Mandaean texts, however, its uttered by the messenger of light and the savior in his descent to the world of darkness followed by his ascend to the light.

This journey embodies Gnostic redemption, which is present in the Mandaean savior concept. The journey represents the process of awakening, and the possession of the pearl embodies the spiritual knowledge that makes it possible to return to the light world (the

⁷⁰ Al-Saadi, trans *Ginza Rabba*.

⁷¹ Bultmann, *the Gospel of John*, 225, n 3.

father's house) -- in both cases. In this context, duality is the driving force behind the savior's journey, his descent from the light world to the world of darkness, and then, his ascent to the domain of the divine, the world of light. Essentially, because of the Savior's descent to the polluted world of darkness, he had to be baptized after his ascent to the pure light world to be purified. To accomplish this task, he had to undergo 360 baptisms. This ritual became the blue print for the Mandaean priest's initiation process. The savior's heavenly baptism is inscribed, in detail in the priestly commentaries scroll, *The baptism of Hibil Ziwa*, which I will utilize in the last chapter about baptism.

Chapter 3

Theological Anthropology: Theology of the Female Soul

In Mandaean texts, the soul is regarded as “free soul the daughter of radiance” who was asked after the creation of the earth and Adam to enter his lifeless body to be her exilic temporary home from which she will ascend back to her Father’s house. From there she was promised to be released after death and raised to the world of light, her original home, where she will end rejoining her counterpart in *mšuna kušta* (the world of ideal counterpart). In Gnosticism, “the ‘soul’ of the individual is part of the ‘universal soul,’ which is caught up precisely in the image of ‘inner’ or ‘individual man’ and from the secret backbone of mankind, without which there would be no redemption.”⁷² Likewise, in Mandaeism, the body of Adam signifies the bodies of the world, and his soul is the aggregate of all human souls. Duality is also present in the notion of female soul: a good soul called *nishimtha* and its twin sister, the dark spirit *ruha* (the seat of desire), are in constant conflict. This conflict is reflected in the description of the differences between the soul and the spirit⁷³: “When the soul came from the world of light and fell into the Body, there come with her some of the mysteries which exists in the world of light: some of radiance and light, some of sincerity, some of its unity, its order, peacefulness and honesty.” The evil spirit (*ruha*), on the other hand, “came with her, and accompanied by all the mysteries that exists in the darkness, and into the body she introduced song, frivolity, deceit, falsehood, excitement, and lust, lying and witchcraft, violence and perversion.”⁷⁴

I believe, in order to appreciate the magnificence of the Mandaean female soul, once need to

⁷²Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 109.

⁷³Drower, trans., *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*.

⁷⁴Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 49.

hear her voice that is infused with strength and pride even when she was afraid and sad, along with the love and reverence that beings of light conveyed to her throughout her journey. For that very reason I chose some long passages.

In the Mandaean dualistic view, the descent and imprisonment of the reluctant soul in the human body and in the world of darkness starts by her insertion into the body like a “grain of mustard-seed.” The soul “made herself a sky and earth and formed a body (*stuna*) therein, like the cocoon which is formed of silk from the thread.”⁷⁵ The soul, in the *Ginza L*, is brought to the world by three beings of light (*Uthri*)⁷⁶, to enter Adam’s lifeless body: “The soul was afraid, startled, she wept and wailed. She refused to enter the body.” She asked them why they want to expel her from the house of her father in the light world and said, “My origin is there, and my roots are there, in the place where my father resides. Why did you bring me to this disgusting place?” The soul goes on with a clear and confident voice:

Now the wrong-doers will control me,
They will teach me according to their knowledge.
They will talk to me the same as they are talking,
To make me forget who I am.
They will make me descend with them into the depths,
From which they will never rise again.⁷⁷

At this point, in *Ginza R*, to give the soul comfort and protection, the second Life Manda d Hayyi himself “assumed the form of a human being”, in other words, the light being became flesh. In his kind and loving words Manda d Hayyi told the soul:

Here I am, in a visible form,
O soul, I will not frighten you.
Never be alarmed while you are in the body.
In order not to frighten you,
I assumed the form of human being.
I sat down beside her.

⁷⁵ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 51-52.

⁷⁶ The three angels are Hibil, Shitel, and Anush, they are the guardians of the baptismal rituals and the site.

⁷⁷ Al-Saadi trans., *Ginza Rabba*, GL 45-47.

Shining fourth, I sat close to her;
I spread the glory of the great Mana on her,
the glory out of which Adam emerged.
Beside her I sat, and taught her all that Hayyi had entrusted to me.
With a vice like the cooing of dove,
I recited the recitation to her.
I awakened her heart from its long hibernation,
With the speech of the angels, I spoke to her.
I taught her my wisdom,
I bestowed my wisdom upon her.
I said to her:
Arise, o soul!
Glorify Hayyi,
and bow down to him!
Praise the sublime places, where the pious dwell.⁷⁸

Back to *Ginza L*, The light beings addressed her as “free soul” and told her that she is the daughter of radiance and that for her the earth was made solid with all its fragrant flowers, fruits, and flowing water. They also promised her that she would remember the wisdom God imparted to her and that it would give her peace till she comes back to her father’s house after the death of the body. In a challenging tone, the soul said:

If you want me to enter into this body,
give me a weapon to protect my self against calamity,
because enemies will multiply all around me.

The light being answered:

Free soul,
Which weapon do you want?
Which weapon is sharper than what you have?

Nasirutha⁷⁹ is your weapon!
The sincere living words that you received from the house of life
are your sharpest weapon.⁸⁰

Finally, the soul agrees to enter Adam’s body, which is symbolic of all human bodies, and

⁷⁸Ibid., GR 61-62.

⁷⁹ Nasirutha is “the true faith. The deep knowledge of the Mandaean religion. A Nasurayia is the one who is thoroughly versed in the faith and the doctrine of Mandaeism.” Al-Saadi trans., *Ginza Rabba*, 210.

⁸⁰ Ibid, GL 47.

awaits the day she can return. The soul said:

I went and entered the body'
with the powers and abilities of Hayyi....
I became a spouse to the body,
in to watch him and take care of him.⁸¹

Similarly, one of the Christian Gnostic Nag Hammadi Codices portrays the fall of the soul from its “father’s house” into the physical world, where it loses its virginity and has to “endure mean and wretched existence.”⁸²

The ascent of the soul to the world of light during baptism unites her with her sister the vital spirit. They leave the body behind and “fly hand-in hand into the sublime ether as one.”⁸³ What happens next is depicted in a beautiful hymn recited at Mandaean baptisms from the canonical prayer book.⁸⁴ “It is probably one of the oldest.”⁸⁵

In the name of the life!
What did thy father do for thee, soul,
The day on which thou wast raised up?
“He took me down to the Jordan, planted me
And rose and stood me upon its bank.
He broke and gave me bread [*pihta*],
Blessed the cup and gave me thereof to drink.
He placed me between his knees
And pronounced over me the name of the mighty [*life*].
He passed into the mountain before me.
He cried loud that I might hear,
That I might hear he cried loudly,
‘If there is strength in thee, soul, come!
‘If I climb the mountain I shall fall,
I shall overturn and perish from the world!’
I lifted mine eyes to heaven
And my soul waited upon the house of life.
I climbed the mountain and fell not.

⁸¹ Ibid, GL 49.

⁸² Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 110.

⁸³ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 53.

⁸⁴ Drower, trans., *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*.

⁸⁵ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 53.

I came and found the life of my self.⁸⁶

The questions and answers were repeated when the soul passed through the fire and entered the sea, before reaching heaven. There, the soul met its counterpart, and they embraced as if she had come back from prison. They continued on to the realm of *mšuna kušta*, which is the ideal world of true being, where everything in the material world -- including the river of living water (Jordan) – has a double. This world is like a mirror image or an archetype. Drower speculates that the idea of “twin motifs” of archetype theology and dualism, “possibly Magian in origin, perhaps Pythagorean, must have been well rooted in Judaea in the first Christian centuries.”⁸⁷

Before the soul ascends, after the death of the body, she agonizes for leaving it behind. In this vivid passage the soul, clearly, feels the bond with the body and finds it painful to break away from it. Body and soul once formed one human entity, now they are departing ways; each is going back to its origin:

The soul wailing, weeping, and saying,
“what can I do for you, my body?
If you were garment of radiance, I would wear you,
to ascend with me to the house of life.....
the soul spoke to the body,
but the body did not hear her.
I can hear the voice of the messenger of Hayyi calling me,
“O brilliant soul, come along;
you who provided sweet scented perfume,
you who made the stinking body fragrant with perfume.
Come along, noble one who was called a slave
In the house of the wicked! Come along!
The soul said, “What can I do for you, my body?
I wish if you were not from clay!
You were formed from clay,
and to clay you will soon again return.
All who tortured you in this world will be judged guilty.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 53-54.

⁸⁷Ibid., 45.

⁸⁸Al-Saadi trans., *Ginza Rabba*, GL 75-76.

The soul in the Mandaean belief system is freed from its prison in the human body after its death and, following God's directions, goes back to her home in the light realm. In comparison, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Essenes (a second temple Jewish sect) believed that the body is "corruptible" and the soul immortal. "Emanating from the fine ether, those souls become entangled, as it were, in the prison-house of the body, to which they are dragged down by a sort of natural spell; but when they are released from the bonds of the flesh, then, as though liberated from a long servitude, they rejoice and are borne aloft."⁸⁹

During ascend, the soul arrives at the frontier guarded by 'Abathur of the scale', prompted by guardian angel, she displays her (passport) baptismal sign. Abathur, is "The celestial being who weighs souls after death in his balance against the soul of Seth."⁹⁰ Seth *Šitil taba* 'the good plant, he is the perfect human and the "archetype of a spirituality", his soul is purest soul that all other souls should be weighed against.

And on she went and reached Abathur's house of detention, (Abathur). The Ancient, Lofty, Holy and Guarded one. There his scales are set up and spirits and souls are questioned before him as to their names, their signs, their blessing, their baptism and everything that is therewith....

The souls of our fathers were signed with the sign of life and the name of Manda d Hayyi was pronounced over them. They put them in the scales, putting their deeds and rewords and weighed them. And the perfect went in (also), the spirit with the soul, but they took them out (for they were) clean. Radiance issued from the radiance of Abathur and clothed them and they brought light and covered them (therewith).... They raised her up beside the living, they bring her in, in the likeness of Life, they support her in the place where radiance, like light, flameth. And the spirit went and became of the same nature as the soul and was established in the house of life.⁹¹

The very last stage that the soul has to pass through before her ultimate destination is

⁸⁹Elizer Segal, *Introducing Judaism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 183.

⁹⁰Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 29.

⁹¹E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959, 44-46.

a world of purification *matarata*. Drower suggests that if the departing soul is “pure enough to counterpoise the soul of Seth, Abathur permits it to pass on from the judgment seat to *mšuna kušta*. If not, it must return to *matarata* for further purgation.”⁹²

On earth, three days after death and once a year for all the dead souls, the Mandaean priests, hold (mass for souls) a complex ritual named *masiqta*, which means “the rising up” it is “spiritual resurrection or ceremony to aid the ascent of the soul”⁹³. Below, is an excerpt from the long prayers of the *masiqta*:

All fruits wither: all sweet odours pass away, but not the fragrance of *Gnosis* of Life, which cometh not to an end nor passeth away for an age of age and for world without end. May the souls of this *masiqta* rise up without sin, trespass, folly, stumbling and mistakes unto the place of light and the Enduring abode.

And Life be praised!⁹⁴

With respect the *masiqta*, Kurt Rudolph, theologically, suggests that this ritual of the ascent of the soul gives the meaning that redemption or salvation are achieved by the “means of Gnosis”. He asserts that in the oldest liturgical texts “redemption and ascent of souls, always stands close together. The one who reveals, who mediates salvation, is also the one who redeems and escorts the souls into the beyond”. He also suggests that revelation and salvation is the liberation from the world of darkness and death, which is exhibited clearly in the Mandaean ancient texts.⁹⁵

In the final analysis, I chose to go back and fourth between the *Ginza R& L* and the, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, to present the richness of this unique Mandaean female soul theology and her connection to God and the body. The soul descended from the divine realm

⁹²Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 35.

⁹³Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, n 4, 32.

⁹⁴Ibid., 34.

⁹⁵Kurt Rudolph, "Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion." *History of Religions* 8, no. 3 (1969): 210-35.

on the request of the light beings in charge of the creation of Adam, she was afraid and, initially, refused to enter the body. With the love, tenderness, and protection of the highest light being and the promises of the Uthri, she finally agreed to enter Adam's body. This body as all human bodies is the temporary home for the divine soul on earth (darkness). A home in the Mandaean tradition that needs to be protected and taken care of because of the precious soul it houses. That is, perhaps, why the Mandaeans are pacifist, war, they believe, will incur damages to the body, which in turn will disturb and harm the soul. This intricate relationship between the soul and the body is one of reverence and respect.

The Mandaean human body, on the other hand, is the soul's home on earth. Drower states that to the Mandaeans, the human body is "replica of the glorious cosmic body, and the holiest of mysteries."⁹⁶ The body, its organs and functions carry symbolic importance as part of the "Divine chemistry of genesis"⁹⁷ As a relief from imprisonment, baptism offers a way of soul establishing connection with the source in the light world till the soul ascends to that world after the death of the body. Baptism and the, mass for souls, offer redemption for the soul and spirit, through which the body will be redeemed and protected as well.

To follow Rudolph's interpretation of the ascent of the soul, the soul originated in the light world, after her descent; the revelation happened when Manda d Hayyi became flesh to ease her fear from being in Adam's body. Then, when the time came for the soul to ascend to be redeemed from the world of darkness, she was escorted by the "messenger of Hayyi" back to her father's house in light world after passing through Abathurs' gate and proven to be clean and ready to move on. Essentially, what comes out from the light must go back to the light. However, while in the body, the soul functions as individual's prime connection to the

⁹⁶ Drower, *The Secret Adam*, xvii.

divine, she is the mediator between the two realms, the divine and the mortal.

Most of all, the female soul in the Mandaean religion has agency and power, her initial refusal and outrage when the light beings asked her to enter Adams body is a sign of autonomy. As a result, she was promised keep her connection to the Father in light world through baptism and after the death of the body as a condition for her approval.

The concept of the soul in exile in the human body is one of the Gnostic features present in the Mandaean religion that is based on duality and shared with ancient Christian Gnostic traditions and Jewish groups like the Essenes. The soul and the vital spirit are the main players in the Mandaeans' dualistic world of imprisonment in the physical world of darkness and they at the end of the human life they return to the light. This rich depiction of the female soul is animated through the rituals of baptism.

Chapter 4

The Practice and Theology of the Mandaean Baptism

The Mandaean repeated baptism *masbuta* on earth is the reenactment of the divine baptism of the savior spirt *Hibil –Ziwa* in the light world. It holds Gnostic symbolism and theology within its rituals that signifies the redemption of the body, soul, and spirit through the full immersion in the living water. It is performed during Mandaean religious holy days, before and after marriage, and before death (if possible). Pearson asserts “Earthly baptism is regarded as an imitation of the heavenly liturgy, and the running water (Jordan) used in the Mandaean baptism is connected to the world of light.”⁹⁸

Baptism is a Mandaean central practice performed on Sundays by full immersion in living (running) water *yardna* for purification and salvation. It must be performed with the help of a priest and a helper. It also serves as a bridge for the soul to connect with the light world, “connection between the two worlds: that of the earthly Mandaeans and the ancestors on high.”⁹⁹ The baptismal rituals end with the anointment of oil followed by the sharing of bread and water. In the same way, purity is associated with the light world in other Gnostic traditions, Rudolph suggests that baptism “makes it essential that the elements of light which comes forth from the earthly darkness are thoroughly purged of all dross associated with this life before it makes its entry. Above all, washings or ‘baptism’ as they are depicted in various writings serve this purpose.”¹⁰⁰

Many religious groups practiced full immersion baptism in ancient times. According to Ryen, “In primitive Christianity, baptisms were probably performed by immersion in

⁹⁸ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 320.

⁹⁹ Buckley, Jorunn Jacobsen. “Why Once Is Not Enough: Mandaean Baptism (Masbuta) as an Example of a Repeated Rituals. “History of Religion, 1989., 23, JSTOR Journals, EBSCO host accessed August 8, 2016. 29.

¹⁰⁰Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 188.

flowing water, much like John's baptism in the Jordan."¹⁰¹ Rudolph adds the Jewish purification rites to the Gnostic mix, noting that "there are indications that water rites existed in the Gnostic communities independent of Christianity, and derived from Jewish purification rites, especially those of heretical origin. The Jewish baptismal sects evidently had a certain affinity with the Gnostic movement."¹⁰² The practice of water purification rituals was common practice around the rivers of the world, where living water is considered to be divine.

Drower was the first scholar in modern times to observe the Mandaean baptism and write about it in her book, *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran*, in 1937. An anthropologist by training, during the nineteen thirties, she lived among the Mandaean community in southern Iraq for a few years and slowly she earned their trust. Baptism occupied one chapter in that book, that also included other information that dealt with other rituals, practices, and beliefs along with the Mandaean texts and some of their contents. In addition, in his book, *Masbuta* (1958), Eric Segelberg¹⁰³ researched the Mandaean baptism mostly from the textual perspective. He relied on the writings and translations by German scholars before him as well as Drower's observation of the Mandaean baptism and the translations of their texts. In 1996, Jorunn Buckley, visited the Mandaean community in southwestern Iran, where, she observed the baptismal ritual and other rituals. She documented many of her observations and conversations with priests and a lay people in her book, *The Mandaean*, in addition to many articles and lectures.

Practices

¹⁰¹Ryen, *Baptism in Jordan*, 287.

¹⁰²Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 227.

¹⁰³Eric Segelberg, *Masbuta; Studies in the Ritual of the Mandaean Baptism*. Uppsala, 1958.

Apart from the regular baptism *masbuta* that requires a priest, there are two water rituals that can be performed individually. The first is, *rišama*, which is, simply, the washing accompanied with prayers without immersion that could be performed individually on a daily basis. The second is *tamaša* that means immersion; it consists of three immersions in the running water for the purpose of purification after certain acts that lead to defilement. Anders Hultgard states that “these two minor rituals seem to reach as far back in time as the major water rituals”¹⁰⁴

Many elements are associated with baptism including the requirement of using a baptismal name, *Malwašia*, during baptism that every Mandaean is given at birth along with their regular name. This name is matrilineal given at the first baptism by the priests who follow a certain formula found in the, *Book of the Zodiac (Sfar Malwašia)*, which requires the birth date and the child’s mother and grandmother’s names. Before baptism, the priest and the person to be baptized should wear a specific white garment known as the *rasta*. The priest and his helper prepares the following items before the ceremony: the *klela* (a small myrtle wreath), *drabsha* (white banner), incense, flour water, and salt to make bread, drinking water, and the priest’s staff known as the *mergna* (made from an olive tree branch).

The Role of Priests

The Mandaean priest usually come from priestly families, but any other observant Mandaean can become a priest. The priest is a *malka br malkia*, which means a king son of

¹⁰⁴ David Hellholm, *Ablution, initiation, and baptism: late antiquity, early Judaism, and early Christianity = Waschungen, Initiation und Taufe: Spätantike, frühes Judentum und frühes Christentum*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010,73.

kings. Therefore, the process of the priest's initiation is the coronation. In her opening explanation of the, *Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa*, Drower states "for a priest it is otherwise .. A man raised by the 'crown' of priesthood to the rank of 'king' becomes responsible for the spiritual and material well-being of his people." This symbolic kingship is predominant in many religions in the Middle East, such as Iranian and Jewish traditions. Baptism and *masiqta* (raisin up) are the main rituals performed in the very lengthy and complex coronation process. Those crowned priests belong to either the first level, *tarmide*, or the elite priests, the *ganzibre*, both have to undergo exhaustive training and education. Some of the Mandaean texts such as the *Coronation of Great šišlam*, and *Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa*, contain steps and prayers detailing the process of initiation. To illustrate, the savior Hibil-Ziwa is announcing to the newly initiated priest:

everyone that is baptized with my baptism, Hibil-Ziwa's, shall be set up beside me and shall resemble me, and shall dwell in my world, Hibil-Ziwa's. Three hundred and sixty mansions in my world shall be prepared for him and nine hundred banners shall be unfurled for him, and radiance and light and robes of state shall clothe him. They shall set him in the upper world of the King, and all kings shall grasp his hand in *kušta*.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, despite the clear different methods and symbols between the Mandaean water purification and the Zoroastrians fire purification, Anders Hultgård finds similarities between them in the conservatism of the priesthood, the use of the white garment during baptism, and names of the garment pieces as well as the use of myrtle in the rituals. He states that pre-Islamic Iranian priests preserved their tradition through "oral transmission"; the Mandaean priests however, did the same but added "written transmission" by copying the religious texts. Hultgård concludes, "The emergence of the Mandaean priesthood is most probably explained as coming from a double background, the model being some of the

¹⁰⁵ E. S. Drower, *Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa*, 59.

specialized Mesopotamian priest classes and the Iranian magi.”¹⁰⁶

The Mandaean baptismal practices take place on Sundays on the banks of rivers (living water). Priests with varying ranks can perform the baptism for a group of Mandaeans men and women in separate groups. In their native lands, the Mandaeans built a small temple the *mandi*, close to the river banks to prepare for the rituals of baptism. Before baptizing the people, the priest robes, immerses himself, and say the preparatory prayers. The baptizer and the soon to be baptized wear a special white cotton garment that is cut and sewn according to special specifications and each piece holds a special meaning. This garment is named the *rasta*, it consists of the garment, pants, a scarf, a wool woven belt, and a turban that the small myrtle wreath (*klela*) placed in its fold by the priest at the end of the three immersions. The white color is a representative of the light world. On the banks, with the people waiting to be baptized, stands a white silk banner placed on crossed wooden poles known as *drabša* as another representation of the light. it is also called John the Baptist’s banner. On the site, on a clay tray, the priests places incense, fuel, flour, salt, sesame, brass drinking bowls, a bottle of water, and branch of fresh myrtle twigs. The priests then recite prayers. He “mixes the flour with salt (called ‘the mystery of the soul’), wets it with the ‘Jordan’(running) water, and bakes it before baptism on a fire-saucer used for this purpose and for burning incense.”¹⁰⁷

This unleavened sacramental bread will be shared among the baptized people later.

In the Ginza, the first baptism came about when God baptized himself in the light realm. He is the first baptizer:

I am the first baptizer who believed in the *kusta* and my *masbuta*. Anyone who adheres to me and believe in my *kušta* and my *masbuta* shall be in communion (*lufa*) with me and find a place in my abode (*škina*).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶David Hellholm, *Ablution, initiation, and baptism*, 81.

¹⁰⁷Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 67.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 80.

In time, the priest enters the water, first holding his priestly staff, reciting, “I go down before these souls whom life delivereth and saveth, and protecteth these should from all that is evil....,”¹⁰⁹ followed by creating a sacred circle in the water. From my observation, the priest creates the circle with his arms in which he and one other person fit. Next he recites this prayer:

In the name of life! Let every man whose strength enableth him and who loveth his soul, come and go down to the Jordan and be baptized and receive the pure sign; put on robes of radiant light and set a fresh wreath on their head. [Here baptize the souls. And they shall descend behind thee and shall submerge three times...] ¹¹⁰

At this point, the priest calls the people to enter the water one at a time. As the individual enter the water, the baptized person going in the water stats her/his baptismal name before approaching the priest. Then, the baptized “walks out into the water in front of the priest and then turns leftward around him, and crouches in the water to make a full submersion three times in the water behind the priest.”¹¹¹ Immediately after the immersion, the priest with his right-hand signs the baptized three times on the forehead from the right ear to the left in the name of *Hayyi*. After the three signs, the priest gives the newly baptized “three palmfuls of water to drink and say to them ‘ Drink! And be healed and strengthened! The name of Life and the name of *Manda-d- Hiia* have been pronounced upon thee’.”¹¹² In regard to the signation, Segelberg states, “It is remarkable that the baptismal formula is used at the signation. It seems to point out that these two acts, immersion and signation are regarded as being intimately connected with another.”¹¹³ This water baptism concludes with the

¹⁰⁹ Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹¹¹ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaean: Ancient Texts and Modern People*. Oxford University Press, 2002. Book, 81-82.

¹¹² Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 14.

¹¹³ Segelberg, *Masbuta*, 53-54.

placement of the *klela* wreath on the baptized person's head, placing hands on the head, and the ritual handclasp of giving *kušta*. The *kušta* will be repeated three more time throughout the baptismal ritual.

The water baptism ends with the long "Dedicatory Prayer of the Jordan" from which the last parts as follows:

I rose up from the Jordan
And a group of souls I met,
I met a group of souls
Who surrounded our father Šitil,¹¹⁴
Saying to him, "by thy life, our father Šitil,
Go with us to the Jordan!"

"If I go with you to the Jordan,
Who will be your witness?"

" The Jordan and its two banks
Will bear witness for us;
(*Pihta, kušta, and mambuha*)¹¹⁵
Will bear witness for us;
Habšaba, (Sunday) and (*kana-d- Zidqa*)¹¹⁶
Will bear witness for us;
The sanctuary in which we worship
Will bear witness for us;
The alms that in our laps
Will bear witness for us;
And our father who is our head
Will bear witness for us."

"This is that which I seek,
This is that which my soul desireth!
When I rise to the House of Life
And travel to the Everlasting Abode,
When Life questioneth me, (these) witnesses
Will come and bear witnesses of the truth are they,
Sure is all that they say!"
And Life is victorious!¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Šitil is the equivalent to the biblical Seth.

¹¹⁵ The sacramental bread, the *kušta* rite, and the sacramental drink (water).

¹¹⁶ The oblation collected for the Blessed Oblation.

¹¹⁷ Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 18.

After the water baptism, on the river banks, before joining the other baptized, each individual walks clock wise around the fire three times while reciting a prayer, then sits and waits to be anointed with oil. During this time no one is allowed to touch the person to be baptized. Sesame seed oil is used in the anointing process when the priest, with his finger, signs on the forehead three times, “ ‘We acknowledge the name of Life’ ‘precious oil art thou,’ Thou wast established, First life’, upon the oil and sign the souls thou hast baptized, when they rise up out of the Jordan.”¹¹⁸ The purpose Anointing, also called the “sealing,” is to give the baptized protection, healing, and redemption. The sealing is “well known from Gnostic literature also outside Mandaism. Often, they were connected with anointing with oil before or after baptism.”¹¹⁹ In some Gnostic traditions anointing was more important than baptism.

The last of the Mandaean baptismal rituals is the breaking of the sacramental unleavened bread *Pihra*, and the drinking of the water, *mambuha*, after the sacraments. The priest then recites:

Ye are set up and raised up into the place of the Good. Established amongst *manas* of the light are those souls which went down the Jordan and were baptized (and those) of our fathers and teachers and our brothers and sisters who departed the body and those who are still in the body. There, in the light shall ye be raised up. And life is victorious!

This prayer is followed by the baptismal prayer “What did they Father do for thee, soul” on page 32-33, chapter 3 of this thesis. The baptism ends with the throwing of the *klela* into the water and giving thanks and making a wish. In Gnosticism, as Rudolph suggests, the bloody sacrifice of traditional religion is replaced with bread, wine, and incense, which function to purify the believers and remit their sins. He remarks, “Its symbolical value is preeminent as

¹¹⁸ Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 21.

¹¹⁹ Ryen, *Baptism in Jordan*, 299.

can be seen in the metaphorical usage of the terms ‘baptism’, and ‘seal.’ The position is much clearer with regards to the partaking of bread and water among the Mandaeans, which takes place at the close of the water baptism.”¹²⁰ Each of the steps taken during baptism holds a special meaning and the significance of the rituals is that can be traced back to the texts. However, the larger meanings and theology of the main practices such as full immersion, repetition, and the importance of the living water as medium, represents the gnostic essence of the Mandaean religion.

Meaning and Theology

The Mandaean baptismal rituals bring to life the theology of redemption (salvation) and rebirth through the repeated full immersion in the living water that works in tandem with the textual descent and ascent of the savior and the soul. Victor Turner suggests, “For a ritual, like a space rocket, is phased, and each phase in a ritual is directed towards a limited end which itself becomes a means to the ultimate end of the total performance.”¹²¹ Based on Turner’s statement, the aim of the Mandaean baptism is to purify and redeem the body, soul, and spirit from sin and create a connection to the divine in the light world, which is achieved by going through different phases of death and rebirth, healing and sealing, and feeding and nourishment. Within each phase, various ritualistic steps with a pacific sequence must be followed.

For the following analysis, in addition to the scholarly interpretation of the baptismal rituals, I will utilize the explanations I obtained through a phone interview I conducted on

¹²⁰Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 230.

¹²¹Victor Turner, *The forest of symbols aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Pr., 2014, 52.

12/10/2016 with Isam Al-Zuhairy. He is a practicing Mandaean priest who resides in Denmark and holds a PhD in Mandaean history from Manchester University, Manchester, England.

The ritual of Full immersion in the Living water plays a significant role in the Mandaean baptism. To the Semitic people, Drower suggests, water is the liquid counterpart to the light. Similarly, to the Mandaeans, water, “mostly expresses the mystery of being” or more accurately, the “great life.” The river on earth is equivalent to the heavenly Jordan of the light world. She adds:

Immersion, therefore, is an act, which purifies, revitalizes and protects. The spiritually dead—and pollution is a form of spiritual death—can be reborn through baptism (immersion, dipping). Baptism *is a rite de passage*: it corresponds not only to babe’s transit from darkness of the womb to the outer world but also to passage of the soul from the world of matter into that of spirit.”¹²²

As to the symbolic meaning of the Mandaean baptism, Al-Zuhairy, asserts that the baptism’s main purpose is for the purification and the salvation of the body, soul, and spirit. Salvation in the Mandaean religious context means repentance for sins, which could be from a simple lie to breaking religious and moral laws. More importantly, baptism is a process of rebirth. Most of the baptismal rituals, he states “are repeated three times, that is, for the body, soul, and spirit, as each of them needs the same purification treatment.” He goes on to explain why the Mandaean baptism is repeated. He states that baptism provides continuous purification and salvation from the daily mistakes and sins that affect the three elements. As mentioned above, it also, functions as a bridge for the soul to keep its connection, while in the body, to the light world, her place of origin.

¹²² E. S. Downer, *Water into wine: a study of ritual idiom in the Middle East*. (London: John Murray, 1956), 229.

Al-Zuhairy, then, moved to describe the significance of the myrtle wreath (*klela*). He stated that it is the green crown put on the head after the full immersion to signify the baptized' success of the baptized in her/his union with the light world (crowning achievement). Finally, he touched on the practice of anointing with oil, which is to protect the baptized from illnesses of all kinds. He also called the bread and water the "sacred meal" that is given to the newly born (the newly-baptized) for nourishment. Most the interpretations of the priest Al- Zuhiray's are not found in the religious texts because they are part of the oral tradition that the Mandaean priests learn through their inattention process and continued practices.

Full Immersion

Full immersion element of baptism, on the other hand, according to Al-Zuhairy, symbolize the rebirth process in the living water. When the person holds her/his breath while crouching down under the water, she/he is considered to be dead for that moment. The emergence from the water, then, symbolizes the new birth from the water, which symbolize the womb. Again, full immersion must be done three times for the benefits of the body, soul, and spirit. His interpretation of the immersion's role in baptism is, in many ways, similar to that of Drower.

Similarly, one could look at the Mandaean full immersion meaning through the Turner's anthropological lens. Especially, the liminal period in the rite of passage that "indicate and constitute transitions between states."¹²³ Coupled with, "the liminal persona", which is the "transitional- being" that exhibits the character of "no longer" and "not yet"

¹²³ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*,93.

classification.¹²⁴ I believe that even though the Mandaean baptism is repeated and it does not seem to fit into Turner's description of one time rite of passage such as initiation, some aspects within the baptismal ritual do. For instance, the symbolic death and rebirth during the full immersion resembles the liminal persona within the rite of passage. When the person is under the water on their way to merge out, he/she is in between no "longer dead" and "not alive yet". In addition, the reason behind not touching the newly baptized till the end of the rituals, according to the priest Al Zuhiray, is that the person is still going through the rebirth transformation process. That is similar to Turner's observation of the Ndembu girls initiation rituals when the young girl placed under the milk tree wrapped in a blanket and not suppose to be touched by any one till the end of the ritual.

Living Water

The living water is a significant part of this baptism owing to the fact that the living (running) water is the life giver in the Mandaean tradition. According to Ryen, since *yardna*, the Jordan and its counterpart in the light world are made from divine elements, for this reason, the Jordan plays an important role in Mandaean theology. It is considered to be an emissary of life and a place of the highest divinity. This role is described in the baptismal liturgy: "Great Jordan of life, I laud thee and adjure thee by 'Usar-Nhura' (the treasure of light), the great solace and support of life, that thou givest no room to evil beings (who are) against these souls who go down into thee."¹²⁵ It is important to note that *yardna* does not mean only the Jordan River, it refers to all living running water in the form of rivers, lakes,

¹²⁴ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 96.

¹²⁵ Jon O. Ryen, "Baptism in Jordan . . . for Christians and Agnostics: Remarkable Similarities between Old Syrian Liturgies and the Mandaean Masbuta," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13, no. 2 (2009): 283.

and ponds, anywhere on earth. However, salty water is not considered to be living. Therefore, oceans, salt water lakes and ponds are not possible for the Mandaean baptisms.

Redemption

Through the Mandaean baptismal practices, redemption is achieved. In this redemption process, who is the redeemer and what is redeemed? Who is redeemed and from what? As in other Gnostic religions, redemption, in the Mandaean religion, occurs on the spiritual level through the knowledge of the divine and the esoteric teachings including, the descend and ascend of the light beings to bring the saving knowledge. Knowledge (Gnosis) that refers to knowledge of the divine, conveys redemption in Gnostic religions in Rudolph's view. He argues, "It is the act of self-recognition which introduces the 'deliverance' from the situation encountered and guarantees man salvation."¹²⁶ However, the Mandaean baptism facilitates salvation on both the physical level (Body) and the spiritual level, marked by the ascent of the soul. This baptism, for the lay Mandaean, follows the same steps (blue print) of the savior *Hibil- Ziwa*'s heavenly baptism in the light word, however, with more stringent rules added for the priest's initiation. In view of this fact, the baptism of the savior, naturally, holds the promise of redemption to the baptized within its folds when it is (copied) on earth.

The physical redemption is made possible by the full immersion in the divine life-giving living water. Significantly, when rebirth is attained in the living water through full immersion, the body emerges anew, saved from sin, so and the soul and the spirit are similarly saved. Therefore, rebirth after full immersion is the precursor to salvation. It safe to say that baptism, without full immersion, is only purification. Furthermore, to establish the

¹²⁶ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 113.

spiritual connection between the light world and earth during the water ritual, the name of God (Life) is invoked before each step:

In the name of the Life!

Bound together and sealed are these souls who went down the Jordan and where baptized in the name of the Great Life.”¹²⁷

In the name of the Life!

I call on the mighty, sublime, all-surpassing life, supreme over all works and I say to it, ‘behold, behold Great life, us who at Thy name, Life, descended into the Jordan and for Thy name’s sake, Life, we took our sign from the great Jordan of Life and from the great source of healing, at the word of Truth...’¹²⁸

To answer the first question, the redeemer is the knowledge of the divine, the mediation of the savior and the soul between the divine and humans, and the role the living water plays is that of the divine medium that both purifies and saves. In the Mandaean baptism, the body is redeemed along with the soul and spirit.

Spiritually, baptism strengthens the bonds between the person and the divine through the souls renewed connection to light world (her origin). The soul agrees to descend into the body to experience what God created for her on earth with the condition that she keeps that divine bond by the means of baptism until she ascends after death. This bond entrusts the soul with the role of the mediator between the divine and the body. Consequently, the soul is the main connector to the divine as well as being is the beneficiary of baptism and redemption. Since the soul resides in the body, the body will be redeemed and saved as well.

At this juncture, the answer for the second question would be that the individual person is redeemed, that is the baptized Mandaean, is purified from physical and spiritual pollution (sin), yet, the whole community celebrates the baptism and the baptized as redeemed people. Therefore, the baptized and redeemed individual is a healthy member of

¹²⁷Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 22.

¹²⁸Ibid., 23.

the Mandaean community in body and spirit. Ultimately, Mandaean baptism is the thread that connects the body, soul, and the spirit to the light world, it is the foundation of redemption for the three human components.

All parts and aspects of the Mandaean baptism are moving in one direction, as Drower states, “baptism is the foundation of the whole redemption system: it is spiritual birth, it cleanses the body and soul and symbolizes rising into a new life: the ascent to the bank after immersion is symbolic.”¹²⁹The soul, during baptism, through the body descends into the baptismal water on earth to enter the darkness or the womb in the living water (the life giver). For a few seconds, under the water, she goes through the symbolic death, the soul, then, is reborn again saved and free of sin when the body emerges from the water, just like a newborn baby leaving the womb. This new born need God and the angels’ protection, sealing form evil, and food and drink for nourishment. Those needs are, symbolically, provided by anointing, the sacramental bread and water, along with prayers and blessings. Feeling rejuvenated again, on the banks, the soul gets her chance to ascend to her Fathers’ house in the light world, and embrace her counterpart as she was promised. Till the next baptism, the body and the soul are reborn, saved, and ready to play their part in leading a wholesome and truthful life here on earth.

This essential Mandaean baptismal ritualistic religious practice that incorporate written teachings, oral tradition, and gnostic theology within it, has been under-studied and under-researched by scholars in recent times. The study of the Mandaean baptism could answer many question about this practice in ancient times, if scholars were willing to put their prejudices aside. Buckley argues that some scholars reject the repeated baptism based

¹²⁹Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 66.

on their personal views. She asserts, “Ethics becomes irreconcilable with repeated rituals.” She argues against some scholars, including Rudolph and Segelberg’s negative “views of repeated rites that evince what one might call a ‘Protestant’ disdain (irrespective of these scholars actual religious affiliations) for ‘easy’ salvation.”¹³⁰ Furthermore, Buckley argues that some gnostic scholars are oppose to the examination of rituals. In her view, “The idea that rituals in Gnosticism are basically superfluous has long been commonplace.” Buckley attributes that to the judgment that these practices are either early and were modified later to spiritual and philosophical concepts or, they are judged as being later, which makes them “evidence of Gnosis degenerated into magic.”¹³¹ Again, scholars’ personal opinions and biases are the determining factor in giving any subject great importance or total dismissal, which has been the case with the Mandaean study in general. This lack of in- depth research in the Mandaean baptism and other rituals has been apparent to me, during the processes of the research for this paper.

¹³⁰ Buckley, *Why Once Is Not Enough*, 26.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

Conclusion

The path between heaven and earth is well travelled in Mandaeanism, paved by the savior and the soul. Mandaean theology and practice are marked by those journeys. The saviors descend from the light world, where the transcendent God, Hayyi, dwells, into the world of darkness to bring the saving knowledge in his ascent to his Father's house. The soul's journeys of descent to earth to enter, reluctantly at first, the human body from which she laments for leaving behind, after a life time, before her ascent to her home in her Fathers house in the light world. This path is well-worn by the countless baptizing souls, for generations, to catch glimpses of the light world during their baptisms. Soon, this path will fade and disappear when the Mandaean souls leave the earth for good.

The vehicle for the savior and soul's journeys is furnished by the Gnostic dualistic world view. They move between the pure world of light and its opposite, the polluted world of darkness. For the savior, he is to mediate between the divine and the mundane to bring redemption and to save humans from sin. As for the soul, her descent from the divine realm into the earthly body, though it is a prison, brought divinity to it. Therefore, it should be treated with reverence. The repeated baptism gives the soul the opportunity to ascend to the light, frequently, until the death of the body, then, she will take her last journey in this dualistic world.

Cosmology, anthropology, theology, and soteriology compose the main structure of the Mandaean baptism. In the gnostic world of opposing forces and elements the savior and the soul are given the power to negotiate between the worlds of light and darkness. Baptism is the soul's passport in her ascend to her Fathers' house in the light world during the life and

after the death of the body she dwells in. Ultimately, rebirth and then redemption are bestowed on the Mandaean body, soul, and spirit by the end of baptism. It is the antidote for sin and defilement throughout the person's life. In the eternal living water, the full immersion baptism on earth is performed under the watching eyes and the protection of God and the angels.

This intricate Gnostic system coupled with the baptismal rituals are geared toward one goal: redemption. The catalysts for redemption in the Mandaean religion are the knowledge of the divine, the mediation of the savior and the soul, between the divine and humans, and the living water as the divine medium that both purifies and saves the body, soul, and spirit, who are the three beneficiaries of redemption. On the other hand, the baptized individual is redeemed from impurities and sin. Ultimately, the redeemed individual is a healthy part of the entire Mandaean community.

Scholars who researched the religion and came in contact with the Mandaean community have been sounding the alarm about their looming extinction for decades to no avail. Drower's words in 1959, still ring true today with more urgency. She expresses, "I feel it a privilege to have been brought into contact with a religion which may before long become extinct."¹³² Similarly, Segelberg (1958), in addressing the issue of the lack of the "proper description of the entire rite" of baptism, he asserts, "which we cannot be provided until we have had an opportunity to study carefully the living tradition of a dying sect."¹³³ Moreover, Buckley, in her visit to the Mandaean community in Iran in 1996, was the first scholar who wrote about the memories of a massacre, which is a part of the systematic persecutions carried out by Muslims that the Mandaean have endured for most of their

¹³² E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandeans*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959, VIII.

¹³³ Segelberg, *masbuta*, 19.

history. This massacre occurred during the 1870s, and was saved by their oral tradition. Buckley stood on the site of the massacre where, “many Mandaean die, and those who are able to flee know that their fellow religionists have been thrown into wells and drowned. A calculated, cruel death for baptists!”¹³⁴

To the Mandaean community, at this critical juncture of the Mandaean existence, it is imperative that the Mandaean community and the priests recognize the necessity to consider allowing the “half” Mandaean, especially those who have Mandaean mothers, to be baptized and become legitimate and active members in their communities, if they chose to do so. During similar times, in the past, the Madaeans had to take drastic measures to ensure the survival of the religion and the community. In the words of the copyist, Yahia Bihram’s, hidden in the colophon of the scroll, *Masbuta d Hibil Ziwa (The Baptism of Hibil Ziwa)*, he describes that in 1831, during the cholera epidemic that wiped out all the priests, how some of the learned Mandaean in the affected area “consecrated one another, one by one as priests. And one (priest) gave the other “pure oil” and they performed a marriage.”¹³⁵ An act that is not allowed religiously under regular circumstances, in this case, contributed and ensured the continual existence of the religion to the present time.

In addition, the same copyist, recalls a time when the head of a Muslim tribe leader in their area circumcised all the Madaeans by force, “male and female, boys and girls” against their will and their religious norms prohibit circumcision. The copyist asserts, “those souls the tribe circumcised we took them in with us by baptism and marriage. For every fear, not a person could go out on the roads, for if one did go out, they would circumcise him. For that

¹³⁴Buckley, *The Madaeans*, 6.

¹³⁵Drower, *Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa*, 87-88.

reason, we received them and took them in with us.”¹³⁶ Those were the wise and courageous souls who understood and faced the danger of extinction of their religion and tradition with pragmatic and decisive actions, which is the exact action we need to take in our current situation in diaspora today.

After doing the research for this paper, I am faced with the harsh reality that, at this point, scholarly research and in- depth study of the Mandaean theology, gnostic elements, and the practice of baptism, though important, it is not enough to bring this dying community, language, and religion to life. In order for the research to be effective, it needs to be accompanied by activism and community work on many levels.

¹³⁶ Drower, *Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa*, 90.

Glossary

<i>Abathur</i>	The celestial being who weighs souls after death in his balance against the soul of Seth.
<i>Drabša</i>	Banner, Representative of the light used during baptism.
<i>Ganzibra</i>	The second level of the Mandaean priesthood.
<i>Ginza</i>	Treasure, The Mandaean holy book
<i>Habšaba</i>	Sunday
<i>Hibil –Ziwa</i>	The angel (Uthra) of light, the first messenger and the savior.
<i>Hayyi</i>	“Life”, The living God.
<i>Klela</i>	A small wreath of myrtle used in baptism.
<i>Kušta</i>	Truth, promise, a ritual handgrip, the hand of honor.
<i>Malka br malkia</i>	A king son of kings.
<i>Malwašia</i>	Baptismal name
<i>Mambuha</i>	Sacramental water.
<i>Mana</i>	A vessel, garment, intelligence, mind, thought, heart, spirit, being.
<i>Manda</i>	Gnosis, Knowledge
<i>Manda d Hayyi</i>	The Gnosis of life, the father of the Uthri.
<i>Masbuta</i>	Baptism
<i>Masiqta</i>	“The rising up”, spiritual ceremony to aid the ascent of the soul.
<i>Mergna</i>	A ritual staff made of olive tree branch.
<i>Mšuna kušta</i>	The world of ideal counterpart in the light world.
<i>Nišhimta</i>	The soul.
<i>Pihta</i>	Sacramental Bread.
<i>Rasta</i>	Baptismal White garment.
<i>Rišama</i>	Daily ritual ablution.
<i>Ruha</i>	The vital spirit
<i>Tarmitha</i>	The first level of the Mandaean priesthood.
<i>Uthra</i> (pl. <i>Uthri</i>)	Angel, heavenly spirit of light.
<i>Yardna</i> (pl. <i>Yardni</i>)	The Jordan, living water.
<i>Yohana</i>	John, John the Baptist.

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