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**The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora:
New Opportunities to Reach Iraqi Mandaean Refugees with the Gospel**

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To my mother, Elaine Newcomb,
who gave me a love for learning by modeling life-long learning

To my husband Verne,
who has also modeled life-long learning and
who has been my supporter, encourager and advocate

ABSTRACT

The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora: New Opportunities to Reach Iraqi Mandaean Refugees with the Gospel

Introduction

This thesis argues that the status of Iraqi Mandaeans, who are fleeing their native country and becoming refugees by the thousands, presents an unprecedented opportunity for the gospel message. The Great Commission requires taking the gospel message to every people group in the world. However, the Mandaeans have been an inaccessible sect until the present time.

The Thesis

This thesis evaluates the current situation of Mandaeans through academic journals and books, consultation with missionaries to Mandaeans, and interviews with Mandaean refugees. As a result of their physical isolation, deep within the Muslim world of Iraq and Iran, and their philosophical isolation, based on their emphasis on secret truths, the Mandaean sect has not previously been exposed to the gospel. This thesis argues that their unique status as refugees has created the first opportunity in centuries for Mandaeans to have the opportunity to hear the gospel.

The evaluation of the Mandaeans' potential receptivity toward the gospel is evaluated based on five comparative categories by which religious motivations and ethics can be understood. These categories are: history and origins of the religion; membership and community; authority and organization; rituals and holidays; and signs and symbols. The history and origin of Mandaeanism is broken into two parts. The first investigates Mandaeanism's relationship to the Gnosticism of the first through third centuries AD. The second evaluates the syncretic adaptations of Mandaeanism to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Conclusion

The Mandaeans, a historically inaccessible people group, is in an unparalleled, unique situation to receive the truth of the gospel message due to the diaspora currently taking place.

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CHAPTER ONE—INTRODUCTION

Section 1. Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The unrest in the Middle East has brought unprecedented opportunities to reach the “unreached” for Christ. The Mandeans, a small Gnostic sect located primarily in Iraq, are classified as a one of over sixty five hundred “unreached people groups.” Being classified as “unreached” by mission organizations means that less than two percent of the population is identified as evangelical Christians. It is a “people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize the group.”¹ Two percent of the indigenous population has been used by the Joshua Project as the minimum percentage of a population necessary in order to impact the entire group.²

¹ Joshua Project, “Arab, Najda Bedouin of Iraq,” <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopctry.php?rop3=101196&rog3=IZ>. The Joshua Project provides information on people groups that have the least exposure to the Gospel and the least Christian presence in their midst. The organization compiles and updates the work of missions researchers in order to bring definition to the unfinished task of the Great Commission to accelerate the Gospel’s impact into each of the least-reached people groups. This information is provided to mission agencies to assist as they develop their strategies to reach the lost.

² The International Congress for World Evangelism met in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974 and was comprised of 2400 representatives of mission agencies, academia and missionaries. At this conference, the framework was developed to look at missions from a strategic viewpoint that targeted specific people groups for mission efforts. A “people group” is a “significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity to one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the largest possible group within which the Gospel can spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance. . . (An unreached people group is) a people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.” (Edward Dayton, Samuel Wilson, ed. , *The Refugees Among Us*, [Elgin, IL.: Cook,1983], 499.) The initial definition of unreached people groups suggested that less than 20% of the population is indigenous, practicing Christians. This 20% figure was arbitrarily selected, and since the 1980s, has gradually gone down to the 2% used currently by the Joshua Project and other mission organizations.

The use of “Unreached Peoples” . . . is now making major changes in mission strategic thinking. . . . Mission does not mean going to *places* but to *peoples*, unreached peoples, to be precise – wherever representatives of such people are. . . . Missions is a specialized kind of evangelism, the kind that is a “first penetration” into a group that might otherwise never have a chance at all.³

The “unreached” status of the Mandaeans comes first from their geographic isolation in Iraq, historically making them physically inaccessible to missionary efforts. Second, their hostility to outsiders has prevented influence even from Arab Christians within Iraq. Third, their Gnostic belief system has been relatively unknown to Christian organizations even to the present time. Thus, usual methods of evangelism have not penetrated this sect. Their belief system is not an aberration of Judeo-Christian doctrines, nor is it a derivation of any of the major world religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or even tribal and animistic practices. Because the Mandaean beliefs are in a category of their own and because of their traditional isolation from and hostility toward outsiders, reaching them has been intellectually and geographically virtually impossible.

The quest to discover *who* the Mandaeans are is not easily satisfied because, first, ascertaining the name of the sect is a challenge. For every name, there are different spellings; for every spelling, there are different groups, some of which have no relationship to the people of this study. The names used include: Sabia Al-Mandaean, usually shortened to Sabian; Sabaeen; Subba (meaning baptizers, those who immerse themselves in water); Sabba; Mendaia or Mendai; Sabbi; and St. John Christians, later corrected to John the Baptist rather than the Apostle John.⁴

³ Ralph Winter, “Editorial,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (Apr 1991): 2, 4.

⁴ Jody Miller, Email to Karen Baker, 25 Jan 2006; Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), “Islamic historians referred to all pagans as ‘Sabaeans.’” 85; 67. “The Mandaeans have always played up the similarity in sound between *subba* and *sabiah* (as referenced in the *Qur’an*) in order to obtain a much-desired recognition from the local (Muslim) lords.” 88; 95. Sabbi is the name used by the Arabs and Persians for this people. 73, 75, 84, 87. These names are all the more confused by the willingness of the Mandaeans to rewrite their history based on the favor/oppression that might be facing them. In fact, it was the Portuguese who aligned the Mandaeans with John the Baptist, “since in their rituals, together with their name and the appearance of

Part of the reason for this confusion is the secretive nature of the people themselves. Although some have revealed “secrets” to various authors, the information is not always consistent. Even within the sect, knowledge of beliefs, practices, and history among its adherents is neither widely understood nor consistent. Their self-identification varies based on the listener. To someone they consider unfriendly, they will call themselves one of the various forms of Sabaeans, but within their community and to friendly outsiders, they identify themselves as Mandaeans.⁵ This thesis will refer to this people group as “Mandaean” unless a direct quote uses another name.

Second, further complicating the matter is the fact that “Mandaean” refers to one who both belongs to a specific ethnic group and adheres to a specific religious belief. When Mandaeans abandon their “specific religious identity, they cease to exist as a separate ethnic group.”⁶ Thus, finding Mandaeans who may have converted to another religion is difficult as they may no longer respond to the ethnicity of Mandaeanism in a census. When noted scholar J. J. Buckley visited Iran in 1996 one of the Mandaeans thanked her for telling Muslim scholars and students about Mandaeans and their plight. “His statement says something about the responsibilities of a scholar to a people beset by internal and external perils and astonished that any outsider knows about them at all.”⁷ The Mandaeans have lived in seclusion for centuries. The world around them, primarily Muslim, has had little influence on their ancient practices. However, they are currently facing a diaspora of their people throughout the world. In the past

Christianity, there have mixed together many superstitious ceremonies that have a Jewish air about them.” Lupieri, 87.

⁵ Wisam Lazim, interviewed by author 16 Oct 2006.

⁶ J. J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 5.

⁷ J. J. Buckley, “With the Mandaeans in Iran,” *Religious Studies News* 11.3, American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature (Sept 1996): 11. Mandaean scholar Jorunn Buckley traveled to visit the Iranian Mandaean community in 1996 on an AAR research grant, and has since described her visits with Mandaeans in many articles, culminating her observations in *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People*.

sixteen years, the two wars in Iraq have had the potential of bringing not only physical freedom, but also spiritual freedom to the Iraqi Mandeans. The Persian Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991), and the Iraq War, Operation Freedom (2003-present), have produced the largest diaspora of Mandeans in history. Persecution of this people group began with Saddam Hussein's forces. In the aftermath of his government's demise, Muslims have persistently kidnapped, raped, assaulted, murdered, and terrorized Mandeans. Threats and forced conversions by Muslim terrorists have resulted in many Mandeans fleeing Iraq. Clashes between other groups in Iraq, such as the Kurds and the Arabs of northern Iraq, have left the Mandeans homeless and hopeless. "As far as the Mandeans are concerned, the insecurity and unfamiliarity of a life in exile and permanent separation from their homeland is preferable to going back to Iraq. . . . It is impossible for the time being for them to go home. The risk is too great."⁸

For most who flee Iraq, the first stop is Amman, Jordan, a country that has welcomed refugees awaiting relocation to other parts of the world, such as Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.⁹ The Jordanian government does not allow Christian efforts toward its own Muslim population; however, since it does not provide services to refugees, Jordan welcomes humanitarian and Christian efforts to assist refugees with basic needs such as education and health care. This creates an opportunity to bring Christ's love to the Mandeans without governmental interference and perhaps in an environment that encourages them to be open to the gospel. In fact, after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Christian missionaries reported that more Iraqi refugees in Amman came to faith in Jesus Christ than the total

⁸ Sarah Reinke, "Mandeans in Iraq," <http://www.gfbv.de/inhaltsDok.php?id=694> (Mar 2006): 8.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

evangelical Christian population of Jordan.¹⁰

Refugees are a growing population around the globe and represent opportunities for the gospel that might not otherwise be available. In fact, the crises that often create refugees are becoming more visible and compelling throughout the world, representing opportunities for which Christians must be prepared. Recent examples include wars, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and other natural disasters.

War can sometimes bring hope to the oppressed. Such has been the case for the Mandeans who have lived in a closed society for centuries. Since the late twentieth century, Mandeans have joined the thousands of Iraqis who have left their homeland in search of refuge in other countries.

Published reports indicate that before the current conflict in Iraq, there were between 250,000 and 300,000 Iraqis in Jordan, although officials acknowledge that this is a conservative estimate.¹¹ “The number of Iraqis could be much higher since Iraqis in Jordan doubt the benefits of registering with the UNHCR (United Nation’s High Commissioner for Refugees) and therefore fail to do so.”¹² At the height of the Iraqi refugee situation in Amman, there were nearly one million Iraqis in Amman, which supplemented the 1.2 million Jordanian population of Amman.¹³ Most refugees desire to return to their homeland, as did most of the Shiite Muslims who had left under Saddam Hussein’s regime. Of the Iraqis in Jordan before Operation Freedom in 2002, only 5000 refugees were awaiting resettlement to another safe country. Jordan’s

¹⁰ Donald M Eenigenburg, Christar, correspondence to author, 24 Jul 2006.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, “Flight from Iraq: Attacks on Refugees and other Foreigners and their Treatment in Jordan,” 15.4 (May 2003): 14.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Amal Bejjani, former missionary to Iraqi refugees in Amman, Jordan, 1991-2002, currently working among Iraqi refugees in Lincoln, NE. Telephone interview by author 07 Mar 05; Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 326.

agreement since 1998 has been to grant temporary asylum to refugees “for a maximum period of six months, after which they become illegal aliens, subject to daily fines and at risk of forced deportation back to Iraq. The *de facto* presence of refugees waiting for resettlement is tolerated by the authorities pending their departure, although they have no permission to work and they are subject to regular roundups.”¹⁴

When Saddam Hussein’s government was toppled in 2003, the Shiites returned to Iraq from Jordan in vast numbers. However, they were quickly replaced by Kurds, Sunnis, and Christians who now dominate the Iraqi refugee population in Amman.¹⁵ Very few evangelical Christians are among the refugees, though there are reportedly over ten evangelical churches and over 300 house churches in Baghdad.¹⁶ The religious beliefs of the most recent refugees in Amman are mixed: about fifty percent are Christian and about fifty percent are Muslim. Mandaeans are among those identified as “Christian,” although Mandaean beliefs bear little resemblance to Christian beliefs.

Most Iraqi refugees arrive in Amman with intact families and often with extended family members. Though on occasion men will leave ahead of their families to scope out opportunities, pave the way for emigration to other countries, or secure living quarters, most have fled Iraq as a family unit, taking as many of their possessions as they can carry.

In the refugee community, the playing field is leveled and the usual tensions and conflicts among various sectors of Iraqi society seem to be non-existent. In fact, these differences may be emphasized more in the press than actually exist in real life. “People groups have been played

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch.

¹⁵ The category of “Christians” from the Human Rights Watch includes Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Sabeans (Mandaeans).

¹⁶ Johnstone, 307, 308.

against one another, especially throughout the Ottoman rule through World War I, in order to maintain authority and control over these occupied lands. The British continued this method of control until they left after World War II.”¹⁷

The social structures of refugee communities are often completely broken down. Safety and trust are lacking. There is distrust among members of the community, who fear traitors or informants. There is even more intense distrust toward foreigners, especially Westerners. There is also distrust toward the host country. Language barriers often add to the distrust, as they present an obstacle to building relationships.

Fear is pervasive among refugees: fear of the past experience in their native country; fear of military reprisals; fear of intimidation; fear of being forced to return to imprisonment or death in their home country; fear of an uncertain future.¹⁸ Additionally, there is an “alarming tendency for exiles to become long-term, if not permanent. This dehumanizes [people], uproots [them] from their cultural milieu, leaves them in constant insecurity and leads to intractable social and security problems.”¹⁹

The needs of all refugees, regardless of country of origin, religion, sect, occupation, education, or social status, are reduced to basic existence. The refugees in Amman live in very poor, substandard conditions. They are not allowed to work legally. Health care is non-existent. Food is scarce; water is even scarcer. Education is unavailable. Fear is rampant. Hope is illusive for refugees as their dignity, self-identity, safety, and security have all been ravaged.

The strategies used by missionaries for refugees as a group take precedence over strategies for a specific religious or people group since they are all in the same community and,

¹⁷ Bejjani.

¹⁸ Paul Flamm, “Refugee Ministry: Towards Healing and Reconciliation,” *Mission Studies* 15.01 (1998): 101.

¹⁹ Michael Blume, “Refugees and Mission: A Primer,” *Mission Studies* 17.01 (Jan 2000): 169.

facing many of the same issues, can potentially be reached with similar strategies. Outreach efforts that are culturally relevant, combined with a high degree of creative flexibility, are most effective in any given area. “Any strategy should focus on reaching a people within the context of their needs rather than on the basis of preconceived methodologies. . . . Evangelization always takes place in the context of needs.”²⁰

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to provide descriptive information to assist missionaries and mission agencies in understanding this unreached people group, the Mandaeans. The current dispersion of Mandaeans offers a window of opportunity to reach individual Iraqi Mandaean refugees with the gospel, first in Amman, Jordan, and then throughout the world. This thesis considers information from representative academic sources, consultation with missionaries directly involved with the Mandaeans, and discussions with Mandaeans who have converted to Christianity. The results of this research will be provided to mission agencies and missionaries in order to better equip the bearers of the gospel who have the potential of connecting with Mandaean refugees in the Middle East or wherever their migration takes them. Since Gnostic beliefs, and specifically Mandaean beliefs, are significantly different from what a Western evangelical Christian would normally encounter among Western non-believers, this thesis provides a description of their beliefs and practices and discusses how these factors could be used to initiate a conversation about Biblical truths.

The Mandaeans, a sect that dates back to at least the first and second centuries after

²⁰ Lilly A Takona, “Strategies for Muslim Evangelization,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 15.1 (1996): 55, 56.

Christ, have lived in southern Iraq and in one province of Iran.²¹ They are mentioned in the *Qur'an* as Sabians.²² The *Qur'an* provides for *ahl al-kitab*, which is tolerance toward ‘people of the Book,’ “people who profess a religion recognized by Islam to have been of divine origin.”²³ To be *ahl al-kitab* requires monotheism and a holy or divine book. The Mandaeans produced a written copy of their prayers and rituals in the *Ginza* and thus qualified as *ahl al-kitab* in the mid-seventh century.²⁴

As the only surviving, practicing Gnostic group, the Mandaeans have been the subject of investigation regarding their origins and the influence of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity on their beliefs. Since they are a closed sect, allowing no converts and having little to do with the outside world, information about this group has been unavailable until about the nineteenth century when several of their writings were translated from their original, ancient language. Similarly, physical access to the sect has not been possible in their native locales in Iraq or Iran. Buckley noted, after her 1996 visit with Iranian Mandaeans, that “No scholar from the outside had come to visit the Mandaeans . . . since the 1930’s. Most were amazed that someone in the outside world would know their religion.”²⁵

Though the Mandaeans are a small part of the total population of unreached peoples

²¹ Some sources suggest the Mandaeans are of a pre-Christian origin, but most seem to agree with the second or third century origin.

²² Although a people named Sabians are mentioned in several passages of the Old Testament, they are not related to the people group under discussion. The biblical Sabians, antagonists of God’s people, were from the area of present-day Yemen.

²³ M. A. Muhibbu-Din, “Ahl Al-Kitab and Religious Minorities in the Islamic State: Historical Context and Contemporary Challenges,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20.1 (April, 2000): 111.

²⁴ The *Ginza* is the Mandaean holy book, divided into two parts, the right and the left. The first part, or *Right Ginza*, contains cosmogonies, legends of creation, prayers, and mythology. The second part, or *Left Ginza*, is written upside down and deals exclusively with the dead. E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1937), 24.

²⁵ Buckley, “With the Mandaeans in Iran,” 9.

throughout the world, Christians are commanded to bring the gospel to *every* nation (emphasis added) (Mt 28:19).²⁶ Given the unprecedented opportunity to reach Iraqi Mandaean refugees, the more we can understand about their culture and their belief system, the greater the possibility of reaching them with the gospel. The greatest challenge in the past has been the physical inaccessibility of this people group. With the current diaspora, the physical barriers that have existed in the Middle East are eliminated, at least for the immediate future. The window of opportunity to reach the unreached Madaeans is open now and presents opportunities to bring the gospel to them. This thesis presents an effort to use this circumstance wisely in order to see them among the multitudes surrounding the throne of the King (Rev. 7:9).

Statement of Importance of Problem

Reaching every nation with the gospel is the mandate of Jesus to His followers (Mt. 28:19). Therefore, the opportunity to reach a people group that has been formerly unreachable for geographic and philosophic reasons makes this quest of extreme importance. Additionally, the dispersion of the Iraqi Madaeans throughout the world makes the opportunity even more urgent. They themselves are in a unique position to evangelize other Iraqis and especially other Madaeans. Additionally, their ethnicity creates greater opportunities for them to bring to the gospel to the Arabic peoples both in the Middle East and throughout the world. Therefore, the modest population numbers must be viewed in light of the potential represented by this people group to reach others from the Arab culture of the Middle East.

The population of Madaeans is difficult to estimate for three reasons: 1) conflicting and unavailable information; 2) identification of Madaeans who are no longer in Iraq or the Middle

²⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible references are from *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973).

East; 3) lack of clarity regarding the identity of Mandaeans who have left the sect. Specific population estimates are hard to arrive at but Mandaean scholar Buckley estimates the world-wide population of Mandaeans to be less than 100,000 in 2006.²⁷ Mandaean-sponsored websites indicate a world-wide population in 2000 of 38,000.²⁸ The Association of Mandaeans “reckons the number of believers worldwide to be approximately 60,000.”²⁹ Two Christian missionary web-sites indicate similar estimates ranging from 31,000-61,000 in Iran and Iraq.³⁰ Further, the British BBC news service estimates that “there are only 13,000 Mandaeans still left in Iran and Iraq.”³¹

Population distribution is even harder to obtain due to unrest in Iraq and Iran, and emigration patterns that are difficult to track.³² The predominant countries to which Mandaean refugees have immigrated include Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and America. Within the United States, there are small groups of Mandaeans in Michigan, California, and Florida.³³ Finally, the term “Mandaean” refers both to one who belongs to a specific ethnic group *and* to one who adheres to a specific religious belief. Their ethnicity is tied to their religion, and if one leaves the sect, he is no longer considered ethnically “Mandaean.”³⁴

²⁷ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 6; Buckley, email correspondence to author, 25 Feb 06.

²⁸ Mandaean World, “Population Figures: Documented Sources,” <http://www.mandaeanworld.com/who4.html>.

²⁹ Reinke, 4.

³⁰ Joshua Project.

³¹ Reinke, 6.

³² Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 6.

³³ Bejanni, 27 Feb. 2006.

³⁴ Lupieri, 5.

Statement of Position on the Problem

The assumption of this thesis is that the Iraqi Mandaeans, as refugees, are presently in a unique position to receive the gospel message.³⁵ Their situation of dislocation and dispersion as refugees and the disruption of their previously closed community, while lamentable in itself, may have a positive result in that it tends to make them more sensitive to spiritual truths. By equipping Christians with current, reliable information, access to the Iraqi Mandaean refugees with the gospel message tailored to their needs and philosophical viewpoint will be enhanced.

Limitations

The Mandaeans are a Gnostic sect, originating in the early centuries after the ascension of Christ. There are extensive writings on Gnosticism, and the literature about the Mandaeans is growing continually. In spite of this, there is little first-hand knowledge of this people group, save the extensive research done by Lady Drower in the 1940s and by Buckley in the last thirty years. Of particular interest is Buckley's latest book, *Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People*, in which she describes her visits with Mandaeans in Iraq and in America. From the viewpoint of those sympathetic to the Mandaean plight, however, the academic inquiries have not been helpful. "Academics interested in the Mandaeans already to some extent treat them as a subject of historic study and do very little to help save the small faith community" from extinction.³⁶

From a Christian Missiological perspective, none of these writings answer the question of how to present an opportunity to Mandaean people to know the one truth, Jesus Christ. While

³⁵ This is particularly true in their initial state of being in "limbo," not really knowing where or when they will be resettled, still grieving over the loss of their native home and surroundings. Once they are resettled, they become more complacent spiritually, reverting to prior practices and beliefs.

³⁶ Reinke, 8.

serious scholarly efforts have been devoted to uncovering their origin, the date of origin, the location of origin, and their belief systems and rituals, no sources have evaluated the opportunities for the gospel created by the Mandaeans' status as refugees and their dispersion throughout the world. The literature is either completely objective in its intensive academic investigation to uncover various elements of this secret belief system, or it is clearly enamored by the idea of understanding the only remaining Gnostic sect. In fact, the most prolific Mandaean scholar of today, Buckley, is distressed that converts are not allowed to enter this sect, as she feels the Mandaeans do indeed have the secret ultimate truth, and she apparently wants to share in this secret.³⁷

Section 2. Method

Descriptive information will be presented to explain the beliefs, history, and current situation of the Mandaeans. The extensive literature available has been evaluated related to the origins, beliefs, and practices of the Mandaeans. However, for purposes of this thesis, the literature is somewhat limited due to its focus and perspective on the ancient religion compared with current beliefs and practice. Literature regarding refugees and their inclination to the gospel message has also been reviewed. Additionally, and most importantly, information suited to the purpose of this thesis has been discovered in consultation with current missionaries and in interviews with Mandaeans who are refugees or have emigrated from Iraq to North America. Comparative charts, delineating similarities and differences between the Mandaean beliefs and practices and other religions enhance and clarify information regarding this sect.

³⁷ The prohibition of conversion into the sect by choice or marriage is due to the fact that Mandaeans believe they are the only people who have been endowed with a spark divinity at birth, and marriage outside the sect would dilute their relationship to the Supreme Being. This is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

Section 3. Proposed Development of Thesis

Proposed Chapter Divisions/Summary Arguments

The chapters are divided according to five categories by which all religious movements can be compared and contrasted. By understanding each of these categories, one can gain a good understanding of the motivation and ethic of the belief system.³⁸ These categories then provide the basis for developing an apologetic to the Mandaeans.

Chapter One—Introduction

The introductory chapter states the problem, purpose of the research, importance of the problem, the author's position on the problem, and the limitations of the research. It follows the outline provided in the Liberty University *Graduate Studies Handbook* for the School of Religion. Though this is a relatively small people group, a unique and unprecedented opportunity exists to reach them due to their status as refugees and their dispersion throughout the world.

Chapter Two—History and Sources: Gnosticism

Chapter two develops the first category of understanding a belief system by evaluating the basic tenets of Mandaism's parent philosophy, Gnosticism. By reviewing its history and sources, one can understand how a sect explains its beliefs. There are many similarities between Gnosticism and Mandaism in defining their beliefs and determining their origin. A summary of the main characteristics of Gnosticism prepares the foundation for understanding Mandaism's characteristics.

Chapter Three—History and Sources: Mandaism

Chapter three draws on the foundation developed in Chapter Two, presenting

³⁸ Ergun Caner, "Global Apologetics," Liberty Theological Seminary lecture, Lynchburg, VA. Mar 2006.

Mandaism's continued use of Gnostic themes. It then describes the influence of three major world religions on Mandaism's development, including Judaism, Christianity, with a focus on the influence of Roman Catholicism, and Islam. Charts provide a visual comparison of each of these religions with Mandaism. Tracing how the beliefs and practices of these religions have been syncretized into Mandaean beliefs and practices illustrates the potential bridges that can be developed in discussing spiritual matters with Mandaeans.

Chapter Four—Membership and Community

Chapter four addresses the membership and community of the Mandaeans and describes the process of salvation from the earthly world to the eternal Lightworld. This section deals with how the community is being maintained despite the current fragility of the community due to the dispersion of Mandaeans around the world. For Christians, membership and community are defined by salvation and sanctification, which is open to anyone regardless of birth or other circumstances. The lack of conversion opportunities to Mandaism, due to its exclusivity and secrecy, will be compared with conversion opportunities to Christianity. Understanding the emotional needs of the Iraqi Mandaean refugee, particularly from the context of an exclusivistic, isolationist community, will assist in meeting their physical and emotional needs while seeking opportunities to meet their spiritual needs.

Chapter Five—Authority and Organization

Chapter five presents the authority and organization of the Mandaeans by looking at the priestly caste and its hierarchy. This category deals with how the group is organized, its hierarchy, and how the community works together. In Christianity, this is the equivalent of ecclesiology. This chapter describes the significance of the role of the priestly class in maintaining the organization, and discusses the ordination process, particularly compared with

the Levitical system of the ancient Jews, demonstrating the syncretization of the Jewish system into the Mandaean system. It also discusses the role of John the Baptist in the Mandaean belief system. Finally, the dispersion's effects on the authority and organization of the Mandaean community are presented.

Chapter Six—Rituals and Holidays

Chapter six presents the rituals and holidays of the Mandaeans, including baptism, weddings, funerals, and holidays. Every religious movement has holidays and/or sacred rituals that are exclusive to its members. This section describes how the group acts and celebrates together. In Christianity, this is referred to as worship and ethics. The connection between the living and the dead is emphasized in each Mandaean ritual, as well as the heavy responsibility of individuals to earn their salvation to the Lightworld (their term for the afterlife in the skies) through repeated baptisms.³⁹

Chapter Seven—Signs and Symbols

Chapter seven discusses the signs and symbols of the Mandaeans. This chapter describes the significance of mythology, legends, and visions in the Mandaean understanding of the supernatural. In Christianity, evangelism is often identified by symbols of the cross or the fish on clothing, buildings and jewelry. Mandaean symbols include the *dropsa*, which is often worn in the form of a pendant and looks similar to the Christian cross, and the *skandola*. Mandaeans, who are jewelers by tradition, make and wear jewelry using the *dropsa* as a pendant to bring good fortune. The *skandola* is an instrument of magical powers used by the priests to bring peace and protection. The signs and symbols of the Mandaeans illustrate their approach to the supernatural world and how they hope to manipulate situations with magic.

³⁹ See Chapters 3 and 4 for more on the Lightworld.

Chapter Eight—Conclusion: Opportunities

Chapter eight concludes the thesis by identifying the conditions that have proven effective in sharing the gospel with Iraqi Mandaean refugees. It provides strategies and methods for ministry based on the experiences of missionaries and converts. The testimony of the conversion of a former Mandaean concludes this thesis.

Section 4. Review of the Literature

Research Sources

Extensive research and review of available journal articles, books, essays, and dissertations has been completed, in addition to lecture notes and consultation and correspondence with experts in the field. International statistical information and mission organization analyses have been obtained through the internet. Additionally, information obtained in consultation with missionaries to Iraqi refugees, as well as first-hand experiences of individual Mandaean Iraqi refugees, is presented.

Section 5. Results

Document

A document that accurately reflects present-day opportunities and challenges for ministry to Iraqi Mandaean will be provided to the Joshua Project and made available to other mission agencies.

Information

Information will be shared with mission agencies and missionaries who are ministering to Mandeans in the diasporas of Jordan, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada.

Conclusion

Though their numbers are small, it is imperative to see the Mandeans as among those for whom Christ died. Their presence in Amman, Jordan as refugees from Iraq, and their dispersion throughout the world, makes them more accessible and inclined to the gospel. The break-up of their community, the lack of access to flowing water and priests for baptism, and their predisposition to some tenets similar to Christianity, such as baptism and the return of the “judge” at the end of the age, afford bridges of opportunity to discuss spiritual matters. The physical movement of Iraqi Mandeans from their centuries-old habitat has exposed them to new and different things. This has resulted in the accusation by Iranian Mandeans that the Iraqi Mandeans are relaxing the rules, making them more susceptible to modern, secular ideas.⁴⁰ It is true that exposure to new information may have the effect of changing their viewpoints and their beliefs. This is especially true of those who are refugees. Having felt the love of Christ through Christians has resulted in conversions from true darkness to true light. Thus, the unique opportunity presented by the current diaspora of Mandeans should not be ignored, but pursued with diligence, integrity, and urgency.

⁴⁰ Buckley, *The Mandeans*, 66.

CHAPTER TWO—HISTORY AND SOURCES: Gnosticism

Introduction

Gnosticism is the parent philosophy of Mandaism. Thus, understanding Mandaism is enhanced by studying the history and sources that contributed to its development. Gnosticism is generally considered to be one among many false doctrines that the early Christians faced in the centuries after Christ. However, it is not a single entity with clearly defined beliefs. Since about the fourth century, the issue of Gnosticism has lain dormant. Beginning in the nineteenth century, stimulated by the interest of the History of Religions School in Germany, research of Gnosticism became in vogue and with it emerged several controversies.

The School promulgated “Gnosticism as a discrete religion, older than Christianity and surviving among the Mandaeans of modern times.”⁴¹ They saw it as a “pre-Christian phenomenon with its roots in the Orient.”⁴² Buckley claims that the term gnosticism “indeed, starts to look very much like a predominantly German invention, an unwieldy creature squeezed into rigid analytical systems.”⁴³

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices in 1945-1946 intensified speculation regarding this belief system, as scholars have attempted to identify Gnosticism’s origin, define its characteristics, and uncover its relationship with Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other Near

⁴¹ M. J. Edwards, review of *What is Gnosticism?*, by Karen L. King, *Journal of Theological Studies* 56.01 (2005): 198.

⁴² Ingvild Gilhus, review of *What is Gnosticism?*, by Karen L. King, *Numen* 51.02 (2006): 211.

⁴³ J. J. Buckley, review of *What is Gnosticism?*, by Karen L. King, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.02 (2006): 547.

Eastern and Eastern Religions. However, it does not appear that much light has been shed on the subject, and these fifty-odd manuscripts clearly “do not fit habitual categories.”⁴⁴ “After 1600 years of silence the Gnostics finally speak back. Alas, they do not speak with one tongue, but with several, and they say almost nothing about who they were.”⁴⁵ Rather than answering questions, the “texts instead present a new problem – a complex variety of theological orientations, none orthodox and yet many not quite Gnostic.”⁴⁶

Karen L. King, author of *What is Gnosticism?*, provides an in-depth look at the history and development of this belief system in the twentieth century. She contends that there is no such thing as Gnosticism, in spite of the Nag Hammadi discovery, and she goes to great lengths to urge abolishment of the term in scholarly circles. King apparently disagrees with scholars who believe that the Nag Hammadi Codices have indeed provided evidence of a “belief system with its own prayers, creeds, and worship.”⁴⁷ That “the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library casts new light on the questions of definition and Gnostic origins” was the theme of the 1983 Springfield Seminar.⁴⁸ The 1945 discovery provided new source material, but also raised new questions. The historical period of these manuscripts has been determined ca. 350 C.E., but the users of these documents are still a mystery; though the dating of individual texts is unknown,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 548.

⁴⁵ Gilhus, 212.

⁴⁶ Paul A. Mirecki, review of *What is Gnosticism?*, by Karen L. King, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67.02. (2006): 350.

⁴⁷ Paul Roren, review of *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles W Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15.03 (2006): 286.

⁴⁸ Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. ed. *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986), 7. The 1983 Springfield, Missouri Working Seminar on Gnosticism and Early Christianity, March 30-April 2, 1983, concentrated exclusively on the relationship between Gnosticism and early Christianity.

the papyrus manuscripts are from the mid-fourth century CE. And because the find contains manuscripts with no evidence of Christian influence,

it demonstrates beyond question that gnosticism was not simply a Christian heresy . . . While there may be no extant Gnostic manuscripts from the early first century CE to show that there existed a pre-Christian gnosticism in a *chronological* sense, these texts clearly demonstrate the existence of pre-Christian gnosticism in an *ideological* sense. Such hard evidence presents a previously unavailable avenue for investigating the interaction between Christianity and its Gnostic opponents.⁴⁹

In contrast, Rudolph claims that “the entire corpus seems to have been collected and used by Christian Gnostics.”⁵⁰

Since the first few centuries after Christ, there is no evidence of a legacy of Gnosticism in the world, save the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, who number less than 100,000 (probably closer to less than 50,000) and whose writings and practices seem to be traced to first and second century Gnostic characteristics as they are understood today. “As biblical Christianity was more clearly understood, Gnosticism’s inadequacies became more apparent and eventually they yielded to the force of the strong logic which Christian orthodoxy represented.”⁵¹ Riemer Roukema, noted author on Gnosticism and its role in early Christian history, “demonstrates that the main Gnostic themes simply could not compete with their orthodox rivals.”⁵²

Definitional Controversies

Defining Gnosticism has been a major challenge in studying this belief system. King argues that Gnosticism is a “rhetorical term which has been confused with a historical entity.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵⁰ Kurt Rudolph, “Gnosticism” in *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600* ed. W. H. C. Frend and Ian Hazlett, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 191.

⁵¹ Gerald Bray, review of *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity: An Introduction to Gnosticism*, by Riemer Roukema, *Churchman* 114 (2000): 93.

⁵² Ibid.

There was and is no such thing as Gnosticism, if we mean by that some kind of ancient religious entity with a single origin and a distinct set of characteristics. . . . The term ‘Gnosticism’ was first used by Henry More in 1669. . . . The term ‘knowledge’ is translated from the Greek word *gnosis*, but in Gnosticism it has come to stand for false knowledge, in short, for heresy” against the Orthodox Church.⁵³

Until the twentieth century, scholars seemed to understand Gnosticism with one accord. However, in 1966, a major conclave of international academicians met in Messina, Italy, for the purpose of discovering Gnosticism’s origin and defining the essence of Gnosticism in order to align their collective understanding and their individual research. The outcome was that there was no clear definition to which they could all agree. The only agreement that came out of that conference was the differentiation between the “general term ‘gnosis,’ which was taken to mean ‘knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite,’ and ‘gnosticism,’ which was applied to a more specific assortment of religious systems or sects who are historically attested beginning in the second century C.E.”⁵⁴ Yamauchi believes that those who define Gnosticism very narrowly “do not find conclusive evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism, whereas those scholars who operate with a ‘broad’ definition of Gnosticism find it not only in the New Testament but in many other early documents as well.”⁵⁵

As a result of this lack of definition, several scholars, notably Karen L. King and Michael A. Williams, have suggested that the category called “Gnosticism” is misleading and should be abandoned. While King “encourages us to hear differing voices . . . (she) leaves us with more

⁵³ Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1, 7.

⁵⁴ Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: University, 1996), 27.

⁵⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 13-14.

questions than answers.”⁵⁶ Williams suggests replacing the term Gnosticism with the alternative phrase “biblical demiurgical traditions,” not only to make a distinction from those Gnostic traditions that ascribe creation and management of the cosmos to a lower entity (demiurge) distinct from the highest God, as in Platonism. Williams narrows the category of Gnosticism considerably with the addition of the “adjective ‘biblical,’ to denote ‘demiurgical’ traditions that also incorporate or adapt traditions from Jewish or Christian Scripture.”⁵⁷

Controversies of the Origin of Gnosticism

The early church fathers identified Simon Magus of Samaria (Acts 8) as the originator of Gnosticism.⁵⁸ Irenaeus alleged that Simon was “the one from whom all heresies originated.”⁵⁹ Some sources agree that “as a definite entity Gnosticism appears with Simon Magus (and others) and it appears in an entirely Jewish and Christian context.”⁶⁰ It is argued that since the formation of Christianity’s identity was woven into the apologetics and polemics of these early centuries, the early church tended to identify beliefs in conflict with the church’s position as heresy, often placing them in the still ill-defined category of “Gnosticism.” However, Carl B. Smith, in a recent book that provides an extensive survey of the issues surrounding the rise of Gnosticism, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins*, argues with considerable confidence that “there is little evidence that supports this claim or even identifies Simon as Gnostic”, particularly

⁵⁶ Michael C. McCarthy, review of *What is Gnosticism?*, by Karen L King, *Theological Studies* 65.03 (2006): 640.

⁵⁷ Williams, 51.

⁵⁸ Carl B. Smith, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 3.

⁵⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.23.2.

⁶⁰ G. R. S. Mead, *The Gnostics: Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1960), xv.

in light of the fact that “it is a well-established fact that the Christian apologists of the second century were not accurate historians.”⁶¹

Most scholars agree that Gnosticism did not originate from a single source. In fact, the literature identifies the influence of many belief systems on Gnosticism’s development. Smith agrees that Gnosticism “has affinities with themes from many religions of the ancient world, but none of them provide the innovation that became Gnosticism in the second century.”⁶² He argues that Gnosticism developed when the three currents of “Judaism, Christianity, and Platonism converge(d), obviously with varying degrees of emphasis, with anti-Judaism being a crucial feature.”⁶³ The “anti-Judaism” element that is essential to Gnosticism, as articulated by Basilides of Egypt, is the devolution of the God of the Old Testament to an evil demiurge who created the world in opposition to the supreme God.⁶⁴ The Christian element essential to Gnosticism is the “redeemer” who comes to inform humans of their innate deity, having had a spark of divinity implanted in them. The platonic elements of Gnosticism are anti-cosmic dualism and mythology. Smith’s position is that it was the “ripe intellectual and historical (and perhaps geographical) context in which the innovation of Gnosticism could have occurred, resulting in the creative Gnostic religion of the early second century C.E.”⁶⁵

Some scholars assert that it was “out of the melting pot of religions that was Palestine at the beginning of the Christian era, that Gnosticism arose.”⁶⁶ However, with considerable

⁶¹ Smith, 3.

⁶² Ibid., 19.

⁶³ Ibid., 250.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 22

⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶ Mead, xvii.

evidence, Smith's extensive evaluation considers Egypt as an attractive hypothesis as Gnosticism's place of origin, based on "the fact that the first historically viable Gnostics came from Egypt: Basilides, Carpocrates and his libertine son, Epiphanes and Valentinus," and Egypt is where "all the chief elements integral to the Gnostic systems were present."⁶⁷

Controversies of the Characteristics of Gnosticism

No Gnostic text or belief system reflects all of the characteristics that have been identified, nor are they reflected uniformly or equally if they are present. Additionally, many Gnostic elements can be seen in other religious and philosophical systems of the ancient world. With these caveats in mind, the primary characteristics of Gnosticism are:

- 1) **A Supreme Being or Absolute Sovereign** is transcendent over all, beyond human understanding and comprehension, yet "invariably good. . . . Nearly always evil is inherent in matter in the manner of a physical quality."⁶⁸ This Supreme Being is the "source of Gnosis."⁶⁹
- 2) **Creation** was accomplished by a "lesser" god in rebellion against the Supreme Being. The world is generally regarded from a pessimistic viewpoint. Thus, all that was created, matter, is evil. When the Supreme Being saw what the underling, or demiurge, had done, he determined that humans were at least eligible to be returned to their heavenly origin, so he deposited a spark of divinity in each person. The "divine spark" theory can be traced back to the Stoics.⁷⁰ In Gnosticism, the creation myth is "anti-Jewish, or anti-Creator—that is anti -the God

⁶⁷ Smith, 3, 251.

⁶⁸ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 14.

⁶⁹ Smith, 15.

⁷⁰ R. McLachlan Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem: A Study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy* (London: Mowbray, 1958), 69-70.

of the Old Testament,” as the Gnostics defined the God of the Jews as inferior to and separate from the true and highest God, and they defined the product of his creative activity as evil.⁷¹

Roukema describes in detail the devastating results of this type of thinking on the early Christian church, as he commends the church fathers for their wisdom in declaring these beliefs heresy. The Gnostic distinction between a higher good god as the father and a lower god as the creator was countered by Irenaeus’ argument that there is one God who has made all, visible and invisible, through his Word, Jesus Christ, who is also the redeemer. This means the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. This gives credibility to the redeemer, Jesus (who therefore was God of the earth as well as the heavens), and the physical resurrection of the dead. Roukema concludes with perhaps the most important benefit of the church fathers’ decision regarding the unity of God:

If the church had gone along with it (the splitting of the God of the OT and the NT), then the bond with the people of Israel would have been cut more than ever. The God of the Jewish people would then have been different from the Father by whom Jesus Christ knew he had been sent. Jesus would then not stand in the line of the Old Testament prophets, but would have proclaimed a completely new, heavenly message. . . . In preserving the Old Testament as holy Scripture for the Church . . . they made it clear that the Christian faith stems from God who has created life on earth and who has started on a history with humankind from the beginning. . . . By starting from the Old Testament, Christian faith opposes the feeling that Gnosticism causes, namely that life on earth is profoundly meaningless or serves only a heavenly purpose.”⁷²

3) Gnosis, the ability to “know,” was implanted as part of this spark of divinity, creating within each human the desire and ability to know the secrets of the divine. Gnosis, or knowledge, is the key to salvation, rather than faith or obedience to laws. Thus, humans would come to realize their true place in the heavenlies and would eventually arrive back at their

⁷¹ Smith, 2.

⁷² Riemer Roukema, *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity: An Introduction to Gnosticism*, trans. John Bowden, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999): 160-1.

destiny after earthly death. This relates to self-knowledge, which teaches man to understand himself as a piece of divine substance, and therefore such knowledge is the equivalent of “knowledge of God.”⁷³ This gnosis or knowledge is “given by revelation, which has been made available only to the elect who are capable of receiving it, and therefore (it) has an esoteric character.”⁷⁴ However, it is this revelation to the “elect” that makes it a “secret” to most humans and defines the secret nature of Gnosticism.⁷⁵ This notion of elitism has since been challenged by Roukema, who asserts that “Gnostics were ready to share their special gnosis with others or saw this as their task. Nor did they always think that they alone had a share in redemption.”⁷⁶ However, the demise of the Gnostic belief indicates that minimal missionary effort occurred. Additionally, the only surviving Gnostic belief system, the Mandaeans, is very secretive and definitely does not see others outside their own sect as being capable or worthy of receiving redemption. This lends support to the notion that sharing gnosis was not a widespread practice.

4) A Redeemer, a representative of the Supreme Being who is unknowable and unapproachable, is the rescuer of humans, and directs or guides them back into the heavenlies, along with aeons, who, depending on the myth under consideration, either escort the soul or test it along the way. The human soul must be redeemed from the portion of humanity that is the prison of the soul, the human body. “In Oriental religions, redeemers somewhat analogous to the Gnostic ones may have existed, but thus far no one has been able to prove that they were known as such before the rise of Gnostic thought. . . . The most obvious explanation of the origin of the

⁷³ Smith, 11.

⁷⁴ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis*, trans. and ed. Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 55.

⁷⁵ Yamauchi, 14.

⁷⁶ Roukema, 168.

Gnostic redeemer is that he was modeled after the Christian conception of Jesus.”⁷⁷ Further, the redeemer is often seen as a redeemed redeemer, a phenomenon that some have tried to attribute to pre-Christian Gnosticism. However, Yaumauchi argues effectively against a pre-Christian redeemer, demonstrating that the leading scholars have come to deny a pre-Christian Redeemer myth and concluding that such a myth is generally rejected.⁷⁸

However, since not all of these characteristics are found in all Gnostic systems, there are systems “without a redeemer myth . . . which appear frequently among the early accounts of Jewish and Christian Gnosticism . . . (including) the original systems of the Naassenes, the Valentinians and the Marcosians.”⁷⁹

5) Dualism is a basic foundation in Gnosticism, pitting spirit as good against matter as evil. This is considered by some as the most unique and definitive element of Gnosticism as many of the other components can be traced to other belief systems.⁸⁰ “Ethical dualism” of light versus darkness is common to other religions of the Near East, but the “dualism unique to the Gnostics identifies the spiritual realm of nature and the universe as morally good and the physical domain as evil, not merely less good as in various Platonic systems.”⁸¹

6) Eschatology or Last Things is the final restoration of the soul to heaven, of not only individuals at their earthly, physical death, but of all of the “elect” when the material

⁷⁷ Robert M. Grant, ed. *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 18.

⁷⁸ Yamauchi, 15, 29-20, 165-166. The legend of a redeemed redeemer asserts that a redeemer is sent from heaven to alert man of his divine origin and gives man the gnosis to bring man back into his divine state. The redeemer then re-ascends to heaven, defeating demonic powers along the way, thus preparing the path for those who will follow. As the souls of man are re-gathered in heaven, the Redeemer is himself redeemed.

⁷⁹ Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1971), 45.

⁸⁰ Smith, 1.

⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

world comes to an end.

7) **Mythology** is the glue that holds everything together for the Gnostic. There is an elaborate mythical system by which Gnostics understand their universe and their place in it. They see themselves as a part of the heavenly divinity, assigned to earth for a period of time, but destined to return to their heavenly origins upon death.

8) **Cult and Community** involves a fair amount of speculation since we know very little about it. However, it is included because it is a critical element among the Mandaeans, which is the only surviving Gnostic sect existing today. It may be seriously contended that the reason for their survival has been their tight-knit, secretive, exclusivistic community, which until the late 1990's, has been able to exist and thrive in spite of the pressures of the world around them.

9) **Syncretism**, also called **Parasitism**, is the precise problem in defining the relationship of Gnosticism with other Near Eastern religions, especially Judaism and early Christianity.⁸² Gnosticism had the unique ability to innovate its beliefs based upon new “revelation,” which often reflected the landscape in which it was immersed. It had no traditions of its own, only those that were borrowed from other religions. There appears to be no exclusivity between the different branches of Gnosticism, nor did they have their own canon of scripture, unless it was that of other religions, which they employed and interpreted for their own purposes. They became masters at “extracting as much as possible out of the thoughts and expressing it in ever new ways . . . (Thus) a statement of the text was given a deeper meaning, or even several, in order to claim it for one's own doctrine or to display its inner richness.”⁸³

⁸² Ibid., 12.

⁸³ Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 54.

However, Hedrick presents a contrary view as he has evaluated the nature of the Gnostic manuscripts from the Nag Hammadi findings. While most of the academic literature supports the notion of generally harmonious Gnostic groups, united in their opposition to Christianity, Hedrick asserts that they were in competition with one another as well.⁸⁴

Conclusion

It is readily observed that controversy within the study of Gnosticism is deep and broad, as is the study of Mandaeism. There seems to be no element of this belief system about which scholars completely agree.

However, based upon the information available at this time, it seems that the Gnostic belief system is the antithesis of the Christian belief system. While both systems view the Supreme Being, God, as good, the Gnostic system cannot explain evil except by creating a different and distinct deity. While both systems recognize the Supreme Being as omniscient, the Gnostic system considers omniscience as something humans can achieve. While both systems generally recognize a Redeemer, the Gnostic system believes redemption is achieved through human effort, perhaps with some assistance or guidance from the redeemer. While both systems believe in an after-life, the Gnostic system believes that the soul is inherently part of God and will be reunited as part of deity in the end. While both systems believe the world as we know it will end, the Gnostic system believes that this will signal the end of matter, which is evil. While both systems recognize the difference between good and evil, or light and darkness, the Gnostic system assigns a physical characteristic, matter, to the evil or dark elements, failing to recognize the spiritual elements of evil and darkness.

⁸⁴ Hedrick, 10.

While it is of interest to compare, contrast, and investigate the belief systems of ages past, one must be consistently aware of Paul's warning to the Colossians to "beware of philosophy" (Col. 2:8). In a fascinating article by Norman Geisler, the inherent philosophies that stem from man's imagination are delineated. Geisler shows how the presuppositions of scholars through the ages have resulted in the denial of miracles and predictive prophecy, and have turned the gospel history into religious mythology. By applying the naturalistic methodology of philosophy to science, society, and religion, the widespread notion that evolution is scientifically proven has resulted, along with the idea that religion has evolved from magic to polytheism to monotheism to the atheism we know today. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, along this same line, is that though "I understand all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing" (I Cor. 13:2). "Scholarship should be used to build Christ's spiritual kingdom, not to build an academic kingdom for one's self."⁸⁵

Ireneaus is recognized as perhaps the most effective and prolific polemicist against Gnosticism. However, it was not his intent to portray Gnosticism as a specific or uniform belief system that opposed Christianity. Rather, it was his argument that

truth is one while error is various, and the only trait that (the followers of these heresies, including) Valentinians, Simonians and Marcionites have in common is that all make a presumptuous claim to *gnosis*, that is to knowledge acquired through personal revelation or private judgment without the guidance of the Church. He does not pretend that every professor of *gnosis* claimed the same knowledge, let alone that everyone styled himself a *gnostickos* . . .⁸⁶

Thus, while the critics claim that the church fathers smothered an ancient belief system, we can be thankful that it was through God and His people that such notions were put to rest in the

⁸⁵ Norman Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42.01 (2004): 13.

⁸⁶ Edward, 199.

early centuries after Christ. This author agrees with Roukema, who concludes that Gnosticism was rightly rejected by the church fathers, based on three facts. First, “it was disastrous to separate the God of Jesus [the Father] from the God of the Old Testament. Second, it was historically mistaken to suggest that Jesus came with a special *gnosis* for the elect. Third, it was elitist, believing that they alone had the *gnosis* and hence salvation.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Steve Moyise, review of *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity: An Introduction to Gnosticism* by Riemer Roukema, *Anvil* 17.4 (2000): 328.

CHAPTER THREE—HISTORY AND SOURCES: MANDAEISM

Introduction

Mandaeism not only shares remarkable similarities to Gnostic beliefs. It “adheres to the typical Gnostic doctrines and mythologies regarding the soul’s entrapment in earthly life and the existence of a heavenly Lightworld, the soul’s true home.”⁸⁸ It also shares a “similar mode of expression, through myth. In other words, we do not find philosophical reflections but stories.”⁸⁹ In fact, it is impossible to reconstruct a unified, coherent vision of certain important aspects of religious doctrine because of the different Mandaean teachings recorded centuries apart. “Mandaean literature is confused and self-contradictory. . . [consisting] of many parts which belong to different historical periods and contain[ing] both old and new elements.”⁹⁰ “The more ancient traditions seem clearly dualistic and are nearest to the ideal positions of classical Gnosticism. There are also texts, however, where the physical world is seen in a positive light, considered the direct creation of the highest, good divinity. These passages must have been redacted in periods of clear cultural dependence on Christianity, or perhaps on Islam.”⁹¹ In fact, the *Ginza*, the Mandaean holy book, describes seven different accounts of the origins of the cosmos, each “with features that are most difficult to reconcile.”⁹² This conflict is also evident

⁸⁸ Buckley, “With the Mandaeans in Iran,” 8.

⁸⁹ Lupieri, 38.

⁹⁰ Sinasi Gunduz, “The Problems of the Nature and Date of Mandaean Sources,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 53 (Mar 1994): 89.

⁹¹ Lupieri, 38.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 38.

among the individuals who conveyed information to various scholars throughout the past centuries. Since each Mandaean is endowed with certain revelation or truth that others may not possess, the truth one knows may conflict with the truth others in the sect have. The way this conflict is overcome is to recognize that all truth is secret, and thus, a reluctance or inability to communicate it is part of the complexity of this religion. Lady Drower found this inconsistency in the written *Ginza* and the information communicated to her by trusted informants from the priestly caste. These discrepancies are still experienced today by practicing Mandaeans and are simply accepted as the fact that each person may have different truths or different levels of the same truths. This demonstrates the essence of Mandaism's syncretism; it simply incorporates all beliefs into its system as truth and "does not seem to have developed a theological orthodoxy capable of pushing dissident opinion aside."⁹³ Buckley asserts that "such dynamics demonstrate that the religion remains in conversation with itself, and these debates should not be interpreted as glaring contradictions, hopeless fragmentation, or loss of identity."⁹⁴ Indeed, this dynamism stems from the fact that many of the Mandaean mythological figures "travel between realms, [are] hard to pin down, [and] resistant to stasis."⁹⁵

The Gnostic Elements of Mandaism

All of the nine attributes of Gnosticism listed in chapter two are present in the Mandaean belief system. Perhaps the predominant feature of Gnosticism in Mandaism is its syncretism, its ability to reinvent itself based on new information or influences. That this strain of Gnosticism has survived until the twenty-first century is often attributed to Mandaism's unique

⁹³ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁴ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 35.

ability to incorporate other beliefs and practices into its system.

1) The **Supreme Being** in Mandaism is called by different names, including the Great Life or First Life, *Mara d-Rabuta* (Lord of Greatness), *Malka d-Nhura* (King of Light), and *Mana* (Powerful). The First Life does not travel or maintain contact with humans, but sits above all, overseeing everything. He presides at the pinnacle of the Lightworld, majestically enthroned, the royal chief of the saving ambassador *utras* and of all Mandaeans. He is the “good” spirit who reigns supreme over all. From this First Light emanates the Second Light, whose name is derived from the secret name of Yahweh, but whose position in the Mandaean pantheon is ambiguous.⁹⁶ The Third Light is called *Abatur*, who is the judge at the end of time, and the Fourth Light is *Ptahil*, who is the least perfect and is found at the edge of light, in contact with darkness.

There are a number of celestial beings, called *utria*, meaning wealth, or *malkia*, meaning king. These beings are intermediaries and messengers between humans and the First Being, and thus were identified as angels by missionaries of past centuries. *Manda d-Hiia*, Knowledge of Life, is the preeminent *utra*. He is often equated with Jesus of Christianity.

2) The **creators** of the cosmos are *Yasamin*, who is a prototype of a Mandaean priest who suffers from excessive pride, *Abatur*, who is the judge, and *Ptahil*, who is under the orders of his father, *Abatur*. All three have complex double personalities, which may be negative or positive depending on the circumstances. These three are also portrayed as saviors in other settings. *Abatur*, the “guardian of the scales” and the judge at the end of time, detests this role, which is punishment for his involvement in the creation by insufficiently training his son

⁹⁶ Lupieri, 39. This secret name of Yahweh, Iao, is present in numerous magic and Gnostic texts and is generally considered a positive divinity.

Ptahil.⁹⁷ Though this role as judge might seem a powerful and important role, “in the Mandaean view, *Abatur*’s position is a form of punishment, a thankless, contemptible task.”⁹⁸

Creation is portrayed by a number of different descriptions. These are generally divided between a creation model of two oppositional worlds, the Lightworld and the world of darkness, and the emanation model, which is more common. Moreover, the “sheer mass of variations in their creation mythology makes it impossible to appoint one specific version as ‘the original.’”⁹⁹

3) Gnosis, the ability to “know,” was implanted as a spark of divinity, creating within each Mandaean the desire and ability to know the secrets of the divine. When man was created, the First Life endowed humans with the ability to know all things. These things are secret, revealed over time to individuals and passed on as other individuals are fit to receive that knowledge. Mandaism is defined as “self-designated ‘knowers.’”¹⁰⁰ The people are secretive and defensive about their beliefs and practices. Marriage outside the sect is not allowed, nor are conversions into the sect allowed. “Knowledge” is reserved to the leaders and careful attention to their lineage is preserved.

However, even those born into this sect often do not have much information about their actual beliefs. It is primarily the responsibility of the family to teach the beliefs. However, they are at a disadvantage since knowledge is dispensed only by the priests. Mandaism is seen as “an absolutely exceptional religion . . . [having been] preserved by a small nucleus of believers who are socially discriminated against and immersed in a hostile ethno-religious context.”¹⁰¹ Its secret

⁹⁷ Buckley, 38.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰¹ Lupieri, xviii.

knowledge is reserved to a tiny minority and thus “has exposed the group to constant danger through biological extinction of the caste invested with this knowledge.”¹⁰² Thus, it has often had to camouflage itself in its surrounding religious world. “The people are at a disadvantage because they don’t know their beliefs, relying on the clerics to decide everything for them. Yet, they are afraid to leave since they only have a single frame of reference and to leave their tradition is frightening.”¹⁰³

4) The **redeemer** is represented primarily by *Hibil*, also called *Hibil Ziwa*, who is part of the trinity of Mandaeism. All three members of this triumvirate can substitute for *Manda d-Hiia* as revealers and are also saviors or redeemers, depending on the circumstances. A recurring formula in Mandaean prayers is “In the name of *Hibil*, *Sitil* and *Anus*.” These three are brothers from different generations. *Hibil*, who is Abel in his human form, is the savior. *Hibil Ziwa* follows the Gnostic patterns of the descent of the heavenly savior into the darkness, ultimately needing to be freed by divine intervention. “In short, *Hibil Ziwa* impersonates the so-called ‘savior to be saved,’ very much a part of Gnostic tradition.”¹⁰⁴ In legends, he is referred to interchangeably with *Manda d-Hiia* as revealer. He also appears in a creation myth as the creator.

Sitil, called Seth in his humanity, is pure. He has never slept with a woman, is innocent of bloodshed and agreed to die instead of his father, Adam. He is “virtually sinless,” in his humanity.¹⁰⁵ According to legend, *Abatur* compares each person’s purity after death against *Sitil*’s purity to determine the degree of his punishment on his ascent to the Lightworld. Because

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Bejanni.

¹⁰⁴ Lupieri, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Buckley, 38.

of *Sitil's* untimely death, before his father Adam who refused to die, *Sitil* reversed the expected pattern of parents dying before children and he became the first death. “*Sitil's* purity above all other humans is ensured because he died instead of his father.”¹⁰⁶ He is the first human death and the first to ascend to the Lightworld from earth. Because of his purity, he was immediately elevated from humanity to the status of celestial being, an *utra*.

Anus, Enoch in his humanity, is a healer and preacher whose role resembles that of Jesus. *Anus* is described in legend as coming to Jerusalem in bodily form, where he “heals the sick, makes the blind see, purifies the lepers, makes the cripples that drag themselves along the ground walk straight, makes the deaf-mutes talk and gives life to the dead. He identifies the faithful among the Jews and instructs them: ‘There is death and there is life; there is darkness and there is light; there is error and there is truth.’ He calls upon the Jews to convert in the name of the Most High King of light.”¹⁰⁷

The *Left Ginza* presents another, unnamed savior, who “not only informs the soul of its heavenly origin, [but] he returns at the death of the particular person and at the end of the world, to lead the individual and the world soul upward to its home. . . . [This being] is related to the soul in a peculiar manner . . . where the messenger and soul are the two manifestations of the one divided personality.”¹⁰⁸

5) Dualism is an important aspect of Mandaeanism. The world is seen as opposing and conflicting principles. There is:

division between good and evil on earth (ethical dualism), the forces of good and evil, of light and darkness battle throughout the entire universe (cosmic dualism). Even divinity

¹⁰⁶ Buckley, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Lupieri, 244.

¹⁰⁸ Carl H. Kraeling, *Anthropos and Son of man: a study in the religious syncretism of the Hellenistic Orient*, Vol 25 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927) Reprint, New York: AMS, 1966, 68-69. Since the Mandaeans do not allow converts, this teaching from the *Ginza* is clearly a contradiction to current doctrine.

is divided . . . (this dualistic vision of the divine is tempered) with the idea that in the beginning there was only one positive divine principle, the Light, which later degenerated through multiple emanations until the last of these got caught up in matter, conceived of as negativity, void, and absence.¹⁰⁹

The imbalance between the negative and positive, which led to the origin of this world, “will cease only when the irreconcilable components of the cosmos, once again completely separated with the light that is dispersed and imprisoned in darkness, has been recovered in all its parts, and return(s) to the enjoyment of an eternal equilibrium.”¹¹⁰ In common with other Gnostic systems, Mandaism sees “human beings living in fundamental alienation on earth while the true home lies up above, in the light.”¹¹¹

6) Eschatology represents one of the syncretistic features of the Mandaean doctrine in the “parallel nature of the figures of *Manda d-Hiia* and Jesus Christ, considering the former a derivation of the latter.”¹¹² The signs that Christians point to indicating the imminent return of Jesus are the same signs that Mandaeans point to indicating the coming of their messiah. One of the main indicators of the coming of their messiah is that Mandaeans will begin leaving their faith, converting to other religions. This is happening frequently and is considered a sign that the end will soon come. At that time, all the Mandaeans will go directly to the Lightworld from earth. Some Mandaean texts indicate Jesus will return to earth; others indicate that *Anus* or *Manda d-Hiia* will return.¹¹³ Finally, they believe in a final judgment of all people by the judge, *Abatur*, and the final destruction of earth. When all the Mandaeans are taken to the Lightworld

¹⁰⁹ Lupieri, 37.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

¹¹¹ Buckley, 7.

¹¹² Lupieri., 116.

¹¹³ Ibid., 52.

from earth, the earth will be destroyed.

7) **Mythology** is prominent in the Mandaean beliefs. In addition to sharing similar Gnostic elements, Mandaism shares the Gnostic mode of expression of its beliefs through mythology and legends. Legends about Mary, Jesus' mother, John the Baptist, and many of the Old Testament characters are part of the fabric of this belief system. Mandaism has its own mythological system, an enormous body of literature that spans a number of genres and has rarely been studied in modern times. Its lengthy and detailed rituals resist easy interpretation. One of the most difficult aspects of researching the Mandaeans is the ambiguity regarding every aspect of the character of this sect. As illustrated in the above, there are various myths describing the creation, as well as the end of time. It is difficult to categorize their beliefs with clarity "into an overall scheme respecting our normal canons of logic. Our own logic in fact does not seem to be the ideal means to reach an understanding of Mandaean traditions."¹¹⁴

8) **Cult and Community** are extremely strong in the Mandaean culture. The practices of the faith are predominant in their daily lives and the community is reinforced by keeping track of blood lines (for those aspiring to the priesthood), marriage within the community, prohibition from conversion into the sect, and separation from the world around them.

Especially important are the Mandaean holidays that honor their ancestors from ancient times and the recent past. These holidays always include particular foods, baptisms, and prayers for those who have gone on before.

Although the diaspora has fractured the community, creative technological efforts are underway to keep them connected throughout the world. This is described in more detail in chapter four.

¹¹⁴ Lupieri, 52.

9) **Syncretism** is a most striking element of Mandaism. The sect has created and reinvented its beliefs according to external influences. This is the primary topic of this chapter, as we discover the elements of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that have become a part of Mandaism. Table 1 compares the major beliefs of Mandaism and Gnosticism.

Table 1. Mandaism vis-à-vis Gnosticism

Belief	Mandaism	Gnosticism
Supreme Being, transcendent over all	This being is good; no evil in him; no contact with humans.	This being is good; no evil in him.
Creation	Many different and conflicting legends; two main themes are creation as a result of darkness against the light (two separate and warring entities), or the emanation model, in which sparks of divinity emanated from the Supreme Being into the Mandaicans.	Accomplished by a lesser god; the Supreme Being implanted a spark of divinity in each person.
Gnosis	Gnosis was implanted as part of this spark of divinity; Gnosis is the key to salvation. However, it is reserved to Mandaicans, and specifically to priests. Cannot be shared with outsiders.	Gnosis was implanted as part of this spark of divinity; Gnosis is the key to salvation. Gnosis was encouraged to be shared with others.
Redeemer	This role is played in varying degrees by several of the mythological characters. The primary responsibility of the redeemer-types is to assist Mandaican souls to the Lightworld, as they encounter obstruction along the journey.	A representative of the Supreme Being who rescues and/or guides humans to the heavenlies; some test along the way.
Dualism	Mandaicans see the world as opposing, between good and evil on earth, but also in the entire universe. Even divinity is divided between good and bad. This will be resolved at the end of the world. Mandaism's dualism "appears less stark than one might expect in a Gnostic religion." ⁱ In contrast to Gnosticism, Mandaism is opposed to the asceticism and celibacy common in other forms of Gnosticism. ⁱⁱ	Good is represented in spiritual and evil is represented in matter or physical. This results in asceticism, which regards even the body as repulsive.
Eschatology	A being parallel to Jesus (in some texts it is Jesus) will return at the end of the world to escort all Mandaicans to the Lightworld.	Souls are returned to heavenly home at their physical death, and also when the material world comes to an end.
Mythology	Legends and mythology, including mythological characters, explain the universe and all that happens within it. Most of the legends portray characters from the Bible, although in striking dissimilarities to the Biblical versions. (Examples include Jesus as false prophet, Abraham as leader of Mandaicans until he succumbed to circumcision, Adam as refusing to die.)	Legends and mythology, including mythological characters, explain the universe and all that happens within it.
Cult and Community	This trait among the Mandaicans may be a primary reason they have survived. As they allow no conversion into the sect, and no marriages outside the sect, they have been able to maintain their autonomy for centuries.	Very little known about Gnostic communities.
Syncretism	Very clear evidence of adopting beliefs of other faiths in order to survive. Called a faith in tension and a belief system in constant communication with itself, it reinvents itself as circumstances require.	Gnosticism has no traditions of its own; everything within Gnosticism is taken from other religions of the time. There is no canon of scripture.

ⁱ J. J. Buckley, *The Mandaicans: Ancient Texts and Modern People*, (New York: Oxford, 2002), 18.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

The Origin of Mandaism

The origin of the Mandaeans is a question that is fraught with contradictory evidence. According to some, the explanation of Mandaean's origin and history "is legendary and full of fantasy," often giving contradictory information.¹¹⁵ The Mandaeans claim that their beliefs and religion were formed by Adam. Legend informs us that Adam was given a spark of the divine during his creation. He did not sin in the garden but reaffirmed the right that made him like God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, actually fulfilling his destiny, gaining knowledge. That knowledge was given directly from the First Life and included the method and significance of baptism in order to reunite with the Lightworld. Other information claims that there is no specific founder of Mandaism, but that Abraham was considered a Mandaean (until he was circumcised) and that John the Baptist was the last messenger to the Mandaeans.¹¹⁶ The earliest known sacred writings of the Mandaeans are mid-seventh century, produced to prove to the Muslims that they qualified as *ahl al-kitab*.¹¹⁷

A dilemma that has plagued researchers of the Mandaeans is the effort to categorize them. From a "dissident Christian sect" to a "splinter group from Hellenistic Judaism" to "the only surviving (from the ancient world) group of Gnostics," there is agreement only on the fact that they cannot be easily classified.¹¹⁸ Buckley doubts they ever had a Christian stage, asserting that there is a "consensus, based on linguistic and historical research that puts Mandaism back into its original, 'heretical' Jewish baptist milieu," though she recognizes the "strong anti-

¹¹⁵ Gunduz, 93.

¹¹⁶ Lupieri, 10.

¹¹⁷ Buckley, 10.

¹¹⁸ Francois de Blois, "The 'Sabians' in Pre-Islamic Arabia," *Acta Orientalia* 56 (1995): 44; Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "The Mandaeans and Heterodox Judaism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 4.01(1983):148; Buckley, 7.

Christian as well as anti-Jewish sentiment in Mandaean traditions.”¹¹⁹ Further, Buckley notes the Friday evening prayers, coinciding with the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, and the Saturday evening prayers, marking the end of Jewish Sabbath, both honor Mary and at the same time are highly polemical in content. These two prayers function as “a weekly restatement of Mandaism’s cut ties to Judaism, as a repeated exorcism.”¹²⁰ However, Buckley also acknowledges that Mary’s “very presence raises the issue of the possibility of a brief, Christian stage in early Mandaism.”¹²¹

One of the clearest reasons for the syncretization of the Mandaean religion with other religions is their location in the midst of Muslims. Since the seventh century, they have been under the rule of Muslims, and have had to maintain their traditions, and indeed, their viability, under adverse and potentially fatal circumstances. Fortunately, they seized an opportunity in the *Qur’an* that proved to be their salvation from extinction. The *Qur’an* provides for *ahl al-kitab*, which acknowledges ‘people of the Book,’ “people who profess a religion recognized by Islam to have been of divine origin.”¹²² To be *ahl al-kitab* requires monotheism and a holy, divine book. The Sabians are specifically listed in Surahs 2:62, 5:69, and in 22:17, which specifically classify the *ahl al-kitab*. The first two passages

list four religions: ‘those who believe’ (evidently meaning the Muslims), the Jews, the Christians and the Sabiun, all of whom, provided they actually fulfill their religious duties, are, or at least were at some time in the past, potential candidates for salvation. As such, they stand in stark contrast to the polytheists, the ‘associators’, who, the *Qur’an* insists, are destined to damnation. Although it is nowhere explicitly stated that the Sabiun are ‘people of the book’—this designation is expressly applied only to the

¹¹⁹ J. J. Buckley, “The Mandaean Appropriation of Jesus’ Mother, Miriai.” *Novum Testamentum* 35.02 (1993): 181, 183.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹²¹ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 49.

¹²² Muhibbu-Din, 111.

Jews and Christians—the fact that in these verses they are mentioned together with the Jews and Christians has on the whole led Muslim interpreters to the (plausible) deduction that the Sabiun are in fact *ahl al-kitab*, that is to say that they had a more-or-less monotheistic faith and a book that had been given to them by a genuine god-sent prophet.¹²³

Yet, “it is significant that historically and mythologically . . . Mandaean consider themselves former Jews. In this context it is worth mentioning that the language of the Babylonian Talmud is quite close to the classical Mandaic.”¹²⁴

Relationship to Judaism

Many scholars contend that there is significant Jewish influence in Mandaeanism. This is especially illustrated by the similarities of the priestly process that is discussed in detail in chapter five. Both faiths prohibit eating meat from animals that have been killed by other animals, and require purification of the kitchens and tableware prior to their great holidays, *paruanaiia* for the Mandaeans, Passover for the Jews.

The Jewish holy book, the *Torah*, is considered false and full of lies by the Mandaeans, perhaps a view borrowed from the Muslims who consider it “corrupted.” In fact, the sign of the Jews given to Abraham by God, circumcision, is considered abhorrent by the Mandaeans, to the point that if one is circumcised (even by an enemy), he is permanently excluded from the community. Yet, many of the practices of Mandaeans mirror Old Testament practices of the Jews, with the Mandaean priestly ordination following the Jewish priestly ordination very closely, as is shown in chapter five. Table 2 provides a comparison of Judaism and Mandaeanism.

¹²³ de Blois, 40.

¹²⁴ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 4.

Table 2. Mandaism vis-à-vis Judaism

Comparison	Mandaean	Judaism (Ancient [Old Testament])ⁱ
View of Old Testament	The Old Testament is “considered false and full of lies, an instrument of propaganda and oppression, invented by Yahweh and his followers.” ⁱⁱ	Torah, the “teachings of the Five Books of Moses, is truth. A person must have faith in its essential, revealed character. A true Jew believes in revelation and the divine origin of the oral and written Torah.” ⁱⁱⁱ
Response to Circumcision	Prohibited; if circumcised, one is permanently excluded from community.	Required by God through the <i>Torah</i> , beginning with Abraham. (Gen. 17:10-11)
Relationship of ethnicity & religion^{iv}	“Mandaean” applies to both ethnicity and religious belief. However, if one abandons his religious belief, he is no longer considered as a part of the Mandaean ethnic group.	Jew applies to ethnicity and religious belief. However, to abandon religious belief does not separate one from the ethnic group.
Purification of tableware, kitchenware, pots, pans	In preparation for <i>paruanaiia</i> : By immersing all kitchenware in the flowing river water by priest, pronouncing over each item the name of Life and the name of <i>Manda d-Hiia</i> .	In preparation for Passover: by eliminating all leavening/yeast in the home.
Prohibition of eating meat	Animals killed by other animals and pregnant animals are prohibited. ^v All approved animals must be killed and sacrificed by a priest or layman (<i>halala</i>) whose purity is intact before they are eaten. They cannot simply be killed and eaten. ^{vi}	Animals killed by other animals are prohibited (Ex. 22:31); “unclean” animals, those that did not have both split hooves and chewed cuds (Lev. 11:2-3); and those of the sea that did not have both scales and fins (Lev. 11:9-12).

ⁱ Old Testament comparisons are important as the Mandaeans believe they preceded the Jewish religion; however, one can see that many of their requirements seem to be developed in opposition to the Jewish beliefs of the Old Testament, which may not be followed by modern Jews of any sect.

ⁱⁱ Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean C. Halverson, gen. ed., *The Compact Guide to World Religion* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 125.

^{iv} Lupieri, 5.

^v Mandaean Research Centre, Council of General Affairs, *About the Mandaeans* (Baghdad, 1999), 2.

^{vi} Lupieri, 13.

Relationship to Christianity

The Mandaeans have a strong aversion to Christianity even though their method of baptism by immersion initially appears to align them with Christianity. Thus, several scholars have gone to great lengths to disassociate these two religions by their baptismal practice, which is repetitive rather than initiatory. The Mandaean emphasis on baptism indicates a need for purification, cleansing of sin, and forgiveness, even though they deny original sin (for Mandaeans) and they have no standard definition of sin. Mandaeans contain a spark of the divine and bear responsibility for reconnecting with the Lightworld, based totally upon human effort through the repetitious baptisms.¹²⁵

The relationship of Mandaism to John the Baptist is murky. The veneration of John the Baptist and his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, is ironic as the Mandaeans deny he was the originator of baptism, or even the “baptizer par excellence.”¹²⁶ In fact, they see his baptisms only as part of his priestly routines, but do credit him with being a great teacher. They seem to lack understanding of John’s baptism as a sign of repentance, not as a method for salvation (Acts 19:4). The internal conflict within Mandaism is illustrated by their adoration of John the Baptist, a circumcised Jew, and their abhorrence of the practice of circumcision.¹²⁷ Furthermore, all other characters in the Mandaean mythology existed as humans in their pre-celestial status. There are, however, no characters in the world of light that bear John’s name, and no stories exist of his personal double. Neither does John appear in any apocalyptic texts, so in spite of being a figure of extraordinary standing, and although in some texts there is an attempt “to exalt him as a

¹²⁵ However, even as the Mandaean clergy dissociate their religion from Christianity, among the lay people, the Mandaeans speak of Christianity and Mandaism as “cousins,” possibly referring to the kinship between John the Baptist and Jesus.

¹²⁶ Lupieri, 162-163.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 111.

superhuman and semi-divine being, in the Mandaean religious consciousness he has always remained only a human being.”¹²⁸ As part of their syncretistic pattern, however, Mandaeans accentuate small points of resemblance to people of other faiths. “To inquirers they will say, ‘John is our prophet like Jesus’ (or ‘Muhammad’, as the case may be) ‘is yours.’”¹²⁹ The convenience of producing the name of John to Christians, and to invoke tolerance from Muslims, appears to be the primary importance of John, as opposed to any theological impact from him.

There is a strong Mandaean polemic against Jesus, calling him the greatest false prophet. References to Jesus, “for the most part refer to the practices of Byzantine Christianity which awake horror in Mandaeans, such as the use of ‘cut-off’ (i.e. not flowing) water for baptism, and the celibacy of monks and nuns.”¹³⁰ Yet the Mandaean deities bear a resemblance, as *Anus* is the miracle worker similar to Jesus.¹³¹ However, in true Gnostic form, the conflict between good and evil existed in Jesus, with some legends presenting Jesus as a negative demonic reality. Others portray him as a “direct emanation of the very heart of the divine” who took over a fleshly body to save them.¹³² All Mandaean legends agree that He never suffered the passion but rather escaped the earthly body and watched a substitute endure the cross (a view consistent with Islam). By this reversal of the event, they have been able to reconcile their own ideas of a messiah. This phenomenon, known as the Gnostic Christological dichotomy, explains the opposition of the two constituent elements of their composite view of Jesus.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹²⁹ Drower, 2. Lady Drower lived among the Mandaeans during the 1930s and 1940s when her husband was a British diplomat to the area. She recorded her findings and translated many of the Mandaean texts, becoming the preeminent source for twentieth century scholars.

¹³⁰ Drower, 3.

¹³¹ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 8.

¹³² Lupieri, 37.

The baptismal ritual meal of water and bread is reminiscent of the Christian communion supper. Their holy day is Sunday, the same as Christianity, but for vastly different reasons. While Christians worship on Sunday to commemorate Jesus' resurrection, Mandaeans honor Sunday as the first day of the week and as a tribute to the sun.

Their legends often contain elements of Christianity and/or Judaism, but with deviations and elaborations. The legends of Mary, for example go to extreme lengths to preserve her apart from her Jewish birth and her relationship as Jesus' mother.

Finally, there are a number of passages in Mandaean texts where the physical world is seen in a positive light and considered the direct creation of the highest, good divinity. "These passages must have been redacted in periods of clear cultural dependence on Christianity, or perhaps on Islam."¹³³

Relationship to Roman Catholicism

The Mandaean's relationship to Roman Catholics dates to the sixteenth century when the Portuguese maintained a trading station in the current location of Basrah, Iraq. Portuguese Catholic missionaries mistakenly identified the Mandaeans as "Christians of St. John." Assuming the Mandaeans were simply unaware of the gospel of Christ, similar to the Ephesian disciples Apollos met who had received the baptism of John the Baptist, but were unacquainted with the full gospel of Jesus (as recorded in Acts 18:26, 28; 19:5), the Catholics tried to convert them by force.

Several traditions of Mandaism seem to have developed as a polemic against Catholicism. For example, Catholicism requires priests to be celibate, whereas Mandaism requires priests to be married to at least one wife, preferably two. "Several polemical Mandaean

¹³³ Ibid., 38.

texts view with horror and disgust Christian monks and nuns who ‘cut off life.’”¹³⁴ Probably the most striking similarity is the belief in purgatory, which may have originated during the period of Portuguese influence. Both the Catholic and Mandaean sects believe in a place of suffering to purify one before he goes to heaven/Lightworld. Both believe that the length of time in purgatory is dependent upon the type of sin, which determines the amount of purification required. Both pray for the dead at specific time intervals. However, Catholics pray for the judgment of the soul, “never taking for granted that the soul is sure of heaven.”¹³⁵ In contrast, the Mandaeans pray for the souls to have strength for the next level of their journey to the Lightworld. True salvation occurs at death, which begins the soul’s journey toward divinity, but its destination is not in question, only the time required to attain it.¹³⁶ Finally, the Mandaeans’ acceptance of Mary’s virginity, and the birth of Jesus through the mouth to preserve her virginity, has been viewed as an example of the Mandaean culture “for centuries impregnated with forms of deliberate religious equivocation aimed at attracting the sympathies of the successive Western people they came into contact with.”¹³⁷ Table 3 summarizes the similarities and differences between Mandaism and Catholicism.

¹³⁴ J. J. Buckley, “Libertines or Not: Fruit, Bread, Semen and Other Body Fluids in Gnosticism,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 25.

¹³⁵ George D. Smith, ed. *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, Vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 1171.

¹³⁶ Lupieri, 30.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

Table 3. Mandaism vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism

The Mandaeans were exposed to a number of Catholic traditions based on the long occupation by the Portuguese, whose aim was to spread their Catholic religion. The Mandaeans were always anxious to include acceptable practices in order to avoid persecution by the Muslims by trying to appear like “People of the Book,” whom Islam protected from persecution. Exposure to other traditions also served to create traditions of the Mandaeans in opposition to those of other religions.

Comparison	Mandaism	Roman Catholicism
Baptism	<p>Repetitive baptisms, by immersion.</p> <p>Daily for personal purification.</p> <p>Weekly, on Sundays, and during sacred holidays, in sequences of three, during solemn ceremonies led by the priests, who repeat specific prayers and adhere to specific rituals.</p> <p>There are several effects of the Mandaean baptism:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It reduces, but does not eliminate, the quality and quantity of punishment in the next world.ⁱ 2. Forgiveness, purification, blessing and healing. 3. The most significant effect is allowing the soul a means of sharing in the Lightworld and of being in communion with ancestors who have already died and gone to that world.ⁱⁱ <p>Feast days tend to be baptism days for Mandaeans who may otherwise neglect the ritual.ⁱⁱⁱ</p>	<p>“An exterior washing of the body under a prescribed form of words.”^{iv}</p> <p>Candidates can be “plunged in flowing water” or a “still water of a pool” or, if there is not enough water for immersion, “then water may be poured three times on the head.”^v</p> <p>Immersion, pouring on head, or sprinkling all are acceptable, but the custom of immersion is always three times to signify three days of Christ’s burial.^{vi}</p> <p>Baptism is required for salvation, cleansing of sins, and admission to heaven; without baptism “it is impossible to go to heaven.”^{vii}</p> <p>Cannot be saved without baptism except in specific circumstances where baptism is not available. One becomes a part of body of Christ only through baptism.^{viii}</p> <p>“Solemn administration of this sacrament (baptism) is reserved to the clergy.”^{ix}</p>
Baptism of Infants	<p>Performed on newborns, including the giving of the child’s astrological name, which is “calculated” by the priest.</p>	<p>Established by 160 AD;^x for salvation until confirmation at the age of accountability. (7 years old).^{xi}</p>

ⁱ Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 16.

ⁱⁱ J. J. Buckley, “Why Once is Not Enough: Mandaean Baptism (*Masbuta*) as an Example of a Repeated Ritual,” *History of Religions* 29 (Aug 1989): 29.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 81.

^{iv} George D Smith, ed., *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, Vol 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 769. Some of these teachings appear contradictory and some have been changed since the publication of this book, but would have been in effect during the time the Mandaeans were being influenced by the Roman Catholic Church.

^v *Ibid.*, 770.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 771-772.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 675.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 675-676

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 789.

^x *Ibid.*, 794.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 836.

Comparison	Mandaicism	Roman Catholicism
Role of Mary, Jesus' Mother	Mary is revered as the virgin mother of Jesus, who was a false prophet. According to their legend, she conceived by drinking spring water, as commanded by God. In order to preserve her virginity, she gave birth through her mouth. ^{xii} Mary became a Mandaean priest, <i>tarmida</i> , leaving the Jewish faith after the birth of her son, Jesus.	Mary is revered as the Mother of God; she lived with her sister after Joseph's death; she is free of original sin and actual sin; she is a perpetual virgin. ^{xiii}
Marital Status of Priests	Marriage required; polygamy practiced.	All religious clerics must be celibate, unmarried males. Celibacy has been written tradition since 365 AD. ^{xiv}
Women as Religious Leaders	Historically there is evidence of women as <i>tarmida</i> (priests) and <i>ganzibra</i> (high priests), with the only limitation that women could and should celebrate not more than one marriage. ^{xv} Mary, the mother of Jesus was a <i>tarmida</i> . "The earliest, attested, named historical scribe is a woman priest named Slama in 200 AD" and there is also a woman priest named in the 7 th Century. ^{xvii}	All religious clerics must be celibate, unmarried males.
Role of Water	Water is considered sacred, but only if it is flowing, which then makes it "alive." It is used for purification through immersion baptism and ceremonial drinking. It cannot be used if in a pool, tub, or otherwise stagnant, non-flowing state. Mandaecans believe that running water draws its vital power from the heavenly river of light and life. This power is present in every course of water on earth in the ratio of one to nine; it is absent from non-flowing water. ^{xviii}	Necessary for salvation. Rite of washing with water signifies spiritual cleansing. ^{xix}
Unforgivable Sin	For priests: adultery. ^{xx}	No sins are unforgivable. ^{xxi} Only one who has refused to seek pardon is unforgiven, as he will not ask for forgiveness. ^{xxii}

^{xii} Lupieri, 121.

^{xiii} Smith, Vol 1, 515, 520-522, 527.

^{xiv} Ibid., 1061.

^{xv} Lupieri, 13.

^{xvii} Buckley, 4, 5.

^{xviii} Lupieri, 13-14.

^{xix} Smith, Vol. 2, 767

^{xx} Lupieri, 16.

^{xxi} Smith, Vol. 1, 608

^{xxii} Smith, Vol. 2, 962

Comparison	Mandaicism	Roman Catholicism
Holding place for dead before judgment	<p>Mandaeans believe in a holding place that the souls pass through on their way to the Lightworld.^{xxiii} It is a dangerous voyage because the heavens are inhabited by demons or evil beings who test the souls according to their impurity at the time of their death.^{xxiv}</p> <p>Meals for the dead are held on the first, third, seventh and 45th days after death ritual to give the souls strength to get to the next level.^{xxv}</p> <p>Souls that have not lead pure lives according to Mandaean observance are imprisoned for various lengths of time along the way, for purification through suffering.^{xxvi}</p>	<p>Purgatory is a place of suffering for a time after death for unrepented/unforgiven sin or for sins “whose due punishment is to be completed after death.”^{xxvii} Through the purifying power of suffering, purgatory prepares souls for eternal life on their way to heaven.^{xxviii} The sufferings in Purgatory are to free the soul to enter its heavenly reward.^{xxix}</p> <p>“These sufferings can be replaced by the intercessions of the church on earth for the soul.”</p> <p>The length of time in Purgatory is uncertain, depending on the type of sin and the state of the heart toward God at the time of death.^{xxx}</p>
Relationship to the dead	<p>True salvation occurs at death, which allows the soul to rise and leave earth toward divinity.^{xxxi}</p> <p>Ritual meals for the dead are held at weddings, anniversaries, ordination ceremonies and holidays.^{xxxii}</p> <p>“Every moment of the community’s ritual life, all their forebears, from Adam to John the Baptist, through the great priests of the past and the closest relatives of those present, can and should be invited to the community meal.”^{xxxiii}</p>	<p>Praying for the dead begins at death, on the day of burial, and on the 3rd, 7th or 30th day after death, and on the anniversary of death. Additionally, daily Mass may be said. All Souls’ Day – November 2, several holiday/masses throughout the year. “The dead must always be prayed for . . . but only for the Catholic,” until the end of the world.^{xxxiv} “The doctrine of Purgatory is not learned from Scripture . . . but these texts were written by men who, in the Jewish church or in the Catholic Church, already knew this doctrine.”^{xxxv} “Prayers for the dead refer not to Purgatory but to judgment,” never taking for granted that the soul is sure of heaven.^{xxxvi}</p>

^{xxiii} Lupieri, 79.

^{xxiv} Ibid., 31.

^{xxv} Ibid., 32.

^{xxvi} Ibid.

^{xxvii} Smith, Vol, 2, 1141

^{xxviii} Ibid., 1147-8.

^{xxix} Ibid., 1155.

^{xxx} Ibid.

^{xxxi} Ibid., 1159.

^{xxxii} Lupieri, 30.

^{xxxiii} Ibid., 32.

^{xxxiv} Ibid., 23.

^{xxxv} Smith, Vol. 2., 1162.

^{xxxvi} Ibid., 1166.

^{xxxvii} Ibid., 1171.

Relationship to Islam

A critical survival feature for Mandaism has been its monotheism. Since the seventh century its adherents have lived under Islamic rule, and their continued existence has depended on being considered *ahl al-kitab* by Muslims. It remains a crucial survival strategy today. In 1980, the Mandaeans in Iran were stripped of their protected status by Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1996, he revised his opinion and issued a *fatwa*, a cleric's opinion "that the Mandaeans possess the requisite characteristics to be recognized as a 'people of the book.'"¹³⁸ As required by the *Qur'an*, Khomeini reiterated these requirements, stating that "they seemed to be monotheists with a holy scripture and a prophet and should therefore be recognized as a protected religion."¹³⁹

In 2001, then-President Saddam Hussein of Iraq praised the Mandaean sect and pledged to build a temple in Baghdad for its followers. In this same address, he promised that the Mandaeans "would keep their equality with Muslims and Christians, the two main religions in Iraq."¹⁴⁰

Similarities with Islam include fasting, giving alms, and prayer rituals. Mandaeans are required to pray three times a day, whereas Muslims are required to pray five times a day.¹⁴¹ Praying facing a specific direction is also unique to each of these religions, with Muslims facing Mecca and Mandaeans facing the north, because they consider the North Star to be the throne of

¹³⁸ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 60.

¹³⁹ Buckley, "With the Mandaeans in Iran," 8.

¹⁴⁰ "Saddam praises Sabaeans, pledges to build temple," <http://www.hrwf.net/html/iraq2001.html#Saddampraisessabaeans>

¹⁴¹ Drower, 3. Legend attributes the diminution of prayer from five times to three times a day to John the Baptist.

Abatur, who will in the end judge all mortals.¹⁴²

Both religions contain elements of secrecy, as the lay people are either not able or not allowed to read their holy books. Islam's requirement that its holy book, the *Qur'an*, only be read in Arabic results in eighty percent of the world's Muslims being unable to read the *Qur'an*. Thus, those who cannot read Arabic must rely on the *imams'* interpretations of their scriptures.¹⁴³ The Mandaeans limit their holy books to the clergy except in rare instances where laypersons are capable of reading the ancient Mandaic language.¹⁴⁴ Even in the 1930s, "few lay Mandaeans know their own script or holy books; such studies are left to priests" whose number was diminishing even then.¹⁴⁵ Thus, the scriptures contained in the holy books of Islam and Mandaeism are not readily available to the lay people.

Both the *imams* of the Muslims, and the *tarmidia* of the Mandaeans, are considered endowed with special knowledge and are seen in most cases as leaders of the local community of believers. Shiite Muslim clerics and Mandaean priests are both regarded as civil as well as religious leaders.¹⁴⁶

Purification rituals are strong in both traditions. Muslims are required to perform the *wudu*, (ablution or cleansing) prior to each prayer. Mandaeans are required to perform cleansing rituals in the form of immersion baptism, *masbuta*, at least weekly and more often if sin requires it. Mandaeans also practice *risama*, a daily cleansing process of all parts of the body and

¹⁴² Lupieri, 15.

¹⁴³ Ergun Caner, *When Worldviews Collide*, (Nashville: LifeWay, 2005), 132.

¹⁴⁴ J. J. Buckley, "Glimpses of a Life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest," *History of Religions* 39 (Aug 1999): 48; Lupieri, 10.

¹⁴⁵ Drower, 51.

¹⁴⁶ Lupieri, 10.

especially before participation in any religious ceremony. Additionally, the Mandaean practice of self-immersion is performed during the week in cases of contamination while awaiting the *masbuta* on Sunday.

Lamenting or grieving over the dead is prohibited in both traditions; however, the destiny of the dead is drastically different. Hell is an ever-present reality in Islam with no assurance of one's final destiny. The souls of Mandeans are assumed to be destined for the Lightworld. It is simply a process to negotiate the ascent to the Lightworld. Muslims and Mandeans both believe there are seven levels in the underworld. However, Mandaean literature devotes little attention to the underworld, while Islam specifies which categories of people will be in each level.¹⁴⁷

Both Mandaism and Islam revere Mary, the mother of Jesus, and believe she was a virgin. While Islam views Jesus as a prophet, Mandaism rejects Jesus as a false prophet and both religions disavow his crucifixion.¹⁴⁸ Like Islam, Mandaism believes Jesus was taken away while a substitute endured the cross.

Both faiths hold Adam in high esteem. Islam identifies Satan's sin as refusal to worship Adam. For the Mandeans, Adam is the first to be instructed in the ritual and necessity of baptism and is thus the progenitor of this tradition.

While there are many similarities to Islam, it must be remembered that Mandeans have lived under Muslim rule since the seventh century and clearly have been influenced by their surroundings. This is particularly noteworthy as one considers the necessity of being labeled *ahl al-kitab*. Thus, it is not surprising that many elements of Islam appear to be mirrored in the Mandaean traditions. Table 4 summarizes the comparison of Mandaism and Islam.

¹⁴⁷ Ergun Caner, "Doctrines of Islam," Liberty Theological Seminary lecture, Lynchburg, VA., 27 October 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Emir Caner and Ergun Caner, *More than a Prophet*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 62.

Table 4. Mandaicism vis-à-vis Islam

Comparison	Mandaicism	Islam
Main Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monotheism. ▪ Baptism (at least weekly). ▪ Prayer 3 times/day, facing north.ⁱ ▪ Fasting applies to anything that distorts man's relationship to God; abstinence from meat at certain times of the year. ▪ Alms-giving (moral and material). <p>In addition to the main tenets, Mandaeans also stress the importance of marriage.ⁱⁱ</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monotheism is expressed by <i>Shahada</i>, a declaration of belief that Allah is one and Muhammad is his prophet. ▪ Prayer, <i>Salat</i> (5 times/day), facing Mecca. ▪ Fasting, <i>Sawm</i>, thirty days during Ramadan, during the sunlight hours. ▪ Alms-giving, <i>Zakat</i>, 2.5% of wealth. ▪ Pilgrimage, the <i>Hajj</i>, to Mecca if physically and financially able.ⁱⁱⁱ <p>Also stressed, although considered optional by some sects, is the Muslim holy war, <i>jihad</i>. <i>Jihad</i> may be interpreted as internal (as a spiritual struggle) or external (defending Islam).^{iv}</p>
Primary Occupation^v	Jewelers: goldsmiths and silversmiths. ^{vi}	Muslims forbidden to work gold directly.
Missionary effort	No one may convert; must be born into religion.	Everyone must convert or be damned; conversion sometimes accomplished by force.
Prayer Direction	Prayer is always to the North. Mandaeans consider the North Star to be the throne of Abatur, who is the divine judge of all mortals. ^{vii}	Prayer, <i>oibla</i> , is toward Mecca, birthplace of prophet Muhammad and the location of the <i>Kaba</i> , the Sacred Mosque. ^{viii} (<i>Qur'an</i> 2:143-144; 149-150)
Adam/Sin	Adam did not sin, but ate the fruit he was destined to eat in order to gain knowledge. "His salvation does not derive from repentance but from the knowledge that the divinity has bestowed upon him. Also, baptism . . . serves to maintain or recover the purity lost through contact with the physical . . . There is no trace of Adam sinning in Mandaean texts." ^{ix}	Adam is to be worshipped by the angels; Satan's (<i>Iblis</i>) sin was refusing to worship Adam (<i>Qur'an</i> 7:11; 17:61). Adam was the first created being, was considered a prophet of God, and did recognize his nakedness after he sinned against God in the garden. (<i>Qur'an</i> 95:4; 7:27) However, his sin was removal from Paradise, and his punishment was toil upon the earth (<i>Qur'an</i> 7:24, 90:4). ^x There was no residual effect of his sin on humans.
Religious leaders	Priests, <i>tarmid</i> , are the highest religious and civil authority and recognized by Islamic authorities; also called "sheik" and "king." ^{xi}	The Imam is the spiritual leader of the local mosque. ^{xii}

ⁱ E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1962), xvii.

ⁱⁱ Mandaean Research Centre, Council of General Affairs, *About the Mandaeans*, (Baghdad, 1999). 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean C Halverson, gen. ed., *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 106-107.

^{iv} John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *The Facts on Islam* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1998), 11.

^v Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

^{vi} Jewelry-making continues to this day to be the primary occupation of Mandaeans, resulting in many kidnappings by Muslims, hoping to attain large ransoms. This information was given to this author repeatedly during a 2005 visit to Iraqi refugees in Amman, Jordan.

^{vii} Lupieri, 15.

^{viii} Halverson, 107.

^{ix} Lupieri, 45.

^x These passages are an example of inconsistency in the Qur'an, where Adam is not only a sinner, but because he repented immediately, and did not place blame elsewhere, God forgave and elevated him.

^{xi} Lupieri, 10.

^{xii} Emir Caner and Ergun Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Kregel, 2002), 249.

Comparison	Mandaicism	Islam
Access of sacred text/doctrine to lay persons	<p>Secretive: Knowledge of religious texts and mysteries reserved to priests. “. . . religious knowledge has been the sole privilege of priests and their families.”^{xii}</p> <p>However, there are also “those who are not priests, but who know how to read and write the classical Mandaean language and who have access to the sacred texts and the knowledge those texts convey.”^{xiii}</p>	<p>The <i>Qur'an</i> is to be read only in Arabic. If unable to read Arabic, must rely on imams for instruction. Only 20% of Muslims world-wide are able to read the Arabic <i>Qur'an</i>.^{xiv}</p>
Purification Rituals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Baptism, <i>masbuta</i>, by immersion by the priest; Madaeans are baptized every Sunday and on most holidays. Baptism “reduces (although does not eliminate) the quantity and quality of punishment in the next world for sinful or irregular behavior, and restores those who have been very seriously contaminated to a state a ritual purity.”^{xv} 2. Daily ablution (cleansing), <i>risama (rusuma)</i>, of all parts of the body and before participation in any religious ceremony. 3. Self-immersion, <i>tamasa (tumusta)</i>, cases of contamination (of a long list of sins) while awaiting the <i>masbuta</i> (baptism) on Sunday. 	<p>Ablution or cleansing, <i>wudu</i>, that must occur before each prayer. It involves:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Washing the hands up to the wrist three times. 2. Rinsing the mouth three times. 3. Cleaning the nostrils by sniffing water three times. 4. Washing the face from forehead to chin and from ear to ear. 5. Washing the forearms up to the elbows three times. 6. Passing a wet hand over the whole of the head. 7. Washing the feet up to the ankles three times, first the right, then the left.^{xvi}
Hell	<p>Madaeans believe in hell, an underworld of darkness, in contrast to the Lightworld. There are seven levels to the underworld. However, since it is not a reality for Madaeans, very little attention is given to it in the literature.^{xvii} There are <i>matartas</i>, toll stations, which are vast spaces between earth and the Lightworld, which imprison <i>utras</i>, celestial beings who sinned and here they are “stuck in sorrow and punishment until the end of time.”^{xviii} When Madaeans become extinct on earth, it will cease to exist. Then the jailed <i>utras</i> will return to the Lightworld. “Souls of wicked Madaeans go not to the underworld but upward to be purified in suitable <i>matartas</i> until they are fit for further ascent.”^{xix}</p>	<p>Hell, <i>jahanam</i>, is accepted as factual. It is a place of eternal torture, a bottomless pit.^{xx} The abode of sinners (<i>Qur'an</i> 4:97). The abode of Satan (<i>Qur'an</i> 38:85; 7:18). The majority of hell’s dwellers are women.^{xxi} Two Surahs teach that Christians will go to paradise (2:62, 5:69) and two Surahs teach that Christians will go to hell (5:72, 3:85). Throughout Muslim thought, hell always seems much nearer than Paradise.^{xxii} Every Muslim will spend some time in hell (Surah 19:71) except those who die in <i>jihad</i> will go immediately to paradise. There are seven levels to hell, the shallowest reserved for those who believed in Allah but who ignored his commands. The deepest level is reserved for “religious hypocrites.” The sixth level is for Christians and the fifth for Jews.^{xxiii}</p>

^{xii} J. J. Buckley, “Glimpses of a life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest,” *History of Religions* 39.1 (August 1999): 48.

^{xiii} Lupieri, 10.

^{xiv} Ergun M Caner, *When Worldviews Collide* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2005), 132.

^{xv} Lupieri, 16.

^{xvi} Caner and Caner, 123-4.

^{xvii} J. J. Buckley, *The Madaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 40.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 8.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 9.

^{xx} Caner and Caner, 122, 145, 148.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 134.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 33

^{xxiii} Ergun Caner, “Doctrines of Islam,” Liberty Theological Seminary lecture, Lynchburg, VA, 27 Oct 2005.

Relationship to Three Major World Religions

In summarizing Mandaism's syncretism with these three major world religions, it is somewhat difficult to clearly identify which has been the influenced, or the influencer, on several levels. While Mandaism claims to be the world's original and oldest religion, citing Adam as its founder, historical evidence does not support that claim. Some scholars date Mandaism to the third century CE, while others date it at the start of the Christian era in the first century.¹⁴⁹ Islam was clearly developed by Muhammad in the seventh century, and the earliest evidence for Mandaism is the fourth century. However, as discussed earlier, Mandaism, even though assumed to be older than Islam, is noted for accepting elements from others and reshaping them to fit the Mandaean belief system. It is also of interest that in the Mandaean system, all of the traditions or belief elements are initiated by God and copied from the Mandaean by subsequent groups.

It is the view of this author that of the major world religions considered in this thesis, Judaism is the oldest, followed by Christianity. The Scriptures began with the Jews in the Old Testament and continued with the Christians in the New Testament. Christians consider that the Scriptures were completed in the first century AD. Islam followed, chronologically, by Muhammad's claim of hearing additional revelation from God through Allah's messenger, Gabriel. After Muhammad's death, his followers recorded his orally-transmitted words, creating the *Qur'an*. Islam then imposed the rule that any religion tolerated by Muslims must be able to produce a holy or divine book. This resulted in Mandaean recording their oral legends in the *Ginza*, thus enabling them to become a protected, or at least a tolerated, religion by Muslims.

Sacred places were initiated by God, who claimed His holy mount, known as Mt. Moriah

¹⁴⁹ Reinke, 9.

in Abraham's time, Mt. Zion in King David's reign, and Jerusalem in the New Testament era. Islam followed this model, by naming three holy places for its followers: Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad, Medina, the final resting place of Muhammad, and Jerusalem, the location of Muhammad's translation into heaven. The Mandeans have strayed from this model somewhat, by initially claiming the Jordan River as its holy site. It eventually expanded its definition of "holy" to any flowing water, no matter where it is located.

God initiated a holy day to be set aside for worship, the Sabbath of the Old Testament (Ex. 16:23; 20:8). Most of Christianity claimed Sunday to honor the risen Jesus (Jn. 20:1, 19, 26; Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2). Islam also claimed a holy day, Friday, as the day of assembly (*Qur'an* 62:9). The Mandeans designated Sunday as their holy day, in honor of the sun and the first day of the week. This is the time for baptisms and other religious activities, although secular business pursuits on Sunday are not prohibited.¹⁵⁰

All three of these major religions are monotheistic, recognizing one God. However, the attributes and character of the Supreme Being of Islam and Mandaism are quite different from the God of Judaism and Christianity. And while Judaism and Islam disavow a triune nature of God, Christianity and Mandaism share a view of a triune God. In Mandaism, however, the trinity is comprised of three celestial beings who do not include the Supreme Being.

The view of sin and salvation constitutes a significant difference between Christianity and other religions. The belief in sin and salvation basically drives all practices and rituals developed in each sect. While heaven and hell are a reality for all four of these (to a lesser degree to modern Jews), and a final day of judgment exists in each, the inhabitants of these final dwelling places and the paths to these eternal locations are very different. Of the four religions under consideration, only Christianity adheres to the belief of "original" sin through Adam to all

¹⁵⁰ Drower, 96.

humans.¹⁵¹ Thus, for all branches of Judaism, Islam, and Mandaism, sin is committed by breaking the rules of the religion involved. For Islam, it is rejecting “right guidance”; for Judaism sin is breaking the commandments of the Law, social action, or societal rather than individual; for Mandaism it is wrongs against others and some other specific acts. The basic way to salvation in Islam and Judaism is through good deeds, and in particular, more good deeds than bad deeds. For Mandaism, forgiveness comes through baptisms. Ultimately, in Mandaism, all Mandaean souls will return to the heavenly Lightworld, so the only “penalty” for sin is the amount of time it takes to ascend to the Lightworld. If a person does not have enough baptisms to cover his wrongs, he will need to pay penalties along the way to the Lightworld after death. How severe or time-consuming the penalties are depends on the degree of wrong-doing and upon the prayers of those still alive.

Conclusion

Given that many Mandaean beliefs have parallels in Christianity, there are many opportunities to build bridges of understanding between these two faiths. Knowledge and truth are very important to Mandaeans. While their belief that they possess the ultimate truth is a strong characteristic of their belief system, history has shown their ability to incorporate new “truths” into their belief system. The Bible teaches that those who seek truth will find it (Dt. 4:29; I Chron 28:9; Mt. 7:7). This chapter has described many doctrines of Christianity that have reflections in Mandaean doctrines. In fact, virtually every major element of Christianity has a counterpart in the syncretized beliefs of Mandaism. This understanding of their world provides bridges of opportunity for sharing the gospel message of Jesus Christ, the only and ultimate truth man can know. Understanding Christianity’s response to each of these comparative elements

¹⁵¹ There are some sects of Christianity, both present and past, who do not hold this view of original sin.

addresses issues faced by all truth-seekers, beginning with one's purpose on earth and concluding with one's eternal destination. A summary of these comparisons and contrasts is displayed in table 5.

Table 5. Mandaism vis-à-vis Three Major World Religions

Mandaism claims to be the first world religion, yet many of its practices and traditions seem either adapted to, or in protest of, these three major world religions. Thus, it is significant to compare the general beliefs of each with Mandaism.

Comparison	Mandaism	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Origin	There is no specific founder of Mandaeanism. Adam was considered the first Mandaean. ⁱ John the Baptist was the last messenger.	Abraham (Gen. 12) However, some commentators assert that it was formalized around BC 200 when rabbinic Judaism developed as distinct from the religion of ancient (Old Testament) Israel. ⁱⁱ	Jesus, approximately 33 A.D.	Muhammad, 632 A.D., upon his death. ⁱⁱⁱ
Prophets^{iv}	Adam received the last fragment of light from the creator; he did not sin in the garden but reaffirmed the right that made him like God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. If there was sin, it was that Adam allowed himself to be seduced by Eve. When Adam became aware of his true spiritual self, he was taught baptism by the Great Revealer, making Adam first Mandaean. He refused to die and lived 1000 years. Seth – received the spirit of Light; died in place of his father, Adam. Enosh (Enoch), Noah, Shem Zechariah – John the Baptist’s father John the Baptist – most highly venerated prophet. ^v Prophets abhorred by Mandaeans: ^{vi} 1. Abraham – refused to die; he is detested by Mandaeans because of circumcision. ^{vii} 2. Moses – refused to die. 3. Jesus didn’t die but went directly to heaven with a surrogate dying on the cross. 4. Muhammad.	All Old Testament prophets.	All Old Testament and New Testament prophets (Mt. 4:17).	Many Old Testament prophets are considered legitimate, though their lives and actions are retold according to the perspective of Muhammad as he perceived the Scriptures to be corrupted by men. Jesus is the only New Testament figure to be considered a prophet by Islam, although again revised according to their belief system. ^{viii}

ⁱ J. J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 64; Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 45.

ⁱⁱ Dean C Halverson, gen. ed., *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 122.

ⁱⁱⁱ Caner and Caner, *Unveiling Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 68.

^{iv} Lupieri, 164-165. Lupieri notes on page 164 that the Mandaeans had an interesting method of dealing with well-known Biblical figures from the Old and New Testaments: “The founders of hostile or enemy religions, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, are turned into demons. Their predecessors, from Adam to Shem in the Old Testament and John (the Baptist) and his parents in the New Testament, are transformed into Mandaean figures. In this way Judaism and Christianity can be considered a deviation from a pre-existing Mandaean reality.”

^v Ibid., 163.

^{vi} Ibid., 116, 162. These four are called the “four prophets of falsehood.”

^{vii} Ibid., 65.

^{viii} Caner and Caner, 82, 87-93.

Comparison	Mandaicism	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Holy Book	<p>The <i>Great Treasure</i>, The <i>Ginza</i>, also called the <i>Sidra</i> is written in Mandaic, the language of the Mandaeans since their beginning.</p> <p>It is a compilation of writings, legends, prayers, hymns and reached its final form in the mid-seventh century, in time to present it to the Muslim authorities.^{ix}</p>	<p><i>Torah</i> “Old Testament” is the written Law. It includes the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, poetry and hymns.</p> <p><i>Talmud</i> contains the interpretation and rules accompanying the Torah, as written by rabbis to assist in following God’s laws. (Acts 24:14-15)^x</p>	<p><i>Holy Bible</i>, the only and inerrant Word of God, spoken through prophets and through Jesus by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 1:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:16).</p>	<p><i>Qur’an</i>, contains the words of Allah transmitted by Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad.</p> <p><i>Hadith</i>, a collection of sayings and examples of Muhammad. It is the second most important book in Islam after the <i>Qur’an</i>.^{xi}</p> <p>Muslims believe the Qur’an supersedes and corrects errors in the Bible.^{xii}</p>
Holy Places	<p>Jordan River, originally believed to be sacred, suggesting the sect’s origination in Palestine. Now all flowing water is generically called “<i>iardna</i>” or “<i>yardna</i>,” Arabic for Jordan.^{xiii}</p> <p>Any river is appropriate to use as it is flowing water from the Lightworld and thus is holy.</p>	<p>Jerusalem, God’s Holy Mount Zion.</p> <p>Israel, God’s covenant land to the Jews.</p>	<p>Israel/Jerusalem, the place of the origin of Christianity and historically “God’s people” of the Bible. However, Christians do not necessarily revere these sites (Jn. 4:21-24).</p>	<p>Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad; place of the most Holy Mosque, the <i>Kaba</i>. Muslims are required to make one pilgrimage to Mecca in their lifetime.</p> <p>Medina, the place of death of Muhammad.^{xiv}</p> <p>Jerusalem, the place of Muhammad’s translation into heaven.^{xv} Dome of the Rock, built in 691 AD to commemorate translation.^{xvi}</p>

^{ix} Buckley, 10.

^x Ergun M Caner, *When Worldviews Collide* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2005), 110.

^{xi} Caner and Caner, 249.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 87.

^{xiii} Lupieri, 14.

^{xiv} Caner and Caner, 64.

^{xv} Caner and Caner, 46.

^{xvi} Caner and Caner, 71.

Comparison	Mandaicism	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Weekly Holy Day	<p>Sunday: In honor of the sun and the first day of the week; “baptisms and religious exercises are enjoined, but otherwise, Sunday is an auspicious day for business.”^{xxvii}</p> <p>Baptisms for all practicing Mandaeans take place every Sunday; “the ceremony lasts several hours, occupying nearly the entire morning.”^{xxviii}</p>	<p>Saturday: The Sabbath (Ex. 16:23; 20:8).</p>	<p>Sunday : The Lord’s Day commemorates Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week (Jn. 20:1, 19, 26; Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2).</p> <p>It is noted that some Christian sects do consider their holy day as Saturday, the Sabbath of the Old Testament.</p>	<p>Friday: “The Day of Assembly” (<i>Qur’an</i> 62:9-10).</p>
Supreme Being	<p>Monotheistic, with several names: Life, Great Life, First Life, Lord of Greatness, King of Light, Powerful.</p> <p>The Great Life is a personification of the creative and sustaining force of the universe, but the personification is slight and spoken always in the impersonal plural, it remains mystery and abstraction. The symbol of the Great Life is “living water,” that is flowing water, or <i>yardna</i>.^{xiv}</p> <p><i>Manda d-Hiia</i> – Knowledge of Life – occupies the preeminent position among the celestial beings. <i>Anus</i> performs miracles in the style of Jesus and destroys Jerusalem.^{xx}</p> <p>Mandaeans view Yahweh as “the ignorant and evil God, who created the world, is easily angered and anthropomorphic . . . and tried to smother . . . knowledge.”^{xxxi}</p>	<p>Monotheistic, with several names: G-d, Yahweh, Jehovah.</p>	<p>Monotheistic, represented in the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.</p>	<p>Monotheistic, named Allah.</p>
Jesus	<p>A negative, demonic reality, a creature the demiurge (Yahweh) made for the purpose of trapping the heavenly messenger within it. He did not suffer the passion, nor was he ever actually killed.^{xxxii}</p>	<p>A good teacher. However, his role as Messiah is rejected.^{xxxiii}</p>	<p>The Messiah, as prophesied in the Old Testament; Son of God (Jn. 3:16); Savior of the world (Acts 2:14-36).</p>	<p>A good prophet; Muslims affirm the virgin birth but deny the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, claiming that a substitute was crucified in His place.</p>

^{xvii} E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq an Iran* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1937), 96.

^{xviii} Lupieri, 15.

^{xix} Drower, xxi

^{xx} Buckley, 8.

^{xxi} Lupieri, 36.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 37.

^{xxxiii} Caner, *Worldviews*, 122.

Comparison	Mandaism	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
<p>Mandaean View of/ Relationship With Other Major Religions</p>	<p>Mandaism considers itself the original religion of the world.^{xxiv}</p> <p>As such, it has provided the basis for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.^{xxv}</p>	<p>Judaism is viewed with the most antagonism because it is “considered the first religious deviation (from Mandaism), the one from which all other religions derive...,” including Christianity and Islam.^{xxvi}</p> <p>Several Mandaean prophets seem to have originated from the Hebrew Bible. (See section on “Prophets.”)</p>	<p>Christianity is considered a deviation from preexisting Mandaean reality.^{xxvii}</p> <p>Jesus is considered a false prophet; John the Baptist, his parents Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are the only highly regarded people from the New Testament. (See section on “Prophets.”)</p>	<p>Muhammad is abhorred by Mandaeans as a false prophet. (See section on Prophets)</p> <p>Muslims have been the rulers over territories where Mandaeans have located for most of their history, so they have survived by aligning themselves with “people of the book” for protection, usually attempting to appear like Christians, invoking the name of John the Baptist.</p> <p>The <i>Qur’an</i> allows protection for People of the Book, and specifically lists Sabians (Surah 2:62; 5:69; 22:17). This designation is expressly applied to the Jews and Christians, but the mention of the Sabians has led Muslims to interpret the Sabians as being included in this protection, “that is to say, that they had a more-or-less monotheistic faith and a book that had been given to them by a genuine god-sent prophet.”^{xxviii}</p>

^{xxiv} Lupieri, 213.

^{xxv} Lupieri, 165, 213.

^{xxvi} Ibid.

^{xxvii} Ibid., 164, 165.

^{xxviii} Francois De Blois, “The ‘Sabians’ in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” *Acta Orientalia* 56 (1995): 40.

Comparison	Mandaism	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Sin	<p>Since Adam did not sin, the notion of “original sin” doesn’t exist for Mandaeans. However, wrongs against others, or in conflict with their teachings, are considered “sin.”</p> <p>Mandaeans believe they are the only people who are born without sin, but that they do sin by action or inaction. Thus, baptism(s) are required for sins and moral faults, the number depending upon the sin.</p>	<p>All branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) reject the notion of “original sin.” Orthodox believe sin is breaking the commandments of the Law; Conservatives believe sin is moral or social action; Reform believe sin is societal, not individual.^{xxix}</p> <p>Since the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, Jews have believed “that good deeds could atone for bad deeds and that by pursuing good works coupled with genuine repentance, one could be forgiven.”^{xxx}</p>	<p>Every person is born in sin as a result of Adam’s sin, and thus needs to be forgiven of the guilt and penalty that sin requires. Sin causes separation between man and God, but atonement through Jesus Christ restores a right relationship between an individual and God (Rom. 3:23, 5:12, 6:23, 5:8, 10:9-13; Jn. 3:16; Heb. 9:11-28).</p>	<p>Sin is considered rejecting right guidance. It can be forgiven through repentance. No atonement is necessary.^{xxxi}</p> <p>Sin is never paid for: it is weighed on a balance scale. The goal is to please Allah more than one offends Allah.^{xxxii}</p>
Salvation	<p>“Comes from physical death, which allows the soul to rise. At the end of one’s earthly existence the search has come to an end; the time for questions is over, and the time for answers has finally arrived. The heavens are open, and the human message can cross them in a voyage toward divinity; <i>Abatur</i> is the judge of the dead.”^{xxxiii}</p>	<p>“‘Salvation’ is not considered to be a Jewish concept, inasmuch as Jewish people presume a standing with God.” The Orthodox and Conservative Jews believe in prayer, repentance, and obedience to God’s laws. Additionally the Conservatives include the necessity of maintaining a Jewish identity. Reform Jews believe “salvation” is attained through personal and social improvement.^{xxxiv}</p>	<p>Comes from recognition of man’s sinfulness and a decision to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of one’s life (Rom. 3:23, 5:12, 6:23, 5:8, 10:9-13; Jn. 3:16-17; 17:3, 8; Heb. 9:11-28).</p> <p>Some branches of Christianity add baptism or other sacraments.</p>	<p>Comes from doing more good than bad deeds in this life. No certainty about one’s final destination, as it is determined by Allah and man cannot know Allah’s decision.^{xxxv}</p>

^{xxix} Halverson, 125.

^{xxx} Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 100.

^{xxxi} Halverson, 107.

^{xxxii} Caner and Caner, 150.

^{xxxiii} Lupieri, 30.

^{xxxiv} Halverson, 126.

^{xxxv} Caner and Caner, 31.

Comparison	Mandaicism	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Day of Judgment; Jesus' Return	<p><i>Abatur</i> is the judge of the dead.</p> <p>We are living in the fourth, shortest, and last of four ages of human history, which will be destroyed from the air.</p> <p>In some texts, Jesus will return at the end of time; in others, <i>Manda d-Hiia</i> will return.^{xxxvi}</p>	<p>The Messiah will come and reign over Jerusalem.</p>	<p>Jesus will return to judge and reign over all (Jn. 14:1-3; Mt. 16:27; Mk. 13:26-27; Rev. 1:7-8; 20:11-15).</p>	<p>Jesus did not die, but “will appear to all just before the final judgment” battle victoriously and “establish a thousand years of righteousness.”^{xxxvii}</p> <p>The Day of Assembly “will be a day of mutual loss and gain . . . And those who believe in Allah and work righteousness he will reserve them from their ills, and he will admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein forever” (<i>Qur'an</i> 64:9).</p>

^{xxxvi} Lupieri, 52.

^{xxxvii} Caner and Caner, 221.

CHAPTER FOUR—MEMBERSHIP AND COMMUNITY

Introduction

Mandaeans are a part of “clearly defined communities. Identity is chiefly communal in nature.”¹⁵² While some scholars focus on individualism, particularly in the context of the baptismal ritual, it is impossible to dissect the Mandaean community. Even baptism is not an initiatory ritual of personal transformation, but a ritual that reinforces and maintains the communal nature of the sect.

Membership in the Mandaean community is attained only through birth. Maintenance of the community is achieved through elaborate rituals, specifically the baptismal and death rituals. Reinforcement of the community is accomplished through the blood lines of the priests and the continued involvement between the living and the dead through the Mandaean festivals and celebrations.

The priests play an essential role in keeping the community intact. None of the rituals can be performed without them, and the current diaspora, combined with the declining number of priest-candidates, severely threatens the ongoing cohesion of Mandaism’s adherents. During the diaspora, Mandaean priests from other countries “are now helping Mandaean exile communities maintain their religious traditions. In addition, Mandaean texts are being translated and a Mandaean magazine is being published in the Netherlands, Britain and Iraq. The Mandaeans are also using the internet and have their own dedicated websites where there are forums that they can use to keep in touch with one

¹⁵² Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 85-86.

another and strengthen the bonds that keep their community together.”¹⁵³

Understanding how a sect develops and maintains its sense of community is crucial to understanding its mindset. The nature of community membership involves initiation, salvation, and eternal destiny. The conclusion to this discussion demonstrates how Mandaean beliefs combine to provide opportunities for Christians to participate with the Mandaeans in their quest for eternal truth.

Birth Rights

The Mandaeans are considered in a “state of arrested development” as their “cults, which are regarded by them as more sacred than their books . . . have been tenaciously retained [for centuries]; their ritual, in all its detail, most carefully preserved by a priesthood who regard a slip in procedure as a deadly sin.”¹⁵⁴ In spite of living among the Muslims for centuries, they have maintained their ancient traditions, including non-marriage outside the sect, and have continued their existence into modern times against extraordinary pressures. Though the Mandaeans “are only a handful of people, surrounded by neighbours of other faiths, they never mingle with them or admit them to intimacy; while a Subbi who marries outside his race and creed automatically leaves it.”¹⁵⁵

Birth into the Mandaean community assures salvation. The Mandaeans believe they are the only people who have a link with the Supreme Being, having been endowed with a portion of his divinity at their birth. This conviction creates the exclusivistic perspective that is woven into their entire belief system. It makes them different from

¹⁵³ Reinke, 8.

¹⁵⁴ Drower, xv.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

everyone else. In fact it not only elevates them “above everyone else . . . but also above God the creator and *his* laws.”¹⁵⁶ This special endowment thus creates the boundaries of the sect and they are fiercely protected.

Marriage with outsiders is prohibited and conversions into the sect are forbidden. Though most scholars agree that the boundaries of membership in the sect are impenetrable, a recent publication concerned with the potential demise of the Mandaeans states that

Mandaism is not a proselytizing religion. There is no law prohibiting members of this faith community from converting to another religion or preventing members of other religions from converting to Mandaism. However, marriage or forced marriage to someone of a different faith or forcible conversion results in a Mandaean losing their membership of [*sic*] the faith community.¹⁵⁷

This statement contradicts volumes of research claiming conversion into the sect is not permissible, and indeed is a current example of the characteristically Mandaean flexibility to adapt to current circumstances.¹⁵⁸

Baptism: Preparation for Lightworld

Baptisms are performed on newborns, at which time the priest pronounces the child’s astrological name. The priest is responsible to calculate this name, providing several acceptable options to the parents who then select the final name. This is the most important name of the four names Mandaeans have, and it is never revealed to strangers.

¹⁵⁶ Lupieri, 35. The Gnostic belief, though monotheistic, recognizes a lesser god as the creator, who is under the Supreme Being. As Mandaeans are endowed with the divinity of the greater God they are superior to the creator god.

¹⁵⁷ Reinke, 10.

¹⁵⁸ Wisam Lazim, interviewed by author 23 Sept 2006. An interview with a converted Mandaean priest-candidate points out that this is an example of “the new generation of priests bending the rules as the sect becomes smaller due to out-migration. To become Mandaean by the authority of some priests is to simply be baptized 366 times, the equivalent of the prior year of sin. However, circumcised men cannot convert, and all converts remain ‘second class,’ never accepted as true Mandaeans.”

This secret name is used only during religious rituals. “Unbaptized children are not considered to be a part of the faith community” until baptism.¹⁵⁹

Routine baptisms generally begin at the traditional age of accountability, when a young person is considered able to distinguish between right and wrong. This is usually in the late adolescent or early teen years, between eleven and fourteen years of age. Once one begins the baptismal process, it is necessary to continue it throughout life. Repeated baptismal immersions “mark preparations and rehearsals for entry into that [Light] world, an entry that properly happens only at the death of the body.”¹⁶⁰ Rather than being an initiatory ritual, baptism in Mandaism is a “reaffirmation, consolidation with the Lightworld, and a reintegration with fellow Mandaeans past and present . . . the [baptisms] re-create and reconfirm the . . . vital connection between the earthly world and the Lightworld.”¹⁶¹

Baptisms are performed for everyone every Sunday. Additional baptisms for all occur at holiday festivals and at Mandaean funerals. Individuals may also baptize themselves between official baptismal occasions as the need arises (see chapter six).

Death: Entry into the Lightworld

“True salvation comes with physical death, which allows the soul to rise. At the end of one’s earthly existence, the search has come to an end; the time for questions is over, and the time for answers has finally arrived.”¹⁶² One’s eternal habitation is never in

¹⁵⁹ Reinke, 10.

¹⁶⁰ Buckley, 80.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶² Lupieri, 30.

question, only the time it takes to ascend from the earth to the Lightworld. This time is spent going through a series of portals, *matarata*, called “toll” booths by Buckley and called “houses of punishment” by Lupieri. These portals are guarded by sentinels of the underworld and are a type of purgatory “where the soul is examined and if necessary, penance is paid along the way.”¹⁶³ The penalty is dependent upon sins that have not been absolved through baptism. How quickly one ascends is also dependent upon the prayers of the remaining Mandeans. All Mandeans who have passed on are always invited to the feasts and reunite in spirit with the living during their festivals. Thus, the connection between the living and the deceased is maintained in the community of believers.

Funeral rituals are an elaborate experience officiated by the *tarmidia*. Other than the inability to properly practice baptism, the greatest difficulty facing dispersed Mandeans is the inability to properly send their deceased into the Lightworld. “It is a difficult problem for Mandeans in the U. S. exile who . . . without priests, cannot have proper death rituals.”¹⁶⁴ They have been forced to rely on their own laypeople and clergy of other faiths to assist in these rituals. For Mandeans to be without their own priests to carry out these rituals “is a very painful situation.”¹⁶⁵ Mandeans in America try to avoid the subject because the implications of dying without the priests and the proper flowing water are so immense. In fact, some Mandeans have been known to return to Iraq to die, even in light of the desperate situation from which they escaped.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Lupieri, 31.

¹⁶⁴ Buckley, 29.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

Conclusion

Mandaeans live with the confidence that they are the chosen who will live eternally in the Lightworld, a heavenly “peaceful place of abundant food, music, fresh breezes, and no need to communicate by talking, for everybody knows what the others want.”¹⁶⁷

However, one of the most painful conversations between scholar Buckley and members of the Mandaean community in America underscores the dependence of this paradise upon their rituals and, specifically, their priests to administer the rituals. While seeking asylum from the horrors of Iraqi life, there is a strong desire to maintain their community in order to secure their eternal destination. This dependence upon the priests underscores the fragility of their system, which collapses when priests are not available to oversee the rituals that bind the community together.

Two major areas of opportunity exist for bridging understanding and discussing spiritual matters based on membership and community in Mandaism compared with Christianity. First, the fragmentation and disintegration of their community provides the opportunity of discussions of an eternity built on a better foundation, a foundation that is not dependent upon humans but which has already been provided by the sacrifice of Jesus and his completed high priestly activities on our behalf as presented in Hebrews 9:28 and 10:12. Secondly, the open invitation for all to come to Jesus is a sharp contrast to a system built on the odds of being born into the Mandaean community. This openness can be communicated through the life of Jesus and His encounters with those who were not born into the Hebrew faith, such as the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4). The availability of salvation to all is further demonstrated in the encounter of Peter with Cornelius of Caesarea (Acts 10)

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 29.

and Paul's ministry dedicated to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Rom. 11:13). The Bible states a clear invitation for all to come to Jesus regardless of ethnicity, birth, heritage, social status, or gender. Passages to reinforce this concept include: Gal. 3:26-27; Col. 3:11; Jn. 3:16; 10:16, 28-30; Mt. 28:19; and Rom. 10:9-13.

CHAPTER FIVE—AUTHORITY AND ORGANIZATION

Introduction

Mandaism considers several well-known Biblical figures, from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as founders of hostile or enemy religions. Those they do not like, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, are turned into demons. “Their predecessors, from Adam to Shem in the Old Testament and John and his parents in the New, are transformed into Mandaean figures. In this way, Judaism and Christianity can be considered a deviation from the preexisting Mandaean reality.”¹⁶⁸ Lupieri argues that this adaptation of biblical characters into Mandaean characters is

clear evidence that Judaism and Christianity, with their Scriptures, already existed when Mandaeanism was formed. Further proof of this is supplied by the fact that the phenomenon does not repeat itself with . . . Islam, so that there is no seeking for anyone preceding the founder to turn into a Mandaean. . . . Islam [is] considered a further degeneration of Judaism and Christianity, not directly a deviation from Mandaeanism. The fact that Judaism and Christianity, with their founders, receive such careful attention . . . proves that the specific variety of Gnostic syncretism that is Mandaeanism stems from Judaism and Christianity and splits off from them.¹⁶⁹

The Mandaeans claim that their beliefs and religion were formed by Adam. Their legends describe Adam being given a spark of the divine during his creation. He did not sin in the garden but reaffirmed the right that made him like God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, actually fulfilling his destiny, gaining knowledge. That knowledge was given directly from *Manda d-Hiia* and included the methods and significance of baptism in order to reunite with the Lightworld. Other information claims that there is no specific

¹⁶⁸ Lupieri, 164.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 164, 165.

founder of Mandaism, but that Abraham was considered a Mandaean (until he was circumcised) and that John the Baptist was the last messenger to the Mandaeans.¹⁷⁰

The earliest known sacred writings of the Mandaeans are mid-seventh century, produced to prove to the Muslims that they qualified as *ahl al-kitab*.¹⁷¹

John the Baptist is the last and most recognized Mandaean prophet. However, Mandaeans regard Shem as their most important prophet, who is considered by Mandaeans as their “founding father.”¹⁷² As the Mandaeans have traced the origins of various groups, one fact remains consistent in their mythology: they “are the only ones who are pure and genetically without sin.”¹⁷³

The Priestly Role

The Mandaeans make a clear distinction between priests and laypeople. Their society is stratified: priests (*tarmidas* and *ganzibras*), learned laymen (*yalufas*) and laypeople. Priests are required to be married and have offspring.¹⁷⁴ This “high regard for marriage among the Mandaeans differs strikingly from the antipathy toward marriage held by the early Gnostics.”¹⁷⁵ Priests function as the head of the community in both a spiritual and civic sense. The *tarmidas* are of the lower priestly rank, and the *ganzibras*, are from the highest rank. The high priest, *ganzibra*, also known as the treasurer, is responsible for

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷¹ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 10.

¹⁷² Lupieri, 51.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁷⁴ Drower, 59.

¹⁷⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, review of *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People*, by J. J. Buckley, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 124.1 (Jan-Mar 2004): 136-137.

the preservation of the treasure of knowledge, the sacred book, the *Ginza*. The priests are “aristocratic . . . [and] enjoy enormous respect as ritual specialists and spiritual leaders of the people. Without them, traditional Mandaean society would not exist.”¹⁷⁶

There are many factors that are diminishing the ranks and practices of the Mandeans in the current diaspora, but probably the most significant is the declining number and distribution of priests throughout the world. The sect nearly went extinct in the 1830s when two cholera epidemics “erased the entire Mandaean priesthood, leaving a decimated and demoralized lay population [W]ithout priests to baptize, celebrate marriages, officiate at religious festivals and at ceremonies for the dead, the Mandaean religion could not—and still cannot—be sustained.”¹⁷⁷ Fortunately for the sect, two young men, sons of priests, initiated one another into the priesthood in a highly unorthodox manner, and in doing so, have preserved the sect for another 175 years to the present time.

Today, there are very few learned laypersons and very few young novices. The priestly responsibilities are carried on within the priestly families, but more of today’s young men are choosing other occupations. While Mandeans cite more leisure opportunities and more varied career choices, the status of Mandaean priests within their own community has changed considerably. No longer held in the highest esteem, priests are criticized for failing to communicate properly with adherents, “so that knowledge of their own written language and Mandaean religion is very limited Unless something is done soon to support the more spiritually inclined members of the younger generation and reinforce their knowledge of their religion in their country of origin and in the

¹⁷⁶ Buckley, “With the Mandeans in Iran,” 8.

¹⁷⁷ Buckley, “Glimpses of a Life,” 34.

diaspora, the pessimistic view that Mandaicism is on the verge of extinction will prove to be fully justified.”¹⁷⁸

The Priestly Ordination

The ordination process is very lengthy and follows to some degree the ordination of Levitical priests set forth in the Old Testament. In addition to the purity of the priest himself, the wives of all participants, the candidate, the teachers, and any other priestly assistants must be pure throughout the initial nine day and eight night period. If any of the wives are menstruating, about to give birth, or have a miscarriage during the ceremony, it would be invalid and all (male and female) would have to go through extensive purification rituals. Once the proper week is chosen, various baptismal and sacrificial rituals are carried out. A special ordination hut is constructed with the doorway facing north and with the door covering made of blue cloth. Blue is anathema to Mandaeans, perhaps signifying the material aspect of the world. The candidate is clothed in a new *rasta*, a garment also used in baptism, representing the candidate’s death to the material world. He must then demonstrate to his teacher and all participants that “he possesses the necessary knowledge and preparation. He will recite from memory an entire sacred book, prayers, and the ritual for the dead.”¹⁷⁹ The officiating priests follow along in the sacred book to assure that the candidate recites accurately, with no errors, while others prepare the sacred food. The candidate and his teacher must stay awake the entire week. “Just as the high priest of Jerusalem was kept awake the night before Yom Kippur, the Mandaean candidate to priesthood must not sleep. Both cases respond to the same fear: a nocturnal

¹⁷⁸ Reinke, 11-12.

¹⁷⁹ Lupieri, 26.

ejaculation could make the man who must approach divine things impure.”¹⁸⁰ During the week, the priest-candidate remains in the hut to “pray, recite sacred texts, discuss things with his teacher and receive secret instruction.”¹⁸¹ If a candidate does become impure during this period, the ordination could be postponed for up to a year and a series of baptisms would be necessary.

When a priest-candidate completes this initial period successfully, he then begins a sixty-day period of isolation and purification. This involves separation from his wife and family, daily purification immersions, and preparation of his own food by special processes. At the end of the sixty days, the final initiatory act requires that the candidate recite the entire *masiqta*, the death mass, and perform the ceremonial actions that accompany this ritual. Only at the end is the candidate considered a true *tarmida*.

For a *tarmida* to advance to the *ganzibra*, he must participate in a special ceremony of one who is near death and who has lived a blameless life. This person, upon death, will be the “message” to the Lightworld, informing them of the new *ganzibra*.

Relationship of Mandaean Priests to Ancient Jewish Priests

Many scholars contend that there is significant Jewish influence in Mandaism and this is especially illustrated by the similarities of the priestly ordination process. Priests in both Judaism and Mandaism must be born into the priestly “caste”, may never shave their heads or beards, and must be mentally and physically fit. The Mandaean priestly candidates are inspected for physical perfection prior to ordination. Levitical priests were prohibited from serving if a single imperfection was present (Lev. 21:5). The rituals to

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

ordain priests follow similar procedures, beginning with the cleansing of the body and the wearing of specific clothing. The ritual for the Mandaean *tarmidia*, however, is far more extensive than that of the Levitical priest, lasting sixty-eight days, while the Levitical ordination lasted eight days. The Mandaean priest is required to memorize prayers and receives secret knowledge from the head priest during the sixty-day isolation period. Table 6 provides a summary of the ordination rites of the Mandaean priests compared with the Ancient Jewish priests. Table six compares the requirements for Mandaean priests with the requirements for the Jewish priests of ancient Israel.

Table 6. Mandaean Priests vis-à-vis Jewish Priests

Comparison	Mandaism	Judaism (Ancient [Old Testament] ⁱ)
Priests: Requirements	Though priests may come from outside the “priestly class,” most priests have a lineage of priests in the family. “A lay Subbi who has a ‘clean’ family history for the necessary number of generations and has the requisite physical and mental qualifications, can become a priest, but, in practice, the priesthood tends to run from father to son.” ⁱⁱ “A certain family right usually holds true . . . the sons of priests usually become priests, especially as they move up in the hierarchical order.” ⁱⁱⁱ	Must be born into a priestly family, the Levites, descendants of Aaron, the first High Priest (Ex. 29:10; 40:15; Nu. 3:10).
Priests: Hair	Priest/candidate may not cut hair beginning at puberty. ^{iv} Hair on the head is sacred, a mark of honor. Even laymen consider cutting the hair of the head or beard as impious. ^v (This requirement seems to have some connection to the Biblical Samson, told as a folk-story in Iraq.) ^{vi}	Priests must never shave their heads or trim the edges of their beards (Lev. 21:5).
Priests: Physical Perfection	“Must be perfect of body and mentally fit.” ^{vii}	Priests may not have physical defects (Lev. 21:16-23).
Priests: Importance of Color Blue	Blue fabric not allowed, as it “symbolized the material aspect of this world.” ^{viii}	High Priest’s robe required to be entirely of blue cloth (Ex. 28:31).

ⁱ Old Testament comparisons are important as the Mandaeans believe they preceded the Jewish religion; however, one can see that many of their requirements seem to be developed in opposition to the Jewish beliefs of the Old Testament, which may not be followed by modern Jews of any sect.

ⁱⁱ E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1962), 146.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 13.

^{iv} Drower, 146.

^v *Ibid.*, 166.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 165.

^{vii} Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 98, 183 n.5.

^{viii} Lupieri, 26.

Comparison	Mandaicism	Judaism (Ancient [Old Testament])
<p>Priests: Ordination Ceremony</p>	<p>A ritual that takes a total of 68 days to complete: 9 days and 8 nights, plus a waiting period of 60 days until the priest-candidate is eligible to conduct priestly duties.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Preparatory ritual: double baptism, ram sacrificed, and verification of physical perfection of priest-candidate. 2. Candidate provided special, specific clothing. 3. Candidate recites from memory an entire sacred book, prayers and the ritual for the dead. 4. Candidate receives symbols of priesthood: crown, gold ring, ceremonial stick of olive wood. 5. Candidate receives secret instructions from mentor. 6. Priest- cannot sleep for the entire 9day/8 night ceremony, for “fear of nocturnal ejaculation, which would make him impure” and result in postponement of the consecration ceremony for at least one year and/or a series from nine to 366 baptisms.^{ix} 7. Priest is baptized in a series of solemn baptisms. 8. Priest is isolated and purified for 60 days. 9. Priest leads celebration ceremony for the dead from memory. <p>Priest offers sacrifice, prepares ceremonial bread and wine surrogate.^x</p>	<p>A ritual that took 8 days to complete.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Priest cleansed with water (Lev. 8:6). 1. Priest provided special, specific clothing (Lev. 8:7-9; 13). 2. Priest anointed with oil (Lev. 8:12). 3. Ram sacrificed (Lev. 8:22-24). 4. Unleavened bread (Lev. 8:26). 5. Priest sprinkled with blood and anointed with oil (Lev. 8:30). 6. Priest remained in Tent of Meeting 7 days to complete the ordination (Lev. 8:33-36).

^{ix} Lupieri, 27. This same requirement was placed on the High Priest of Jerusalem on the night before Yom Kippur for the same reason.

^x Ibid., 25-29.

Conclusion

The responsibility of maintaining a tight community that is protected from outsiders is vested in the priests, who maintain a relationship between the material, physical world and the divine spiritual world. From requiring priests to come from priestly families, to a lengthy ordination process, the priests are prepared and equipped to provide spiritual and civic leadership to the Mandaeans. Their repeated rituals are reminiscent of the repetitive rituals of the Levitical priests of ancient Judaism. However, the need for these repetitious rituals in Judaism was eliminated by Jesus, the ultimate high priest, who provided the final and purest sacrifice for all times for all people.

For Mandaeans who are especially familiar with the priestly process, the opportunity exists for discussion regarding the priests of the Bible as compared with the ongoing priestly responsibilities in Mandaism. Hebrews presents an excellent study of this topic beginning with the qualifications of the high priest as outlined in Hebrews 5-7 and ending with the rationale for the elimination of earthly priests, as this role has been completed in Jesus.

- 1) He must be a man (5:1-3)
- 2) He must be appointed by God (5:4-5)
- 3) The hierarchy and finality of Jesus as the final high priest (5:6-10)
 - a. Melchizedek-priesthood not dependent upon human genealogy (v 6)
 - b. Greater priesthood than Aaron's (7:4-10) because:
 - He received tithes from Abraham
 - He blessed Abraham (the greater blesses the lesser)
 - Abraham greater than Levi because Levi's descendents were from Abraham and the father is always greater than the son (descendents)

- c. Melchizedek preceded the Jews (7:1-3)
- d. Melchizedek was a perpetual priest (v 2):
 - He had neither father nor mother nor genealogy, in contrast with Levitical (and Mandaean) priests who rely on a carefully delineated heritage.
 - He was without beginning or end
 - He was like the son of God

This outline provides the foundation for a discussion of the priestly responsibilities in Judaism in light of the new covenant in Christ, and could be the basis for discussion with Mandaeans about their priestly system, particularly the repetitious rituals. However, this represents only one aspect of apologetic discussion that is possible with Mandaeans and should be preceded by a solid foundation of friendship and trust.

CHAPTER SIX—RITUALS AND HOLIDAYS

Introduction

Rituals require effort, discipline, and belief that the effort is producing something of value to the participant. For Mandaeans, the work involved in the rituals makes the Lightworld accessible to the earthly inhabitants, binding living Mandaeans with their ancestors who have gone on before. Mandaean rituals are very specific, with complicated and precise requirements in words and deeds. When followed explicitly, which is the responsibility of the priest-administrator, there is no question in the minds of the adherents that the ritual is producing the desired link between the Lightworld and the human world. The purpose of this section is not to detail the intricacies of the ritual practice, but to provide an overview that presents the beliefs and outcomes the adherents expect to accomplish by the practice.

Baptism

The most obvious and well-known ritual of the Mandaean religion is their frequent use of immersion baptism (*masbuta*) for purification. Baptisms (*masbutiata*) must take place in a river, in water that is flowing, living water (*yardna*). *Yardna* originally meant the Jordan River, but today applies to any river. The flowing water serves as the source of life and as a connection between the Lightworld and the earthly world, and connects Mandaeans with their ancestors who have gone on before them. Since the river water is not totally pure, the baptism is preceded by the priest “binding the forces of darkness,” and

making the river suitable for baptism.¹⁸²

In the current diaspora situation, it must be noted that exceptions are being made for the requirement of baptism in flowing water. As it has become harder for Mandaeans to maintain their rituals according to tradition, those “traditions have decayed and ritual practices have been abandoned in modern industrial society.”¹⁸³ Reports from countries outside the Middle East indicate that showers in private homes, swimming pools and fountains are being used.

This connection between the Lightworld and earth through water comes from the Mandaeans’ sacred book, the *Right Ginza*, XV 354, 12-13: “Thus the water gushed forth and the connection of this world was established.” “The sending of heavenly living water into the waters of the earth and the close association of the concepts of life, light and water are the most important aspects regarding salvation in the Mandaean mythology.”¹⁸⁴

The chief characteristic of the Mandaean *masbuta* is its repeated enactment, contrary to the usual understanding of baptism as a singular, initiatory rite.¹⁸⁵ “This constantly recreated redemption is, of course, balanced with the goal of final liberation from the earthly realm. Life on earth is neither free nor automatic, but must be continuously reconfirmed in its dependence on the Lightworld. Therefore, human responsibility for ritual action weighs heavily.”¹⁸⁶ “The continually repeated baptism

¹⁸² J. J. Buckley, “Why Once is not Enough: Mandaean Baptism (*Masbuta*) as an Example of a Repeated Ritual,” *History of Religions* 29 (Aug 1989): 28-29.

¹⁸³ Reinke, 11.

¹⁸⁴ Majella Franzmann, “Living Water Mediating Element in Mandaean Myth and Ritual,” *Numen* 36 (Dec 1989): 158.

¹⁸⁵ Buckley, “Why Once is Not Enough,” 25.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

serves to confirm and consolidate the Mandaean in their two-world membership.

Madaeans make their Lightworld visible, tangible and accessible through ritual work.”¹⁸⁷

This stems from their belief that baptism furnishes the only possibility for taking part in the Lightworld, and it affects their reintegration with fellow Madaeans past and present.

It recreates and reconfirms the connection between the two worlds: the world of the earthly Madaeans and the world of their ancestors on high. Thus, the steady repetition of baptism is necessary. To abolish the repetitions would imply severance from the Lightworld and spiritual death.

Newborn infants are baptized within forty days of birth. At that initial baptism the infant is given his secret, astrological name. Baptisms of newborns generally occur in the spring or summer, unless the infant’s life is in danger. Children are not generally baptized again until an age determined by the parents, generally at eleven or twelve years of age.¹⁸⁸ Baptisms are held every Sunday and during every Madaean holiday, but also after any personal defilement, especially after menstruation and following sexual intercourse. In order to maintain purity between priest-administered baptisms on Sundays or holidays, individuals may practice self-immersion between the official baptismal events.

Individuals being baptized wear a special white garment, a *rasta*. This same garment is worn by the deceased, “so one enters the water and the Lightworld [at death] in the same kind of garment.”¹⁸⁹ The water is considered the “garment of light” for the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸⁸ Lazim. Because of the rapid out-migration of Madaeans from the sect, there has been discussion of requiring child baptisms in order to more directly tie young people to the sect. However, the official rules of the religion do not require child baptisms since the sins of children are considered insignificant.

¹⁸⁹ Buckley, 30.

baptized, rather than the material fabric being the garment of light.¹⁹⁰ During the baptism, “one has the impression that the barriers separating the world of light and the earth have disintegrated, that there is no longer a certain heaven and earth but a merging of the two in the experience of the ritual.”¹⁹¹ “Mandaeans believe that life stops for a brief moment before starting again fresh and new after the baptism.”¹⁹² The priests are the mediators who cross between the boundaries of earth and the Lightworld on this heavenly journey, essentially participating in both worlds.

The procedure for baptism begins with the individual immersing himself three times. The individual is then immersed three times by a priest, followed by drinking river water from the priest’s hand three times and engaging in a sacred handshake, signifying the giving of truth. The priest, with his wet finger, draws three lines across the individual’s forehead, from left to right ear. The purpose of this action is unclear in the literature. Lupieri suggests this action possibly symbolizes the Christian sign of the cross, while Segelberg maintains that its meaning is unclear, but speculates that perhaps is a dedication to Hibil, Sitil and Anus, the trinity of utras who are invoked in Mandaean prayers.¹⁹³ He then crowns the individual with a myrtle wreath, all the while reciting the potent names of Lightworld beings to protect the baptized person. After all have been baptized, the ritual continues on the river bank with each participant receiving a piece of special bread prepared in advance by the priest, drinking three servings of river water, exchanging the sacred handshake once again and throwing the wreath into the water. Throughout the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹⁹¹ Franzmann, 160.

¹⁹² Reinke, 10.

¹⁹³ Lupieri, 16; Segelberg, 54.

ritual, the priest recites specific prayers for each aspect of the proceedings.

Among the “sealing” prayers offered by the priest is one that “asks for forgiveness of sins for past and present Mandaean.”¹⁹⁴ There are several effects of the Mandaean baptism, including forgiveness, purification, blessing, and healing. However, the most significant effect of baptism is providing a means for the soul to share in the Lightworld and to be in communion with ancestors who have already died and gone to that world.

John the Baptist is considered by recent Mandaean traditions as the only true prophet. It has also been noted earlier that there is an element of convenience in having had a prophet, in that it facilitated attaining *ahl al-kitab* protection by the Muslims. However, John the Baptist is not regarded as the originator or even the most important prophet in the Mandaean faith.

In the more ancient literary contexts, he does not act as a prophet, nor is he called one, except in an anti-Islamic function. The only prophecy that is recorded for him concerns the coming of Muhammad. . . . for the Madaeans, John is not the Baptist par excellence (indeed, he is not even called “baptist,” except in just one of the many passages that speak of him) since he was not the one who invented baptism. This was revealed to Adam by *Manda d-Hiia*, and so Adam is the initiator of the Mandaean ritual baptism on earth, and John learned it as a child from Anus.¹⁹⁵

In the early twentieth century, German scholar H. Lietzmann “denied that the Madaeans had anything to do with the disciples of John the Baptist and stated that the traditions about John in the Mandaean literature were derived from the New Testament and Christian legends via Syrian Christians and that they were introduced in the Mandaean texts as late as in Arabic times.”¹⁹⁶ He further asserted that the baptismal rituals of the

¹⁹⁴ Buckley, “Why Once is Not Enough,” 32.

¹⁹⁵ Lupieri, 162-163.

¹⁹⁶ Eric Segelberg, *Masbuta: Studies in the Ritual of the Mandaean Baptism* (Uppsala, Sweden: Almquist & Wiksells, 1958), 15.

Mandaeans were copied from the Nestorians. Though Lietzmann's theories were eventually dismissed by other scholars, Segelberg predicted the imminent demise of the last of the Gnostic sects and decried the fact that "it is still not possible to describe accurately and completely the central act of the Mandaean religion."¹⁹⁷

Weddings

Weddings are also an occasion for baptisms. They occur on Sundays and last one to two days. The wedding is, of course, officiated by the *ganzibra*, the highest priest, without whom it would be invalid. The baptism of the bride is preceded by her silence until the purification process is complete. The bride is taken to the *mandi*, the cultic hut used for certain rituals, where she is examined to determine her virginity.

A special wedding hut is prepared in the grooms' courtyard, which has no walls but decorations of flowers and various grasses and reeds. It is covered with a white veil, similar to a mosquito net. The actual wedding ceremony takes place in this wedding hut with the groom, the *ganzibra*, and a man representing the bride. The bride is not present and this representative answers all questions for her, officially accepting the groom on her behalf. The ceremony lasts for several hours, beginning with a ritual meal for the dead. The Mandaeans believe that all ancestors from Adam to John the Baptist to all of their forebears should be invited to all community meals, which include ritualistic foods and beverages. The foods are much richer in the wedding ceremony, but the sacredness of the food requires that it cannot be thrown away, nor used on other occasions. It must be distributed among the poor or discarded into the river.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 18.

The bride remains in the wedding hut throughout the ceremony. Near the end of the event, one of the priest's helpers brings her two rings from the groom and in the presence of witnesses she is asked if she wants to marry the groom. After the final pronouncement of their wedded status, the participants throw rose petals, powdered sugar and almonds over those present. Following the declaration of marriage, the marriage is consummated, based upon a time determined by the priest to be the most propitious time, usually within six hours of the ceremony.

Funerals

The Mandaean funeral ritual is complicated and significant to the final destiny of the soul. The death mass, *masiqta*, takes about twelve hours. However, the annual *masiqta*, occurring during the five-day holiday of *Paruanaiia*, requires even more time. Though several priests may be involved in the *masiqta*, at least one must be the *ganzibra*. The near-death of a blameless person (either a man or woman from a spotless priestly family or a married person with children) also provides the final step in the ordination process for a new high priest.¹⁹⁸ The deceased is given the responsibility to carry the “message,” the announcement to the Lightworld of a new *ganzibra*.

The funeral ceremony commemorates all deceased Mandaeans, inviting them to be present in the community. Simply pronouncing the names of the deceased “creates their presence . . . [and is similar to the way] that the word ‘remembrance’ should be understood in connection with the commemoration” of the Eucharist.¹⁹⁹ This is comparable to the celebration of the Eucharist in the Catholic Church, which represents the actual body of

¹⁹⁸ Lupieri, 29. (See chapter five for a full discussion on the ordination procedure for priests.)

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

Christ present among the worshipers.

The funeral ritual varies slightly with the occasion, whether performed as part of the *Paruanaiia*, the ordination of the priest, or simply as a death mass. It always includes the sacrifice of a dove and special bread prepared by the priests. The ceremony cannot begin less than three hours after death. Loud wails and weeping is forbidden among the Mandeans as it is among the Muslims.

Holidays

The Mandeans celebrate four major holidays, all of which include baptisms. “The feast days tend to become occasions for baptism for many Mandeans who may neglect it at other times.”²⁰⁰

The Great Feast, *Dihwa Raba*, is a two-day celebration of the New Year and Creation, which was completed on this day. During this time, all the spirits of light leave the earth, taking twelve hours to travel to the Lord of Greatness and pay their compliments. The powers of evil and death are left unrestrained on earth, so the community must remain in their homes for thirty-six hours. If someone dies during this time, the funeral is delayed until the festival’s end. This holiday is also marked by the priest making predictions for the coming year.

The Feast of Golden Baptism, *Dihwa id Dimana*, celebrates the baptism of Adam. This one day feast includes baptisms of all Mandeans, including infants and children. If a person is baptized in a new *rasta*, the white baptismal garment, the baptism is the equivalent to sixty baptisms.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 26.

The Short Feast, *Dihwa Hnina*, also called the Little New Year, is a one-day feast celebrating the return of *Hibil Ziwa* from the underworlds to the Lightworld.²⁰¹ It is a night of power, when, if a man is pious, he can obtain whatever he asks. If he is truly pious, he doesn't ask for worldly favors, but freedom from sin and the blessing of spiritual gifts. If granted, the individual is informed through a vision. During this holiday, food is distributed to the poor, baptisms occur, and ritual meals are eaten honoring the dead.

The greatest holiday is the *Paruanaiia*, meaning "five."²⁰² This five-day, intercalary festival is a great celebratory feast held at the river. It usually falls in the early part of April when the rivers are swollen. This religious festival, with a great baptismal river feast, is a time to invite the dead to the sacred meals. It is considered an especially fortunate time to die, as the heavens are open and souls who die during this period go into the Lightworld without interference from the forces of evil along the way. Special preparations are made for the feast, including consecration of the *manda*, the cultic hut used in ordination of priests, and purification of the tableware and kitchenware of all members of the community. The members of the community who have died are invited to celebrate in the feasting of *Paruanaiia*.

Conclusion

While birth into the Mandaean sect gives special status in the universe, and the secret knowledge given only to Mandaeans is the key to salvation, the "cultic rituals are as important as (or more important than) knowledge for leaving the earthly world of darkness

²⁰¹ Drower, 88. *Hibil Ziwa* is a light spirit, the divine being most directly in touch with the earthly world.

²⁰² The Mandaeans use a 365 day solar year, but do not have leap years. Thus, they have twelve months of thirty days, and between their eighth and ninth months, they add five days (intercalary), which are used as a great feast.

and bodies where the soul is prisoner, and ascending to the soul's native world of Light. Hence, the rituals are necessary for every Mandaean.²⁰³ The baptism ritual confirms and reconfirms the individual's salvation. "Still, the constantly created redemption remains incomplete, for it must be balanced at the end of the earthly life with the final liberation from this life."²⁰⁴ It is thus the responsibility of the Mandaean to continue the baptisms throughout his/her lifetime, a heavy responsibility for any human to attain his own salvation.

²⁰³ Gunduz, 13.

²⁰⁴ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 85.

CHAPTER SEVEN—SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Legends and Visions

The Mandaeans, like most Middle Eastern people, have a strong sense of the supernatural. Their belief in an entire system of *utras*, messengers between earth and the Lightworld, is a clear example of this. Each *utra* has a specific purpose and most have reached this status after an exemplary life as a human. As noted earlier, John the Baptist is an example that this elevation to an *utra* is not always the reward for a prophet.²⁰⁵

Of particular note is the symbolism encompassing the celebration of *Paruanaiia*, the five-day intercalary holiday, which is steeped in superstition. This is considered a particularly favorable time to die since during this five-day period the souls of the dead do not have to go through the journey to the Lightworld with dangerous encounters. The gates of the Lightworld are open during these five days and souls enter directly. However, the five days preceding the *Paruanaiia* are a particularly inauspicious time to die, as the forces of evil are unusually rampant during those days.

Belief in the authenticity of visions is common among Middle Eastern peoples. The most visible and influential are the visions of Muhammad, which resulted in the Islamic religion. Individuals are often blessed or cursed by visions. The Mandaeans particularly look forward to visions to answer their desires during the New Year Celebration. This is the one time when a person can ask for anything, and if it is to be granted, this is communicated through a vision.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ See chapter three, “Relationship to Christianity,” for a discussion on the elevation of humans to celestial beings.

²⁰⁶ See chapter six, “Holidays.”

Talismans and Pendants

The *skandola*, meaning official knife, is a talisman used to protect from evil. It is a magic signet ring that “bears incised representations of the lion, scorpion, bee (or wasp), and serpent. . . . It is worn [by the priest] during exorcisms and by those isolated for uncleanness, such as childbirth, or marriage.”²⁰⁷ This item is available only to priests and holy people, lay persons who have been approved to assist in certain priestly functions. It is “used during religious ceremonies, thus becoming legitimized.”²⁰⁸ The *skandola* is used throughout the life cycle to ward away evil spirits. It is placed under a woman’s bed during childbirth to protect the baby and take any evil from the baby.²⁰⁹ It is used to “seal” newborns from evil, by impressing it on the baby’s navel.²¹⁰ The bridegroom is invested with it by the priest during the wedding ceremony. The *skandola* is used during the funeral rites by attaching it first to the dead body until burial, and then to “seal” the tomb on all four sides after burial. It is even used for insomnia. The *skandola* also figures prominently in Mandaean legends of the battles in the underworld and between the various characters of mythology.

A symbol of particular interest is the *dropsa*, an emblem that looks similar to the Christian cross. The *dropsa* is a specific manner in which two sticks are put together at the baptismal site beside the river. Prior to baptism, the outer clothing is placed on the *dropsa* while the individual goes into the baptismal waters. Mandaeans make jewelry using the *dropsa* as a pendant and it is worn by both males and females.

²⁰⁷ Drower, 37.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁰⁹ Lazim.

²¹⁰ Drower, 36.

Early missionaries encountered this symbol and assumed it was a cross, conveying the image of Christianity. However, this was a misunderstanding of the use of the *dropsa* during the baptismal ritual. Additional use of this symbol was identified by Ignatius of Jesus, a missionary in the seventeenth century, who noted that “little crosses [were] embroidered onto the priests’ robes (going so far as to call them ‘the marks of priesthood’), even though they were hidden from sight for fear of the Moslems [*sic*].”²¹¹ He also saw the Mandaean priests kissing the *dropsa* to demonstrate their devotion to it.

Modern Mandaean are still preeminent jewelers with most young men learning the basics of this trade even if they pursue other vocations. The symbol looks like a Christian cross with a cloth draped over it, as is seen in some churches and especially during the Easter season. This “wrapped cross” is often confused as simply another version of the Christian cross, confusion not necessarily avoided nor corrected by modern Mandaean any more than their ancestors. However, modern Mandaean do not generally see it as a representation of their religion, nor of their baptism. Rather, it is considered a symbol of peace, and is worn to protect from evil and to bring good luck.²¹²

Conclusion

Recognizing the elaborate systems that have been created to avoid evil and bring good luck and peace can be overwhelming, particularly in Western society where a worldview laced with superstition is not an inherent part of the culture. The legends, practices, and beliefs vary within the Mandaean community, based on what has been taught in the home. However, those from the priestly caste have greater exposure to these

²¹¹ Lupieri, 89.

²¹² Lazim.

practices, and everything a priest does carries a price tag, so adherence and promotion of these practices is a prime concern of the priests. The lack of understanding of the legends and symbols by laypersons may be an advantage for spreading the gospel. On the other hand, dreams and visions are a common way in which the Holy Spirit has spoken to the hearts of people from the Middle East, so acknowledging that the Holy Spirit does still talk to individuals in this manner can be an advantage.

The *dropsa* is a very common accessory worn by children and adults, both male and female. While most Mandaean simply see it as a good luck charm, a Christian's understanding of the symbolism of the *dropsa* and its role in the baptismal ritual of Mandaean can present an opportunity for spiritual discussion with Mandaean. The *dropsa* was misunderstood by early Roman Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century because of its resemblance to the cross. Today's missionaries have the opportunity to be more perceptive to the real symbolism represented by the *dropsa*.

CHAPTER EIGHT—CONCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES

Introduction

This paper was initiated based on the premise that a better understanding of the Mandaean people and their beliefs would enhance the opportunity for the gospel to be shared with them in light of their unique circumstance as refugees locating in countries away from their native land in Iraq. As refugees, the Mandaeans are being dispersed throughout the world, unraveling their tight-knit community; the number of priests is dwindling, making it impossible to continue the Mandaean rituals in many locations; and the exodus of younger people from the sect exposes them to not only secular issues but also spiritual issues.

The fact that the Mandaean beliefs are primarily taught within the family unit makes the information that is passed down inconsistent. Parents are often lacking in their own understanding and so are ill-equipped to instruct their children in this complex belief system. Furthermore, this information that is passed on is often questioned in light of the new realities faced by these people.

This concluding chapter will focus on specific apologetic approaches that might be used with this people group that is increasingly dispersed around the world. Most Mandaeans have limited knowledge of Christianity so it is important to find elements within their worldview that can serve as a bridge to the discussion of the gospel.

The issue of Iraqi refugees is unlikely to abate in the foreseeable future. As of November, 2006, about 100,000 people were fleeing Iraq every month. Officials initially

thought that the situation in Iraq would stabilize and previously displaced Iraqis would return to Iraq. However, the continued violence in Iraq has thwarted efforts to return and officials do not see this situation reversing in the foreseeable future.²¹³

It is important to understand the belief system of this people group that has been inaccessible in the past. Understanding not only their physical needs as refugees but also their spiritual background is crucial, as the Mandaean belief system is likely to be unfamiliar to most Christians. For refugees, the two things that they have usually been stripped of are hope and relationships. The Christian belief system not only brings hope for life after death. It mandates that Christians care for the poor, the oppressed, the broken-hearted, and those who are in physical need. By offering physical assistance, the Christian has an opportunity to build relationships with Mandaeans that meet their basic needs at a time when it is most needed. Physical assistance, combined with true friendship and respect, provide a natural bridge for engaging in personal discussions. A significant investment of one's self is required when working with refugees, both temporally and emotionally. While meeting their immediate needs, a platform is being built to share spiritual beliefs.

Christians engaging Mandaeans may soon discover that many Biblical names and events of the Bible are somewhat familiar to the Mandaeans. However, it will become evident that the names, places and events are not usually portrayed from the biblical perspective. Since most Mandaeans do not read their ancient holy books, they have obtained their worldview from oral communication, primarily passed down within families. Even if they have read their holy book, the *Ginza*, their understanding of the

²¹³ Associated Press, "Officials say about 100,000 flee Iraq monthly," *The Roanoke Times*, 4 November 2006, sec. 2A, 2.

biblical characters will be distorted. Thus, much patience and understanding will be required of the Christian, who “must be careful not to speak with superiority about ‘our faith’ . . . but rather with humility.”²¹⁴ Each encounter with an unbeliever must be bathed in prayer and conducted with love.

The literature speaks of many examples of the natural disasters of recent times and the opportunities that these have presented for the gospel. It becomes clear that without offering humanitarian aid there would have been no opportunity to earn the trust of those displaced in order to present the gospel. While nightly evangelistic meetings and distribution of Scriptures in the language of the people gave the opportunity for the presentation of the gospel, it has been the humanitarian aid offered by Christians from different missionary organizations throughout the Middle East that cultivated the hearts of people. “Christians in the Middle East are seeing a steady stream of . . . refugees become followers of Christ, often as a result of humanitarian aid offered by the Christians. . . . They are wide open to the Gospel in a way they haven’t been before . . . and they are quite surprised by the help they are getting from the local Christians.”²¹⁵ It is evident that works speak volumes before words are ever spoken.

Specific Strategies for Developing Relationships

Showing an interest in the culture, language, foods, habits and practices of an individual goes a long way to establish trust and build friendship. The importance and significance of the English language cannot be overestimated. Learning English is one of

²¹⁴ “Christians, Muslims and the Communication of the Gospel,” *International Review of Mission* 84 (October 2004): 450.

²¹⁵ Stan Guthrie, “Gulf refugees respond to aid and gospel,” *Christianity Today* 34.17 (19 Nov 1990): 65.

the most desirable things that Westerners have to offer, both to refugees in America and to refugees in other countries, many of whom hope to immigrate to America or another English-speaking country someday. Even on short-term mission trips, one of the most requested tasks or services is to teach English. Teaching English provides the basis for developing trust, for building a relationship, for communicating, and for friendship. It also creates the stepping stones to introduce the gospel. Because learning English takes time, there is a progression in the relationship that naturally occurs and develops, ultimately providing a kinship that fosters sharing intimate values, such as one's faith. People of the Middle East, like all people, believe and trust those they know. It is crucial that a friendship relationship be developed as a first step toward sharing the gospel.

It takes at least seven specific, personalized contacts with the gospel before the gospel takes on meaning to an American.²¹⁶ For Muslims, it takes over one hundred contacts with the gospel “before the truth of it sinks in. And they have to hear it from different angles, in bits and pieces, until all of a sudden the pieces start falling together.”²¹⁷ Though no specific studies have been done on Mandeans, it can be assumed that it would take nearly as many contacts for Mandeans as it does for the Muslims, given their country of origin, their Middle Eastern cultural disposition, and the inculcation of their own beliefs regarding spiritual things.

Chapter one of this thesis addressed the general distrust refugees have toward others: their native country, their new neighbors, others from their host country, and most

²¹⁶ Elmer Towns, *Winning the Winnable: Friendship Evangelism*, (Lynchburg, VA: Church Leadership Institute, 1986), 43.

²¹⁷ Wendy Murray Zoba, “Islam, USA: Are Christians Prepared for Muslims in the Mainstream?” *Christianity Today* 44.4 (3 Apr 2004): 44.

especially, Westerners. An additional trust factor relates specifically to the Middle Eastern culture. Most socializing occurs in groups. However, one-on-one sharing is the only way to reach into the heart of a person from the Middle East. “. . . [T]hey will only share personal issues with someone they really trust, and this is rare. In the East, anything negative soon finds its way to the ears of friends and family. The result is shame and a loss of honor. . . . But there is a positive side to this. I have found that most Muslims living cross-culturally would rather share personal struggles with a Westerner than with another Muslim.”²¹⁸ Thus, being an ‘outsider’ can be an advantage since deep spiritual issues will only be discussed in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and love.

Specific Apologetic Approaches for Mandaeans

The most striking appeal to Mandaeans is in light of their most visible ritual, their repeated baptism, which is an effort to continually purify oneself in order to be prepared for the Lightworld. This continuous effort can be compared to the ritualistic traditions of the Old Testament. Indeed, many of their rituals, particularly the priestly ordination and some of the priests’ responsibilities, are clearly reminiscent of the rituals and ordination process of the Old Testament. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that the rituals were not the saving mechanism. It was the heart that was turned toward God as reminded through the repeated rituals. Hebrews 10:3-7 describes the purpose of the sacrificial rituals, as a reminder of sins, but what God really wanted was the hearts of the people, as indicated in Hebrews 8:10, 10:8-16, as well as in Old Testament passages such as I Samuel 16:7, where God makes it clear He looks at the heart, and I Samuel 15:22, where God indicates

²¹⁸ Edward J. Hoskins, *A Muslim’s Heart* (Dawsonmedia: Colorado Springs, 2005), 23-24. This author deals specifically with Muslims, but his observations and comments apply to the culture of the Middle East. This viewpoint has been confirmed in conversations with missionaries and Mandaean converts.

obedience is better than sacrifice. Galatians 3:23-25 further describes how the law, or rituals, was intended to lead us to Christ, not to achieve salvation. Finally, Romans 10:4 shows that Jesus was the end of the law, so there could be righteousness for all.

Another approach to a discussion of baptism and the once-for-all completion of the salvation process may be based on the symbol of the *dropsa*. An understanding of the origin and practical use of the *dropsa* as a part of the baptism ritual allows one to go beyond a simple discussion of the “good luck charm” to the reality of what the repeated baptisms are attempting to provide for the adherents. Since the repetitive baptisms are an attempt to purify oneself for admission to the Lightworld, the Redeemer’s role in bringing people to heaven must be communicated. Acts 4:10 and 12 demonstrate that there is no name other than Jesus that can bring salvation; John 14:6 quotes Jesus, who says He is “the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul declares that there is no salvation by works or human efforts.

The Mandaean’s effort to reunite with their celestial counterpart offers an opportunity to discuss the hierarchy of beings as created by God. The Bible chronicles the origin of Adam, who is their revered founder, as well as other honored prophets/celestial beings in their mythology, such as *Sitil* (Seth) and *Anus* (Enoch). A discussion centered on the first eleven chapters of Genesis would bring light to the subject of Adam and his descendents, as well as his own need for salvation after sinning. A study of Romans 5, and especially verses 12 through 21, clarifies the sinful nature of Adam that has been passed on to all generations. Further study in Hebrews 1:14, 2:5-12, and 9:27 demonstrates man’s relationship to the angels, and the angels’ relationship with God. Man’s current relationship to the angels is below them on earth, but in heaven the angels are ministering

spirits, serving the believers in heaven.

Recognizing that the Mandaean religion is a form of Gnosticism requires an understanding of Gnostic dualism, the distinction of black and white as applied to all ethical and moral realities. Gnosticism cannot allow the good Supreme Being to exist without an equally supreme evil being. The Bible is clear that the evil of this world is subservient to God and that there is no greater power than that which God possesses. A study of the attributes of God would reveal the holiness, righteousness, and justice of God.

The Gnostic and Mandaean systems both rely on a redeemer. However, the ascension of Mandaeans to the heavenlies is not totally dependent on the redeemer. It is also dependent on the individual's human effort. On the other hand, scripture is clear that there is only One who can deliver humans into the presence of God and that is Jesus Christ. It is by grace that we are saved; it is not because of anything we have done or can do, but because of the penalty that Jesus has already paid for our sins, as stated in Ephesians 2:8-9 and Hebrews 9:27-28.

Concluding Thoughts

While this paper is focused on understanding the Mandaean belief system and presenting strategies and apologetic approaches to reach them with the gospel, it is important to recognize that the Holy Spirit may already be working in the life of the Mandaean. Thus, it is the duty of Christians to provide compassionate humanitarian aid and to choose to love refugees unconditionally. The status of the Mandaeans as refugees casts them in the situation of needing material and financial assistance along with people upon whom they can depend. Factors that give Mandaeans a propensity toward the gospel are their interest in truth and their status as refugees, which may make them temporarily

dependent upon others. Yet, the gospel is primarily demonstrated by actions before words. The following excerpt from the testimony of a young Mandaean woman exemplifies a common theme heard from several who are either missionaries to Mandeans or Mandeans who have converted to Christianity. That theme is the love and acceptance they received from Christians before they were ever presented with the gospel.

Dina was raised in a traditional Mandaean family in Iraq.²¹⁹ She confesses that at the age of ten, she was involved in things that she won't even tell her parents now, thirteen years later. She was not aware of the religious beliefs, though her family did all the traditional rituals, including baptisms at least three times a year. There were no Mandaean books in her home and there was no specific form of prayer that she or her family knew of other than to simply speak if they wanted to talk to God. She had never heard the name of Jesus. Dina did not feel she received any spiritual upbringing within her family. (Interestingly, her uncle was pursuing priestly training at the same time, which illustrates the differences of training within the individual Mandaean homes.)

Dina had many opportunities to observe Muslims in her community and was especially aware of their frequent prayers. She also noted a lifestyle that she considered wrong, as they treated others with selfishness, greed, dishonesty and cheating. At her young age, she wondered, "What's the point of living?"

While still in Iraq, Dina was reminded many times of her sins, which created a longing to reach God and know truth. Since she did not know how to pray to God in her Mandaean religion, she went to Islamic classes. Even as she tried to memorize the ninety-nine Islamic names of God, she longed to know God. Yet she was confused by the Muslims' hypocritical lifestyle and their lack of assurance of their own salvation.

²¹⁹ Dina Sabiri, Mandaean Christian, interviewed by author 10 Dec. 2006.

When her family was forced to leave Iraq, they fled by cover of night and were dropped off by their driver in front of the Iraqi Grace Church and School in Amman, Jordan. They had connections in New Zealand and assumed their stay in Amman would last only a few weeks until they could emigrate. They didn't know anyone in Amman and needed to find housing quickly. They found a place, but it was owned by Muslims who would only rent to Muslims. In true Mandaean fashion, the family quickly adapted to the situation, with the father claiming they were Muslim.²²⁰

They rented the apartment, but after a few months they ran out of money. They could not work legally and the children could not attend school. Neighboring Muslim families provided cooked meals for them, often secretly leaving food at the door. Providing food for the family, sometimes in very bad weather, impressed Dina. (In retrospect, she notes that this occurred during Ramadan, a time when Muslims are supposed to be especially charitable to other Muslims. She also understood that they were trying to get God's approval for their charity toward others.) Meanwhile, the Muslim landlords were pressuring Dina's father to attend the local mosque. Her father wanted to quit pretending so they began searching for another apartment.

The neighbors in their new apartment were Christians and the children were attending the Iraqi Grace School. Soon they invited Dina and her older sister to attend with them. Dina's mother had been a school teacher in Iraq, and when they discovered the School, she asked to volunteer as a teacher there so her children could go to school. The School, always in need of teachers, agreed, and Dina and her siblings enrolled in the

²²⁰ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 27. It is not uncommon for Mandaean to represent themselves as Muslims in order to get along. Buckley describes a situation of a family now in California who registered their children as Muslims while in Iraq for protection from discrimination and to provide access to higher education.

Christian school. At the same time, the family moved from the Muslim's apartment and began attending different functions of the church.

Dina was especially aware of the love, hope, and joy that the Christians had. While she felt the Muslims who had given food to her family were truly compassionate and not simply fulfilling an obligation, she sensed a different attitude among the Christians. When they sang, and when they prayed, it was as if their God really heard and answered them. When they provided physical aid, they credited it to Jesus in their lives. She had never heard this type of attribution before.

For Dina, it was ultimately God's Word that penetrated her seeking heart (Rom. 10:17). The pastor's message from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John was the turning point for her. As he spoke of the "other sheep" that God knows and cares about, she saw herself as one of those "other sheep." She went home from church and prayed, asking Jesus into her life and to change her life. Dina's conversion led to most of her extended family becoming Christians and she is currently completing her fourth year of Bible school in Canada, with the desire to return to the Middle East to minister among the Mandaean people.

It is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit in a life that compels one to trust in Jesus Christ as the Savior of each individual soul. Missionaries who have seen Mandaeans come to Christ and Mandaean believers themselves have concurred that while the tragedy of their life circumstance makes them amenable to hearing the gospel, it is the love and compassion apparent in Christians that draws them to Christianity. As Dina succinctly stated, "I lived among Muslims all my life, but there was nothing in their lives that caused me to connect their actions with their beliefs or their God."

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