

THE MANDAEANS

A Research Paper

Presented to

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University of Mobile

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for [CST 420]

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May 03, 2020

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INTRODUCTION TO GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is the “parent philosophy” of the Mandaean religion.¹ Although specific Gnostic beliefs are not clearly defined, there are a few that stand as general guidelines.² Dualism is the bedrock of Gnosticism, displaying the dichotomy of the spirit as good and matter as evil.³ Cosmology has a tendency to be defined by the struggle between dark and light.⁴ Gnosticism holds that there is a Supreme being who is the source of all *gnosis* (“knowledge”) and is transcendent over everything.⁵ He is characteristically good, since physical matter to the Gnostics is what harbors evil.⁶ The *gnosis* that he gives is the key to salvation.⁷ The creator god of the universe, the Demiurge, is separate from the Supreme being and is inherently evil.⁸ Therefore, all matter created by him is evil.⁹ When the Supreme being recognized the rebellion of the

¹ Karen Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora: New Opportunities to Reach Iraqi Mandaean Refugees with the Gospel” (Master's thesis, Liberty University, 2007), 19, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/58821231.pdf>.

² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 25.

³ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 28.

⁴ Kurt Rudolph, “Mandaeans,” The Gnostic Society Library, accessed May 01, 2020, http://gnosis.org/library/Mandaean_Religion_Rudolf.html.

⁵ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 25.

⁶ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 25.

⁷ Edmundo Lupieri, *The Mandeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 34, <https://www.amazon.com/Mandeans-Gnostics-Mr-Edmundo-Lupieri/dp/0802833500>.

⁸ Lupieri, *The Mandeans: The Last Gnostics*, 34.

⁹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 25.

Demiurge in creating the universe, he instilled a spark of the divine in each human so that they could still return to heaven.¹⁰ This spark was the ability to know.¹¹ When a Gnostic comes to the realization that he/she in fact *is* a Gnostic, it is recognized that he/she is already saved since nothing can alter the fate of the spiritual endowment in a Gnostic's soul.¹² The status as a Gnostic places the individual above everything and everyone else, even the Demiurge and his precepts.¹³ Moreover, there is usually a redeemer in the Gnostic religion—one who represents the Supreme being and is unknowable.¹⁴ The redeemer rescues humans and shows them the way back to heaven.¹⁵ The soul of a human must be redeemed from the human body, which is evil.¹⁶

Mandaeism is not identical with every aspect of Gnosticism, but it utilizes enough to be characterized as a Gnostic sect. It identifies with dualism in the cosmology. There is the *Alma d-nuhra* (“World of Light”) and the *Alma d-hšuka* (“World of Darkness”).¹⁷ The *Alma d-nuhra* is ruled by a Supreme being with many names, one being *Haiyi Qadmai*

¹⁰ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 25.

¹¹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 26.

¹² Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 35.

¹³ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 35.

¹⁴ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 27.

¹⁵ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 27.

¹⁶ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 27.

¹⁷ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

(“First Life”).¹⁸ He created the *Alma d-nuhra* by other creations—*Yōšamin*,¹⁹ *Abatur*, and *Ptahil* (the “Second Life,” “Third Life,” and “Fourth Life”).²⁰ Then, there is the *Alma d-hšuka*, ruled by the *Mara d-hšuka* (“Lord of Darkness”) who represents chaos.²¹ The powerful authorities in this world are the dragon *Ur*²² and *Ruha*²³ (“Spirit”).

The conflict between these two worlds causes *Ptahil*, previously the “Fourth Life,” to rise to the position of Demiurge and create the world by the power of *Ruha*.²⁴ Adam, in his physical form, is created by evil but his essence comes from the *Alma d-nuhra*.²⁵ The light within Adam represents the human soul which has to be rescued from the evil body and world around them.²⁶ Mandaeans each possess knowledge that was

¹⁸ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁹ Derived from secret name יהוה / Ιαω. See Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 35.

²⁰ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

²¹ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

²² Probably a polemic transformation of Hebrew אור (“light”). See Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

²³ Comparable to Hebrew רוּחַ (“spirit”); moreover, this is the same *Ruha* that works with *Adonai* in *Haran Gawaita*.

²⁴ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

²⁵ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

²⁶ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

passed to them through the divine spark placed within them by *Haiyi Qadmai*.²⁷ This spark allowed for each individual to seek and know divine secrets.²⁸

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Sabean-Mandaeans, also known as the Mandaeans, are a marginalized group from the Assyrian/Aramaic cluster in Iraq.²⁹ The Muslims gifted them with the name *ṣābe'un* (“Sabians”) from the Qur’ān and early Arabic literature.³⁰ Being designated as such allowed them to retain the status of *ahl al-kitāb* (“people of the book”).³¹ The original Aramaic root of the term is *ṣeba*, which means “to immerse, baptize, wash.” The term *Mandai* (“Mandaean”) ties back to the term *manda*, meaning “knowledge” or “gnosis.”³² Today, it describes the laity of the religion in order to display the distinction between the *Tarmidi* (“disciples” or priests) and the *Naṣorai* (“initiates”).³³ However Western scholarly tradition uses the term as an all-encompassing attribution.³⁴

²⁷ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 26.

²⁸ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 26.

²⁹ They will be referred to as “Mandaeans” for the rest of the paper.

³⁰ For example: “Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or *Sabeans* [before Prophet Muhammad] - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.” Quran 2:62.

³¹ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

³² Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

³³ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

³⁴ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

Mandaeans reside on the banks of major rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates.³⁵ They are also dispersed through Baghdad and the Al Basrah governorates.³⁶ The total world population is sixty-seven thousand, with larger communities in places like Australia, Canada, Sweden, and America.³⁷ The largest population is in Iraq with thirty-thousand people.³⁸ The Mandaeans are most concentrated in a singular area in Worcester, Massachusetts.³⁹

According to the Mandaean tradition, the founder of the religion is Adam, the first human.⁴⁰ Mandaeans believe that a spark of the divine was bestowed within Adam when he was created. While he resided in the Garden of Eden, he was sinless. The eating of the fruit in Mandaism does not carry the same negative connotation as Judaism and Christianity do. This action did not bring sin into the world. It was not an act of rebellion; rather, partaking of the fruit was Adam's appointed destiny and when he did so he was gifted with knowledge from *Haiyi Qadmai*⁴¹ (also known as *Hayyi*

³⁵ The Joshua Project, "Mandaean, Sabean in Iraq," Accessed April 24, 2020, <https://legacy.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=13483&rog3=IZ>.

³⁶ "Mandaean, Sabean in Iraq."

³⁷ "Mandaean, Sabean in Iraq."

³⁸ "Mandaean, Sabean in Iraq."

³⁹ "Mandaean, Sabean in Iraq."

⁴⁰ It is important to note that although the Mandaeans ascribe to an Adamic beginning, they reject the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an.

⁴¹ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 44.

Rabbi).⁴² This knowledge included the practice and importance of baptism, a crucial part of reuniting with the *Alma d-nuhra*. Adam's partaking of the fruit and subsequent revelation is the framework of what all Mandaean salvation should look like.⁴³

Another notion is that Abraham was a Mandaean up until his circumcision, which is supposedly what proliferated the culture and religion in the Ancient Near East.⁴⁴

Outside of their religion, the ethnic heritage of the Mandaeans is difficult to establish. The origin of this people group is heavily disputed. Some say they are the remnant of the Essene community that survived after it was demolished in 70 AD.⁴⁵ Other Mandaeans attribute their origin to Mesopotamia along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.⁴⁶ Another claim of origin by the Mandaeans is that their ancestors were from Judea and followed intricate baptismal rites on the Jordan River. At the beginning of the first century AD, they came under persecution by the Jews, exited Palestine, and were forced to resettle along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.⁴⁷ However, if the resettlement actually occurred is uncertain because Mandaeans believe their religion was created by

⁴² Qais Al saadi, "Ginza Rabba 'The Great Treasure' The Holy Book of the Mandaeans in English," Mandaean Associations Union, September 27, 2014, <http://www.mandaeanunion.com/component/k2/itemlist/category/45-mandaean-identity>.

⁴³ Rudolph, "Mandaeans."

⁴⁴ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 44.

⁴⁵ "Mandaean, Sabeian in Iraq."

⁴⁶ Richard Thomas, "The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People," *Studia Antiqua* 5, no. 2 (2007): 3, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=studiaantiqua>.

⁴⁷ Thomas, "The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People, 3.

the *Alma d-nuhra* and are subsequently disinterested in human history.⁴⁸ The Mandaeans also revere John the Baptist as one of their most important prophets, claiming that he was a Mandaean alongside Adam, Abel, Seth, and Enoch.⁴⁹

Moreover, it is difficult to classify the Mandaeans. They have been attributed as “a dissident Christian sect,” “a splinter group from Hellenistic Judaism,” and “the only surviving (from the ancient world) group of Gnostics.”⁵⁰ It is highly unlikely they were ever “Christian” or “Christian-like” due to the “consensus, based on linguistic and historical research that puts Mandaism back into its original, ‘heretical’ Jewish baptist milieu.”⁵¹ Mandaeans historically and mythologically consider themselves to be Jewish in their original context. However, Mandaeans possess powerful anti-Christian and anti-Jewish sentiments in their traditions.⁵²

Although the precise reason for the religion’s existence is unknown, the main idea is cultivated out of Gnosticism. The ability to have knowledge was instilled within a divine spark which was subsequently placed in each Mandaean. This spark allowed for each individual to seek and know divine secrets.⁵³ Moreover, the main

⁴⁸ Mandaean Society in America, “The Mandaeans: Their History, Religion and Mythology,” Mandaean Associations Union, March 27, 2013, <http://www.mandaeanunion.com/history-english/item/170-brief-history-on-the-mandaeans>.

⁴⁹ Thomas, “The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People,” 5.

⁵⁰ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 43.

⁵¹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 43.

⁵² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 44.

⁵³ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 26.

goal of a Mandaean is to eventually reach the *Alma d-nuhra* and the *Haiyi Qadmai*.⁵⁴ Therefore, one could suppose it came into existence because of a collective desire for deeper knowledge and the assurance of a good afterlife. All Mandeans enter the *Alma d-nuhra* eventually; the emphasis is on how long it takes one to do so.⁵⁵ It could be argued that Mandaeism came into being to redefine God in light of the evil world.⁵⁶ It was difficult for them to believe that a good and loving God would place man into a sinful vessel that has to kill (flora and fauna) in order to live and ultimately die and decompose into nothing.⁵⁷ Basically, there was a question of human suffering. Why would a good God place humans he loved on earth if they were going to suffer from what he created? Because of this, Mandaeism most likely was born out of a breaking off from Judaism.⁵⁸

Mandeans are similar to Jews in some respects, but what they differ in is quite polarizing. The *Torah* is seen as a wrong, propagation of lies by Mandaean history and circumcision is egregious in Mandaean culture.⁵⁹ If a Mandaean were to be circumcised, it completely cuts him off from his community.⁶⁰ The practice of circumcision, in

⁵⁴ Thomas, "The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People," 5.

⁵⁵ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 72-73.

⁵⁶ Lupieri, *The Mandeans: The Last Gnostics*, 35.

⁵⁷ Lupieri, *The Mandeans: The Last Gnostics*, 35.

⁵⁸ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 45.

⁵⁹ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 46.

⁶⁰ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 46.

Mandaean history is actually what caused them to split off of Judaism.⁶¹ Moreover, both groups are ethnic and religious.⁶² With Jews, if they are no longer Jewish believers they can still remain as an ethnic Jew.⁶³ If Mandaeans abandon the faith, they are cut off from the Mandaean ethnicity as well.⁶⁴ They do not worship *Adonai* presently because they believe He is a false god of the sun.⁶⁵ A close examination of the Mandaean scroll *Haran Gawaita* (“Inner Haran”) reveals that the Mandaeans once worshiped *Adonai* until Jesus was born.⁶⁶ The change in veneration is due to the fact that they believe Jesus to be the “False Messiah” that only brings perversion to people.⁶⁷

Mandaism is very similar to Islam, most likely because of the syncretism with Islam in order to survive persecution.⁶⁸ Although purification rituals are significant in

⁶¹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 45.

⁶² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 46.

⁶³ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 46.

⁶⁴ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 46.

⁶⁵ Thomas, “The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People,” 9.

⁶⁶ “And they loved the Lord, that is, Adonai, until in the House of Israel there was created something which was not placed in the womb of Mary a daughter of Moses. It was hidden in her womb for nine months and bewitched her until the nine months were fulfilled and she was in labour and brought forth a messiah.” See Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 3.

⁶⁷ “And he took to himself a people and was called by the name of the False Messiah. And he perverted them all and made them like himself who perverted words of life and changed them into darkness and even perverted those accounted Mine. And he overturned all the rites. And he and his brother dwell on Mount Sinai, and he joineth all races to him, and perverteth and joineth to himself a people, and they are called Christians.” See Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

⁶⁸ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 56.

both faiths, the Mandaeans practice ritual baptism far more often than Muslims.⁶⁹ Moreover, while Muslims firmly believe in Hell and one's salvation is never assured, Mandaeans' beliefs about the afterlife are strikingly different.⁷⁰ They ascribe to an ascension into the *Alma d-nuhra* upon death, where every Mandaean is definitively accepted no matter the sin level.⁷¹ Mandaeans also write very little about the underworld, whereas Islam details precise specifications about the different levels of it.⁷² Islam counts Jesus as a credible prophet, while Mandaism calls him a false one.⁷³ Mandaeans do not possess the idea of *jihad* due to their pacifistic tendencies. In conclusion, Adam is sinless in the Mandaean tradition.⁷⁴ Muslims believe he sinned against God and was punished with the removal from Eden.⁷⁵

Lastly, connections between Christianity and Mandaism are attempted to be made because of the importance of baptism in both traditions.⁷⁶ However, Mandaean baptism is for purification, forgiveness of sin, and is performed multiple times.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 55.

⁷⁰ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 58.

⁷¹ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 56.

⁷² Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 56.

⁷³ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 56.

⁷⁴ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 57.

⁷⁵ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 57.

⁷⁶ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 47.

⁷⁷ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 47.

Protestant Christian baptism happens, usually, only once and is a representative act. It does not perform the actual saving. One of the biggest differences is the personhood of John the Baptist.⁷⁸ Mandeans see him as a great teacher and prophet, but do not credit the origin of baptism to him.⁷⁹ Interestingly, they venerate him even though he was a circumcised Jew.⁸⁰ The primary reason John is present as a “prophet” is most likely out of attempting to make a short tie between Christianity and Mandaism as well as a way to placate Muslims.⁸¹ Furthermore, although Mandeans take their “Sabbath” on Sunday, it is for the purpose of it being the first day of the week and to pay tribute to the sun.⁸²

The history of the Mandeans is critical for determining their religious identity today. Syncretism is a large facet of Mandaism because each Mandaean is given specific knowledge that others may not have access to; the knowledge of one adherent may contradict with the knowledge of another.⁸³ The contradictions are explained by the idea that all truth is secret.⁸⁴ There are often inconsistencies in the *Ginza* (Mandaean Scripture) and the information given by the priesthood.⁸⁵ These incongruities are still

⁷⁸ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 47.

⁷⁹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 47.

⁸⁰ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 47.

⁸¹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 48.

⁸² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 49.

⁸³ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 34.

⁸⁴ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 34.

⁸⁵ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 34.

present in today's Mandaism. However, they are explained by the concept that each person may possess different truths or various levels of the same truths.⁸⁶ The core of Mandaism's syncretism is shown here as it brings all "truths" into its system and does not possess a developed theological orthodoxy.⁸⁷ Furthermore, beginning in the seventh century AD, Mandaeans came under Islamic rule.⁸⁸ After Muhammad died, the Muslims issued a rule that stipulated coexistence between Islam and another religion but only if they are *ahl al-kitab*.⁸⁹ In order to survive, Mandaeans wrote their oral traditions down and formulated the *Ginza* so they would be protected.⁹⁰ Their continued existence has depended on this status determined by the Islamic rulers. It is a crucial survival strategy today.⁹¹ Additionally, to escape Muslim persecution and possibly Jewish persecution in the early times, Mandaeans syncretized their religion in order to somewhat mirror the religion of those persecuting them. This, in turn, alleviated some of the persecution.⁹²

⁸⁶ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 34.

⁸⁷ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 34.

⁸⁸ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 54.

⁸⁹ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 9.

⁹⁰ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 59.

⁹¹ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 56.

⁹² Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 56.

PRACTICES AND WORSHIP

There is little information about the Mandaeans outside of their religion. Their religion is their culture and shapes their worldview. It is important to note that Mandaism is an orthopraxical religion that focuses on right practice rather than right belief. Therefore, their basic culture can be equated with a life of asceticism, pacifism, and ritual purity.⁹³ It is important to note the different classes of adherents to Mandaism: the *Riš ama*, the *Ganzibria*, the *Našoraiyi*, the *Ialupia*, the *Tarmidi*, and the *Mandaiyi*.⁹⁴ The *Riš ama* (“head of the people”) is a singular man at the top of the religious hierarchy.⁹⁵ This position has remained unfilled since the early nineteenth-century AD.⁹⁶ The lack of a *Riš ama* for so long is partially what is causing the instability and subsequent decline of the religion.⁹⁷

The *Ganzibria* (connected to the *Ginza*, which means “treasury”) are the “treasurers” of the sacred texts—their job is to preserve the *Ginza*.⁹⁸ Catholic missionaries often compared them to Christian bishops, which displays that they may have also possessed some form of administrative power in the Mandaean communities.⁹⁹

⁹³ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

⁹⁴ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9-11.

⁹⁵ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 11.

⁹⁶ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 11.

⁹⁷ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 11.

⁹⁸ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 11.

⁹⁹ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 11.

The *Naṣoraiyi* are the “true Gnostics” of Mandaicism.¹⁰⁰ They are the ones who possess *naṣiruta*—which is profound knowledge of the secret mysteries of the religion.¹⁰¹ In the past all Mandaeans were *Naṣoraiyi*, but now it is only the oldest and wisest adherents.¹⁰² *Naṣoraiyi* of the past could supposedly do miraculous things, such as remain unharmed by weapons, walk through fire unburned, and read the future in the stars.¹⁰³ Today, they form a cultural, elite caste within the religion.¹⁰⁴ They are not all priests, even though priests are expected to possess *naṣiruta* as well.¹⁰⁵

Then there are the *Ialupia*. These are men who are not priests but they know how to read and write the Mandaic¹⁰⁶ language (which is basically extinct).¹⁰⁷ They hold the ancient scriptures and are experts on their contents; however, they are not specifically

¹⁰⁰ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9.

¹⁰¹ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9.

¹⁰² Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9.

¹⁰³ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ It is based on the Aramaic alphabet and began within the second-century A.D. and is part of the East Aramaic sub-family of Northwest Semitic languages. It is the ritual language of the Mandaean religion. A similar language to Mandaic is Syriac, but if the Mandaeans speak something other than Mandaic, it is Arabic. Mandaic is spoken solely by the Mandaeans. See “Mandaic Alphabet,” Omniglot, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.omniglot.com/writing/mandaic.htm>.

¹⁰⁷ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 10.

priests.¹⁰⁸ Next are the *Tarmidi* (originally denoted as “disciples”) who are the priests.¹⁰⁹ The priesthood plays a significant part in this culture because they are regarded as civil and religious leaders.¹¹⁰ They are comparable to a “king/sheik” within their individual communities.¹¹¹ The community cannot remain intact without the *Tarmidi* since only they can perform rituals which is an irrevocable part of Mandaean life.¹¹² The effectiveness of a ritual is dependent upon the purity of the priest performing it, so they pay very close attention to purity guidelines in relation to food, drink, and behavior.¹¹³ The final class is the *Mandaiyi*. They are the laity of the religion.¹¹⁴ They can possess knowledge, but not to the same extent as the *Naṣoraiyi*.¹¹⁵

Madaeans live in communities and identity is communal.¹¹⁶ Collectivism is preferred to individualism.¹¹⁷ The family structure and marriage are significant in the Mandaean culture. Madaeans do not read their scriptures but pass them down orally

¹⁰⁸ Lupieri, *The Madaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Lupieri, *The Madaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 10.

¹¹⁰ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 55.

¹¹¹ Lupieri, *The Madaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 10.

¹¹² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 69.

¹¹³ Lupieri, *The Madaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 10.

¹¹⁴ Rudolph, “Madaeans.”

¹¹⁵ Rudolph, “Madaeans.”

¹¹⁶ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 69.

¹¹⁷ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 69.

through the family.¹¹⁸ Although women are not forced into marriages, celibacy is seen as a sin due to the bearing of children as religious duty.¹¹⁹ Divorce is not accepted, but a couple can live in separation if they choose.¹²⁰ Polygamy is practiced in the community, but it is not a universal tenant of the faith.¹²¹ Marriage must be within the community or the member will lose their place in the faith.¹²² Each mother must tend to her own children while the father is in charge of the education until the age of fifteen.¹²³ Mandeans do not accept conversions into the faith—one must be born into the community to have salvation.¹²⁴ Moreover, the Mandeans have specific rituals for purifying foods, and cannot consume red meat or things such as alcohol and tobacco.¹²⁵ Fruits and vegetables must be eaten raw.¹²⁶ Food grown only from a seed is allowed to be consumed and meat is eaten very rarely due to the facet of killing or bloodletting of any kind is sinful.¹²⁷ If any meat is consumed, the killing is done quite apologetically and

¹¹⁸ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 101.

¹¹⁹ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

¹²⁰ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

¹²¹ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

¹²² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 71.

¹²³ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

¹²⁴ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 69.

¹²⁵ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

¹²⁶ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

¹²⁷ “Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices.”

with general unease.¹²⁸ Additionally, Mandaeans do not believe in circumcision because of their belief in the integrity of the human body.¹²⁹ They also prohibit the use of violence, even in the case of self-defense.¹³⁰

Furthermore, every Mandaean has two names: the earthly and the zodiacal (*Malwasha*).¹³¹ The *Malwasha* is a Mandaean's real name which stems from the matriarchal side and is used in religious contexts.¹³² This name is given by the priest based on astrological chart, zodiac sign, time of birth, and date of birth in order to protect the individual from the evil within his/her zodiac.¹³³ The earthly name is given by the parents and has no relevance in the religion.¹³⁴

Additionally, a crucial part of the Mandaean culture is *Masbuta*, or baptism. *Masbuta* is performed at birth, marriage, and death and other major events.¹³⁵ It is also done every week on Sunday, which is regarded as a Mandaean holiday.¹³⁶ The water

¹²⁸ "Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices."

¹²⁹ "Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices."

¹³⁰ Matthew Bell, "These Iraqi Immigrants Revere John the Baptist, but They're Not Christians," PRI, October 6, 2016, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-10-06/these-iraqi-immigrants-worship-john-baptist-theyre-not-christians>.

¹³¹ "Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices."

¹³² "Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices."

¹³³ "Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices."

¹³⁴ "Mandaean Beliefs and Mandaean Practices."

¹³⁵ Rudolph, "Mandaeans."

¹³⁶ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 71.

cleanses, but it is also representative of the *Alma d-nuhra*.¹³⁷ During *Masbuta*, each Mandaean submerges themselves into the water thrice while wearing white garments (females wear black cloaks over the garment).¹³⁸ Then, the priest enters in the water wearing his ritual garments and immerses them three times.¹³⁹ As they touch the water, they take a triple symbol on the forehead with the water and drink three handfuls of the water.¹⁴⁰ Post-baptism, they are crowned with a *klila* (small myrtle wreath), anointed with sesame oil, eat a meal of *pihta* (bread) and *mambuha* (water), and engage in *kushta*, a ritual handshake, with the priest.¹⁴¹

Mandaeans desire to reach the *Alma d-nuhra*. The deliverance of the soul on the day of judgment is a significant aspect of their religion.¹⁴² After death, they believe that the soul rises to the *Alma d-nuhra* and to the presence of the *Haiyi Qadmai*.¹⁴³ However, in order to reach the *Alma d-nuhra*, the Mandaean soul must be released from the human body and begin the 45-day rise to the *Alma d-nuhra*.¹⁴⁴ On the ascent, the soul

¹³⁷ “Mandaean Religion,” Encyclopedia.com, April 01, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mandaeen-religion>.

¹³⁸ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹³⁹ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁴⁰ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁴¹ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁴² Thomas, “The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People,” 5.

¹⁴³ Thomas, “The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People,” 5.

¹⁴⁴ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

will go through *matarata*, portals that are often named by Mandaean scholars as “houses of punishment” or “toll booths.”¹⁴⁵ The *matarata* are inverted parallels to the underworlds, created by *Hibil* (an *Alma d-nuhra* envoy) before the earth was formed.¹⁴⁶ They are patrolled by demons as well as the *’utria*, who are Lightbeings that basically fell from grace when they became involved with the evil creation of *Ptahil*.¹⁴⁷ These Lightbeings can either present themselves as good or evil.¹⁴⁸ The experience of the soul within the *matarata* is purgatorial.¹⁴⁹ In these houses, ascending souls go through trials, sufferings, and tests.¹⁵⁰ The punishment they receive is approximate to the amount of sins that have not been forgiven by the act of baptism. So, if they have not been baptized enough to cover their sins, they receive penalties.¹⁵¹ The main idea of “sin” in Mandaicism is the wronging of others.¹⁵² The “punishment” for their unabsolved sin is extra time in the *matarata* before ascending to the *Alma d-nuhra*.¹⁵³ Moreover, Mandaicans receive the knowledge to move through the *matarata* through ordinances, like

¹⁴⁵ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 73.

¹⁴⁶ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁴⁷ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁴⁸ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁴⁹ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁵⁰ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁵¹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 61.

¹⁵² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 61.

¹⁵³ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 61.

baptism and rituals, set by their priesthood.¹⁵⁴ Nonbelievers will remain in the *matarata* forever.¹⁵⁵

There is a large corpus of Mandaean literature, but are often unknown in origin. The more significant Mandaean texts are the Scriptures— *Ginza* (“Treasure”) also known as the *Sidra Rba* (“Great Book”).¹⁵⁶ This book is made up of two sections: the *Ginza Yamina* (“Right Ginza”) and *Ginza Smala* (“Left Ginza”).¹⁵⁷ The *Ginza Yamina* is 18 treatises that include theological, cosmological, didactic, and ethical information.¹⁵⁸ The *Ginza Smala* only contains information about the rising of the soul to the *Alma d-nuhra*; therefore it is often attributed as the *Sidra d-nišmata* (“Book of the Souls”).¹⁵⁹ Hymns, prayers, and instructions for rituals are held in the *Qolasta* (“Canonical Prayerbook”).¹⁶⁰ The *Draša d-yahya* (“Book of John”) house sermons from John the Baptist, the conversion account of *Miryai* (Mary, mother of Jesus),¹⁶¹ the discussions of *Šum* (Shem), and the arrival of *Anōš* (Enosh) in Jerusalem.¹⁶² There are many unpublished ritual texts,

¹⁵⁴ Thomas, “The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People,” 5.

¹⁵⁵ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁵⁶ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁵⁷ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁵⁸ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁵⁹ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁶⁰ Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

¹⁶¹ Mandaeans revere Mary, mother of Jesus, because they believe she converted from Judaism to Mandaeanism. See “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁶² Rudolph, “Mandaeans.”

such as the *Alf Trisar Šualia* (“1,012 Questions”) which is only composed for the priesthood.¹⁶³ The sole historical text is the *Haran Gawaita*.¹⁶⁴

In summation, the ideal of the Mandaeans is reaching the *Alma d-nuhra* and possessing knowledge. Sin keeps them from inheriting divine knowledge and reaching the *Alma d-nuhra* in a timely manner. Baptism absolves a Mandaean of his/her sin and quickens the journey to the *Alma d-nuhra*. They live pacifistic lives and dedicate themselves to serving one another, with weekly (and sometimes even daily) baptisms. Their main Scripture is the *Ginza*.

DIFFERENCES FROM ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

Mandaean practices are very different from orthodox Christian practices. In the Protestant scope of Christianity, there are not really established classes of people except for elders, pastorate, deacons, committees, then the congregation (depending on the denomination). In Catholicism, the hierarchy is more established: Pope, bishops, priests, and Catholic laity.¹⁶⁵ There is no definitive head over the Protestant Church that would be comparable to the *Riš ama* and even though pastors are crucial to a Church, they are not

¹⁶³ E.S. Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore,” The Gnostic Society Library, accessed May 01, 2020, <http://gnosis.org/library/manda-dower-1937.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

¹⁶⁵ “Church Hierarchy,” St. David's Priory, accessed May 02, 2020, <http://stdavidspriory.wordpress.com/history-of-the-church/church-hierarchy/>.

specifically required to practice the faith. Moreover, Protestant Scripture is accessible in many languages, so it does not require someone to explain every detail.

Divorce is frowned upon, except in the case of infidelity.¹⁶⁶ Celibacy is not seen as sin, for Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:8 that it is good to remain single. Polygamy is not accepted at all.¹⁶⁷ Christianity does not possess the same family structure. It is more dependent on whether they are complementarian or egalitarian in their theology. Christianity readily accepts converts—in fact, Jesus commanded the sharing of the Gospel in Matthew 28:19-20. There are no laws regarding food. One can eat or drink what they desire, so long as it does not lead to drunkenness or gluttony.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, there is no name change in orthodox Christianity. Christians are addressed by their names given at birth by their parents.

Baptism is important but is utilized in a different way. The act of baptism is an outward expression of an inner change. It is usually only done once (or maybe twice in the circumstance of a rededication) and is only a symbol. It does not perform the saving (in Protestant circles, at least).¹⁶⁹ There is no prescribed clothing or body of water for baptism, either. It is whatever and wherever is available. Moreover, death for a Protestant Christian means an immediate arrival in heaven, for to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.¹⁷⁰ There is no purgatorial experience and no trials or tests to reach

¹⁶⁶ Mt 5:32.

¹⁶⁷ Mt 19:5.

¹⁶⁸ Rom 13:13; Phil 3:19.

¹⁶⁹ Eph 2:8.

¹⁷⁰ 2 Cor 5:8.

heaven.¹⁷¹ The only way to reach heaven is through salvation in Jesus Christ.¹⁷² Nothing can cleanse sins other than His blood and true repentance. The punishment for sin is death and one who is unrepentant and unaccepting of Jesus will go to hell.¹⁷³

The Bible is the orthodox Christian Scripture. It is breathed out by God and without error.¹⁷⁴ It is composed of a Hebrew section of thirty-nine books and a Greek section of twenty-seven books—namely, the Old and New Testaments.¹⁷⁵ It is the sole holy Scripture Protestant Christians live their lives by.

THE PERSON OF JESUS

The person of Jesus Christ is strikingly different in Mandaism from orthodox, Christian views. There are two main perspectives about Jesus in Mandaism. The first is that Jesus is an apostate Mandaean.¹⁷⁶ Titles for Jesus are the “false messiah,”¹⁷⁷ the

¹⁷¹ Lk 16:26.

¹⁷² Jn 14:6.

¹⁷³ Mt 25:46.

¹⁷⁴ 2 Tm 3:16.

¹⁷⁵ Within Scripture there are portions in Aramaic as well: Gn 31:47, Jer 10:11, Dan 2:4-7:28, Ezr 4:7-6:18 and 7:12-26, and Mk 15:34.

¹⁷⁶ “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁷⁷ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

“lying Messiah,”¹⁷⁸ and the “greatest false prophet.”¹⁷⁹ He is a deceiver.¹⁸⁰ The *Haran Gawaita* specifically speaks of Jesus “bewitching” Mary while in her womb.¹⁸¹ In *Draša d-yahya* 30, it is told that Jesus is beseeching John the Baptist to baptize Him. John is hesitant to do so, because he recognizes Jesus’ “wicked intentions.” At the command of *Abatur*, the Third Life, John baptizes Him. Upon His immersion, *Ruha* draws the sign of the cross above the Jordan River. At the appearance of the symbol, the river becomes riddled with many colors and loses its shine. This is representative of a bad omen.¹⁸²

However, it does speak of Him being “not placed in the womb of Mary.”¹⁸³ Literally, the original term means “not given” and a translator’s note indicates that it may mean “not given by her husband.”¹⁸⁴ Moreover, the *Haran Gawaita* explains that the Mandaeans “loved the Lord, that is *Adonai*, *until*”¹⁸⁵ in the House of Israel there was created something which was not placed in the womb of Mary, a daughter of Moses.”¹⁸⁶ Seemingly, the incarnation of Jesus is unquestioned; yet they still call him a false

¹⁷⁸ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

¹⁷⁹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 48.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas, “The Israelite Origins of the Mandaean People,” 5.

¹⁸¹ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 3.

¹⁸² “Mandaean Religion.”

¹⁸³ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 3.

¹⁸⁴ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 3.

¹⁸⁵ Emphasis added by me.

¹⁸⁶ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 3.

messiah. Most likely because He came to being in the form of matter, which is inherently evil.

The second view of Jesus is that He is a “direct emanation of the very heart of the divine.”¹⁸⁷ Meaning, a divine being—a Gnostic savior—entered into Jesus’ fleshly form to guide and save the Mandaeans.¹⁸⁸ They believe that Jesus was a negative demonic reality created by the Demiurge *Ptahil* in order to ensnare the divine savior inside the flesh form.¹⁸⁹ *Ptahil* believed he could capture the savior by nailing it to the cross and killing it.¹⁹⁰ However, all Mandaean traditions point to the fact that the savior did not endure the cross, but escaped the flesh and looked on as a substitute—his bodily image—died in his place.¹⁹¹ Apparently the divine savior watched from above, “laughing his heart out” since he had not been ensnared by *Ptahil*.¹⁹² In this view, however, Jesus in human form is still seen as evil, similar to the first. Despite the two sides, any reference to Jesus is completely polemical and usually refers to the Byzantine Christianity, where non-flowing water was utilized for baptism and monks and nuns ascribed to celibacy.¹⁹³ Both of these things are unheard of in Mandaeism, which could be cause for disagreement.

¹⁸⁷ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 48.

¹⁸⁸ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 37.

¹⁸⁹ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 37.

¹⁹⁰ Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 37.

¹⁹¹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 48.

¹⁹² Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, 37.

¹⁹³ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

Responding to these views is quite difficult and I am honestly unsure of how to approach them. My explanation may not have any power, but it is the working of the Holy Spirit that opens the eyes of the people to see Jesus for who He truly is. To the first view, my response would start with the “bewitching” of Mary. They believe he tricked her because she was supposedly a Mandaean convert. I would ask for them to show it to me in their Scripture (or tell me about it, since they pass it down orally). Once they did so, I would utilize the Bible to display the lack of evidence (in a loving manner) for this supposition. There is also no other source that supports Mary being a Mandaean convert. I would point to Gabriel appearing to Mary and her response of, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”¹⁹⁴ Additionally, there is the question of how Jesus “bewitched” her. It is unexplained in the *Haran Gawaita*. Moreover, it says in their own books that they loved *Adonai* before the arrival of Jesus. Even further on this point, the belief that *Adonai* would create something evil and send it is strange and somewhat does not make sense. If they were devoted to Him, why would the arrival of Jesus suddenly change their minds? Could it be possible that *Adonai* sent Jesus here in order to show us a better life, unfettered by religious laws? We can be pure because Jesus is pure—not because of rigorous rituals. Furthermore, even though Mandaeans point to being the first religion on the earth, they have no proof (to put it bluntly). The oldest texts from the Mandaic religion only date back to the third or fourth centuries AD. Christian literature—namely, the Hebrew portion— can be dated as far

¹⁹⁴ Lk 1:38; Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*.

back as 1900-1700 BC.¹⁹⁵ Even many books in the New Testament were composed before Mandaean texts. If any text has the authority on who Jesus is, I would say it is the firsthand account of Him, written before Mandaean texts had the chance to utilize them in order to insert their own theology into the story. Additionally, other indicators display the *Haran Gawaita* as historically inaccurate. They place Moses alive at the time of Jesus.¹⁹⁶ To further back up this history, the *Haran Gawaita* speaks of Moses coming against *Anuš-‘Uthra* (the Christ-figure in Mandaean tradition; also called *Manda d-Haiyi*).¹⁹⁷ Yet, *Anuš-‘Uthra* was sent to Jerusalem to counter and expose Jesus as a false prophet.¹⁹⁸ It is the same Moses as the in the Hebrew Bible, indicated by the rebellious nature he plays in the story of the *Haran Gawaita* since Mandaean tradition calls him one of the “four prophets of falsehood” (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad).¹⁹⁹ All in all, the timeline does not match up.

Additionally, Mandaeans do not possess any historical saviors, but only those of mythological origins.²⁰⁰ There is no definitive proof that *Anuš-‘Uthra* ever actually existed and performed any of the works attributed to him. While, on the other hand, there

¹⁹⁵ The Book of Job. See Stephanie Hertenberg, “What Is the Oldest Book in the Bible?,” Beliefnet, accessed May 01, 2020, <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/what-is-the-oldest-book-in-the-bible.aspx>.

¹⁹⁶ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 8.

¹⁹⁷ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 8.

¹⁹⁸ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

¹⁹⁹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 63

²⁰⁰ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

are many references to Jesus outside of the New Testament in historical accounts.²⁰¹ Bart Ehrman, a New Testament scholar, says that although the extra-biblical sources do not provide much information on the life of Jesus, they are “useful for realizing that Jesus was known by historians who had reason to look into the matter. No one thought he was made up.”²⁰² Validating that Jesus was an actual being on the earth makes it more plausible that the events in the New Testament are true. Without validation that a figure ever existed, it is much more difficult to provide evidence of their activities.

To the second view, I would show the story of Jesus in the Bible as the substitutionary atonement for us. The act of the cross, although evil in the world’s eyes, was ultimately good because Jesus rose again and our sins were cleansed. We do not have to be purified by baptisms because we have been wiped clean by His death and resurrection. Another issue with this view is that it is inconsistent with the *Haran Gawaita*, which specifically says Jesus is a false messiah created by *Adonai*. There is nothing that shows a divine savior entering into Jesus’ human flesh to guide the Mandaeans. Besides, the *Haran Gawaita* also talks about Jesus’ works being perverse.²⁰³ Would they attribute the work of a divine savior as perverse? Certainly not.

²⁰¹ Christopher Klein, “The Bible Says Jesus Was Real. What Other Proof Exists?,” *History*, April 02, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/was-jesus-real-historical-evidence>.

²⁰² Klein, “The Bible Says Jesus Was Real. What Other Proof Exists?,”

²⁰³ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

THE WORK OF JESUS

Mandaean theology about the work of Christ acknowledges that He possessed the power to do the things He did and that He did them, but it focuses on His motive being the perversion of people and His power stemming from sorcery. Mandaean theologians believe Jesus was originally a *Naṣoraiyi* but turned out to be a heretical insurgent who misled people and made religion easier to practice (removed religious Laws which are very crucial in Mandaean tradition).²⁰⁴ An excerpt from the *Haran Gawaita* speaks of His works:

...and he called the people to himself and spoke of his death and took away some of mysteries of the sacred Meal and abstained from the Food. And he took to himself a people and was called by the name of False Messiah. And he perverted them all and made them like himself who perverted words of life and changed them into darkness and even perverted those accounted Mine. And he overturned all the rites. And he and his brother dwell on Mount Sinai, and he joineth all races to him, and perverteth and joineth to himself a people, and they are called Christians...²⁰⁵ it will come to pass that the false messiah, son of Miriam... will come and will show forth signs (wonders) in the world until the birds and the fish from sea and rivers open their mouths and bless him and give testimony until (even) the clay and mudbrick in a building bear witness to him, and until four-legged creatures open their mouths and testify to him.²⁰⁶

The *Haran Gawaita* seemingly acknowledges the miraculous works of Jesus, but attributes them to perversion and overall the work of the evil *Ruha* and *Adonai*.²⁰⁷ The second portion that speaks of creation testifying about the “false messiah” seems to have paralleled verses from the Bible. The portion about everything bearing witness to Him

²⁰⁴ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

²⁰⁵ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 3-4.

²⁰⁶ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 19.

²⁰⁷ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

calls to mind Job 12:7-10, Psalm 96:11-12, and Psalm 150:6. In His “show[ing] forth signs [and wonders]” lies a strong connection to Matthew 24:24 and an Antichrist characterization present in Revelation 13:13-14. In fact, Jesus seems to be an Antichrist figure in the *Haran Gawaita*. He comes after four-thousand years of Arab rule.²⁰⁸ The Arab rule was established by the “Arab Son-of-Slaughter” and during this time persecution and trials were to come upon the Mandaeans.²⁰⁹ The beginning of the Arab rule is the start of the end of the world and Jesus will be in power at the latter portion of the end-times, coming with signs and wonders.²¹⁰

Although the *Haran Gawaita* acknowledges Jesus’ power and the praise given to Him by all creation, the text shows *Hibil* (the *Alma d-nuhra* envoy) warning the *Naṣoraiyi* about Jesus, “O Naṣoraeans, and righteous elect men, testify not to him, for he is a false Messiah that walketh by fraud and sorcery. He is Mercury, who attracteth attention and doth whatsoever he wisheth and his mind is filled with sorcery and frauds.”²¹¹ Jesus’ works are accounted to sorcery. Even while in the womb of Mary, He is said to be “bewitching” her.²¹² There is also the narrative of *Anuš-‘Uthra*, the Jesus-parallel in Mandaeism, coming to Jerusalem as an adversary of Jesus for the purpose of

²⁰⁸ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

²⁰⁹ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 18.

²¹⁰ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 19.

²¹¹ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 19.

²¹² Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

showing Him as a sorcerer and deceiver.²¹³ This narrative was most likely created after the Mandaean encounter with early Christianity in order to prove it false.²¹⁴

In response to these claims, I would first see if there were exact parallels to the miracles Jesus did in the New Testament. The *Haran Gawaita* is not specific on what exactly Jesus did, just that He performed signs and wonders.²¹⁵ As far as addressing Jesus as a sorcerer, one should observe multiple Christian Scriptures. Acts 19:18 tells of those who once were enslaved by magic coming to faith in Christ and burning their magic arts books. By the burning of these materials, the “word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.” Once Jesus has captivated a person’s being, all dabbling in sorcery ceases. It is Jesus or the occult—there cannot be both together. Galatians 5:20 places witchcraft alongside other works of the flesh while Revelation 21:8 places it on par with murder, like in Deuteronomy 18:10.²¹⁶ Scripture is clear that Christians should not be involved with any activity that deals with the Spirit world or supra-normal forces that are not placed on Jesus as He is displayed in the biblical corpus.²¹⁷

Moreover, there is the question of why Jesus’ works were considered evil. Other than His “overturn[ing] all the rites,”²¹⁸ the other miracles and works of Jesus are

²¹³ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

²¹⁴ Drower, “The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran.”

²¹⁵ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 19.

²¹⁶ John Piper, “Jesus vs. The Occult,” *Desiring God*, July 26, 1981, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-vs-the-occult>.

²¹⁷ Piper, “Jesus vs. The Occult.”

²¹⁸ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

seemingly only for the good. Possibly, evil is seen in His healing of the human body and resurrection of the dead, since matter is evil and His power over matter may in turn paint Him wicked as well. The main issue is seen to be in his “perversion” of rituals and religious purity laws.²¹⁹ My response would be that Jesus did not come to “pervert” these laws, but fulfill them.²²⁰ All that was written is pointing to Jesus and He ultimately completes what the Law required.²²¹ Moreover, the law was pristinely kept by Jesus. All the penalties of it were delivered onto Him. So now, the law is not the path to being righteous or pure, but Jesus is. The end-goal of the law is that we would eventually look only to Christ for purity, not legalism (Romans 10:4).²²² Therefore, food laws are fulfilled and over in Jesus, for He says in Mark 7:18-19, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)”²²³ Jesus does not just overturn the rites—He fulfills them.

Despite the Mandaean traditions about Jesus’ personage and work, many Mandaeans know nothing of Jesus.²²⁴ One source tells of a young woman named Dina

²¹⁹ Drower, *The Haran Gawaita*, 4.

²²⁰ Mt 5:17-18.

²²¹ John Piper, “How Christ Fulfilled and Ended the Old Testament Regime,” *Desiring God*, February 23, 2005, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-christ-fulfilled-and-ended-the-old-testament-regime>.

²²² Piper, “How Christ Fulfilled and Ended the Old Testament Regime.”

²²³ Piper, “How Christ Fulfilled and Ended the Old Testament Regime.”

²²⁴ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 107.

who grew up in Iraq in a traditional Mandaean family. She did not know anything about her religious beliefs, even though she took part in the rituals. They possessed no Mandaean resources or books and she had never heard the name of Jesus.²²⁵ An issue for the Mandaean *Tarmidi* is teaching the traditions in an attractive way that can be relevant to young people²²⁶ which, combined with Dina's testimony, displays how the newer generations do not know much, if anything at all, about their religion let alone Jesus.²²⁷ It is also highly unlikely Madaeans would have a deep knowledge of Scripture, since it is solely in the hands of the *Tarmidi*, except for in specific instances where a layperson is able to read Mandaic.²²⁸ The *Tarmidi* then communicate and interpret it orally. The solely verbal communication does not completely debunk the Mandaean ability to know their scripture; however, it does make it more difficult for them to study it. Since they do not have physical access to it and cannot read it in Mandaic, it may be difficult for them to identify every facet of their belief system.

²²⁵ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 107.

²²⁶ Tarmida Nashmi, "Contemporary Issues for the Mandaean Faith," Mandaean Associations Union, April 24, 2013, <http://www.mandaeanunion.com/history-english/item/488-mandaean-faith>.

²²⁷ Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 107.

²²⁸ The laity possessing the knowledge of Mandaic is highly unlikely today. In the 1930s very few lay-Madaeans knew the script or their holy books—and the number was in decline at the time. Ninety years later, it is even more unlikely any layperson would possess the knowledge of Mandaic. See Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 55.

MISSIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Sharing the Gospel with a Mandaean is dependent upon what context the conversation and relationship is in. If it is in the context of a mission to Iraq, then the best way to establish trust would be to attempt to build a relationship with the *Tarmidi* or the men of the culture, since it is a patriarchal, collectivist community.²²⁹ Going through these people would be the only way, in the Iraq location, to reach the larger group.²³⁰ There would have to be trust established and a resource, such as the teaching of English.²³¹ Learning English is one of the better things Westerners can give, since many of this marginalized group hope to immigrate to America or any other English-speaking country.²³² In order to further establish trust, I would need to adopt the Mandaean customs in order to blend with the people and “become like” so they can “remain like.”²³³ This means eating the food, wearing the clothing, etc.

Furthermore, since they are within their original context of their religion, it is more likely the adherents will be more faithful since they are connected to the *Tarmidi* and are engaged in the collectivist, isolated community.²³⁴ Emulating their culture,

²²⁹ Douglas Wilson, video conference with author, Eclectic, AL, May 02, 2020.

²³⁰ Wilson, video conference with author.

²³¹ Wilson, video conference with author.

²³² Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 103.

²³³ Harley Talman, “Become Like, Remain Like,” in *Perspectives On The World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph Winter, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 147.

²³⁴ Wilson, video conference with author.

without contradicting Christianity, is one of the best ways to gain their trust.²³⁵ Sharing the Gospel could be made through talks about baptism and ritual, connecting Christianity to Mandaism through baptism, rituals of the Old Testament, as well as through John the Baptist. After these comparing discussions, I would eventually bring it around to the fact that God did not intend for the rituals to be the saving aspect.²³⁶ He does not want our works only, He wants our hearts (indicated in Hebrews 10:3-7, 8:10).²³⁷ He looks at our hearts, not at our practice of ritual (seen in 1 Samuel 15:22).²³⁸ There is always a need for the Holy Spirit; however, in this context, the Holy Spirit would have to fully make the way. There is no trust or relationships built without His influence, since they are very distrustful of Christians and people outside their religion in general.²³⁹ The discussions would have to either be with the *Tarmidi* or with a group of powerful men. Since they are in the collectivist culture, the one-on-one approach will not work in this specific circumstance.²⁴⁰ In both contexts, but especially this one, it is important that the Mandaean know they do not have to surrender their cultural identity to become a Christian. Removing them from their culture is not the goal but allowing them the space to retain their socio-religious identity while living as a Christian is. Of course, aspects of

²³⁵ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 102

²³⁶ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 104

²³⁷ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 104.

²³⁸ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 104

²³⁹ Baker, “The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora,” 7.

²⁴⁰ Wilson, video conference with author.

their Gnostic religion must be debunked so as to not lead to more syncretism. However, if they view becoming a Christian as having to abandon their culture completely, they probably will not do it. The Gospel must be implanted in the Mandaean community, so that families remain together and unnecessary isolation from the community is done away with.

However, sharing the Gospel with an Mandaean refugee, perhaps, living in America brings about a completely different evangelism strategy. This route would most likely be the easier one. Since the Mandaeans in America are now immersed in an individualistic culture, they no longer have their community to form everything they do.²⁴¹ They may still be under a *Tarmidi*, but the priesthood is few and far between in modern times.²⁴² A one-on-one approach would be more appropriate in this context. Especially since, in the 21st century, Mandaeans that are refugees are no longer striving to isolate themselves from society as they have done in the past.²⁴³ They are attempting to build their communities from the inside out into the world so that they can intermingle with their new environments.²⁴⁴ Therefore, it is more likely to encounter them in the workplace, schools, or the general public. Since they are attempting to adapt with their new environments, it is likely they will take well to creating relationships with outsiders.

²⁴¹ Wilson, video conference with author.

²⁴² Baker, "The 21st Century Mandaean Diaspora," 100.

²⁴³ "The Mandaeans: Their History, Religion and Mythology."

²⁴⁴ "The Mandaeans: Their History, Religion and Mythology."

I would begin by just starting a friendship with a Mandaean. I would express interest in them as a human being, because that is what any person desires. They do not want to only be seen as their religious identity.²⁴⁵ Once there was mutual trust established, I would show my interest in their culture and in getting to know them. Building a relationship is crucial. I would begin to connect to the Gospel through the comparison of Mandaean practices to Christianity (as I would with the Mandeans in Iraq). Hopefully, this will ease any tension on the topic of Christianity and allow them to become more comfortable with learning more about the religion. This comfort could lead into more discussions about Scripture, Jesus, and so on. If there has been enough contact about the Gospel to where they are very intrigued in learning more, I would invite them to attend church with me. With the working of the Holy Spirit occurring throughout the entire process, by this time there will be an opportunity for me to share the full Gospel of Jesus rather than just pieces of it. The entire process will have to be very gradual. Moving too fast is the best way to lose their trust and make it seem like they are only a religious conquest. The friendship has to be authentic—there can be no fabricated portions at all. They are human beings with feelings just like we are and should be treated as such.

I have had no encounters with Mandeans, as there are none in my immediate context. Most of the Mandeans in America like in Massachusetts.²⁴⁶ I have not attempted to contact any through social media, either. My ultimate goal is to go on a mission to Iraq through an academic entry point and encounter the community there;

²⁴⁵ Wilson, video conference with author.

²⁴⁶ “Mandaean, Sabean in Iraq.”

however, this does not mean I will not attempt to engage the Mandaeans who live outside of Iraq.

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On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance in completing this assignment.

