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THE ISRAELITE ORIGINS OF THE MANDAEAN PEOPLE

RICHARD THOMAS

ON the banks of the Euphrates River exists a small community of faithful known as the Mandaeans. In their own language, derived from Aramaic, the word *mandayye*, from which they take their name, means “gnostic.”¹ The religious practices of these people, which dominate most aspects of their lives, are the last remaining traces of ancient gnosticism in the world today.² The origin of the Mandaeans is much debated, and it will be the focus of this paper. The Mandaeans claim that their ancestors came from Judea and originally practiced complex baptismal ordinances, the focal point of their religion, on the Jordan River. They claim that soon after the start of the Common Era, they were persecuted by the Jews and left Palestine, in a mass exodus of around 60,000 individuals, to eventually settle on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. There they have stayed, according to their oral tradition and their written record, for nearly two millennia.

They are relatively few in number (commonly estimated to be less than 15,000³), and they do not seem to have played a very important role in the shaping of world history. However, understanding the origin of this group can lead to a better understanding of the religious makeup and practices of Judea at the dawn of Christianity. In the course of this paper, I will show that there is evidence which links the origin of Mandaism very closely to Judea and the pre-Christian sectarian, or non-Jewish, sects centered on the Jordan River which preserved the heritage of the preexilic Israelite temple cult. Though I will not be able to conclusively show this to be the case, I believe that the evidence which I will present will show the above stated thesis to be a strong possibility.

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1. Kurt Rudolph, *Mandaism* (Lieden: Brill, 1978), 29.

2. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 1. This is considered a fact among all scholars of Mandaism.

3. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 1.

In order to accomplish this, first I will cover the Mandaeans in general, discussing aspects of their religion, ordinances, record, and tradition. Then I will show how they are Gnostic in origin. I will examine early Christianity, Judaism, and heterodox sectarian Judaism, pointing out aspects of these religions that have parallels in Mandaeism. I will also identify the Nasarenes, the group from which the Mandaeans most probably originated. In order to show the beliefs of these early Mandaeans, I will examine John the Baptist and his group, which likely are the same group as the Nasarenes. Lastly, I will show how aspects of this group tie back into the pre-exilic Israelite temple cult beliefs, and show the possibility that some of the traditions of preexilic Israel were preserved by the Nasarenes.

The Mandaeans

I have selected to review aspects of Mandaeism which are important both for understanding the religion and for the framework of this paper. It is important to understand their ritual, beliefs, and relationship to other traditions which originated in Judea in order to understand the origins of Mandaeism. Fundamentally, Mandaeans are Gnostics. They claim to have a secret knowledge which makes it possible for their souls, after death, to return to the “Worlds of Light” from whence they came. Their gnosis is manifest in a complex series of sayings, ordinances, and rituals which are absolutely necessary for salvation. They have multiple books of scripture which gave them protection as “People of the Book” under Arab rule.⁴ Primary among these books is the *Ginza*, which includes creation myths, underworld journeys, the story of Noah, words of wisdom from John the Baptist, doctrinal poetry, and Old Testament history with a Mandaean twist. According to Mandaean scholar J. Buckley, “The *Ginza* testifies of a fully developed Mandaean Gnosticism.”⁵ Other important works of literature include the *Haran Gawaita*, the *Book of John*, the *Liturgies*, and other works.⁶ Though the literature preserves the doctrines, beliefs, practices, and traditions of the Mandaeans, it exists in a very confused state. Consequently, there has traditionally been reluctance among scholars to use this literature as a historical source. Recently, however, scholars have examined the texts not for specific historical facts but for traditions which may be based in history.

As previously stated, the Mandaeans have a highly developed Gnostic belief system marked by a strict concept of dualism between the world of

4. Sinasi Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of Mandaeans and Their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur'an and to the Harranians* (England: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70, quoting *Ginza Right*, 15.

5. Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12.

6. Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 13–15.

light and the world of dark.⁷ Their Gnosticism definitely contains eastern influences but is remarkably similar to the Valentinian Gnosticism described by Irenaeus.⁸ Their supreme being, the “Great Life,” exists in a “Light World” and is surrounded by numerous light beings which emanate from him in a manner that shows a gradual fall from the Great Life to the earthly world.⁹ The world was created by the Demiurge, who is the son of Ruha, the female fallen spirit and adversary of light.¹⁰ Pthil created the human body, but it remained motionless until the preexistent soul of Adam was brought from the Light World by an angelic figure called an *uthra* and inhabited the body, thus creating human life.¹¹ All of these concepts share remarkable similarities with beliefs held in classical Gnosticism.

In addition to this Gnostic basis, the Mandaeans revere John the Baptist as one of their most important prophets and claim that he was a Mandaean, along with the Old Testament prophets Adam, Abel, Seth, and Enoch. However, they consider Jesus Christ a deceiver. They are decidedly anti-Christian and anti-Jewish, though they conceptualize their origins as stemming from the same tradition as these two religions.¹² They believe in the deliverance of the soul at a cosmological day of judgment. Upon death they believe that the soul ascends to the Light World and to the presence of the “Great Life.” The ordinances, signing names which they receive, as well as the good deeds of the Mandaean, are requisite to get past the watch-houses of the demons as their souls make the journey through the cosmos.¹³ This knowledge is provided to Mandaean initiates through a series of ordinances by their established priesthood.

7. Rudolph, *Mandaicism*, 13.

8. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1, in *The Early Church Fathers* (Weston, NY: Dajul Enterprises, 2000–2001). Irenaeus describes Valentinian Gnosticism as a sect claiming to be Christians which believes in an extremely complex heavenly structure consisting of a great, unknowable god from which many lower gods, or Aeons, emanate from. These aeons exist in a state known as the Pleroma. They believe that the earth and all things in the material universe was created by the Demiurge, the son of the fallen aeon, Sophia (Wisdom). Sophia was restored, and Christ and the Holy Spirit were created to retrieve the fallen. According to Irenaeus, the Gnostics believe “the consummation of all things will take place when all that is spiritual has been formed and perfected by Gnosis (knowledge); and by this they mean spiritual men who have attained to the perfect knowledge of God, and been initiated into these mysteries by Achamoth. And they represent themselves to be these persons” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.6.1). This secret Gnosis is what makes it possible for human beings with corrupted physical bodies to return to the Pleroma.

9. Rudolph, *Mandaicism*, 13.

10. Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 40–48. Though she is often seen as the leader of the forces of darkness, Ruha is not always construed as evil. A very positive side of her exists, which Buckley brings to light. She is compared to the Gnostic Sophia.

11. Rudolph, *Mandaicism*, 14.

12. Rudolph, *Mandaicism*, 14.

13. Rudolph, *Mandaicism*, 10–11.

The most important ordinances are the baptism, or *masbuta*, and the mass of the souls, or *masiqta*.¹⁴ When any ordinance is preformed, both the priest and the initiate are dressed in special white garments similar to those worn by the Levite priests of Judaism.¹⁵ These baptisms takes place every Sunday in “living” (flowing) waters, and are preformed by the priest.¹⁶ The ordinance includes prayers, triple self-immersion, triple immersion by the priest, triple signing of the forehead with water, triple drinking of water, investiture with a myrtle-wreath, blessing by the priest laying his right hand on the head of the initiate, prayers, hymns, and formulas. Then, on the river bank, the second part of the initiation includes anointing of the forehead with sesame oil, a holy meal with pita and water, and a sealing against demons by a recitation of the “sealing prayers” over the head of the initiate. Lastly, a ceremonial handclasp called “giving *kusta*,” or “truth,” is given.¹⁷ The purpose of the baptism is to make contact with the healing powers of the world of light and to purify believers from ritual and moral sins. Without it, there is no hope of ascending to the Great Life.

The mass of the soul prepares the soul for its ascent to the Light World. It also includes triple immersion in the water, anointing, dressing in the sacred white ritual dress, and investing with a myrtle-wreath and a flask of oil. After the death of a Mandaean, ritual eating for the dead takes place, which provides the dead with energy for his or her divine ascent.¹⁸ If the Mandaean dies unclean, a special ceremony called the “bestowal of the garments” can be performed by a living person standing as proxy for the dead person which prepares the soul for ascent.¹⁹ The marriage rite is also very important. It includes the baptism of the bride and groom, a sacred meal, and a ceremony which takes place in a sacred hut which allows the couples’ ancestors to “take part in rites which mean the continuance of their race and to bless the young people.”²⁰

Theories on Origin

The rites and beliefs here described seem to have some parallels in both ancient Mesopotamia as well as in Judea. For this reason, the discovery of the

14. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 8.

15. E. S. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq: Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore*, 2nd ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002), 32. These robes consist of a shirt (*ksuya*), a small patch piece stitched to the outer side of the right breast of the shirt (*dasha*), drawers (*sharawala*), and a stole and belt (or girdle). Also, a turban (*burzinqa*) is worn, which wraps around the head three times, with the end hanging over the left shoulder. Priests wear a crown of silk, and a gold ring on the right little finger, and hold a staff.

16. Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 80.

17. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 8–10.

18. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 10.

19. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 11.

20. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 12.

Mandaean place of origin is difficult to determine. This is a subject that has traditionally been highly disputed among Mandaean scholars. One school of thought purports that the Mandaeans developed in Mesopotamia on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This school tends to ignore Mandaism's own claims that their ancestors fled from the Jordan River Valley. Edmondo Lupieri, a proponent of this theory claims:

From the point of view of a comparative analysis it means also that Mandaeanism has aligned itself with those religions that allocate a flight to their beginnings, following upon a persecution. In backgrounds linked to Judaism, this flight or original migration is characterized by a flight from Jerusalem before its destruction The early Christian story of the flight to Pella, the Mormon story of an exodus to America, and the modern Mandaean one of the migration to Mesopotamia are three examples of etiological legends that are useful for our understanding of the historical situation of the religious community of the charismatic head that produced them, but tell us nothing of the actual ancient history to which they refer.²¹

The claim is that there are multiple religions that borrow ideas from Judaism, including Christianity, Mormonism, and Mandaism. Each of these various religions, in the opinion of Lupieri, has fabricated their origin stories as a justification for their ideological parallels with Judaism and their thematic ties to the Hebrew Bible.

Lupieri and those of his persuasion cite as evidence the fact that Mandaism has similarities with Zoroastrianism, Islam, and ancient Babylonian magic. Such similarities include a strict dualism, conceptualization of magic and astrology, ritual meals, meals for the dead, cosmology, and loan words from the languages of Mesopotamia (including more than 80 from Akkadian).²² The similarities to these Near Eastern religions are far less significant and numerous than similarities with Judean groups. They can be accounted for by the many centuries that the Mandaeans have spent living among the peoples of that region. As with any other religion, having lived as a minority among other dominant religions, it is inevitable that they would have adopted some words, ideas, and practices from them. It would be unreasonable to assume that coexistence with these religions for so many centuries would not result in significant and multiple exchanges and adoptions of ideas. But this assumption says nothing of the origin of the community.

Though this school of thought points out that the Mandaean conceptualization of cosmology, dualism, and astrology is similar to their Persian counterparts, they are not able to show that these similarities strictly point to

21. Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 160.

22. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 74–82.

a Mesopotamian origin. Similar concepts are to be found in Valentinian Gnosticism and in Jewish mystical circles. The Jewish mystical system of Kabbalah, for example, also claims an ancient Judean origin and is very heavily reliant on astrology and magic.²³ Edwin Yamauchi claims a Babylonian origin for Mandaeans because their ethical approach to sexual relations seems to be quite different from what we know about the Gnostics of the Early Common Era.²⁴ Though this is true, it is not the case when comparing Mandaean ethics with Jewish, Christian, and Israelite ethical systems.

Another downfall of this explanation on Mandaean origins is their inability to provide a solid explanation for the prominence of Israelite characters, place names, and themes in Mandaean literature and mythology. In his study, Lupieri thoroughly exhausts the Mandaean scriptures, pointing out all the numerous occasions that they refer to Jerusalem, John the Baptist, the Jordan, Mary, and other biblical characters, and explains them away by claiming:

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 and his parents in the New, are transformed into Mandaean figures. In this way Judaism and Christianity can be considered a deviation from a previous Mandaean reality.²⁵

A similar phenomenon occurred when the Hellenistic concept of “daimon” was changed dramatically into the Christian “demon” in the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity. True though this may be, it does not answer the question of why the Christian and Jewish founders are demonized instead of Zoroastrian, Persian, and Islamic founders and gods, if the Mandaeans originated in Persia and not Judea. There were an abundance of Jews in Babylon at the time of the supposed development of Mandaeism as a religion. Why, then, were the Babylonian Jews not demonized, instead of their ancestors at Jerusalem? Why is the link made with Israel, if there was not one to begin with? The theory of a Babylonian origin was, at one time, the dominant theory, but it has lost adherents in recent years due the vast amount of evidence for a Judean origin.

The second school of thought more effectually demonstrates that the Mandaeans came originally from Judea and the Jordan basin, as the Mandaeans themselves assert.²⁶ Many scholars today subscribe to this theory, not only because it is the tradition of the Mandaeans, but because of the vast

23. For further discussion of Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism, see David A. Cooper, *God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997).

24. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2004), 35–42.

25. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 164.

26. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 69–70.

Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic elements which are to be found, to some extent, in Mandaism. Gunduz sums this argument up by observing that,

if we reconstruct the history of migration of the Mandaeans and their settlement in the East, it is quite probable that the Mandaeans migrated under Parthian protection from Palestine to the district of Adiabene which they called . . . the Median Mountains in the first century A.D. Presumably because of the strong Jewish influence at Adiabene they continued their migration until they reached southern Mesopotamia, where they established their community.²⁷

This is the point of view of which I am largely in favor and which I wish to support. In order to solidify this point, it is necessary to examine parallels between various Judean sects and Mandaism. This makes a strong case for a Judean origin because the similarities between them are so numerous and so specific.

Strong anti-Jewish feelings among the Mandaeans point to close contact between the two early in the development of the religion. The Mandaeans themselves claim that they were originally the same people as the Jews,²⁸ but the Jews were corrupt and began to practice evil rituals such as circumcision.²⁹ Though they lay out many reasons, the overriding reason for the Mandaean hatred for the Jews is a strong tradition that the Jews persecuted their ancestors in Jerusalem.³⁰ They portrayed Adonai, the Jewish God, as a false god associated with the worship of the sun. But a careful reading of their texts reveals that they once worshipped Adonai along with the Jews. Not until the time of Christ did Adonai lose his place as the Mandaean God.³¹

Though it is diametrically opposed to Judaism, Mandaism shares many traits with it. In addition to revering many biblical figures, including Adam, Abel, Seth, Enoch, Eve, Noah, and Shem, it has traditions regarding Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Satan, Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael. Most of these names appear in the very early Mandaean literature.³² In addition to these figures, it refers to biblical events, including the crossing of the Red Sea and the Great Flood. Mandaeans also embrace much of the same legal terminology and ethics as their Jewish counterparts.³³ One of the most important similarities between the two is their ritual practices. Parallels exist between the ordination ritual of the Mandaean and the Jewish priests, and in their foot washing, enthronement, laying on of hands, and ritual kissing.³⁴

27. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 124.

28. Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 49.

29. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 84; see also *Ginza*, 25.

30. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 106.

31. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 94; see also *Haran Gawaita*, 3.

32. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 86–92.

33. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 95–97.

34. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 124.

The similarities with Judaism are alone not enough to explicitly connect Mandaeism with a western origin. Its similarities with Christianity are also striking, however, and lend much to help strengthen this point of view. Much like the Jews, the Mandaeans express a longstanding hatred for Christianity that also seems to stem back to early contact between the two religions. In Mandaean literature, Christ was born a Mandaean but rejected his heritage. He became, instead, a deceiver and a false Messiah who changed the teachings of John and baptism in the Jordan.³⁵ His followers are seen in the same light as he is. Though they view Christ in this negative light, the Mandaeans do recognize a divine being that came from the Light World to Jerusalem during the reign of Pilate performing miracles and bringing a salvatory knowledge to many. The *Ginza* records:

On the contrary, Enos (Anos)-Uthra comes and proceeds to Jerusalem, clothed as with a garment in water-clouds. . . . He emerges and comes during the years of Pilate, king of the world. Enos-Uthra comes into the world with the powers of the sublime King of Light. He heals the sick and opens (the eyes of) the blind, makes the lepers clean, raises the crippled and the lame so that they can move, he makes the deaf and dumb to speak and gives life to the dead. He gains believers among the Jews and shows them that there is death and life, darkness and light, error and truth. He leads the Jews forth in the name of the sublime King of Light. 360 prophets go forth from the place Jerusalem.³⁶

It is possible that this reference to Anos-Uthra is a preservation of an early memory of Jesus before the advent of Christianity.

No matter what the opinion of Christ is among the Mandaeans, his mother is not subject to such criticism. It is obvious from Mandaean references to Mary and Elizabeth that the Mandaeans had knowledge of the relationship between the two women, possibly due to familiarity to the Gospel of Luke which originated in the eastern Mediterranean.³⁷ Along with Christians, the Mandaeans have a rich tradition of the veneration of Mary (Miriai).³⁸ As previously mentioned, John the Baptist is also revered as the special prophet of Mandaeism. His veneration is so much a part of their religion that one of their key books of scripture is the *Book of John*. When Portuguese missionaries discovered the Mandaeans in the seventeenth century, they incorrectly dubbed them “the Christians of St. John.”³⁹ Ordinances are similar between the two,

35. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 104; see also *Ginza*, 51.

36. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 106.

37. Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 49.

38. Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 50–56. Miriai is identified as the mother of Jesus the false Messiah, but she has traits of both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. She is seen as a convert to Mandaeism from Judaism and is even portrayed as a priestess at certain points. Eventually she obtains an archangel-like role as a light being in the world of light.

39. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 1.

including the washing of the feet and baptism. Terms associated with baptism are the same, including, *anointing*, *consecrating of water*,⁴⁰ *descending*, *triple immersion*, and *unction*.⁴¹ Such connections are not enough to tie Mandaism with the origins of Christianity. However, they do suggest that the two religions may have stemmed from the same tradition.

The baptism of the Mandaeans has other elements which, though not specifically Christian or Jewish, help trace them back to the Near East. In the Mandaean tradition, all baptismal waters are considered “Jordans” (*yardne*), and they are all seen as physical descendants of the Jordan which exists in the Light World.⁴² The Jordan tradition appears in the very oldest Mandaean texts. Another site which is referred to by Mandaean text and tradition is Hauran, the land on the eastern side of the River Jordan in Syria. Like the term Jordan, Hauran is referred to in the most ancient Mandaean engravings and refers to a celestial homeland from which the living water flows.⁴³ The references to Hauran seem to indicate that the early Mandaeans saw Hauran as a homeland, and its name began to be used in referring to their celestial home from which, like Hauran, they were separated. The Mandaean language is based on Aramaic,⁴⁴ which was spoken both in Babylon and in the west, but specific terms seem to be derived from the west. Mandaean baptismal terms for immersion, descent, signation, drinking of the water, oil, myrtle wreath, and the laying on of the hand are all of western origin, as are the names of the guardians of baptism, Silmai and Nidbai.⁴⁵

Probably the most important connection to the Judea, however, is the belief system of the Mandaeans. As was earlier stated, the Mandaean belief system is very similar to Valentinian Gnosticism. This Gnosticism appears very early in the history of Christianity and likely developed in Judea as part of early Christianity. Gnosticism, as with Mandaism, is firmly rooted in the west, and the parallels which they share suggest that both originated in the west, possibly from the same tradition. As Valentinian Gnosticism was a branch of Christianity, it is highly likely that they all share a common ancestry from Judea.

One important Judean movement not yet discussed is the baptist sects which existed in Judea from long before the Christian era to two or three centuries after. Together these believers created a baptist movement which was very influential in and around the regions of the Jordan.⁴⁶ Though very little

40. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 10.

41. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 115–16.

42. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 8.

43. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 113; see also the *Book of John*, 287.

44. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 14.

45. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 115. Nidbai and Silmai are derived from the Phoenician deities *ndbk* and *slmn*.

46. Charles H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 33.

information has survived about these sects, the small bits that have survived show that they share significant traits with Mandaism which are worth pointing out. In addition, each group shares things in common with other sects, making it impossible, based on the surviving evidence alone, to correctly identify the names and actions of each of these sects. The same group may have been referred to by different names, and each group may have been part of a larger religious whole.

The largest and most encompassing group of baptists, as far as we know, was the Essenes. Josephus described them as another group of Jews along with the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Essenes shared common meals and lived a simple, pious life. He says, "They assemble themselves together . . . into one place; and when they have clothed themselves in white veils, they then bathe their bodies in cold water." He also describes the ritual meal of bread and wine that was blessed by their own priests.⁴⁷ They were a populous group that increased their number by adopting other men's children.⁴⁸ Some practiced marriage and had children as well. They had a belief that the body was corruptible, but the soul was immortal. They rejected the priesthood of the temple as corrupt. The people of Qumran were likely an Essene group which removed itself from Jerusalem into the desert to keep their people away from the corrupt society and priesthood of the Jews. The Essenes parallel the Mandaeans in many ways. Such parallels are persuasive evidence pointing towards a Judean origin for Mandaism.

The early church writer Epiphanius mentions the Masobothians and the Hemerobaptists. Besides the fact that they were part of the baptist movement, very little can be said for sure about them. It is likely, however, that at least the Hemerobaptists were very similar to the group of John the Baptist, as the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* refer to him as "one John, a hemerobaptist who was also . . . the forerunner of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴⁹ This idea shows that the baptist sects were very similar to one another. If they were distinguishable at all, they certainly were not by outsiders.

In light of the tie to Mandaism, the most important of these sects for this study is that of the Nasarenes. Information regarding them was preserved by Epiphanius in his *Panarion*. He takes care to note that the heterodox Jewish group of Nasarenes were different than the Christian group of Nazorenes, whom he also describes.⁵⁰ He states that they lived primarily on the east side of the Jordan, that they practiced circumcision, observed the Sabbath and the Jewish feasts, honored the patriarchs, but rejected the law of Moses (the Pentateuch).

47. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, in *The New Complete Works of Flavius Josephus* (trans. William Whiston; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999) 2.8.5.

48. Josephus, *War* 2.8.5.

49. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 35.

50. Epiphanius, *The Panarion*, 29.1–9.

They were particularly against the sacrifices and were vegetarians. Also, they had notions of “fate” and “astrology,”⁵¹ on which he does not elaborate. He implies that they were a large group of baptists.⁵² Epiphanius wrote more than three centuries after the Nasarenes of the pre-Christian era, thus the actual make up of these Nasarenes at that time is unknown.⁵³ All that can be said for sure, is that there existed a baptist group centered on the Jordan who rejected the Law of Moses and called themselves Nasarenes.

The existence of the Nasarenes is significant, because the Mandaean version of that term, Nasoraean, is used often in the most ancient Mandaean literature. Gunduz points out that the term Nasoraean appears in two kinds of usage:

Firstly, it is one of the earliest self-designations of the Mandaeans. We generally see this term referring to the Mandaeans in the texts concerning their history, like Haran Gawaita. Secondly the term is used for a certain group of Mandaeans, those who possess secret knowledge and rites. . . . In the texts, not only historical persons such as John the Baptist, but also heavenly beings such as Hibil, Sital and Anos (Enos-Uthra), who symbolize the faith of the Mandaeans are called the Nasoraean.⁵⁴

This term is deeply connected to the Madaean self-recognition but also in their conceptualization of their relationship with the Light World. Thus far in the paper, multiple parallels have been examined, the traditions of the Mandaeans have been explained, loan words and customs have been identified. From all of this evidence, it is logical to infer that a pre-Christian Judean origin of the early Mandaeans is very likely. It seems far too much of a coincidence that both the early Mandaeans (calling themselves Nasoraean), and the Nasarenes, would have existed simultaneously in the Jordan basin, had strong conflicts with the Jewish religion, and, as part of the wider baptist movement, not have been the same group.

This means, then, that the proto-Mandaeans must have at least in part consisted of the Nasarenes of Epiphanius. Mandaean scholars of this century, including Drower, Macuch, Buckley, and Gunduz, have come to this conclusion. Gunduz summarizes Macuch’s German hypothesis that “the movement of separation from official Judaism in the pre-Christian period described by Epiphanius developed in two forms. One group migrated to the

51. Epiphanius, *The Panarion* 18.1.1–3.

52. “I shall next undertake to describe the sect after the Hermerobaptists, called the Nasarenes. They . . . scarcely had any beliefs beyond those of the Jewish sects I have mentioned” (Epiphanius, *The Panarion* 18.1.1.).

53. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 35. It is obvious from Epiphanius’ scanty coverage of the Nasarenes and the Hermerobaptists that he knows comparatively little about them, and that he is just reflecting what he has heard. Besides identifying their existence, he can hardly be considered a primary source.

54. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 109.

East where they were influenced by Babylonian, Iranian and Syrian Christian traditions. These are the later Mandaeans. The other group stayed in Palestine and later was absorbed into Jewish-Christianity.”⁵⁵

This theory explains the Mandaean reverence of both the Jordan and Hauran, their animosity towards Judaism, their belief that they truly are God’s chosen people, the origins of their baptismal ritual, and possibly their reverence for John the Baptist. It also adds much to understanding why the Mandaeans have for so long been opposed to Christianity.

If the Nasarenes were at all connected with the Jewish-Christian Nazorenes, there would have been animosity toward that group of Christianity, which they would have seen as heretical and apostate, which is manifest today in the Mandaean disdain for Christianity. I concur with Macuch’s conclusion on all but one account. The Nasarenes, rather than being a branch of Judaism, existed alongside it as a separate tradition, preserving remnants of the Israelite temple cult. To solidify this point, it is necessary to understand the role of John the Baptist’s followers. With a clear picture of John and his followers, his ties with Mandaism can clearly be seen.

John the Baptist

Comparatively little is known about John the Baptist, but his influence was great both on Christians and Mandaeans. According to both traditions, John was born of pure priestly descent; that is, his father, Zecharias, was a temple priest, and his mother, Elizabeth, was a “daughter of Aaron.”⁵⁶ A recent theory about John’s connections to the Essenes at Qumran has taken hold, and is convincingly conveyed by Fitzmeyer.⁵⁷ The evidence is that John was orphaned at a young age and that he “grew . . . in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.”⁵⁸ As previously stated, it was the practice of the Essenes, including those at Qumran, to adopt other men’s children, “while yet pliable and docile . . . and mold them according to their ways.”⁵⁹ This is likely the case with John, in that he was orphaned and raised in the wilderness.⁶⁰ It would be reasonable to assume that if he was not raised at Qumran, then he was raised by another Essene or baptist group. His ministry shares with the Essenes beliefs about baptism, asceticism, anti-Jewish sentiments, desire for piety and righteous

55. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, III.

56. Luke 1:14.

57. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 18–21.

58. Luke 1:80.

59. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.8.2.

60. In the Community Rule, the reason for the Qumran community’s desert existence is outlined. It says, “go into the desert to prepare there the way for HIM, as it is written, ‘Make ready in the desert the way of (Yahweh); make straight in the wilderness a path for our God’”

living, and just acts toward others. Because his ministry was part of the larger baptist movement, he likely at least had contact with, and was influenced to some extent by, Qumran, the Essenes, and the Nasarenes.

John attracted many people to him. The Gospel of Matthew records the tradition, "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan."⁶¹ He taught the necessity of confession⁶² and repentance of sin, a baptism by immersion as a physical token of this inner cleansing, prayer, fasting,⁶³ expectation of a coming messiah who would proceed an eschatological day of judgment,⁶⁴ upright living, justness, and piety toward God.⁶⁵ All these principles are espoused by Mandaeans, and similar parallels can be found in the temple cult. Among other people, some, if not all, of Christ's twelve Apostles came from the ranks of John's disciples.⁶⁶ This may have been seen as a requirement of apostleship to the very earliest Christians.⁶⁷ Such an affinity for John's teachings shows a close relationship between the teachings embraced by Jesus and by John, again suggesting the common roots of Christianity and Mandaeism. After Jesus began ministering and baptizing in Jordan following his baptism by John, John and his disciples began preaching and baptizing in Samaria.⁶⁸

After John's death, his group continued to grow. John's followers were widely spread and could be found as far as Alexandria⁶⁹ and Ephesus.⁷⁰ Many of the group apparently converted to Christianity, but there is evidence to show that the rest began to consider John as the Messiah and greater than Jesus. The *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* and the *Homilies*, thought to

(1QS 8). This is the same purpose of John's ministry, as recorded in all four gospels. Other passages in the *Rule of the Community* include discussion about the ritual washing of the body as a way to enter the covenant (1QS 5.13–14), as well as looking forward to God's purging the wicked with the spirit of truth (1QS 4.20–21). Also, ancient tradition claims that John's ministry happened along the Jordan at a point that was within walking distance from Qumran.

61. Matt 3:5.

62. Mark 1:5.

63. Luke 5:33.

64. Matt 11:3.

65. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.2.

66. Acts 1:21–22. This was a requirement for apostleship in the early Christian church.

67. Acts 1:21–22. The text of Acts states, "Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection." In choosing a new apostle, Luke states that the candidate must have been with the apostles from the Baptism of John.

68. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 163–64. Scobie shows conclusively that the mysterious "Aenon near Salim" mentioned in John 3:21 is, in fact, located in the region of Samaria. This notion is strengthened by the later association of Simon and Dositheus, both famous Samaritans, with John's sect.

69. Acts 18:24–25. Apollos, a Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria, was baptized by John.

70. Acts 19:3.

have come from Syria in the early third century C.E., record this tradition. In *Recognitions*, it says, “And, behold, one of the disciples of John asserted that John was the Christ, and not Jesus, inasmuch as Jesus Himself declared that John was greater than all men and all prophets. ‘If, then, said he, he be greater than all, he must be held to be greater than Moses, and than Jesus himself. But if he be the greatest of all, then must he be the Christ.’”⁷¹ Though the events of the Pseudo-Clementine literature are considered fictitious by most, it is likely that they preserve concepts that were believed by many early Jewish Christians.⁷² Furthermore, *Homilies* records that Simon Magus, a Samaritan heretic associated with magic and proto-Gnosticism, was part of, and for a time led, John’s group.⁷³ This claim is important, because it helps us to conceptualize the some of the beliefs of John’s group which did not find their way into the New Testament. Simon Magus was widely recognized by the early Christians as the father of all heresies. He is also popularly referred to as the first Gnostic.⁷⁴ Though this is a speculative claim, Haar makes an in depth study of it and concludes:

There are sufficient grounds to answer a tentative “yes” to him being a pre-Gnostic in the terms of the definition. . . . From the viewpoint of ancient Christian writers there are clear grounds to conclude that Simon was considered a heretic and the author of all heresies. Further, that he practiced ancient magic, was influenced by Greek philosophy, and entertained nascent forms of Gnostic cosmology and anthropology. . . . A self-proclaimed expert on divine things, Simon would not have rejected the notion of being a “Gnostic.”⁷⁵

It is possible that, whether embodied by Simon or symbolized by him, the reference to Simon in the Clementine literature is nothing more than the memory that gnostic concepts, present in both Mandaeism and the temple cult, were part of John’s group, as Simon was a symbol of magic practices and proto-gnostic concepts. Messianism was very common in most sects through the region of Judea at that time. Because of the prevalent expectation of a heavenly messianic figure, his followers concluded that John was greater than Christ and a fulfillment of this expectation. This belief is very similar to John’s portrayal in Mandaean literature. They understand John as the leader of the pre-Christian Mandaeans. He believed all the things which the New

71. *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 1.60 (Weston, NY: Dajul Enterprises, 2000-2001). Part of the reason that they may have seen John as the Messiah is because of the Samaritan belief in Taheb, a Moses-like prophet/messiah figure for whom they awaited. See Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 175.

72. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 190–92.

73. *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 2.8.

74. Steven Haar, *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 1.

75. Haar, *Simon Magus*, 306–07.

Testament writers recorded of him, as well as espousing the gnostic ideas that Pseudo-Clement ascribes to him.

Among other Gnostic concepts, the Mandaean *Book of John* presents a John who taught about ascent through the realms into the Light World and the presence of the Great One.⁷⁶ Also, he taught about a dualism between the King of Light and the “King of Darkness.”⁷⁷ He taught that the King of Light had many children, lower deities and light-beings which came (emanated) from him originally.⁷⁸ This John was associated with a complex system of rituals, ordinances and knowledge which allowed men, upon their deaths, to ascend through the spheres and return to the King of Light. I have established that John’s group was associated, by the late Christian writers, with Gnosticism and un-orthodox beliefs. The character of John the Baptist in Mandaean literature validates this claim well. They also claim that John the Baptist was a Nasorean, who stayed true to the faith. Thus, according to the Mandaeans, John’s group would also be Nasoreans.

Scholarship recognizes that the beginnings of Mandaeism in Judea and the beginnings of Gnosticism are tied together. Buckley states, “Given Mandaeism’s affinities with other forms of Gnosticism, one might be able to combine research from the earliest data and strata of Mandaeism with those of other Gnostic sources. This would be crucial for the aim of obtaining a clearer historical picture of Gnosticism’s beginnings.”⁷⁹ Likewise, Rudolph states, “We may in fact conclude that there is an original connection between an early cultic community of Jewish heretics and Gnosticism.”⁸⁰ It is logical from the evidence presented thus far to accept that the early Mandaeans (proto-Gnostics) were to be found primarily in Judea. However, there is not a strong basis in Orthodox Judaism for many of the Gnostic beliefs here discussed which the Mandaeans ascribe to. In fact, many of their beliefs are diametrically opposed to Judaism of the Pre-Christian era. Such beliefs can, however, be found in the pre-exilic Israelite temple cult.

The Preexilic Israelite Temple Cult

Recent scholarship points to the fact that the Israelite religion which is described in the Old Testament is vastly different than the Israelite religion of history. Margaret Barker presents the argument, and supports it well, that there was an ancient temple cult practiced by the preexilic Israelites, which was suppressed by the reforms of King Josiah and his scribes. The reforms focused

76. G.R.S. Mead, *The Gnostic Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book* (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), 43.

77. Mead, *The Gnostic Baptizer*, 89.

78. Mead, *The Gnostic Baptizer*, 89.

79. Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 3–4.

80. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 16.

the attention of the Israelites on the law rather than on God or the temple. Josiah's reforms were solidified and followed up by Ezra and his scribes after the return of the Jews from Babylon. In making these reforms, they tried to erase all traces of the temple cult among the Israelites. Anything reminiscent of polytheism, multiple heavenly realms, a Wisdom tradition, secret saving knowledge, and a higher priesthood espousing multiple saving ordinances was done away with. Barker studies this cult by examining nonbiblical, nonorthodox records from that era, including the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch*, which was seen as heretical by Jews but embraced by some Christians. She also examines the writings of Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi Library, and the Old and New Testaments for still-extant traces of this religion. Though some of the elements were transferred to Orthodox Judaism, most were suppressed and ultimately lost, though their influence can sometimes still be seen.

Barker's main thesis is that remnants of the temple cult survived through the beginning of the Christian era, and served as the basis of Christianity and the backdrop for Christ's ministry. She also asserts that the roots of Gnosticism are to be found in the remnants of the temple cult.⁸¹ Barker makes strong comparisons between the temple cult and Gnosticism in regards to the conceptualization of the Great God, the Great Angel, and fallen angelic deities.⁸² She describes what to look for when searching for remnants of the temple cult:

We should expect to find expression of the anger felt by worshippers of Yahweh who had been excluded by the purists of . . . those who were declaring that Yahweh and El were one. We should expect to find hostility to the Jews, since this was the name by which the returned exiles were known. We should expect to find a role for Lady Wisdom . . . We should expect to find a belief in the plural nature of Yahweh. We should expect to find a cult of Angels and heavenly powers with vestiges of the original temple setting. We should expect to find a view of the origin of evil akin to that of the myth of the fallen angels, and we should expect hostility towards the Mosaic Law which characterized the religion of those who both replaced and displaced the ancient cult.⁸³

Barker shows that Christian Gnostics fit the picture perfectly. It is apparent that the Mandaeans can be even more closely identified with the temple cult. This comparison may not only show that the earliest Mandaeans preserved remnants of the temple cult, but it also supports the concept that they have the same background as the early Gnostics. Buckley states, "Given Mandaism's affinities with other forms of Gnosticism, one might be able to

81. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1992), 162.

82. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 166.

83. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 166–67.

combine research from the earliest data and strata of Mandaism with those of other Gnostic sources. This would be crucial for the aim of obtaining a clearer historical picture of Gnosticism's beginnings."⁸⁴ Likewise, Rudolph says, "We may in fact conclude that there is an original connection between an early cultic community of Jewish heretics and Gnosticism."⁸⁵ I will compare specific aspects of Mandaism, and the temple cult to show this connection.

Mythology and the Heavens

The temple cult looked to a great unknowable father God whom they called El Elyon.⁸⁶ El was the high god, and evidences of his existence survive both in the Torah and in prophets, such as Daniel.⁸⁷ It seems this high God had both male and female aspects and was the father of the rest of the hosts of heaven. Similarly, the Mandaean supreme being is conceptualized as being "at the summit of the World of Light."⁸⁸ This supreme God is referred to as the "Great Life," "Master Mind," and "Melka Ziwa."⁸⁹ The Light Worlds surround and emanate from him, much like the heavenly realms were seen as the throne of God.

In the heavens, which surrounded the throne of God, existed the "Sons of God" and a host of other angelic figures. In the temple cult tradition, El Elyon bore many sons, which the Israelites called the Sons of God, or the "Heavenly Hosts." Chief among these subsidiary gods was Yahweh, Israel's patron deity. Often throughout the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and some Dead Sea Scroll texts, Yahweh is referred to as "Yahweh of Hosts,"⁹⁰ and there are nearly constant references to "Sons of God."⁹¹ These divine beings, such as Michael,⁹² Raphael,⁹³ and Gabriel,⁹⁴ were seen as great angels of the El. Three more, Uriel, Raguel, and Sarakiel, are discussed in detail in Enoch.⁹⁵ Yahweh was worshipped as the Son of God and the Holy One of Israel with the

84. Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 3–4.

85. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 16.

86. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987), 286.

87. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 20.

88. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 13.

89. E.S. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2002),

251. It is very similar to the Hebrew name Melchizedek, or King of Righteousness.

90. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel*, 162.

91. Barker, *Older Testament*, 104–21.

92. Daniel 10:21.

93. "Tobit," in *The Apocrypha*, trans. Edgar J. Goodspeed (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 113. Raphael is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but is familiar to Israel, as seen here.

94. Daniel 9, 12.

95. *The Book of Enoch the Prophet* (trans. Richard Laurence; San Diego, CA: Wizards Bookshelf, 1995), 26–27.

implicit understanding that there were other holy ones, but they were not to be worshipped by Israel as was Yahweh. Also in the heavenly realms were female angelic deities which acted as consorts to the gods and Sons of God previously mentioned. Of these, we have record of Asherah, Sophia, and the Queen of Heaven.⁹⁶ The Queen of Heaven is seen as the consort of “The King,”⁹⁷ and Asherah as the consort of Yahweh.⁹⁸ Marriage was cast in a positive light among the Israelites partly because the Gods existed in a “marriage-like” state.

As El’s throne was surrounded by cherubim and other angelic figures, the Great Life was surrounded by countless angelic beings known as *uthra*. The *uthra* were created by the Great Life.⁹⁹ They too were conceptualized as the children of the high god¹⁰⁰ and were thought to have their own godlike powers. They created the earth under the direction of the Great Life, acted as his messengers, interacted with earth, and preformed saving functions. The Mandaean sacred text *Hauran Gawaita* states that the Mandaeans “loved the lord Adonai” until the appearance of Christ.¹⁰¹ Adonai, the Hebrew word for lord, is the title of Yahweh. Thus, the Mandaeans originally saw Yahweh as one of the *uthra*, much as did the Israelites. Another important *uthra* to the Mandaeans was Anos. Anos was a messianic *uthra* that came from the Worlds of Light to Jerusalem during the reign of Pilate, performing miracles and bringing a saving knowledge to many. The *Ginza* records:

On the contrary, Enos (Anos)-Uthra comes and proceeds to Jerusalem, clothed as with a garment in water-clouds. . . . He emerges and comes during the years of Pilate, king of the world. Enos-Uthra comes into the world with the powers of the sublime King of Light. He heals the sick and opens (the eyes of) the blind, makes the lepers clean, raises the crippled and the lame so that they can move, he makes the deaf and dumb to speak and gives life to the dead. He gains believers among the Jews and shows them that there is death and life, darkness and light, error and truth. He leads the Jews forth in the name of the sublime King of Light. 360 prophets go forth from the place Jerusalem.¹⁰²

Anos came, much like the Jewish messiah, as a heavenly Messiah to bless and save his people. *Uthra* were paired in marriagelike partnerships. Mandaean tradition claims that the *uthra* created by Milka Ziwa had “female

96. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 52.

97. This king may have been El Elyon, or it may have been Yahweh. If it was Yahweh, it is possible that these three females were all titles for the same deity. See Barker, *The Great Angel*, 52.

98. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 53.

99. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 251.

100. Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 47. A quote from the *Ginza*, which references a prayer of Ruha’s to the Great Life, asks, “My Father, my Father, Why didst Thou create me?”

101. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 4.

102. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 106.

compliments.”¹⁰³ Female uthra are referred to and revered by name, including Miriai (Mary)¹⁰⁴ and Ruha.¹⁰⁵ Both traditions, then, record a complex heavenly order consisting of a high god and many offspring. These lower deities act as angels, saviors, patron gods, and heavenly priests. They often exist within marriagelike partnership.

According to Mandaicism, everything that has been created on earth has a spiritual counterpart in the Worlds of Life: “Therefore, the early Adam and Adamites (descendants of Adam) are only the images of the heavenly Adam and Adamites. Consequently the salvation of the soul happens only when a soul leaves the earthly world and body and unites with its heavenly partner.”¹⁰⁶ The temple cult also portrayed a spiritual creation which preceded a physical creation. Barker states, “Later traditions knew that an elaborate heavenly world had been created before the material world and this heaven was totally integrated with this earth.”¹⁰⁷

The Mandaean tradition records that the supreme god, “deputed the governance of the material world which is a world of non-reality, and even its creation, to regents, spirits of power and purity . . . three hundred and sixty in number.”¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere in Mandaean literature, the creation happens as a result of the uthra moving away from the Great Life, and was brought about “by the demiurge Ptahil with the help of the dark powers.”¹⁰⁹ The concept, then, is that the world was created, as well as the body of man, by fallen angels in conjunction with the dark world. Ptahil’s creation of the world, though, was under the direction of his father Hiwil Ziwa, the uthra most closely associated with this world and its inhabitants.¹¹⁰

Fallen or evil uthra play a large role in Mandaean mythology. They include Ruha, the Demiurge Pahtil, and, eventually, Adonai, as the fallen god of the Jews.¹¹¹ The Mandaean Religion is defined by its strict conceptualization of

103. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 251.

104. Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 49–56. Miriai is identified as the mother of Jesus, the false Messiah, but she has traits of both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. She is seen as a convert to Mandaicism from Judaism and is even portrayed as a priestess at certain points. Eventually she is identified as an uthra in the World of Light.

105. Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 43–47. In this passage, Buckley expounds upon Ruha’s role. Often she is seen as the root of evil, the creator of earth, the patron deity of Jerusalem, a child of the Great Life (and thus an Uthra), and even in a semi-messianic light. She is very much like Sophia, but the Mandaean literature does not provide an account of her “fall” as does Gnosticism with Sophia. Instead, it seems she was created by the Great Life in the world of Darkness, and there dwelt, though she was a child of the Great God.

106. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 3.

107. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 7.

108. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 251.

109. Rudolph, *Mandaicism*, 14.

110. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 252.

111. Gunduz, *Knowledge of Life*, 94.

dualism between Light World and the World of Darkness, the King of Light and the King of Darkness.¹¹² Fallen angels ceased to be followers of the Great Life, and began to follow the King of Darkness. Similarly, a strong undercurrent of dualism is to be found in the temple cult between the Prince of Light, sometimes conceptualized as Michael or Melchizedek, and the Prince of Darkness called Satan. The temple cult also acknowledged fallen angels, including Lucifer. They believed in the concept that sin and evil was introduced into the world by a multitude of fallen angels known as the sons of heaven.¹¹³

Ritual, Practices, and Doctrines

The Israelite temple cult was focused in and around the temple of Solomon and its priesthood. At first glance, the rituals of the temple cult do not much seem to resemble the baptismal rituals of the Mandaeans, but a closer examination reveals amazingly similar parallels. Whereas the temple occupied the central place to the temple cult, that role is filled by the *mandi*, or ritual hut, in the Mandaean tradition. In early texts, these *mandi* were called “temples” or “tabernacles.”¹¹⁴ The design of the hut is similar to that of the Israelite temple, albeit on a smaller scale, with a boundary wall that sets off the sacred space of the temple, a courtyard, through which flows a small man-made inlet from the river in which ordinances are preformed (possibly similar to the brazen sea in the Israelite temple),¹¹⁵ and the sacred hut at the center. Within the hut complex, they make use of incense alters and offer sacrifices of doves, fowl and sheep. The sacrifices are ritually slain and baked for consumption.¹¹⁶ They practice these and most other ordinances within their small temple complexes.

Paramount to the Mandaean ritual, and the most important feature of the *mandi* is the flowing water (*yardne*) in which rituals are performed. The purpose of the baptism ritual of the Mandaeans is to, “make contact with the worlds of light and their healing powers.”¹¹⁷ Lady Drower, the premier Mandaean scholar of this century, claimed that it was, “regarded not only as a symbol of life, but to a certain degree as life itself. . . . Immersion in the water is immersion in a life-fluid, and gives physical well-being, protection against the powers of death, and promise of everlasting life to the soul.”¹¹⁸ Though the rite of baptism was likely practiced in the temple cult,¹¹⁹ it cannot yet be proven

112. Gunduz, *Knowledge of Life*, 2.

113. 1 *Enoch* 6:2.

114. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 7–8.

115. Barker, *The Gates of Heaven*, 65.

116. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 135.

117. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 10.

118. Drower, *Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 100.

119. This will be a major point of discussion later in the paper, when the followers of John the Baptist are discussed.

to have been a part of the cult. However, Barker shows that water was used as a symbol among the temple cult in much the same way that water is used by the Mandaeans. The conceptualization of water among the temple cult is seen in the Psalms. “And thou make them drink of the river of thy pleasures. For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light shall we see light.”¹²⁰ Also, she points out that, along with Isaiah, Joel, and Enoch, Ezekiel prophecies that on the Day of the Lord, water will flow from the door of the temple and towards the sea. It will heal the Dead Sea, making its waters sweet again, and cause life and prosperity.¹²¹ Here, and elsewhere, this water is representative of Yahweh, the Heavenly Messiah who would heal, bring life, and salvation. This “Living Water” role of Yahweh is identical to the role of purifying water in the Mandaean Tradition. The “Living Waters” of baptism are the only way a Mandaean can hope to enter the Worlds of Light, just as Yahweh’s messianic role was seen by the temple cult as the only way by which the Israelites enter into the presence of God.

Mandaean priests represent the angelic uthra in their performance of the ordinances,¹²² Their ritual dress is very reminiscent of the ritual dress of the temple priests. It consist of a shirt (*ksuya*), a small patch piece stitched to the outer side of the right breast of the shirt (*dasha*), drawers (*sharawala*), and a stole and belt (or girdle). Also, a turban (*burzinqa*) is worn, which wraps around the head three times, with the end hanging over the left shoulder. Priests wear a crown of silk, a gold ring on the right little finger, and hold a staff.¹²³ The white clothes, the headdress, girdle, robe, crown, and staff used to adorn Mandaean priest are similar to the ephod, robe, brodered coat, mitre, and girdle of the Israelite priests (Exod 28:4). Also similar are the means of ordaining priests between the two. In Mandaean Communities, priests have the same function as kings and are sometimes referred to as kings. In the performance of their ordinances, the priests represent the uthra. The Israelite temple cult included a priesthood of El Elyon, or priesthood of Melchizedek.¹²⁴ This priesthood was a higher priesthood than held by the Levites or the sons of Aaron. The holders of this priesthood were the kings of Israel, who were also identified with Melchizedek¹²⁵ and represented Yahweh in the ordinances which they performed. Much like the Mandaeans, then, the priests of the temple cult were seen as kings and represented heavenly beings in their priestly roles.

In the *Testament of Levi* (a heterodox Jewish text thought to have come from at least the second century B.C.E.) a vestment ordinance is described which

120. Ps 36:3–9.

121. Barker, *The Gates of Heaven*, 87. She quotes parts of Ezekiel 40–47.

122. Rudolph, *Mandaism*, 6.

123. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, 32.

124. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 88–89.

125. Barker, *The Great Angel*, 89.

included anointing with oil, washing the body, a ritual meal of bread and wine, clothing in priestly clothing, and the wearing of a sacred name.¹²⁶ The ordination of priests in the Mandaean tradition consists of a very lengthy ritual that includes intricate purification processes, animal sacrifice, baptism, and all the rituals that have been previously described as part of that.¹²⁷ Such rituals include all of the aspects of priestly ordination described in the *Testament of Levi*. In both traditions, the ordination to the priesthood is a symbolic ascent experience. It symbolically transforms the priest from being merely a man to becoming a celestial being. The *Secrets of Enoch* records the concept that after Enoch was clothed and washed and anointed by the heavenly beings (i.e., after he became a priest of El) he was “like one of his glorious ones.”¹²⁸ Because the rituals of the temple cult are mostly lost, it is beneficial to look at the rituals of Orthodox Judaism which are recorded early in the Bible. Parallels between ordination ritual of the Mandaean and the Jewish priests include foot washing, enthronement, laying on of hands, and ritual kissing.¹²⁹

Melchizedek, as the archetypal high priest of El Elyon, is another interesting parallel between the two traditions. Barker states, “Melchizedek was central to the old royal cult. . . . It is quite clear that this priesthood operated within the mythology of the sons of Elyon, and the triumph of the royal son of God in Jerusalem. We should expect later references to Melchizedek to retain some memory of the cult of Elyon.”¹³⁰ His name, translated from Hebrew to mean “King of Righteousness,” is very similar to the Mandaean name for the Great Life, Malka Ziwa. The word *malka* in the Mandaean tradition means “king,”¹³¹ and is cognate with the Hebrew word *melek*. The Mandaean word *ziwa* means radiance;¹³² thus Malka Ziwa is the “King of Radiance,” while Melchizedek is the “King of Righteousness.” The similarity is striking, as are the similarities between the name of the Israelite God Yahweh (*yhw*), and the Mandaean *uthra*, Yawer (*ywr*, which means “blindingly bright”). This seems especially remarkable when it is understood that “y” and “r” are interchangeable in the Mandaean script (giving a possible spelling *ywy*).¹³³

One of the most important aspects of the temple cult was its conceptualization of knowledge. The cult understood a carefully guarded heavenly

126. Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark Ltd., 2003), 128. She quotes a fragmentary version of the Testaments of Levi from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which I was unable to locate.

127. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq*, 146–65.

128. *The Secrets of Enoch* 22:9, in *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden* (Newfoundland: Alpha House Inc., 1927), 89.

129. Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 97–98.

130. Barker, *The Older Testament*, 257.

131. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq*, 78.

132. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq*, 73.

133. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq*, 29.

knowledge that could cause man to become like the gods.¹³⁴ This concept is what is illustrated in the account of the Adam and Eve in Genesis, when El said, “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.”¹³⁵ This knowledge is again referred to in the account of the Watchers imparting their heavenly knowledge to mankind, teaching them secrets previously known only to the gods.¹³⁶ The cult understood that, “Wisdom, i.e., the Spirit, transformed human beings and made them like God.”¹³⁷ Such a concept is also central to Mandaeism. They conceptualize that celestial uthras (including the aforementioned Anos-Uthra) teach believers the knowledge necessary to gain salvation.

After the fall of the soul or the “inner Adam” into the body or “trunk” of Adam. . . . Manda dHayye (an uthra whose name means “Knowledge of Life”) came to Adam and taught him the mysteries of the cosmos and the cult-rites. In this way, Adam received “knowledge” (manda) and redemption. “Salvation” or “redemption” (purqana) by means of knowledge and cultic action is brought about in the ascension of the soul (masiqta) to its native realm of light.¹³⁸

It was only through this saving knowledge that the soul was able to travel through the cosmos past the watchtowers and into the Worlds of Light, thus becoming an uthra. Here an angelic figure provides Adam with the knowledge necessary to become a Light World being, or to become like the gods (uthra). It is here apparent just how much the Gnosticism of Mandaeism and the protognosticism of the temple cult have in common. Along with this, there a belief among the Mandaeans and the temple cult in a day of judgment.

Among the Mandaeans, a ritual hand clasp finalizes the baptismal ordinance, called the “giving kusta,” or “truth.” Its name implies that this kusta is an essential part of the saving Wisdom. It cannot be said for certain if the temple cult had such a practice or not, though the concept is seen in many other similar religions and organizations throughout western history.¹³⁹

In the temple cult, wisdom was the means whereby wise men were able to ascend through the heavenly realms in a *merkabah* experience and be presented into the presence of El Elyon. This divine ascent experience usually is described in terms of the temple, and is associated with the Holy of Holies and

134. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel*, 164.

135. Genesis 3:22.

136. 1 *Enoch* 8:1–3.

137. Margaret Barker, *On Earth As it is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 31.

138. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 14–15.

139. This *kusta* is identical to the first Masonic hand-clasp. It is also reminiscent of the dexiosis seen on Greek and Roman funerary art, the art associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the records preserved regarding the rituals of Mithraism.

the priesthood of El Elyon. Such theophanies are referred to multiple times in the Old Testament, Enoch, and other pseudepigraphical works which preserve traditions of the temple cult. A similar *merkabah* experience is related in the Mandaean *Book of John*, when recounting the vision of Zacharias in regard to the birth of John: “Fire burned in Old Father Zakhria; three heaven-lights appeared. The sun sank and the lights rose. Fire lit up the house of the people, smoke rose over the temple. A quaking quaked in the Throne-chariot (merk-abah, i.e. heaven) so that Earth removed from her seat. A star flew down into Judea, a star flew down into Jerusalem. The sun appeared by night, and the moon rose by day.”¹⁴⁰ Zachariah here has an ascent experience in which he describes bodies of light and a vision foretelling the birth of John. It is very reminiscent of the other mystical wisdom ascent accounts.

In addition to these similarities, it must be remembered that much of the ordinances and practices of the temple cult have not survived intact. Therefore, it is impossible to present a complete picture of the practices and rituals of the cult. It is most probable that there were other ordinances, rituals and beliefs of the temple cult than what have here been covered. Using the information that is available, differences between the two can be seen. These differences do not testify that they are different traditions, but rather that there is a 2,500-year separation between modern Mandaism and the ancient temple cult. In that time, the common tradition has been influenced by Egyptian magic, middle-Platonism, Orthodox Christianity, Hellenistic mystery cults, Babylonian cults, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. With such separation, it is remarkable that so much has stayed the same. In light of all of this evidence, it seems obvious that the origins of Mandaism lie in the temple cult of Israel.

I realize that the conclusions at which I have arrived are not definitive. They cannot be specifically proven because no documents or archeological date exists to do so. However, with the evidence linking Mandaism to the Israelite temple cult which has been presented through this paper, I feel that a fairly accurate portrayal of Mandaism’s progression has been traced.

Despite being diluted for more than two thousand years, the tradition seems clear. The temple cult of Jerusalem, as it appeared in ancient Israel, was nearly destroyed by Josiah’s reforms. However, the tradition survived over the next six hundred years in one form or another and was still being practiced, to some extent, by the Essenes and Nasarenes in Judah just prior to the advent of Christianity. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were likely either born into or adopted this tradition and used it as the backdrop for their teachings. After John’s death, it would appear that the Nasarenes who revered him as a prophet mingled with some outside influences and began to be persecuted by the Jews

¹⁴⁰ G. R. S. Mead, *The Gnostic John The Baptizer: Selections from the Mandaean John-Book* (London: John M. Watkins, 1924) 35–36. This is part of an extended excerpt from the Mandaean *Book of John*.

of the age. The followers of Jesus had much the same experience. Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E., the Nasarenes likely chose to leave Judah and Syria in a mass exodus, so as to not be punished by the Romans for the sins of the Jews. Through Syria they traveled to Iraq, where they eventually settled down towards the south east end of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There they remained for the next nearly two millennia, practicing ordinances and passing on the sacred *mandayye*, which would guarantee them a place in the Light World.