

Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaean: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The last few years have seen an increasing number of publications dedicated to the religious community of the Mandaeans, the only surviving Gnostic sect from late antiquity. This group is something of an arcane topic, but much more than just a footnote to history. Far from being obscure, isolated, and obsolescent, they are engaged in Middle Eastern society at every level, and have produced some of the region's leading cultural luminaries, such as the Iraqi poet Abd al-Razzaq Abd al-Wahed. As the world's only surviving gnostics, they are a unique sect, even in a region known for its ancient faiths and diverse creeds; according to Jorunn Buckley,

They defy easy categorization. Neither Jewish, Christian, nor recognizably "pagan," they possess an extensive literature containing multifarious mythological traditions, and they continue to practice intricate rituals whose precise origins and antecedents are difficult to determine [...] Many aspects of the religion, particularly on the mythological level, resemble those found in other Gnostic systems. But it has a distinct identity, not attributable merely to language and geography. Mandaism's own enormous literature spans a number of genres and is barely studied these days, let alone fully known. And the religion's lengthy and detailed rituals resist easy interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, this community, which has had the strength to survive as a religious minority in such a turbulent area for nearly two millennia, today finds itself in a desperate fight for its survival.

The interest that this topic has generated recently is long overdue. Despite three and a half centuries of Western interaction with the Mandaeans, scholars interested in the modern community are confronted by a scarcity of materials. Before the millennium, the only recent work on the topic was Edmondo Lupieri's *I Mandei: Gli ultimi gnostici* (Paideia, 1993), available to the Italian-speaking public. The seminal work on the Mandaeans, E.S. Drower's *Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Oxford, 1937), had been out of print since the publication of its first edition. No serious ethnography of this important group has ever been published. The only aspects of their culture that have received any scholarly attention are their language and the nature of their relationship to other pre-Islamic religions. Ironically, while some of the world's best scholars within these fields have long considered the Mandaeans crucial to our understanding of them, the modern community itself has somehow eluded academic attention.

Thus, the amount of materials which appeared after the millennium, while still quite small by any standard, seems a wealth when compared to the paucity of material on this topic that existed before. The trend was set by the publication of *Šābe'in-e Irān Zamin* (English title: *Baptists of Iran*, Key Press, 2001), a collection of photographic images taken from Mandaean rituals in Iran which, while not a scholarly work in the strictest sense, graphically illustrates these aspects of Mandaean life. Most Western scholars have never had an opportunity to observe anything like them, so this book constitutes a great boon to

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<sup>1</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaean: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

academics interested in gnostic rituals and the Mandaeans in particular. The following year, an *annus mirabilis* for Mandaean studies, saw Drower's *Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* reprinted by Gorgias Press on the sixty-fifth anniversary of its first publication, and an English translation of Lupieri's book, under the title *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (Eerdmans, 2002). It was also in this year that Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley published *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford, 2002), which contains the first original research on the modern Mandaeans since Drower's time.

Buckley is the inheritor of Lady Drower's mantle. After she became acquainted with the famous scholar towards the end of her life, Buckley collaborated with Drower's daughter, the Egyptologist Margaret Hackforth-Jones, to continue Drower's work to the present day, and consequently is the foremost authority on the modern community. Given her involvement with this community and her academic research on Mandaean literature and ritual, it is only logical that these should be the focus of the book. The book is divided into sections on mythology, ritual, and hermeneutics. In order to place the discussion of each topic in its proper context, Buckley introduces each with an account of her interactions with the modern community, each account situated in a different geographic area; this device serves to separate the three topics of the book from one another.

Consequently, after beginning with a concise overview of the scholarship on Mandaean origins, religion, and literature, she introduces the reader to the Iraqi poet Lamea Abbas Amara. Today, Amara lives in San Diego with her sister Shafia and her son Zaidoun, along with a small community of other Iraqis. As a prominent figure in Iraq, her situation has always been perilous. In 1963, the Iraqi authorities tortured and killed a young woman whom they thought to be Amara. It would be another fifteen years, however, before she finally left Iraq, following the rise of Saddam Hussein. During that period she was alternatively courted and persecuted by the authorities; her life is an allegory for the situation of the Mandaeans in Iraq.

It was Amara who introduced Buckley to the enduring role of Mandaean mythology and history, and so it is fitting that her story should offer a preface to a description of several important mythological figures: Šitil, son of Adam (the Mandaean "Seth"), Ruha *q*-Qudša, the Mandaean "Holy Spirit," and Miriai, the mother of Jesus. Together, these three figures constitute a cross section of the mythology of the Mandaeans, and illustrate Mandaicism's connections to the major intellectual currents of the Late Antique Near East. Šitil has received scant attention from those who have theorized the existence of a "Sethian Gnosticism," despite the fact that he plays so many roles within the hierarchy of Mandaean divinities. Šitil, although not as prominent among the *'utria* (roughly equivalent to archangels in the Mandaean divine hierarchy) as his brothers Hibil Ziwa and Anuš 'Utra, is nonetheless a central Mandaean figure. As the purest of all souls, he is the standard against which all departed souls are measured; weighed on the scales of Abatur, the Mandaean Judge of the Dead, they are either deemed worthy of immediate passage into the Mandaean Lightworld (*Alma q-nhura*) or further purification in a *maṭarta* or "toll station," a kind of Mandaean purgatory.

As important as Šitil undoubtedly is, he attracts only half the attention which Buckley lavishes upon each of the two female figures. Ruha, she argues, occupies a more ambivalent

position in the spectrum of good and evil. As the mother of the signs of the Zodiac and the planets, all considered to be malign entities by the Mandaeans, she is often portrayed as a leader of the forces of darkness. In addition to her role as the mother of these monsters, she is a seductress and the sworn enemy of the *ʿutria*. Nonetheless, like the *ʿutria*, she is an creature of the Lightworld, and ultimately attains gnosis despite her involvement with the dark side. Of all the evil entities in the Mandaean cosmology, she is by far the most reflective; in the *Ginza* she defines herself according to categories in opposition, saying “I am death; I am life. I am darkness; I am light. I am error; I am truth.”<sup>2</sup> Her lament in the Mandaean prayerbook (included within prayer 75), “My God, my God... why hast thou cut me off and left me in the depths of the earth?” echoes the lament of Christ on the cross (Mark 15:34). Buckley offers many reasons to consider her a reflex of Sophia, albeit a fallen one; “a malfunctioning Gnostic, [who] appears as a candidate, however reluctant, for salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

A more positive female figure in Mandaean mythology is Miriai, the mother of Jesus. Miriai’s story is puzzling for many reasons; she is initially identified as Jewish, but finds herself drawn to the Mandaean religion; she converts and becomes a priest (unimaginable today, as neither conversions into Mandaeism nor female priests are permissible—even if the evidence suggests that women served as priests until the early modern period).<sup>4</sup> Although John, the son of her sister ʿNišbai (Elizabeth), becomes the chief prophet of the Mandaeans, she is never upstaged by her sister. Ruha and Miriai are both examples of figures that appear to be “adopted” from other traditions, yet nonetheless play an important role within the Mandaean tradition. In the case of Ruha, this role may be somewhat ambiguous, but the role of Miriai is unambiguously positive.

The central portion of *The Mandaeans* is dedicated to ritual, and is situated in Iran, where Buckley was privileged to witness these rituals as they occur even today. She introduces this section with an account of her visit to Iran in 1996, thus placing this section out of place, chronologically, with the two sections that frame it. The description of the time she spent in Iran is rife with the same sort of lively details that characterize the rest of the book; she puts a human face on Sheikh Choheili, who collaborated with Rudolf Macuch to produce his *Neumandäische Texte im Dialekt von Abwaṣ* (Harrassowitz, 1993), describing his “trusty old Ford, with its long-spent suspension, windshield bullet hole, and coarse fake fur on the dashboard.”<sup>5</sup> For the duration of her academic career, Buckley has studied Mandaean rituals, but this trip furnished her with her first direct experience with them.

The central position accorded to ritual is not accidental, as rituals have defined the community since its inception, and therefore provide a palpable link between the Mandaeans of Late Antiquity and the modern community. According to their beliefs, Mandaeans throughout the world are connected not only to one another by the *laufa* (“connection”) evoked by these rituals, but also to their ancestors in the Lightworld. The rituals detailed in the book include the *maṣbuta* or “baptism” (baptism being one of the defining

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<sup>2</sup> Buckley 2002, 45.

<sup>3</sup> idem.

<sup>4</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “The Evidence for Women Priests in Mandaeism”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 59.2 (Apr. 2000): 93-106.

<sup>5</sup> Buckley 2002, 67.

characteristics of Mandaean religion), the death mass or *masiqta*, and the initiation of the disciple, known in Mandaic as *tarmida*, into priestly life. Buckley notes that the interpretation of many Mandaean texts is intrinsically tied to the rituals, and thus a basic knowledge of these rituals, as they are performed to this day, is a prerequisite for any attempt at understanding the texts. Far too often, scholars attempt to divorce such texts from their ritual context.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately for us, Buckley accords to the representation of these rituals the same attention to detail which the priests follow in their performance.

The third and final portion of the book is situated on the other side of North America, in New York, where a jeweler by the name of Nasser Sobbi introduces us to Mandaean hermeneutics. Sobbi, in addition to being one of the few remaining native speakers of Mandaic, is a lay scholar of Mandaean scripture. He has dedicated his life to the collection and study of Mandaean manuscripts, and has lovingly copied a manuscript of the *Ginza Rba*, the preëminent Mandaean sacred work. The following chapters introduces are dedicated to imparting an understanding of the esoteric priestly documents – particularly *The Great “First World”*, *The Scroll of Exalted Kingship*, and *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*. In these chapters, Buckley introduces the reader to the role of these texts with regard to Mandaean rituals, and the various strategies used to illustrate the meaning to the initiated while confounding the uninitiated.

*The Great “First World”* and its companion scroll *The Lesser “First World”* belong to the category of esoteric priestly literature; they describe the formation of the Lightworld and the creation of its lower image, the earthly world. This manuscript is decorated with schematic figures, in the same manner as many Mandaic diwans; the subject of these superficially primitive yet intricately designed figures is often Lightworld beings and priests; one figure is covered with the letters of the Mandaic alphabet and text taken from prayers 79 and 82 of the Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans. This figure is given with no accompanying identification or explanation, and previous scholars of the texts have tended to ignore the figures. Buckley explains that the juxtaposition of the schematic figure and the jumbled text, taken from the response prayers used during the baptism ceremony, is meant to evoke Hibil Ziwa, the prototypical priest, to those familiar with Mandaean mythology. Mandaic literature—particularly that of the esoteric variety—abounds with such word games.

Words have an intrinsic power within the Mandaean worldview. All rituals have an important verbal component which imbue the ritual with power. During his initiation, the candidate for priesthood, recites the first 103 prayers from the Mandaean liturgy, including those used for the *maṣbuta* and *masiqta* ceremonies, as well as the response prayers, as detailed in *The Scroll of Exalted Kingship*. Divorced from their more frequent contexts, without their usual somatic components, these prayers are given new meaning, upon which the scroll comments in detail. While the exegetical principles governing the reinterpretation of these prayers within the context of the initiation ritual are unstated, Buckley attempts to reconstruct them, as well as the Mandaeans’ own theories governing rituals and the role of prayer within them. This novel approach, which owes as much to the discipline of anthropology as it does to philology, represents a departure from the scholarship of Nöldeke

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<sup>6</sup> Drower gives several examples of ritual terms whose proper interpretation eluded Lidzbarski; E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2002), xxii *et passim*.

and Lidzbarski, but a natural development of Drower's scholarship. In this regard, Buckley is as much a pioneer in the field of Mandaic studies as Drower herself was.

In the Mandaean worldview, words and even individual letters are freighted with meaning, often beyond the control of the person who utters them. Even the denizens of the Lightworld are susceptible to losing control of their own words; according to *Exalted Kingship*, sin first became associated with sexuality as a result of the homophony between the Mandaic words for "sin" and "suitable." When the Lord of Greatness created man, he used this word in reference to the marriage ceremony, forever condemning his creation. Buckley highlights the importance of correct speech within a ritual context, and the delight that Madaeans have taken in making puns, throughout history and to the present day. *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* address the importance of performing every last gesture and uttering every last word properly, as the penalties for mishaps are severe. Pages of instructions are dedicated to rectifying mistakes and errors of omission in rituals, which threaten to invalidate the ritual and even the priestly status of the celebrant.

In the final pages of the book, we are given a brief preview of Buckley's forthcoming research into colophons, which promises to illuminate not only the particular history of the Madaeans, but also that of the whole region. Since 1987, she has been studying and comparing Mandaean colophons, or *tarikia*, which contain lists of the scribes who were responsible for copying the manuscripts, and include invaluable glimpses of their times and the climate in which they wrote the book.<sup>7</sup> At the present, she has traced one manuscript tradition, that of the *Left Ginza*, back to a single woman, Šlama, daughter of Qidra. The tradition begins several generations before a famous Mandaean contemporary of Mani, and therefore probably belongs to the period straddling the turn of the second century. The basic chronological framework provided by such studies are fundamental for any sort of historical research, and given the paucity of information about the region during this period of time, Buckley's inquiries into the Mandaean colophons are crucial.

Clearly, the arrangement of these chapters follows an unspoken objective, discernable in the way that Buckley has alternated her description of Mandaean texts and rituals with vignettes illustrating various aspects of their lives today—both in their homelands and abroad in the diaspora. This is a subtle, yet highly effective, means of forcing her reader to consider the parallels between the texts themselves and the context in which they are meant to be understood. Before Drower's work, scholars of Mandaic interpreted their texts in a vacuum, without any access to contemporary wisdom on the interpretation of these texts or the rituals that accompanied them. Needless to say, even though the early scholars of Mandaic and Mandaean religion were giants in their fields of research—polymaths like Theodor Nöldeke and Mark Lidzbarski—the advances they made in the understanding of these texts were surpassed and even rendered obsolete by scholars such as Drower and Macuch, who made every attempt to consult the modern community of Madaeans. Drower was an autodidact, albeit an especially gifted and resourceful woman; nonetheless, Nöldeke and Lidzbarski, who could claim far more expertise in the field of Semitics, were laboring under a handicap that Drower did not share. Without access to the living tradition, much of their work was hypothetical, not fully informed, and therefore

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<sup>7</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "The Colophons in the Canonical Prayerbook of the Madaeans," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 51.1 (Jan., 1992): 33-50.

potentially subject to error. If modern scholars of the Mandaeans fail to take account of this tradition while it is still accessible, they will be subject to the same handicap.

A case in point: after the passing of Rudolf Macuch in 1993, the documentation of the few surviving modern Mandaic dialects, which he initiated and to which he continued to contribute until his last days, has all but ceased. Over the last thirty years, Joseph Malone of Columbia University has published much material on modern and classical Mandaic, applying modern linguistic techniques to the study of the language. When Malone contributed his chapter on Mandaic phonology to *The Phonologies of Asia and Africa* (Eisenbrauns, 1997), he drew his data almost entirely from Macuch—despite the fact that a small community of Mandaic speakers has existed in New York since 1970. It would have been possible for him to consult with New York's Mandaeans while preparing this chapter, which would have not only been a great service to them, but also would have added a new dimension to his work. Unfortunately, he was unaware of the community, and thus did not have the opportunity to work with it. While the great Semitists may be forgiven for not having taken the modern communities under consideration, now that a growing body of material exists and Mandaeans can be found in diaspora throughout the West, today's scholars should make every effort to consult them, as Buckley has.

One of the few shortcomings of the book is the lack of information on the Mandaean community in Iraq, despite the large role that individual Iraqi Mandaeans play within the book. Naturally, this is due to no fault of the author; research on the Mandaeans within Iraq has been prohibitively difficult to conduct since the first Gulf War. Furthermore, before the fall of Saddam Hussein, even those Iraqi Mandaeans who lived outside of Iraq were hesitant to talk about their former home, for fear of endangering their correligionists there. Consequently, much information has been suppressed, the Mandaeans censoring themselves more often than not, and prevailing upon Buckley to exercise delicacy with her own information. The dearth of information regarding the Mandaeans in Iraq has not been alleviated since the toppling of the Baathist regime; of late, the fog of war has obscured the situation of the Mandaeans in Iraq.

This information vacuum is doubly unfortunate because the Iraqi community is the largest and most well-established of the Mandaean communities, and yet its position today is the most precarious. Since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Iraqi Mandaeans have shared in the trials of their compatriots, and have also been subject to terrible persecution at the hands of criminals and religious extremists. Because Mandaeans traditionally work as jewelers, they are largely perceived as fabulously wealthy, and have become a frequent target for looters and thieves. Despite the fact that both scholars and authorities on Islamic law have identified them with the Sabians of the Qur'an, their esoteric nature makes them an easy target for religious demagogues seeking to unify their communities against perceived threats, internal and external. In Falluja alone, thirty-five families have been forced to convert to Islam—a situation which would have been inconceivable at any other time in the history of the modern state of Iraq.<sup>8</sup> If their welfare is not soon ensured by the modern rulers of Iraq and the international community, this unique faith will pass into history, like so many other treasures of the ancient Near East.

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Kendall, "Iraq: The Persecution of Mandaeans." *Assist News Service*, 31 January 2004.