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The Mandaean Book of John: Text and Translation

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Edited by
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The Mandaic text in this book was set in the font *Ardwan Lidzbarski*, the forms of which preserve characteristics of the handwriting of its pioneer translator, Mark Lidzbarski, but improve upon their legibility. Ardwan Alsabti designed the font for this edition of the Mandaic Book of John in 2018, after careful study of the original manuscript.

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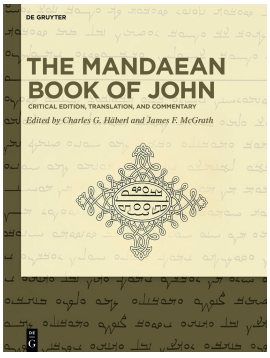

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Translators' Preface

The *Teachings of the Kings*, or "Mandæan Book of John" as it is commonly known, has provided ethical instruction to members of its ancient religious community for ages and generations. For this reason, it is one of the most commonly copied texts, and most frequently found in their homes, but until now it has never appeared in a full and unabridged English translation. Portions of it have found their way into English and other languages, and complete translations have emerged in both German and Arabic, but these universally render it in prose rather than its original verse. This new English verse translation therefore serves not only the interests of this community as it finds refuge in its diaspora around the world, but also that of a reading public perennially engaged with the sacred texts of ancient Middle East, and most particularly those that relate to its own faiths.

As elaborated in these sacred texts, the core of their faith is a doctrine known as *Nāṣerutā* or 'Nazorenism', the adherents of which are called 'Nazorenes' (*nāṣorāyi*). Within this group of people, these texts further distinguish between a priesthood, *tarmidutā*, and a laity, *mandāyutā*. The latter word, which comes from their word for knowledge (*mandā*), furnishes us with a useful term for the entire complex of beliefs, culture, faith, and practices associated with this doctrine, namely 'Mandæism'. Thus its followers are often called Mandæans, although we could just as easily refer to them as 'Nazorenes' or even 'Gnostics', using the Greek word for knowledge (*gnōsis*) in place of an Aramaic one. To their non-Mandæan neighbors in the region, they are most commonly known as Ṣubba or Sabians, employing a term lifted from the religious vocabulary of the Qur'ān.

The "kings" referenced in its original title are spirits who have descended from the world of light and govern the material world. Their moral teachings, brought for the benefit of a humanity enmired in a fallen world, are integrated into a cosmic narrative that spans from a violent war in heaven to the creation of the material world and the strange creatures that populate it, and the apocalyptic destruction of Jerusalem with which it concludes. Above this drama presides the Great Life, the supreme being of the Mandæans, whose name closes each chapter. Among the mortal figures who grace its pages, pride of place is given to the chief prophet of the Mandæans, John, son of Zechariah, who is known to Christians as the Baptist.

When it comes to matters of interpretation, scriptures stand in a category of their own, separate from modern and post-modern literature (for which even the most traditional readers admit the potential for a multiplicity of readings) and epigraphic texts (which had long ceased to be curated by any community before they were rediscovered). While nothing prevents you or us from reading any of these works as we please, and reading our own meanings into them, scholars and people of faith alike find themselves confronted with a (somewhat self-imposed) constraint: how to read these texts correctly, which is to say, how to read the correct meaning into them. As a rule, we do not permit ourselves to read any old meaning into scriptures or ancient texts, and with good reasons.

One of the most characteristic features of scriptures is that their readings are actively and presently curated by a religious community. There may be many reasons for this; the community in question may consider them to be

- divinely authored or inspired; that is to say, whether they are attributed to a human author or not, they are ultimately of supernatural origin;
- in James Kugel's terms, "omnisignificant," that is, meaningful in each and every detail, and with a meaning that is eternally and directly relevant to each and every reader;
- ultimately admitting only of a single correct meaning, which can be discovered only through careful analysis, rather than a fluid multiplicity of meanings.

These three attributes of scriptures, at least as they are understood among those traditions conventionally described as "Abrahamic," naturally exist in a certain tension with one another. If every last detail is existentially relevant but admits of only one possible divinely-ordained reading, then it behooves the scholars of that community to struggle continuously to elaborate this reading, and then guard it for the benefit of future generations, which extends to subsequent re-workings of scripture into different languages. Thus "context rather than content makes the holy untranslatable," in the words of Christopher Shackle.

In the case of some ancient texts, these painstakingly developed schools of interpretation, laboriously constructed over the centuries, have largely disappeared along with the community that constructed them, and in their absence, other scholars have appointed themselves their custodians, and perpetuate the interpretive work of that vanished community, with an important exception—to our knowledge, no latter-day scholar of the Babylonian creation myth *Enûma Eliš* (to give one example) maintains that it is divinely inspired. While secular scholars differ from religious scholars in that respect, otherwise much of their approach to the text remains the same. They both maintain that the text admits of only one correct meaning, both at the time in which it was authored and subsequently for all time, and that this meaning reveals itself only through careful analysis. These texts then share much with more familiar and widely-disseminated scriptures, save that they are no longer curated by communities that consider them divinely inspired or divinely authored. We might therefore deem them "post-scriptures."

An obvious tension emerges, then, when secular scholars apply the same approach to scriptures that are still being actively curated by a religious community, with their own painstakingly developed schools of interpretation. To give an example, the present-day German scholar Christoph Luxenberg disagrees with the fourteenth-century Shafi'ite scholar Ismail ibn Kathir on the divine authorship of the Qur'an, but agrees with him regarding the existence of a single exclusive meaning of this particular text, which he likewise seeks to uncover. Neither considers himself to be engaged in the business of "knowledge production," but rather the business of "knowledge recovery," and for this reason their readings are not only in direct competition with one another, but also mutually incompatible.

Since neither secular nor religious scholars typically admit of a fluid multiplicity of meanings, each community establishes its own conventions for producing readings, and its own criteria for assessing their merits. The conventions for secular scholars are much the same as those for religious ones. The ultimate basis for both is direct observation, either from internal factors such as the ways in which the scriptures describe the world around them, which can presumably be connected to that world in ways that might be meaningful, or from external factors, such as the age of the physical manuscripts, and what its copyists and past interpreters have to say about it. From these observations, new questions inevitably emerge, and scholars develop new readings to answer them, and hopefully test these readings in order to expand, alter, reject, or refine them.

Among communities of secular scholars, the merits of the readings so developed are assessed through the process of peer review. Ultimately, a reading's success will depend not only upon its ability to answer the questions that emerge from observation, but also upon other forms of merit, such as its originality, or the qualifications of its reader. The former is critical, to ensure that the reader has not simply replicated past scholarship, or even presented it as an original contribution. The latter is equally critical to the reading's success, but some communities employ double blind peer review, in an attempt to reduce the impact of psychological and socio-economic factors on its initial reception. In such instances, the identities of both the reader and the reviewers are obscured, until the other merits of the reading have been assessed.

In any model of scholarship, there is, was, and always will be a tension between the ways in which a reading's merits are assessed, and the ways in which they determine its ultimate impact. Some readings are accepted primarily on the strength of the reader's qualifications, and the level of prestige and support they enjoy from the scholarly establishment. This is frequently the case with secular scholars working on the religious traditions of others. Others are valued for the degree to which they affirm a scholarly or religious dogma. This is often the case with religious scholars elaborating their own religious traditions, who must necessarily deprecate originality in favor of orthodoxy. Regardless of whether we seek the support of scholarly or religious establishments, we might still conclude that the ultimate merit of our own effort at reading meaning into the text is whether it answers the questions that emerge from observation, and whether another careful reader, equipped with these same observations and furnished with these same questions, could (we dare not say "would") arrive at the same reading. This, then, is the rubric against which we hope this reading will be evaluated.

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