

The Mandaeans

The First Baptists, The Last Gnostics

James F. McGrath

Butler Brown Bag Series

The First Baptists. The Last Gnostics

Presentation by James McGrath
Philosophy and Religion

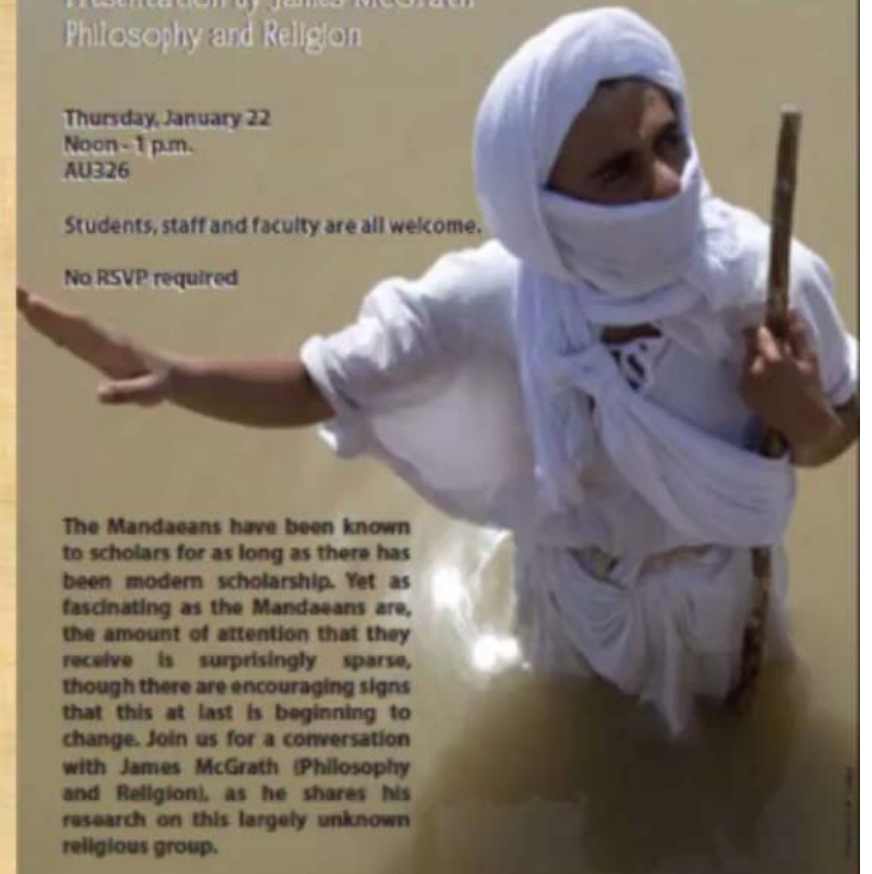
Thursday, January 22
Noon - 1 p.m.
AU326

Students, staff and faculty are all welcome.

No RSVP required

The Mandaeans have been known to scholars for as long as there has been modern scholarship. Yet as fascinating as the Mandaeans are, the amount of attention that they receive is surprisingly sparse, though there are encouraging signs that this at last is beginning to change. Join us for a conversation with James McGrath (Philosophy and Religion), as he shares his research on this largely unknown religious group.

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Who are the Mandaeans?



- Most people have heard of Gnostics and Gnosticism
- Relatively few people have heard of the Mandaeans (also known as Sabians, Nazoreans, and [mistakenly] as “St. John Christians”)
- Yet the Mandaeans are a Gnostic group which has survived from ancient times down to the present day
- They are historically found in the border region where Iraq and Iran meet
- Their modern diaspora has brought them to many parts of the United States, the UK, Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and many other places
- They used to be known only to those who traveled to Mesopotamia or read books about them. Now they have a web presence and are on YouTube.

What is Gnosticism?




- Most have heard of it, but what is it exactly?
- As with most things (including “religion”), definitions, and even the appropriateness of the word, are debated
- Defining features include:
 - The creator of the material world (demiurge) is a malevolent figure
 - The supreme, indescribable God is far removed from that creator
 - A series of emanations/intermediaries separate the two
 - (Some) humans have a connection with the lightworld, and can prepare to ascend there after they die.

Distinctives of the Mandaeans



- They still exist as a living tradition
- Mandaic is a dialect of Aramaic
- The Demiurge is called Adonai; closely associated with Ruha d-Qudsha (“Holy Spirit”) as negative figures
- John the Baptist is considered to have been a Mandaean
- They have a negative view of Jesus, considering him an apostate Mandaean
- Baptism as their main ritual
 - Repeated act to achieve forgiveness and prepare for ascent to lightworld
 - Not a single-time symbol of conversion as in Christianity
 - Flowing water (in Aramaic “living water”) of the sort appropriate for baptism is called a “Jordan”

A woman wearing a white headscarf and a white garment, looking thoughtfully to the side with her hand near her chin. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Mandaean Baptism

- “Sabians” (the name by which they are mentioned in the Qur’an) means “baptizers”
- In the past, one had to travel to remote parts of Iraq or Iran to see their ritual
- Nowadays, it is on YouTube

Symbolism

- Water is thought to descend from the lightworld above
- Myrtle branch symbolizes life and fertility, as does water



Mandaic Language and Alphabet

- Dialect of Aramaic
- Written vocalized
- No known secular usage – only found in Mandaean sacred texts, and magic bowls and amulets



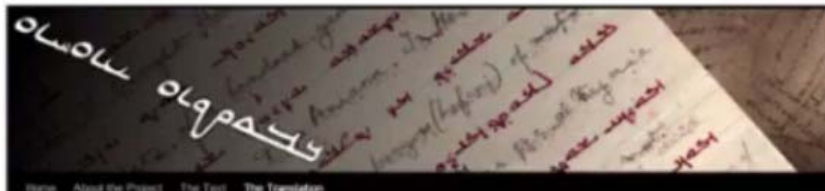
Mandaean Literature

- Ginza Rba (Great Treasure)
- Book (or Teaching) of John
- Canonical Prayerbook
- Haran Gawaita (snippets of history)
- Various esoteric commentaries
- Some manuscripts are illustrated



The Mandaic Book of John

Translated by the author into English
for the first time.



Home About the Project The Text The Translation

Relationship to Judaism and Christianity

- Anti-Jewish and anti-Christian elements in texts
- Similarities to both
- Frequent mentions of Jerusalem, whose destruction is viewed as punishment for the persecution of Mandaeans
- Banner draped on cross-beam
- Jordans, Nazoreans, other terms
- Sunday as sacred day
- Mandaean version of Jesus' baptism by John



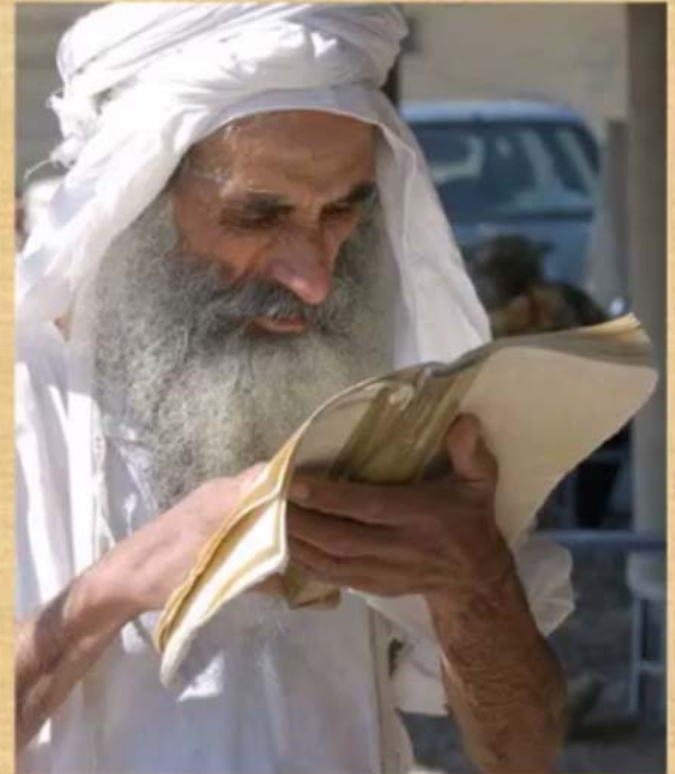
The Story of John Baptizing Jesus

- John refuses, not because he views Jesus as superior, but because he distrusts him
- The “Holy Spirit” is present, but not as a positive figure
- Jesus asks to become John’s disciples – offers to mention him in his writings!
- A voice comes from heaven instructing John to Baptist “the deceiver.”



Mandaean Origins

- Origins an ongoing question in study of Gnosticism
- Focus on Jerusalem and Judaism, as with Christianity, probably suggests a historical connection with Judaism, going back to before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE
- The Mandaeans may help us to answer the question of how Gnosticism arose



Progress in Academic Study

- Translations and commentaries
- Other books
- Society for Mandaean Studies
- Work still to be done, including translation of the Great Treasure, revisiting the study of the relationship of Mandaeanism to Judaism and Christianity in detail





Mandaeans today

- Many refugees from historic homeland
- No converts accepted
- Traditions in danger of being lost

