

The Mandaean Death of John

Charles G Häberl
Rutgers University
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The Mandaeans are the major surviving Gnostic group.¹ Their writings, especially those claiming John the Baptist as ancestor, have been dismissed as late, meant to establish a claim that the Mandaeans are a “people of the book” and thus entitled to recognition as a religion under Islam in the 7th century.² But Buckley’s study of scribal colophons shows that the scribal tradition for at least some texts goes back to the 3rd century.³ Mandaean tradition, however elaborated over the centuries, is thus of great interest as evidence for a belief apparently ancestral to the first Christianity, one which continued in parallel with Christianity for much of the rest of the century.

The Death of John (Yahya) in Mandaean tradition is an ascent to Heaven, not unlike that which some Christians had claimed for *their* founder. It exists in several versions, which differ (among other things) in the degree of reluctance John shows at leaving his body. In the right-hand volume of the *Ginza Rba* (“Great Treasure”), which seems to be the earliest of several versions, this concern does appear:⁴

Ginza Rba 5:4, 192-193. Then Manda d’Hayyi said to John, When I put my hand on you, you will depart from your body. John said to Manda d’Hayyi, I have seen you; now I will no longer be here. I have seen and reached you; now I beseech thee in truth. Do not curse me away from you, from the place from which you have come. Prepare me and give me instructions for the great place to which you are going. Have mercy upon me, and reveal to me the mysteries of the kings, about the Great Fruit of the Light, about the anvils and fruits of the Earth, against which they are pressed, about the anvils of the water, against which the living fire spreads, where the Life resides, which is earlier and greater than any other.

[Manda d’Hayyi] undressed him from his clothes in the Jordan, he removed him from his garment of flesh and blood, he clothed him in a robe of splendor and covered him with a good pure turban of light. Manda d’Hayyi continued on his way to the place which is entirely aglow, to the place which is entirely light, and John went with him.

The fish out of the sea and the birds of the two shores of the ocean rallied over the body of John and covered him. When John saw his body, he was troubled about it.

¹For a general introduction, see Buckley **Mandaeans**.

²See eg Pallis **Studies**.

³Buckley **Stem** 272.

⁴From Drower **Mandaeans** 273-280.

But it is short-lived:

Then Manda d'Hayyi said to John, Why are you troubled about the flesh and blood from which I removed you? If you want, I will lead you back into it again. Then John said to Manda d'Hayyi, Blessed and praised be the man who stripped the robe of flesh and blood from me, who has redeemed me and freed me! Praise, glory, strengthened and honored is the chosen man, who has clothed me with the garments of splendor and covered me with the good pure turban of light. No, I grieve for my children, who are full of zeal, that I had to leave them there without anyone who can teach them.

Then Manda d'Hayyi said, Whosoever has lived in your mind and in your heart will also live within the hearts and minds of your children. My son, I understand why you grieve.

Then John said to Manda d'Hayyi, "You know even the heart and penetrate the senses. The heart, liver, and kidneys are as plain as the day before you. You split a hair and see what is within it. You understand what is within the light, and what is within darkness." Thus his mouth spoke in glory from the foam of the water and the lapping of the water. Then he took sand from the sea and from the two shores of the ocean, and began to throw it over the body of John. From that day, the burial of the body has been done.⁵

But he was taken and borne to the Realm of Light, and to Shamish and the Lord of Radiance, and joined in the perpetual worship of the Light King.

The Mandaean account of the Death of Adam shows much greater reluctance to leave the body behind. This parallel tradition has affected the Death of John tradition also. An account of the death of John collected by Drower from an informant seemingly shows the one tradition as influencing the other:

Now, when he had left his body, Yahya looked down and saw his corpse in the water. The birds descended and began to peck at it, for it began to decay. The vulture flew down, and began to peck out the eyes. Yahya gazed at it, and Manda-t-Haiy said, Why gaze on that? That is a corrupt thing of the earth! And Manda-t-Haiy seized earth and buried it. Yahya was glad, for he had loved his earthly body, which we call paghra or 'ostuna, and did not wish it harmed. And the grave still appears above the Jordan like a mound, and the Mandai know it for Yahya's grave.

Works Cited

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⁵Lupieri **Mandaean** 236 n29 has suggested, "This institution shows that the redactor of this passage is reutilizing a legend about Adam, for whose corpse it makes sense to speak of first burial." But by contrast, the Ginza account of the death of Adam explicitly mentions that his corpse will remain unburied, unlike that of John.