

THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

KEVIN T. VAN BLADEL:

From Sasanian Mandaean to Šābians of the Marshes.

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In his earlier works, Kevin van Bladel has discussed many by-ways of Late Antiquity. With this book he turns his attention to the dark age of the Mandaeans. Earlier scholarship on the origins of Mandaeanism has been based largely on internal analysis of Mandaean texts. Van Bladel gives full attention also to Syriac and Arabic sources. His research points to the fifth century as the time when Mandaeanism came into existence in the religious environment of Sasanian Iraq.

In Chapter 1, van Bladel shows that the expression *b-šny' d-q' bylywn 'arb'yy'* in one of the colophons of the *Canonical Prayerbook* does not refer to the Arab conquest but is a standard expression for the Islamic calendar. The passage has been used as evidence for Zazai having lived 368 years before the conquest, which would necessitate putting the origin of Mandaeanism in the third century.

The next three chapters draw on heresiographies and other texts and clarify the relation of the Mandaeans to the Kentaeans (an earlier, cognate group) and the Dostaeans (another name for the Mandaeans).

Chapter 5 discusses a passage on the authority of a certain Abū 'Alī from around 900, quoted in Bar Bahlul's Arabic *Kitāb al-Dalā'il*. The passage concerns the Šābians, but van Bladel shows that here they are to be understood as Mandaeans. Chapter 6 attempts to identify Abū 'Alī with Abū 'Alī Ibn Muqla (d. 940), the famous secretary. While van Bladel claims (p. 59) that "the sum total of circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that Ibn Muqla was the author of the report", the reader may not be equally convinced. Ibn Muqla may be a good candidate for the Abū 'Alī, but nothing more.

The identity of Abu 'Alī, though, is not essential. Chapter 7 returns to discussing the contents of this important passage describing the Mandaeans of around 900 in the marshes near al-Wāsiṭ.

These marshes were the scene of a long rebellion by the Zanj in the late ninth century. When the rebels were crushed, the marshes became a development project. This brought the Mandaeans to light, and van Bladel connects the passage by Abū 'Alī with the changed situation around 900, as Muslims had to define what the Mandaeans were now that they had materialized. By identifying them with the Šābians, Muslims, Abū 'Alī among them, were able to give them a legal status, which had an economic impact: the Mandaean villages became a lawful source of income.

Chapter 8 continues tapping the meagre sources to document the Mandaeans in the tenth century and later. After reviewing the available evidence, van Bladel comes back to the question of the origins of Mandaeanism in the following chapters. In chapter 9, he convincingly shows that the evidence for a third-century date for the origin of Mandaeanism is largely based on misinterpretations. Chapter 10 draws together van Bladel's hypothesis of Mandaeanism having been born in Sasanian Iraq in the late fifth century from within the earlier Jewish Christian sect of Nazoraeans (p. 94). He delineates the development of early Mandaeanism in the rest of chapter 10. His vision of how Mandaeanism developed is interesting, albeit

speculative. While the details may be vague, the overall dating of Mandaicism to the late fifth century is based on solid ground.

Chapter 11 discusses the religious environment of Sasanian Iraq. Van Bladel sees Mandaicism as one of the new movements in Sasanian Mesopotamia, all movements reacting to a new context to find a new form of religion while drawing on former idolaters ready to convert as supporters. Admitting (p. 102) himself that there are few sources on paganism in Sasanian Mesopotamia, van Bladel points to the changes of the policy of the Sasanian kings in the late third and late fifth centuries, who turned against idolaters and their temples, leaving idolaters in a sense homeless, ready for conversion.

The final chapter points out Mandaean passages referring to the changes the religion underwent. The book is wrapped up by two appendices giving some key passages from Bar Konay and Ibn Waḥshīyya on the Mandaeans, as well as a bibliography and an index.

On many occasions, the book is speculative. Van Bladel strains the evidence when he (p. 66) searches for the motivation of the Caliph al-Qāhir (r. 932–934) to obtain a legal ruling against the Ḥarrānians being the Ṣābiāns of the Quran in the (undocumented) influence of his vizier Ibn Muqla, claiming that the latter tried to prove that the Mandaeans were the real Ṣābiāns and for this reason wanted the Ḥarrānians out of the way. While the equation of Abū ‘Alī with Ibn Muqla is possible, the rest does not convince.

In the discussion of the demise of Mesopotamian temples (pp. 103–12), van Bladel sees these in terms of wealthy Late Babylonian temples, assuming that their closure caused the rise of a number of new religions, Mandaicism among them, that were not bound to major temples. This ignores the fact that the great temples had never been the sole places of worship in Mesopotamia, so their closure could hardly have affected the life of the population in the countryside and in small villages, which were accustomed to making their offerings in their local temples.

It seems more probable that the old cults gradually lost their credibility when the world around them changed. Christianity and Zoroastrianism were ruling religions, and their prestige led to the birth of religions that combined their features, and also those of Judaism and older religions. A similar phenomenon occurred when Islam encountered local Iranian religions in the mid-eighth century.

The speculative character of some points aside, van Bladel’s book is a major contribution to the study of the early history of the Mandaeans, tapping sources that have hitherto either been ignored or not used intensively enough.

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila
University of Edinburgh

JOSEPH E.B. LUMBARD:

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love.

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The younger brother of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, has long been recognized as an important figure in the history of Sufism, at least in the Persian-language scholarship. Until the publication of Lumbard’s monograph, however, Aḥmad’s life and works have not been at the centre of a monograph in Western