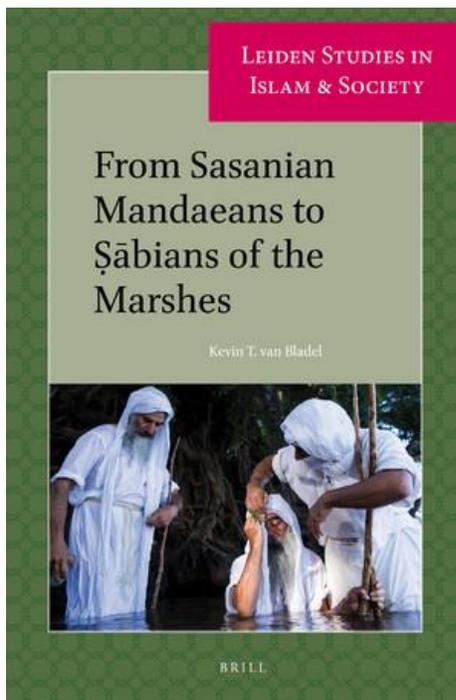




Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2019.01.01

Kevin T. van Bladel. *From Sasanian Mandaean to Šābians of the Marshes*. Leiden: Brill, 2017. ISBN: 978-90-04-33943-9. Pp. 154. EUR €40.00 / USD \$46.00. Paperback.

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Kevin van Bladel's book *From Sasanian Mandaean to Šābians of the Marshes*, published in the E. J. Brill series *Leiden Studies in Islam and Society*, is a survey and investigation of references to the Mandaean found in Arabic and Syriac literature from antiquity. In addition to some that are well known, the book highlights several mentions and allusions that have hitherto either been neglected or simply not recognized for what they are, including a number that are particularly significant due to their relatively early date. The book thus brings together in translation what probably constitutes the most comprehensive collection of the testimony of Syriac Christian, Arabic Muslim, and other sources from the Sasanian period onward concerning the Mandaean. Van Bladel discusses each text, providing details that help account for previous neglect, for instance when recognizably Mandaean names and terminology have become garbled as their meaning was forgotten or as the information moved between different linguistic environments. For instance, he identifies an allusion to

Mandaean beliefs in poetry by Ru'ba ibn al-'Aġġāġ (d. 762), who refers to the time of Fiṭaḥl in conjunction with imagery that indicates that the poet has Ptahil in mind (pp.15–17). When the various texts are considered together, it becomes clear that a regular feature in the earliest Syriac sources is an association between the Mandaean and a group called the Kentaeans, and that the scriptural texts of both groups overlapped or at least had features in common. Using clues in these

sources, van Bladel makes a cogent case for recognizing polemic against the Kantaeans within Mandaean sources themselves, where they are referred to as the “people of Kewan” (i.e. Saturn).

In addition to proposing new ways of correlating Mandaean sources with testimonies from others about them, van Bladel also highlights one particular source that has hitherto been entirely neglected by those studying Mandaeism (p.47):

The earliest source to describe their social life ... is an Arabic work of al-Ḥasan ibn Bahlūl (fl. circa 950–1000), another learned member of the Church of the East. His work is also the earliest to identify the Mandaeans unambiguously as Ṣābians, marking their transition to a status legitimate under Muslim rule.... One of the chapters of his *Kitāb ad-Dalā'il* presents an extraordinary, detailed, and detached (if not sympathetic) description of sectarian villagers, deriving from the first half of the tenth century, cited from an author whom Ibn Bahlūl names as “Abū ‘Alī”.... This is, I believe, the single most informative text about Mandaean life and custom written by a non-Mandaean before modern times, and is all the more important in that it derives from circa 900.... It has never been discussed before in scholarship on the Mandaeans....

A translation of the relevant passage is provided, in which these Sabians are said to consider themselves the “religion of Seth son of Adam” who is their prophet, and are further said to acknowledge John the Baptist. There can indeed be no real question that the reference is to the Mandaeans, and the mere identification of the text as relevant to Mandaean studies and provision of a translation constitutes a significant contribution to a field in which, as van Bladel’s study highlights repeatedly, ancient sources of clear relevance are far fewer than is desirable. Van Bladel, however, goes further still, devoting a chapter to the identity of the Abū ‘Alī mentioned by ibn Bahlūl, and proposing the plausible candidate of Abū ‘Alī ibn Muqla, the vizier of al-Qāhir (r. 932–934).

The section about ibn Bahlūl’s testimony also brings into focus the biggest problem with van Bladel’s study. Van Bladel’s argument is that the earliest of the references he identifies, dated to around the 5th century of the Common Era, indicates the time period in which the origin of the Mandaeans *as such* should be sought. He says throughout his study that his focus is on Mandaeans “as such,” meaning the Mandaeans referred to by that name. And yet it is abundantly clear even in literature from much later than the 5th century, whether composed by others or the Mandaeans themselves, that this term was not consistently used, either as a self-referent or as a way that others referred to them. Van Bladel does not deny that there must have been a religious tradition (if not indeed more than one) that served as a precursor to that described in our earliest sources about Mandaeans. And he is surely correct (as most if not all would agree) that the Arabic name “Sabians” was not consistently applied to the Mandaeans and did not denote them exclusively. But at times the term clearly does refer to Mandaeans in Arabic sources, while within their own literature the term “Mandaean” is sometimes absent, and where it begins to occur in later strata, it denotes laypeople over against priests rather than the religious community as a whole. It thus seems at best odd, and at worst seriously problematic, to focus on the history and identity of Mandaeism in conjunction with this particular term, even if it is the preferred modern label for the group.

It is a frequent phenomenon in the history of religion that the preferred self-designation(s) of a religious group may not match those applied to them by outsiders, and both internal and external labels may be multiple and applied inconsistently. For instance, we would search in vain for outsider references to the “sons of light” or the Yahad as a way of referring to the community whose scrolls were found in caves near Qumran, just as we find no references to “Essenes” within the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves. Nevertheless, most scholars believe that the texts and the outsider references nonetheless converge on the identity of a single movement or at least a constellation of related groups. Similarly, while there is an important insight that may be gained by observing that Paul the Apostle does not use the term “Christian,” ignoring Paul in a history of early Christianity because of the absence of the term itself, as though he were not a representative of the religion that was later denoted through that label, would seriously distort our understanding of the development of that religious tradition.

Unfortunately, as van Bladel seeks to situate Mandaean origins in a Sasanian context, he is prone both to overstate his case, and to summarily dismiss evidence that does not fit well within the framework of his preferred scenario. For instance, the possibility that the “books of John and Seth” might include a precursor to what we know as the Book of John is initially ignored (p. 53) and then summarily dismissed (p. 56) on the basis of the material in the Book of John that is clearly post-Islamic. However, as detailed analysis of the linguistic features of this book shows, and as redaction-critical analysis likewise suggests, the book is a compilation of material stemming from different time periods. It is not inappropriate to focus on the final complete version of a work like the Book of John, and to ask about the time period and context in which it reached that form, just as can be done with texts like the Book of Genesis, or the New Testament as canonical compilation. However, the usefulness of considering the context and meaning of a text’s final form does not invalidate the effort to dig behind the form in which we now have it, asking about earlier versions and the time periods and geographic contexts that may have contributed to those. To the extent that the primary question under investigation is about *origins*, recognizing redactional activity and exploring hypotheses about sources may be the only way to plausibly proceed. Once again, this is not a state of affairs that is unique to the Mandaeans and their literature.

Beyond the issues with van Bladel’s claim to be focused entirely on Mandaeism so designated, there are even more serious problems with his proposal regarding the precursor to Mandaeism. While van Bladel is surely right to view the term *nasurai* (Nasorean) as likely to have been an important identifier well before the term “Mandaean” gained currency, his insistence that the group called by this name must have been a Jewish Christian group is not only at odds with what the Mandaean sources themselves suggest (consistently adopting a negative view of Jesus and Christians when these are mentioned), but also at odds with the evidence of Epiphanius which van Bladel cites (see pp. 91–97). Epiphanius talks about Nazoreans as a Jewish Christian group. But he makes a point of distinguishing them from another group he refers to as Nasareans, who he says were pre-Christian and were not Christians, and who have the patriarchs but not the Jewish scriptures. This characterization would fit well a group (or a precursor to a later group) that discussed figures like Adam, Abel, and Seth in a positive way, while rejecting the Torah (Panarion 29.6.1). Epiphanius, to be sure, is not entirely clear or consistent in his discussions of sects, but neither are Mandaean sources, nor the Syriac Christian, Arabic Muslim, and other sources that speak about the Mandaeans.

Van Bladel's treatment of problems with the terminology of "Gnosticism" ignores the possibility that the etymological origin of the very name "Manda" from which "Mandaeism" derives means *knowledge*. But even setting that debate to one side, questions about the utility of the term "Gnosticism" do not in any way diminish the close correspondences between the Mandaeans and religious texts and beliefs that have, rightly or wrongly, been labeled as "Gnostic" in the past. The Mandaean religion views the creation of the material world negatively, and regards it as under the power of precisely the deity who is viewed as the creator in the Jewish scriptures (typically called *Adonai* in Mandaean texts). The points of contact between Mandaeism and key texts from Nag Hammadi are substantive and striking, irrespective of one's view of the best terminology with which to refer to these and related constellations of beliefs. One major alternative that many prefer to "Gnosticism" is "Sethianism," and that name would also connect well with Mandaeism's focus on Seth (Shitil), as van Bladel's own study illustrates repeatedly.

Sometimes, van Bladel seems determined at all costs to avoid finding evidence of Mandaeism's existence (in substance if not in name). For instance, in an effort to avoid having distinctive characteristics of Mandaeism be the source of certain Coptic Psalms of Thomas, he proposes that they derive instead from the Elchasaites, who then lend them to both Mandaeism and Manichaeism. There is, however, no evidence that the Elchasaites used precisely those terms and names that later become so distinctive of Mandaeism. Van Bladel also asserts (p. 88) "that Mandaean scriptures derive in part from a stock of texts held in common among different religious groups of related origins has been proved already by Pognon, who demonstrated that a passage in the Left part of the Ginza was also used by the Kentaeans." The problem is that we do not know how the Kentaeans and Mandaeans relate to one another, whether as sibling offshoots of a common ancestor, as parent and child traditions, or something else. Imagine if one were to insist that Christian scriptures must "derive in part from a stock of texts held in common among different religious groups of related origins" because they were also used by Jews, or by Manichaeans. Such language fails to give an accurate sense of the relationships among the groups. And of course, the same could be said if someone were to speak about the scriptures of Jews and those of Israelites, or those of Essenes and those of Jews. In each case, referring to matters in this manner obscures rather than clarifies the nature of the relationships in question. But at any rate, even if the Mandaeans emerged from the Kentaeans and broke off as an offshoot, eventually outliving their parent tradition, this would simply turn the quest for Mandaean origins into the quest for Kentaeans origins.

Positing that Babylonian pagans invented new religions in this period, in order to cope with anti-idolatry policies and sentiments, is not adequate to explain why Mandaean texts refer not only to *Adonai* and *Ruha* but also other beings with what sound like they could be pre-exilic Israelite divine names (such as Yurba and Yoshamin, deriving from "Yah the Great" and "Yah of Heaven," respectively). It does not explain the focus on Jerusalem in Mandaean texts. It does not explain the fact that the transition from Mandaean layperson to the priesthood is compared to the transition from Jew to Mandaean (p. 95, referring to a passage in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*), which suggests that Judaism was the default identity in the context in which Mandaeism existed at some crucial point in its history. It may be that, at a key point in its history, the religious tradition gained new converts who came from a background of worship of traditional Mesopotamian deities. It may perhaps have splintered as a result of the influx of these individuals, with the new influences they brought, much as may be envisaged happening in the early history of Christianity as a result

of the influx of Gentiles. The invention of Mandaism's distinctive features, however, is a different matter entirely, one that is not explained adequately by the social context of the 5th century when one considers the actual details of Mandaean belief and practice. Mandaism clearly owes something important to Mesopotamia in the 5th century and later. However, it also owes things to other places and earlier times, quite possibly including the vicinity of John the Baptist in a region ruled by Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, a city which is a major focus of Mandaean texts, and the destruction of which the Mandaeans blamed on persecution of "disciples" (or perhaps what we would call "Mandaean priests").

The appendix to the book helpfully provides a translation of the testimony of bar Konay about the Mandaeans (also called Dostheans among other things) as well as what he says about the Kentaeans. However, anyone reading it will wonder why these polemical insults about purported religious founders are supposed to be in any way more credible than the obscure materials in Mandaean sources such as Haran Gawaita, which van Bladel dismisses (rightly or wrongly) as legends of little value. That there is a kernel of truth to what bar Konay wrote about the founding of Mandaism is never demonstrated, much less that it is in any sense *more* reliable than other sources. That he knew Mandaean texts (or drew on a source that did) is unambiguously clear—he not only provides quotations from them, but makes reference to places and names that are important in Mandaean literature. However, does his attribution to Ado's family members of a wide array of names typical of Mandaean religion provide evidence that Ado simply named lightworld beings after his relatives when founding a new religion? Might it not be the case that bar Konay knew these names from Mandaean texts and used them in a fictional account of their origins? Alternatively, could Mandaism (or something like it under another name) have already been sufficiently well-established in Ado's time that Mandaeans chose distinctive names from among its key figures? These various possibilities are never explored, much less evaluated in detail so as to adjudicate between them.

In concluding this critical review of van Bladel's book, I want to be sure to do so in a spirit of appreciation for the significant value of what he offers to readers. As his study amply illustrates, the relevant evidence is often ambiguous, piecemeal, obscure, and susceptible to more than one interpretation. Radically divergent views on the origins and history of the Mandaeans are held not only for these reasons, but also because many relevant sources have not been identified; others have not been translated, studied, or published; and still others have only been the subject of a small handful of analyses. Considered within that context, van Bladel's wide-ranging survey of relevant sources, and his effort to make sense of them within a unified framework, is precisely the kind of study that is called for, and what it provides is not only helpful but crucially important. That I disagree with his conclusions and argue strongly for different ones should in no way detract from the fact that I can do so in part because scholars like van Bladel have made relevant sources, composed in a wide array of languages, available for me to study them. Indeed, van Bladel's book has drawn several important primary sources to my attention of which I was previously ignorant. And so, my disagreements notwithstanding, I do sincerely recognize the debt of gratitude that I and others working in this field owe to van Bladel for this contribution to our knowledge and to our ongoing discussion and debate of the challenging question of Mandaean origins.

