CHAPTER SIX

KING AND PROPHET IN MANDAEAN SOURCES

THE SITUATION IN MANDAEAN RESEARCH

The discovery of the Mandaeans by modern western scholarship parallels in many respects the rediscovery of the Samaritans. In both cases a remnant of the ancient sect survived in isolation, preserving very old cultic practices and traditions as well as a literature of great importance. Both groups became known to the West through the reports of travelers, and the investigation of their documents has proceeded alongside eye-witness descriptions of present rites and oral traditions.

The quality and extent of the research devoted to the Mandaeans, however, have produced a much more fortunate situation for the student of their history than for the student of Samaritan lore. In 1875 the great Semitist and Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke published his monumental grammar of the Mandaean dialect of Aramaic,¹ a work so thorough and precise that it remains the fundamental philological tool despite many subsequent discoveries and publications of texts. Building on this foundation, another renowned semitic scholar, Mark Lidzbarski, devoted much of his life to the collection, editing, and translation of the major Mandaean documents.² More recently the remarkable Lady Ethel Stefana Drower, who has lived most of her life in the Near East, not only has won an intimacy with the living Mandaeans which permitted detailed description of their continuing rituals³ and the acquisition of valuable manuscripts, but has acquired the philological skills necessary for the publication of a large number of texts with translations.⁴ Finally, the publication of A Mandaic Dictionary, based on Nöldeke’s notes and on the independent studies by Lady Drower

² See below, p. 262, nn. 4,6; p. 263, n. 1.
⁴ See below.
and R. Macuch,\(^1\) makes the published texts accessible even to a non-specialist.

Despite the solid progress of basic research into Mandaeanism, major problems of interpretation remain. Foremost among them is the problem of understanding the Mandaean myths. These myths are of central interest to the historian of religions and to the New Testament scholar, for they have been widely regarded as a key to the puzzle of pre-Christian gnosticism and, in some circles, as the key to the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.\(^2\) Certainly the Mandaean religion, as revealed by the literary compilations of the seventh century and later, is aptly termed "gnostic." Therefore the Mandaean texts are extraordinarily valuable because they portray a gnostic group as seen from within rather than through reports of opponents. Until the recent discoveries of Coptic gnostic papyri at Chenoboskion, the Mandaean texts were the only extensive primary documents of a gnostic sect. Consequently two generations of scholars have labored to analyze the Mandaean texts and to construct a synthetic outline of "the gnostic redeemer myth" portrayed by them\(^3\) without bringing the problem to rest.

Each of the attempts at a systematic description of the Mandaean religion has assumed that there is a unitary, organic myth at its heart. Yet careful reading of the published Mandaean texts leaves the impression rather of a multiplicity of myths, an extremely diverse vocabulary of names and images, and great fluidity in the description of mythical actions. To be sure, there are certain patterns

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2 See above, pp. 7-II.