Three Sixth-Century Syriac References to Mandaeans by Name

Three separate sixth-century references to the Mandaeans by that name occur in Syriac texts preserved by scribes of the Church of the East. These clearly indicate the existence of Mandaeans of some kind two hundred years before Theodore bar Konay’s account, under the rule of Sasanid kings. One of these references may even point to Bar Konay’s source on the Kentaeans and Mandaeans. Although all three of these references have long been noted in scholarly publications, they have practically escaped serious discussion in the literature on the origin of the Mandaeans. The recognition of the value of these references has not been helped by the distortion of the rare name Mandāye (written correctly as mndyʾ) in some of the manuscripts where the references occur and in the editions based on them. In any case, none of them has been adequately contextualized. Therefore, more remains to be gained from these sources of information. While Bar Konay’s account has sometimes been considered as the earliest real specific external reference to the Mandaeans, these earlier testimonial push the history of the Mandaeans, as a group by that name, back securely by two hundred years into Sasanian times. Given the difficulties posed by the Mandaean traditions themselves, it is very important for the investigation here to have such references external to the Mandaean community.

All three references to the Mandaeans occur in short lists of heretical groups, in each case including also the Manichaeans among others, but the different lists were written for different reasons and appear in different contexts. In each case the Mandaeans appear side by side with the Kentaeans, whom Theodore bar Konay described closely along with the Mandaeans, saying that they were one of the sects from whom the Mandaeans borrowed. The regular collocation of the Mandaeans with the Kentaeans already in the sixth century lends credibility to Bar Konay’s source, which relates the two groups together in their doctrine and origins.

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1 Duchemin (2012: 202) alone notes all three references, but then considers them too allusive to be usable. On the contrary, these are the earliest historical references to a group bearing the name “Mandaeans” and their contexts are meaningful, as I will show. For more on Duchemin’s account, see chapter 4, below, on the Kentaeans.
1. I begin with the latest of these three Syriac references to the Mandaeans. It occurs in the title of a lost work of Nathaniel of Šahrazur (Syriac šyrzwir)² (d. 611/12).³ Around 580, he became the bishop of this town below the Avroman Mountains, part of the Diocese of Bet Garmay. His two reported works, known just by title as listed in the Catalogue (Menyānā, lit. “Tally”) of East-Syrian authors and their works composed by ‘Abdišo’ bar Brikā of Nisibis (d. 1318),⁴ were a commentary on the Psalms (called Nuhhār Dāwid) and a “polemic against the Severans (Jacobites), Manichaean, Kentaeans, and Mandaeans” (called Drāšā haw d-luqbal Seweryāne w-Monenāye⁵ w-Kentāye w-Mandāye).⁶ Both works appear to be lost today. Another version of these two titles is reported in Išo’dnaḥ of Baṣra’s Book of Chastity (or Book of Monasticism, Ktābā d-nakputā, wr. circa 850), which includes Nathaniel among the luminaries of monasticism in the Persian kingdom. Here again two works are attributed to Nathaniel: a commentary on the Psalms, bearing the slightly different title Puššāqā d-Dāwid, and a “Book against the Zoroastrians,” Ktābā d-luqbal mguše.⁷ The two pairs of titles are sufficiently similar that they must be referring to the same works by different names. The question here concerns the targets of Nathaniel’s refutation, which are different in the two reported titles: was it a variety of sects including the Kentaeans and Mandaeans, or just the Zoroas-

³ Vööbus 1965: 292–293; Baumstark 1922: 129–130; Fiey 1968: 69. This Nathaniel’s name appears attached to the Synods of A 1 (year: 585) and of Gregory I (year: 605) (Guidi 1889: 413). He lived during the great war of Ḫusrō II with the Romans. An official named Rād rḏ (a name that may be either Middle Persian or Parthian) persecuted the Christians of Šahrazur under his episcopate in 605. Rād was presumably the šahrab, or local governor, of Šahrazur (Gyselen 1989: 59–60)—unless the name is really the Zoroastrian priestly title Rād (leaving unexplained the unusual ’ in the Syriac spelling). The people threw Rād out. In response, Ḫusrō II summoned Nathaniel, had him imprisoned for six years, and finally had him crucified. See the Khuzistan Chronicle in Guidi 1903: 21:16–24; English trans. Greatrex and Lieu, 2002: 232; and Išo’dnaḥ’s Liber castitatis in Chabot 1896: 258 (on this last book see most lately Wood 2013: 150–154).
⁴ Assemanni 1719–1728: 3.224.
⁵ On the vocalization of this word for “Manichaean,” see de Blois in de Blois and Sims-Williams 2006: 75n11.
⁶ Assemanni’s text reads w-mndry’ but clearly, especially in the immediate context of the Kentaeans, the Mandaeans are intended. The additional reš is an error by a copyist encountering an unfamiliar name. Walker (2006: 170) notes this work and its title but does not recognize the groups named (“… Cantāye, and Māndrāye”).
⁷ Chabot 1896: 66a, 39 (Syriac), 34 (French trans.).