CHAPTER 11

The Religious Environment of Sasanian Iraq

If Mandaeism came into being in Sasanian times, as the sum of the preceding investigations demonstrates, then it is in the context of Sasanian Iraq that we must understand its origin and growth. The report transmitted by Bar Konay states that the Kentaean religion was founded by an idolater of the region of Goḫay who abandoned his idolatry in response to an edict by the Sasanian king Peroz against idols and their priests (ʾal ṭakre w-kumrayhon). According to the same account, the Mandaeans were a group partly derivative from the Kentaeans, at least in their doctrine. As seen in Chapter 4, Mandaean authors themselves saw the Kentaeans as uncomfortably similar to themselves and as a group to be shunned. If Kentaeism and Mandaeism are no older than the time of Peroz, it will be worthwhile to attempt to discern whether the Sasanian context of the origin of the Mandaean religion is meaningful for our understanding of it, or whether the Kentaean, Mandaean, and other related cases have anything to offer our understanding of the Sasanian period in Iraq. I will argue here that, although Mandaeism was built by Nāṣoraeans of some kind (admittedly not well understood), it was also the product of a social environment characterized by religious innovation in Sasanian Iraq that arose after the dismantling of the local institutional bases of Babylonian paganism. It is from this population of dispossessed idolaters that many early lay Mandaeans must have been recruited by the baptizing priests. Mandaeism is apparently the longest-lived example of several new movements in a period of religious innovation among the Aramaeans of Sasanian Iraq, triggered as their old religious communities lost their material foundations and priestly leadership. The major fact to be reckoned with is that at the onset of Persian rule in the third century, there were numerous Aramaean pagans worshipping gods represented in statues in established, sometimes wealthy, temples. By the end of the Sasanid dynasty, in the seventh century, these temples seem mostly or entirely to have disappeared. The primary sources shed limited light on the causes and circumstances of this, but it is necessary to extrapolate from what is known to suggest an explanation into which the Mandaeans fit as one part of a larger phenomenon. Without this attempt, the Sasanian context of Mandaean origins is less meaningful.¹ I shall not argue that Mandaeism is an outgrowth

¹ This argument has undeveloped forerunners. Schaedler (1950: 288) briefly connected the rise
of Babylonian paganism. That idea, suggested in an early stage of modern research on Mandaeism, was convincingly discredited long ago by Rudolph. Instead, I aim to shed light on the social environment in which Mandaeism came into being alongside several other relatively obscure religious groups.

The region of Goḫay (Arabic Ġawḥay, normalized as Ḡūḥā), east of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and populated by Aramaic-speakers, was a fertile land by the Tigris under Sasanid rule until the westward shift of the Tigris around 628. In the first century, Pliny the Elder reported that the region was watered by a divergent channel of the Tigris that eventually rejoined the main stream that passed through Mesene to the south. By late Sasanian times, the name Goḫay designated a diocese of the East-Syrian ecclesiastical province of Bet Arāmāye. The historian al-Masʿūdī reports in the tenth century that it had been “the most prosperous part of the Sawād (i.e. southern Iraq), and its people were the foremost of those in the region.” After the disastrous shifting of the Tigris, culminating in 628, however, it dried up and became a wasteland, though Syriac sources mention a bishop of Goḫay in 790 and in 830. During its populous efflorescence under the Persian kings, Goḫay appears also to have been fertile ground for new religious movements. Mani (d. 274), the founder of Manichaeism in the third century, was reportedly from Goḫay; his father abandoned idol-worship and joined an Elchasaite group, eventually summoning his son Mani, who therefore must have also been an idolater as a child, to join him. Only later, in early adulthood, did Mani become a religious innova-

of new religions in Mesopotamia like Kentaeism with the demise of “Babylonian Hellenism” in the face of state support for “the Zoroastrian church.” Schaeder characterized this in a matter of “spiritual life”—das geistige Leben im Lande—but I think it is sounder to address the institutional and social foundations of the demise of Babylonian paganism in temple life, as I will do here. I agree with Schaeder, of course, that Christian proselytism was also a factor in the erosion of Iraqi paganism.

3 On its geography, see fundamentally Henning (1942: 945–947).
4 Pliny the Elder (6.31) describes this part of the Tigris’ course: citra seleuciam babyloniam cxxv p. divisus in alveos duos, altero meridiem ac seleuciam petit mesenen perfundens, altero ad septentriōnem flexus eiusdem gentis tergo campos cauchas secat.
5 Van Rompay 2011: 70.
7 Verkinderen 2015: 51, 54, 108 (analysis including citations of Ibn Rusta).
8 Fiey 1968: 257.