Mandaeism as a Changing Tradition

It can be tempting to regard a tradition like that of the Mandaeans as a fossil from antiquity that has been relatively preserved from change by its isolation. To some extent this is true, but Mandaic texts amply attest to numerous challenges to maintaining a consensus about orthodoxy over many centuries.\(^1\) Clearly there were serious schisms about which we know little. According to the *Haran Gawaita*, there was the schism of a certain Qiqil that is supposed to have occurred eighty-six years before the time when Anoš bar Danqā explained his religion to Arab authorities. By the hitherto common (and erroneous) modern conception of this chronology, that would put Qiqil in the middle of the sixth century, in the reign of Ḥusrō I (r. 531–579), but it was probably much later, because Anoš bar Danqā was probably later. In southern Mesopotamia, we are told, in the town of Ṭīb, a Nāṣoraean named Qiqil was deceived by the Spirit (*Ruhā*), wife of Adonai (an evil figure), into writing false scriptures. He later recanted but, despite efforts to burn all the false writings, some of these texts survived among those belonging to “the root of the Jews.” So the priests are warned to rely only on the Great Revelation and to avoid these novelties.\(^2\)

The heterogeneity of Mandaean myth and doctrine is another symptom of innovation and change in the tradition over time. The internal discrepancies of the texts are only barely obscured by the passage of the Mandaic manuscript traditions through several bottlenecks and times of constraint during which priests approved and anthologized some texts of various origins while discarding others. At least one of their goals in later times included adaptation to the

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1. This was observed by Buckley (2005: e.g., 192 and 196).
2. Buckley (2005: 337–338) suggests that this account of the “heresy” of Qiqil is actually a reference to the Quqite sect known from sources dating back to the third century. The sect’s founder was known as Quq, Aramaic for “vessel, pot.” (On the Quqites see Drijvers 1967.) Presumably this name is related to the concept that the body is merely a vessel as expressed in other contemporary sects among the Aramaeans. It is probable that Qiqil, whose name means “excrement, dunghill” (Mandaic *qyqlʾ*, *qyqyltʾ*; Syriac *qiqaltā*), is a word deliberately distorted from some unknown original name in the effort to discredit the repentant author of these heretical books. As seen in the discussion of the Kentaeans above, Mandaean texts are full of puns and folk etymologies, some of which are used to discredit other sects. But the founder of the Quqite sect, otherwise almost unknown, is supposed to have lived in the second century, whereas the innovations of Qiqil appear to belong to a time occurring centuries later. Qiqil and the Quqites cannot be related.
sovereignty of Muslims who demanded that they have a prophet, a book, and one god. Modern scholars have remarked on the heterogeneity of the doctrine and mythology of Mandaic literature with bafflement. In my view this may well represent what were really sectarian innovations, new beginnings, and local Mandaean compositions written without the vetting power of a central authority. The narrator of the late text Haran Gawaita describes the very process:  

That which I found in these commentaries of the Great Revelation I did not find in all the copies, cordon, and scrolls of the First Life that were in the libraries (or collections, ginze) and in my presence. I went around to all the Nāṣoraean ethnarchs (reš-amme) that there were. I saw many books, and books that were scrutinized (mhaqqar), and books of the Great Revelation, and I did not see the likes of this source firmly-established from the beginning forever ...  

w-l-mʾhw dʾškyt b-hʾzyn ṭrʾsʾtʾ d-lʾltʾ rʾḥtyʾ lʾ-škyt b-kwlḥwn syggyʾw-mysrʾyʾ w-dryptoʾnʾn ḥyʾddʾyyʾ ḥ-dḥw b-gynzyʾw-lʿtwʾy ḥydrʾt l-kwlḥw ṭnyʾ ṭʾmyʾ nʾswʾṭʾyyʾ ḥ-dḥwn ḥḥyʾ ḥdʾbyʾ nʾḥʾsʾyʾw-kdʾbyʾ ḥ-mḥʾqʾr ṭ-w-kdʾbyʾ ṭ-d-gʾ ṭ-lʾ ṭʾḥtyʾ w-lʾ-hḥyʾ kwʾt hʾzyn ṭyrʾšʾ ḥ-mʾṭʾqʾnʾ ṭ-mn ṭqdym w-lʾʾlm ...  

The passage is followed with a warning that “Any Nāṣoraean man in whose library these explanations are found should beware lest he reveal” its contents to fools. The expression here for “library” is ginzā (gynzʾ), literally “storehouse” or “treasure.” The chief collection of Mandaic texts that has been handed down, the Ginzā Rabbā or “Great Treasure,” can be understood in just the same terms. These are not large “libraries” and perhaps not more than anthologies of scriptures. There were evidently Nāṣoraean men with different idiosyncratic collections, or proto-canons, of their own, even as late as the author of the Haran Gawaita. Only one of these collections has reached us from the sixteenth-century copyists in Ḫūzistān, and it is so internally heterogeneous that it contains no fewer than seven differing accounts of creation. One can only wonder what other sorts of collections may have existed at one time, and what regional variation there may have been among the Dostaeans of Bet Arāmāye, the Mašknaeans of Mesene, and other closely related Mandaic groups, not to mention

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3 Drower 1953: scroll facsimile of DC 9 (copied 19th century), lines 152–155. See also the facsimile of manuscript DC 36 (dated 1677) accompanying Drower 1960a, has an identical text. Cf. the translation of Drower (1953: 16).

4 Häberl in Petermann 2007: x.