Bar Konay on the Kentaeans, Dostaeans, and Nerigaeans, in English

I provide here a translation of Bar Konay’s passage on the Kentaeans and the Mandaeans. It is a difficult passage in that it deals with obscure subjects, contains corrupt passages, and cites doctrines from the southeastern or Mandaic dialect only partially rewritten as Syriac, including words normal in Mandaic but not normally used in Syriac. At least two editions and several modern translations of the text exist, including detailed commentaries of different kinds. Given its extensive coverage in previous scholarship, I would not have felt the need to make a new translation here. Nevertheless, because the account is central to the investigation of the Mandaeans and Kentaeans and I make reference to it frequently in this work, I provide a translation here for the convenience of the reader, drawing on the efforts of all the earlier translators. I have not intended to provide a full commentary beyond what I mention in Chapter 2. For more details, one should consult especially Pognon and Kruisheer.

Numbers in brackets refer to the page and line numbers of Scher’s edition, which was my basis.

[p. 342.6] On the Kentaeans. About the stupid Kentaeans, then, they report that their teaching is transmitted from Abel. It is necessary to demonstrate from where it actually is.

When Goliath, the hero (gabbārā) of the Philistines, was killed by David, then, because they were embarrassed to say that their hero died by a sling stone, they lied and said, “A warlike man carrying a staff of iron came from the camp of the Hebrews, struck him, and killed him.” They made a statue (ṣalmā) of him [i.e., of Goliath]. Annually they would make a festival of the murder in the manner of a battle. Marshalled and standing opposite each other in troops, the priests of Dagon, who were the priests of Goliath, would scratch their bodies with irons, strike each other with the staves, and run after each other with the battle standard. Then one of them, carrying a staff of iron, would approach, and he would strike that statue and knock it down, in the likeness of the

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fall of Goliath. At the time of its fall, they would shout, “Thus the wretch has killed the hero, and the weak the strong!” For a long time, this was how they acted in their country.

But when Nebuchadnezzar captured the Philistines, he broke the statue of Goliath, and when the priests of Dagon came to Babylon, they carved a great piece of wood in the likeness of Goliath and set iron on its head as the helmet of Goliath. They lined up and one of the priests knelt before it and ostentatiously struck himself with a knife. They would break a great, thick stick, and hang on it nuts and edible things. One of the priests, stripped naked, would carry it, and would tie a girdle of dyed cloths on his loins. They would go forth on the path, shooting arrows and shouting, saying, “Arrow, fly!” And the men would shout together with the women, “The mysteries have been killed, but I am silent! The heroes have been put to death, but I am silent!” like one weeping over the killing of Goliath. They would carry out this madness in the month of Āb and in the autumn.

But the Chaldaeans, according to their findings in their horoscopes, named this religion from the name of an old, false devil (šedā), called by them Nergal. Thus this religion remained until King Yazdgird. In the days of Peroz, Baṭṭay of Goḥay introduced it into another change.

On where Baṭṭay was from. The members of this religion (deḥltā) had a chief called Pappā bar Klilāye, from Goḥay. This Pappā had a slave named Baṭṭay. He, because of his laziness, fled from his slavery and hid himself among the Jews. From there he passed to the disciples of Mani. He took and arranged a little bit from their words and the mysteries of their sorcery.

In the days of King Peroz, when the decree against the idols and their priests went out, so that only the religion (deḥltā) of the magi should remain, when Baṭṭay saw that his religion (deḥltā) was defunct, he sought favor with the magi and worshipped the luminaries. Also they received the fire and established it in their temples (b-ʿumrayhon). He changed his name from Baṭṭay and was called *Yazdān-ahāz (?), meaning “He is the gods” [or “The gods brought him.”]³ For he stole from the Jews that they not eat pork, and [he stole] the name “Lord God” (Māryā Alāhā) from the Pentateuch. From the Christians he stole the sign of the cross

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2 Emending gwnhʾ ḫwnt to gwknyʾ ḫwnt, with Nöldeke (1898: 360).

3 Three forms are attested by the editors: yzdʾnʾy, yzdʾny, and yzdʾnʾy. The Syriac translation given in the text here clearly shows that Yaz(ʾ)aḥān (the plural) is correct for the first part of the name, indicating also that the words must come from an Iranian language. The distorted second part of the name must correspond to the Syriac, but the Syriac word is formally ambiguous. It could be itawʾ, “he is,” perhaps corresponding to Parthian ahāz, “was,” or, as suggested by Shapira (2004: 251), aytuʾ, “they brought him.” In any case, it is clear from the word yazdān that he adopted a name from an Iranian language.