THE MANDAEAN TABAHATA MASIQTA

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Introduction

In her introduction to the Mandaean texts *The Haran Gawaita and the Baptism of Hibil Ziwa*, E. S. Drower says,

...

to [the Mandaeans] the immutable and sacrosanct elements of his religion are the ancient rituals, baptism and the various forms of the sacramental meal. It does not worry him that there are a number of creation-stories, contradictory to one another or that there is confusion in the heterogeneous pantheon of spirits of light and darkness. What does matter is that no rule of ritual purity be broken, and that every gesture and action prescribed for ritual shall be rigidly observed. ¹

That ritual commands such a central position in the Mandaean religion should come as no surprise to scholars of Gnosticism. However, the Mandaeans were—and remain—"practising Gnostics" to a degree that still baffles students of the religion. Lofty, speculative mythologies exist side by side with complex rituals. This combination challenges scholars more at ease with mythologies and with philosophical thought than with obscure ceremonials. As a result, students of Mandaeism continue (more or less tacitly) to regard the myths and the rituals as essentially unrelated. Generally, where a concern with ritual emerges, mere description and comparative interests take the lead.² Attempts to render the rituals of Mandaeism meaningful within the frameworks of the religion's mythological thought are still scarce.

But the idea that myth and ritual go together has been a commonplace in religious studies for a long time and is surely also considered as such by the authors with which the present essay will take issue on some points. Without committing myself to exaggerated versions of the various myth-ritual theories, or claiming that the *legomenon* and the *dromenon* (to use Jane Harrison's terminology) are everywhere and always two sides of one and the same coin, it will be argued here that the Mandaean masiqta is precisely such a case of two complementary components, the speculative and the practical, saying the same thing—each in its own language—and mutually
reinforcing one another. Thought and ritual action taken together, reveal parallel insights and goals. To this end I shall analyze part of the Mandaean *masiqla* (i.e. death mass) ceremony. According to Lady Drower,

The *masiqla* ('raising') affects the two non-material parts of a human being which survive death; the *nishimta* and the *ruha*. The *nishimta*...is pre-existent and when destiny attached it to its earthly partners, the *ruha* (spirit) and the *pagra* (body), it associates with them reluctantly and yearns for its home in the 'world of light'. The *pagra* dies and is integrated back into mother earth. The *ruha* is...swayed by emotion and strongly affected by bodily instincts and yet is drawn upwards by the *nishimta*. After purification in the after-life, the *ruha*, which is still linked to the *nishimta*, unites with it...and they rise 'as one' into the 'ether-world' or 'world of light'.

The *masiqla*, then, focuses on the two upper elements, the spirit and the soul, for the body cannot rise. A crucial part of the *masiqla* is devoted to the joining of the spirit with the soul. The two must accompany one another in order to be incorporated into a new, celestial body ('*ustuna*) in the Light-world. Aside from these two goals—the joining of spirit and soul, the creation of a Light-world body—the *masiqla* has a third objective, viz. to incorporate the newly deceased into the community of its Mandaean ancestors in the world above.

The Mandaean priests, the ritual specialists, are able to achieve this three-fold goal. Celebrating the *masiqla* for every deceased Mandaean the priests maintain the fragile, vital connection, *laufa*, between the living and the dead. Earthly impersonators of 'ighthia', Light-beings, the priests are capable of crossing the boundaries between earth and Light-world. Thus, the priests mediate between the two realms, and only the priests’ work enable laypeople (and priest-colleagues) to ascend through the hostile planetary spheres, seen as purgatories (*matara.ta*), to the Light-world.

There are several kinds of death-masses, *masqata*; they differ somewhat with respect to prayers and number of required participants. The *masiqla* presented here is the *masiqla* “of the Parents”, *Tabahata*, which is celebrated on the last day of the five-day, intercalary period *Panja* (or: *Parwanaia*) in the spring right before the new year. A double *masiqla*, the *Tabahata* is performed in two parts, which I will present in three sections. My presentation relies on Drower’s field-work accounts and on her editions and translations of primary Mandaean sources. Prayers, priestly