THE MAKING OF A MANDAEAN PRIEST:
THE TARMIDA INITIATION

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I. PREPARATIONS FOR THE INITIATION

This study presents an overview of the sequence of rituals that make up the consecration of a lower-ranking priest, a tarmida, in Mandaean Gnosticism. E. S. Drower, the eminent authority on the religion as practised in Iraq in the 1920's and 1930's, gives an account of these rituals in *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*. In the following, I rely on this volume as well as on two Mandaean texts, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* and *The Coronation of the Great Šišlam*, both of them edited and translated by Drower.

Examining the cluster of rituals that forms the tarmida initiation ceremonies, I adhere to the sequence of the rituals. More specifically, I focus my attention on a number of issues central to an interpretation of the ceremonies. Among these are: the relationship between the šualia (novice) and his rba (teacher); the balance of elements and insignia deemed “male” and “female” in the ceremonies; the puzzling injunctions against including or excluding certain words or formulae in the prayers at specifically given times in the ritual. Throughout, I attempt to keep track of the “logical progression,” the step-by-step character of the procedure. For through this ritual, the novice is gradually transported from the earthly to the other-worldly, the Lightworld, realm, while bodily remaining on this earth.

Any Mandaean of “pure” (not necessarily priestly) family can become a tarmida. He need not be married, although this is the ideal Mandaean state. The postulant has trained as an acolyte, šganda, since early childhood, and is usually ready for initiation to priesthood shortly after puberty. His teacher, who is a ganzibra (the higher-ranking Mandaean priest), gathers as many priests as he can to be present at the ceremony for the novice. First, there is a ritual slaughter of a sheep which serves to ward off evil. But also,
because the sacrifice is called *fidwa*, ransom, for the novice, it is clear that the sheep is his substitute. The victim provides food for the Mandaean community, an obvious parallel to the new priest who will benefit the congregation with his services.

Before the sacrifice takes place, the initiand has been baptised, and now the priests inspect him, ascertaining that the novice is mentally fit and perfect of body. Next, the priests construct a reed-hut, *'ndruna*, over which they throw a blue cloth, the “little sky.” The hut thus roofed symbolizes the earthly world, which the novice is about to leave, for priests are specifically connected with the Lightworld, which is inhabited by priestly archetypes, *'utria*. Sacred books are placed in the *'ndruna*, and the *rba* prays the *rahmia*, the prayers for the daily office, in the hut. Sitting on a chair in front of the *'ndruna*, the novice receives a crown, *taga*, made of white silk and is publicly tested in his knowledge of the scriptures. Spectators are grouped all around. *Drabšia*, banners symbolizing the Lightworld, are stuck into the ground on the novice’s right and left. Also to the right and left stand two *kinata*, clay receptacles used for ritual tools.

Holding *asa*, myrtle, and the closed book of the baptism liturgy (*The Book of Souls*) in his hands, the initiand recites from memory. After successful recitation, the novice joins the priests in the *'ndruna*. Prayers ensue, and soon the novice and his *rba* are left alone in the hut for the night. However, before night falls, the other priests, aided by Mandaean laypeople, build a *škinta* to the north of the *'ndruna*. Ordinarily, *škinta* has two other meanings: the Lightworld abode of *'utria* and the clay-and-reed hut situated on the river-bank, a structure used by priests for ritual purposes. But the *škinta* erected now, at the initiation, is more fragile, built of reeds only. Unlike the *'ndruna*, the *škinta* receives a white cloth roof, signifying the Lightworld, as opposed to the blue “sky” of the *'ndruna*.

To prevent the novice from falling asleep during the night in the *'ndruna*, he is kept awake by the din of festivities by the laypeople as well as by his teacher’s instructions. It is prohibited to leave the *'ndruna* empty at any time during the night. At dawn, both teacher and novice emerge from the hut, which is then destroyed. Standing in-between *'ndruna* and *škinta*—symbolizing earthly realm and