

MANDAEAN REFERENCES TO ABĀ SABĀ ZAKHRIĀ

1. *Johannesbuch* chap. 18:¹

A little child was planted from above, a mystery was revealed in Jerusalem.

The priests saw dreams. Paralysis took possession of their children, paralysis took possession of Jerusalem. In the morning he (one of those who dreamt) went early to the Temple. He opened his mouth in mischief and his lips of deception. He opened his mouth in mischief and spoke to all the priests: ‘In my visions of the night I looked; [I looked] at my visions. When I was lying down, I did not sleep and I did not rest, and the sleep of the night did not take possession of me. I did not sleep and I did not rest, (and I watched) while a star appeared and stopped over ‘Enišbai (Elizabeth). Fire burned on Abā Sabā Zakriā; three celestial lights appeared. The sun set and the stars went out. The house of the people caught fire, smoke rose up from the Temple. A convulsion shook the *markabtā*, so much so that the earth moved from its place. A star flew down in Judaea; a star flew down in Jerusalem. The sun appeared at night and the moon rose by day.’

When the priests heard that, they threw dust on their heads ... [after much consternation and ineffectual attempts to understand the dream’s import, they consult a certain Lilyuk who is skilled in dream interpretation]. When Lilyuk heard that, he threw dust over his head. Naked Lilyuk pulled himself out of his bed and took the Book of Dreams ... He wrote them a letter and interpreted it for them on a written page. In it he said to them: ‘Woe to all you priests, for ‘Enišbai will bear a child. Woe to you rabbis, for a child will be born in Jerusalem. Woe to you teachers and students, for ‘Enišbai will bear a child. Woe to you, mistress Torah, for Yūhānā will be born in Jerusalem. Yūhānā will receive the Jordan and will be called a prophet in Jerusalem.’ Lilyuk wrote them a letter and said to them, ‘The star that came and hovered above ‘Enišbai (means): a child will be planted from the highest heights; he will come and will be

¹ Mark Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (2 vols.; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1905-15), 2:75-80.

given to 'Enišbai. The fire that burned on Abā Sabā Zakriā (means): Yūhānā will be born in Jerusalem.' [The letter is delivered and then read by the priests 'Elizar and Abā Sabā Zakriā].

'Elizar now opened his mouth and said to Abā Sabā Zakriā: 'O Abā Sabā, go away from Judaea so that you may not cause strife in Jerusalem!' Then Zakriā raised his right hand and struck 'Elizar on the head. He said to him: [there now follow a series of insults and a denial that Lilyuk's interpretation can be correct inasmuch as he and his wife have been sexually inactive the past twenty-two years. After the rest of the priests similarly remonstrate with him, he departs the Temple in a huff].

'Elizar followed after him. Then three lights appeared that were accompanying him. They ran after him, seized Abā Sabā by the hem of his cloak, and said to him: 'O Abā Sabā, what is this that precedes you and that follows you?' He then replied to them: 'O 'Elizar, you great house, you head of all the priests! I do not know whom the lights that precede me protect; I do not know whom the fire that follows me is accompanying.'²

2. *Johannesbuch* chap. 32:³

The place Jerusalem shook, and the wall of the priests swayed. Then 'Elizar, the great house, stood up, and his body was shaking. The Jews gathered together, came to Abā Sabā Zakriā, and said to him: 'O Abā Sabā Zakriā! You must have a son. Tell us now what name we should give him' [Two names are then suggested].

When 'Enišbai heard that, she shouted and said: 'Of all these names that you name, I do not wish to give him a single one of them. Instead I will give him the name Yahyā-Yūhānā, the one which the Life itself has given to him.' When the Jews heard that, they were filled with evil anger against her and said: 'What weapon must we prepare for him and for his mother so that he might die by our hands?'

When Anūš-'Uthra heard that, he took the child and brought him to Parwan, the white mountain, to Mount Parwan, where nurslings and small children are nourished with *mambuhā*. [I remained there] until I was twenty-two years old. There I learned all my wisdom and I completely acquired all my speech. They clothed me with garments of radiance and covered me with raiment made of cloud. They wrapped a girdle

² Translation is adapted from those of Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch*, 2:75-80, and of Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (trans. Charles Hindley; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 225-28.

³ Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch*, 2:115-16.

around me – a girdle of water – that shone and glistened beyond measure. They placed me in a cloud, a cloud of radiance,⁴ and in the seventh hour one Sunday they brought me to the place Jerusalem.⁵

3. *Haran Gawaita*:

The First Life conceived a plan for gaining a grasp in order to destroy the mysteries of Adonai from the seas and to destroy the plot of Rūhā and Adonai which came from the House of Rūhā; to ruin the scheme of Rūhā before the presence of the great Father of Glory and to propagate the mysteries (of Mandaism)

... and in Tmar, the Jordan is pure, and witness was borne to the Truth (*kušṭā*). And in the Great Jordan a pure seed was formed, and it came and was sown in the womb of ‘Enišbai (Elizabeth), so that from it a child might come into being, a prophet of the great Father of Glory, praised be His name, in order to destroy the building of Rūhā and Adonai.

... of the Life, and to propagate a family in the House which Rūhā and her seven sons built, so that they will not have dominion ... in the midst of the worlds, and he shall be called Yahyā-Yūhānā, prophet of Truth, apostle who dwells in the city of Jerusalem, healer whose medicine is living water, healer that heals [blemishes?] which go forth from Rūhā and Adonai to destroy the physical body.

... then ... when the boy was born Anūš-‘Uthra came by command of the great Father of Glory and they came before Hibil-Zīwā by command of the great Father of Glory and travelled over deserts towards Mount Sinai and proceeded ... towards a community called Rūhā’s that is situated near the place where the Ark was built

... And they did not alter the order or commands which emanated from the presence of the great Father of Glory ... Šufnai the lilith took him (i.e., the child) before the eyes of his mother fell upon him ... at the order of Anūš-‘Uthra. And they mounted up towards Parwan, the white mountain ... (a place where?) fruit and sky are large. There they set down Yahyā near the Tree which nourishes nurslings ... Then Šufnai the lilith returned to her place. When thirty days had passed, Hibil-Zīwā came at the command of the great

⁴ Compare the tradition found in the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* of Tha‘labī: ‘some of the tales have it that when he was born he was raised to heaven and there feasted beside the rivers of Paradise until he was weaned, when he descended again to his father; and the house (or the Temple) shone because of his radiance’ Cited from J. C. L. Gibson, “John the Baptist in Muslim Writings,” *The Muslim World* 45 (1955): 344.

⁵ Translation is adapted from those of Lidzbarski, *Johannesbuch*, 2:115-16, and of Lupieri, *Mandaeans*, 229-30.

first Father of Glory, and he came to the Median hill country and sent Anūš-‘Uthra to Bihram, son of ‘uthras and to the Median mountains. And they took Bihram from the Median hills and went ... and performed baptism and baptized the child beside the Tree that nourishes nurslings. And (when) he was seven years old, Anūš-‘Uthra came and wrote for him the *abjad*-alphabet ... and, until he was twenty-two years old, he taught him about all *naširuta*.

... then, at the command of the great Father of Glory he set the crown on him and seated him beside himself, until they came to the city of Jerusalem amongst the community which Rūhā founded ... all belonged to her and to her seven sons except (those from?) the Median hills, Aharan,

... Then Yahyā-Yūhānā took the Jordan and the healing Water, and he cleansed lepers, opened (the eyes of) the blind, and lifted the lame to walk on their feet by the strength of the sublime King of Light, praised be His name, and he gave a response to all who sought him. And he was called in the world ‘envoy of the great sublime King of Light’ (praised be His name), even at the abode and building of Rūhā and Adonai and her seven sons (i.e., the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem).

And he acquired disciples for himself and proclaimed the Call of the Life in the fallen House. Forty-two years (he dwelt) therein, and then his planter⁶ appeared to him, and he rose up with his planter at the behest of the sublime King of Light.⁷

4. *Right Ginzā* 2.1.151-53:⁸

And after that, in that place, a child was born and was called by the name Yūhānā, the son of Abā Sabā Zakriā, who was begotten to him in his old age at the end of a hundred years. His mother, the woman ‘Enišbai (Elizabeth), became pregnant with him; in her old age she gave birth to him. When Yūhānā grows up in that time of Jerusalem, faith will dwell in his heart and he will receive the Jordan and he will carry out baptisms for forty-two years, before Nbū (Mercury/Christ) is clothed in a body and come into the world.

⁶ The supernal entity Mandā de-Hayyē, as is described in the following passage taken from the *Ginzā*.

⁷ Translation is adapted from those of E. S. Drower, *The Haran Gawaita and The Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1953), 4-6, and of Kurt Rudolph in Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts* (2 vols.; trans. R. McL. Wilson; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 2:314-15.

⁸ Mark Lidzbarski, *Ginzā: Der Schatz oder Das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1925), 51. Note especially the discussion of A. J. H. Wilhelm Brandt, *Die mandäische Religion: Ihre Entwicklung und geschichtliche Bedeutung* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1889), 137-40.

And when Yūhānā is in that time of Jerusalem, and receives the Jordan and performs baptisms, ‘Iṣu Mšiha comes, walks about in humility, is baptized in the baptism of Yūhānā, and through the wisdom of Yūhānā becomes wise. But then he distorts the words of Yūhānā and changes the baptism of the Jordan: he distorts the words of Truth (*kušṭā*) and summons crime and deception into the world.

The day in which the measure of Yūhānā is full, I (Mandā de-Hayyē) myself come to him. I appear to Yūhānā like a little child three years and a day old, and I speak to him about baptism and I instruct his friends. Then I take him out of his body and I cause him to rise up in victory to the world which is full of radiance, and I baptize him in the white Jordan of gushing and brilliant waters. I clothe him in garments of splendor and cover him with turbans of light, and I put praise into his pure heart from the praise of the angels of light, that with which they praise their lord without interruption in eternity.⁹

⁹ Translation is adapted from those of Brandt, *Religion*, 228; Lidzbarski, *Ginzā*, 51; Rudolph in Foerster, *Gnosis*, 2:308, and Lupieri, *Mandaeans*, 224-25.