

THE ALPHABET IN MANDAEAN AND JEWISH GNOSTICISM

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For some time scholars have recognized a connection between Judaism and the Mandaean religion.¹ In 1925 M. Lidzbarski located the beginnings of Mandaeism in the Christian period in Syria-Palestine. According to him the ancestors of the present day Mandaeans were originally situated in the Transjordan and had their spiritual home in the heterodox circles of Judaism.² In 1940 S. Pederson argued that Mandaeism had at one time a positive relation to Jews and therefore contains numerous Jewish elements.³ Following Brandt⁴ G. Widengren in 1961 expressed the opinion that the earliest structure of Mandaeism is of Jewish origin.⁵ Similarly in *The Secret Adam*, published in 1960, Lady Drower stressed the connections between Mandaeism and Judaism, drawing a few parallels between gnostic ideas in these religious traditions.⁶ More recently K. Rudolph⁷ and G. Scholem⁸ argued along similar lines.

Unfortunately, however, little work has been done on comparing Mandaic texts with Jewish sources.⁹ The purpose of this article is thus to contrast a central gnostic doctrine in Mandaeism—the role of the alphabet in creation—with that found in the *Sefer Yesirah*, the earliest extant Hebrew mystical text of speculative thought.¹⁰ The fact that similar ideas are found in this early rabbinic text and in the secret scrolls of an early date used at the ordination of Mandaean priests¹¹ adds weight to the view that Mandaeism and Judaism were originally intimately related.

According to one of these secret Mandaean texts, the *Alf Trisar Šuialia*, the Wellspring is described as the mother of the alphabet: 'And the great and lofty one (Adam Kasia) who is the soul who sitteth in the celestial firmament spoke and said, 'Praised be the great First Light, the Wellspring of Light, mother of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet.'¹² These letters are represented as instrumental in forming Adam Kasia—the cosmos in the shape of physical man—in the following way: 'The 'L' came into being—and up to the 'La' they were twelve. And from the halfway 'La' unto the end of the living (mysteries?) it was (also) twelve because they divided that Well in which there are four corners. Thus its counterpart which pertaineth to it, which is named 'L', is seen to be the middle half of the alphabet. When they were 'H' the mysteries

expressed themselves defectively but encouraged themselves saying, 'If we separate ourselves and place ourselves at a distance one from the other the building will not hold together. (But) if we approach one another and merge together we shall construct the building soundly and will set it out in orderly fashion. . . . When they had thus regarded themselves, they took hold of one another's hands at those corners and set their course toward Him. And He turned about in His kingliness and caused them to approach Himself, gave His testimony and set them to work on the House'.¹³

Adam Kasia is both macrocosm and microcosm; the cosmos was built in his form and man is constructed in the shape of the cosmos. In another of the Mandaean secret texts, the *Alma Rišaia Rba*, his creation is related as follows: 'And then He (the author of Being) stood at the brink of the Wellspring and the Palm Tree, looked in, and beheld that which was wondrous. Thus was formed Seed within the Wellspring, and thus He planned to create Adam, His First-born Son . . . seed was cast and fell into that Wellspring which is named the Womb. It was three hundred and sixty days within that Well.'¹⁴ When Adam was formed, 'Pure Ether came carrying a letter in his right hand. And he (Adam) took the letter with his right hand and smelt at it and sneezed . . . then a voice came from above, and he sent Mahzian-the-Word, carrying a letter in his hand. And he (the Word) came towards him and gave the letter into his right hand. . . . And he (the Word) instructed him (Adam) about the alphabet.'¹⁵

As macrocosm Adam Kasia seems to be represented diagrammatically in the *Alma Rišaia Rba*:

On the lower part of the trunk, facing the top of the scroll, is written: 'At the Beginning Water, *mambuhia* (founts) of Life. Above them (the waters), three *škintas*, Watchers that are sublime, blessed to the utmost degree. In the beginning I¹⁶ came forth. I went thither; I remained and ruled over them, existing (*mquaimia*) from the Beginning to the End.'¹⁷

In small compartments on the figure (facing the other way) are the following texts and recondite letter combinations.

| | | |
|--|---|-----------------|
| ' <i>Sanaï</i> ' (wondrous, fem.) and incense' | Š | T |
| 'Thy wreath they twine' | P | S |
| 'In the precinct of the <i>manda</i> ' | Ṭ | Y |
| 'Hibil rejoiced' | H | U |
| 'When myrtle' | B | G |
| 'Pleasing' | D | A |
| 'To the Jordan which is' | Q | R |
| 'A bowl from it' | S | ' |
| 'He who gave it to me' | K | L |
| 'When marjoram' | Z | H |
| 'Myrtle in the gardens' | G | D ¹⁸ |



On the head of Adam Kasia are the letters of the alphabet.¹⁹

In another Mandaean secret text, the *Alma Rišaia Zuta*, many of the parts of the body of Adam Kasia are connected with the recitation of liturgical prayers, and from this passage it is possible to reconstruct the structure of Adam as macrocosm and microcosm. The following prayers are said in praise and obeisance to the various organs and limbs named: 'When thou has saidest 'Praised be the First life', thou praisest the four projections (*zavia*) which are in thy head. . . . And when thou recitest 'Ye are set up and raised', thou praisest its heart. And when thou sayest the longer 'Blessed and praised be Life' thou praisest and maketh obeisance to its Bowels, and when thou recitest 'Good is the good for the good', thou praiseth its Liver. . . . And when thou sayest 'Loosing sins'. . . . Thou makest bow and submission to the Spleen. . . .

Then thou praisest the unique sphere (*girgla*) which they call the Liver, . . . And when thou takest up the *pihta* and *mambuha* . . . thou makest bow, obeisance and worship to the Stomach and the seven lobes (or 'leaves') which are in it, then to the seven other cleansing organs. . . . And as thou eatest thy *pihta* thou subdueth thy gall from rage. And when thou drinkest thy *mambuha* . . . thou hast soothed and purified its rage, for he is the Base of the Body ('*ṣṭun*). . . . And when thou drinkest the *halalta* . . . thou givest praise and impartest strength to the Bladder. And when thou takest the second rinsing and recitest 'Life is fulfilled' thou praisest and impartest strength to the partition which is between the faeces and the urine. . . .'²⁰

In Mandaean gnosticism then we can see that the letters of the alphabet are instrumental in forming Primal Man (Adam Kasia) with his various parts and organs, which is the physical model for mankind. In the *Sefer Yeṣirah*²¹ there is a similar doctrine concerning the role of the alphabet in creation and the instrumental power of the letters in relation to the microcosm—the human form: According to the *Sefer Yeṣirah* the 'Foundation of all things' are the twenty-two letters: 'God has formed, weighed, transmuted, composed, and created with these twenty-two letters every living being, and every soul yet uncreated.'²²

These letters are of three types: mothers; doubles; singles. The mothers (𐤆, 𐤂, 𐤌) represent the three types of Hebrew letters—mutes, sibilants, and aspirates, and they symbolize the three basic elements of all existing things. Water (the first letter of which is 𐤂 in Hebrew) is symbolized by 𐤂; fire (of which in Hebrew 𐤆 is the most prominent sound) is symbolized by the sibilant 𐤆; air (the first letter of which in Hebrew is 𐤌) is symbolized by the aspirate 𐤌. Just as the 𐤌 holds the balance between the mute letters and the sibilants, so air is in the natural world intermediate to water which always tends in a downward direction and fire which always ascends. Thus 'three mothers' namely 𐤆, 𐤂, 𐤌 . . . are Air, Water, and Fire: Mute as Water, Hissing as Fire, and Air of a spiritual type, is as the tongue of a balance standing erect between them pointing out the equilibrium which exists.'²³ These three mothers represent in the microcosm, that is in the human form, 'the Head, the Belly, and the Chest—the head from the fire, the belly from water, and the chest from the air that lies between them.'²⁴

The seven double letters (𐤅, 𐤆, 𐤇, 𐤈, 𐤉, 𐤊, 𐤋) typify the 'contraries' in the cosmos, the forces which serve two mutually opposite ends. These letters (which are double because they express two different sounds) were 'formed, designed, created and combined into the stars of the universe, the days of the week, the orifices of perception in man . . . two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and a mouth, through which he perceives by his senses.'²⁵ According to some editions of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* each of the double letters is aligned with an individual orifice:

- (1) He caused and produced. א. predominant in wisdom crowned, combined and formed, the Moon in the Universe, the first day of the week, and the right eye of man.
- (2) ב. predominant in health, crowned, combined and formed Mars in the Universe, the second day of the week, and the right ear in man.
- (3) ג. predominant in fertility, crowned, combined, and formed the Sun in the Universe, the third day of the week, and the right nostril in man.
- (4) ד. predominant in life, crowned, combined, and formed Venus in the Universe, the fourth day of the week, and the left eye of man.
- (5) ה. predominant in power, crowned, combined and formed Mercury in the Universe, the fifth day of the week, and the left ear in man.
- (6) ו. predominant in peace, crowned, combined, and formed Saturn in the Universe, the sixth day of the week, and the left nostril in man.
- (7) ז. predominant in Beauty, crowned, combined, and formed Jupiter in the Universe, the seventh day in the week, and the mouth of man.²⁶

The twelve simple letters (ק, צ, ע, ס, ג, ה, י, י, ח, ז, ו, ה) correspond to man's chief activities (sight, hearing, smell, speech, desire for food, the sexual appetite, movement, anger, mirth, thought, sleep and work).²⁷ In addition these letters are emblematic of the twelve signs of the zodiac in the heavenly sphere, the twelve months, and the twelve chief limbs of the body. According to some versions of the *Sefer Yeşirah* each letter corresponds to particular parts and organs of the body:

- (1) ה —the right foot of man
- (2) ו —the right kidney of man
- (3) ז —the left foot of man
- (4) ח —the right hand of man
- (5) ט —the left kidney of man
- (6) י —the left hand of man
- (7) יא —the gall in man
- (8) יב —the intestines in man
- (9) יג —the stomach of man
- (10) יד —the liver in man
- (11) יו —the gullet in man
- (12) יז —the spleen in man.²⁸

The *Sefer Yeşirah* thus parallels many of the notions found in Mandaean gnosticism. In both traditions the alphabet plays a fundamental role in creation, and despite the obscurity of many texts, it is evident that the letters are instrumental in forming man as a microcosm. The doctrine of *Adam Kasia*—as the universe constructed anthropomorphically—is absent from the

Sefer Yeşirah,²⁹ yet in this work the Hebrew letters are linked with the various parts and organs of man. These striking similarities suggest that the concept of the creative power of the alphabet stems from a common source, and there is no doubt that such a belief was deeply rooted in early rabbinic Judaism. The function of the letters in the construction of the world is found in numerous rabbinic texts. In an ancient fragment of *Midrash Tanhuma*, we read for example that 'the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: 'I request labourers'. The Torah told Him: 'I put at your disposal 22 labourers, namely the 22 letters which are in the Torah. . . .'³⁰ Again in the Talmud (Ber. 55a) it is stated that 'Bezaleel (the architect of the Tabernacle in the desert) knew how to join together the letters by means of which the heavens and earth were created.' No doubt the original Jewish elements in Mandaean cosmology were eventually overlaid with foreign notions, but the fact that Mandaean gnosticism echoes ideas found in the *Sefer Yeşirah* strengthens the claim made by such scholars as K. Rudolph that 'even the earliest form of that which we today call Mandaism was a splintering off from official Judaism . . . a Jewish substratum with foreign elements, be they Iranian, late Babylonian, Syrian or Greek, is to be considered . . . as the root of Mandaean *Nāsōraenism*'.³¹

NOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Mr. Ian Gardner for the help he has given me with this article.
- 2 M. Lidzbarski, *Ginza, der Schatz Oder das grosse Buch der Mandäer*, Gottingen 1925, ix.
- 3 S. Pederson, *Bidrag til an Analyse af de Mandaeske Skrifter, med henblik paa bestemmelsen af Mandaernas forhold til Jødedom og Kristendom*, Aarhus 1940, pp. 222–3.
- 4 W. Brandt, *Die Mandäische Religion*, Leipzig 1889.
- 5 G. Widengren, 'Die Mandäer in B. Spuler (ed.), *Handbuch der Orientalistik VIII, Pt. 2; Religionsgeschichte des Orients in der Zeit der Weltreligionen*, Leiden 1961, p. 89.
- 6 For example: She notes the similarity between the process of creation in *The Sefer Yesirah* and that found in the secret Mandaean texts. (E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1960, p. 17.)
- 7 K. Rudolph, 'Problems of a history of the development of the Mandaean Religion 1, *History of Religion*, Vol. 8, no. 3, February 1969, University of Chicago Press, pp. 228–9.
- 8 G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York, Quadrangle 1974, p. 22.
- 9 A notable exception is G. Quispel, 'Jewish Gnosis and Mandaean Gnosticism' *Nag Hammadi Studies*, VII, Leiden 1975, pp. 82–122.
- 10 G. Scholem argues that 'The Hebrew style (of the *Sefer Yeşirah*) points to an earlier period. . . . Epstein already proved its proximity to the language of the Mishnah, and additions can be made to his linguistic proofs. The book contains no linguistic form which may not be ascribed to second-or-third-century Judaism.' *Kabbalah*, New York, Quadrangle 1974, pp. 26–7.
- 11 In *A Pair of Naşorean Commentaries*, Leiden, E. J. Brill 1963, p. vii, Lady Drower notes that a group of secret texts are shown to none but those entering the priesthood. 'Here and there', she writes, 'in these texts . . . appear the esoteric doctrines imparted only to priests and *Naşuraiia*, that is to say, to instituted

- persons. These doctrines, which reflect theosophic theories held by certain gnostic groups scattered throughout the Middle East as early as the first century, are regarded as highly secret.' These scrolls are: *Alf Trisar Šuialia*; *Alma Rišaia Rba*; *Diwan Malkuta 'laita*; *Alma Rišaia Zuta*; *Zihrun Raza Kasia*.
- 12 In *The Secret Adam* Lady Drower notes that the Mandaeen alphabet consists of 22 different letters, 'but to bring the number to the solar 24, the first letter is repeated at the end and the particle 'd' inserted'. *op. cit.*, p. 18.
 - 13 *Alf Trisar Šuialia*, 181 f. trans. E. S. Drower, Berlin, Institut Für Orientforschung, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften 1960, as quoted by E. S. Drower *The Secret Adam*, pp. 19–20.
 - 14 *Alma Rišaia Rba*, 68–85 as translated by E. S. Drower, *A Pair of Naṣōraean Commentaries*, p. 5.
 - 15 *Alma Rišaia Rba*, 116–129 as translated by E. S. Drower, *A Pair of Naṣōraean Commentaries*, p. 6.
 - 16 Adam Kasia (E. S. Drower suggests the subject might be The Great Life, but this is somewhat doubtful in this context.) See E. S. Drower, *A Pair of Nasorean Commentaries*, p. 9.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 9. This figure is from the scrolls accompanying *A Pair of Nasorean Commentaries*.
 - 19 In early *Ma'asheh Merkabah* literature there are similar references to a primordial man of vast proportions. As Scholem writes in *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), p. 16, these passages 'enumerate the fantastic measurements of parts of the head as well as some of the limbs. They also transmit 'the secret names' of these limbs, all of them unintelligible letter combinations. Different versions of the numbers and the letter combinations have survived and so they cannot be relied upon, and, all in all, their purpose (whether literal or symbolic) is not clear to us'. The most comprehensive account of this primal man is in the *Šhiur Komah* of which the following are the extant texts:
 - (1) מרפנה שלימה f. 30a–33b
 - (2) ס רויאל 1701 f. 37a–38b and with various different readings in מרפנה שלימה f. 34a–40a.
 - (3) MS. Oxford 1791 f. 58–71 ספר אונהייה הקומה in 12 chapters. Fragments are also scattered in the דר עקיבא
 - 20 *Alma Rišaia Zuta*, 19–33; E. S. Drower, *A Pair of Naṣōraean Commentaries*, pp. 56–7.
 - 21 The Hebrew editions of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* are as follows:
 - (1) A version by Saadia, ab. ben David and three others, Mantua 1562 4to.
 - (2) A version with the commentary of Rabbi Abraham F. Dior, Amsterdam 1642, 4to.
 - (3) A version with preface by M. ben J. Chagiz, Amsterdam 1716 16mo.
 - (4) A version Constantinople 1719 8vo.
 - (5) A version Zolkiew 1745 4to.
 - (6) A version by Moses ben Jacob. Zozec 1779. 4to.
 - (7) A version Grodno 1806 4to.
 - (8) A version Dyhernfurth. 1812. 8vo.
 - (9) A version Salonica. 1831. 8vo.
 - (10) A M.S.S. copy dated 1719 in the British Museum.

In addition there are several Latin versions: (1) Gulielmus Postellus, 1552, Paris (2) J. Pistorius, 1587, Basle (3) J. St. Rittangelius, 1642, Amsterdam. See *Sefer Yesirah* translated by W. W. Westcott, Cambridge I.A.M. 1978, pp. 3–4. Westcott's translation is of the Hebrew versions collated with the Latin versions.

22 *Sefer Yesirah*, 2.2, as translated by W. Westcott, *Sefer Yesirah*, p. 9.

23 *Sefer Yesirah*, 2.1, *Ibid.*, p. 9.

24 *Sefer Yesirah*, 3.4, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

25 *Sefer Yesirah*, 4.2–4, *Ibid.*, p. 12.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

27 *Sefer Yesirah*, 5.1, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

29 This doctrine, however, is found in later Kabbalah.

30 E. Urbach in *Kovez al Yad*, 6 (1966).

31 K. Rudolph, *History of Religion*, pp. 228–9.

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