The subject of this chapter is a small ethno-religious community, a single thread running through the rich tapestry of the Gulf region, from which it has roughly been plucked. As elaborated in its sacred texts, the core of this community’s faith is a doctrine known as Nāṣirutā or ‘Nazorenism’, the adherents of which are called ‘Nazorenes’ (nāṣorāyī), who include among their number John the Baptist and his followers in Jerusalem. Within this group of people, these texts further distinguish between a priesthood, tarmidutā, and a laity, mandāyutā. The latter word, which comes from their word for knowledge (mandā), furnishes us with a useful term for the entire complex of beliefs, culture, faith and practices associated with this doctrine, namely ‘Mandaism’. Thus its followers are often called Mandaens, although we could just as easily refer to them as ‘Nazorenes’ or even ‘Gnostics’, using the Greek word for knowledge (gnōsis) in place of an Aramaic one. To their non-Mandaen neighbours, they are most commonly known as Šubba or Sabians, employing a term lifted from the religious vocabulary of the Qur’ān.

Before they were ethnically cleansed, the bulk of their community was to be found in and around the marshy regions at the head of the Gulf, in what is today southern Iraq and south-western Iran. They also spread widely throughout the Gulf system and the Indian Ocean, sometimes even...
becoming ministers and elite officials to Muslim rulers such as Sayyid Said bin Sultan of Zanzibar and Muscat. But they have always maintained that they had emigrated to the Gulf from somewhere else. Stefana Drower, their premier ethnographer throughout the twentieth century, collected oral traditions situating this territory ‘to the west’ of the then current distribution of the Mandæans, in and around a legendary ‘Mountain of the Mandæans’, also known as Jabal Maddā’ī, ‘for Arabs call the Jebel Mandai [sic] the Jebel Maddai [sic]’ (Drower 1937: 316).

Although these oral traditions have not received as much attention as the written sources concerning the origins of the Mandæans, it bears noting that oral traditions can sometimes manifest a surprising antiquity. The Africanist Jan Vansina relates (1985: 17–18) an account collected in 1954 from a caravan guide in southern Libya:

He said that west of the Teda (Libya/Chad) live people who do not know how to make fire. They are called the sun-fire-people. They live around a big well into which the sun sets every night. Then the water gets hot and they can cook their food. Thus they only eat once a day. Confirmation of this was given three weeks later by another guide. I cite this bit of gossip rather than another because it has already been told for the same general area by both Herodotus and Pliny. This bit of gossip then is 2,500 years old, and dispels the notion that gossip must be ephemeral.

Likewise, the first-century CE Greek geographer and historian Strabo noted that Piraeus, the port of Athens, had previously been situated upon an island. A group of French and Greek geologists and archaeologists conducted soundings to extract sediment cores, and demonstrated that the peninsula on which Piraeus is currently located had indeed once been an island – between 6,000 and 4,000 years before the present date, which means that the oral traditions upon which Strabo drew had already persisted for over two thousand years before being recorded (Goiran 2011: 531).

Considerably less time separates Drower from the subjects of the traditions that she has recorded, so we cannot cavalierly disregard the testimony of her informants, at least not without significant proof to the contrary. Furthermore, the oral accounts of their origins are consistent with their literary accounts, including the Great Treasure, their most sacred religious text,
and the *Scroll of the Great Revelation*, also known as the *Scroll of Inner Harrān*, a collection of legends first published by Drower in 1953, which details their settlement in a territory identified as ‘Inner Harrān’ (*Harrān Gāweytā*), during the first century of the Common Era.

According to the latter text, Harrān, also called *Ṭurā d-Maddāyi*, the ‘Mountain of the Maddæans’, is a country beyond the lands of Islam in which Mandæans live free from the domination of other races, comparable in this respect to the medieval European legend of Prester John’s Kingdom. It was to this refuge that the ancestors of the contemporary Mandæan community were led by an Arsacid ruler named Ardawān, and it is from it that Mandæans are occasionally brought forth to re-enter the rest of the world. Drower, her contemporaries Rudolf Macuch and Kurt Rudolph, and her successor Jorunn J. Buckley – which is to say all the scholars who are most familiar with Mandæans and have worked directly with their community, their language and their texts – all accept this legend as an authentic Mandæan representation of their own origins. To what degree should we be prepared to accept the Mandæans’ own accounts of their origins, as opposed to external accounts and those constructed for them by scholars? This question – often implied, but seldom articulated – lies at the heart of all scholarship on the Mandæans over the last hundred years or more.

Much of the debate over Harrān in particular has revolved around whether the term refers to a physical location, and if so, where it might lie. Various sites have been proposed for it, including a mountain (Jabal Ḥawrān in Syria), a city (Ḥarrān in Turkey), a mythological location, and, most recently, a seasonal watercourse (the Wādi Ḥawrān in Iraq). The present study examines potential candidates for this territory, assesses them in the light of existing sources for the geography of the region, both written and oral, and identifies the most plausible among them. It analyses the larger context of Mandæan sacred texts in an attempt to define the boundaries of the Mandæan world, and situates it within these boundaries.

‘Sabian’ and ‘Chaldæan’: Two Problematic Categories

Whether we date Mandæan contact with Europeans to Ricoldo da Monte de Croce’s *Peregrinations* at the end of the thirteenth century (Lupieri 2002: 63–6) or the Portuguese mission in the middle of the fifteenth (Lupieri 2002:
67–9), it is clear they were already well-known as Sabians prior to that time, as both they and their non-Mandæan neighbours consistently represented them as such to Europeans. Indeed, they were apparently the only group so designated at the time of contact. This term is not only the oldest recorded by European scholars, but it has also outlasted all other competing representations from that same period, such as ‘St John Christians’. Its durability can perhaps be attributed to the fact that it circumscribes significant aspects of their public identity, and continues to have personal significance to Mandæans even today. Despite this (or perhaps, perversely, because of its centrality to Mandæan self-representations), scholars have aggressively developed the case that the Mandæans are not who they claim to be, from the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing to the present date. How did this state of affairs come to be?

Although earlier references to Mandæans have survived (van Bladel 2017: 26–36), the earliest substantive and unambiguous account of the history and beliefs of the community we today call Mandæan appears in the final chapter of the Book of the Scholion by the eighth-century Christian scholar Theodore bar Kǒnay. Identifying them explicitly as Mandæans (Syriac Mandāye), he notes that they exist in Bet Arāmāye (that is, central Mesopotamia), and mentions that they were still known in that region as Nazorenes (Syriac Nāsraye) rather than Sabians. As unusual (and uncomplimentary) as his account of their origins is, bar Kǒnay demonstrates a surprising familiarity with their doctrine, even including a brief extract from the Great Treasure (Pognon 1898: 245–55; Kruisheer 1993–4: 163–8). Although he writes shortly after the advent of Islam, he assigns their arrival in central Mesopotamia unambiguously to the pre-Islamic period.

After bar Kǒnay, ‘Mandæans’ and ‘Nazorenes’ virtually disappear from the historical record until their encounters with European missionaries in the sixteenth century, but it is clear that this same group became one of several groups indiscriminately identified as ‘Sabian’ by historians throughout the Muslim world, principally the tenth-century Baghdadi scholars Abu al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī al-Masʿūdi and Abūʾl-Faraj Muḥammad b. Išḥāq al-Nadim, the eleventh-century Andalusian scholar Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. Saʿīd b. Ḥazm, and his near-contemporary from the province of Khwarazm, Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī. From the start,
these scholars attempted to identify Sabians among different groups, including (but not limited to) Babylonians, Chinese, Christians, Egyptians, Greeks, Indians, Jews and Persians. Of particular interest, in connection with the discussion of Mandæan origins, are their attempts to identify the inhabitants of the city of Harran near Şanlıurfa in Turkey as Sabian. The tenth-century Church of the East scholar al-Hasan ibn Bahlul, better known as Bar Bahlul, uniquely identified a group that resembles Mandæans in nearly every particular as authentically Sabian (van Bladel 2017: 47–56), and takes pains to distinguish them from these other Sabians, but it must be acknowledged that most of the subsequent scholarship on Sabians has been concerned with the Sabians of Harran rather than with any of these other groups.

Many of these scholars, but most particularly al-Bīrūnī and b. Ḥazm, emphasise the hybrid nature of Sabians and their religion. In the words of the former (ed. Sachau 1879: 188), they arose from a mixture of the Jews who settled in Babylonia and local Magians, whom he identifies as practising the ‘religion of Nebuchadnezzar’. The latter scholar contrasts (ed. Ibrāhim Nāṣir and ʿAmīrah 1996: 88) his reconstruction of a pure Sabian religion with the mixed religion of the contemporary Sabians of Harran. According to this reconstruction, Sabians originally kept ḥalāl, fasted during the month of Ramaḍān, and prayed five times a day in the direction of the Kaʿbah, precisely in the manner of his own community, but their depictions of the stars and their reverence for them eventually led them into idolatry.

All these scholars deliberately connect these diverse ‘Sabians’ with a group mentioned within the Qurʾān (e.g. 2: 62, 5: 69, 22: 17), where the term makes its first appearance in the literature. These are, in fact, their first principles, namely that the Qurʾānic term ‘Sabian’ refers to a specific and discrete group that must have existed at some point, and that other groups so designated must either be related to this group or not, in a strictly genealogical sense. Both propositions are potentially problematic, because the Qurʾān also situates supernatural beings such as Jānn (e.g. Sūrat al-Jinn 72) and ʿAfārīt (e.g. 27: 38–40) in the very same world as Jews, Christians and Sabians. This is not necessarily a problem for Muslim scholars, who embrace all such references as equally valid and further develop these categories on that principle, but non-Muslim scholars and those who reject the existence of djinnis and ifrits as fictive categories have thus far failed to articulate
why Qur’anic references to Jews, Christians and Sabians should be any less factitious. The proposition that Sabians cannot be a discursive construct but must really have existed as a specific entity, simply because the Qur’ān mentions them, is thus a product of the sort of extreme realism that has always characterised the study of religious texts.

It is, in any case, clear from these descriptions that the reference to this term was contested practically from the moment it first emerges into discourse; our earliest extra-Qur’ānic authority, al-Maṣʿūdī, ascribes four different groups to that category (ed. Ismāʿīl Sāwi 1938: 4, 18, 101, 138–9), and one of the earliest surviving Qur’ānic commentaries, that of his contemporary Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jaʿrār al-Ṭabarī (ed. Shakīr 2001: 252), offers us no fewer than ten different opinions about them, of which three characterise them as a hybrid of two other religions. This emphasis on hybridity reflects the perennialist doctrine, expressed repeatedly in the Qur’ān (e.g. 5: 41–8), that Allāh has revealed His laws at multiple times in the past, but that His followers had subsequently distorted them, producing different religions. Any similarities between them must reflect these revelations, whereas any differences between them (and particularly with the latest and final revelation, which is the standard against which other claims to divine inspiration are measured) must therefore be attributed to human agency.

Non-Muslim scholars do not share these same theological constraints, and are therefore not similarly obliged to distinguish these groups according to their quanta of divine revelation. The twelfth-century Andalusian Jewish theologian Mūsā ibn Maymūn, better known as Maimonides, and the thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox historian Abū’lfaraj ibn al-ʿIbrī, better known as Barhebraeus, both elaborate upon this category, following al-Nadīm (ed. Fouad Al-Sayed 2009: 383) in identifying them as ‘Chaldæans’ (Syr. kaldāye, Arab. kaldāniyūn); none of the other authorities explicitly characterises its subjects as such. This is a term of biblical origin that primarily signifies ‘astrologers’ (cf. Dan. 2: 10; 4: 7; 5: 7, 11), and only secondarily those who spoke various forms of Aramaic (cf. Dan. 1: 4) and were not otherwise distinguished as ‘Syrians’ (Syr. suryāye, Arab. suryāniyūn). When describing the Sabians of Ḥarrān in his Compendious History of the Dynasties (ed. Şāliḥnāi 1890: 265–6), Barhebraeus characterises their ‘profession’ (diʿ wāb) – not in the sense of an occupation but rather in the sense of an
open but transparently false claim – as *di‘wat al-kalduıyin al-qudamā*, ‘the profession of the ancient astrologers’. In this, he agrees with al-Nadīm and the other Muslim sources who identify the Sabians of Ḥarrān as worshippers of the stars and the planets, even though he does not share their perennialism.

Among the Europeans belonging to their early modern period, on the other hand, the term ‘Chaldaean’ had a subtly different meaning. In its broadest sense, it referred indiscriminately to different forms of Aramaic and their speakers, and in a narrower sense to Christians adhering to the East Syrian Rite, namely those belonging to the Church of the East (Lupieri 2002: 72, fn. 20). Barhebraeus also occasionally uses this term in its latter, strictly sectarian sense. When he refers to contemporary ‘Chaldaens’ as opposed to ancient ones (e.g. Assemani 1725: 214), he exclusively intends members of that denomination, and never himself or his fellow ‘Syrian’ Christians. In any case, these are clearly not the senses of the word ‘Chaldaen’ that he intends in his discussion of the Sabians of Ḥarrān and their profession, as Ḥarrān is no more located in Chaldaean territory than his own native Malatya is, and the ancient Chaldaens were no more adherents of the Church of the East than he was. Additionally, in their earliest accounts of the Sabians or ‘St John Christians’ of Basra, European missionaries and travellers consistently distinguish ‘Sabians’ from ‘Syrians’, ‘Chaldaens’ and other Christian communities, at least until the mid-seventeenth century (Lupieri 2002: 72–3).

Then, in 1650, the English theologian Edward Pococke first translated Barhebraeus for a European audience, remarking that ‘the one thing clear to us concerning the sect of the Sabians is that their profession is absolutely the same as the profession of the ancient Chaldaens’ (165). Here, we see the beginnings of a semantic shift, from Chaldaens and Sabians as two distinct religious communities, to two synonyms for a single community. Citing Pococke, his Swiss contemporary Johann Heinrich Hottinger expanded the range of the term Sabians (Arabic *al-Sabi‘ūn*, with a șād) to encompass other completely unrelated peoples in other times and other places, such as the ancient Sabaeans of southern Arabia (Arabic *al-Saba‘iyūn*, with a sīn) in his *Historia orientalis* (1658: 165), ascribing any differences in the spelling of the two names to ‘Mohammedan ignorance’. As these scholars expanded the horizons of these terms, they came to develop their own referential and
representational powers, such that by the end of the eighteenth century the Swedish scholar Matthias Norberg could put a factitious Chaldaism on an equal footing with Judaism and Christianity in the history of religions (1780: 4–5), even as he ultimately discounts theories of a Chaldaean origin for the Mandaeans:

But since in these books are teachings about stars, angels and demons, counterfeit histories of Adam, Seth, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, and others, and stories made conspicuous by the appearance of John and Christ, it is doubtful whether we ought to attribute their birth first to a Judaism slightly tinged by Chaldaeans, or to a Chaldaism slightly tinged by Jews. I shall conclude, however, that they came to light at a time when Judaism was drawing its last breaths. For it was during that time that books bearing the names of illustrious men went out among the common people, some Gentile, others Jewish, others Christian, to whose abilities this religion’s claim to deceive rational beings seems to owe its origin. Insofar as is consistent with what is described in these books, I can perceive that the Sabians ought not to be considered Chaldaeans, since they do not worship the sun, the moon, and the stars, nor Jews, since they do not await the Messiah, nor Christians, since they claim that Christ is a false messiah; but their religion is bundled up with the teaching and the rites of these peoples.

By this point, the Chaldaeans had acquired a national identity very much in the contemporary romantic vein, with all the trappings of European nationhood, including a national language (Chaldaic), a national religion (Chaldaism) and a national homeland (Chaldaea). This passage is significant on many levels, not merely because it bears witness to the emerging synthesis of classical Islamic ontologies with those of Romantic nationalism, but also because a footnote to this very passage identifies the Mandaeans as latter-day Gnostics, and their books with those the fourth-century Christian heresiologist Epiphanius attributed to the Gnostics, for the very first time. As the first European scholar to engage with Mandæan texts, Norberg was the starting point from which all subsequent scholarship throughout the nineteenth century departed. It was therefore he who introduced this powerful new frame of reference, that of ‘the world’s only surviving Gnostic religion’. In time, this frame also developed its own referential and representational powers,
and it continues to be the frame within which Mandæans are most popularly known and understood today.

Thirty-five years later, Norberg published the first translation of any Mandæan scripture, an edition of the Great Treasure under the name Codex Nasaraeus. Significantly, this text explicitly repudiates the worship of the stars and the planets, once again emphatically disassociating the Mandæans from these other groups categorised as Sabian and Chaldæan, who are defined primarily and indeed rather exclusively by their worship of these entities. Confronted with these new data, scholars nonetheless failed to re-examine these categories, and continued to deploy them uncritically, as this passage from the German theologian Johann Georg Sommer (1846: 310–11) demonstrates some decades later:

Among the Zabians or Sabians, also well-known as Sabaeans – among whom we intend the adherents of the Chaldæan religion, namely star-worshippers (for which reason they are called Chaldæans, and also Harrâniâns, with respect to their chief sanctuary in Harrân) diffused widely from Babylon, even as far as the ancient Arabs – we find interesting parallels with the observances of the Hebrews.

This is none other than the typology that Hottinger had already proposed two centuries earlier in his Historia orientalis, namely the wholesale identification of the Qur’anic Sabians with Sabians of Ḥarrân, the Sabians of the marshes of southern Iraq, the Arabian Sabaeans, and all four with the star-worshipping Chaldæans – even though Norberg had already demonstrated that the sole surviving group of Sabians emphatically rejects the worship of the stars, and in any case such an identification would have been complete anathema to the Muslim scholars who had originally introduced this category. In their accounts, such worship was a wholly incidental and often external influence upon the original Sabian religion, rather than its essential and defining feature, as non-Muslim scholars have so often construed it.

This process, by which the category ‘Sabians’ expanded to delimit more and more groups, including those against which it had formerly been contrasted, was first documented by the Russian Orientalist Daniil Avraamovich Khvol’son. He was the first to address ‘Sabians’ as a discursive construct, which is to say a product of the very scholarship that sought to explain
it, anticipating the work of Edward Said 122 years later. Even though he uncritically embraces his predecessors’ ontological realism, he is nevertheless surprisingly prescient in acknowledging the representational powers of scholarship. In discussing the relationship between the Mandæans and other groups called Sabian, he concludes (1856: 310):

We have seen that originally only the Mandæans and their religion were known as Sabians and Sabism, but other Sabians, who differed quite distinctly from those Sabians in locality, history, and religion, have come to the fore since Caliph al-Maʾmūn; furthermore, that Muslims, knowing well that these Harrânian Sabians were pagans, increasingly called other pagan peoples, whose cults they believed to be related to that of the Harrânians, Sabians as well; and furthermore, they gradually ceased to distinguish one pagan from another, and came to consider paganism chiefly as the worship of the stars, and therefore considered all the pagan nations of the ancient world, and those of their time, as Sabians, and their religion as Sabism, so that Sabian and pagan, Sabism and paganism, became identical concepts.

Khvol’son has rightly been criticised (e.g. de Blois 2001) for too readily identifying Mandæans as ‘the original Sabians’, on the grounds that the sources cannot be reconciled in such a way as to reflect the Mandæans, or for that matter any other community. Furthermore, once Khvol’son had introduced the concept of ‘the original Sabians’ into the scholarly discourse, his critics felt obliged to introduce their own candidates, including (but not limited to) Harrânians, Elkesaites, Nisibenes, ‘Gnostics in general’, and more recently ‘non-monotheists, but in a theologically neutral way’ (Gutas 1988: 44), despite never having established with any certainty what the Qurʾān really intends by it (Greene 1992: 104–19). This ‘uncritical reading of medieval sources, sources that themselves reflect a mythical conception of the Sabians’ is what Sarah Stroumsa (2011: 90) calls ‘the modern Sabian myth’.

Following the whole span of this debate, it is hard not to conclude that this term ‘Sabian’ is anything other than a blanket category, much like ‘Oriental’, initially imposed by Muslim scholars upon the complex religious situation in Mesopotamia that they had inherited through its conquest, in order to understand the multiple faiths of their new subjects and situate them within the framework of their own theology. This same blanket was
subsequently appropriated by non-Muslims for similar purposes, to designate different parties in different places and at different times. The question we should be asking ourselves is what work this blanket continues to do for us now; it has obvious potential to elucidate how we scholars of these religions have viewed our subjects across an extremely long period of time, but it also undeniably obscures their own beliefs and conflates their separate histories in a fundamentally anachronistic and intellectually dishonest way.

Today, Chaldæism has completely vanished from discourse, even though scholars from Edward Pococke to Adolf von Harnack have accepted its reality as a matter of faith, referencing it and elaborating upon it through their scholarship. This is not unexpected, considering that socially constructed categories such as Chaldæans and Sabians can be surprisingly evanescent and require constant attention on the part of their communities to maintain. In the absence of this effort, the impressive edifice of scholarship on Chaldæism has now completely collapsed, and ownership of the discursive construct ‘Chaldæan’ has reverted to the one community still engaged in maintaining it, the Chaldean Catholic Church, descendants of those pre-1650 Chaldæans who entered into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church but continue to follow the East Syrian Rite.

The same has obviously not happened to the discursive construct ‘Sabian’ and the communities still engaged in maintaining it. Its continued relevance as a subject of discourse is ensured by their appearance in the sacred literature of Islam and by the living example of the Mandaens, even though the scholarly debate over their meaning in the former has brought the continued existence of the latter into question in a very real way. Unlike Chaldæism, however, many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike still maintain that Sabism was once a specific religion, one whose tenets and history can be discerned through careful analysis – not of the texts of the Mandaens themselves, which are generally disregarded as self-interested, but rather those of Islamic and Christian heresiologists, even though these are by no means disinterested accounts.

Despite a growing recognition that any attempt to recover the Sabians as ‘a single people with a single religion’ would be pointless and futile, Stroumsa’s ‘modern Sabian myth’ obviously still has legs. As a consequence of this myth, Mandaens – who obviously exist in the real world, follow a real
religion and are today the only real community that still identifies as Sabians – find themselves accused of not really being authentically ‘Sabian’ – which is to say, members of a socially constructed category not unlike ‘Oriental’, the parameters of which have never been fully defined, and which has demonstrably referred to different groups at different times. At the very least, they find themselves accused of not being authentically ‘Sabian’ in the ways that matter to those who are even today still engaged in the work of elaborating what ‘Sabian’ signifies. That is, Mandaeans are not doing their fair share of the discursive work that these scholars expect ‘Sabian’ to do for them.

This scholarly hand-wringing over whether Mandaeans are the original Sabians or merely another group of the same name brings to mind the old quip that ‘the Homeric Poems were not written by Homer, but by another man of the same name’. The legendary poet is celebrated as the father of Greek literature, even though the origins of the name ‘Greek’, and the process by which it came to be attached to the citizens of the Hellenic Republic, are every bit as convoluted as those of ‘Sabian’. Despite this complicated history, or perhaps because of it, most of us are content to acknowledge the useful work that the term ‘Greek’ does for us when identifying figures like Homer, Herodotus and Alexander. Only the most contrarian of scholars object when contemporary Greeks recognise them retrospectively as their own, despite the obviously anachronistic nature of this recognition, which collapses three millennia into a single chronotope of ‘Greek’ history. As Stephan Palmié notes (2013: 35, fn. 3), ‘human social interaction could not be apprehended as “continuous” in the complete absence of such retrospective mechanisms’. It is precisely this continuity that scholars seek to deny to Mandaeans.

Under scrutiny, the socially constructed and ahistorical nature of these representations quickly becomes apparent. For example, until their War of Independence inaugurated an entirely new discourse about them in 1821, our prospective Greeks did not delimit themselves in the manner now familiar to us. Instead, they were subsumed under a different identity, one reflected by the now obsolete autonyms Romaíiki for their language and Romaíoi for themselves, and by prior retrospective recognitions of figures like ‘Alexander the Roman’. Absolutely no one, to my knowledge, argues that they had claimed this ‘Roman’ identity for the purpose of self-legitimation; yet when it comes to the most recent summation of the status quaeestionis sabiorum,
van Bladel (2017: 5) professes that the original ‘Sabians’ were a single people with a single religion, even if Muslims had ‘obscured or forgotten’ their identity ‘within a short time after Muḥammad’s death’, and that Mandaeans have since taken advantage of their ignorance by appropriating that identity. Obviously, a spectre is haunting scholarship – the spectre of Hottinger. The only explanation for this highly uncharitable account of ‘Mohammedan ignorance’ and Mandæan cunning is simply that the very real Mandæans have not had the courtesy to fit within the neat lines that we have drawn for the very fictive Sabians over the centuries.

**Mandæan Accounts of their Own Origins**

The attentive reader will no doubt have already noted the absence of an important voice from the preceding account of thirteen centuries of scholarship on Mandæans – that of the Mandæans themselves. Edmondo Lupieri has documented how Roman Catholic missionaries at first enthusiastically embraced Mandæan traditions about their origins from the middle of the sixteenth century, but by 1622 these missionaries had become increasingly sceptical of their claims (2002: 89). Mandæans preserve their doctrines and beliefs in an extensive collection of manuscripts, but extremely few non-Mandæans have ever acquired even a modest fluency in their language, and even fewer of these manuscripts have circulated outside of their community. After Norberg published his Latin translation of the *Great Treasure* in 1815, scholars finally had access to Mandæan accounts of their own origins. By that time, however, what Palmié (2013, 7) calls the ‘ethnographic interface’ between what scholars wanted to discover and what Mandæans wanted them to find had already been thoroughly inscribed, and the challenge of inscribing these ‘new’ texts and all that they entail into this interface remains with us even today.

The following represents a modest attempt. The very first chapter of the *Great Treasure*, which again was the only Mandæan text available in translation for much of the nineteenth century, concerns historical and cosmological matters. As this chapter draws to its conclusion (Norberg 1815: 100–3; Lidzbarski 1925: 30), we find a short account situated in Jerusalem, in which a supernatural figure appears during the time of Pontius Pilate, performs miracles such as healing the sick and raising the dead, and converts Jews to
'the name of the Lofty King of Light'. Jerusalem is destroyed, and the Jews go into exile, but this same supernatural figure lifts 360 prophets up from Jerusalem and sets them down at a place called ‘the diverter, Truth’, Məšonni Koštā. The chapter then ends with the arrival of Muhammad.

While Mesopotamia has not thus far appeared anywhere in this chapter, the name of the final destination of the Jerusalem community, ‘the diverter, Truth’, provides us with a potential connection. The Aramaic word məšonni (‘diverter’) ultimately derives from an Akkadian word mušannitu, ‘diverter; dam’, and is likely related to an Arabic word with the same meaning, al-musannāh (Kaufman 1974: 73). The only other reference to this location comes from a legend related in the Babylonian Talmud, in Tractate Sanhedrin (97a), concerning the death of Rabbi Tabuth’s two sons (Kiperwasser 2014: 296–7). According to this legend, a certain R. Tabuth (or perhaps Tabyomi) once lived in a place called Truth (qušā),

which does not differ [lā məšanne] in its words [that is, no one tells lies], and where no man dies before his time. There, he married a woman, and she bore him two sons. One day, while his wife was bathing, a neighbour came looking for her, and out of his concern for etiquette R. Tabuth told the neighbour that she was not there. His two sons died, and the inhabitants of Truth drove him out of town for inciting death against them.

For ever more, R. Tabyomi (whom Kiperwasser connects with a Babylonian sage of the fifth generation, which is to say the mid-fourth century CE) refused to tell a lie, ‘even if he were given all the empty spaces of the world’.

Given the Mandæan penchant for wordplay, it is probably not coincidental that this defining characteristic of the people of Truth is echoed in the Mandaic place name Məšonni Koštā, as Kiperwasser notes in a personal communication (23/3/2014). In addition to sharing a name, the people of Truth share another quality with the Nazorenes. Twice, the colophons with which Mandæan copyists conclude their scriptures include the following petition: u-zāki ammā d-nāšorāyi d-lā šannon mendi d-Heyyi paqqed (‘May the Nazorene people, who did not change (lā šannon) anything that Life has commanded, win’). If these two legendary places called Truth, in which live people who do not change their words, can be identified with one another, then the ending to the first chapter of the Great Treasure must reflect a legend
about the Nazorenes that has circulated in the region since the mid-fourth century, if not before.

Truth appears once again in the nineteenth-century French scholar Nicolas Siouffi’s *Études sur la religion des Soubbas ou Sabéens*, in an account collected from his informant, a Mandæan convert to Christianity named Adam. He begins his account of their origins (1880: 3) with Truth, describing it as a physical location rather than a spiritual one, and

an immense country, even larger than the one we inhabit, but unknown to us. It is better than our world, which is considered in relation to it as the left hand to its right. The inhabitants of this mysterious world are all Sabians. They are all human like us, but because they always remain pure without a trace of sin, after they die they go directly to *Olmi-Danhouro* [the lightworld], which is their paradise, without passing through any place of punishment.

Drower collected further information about Truth (1937: 55–6) during the course of her own fieldwork in Iraq. According to her informants, it is an exact likeness of this world, located somewhere far to the north, beyond the snow and ice. Everything here is represented by a perfect likeness there, and when people die, their doubles ascend immediately to the lightworld, but their souls assume their doubles’ bodies, and go through a process of purification before eventually ascending to the lightworld, where they are reunited with their doubles.

Just as Khvol’son was writing his *Ssabier und Ssabismus* in Saint Petersburg, the German Orientalist J. Heinrich Petermann collected a legend similar to the one related in the *Great Treasure*, in which a demon saves a portion of a community of Mandæans from religious persecution by lifting up them up into the sky and setting them down in a kind of terrestrial paradise (1861: 100–1). In one version of this same legend (Häberl 2010, 2013), they are taken north, directly to Truth as in the *Great Treasure*’s account, but in Petermann’s version they are taken instead to a country called Beyādhiye, which lies to the west.

This same legendary refuge also appears repeatedly in several Mandæan legends collected by Drower, ‘Concerning the Mountain of Maddai [*sic*] and How the Turks Came to Take It’ and ‘How the Maddai [*sic*] and Their
Ganzibra Left the Mountain of the Maddai [sic] for a Better Country, Farther North’ (1937: 309–25) and in the tale of ‘The Appearance of the White Cat’, which can be found in the newly enlarged edition of her Folk-Tales of Iraq edited by Jorunn Buckley (2007: 443–8). In these tales, it is explicitly identified as the ‘Mountain of Maddai [sic]’ or ‘Jebel Mandai [sic]’, and always situated in the far west. The connection between Petermann’s Beyādhiye and Drower’s Mountain of the Maddæans is not immediately obvious, but Drower (1937: 287) notes that the Mountain of the Maddæans is also known as Harrān Gāweytā, ‘Inner Harrān’. The Arabic Bayādiyah or ‘White (Country)’ would then appear to represent a calque upon the Mandaic name Harrān, assuming a folk etymology from the Mandaic word həwāra ‘white’.

This name is familiar from one of the Great Treasure’s accounts of the flood. In this particular account (Petermann 1867: 380, ln. 11; trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 409), Noah chops down cedars from Harrān and fir trees from Lebanon, paralleling another account (Petermann 1867: 265, ln. 12; trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 263) in which he is commanded to chop down cedars from the land of Lebanon and firs from a third mountain, Ṭurā d-Yatur. Lidzbarski was justly sceptical that the authors of this passage would ever have considered the city of Ḥarrān to be an appropriate source of cedars, and so emends Harrān to the otherwise unattested form *Hāmān, situating it far to the north, in the Amanus mountains. He was perhaps too hasty to emend this text, as the traditions collected by Drower (1937: 258, 259) clearly and unambiguously identify the source of Noah’s wood as Jabal Ḥawrān near the Syrian border with Jordan and Israel, formerly known to the Romans as Auranitis, and today known as the Jabal al-Durūz or Jabal al-ʿArab.

Another clew guiding us to this location is the name of the third mountain, Ṭurā d-Yatur. Lidzbarski emends this to Ṭurā d-Atur, Mt Athur or ‘the mountain(s) of Assyria’. This phrase would likewise be unique within Mandaic literature, and perhaps any other literature from the region. Certainly, neither the ancient city of Aššur nor the territory of the diocese of Mosul, to which the word ’Atur strictly corresponded until the archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth century expanded its reference to encompass the territory imagined by Lidzbarski, was any more mountainous or thickly wooded than the city of Ḥarrān. Yatur likely corresponds to Jathur, the tenth son of Ishmael and therefore one of the twelve tribes of Hagarites which
settled somewhere in the vicinity of the Israelite tribes of Manasseh, Gad and Reuben, in the mountainous region known as Iturea, \(^3\) again in close proximity to Lebanon.

In short, there is no compelling reason to emend either Harrān or Yatur, as there are very plausible candidates for both in the vicinity of Lebanon. If the evidence for Harrān in the *Great Treasure* therefore seems reasonably secure, perhaps it is worth revisiting the location of Inner Harrān.

### Towards a Mandæan Geography

Knowing how ancient peoples like the Mandæans perceived and regarded the spaces they occupied is as critical to understanding their texts as simply identifying these spaces, and in some respects even more critical. In the exhibit ‘Reconstructing Ancient Geography’, at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University, banner 11 reads:

Geography is central to the investigation of ancient cultures. Humans are spatial creatures, and their activities and interactions in antiquity were embedded in spatial contexts ranging from the physical layout of the smallest private home to the grandest public spaces of the city-state or imperial capital, and beyond. Consequently, we can better understand the thoughts and actions of ancient people if we can identify the places and spaces they occupied, and explore the challenges and successes they encountered there, traveling, living, and at times exploiting resources.\(^4\)

Thus, ancient ‘geographies’ are as conceptual as they are physical, which is to say that they are informed as much by abstract concepts (such as social, ethnic, political and cultural boundaries, the limits of the known world) as they are by physical locations (including features like rivers, mountains and settlements). While these particular scriptures contain no charts (or indeed illustrations of any sort), we can derive a sense of the parameters of the Mandæan *mappa mundi* from the place names embedded within them. By contrast, if we fail to ascertain (or even attempt to ascertain) how Mandæans perceived the world around them, we cannot read their texts as they would have, but rather anachronistically impose our own perceptions of the geography of the region upon their texts.

The fact that the Mandæan scriptures refer to the geography of the ‘Holy
Land’ of the Hebrew Bible is particularly significant, because it speaks to these same perceptions. To give one example, at the beginning of Chapter 18 of the Mandæan Book of John, which is the first of several chapters dedicated to John the Baptist, the text introduces us to the full sweep of this geography with the verses

Upon the Eulæus, a silence descended; a silence descended upon Jerusalem.

The parallel of Ulāy, likely to be identified with the river Karûn in Iran, and Urašlam, Jerusalem, suggests a merism, a popular literary device in ancient Near Eastern poetry (and as much at home in the Mandæan scriptures as in the Hebrew Bible). Thus, in my reading, the stupefaction of the entire world on the eve of the prophet’s birth is conjured by the listing of these two geographic locations, conspicuous in both their assonance and their location at the opposite ends of the Mandæan world. The Book of Daniel (8: 2, 16) similarly invokes this same river as the setting of one of Daniel’s own apocalyptic visions.

The Book of John contains both mythical and legendary content (Figure 4.1 overleaf). The former unfolds in the worlds of light and darkness, and strictly involves supernatural beings, whereas the latter is consistently and unambiguously situated within the material world, and involves humans and animals as well as supernatural beings. Among the physical locations mentioned within the Book of John are four bodies of water, the Jordan or Yardnā (x 61), the Euphrates or Pəraš (x 12), the Eulæus or Ulāy (x 1) and the Yamnā Rabbā d-Sup (x 10), a single body of water historically known as the Erythraean Sea, which from our vantage point comprises three separate bodies of water, namely the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Gulf. Additionally, the Book of John includes two cities, Jerusalem or Urašlam (x 87) and Babylon or Bābel (x 1); a mountain, Mt Carmel or Ţurā Źur Karemłā (x 3); and two peoples, the Jews or Yahu†āyi (x 22) and the Arabs or Arbāyi (x 2). As can easily be seen, the overwhelmingly largest number of these references relate to ‘western’ people and places.

The Great Treasure contains a much larger number of people and place names, including rivers, adding the Tigris or Deglāt (x 3); mountains, adding Mt Sinai or Ţurā d-Sināy (x 1), Mt Judi or Ţurā d-Qardun (x 2) and Mt
Figure 4.1  A map of the principal locations to be met with within the Mandæan literature. © 2017 Ch. G. Häberl.
Lebanon or Lebnān (x 2); cities, adding Bethlehem or Bet Lahmi (x 1) and Borsippa or Borşep (x1); and entire regions such as Judaea or Yahud (x 3). Some of the landmarks of the city of Jerusalem are included as well, such as the Temple (Bet Mɔqaddəši, x 2) and possibly Mt Moriah (Ṭurā d-Mārā, x 1 cf. S 2 Chron. 3: 1). Other regions are referenced through gentilics, such as Indians (hendōwāyi), and perhaps even ekuri ‘demons’, literally denizens of the ē.kur or temple of Nippur, although the last noun, much like ‘Chaldaëans’, had likely come to refer to a class of beings independent of geography rather than the inhabitants of a particular place.

Just as in the Book of John, the Jordan (x 185), Jerusalem (x 44) and the Jews (x 44) constitute the overwhelming number of references to people and places in the Great Treasure, which is to say that these two texts are as familiar with ‘western’ peoples and places as they are seemingly unfamiliar or unconcerned with other parts of the ancient world. There is absolutely no reason to assume that any of these places are anything other than what they appear to be, and certainly not deliberately cryptic names or ciphers. While the ‘western’ focus of these texts does not in itself constitute proof of ‘western’ origins, it certainly cannot be said that the Mandæans’ own texts situate their origins anywhere else, and logically it is therefore to the west that we must first look in any discussion of these origins, at least insofar as such discussions are based on their own accounts and not those of others, as McGrath (2013: 373) notes in his discussion of Jerusalem in these accounts. This probably goes without saying, but if we choose to discard these accounts in our attempts to construct a narrative about Mandæan origins, then the only limits are those provided by our imagination.

**Situating the Mandæans and Harrān**

Over the course of the twentieth century, seven scholars situated the Mandæan Harrān in three different physical locations and one imaginary location. In his edition of the Great Treasure, Mark Lidzbarski (1925: vi) proposed the region around Jabal Ḥawrān, despite having emended the sole instance of Harrān in this same text to Hāmān. Stefāna Drower (1937: xvi) and J. B. Segal (1956: 375) both proposed the city of Ḥarrān on the Turkish border with Syria, south-east of Şanlıurfa, although they felt that the ‘Mountain of the Maddāyi’ with which it is frequently identified lay not to the west, as the
texts and the traditions suggest, but rather to the east in Iran. Jorunn Buckley has recently (2010: 293) proposed the Wādi Ḥawrān, the principal effluent of the Euphrates in the Syrian desert, reviving the thesis of the nineteenth-century American orientalist Samuel Fales Dunlap (1861: 13), who first suggested this same wādi as the means by which the Mandaeans attained the Gulf. Against all these other scholars, Macuch (1954: 360) claims that the references to Harrān in their sacred texts are purely mythical, a rather original claim that van Bladel (2017, 82) has recently revived.

So, which, if any, of these corresponds to the Mandæan Harrān? What clues run through the Mandæan traditions to guide us to this place? We can rule out the city of Ḥarrān on several grounds:

- The Harrān of the Great Treasure is described as being in the vicinity of Lebanon and Ituræa, and as the source of cedars, details which match Jabal Ḥawrān but not the city of Ḥarrān.
- In the Scroll of the Great Revelation, Harrān Gāweytā is specifically called the ‘Mountain of the Maddāyi’, but the city of Harrān is located in the centre of a level plain, rather than in mountain country.
- The city of Harrān was once served by two seasonally spring-fed brooks, the Jullāb (Cüllab) and the Daysān (Deysan), but proper rivers, so prominent in the liturgy and literature of the sect, are absolutely nowhere to be found within a 120 km radius.
- Finally, as shown above, the Mandæan sources demonstrate considerable familiarity with the territory around Palestine and Babylonia, but are completely mute about the territory around the city of Harrān.

At this point, one might reasonably ask why anyone might identify Harrān, apparently from the geminate root √ḥ-r-r ‘to be arid’ after the lenition of the pharyngeal, with Hawrān, presumably from the hollow root √ḥ-w-r ‘to be white’. A cognate of the latter form does indeed appear in the Mandæc liturgies, in the form Hawrān u-Hawrārān, a lightworld location; Jabal Hawrān, here in the material world, is otherwise represented by the form Harrān, as we have seen above. The identification of these two is made possible by the complete collapse of the paradigms of geminate and hollow verbs, already in the classical texts, and the Mandæan tradition that identifies Harrān with
al-Bayādiyah ‘the white country’ requires us to privilege a derivation from √ḥ-ṣ-r, particularly since √ḥ-r-ṛ has left no other traces within the classical texts.

Lest we jump to the assumption that the collapse of these two roots is an indication of the relatively recent vintage of these Mandæan traditions, evidence suggests that these two names are likewise equated in the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Genesis (28: 10), Jacob, son of Isaac, travels from Beersheba towards a place called Ḫārān in Hebrew, when he has a vision in which he is granted all the land that would later bear his name. Beersheba is repeatedly identified as the southern extent of the land of Israel (e.g. Jud. 20: 1; 2 Sam. 17: 11; 2 Chron. 30: 5), but in the Book of Ezekiel (47: 16–18) it is not Ḫārān but rather Ḥawwān that is identified as its northernmost extent. In the following chapter (Gen. 29: 1), Jacob encounters the nomadic Qedemites or the ‘children of the east’, who tell him (29: 4) that they are from Ḫārān. Why exactly would these eastern nomads tell Jacob that they have come from a city far to the north? The most famous of the ‘children of the east’ is, of course, Job, who, we are told (Job 1: 1–3), resides in the land of Uz, to the east of the river Jordan, and pointedly not anywhere near the city of Ḫarrān. All this points towards identifying the Ḫārān of Genesis with the Ḥawwān of Ezekiel, and it seems that the Mandæan scriptures are merely agreeing with the Hebrew ones in this regard.

The ensemble of this physical and textual evidence suggests not only that the city of Ḫarrān is a poor candidate for the Mandæan Harrān, but also that it and its environs were completely alien and unknown to their own conception of the world that surrounded them. Leaving aside Macuch’s intriguing but ultimately unsubstantiated hypothesis, namely that it was not a physical location, as it is otherwise consistently described in the Mandæan texts and the biblical ones with which they are clearly engaged, the exclusion of the city of Ḫarrān leaves the Jabal Ḥawwān as the only plausible candidate for the Harrān of the Great Treasure. Given the facts listed above, the former would be the obvious candidate for ‘Inner Harrān’ as well, if it were not for the fact that it was never under Parthian rule and therefore no Parthian ruler could possibly have provided a refuge to the Mandæans there (Buckley 2010: 297).

The problem of resolving the two different Ḫarrāns would seem to be intractable, until we consider that the term ‘Inner Harrān’ implies the
existence of an ‘Outer Harrān’ as well. Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft informs us that the term ‘Auranitis’ (s.v.) did possibly refer to two separate regions in antiquity: a Palestinian Auranitis and a Mesopotamian Auranitis, which appears in some manuscripts of the Geography of Claudius Ptolemy as a variant form of ‘Auchanitis’ (s.v.). Was this indeed its original name, confused by subsequent copyists with the similar-sounding Auranitis, or is Auranitis the form to be preferred? The Realencyclopädie is non-committal.

Ptolemy situates his Auranitis or Auchanitis along the west bank of the Euphrates, and lists four towns within it. Travelling down the river, they are Idikara, which Pauly-Wissowa inform us is another name for Is (the modern Hit), Duraba, Thakkona and Thelbenkane. Apart from Hit, which is located immediately south of where the Wādī Ḫawrān joins the Euphrates, none of these towns has been satisfactorily identified. Other towns in their vicinity along the east bank have, however; Neharde’a, one of the earliest centres of Babylonian Judaism; Seleucia, the Seleucid capital; the ancient site of Sippar, today Tell Abu Habbah; and finally Babylon and Borsippa, which are the two Mesopotamian cities mentioned in the Great Treasure.

Relative to these other sites, Ptolemy’s Duraba, Thakkona and Thelbenkane were located along the Euphrates in precisely the region defined to the north and east by that river, to the south by the Arabian desert, and to the west by the Wādī Ḫawrān, which slopes from the summit of Jabal Lahā, close to where the present borders of Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia converge, to the Euphrates, for a distance of about 300 miles. In his Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys, the Swiss explorer Jean Louis Burckhardt (1830: 217) describes this part of the desert as

the ‘low-grounds’, so called in the Desert, between Tedmor [Tadmûr, also known as Palmyra] and Anah [ʿĀnah, on the Euphrates immediately north of Hit]. Those low grounds, which are denominated ‘wādys’, and of which the Bedouins distinguish eight as the principal in this direction, are the pasturing places of all the great Aeneze tribes in winter time, and extend for a distance of five day’s journies [sic] from west to east. Wady Hauran, which has been mentioned in a preceding account of this Desert, forms a part of those wadys. During the last century [the seventeenth] this ground was the
continual scene of conflict between the Mowaly Arabs, who were then very powerful, but at present inhabit the desert around Aleppo, and the Beni Khaled tribe from Basra. On those grounds both tribes were accustomed to meet in winter, and contend for the right of pasture.

It would appear, therefore, that this region was actually quite heavily travelled in the pre-modern period, from the direction of the Levant as well as Lahsa (al-‘Ahsa’, the traditional territory of the Bani Khalid at the head of the Gulf). If the Palestinian Auranitis never fell within the orbit of the Parthian empire, the same cannot be said of the Mesopotamian Auranitis; indeed, it is a strategically important location between the Parthian capital and the Parthians’ Roman adversaries in Syria, and therefore demanded their attention. Furthermore, the Mesopotamian Auranitis is directly adjacent to sites such as Khoaibir, Kutha, Nippur and Adab, where the incantation bowls, which are the earliest Mandæan artefacts, were discovered, and was also an integral part of the territory of the Lakhmid ‘Kings of the Arabs’, whom the Great Treasure records among the last rulers of the Mandæans prior to the advent of Islam (Petermann 1867: 387, ln. 8–10; trans. Lidzbarski 1925: 414).

It is clear that the name of the wādi preserves the ancient name of the region, and that the textual variant ‘Auranitis’ is therefore to be preferred over ‘Auchanitis’. Is the similarity between the names of the two regions more than a happy coincidence? Anne Blunt (1881: 235–40) described the Syrian desert as ‘a plain of sand-stone grit, or gravel, unbroken by any considerable range of hills, or by any continuous watercourse, if we except the Wady Hauran, which traverses it in the extreme north and in rainy seasons forms a succession of pools from the Harra, east of Jebel Hauran, to the Euphrates’. Her claim was later repeated verbatim in the 1910 Encyclopaedia Britannica (s.v. ‘Arabia’, 257–8). Gertrude Bell (1911: 131–2) was more circumspect about the Wādi Ḥawrān, describing it as ‘one of three valleys that are reputed to stretch across the Syrian desert from the Jebel Hauran to the Euphrates’. Blunt and Bell were merely reporting what they had heard from their local informants, but in reality ‘the great Wadi Hauran and other effluents of the Euphrates . . . rise, not as Arab report had it on the Jebel Druze, but on the Jebel Aneiza and Laha, the most important divide in “Arabia Deserta”’ (C. 1928: 278–80).
What is most important for our purposes is not that the Wādi Ḥawrān
doesn’t actually begin in the Jabal Ḥawrān, but rather that local tradition
places its source there, effectively making the two Auranitides contiguous in the
mental geography of the region, even if they are not contiguous in its physical
day. As I mentioned earlier, the existence of two separate but contigu-
ous territories both named Harrān is suggested by the epithet ‘inner’ (gāweytā),
which presupposes an ‘outer’ (bāreytā) territory, with which it is contiguous,
along the same lines as Mongolia, formerly known as ‘Outer Mongolia’, and
the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China, 内蒙古 Nèi Měnggu. If
the Mandaeans identified the Palestinian Auranitis simply as Harrān, then that
would logically make the Mesopotamian Auranitis Harrān Gāweytā.

One other possible ramification of adopting Ptolemy’s Mesopotamian
Auranitis as the location of Inner Harrān is that the name Ṭurā d-Maddāyi
logically cannot refer to the ‘Median hill-country’ as it has traditionally been
translated by Drower and her followers, including me. In identifying the
Maddāyi with the Medians (Mādāyi) rather than the Mandaeans (Mandāyi),
both Drower (1953: ix) and Segal (1956: 375) cite the research of Henry
Field (1949: 301–28). It should be mentioned in this context that Henry
Field’s conclusions concerning the Mandaeans in the Anthropology of Iraq are
derived exclusively from the now-deprecated science of anthropometrics. The
following passage, from the page cited by Segal, is representative of Field’s
approach:

In stature the Subba were tall, the result of long trunks. The head and
forehead were wide, although the bizygomatic breadth (136.05) was not
usually large. The bigonial breadth (104.66) was exceptionally narrow so
that the face tended to have an ovoid or even triangular appearance. Since
the upper and total facial heights were long, the cephalic index (78.39) is
misleading unless examined in relation to the Keith classificatory system
(p. 308). There appeared to be both dolichocephalic and brachycephalic
elements present.

Field’s approach is an inheritance from nineteenth-century scientific racism,
and most particularly Georges Vacher de Lapouge’s 1899 L’Aryen et son rôle
social. In the social and political climate of the 1930s, his conviction that
Mandaeans were of Iranian and therefore ‘Aryan’ stock easily found its way
into the ethnographic interface, such that even Drower, who was easily the most sympathetic researcher of Mandæan traditions in her time, could compare Mandæan self-representations to contemporary ‘Nordic’ propaganda (1937, 9). Drower had accompanied Field on his tour of southern Iraq, and deemed his research ‘painstakingly thorough’ (1953: ix). In this manner, the Iranian hypothesis of Mandæan origins first entered into the ethnographic interface, where it has been endorsed and elaborated by Geo Widengren (1960: 89–108) and other Iranists.

Field also moots a potential connection with the ‘Hairy Ainu’ of the Japanese island of Hokkaido (310), but ultimately rejects it on these same anthropometric grounds. The grounds on which he attributes the Mandæans to a ‘Iranian Plateau Race’, and therefore Drower and Segal’s identification of Mandæans with the Medians, are equally suspect. Nor can we still seriously entertain the prospect that Mandæans ever represented the city of Ḥarrān as their hometown. Instead, their traditions about the Jabal Mandā’ī or ‘Mandæan Mountain’ refer to the Ṭūrā d-Maddāyi of the Harrān Gāweytā, and both are to be identified with the Harrān of the Great Treasure, which is to say, the region around Jabal Hawrān. In this regard, it is worth noting that the ‘black stony fastness’ to the north-east of the latter is even to this day known as al-lajāh, ‘a refuge – as its Arabic name indicates – at all times to turbulent tribes’, in the words of Philip Hitti (1951: 42).

Conclusions

Whether it be traditional or postmodern, religious or secular, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, outside scholarship has obviously played an oversized role in the representation of the Mandæans. With the exception of the earliest missionary accounts (Lupieri 2002), scholars of the Mandæans have traditionally worked in complete isolation from their subjects, effectively denying them any voice in the way they are represented. Despite Drower and Buckley’s critical interventions, when Mandæan texts directly contradict the convictions of centuries of scholars (such as the ancient but improbable claim that Mandaism derives from the ancient Mesopotamian astral cults), we still tend to summarily disregard these texts rather than embark upon the challenging but intellectually honest labour of returning to our own hypotheses and revising them in light of the evidence.
The contemporary debate among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars over their own representations of Mandæans has had real-world consequences for this community, which has been ethnically cleansed from Iraq due at least partially to this debate, as evidenced by the fact that the fatwas issued against them since 2003 cite the lack of clarity over their status as a protected faith, their putative connections to those astral cults and their supposed Iranian origins. Although these fatwas represent themselves as the products of traditional Islamic scholarship, all of these claims can be directly attributed to repeated European interventions into the literature on the Sabians since the mid-seventeenth century, as mediated by Muslim scholars such as ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī (1931, 1955, 1963).

Looking back on the long span of European scholarship on Mandæism, it is hard not to conclude that it represents a textbook example of ‘How Not to Study Religion’. Although it is now too late to undo the very real damage that has already been done, it is never too late to call for reassessment of our representations of Mandæans, beginning with a more charitable treatment of their own texts. Within these texts, the ‘known world’ consists of a narrow band running from roughly 28° to 34° N and from 33° to 48°E, describing a rough trapezoid with its corners defined by Mt Lebanon, Baghdad, the Karūn River and Mt Sinai. Beyond this band, the world as described grows more abstract, defined by distant peoples rather than specific geographic features such as cities, mountains and rivers. To the north, there were Greeks; to the south, there were Arabs; to the east, there were Persians and Indians; and to the west, there were Egyptians. Within the band, two areas stand out as being described in considerable detail: the regions of Palestine and Babylonia. It is only within these two areas, and particularly in Palestine, that the texts demonstrate any familiarity.

For this reason, it stands to reason that the referents of place names found in the texts should be sought first in these regions before they are subjected to unnecessary emendations and forced to correspond to places much further afield, such as upper Mesopotamia or the Iranian plateau, regions of which the texts and the communities who preserve these texts otherwise reveal no direct knowledge. Furthermore, when these texts and communities plainly situate these places in the material world, there can be absolutely no justification for reading their referents as mythical or cryptic in lieu of a
straightforward and charitable reading of the sources. When we employ such dubious strategies, we do a grave disservice to our scholarship by engendering a justified and healthy scepticism not only among our subjects but also among our scholarly colleagues in other fields.

Finally, oral traditions about this region, and particularly the Mandæans’ own oral traditions, are critical to understanding the context within which these sources have been interpreted — not least that of the community that has sustained them for many centuries. The textual and oral traditions situating Harrān as a place of refuge linking Palestine and Babylonia are corroborated by abundant external evidence from multiple sources: Ptolemy’s Geography, which situates twin Aurantides adjacent to these two regions; the archaeological record, which furnishes us with the earliest material evidence for the Mandæans precisely opposite the Mesopotamian Auranitis, along the east bank of the Euphrates; and other local but non-Mandæan oral traditions, identifying the Wādi Ḥawrān as a conduit between the two. In light of all this evidence, the Mandæans’ own accounts of their origins, as recorded in the Great Treasure and in the Scroll of the Great Revelation, should not be cavalierly disregarded, as they have been by generations of scholars, and other (ultimately unsustainable) attempts to situate their origins in upper Mesopotamia or the Iranian plateau can safely be discounted. Instead, the Mandæans can be seen as a link between the Mediterranean and the world of the Gulf. Although misunderstood by outside sources and variously protected or persecuted, the Mandæans lived and navigated within the cosmopolitan milieu of pre-modern Gulf society.

Notes

1. All non-Latin script languages are transcribed and normalised according to widely accepted standards (sbl for Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, din 31635 for Arabic), with the exception of Mandaic, as its script represents neither consonant length (‘gemination’) nor phonemic contrasts in vowel tenseness (‘length’). Thus haran could represent *hārān, *harrān, *hāran, *hārraŋ, *haran, and *harran, even if only the first three patterns are attested (Macuch 1965: 171–87), and if we recognise -an as the suffix -ān (193–6), then only the first two are feasible. I have normalised these forms according to either the received pronunciation or established comparative linguistic principles. All translations from various Aramaic languages, Arabic, Latin, French and German are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. The syntax of the phrase is characteristic of Mandaic place names (Macuch 1965, 396), e.g. arā Bābel ‘the land, Babylonia’, kobbā Bel ‘the planet, Jupiter’, mātā Urašlām ‘the city, Jerusalem’.

3. The Hebrew equivalent in 1 Chron. 1: 31 and 5: 19 is υστὺρ, hence the Jetur, but the Vulgate has Jathur, reflecting Jerome’s 5th-century Palestinian informants, and likely the Nabataean personal name ṣṭr, which is rendered iatour in Greek transcriptions. Already in the Septuagint (G 1 Chron. 5: 19) the territory of Jathur is identified with the classical Ituræa (🏅iτūr, Syriac ʾitūryā, with an emphatic t), albeit not uncontroversially. The identification of Yatur with Jathur and Ituræa is likewise not without its problems; for example, the Mandaic form has a ṭ, corresponding to the form ṣathur, but the Hebrew and the Syriac have a ṭ (even if S 1 Chron. 1: 31 has nτyτ in place of υστυτ).


5. Lidzbarski (1915: 75, fn. 1) considers the possibility of eulḥ being the river Ulāy, but rejects it in favour of the reading olli ‘his embryo(s)’, which he himself deems to be unsure and even doubtful.

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