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YEZIDI BAPTISM AND REBAPTISM
Resilience, reintegration, and religious adaptation

Tyler Fisher and Nahro Zagros

The Yezidis1 and their distinctive religion rocketed to international attention in August 2014, when international media broadcast real-time coverage of Islamic State’s genocidal siege of Sinjar. Prior to that date, to the wider world beyond the upper reaches of Mesopotamia, the Yezidis were little more than a footnote in histories of the region, an ethnographic curiosity, or a brief encounter in travelers’ tales. Now, they are the subject of specific humanitarian initiatives, photography exhibitions, a symphony, documentaries, and Congressional resolutions. One striking indication of this drastic change in wider recognition is the inclusion of Yezidism in works of reference. For instance, The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, from Abraham to Zoroaster (1984) and the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions (2006), in spite of their claims of comprehensive coverage, make no mention of the Yezidis. In the aftermath of the ethno-sectarian massacres, displacements, and abductions in Sinjar, however, Yezidis figure in Great Events in Religion: An Encyclopedia of Pivotal Events in Religious History (El-Moursi 2016, II.512–14), the title of which reflects the very different status the Yezidis currently occupy in international consideration as targets of the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed caliphate. Yet the creeds and rituals of the Yezidis’ unique religion remain largely inscrutable to outsiders—a religion historically misconstrued and sensationalized as devil worship or dismissed as an impenetrable, unsystematic syncretism of neighboring faiths. This chapter examines one key dimension of Yezidi culture which has not yet received sustained scholarly attention: namely, water baptism (mor kirin), specifically in the waters of Kanîya Spî (the White Spring). This rite and its practice, evolution, and associated lore, we argue, are crucial to understanding the Yezidi religion and the community’s resilience in the face of the recent genocidal campaigns.

The following account of Yezidi baptism is based on personal interviews in the Badinan province of Kurdistan, Iraq, and participant observation at Kanîya Spî itself, in November 2016. In order to gather a wide, representative cross section of Yezidis’ perspectives, experiences, and conceptualizations of their baptismal traditions, the series of interviews intentionally included at least one woman and one man from each of the three Yezidi castes (Mirîd, Pir, and Sheikh). Thirteen interviewees participated in total, ranging in age from 14 to 84 years.2 Before delving into their responses, however, we must first situate the baptismal spring in the context of the Yezidi belief system more broadly.
Kaniya Spi, the White Spring: fountainhead of creation and preservation

“This is my Vatican,” a Yezidi remarked as he accompanied us to Lalish (ShMMi52). The valley of Lalish, the Yezidis’ most sacred site, has three focal points. In the midst of the valley’s cluster of mausoleums, among the distinctively fluted spires, lodging quarters, and natural caves to which the Yezidis ascribe varying commemorative and supernatural significance, the principal acts of devotion center on the tomb of Sheikh Adi, the Spring of Zemzem, and the White Spring. The latter spring, Kaniya Spi, is integral to Yezidi cosmogony and constitutes a centerpiece of their personal devotion and community cohesion. As such, it figures prominently in the qawwali, the traditional songs that preserve the Yezidis’ sacred lore.

In the account of Creation in “Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr,” for one, Lalish is the Yezidis’ Eden, with Kaniya Spi its principal feature: “Lalish lies at the centre / Its hallmark is the White Spring / The sign of earth and heaven” (stanza 20, trans. Kreyenbroek and Jindy 2005, 60). “Qewlê İmanê,” among other hymns in the same vein, specifies that the creation of the White Spring preceded the creation of the earth, sky, and oceans, and designates it the Yezidis’ qibla or orienting point for devotion (ibid., 83–88). “Qewlê Qere Ferqan” describes the waters of the White Spring as a pre-eternal leavening agent for the creation of all material substance (ibid., 96–97; Khalal 2009, 20–21). In the Yezidi cosmogony, then, Kaniya Spi is the primordial source, the Creator’s most elemental ingredient, the physical and symbolic wellspring of the Yezidi Paradise.

Like many peoples of Mesopotamia, the Yezidis have a story of a worldwide flood, in which a singular hero, his family, and representative specimens of animal life survive the deluge in an Ark. According to the Yezidi oral tradition, the pure, primeval waters of the White Spring—so essential to creation and purification—were also preserved in the midst of the floodwaters, which arose, by contrast, from a murky neighboring spring in Shaykh Ɨ (MPi51). As Baba Sheikh described it to us, the Yezidis consider the water of Kaniya Spi to be pure. We believe that when the Flood happened, Kaniya Spi stayed pure and clean. It’s for cleansing, this water. […] The water was pure before, during, and after the Flood. […] There were so many rocks, wood, and debris: the floodwaters were dark, but Kaniya Spi’s water remained white.

A refugee from Khânasor added, “God’s will preserved the purity of Kaniya Spi during the Flood” (KhâMS62). Regarding the supernatural mechanism by which this divine preservation was accomplished, a learned Pir recounted that “when the Flood began, the water of Kaniya Spi became like a whirlwind, standing in the middle of the Flood, and never mixed with the floodwater” (ShMPI64). Other accounts depict the spring rising like a tower or pillar, firmly safeguarded in the midst of the Flood. Clearly, there is a strong dualistic dimension at the heart of the Yezidis’ Flood narrative, which sharply distinguishes pollution and purity, destruction and preservation, foregrounding the motif of the White Spring. Nevertheless, although the symbolic resonances are apparent, the Yezidis’ doctrines, songs, and stories leave the spring’s significance and implications for baptism largely implicit; those who created and transmitted these texts doubtless presumed these aspects to be recognizable and comprehensible to the relevant community. For the implications of Kaniya Spi as an integral source and site of baptism, we turn now to the record of outsiders’ observations and Yezidis’ own explanations.

Baptism in theory and practice

Curiously, from the late 17th century to the early 19th century C.E., the various Latin, Italian, French, and German accounts of the Yezidi religion are utterly silent concerning
the fact that the Yezidi religious customs include water baptism. This omission is even more striking when set alongside the details some of these accounts offer concerning such matters as customary greetings, shamanic rituals, circumcision, and burial rites among the Yezidis, and suggests that the Yezidis themselves might have been deliberately reticent about baptism at that time. Claudius James Rich’s *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan* (1836) was the first to report that the Yezidis practice baptism. This posthumously published journal of the visit that Rich and his wife made to the region in December 1820 observes that the Yezidis “admit both baptism and circumcision.” Although the Riches’ expedition did not include a visit to Lalish, their footnote regarding Yezidi baptism draws on information from an unnamed “Christian priest who has been at [the shrine of] Sheikh Adi”: “There is a spring of water in it [i.e. in Lalish] which is received into a basin, and used by the Yezids [sic] for baptising their children, whom they dip three times, but say no prayers on the occasion” (II.69–70). This brief, secondhand record offers the earliest known account of the Yezidi baptismal rite.

Asahel Grant, a medical missionary who worked in Ottoman Kurdistan, also mentions, in passing, that the Yezidis “practise the right [sic] of baptism” (1841, 31), but, perhaps surprisingly in view of his vocation, he offers no account of the custom. In the same decade, Austen Henry Layard, who was instrumental in securing the Yezidis some measure of legal protection from depredations under Ottoman authority, earned their confidence and was able to add further details concerning their baptismal rite. He observed that “They baptise in water, like the Christians; if possible, within seven days after birth” (1849, I.300). He learned, moreover, that Yezidi baptism bore no connection to the naming of a child at birth but rather that “the rite of baptism [was] reserved for a future day, when the child could be carried to the tomb of Sheikh Adi, and could bear immersion in its sacred waters” (I.274–75). Here, Layard confuses or conflates the two sacred springs within Lalish for he assumes that the Yezidis baptize in the spring called Zemzem, within the shrine of Sheikh Adi, wherein he describes

> a reservoir filled by an abundant spring issuing from the rock […]. The water of the reservoir is regarded with peculiar veneration, and is believed to be derived from the holy well of Zemzem. In it children are baptized, and it is used for other sacred purposes.

*(1849, 282–83)*

In fact, while the Yezidis ascribe medicinal and cleansing properties to the waters of Zemzem, the functions of baptism pertain exclusively to the waters of Kaniya Spi. The White Spring is the Yezidis’ baptismal font, housed within a tripartite baptistery, which stands slightly uphill to the southwest of the Suq al-Ma’rifa and Sheikh ‘Adi’s sanctuary at Lalish. The spring itself wells up in an oblong cistern in the largest of the baptistery’s three chambers and then flows into separate basins or pools in the other two
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chambers, all three having a separate doorway. The tripartite division corresponds to a traditional distinction among three categories of whom or what is to be baptised where: the uppermost chamber is for baptising religious paraphernalia, such as sacred ornaments and the clothing of religious leaders; kanîya kurkah, the subsequent chamber, is for boys; and kanîya kichka, the third and smallest chamber before the spring water exits the baptistery as a free-flowing stream, is for girls (ShMMi52). Unprompted, Baba Sheikh and Baba Chawish corroborated this traditional tripartite organization in their comments on mor kirin.

Mor kirin, the Yezidis’ term, which we have translated as “baptism,” literally and etymologically denotes the action of “stamping” or “sealing” in Kurdish. In the Yezidis’ conceptualization, the rite serves, among other functions, to signal a person’s membership in the community. “Every Yezidi must be baptised, or they are not Yezidis” (ShMPi64). Concomitantly, it assigns his or her status as clean (halal) as opposed to haram. “It’s like you are registering your baby (halal kirîn)” (ShMMi52); “anyone who is not baptised is not halal, because baptism confers purity” (KhâMS62). According to Baba Chawish, if a Yezidi is not baptised, no animal they slaughter or food they serve will be halal or acceptable (although an unbaptised person could still be buried in a Yezidi cemetery). For this reason, Yezidis generally endeavor to take their children for baptism at Kanîya Spî as soon as possible following their birth; however, there is no strict requirement regarding the age at which a person must be baptised. This allows Yezidis who live far away from Lalish to come for baptism when they are able (MâFP69, MâMP51). Alternatively, as Baba Chawish explained, distance can be overcome by transporting water from Kanîya Spî for baptisms abroad:

The water is holy (piroz). Whatever one washes with this water will become holy, too. Any object, whether liquid or solid, will be purified by this water. People coming from foreign lands take both waters with them — that of Kanîya Spî and Zemzem. The law [khanun] is that baptism should happen here [in Lalish]. But some people, to satisfy the parents, do it with water transported elsewhere.9

In summary, “Yezidis are baptised once, but revisiting Kanîya Spî is recommended” (KhâMS62). “Every Yezidi must be baptised once, but it is highly recommended that, afterwards, Yezidis should wash their faces with the holy water every time they visit Lalish, to be renewed (nujan kirîn),” and it is also common practice to drink the water of Kanîya Spî when visiting Lalish (ShMPi64).

Many Yezidis, displaced from their homelands by the Islamic State, now reside as refugees in provinces nearer to Lalish. Some have taken advantage of this proximity in order to be baptised for the first time at an older age. One mirîd, who was 13 when the Islamic State took over her home village in Sinjar, reported, “I was baptised when we ran away, but I was always a Yezidi” (TallBFMi15). Another Sinjari father commented, “Coming here as a refugee, it was a good opportunity to baptise my older son. Families worry about children who have not yet been baptised. Some do it during the baby’s first week” (KhâMS62). One mother reflected on having brought her two girls and two boys to be baptised:

Mor kirîn signifies purification. Without baptising children, you don’t feel comfortable. You don’t think you’ve done your duty as a parent. Because of this strong belief, that’s why you see people coming from around the world to baptize their children here.

(MâFMi31)
Displacement from Sinjar gave another young woman, along with her brother and sister, the opportunity to make doubly sure that they had indeed been properly baptised: “I came here to be baptised when I was a child, according to my mother, but I had no recollection of that, so I wanted to be sure, so I came for rebaptism” (KhâFS19).9

The customary officiant at the White Spring is called a mijêwir (keeper, guardian, custodian), and his or her occupation is known as ber derîye or ser derîye, denoting the officiant’s position just outside the door of the spring.10 This office, appointed by the Mir, pertains only to the Pit Buala lineage and, for the past dozen years or so, has been filled by a woman whom everyone knows as Diye Asmar. (She herself is unwilling or unable to state with certainty the number of years she has held this role.) In Diye Asmar’s own words, she conducts the ritual in the following manner:

Families come here, bringing their unbaptised children, they tell me, ‘Mother, we want to baptise this child.’ The mother or the father, one of them, will bring the child inside, and I will baptise the child. I pour water three times on their heads.

With words and gestures that do not vary according to sex, Diye Asmar performs the baptism by affusion, rapidly scooping water into her hand and letting the water pour down three times on the subject’s head. She then places her wet hand on the subject’s head while pronouncing a blessing upon them. There is no longer a set formula for the blessing. On various occasions, Diye Asmar gave us varied versions: “I put my hand on their head, and I say, ‘I wish you well, may God protect you.’ I say things along these lines.” A moment later she rendered her blessing as “God protect you, give you gifts, make you live a thousand years, make you stay healthy.” In yet another version, her blessing invoked the White Spring itself, as if it were an animate entity: “Kaniya Spî make your wishes come true. Kaniya Spî make you healthy, bring you gifts, preserve you from troubles, exalt you and make you likeable.” We even witnessed Diye Asmar perform baptisms without ostensibly saying any blessing at all. When we inquired about this, she initially protested that she had indeed pronounced a blessing, but later she allowed that she had only said it within herself.

At the close of the baptism, there is often an exchange of gifts, as Diye Asmar gives white headscarves to the newly baptised: “And I say, ‘You are all most welcome. Come back next year with another child!’” They give her money for her services, and parents give gifts to their children. “Everyone claps to show their joy” (MâFMi31). The whole ceremony lasts only about two minutes (MâMP51), but celebrations continue afterward. After tossing candies or chocolates to bystanders (KhâFS19), the child and his or her parents receive congratulations from those in attendance,

and then, when they return home, they will serve food to their family and neighbors. On that occasion, they serve food in their house for their neighbors. They will usually sacrifice an animal and distribute the meat to the neighbors.

(BshMMi52)

Baptism can take place on any day of the week as well as during eids, with as many as 2,000 people being baptised per day, from morning to evening, on major eids of pilgrimage (ShMMi52). Traditionally, those being baptised must wear an article of white clothing. “For young boys, they wear white clothes. For girls, it is a wreath of white flowers around their heads” (MâFMi31). In practice, we observed a wide range in the application of this custom.
Some infants were dressed entirely in white, while others might wear only white socks or a similar token white item.

Thus far, we have seen initiatory, purificatory, and renovative effects attributed to mor kirîn. One additional effect deserves mention. Although the Yezidis maintain a steadfast agnosticism regarding whether or not baptism confers any salvific advantage in relation to the afterlife (post-mortem destiny being, in their view, entirely as God wills, beyond the influence of a ritual), they do consider it to have salutary influences on physical health and length of life, not unlike the terms of Diye Asmar's blessings. One explanation we heard concerning why parents would want to baptise their child as soon as possible is that mor kirîn can avert sickness for the child and even fend against infant mortality.

When a child is born, the first thing parents, especially mothers, think about is to baptise him or her. It is their first concern. Sometimes your neighbours or relatives will ask you whether you have baptised your child. If you say something like, ‘No, he was ill’, they will say, ‘Oh you should have done it first thing. He would get better soon’. They think that a baptised child is more likely to avoid catching illnesses and live longer. The parents are concerned to do the baptism first thing. They think that after baptism the baby will be healthy and live long.

(ShMMi52)

Initiatory, purificatory, renovative, and salutary—these special properties of the Kanîya Spî baptismal water can be extended not only geographically to Yezidis residing at a distance by carrying away the water itself from the White Spring as we have seen, but also via little balls or pellets of dry mud about the size of marbles. The Yezidis call these barat. According to Baba Chawish, barat are prepared by unmarried Yezidis using mud from a cave of Lalish, mixed with water from Kaniya Spî. Moreover, baptism in the waters of Kaniya Spî extends to non-human entities and inanimate material as well. Strangely, akin to the old English tradition of baptising church bells, Yezidi religious paraphernalia must be baptised. This includes the clothing of all religious leaders, even Baba Sheikh’s walking stick; the peacock image of Melek Tawus; the metal ornaments (hlêl) that adorn the summits of Yezidi spires—baptised in Kaniya Spî once every two years; the pari cloths in seven different colors (red, green, white, black, silver, brown, yellow—each representing one of the Yezidis’ seven angels), which also adorn spires and tombs; historical, religious manuscripts in metal containers; nishan, the symbolic metal heirlooms that represent particular family lines; and even prayer beads (ShMMi52, ShMPi64). Ultimately, “anything that comes from Lalish is baptised, even souvenirs” (KhƗMS62). Certain foodstuffs too, especially yoghurt, bread, and grain products, are baptised annually in early spring when sheep and goats tend to produce the most milk. “Yezidi villages take their yoghurt, food, wheat and barley, couscous, and so forth, to be baptised at Kaniya Spî” on days allocated to particular villages (ShMMi52).

For all of these materials, as when baptising humans, the mijêwir officiates, and pours water from Kaniya Spî three times on the object while pronouncing a blessing on it (ShMPi64). The vast number of items to be baptised might seem to present an enormous, unmanageable task for one mijêwir, a woman who is, after all, approaching 70 years of age, but it is not necessary that each particular item must be baptised directly in order to acquire the properties of Kaniya Spî. Significantly, the Yezidis imagine its supernatural properties as communicable and treat them as such. Recalling the qawwali on the Creation, in which the water of Kaniya Spî functions as a leavening agent for created matter, the annual baptism of yoghurt offers a very tangible picture of this concept.
The earth, the universe, was not created until Kaniya Spî water was mixed with it. That is why, in March, we take yoghurt to Kaniya Spî, and from there we make *mast au* (yoghurt water) to bring home and create more yoghurt from it [as a starter culture].

(ShMMi52)

This custom is called *nujan*, literally an annual renewal of each household’s yoghurt and bread. The same can be achieved via adding *barat* to the yoghurt culture, or by adding baptised bread to other foods to communicate Kaniya Spî’s purification and renewal. The water of Kaniya Spî is, in a sense, positively infectious.

The Yezidis have conserved and perpetuated their religion largely via a complex body of customs and oral tradition, rather than in a fixed, canonical text. Variation in ceremonies and doctrine is likely, if not inevitable. The baptismal rite, through innovation and the discarding of certain features, has evolved within the community’s living memory. Yezidis perceive and readily acknowledge a relaxing of formalities in the administration of *mor kirin*. The formulaic blessings of old are forgotten, and baptism is now applied by affusion or aspersion rather than by immersion:

Before, [the *mijêwir*] used to immerse the child three times, but now they think that the children will be frightened by this, so she only sprinkles the water on their faces. They also recite a saying, but unfortunately I cannot remember. People no longer know the formal sayings. To be honest, even Diye Asmar does not know the saying. She only says, ‘May God look after you and give you health and long life.’

(ShMPi64)

Moreover, the clear distinction among the three baptismal chambers at Kaniya Spî is now ignored more often than not. Most human baptisms today take place in the chamber that is theoretically designated for the religious paraphernalia and other inanimate materials, rather than in one of the sex-specific chambers. Reasons for this are apparent. The uppermost chamber at Kaniya Spî is also the most commodious. It more easily accommodates the sheer number of Yezidis who are seeking *mor kirin*.

Sometimes if it is very crowded, they bring the water from [the uppermost chamber at Kaniya Spî], and can baptise people outside.

People used to only visit Lalish very rarely. Only fifty Yezidis might be baptised in a year. There are so many now that it would require staffing each of the three baptismal chambers to allow for the old differentiation by sex (ShMMi52). Yezidis from Ba’shîqa Bâzân have resisted this change. As Diye Asmar explained,

If they are from Ba’shîqa Bâzân, I will open the other doors [to Kaniya Spî]. I will baptise their children there. It’s not like it used to be anymore. Most of them come here. Those who know our tradition, they know where to go.

Other elements that characterized the ritual in former times also seem to be neglected now.
In the past, they used to put some mud on the baptised child’s clothes as a symbol to show that they had just been baptised. Also, they would put a white cloth around his head or shoulders. That piece of cloth was also baptised.

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Yezidis also remarked on other, more superficial changes in their baptismal rite. For instance, those celebrating “used to scatter dried figs or raisins, which they brought specially from their home villages, but now it is candies or chocolates” (ShMMi52).

Spiritual cleansing in the wake of desecration

A far more momentous change in creed and custom emerged in response to the devastation inflicted by the Islamic State. Traditionally, in Yezidism, if a Yezidi chooses to marry a non-Yezidi, he or she would be considered utterly cut off from the community. The same applies to those who are sexually violated; Yezidism regards them as defiled, fit to pertain only to the one who took them by force. “The girls who were in the hands of the Islamic State, had all been baptised before, but they became haram at the hands (ketiye destet wan, captured, in their hands, with a sexual connotation) of non-Yezidis” (ShMMi52). Yezidi women and girls like Farida Khalaf, abducted and enslaved by men of the Islamic State, understood this principle all too well. Farida’s eloquent memoir of her ordeal declares,

one thing was clear to us all: if an ISIS fighter decided to make us his wife, our life was over. We would bring disgrace to our families and be cast out of the community. No Yazidi man would want to marry us afterwards. It must not come to that. We bore a responsibility to ourselves and the honour of our families.

(2017, 66–67)

A legend concerning Hafiz Pasha, the governor of Diyarbakir whose military campaigns of 1837–38 decimated the Yezidi population, sheds light on the mentality that the Islamic State endeavored to exploit.

Hafiz Pasha seized a Yezidi girl from Mount Sinjar. She was called Khazal. When Hafiz Pasha’s soldiers were looking for Yezidis to abduct, they saw her and took her. When her husband returned home and realized she was missing, he asked his children where Khazal was. They told him she had been taken by Hafiz Pasha. He took his sword and went to take his revenge. He found her with Hafiz Pasha and declared that he would kill him and take her back. She answered that she could no longer be a Yezidi, having been forcibly taken, and asked him not to kill the Pasha but to return to take care of the children as well as he could.

The storyteller glossed his recounting of this legend: “Daesh [i.e. the Islamic State] understands our way of thinking and had seen our weaknesses and were trying to destroy us. How might they best achieve their objectives? By making sure that there were no women left.” The Islamic State’s genocidal tactics are not limited to mass killings.

The abductors explicitly exploited the Yezidi belief in loss of belonging through defilement, as a way to persuade their captives against resistance. “The jihadis told the girls, ‘From now on, it’s over. You are no longer Yezidis,'” Baba Sheikh said. He recalled his reasoning
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on the matter: “Even prostitutes can go back to their own families and cultures. If prostitutes can be welcomed back, why can’t we receive our girls? Whoever comes back is welcome.” The Yezidis needed a potent new way to formally represent that welcome—to reincorporate those who escaped or were rescued from the Islamic State.

The solution was a return to the White Spring. Baba Sheikh issued a decree, dated February 6, 2015, as a form of counter-propaganda, declaring men and women who had accepted forced conversions or been physically defiled still to be Yezidis. He proudly emphasizes his role in making this decision:

I realize the revolutionary impact of reintegrating the abducted women. It was my decision alone. The Mir was absent [overseas], and in his absence we had to make a decision. I am authorized to make an official order as the source of spiritual authority [majahdeen, (Arabic for spiritual authority)] for the Yezidis.

The decree was announced in writing and broadcast via television in Kurdish, Arabic, and English. Women who were still held captive at the time of the decree later told Baba Sheikh of their reaction.

The girls reported that they were under extreme pressure, sold from one person to another, under persecution, unsure of their future. And the jihadis said that they would be killed if they left; they would be unwelcome in the Yezidi community. Some of the girls said they were terrified, but when the announcement was made, they told me it gave them hope: ‘We saw you on television talking about it; we were very happy’. I received the girls when they came back, and I remained with them until they left for Germany. I was there [at Kaniya Spî] when they cast water on them. Then we gave them barat. I told them, ‘Welcome back. You are most welcome. You are halal.’ They are not haram. What they did to them, it was not their choice. Islamic State thought they could break the Yezidi community by taking the women. But this decision broke that way of thinking.

In the wake of Baba Sheikh’s decree, those who had escaped or been rescued from the Islamic State, old and young alike, were restored to their socioreligious home by rebaptism. “The first day upon their return, they try to bring them to Lalish,” a witness explained. He went on to detail the exuberant relief with which the girls participated in renewed mor kirin.

They threw a greater amount of water on the girls [than normal], and many of the girls splashed the water over their faces and arms after the baptism. Three times they cast the water. Even after baptism, the girls themselves washed their faces and eyes with the water.

Diye Asmar described how she conducted baptisms en masse for the returning women.

They all came here. I rebaptised all of them. They left money at the door [of Kaniya Spî]. I said, ‘You are all poor people. Take your money with you. You don’t have to pay.’ They all came one by one. Some were accompanied by their mothers, but some came alone. There were many more than a hundred. I did not count. People gathered to watch. They came in a group. Each took one or two minutes, and it was emotional. As I poured water on them, they wept. I wept along with them. Nothing was different about how the baptisms were conducted for the abducted women.
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Diye Asmar’s son, who often assists her at Kaniya Spi, described it this way:

We brought the girls here and they were rebaptised — the same process as with little children. We must remember that these girls were taken by force. So now we rebaptise them Normally baptism is just once, but these were special circumstances.

(MâMPî51)

By one estimate, some 2,600 Yezidis have been rebaptised after escaping from the Islamic State, including men and boys (ShMMi52). “Although their hearts were broken, it was soothing for them, this process, and also as a form of defiance, so many young Yezidi men came back from Germany to marry the rebaptised Yezidis. The families welcomed the idea” (ShMPî64).

In Ba’adrê, we listened to refugees whose families have been shattered by the Islamic State massacres and abductions. Under the care of humanitarian aid agencies, one 14-year-old girl is busying herself there with simple, daily routines just to occupy her mind. Her father was killed by the Islamic State; she and her grandmother and other women of her family were taken captive to Tal Afar. This young girl endured forced conversion, forced labor, and rape at the hands of the Islamic State. One of the other Yezidi girls, held captive in Tal Afar, knew enough about medicine to add Allermine (chlorpheniramine) tablets to the food the girls served to their “owners” to induce sleep. That is how they made their escape. Separately, they fled on foot. Young and old walked all the way from Tal Afar to Mount Sinjar, from which they were airlifted by helicopter to Duhok. One of this girl’s sisters and a cousin remain in captivity in Syria as slaves of the Islamic State. She gave an account of her reunion with her relatives and her visit to Lalish:

I was welcomed back into my family. My family received me with great respect. Although my legs were very sore [from the long walk to safety], I went [to Lalish] on the first day upon arriving, wearing a white headscarf. I was part of a group, with my family as well. I was re-baptised alone, with my aunt accompanying me into Kaniya Spi. We went to the room [of the baptistery]. The woman there, Diye Asmar, threw water into my face — I think it was three times — and it was very nice to be back there. She then said a few blessings. It was amazing. It was very nice (galek khosh bu).

(SiFMî14)

Her grandmother also paid a visit to Lalish for rebaptism, though only after a period of recovery following the arduous trek to Mount Sinjar:

My legs were swollen. I could not make the journey to Lalish for two months after escaping. […] I was halal anyway, but we made ourselves halal again. Until we go to Kaniya Spi, undergo baptism, and drink the water of Kaniya Spi, we are not halal. We go there to make ourselves halal. We drink the water because it is a holy water.

(SiFMî63)

As for how she felt about being rebaptised, her granddaughter added, “I felt that from now on I have full freedom.”

Conclusion after the cataclysm

In relation to the mythology concerning the worldwide Flood, one Sinjari sheikh recalled the following story:
In the town of ’Ayn Sifnī, where Noah built the Ark, there is a tomb of an innocent Yezidi woman who took yoghurt to Noah each day, asking when the Flood would take place. That woman was miraculously preserved during the Flood, although she did not board the Ark. (KhâMS62)

The parallels are clear, and it is not surprising that a conversation about Kaniya Spî and baptism brought the story to the sheikh’s mind. Like the White Spring, this faithful woman and her innocence remained safeguarded in the midst of the darkest cataclysm, and, as a survivor, she was restored to the world that emerged after the Flood. For the Yezidis subjected to atrocities at the hands of the Islamic State, the pre-eternal water of Kaniya Spî holds reassurance of their belonging. The Spring imparts what it represents in myth and ritual: purity, preservation, resilience, renewal. The ingredients and tools for the religious leaders’ vital innovation were already inherent in the traditions concerning the White Spring, already recognized as adaptable in the face of evolving ritual norms, and ready to be formulated into a formidable gesture of resistance. Adaptability is a key component here. In a paradox that is more apparent than real, a certain intrinsic flexibility—an openness to reform within the tradition—may prove to be Yezidism’s greatest force for preservation, maintaining their vibrant way of life in spite of all the factors that threaten their fragile survival as a people.

Baba Chawish’s comments were unequivocal concerning the importance of baptism: “Mor kirin is the most important thing for us. […] It is a holy thing, and it is the first point in Yezidism.” The age-old rite and site of Yezidi baptism has now taken on fresh importance as a decisive means of reasserting the community’s integrity and self-determination.

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Notes

1 Among the various transliterations of the name of this ethno-religious group, Yezidis is the version that now prevails among academic publications, while the United Nations and the mass media, including the BBC, The New York Times, The Guardian, Newsweek, Reuters, and National Geographic, have generally tended to use the alternative Yazidis. One unfortunate, inadvertent consequence of spelling Yezidi in this way is that it reinforces an erroneous association with the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, with implications of a primordial Arab apostasy; the association carries peril in a region where extremists seek justification for genocide. See Asatrian and Arakelova (2014, 46–48) for an instance of this error. Êzidi perhaps most closely approximates what the Yezidis call themselves. The initial /j/ in the Yezidi or Yazidi form of the name is most likely a reflection of the tendency for native speakers of Arabic to insert this phoneme as a substitute for /ê/. For the transliteration of geographical terms, this essay follows Cecil John Edmonds’s meticulous survey of Yezidi places and populations, which he produced for the Royal Asiatic Society (1967, 82–87).

2 Although our informants were willing for us to record their names, we have chosen not to identify them by name here, with the exception of Khirto Haji Ismail, the Yezidis’ religious head (Baba Sheikh); Baba Chawish, the high priest and cantor of Lalish; and Diye Asmar, the baptismal officiant at Kaniya Spî; because they are already, in effect, public figures. As the security situation remains precarious at present, the potential for reprisals is real, and caution is imperative. Thus, we have adopted and adapted Philip Kreyenbroek’s method of encoding Yezidi informants’ identities.
Yezidi Baptism and Rebaptism

by place of origin, sex, caste, and age (2009, 13–14); for example, ShFMi47 represents a 47-year-old woman Mirîd from Shaykhān. See the Appendix for abbreviations of castes and places of origin.

3 Philip Kreyenbroek’s notes on Layard’s description of the springs are enlightening (1995, 88–89). Cecil John Edmonds was among the first to distinguish between Zemzem’s and Kaniya Spî’s separate ritual functions, and noted, moreover, the separate chambers for male and female children within the Kaniya Spî baptistery (1967, 19).

4 See, for example, W. B. Heard (1911, 209); Joseph (1919, 161), who flagrantly plagiarizes Layard; and the discussion in Abbas Al-Azzawi’s “Notes on the Yezidis,” which quotes Nuri Beg, writing in 1912:

the baby is brought to the tomb of Sheikh Adi and taken inside by the Sheikh to the dark vault there and plunged three times into water which they claim to be the water of ‘Zam-Zam’ [sic]. No one enters the vault except the Sheikh, the parents, and the other relatives waiting outside, and no one is allowed to move in its direction. While the Sheikh immerses the baby he addresses it to place trust in ‘Tawus Melek’ and to remain in his faith and tells it that the reward for so doing will be blessing and piety. This is said, or what resembles it, in the Kurdish language in a loud voice so that the people waiting outside can here.

(ABbas 1951, 91)

5 Cf. the introductory remarks of one of our interviewees:

YeZidis are baptized in the water of Kaniya Spî. Water is very significant among ancient peoples, and particularly among the Yezidis. The water of Kaniya Spî was regarded as holy from the beginning to the present. Water is important because it is the source of life for humans, for crops, and for animals. The holiest water is that of Kaniya Spî.

(ShMiMMi52)

6 For instance, Birgül Açikyildiz gives a self-contradictory account of the rite ([2010] 2014, 99–100). John Guest’s otherwise excellent history of the Yezidis devotes as much attention to the “sacred newts” that purportedly live in Kaniya Spî as to the rituals performed there ([1993] 2010, 37, 39); we found no current evidence of newts in the spring. Ezter Spät’s The Yezidis briefly describes the White Spring as a site of baptism (2005, 26, 55–56). Of greater value is Spät’s doctoral thesis for its in-depth discussion of the Yezidi practice of baptising sacred clothing called khirîqe (2009, 119–36). Kreyenbroek laments the paucity of information concerning Yezidi baptism: “Beyond the fact that baptism (mor kirîn) is practised in Yezidism, little precise information appears to be available, probably because the details of individual ceremonies vary.” He offers a brief compilation of earlier descriptions of the rite (1995, 159).


8 Interestingly, Layard noted this allowance in his second expedition among the Yezidis:

When a child is born near enough to the tomb of Sheikh Adi, to be taken there without great inconvenience or danger, it should be baptized as early as possible after birth. The Cawals in their periodical visitations carry a bottle or skin filled with the holy water, to baptize those children who cannot be brought to the shrine

(1853, 93)

and this custom survives today. Kreyenbroek records, however, a perceived waning of importance placed on baptism among Yezidis in the diaspora who cannot readily travel to Northern Iraq (2009, 31).

9 Another woman similarly reported having chosen to be (re)baptized as an adult because she did not fully trust her mother’s memory of the alleged baptism as a child (MÂFMi31).

10 In addition to these terms, Baba Sheikh used dergavan and the Arabic haras to refer to the officiants at Kaniya Spî.

11 While this might be technically true, Baba Sheikh omits to mention the appeals from the wider Yezidi community leading up to his decree, as well as the input of the Council of Spiritual Leaders and the Mir on the formulation of his decision.

12 The implication is that she had not been sexually abused by her captors.
References


Grant, Asahel. 1841. The Nestorians; or, The Lost Tribes. London: John Murray.


Appendix

Abbreviations used for castes and places of origin:

BaBā Ba’shīqa Bāzān
Khā Khānasor
Mā Māmranšān
Mi Mirid
Pi Pir
S Sheikh
Sh Shaykhān
Si Sinjar City
TalA Tal Afar
TalB Tall Banat
TalQ Tall Qašab