

## THE IDENTITY OF THE ŠĀBI'ŪN: AN HISTORICAL QUEST

One of the mysterious and unsolved Qur'anic problems surrounds the identity of the Sabians, *al-šābi'ūn*. As Jane McAuliffe has shown in her study published in an earlier volume of this journal,<sup>1</sup> Muslim exegetes reflect uncertainty on this point from the very start. Over time the term so diversified in meaning that it became even more difficult to determine to whom it referred. Yet one would assume that in the Qur'ān *al-šābi'ūn* denotes a specific historical community. Placed alongside Jews, Christians, and "the Believers" (Muslims) in S. 2:62, one is tempted to regard the Sabians as a fourth monotheistic community. This association is all the more inviting when once again, in S. 5:69, the same four religions are distinguished following an address to the "possessors of scripture" several verses earlier. This sense of parallelism would appear in S. 22:17 to extend to the *Majūs*—who are called into question by the obtrusion into the context of "those who associate" (gods with God). Whatever the solution, these groups constitute a significant internal witness to the religious demography, so to speak, within the Qur'anic universe.

To make sense of the demographic puzzle in which the Sabians figure as the least familiar piece, a fresh methodological "angle" is suggested by the inconclusive data obtained from the study of Muslim commentators. Their indecisive witness is itself a problem which may need to be explained in other ways than simply as resulting from educated speculation. Complementary to McAuliffe's illustrative exegetical survey, the present study employs, therefore, an historical methodology which enables us to place history alongside tradition. A comparison will be drawn between the prominent religious communities Islam encountered during its first two centuries of expansion and the groups identified as *šābi'ūn* by Arabic and Persian authorities, primarily of the tenth century. Moreover, data gleaned from pre-Islamic sources will offer an independent witness, especially crucial for determining who the Qur'anic Sabians originally were.

Waardenburg provides a fairly sequential list of religious communities encountered in the course of conquests outside Arabia during the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.:

- 1) Mazdaeans in Mesopotamia, Iran and Transoxania
- 2) Christians of different persuasions:
  - Nestorians in Mesopotamia and Iran
  - Monophysites in greater Syria, Egypt, and Armenia
  - Orthodox Melkites in greater Syria
  - Orthodox Latins in North Africa
  - Arians in Spain
- 3) Jews in Mesopotamia and Iran, greater Syria, and Egypt

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Šābi'ūn," *MW*, LXXII (1982), 95-106.

- 4) Samaritans in Palestine
- 5) Mandaeans in south Mesopotamia
- 6) Ḥarrānians in north Mesopotamia
- 7) Manichaeans in Mesopotamia and Egypt
- 8) Buddhists and Hindus in Sind
- 9) Followers of tribal religions in east Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Excluded from Waardenburg's list are the Sabaeans of the spice-exporting kingdom of Saba' which flourished in the mountain altitudes in South Arabia, whose rich legendary history finds expression in the "Queen of Sheba" and Solomon narrative of the Qur'ān. They should not be confused with the distinctly different Sabians. The first in fact to be called a *ṣābī'* was the Prophet Muḥammad. In the earliest extant biography of the Prophet he is referred to as "This *ṣābī'* who destroyed the authority of Quraysh,"<sup>3</sup> and the Prophet's followers are referred to as *ṣubāt*.<sup>4</sup> 'Umar b. Waḥb's conversion is described as *ṣaba'a*, in a context which scarcely requires the meaning "baptized."<sup>5</sup> The interesting occurrence in the Qur'ān of the related word *ṣibgha* (S. 2:138) heightens the ambivalence of what has often been rendered as "baptism."<sup>6</sup> *Ṣābī'*, however disputed its etymology, came to serve as one of several designations for "proselyte" (*ḥanīf/ṣābī/muhājir/anṣār*).<sup>7</sup> This initial post-Qur'anic association with the Sabians prompted Ibn al-Nadīm, to whom we will refer later,<sup>8</sup> to speak in his *Kitāb al-Fihrist* of the monotheistic *ḥanīfs* as "the Ibrahimitic Sabians."

The hypothesis we want to test in this article is that the tenth-century identifications of the *ṣābī'ūn* which will be considered here reflect the first wave

<sup>2</sup> J. Waardenburg, "World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam" in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. A. Welch and P. Cachia (Edinburgh: University Press, 1979), p. 248.

<sup>3</sup> J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition in Islamic Salvation History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 102. The exegetical tradition, Wansbrough informs us, glosses *ṣābī'* as "he who separates himself from the religion." Guillaume renders it, "a man who changes his religion"; for the triple occurrence of this word in the *Sīra* see A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 205, 567, 639. Comparable is Waqīdī's usage in *Maghāzi*, 32; see Wansbrough, *Milieu*, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, p. 205.

<sup>5</sup> Wansbrough, *Milieu*, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> R. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), pp. 33-34; Rodwell, *Koran*, p. 352.

<sup>7</sup> Wansbrough, *Milieu*, p. 100.

In his 1972 study on the Ḥarranian Sabians Hjärpe discussed various theories regarding their identity and devoted separate appendices to the etymology of the word *ṣābī'ūn* and the relationship between the terms *ṣābī'* and *ḥanīf*; Jan Hjärpe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur les Sabéens Ḥarraniens* (Uppsala: Skriv Service AB, 1972), esp. pp. 1-34. He summarized the main theses of the classical study of D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*, I-II (St. Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1856; reprint New York-London: Johnson Reprint, 1965), and concluded (p. 21): "Il semble évident que le mot 'sabéen' chez les anciens auteurs arabes signifie 'gnostique' (dans un sens étendu), ainsi que Pedersen l'a proposé. Cette interprétation rend les textes plus compréhensibles et est préférable à la thèse de Chwolsohn selon laquelle 'sabéen' signifie d'abord 'mandéen' et ensuite 'adorateur des astres' et enfin 'païen.'"

<sup>8</sup> See especially note 38.

of Muslim expansion after the Prophet's death, especially the encounter with the groups listed by Waardenburg under numbers 5-9.<sup>9</sup>

*Mandaean in south Mesopotamia.* It should not surprise us that the literary sources available to us are relatively late, since Islamic historiography was essentially the extended memory of oral tradition for around a century and a half. With this in mind we should face with greater openness the value as well as the limitations of the often-contradictory tradition and be careful not to assume that disparate data are necessarily meaningless. In the case of the Sabians, an interpretation which accounts for diverse identifications would show the validity of data which otherwise would simply be dismissed as contradictory and therefore wrong.

From the end of the tenth century dates an important reference to the Sabians, from no one less than al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), who writes that the name applies to

the remnants of the captive Jews in Babylonia, whom Nebukadnezar had transferred from Jerusalem to that country. After having freely moved about in Babylonia, and having acclimatized themselves to the country, they found it inconvenient to return to Syria; therefore they preferred to stay in Babylonia. Their religion wanted a certain solid foundation, in consequence of which they listened to the doctrines of the Magians, and *inclined* towards some of them. So their religion became a mixture of Magian and Jewish elements like that of the so-called Samaritans who were transferred from Babylonia to Syria.

The greatest part of this sect is living in Sawād-al-ʿIrāq. These are the real Sabians. They live, however, very much scattered and nowhere in places that belong exclusively to them alone. Besides, they do not agree among themselves on any subject, wanting a solid ground upon which to base their religion, such as a direct or indirect divine revelation or the like. Genealogically they trace themselves back to Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere in his erudite *Chronology of Ancient Nations* the Persian savant states in a similar passage that "the real Sabians differ from the Ḥarrānians, blaming their doctrines and not agreeing with them except in a few matters. In praying, even, they turn towards the north pole, whilst the Ḥarrānians turn towards the south pole."<sup>11</sup> While al-Bīrūnī does not designate them by any other name than the general category Sabians, the religion described here is clearly that of the

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<sup>9</sup> Professor H. Kassis informed me that the Syrian scholar Sayyid ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ḥusaynī of Ṣayda has sought to demonstrate that at one juncture the Mazdaeans or Zoroastrians (the first group on Waardenburg's list) were identified as Sabians, but I have been unable thus far to obtain this study. See below, at note 16.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, tr. C. Edward Sachau (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1879; Frankfurt: Minerva Reprint, 1969), p. 314. For a slightly different translation of this passage see J. Pedersen, "The Ṣābiāns," in *A Volume of Oriental Studies presented to Edward G. Browne*, ed. T. Arnold and R. Nicholson (Cambridge: University Press, 1922), p. 389.

<sup>11</sup> *Chronology*, p. 188. For a French translation and a discussion of these two passages see Hjærpe, *Les Sabéens*, pp. 6-8 (cf. also p. 185, index, s.v. al-Bīrūnī).

*Ṣubba* or *Ṣabba*, the more formal self-designation being the Mandai or Mandaean.<sup>12</sup>

These so-called "Christians of St. John" did (and still do) face the Polar Star as their qibla—the North is the source of light, enlightenment, and healing. This is a heritage from the Babylonians, distinct from both the Zoroastrians and the Ḥarrānians, who would turn south. A further point of agreement with al-Bīrūnī's account regards the tradition of the "founder" of the religion, since Mandaean priests<sup>13</sup> count Anush or "Enoch" as the first priest. The final point of accord touches on origins. In the second passage referred to above, al-Bīrūnī reports of the Sabians: "For the Sabians are the remnant of the Jewish tribes who remained in Babylonia, when the other tribes left it for Jerusalem in the days of Cyrus and Artaxerxes. Those remaining tribes felt themselves attracted to the rites of the Magians, and so they *inclined* (were *inclined*, i.e. *ṣābī*) towards the religion of Nebuchadnezzar, and adopted a system mixed up of Magism and Judaism like that of the Samaritans in Syria."<sup>14</sup> In the Mandaean legend of "Nebuchadnezzar's Daughter" we find a similar report of their origins:

Some of the Jews fled until they reached Babylon. The King Nebuchadnezzar (*Bukhtanaṣṣar*) said to the rabbis and cohen, "Why did you thus? Why did you kill these people of your own blood without right?" . . . They said, "The Naṣurai have a secret doctrine, and that was the reason." The king replied, "I myself, and my following, we will go also and become of their company." He and his wise men left the Kingdom and went to the Mountain of the Mandai . . . and . . . were made Mandai.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Bīrūnī's assertion that Sabian doctrine and praxis partly derived from a Magian heritage seems to establish some association of the ṣābī'ūn with the community mentioned as the first one on Waardenburg's list.<sup>16</sup> But the main point of interest is undoubtedly the distinction he makes between various groups somehow falling under the general category of ṣābī'ūn and the identification of the Mandaean as the *real* Sabians.

*Ḥarrānians in north Mesopotamia.* The Ḥarrānians referred to above were the ancient *Carrhae*, a pagan sect in Ḥarrān influenced by Hellenism.<sup>17</sup> Al-Bīrūnī refers to them immediately following his discussion of "the real Sabians."

The same name is also applied to the Ḥarrānians, who are the remains of the followers of the ancient religion of the West, separated (cut off) from it, since the Ionian Greeks (i.e., the ancient Greeks, not the . . . Byzantine Greeks) adopted Christianity. . . . This sect is much more known by the

<sup>12</sup> E. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iran and Iraq: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), pp. 1, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18; xxiii.

<sup>14</sup> *Chronology*, p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Drower, *Mandaean*, p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> See above note 9.

<sup>17</sup> H. Gätje, *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis*, tr. A. Welch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 265.

name of Sabians than the others, although they themselves did not adopt this name before A.H. 228 under Abbasid rule, solely for the purpose of being reckoned among those from whom the duties of *Dhimma* . . . are accepted, and towards whom the laws of *Dhimma* are observed. Before that time they were called heathens, idolaters, and *Harrānians*.<sup>18</sup>

A survey of their feasts follows after which al-Bīrūnī expresses the hope that contacts with the *Harrānians* themselves will enable him "to distinguish between what is peculiar to the Sabians, the *Harrānians*, and the ancient magians."<sup>19</sup>

The twelfth-century Persian scholar al-Sharastānī was in a position to learn more about these Sabians. In his *Book of Religions and Philosophical Sects* we are told that the largest, most influential sect of *Harrānians* were called *aṣḥāb al-rūḥāniyyāt*, or "proponents of spiritual beings." According to the author, the *rūḥāniyyāt* served as intermediaries through whom the Wise and Productive Creator ought to be sought.<sup>20</sup> By purifying one's soul, and controlling one's passions, one could enter into a communion with the spirits, who direct the force of the divine power towards the lower beings. At times the Sabians called the plant fathers and the elements mothers. One could see why Caliph al-Ma'mūn thought of destroying these "star-worshippers,"<sup>21</sup> but their intellectual prowess won them toleration. The Sabian Abū Ishaq b. Hilāl, secretary under Caliphs al-Muṭī' and al-Ṭā'ī, succeeded in securing an edict of toleration in favor of his coreligionists of *Harrān* around the year 364/975.<sup>22</sup>

*Manichaeans in Samarqand.* Manichaeans within the Muslim empire were, for the most part, stigmatized as *Zindiqs* (from the Persian *zandīq*, "follower of Zand") and thus subjected to persecution. The only exception was the community of Manichaeans who were known as (presumably lawful) Sabians. Ibn al-Nadīm informs us that when Manichaeans sought refuge in Samarqand to escape persecutions in the tenth century, the ruler of *Khurāsān* wished to put them all to death. Reprieval came as an unexpected fortune when the Manichaean king of the Uighurs nearby at *Qočo* threatened to kill all Muslims within his kingdom if any harm should befall the Manichaeans in Samarqand.<sup>23</sup> On the authority of al-Bīrūnī we are told:

<sup>18</sup> *Chronology*, pp. 314–15. See at note 10 above.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> That is, the largest, most influential sect of *Harrānians*. See B. Lawrence, "Shahrastānī on Indian Idol Worship," *StIsl*, XXXVIII (1973), 66. For the in this connection most important passages in al-Shahrastānī see below note 31.

<sup>21</sup> When in A.D. 830 al-Ma'mūn encountered the people of *Harrān*, an official of the victor enquired: "Who are you?" The folk of *Harrān* replied, "*Harrānians*." "Christians or Jews?" "Neither," was the answer. The conqueror demanded, "Have you any holy books or a prophet?" To this the *Harrānians* gave a guarded and confusing response. Whereupon the official observed, "You must be *Zindiqs* (*zanādiqa*)." From that time onward, the *Harrānians* adopted and kept the name *Ṣābi'ūn*. See Chwolson, *Die Ssabier*, II, 15–17; the passage is from Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* (Arabic text and German trsl. are given); this section is also quoted in H. Nibley, "Qumran and 'The Companions of the Cave,'" *Revue de Qumran*, V (1965), 187.

<sup>22</sup> B. Carra de Vaux, "al-Ṣābi'a," *E.I.*, IV/1, 22.

<sup>23</sup> S. Lieu, *The Diffusion and Persecution of Manichaeism in Rome and China: A Comparative Study* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 1981), p. 64 and p. 243, n. 351.

Of his [Mānī's] adherents, some remnants that are considered as Manichaean are still extant: they are scattered throughout the world and do not live together in any particular place of Muhammadan countries, except the community in Samarkand, known by the name of *Šabians*.<sup>24</sup>

*Buddhists and Hindus in Sind.* For all of al-Bīrūnī's knowledge of Brahmanism, it is remarkable how little he knew of Buddhism.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, he is our main authority for the extension of the term Sabian to include the Buddha and his followers. Al-Bīrūnī placed the Buddha in the class of "pseudo-prophets" who deluded their communities: "The first mentioned is *Būdhāsaf*, who came forward in India after the 1st year of Ṭahmūrath. He introduced the Persian writing and called people to the religion of the *Šabians*. Whereupon many people followed him."<sup>26</sup> It seems likely that al-Bīrūnī was acquainted with the history of the Buddha through the Arabic romance *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Yūdāsaf* (Būdhāsaf). Not a direct translation of any single Indian Buddhist work, the Arabic legendary life of the Buddha is a syncretic compilation of episodes found in the *Buddha-carita*, the *Mahāvastu*, the *Lalita-vistara*, and the *Jataka Tales*.<sup>27</sup> Right after al-Bīrūnī tells of the Būdhāsaf, he mentions Balkh. This is an association which may not have been accidental, for Balkh (along with Sogdiana and Ferghana) had a strong Buddhist minority. Indeed, the ruins of the Buddhist period in Balkh, associated with names from the Persian saga-cycles (*Takht-i-Rustam*, etc.) are better preserved than the Muslim ruins.<sup>28</sup> Apparently, extension of the term Sabians to include Buddhists was not peculiar to al-Bīrūnī, but was a practice among other Islamic writers as well.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Shahrastānī was apparently the first author to apply the designation Sabians to various religious groups in India, using it to classify them according to degrees of idolatry.<sup>30</sup> In the earlier mentioned section of his *Kitāb al-milal wa 'l-nihāl* he discussed how the Sabians traced their teachings back to Ādhīmūn (Agathodaimon; Shīth, Seth) and Hermes (Idrīs, Henoch),<sup>31</sup> and dealt with them mainly under the three categories of *aṣhāb al-rūhāniyyāt* (referred to above),

<sup>24</sup> *Chronology*, p. 191.

<sup>25</sup> See Jane Smith, "Early Muslim Accounts of Buddhism in India," *SI*, X (1973), 94-96.

<sup>26</sup> *Chronology*, p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> D.M. Lang, "Bilawhar wa-Yūdāsaf," *E.I.*, new ed., I, 1215-17.

<sup>28</sup> S. Yusuf, "The Early Contacts between Islam and Buddhism," *University of Ceylon Review*, XIII (1955), 22-23, citing R.N. Frye's article, "Balkh," *E.I.*, new ed., I, 1000-1002.

<sup>29</sup> Lang, "Bilawhar," *E.I.*, new ed., I, 1215-17; S. Pines, "Shī'ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, II (1980), 196, in the section "Two Points of Similarity between the *Kuzari* and the Disputation between the Šabians and the Ḥunafā' in al-Shahrastānī's *Kitāb al-Milal wa 'l-Nihāl*." Al-Mas'ūdī occasionally links the Buddha (*Būdhāsib*) with the Sabian religion; see A. Shboul, *Al-Mas'ūdī and his World: A Muslim Humanist and his Interest in non-Muslims* (London: Ithaca, 1979), p. 162 and references on p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence, "Shahrastānī," *StIsl*, XXXVIII (1973), 65.

<sup>31</sup> *Kitāb al-milal* (Cureton ed.), p. 202; German trsl. Theodor Haarbrücker, *Asch-Schahrastānī's Religionspartheien und Philosophen-Schulen* (Halle: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1850; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1969), II, 3. Both were also mentioned as prophets of the Sabians by al-Bīrūnī, *Chronology*, p. 188. For a further discussion of this topic see the section "Les 'prophètes' des sabéens, harrāniens," in Hjārpe, *Les Sabeens*, pp. 164-68.

'*abadat al-kawākib* (star worshippers) and '*abadat al-asnām* (idol worshippers).<sup>32</sup> Making use of these same three categories in his final chapter, "Arā' al-Hind," he could find a place for eleven Indian religious groups under one of these headings (excluding only the Barāhima and the Indian philosophers), moving from the most spiritual among them, especially the followers of Viṣṇu and Śiva, via the star worshippers to those who worship idols which their own hands have made.<sup>33</sup>

*Followers of tribal religions in East Africa.* During Islam's expansion in its first two centuries it also encountered tribal religions in Africa. The process which led to the eventual identification of African aboriginal religions with Sabianism involved an intermediate association, one which was struck by the tenth-century author Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Mas'ūdī. In his *Tanbīh* Mas'ūdī asserts that the Egyptians were ancient Sabians, who honored as their prophets Hermes and Agathodaimon, the names occurring in the above mentioned account of al-Shahrastānī. These "Sabians of the Egyptians" were in fact the forebears of the "Sabians of the Ḥarrānians."<sup>34</sup> He viewed the Buddha as an ancient Sabian prophet of considerable influence in antiquity,<sup>35</sup> and regarded the ancient religions of China, Persia, Egypt, Greece and Rome as vestiges of the *ṣābi'* type of religion.<sup>36</sup> It was natural in the course of time for Muslim authors to extend the application of the term Sabian to cover not only communities from a far distant past, but also contemporary communities with which they themselves came in contact, including some in Africa.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, the term Sabian had by now proved to be the most meaningful and attractive nomenclature for comprehending foreign religiosities within what could still be considered a Qur'anic world view.

While we have discussed thus far the application of the term *ṣābi'ūn* to groups outside the Jewish and Christian communities, we move, finally, to a category of Sabianism to which tenth-century Muslim authors as well as Christian sources make reference:

*The Muḡhtasila "Sabians of the Marsh."* An ethnographic note in the great encyclopaedic work *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, written 377/987, refers to a religious

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Lawrence's article mentioned in notes 20 and 30 above and, largely based on Lawrence, Waardenburg, in *Islam, Past Influence*, pp. 253-54 (for other articles by Lawrence see p. 271, notes 11 and 17). Of special interest are the sections *Kitāb al-milal*, pp. 203-51, 444; Haarbrücker's trsl., II, 4-77, 355.

<sup>33</sup> *Kitāb al-milal*, 444-58, Haarbrücker's trsl., II, 354-76.

<sup>34</sup> Pedersen, in *Oriental Studies Browne*, p. 388. For Mas'ūdī's references to Agathodaimon and Hermes see Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, II, 378-79, 624. (For his identification of Enoch-Idrīs and Hermes, see *ibid.*, II, 621.) Chwolsohn gives the Arabic text and his translation of a more extensive discussion of the Sabians by Mas'ūdī in *ibid.*, II, 366-77.

<sup>35</sup> For a comparison with Al-Bīrūnī's view see the latter's *Chronology*, pp. 188-89. Cf. A. Jeffery, "Al-Bīrūnī's contribution to Comparative Religion," *Al-Bīrūnī's Commemoration Volume* (Calcutta, 1951), pp. 147-48 and D. Gimaret, "Bouddha et les Bouddhistes dans la tradition musulmane," *Journal Asiatique*, CCLVII (1969), 273-316.

<sup>36</sup> See T. Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'ūdī* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975), p. 65, who notes that Mas'ūdī's use of the term originates from his belief in a universal star worship among the ancient nations. See also Pedersen in *Oriental Studies Browne*, pp. 388-89.

<sup>37</sup> See Y. Marquet, "Sabéens et Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'," *S Isl*, XXIX (1966), 35-80 and XXV (1967), 77-109.

community situated in a swampy region traversed by the Euphrates in its lower course. These people were known locally to the Arabs as *al-mughtasila*, or "those who wash themselves." The author of the *Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadīm, accordingly calls them *šābi'at al-baṭā'ih*, "Sabians of the Marshes."

[The Mughtasila:] These people live in great numbers in the regions of the swamps; they are the Šābians of the swamps. They profess that people are to wash themselves, and everything they eat. Their head is called . . . [al-Ḥasīḥ] and it is he who founded their religion. He maintains that the two principles of existence are the male and the female, and that the herbs belong to the male principle, whilst the mistletoe belong to the female, the trees being its roots. They have some detestable axioms that can only be called nonsense. [Dodge: "They have seven sayings, taking the form of fables."] He [al-Ḥasīḥ] had a disciple named Sham'ūn. They (the Mughtasila) agreed with the Manichaeans with regard to two principles, but otherwise their religions differ. Among them are some who worship the stars up to the present day.

Mānī's father Futtaq [Fātiq] visited a heathen temple. A voice told him to abstain from meat, wine, and marriage, and this was repeated several times. And when Futtaq had learnt this, he joined some people who lived in the regions of Dastumisān, and who are called *al-Mughtasila*; and in those regions and the swampy districts the remnant of them live up to our days. And they embraced the creed that Futtaq was ordered to adopt.<sup>38</sup>

Chwolsohn read the founder's name as "al-Ḥassayḥ"<sup>39</sup> rather than as "al-Ḥasīḥ," but in either case any doubt as to the relationship between Elchasai and the Mughtasila had to be abandoned after the discovery in 1969 of an original Manichaean manuscript, the Kölner Codex.<sup>40</sup> This Greek parchment codex (dated fifth century A.D. on paleographic grounds), from the papyrus collection of the University of Cologne, is the smallest known manuscript from antiquity.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Pedersen, *Oriental Studies Browne*, pp. 383–84. Cf. Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), II, 811; 773–74. For minor improvements and clarifications on Dodge's translation of the two passages see A. Klijn and G. Reinink, "Elchasai and Mani," *Vigiliae Christianae*, XXVIII (1974), 278–79. The tenth-century Persian writer Ḥamza Iṣfahānī saw as the true Sabians those "living between the desert and the swamps," regarded to be heretical Christians. See W. Brandt, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Mandaecans," VIII, 390, who observes: "This opinion may have arisen from a fusion of vague reports about the Mandaecans and the Mughtasila." For the Arabic text of this passage and Chwolsohn's translation see *Die Ssabier*, II, 543–44. For Chwolsohn's translation of and his very extensive notes on Chapter One of the Ninth Book of the *Fihrist* see *Die Ssabier*, II, 1–52 (Arabic text and translation) and 53–365 (notes).

<sup>39</sup> Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, II, 543–44: el-'Hasai'ḥ; Dodge reads "al-Ḥasīḥ"; Pedersen gives in this passage the name in Arabic characters only, but transliterates it as "el-Ḥasaiḥ" in a preceding paragraph.

<sup>40</sup> A. Henrichs, "Mani and the Babylonian Baptists: A Historical Confrontation," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, LXXVII (1973), 44–45. Reservations are expressed by J. Coyle, "The Cologne Mani-Codex and Mani's Christian Connections," *Eglise et Théologie*, X (1979), 179–93.

<sup>41</sup> R. Frye, "The Cologne Greek Codex about Mani," *Ex Orbe Religionum. Studia Geo Widengren Oblata* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), I, 424–29. Coyle notes that L. Koenen now favors Lycopolis as the



Probably from a grave in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, the parchment had evidently served as an amulet. The text was rendered into Greek from a Syriac original, and bears the title *On the origin of his body*—where “body” (*sōματος*) should be taken in the ecclesiological sense of St. Paul’s *sōma Christou*.<sup>42</sup> This “history” of Mānī’s Church is not only of unquestioned<sup>43</sup> importance for our knowledge of Manichaean origins, but also for our recovery of the Mughtasila, the “Sabians of the Marshes.”

The Cologne Mānī Codex (CMC) provides the following details regarding those “baptizers” among whom Mānī had lived and from whom he later broke away. Located in the Sasanid province of Mesēne in southern Mesopotamia (the Mesēne/Maisān region was at the embouchure of the Euphrates), Mānī’s baptists dwelled communally in isolated villages. Agriculture was the major source of livelihood, along with related kinds of physical labor. The CMC consists of “I”-narratives of Mānī, prefaced by formulae which are not only introductory, but which are ascribed to particular (and elsewhere-attested) Manichaean authorities as well.<sup>44</sup> These memoiresque literary sources are judged to have a high degree of historicity, although clearly hagiographic in nature.<sup>45</sup> In the CMC, Mānī tells us: “I was reared and brought up in this sect of baptists, and to its leaders and presbyters I was related through the upbringing of my body.”<sup>46</sup> “If you accuse me concerning baptism, see, again I show you from your Law and from what had been revealed to your leaders that it is not necessary to baptize oneself. For this is shown by Alchasaïos the founder of your Law.”<sup>47</sup>

The co-editor of the critical edition of the CMC, A. Henrichs, suggested eight major points of congruence between Mānī’s Elchasaites and the Elchasaites of other ancient reports, and also singled out elements in common with related baptist sects of Jewish-Christian origin.

1. *Orientation toward sacramental piety.* All baptist sects related external purifications to salvation. Observance of sacramental baptisms along with other ritual laws had both salvific and communal value. Such purifications renewed the spirit and though distinct from the Mosaic law they were in a sense a continuation of it. This explains why the CMC baptists could refer to their religion as “our law and that of the fathers in which we have been living since olden times.”

2. *Keeping of the Sabbath.* Ancient sources inform us that the followers of Elchasaï were obligated to observe the Jewish Sabbath. Evidence that the CMC Elchasaites did likewise hinges on one passage in the codex, and its

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place of origin for this papyrus document; *Égl. et Théol.*, X (1979), 182; A. Henrichs, “The Cologne Mani Codex Reconsidered,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, LXXXIII (1979). For further studies see the introduction in Cameron-Dewey, note 46 below (p. 6).

<sup>42</sup> Henrichs, *H.St.Cl.Phil.*, LXXVII (1973), 40.

<sup>43</sup> Only certain hasty conclusions are questioned by Coyle.

<sup>44</sup> Henrichs, *H.St.Cl.Phil.*, LXXXII (1973), 47–55.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30; 42.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. For a partial translation of the CMC, consult R. Cameron and A. Dewey, *The Cologne Mani Codex* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979).

<sup>47</sup> A. Klijn and G. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), p. 255.

interpretation. The CMC Mānī epitomizes the religion of the baptists as “the doctrines of those who are used to reading about purity, castigation of the flesh and the keeping of the resting of the hands.” Mandaic texts, in explicitly anti-Jewish and anti-Christian passages, confirm the interpretation of “the resting of the hands” as Sabbath observances.

3. *Baptisms/ablutions through immersion in running water.* The Elchasaites are attacked by Mānī in severe criticisms which strike at the very heart of baptist life. Mānī criticizes the daily baths. Such lustrations were comparable to those performed by the Hemero-baptists as well as by Ebionite Christians. From Mānī's arguments we can infer that the CMC Elchasaites also practiced initiation by special sacramental baptism, again not unlike the Ebionites.

4. *Celebration of the Eucharist with unleavened bread and water.* Quoting scriptural passages from Tatian's *Diatessaron*, Mānī takes to task the baptist practice of regulated preparation of bread for ritual purposes. Since Mānī in the CMC appeals to the Lord's supper as contradistinct to what was held by the Elchasaites, Henrichs infers that their celebration of the Eucharist was like that of the Ebionites, who partook of unleavened bread and pure water.

5. *Baptists' rejection of portions of Scripture, including all writings of Paul.* The CMC portrays only a single instance where the baptists drew from scripture. The occasion was an altercation with Mānī. Exactly which texts were invoked is uncertain. Henrichs argues that when challenged by Mānī on New Testament grounds, the baptists would in all likelihood have repudiated the authority of Mānī's proof-texts, especially those marshalled from St. Paul. Charging that parts of scripture were interpolations was, of course, an issue in Jewish-Christian polemic, Henrichs points out. The baptists in any event suspect Mānī of “going to the Greeks” or “to the Gentiles” apparently referring to his appeal to St. Paul; the wording that the latter was a “Greek” was a term of abuse in some Jewish-Christian polemics.

6. *Encratism.* The baptists of the Cologne Codex were confirmed vegetarians, as has been reported of the Ebionites. Henrichs speculates that baptist asceticism extended to continence in the CMC (on the basis of Ibn al-Nadīm's report), although he is aware that Elchasai encouraged marriage and that continence as an ideal was foreign to all other Judaic baptist groups. To account for Mānī's total abhorrence towards sexuality, Henrichs expects that, like Jeseplus' Essenes, Mānī must have grown up in all-male environment.

7. *The doctrine of the “True Prophet.”* Not everything that was baptist was rejected by Mānī, and the most striking instance of this perhaps is to be found in Mānī's prophetology, where there is some ideological carry over. Henrichs states:

The Pseudo-Clementines and Elchasai coincide in that they propagate the cyclic incarnation of the True Prophet. For Elchasai, however, the series of incarnations did not culminate in Christ, but included Elchasai and continued even beyond him. The Cologne Codex has a clear reference to this doctrine. Some of the baptists were so impressed by Mānī's performance as a theologian that they regarded him as the True Prophet and the incarnation of the Living Logos (CMC 86, 1-9). This doctrine, which lies at the root of Mānī's own conception of his apostleship as the

concluding stage in a series of incarnations, forms, in combination with the docetism of Marcion and Bardaisan, the basis of Mānī's christology.

8. *Eschatological belief in the resurrection of the body.* All the CMC baptists referred to the future resurrection of the body as the "resting of the garment," we are told. Such doctrine was widespread, though not universal, in various forms of Judaism and Jewish Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

Henrichs considers these parallels between the new data of the CMC and ancient reports on the Elchasaites to be "overwhelming": "Henceforth, the fact that Mānī grew up with, and was influenced by, Jewish-Christian baptists must be reckoned with."<sup>49</sup> The tentatively suggested identification of the Sabians of the Marshes, the baptists in the CMC and the Elchasaites now needs further consideration.

### *Sabians of the Marshes—CMC baptists—Elchasaites*

The *Fihrist* evidently equates the Mughtasila Sabians of the Marshes with Elchasaites, and the CMC equates Mānī's baptists with Elchasaites; but does any pre-Islamic source equate Elchasaites with Sabians, thus furnishing a third independent attestation to the validity of the equation?

A rare occurrence of what appears to be a form of the term "Sabian" in Christian sources prior to Islam is found in Hippolytus of Rome who, writing in A.D. 225, voiced this warning:

What was the recent arrival of the strange demon Elchasai and that he used as a concealment of his particular errors his apparent adhesion to the Law but in reality he devotes himself to the ideas of the Gnostics, or even those of astrologers and magicians. . . . When his doctrine had been spread about throughout the entire world, a cunning man and full of desperation, one called Alcibiades, living in Apamea, a city of Syria, examined carefully into his business. And considering himself a more formidable character more ingenious in tricks than Callistus, he went to Rome. He brought with him some book alleging that a certain righteous man, Elchasai, had received this from the Seres of Parthia. And that he gave it to one called *Sobiai*. . . .<sup>50</sup>

The word "Sobiai" bears resemblance to both Arabic and Mandaic terms for Sabians, and Macuch's observation in his *Handbook of Classical and Modern Mandaic* sufficiently illustrates the probability of a *Sobiai/šābi'a* association:

Observation of actual pronunciation corrected my view concerning this Glossary in many points. The frequent confusion of the emphatic š with the non-emphatic s does not go back—as Nöldeke thought—to the similarity of the Mandaic s to the Arabic š, but is . . . based on actual pronunciation . . . . The Mandaeans themselves confuse the emphatics with their non-

<sup>48</sup> Henrichs, *H.St.Cl.Phil.*, LXXII (1973), 47–55.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, pp. 113–15.

emphatic counterparts. The letters which my Mandaean friends write to me are full of such confusions. They would often write even the word *šubia* (Ar. *šubbī*) with s.<sup>51</sup>

Lady Drower, who studied the Mandaeans for many years in her field work, is of the opinion that the term *Šubba* or *Šabba* is a colloquial form by which the Mandaeans refer to their principal cult, immersion, the more formal name of their religion and people being *Mandai*.<sup>52</sup> The question arises whether Sobiai could be a reference to a sect rather than to a particular person. The probability that this is the case is strongly suggested by Klijn and Reinink who in their study of Hippolytus reached the conclusion: "We presume that Sobiai is not the name of a person, as Hippolytus suggests, but that of a group using this name to express the emphasis they laid on the importance of purification through baptism."<sup>53</sup> It is corroborative that the Cologne Mānī Cōdex gives the proper name for the baptist Elchasaites it describes as *Sabbaïos 'o Baptistēs!*<sup>54</sup>

The relationship between the groups referred to in the reports of Ibn al-Nadīm, CMC and Hippolytus can ultimately only be determined by a study of their teachings. The historical integrity of each of these reports seems to us a primary concern, an issue not raised by Klijn and Reinink in their study comparing and contrasting these passages.<sup>55</sup> Summarily we would see in Ibn al-Nadīm the Muslim historiographical tendency to stereotype, while we clearly encounter hagiography in the CMC and hostile heresiography in Hippolytus. The discrepancies can easily be accounted for if one takes these distinct approaches seriously, for, as Stone once remarked, "the rush to compare the heresiologists' report to the insiders' self-description is useless. The two will never be the same."<sup>56</sup>

Klijn and Reinink concede that Ibn al-Nadīm gives us a rather one-sided picture of Mughtasilan practices. This is obviously due to the nature of the description itself. We think, e.g., of the instruction given to Fātiq in the heathen temple: "O Fātiq, do not eat meat! Do not drink wine! Do not marry any human being!"<sup>57</sup> and the injunctions for entrance into Mānī's own cult and community, recorded several pages later: "He who would enter the cult must examine his

<sup>51</sup> R. Macuch, *Handbook of Classical and Modern Mandaic* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965), p. 2. Chwolsohn, too, understood Sobiai as the personification of a sect, and discussed at some length the issue of the identification of the Mughtasila-Sobiai-Sabians-Elchasaites (see below)-Mandaeans; *Die Ssabier*, esp. I, 109ff. (121 on the identification Sobiai and Sabians).

<sup>52</sup> Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Patristic Evidence*, p. 55. Also of interest is the possibility that the Seres whom Hippolytus associates with the Elchasaites may have been a community with baptist tendencies. The description which the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* gives of the Seres reflects at least a lack of sacrifices, and baptismal and sacrificial cults were usually antithetical to each other. *Recognitions*, 8:48; 9:19. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 179, 187.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> See note 38 above.

<sup>56</sup> Recorded in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale . . . March 28-31, 1978*, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), II, 674.

<sup>57</sup> B. Dodge, "Mani and the Manichaeans," *Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies in honor of Aziz Suryal Atiya*, ed. S. Hanna (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), p. 87.

soul. If he finds that he can subdue lust and covetousness, refrain from eating meat, drinking wine, as well as from marriage, and if he can also avoid (causing) injury to water, fire, trees and living things, then let him enter the cult."<sup>58</sup> Thus Ibn al-Nadīm tells us only of those practices which prototypify Māni's later cultus and dualistic notions. The comment Klijn and Reinink made on this point seems beyond challenge:

These words show exactly the same instructions which Mani gave to the members of the sect according to the Kölner Codex. This proves that the Kölner Codex and the *Fihrist* are essentially talking about the same sect. They both show that Mani, while preserving some of the sect's practices, wished to reform its doctrine having a different view on the body and the material world.<sup>59</sup>

The link between the Elchasaite Mughtasila and the pre-Manichaean Elchasaite baptists throws fresh light upon an early kind of Sabianism. That the details do not fully tally with those of the Elchasaites of Hippolytus' description is not a negation of the new-found evidence. The Elchasaite connection of Māni's Babylonian baptists, as Henrichs suggests, may well be secondary and superimposed on an original Palestinian substratum, through the adoption of Elchasaï's book of revelation.<sup>60</sup>

As far as the identification of the Qur'anic Ṣābi'ūn are concerned, we are faced with one final issue. Two rival claimants come to fore: Mandaeans and Elchasaites.<sup>61</sup> The question of the relationship between these two baptist groups

<sup>58</sup> Klijn and Reinink, "Elchasaï and Mani," *Vig. Christ.*, XXVIII (1974), 278-79. Dodge, *Fihrist*, p. 778.

<sup>59</sup> "Elchasaï and Mani," *Vig. Christ.*, XXVIII (1974), 285.

<sup>60</sup> Henrichs, *H.St.Cl.Phil.*, LXXVII (1973), 55.

<sup>61</sup> Gätje, for example, declares with regard to the *ṣābi'ūn*: "In the Qur'ān itself the Mandaeans are no doubt intended"; *Qur'ān*, p. 265. C. de Vaux, on the other hand, states that the Sabians "have sometimes been identified with the Mandaeans or with the Elkasaites"; *Shorter Enc. of Islam*, p. 477. For the views of Maimonides on Sabianism, see L. Strauss's introductory essay to S. Pines's translation of *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. xxxiv ff. and Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier*, I, 689-716; II, 451-91. The Persian Prophet Bahā'ullāh gives what would constitute the Bahā' perspective. Bahā'ullāh refers to ancient followers of John the Baptist who kept separate from Christianity and "who are even now still on the earth and are known as the *Ṣābi'ūn*" (tr. D. MacEoin from *Asrārū'l-Athār*, IV, 233; *World Order*, X (Winter 1975-76), 11; see also MacEoin, *World Order*, X (Fall 1975), 3, where an almost identical passage from Bahā'ullāh is given: "After the martyrdom of the son of Zachariah [John the Baptist], some of his followers did not turn unto the divine Manifestation of Jesus, the Son of Mary, and removed themselves from the Faith of God, and until this day they have continued to exist in the world, being known to some as the *Ṣābi'ūn*. These people consider themselves to be the community of John . . ."; *Qāmūs-i-Īqān*, II, 987. The closest analogue to this historical perspective within the Christian tradition would appear to be the following Ebionite Christian reminiscence: "For the people was now divided into many parties, ever since the days of John the Baptist. For when the rising of Christ was at hand for the abolition of sacrifices, and for the bestowal of the grace of baptism, the enemy . . . wrought various schisms among people. . . . Yea, some even of the disciples of John, who seemed to be great ones, have separated from the people, and proclaimed their own master as the Christ"; *Recognitions*, I, 53-54. In this connection, there is a remarkable report by Conti the Maronite (1650) who asserts that a sect had migrated to Mergab in Lebanon from Galilee, around 150 years prior to his own time,

deserves renewed attention, and the following remarks of Henrichs seem very important in this connection:

It is much easier to regard the analogies between the Manichaean and Mandaean religions, which consist in parallels in the extant literatures rather than similarities in cult practices, as an independent heritage from common ancestors, namely, the Palestinian and Babylonian baptist movements which influenced Mānī and which helped to produce the Mandaeans (or proto-Mandaeans) as their last offshoot. The problem presented by the fact that Mandaean ritual provides the only parallel for two of the ritual practices with which the baptists are credited by Mani finds its easiest solution if explained on the same lines. The two rites which Mani's baptists share with the Mandaeans of the extant Mandaic documents are the purification of their food by ablutions with water and the ritual preparation and baking of their bread, most likely unleavened bread. . . . The first practice is comparable to the ritual cleaning of the Mandaean *Tābūtā*, the second survived in the Mandaean *Piḥtā*, and *Faṭīrē*, two different kinds of unleavened bread prepared for sacramental use.<sup>62</sup>

Mandaeans and Mānī's Elchasaites<sup>63</sup> dwelled in the marsh lands and delta of the lower Euphrates in southern Mesopotamia where they co-existed as two baptist movements both known as Sabian communions. Were these Sabians also within Arabia? Epiphanius reports that various Jewish-Christian sects, including the Elchasaites (whom he calls also Sampsaeans) are found in Arabia: "The Sampsaeans and the Elkasaites . . . still live in Arabia. . . . In everything they are

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which considered John the Baptist as its founder. The priests wore turbans and garments of camel's wool. Sacraments consisted of locusts and wild honey. The sect held Jesus to be a mere prophet who succeeded John. Days of assembly were Sunday and Thursday. The four annual feasts were the birth of John the Baptist; the commemoration of his baptism; the lamentation for the beheading of John; and a feast in honor of John's victory over a dragon. This report, however, is not confirmed by any ancient source. See Smith-Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography* (New York: AMS reprint, 1967), s.v. "Sabians," p. 570.

For a critical evaluation of some Ismā'īlī identifications of the Sabians—among others by the tenth-century Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, who held them to have been disciples of Mānī, Bardesanes and Marcion, and by his contemporary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, who identified them as Christians inclined toward Zoroastrianism—see S.M. Stern, *Studies in Early Ismā'īlism* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1983), pp. 33–34.

<sup>62</sup> Henrichs, *H.St.Cl.Phil.*, LXXVII (1973), 46. For the survival of Elchasaite/Ebionite True Prophet Christology in Manichaeism, see E. Rose, *Die manichäische Christologie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979).

<sup>63</sup> See W. Sundermann, *Acta Orientalia*, XXXVI (1974), 129–30 and 148 who discusses a Manichaean fragment in Parthian dialect which mentions the date of Mani's first major revelation (539 Seleucid era – A.D. 228) on recto, and refers to Elchasai on verso; cf. Henrichs's notice of this independent witness in *H.St.Cl.Phil.*, LXXXIII (1979), 367.

similar to the Ebionites."<sup>64</sup> The question of their identity and history certainly deserves further research.

Our study has shown that the issue of the apparent confusion among Muslim exegetes over the identity of the Sabians is resolved once the historical circumstances are grasped. Exactly because it was imprecise, the word *ṣābi'ūn* functioned as a term of great legal importance by contributing to an attitude of toleration towards minority religions under Muslim rule. The term evolved from a once-specific designation to a classification which, adapted to ever new historical contexts, expanded its meaning to embrace peoples of otherwise uncertain standing, giving them a place of security within a Qur'anicly sanctioned framework.

As far as the original Qur'anic *Ṣābi'ūn* are concerned, special attention was paid to the Cologne Mani Codex which confirms the assertion found in the *Fihrist* that Sabians were Elchasaites, an identification which may also be implied in Hippolytus. On the basis of evidence to date it seems justifiable to reaffirm Chwolsohn's conclusion that the Qur'anic Sabians were persons known for their emphasis on ritual purifications, predominantly Mandaeans and Elchasaites.<sup>65</sup>

*Vancouver, British Columbia*

CHRISTOPHER BUCK

<sup>64</sup> Translation by Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, p. 193. See also J. Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979), p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> For Hjärpe's summary of Chwolsohn's conclusion—"Mandaeans" as the first meaning of the term sabians—see above, note 7 which contains also a reference to Hjärpe's own rejection of Chwolsohn's thesis, following Pedersen (cf. Pedersen, *Oriental Studies Browne*, p. 358: "The Mandaeans and the muḡtasila are thus two different sects, and the Elchasaeans are identical with neither of them").