

# **Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition**

by

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## Abbreviations

*AJSLL - The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*

*CSCO - Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*

*BSOAS- Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*

*JA – Journal Asiatique*

*JAOS – Journal of American Oriental Society*

*JRAS - Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*

*NHS – Nag Hammadi Studies*

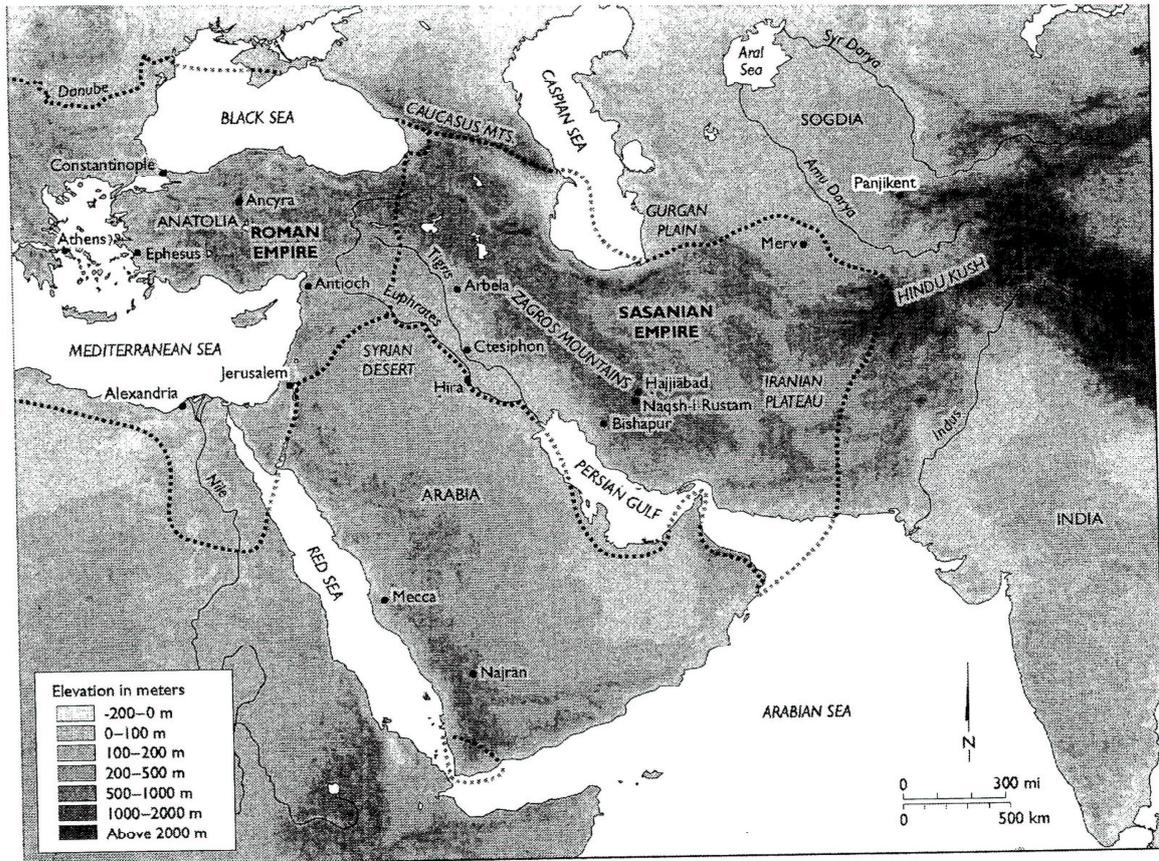
*NHMS – Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*

*RMM – Revue du Monde Musulman*

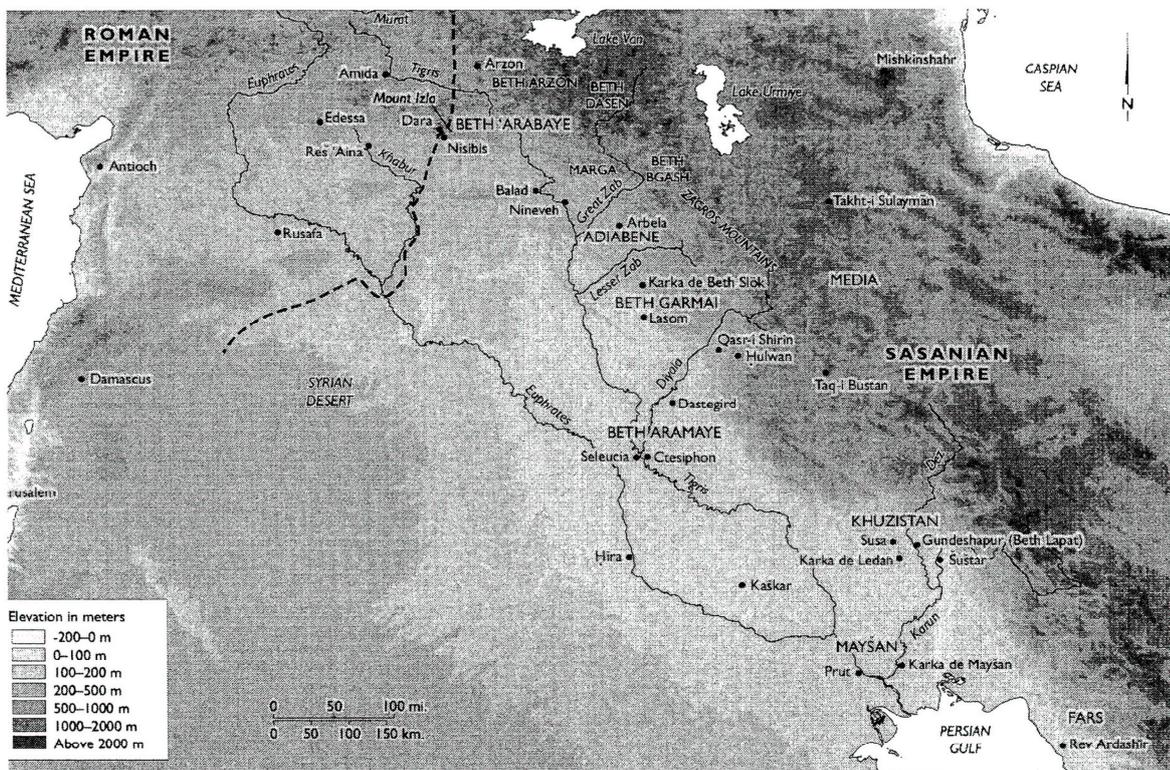
*RSO – Rivista degli Studii Orientali*

*SC - Sources Chretiennes*

# Maps

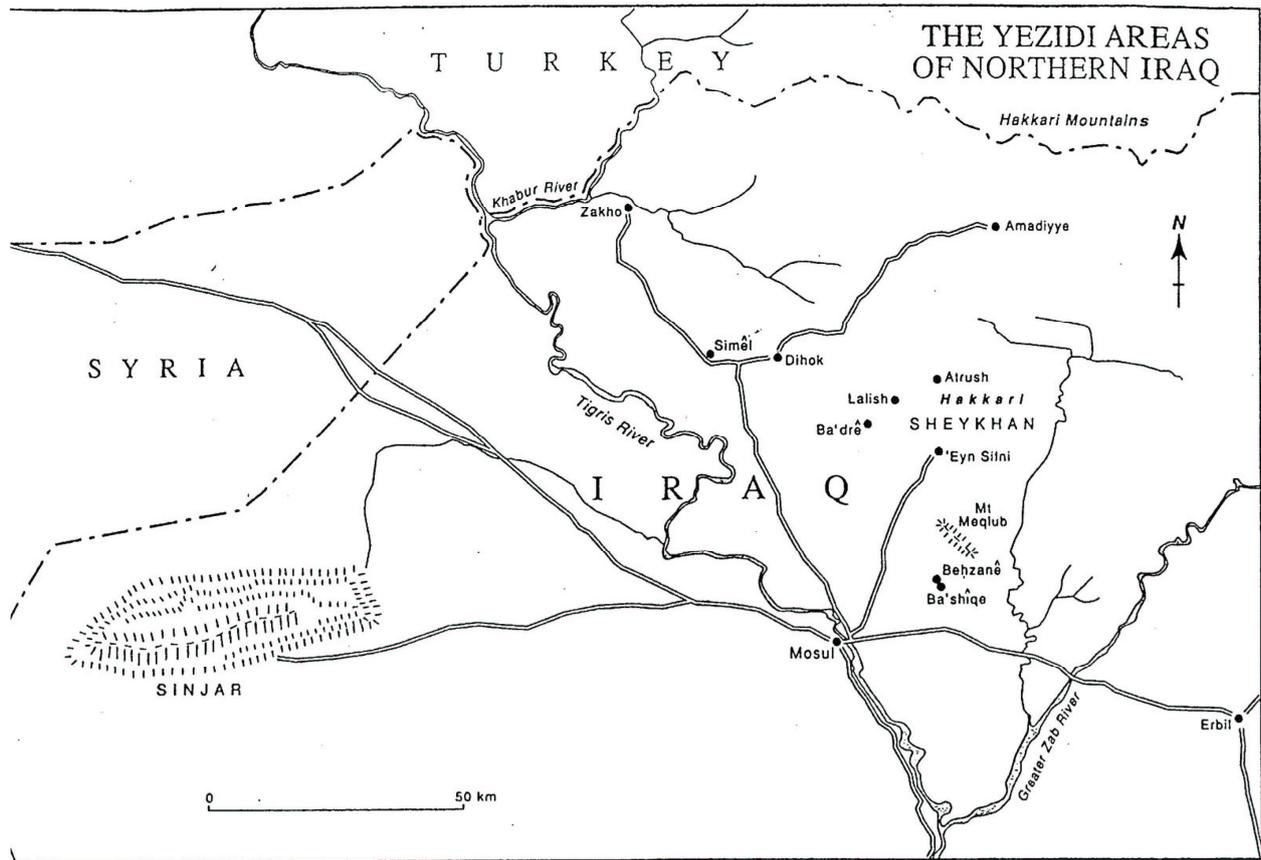


MAP 1. The Late Antique Near East, c. 600 C.E.



MAP 2. Major Provinces of the Church of the East, c. 600 C.E.

Source: Joel T. Walker. *The Legend of Qardagh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3-4.



Source: Philip G. Kreyenbroek. *Yezidism* (Lewiston NY, Edwin Mellen Press, 1995.)

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Yezidis are a Kurdish speaking religious minority of a few hundred thousand souls, living mainly in northern Iraq, but also in Syria, Turkey, Iran and in the Caucasus, where they emigrated in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Today there is also a sizeable Yezidi community living in Europe, primarily in Germany. Yezidis are not Muslims, neither may they be considered Jews or Christians. Rather they follow an oral religion of their own which may be assigned to none of these categories. These people, accused of being “devil-worshippers”<sup>1</sup> by their Muslim and Christian neighbors, have for a couple of centuries, since the first reports of European travelers, exercised the imagination of European researchers and scholars.

The aim of this work is to throw light on the meaning of some elements in Yezidi religion through tracing their origins in Late Antiquity. Yezidi mythology and religious imagery have incorporated and adapted to their particular religious system some myths and motifs which once enjoyed widespread popularity in the wider region, but which have since been mostly been relegated to oblivion, except among students of Late Antique religions. The study of such motifs and myths would help to explain some elements of the Yezidi faith which have previously been considered obscure, confusing, occasionally even childish, and were deemed to be the results of Yezidis’ misunderstanding or distorting legends or myths taken from other religions (that is from Islam or Judeo-Christianity), or were simply dismissed since interpreting them proved too difficult.

These motifs fall into place within the Yezidi system of beliefs and become easier to understand once light is shed on their origin. Placing these motifs in the context of a religious language originating in Late Antiquity could be the key to a better understanding of Yezidi religion and the way it developed, as well as of the working of oral tradition in the region. In this context, establishing the Late Antique origins of some motifs demonstrates the way literacy interacted with orality in the region.

Finally, it may be of interest, especially for students of Late Antiquity and the Hellenistic *oikumene*, to see that even the Yezidi Kurds, living much later on what used to be the periphery of the Hellenistic world, have inherited their share of a common culture which contributed so much to the development of both the Christian and Islamic cultures.

Naturally, through Christianity and especially Islam, which contributed much to the

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<sup>1</sup> The Peacock Angel (*Tawusi Melek*), believed to be the chief of angels, God’s viceroy on earth, and the special protector of the Yezidis, is habitually identified with the Devil by Yezidi’s Muslim neighbors. As personally I have seen nothing among the Yezidis and in Yezidi text that would even distantly imply that there was any truth in this accusation of worshipping the Devil, or identifying the Peacock Angel with him, I mostly consider this accusation a time-honored method of discrediting the “other” (or rather “another faith”) along with the charge of sexual licentiousness, both wide spread since Late Antiquity, and shall not deal with it in this thesis.

development of Yezidi religion, Yezidis have inherited a great deal from Late Antique religious thought, as is obvious to anyone slightly familiar with Yezidi myths. However, the present study aims at studying motifs where such a connection is not immediately apparent because these motifs have since sunk into oblivion in mainstream Islam or Christianity.

To appreciate the relevance of such a piece of research, it is necessary to place it against the background of Yezidi studies: Yezidism, a religion based on oral tradition,<sup>2</sup> has always proved difficult to understand for people educated according the premises of book-based religion, whether Muslim or Christian. Interpreting Yezidi oral tradition and comprehending their religion was, until recently, to a large extent hampered by a lack of material. Researchers had to base their studies on the two alleged “sacred books” of the Yezidis, that is, two short tracts which surfaced at the end of the nineteenth century, on some brief and generally not too accurate observations from the pen of travelers in the region, and scant reports, even less accurate and reliable, from mostly hostile Muslim sources. Another problem was that Yezidi “teachings” were subjected to the same criteria as religions based on written texts and, as oral traditions function along rather different lines, Yezidi religious concepts were promptly found wanting coherence and even essence.

As a result, Western researchers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century tended to dismiss Yezidi religious texts<sup>3</sup> as inadequate, because they did not conform to their ideas of scholarly theology. G.R. Driver writes (referring to myths, some of which will be discussed in this study): “Their beliefs seem to be a confused medley of Jewish legends overlaid with the crassest superstitions, of many of which it is now quite impossible to trace the source.”<sup>4</sup> R. Lescot, in his seminal work on the Yezidi tribes of the Sinjar and Syria, speaks of the incoherence of the texts, their confusion and naïveté.<sup>5</sup> The editor of M.N. Siouffi’s “Notice sur des Yézidis,” in the *Journal Asiatique*, the first detailed account of Yezidi mythology, applies the term “puérilité” in the introduction to the article, where he offers an apology for publishing such childish myths.<sup>6</sup> Such opinions were shared by most students of Yezidi religion, who were at a loss what to make of the little they could gather of oral Yezidi mythology. As C. Allison writes: “Little sensitivity to the conventions of the genres in which these texts were composed was shown ... Little attention was paid to the ways in which Yezidis understood, interpreted and used these traditions.”<sup>7</sup>

Yezidi religion eventually came to be seen as “degenerated” and, as a result, academic

<sup>2</sup> Not only did Yezidis not have written books, but even reading and writing (and especially the writing of religious texts) was forbidden them, with the exception of the Adani lineage of *sheikhs*. Religious knowledge was transmitted orally by special “experts.” See chapter “Yezidi Religion.”

<sup>3</sup> Following the conventions of linguistics I will use “text” for both written text and speech, that is, spoken text.

<sup>4</sup> G.R. Driver, “The Religion of the Kurds,” *BSOAS* 2.2 (1922): 200-201.

<sup>5</sup> R. Lescot, *Enquête sur les Yezidis de Syrie et du Djebel Sinjār* (Beyrouth: Institut Français de Damas, 1936), 54, 55, 60.

<sup>6</sup> M. N. Siouffi, “Notice sur des Yézidis,” *Journal Asiatique* ser. 7. vol. 20 (1882): 252.

<sup>7</sup> C. Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Richmond: Curson Press, 2001), 36.

interest in Yezidis eventually dwindled. This situation gradually changed in the last few decades by the publication of Yezidi texts collected in Iraq and Armenia and, most importantly, by Ph. Kreyenbroek's two books *Yezidism, Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) and *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2005). These books contain dozens of sacred texts, in Kurdish and English, as well as information collected from Iraqi Yezidis on their religious literary genres, caste and social system, rituals, holidays, and a list of holy beings. Besides, making Yezidi religion far more accessible to researchers, Kreyenbroek's work has been also of great relevance in as much as it has drawn attention to the fact that Yezidism was essentially an oral religion and should be evaluated and studied as such. Furthermore, while not denying the far-reaching influence of Islam, and especially of Sufism on Yezidism, he pointed out that Yezidi oral tradition retained ideas which could be traced to Pre-Islamic (and in fact pre-Zoroastrian) Western Iranian mythology. Thus, for example, Kreyenbroek's comparison of the Yezidi and Ahl-i Haqq<sup>8</sup> cosmological creation myth with the Avesta and Rig Veda demonstrated the presence of a very important Iranian substratum in Yezidi mythology, transmitted orally through the centuries.<sup>9</sup> Kreyenbroek's work opened up new directions for research, partly due to the relative abundance of texts it made available, and partly because it made it possible to see Yezidism as an oral tradition, which integrated motifs from different epochs in its history into a complex whole, as is typical of oral traditions in general.

My study, relying to a large extent on the texts published by Kreyenbroek, as well as myths and other information collected during my field research, intends to add to the understanding of Yezidi religion. It aims to demonstrate that beside the Islamic and Iranian background, Yezidi religion also shows the influence of Late Antique religious thought and literature, tying Yezidis to the prolific world of late Mediterranean Hellenistic culture. It will also try to show that motifs coming from this common culture are not purposeless relics adopted haphazardly and whimsically by the Yezidis, but elements that fit into the pattern of a religion based on oral tradition and should be interpreted within the context of the interplay between literacy and orality.

Late Antique influence has, of course, already been suggested by several researchers. Finding common points between Christianity and Yezidism is hardly surprising, as Yezidis live in places where the presence of Christianity goes back a long way, and Yezidi-Christian relations have

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<sup>8</sup> Ahl-i Haqq, or Kakai, as they are known in Iraqi Kurdistan, are a Kurdish people who follow a heterodox form of Islam. Though officially, unlike Yezidis, they prefer to be considered Muslims, their religious system shows a number of peculiarities which are foreign to Islam, but very similar to Yezidi beliefs. Just like Yezidis they are considered "devil-worshippers" by some Muslims or at least *ghulat*, or extreme Shiites, following ideas that are not acceptable to the main body of Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiia.

<sup>9</sup> Kreyenbroek, "Mithra and Ahreman, Binyāmīn and Malak Tāwūs," in *Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religions: From Mazdaism to Sufism*, ed. P. Gignoux (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes: 1992), 57-79; idem, *Yezidism*, 52-59.

usually been good (probably due more to a shared sense of persecution than shared theological points.)<sup>10</sup> The strongly “exotic” character of Yezidis has also prompted some students of their system to speak of Late Antique “dualistic,” that is, of Gnostic and/or Manichaean influences or even origin. It must be stated, however, that such suggestions were either based on some misunderstood aspects of Yezidism, on generalities or just on general impressions, not on a detailed analysis of Yezidi ideas.

One of the features of Yezidism which induced researchers to look for a dualistic origin was the controversial figure of the Peacock Angel, the chief angel of the Yezidis, identified with Satan by Muslims. A. v. Haxthausen, a mid-nineteenth-century Prussian agronomist who became familiar with Transcaucasian Yezidis, thought that the reverence paid to the Peacock Angel could be connected with the Gnostic doctrine of the Demiurgos (the evil maker of the material world,) rather disregarding the fact that Gnostics were very far from revering the Demiurgos.<sup>11</sup> A. Neander interpreting the Yezidi’s reverence for the Peacock Angel as a cult of the Fallen Angel links Yezidis with Medieval Bogomils and Paulicians, who were accused of being Manichaeans.<sup>12</sup> N. Marr, who argues for Yezidism as an “authentic Kurdish religion” actually turned Neander’s argument around and suggested that the appearance of such heretical movements as Paulicians, Tondrakites, and so on (accused of being dualists) in Greater Armenia should be attributed to the influence of an indigenous pagan religion “de la même essence que le yézidisme kurde” on Armenian Christianity.<sup>13</sup> A. Grant saw some strong resemblances to the Manichaeans (though he ultimately ascribes them a Jewish origin as one of the lost tribes) based on the figure of the Peacock Angel (whom he saw as an angel of light), the geographical position of the Yezidis, and the similarity of Sheikh Adi’s (the holiest figure of the Yezidis) name with that of Addai, one of Mani’s apostles sent to northern Mesopotamia.<sup>14</sup>

A. Mingana, following a different line of arguments, thought that the name applied to the Yezidis in the Mosul district “Daisanites” (“Dasenis”) was related to the second century heresiarch of Edessa, Bardaisan, who displayed an interest in astrology, and had what were seen as

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<sup>10</sup> However, the most easily observable points of such a shared religious culture, baptism and the revered position of Jesus in Yezidism, can be misleading, as they do not necessarily designate a Christian origin. The respect Yezidis tended to evince toward Christian holy places and saints is again more a religio-social phenomenon than any kind of indication of a common past.

<sup>11</sup> A.v. Haxthausen, *Transkaukasien* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1856), referred to in W. Ainsworth, “The Assyrian Origin of the Izedis or Yezidis – the so-called ‘Devil Worshipers,’” in *Transaction of the Ethnological Society of London* Vol 1 (London: Ethnological Society, 1861), 42.

<sup>12</sup> A. Neander, “Über die Elemente, aus denen die Lehren der Yezidis hervorgegangen zu sein scheinen,” in *Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen*, ed. J.L. Jacobi (Berlin, Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen 1851), referred to in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> N. Marr, “Yeschcho o Slove ‘chelebi,’” (Again about the word “chelebi”) *Zapiski Vostochnovo Otdeleniya Imperatorskovo Russkovo Arkheologicheskovo Obshehestva* 20 (1910): 99-151, quoted by B. Nikitine, *Les Kurdes: Étude Sociologique et Historique* (Paris: Éditions d’Aujourd’hui, 1956), 230-31.

<sup>14</sup> A. Grant, *The Nestorians; or, the Lost Tribes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841.)

gnosticising tendencies.<sup>15</sup> He was also said to have established a sect known as the Daysaniyya. (Bardaisan was actually considered the spiritual teacher or predecessor of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, by St. Ephram.) He argued that this claim was supported by the “daily worship which these Yezidis direct to the stars, to the sun and the moon.” (Yezidis pray toward the rising and setting sun, but no such reverence is given to the moon or the stars.) He also stated that Yezidis were “greatly influenced in the second century by some aberrations of Gnostic thought” but he failed to support his statement with any concrete details.<sup>16</sup> The arguments about the name “Daisanites” and a “Manichaeian” origin were also raised by D. Chwolsohn.<sup>17</sup>

Sabaeian influence is also often quoted by authors, though what they mean by Sabaeans is unclear, as there have been a great many different ideas on the identity and teachings of the mysterious Sabaeans throughout the ages. For example, Driver speaks of the Sabaeans of Harran.<sup>18</sup> A. Layard who equates the Sabaeans with the Mandaeans of South Iraq and attributes a Sabaeian or Chaldaean origin to Yezidis, actually says (though without giving explicit arguments): “There is in them a strange mixture of Sabaeianism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism, with a tincture of the doctrines of the Gnostics and Manichaeans. Sabaeianism, however, appears to be the prevailing feature. And it is not improbable that the sect may be a remnant of the ancient Chaldees.” Layard bases his claim for a Sabaeian/Mandaeian origin on a Yezidi tradition that he had heard, claiming that Yezidis originally came from the south, from the region of Basrah.<sup>19</sup> G. Badger thought Yezidism came from Zoroastrianism, but was corrupted by the Sabaeans.<sup>20</sup>

It must be added that most of these authors displayed limited knowledge both of Yezidi mythology and late antique dualistic religions (which is hardly surprising, as most of the authors lived before the discovery of new texts made the study of Yezidis, Gnosticism and Manichaeism possible.) G. Gasparro, writing much later, had more material at her disposal, and her suggestion of a Gnostic influence is the only one which I think merits serious reflection. Gasparro is induced to look for Gnostic origins by the cosmic Pearl of divine light in Yezidi cosmology, from which God created the world. For Gasparro this presents typological affinity to the Gnostic image of the pearl which symbolized the consubstantiality between the Godhead and its emanations. Gasparro finds

<sup>15</sup> Actually it was not so much Gnosticism, but Hermetic doctrines and Platonic philosophy that attracted the Edessan intellectual’s attention, see J. Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 13.

<sup>16</sup> A. Mingana, “Devil-worshippers: their Beliefs and Their Sacred Books,” *JRAS* (1916): 512 and 516.

<sup>17</sup> D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus* (St Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1856), quoted in T. Bois, “Les Yézidis. Essai historique et sociologique sur leur origine religieuse,” *Al Machriq* 55 (1961): 123.

<sup>18</sup> Driver, “Religion of the Kurds,” 212; See also Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*.

<sup>19</sup> A. Layard, *Niniveh and its Remains* (London: Muray, 1849), vol. I. 306-07.

<sup>20</sup> G. Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842-1844*, vol 1. (London: Joseph Masters, 1852), 126.

the closest parallel in Mandaean texts, where the pearl symbol is widely utilized.<sup>21</sup> However, the pearl plays a completely different role in Yezidi cosmology than in Gnostic and related texts. For the Gnostics it is the symbol of human soul, rather than the material and the scene of creation.<sup>22</sup>

In this study, instead of making sweeping generalizations, I would like to analyze the possible influence of Late Antique religiosity on concrete Yezidi myths and motifs, making a detailed comparison of the Late Antique and Yezidi material. Unlike some of my forerunners, I have no wish to look for the origins of the Yezidis as a group. Such a search for origins, once very fashionable in the field of study of religions, is no longer thought to contribute toward understanding religious phenomena, but rather to distort it. On the other hand, identifying elements Yezidi religion has in common with the other religions of the region either living or past, and examining what Yezidis made of them, can be relevant for understanding the way Yezidi religious oral tradition is constructed and works.

It must also be understood that this study does not claim to present Yezidis as the direct and sole inheritors of the motifs discussed in the following chapters and certainly does not suggest that Yezidis are an exceptional, isolated case, the lone survival of a long gone culture. I do not wish to present the Yezidis as a group of people who mysteriously preserved some curious religious concepts, hanging on to them tenaciously in an ocean of people for whom such beliefs meant as little as they do to the modern observer. In other words, I lay no claim to saying that Yezidis, who appear in our sources only in the second half of the Middle Ages as a Sufi group given to heretical tendencies, are in effect some crypto-Gnostic or Manichaean group, even if most of the motifs analyzed in this work can be connected to these dualistic movements. Furthermore, I believe there is no reason to assume that the Late Antique elements necessarily made their way from written religious texts directly into Yezidi religious tradition – seeing that this tradition is unlikely to have emerged in a full-fledged form before the thirteenth-fourteenth century at the earliest. Rather, I argue, supported by the meager sources available to researchers, that the motifs discussed in the following chapter once enjoyed a wide-spread currency in the region and formed part of a common cultural substratum shared by and understandable to many different groups (including the proto-Yezidis.) Known to us from literary sources, whether Christian, Jewish, Gnostic or Manichaean, they must have infiltrated “popular” religion and became an integral part of the religious oral tradition of the region due to the interaction between literary and oral, between “high” and “low” culture. Many of the motifs discussed in the subsequent chapters can still be found among other groups in the Middle East, from so-called heterodox Islamic groups to “popular” beliefs<sup>23</sup> current

<sup>21</sup> G. Gasparro, “I Miti Cosmogonici degli Yezidi,” *Numen* 21.3 (1974): 221.

<sup>22</sup> For an interpretation of the pearl as the Indo-Iranian concept of “stone sky” enclosing the world like an eggshell, see P. Kreyenbroek, “Mithra and Ahreman, Binyāmīn and Malak Tāwūs.”

<sup>23</sup> The use of the word “popular” has become increasingly questioned by historians of culture, who claim that the notion

among “mainstream” Sunni Kurds. Sadly, the study of non-mainstream religious groups such as the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq, the Turkoman-Kurdish-Arabic Shabak, the Kurdish-Turkish Alevi,<sup>24</sup> Arabic Alawites (Nusayrîs) has so far been rather limited.<sup>25</sup> The same is true (perhaps even to a greater extent) of the “popular” religious beliefs and myths of the Muslim and Christian population.<sup>26</sup> As Allison writes: “the religiosity of the vast majority of Sunni Muslims, with their low literacy rates, their thriving Sufi brotherhoods, and their religious practices which bear a close resemblance to those of their non-Muslim neighbors, has hardly been studied at all.”<sup>27</sup> A statement to which the words of Hamzeh’ee could be added: “Oral traditions have not received the attention they deserve among social scientists. Unfortunately, one of the most neglected areas in this respect is the Near East. In 1961 Stith Thompson wrote in his introduction to Antti Aarne’s book on folktales that Iranian folk literature is ‘almost completely unexplored’. Even after 35 years, this statement is still valid today.”<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding, there is enough information at our disposal to at least indicate that the motifs analyzed in this work are not exclusively peculiar to the Yezidis, but are generally shared by one or more of the other religious groups as well, including “non-official” or “popular” beliefs current among majority Muslims.

Naturally, such an unusual study combining an analysis of Late Antique and early Medieval texts and of contemporary oral tradition, raises a great number of questions and difficulties which

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of “popular” was the “creation” of the elites, and it presupposes a kind of binary opposition between the culture of the elite and the “general populace,” while also giving a false impression of homogeneity within these two, artificially constructed classes. (See P. Burke, “Popular Culture Reconsidered,” in *Mensch und Objekt im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit: Leben – Alltag – Kultur*, ed. G. Jaritz (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), 181-91. However, I argue that in the present study it is justified to use the adjective “popular” to talk about the different beliefs of the non-literate classes. The emphasis here is exactly on the fact that they did not (and in the case of rural Muslim Kurds do not) belong to the literate elite, and consequently their beliefs, which may have significantly differed (or still differ) from those laid down in “canonized” texts, were seen by the elite as ideas of the ignorant and were only exceptionally recorded in writing. This lack of documentation means that one has to try to reconstruct the different “popular” ideas professed by the non-literate classes throughout the centuries with the help of what little was recorded by members of the elite, and the findings of modern ethnologists.. My use of “popular” is also far from denying the interaction between the elite and the other classes (yet another frequent argument against the use of “popular,”) since the core idea of this work is to demonstrate how ideas developed in a literary culture may have become incorporated in the oral tradition of non-literate people.

<sup>24</sup> Turkish Alevi have to a certain degree been studied in the past decades, though most studies concentrate on sociological elements, rather than on mythological ones. As for Kurdish Alevi who probably have traditions peculiar only to them, little study has been carried out, no doubt due to the sensitive political situation in Kurdish regions. As recently as 2001, Dersim (Tunceli), the heartland of the Zaza Alevi, was strictly off limits to visitors.

<sup>25</sup> This is partly due, no doubt, to political considerations, but also to the fact that these groups traditionally practice *taqiyya*, or concealment and have been reluctant to divulge their teachings to foreigners. The same was true of the Yezidis, though the last few decades have seen great changes.

<sup>26</sup> Speaking of Christian oral traditions in Iraq, J. Walker states that “studies of the ‘oral literature’ of the Kurdistan Jews support the hypothesis that the Christians of late antique Iraq also possessed a rich and diverse oral culture.” J. T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 78. As Kurdistan Jews were mostly studied in the second half of the twentieth century, there is no reason to suppose that such a rich oral and diverse oral culture among Christians would have been restricted to Late Antiquity and not be found much later as well.

<sup>27</sup> C. Allison, “Oral History Methodologies and Islamic Groups,” in *Ethnology of Sufi Orders: Theory and Practice*, ed. A. Zhelyazkova and J. Nielsen. (Sofia: IMIR, 2001), 442.

<sup>28</sup> M. R. Fariborz Hamzeh’ee, “Methodological Notes on Interdisciplinary Research,” in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beaujean (Brill: Leiden, 1997), 111.

will have to be addressed as far as possible. These include the following, related research problems:

## “Late Antique” Motifs

When I started my research my aim was to work on Gnostic motifs in Yezidi mythology. However, I soon came to realize that while some of the motifs I have found are clearly of Gnostic origin, others were shared by a variety of other groups, that is, they were part of the religious language in the cultural milieu of Late Antiquity, especially in the East, in the regions of Syria, Mesopotamia and Iran. My readers have to be aware that I use “Late Antique” as an auxiliary collective term to designate such different but still interrelated religious movements as Judaism, Christianity (or rather the varieties of Christianity), Gnosticism, Manichaeism and everything in between.<sup>29</sup>

It would not be feasible to pinpoint the exact origin of any of the motifs analyzed. Some of them are clearly of a dualistic character, but it would be impossible to say if they reflect ideas from Gnosticism or Manichaeism, and if the former, then which school of Gnosticism. Other motifs are equally likely to have come from Judaism, Syriac Christianity, Gnosticism and Manichaeism alike. In fact, it is even feasible that they are the result of an amalgamation of all these different religious traditions, with ideas and motifs fusing into each other and producing ever new forms over the centuries.

It should not come as surprise that it might be impossible to unravel which Late Antique religious movement left its mark on Yezidi mythology, as in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia<sup>30</sup> a veritable vista of religious syncretism opens up before us. “The East also became the home of a variety of gnostic groups, all of which display tantalizing hints of genetic connections with earlier Jewish, Jewish–Christian and/or pagan currents”<sup>31</sup> lived side by side and drew on the same sources. Furthermore, it may be assumed that these movements, at least in their embryonic form, influenced each other as well. They converged, mixing and producing ever-new forms of religious expression

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<sup>29</sup> Gnosticism (which is usually dated as roughly lasting from the mid-second c. AD to the fifth c.) and Manichaeism (starting in the second half of the third c. and slowly disappearing in the Middle East only after the coming of Islam) are both labeled Late Antique spiritual movements in the literature, hence my choice of the term. Although they cannot be labeled “proper” Late Antique religions, I will also consider the influences of Christianity and Judaism, for both of them not only coexisted (and were mixed) with Gnosticism and Manichaeism during this period, but also shared a number of common features and motifs with them. J. Reeves, talking of shared forms of mythological expressions and expositions ultimately rooted in Jewish biblical exegesis, uses the term “Syro-Mesopotamian gnosis” and “Syro-Mesopotamian” to label what he defines as “a regional trajectory that expresses itself in a series of discrete ideological formulations within the religious discourse of confessionally disparate communities in Syria (including Palestine), Mesopotamia, and Iran during late antiquity and even into the medieval era.” Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Though we know practically nothing of the history of the Kurdish mountains during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, it cannot be doubted that the different ideas fermenting in the intellectually fertile world of Syria and the Mesopotamian plains at the foot of these hills could not have failed to penetrate the mountains. Possibly they may have even served as a refuge for those who were persecuted for their particular religious views in the lowlands either by Christian, Zoroastrian or later Islamic authorities.

<sup>31</sup> Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 46.

that shared many common points and facets. What seems to be a clear cut border between what we call orthodoxy and “heresy” today may not have been perceived as clearly back then.<sup>32</sup> As Reeves said, there existed a “complex ‘symbiosis’ wherein Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Gnostic and pagan currents feed off of and reinforce each other to form strange, hybrid ideological structures.”<sup>33</sup> One result of this symbiosis was that boundaries between “orthodox” Syriac Christianity, dualistic movements and other schools of thoughts are sometimes extremely hard to distinguish between. This is clearly demonstrated by a number of literary works,<sup>34</sup> whose provenance is much debated among scholars. They have been ascribed to a number of theoretically distinct schools of thought. The ideas and motifs they contain may have come from Syriac Gnostic groups or Manichaeans, but they may have equally come from mainstream Syrian Christianity, or may even have an Iranian background.

Two more important factors must also be taken into consideration. First, we have at our disposal only a fraction of the religious literature of Late Antiquity (and the early Middle Ages) especially as regards those of a “heterodox” nature; consequently our knowledge of the religious landscape of Late Antique Mesopotamia is rather limited. Secondly, we must also keep in mind that the majority of the people must have been illiterate, at least from the functional point of view.<sup>35</sup> According to W. Harris, orality played a more important role than written works even in the spread of Christianity, a theoretically book-based religion. As most ordinary Christians would have been illiterate, or semi-literate, “the church’s leaders recognized that if Christian writings were to have much effect on the masses they would have to be transmitted orally. In the second century scriptures were normally *heard*.”<sup>36</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century, realizing that some Christians could not read the scriptures, “tells them to learn by heart a short summary of the dogma. In Augustine’s time, pamphlets describing miraculous events (aretalogies) were read out to the faithful. These were all ways in which the church brought the written word to bear on its partly

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<sup>32</sup> On the question of “varieties of Christianity” and the problem of “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” especially in the Syriac speaking territories, see W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.) The best documented example for the shifting boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is perhaps the fourth-century Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library from Egypt, which includes works traced to different Gnostic schools, as well as works of Hermetic, encratite (Thomas) Christian, Platonic and Jewish origin. What is more, the codices probably belonged not to a Gnostic community, but to a nearby Pachomian monastery, proving that heterodox works were once routinely read and copied in orthodox communities.

<sup>33</sup> Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 48. Speaking of motifs of ultimately Jewish origin - one of those characteristic features which these movements have in common (and which play an important part in the present study) - Reeves also adds: “a prime vehicle through which Second Temple pseudepigraphic traditions reached Mesopotamian, Iranian, and even Arabian soil was gnostic, often Manichaean, in character, and the subsequent manipulation of these motifs was governed by principles coherent with this origin.” See also F. E. Peters, “Hermes and Harran,” in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. Emilie Savage-Smith (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 64-65.

<sup>34</sup> For example, the *Odes of Solomon*, or the *Hymn of the Pearl*, probably both composed in Syriac.

<sup>35</sup> W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

illiterate public.”<sup>37</sup> Harris’ examples, naturally, come mostly from urban centers or at least from highly populated regions around the Mediterranean. It could hardly be doubted that the rate of literacy must have been even lower in the countryside of Mesopotamia and Syria, and the preponderance of orality even higher. It was an oral world, with all the characteristics of religions based on oral tradition. If the literate world (that is the written evidence surviving from Late Antiquity) gives evidence of shifting religious boundaries, oral religion respected boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy, and between different religious movements even less.

Of course, the world of the written word and the world of orality were not rigidly separated from each other. We know that there was a continuum between “elite” (literate) and “non-elite” (oral) culture in Late Antiquity as well as throughout the Middle Ages, and they mutually influenced each other, though we know little about the mechanism of this interaction. Nor do we know much about how orality and “popular” religion functioned in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, especially in the Middle East. Our sources from this period are all written and consequently reflect the literary culture of elites.

### **The Nature of Oral Tradition: Tradition and Change**

It must be understood that oral tradition, whether today, in Late Antiquity or the Middle Ages functions in ways which are quite distinct from literate tradition. The particular, defining characteristics of oral tradition must be kept in mind in order to appreciate how elements originating in Late Antique literate culture could have come to be absorbed into the oral world of the Middle East, and then into Yezidi mythology.

Oral tradition is characterized by an intricate balance of stability and change (creativity).<sup>38</sup>

*Stability:* Oral tradition may contain elements of considerable antiquity. Thus, for example, it is widely accepted today that the Old Testament, and especially Genesis, contains material shared with ancient Mesopotamian cultures and transmitted orally. Similarly, the Zoroastrian Avesta (or the fraction which has survived), which was not written down at least until the era of the Sassanians, was for long centuries transmitted orally from generation to generation. Though no doubt its text is “corrupted” (and the oldest texts, the Gathas, pose a serious linguistic barrier not only to modern interpreters but already to their Pahlavi commentators),<sup>39</sup> no researcher seriously doubts that at least some of the traditions represented by these texts can be traced back to the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> R. Finnigan, “What is Oral Literature Anyway?” in *Oral Literature and the Formula*, ed. B. Stolz and R. Shannon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976), 129.

<sup>39</sup> R. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), 26.

founder of the movement, Zoroaster, in the second millennium before our era,<sup>40</sup> or at the very least to the early period of Zoroastrianism. The Iranian speaking regions of the Middle East appear to be rich in oral tradition going back many hundreds of years. A famous example is that of the epic *Irradiant*, the story of the drawn out war between the Heavenly God and Lionish God, written in English by a man from Luristan, based on the stories he heard from his grandfather as a child. As R. Zaehner has demonstrated there is an unmistakable likeness between Zoroastrian Cosmogony and the *Irradiant*. The material of the *Irradiant*, transmitted either as a secret religious lore or simply as a folktale but certainly orally, is the evidence of the survival of a “substratum of ancient lore” through centuries of Islam.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, as Kreyenbroek has demonstrated, the religious oral traditions of groups like the Yezidis and the Ahl-i Haqq retain ideas going back to a pre-Zoroastrian Western Iranian substratum.

*Creativity and Change:* In counterbalance to stability stand creativity and change. The most distinguishing feature of oral tradition is, as has become an axiom of oral literature studies since the publication of A.B. Lord’s *Singer of Tales*,<sup>42</sup> the absence of a single correct version. Oral tradition as a rule produces many different variants, none of which can be identified as the “true,” “right” or “wrong” version. Oral tradition is characterized by variability and all variants are equally valid. Oral “pieces” are constantly being transformed by the narrators. Many researchers of oral tradition have remarked on how the words in an oral story differ not only from narrator to narrator, but also between the performances of the same narrator, new elements are constantly being introduced. The same is true as regards the sequences of the episodes in case of longer “pieces.” Two performers rarely follow the same order.<sup>43</sup> Such a variability and creativity inevitably means that the content of oral tradition is open to change. Non-literate religions are far more prone to change than literate religions, with their fixed points of reference.<sup>44</sup> This change includes both discarding old elements and absorbing new ones.

While oral tradition, and especially religious oral tradition, which is more conservative by nature than oral history, may retain very old elements, it does not necessarily retain *all* the old elements, rather there is a process of selection. As W. Ong put it, oral societies can be characterized as homeostatic: “Oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium of

<sup>40</sup> Zaehner dates Zoroaster to the seventh century BC, but Mary Boyce argued for a date around 1500 BC. M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.)

<sup>41</sup> R. Zaehner, “Zoroastrian Survivals in Iranian Folklore,” *Iran* 3 (1965): 87-96; and “Zoroastrian Survivals in Iranian Folklore II,” *Iran* 30 (1992): 65-75.

<sup>42</sup> A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York: Atheneum, 1960.)

<sup>43</sup> This is a phenomenon noted and written about by many researchers. See also the transcript of the interviews I made with Feqir Haji on one and the same myth and attached in the appendix.

<sup>44</sup> J. Goody, “Introduction: The Technology of the Intellect,” in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 1-26.

homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.”<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, oral religions (as oral tradition in general) show a strong propensity to absorb new data from other traditions.<sup>46</sup> New elements can be absorbed into the old system, where they are adapted and woven into the tapestry of older motifs, forming a new, complex whole.<sup>47</sup> While one oral tradition may easily borrow from another one, it is equally possible that an oral tradition borrow from a literate one (either directly or indirectly). In fact, in societies living on the margin of literate culture, literacy can play an important role in the process of borrowing. As orality and literacy (or oral and written traditions) are not two invariably separated entities, they may (and often do) actually influence each other.<sup>48</sup> Research carried out in oral communities of Africa, Oceania and the Americas has yielded countless examples of how literate cultures (especially Islam and Christianity) influence oral traditions (both oral history and oral religion.)<sup>49</sup> A special, and relatively recent form of such influence is feedback,<sup>50</sup> when information deriving from the work (and imagination) of missionaries, travelers, colonial administrators, or anthropologists writing on a people eventually comes to be incorporated into the oral tradition of the same people, and comes to be seen as an integral and ancient part of their own oral tradition.<sup>51</sup>

The influence of literate cultures on oral tradition must be kept in mind when considering the case of the Yezidis. Even though the impact of literacy on Yezidi oral tradition must have been considerably weaker in the past than today, there can be no doubt that written religions did influence Yezidis and their ancestors in the past, even if such an influence was less direct and more subtle.

The influence of Sufism on Yezidis (or rather proto-Yezidis), approximately in the twelfth-fifteenth centuries, is beyond doubt, and it is generally assumed that Yezidis, as an organized religious community, developed out of a Sufi brotherhood.<sup>52</sup> At least some of the first followers of such a Sufi brotherhood would have been literate. We have no idea when the Yezidi religious ban on writing was imposed, but most likely there was a period when, while this Sufi brotherhood slowly evolved into a distinctly non-Islamic movement, literacy could not have been completely foreign to the whole of the community. Furthermore, there existed other groups (Christians, Jews,

<sup>45</sup> W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 46.

<sup>46</sup> D. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Traditions: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 99.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter “Literacy, Indirect, Rule, and the Political Role of Antiquity in Oral Tradition,” 95-120.

<sup>48</sup> J. Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), especially chapters “The Impact of Islamic Writing on Oral Cultures,” 123-38, “Literacy and the Non-Literate: The Impact of European Schooling,” 139-47; Finnigan, “What is Oral Literature Anyway?”

<sup>49</sup> Thus, Biblical and Quranic figures and episodes can be found in the oral traditions of Oceanic peoples, Aztecs or the people of Western Africa. It was this phenomenon which the advocates of cultural diffusion used to support their thesis. D. Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982), 82-84.

<sup>50</sup> Henige defines feedback as “the co-opting of extraneous printed or written information into previously oral accounts.” D. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Traditions*, 96.

<sup>51</sup> For a list of instances of “feedback,” see Henige, *Oral Historiography*, 80-87.

<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 3 “The Origin of the Yezidis.”

and possibly heterodox groups as well) in the Kurdish mountains and their vicinity down on the plains, which utilized written religious texts. These literary religious traditions may have influenced the Yezidis, as may have earlier oral cultures of the region who then may have served as intermediaries in transmitting these originally literary motifs in an oral milieu.

Unfortunately, due to the complete lack of (written) evidence, we know practically nothing of how oral religion and culture would have functioned in this region in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. This is exactly the reason why observing the way Yezidi oral tradition functions today has great relevance, supplying clues to a better understanding how Yezidi oral tradition works. Therefore, before starting a detailed analysis of Late Antique motifs in Yezidi religious lore, a whole chapter will be devoted to the way Yezidi oral tradition reacts today to the impact of literacy and encroachment of modernization, highlighting the motivations and considerations that trigger changes.

## The Time Gap

Yet another difficulty facing us when we try to trace Late Antique motifs in religious oral lore, either specifically among the Yezidis or in the Middle East in general, is that of chronology. That is, we may have (relatively speaking) plenty of evidence for the present, and then plenty of evidence in the literature of Late Antiquity, and perhaps the Early Middle Ages,<sup>53</sup> but there is a gap of many centuries between these two epochs, religious minorities, especially oral ones, being very poorly documented in the surviving literary works.

The lack of sources presents a great difficulty for the study of Yezidi religion and mythology. There is precious little evidence of what Yezidis may have believed or the rituals they may have practiced, let alone details of their mythology, until the nineteenth century, when European travelers started turning their attention toward the Yezidis. Even these first travelers managed to learn extremely little about Yezidi mythology itself. As for the earlier periods, Muslim authors furnish hardly more than a few commonplace accusations, remarks about Yezidis rejecting Islamic law and its representatives and paying exaggerated veneration to some of the early leaders of the community. The translation of a sixteenth century *fatwa* against the Yezidis recently published in the *Journal of Kurdish Studies* is a good example.<sup>54</sup> Though aimed against Yezidis, we learn more about how orthodox Muslims of the time saw Yezidis, and heretics and unbelievers in

<sup>53</sup> In fact, even “plenty of evidence” for Late Antiquity and early Middle Ages must be qualified, for we know exceedingly little of Mesopotamian forms of Gnosis, most of our evidence having come from Egypt (though some of the works from there are believed to have been originally composed in Syriac speaking territories.)

<sup>54</sup> M. Dehqan, “Fatwā of Malā Sālīh al-Kurđī al-Hakkārī: An Arabic Manuscript on the Yezidi religion,” *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (2008): 140-62.

general, than about actual Yezidi teaching itself. As for Yezidi mythology, the *fatwa* says nothing, in fact the author does not even imply if Yezidis professed flagrantly different ideas about the creation of the world and mankind than their Muslim brothers.

Though in theory it cannot be ruled out that more informative tracts yet may surface in some archives, in effect this does not seem too probable. In the first place, expecting learned men of the period, often men of religion, to display a modern “anthropological” interest in the “doctrines” of heretical sects (as the Yezidis were then mostly seen), would be somewhat anachronistic. Those writing on the Yezidis were more interested in making plain their rejection of this “extremist” group than in delving into the mysteries of their teachings. In fact, if one considers that it takes a long time and intensive contact with the people, with plenty of field research thrown in, for modern researchers to get to know Yezidi (or any other) religion and customs, it would be highly unreasonable to expect descriptions of Yezidi religious ideas from medieval or early modern Muslim writers. After all, which mullah, imam, or even educated secular Muslim man would have gone and lived among the Yezidis with the sole intention of writing about their despicable ways. The mountainous, inhospitable and not easily accessible regions where most of the Yezidis resided, was hardly a land that attracted much learned attention in any case. And as Yezidis probably possessed no written books, scholars with an antiquarian interest were unlikely to come across such writings and expound them in their books. Thus, by force, our knowledge of Yezidi religion prior to the late nineteenth century is, and will probably remain, extremely scanty.

Some may protest against the validity of trying to establish a connection between Late Antique and modern mythologies, if we cannot find the missing links, in other words trace how and in what way these motifs found their way to their “final destination.” Researchers, familiar with either oral tradition, or with the difficulties of trying to trace the transmission of ideas in poorly documented epochs, reason otherwise. The headache of time gap is not restricted to the study of the Yezidis alone. The manner of transmission between two or several groups is often a mysterious question, even if the fact of a transmission having taken place is considered an established truth. Henige writes on this problem: “In many oral societies large numbers of variant traditions co-exist. In these cases the historian will compare and contrast these in his quest for common features: names sequences, motifs. When he finds these he can provisionally assume that they are clichés of surviving elements of an earlier – perhaps even an original – version. But this must always be by inference, the result of the historian’s applied judgment, and cannot be demonstrated by a series of links from the time of the event recorded until the present.”<sup>55</sup>

As I have said, not only oral historians, but historians working with solid, that is written, evidence may face the problem of missing links, often losing centuries in their “chain of descent.”

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<sup>55</sup> Henige, *Oral Historiography*, 76.

Establishing a connection between two systems without being able to pinpoint the exact path of transmission is not an uncommon phenomenon in the history of religions. Often researchers find such pronounced parallels in thought, language or mythology in systems separated by many centuries that a close correlation may safely be assumed, while at the same time, they have to admit to not being able to trace exactly through what channels these traditions were transmitted.

A very good example of such an approach, also concerning assumed Gnostic origins of some religious thought in the Middle East, is furnished by H. Halm. In his work he has successfully demonstrated the presence of Gnostic mythological elements in Ismaili cosmogony. However, as regards the exact origins and the transmission of Gnostic ideas, he simply says: “we may assume that the Gnostic pattern which provides its basis is of Mesopotamian origin.” Then he adds that more cannot be said, because there is simply not enough information existing on Mesopotamian Gnosis to determine the exact origin of these Gnostic thoughts, nor how they reached Ismailism, which started in the ninth century, that is, long centuries after the heyday of the Gnostic movement.<sup>56</sup>

Similar cases of “established origins, but missing transmission” are, for example, provided by A. Wensinck and S. Brock, albeit in different fields of research. According to A. Wensinck, the figure of the “servant of God” (universally identified with al-Khidr) in the Quran 18.60-82 is based on the Gilgamesh Epic, (which in fact is separated from the time of the Quran’s conception by a much greater gap of time than Yezidi from Late Antiquity.)<sup>57</sup> Brock, writing of Jewish traditions in native Syriac literature, says “for the most part there appear to be no clear means for judging just how these traditions were transmitted”<sup>58</sup> (despite the fact that both are amply documented in writing.)

In the case of the Yezidis, there is also another consideration which may help bridge the time gap, at least to a certain extent: comparison with other groups in the region. As mentioned above, Yezidis are not an isolated case. They are not the only group that have preserved “quaint” ideas long forgotten by everybody else, rather they drew many of their ideas from a common substratum shared by the people of the region. Demonstrating that motifs which presumably can be traced back to Late Antique traditions may be found not only among the Yezidis, but also among other groups, would make the question when these motifs were adopted somewhat irrelevant. Before they became a part of Yezidi religion they might have already been part of religious oral lore in the region, and Yezidis “inherited” them not straight from the written sources, but rather from the oral traditions of other people. Thus, I propose to follow the method advocated by Henige. I shall

<sup>56</sup> H. Halm, “The Cosmology of the pre-Fatimid Ismā’iliya,” in *Medieval Ismai’ili History and Thought*, ed. F. Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82.

<sup>57</sup> A. J. Wensinck, “Al-Khadir,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 902-3.

<sup>58</sup> S. Brock, “Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979): 225.

compare and contrast motifs in Late Antique works in the Yezidi mythology of today, and in the mythologies of other Middle East groups (including both “heterodox” movements and “popular” beliefs among Muslims) in search of common features. Such common features would suggest a shared origin, even if the individual links in the chain from Late Antiquity to present cannot always be traced.

## Sources on Yezidi Religion

Yezidi religion was in all probability traditionally based on oral transmission, with writing down of religious texts actually banned.<sup>59</sup> Among many other consequences, this ban has also led to a dearth of information for researchers. As a result, anyone who wants to study Yezidi religion has to make do with an unusually limited material. Furthermore, the material I have used for my study comes almost exclusively from the Iraqi region. It is possible that Yezidis of Turkey, Syria or the Caucasus may not be familiar with some of the material presented in this work, or may even have other myths and motifs with roots in Late Antiquity which are not known in Iraq.

### *The “Sacred Books:” The Mes’hefa Resh and the Jelwa*

Until the end of the twentieth century, the most important source of Yezidi religious lore in Western scholarship was provided by the two so-called “Sacred Books” of the Yezidis, the *Mes’hefa Resh* (*Black Book*) and the *Jelwa* (*Splendour or Revelation*)<sup>60</sup> “discovered” at the end of the nineteenth century. The former contains an account of Yezidi cosmogony, the beginnings of mankind and Yezidis, a short account of ancient Yezidi history and a list of prohibitions. The second is a text written in the first person singular, that proclaims the sovereignty and omnipotence of a divine figure who is identified by tradition with the Peacock Angel.

These two books surfaced in a number of manuscripts (probably going back to the same source), when Europeans living or traveling in Iraq first started to display a serious interest in Yezidis and their religion. The authenticity of these texts as genuine “sacred books” has since been seriously questioned.<sup>61</sup> It seems likely that they were written down by a non-Yezidi familiar with the Yezidi faith and sacred texts. However, today researchers agree that even if the manuscripts are forgeries, and Yezidis themselves never put their sacred texts down in writing, these two books

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<sup>59</sup> See chapter 4 on “Yezidi Religion.”

<sup>60</sup> Both titles are in Arabic, not in Kurdish.

<sup>61</sup> For an evaluation of the authenticity and nature of the “sacred books,” see A. Mingana, “Devil-worshippers: Their Beliefs and Their Sacred Books,” *JRAS* (1916): 505-26; P. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 10-15.

reflect Yezidi oral lore faithfully.<sup>62</sup> In any case, these two “sacred texts” quickly became standard sources among scholars. Thus, many articles appearing after their publication seem to repeat the same information over and over again, while other variants of the myths they contained, for example the variant of the myth of Adam to be treated later, escaped the attention of researchers.

In this study I use the following translations of the sacred books:

- the translation of Isya Joseph based on an Arabic manuscript given him by a friend from Mosul. His manuscript also contains an Appendix with materials on Yezidi belief and practice, a poem in praise of Sheikh Adi, the alleged principal prayer of the Yezidis, a description of the Yezidi “sacerdotal system,” and the 1872 Petition, which Yezidi leaders addressed to the Ottoman government to exempt them from military service.<sup>63</sup>
- the translation of Anis Frayha of the two sacred books (in Arabic) contained in the three manuscripts brought by the anthropologist Henry Field from Sinjar, Iraq. According to Field, the manuscripts were copied by a local scribe from three original documents, two of which were written on paper and one on gazelle skin.<sup>64</sup>
- the translation of R. Ebied and J. Young of an Arabic text found in a nineteenth-century manuscript obtained by W. Budge during his visit to the Middle East. The whole manuscript contains miscellaneous material in Arabic and Syriac, including a piece in Syriac entitled: *An Extract from the Story of the Yazīdīs*.<sup>65</sup>

### *Accounts on Yezidis*

Further information is added to the “sacred books” by the reports of travelers and researchers working on Yezidis. By far the most important of these for the present study is the report of the French consul, M. N. Siouffi, which was published shortly before the appearance of the “sacred books” and contains independent information collected by Siouffi himself (unlike many later articles which were heavily influenced by the “sacred texts.”)<sup>66</sup>

There is also the “The History of the Yezidis” edited and translated by J. Chabot based on two Syriac manuscripts, described by Chabot as “d’ailleurs tout modernes” from the Bibliothèque

<sup>62</sup> Kreyenbroek, “Yezidism,” 14-15. (As a matter of fact some, or perhaps many, Yezidis today in Iraq think of these books as their real and original sacred texts, others claim that originally these texts were written, but later they had to be destroyed lest they fell into enemy hands, and the texts themselves were memorized and transmitted orally. The latter group does not reflect the circumstances of the publication of the books.)

<sup>63</sup> I. Joseph, “Yezidi Texts,” *The American Journal of Semitic Language and Literatures* 25.2 (1909): 111-56, 218-54.

<sup>64</sup> A. Frayha, “New Yezīdī Texts from Beled Sinjār, ‘Iraq,” *JAOS* 66 (1946): 18-43.

<sup>65</sup> R. Ebied, and J. Young, “An Account of the History and Rituals of the Yazīdīs of Mosul,” *Le Muséon* 85 (1972): 481-522.

<sup>66</sup> Siouffi, M. N. “Notice sur des Yézidis.” *JA* ser. 7. vol. 20 (1882): 252-68.

Nationale in Paris.<sup>67</sup> The text, which according to Chabot was translated to Syriac from Arabic, contained some information on the mythology of the Yezidis as well as the description of some of their religious customs. The author of these tractates was evidently not a Yezidi, though he undoubtedly was quite familiar with them.

Of much more recent date, the doctoral thesis of Jasim Murad Elias, an Iraqi Yezidi, on Yezidi religious oral tradition must also be mentioned in this context. The interviews he carried out with Yezidis from Turkey and Iraq living in Germany were especially valuable for my work.<sup>68</sup>

### *Kreyenbroek's translations*

The impact of Philip Kreyenbroek's works has already been mentioned above. His translations and publications of Yezidi sacred texts (in *Yezidism, Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* and *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition*) are extensively utilized in this study.

### *Texts Collected through Fieldwork*

In order to familiarize myself with Yezidi culture and religion, I carried out research fieldwork in Northern Iraq, in what is colloquially referred to as "Iraqi Kurdistan," between August 2002 and June 2003, April/May 2004 and September 2006. As I was staying in Duhok, a town near the Turkish border in the Kurdish Autonomy,<sup>69</sup> my research initially concentrated on the Yezidi collective villages<sup>70</sup> of Shariya and Khanke near Duhok, and Baadra, the traditional village of Yezidi princes on the southern border of the Autonomy.<sup>71</sup> I was also able to take part in the one-week-long Autumn Festival and in the Feast of Sacrifice celebrated at Lalish, the holy valley of the

<sup>67</sup> J.-B. Chabot, "Notice sur les Yézidis: publiée d'après deux manuscrits Syriaques de la Bibliothèque Nationale," *Journal Asiatique* Sér. ix, t. vii (1896): 100-132. With slight variations, Chabot's text corresponds to the translation of a similar text by E.S. Browne in the Appendix to O. Parry's book, *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery* (London: Gorgias Press, 1895), 380-83.

<sup>68</sup> Jasim Murad Elias, "The Sacred Poems of the Yezidis: An Anthropological Approach," PhD thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1993.

<sup>69</sup> The (unofficial) Kurdish Autonomy (*Herêma Kurdistanê*) existed between 1992 and 2003 in the northern No-Fly Zone of Iraq.

<sup>70</sup> Collective villages or *mujama'ats* came into existence when Saddam destroyed the Yezidi villages (many of them in the mountains) suspected of aiding the Kurdish guerilla forces, and forced them into collective villages on the plain where Iraqi authorities could monitor their activities more closely.

<sup>71</sup> Though this village is a part of the Sheikhhan region which remained under Saddam's rule, Baadra was included in the Autonomy, with Iraqi military checkpoints just down the road.

Yezidis. On these occasions, men of religion and common Yezidis alike congregate in Lalish, making it an ideal place for research.<sup>72</sup> After the first Gulf War and the collapse of the Saddam regime, I was able to visit the settlement of the Sheikhan district,<sup>73</sup> as well as the twin villages of Bashiqe-Behzani, where the *qewwals* or singers of the sacred songs live, near Mosul. Beside the Duhok and Sheikhan regions, a considerable population of Yezidis also live in the Sinjar mountain area near the Syrian-Iraqi border. Due to the uncertain situation west of the Tigris I could pay only two visits to the Sinjar. On the second visit, however, I was able to witness the important ceremony of the Parading of the Peacock.<sup>74</sup>

Among the Yezidis, formal religious education has never been a demand, consequently most Yezidi “laymen” those without an active connection with religion, know very little about it. The little they do know is acquired in bits and pieces, apropos of holidays, pilgrimages and even folktales; as a result they do not possess a coherently structured knowledge of their own faith. Instead of knowledge of a mythological or theological nature, Yezidi identity can rather be said to be defined by a sense of separateness from other people, especially Muslims, coupled with a sense of constant persecution. To this is added the observance of a number of taboos, most of all the marriage taboos, observance of the Yezidi holidays and some connected beliefs as well as adherence to the caste system peculiar to the Yezidis. It is orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy which makes most Yezidis a Yezidi.<sup>75</sup> Notwithstanding, during the course of intensive fieldwork and prolonged contact, even such laymen can furnish many interesting details on Yezidi religion, especially as regards the way they see their own religion and how this perception is influenced by increasing contact with the non-Yezidi world.

When it comes to longer, more coherent accounts of myths and religious ideas on God, his Angels and their connection with the human world, it is better to rely on “religious experts.” Such experts may be *qewwals* (the class of religious singers), men from the cast of *sheikhs* and *pîrs*<sup>76</sup> who fulfill hereditary religious positions, *mijewirs* (the guardian of shrines dedicated to Yezidi holy beings,) *feqirs* (religious ascetics), and increasingly (this may be a modern development) simple laymen with an interest in religion and the Yezidi inheritance. I was lucky enough to have made the

<sup>72</sup> Though the territories under Saddam’s rule were theoretically sealed off from the Kurdish Autonomy where Lalish could be found, during these holidays, Yezidis were allowed by the Iraqi authorities to cross the border.

<sup>73</sup> Sheikhan is the “heart” of Yezidi land. Tradition holds that it received its name because of the many Yezidi sheikhs living there.

<sup>74</sup> See more on this ceremony in the chapter on “Yezidi Religion.”

<sup>75</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Yezidis have a strict caste system: *sheikh*, *pîr*, *murid*. Each *murid* (commoner, layman) must have a *sheikh* and a *pîr*. The choice of one’s *sheikh* and a *pîr* is not arbitrary, but is inherited within family lineages. *Sheikhs* and a *pîrs* fulfill certain religious obligations on behalf of their *murids* and receive regular alms in exchange. Religious positions are inherited within the first two castes. The class of *qewwals* and *feqirs* cuts diagonally across these three castes, but they are also classes one has to be born into. For more information about the Yezidi caste system, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 129-135; E. Spät, *The Yezidis* (London: Saqi, 2005), 42-48.

acquaintance of a number of such men, the most important of whom I would like to name here, expressing my thanks to them and to all those Yezidis who tried to help me.

*Feqir Haji* was my most important source. He is from Baadra, the traditional village of the Yezidi princes, not far from Mosul in Northern Iraq. Though he is not a *qewwal*, that is, a religious singer, he has professed a deep interest in religion and religious texts since his early youth. He comes from a *feqir* family, and has opted for actually becoming a *feqir*, that is, an ascetic or man of religion.<sup>77</sup> Feqir Haji is one of the best known experts of Yezidi lore in the community. During my fieldwork, none of my other informants paralleled his immense knowledge of Yezidi hymns and legends. He has a prodigious memory for religious texts, and just as important, he learned what he knows as a young man listening to his elders, as he said, and not from books, being from a generation that received no schooling. Though even his accounts occasionally reflected the influence of literary traditions on oral lore (notably, when he talked about the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia having been Yezidis),<sup>78</sup> overall he seemed to have been much less influenced by the recent publications on the Yezidi faith than people of younger generations.<sup>79</sup> This is a very important consideration, for – as it will be shown in the chapter on oral tradition and literacy among Yezidis – the ideas generated by these publications, aiming at modernizing Yezidi faith, often lead people to “re-edit” religion, discarding or reinterpreting traditional myths and notions. (A collection of sacred texts known by Feqir Haji was published by his son,<sup>80</sup> and Yezidi periodicals have also used him as a source for their publication of sacred hymns.)

*Arab Khidir* could perhaps be called the diametrical opposite of Feqir Haji. Originally from the Sinjar, he married and settled in Bashiqe-Behzani, the twin-villages where the *qewwals* have traditionally resided. Arabi Khidir is a school-educated man, but merely a layman, not from a family of men of religion, or even a *sheikh* or *pîr*. He started collecting Yezidi texts on his own

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<sup>77</sup> *Feqir* literally means “the poor one” and the word originally referred to dervishes, that is, Sufi holy men and ascetics. It is assumed that once any Yezidi who felt an ascetic inclination could become a *feqir* (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 133.) Today, only the members of certain tribes and families have the right to be initiated as *feqirs*. However, no member of a *feqir* tribe is under any obligation to actually become a *feqir*, it is purely a matter of choice. *Feqirs*, who enjoy great respect, are expected to lead a life of piety and abstinence, by fasting, refraining from drinking and smoking as well as avoiding any violent behavior.

<sup>78</sup> The idea that Yezidism was originally the religion of the region (“the original Kurdish religion”) and that the old civilizations of the Middle East were in fact followers of this faith, and contemporary Yezidis are their descendants still faithful to this faith but much diminished in number, is closely tied up with modern Kurdish nationalism. Furthermore, his mention of peoples like Assyrians, Babylonians and especially Mitannis as having been Yezidis, clearly indicates that even the more traditional forms of Yezidi religious knowledge has absorbed certain modern influences in the past decades or century, an example of the above-mentioned feedback.

<sup>79</sup> Nor did he feel that he had to offer an “apology,” talking about the moral excellence and pious message of Yezidi religion, like many younger religious experts did. He simply recounted his myth without a flicker of self-awareness.

<sup>80</sup> Bedelê Feqîr Hecî, *Bawerî û Mitologîya Êzîdîyan* (The Faith and Mythology of the Yezidis. Dihok (Iraq): Caphxana Hawar, 2002.)

initiative, dismayed by the apparent demise of the ancient lore. He strove to interpret these texts, much in the way a person with a Western-style education would do, and tried to construct a coherent philosophical framework, complete with a moral message based on these texts within which he could place Yezidi religion. Paradoxically, this also means that he is more prone to weed out some old elements which in his view do not conform to a coherent, “Westernized” understanding of the world and religion.

*Sheikh Deshti* from the collective village of Khanke on the bank of the Tigris, near Duhok, is a *mijewir*, that is, a guardian of the shrines of Beyazid Bestami (a Sufi saint “turned Yezidi) and Mehmedê Jindal (the lord of jinns). Sheikh Deshti, who is regarded as an expert on Yezidi lore by the villagers, is one of those who mixes traditional oral learning with modern methods, that is, avid reading of materials published on and mainly by, Yezidis. Though serving in a traditional role as a *mijewir*, he followed the untraditional practice of consulting his handwritten collection of Yezidi hymns whenever he was quoting sacred texts or explaining religious questions. He also regularly visited the Lalish Center in Duhok, a Yezidi cultural center funded by the Kurdish government, where Yezidi periodicals are being published.

*Pîr Jafo* was an octogenarian *mijewir* of the shrine of Mem Şîvan in the collective village of Khanke. He was a representative of traditional, non-school-educated generation.

*Qewwal Suleyman*, from Beshiqe-Bahzani, is the head of the *qewwals*. He was considered an influential figure who had also traveled to Germany in the 1990s leading a group of *qewwals* on a visit to the Yezidi community there.

The *Baba Sheikh* is the “father of the sheikhs,” and responsible for the spiritual side of the faith.<sup>81</sup> This position is inherited within a certain branch of *sheikh* family. The present Baba Sheikh resides in ‘Eyn Sifni, a town in central Sheikhan which until the Gulf War was under Saddam’s rule. I first met him in Lalish and following the war I was able to visit him in ‘Eyn Sifni as well.

*Qewwal Hussein* is a very friendly and welcoming *qewwal* whom I first met in Lalish during the Sheikh Adi festival where he was performing his music in the rituals. Later, I also visited him in his home in Behzani.

*Qewwal Qewwal* was an aged *qewwal* in Behzani. He was eager to share his knowledge

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<sup>81</sup> Western travelers liked to refer to him as “the Yezidi Pope,” though such a term is, of course, rather misleading.

with me – sadly, too much of what he said was in Arabic instead of Kurdish. He died not long after my visit. People present at his funeral claim that the sounds of the flute and tambour – the sacred Yezidi instruments – could be heard coming from his empty house at that time.

*Mamoste Sabah* is an English teacher at the Yezidi highschool in Baadra. His views represent the way a newly emerging, educated Yezidi professional middle-class sees, or wishes to see Yezidi religion as a faith on a par with the “religions of the Book,” and furthermore as a religion offering not only moral, but also scientific truths.

*Pîr Heci* is an aged pîr from the Mahad, a collective village in the Sheikhan formerly under Saddam. He is known as a traditional and religious man, and his followers claim he is a great expert of Yezidi sacred texts.

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During my fieldwork I made many hours worth of recordings. Evidently, it would be both impossible and unnecessary to reproduce all the interviews here. However, two of the chapters in this study will be based on the myth of the creation of the first human (Adam) and the Yezidi nation. As this myth is as yet only partially known to Western scholarship and the variants I collected contained many new and intriguing elements, I felt it necessary to transcribe and translate three versions of this myth. These versions may be found in the Appendix.

## Chapter 2: Religious Movements in the Middle East

### The Geopolitical Background

Yezidi religion developed in the Kurdish mountains northeast of Mosul (ancient Niniveh,) a region near the shifting border of different empires and cultures. The center of the Yezidi religion, both from the historical and the religious aspect, is the valley of Lalish, sixty kilometers northeast of Mosul, just where the mountains start. Lalish itself can be found in what is generally thought of as the heartland of the Yezidis, the Sheykhani region, a transition zone linking the mountain chains of Southern Kurdistan to the Mosul plain. Historical sources indicate that this is where the core of Yezidism, as an organized religion, must have first developed in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. From here it soon spread northward, over the eastern Taurus mountain range (of the Kurdish mountains), reaching south-eastern Anatolia. It was in this extended and mostly mountainous region where Kurdish speaking Yezidi tribes were numerous and powerful until the fifteenth century.<sup>82</sup> From here Yezidis eventually spread northward, through the eastern Anatolian plateau (eventually reaching the Caucasian region,) and westward, through northern Mesopotamia to northern Syria and the Aleppo region.

The historical development of Yezidi religion cannot be considered without taking into account the various external influences which affected the seemingly isolated mountainous regions known as Kurdistan. The Kurdish mountains,<sup>83</sup> while in a way “outside history,” have always existed on – and between – the borders of the great civilizations and religions of the wider region. From west and south lay Mesopotamia (a region where diverse civilizations clashed and merged,) to the east the Iranian world, and to the north Armenia. All these regions, their cultures and religious systems, inevitably exerted their influence on the mountains and its population, even if the terrain checked the ambitions of any conqueror. In fact, it may have been this very inaccessibility, which – while making day-to-day control by remote governments tenuous at best – made it possible that Kurdistan serve as “a refuge for various religiously and politically dissident groups throughout the age.”<sup>84</sup>

Kurdistan was clearly a place of many influences. Assyrian rock engravings at the foothills in South Kurdistan demonstrate the influence of Mesopotamian cultures from an early date on. Presumably this influence never ceased throughout the varied history of Mesopotamia, especially in the low lying transition zone linking the plains to the mountains, just like the region east of Niniveh,

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<sup>82</sup> See chapter 3, “The Origin of Yezidis and of Yezidi Studies.”

<sup>83</sup> Encompassing the Zagros mountains and the eastern Taurus mountain ranges.

<sup>84</sup> Yona Sabar, *The Folk Literature of Kurdistan: An Anthology*, Yale Judaica Series 23 (New Haven: Yale, 1982), xiv.

where Yezidism first took root. Beside the cultural influences seeping in from Mesopotamia, whether Semitic, Hellenistic or Roman, the Kurdish mountains also repeatedly came, at least formally, under the control of the successive Iranian empires (the Median, the Achaemenid, the Parthian and the Sassanian). This must have brought Zoroastrianism, partially supplanting, or at least influencing, the proto-Iranian religion of the mountain dwellers. More importantly for the purpose of this study, Judaism, Christianity (and no doubt related spiritual movements) also found their ways to Kurdistan from Mesopotamia<sup>85</sup> (and possibly from Armenia to the north.) Though little is known about the early penetration of these religions into the Kurdish highlands, important information can be gained from the history of the kingdom (or satrapy) of Adiabene at the foot the Kurdish mountains. This Semitic speaking kingdom lay principally east of the Tigris in the north of ancient Assyria, spreading between the Upper and Lower Zab rivers, with the Zagros mountains as its northeastern border. Its capital was Arbela, today's Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Originally the Tigris formed Adiabene's southwestern boundary, but with time Adiabene spread westward, and incorporated Nisibis in the first century AD.<sup>86</sup>

There were large numbers of Jews settled in the kingdom (or satrapy) of Adiabene since Assyrian times, when the Assyrians deposited the ten tribes of Northern Israel there.<sup>87</sup> Their center was in Nisibis (modern Nusaybin,) in Western Adiabene, but there must have been a considerable community in the capital of Adiabene, Arbela (modern Erbil) as well. According to Josephus Flavius, in the first century AD even the royal house of Adiabene converted to Judaism, and later Adiabene was the only community to provide help to the Jews during the Roman siege of Jerusalem.<sup>88</sup> There is no exact record available when Judaism penetrated the Kurdish mountains themselves, but it is reasonable to believe that it could not have been much later than the original settlement of Jews in Adiabene. Certainly, the Jews of Kurdistan traditionally believe themselves descended from the Ten Tribes.<sup>89</sup> Very little is known about the history of the Jews of Kurdistan, even the Talmud is silent on them, but the fact that they spoke their own dialect of Aramaic (containing many Kurdish loanwords), indicates that they must have developed as a group/cultural entity independent from the Kurdish communities of Mesopotamia before the Arab conquest.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup> For centuries during Late Antiquity Mesopotamia was divided between the Roman and the Sassanian Empire, with the border even moving due to the repeated attacks and counterattacks.

<sup>86</sup> See J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia: I. The Parthian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 59.

<sup>87</sup> Neusner, *The History of Jews*, 13-15. For the geography of Jewish settlement in Iraq in general, see A. Oppenheimer, B. Isaac and M. Lecker, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1983.)

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 59-61; *idem*, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83.1 (1964): 60-66.

<sup>89</sup> Neusner, *The History of the Jews*, 59, Note 1; and Sabar, *Folk Literature of Kurdistan Jews*, xv-xvi.

<sup>90</sup> Down on the Mesopotamian plains Arabic superseded Aramaic as the language of the Jewish communities before 1000 AD, and Aramaic survived as a spoken language (both of Jews and Christians) only in the mountains of Kurdistan. See Sabar, *Folk Literature of the Kurdistan Jews*, xvi-xvii. In the twelfth century the great Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudela reported that there were about a hundred Jewish settlements in Kurdistan, and the town of Amadiya had 25 000 Jews, though his reports were based only on hearsay. Considering that at the time of their forced emigration

Kurdish Jews, who were generally poor given the limited economic possibilities of the region, worked as artisans, weavers, peddlers, as well as farmers (possessing their own lands), loggers, rafters<sup>91</sup> and even as nomadic shepherds – occupations almost unknown in other Jewish communities.<sup>92</sup> The most interesting feature of Kurdistani Jews was the fact that illiteracy was exceptionally high among them (that is, for a Jewish community),<sup>93</sup> while oral tradition played an unusually strong role in maintaining their religion.<sup>94</sup>

Judaism must have paved the way for Christianity (in its many forms) and related movements, such as Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Christianity spread all over Northern Mesopotamia at an early date, and it didn't tarry in reaching Adiabene. Christianity had filtered into Parthian Adiabene and taken root among the region's Jewish community by the end of the second century.<sup>95</sup> It is assumed that the church of Adiabene attracted many of its converts from the region's substantial Jewish population.<sup>96</sup> Other early converts may have come from among the polytheists and Zoroastrians of Adiabene. J. T. Walker is of the opinion that "by the late Sasanian period, Christians probably formed the majority of the region's population, with smaller pockets of Zoroastrians and Jews."<sup>97</sup>

As regards the region where Yezidism first developed, Sheikhan, the Yezidi heartland, was divided between two Nestorian dioceses from the early centuries on. The lands east of the Gornel River belonged to the diocese of Marga, which stretched as far as the Great Zab. The western part of the Sheikhan belonged to the diocese of Bu Nuhadra. The village of 'Eyn Sifni<sup>98</sup> and its

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to Israel in the early 1950s the Jews of Iraqi Kurdistan numbered 25 000, Benjamin Tudela's figure appears to be an exaggeration.

<sup>91</sup> Transporting huge logs down the Khabur River toward the plains.

<sup>92</sup> Sabar, *Folk Literature of the Kurdistani Jews*, xxi-xxiv.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. xxv-xxvi. Sabar attributes this to the lack of physical security, poor economic conditions and communication with the outside world, and the small size of the population. Sabar, *Folk Literature of the Kurdistani Jews*, xxv. There were exceptions as well, of course. For example, the famous rabbi family of the Barzanis of Mosul, who gave one of the first female rabbis to the Jewish community, Rabbi Asenath Barzani of the seventeenth century, evidently hailed from the Barzan district of the Kurdish mountains, and she was actually buried in Amadiyah.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. xxvi-xxix. According to Sabar, "even the written literature recoded in manuscripts from Kurdistan had originated in oral tradition. Likewise, the translation of the Bible into various Neo-Aramaic dialects was transmitted orally from generation to generation with little change in style and vocabulary, and was only recently written down... Reading and – much less – writing were not common. Usually only the hakamim were literate." Sabar, *Folk Literature of the Kurdistani Jews*, xxxii.

<sup>95</sup> M-L. Chaumont, *Christianisation de l'empire iranien, Des origines aux grandes persécutions du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle* CSCO 499, Subsidia 80 (Louvain: E. Peeters, 1988). 52–53; Neusner proposes 100 AD. Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Christianity," *Numen* 13 (1966): 144–50. However, his dating is based on the *Chronicle of Arbela*. The authenticity of the *Chronicle of Arbela*, an allegedly sixth-century document of Syriac Christianity in Erbil, is very much contended by some researchers, while others accept it. There is no scholarly consent on this question as yet.

<sup>96</sup> Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Christianity"; idem, *The History of the Jews*, 168-69; and Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 107.

<sup>97</sup> Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 107. In any case, Christianity was firmly established by the early third century in the Western parts of the Sassanian Empire in general. Episcopal records show that by 224 AD there were twenty bishops in eighty-one sees in the Western satrapies of Iran. See Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Christianity," 147.

<sup>98</sup> 'Eyn Sifni is the "capital" of the Sheikhan region, where the Baba Sheikh resides today. Before the war of 2003 and the unification of the Kurdish territories formerly under Saddam and the Kurdish autonomy, respectively, the Yezidi

environment, including the holy valley of Lalish, was known as Bet Rustaqa (geographically located in Bu Nuhadra, but administered by the diocese of Marga until the seventh-eight century). It was this Bet Rustaqa which was then first renamed Sheikhan, that is, “the house of the Sheikhs” in the fifteenth century, as the number of the tombs or sanctuaries belonging to Yezidi sheikhs increased in the region.<sup>99</sup>

The other important Yezidi conglomeration of northern Iraq can be found in the Sinjar mountains (ancient Singara), a mountain range in northern Mesopotamia (on the northern border of Iraq and Syria today). According to Fuccaro Yezidi infiltration to this predominantly Christian region may have started as early as the thirteenth century, and the mountain was gradually settled by Yezidi tribal groups escaping persecution in the Mosul plain and the Sheikhan.<sup>100</sup> As early as the fourth century Sinjar was part of the Nestorian diocese of Beth Arbeye, whose center was Nisibis. For centuries after the Islamic conquest the Nestorian community of Sinjar flourished, but the Yezidi occupation of the mountain range eventually led to the peripherization of the Sinjari Christians. In the first half of the seventeenth century the Nestorian diocese of the Sinjar ceased to exist, a phenomenon which partly attributed to the advance of the Jacobites and partly to Yezidi proselytizing among the Nestorian population.<sup>101</sup>

As regards the Kurdish mountains proper (which later proved to be a fertile ground for Yezidism emanating from the Sheikhan), the exact time when Christianity arrived is uncertain. However, the *History of Mar Qardagh*, a late Sassanian Syriac work giving an account of the life of the fourth-century Nestorian saint and martyr, Qardagh,<sup>102</sup> attests to the fact that Christianity had already made inroads deep into the mountains. What is more, this work is in fact a testimony to the perennial function of the Kurdish mountains as refuge of the persecuted. The *History of Mar Qardagh* talks about a certain Abdisho, a blessed man (hermit) living in a cave in Beth Bgash (later the hero, Qardagh himself comes to engage in ascetic training in this region.) Beth Bgash was the name of the mountainous highlands lying north and east of Arbela, between the upper reaches of the Great Zab River and Lake Urmiye, overlapping the modern Iran-Iraq-Turkey border.<sup>103</sup> This is the

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prince also had his official residence in ‘Eyn Sifni. According to Yezidi legends the Flood of Noah also started in ‘Eyn Sifni.

<sup>99</sup> J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne: Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1965–68) vol. 1, 227 and vol. 2, 785-87. Interestingly, according to Fuccaro, in the twentieth century the Christian population of mixed settlements, like ‘Eyn Sifni, or Bashiqa and Behzani was not Chaldaean (Nestorians returned to Rome), but mostly Jacobites and Syrian Catholics (Jacobites returned to Rome.) See Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 45.

<sup>100</sup> Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 45-46.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48. *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>102</sup> The legend of the saint Mar Qardagh originated in the region of Adiabene, near Arbela, during the late Sasanian period. An anonymous East-Syrian author gave the legend its definitive written form, the *History of Mar Qardagh*, during the early decades of the seventh century. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 11.

<sup>103</sup> Walker identifies it with the Hakkari district, see *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 24, Note 26, and 108. See also J. M. Fiey, *Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus: Répertoire des diocèses syriaques orientaux et occidentaux* (Beirut and

very heartland of Kurdistan, the Kurdish mountains from where Kurds descended on the plains lying below with time. The words of the sainted Abdisho, when he recounts his life to Qardagh, imply that the first Christians arrived in this mountainous heart of Kurdistan as refugees fleeing for their safety:

But the blessed Abdisho answered and said to him, “As it was told to me by my parents, they were from Hazza, a village in the lands of the Assyrians. But because they were Christians, they were driven out by impious pagans, and went and settled in Tamanon, a village in the land of the Kurds.”<sup>104</sup>

This function of the Kurdish mountains as a refuge for those persecuted for their religious affiliations is of paramount importance for the religious history of Kurdistan, for it seems likely that wave after wave of denominational refugees followed each other seeking relative security (and sowing their own beliefs in their turn.) So, for example, the Jews of Syria and Palestine took refuge in Babylonia and Kurdistan when the Christian Crusaders threatened their community.<sup>105</sup> Sabar also assumes that the Jewish population of urban centers on the plain at the foot of the hills, like Mosul, fled deeper into the mountains between the fourteenth and fifteenth century, at the time of the Mongol raids, creating new rural settlements there.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, when the Mongol armies devastated the Christian (Nestorian) communities of Mesopotamia and Northern Syria, survivors fled to the mountains north of Niniveh (into the Kurdish mountains) to join their fellow believers.<sup>107</sup> Historical documents preserving the memory of all waves of religious refugees are not available, but there can be little doubt that there were many succeeding each other, with people fleeing not only marauding armies, but also central powers intolerant of religious dissent and perceived heterodoxy. The mountains may have thus provided a convenient refuge for Gnostics, Manichaeans and other religious “non-conformists” taking with them some of the heterodox ideas to be discussed below.

## From Gnostics to Islamic Ghulat

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Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 61; idem, “Proto-histoire chrétienne du Hakkari turc,” *L’Orient Syrien* 9 (1964): 448–54. The diocese of Beth Bgash was first attested at the synod of 410, the diocese appears regularly in East-Syrian synodical records. Its bishops participated in the synods of 424, 486, 497, 544, 585, and 605. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 108, Note 88.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 26. The town of Haza is twelve kilometers southwest of Arbela, and had a Christian community from at least the early fourth century and preceded Arbela as the metropolitan see of Adiabene. See Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne*, 166–67. The village Tamanon lies just north of the modern Iraqi-Turkish border, at the base of Jebel Judi, the mountain where Noah’s ark landed according to Syrian Christian and Kurdish traditions. There were important monasteries in its vicinity from the seventh century. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 26, Note 34.

<sup>105</sup> Sabar, *Folk Literature of Kurdistan Jews*, xvii.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>107</sup> Though there is no solid historical evidence that this influx of Jews and Christian – who may have preserved some non-canonical ideas in their oral lore – had an impact on the development of Yezidism, it is certainly worth noting that it coincided with the period when the dervish order founded by Sheikh Adi started to grow into a religious movement of a non-Islamic nature.

In the course of this study a number of different religious movements will be referred to. Religions like Christianity, Judaism or Islam need not be explained to the reader. The same may not be true of the other religious groups mentioned in this study. This subchapter merely aims to give a short introduction in these religious movements.

## Gnostics - Gnosticism

The terms Gnostics and Gnosticism are hard to define, there being many different opinions and approaches to their exact meaning. Though the term “Gnostic” was already used in Late Antiquity by the heresiologists to refer to certain dualistic groups they described as heretical, the term “Gnosticism” to denote a religious phenomenon was only coined by Henry More in the seventeenth century to be used against Catholics.<sup>108</sup> Eventually the words “Gnosticism” and “Gnostics” came to refer to the phenomenon of Late Antique religious dualism in the works of historians of religion, though there was never a unanimous consensus among researchers as to which groups and teachings these words exactly covered. The different “sects” as described by the Church Fathers (the main source on “Gnostics” until recently) appear to have too widely diverged from each other to make such a definition an easy one. The twentieth century discovery of numerous works considered of Gnostic origin further confused, rather than cleared up this issue. For example, texts from the Nag Hammadi library, the greatest discovery in Gnostic studies, not only show an amazing variety of writings, but at the same time “individual tractates place together opinions and myths which, according to the heresiologists, belonged to different sects.”<sup>109</sup> Battles have been ranging not only about the distinguishing phenomenological features of Gnostic religion, but also about the different categories within Gnosticism (Valentinian, Barbelo-Gnostic, Sethian, Basilidean etc.),<sup>110</sup> its roots and connection with other religions and cultures,<sup>111</sup> its dating,<sup>112</sup> about the identity of the different tracts, whether this word was used as a self-designation by the authors of the texts treated today as Gnostics writings.

All these uncertainties about the definition of Gnosticism have led a number of researchers to doubt even the validity of the term “Gnosticism” and whether it is possible to refer to a “Gnostic

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<sup>108</sup> B. Layton “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians*, ed. M. White and L. Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 335.

<sup>109</sup> Frederik Wisse, “The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 25.3 (1971): 209.

<sup>110</sup> For example Pearson writes about the Cainites “There never was such a thing as a particular Cainite sect of Gnostics. There were instead, varieties of Gnostic heretics who could, from time to time, be labeled generically as Cainites...” B. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 105. The same could be said of all the other sub-groups or categories known from the writings of the heresiologists, it being clear from Gnostic texts that Gnostics themselves never thought of themselves along these categories, or along any categories at all.

<sup>111</sup> Judaism, Christianity, Greek philosophy, Iranian religions, etc.

<sup>112</sup> Some talk of pre-Christian Gnosis, pushing back the beginnings of Gnosis to before our era, others think it should strictly be dated after the appearance of Christianity.

religion.”<sup>113</sup> In line with post-modern thinking many, who could hardly be called experts on Gnosticism, have taken up this theme and start protesting at the mention of the word “Gnosticism.”

It must be emphasized, however, that researchers using the term “Gnosticism,” do not do so in the belief that it refers to a single, undifferentiated entity. They are perfectly aware that Gnosticism is an umbrella term, and is used for the sake of simplicity to refer to a religious phenomenon which comprises different dualistic movements or schools, which may have ascribed to different mythologies, but agreed on some basic tenets, and shared a number of distinguishing characteristics. Doing away with the term “Gnosticism” without offering a viable alternative to describe this peculiar religious phenomenon of Late Antiquity would debilitate discourse on it, and any alternative terminology and definition offered so far has proved to be similarly or even more open to criticism.<sup>114</sup>

What makes defining Gnosticism so difficult is the very character of this spiritual movement. The Church Father’s comparison of the Gnostics to a many-headed hydra<sup>115</sup> was perhaps more apt than any other description of Gnosticism so far produced. The question categories and boundaries, the need to adhere to strictly defined doctrines in general were of little relevance for the Gnostics, who ultimately believed that it was the underlying message (the shared body of the hydra) that mattered, not the “outward garb.” This is the reason why the individual Gnostic myths (the heads of the hydra) were expressed in manifold ways, and Gnostic works were characterized by a proliferation of myths, which - although all of them are based on the same anti-cosmic attitude - often differed from each other to a great deal concerning plot, devolvement, the role of protagonists and many other points. These myths were to be interpreted as allegories and symbols, rather than the literal and unchangeable expressions of the truth, as the Biblical texts of Judaism and Christianity. As Irenaeus complains after describing various Gnostic interpretations and representations of the Genesis myth:

And saying such things about the Creation, each day each one of them invents, as

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<sup>113</sup> See for example M. A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism:” An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996); K. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.)

<sup>114</sup> See King, *What is Gnosticism*, passim. As Gershom Scholem sums up succinctly: “Of course, everyone agrees by now that ‘Gnosticism’ in the comprehensive sense in which it is used in the history of religion, is a rather loose term. Only a few of the several sects, groups, and tendencies, now considered ‘Gnostic’ were known as such in their own time. But this does not preclude the use of this convenient term for the religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine. It is to this knowledge that the very term ‘Gnosis’ meaning ‘knowledge,’ that is to say, knowledge of an esoteric and at the same time soteric (redeeming) character alludes.” G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960), 1. While Scholem stresses the importance of Gnosis, Pearson, emphasizes the other distinguishing feature of what usually is referred to as Late Antique Gnosticism, radical dualism, when he argues that “there are definite advantages in retaining the term because ‘Gnosticism’ (or the Gnostic religion) can then be usefully distinguished from the kinds of ‘gnosis’ ...that do not share in the radical dualism or other essential features properly reserved for ‘Gnosticism’!.” B. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 7.

<sup>115</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I.30.15; Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* V.11

much as he can, something new; for among them no one is seen as “perfected” unless he makes use of the greatest falsehoods.<sup>116</sup>

What was the lower body of this hydra then, from which its different heads grew, which formed the basic framework of what came to be called Gnosis by its adherents, or Gnosticism by modern historians?<sup>117</sup> This basic framework entails the idea of dualism, that is, “a radical disjunction between divinity and the powers that create and govern the cosmos.”<sup>118</sup> This manifested itself in Gnostic thought in an unrelenting opposition between the spiritual and material realm (of Light and Darkness). The material world, conceived of as evil, included not only the matter itself, but also its creator (god, the demiurge, the chief ruler) and his helpers (the angels, also referred to as rulers, archons, often identified with the heavenly planets and stars.) To the classic question “whence evil?” they maintained that whatever is bad and imperfect cannot come from the Good and Perfect (the spiritual realm of Light,) in other words the material world was not created by the transcendent God, but by an inferior creature of the matter, the demiurge or the creator. Furthermore Gnostics believed that the human soul (or rather “spirit”, *pneuma*) is a particle of Light, which “fell” from the Realm of Light through some tragic primal accident, and became imprisoned in matter. The 1966 Mesina Congress on the Origins of Gnosticism mentioned as the central idea of Gnosticism

the idea of the presence in man of a divine “spark”... which has proceeded from the divine world and has fallen into this world of destiny, birth and death and which must be reawakened... in order to be finally restored. This idea... is ontologically based on the conception of a downward development of the divine whose periphery... has fatally fallen victim to a crisis and must - even if only indirectly - produce this world, in which it then cannot be disinterested, in that it must once gain recover the divine “spark” (often designated as *pneuma*, “spirit.”)<sup>119</sup>

Gnostic view of history is one of a never-ceasing struggle between the imprisoned Light trying to escape, the representatives of the Light world endeavoring to help it and the rulers of the matters intent on keeping the Light imprisoned. The means of escape from matter, of redemption, is the Gnosis itself, that is, illuminating *knowledge*, which redeems and liberates its possessor.<sup>120</sup> This

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<sup>116</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Hareses* I.18.1. *Et de conditione quidem talia dicentes, quotidie adinvenit unusquisque eorum, quemadmodum potest, aliquid novi: perfectus enim nemo, nisi qui maxima mendacia apud eos fructificaverit.* Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 1, tome 2, ed. A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, SC 264 (Paris: Cerf, 1979), 272. Modern researchers have been more lenient toward Gnostic ways of exegesis and compiling texts. As Elaine Pagels has put it: “Gnostic Christians neither sought nor found any consensus concerning what the story meant but regarded Genesis 1-3 rather like a fugal melody upon which they continually improvised new variations, all of which, bishop Irenaeus said, were ‘full of blasphemy.’” E. Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 64.

<sup>117</sup> For works explaining what Gnosis entails and the different Gnostic schools, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press 1958) (still the best book for initiates into Gnosticism); K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); G. Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.)

<sup>118</sup> A. McGuire, “Conversion and Gnosis in the ‘Gospel of Truth’,” *Novum Testamentum* 28.4 (1986): 343.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 57.

<sup>120</sup> The term “gnosis” as spiritual knowledge, a transcendent form of knowledge (or understanding) derived from the contemplation of the divine, was also used by Christian authors, who referred to the Gnosis of Gnostics as “gnosis falsely so called.” “*Marifah*” (or *marifat*) used by Sufi philosophy to describe mystical intuitive knowledge of spiritual truth is also translated into English as “gnosis.” Neither the Christian, nor the Sufi usage of this term includes seeing

Gnosis cannot be reached through the usual exercise of the faculties of thinking, learning and logic, rather it is given by divine revelation, and is available only to the elect capable of receiving it. The content of this knowledge aims at revealing the true nature of the world and of the human soul, it is seen as the awakening of the soul wrapped in the forgetfulness of the matter. Thus Gnosis is both the means of salvation and salvation itself. “What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth,”<sup>121</sup> says a Gnostic extract preserved by the second-century Clement of Alexandria, while a Nag Hammadi text exhorts “before everything (else), know your birth. Know yourself, that is, from what substance you are, or from what race, or from what species.”<sup>122</sup>

This is the basic theme around which the different Gnostic myths unfold, offering a unity of cosmogony, anthropogony and soterology.<sup>123</sup> These myths, dominated by dualism, tell of the expansion of the first principle, the Godhead, the “unknown” God, filling the spiritual universe (*Pleroma*, “Fullness,” the world of Light) with his divine power through his hypostases emanating from him. They tell of how the tragic fall of a part of this divine power (or light) below, into the Chaos (darkness and primal matter) came about, often through the mistake or error of Sophia (Wisdom) or Ennoia (Epinoia, Forethought), the last of the divine emanations in the *Pleroma*. The myths tell in many different ways how this parcel of Light fallen below animated the matter and brought about the creation of the cosmos (always seen as negative) by the forces of Darkness. The forces (the rulers) are ultimately nothing but the shadows or abortions of the light world, the unfortunate results of a downward movement. Their existence depends on the possession of the fallen power of Light, now enclosed in matter, and makes them resort to all kind of ruses, including the creation of mankind, and all the tribulation men are henceforth subjected to.

As shall be seen when studying Late Antique motifs in Yezidi religious tradition, these Gnostic cosmogonies make ample use of Biblical material, especially of the Genesis.<sup>124</sup> However,

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this “knowledge” as the means of salvation or salvation itself, unlike in Gnosticism. As in the course of this study I shall repeatedly mention Sufi *marifah* (which has its place in Yezidi religious language), in order to avoid confusion, I shall refer to “knowledge as a means of salvation” in Gnostic systems as “Gnosis,” and to the mystical, esoteric knowledge in Sufism (and Yezidism) as “gnosis.”

<sup>121</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78,2 quoted in Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 45.

<sup>122</sup> *The Teachings of Silvanus* 92,10 -14, trans. M. Peel and J. Zandee, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, NHS 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 299.

<sup>123</sup> The individual myths may contain all three, only two, or even only one of these themes, the underlying idea being that the reader is already familiar with the basic framework of the myth.

<sup>124</sup> In fact, the presence and role of motifs taken from the Old Testament is so striking that it has led Hans Jonas declare that Gnosticism is likely to have originated in “close vicinity and partial reaction to Judaism,” hence the “impression of ambivalent proximity to Judaism.” H. Jonas, “Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon – Typological and Historical,” in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 102. Other scholars like Quispel, Pearson, Segal went so far as to argue for a Jewish origin for Gnosticism, though this conclusion is rejected by other researchers. See E. M. Yamauchi, “Jewish Gnosticism: The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the Trimorphic Proténnoia,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van Den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 467-

the use the Gnostics made of Biblical texts is hardly conventional. They were conceived in terms of a revolt, where anti-Judaism and a rejection of the Old Testament creator and his laws was an aspect of the general anti-cosmic attitude. Accordingly, most Old Testament motifs and stories are utilized in Gnostic writings in a “round-about-way,” where black becomes white and white becomes black. Gnostics achieved such an interpretation of the Old Testament with the help of spiritual allegory, taking “each line of the Scriptures as an enigma, a riddle pointing to a deeper meaning.”<sup>125</sup>

## Manichaeism

It is debated by scholars whether Manichaeism should be included among Gnostic religions, or should rather be seen as an inheritor of Gnostic ideas. Certainly, unlike the Gnostic phenomenon so hard to grasp or define, Manichaeism appears as a concrete religion, with a founder, a canon of texts, a definite mythological system, and a church organized along a rigid hierarchy. It was founded by Mani (210-276) born in Persian-occupied southern Mesopotamia in Ctesiphon, and brought up among a baptizing Jewish Christian sect (probably the Elchasaites.)<sup>126</sup> Mani, whose teachings were strongly impregnated by both Christian<sup>127</sup> and Gnostic ideas,<sup>128</sup> saw himself as the Seal of the Prophets, who was sent to found a universal religion among all the peoples of the earth. One of the ten reasons he considered his own religion superior to earlier ones was that unlike his predecessors he set down his teachings in writing.<sup>129</sup> He composed eight works,<sup>130</sup> thus providing his followers with a textual canon, and clearly delineated doctrines to adhere to. Though Manichaean communities produced numerous holy texts in the subsequent centuries, adapting them to local cultures, these works never deviated from the basic myth taught by Mani.

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97. See also Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*, NHMS 58 (Leiden: Brill, 2006.)

<sup>125</sup> Pagels, *Adam, Eve*, 64.

<sup>126</sup> A. Henrichs, “Mani and the Babylonian Baptists,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973): 23-59.

<sup>127</sup> A long range of motifs, images, expressions, ideas from the New Testament and especially from the Pauline Epistles have been identified in Mani’s *Šābuhragān* as well as in the different Coptic writings and even in works from Central Asia. See M. Heuser and H.-J. Klimkeit, “The Use of the Scripture in Manichaeism” in *Studies in Manichaean Literature and Art*, NHMS 46 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 111-22; K. Coyle, “The Cologne Mani Codex and Mani’s Christian Connections,” *Église e Théologie* 10 (1979): 179-93

<sup>128</sup> For the influence of Gnostic mythology on Manichaean mythology, see G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology*. (Leiden: Brill, 1984), especially the chapter “Gnostic Myth in Manichaean Garb,” 145-67; P. Brown, “Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1969): 92-96; S. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), chapter “Gnostic and Other Christian Influences on Mani,” 37-54; and *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1994), 51-69.

<sup>129</sup> M. Boyce, *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 29-30.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13. He also drew the *Ardahang*, a picture book illustrating Manichaean cosmogony. On Mani’s works, also see M. Tardieu, *Le Manichéisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), chapter “Les Oeuvres de Mani,” 45-64

Unlike classical Gnosticism, which was “dualism on a monistic background”<sup>131</sup> and knew only one principle, Manichaeism taught the primeval existence of two principles, good and evil, prompting Hans Jonas to speak of Syrio-Egyptian type and Iranian type of dualism. In the Iranian type of dualism evil is not derived from good – as the consequence of the fall of a part of the divine power to a lower state. It is the antithesis or opponent of good from the very beginning. From the very outset God and Evil, Light and Darkness, Spirit and Matter are opposed to each other as two “primal natures” or principles. But just as in earlier forms of Gnosis man exists in a state of “mixture”, and the Light enclosed in his material body is the cause or aim of the struggle fought between the two principles within the framework of creation.<sup>132</sup>

According to the Manichaean myth there existed two principles (or natures) side by side at the beginning. The Good Principle, Father of Light, dwelled in the Kingdom of Light, surrounded by his Five Glories (Intelligence/Mind, Knowledge, Reason, Thought, Deliberation.) The Evil Principle dwelt in the Kingdom of Darkness, surrounded by dark powers. The powers of Darkness having once glimpsed the Kingdom of Light are filled with a desire to possess it and start waging a war. To stop its attack, the Father sends his hypostases. First there emanates the Mother of Life from the Father, then the Primal Man, and finally the five sons of the latter, who are also called the five basic elements and also correspond to the Five Glories.<sup>133</sup> The Primal Man, putting on his five sons as a sort of armor, descends to take up the fight with Darkness. The Primal Man is eventually overcome by the powers of Darkness. The Primal Man then turns to guile, sets up a trap offering himself as a bait, letting the sons of Darkness devour him and his armor. With the help of this ruse the Primal Man manages to stop the attack of Darkness weakened by the Light they have devoured. However, as a result of his sacrifice, the Primal Man himself is trapped, becomes a prisoner of the evil powers. To rescue him, the Father sends his second son, the Living Spirit (*Spiritus Vivens*) to his aid. The Living Spirit awakens the unconscious divine warrior with his Cry and rescues the divine warrior from the prison of matter. His rescue however is not complete, his armor, his soul (his Five Sons) remains in the deep, a prisoner of the powers of Darkness. Human (and all animate) soul is a part of this armour of divine light imprisoned in matter. This armor or robe, symbolizing the sum of the particles of light imprisoned in matter, is also referred to as the Living Soul. It is this Living Soul (armour) which has to be freed from its prison, so that it can again unite with the Primal Man and return with him to the Land of Light. The cosmos is then created by the Father to help along the separation of matter and Light, while the Lord of Darkness, in an effort to prevent

<sup>131</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 58.

<sup>132</sup> On Manichaean religion and mythology, see Heuser-Klimkeit, *Studies in Manichaean Literature and Art*; H. Puech, *Le Manichéisme. Son Fondateur - sa doctrine* (Paris: Civilisations du Sud, S.A.E.P, 1949), Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, chapter “Creation, World History, and Salvation according to Mani,” 206-37.

<sup>133</sup> “The five elements of Light which the Primal Man puts on as an armor are as it were denser representations of the original five hypostases of the deity, the Sh’kinas.” Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 218, Note 15.

this separation, creates man from matter and imprisons a portion of the captured Light in his body. Henceforward human history, just like in Gnosticism, is one of a constant struggle fought for the liberation of the Light particles (human soul.)

Manichaeism was characterized by an extraordinary missionary zeal. Already Mani sent out a number of missionaries, and his religion spread far and wide after his death. Not only did Manichaeism pose a serious threat to Christianity around the Mediterranean, in Mesopotamia, Persia and Armenia, it eventually spread to Central Asia and China as well.<sup>134</sup> Its missionary efforts were greatly facilitated by Manichaeism's ability to adapt itself to local religions. Without altering the basic mythological framework of message of Manichaeism, its missionaries were ready to adopt new motifs, and displayed a great aptitude for accommodating presenting their doctrines in such a form that their audience, of whichever religious background, could comprehend and absorb it right away. Some Parthian texts even show that it was perfectly capable of camouflaging its message with Islamic concepts and images, when persecution by Muslims made it necessary.<sup>135</sup> This ability to adopt and adapt also made Manichaeans very important literary intermediaries between different cultures.<sup>136</sup>

These characteristics, missionary zeal, flexibility and openness toward local culture, make Manichaeism a likely candidate for being a vehicle of transmission between (pre-Islamic) Kurds living in the mountains bordering Northern Mesopotamia and Late Antique religious traditions.

## The Dualistic Movements After the Advent of Islam

Late Antique Mesopotamia and Syria (as well as Armenia to the North and Iran to the East) were home to different Gnostic groups and Manichaeans despite periodical efforts by both Christian and Zoroastrian authorities to exile them. Heterodox groups continued to exist alongside with "mainstream" Christianity even after the coming of Islam. The Nestorian bishop, Theodore bar Khoni (*Liber Scholiorum*, AD 792) and the Muslim scholar, Ibn an-Nadim (*Fihrist*, AD 988) give accounts in their works of a number of "heretical" sects, the Manichaeans the most prominent among them, still living in the region at their time. As Reeves succinctly puts it, "the persistent and

<sup>134</sup> On the history of Manichaeism, see S. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, and *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East*.

<sup>135</sup> See H.-J. Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1993), 52.

<sup>136</sup> See J. Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature: Representative Texts Chiefly from Middle Persian and Parthian Writings* (Delmar NY: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), chapter "Manichaeism as Literary Intermediary," 37-46.

recurrent flowering during the course of the first post-Christian millennium of a bewildering diversity of seemingly “native” forms of gnosticism - e.g., Manichaeism, Mazdakism, Mandaeism, the Islamic extremist *ghulat* sects, the Jewish groups associated with the production of the *Ma‘aseh Bereshit* literature... - indicates the vibrant vitality of gnostic ideologies throughout this region during this period.”<sup>137</sup>

Heterodox groups certainly enjoyed a higher degree of tolerance under early Islamic rule than before the advent of Islam. The Umayyads are known to have practiced tolerance toward Manichaeans (as well as others.) Some of those Manichaeans who had left for Khorasan at the time of the Sassanian persecutions even returned to Mesopotamia.<sup>138</sup> At the end of the seventh century the community enjoyed the patronage of the governor of Iraq, and the *archegos* (the head of the Manichaean community, who traditionally resided in the Twin-Cities of Seleuceia-Ctesiphon, then moved to the new capital Baghdad under the Abbasids) even received items of luxury from him as gifts.<sup>139</sup> The Abbasids, who took over from the Umayyads in 750, were far less tolerant than their predecessors, and Manichaeans were persecuted as *zanadiqa*.<sup>140</sup> However, despite official persecutions and forced conversions, which became especially severe between 783-87, the Manichaean community still remained influential and philosophically productive well into the ninth century.<sup>141</sup> The Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (908-32) brought the close of Iraqi Manichaeism in Iraq. The *archegos* had to leave Baghdad around the year 908.<sup>142</sup> According to an-Nadim, those few who stayed in Iraq kept their identity secret, while the most left the region.<sup>143</sup> He claims to have still personally known three hundred *zindiq* (heretics, not all of whom may have been Manichaeans) in mid-tenth century, but by the time of the composition of his *Fihrist* at the close of the first millennium, he had only five left among his friends.<sup>144</sup> Most Manichaeans deemed it better to either hide their identity for good or leave the region.<sup>145</sup>

Not only did Gnostic and Manichaean groups survive well into Islamic times, they also

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<sup>137</sup> Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 209.

<sup>138</sup> Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 112

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-13.

<sup>140</sup> The plural of *zindiq*, a term borrowed from the Sassanians. Though originally applied to refer to those of a dualists ascetic religious conviction, it eventually came to signify all heresies which were seen as threatening the Islamic state, which makes it hard to know if all those later references to *zindiq* are indeed an indication of flourishing dualism, or merely a general term, much like “Manichaean” became freely applied to different heretical tendencies in Christendom.

<sup>141</sup> Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 114.

<sup>142</sup> Cyril Glassé, “Crypto-Manicheism in the Abbasid Empire,” in *Manicheismo e Oriente Cristiano Antico*, ed. L. Cirillo and A. van Tongerloo (Louvain-Naples: Brepols, 1997), 110.

<sup>143</sup> Ibn an-Nadim. *Kitab al-Fihrist*. Ed. and trans. Buyard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 802.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 803.

<sup>145</sup> The majority went to Central Asia, where the Manichaeans of the time enjoyed the protection of the Uighur kingdom, though their reception by those already settled there was not always enthusiastic. (Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 114.) We cannot rule out, however, even if we would have no written evidence left of this, that some could have taken refuge in the Kurdish mountains only nominally Islamicised at the time.

seem to have seriously influenced some *ghulat*<sup>146</sup> movements. Some researchers see a strong Manichaean influence in the emergence of such Islamic movements and the Ismailis, the Qarmatis and even the Sufi movement. Cyril Glassé argues that such emblematic figures of the Sufi movement Bayazid Bastami (804-874), Sahl Tutsari (d. 896) and as Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) were in fact crypto-Manichaeans, in active contact with other Manichaeans both in the Abbasid Empire and outside it.<sup>147</sup> Even the invisible Sufi spiritual hierarchies are believed to resemble the descriptions of the Manichaean hierarchy.<sup>148</sup> However, narrowing down the possible source of Gnosticizing influence to Manichaeans alone presents a rather oversimplified image of this region, where many different religious schools coexisted, and often overlapped. What seems certain is that ideas of a Gnostic origin mixed with local forms of paganism in Iraq, giving birth to the formation of new sects.<sup>149</sup> Gnosticizing Islamic sects appeared from the early eighth century on, including such powerful movements as the Ismaili and the Nusayrî,<sup>150</sup> as well as smaller, less known groups and figures.<sup>151</sup> For example, Wasserstrom writes of Mughîra b. Sa'îd (d. 736), one of the “first Gnostics of Islam,” whose central teaching is an Islamicized reworking of a nearly unaltered Gnostic cosmology, that he “emerged out of the Aramaic milieu of late antiquity, in which such Gnostic teachings and the syncretistic ‘transposition’ of their forms were common features,”<sup>152</sup> adding that “Mughîra's religion is an amalgam that comprises demonstrable elements of Jewish, Gnostic, Manichaean, and native Mesopotamian mythologies, in a baptist context.”<sup>153</sup> Wasserstrom also emphasizes that the “free borrowing of formulae,” “transposition of forms” and syncretism in general was one of the distinguishing features of “the Aramaicized multicultural matrix of late antique Mesopotamia.”<sup>154</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Sg. *Ghuluww*, “extremists,” “exaggerators.” It is used to denote Islamic movements, which ascribe divine characteristics to a member of Muhammad’s family, generally Ali.

<sup>147</sup> Cyril Glassé, “Crypto-Manicheism in the Abbasid Empire,” 105-223. See also M. Browder-Hampton, “The Formulation of Manichaeism in Late Umayyad Islam,” in *Studia Manichaica II*, ed. G. Wiessner and H.-J. Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 328-33.

<sup>148</sup> G. Monnot, “Matoridi et le Manichéisme,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominician d’Études Orientales du Caire* 13 (1977): 39-65, quoted in Glassé, “Crypto-Manicheism in the Abbasid Empire,” 123.

<sup>149</sup> M. Morony, *Iraq After The Muslim Conquest* (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2005), 408-409.

<sup>150</sup> H. Halm, *Die islamische Gnosis: Die extreme Schia und die ‘Alawiten* (Zurich: Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 1982); idem, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismailiya* (Wiesbaden: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1978); H. Corbin, *Cyclical Time & Ismaili Gnosis* (London: Kegan Paul, 1983) (I must add, though, that in my opinion Corbin’s work is not quite convincing.)

<sup>151</sup> Morony, *Iraq*, chapter “Pagans and Gnostics,” 384-429.

<sup>152</sup> S. Wasserstrom, “The Moving Finger Writes: Mughîra b. Sa'îd’s Islamic Gnosis and the Myth of its Rejection,” *History of Religions* 25.1 (1985): 4.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* Of course, our knowledge of heterodox communities, limited as it is, is restricted to the domain of written religion. Nothing is known of oral culture, among the illiterate population who, at least on the surface, assimilated to the Islam or Christianity to avoid persecution.

## Contemporary Heterodox Religious Movements in the Middle East

It may also be necessary to say a few words about the different heterodox movements of the region, with whom Yezidis have displayed connections of varying degrees.

### *Ahl-i Haqq*

The Ahl-i Haqq<sup>155</sup> (literally the “People of the Truth,” also known as Yaresan, and in Iraqi Kurdistan as Kakai) are a Kurdish speaking religious minority in Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan, who are considered as *ghulat*, or Shiite extremists by some Muslim theologians. Ahl-i Haqq adherents themselves are not unanimous on their position vis-à-vis Islam. Some distance themselves from Islamic tradition and define their religion as a separate creed, others try to present the faith as in accordance with Shiia orthodoxies, but enriched with a mystical message.<sup>156</sup> Very little is known of their origin, though its formation is generally dated by scholars to the fourteenth or early fifteenth century, a period of power vacuum giving rise to many heterodox movements in the region. Just like Yezidism, the Ahl-i Haqq is believed to have started as a variant of Sufism, appealing to nomadic tribesman and peasants, though in their case a strong Shiia influence is also undeniable.<sup>157</sup>

Despite their association with extreme Shiism – unlike Yezidis, who seem to have emerged from an orthodox Sunni background<sup>158</sup> – the Ahl-i Haqq show a striking resemblance with Yezidis both as regards their religious teachings and their socio-religious institutions.<sup>159</sup> Just like Yezidis, they teach the successive manifestation of the Divinity (or of the divine essence) in human form (as religious leaders,) with each manifestation accompanied by incarnated angels, the angels themselves being the emanations of the Divinity. They profess the metempsychosis of human souls

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<sup>155</sup> For studies of the Ahl-i Haqq, see R. Hamzeh’ee, *The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1990); V. Minorsky, “Notes sur la Secte des Ahlé-Haqq,” *Revue du Monde Musulman* 40-41 (1920): 20-97, and 45 (1921): 205-302; W. Ivanow, *The Truth Worshipers of Kurdistan* (Leiden: The Ismaili Society, 1955); C. Edmonds, “The Beliefs and Practices of the Ahl-i Haqq of Iraq,” *Iran* 7 (1969): 87-106; V. Minorsky, “Ahl-i Hakk,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam* vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 260- 63.

<sup>156</sup> The latter position is the one taken by the so-called reformists, who belong to the school-educated, literate layer of the movement, and who are also intent on transforming Ahl-i Haqq from a basically oral religion to a written one. Traditional, rural communities tend to subscribe to the first view. As Jean During writes “the written official discourse of the elite may not reflect the illiterate or oral tradition of the people.” J. During, “A Critical Survey on Ahle Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran,” in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, ed. T. Olson, E. Özdalga, C. Raudvere (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1996), 110. The Kakai in Iraq are officially considered Muslims at their own request, notwithstanding, they see themselves as a separate community and do not intermarry with other Muslim groups. Kurdish nationalists, on the other hand, stress the ancient Kurdish or Iranian aspects of Ahl-i Haqq, calling it (along with Yezidism and Alevism) the “Cult of Angels,” a term and notion coined by M. Izady, who tried to create a national mythology for Kurdish speakers in his book much read by Kurds. M. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1992.), 145-57.

<sup>157</sup> Ivanow (*Truth Worshipers*, 69-74) is convinced that it was primarily the Ismailism, an extreme Shiite movement, which influenced the Ahl-i Haqq.

<sup>158</sup> See chapter 3 “The Origin of Yezidis.”

<sup>159</sup> For details on Yezidi religion, see chapter 4 “Yezidi Religion.”

as well.<sup>160</sup> Their creation myth, recounting the creation of the world from a primeval Pearl is beyond doubt related to the creation myth of the Yezidis, and probably going back to the same West Iranian mythological background.<sup>161</sup> They also have a number of other myths in common with Yezidis. Ahl-i Haqq society is stratified according to a hereditary religious caste system, which may have had its root in Sufi hierarchy, dividing it into *murids* (followers) and *pîrs*. Each member of the community must have a *pîr* from one of the Khandans, that is, Sayyid families (who trace their descent to one of the incarnations of the Divinity.) Like Yezidis they also have the institution of “brother/sister of hereafter,” which is a must for all adherents. The Ahl-i Haqq also have a number of festivals and rites, some of them possibly also of an ancient Iranian origin, in common with the Yezidis.<sup>162</sup>

The Ahl-i Haqq possess a rich oral tradition in the form of the so-called *kalam*s (lit. “words,”), their religious poetry. *Kalam*s and accompanying myths were originally transmitted orally from generation to generation. They were committed to writing probably only in the nineteenth century.<sup>163</sup> The manuscripts of the *kalam*s were then jealously guarded by the Sayyids, the caste of religious leaders, and the *kalam-khwan* (kalam-reciters), who were the traditional keepers of the tradition.<sup>164</sup> Until today most of Ahl-i Haqq literature is available only in Kurdish or Persian.<sup>165</sup> Studying the sect and sacred texts was also hampered by the principle of *taqiyya* or secrecy, dissimulation, practiced by them as well as by Yezidis and practically all the persecuted heterodox religious groups of the Middle East.

### *Nusayrîs*

Nusayrîs,<sup>166</sup> also known as Alawis, are an extreme Shiia sect, who venerate Ali bin Talib as supreme God. Nusayrîs consider Ali the incarnation of God, or rather think that he is the highest member of the divine trinity, who periodically manifests himself in the form of prophets in the human world, his last manifestation being Ali bin Talib, son-in-law of Mohamed. Nusayrîs are

<sup>160</sup> Unlike Yezidis, however, they claim that people were created with different natures. Those of yellow clay have the possibility of reaching purification through repeated incarnation, which increases their luminous state, while those made of black earth are irredeemably evil.

<sup>161</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>162</sup> See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 52-54, and idem, “On the Study of Some Heterodox Sects in Kurdistan,” *Les Annales de l’Autre Islam* INALCO-ERISM 5 (1998): 163-84.

<sup>163</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Faith and Culture and the Ahl-e Haqq,” in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, ed. C. Allison and P. Kreyenbroek (London: Zed Books, 1996), 118.

<sup>164</sup> The *kalam-khwan* appear to be the Ahl-i Haqq equivalent of the Yezidis *qewwal* class.

<sup>165</sup> Notable exceptions being the translations of Hamzeh’ee, Ivanow, Mokri and Minorsky. For the state of publication and study of Ahl-i Haqq texts, see Dering, “A Critical Survey on Ahle Haqq Studies,” 105-111.

<sup>166</sup> For a detailed treatment of the different aspects of Nusayrî faith, based on the analysis of a number of Nusayrî manuscripts, see M. M. Bar-Asher and A. Kofsky, *The Nusayrî-‘Alawî Religion: An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); and T. Olsson, “The Gnosis of Mountaineers and Townspeople. The Religion of the Syrian Alawites, or the Nusairîs,” in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, ed. T. Olsson, E. Özdalga and C. Raudvere (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1997), 167-83; and H. Halm, “Nusayriyya” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* vol. 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 145-48.

believed to have been strongly influenced by some heretical movements of early Christianity, including Late Antique Gnosticism.<sup>167</sup> Just like Yezidis and other much-persecuted heterodox religious groups of the Middle East, they practice *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, so it has not been easy to learn about the details of their doctrines, though some manuscripts have come to light since the nineteenth century. Nusayrîs teach the periodical manifestation of the Divinity on earth. In each of its earthly manifestations (seven altogether) God (the Essence, *ma'nā*) is accompanied by two subordinate hypostases, the Name and the Veil/Gate. Nusayrîs also teach that the soul of the Nusayrîs were lights, surrounding and praising God, but then due to their insubordination and ignorance they fell, were closed in material bodies and condemned to metempsychosis. From this cycle of continual rebirths only the elect, those, who become capable of recognizing the true Essence of God behind the Name and the Veil, will break free. The freed soul will journey back across the seven heavens, and arrive at its ultimate destination, the contemplation of the divine light.

According to the tradition the sect was probably formed in Iraq in the ninth century by Muhammad ibn Nusayr (d. 883, a supporter of the tenth Shiia imam), from where they later spread westward. Though today Nusayrîs live in Syria and Lebanon and in Southern Turkey,<sup>168</sup> with the heart of their land being in the mountain range, the Jabal al-Nusayrîya, running parallel to the Syrian sea-coast, they could be found over a much wider area once. There must have been Nusayrîs in Northern Mesopotamia, near Kurdistan, as according to our sources in the thirteenth century a number of Nusayrî tribes moved from the Sinjar mountain to Syria, under the leadership of Amir Hasan Yusuf al-Makhzun, in order to help their co-religionists against the Kurds oppressing them.<sup>169</sup> Though traditionally considered heretics and even idolaters by Sunni Muslims today it is the minority Alawi who rule the Syrian military, and consequently Syria, with the Alawi Assad family at the helm.

### *Mandaeans*

Mandaeans (also referred to as Sabaeans) are a group that could fit both categories, that of contemporary heterodox movements in the Middle East, as well as that of Late Antique dualistic religious movements. Mandaeans, today living in the south of Iraq, in the swamp region between the Euphrates and Tigris running into the Persian Gulf, are often referred to as the last surviving

<sup>167</sup> Halm, *Gnosis*, 298-300. T. Olsson, "The Gnosis of Mountaineers and Townspeople;" M. Maróth, "Alaviták" (Alawites,) in *Iráni Föld – Perzsa Kultúra* (Iranian Land – Persian Culture), ed. Éva Jeremiás M. (Piliscsaba: Avicenna Oriental Institute, 2007), 360.

<sup>168</sup> In the vicinity of Antakya, Adana and Iskandurun.

<sup>169</sup> Maróth, "Alaviták," 360.

Gnostic sect.<sup>170</sup> They hold strongly dualistic views, see the human soul as a captive in the material world, from which it strives to break free, through reaching Gnosis, and return to the World of Light and the Supreme Entity. Interestingly enough, their texts display not only strong anti-Jewish feelings, but they also condemn Jesus as a false prophet, who perverted the teaching of John the Baptist, whom they revere as a true messenger bringing divine revelation.

Mandaean religion is based on a strong scriptural tradition. Attempts to reconstruct the chronology of this literature have so far been unsuccessful, but research (comparing themes, script, and consulting colophons) suggests that it may be dated back to the second or third century AD.<sup>171</sup> The fact that they were considered *ahl al-kitab* (people of the Book) by Muslims also indicates that written material played an important part in the transmission of Mandaean religion from an early date on.

For a certain period Mandaeans were thought to be the descendants of Manichaeans, but today the consensus is that they should probably be identified with the “Baptists” of Mani. In other words, the baptizing sect Mani grew up with must have been very similar, even if not identical, with the ancestors of today’s Mandaeans. Very little is known about their origin and early history. Despite the rather pronounced anti-Judaism of Mandaean texts, researchers today agree that the community is of Jewish origin. Like other heretical Jewish sects opposing official Judaism it must have been very open to the reception of non-Jewish influences, above all Iranian and Gnostic. It is assumed that they must have emigrated as a result of religious persecution (or at least opposition) around the first century AD from the Jordan region to the East.<sup>172</sup> It is possible that their road didn’t lead from the Jordan straight to the swampland of southern Mesopotamia, but during their exodus the Mandaeans may have made a sojourn to more northern lying territories and lived for a while near to the Kurdish inhabited regions. One of their sacred texts, the *Haran Gawaita*, reports that during the rule of a Parthian king Ardaban (Artabanus)<sup>173</sup> a large group, “sixty thousand of Nasoreans,” fled from the Jewish rulers to the “inner Haran” territory or the “Median hill-

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<sup>170</sup> Studies on Mandaeans are far more numerous than on other heterodox groups in the region. See, e. g., M. Lidzbarski, *Mandaische Liturgien* (Berlin: Weidman, 1920); E. S. Drower, *The secret Adam, a study of Nasoraean Gnosis* (London: Clarendon Press, 1960); eadem, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden: Brill, 1959); eadem, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002); K. Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, Iconography of Religions 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); E. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004)

<sup>171</sup> Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 4-5, 12; Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 3.

<sup>172</sup> As a sect of repeated baptism, they still refer to the baptismal water as “Jordan.” It may be worth mentioning that Yezidis, just like Mandaeans, have repeated baptism. The first one, usually at a young age, is for initiatory purposes. Later baptisms, however, have a purificatory aim, to wash away sins. Both types of baptisms (*mor kirin*) are carried out in the *Kaniya Spi*, or “White Spring” in Lalish. For those who couldn’t go there, baptism with the help of water taken from the White Spring was possible.

<sup>173</sup> Unfortunately there were five Ardabans.

country.”<sup>174</sup> Rudolph understands “Median Hills” to refer to north-West Iranian territory between Haran (near Edessa, today’s Urfa) and Nisibis (Nusaybin).<sup>175</sup>

Several scholars have already remarked on a possible relationship between the Yezidis and Mandaeans. However, the extent of possible parallels between Mandaeans and Yezidis has never been seriously studied. Lady Drower, who has studied Mandaeans and their texts extensively, paid a few shorter visits to the Yezidis as well. Though her trips to the Yezidis were more of a recreational adventure tourism type rather than the in-depth research she carried out among the Mandaeans, she does point out a few similarities between the two groups. The most interesting point is perhaps the fact that according to her one of the holy books of the Mandaean portrays the Peacock Angel (Malka Tausa for the Mandaeans) as a “spirit concerned with the destinies of this world, a prince of the world of light, who, because of divinely appointed destiny, plunged into the darkness of matter.”<sup>176</sup>

This is not to say that Mandaeans could have exercised a direct influence on Yezidis, of course, their putative sojourn in the north being divided by centuries from the appearance of the al-Adawiya tariqat in the Kurdish mountains. Rather it should be taken as an indication of the presence of wildly heterodox and gnosticising ideas in the region. It is also a good example that groups possessing Gnostic ideas may have survived well past Late Antiquity.

### *Other Heterodox Islamic Groups*

There are a number of other heterodox Islamic groups living in the regions where Yezidis can also be found, which may share some characteristics and myths with the Yezidis. These groups will not be referred to in this study, for it was not possible to study their mythologies thoroughly enough to find parallels for the topics treated in this work. This, however, does not mean that there could be none, merely that there is still a wide field open for further research. Of all these groups the best known are the Alevis of Turkey (not to be confused with the Alawis.)<sup>177</sup> Alevis are a Twelver Shiia group living in Turkey, whose members comprise both Turkish and Kurdish speakers. Though of a

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<sup>174</sup> Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 364.

<sup>175</sup> Unfortunately Rudolph does not explain why he identifies “Median hills” with this rather flat region, rather than the Kurdish mountains to the east of the Tigris.

<sup>176</sup> E. S. Drower, *Peacock Angel* (London: John Murray, 1941), 6; see also eadem, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 257-8.

<sup>177</sup> Alevis, who played an important role in the leftist movements of Turkey, have been widely studied, but mainly from a sociological point of view. Even studies of their religion mostly concentrated on their religious institutions, and collecting myths, or folktales was not a priority. Furthermore, it is mostly Turkish Alevis who have been studied, while Kurdish Alevis, especially those living in the rural communities of the volatile South-East are much less known. Though Alevis have written texts (the so-called *Buyruks*, a compilation of heterogeneous texts) oral tradition probably played a more important role in sustaining religious memory: “the traditional identification of Alevi religious and social life was based on the oral transmission of knowledge, including the esoteric religious teaching. Which was handed down ritually from person to person.” T. Olsson, Epilogue: The Scripturalization of Ali-oriented religions,” in *Alevi Identity*, 200.

different historical origin, and officially considered an extreme Twelver Shiia group,<sup>178</sup> who venerate and divinize Ali, they show some significant similarities to both Yezidis and Ahl-i Haqq, which hints at a common substratum.

Just like the Yezidis and the Ahl-i Haqq, they believe in the repeated manifestation, or reincarnation of God in human form, and in metempsychosis. They have a hereditary spiritual hierarchy, where the spiritual leaders (*murshids*) are known as *pîr* or *dede*. Ordinary Alevis owe allegiance to a particular *dede* lineage on the basis of pre-existing family relations. They also follow the religious institution of brother and sister of hereafter (*musahiplik* or *ahiret kardeşliği*).<sup>179</sup> Some of their rituals<sup>180</sup> also show strong resemblances.

Though no parallels will be brought up in this work between Yezidis and Alevis, they clearly share a number of important myths as well. For example, all three, Yezidis, Ahl-i Haqq and Alevis relate the important cosmogonic myth of angel Gabriel (Jibrail, or in some cases Tawusi Melek) flying around a world covered by water at the very beginning of creation and being confronted by God, whom Gabriel failed to recognize. He could only enter Paradise (or sit on the tree where God was sitting in the form of a bird) after a question-and-answer ordeal, when he acknowledged that his existence originated from God.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, all three communities tell the myth of local religious leaders challenging a quasi divine figure of the community (Sheikh Adi, Sultan Sahak and Haji Bektash respectively) to a miracle working contest riding lions and wielding snakes as whips, which the quasi divine figure counters by riding a rock or wall.<sup>182</sup> Further studies would probably bring to light more myths shared by these different groups.

Northern Iraq (or Iraqi Kurdistan) offers a bewildering number and variety of small heterodox religious groups. However, hardly any research has been carried out and very little is known about minority religious groups like the Shabak, Sarli or Bajalan.<sup>183</sup> The latter two are said

<sup>178</sup> Alevis, also known as “Kizilbash” (“red-heads” from their headgear), were the followers of Shah Ismail, the founder of the Saffavid dynasty, who played a key role in the rise of Twelver Shiism in Iran. As allies of the Shiite and Iranian foe they were persecuted by Selim the Grim and his successors. Curiously, at the same time they are seen as a rural form of the Bektashi dervish order, a Sufi brotherhood much respected in the Ottoman Empire, to which the Janissary corps actually belonged.

<sup>179</sup> See Kreyenbroek, “On the Study of Some Heterodox Sects in Kurdistan.”

<sup>180</sup> For example, the feast of Khidir Ilyas, or Hizir Nebi for Turkish Alevis. See Irène Mélikoff’s description of Alevis celebrating Hizir Nabi’s feast, which shows a striking resemblance to my description of Khidir Ilyas’ feast among the Yezidis in the village of Khanke in Northern Iraq. Irène Mélikoff, *Sur les Traces du Soufisme Turc: Recherches sur l’Islam populaire en Anatolie* (Istanbul: Isis, 1992) 38; and Spät, *Yezidis*, 63.

<sup>181</sup> Yuri Stoyanov, “Islamic and Christian Heterodox Water Cosmogonies from the Ottoman Period: Parallels and Contrasts,” *BSOAS* 64.1 (2001): 19-33, and “Problems in the Study of the Interrelations between Medieval Christian Heterodoxies and Heterodox Islam in the Early Ottoman Balkan-Anatolian Region,” *Scripta & eScripta* 2 (2004): 171-218; Mélikoff, *Sur les Traces du Soufisme Turc*, 48. Yezidis also share this myth with the Ahl-i Haqq, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 54; Lescot, *Les Yezidis*, 57-8.

<sup>182</sup> M. Bruinessen, “When Haji Bektash Still Bore the Name of Sultan Sahak: Notes on the Ahl-i Haqq of the Guran district,” in *Bektachiyya: études sur l’ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, ed. A. Popovic & G. Veinstein (Istanbul: Éditions Isis, 1995), 117-138.

<sup>183</sup> M. Leezenberg, “Between Assimilation and Deportation: The Shabak and the Kakais in Northern Iraq,” 155, in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele and A. Otter-Beaujean

to be sub-branches of the Ahl-i Haqq and the Shabak respectively, though others contest this. The Shabak community, like that of the Yezidis, the Ahl-i Haqq and the Alevis, is organized along the lines of a hereditary spiritual hierarchy reminiscent of Sufi orders. They have hereditary classes of religious specialists of different ranks; their laymen are associated with such religious specialists. Each adult is affiliated with a pîr. They do not observe the five pillars of Islam, but instead have five prescribed obligations of their own (just like the Yezidis, though the actual rules are different.) Bruinessen argues that they are closely related to the Anatolian Alevis.<sup>184</sup> They are multilingual, their mother language is said to be Gurani,<sup>185</sup> but the language of their prayers and rituals is Turkish. Unlike the Alevis, however, they are not Twelver Shiia, though they have urban patrons from Mosul (for whom they are share-croppers) who belong to Twelver Shiism. According to Bruinessen today a gradual Shi'isation is taking place among them.

Further study of the religious system of these little-known heterodox groups, as well as of “popular religion” among the “orthodox” Sunni and Shiia Muslims of the region could yield more valuable information on the common motifs inherited by the Yezidis and other Middle East religious groups from Late Antique religious traditions.

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(Leiden:Brill, 1997), 155-74. While in Iraq I heard only of the Shabaks. They were mentioned in rather hostile tones by some villagers in the Yezidi village of Behzani as Arabs and Shiites, when talking about the lack of security in the region. They certainly did not seem to share the idea of affinity between Yezidi and Shabak religion remarked upon by Leezenberg and other researchers.

<sup>184</sup> M. Bruinessen, “A Kizilbash Community in Iraqi Kurdistan : The Shabak,” *Les Annales de l’Autre Islam* 5 (1998): 185-196.

<sup>185</sup> Gurani is Western Iranian language, related to Kurdish, the language also spoken by many Ahl-i Haqq, the Sarli and the Bajalan.

## Chapter 3: The Origin of the Yezidis and of Yezidi Studies

### The History of the Yezidis<sup>186</sup>

Yezidis themselves trace their origin to the very beginning of mankind, to the miraculously conceived son of Adam, Shehid bin Jar.<sup>187</sup> Today less traditional views claim that they descend from the Zoroastrians, Assyrians, Babylonians, or Sumerians, in other words from the great civilizations of Ancient Middle East.<sup>188</sup>

As for non-Yezidi researchers, a number of different origins have been ascribed to the Yezidis, involving a number of ancient peoples and cults of the wider region. However, today the *communis opinio* among academics is to think of “the arrival of the Sufi Sheikh ‘Adi b. Musāfir, as the first of a chain of events which eventually resulted in the emergence of Yezidism.”<sup>189</sup> It was Sheikh Adi, a twelfth-century Sufi mystic from the Beeka valley in Lebanon, who founded a Sufi order in Lalish, in the Kurdish mountains not far from Mosul.<sup>190</sup> It was this Sufi order, the al-Adawiya, which made possible the beginnings of the Yezidis as an organized religious community with a conscious sense of identity.<sup>191</sup> Even today Yezidism retains a social structure modeled on a Sufi brotherhood, a mythology crowded with great Sufi figures, and a religious language that is rich

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<sup>186</sup> For a very detailed study of Yezidi history and the events surrounding it, see J. Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds: A History of the Yezidis* (London: Kegan Paul, 1993), a book which makes thorough use of all available information, whether coming from Arabic theologians, Nestorian bishops, Ottoman archives, or the report of European travelers. For a more concise account of the early history of Yezidis, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, chapter “The Early History: Factual and Legendary Accounts.”

<sup>187</sup> See chapter 9 on “The Yezidi Origin Myth.”

<sup>188</sup> See chapter 5 on “Oral Tradition and Literacy.”

<sup>189</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 27. For Yezidis Sheikh Adi is an extremely important figure, who could be said to stand in the center of their religion. He is seen as an incarnated angel, a quasi divine figure, and the most relevant historical leader of the community. His grave is a place of pilgrimage, and sacred hymns make frequent mention of his name. There is no mention of Sheikh Adi having been a Muslim in Yezidi lore, nor is there any reference to the period when he lived, though some hymns do mention his having come from Syria. Several travelers mentioned that Yezidis claimed he had lived before the Prophet Muhammad. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the French vice-consul of Mosul, N. Siouffi successfully identified the Yezidi Sheikh Adi with a historical figure, the Sufi Sheikh Adi bin Musafir. N. Siouffi, “Notice sur le Chéikh ‘Adi et la Secte des Yézidis,” *JA* ser. 8, vol. 5 (1885): 78-100. This identification is today accepted by educated Yezidis, but upsets those of a more traditional background. (Professor Kreyenbroek has told me, how at a talk he gave on Yezidi faith to Yezidis living in Germany, an older Yezidi became outraged when he happened to mention the Muslim origin of Sheikh Adi.)

<sup>190</sup> Some Christian sources claim that Sheikh Adi seized a Christian monastery in Lalish, or perhaps converted its monks. I. Joseph, *Devil Worship: Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidiz* (Boston: Badger, 1919) 98-99; Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 30-31; Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 14. Yezidi oral tradition also makes mention of figures like Mar Mati (the founder of the Mar Mati monastery on the Meqlub mountain a couple of miles from Lalish) in connection with Sheikh Adi, implying that there may indeed have been some connection, and even rivalry between the early Adawiyya and local Christians. As regards the idea that Lalish was originally the site of a Christian church or monastery, Birgul Acikyildiz, a Turkish art historian, is of the opinion that the layout of the Central Sanctuary in Lalish indicates a Sufi convent or *tekke*. Given the natural beauty of this green valley, watered by springs in an otherwise arid region, it is likely that this valley has been a place of worship since times immemorial.

<sup>191</sup> Tracing the beginnings of the Yezidi community to a twelfth-century Sufi mystic and his order does not preclude accepting that many ideas, institutions and rituals of the Yezidis may well be older.

in Sufi images, symbols and terminology, even if all these seem to have undergone some profound metamorphoses, and acquired new significance and new connotations

Sheikh Adi (1073-1160), of Umayyad descent, was a Sufi mystic, whose orthodoxy as a Sunni Muslim, as his own writings and the works of contemporaries attest, was never in question. He studied in Baghdad from the same teacher as ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, and may have known a number of celebrated Sufi scholars and philosophers. He arrived in the Hakkari mountains not long after the turn of the century, and founded the Sufi order named after him.

When Sheikh Adi founded his order, the Kurdish inhabitants of the mountains were only partly Islamicized, and those who were Muslims occasionally displayed some variance from “mainstream” Islam. According to contemporary reports there were groups of Kurds who paid excessive worship to the Umayyad dynasty, and to Yezid bin Muawiya, the caliph held responsible for the tragedy of Karbala.<sup>192</sup> A large group of tribal Kurds, on the other hand, were still following their pre-Islamic religion, whatever that could have been.<sup>193</sup> Beside the Kurds, there were of course Aramaic speaking Jewish and Christian communities living in the mountains in considerable numbers.

The al-Adawiyya dervish order founded by Sheikh Adi spread from the Hakkari mountains all over the Middle East. Today, there is still a branch of al-Adawiyya functioning as an ordinary Sufi order in Egypt, quite orthodox in nature. The Kurdish branch of Sheikh Adi’s Sufi order, however, was to have a different career, one which led away from Islam, until it became a system which could be described with some exaggeration by Lescot, as one which in “its present form... shows no similarity whatever with Islam.”<sup>194</sup> Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries the order founded by Sheikh Adi gradually grew both increasingly heterodox and very popular among the Kurds, not only in the immediate vicinity of Lalish (the Sheikhan district), but in a much wider radius. According to the *Sherefnameh*, the sixteenth-century “Chronicle of the Kurds,” written by the emir of Bitlis, seven of the most powerful Kurdish tribes were Yezidis during this period, and for a brief time in the fourteenth century Yezidism became the official religion of the principality of Jezire (today’s Cizre in south-east Turkey.)<sup>195</sup> In order to understand the pull the al-Adawiyya order exercised on local, tribal Kurds, one must be aware of the immense role Sufism played in the Islamization of the Kurdish tribes after the Muslim conquest of Kurdistan. According to Fuccaro “religious institutions such as the ‘Adawiyya brotherhood functioned as veritable socio-economic

<sup>192</sup> Report by al-Sam’ani, quoted in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 27-28.

<sup>193</sup> Reported by Bar Hebraeus, quoted *ibid.* It is worth noting that as late as the end of the seventeenth century there were a hundred families in Mardin who practiced a sun-worshipping cult. As they were not “people of the Book;” Sultan Murad IV was ready to exile or massacre them, but the Jacobite patriarch agreed to admit them into his community. (Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, 58.)

<sup>194</sup> Lescot, *Les Yezidis*, 19.

<sup>195</sup> Guest, *Survival of Yezidism*, 45; Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 10.

and religious points of reference for the rural population. As the ethnic and religious composition of northern Iraq was extremely diversified, brotherhoods represented an ideal venue for cultural and religious osmosis given the central role they played in the development of important economic processes, primarily in the exchanges between nomadic/semi-nomadic and agricultural communities.”<sup>196</sup> Besides the socio-economic considerations, there was another reason why Sufism was so favorably received by the local population. This was the “tendency of Sufi Orders to emphasize the experiential, emotional side of religion rather than the question of dogma.”<sup>197</sup> This special characteristics of Sufism doubtlessly made the absorption of non-Islamic, local thoughts (whether of Iranian origin or other) into an originally Muslim belief system much easier – no doubt, this is what happened in the case of the Yezidis.

It is also possible, that adherents of pre-Islamic religion consciously chose to hide behind the outer form of Sufism, trying to preserve their religious identity, while appearing to have joined Islam in the eyes of the outside world. Naturally, it would not be possible to say, if looked at from this point of view, if Yezidism was originally a Sufi order which incorporated so many pre-Islamic elements with time that it lost its Islamic identity, or if – conversely – it was a native, presumably Western Iranian form of religion, which hid behind the mask of Sufism and in the process absorbed so many Sufi and Islamic elements, which changed its original character and made it appear Islamic to the superficial observer.<sup>198</sup> Perception depends on the view of the observer in this case.

We know very little of what may have actually happened in the first centuries after Sheikh Adi, but it is certain that this turbulent period, which was characterized by political instability and lack of central rule as waves of conquerors followed each other, was favorable to the unchecked growth of religious movements with heterodox tendencies.<sup>199</sup>

We know that Sheikh Adi was succeeded by his nephew, a pious Muslim, as the head of the order, who in his turn was succeeded by his son, the second Sheikh Adi. It was the latter’s son, the fourth leader of the order, Al-Hasan b. ‘Adi (Sheikh Hassan), who first came into conflict with the outside world, and was executed by the Zangid Arabeg of Mosul, Badr al-Din Lu’lu, who probably felt threatened by the large number of Sheikh Hassan’s followers. Badr al-Din Lu’lu also ordered the execution of two hundred of the order’s followers and had Sheikh Adi’s bones burned. Our

<sup>196</sup> Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 13. It must be noted that Sufi brotherhoods continued to play an important social role throughout Kurdish history well into the twentieth century, including even several Kurdish nationalist risings. See M. Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, 1992) chapter “Shaikhs: Mystics, Saints and Politicians.” It is not by mere chance that the leaders of the two ruling Iraqi Kurdish political parties today, Talabani and Barzani, both come from celebrated lineages of Sufi sheikhs.

<sup>197</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 33.

<sup>198</sup> When discussing the question of “Sufism incorporated by pre-Islamic elements” versus “native religion hiding behind a façade of Sufism” with Mihaly Dobrovits, an expert on Central Asian religions, I had to compare this question to mixing coffee with milk. So, was it coffee or milk then? To which I promptly received the answer “cappuccino.” Yezidis then may be seen as the cappuccino of Sufi Islam meeting previous religious beliefs in the region.

<sup>199</sup> On the impact of the Mongols on the local power structures, see Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, 20-27.

sources also indicate that the influence of the order and its leader was of an increasing strength among the local Kurdish population.<sup>200</sup> At the middle of the thirteenth century chronicles speak of the successors of Sheikh Adi only as regards their military and political activities concerning the new Mongol conquerors. Following this date there is a long silence, then al-Maqrizi, writing of the year 1415, reports of the growing hostility between the followers of orthodox Islam and the Adawiyya order or, as it was also known at the time, the al-Sohbetiye, “the companions.” This year a campaign was organized against the followers of Sheikh Adi, many of them were massacred, Sheikh Adi’s tomb and sanctuary were destroyed, and any bones they could find were burned. However, as al-Maqrizi reports, the “companions” soon rallied, rebuilt the sanctuary, and became sworn enemies of those “who bore the title of *faqih*.”<sup>201</sup>

It is worth noting that Al-Maqrizi, though a strict orthodox much inclined to cry heresy, speaks only of the excessive worship the followers of the Adawiyya order paid to the figure of Sheikh Adi and his descendants, and even gives this extreme adoration as the explanation for the order’s belittling the laws of Shariya and for sexual immorality. He makes no mention of Devil-worship, and sees them as Muslims who veered from the right road, but hardly as a distinct religion.<sup>202</sup>

The sixteenth century brought a marked change in both the situation and perception of the Yezidis. The turbulent period brought on by the Mongol invasions, accompanied by political uncertainty, power vacuum and mass migrations of people with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, which saw the emergence of a number of heterodox communities, was drawing to a close. In the late fifteenth-sixteenth centuries two new strong multinational states, the Sunni Ottoman and the Shiia Saffavid Empires emerged, which – through the means of military might and shrewd diplomacy – managed to extend their authority over the Kurdish mountains. Most Yezidi tribes lived in the territories which now belonged to the Ottomans, staunch Sunnis. With this the gradual marginalization of Yezidis had started, and many of the Yezidi tribes converted to Islam, either voluntarily or under pressure, a fact attested by the *Sherefnameh*. Though Sheref Bitlisi, its author, mentions a couple of Yezidi tribes, the most important of whom were the Daseni, in the vicinity of Mosul,<sup>203</sup> he puts the Yezidis’ days of glory in the past, when seven of the most powerful

<sup>200</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 31-32.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. *Faqihs* are experts in Islamic law, literally jurists, here, however, it probably refers either to Islamic authorities, or orthodox followers of the Shariya or Islamic law.

<sup>202</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 34-35.

<sup>203</sup> Sharaf al-Dîn Bitlîsi, *Sharafnâme: Or the History of the Kurdish Nation*, trans. M. R. Izady (Costa Mesa (Cal.): Mazda Publishers, 2005), 36. Sadly, the *Sherefname*’s chapters dealing with the Daseni has been lost (or else never written,) as it is missing from all exempt manuscripts (*ibid.*, 36, note 2.) There were also Yezidi tribes around Batman and Silvan (south-east Turkey), Yezidis possessed the castle of Hosap near Lake Van, and there were Yezidis west of the Lake Urmia, as well as in Northern Syria, in the mountainous Jebel Seman.

Kurdish tribes *used* to be Yezidi, and the emirate of Jezire was Yezidi as well.<sup>204</sup>

What is really interesting is the description of “those who maintain the doctrine of Yezidism” by Bitlisi in his Prologue:<sup>205</sup>

They are followers of Shaykh ‘Adi b. Musāfir ... and ascribe themselves to him. Their wrongful belief is that Shaykh ‘Adi... ‘has done for us in his own days the requisite daily prayers and the fasting. Thus on the Day of Judgment, we will be taken into Paradise without being reproached or questioned.’ They bear unlimited animosity towards the exoteric ulema [that is to the Shariya or Islamic law.]<sup>206</sup>

It is clear that in Bitlisi’s age Yezidis were still not associated with Devil-worship, or he would have certainly mentioned it. The *Sherefnameh* does not even accuse them of being *kafirs*, that is, unbelievers, rather they are simply seen as belonging to one of the extremist groups of Islam. What is even more telling, according to the testimony of the *Sherefnameh*, is that during the period of Ottoman conquest, Yezidi leaders were appointed in very high positions in the recently conquered territories. Sultan Selim the Grim, famed for his orthodoxy and persecution of the Shiites of Anatolia, made a Yezidi, Sheikh Izz ed-Din the “emir of the Kurds” instead of the orthodox Qasim beg (who was executed due to the intrigues of the Yezidi chief) in the newly conquered district of Aleppo.<sup>207</sup> Selim’s successor, Suleiman the Magnificent, upon conquering Iraq, made another Yezidi, Hussein beg from the Daseni tribe, the governor of Erbil. A little later Suleiman added the emirate of Soran (of the Sorani Kurds to the South) to the *sanjak* of Erbil, and made Hussein beg his appointed ruler over the whole territory.<sup>208</sup> These events certainly throw interesting light on the perception of the Yezidis in the sixteenth century by the Sunni community. While hardly considered orthodox in their ways, they must still have been seen as part of the Muslim (and Sunni) community for Sultan Selim and Suleiman the Magnificent, both known as zealous defenders of orthodox Sunni faith, unlikely to support *kafirs*, especially Devil-worshippers, to elevate them into high positions.

Paradoxically (and confusingly), notwithstanding the surprisingly magnanimous treatment these Sultans accorded to at least some of their Yezidi subjects, the sixteenth century was also a time of anti-Yezidi *fatwā* and *radd* (treatises of religious character) being compiled by Muslim scholars.<sup>209</sup> The recently published sixteenth-century *Fatwā* of Malā Sālih (identified as a Kurdish

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<sup>204</sup> Guest, *Survival of Yezidism*, 45; Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 10.

<sup>205</sup> The term “Yezidi” to denote the followers of Sheikh Adi seems to have been in use by the sixteenth century, as it can be found in anti-Yezidi texts, see below.

<sup>206</sup> Bitlisi, *Sharafnāma*, 36-38. (While this latter remark holds true for today’s Yezidis, their not being afraid of the Day of Judgment, or seeing no need for fasts contradicts my own experiences, though some travelers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century claimed that Yezidis believed they could delegate their duties to fast to the so-called men of religion in exchange of some alms.)

<sup>207</sup> Chèref-ou’ddine Prince de Bidlīs, *Chèref-Nâme: Ou Fastes de la Nation Kourde*, Tome II, Partie I, trans. F. B. Charmoy (St-Petersburg: Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1873), 68-69.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>209</sup> Dehqan, “Fatwā of Malā Sālih,” 141, note 4. Unfortunately the author does not quote other examples (Guest as yet knows only of the *Sherefnameh* as a sixteenth-century text dealing with the Yezidis.) Neither is it clear on what basis the sixteenth century is identified as the time the manuscript was composed, as according to the author we have no other

*mufti* by the editor of the text) is a good example of how Yezidis were viewed at the time by some religious authorities of Kurdistan (and how little actually was known about them.)

Most of the points brought up against the Yezidis do not contain anything new. According to Malā Sālih they deny the Koran and the Shariya, instead “they believe in absurd statements such as those of Fakhr al-Dīn, and the like; to which they think they must cling.”<sup>210</sup> What these statements, obviously coming from their sheikhs or leaders, were, Malā Sālih does not say (probably does not know in the first place.) Furthermore, according to Malā Sālih, they are inimical toward the *ulema*, and destroy Islamic books if they come into their hands. They prefer Sheikh Adi over the Prophet, have no need for prayer, but believe they will be carried to Paradise by Sheikh Adi. They make pilgrimage to Lalish instead of the Kaba. Some of the charges brought up seem to be no more than common places of anti-heretical literature, such as accusing Yezidis of attributing to God such qualities as eating, drinking, standing, sitting, and the like, which are related to the body, and of course the ubiquitous accusation of sexual licentiousness .

By far the most important part of the tract is the one dealing with the person of Sheikh Adi. Yezidis are said to be divided into three sects based on their belief concerning his person:<sup>211</sup>

One consists of the Ghulāt (Extremists), who say that ‘Adī b. Musāfir is God. Secondly, (there are) those who say that he shares divinity with God. (That is) that the heavens are in the hands of God and the earth is in the hands of Sheikh ‘Adī. Thirdly, (there are) those who say that he is neither God nor His partner, but that he is the great minister of God and no affair whatever comes from God without his approval and counsel.<sup>212</sup>

This statement implies that by this time the notion that Sheikh Adi was the incarnation of the divine had developed among the Yezidis. This theory is also supported by another comment to the effect that: “the basis on which their religion rests (and I researched this) is reincarnation, and because of this, they are close to the Christians and share some of their beliefs.”<sup>213</sup> The translation here is not clear, but the reference to Christians makes it likely that it refers to the incarnation of the divine, rather than the repeated reincarnation of the soul. Then the text takes a surprising turn asking: “Are they Muslims just because on the outside they outwardly show Islamic behaviour and pronounce the *shahādatayn* (i.e. the Islamic Creed)?” In other words, Yezidis of the time may have still

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information on Malā Sālih.

<sup>210</sup> Dehqan, “The Fatwā of Malā Sālih,” 144.

<sup>211</sup> It is really hard to know what kind of three-fold division the author is thinking of here. The only one that comes to mind is the traditional division of Yezidis into three castes that, however, has nothing to do with how Sheikh Adi is perceived. It is more likely that it was outsiders who had three different concepts about how Sheikh Adi was viewed by his followers.

<sup>212</sup> Dehqan, “The Fatwā of Malā Sālih,” 148, The above statement on Yezidis attributing human qualities to God could, of course, refer to His incarnation as Sheikh Adi, however, as the two things are mentioned in completely separate passages, it is more likely that the mufti was just repeating some stock phrases of heresiologists, rather than thinking of the veneration of Sheikh Adi.

<sup>213</sup> Dehqan, “The Fatwā of Malā Sālih,” 149.

considered themselves Muslims, if they recited the Muslim Creed. The rest of the tract is devoted to debating if Yezidis are apostates (who turned away from Islam) or unbelievers (who are godless) and to expounding that in either case it is legitimate to prosecute them, confiscate their property, and either convert or kill them.

For all its enmity toward Yezidis, one cannot fail to notice that one important element is missing. There is still no mention of worshipping the Devil. However, this latter accusation seems to have reared its head by the mid-seventeenth century, when Evliya Chelebi, the famous traveler and writer, describes his encounters with the Yezidis. In his account of the military campaign against the Yezidis of Sinjar he simply calls them “godless.” (It must be added that the cause of the campaign was not religion, simply the Yezidis’ failure to pay the taxes.) However, Evliya also paid a friendly visit to the leader of the Yezidi Daseni tribe in Duhok, in the province of Mosul. It is in his account of the visit that Evliya mentions, far as I know first among those who wrote about the Yezidis, how they would kill anyone cursing the Satan (which Muslims tended and still tend to interpret as an indication that Yezidi worship the aforementioned evil angel.)<sup>214</sup>

In 1671 the head of the Carmelite and Franciscan missions in Aleppo, who had earlier had some designs of converting Yezidis to Christianity, reported that “there was little chance of achieving anything with the devil-worshipping Yezidis.”<sup>215</sup> In 1674 Michele Febvre, an Italian traveler, published his book, *Specchio, o vero descrizione della Turchia*, giving an account of his travels in the Ottoman Empire. In the book he describes the Yezidis of the Aleppo district, who appear to have extremely bad relations with the Muslim majority, and there is no suggestion here of any possible Islamic background. While rather sympathetic toward the Yezidis, the author equates the Peacock Angel, the highest angel of the Yezidi “pantheon” and the protector of the Yezidis, with the Devil.<sup>216</sup> As the Yezidis themselves are extremely unlikely to have called themselves devil-worshippers or indicate that their Peacock Angel was in fact the Devil, it is obvious that the accusation of the Yezidis being “Devil-worshippers” must have been commonly accepted among the non-Yezidi inhabitants of the region, from whom the European travelers must have learned it.

Later reports from Western travelers regularly echo this accusation of devil-worship (which most of them took at face value.) They also report rather tense relations between the Yezidis and the Muslims, especially Muslim authorities, with the nineteenth century bringing an increased persecution of Yezidis, complete with several military conflicts against them.

<sup>214</sup> Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, 50-51. Evliya also report some extremely curious bans about stepping on an onion or striking a black dog.

<sup>215</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>216</sup> M. Febvre, *Theatre De la Turquie* (Paris: Couterot, 1682), 367-68..

## Yezidis and Western “Yezidi Studies”

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the growing interest of European powers in the Middle East and its people, the attention of the West was increasingly drawn to the Yezidis. Quite a few travelers in the region remarked upon this curious group, despised by their neighbors as adorators of the Devil,<sup>217</sup> even if they were unable to provide much solid information.<sup>218</sup>

The most valuable information on the social organization, customs, and religious rituals of the Yezidis, from this period comes from the famous archeologist A. Layard,<sup>219</sup> who was a great friend of the Yezidis, and from the Protestant missionaries W. Ainsworth<sup>220</sup> and G. Badger,<sup>221</sup> whose primary work was among the Nestorians, but who wondered if the Yezidis might be won for their cause. What they can say on actual Yezidi beliefs is sadly less informative. Layard, while genuinely liking Yezidis, accepted their being devil-worshippers without much ado, while the two Protestant preachers were dismayed at what they saw as a lack of interest in religion and an indifference toward the Creator. Layard, as well as O. Parry, decades later, described the persecution Yezidis were subjected to by the Ottoman authorities while they were staying in the region, including military campaigns that they witnessed.

In the 1880’s important steps were taken forward in Yezidi studies thanks to N. Siouffi, the French vice-consul of Mosul. In 1882 he published some fascinating information on Yezidi religion and mythology. Three years later he came forward with an article in which he identified the mysterious Sheikh Adi of Yezidis with the twelfth-century Sufi saint, Sheikh Adi bin Musafir.<sup>222</sup> A few decades later R. Frank’s study consolidated Siouffi’s finding,<sup>223</sup> rounding out the information concerning the figure of Sheikh Adi. Definitely identifying Sheikh Adi’s person helped to establish the great influence Sufism exerted on this peculiar Kurdish religion known under the name of Yezidism. (Less fortunately, this finding also opened the way to seeing Yezidi religion as merely a peculiar, corrupted form of Islam, which became a dominant view during the better part of the

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<sup>217</sup> There can be little doubt that it was this peculiar epithet awarded to Yezidis by neighboring Muslims which primarily raised (and still raises) Western interest in the Yezidis. It suffices to surf the internet for news articles today on this group. Not a single one refrains from mentioning the accusation of devil worship, and more than one even refers to this in the title of the article.

<sup>218</sup> For a list of early travelers, see W. F. Ainsworth, “The Assyrian Origin of the Izedis or Yezidis – the so-called ‘Devil Worshippers.’” *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* Vol. 1 (London: Ethnological Society, 1861): 12.

<sup>219</sup> A. Layard, *A “popular” Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (New York: Derby, 1854); idem, *Discoveries Among the Ruins of Niniveh and Babylon* (London: Murray, 1853),. idem. *Niniveh and its Remains*.

<sup>220</sup> W. Ainsworth, “The Assyrian Origin of the Izedis or Yezidis – the so-called ‘Devil Worshippers.’”

<sup>221</sup> G. Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*.

<sup>222</sup> N. Siouffi, “Notice sur le Chéikh Adi et la Secte des Yézidis.” He also published an article containing very valuable information on religion and mythology collected from Yezidis: “Notice sur des Yézidis.” *JA* ser. 7. vol. 20. (1882): 252-68.

<sup>223</sup> R. Frank, *Scheich Adi der grosse Heilige der Jezîdis* (Berlin: Kirchhain, 1911.)

twentieth century.)

In 1872 more information came to light about the Yezidis from an unusual source. It was the attempt of the Ottoman government, trying to bring about reforms, to draft Yezidis into the army, which triggered this event. Yezidis, desperately opposed to this plan, asked Western diplomats to intervene on their behalf, and drew up a petition asking for exemption on religious grounds. This document, which came to be known as the 1872 Petition, is of little interest to a student of Yezidi mythology, but contains a valuable exposition on the main observances of the Yezidi faith. As an authentic document beyond doubts originating from the Yezidis, it was reproduced many times in articles in English, German, French and Italian works dealing with the Yezidis.<sup>224</sup>

The importance of the 1872 Petition and the report of travelers was soon to be eclipsed by a far more spectacular discovery, that of the Sacred Books of the Yezidis.<sup>225</sup> In 1889 a curious character called Jeremiah Shamir, a former East Syrian monk, and a dealer of manuscripts (among other things) helped procure Wallis Budge, an official of the British Museum, some manuscripts. One of these manuscripts included a number of treatises dealing with the Yezidis, including a copy of the 1872 Petition, and the texts of what purported to be the text of two (or rather *the* two) Yezidi holy books, the *Mes'hefa Resh* and the *Jelwa*. A colophon to the manuscript states that it was copied by Gabriel Jeremiah (son of Jeremiah Shamir) in Mosul.

In 1891 the Bibliothèque Nationale acquired a manuscript copied by one Abdul Aziz, a Jacobite living in the Yezidi village of Beshiqe and a work acquaintance of Jeremiah Shamir. The manuscript contained a portion dealing with the Yezidis, the material being virtually identical with comparable portions of Budge's manuscript.

In 1892 Oswald Parry, a young priest sent out from England to inspect the work of the Syrian Patriarchate Educational Society, one of the several little missionary societies that sprang up in England at the end of the nineteenth century to help the Oriental churches, acquired a number of manuscripts in Mosul. One of them comprised the texts of the *Mes'hefa Resh* (*Black Book*) and the *Jelwa* (*Splendour*), very similar to that in the two earlier manuscripts. Eventually it was the text of Parry's manuscript which was to be the first publication of the Yezidi Sacred Books in E. G. Brown's translation, in the Appendix to *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery*.

Soon other copies of the two books, displaying some variations in the text, appeared, along with new translation. By the beginning of the twentieth century there were at least half a dozen

<sup>224</sup> It was published by Brown, in Parry, *Six Months*; Lidzbarsky, "Ein Exposé der Yesiden," *ZDMG* 51 (1897): 592-604; Joseph ("Yezidi Texts,"); Driver, "The Religion of the Kurds;" F. Nau and J. Tinkdji, "Recueil de textes et de documents sur les Yézidis," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* ser. 2. vol. 20 (1915-7): 142-200, 225-75; Furlani, *Testi Religiosi dei Yezidi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1930.)

<sup>225</sup> For an account of the successive surfacing of manuscripts, see J. Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, chapter "The Publication of the Sacred Books," 146-63.

manuscripts of the so-called Yezidi Sacred Books in existence.<sup>226</sup> Then, in 1911, Père Anastase Marie announced that he had discovered the original Kurdish version of the Sacred Books (all previous manuscripts were in Arabic.) He claimed that the text was written in an archaic Kurdish dialect.<sup>227</sup>

Refutation was quick to come, not just of the authenticity of Anastase's text, but of the Sacred Books in general, from A. Mingana, an orientalist of oriental origin. Mingana demonstrated that the manuscripts could not have represented an ancient scriptural tradition, but were probably forgeries. He used both internal (linguistic and philological) and external (reference to the Yezidi costumes, information from Christians living in close proximity with the Yezidis) arguments to question the authenticity of the Sacred Books.<sup>228</sup> It was probably the interest of Western researchers in the reputed existence of the Sacred Books which motivated the forger (whom he thought to identify with Jeremias Shamir.) Later Edmonds pointed out that the "archaic Kurdish dialect" of Anastase's manuscript was in fact present-day Sorani, spoken by the Kurds of the South, but not by the Yezidis, who are Kurmanji-speakers.<sup>229</sup> Needless to say, students of Yezidism, avid for new information, were not too eager to repudiate the Sacred Books as forgeries, and authors continued to refer to the *Mes'hef-a Resh* and the *Jelwa* as if they were documents similar to the Bible or the Quran. These two "sacred texts" quickly became standard sources among scholars and many articles appearing after their publication seem to repeat the information contained by them over and over again, while different mythological variants, like those published by Siouffi, received scant attention.

Though today the Sacred Books' authenticity as secret manuscripts is considered implausible, there is little doubt that they represent genuine Yezidi tradition. The sacred hymns (*qewls*) and other orally transmitted religious texts support the cosmogonical content of the *Black Book*. The structuring of the texts, displaying the characteristics of orally transmitted tradition, indicates that they existed as oral, rather than written texts. It is likely that both texts were committed to heart and recited as oral texts, perhaps even under these same titles.<sup>230</sup>

Another document was published in 1908, when Ismail beg, the rebel of the princely family, who had his eyes on the position of the Yezidi Prince, drew up a document for the Armenian Yezidis. This document was similar to the 1872 Petition, but differed on some interesting points. From the religio-historical perspective the most remarkable aspect of the document is its attestation to the increasing influence that written monotheistic religions (Christianity in this case) had on the

<sup>226</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 11.

<sup>227</sup> M. Anastase, "La découverte récente des deux livres sacrés des Yézîdis," *Anthropos* 6 (1911): 1-39.

<sup>228</sup> A. Mingana, "Devil-worshippers; Their Beliefs and their Sacred Books," *JRAS* (1916): 505-26.

<sup>229</sup> C. Edmonds, *A Pilgrimage to Lalish* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1967): 88.

<sup>230</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 14-16.

more educated Yezidi layers, who had a growing contact with the non-Yezidi world (Ismail beg used to serve in the British Levies in Iraq). It starts with the confession: “We believe in one God, the Creator of Heaven, Earth and all that is alive.”<sup>231</sup>

During the time of the Mandate, attempts by some disgruntled groups (mostly from Sinjar) to remove the Yezidi prince, who was seen to have failed his people and to have displayed questionable moral conduct, prompted the British to suggest that Yezidis form a spiritual council, like the other religious groups of Iraq, regulating the appointment and dismissal of the Yezidi Prince, as well as the administration of religious revenues. However, religious leaders, most of whom came from the Sheikhan, finally closed ranks and issued a proclamation called the Sheikhan Memorial in 1931. The Memorial not only declared that the Prince was the unquestionable head of the community, who could be removed only by death, but also spelled out the religious laws of the community.<sup>232</sup>

Though still meager, the amount of data gained from these documents and from the writings of travelers enabled scholars to write erudite works on Yezidis. Most of this focused not so much on the functioning of the Yezidis’ religious system, the construct of their mythology, or the interpretation of particular myths, but rather on the origin, or ethnic roots of this origin.

While Muslim scholars were mostly inclined to see Yezidis as apostates<sup>233</sup> and local Christian claimed that the Yezidis were originally Christians who went astray,<sup>234</sup> early researchers tended to ascribe an ancient origin to Yezidis, seeing them as a fascinating relic of a forgotten era. As early as 1827 the Austrian orientalist, Hammer-Purgstall in his *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*<sup>235</sup> regarded them as descendants of the Mardi, an old Persian sect whom Strabo and others mention, and who were said to worship the principle of the evil.<sup>236</sup> A Zoroastrian, or at least Iranian origin was suggested by Layard and Badger<sup>237</sup> though mixed with Sabaeen or Christian and Muslim elements respectively. W. Jackson also advocated an Iranian origin, identifying them with the opponents of Zoroaster’s religious reform, whom the Prophet called devil-worshippers.<sup>238</sup> Others,

<sup>231</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 8 I know of no similarly worded “creed” among Yezidis hymns. Ismail’s opening sentence is clearly a contemporary nod toward Christians and their Nicene Creed.

<sup>232</sup> For the text of the Sheikhan Memorial, see Edmonds, *Pilgrimage to Lalish*, 25-27; for the circumstances, see Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 138-44.

<sup>233</sup> See Joseph, *Devil Worship*, chapter “The Dogmatic View of the Mahomedan Scholars,” especially 118-21. I must add that most Iraqi Kurdish Muslims, at least today, simply consider Yezidis pagans and devil-worshippers. I cannot recall anyone claiming that they were originally Muslims, who lost the right road.

<sup>234</sup> See, for example, Joseph, *Devil Worship*, 97-104. This view is still current at least among some of the Iraqi Christians, though it is not possible to say if perhaps there are some practical or political considerations behind this (looking for a natural ally in another religious minority.) Some Christians used to hold that Sheik Adi was in fact Mar Addai, the Apostle of Mesopotamian Christianity. Meanwhile Armenians in the region of Van considered Yezidis to be the apostates of the Armenian Church.

<sup>235</sup> Pest: Hartleben, 1827-35.

<sup>236</sup> Referred to in G.R. Driver, “The Religion of the Kurds,” 200.

<sup>237</sup> At the same time Badger thought that the Yezidis’ ethnic origin was Assyrian (as of Kurds in general).

<sup>238</sup> W. Jackson, *Persia, Past and Present* (New York: MacMillan, 1906.)

like Neander, Chwolsohn, Haxthausen, and Mingana looked toward the dualistic movements of the Middle East.<sup>239</sup> Nau and Anastase stressed the influence of Christianity, while Grant looked toward Judaism. Ainsworth was convinced of the Assyrian (as in Babylonian) origin of Yezidi religion, and quoted a dozen of rather arbitrary similarities he perceived between Assyrian (Babylonians) and the Yezidis. Marr saw Yezidism as the representative of an indigenous religion predating the literary religions of the region.

Another branch of researchers was predisposed to seeing Yezidism as a heretical form of Islam. This view, starting with Siouffi's identification of the Yezidi Sheikh Adi with the Sufi Sheikh Adi bin Musafir, eventually grew to be the dominant one. The second phase of Yezidi research, from the 1930s onwards, gave the pride of place in the emergence of Yezidism to Islam. This view of Yezidism as an aberrant form of extremist Islam was shared by Muslim and European writers alike. The pioneer of this approach among Western scholars was the Islamist M. Guidi, who laid the emphasis on Islamic roots, connecting Yezidis with Yazid bin Omayyad, and tracing the beginnings of the Yezidis back to an exaggerated veneration for the Omayyads.<sup>240</sup> While Guidi agreed that the cult displayed a non-Islamic substratum of beliefs, presumably of Iranian or "Kurdish" origin, and admitted the influence of "Iranian dualism" he paid little attention to these phenomena. This notion of "Umayyad *ghulat*" became entrenched when the Kurdologist R. Lescot endorsed Guidi's views, adding that Yezidism was channeled toward mysticism by Sheik Adi. It must be added that despite being an expert on the Yezidis of the Jebel Sinjar and Siman (Syria), Lescot's interest in their religion was limited. Sensitive as his study is of the social and tribal organization, political and social establishments of the Yezidis, it takes a skeptical and rather superior view of Yezidi religion, which, as he declares, Yezidis themselves are not familiar with.<sup>241</sup> T. Bois also cast his vote for an Islamic origin, putting the emphasis on Sufism, evident in the social organization of the Yezidis, their devotional practice and religious language. A special case is constituted by Furlani who - while realizing the importance of the Islamic component - emphasizes the presence of Iranian and Nestorian Christian elements.<sup>242</sup> Even more interestingly, he seems to find the roots of the Yezidi concept of Satan in the teachings of Origen.<sup>243</sup>

### *The State of Yezidi Research Today*

As has been said above, all these scholars had to make do with precious little information actually

<sup>239</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>240</sup> M. Guidi, "Origine dei Yazidi Storia Religiosa dell' Islam e del Dualismo," *RSO* 12 (1932): 266-300.

<sup>241</sup> This, of course, is true to a certain extent, but not true of "all classes" as he claims (Lescot, *Les Yezidis*, 7) as for Yezidis religion stays strictly in the domain of the "religious experts."

<sup>242</sup> Furlani, *Testi religiosi dei Yezidi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1930) and "Sui Yezidi," *RSO* 13 (1932): 97-132.

<sup>243</sup> Furlani, "Origine e i Yezidi," *Rendiconto dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche series* 8, vol. 2 (1952): 7-14.

originating from the Yezidis themselves, a fact which greatly hindered both their work, and the growth of Yezidi studies as a discipline. This situation slowly started to change (though there is still a long way to go) toward the close of the millennium. In the Soviet Union, the Armenian Yezidi researchers, the brothers Ordekhan and Jelîlê Jelîl included a number of *qewls*, that is, Yezidi hymns, which are of tantamount importance for the transmission of Yezidi religion, in their collection *Kurdskij Foklor* (Moskow, 1978.) At the same time in Iraq two young Yezidi university graduates, Pîr Khidr Silêman and Dr Khelil Jindî Rashow, realizing that the transition to a modern life form represented a serious threat to Yezidi oral tradition, managed to convince the spiritual leaders (residing in Northern Iraq) to allow them to publish Yezidi sacred texts. The result was *Êzdiyati* (Baghdad, 1979) to be followed by *Gundiyaî* by Sîleman (Baghdad, 1985.) These collections, and the work of recording and publishing hymns and other texts which followed, are of great value for preserving Yezidi religious tradition from oblivion. These new texts, and the horizons they opened before research, were made available to Western researchers with the first translations published by P. Kreyenbroek.

The approach of recent researchers has become more subtle, and the idea of seeing Yezidism as the final product of a many-layered cultural and religious syncretism has come more to the forefront. Authors no longer try to trace back Yezidism to a single source, but see it as a special synthesis of diverse elements, which resulted in the existence of a novel, independent system, a religion “of its own.” This approach does not deny the strong influence of Islam, specifically of Sufism, but simultaneously looks for other pre-Islamic elements that contributed to the development of Yezidi mythology and determined the ethos particular to it. The fact that Yezidism is an orally transmitted religion is also in the forefront of interest, along with analyzing what this entails from the perspective of content and structure.

The past decade or so has also seen a fast growing interest in Yezidis in academic circles. In 2001 Christine Allison published her *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan*, a detailed analysis of non-religious Yezidi oral tradition, as well as number of articles on this topic.<sup>244</sup> Presently she has turned her attention toward the oral history of Caucasian Yezidis. Research on Armenian Yezidis are also being carried out by Garnik Asatrian<sup>245</sup> and Victoria Arakelova<sup>246</sup> The

<sup>244</sup> Her articles include “Old and New Oral Traditions in Badinan,” in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, ed. P. Kreyenbroek and C. Allison (London: Zed Books, 1996), 29-47; “Unbelievable Slowness of Mind: Yezidi studies, from Nineteenth to Twenty-first Century,” *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (2009): 1-24; “Orality, Literacy and Textual Authority amongst the Yezidis,” in *Proceedings of the 2007 workshop on Ritual and Alevism*, University of Heidelberg, ed. P. Langer and J. Karolewski, forthcoming.

<sup>245</sup> G. Asatrian, “The Holy Brotherhood: The Yezidi Religious Institution of the ‘Brother’ and ‘Sister’ of the ‘Next World,’” *Iran and the Caucasus* 3 -4 (1999 – 2000): 79-96; G. Asatrian and V. Arakelova, “Malak Tāwūs: The Peacock Angel of the Yezidis,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 7.1-2 (2003): 1-36; and “The Yezidi Pantheon,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 8.2 (2004): 231-79.

<sup>246</sup> V. Arakelova, “Three figures from the Yezidi Folk Pantheon,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 6.1-2 (2002): 57 – 73; “Notes

music of Armenian Yezidis is being studied by Estelle de la Brèteque<sup>247</sup> and Nahro Zagros. Birgul Acikyildiz<sup>248</sup> has prepared her PhD thesis on Yezidi sacral architecture. The work of collecting and publishing has also started in Turkey among the remaining few hundred Yezidis by Amed Gökçen and Esra Danacıoğlu and others. A growing number of researchers are beginning to pay attention to Yezidi history within the framework of the Ottoman Empire, while others are dealing with the fascinating phenomenon of the Yezidi diaspora in Europe, a minority of minorities among emigrant Kurds from Iraq and Turkey.<sup>249</sup> Presently there are several Master and Doctoral theses being prepared on the Yezidis at various institution of higher education in Europe.

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on the Yezidi Religious Syncretism,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 8.1 (2004): 19-28.

<sup>247</sup> E. Brèteque, “Chants pour la maisonnée au chevet du défunt La communauté et l’exil dans les funérailles des Yézidis d’Arménie,” *Frontières* 20.2 (2008): 60-66, <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018336ar>

<sup>248</sup> “Le Yézidisme, son patrimoine architectural et ses stèles funéraires,” *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 4 (2009): 94-104; “The Sanctuary of Shaykh ‘Adī at Lalish: Centre of Pilgrimage of the Yezidis,” *The BSOAS* 72.2 (2009): 302-333; *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*, forthcoming.

<sup>249</sup> A. Ackermann, “A Double Minority: Notes on the Emerging Yezidi Diaspora,” in *Diaspora, Identity and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research*, ed. W. Kokot, K. Tölölyan, C. Alfonso (London: Routledge, 2004), 156 – 69; “Yeziden in Deutschland: Von der Minderheit zur Diaspora,” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 49 (2003): 157 – 77.

## Chapter 4: The Religion of the Yezidis

This chapter does not aspire to give a comprehensive, all-encompassing description of Yezidi Religion. My aim is simply to give a concise analysis of those aspects of Yezidi religion which are indispensable for understanding the questions analyzed in the subsequent parts of this study. These topics are

- orality
- the relationship between God (the Godhead) and His Angels and between the Angels and the *khas*, that is, their incarnation on earth as Yezidi leaders.

### Orality

The most important aspect of Yezidi religion is its oral nature. Despite rumors about the existence of holy books already reported by nineteenth-century travelers,<sup>250</sup> and despite the late nineteenth-century discovery of the alleged sacred books, the *Jelwa* and the *Meshef'a Resh* or *Black Book*, all evidence points toward the fact that Yezidi religion has been based on oral transmission for centuries. Yezidis, with the sole exception of the Adani sheikh lineage, have been banned by religious precepts from even learning to read and write.<sup>251</sup> As the *Jelwa* itself says: "I guide without

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<sup>250</sup> Such claims probably reflect the influence of the surrounding "Religions of the Book." (One must remember that in the Ottoman Empire following the rules of Shariya, religions considered "of the Book" had a much more prestigious, and certainly a much safer legal position.) Thus for example, already the Arabic poem purporting to be an eulogy of Sheikh Adi, and translated by Badger (*Nestorians and their Rituals*, 113) mentions a Book of Glad Tidings, a work which is still referred to by some Yezidis (under the title *Mijde*) as the "original" Yezidi sacred book, now probably lost. The title of the work strongly indicates that it was conceived after the fashion of the *Evangelium* (Good News) probably under strong Christian influence.

<sup>251</sup> Some Adani sheikhs today claim that they were not only allowed to read and write, but were in fact the keepers of sacred texts. However, so far no genuine Yezidi manuscript has surfaced. Furthermore, as the transmission of the sacred texts was primarily the task of the *qewwals*, or singers (on whom see more below), the existence of any written texts in the hands of the Adani *sheikhs* would have been basically irrelevant as far as the oral nature and oral transmission of Yezidi religion and sacred texts is concerned. Some *pîr* families also possess a special book called *Mishuri*. I was not able to see any such book, but according to one old *pîr* lady, who possessed such a *Mishuri*, allegedly 800-year-old, the book consisted – beside a few prayers – of lists of tribes, and of the *sheikhs* and *pîrs* whom each of these tribes followed. All of it in Arabic! However, it contained no religious instructions, hymns, or cosmological/mythological material. According to her, the book could be opened only once a year, on the feast day of the holy patron of this lineage of *pîrs*, when anybody could read from it. However, as it turned out, neither the *pîr*, nor her late husband, his father, grandfather or other people around them could read, and even she was doubtful about how the book was read in the past. Furthermore, her description of the book indicated a printed book, rather than a manuscript (which would mean 19<sup>th</sup> century as the earliest date in this region.) My impression was confirmed by the well-known Armenian Kurdologist, Jelîlê Jelîl, who told me in Paris that he had seen the same book, and it was indeed a printed one. Philip Kreyenbroek also saw another *Mishuri* when he was in Iraq in 2006. From what he said I gathered the impression that this book was used for fortune telling (something Muslims also do with the Quran, though officially this is *haram*) rather than as a source of religious knowledge. Allison recounts that Adani sheikhs make (or made) the similar use of books they referred to as the *Jelwa*. (Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 48.) Of course, doubting the ancient nature of such *Jelwas* and *Mishuris* as sources of religious knowledge does not make their existence any less interesting as a

a book.”<sup>252</sup> This orality had far-reaching consequences.

## Lack of Sources

The most important, and unfortunate consequence of orality – from the researcher’s point of view – is the dire lack of sources. Even today, when the collection (and translation) of texts has become possible and some headway has been made, a researcher, especially a non-Yezidi researcher, can be familiar with only a fraction of the existing material. As for the past, this orality simply means that we have no sources for Yezidi religion, mythology, sacred hymns and so on, before the late nineteenth century at the earliest, when the alleged holy books appeared, and no sources for first hand accounts before the 1970’s. Thus the reconstruction of Yezidi history, that is, the history of Yezidi religion prior to these dates, is a work of mere conjecture, where the researcher just cannot lean on earlier sources, unlike in many other fields of historical enquiry. Finally this lack of sources has, naturally, resulted, in a corresponding lack of secondary literature. Though Yezidis have fascinated the imagination of Western scholars since at least the early nineteenth century, the lack of sources hindered the development of scholarly debate and serious work. What little appeared, mainly after the publication of the Sacred Books, tends to be repetitive, and of limited interest today, as - lacking material to sink its teeth into – the majority of past scholarship in Yezidis was concerned with the putative origins of the Yezidis, most of which cannot be taken seriously today.

## Variability

The lack of written texts has led to a lack of a “universally” accepted canon, which has led to the lack of a corpus of theological and exegetical works, which in its turn has led to an absence of a unified theological system or a coherent dogma. As Kreyenbroek summarizes: “The Yezidi tradition can only be understood as the product of a long period of oral transmission. The lack of a written tradition has... prevented the development of formal theology, or the emergence of a single,

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phenomenon, but it seems unlikely that they could have served as transmitters of religious knowledge. Both the Adani’s claim to have preserved a written tradition, and claims about the *Mishuri* of the *pîrs* seem to be more in keeping with the desire to meet the image of a “Religion of the Book” and the intellectual demands brought about by modernity, school-education, and increased contacts with bookish traditions, especially in the diaspora, rather than with the actual facts, (see chapter 5 on “Oral Tradition and Literacy.”)

<sup>252</sup> Frayha, “New Yezidi Texts,” 24; Joseph’s translation (“Yezidi Texts,” 220) says: “I lead to the straight path without a revealed book.” Today most Yezidis, especially older ones, claim that the “hymns cannot be written.” Others claim that Yezidis used to possess such books, but they were destroyed or lost during the many persecutions (*ferman*) inflicted on the Yezidis, or they destroyed them as a safety measure and decided to keep the sacred texts in their heart. A minority, though, believes that the sacred texts are indeed written books which survived the centuries hidden by some high-ranking families of religion.

monolithic system of beliefs.”<sup>253</sup> In other words, there exist side by side not only many different versions of the same myth, hymn, motif, but even basic religious ideas and concepts come in many, often contradictory forms. Not only people, but sacred texts as well may describe certain concepts in different ways. What is more, the virtual absence of an “official body” of teachings can occasionally result in the same person offering statements which sharply contradict each other, or at least lead to inconsistencies.<sup>254</sup>

The variability of Yezidi faith is certainly perplexing. There is not even universal agreement on the names of the Seven Holy Angels of the Yezidi “Pantheon.”<sup>255</sup> Holy beings and angels, who are considered very important in one region, may not be so in another one.<sup>256</sup> There is no universally accepted form of prayer, even prayer-times are debated,<sup>257</sup> a fact that missionaries of the past found “shocking to a Christian mind.”<sup>258</sup> Recently a book was published in Georgia, containing a collection of different variants of the “Confession of Faith” (*Şe’detiya Dîn*), a sort of prayer recited by Yezidis from the region.<sup>259</sup> This little book alone contained thirty-one different variant of the same text, some of them showing quite considerable variations.<sup>260</sup> Little is known about textual tradition in Turkey, as Turkish Yezidis had mostly fled to Europe as a consequence of the ongoing civil war before it was possible to carry out research among them. However, recently some work has been started among the remaining community. The results were made known at a Yezidi conference in Frankfurt, where one of the researchers, Amed Gökçen, demonstrated that hymns recited in Turkey, though bearing the same title as hymns published on the basis of material collected in Iraq, showed a number of variations when compared to hymns recited over the border.<sup>261</sup>

Of course, if one considers the extent of land inhabited by Yezidis with its widely dispersed communities,<sup>262</sup> the lack of a real central power with actual, rather than merely a spiritual authority

<sup>253</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 19.

<sup>254</sup> Kreyenbroek (ibid.) contributes such inconsistencies to the lack of an “official” form of faith, where “different people have been taught different things... not having been trained in Aristotelian logic, some Yezidis seem capable of holding mutually exclusive beliefs at the same time.” However, in my experience, such blatant contradictions were more likely to occur with educated people who tried to “tailor” traditional ideas to the demands of modernity, but occasionally “forgot themselves,” and information not conforming to their “modernized” version of Yezidism slipped out.

<sup>255</sup> For different lists of names, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 99; Edmonds, *Pilgrimage to Lalish*, 4; Drower, *Peacock Angel*, 24; Lescot, *Les Yezidis*, 46-47.

<sup>256</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 69. Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 34.

<sup>257</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 70-71. Lescot (*Les Yezidis*, 70, note 1) even claimed, probably under the impression of information he received in the Sinjar, that “ces invocations sont soumises à la libre invention de chacun.”

<sup>258</sup> Badger, “*The Nestorians and Their Rituals*,” 117-118.

<sup>259</sup> *Meselêd bona Pêzanîna H’ebandîna Dînê Êzdîtiyê: Şe’detiya Dîn* (Material for Making the Yezidi Faith Known and Appreciated,) ed. K’eremê Anqosî (Tbilisi: Pirtûkxana Êzdiya, 2005.)

<sup>260</sup> Kreyenbroek’s collection also contains a “Declaration of Faith” (*Yezidism*, 226-29.) This, of course, is yet another variant.

<sup>261</sup> This triggered off violent protest by Iraqi Yezidi researchers, who promptly claimed the Turkish variants were “wrong,” despite the fact that oral tradition knows no “wrong” or “right” variants.

<sup>262</sup> From Aleppo in the West to the North and North-East of Syria, to Northern Iraq, to South-East Anatolia, to the

over these communities, and finally the lack of written texts which would have made the transmission and retention of knowledge, and the comparison of variants easier, the very existence of Yezidism as a relatively coherent religious phenomenon is amazing. One in fact has to wonder that Yezidism has at all survived as a religion which is perceived by its adherents as a unified faith, and that being a follower of Yezidism provides a clear-cut religious (and in this region: ethnic) identity. That retaining even this much unity was at all possible, and despite all these difficulties, or rather “absences” one can still talk about “Yezidi religion” is due in a large extent to the existence of two crucial, distinctive Yezidi institutions: One is a special class of people, that of the *qewwals* or singers, the other is what could be termed a ritual, the so-called Parading of the Peacock (or *tawûs gerran*).

### *Qewwals*

The class of *qewwals*, or singers and keepers of religious knowledge, sacred hymns, songs and stories, constitutes the living memory of Yezidi religion.<sup>263</sup> During religious ceremonies, most of which would not be complete without the presence of the *qewwals*, they sing the sacred hymns, and perform on their sacred instruments, the flute and the tambourine (*def û şibab*). *Qewwals* transmit their lore from father to son, and no one born from a non-*qewwal* lineage may become a *qewwal*. Previously *qewwals* could marry only among each other, but this restriction is no longer observed. These singers, to whom European travelers somewhat erroneously alluded to as “teachers of the doctrines of the sect,”<sup>264</sup> traditionally resided in the twin villages of Bashiqe-Behzani near Mosul, from whence they traveled to other villages. Interestingly, these twin-villages, the traditional residence of the *qewwals*, who recite the sacred hymns composed in Kurdish, are the sole Yezidi settlements where the people speak Arabic as a mother tongue.<sup>265</sup>

Of course, *qewwals* are not the only ones who know sacred texts. Religious leaders (whose position is also hereditary within the lineage), like the Baba Sheikh, Peshiman, Baba Chawush and

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Caucasian region, and possible Western Iran in the past.

<sup>263</sup> The word *qewwal*, literally “the one who chants or recites” – from Arabic *qawl*, “speech,” “word” - originally referred to Sufi singers who sang ecstatic poems during *semas*, that is, spiritual sessions.

<sup>264</sup> A. Layard, *A “Popular” Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852), 193.

<sup>265</sup> The language situation in Bashiqe-Behzani is a rather obscure one. Possibly the percentage of the population speaking Kurdish or Arabic as a mother tongue has shifted with time. Lady Drower visited the villages during the II WW, and reported that she had difficulty in speaking with some of the inhabitants, as they spoke only Kurdish. (Drower, *Peacock Angel*, passim.) Kreyenbroek writes that the *qewwals* are drawn from two families of the villages, the Kurdish speaking Dimlî, and the Arabic speaking Tazhî family. (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 132.) However, when I visited the villages, people claimed that all inhabitants (born there) traditionally spoke Arabic as their mother language (of course *qewwals*, and most of the older men spoke Kurdish as well. Women and younger people tended to speak little Kurdish, if at all.) Furthermore, I was told by someone from Behzani, that the word *tazhi* – meaning greyhound, the only kind of dog that enjoys respect among the Kurds – is a term the people of the villages generally use to refer to themselves, not only to one *qewwal* family, because they came from the Be’eka valley following Sheikh Adi like loyal dogs.

so on, are also versed in religious lore, while many *sheikhs* and *pîrs* know at least a few hymns, which they need at occasions (birth, circumcision, marriage, death) when they perform rituals on the behalf of their followers, or *murids*. Today some *murids*, like Arab Khidir, one of my most important sources, can also become experts of religion, but this is probably a modern development. Still, it was the *qewwals* whose very *raison d'être* as a class was memorizing, performing and transmitting texts.

*Qewwals* officiate at the religious ceremonies during the different festivals held at Lalish, at burials, and at the ceremonial mourning in graveyards on the morning of New Year. However, these activities were (and are) usually confined to their immediate district (Sheikhan and possibly the Sinjar.) It was only during the Parading of the Peacock that these singers really ventured far from home, from Aleppo to the Muscovy *sanjak* in the Transcaucasian region.

### Parading of the Peacock

The Parading of the Peacock refers to the ritual when the *sanjak*,<sup>266</sup> that is, a bronze image of a peacock, revered as the symbol of the Peacock Angel, the protecting angel of the Yezidis, is taken around the Yezidi villages. The Peacock *sanjak* is the most sacred object of Yezidis, usually well-hidden from the prying eyes of strangers. Originally, there were seven bronze peacocks, corresponding to the seven Yezidi districts, also known as *sanjaks* (a word probably adopted from Ottoman administrative terminology).<sup>267</sup> There seems to be some disagreement as to the original identity of these seven geographical *sanjaks*, but they covered all the territories where Yezidis lived, from Aleppo to Iran and from Iraq to the Muscovy *sanjak* (that is, the Caucasus mountains).<sup>268</sup> The *sanjaks* were traditionally kept in Lalish, the sacred valley of the Yezidis near Mosul, or at other times in the house of the Yezidi Prince at Baadra, also near Mosul, in whose possessions they officially were.

At regular intervals the *sanjaks* were taken on tour to visit the Yezidi villages, each one in its own district, accompanied by a group of *qewwals*. This was called the Parading of the Peacock or *tawûs gerran*. The *sanjaks* belonging to districts near the center were paraded two or three times a year. Those for districts further away went only once, or, when there were political troubles even

<sup>266</sup> In literature on Yezidis this object is referred to as *sanjak*, while Yezidis today usually talk about it as *Tawûs*, that is, "Peacock."

<sup>267</sup> The *sanjaks* had a troubled history. They were the favourite spoils of the hostile Ottoman armies, and even of warring Yezidi factions. Five of the *sanjaks* kept in Lalish were for example taken as war spoils to Baghdad in 1892, though they are said to have been returned later (Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*, 166, 171.) Today some of the original *sanjaks* seem to have been lost for good, though it is impossible to know how many are actually left. Fuccaro (*The Other Kurds*, 139) writes that in the 1920s only three of them toured the Yezidi districts. My Yezidi friends in Iraq claimed that today only two are left, those of the Sheikhan and Sinjar district in Iraq, while Jasim Murad ("Sacred Poems," 129) claims that the Aleppo and Diyarbakir *sanjaks* are still left and occasionally visit their district.

<sup>268</sup> Today the Peacock visits only the two districts in Iraq, and perhaps Syria.

less often.

During the touring of the *sanjak*, the envoys stop at every village<sup>269</sup> on their way and perform the rituals of the *tawûs gerran*.<sup>270</sup> After the small bronze image of the Peacock is ceremoniously set up in a guest room of the village and the appropriate prayer recited, believers arrive in long queues to pay their respect, that is, to kiss the standard and the hand of the leading *qewwal*, and leave some money as well. Later on the *qewwals* perform some religious hymns accompanied by the flute and the tambour. The highlight of the event is the sermon, or *mishabet*<sup>271</sup> preached by the leading *qewwal*. The topic is chosen after consulting the wishes of the audience, and the recitation of the sacred hymns is mixed with the retelling of myths and learned expositions on the subject. A ceremonial meal consumed together with the guests is usually part of the proceedings as well. (In the Sheikhan following the meal there is another session of hymn singing, when the elderly men present can request which hymns they would like to hear. These usually centre around Sheikh Adi, the Peacock Angel, and Yezidi ancestors, and a special hymn is recited in honour of the ancestor *sheikh* to whose lineage the host belongs.)<sup>272</sup> Once the allotted time is over and the trickle of visitors dries up, the Peacock is carefully wrapped in its protective sacred clothes and taken to a new house or a new village, where the proceedings are repeated.

The Parading of the Peacock provided (and in some isolated places still provides) one of the rare opportunities when common Yezidis could get some form of religious instruction. Thus, the rituals surrounding the holy object of the *sanjak*, when the village community assembled to see the Peacock, and the *qewwals* sang hymns and recited sermons explaining Yezidi myths and concepts, were of great importance in preserving Yezidi religion as they secured the continuance of the oral tradition by providing an opportunity for the recitation of oral texts.

The relevance of the ritual of the Parading of the Peacock in keeping alive and “regulating” religious knowledge in the Yezidi community is highlighted by the fieldwork carried out by Jasim Murad among the German diaspora, which demonstrates how important a source of religious knowledge the visit of the *qewwals* was for the outlying communities. Speaking of young Yezidis, who grew up in Germany, he notes that they know practically nothing of their religion. He is of the opinion that this can be attributed to the fact that these youngsters, living in an alien cultural environment, were excluded from the ritual life their parents could still experience in their native villages. It is telling that of all the ceremonial occasions it is the Parading of the Peacock he singles

<sup>269</sup> In collective villages the Peacock *sanjak* spends one day in each of the units corresponding to the former villages.

<sup>270</sup> The following short description is based on my own observances in the Sinjar, in 2004. For a longer and more detailed description, see E. Spät, “The Role of the Peacock ‘*Sanjak*’ in Yezidi Religious Memory: Maintaining Yezidi Oral Tradition,” in *Materializing Memory: Archaeological Material Culture and the Semantics of the Past*, ed. I. Barbiera, A. Choyke, J. Rasson. British Archaeological Reports: International Series, forthcoming.

<sup>271</sup> A combination of myth narrated in prose, recital of hymns, and possibly moral exhortations.

<sup>272</sup> Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 134-135.

out for mention: “For example, the Standard of the Peacock Angel does not circulate among them, a ritual containing a major source for hearing the sacred poems as well as being instructed in the basic doctrines of the religion.”<sup>273</sup> This is corroborated by the interviews made with older Yezidis now living in Germany. Most of them mentioned the Parading of the Peacock as among the most important aspects of their earlier life “living as Yezidis” in their homeland, and the main source of their (limited) knowledge of Yezidi faith.<sup>274</sup> It apparently also served to reinforce their collective identity as Yezidis: “It was during the ritual of the Peacock Angel that my feelings as a Yazidi would become strengthened.”<sup>275</sup>

It is clear that the Parading of the Peacock was an important tool for religious standardization and maintaining the unity of Yezidi religion, as far as this is possible in an oral tradition, through ensuring a continuous contact between the religious centre and periphery, limiting independent religious development in the latter.<sup>276</sup>

### Genres of Yezidi Oral Tradition:

Yezidis have their own terms for different categories of religious texts. The most important literary genres of Yezidi oral tradition are the *qewl*, *beyt* and *chirok*.<sup>277</sup> Their language is invariably Kurdish, though the two former genres contain many Arabic expressions.

*Qewls*: The word *qewl* is translated into English as “hymn” or “sacred poem.” *Qewls* are, ideally, transmitted verbatim, in a fixed form by the *qewwals* and other religious experts.

The language of the *qewls* is excruciatingly hard to understand. They use plenty of Arabic expression, while in some places the texts may seem corrupt, or perhaps they employ old Kurdish forms no longer easily interpreted. Also, many “*Qewls* are based upon a *chirok*, consisting of poetic

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 388-91.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 390. It is also worth noting that as the *sanjak* was in the possession of the Yezidi Prince, who represents the Peacock Angel on earth, the Parading of the Peacock “emphasized the prince’s links with the supernatural power of... [the Peacock Angel] thus, strengthening his authority vis-à-vis the believers.” Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 21. Furthermore, these tours have always provided the prince with an opportunity to intervene in the life of Yezidi communities far from the centre, through the intermediary of the *qewwals* chosen by the prince, and occasionally other dignitaries accompanying the Peacock. The strengthening of the Prince’s authority over outlying communities also contributed if not to the continuation of religious oral tradition, then at least to a sense of unity as a community under a single leader, the Yezidi Prince.

<sup>276</sup> Religious festivals which included ceremonial gatherings in the holy valley of Lalish could have acted in the same way. However, it is highly questionable how many Yezidis, and from how far, could have attended these in the past, before the appearance of modern vehicles and road system. It is also worth noting that the Yezidi tribes of Armenia, shut off from the centre after the creation of the Soviet Union, went through an independent development that is most intriguing for researchers.

<sup>277</sup> For a list of the different Yezidi genres and their description, see Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 49-53.

allusions which are largely incomprehensible to those who are not familiar with the *chirok*,<sup>278</sup> that is, to the average Yezidi layman, who receives no formal religious education whatsoever. As a result, most Yezidi laymen have little idea about the exact content of the hymns, in fact, evidence suggest that they feel little incentive even to try and understand the texts of the *qewls* heard during ritual performances.<sup>279</sup>

The time of the composition of the *qewls* is hard to define. Their language indicates that they must have been composed after the coming of Islam. The literary images and expressions employed by these hymns, the reference to Sufi figures and often their very themes strongly suggest the influence of Sufi poetry and altogether of Sufism. As for the *ante quam* of their composition, “in the case of several *Qewls* the relatively consistent use of terms and symbols with obviously pre-modern Islamic associations, such as ‘the Sunna’ for the community itself and the pejorative ‘Radifites’ for Shi’ies, strongly suggest that an important part of the *Qewl* tradition goes back to a time when questions of identity could still be meaningfully expressed in terms of Islamic discourse.”<sup>280</sup>

Yezidi tradition itself is ambiguous about the origin of the hymns. Some people claim that they were composed by “wise and saintly men from the ‘time of Sheikh Adi’” or perhaps Sheikh Adi himself.<sup>281</sup> More traditional Yezidis, however, insist that these hymns were revealed from the sky, as a sort of divine revelation,<sup>282</sup> or were perhaps brought to mankind by the Angels.<sup>283</sup> This view is also supported by the very content of the hymns themselves:

Thus speaks my King,<sup>284</sup> the Lord of Foundations:  
Indeed, Fekhr,<sup>285</sup> I shall reveal to the earth  
The *Qewls* and the *Khirqes*<sup>286</sup>  
So that the House of Tradition<sup>287</sup> may

<sup>278</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 50. In fact, numerous comments Kreyenbroek has attached to his translation make it clear that even Yezidis versed in religious lore may occasionally be at a loss as to the exact meaning of an expression. Presumably, they refer to stories no longer remembered.

<sup>279</sup> See Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 45. His statement is also supported by my own experience in the course of fieldwork.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>281</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 49. Currently this seems to be the opinion favoured by Yezidi intellectuals of Iraqi origin, who are intent on shaping Yezidism into a modern, “scientific” religion. See chapter 5 on “Oral Tradition and Literacy.”

<sup>282</sup> According to Arab Khidir “just as the Christians say New Testament, and Jews say Old Testament (*Ehdit*, Promise, Alliance,) our hymns are like an Alliance of God, God sent us down the hymns (*qewl*)... instead of Books.” According to Pîr Heji from Mahad, the *qewls* are *semavi*, that is, from the heaven (meaning that they are revealed texts.)

<sup>283</sup> Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 1-2; Bedelê Feqîr Hecî, *Bawerî*, 199. I was told the same by many Yezidis I interviewed on the matter. As the Seven Angels became incarnate as Sheikh Adi and his companions, that is, as “holy men” (see below), this view is in fact easy to reconcile with the statement that the hymns were composed by Sheikh Adi and saintly men from his time. However, the traditional approach sees these religious leaders as incarnate angels, and would never say that the hymns were written by “human beings” and were not “revealed” texts, as the adherents of the first view do.

<sup>284</sup> I.e., God.

<sup>285</sup> Melek (Angel) Fekhredin, one of the Seven Angels of God. See more below.

<sup>286</sup> The sacred black shirts worn by the *feqirs*.

<sup>287</sup> *Sunnexane* (pron. “sunnetkhane”) – a Muslim expression Yezidis apply to themselves.

Adhere to it, rejoice and believe in it...

He fashioned the *Qewls* and *khirqes*  
And revealed them on the earth  
He entrusted them to Melik Fekhredin<sup>288</sup>  
Melik Fekhredin entrusted them to the holy men of Sheikh Adi  
The holy men of Sheikh Adi adhered to them and had faith in them.<sup>289</sup>

*Beyt*: As far as literary compositions are concerned, *beyts*, translated into English as “songs,” cannot be distinguished from *qewls* on the mere basis of formal characteristics. Their categorization as *beyts* is a question of tradition. Theoretically *beyts* are considered generally “less holy” and less important. It must be added however that some compositions known as *beyts*<sup>290</sup> are fairly important and are performed on a regular basis by men of religion, unlike many *qewls*.

*Chirok* (*çîrok*): *Chirok* (also called *destan*,) can literally be translated as tales, folktales. Yezidis use the word *chirok* to refer to prose narratives of Yezidi myths, which are transmitted in the form of story-lines. The exact wording of a *chirok* changes from performance to performances and may depend on a number of criteria. In fact, the same narrator may tell the same *chirok* in different ways at different times.

There is a widespread belief among many (though not all) Yezidis today that *qewls* are older than the *chiroks*. Some of them also claim that *qewls* are more sacred and “authentically Yezidi,” or even that *chiroks* are not sacred at all, they are merely historical accounts of events. They are seen as old and also as true, but they have no “revealed” nature nor are they peculiar to Yezidis.<sup>291</sup>

Both claims are debatable. As regards the age and content of the *chiroks*, one cannot but agree with Kreyenbroek’s observation: “Perhaps the most essential constituent element of the Yezidi religious tradition is the *chirok*.”<sup>292</sup> *Chiroks* contain such myths as the creation of the world, of mankind and of the Yezidis. There are also *chiroks* concerning incarnate angelic beings and their role in Yezidi history. In short they are the very skeleton of Yezidi religion. As regards the origin of the *chiroks*, it is possible that some *chiroks* may have been recently constructed to explain no longer understood references in *qewls*. Other *chiroks*, however, clearly contain myths from a pre-Islamic religious milieu (whether Western-Iranian or Late Antique.) On the other hand the strongly Sufi language and imagery employed by the *qewls*, the references to the community of the Sunna, and

<sup>288</sup> Angel Fekhredin.

<sup>289</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 37, 41 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 100-101.) For the hymns translated by Kreyenbroek and quoted in this study, see Appendix II.

<sup>290</sup> For example, the *Beyta Cindî* (Song of the Commoner,) *Beyta Êvarî* (Song of the Evening,) *Beyta Sibê* (Song of the Morning.)

<sup>291</sup> Yezidis realize that figures like Ibrahim Khalil, Moses, Noah and so on also appear in the tradition of other religions, but they are not familiar enough with these religions to tell that some of the Yezidi myths concerning these figures cannot be found in them, at least not in their written, canonized books.

<sup>292</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 49.

the very Arabic words they use indicate that the hymns were composed at a more recent date, that is, after exposure to Islam and Sufism.

The relationship between *qewls* and *chiroks* is an intriguing one. The two are closely intertwined. Many, though not all, *qewls* are based on *chiroks* and cannot be understood without them. At the same time, *qewls*, with their fixed and memorized texts, help remember storylines in a more or less stable form. “Thus the *Qewl* and *chirok* traditions are complementary, each ensuring the preservation and appreciation of the other.”<sup>293</sup>

As I have said, there is also a theory that only the *qewls* and their content constitute a valid sacred tradition. However, when one gets down to the details, there is no agreement on what is contained by *qewls*, which is hardly surprising given that no person can be familiar with all the different hymns, and even Yezidis suspect that some hymns may have become lost with time. There is also a disagreement on what constitutes a *qewl*. So, for example, the story of Ibrahim Khalil was considered a *chirok* by some, a *mishabet* by others, while Feqir Haji called it a *Qewl of Prophet Ibrahim*, even though his recital consisted mostly of prose and only of a limited amount of hymns quoted.

It seems likely that the verbatim transmission and theoretically fixed nature of the *qewls* greatly contributed to the view held by some that only the hymns are of a sacred nature and they are older or more “authentic” than *chiroks*. This probably reflects the influence of the “Religions of the Book,” where only fixed texts, learned and transmitted verbatim are considered sacred and revealed. Today, when considerable and conscious efforts are being made to turn Yezidi religion into a religion modeled on Christianity and Islam, complete with a fixed canon of sacred texts, it is probable that this view will become increasingly universal.

## God, the Angels and the *Khas* in Traditional Yezidi Belief

A very important caveat must be kept in mind, when writing about Yezidi angels, and their relationship with God and the *khas*, or the holy beings of Yezidi sacred history. As Yezidis do not have (as yet) a coherent theology and theological language,<sup>294</sup> comparable to that of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, for example, it is inevitable that one occasionally use terminology taken from the language of other theological or philosophical systems. Such expressions, for example, as

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>294</sup> As Lady Drower put it so charmingly “one of the charms of the Yazidis is that they are never positive about theology.” Drower, *Peacock Angel*, 6.

“emanation,” “manifestation” are somewhat misleading, as no Yezidi would (today) use such an expression. However, they are also inevitable for describing a Yezidi religious phenomenon in terms understandable to non-Yezidis. Furthermore, apart from the “alien” terminology, describing religious ideas in a sterile, academic construct would also be alien to the traditional Yezidi way of speaking about religion, which used myths and hymns to express ideas, with no thought of giving Western-style definitions and concise explanations. Finally, as is the wont of oral religion, different people may have different ideas about the same thing, though it is possible to draw up “schools of thought” with loose boundaries.

Still, I will here try to give a short summary of the traditional religious view on the nature of the angels, holy beings and their relationship to God, as without understanding the peculiar Yezidi position on these questions, the following chapters would be hard to understand.

### The Godhead and its Seven Angel or Seven Mysteries.

One of the most original and interesting aspect of Yezidi religion is the nature of angels, and their connection, or identity with the Godhead. The Yezidi creation myth, expressed by the *Black Book* and by many hymns, speaks about the Seven Angels (*Heptad*)<sup>295</sup> who came into being during (or just before) the process of the creation of the world. Even though sacred texts, as well as Yezidis talking about the creation of the angels, use the word “to create,”<sup>296</sup> the *Heptad* of Yezidi mythology are not created beings, as the angels of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, but rather emanations or hypostases of the Godhead. This is made clear by the *Black Book*, which declares, in Joseph’s translation: “In the beginning he created six gods from himself and from his light, and their creation was as one lights a light from another light.”<sup>297</sup> Another manuscript, in Ebied and Young’s translation says: “God... created six gods from his essence and from his light. Their creation took place as a man kindles a candle from another candle.”<sup>298</sup> In other words, the Angels come into being from the very light, essence of God, implying consubstantiality between the Godhead and his Angels. They are different entities, but identical in their essence. It is also worth noting that the *Black Book* mentions the creation of six, not of seven angels, just as the *Hymn of the Creation of the World*,<sup>299</sup> even though all sources agree that the number of the Angels was seven

<sup>295</sup> This Zoroastrian term, originally used to designate the *Amesa Spentas*, or Bounteous Immortals, who are the characteristic attributes and inseparable aspect of God (Ahura Mazda), is applied by Kreyenbroek to the Seven Angels, but far as I know is not used by the Yezidis. (On the other hand the Ahl-i Haqq do use the word *Haftan* to designate the Seven Divine Angels of their system, who resemble the Yezidi Seven Angels.)

<sup>296</sup> *Afirandin, xolokandin, çêkirin.*

<sup>297</sup> I. Joseph, “Yezidi Texts,” 224.

<sup>298</sup> Ebied –Young, “An Account of the History and Rituals of the Yazidis of Mosul,” 521.

<sup>299</sup> “Our Lord is the Eternal Lord, He created six Angels, He separated Hell and Paradise.” *Hymn of the Creation of the World* 19, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 185.

(Seven Angels, *Heptad*), and many Yezidis can recite their seven names (even if not necessarily always the same seven.) This may imply that – at least at one point, at some stage of the tradition – God was thought of as one of the Seven.<sup>300</sup>

Contemporary discourse on the Angels also supports the view that the Angels are the emanations of God. As Sheikh Deshti of Khanke said: “The Lord of the World created all the Seven Angels from his own light (*nûr*), that is, from his own power (*quwet*), from his own miraculous might (*keramet*).”<sup>301</sup> Similarly Qewwal Qewwal declared that Tawusi Melek, that is, the Peacock Angel, the leader of the Seven Angels and the protector of the Yezidis, “came into existence from the light (of God.)”<sup>302</sup> Another telling, though rather different, description was provided by Feqir Ali, one of the old Yezidis living in Germany interviewed by Jasim Murad: “The universe was a total void in which the light of God was shining. God turned from His right side and prayed to himself and from his shoulder Tawusi Melek, i.e. Angel Gabrail, was born.”<sup>303</sup> Though this account of the Peacock Angel’s birth is far less abstract than the above statements on the Angels being created from God’s light and essence, the fact that he is said to have been born from God’s shoulder also implies a close, essential connection between them, translated into the language of folktales.

Yezidi hymns elaborate the identity between the Supreme Divine Being and His Angels in many different ways. *The Hymn of Sheykh Obekr*<sup>304</sup> talks of how one angel became two, two angels became three and so on, until the number seven is reached, and explains how these angels are identical, that is, the expressions (or manifestations) of the same essence:

My King<sup>305</sup> is the almighty,  
There were four angels, they became five.  
All five shared another’s character and qualities

My heart is happy because of this:  
There were five angels, they became six.  
All six became the angels of the Throne.

My King made (his) speech pleasant  
They were seated together in Love.  
There were six angels, they became seven.

<sup>300</sup> Similarly in Zoroastrian tradition Ahura Mazda, God, was one of the Heptad, the seven Amesa Spentas, or Bounteous Immortals, the other six abstractions of the Heptad being thought into existence by Ahura Mazda, the supreme being himself. See R. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), 34-35, 45-50.

<sup>301</sup> *Rabul alemi her heft milyaket ji nûra xwe çêkirine, yani ji quweta xwe, ji kerema xwe çêkirine.*

<sup>302</sup> *Tawsî Melek ji nûr çêbû.* The Peacock Angel is traditionally identified with the Satan by Muslims, and Yezidis are accused of worshipping the Devil. Many early studies on the Yezidis thought that they worshipped the Peacock Angel in order to expiate the force of evil. However, there is nothing in Yezidi religion which would support the idea that the Peacock Angel is a malevolent spirit out to lead humans into temptation and destruction, like the Satan or Devil of Judeo-Christianity and Islam

<sup>303</sup> Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 288. The Peacock Angels is often, though not always, identified with the Angel Jibrail, that is, Gabriel

<sup>304</sup> *The Hymn of Sheykh Obekr* 16-22 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 211-13.)

<sup>305</sup> The term “King” (*Sultan*) is used to denote God.

All seven, when they were created,  
Were exactly alike.  
In Love, gazing at one another, they passed the time.<sup>306</sup>

Individual Angels (of the *Heptad*) are routinely described with words and expressions befitting God, rather than one of his creations, in the hymns dedicated to the Angels.<sup>307</sup> For example, the Hymn addressed to Tawusi Melek, describes the Peacock Angel in terms of God, attributing to him all the “characteristics” and deeds of God. It is not possible to quote the whole hymn here, but three stanzas would perhaps be enough to convey the general tone of the hymn:

Oh my Lord, by your eminence, by your rank and by your sovereignty,  
Oh my Lord, you are generous, you are merciful,  
Oh my Lord, you are forever God,  
You are forever worthy of praise and homage.

Oh my Lord, you are the angel who is the king of the world,  
Oh my Lord, you are the angel who is generous king,  
You are the angel of the awesome Throne,  
Oh my Lord, from pre-eternity you have always been the ancient one.<sup>308</sup>

Oh my Lord, you are higher than the sky,  
You have no attributes, you are everywhere,  
You do not give birth, you are alive without having been born.<sup>309</sup>

This hymn does not only describe Tawusi Melek in a way which is in keeping with Muslim (as well as Jewish and Christian) traditions of praising God as the Lord of all the creation, but point blank declares him to be “forever God.” Furthermore, in accordance with the theological traditions of describing God as the all encompassing one, the Peacock Angel appears as a being who has no attributes, as it is only what was created that can be assigned attributes (that is, can be described by them.) What is even more remarkable, the hymn – by declaring that the Peacock Angel gives no birth and was not born - even employs a crucial term used to portray God from one of the best known Suras: “He begetteth not, nor is He begotten”<sup>310</sup> - meant to refute Christian ideas on God the Father begetting Jesus the Son.

Similarly, the hymn addressed to Sheikh Shems, another of the Seven, represents him as the creator:

Oh Sheykh Shems, you are merciful,  
You are my creator from ancient times.

Oh Sheykh Shems, you are compassionate,

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<sup>306</sup> *The Hymn of Sheykh Obekr* 19-22, (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 211-13.)

<sup>307</sup> See *ibid.*, 84, and chapter “A Survey of Prominent Yezidi Holy Beings,” 91-124.

<sup>308</sup> *Hymn of Melek Tawus* 1-2, *ibid.*, 245.

<sup>309</sup> *Hymn of Melek Tawus* 8, *ibid.* (The original text of the last line is corrupt, the translation is made on the basis of an emendated text based on discussing the text with informants (Kreyenbroek, Note 7 for Kurdish text, 248; Note 7 for English text 249) but given the context there is no reason to seriously doubt the validity of this emendation.)

<sup>310</sup> Sura 112.003.

You are my dear creator,  
For all ills you are my remedy,  
To all creatures you are merciful.

Oh Sheykh Shems, you are a refuge,  
You are my creator for ever and ever,  
You give sustenance and you take it away.<sup>311</sup>

There are many ways to describe the essential oneness of the Godhead and His Angels. Texts and people alike mention “light” (*nûr*) very often, people also refer to the power (*quwet*,) or miraculous might (*keramet*) of God,<sup>312</sup> but by far the most important word is *sur*. *Sur* comes from a Sufi word *sirr*, meaning (divine) “mystery,” “secret” hidden from those unworthy of knowing it. As mystery, it refers to the substance of God’s grace, and approaching this *sirr* is a kind of gnosis for the Sufi. In its sense as “secret” *sirr* may allude to divine love, the intimate relation between the mystic and God. Finally it can also mean the innermost part of heart, meaning not the physical heart, but the locus of spiritual revelation, a human faculty for fixing on the spiritual realm.<sup>313</sup>

In Yezidi lore *sur*’s meaning, however, is slightly different. When asked, most Yezidis would define (both in Kurdish and English) *sur* as *nûr*, that is, light, adding that it is the light of God.<sup>314</sup> Some added “power of God” (*quwet*, *qudret*), and occasionally “miraculous power” (*keramet*) to the “light,” and even “spirit” in English.

A careful analysis of Yezidi texts and Yezidi discourse on the question of the *sur* leads to the conclusion that *sur* can best be translated as “divine essence” or as “the essence of the divine.” In Kreyenbroek’s definition it “refers to the mysterious nature of the members of a Heptad of divine beings,”<sup>315</sup> while in the Index of his book it is defined as “the ‘essence’ of a holy being.”<sup>316</sup> In my opinion, *sur* ultimately refers to the essence of the Divine itself, that is, God (or the Godhead), an essence in which his emanations, the divine or holy beings (angels) share. It is the divine *sur* (from here on translated as light or divine essence) that the angels were created from, or rather, emanated forth from.

As Feqir Haci said about the creation of the Seven Angels “the Great Lord created the seven Angels from his own *Light*, from his own *Sur*.”<sup>317</sup> The Seven Angels are in fact often simply referred to as “*Heft Sur*” (“Seven *Sur*”)<sup>318</sup> in the sacred hymns. Again, these hymns make the

<sup>311</sup> *The Hymn of Sheykh Shems of Tabriz* 3-5 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 259,) see the whole of the hymn as well.

<sup>312</sup> These latter two expressions are used in contemporary discourse rather than in the hymns.

<sup>313</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. J. L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 297; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, “*Sirr*” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 12, Supplement (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 752-53.

<sup>314</sup> The only one who translated *sur* in its traditional sense, mystery, was Mamoste Sabah, the English teacher from Baadra. A young, English-speaking Yezidi made a distinction between the two words. He considered *sirr*, to be an Arabic word, meaning “secret,” while *sur* he defined as a Yezidi word meaning “light.”

<sup>315</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 52.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 342. On the “holy beings” or *khas*, see below.

<sup>317</sup> *Rabul Alemî heft milyaketa çêkir(in), ji sura xwe xolokandin, ji nûra xwe xolokandin.*

<sup>318</sup> Translated by Kreyenbroek as *Seven Mysteries*. though this is probably due to the lack of a more fitting expression in

consubstantiality between God and his emanations, the angels, unambiguous, by referring to both as *sur*. For example, *The Hymn of Sheikh Obekr* 15 says of God: “My King is a Mystery (*Sur*) in Heaven,”<sup>319</sup> while his angels in turn are also often referred to in the hymns as *sur*:

My King, ever since he was the Prince

Was the leader of a vast army.

With the Seven Mysteries (*sur*) of Sultan Êzîd,<sup>320</sup> he was the knowing one.<sup>321</sup>

## The *Khas* – the Holy Beings, or Incarnate Angels

The *sur*, the divine essence or light manifesting itself in the emanation of the Godhead, plays a crucial role throughout Yezidi history in the interplay between the human and the divine spheres. It is the key to understanding the nature of the protagonists of Yezidi sacred history. Such personages, who may be known to non-Yezidis from Judaism<sup>322</sup> and Islamic history,<sup>323</sup> or may be specifically Yezidi figures (often wearing the same name as the Seven Angels), are called *khas*,<sup>324</sup> literally “good, holy beings.”<sup>325</sup> The *khas* are in effect the incarnation of angels (that is of divine emanations) whether they go by the same name like their divine counterparts<sup>326</sup> or are known by another name (often adopted from Christian or Islamic figures.) Periodically they appear on earth in human form to lead people (that is, Yezidis) on the road of true faith.<sup>327</sup>

The operative idea here seems to be the *sur*, that is, the divine essence, light of God, from which the Angels were created, and which eventually became manifest on earth whenever these Angels incarnated as human leaders. As one of my informants said of the holy beings, who descend

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English language.

<sup>319</sup> *padşê min surr li sema* (Kreybroek, Yezidism, 211.)

<sup>320</sup> Note how Sultan Êzîd here too appears as God, the head, or possessor of the Seven *Sur*, rather than one of the Seven Angels.

<sup>321</sup> *Hymn of Sheikh Obekr* 11 and 14, (Kreybroek, Yezidism, 211.)

<sup>322</sup> For example, Noah, Ibrahim Khalil, that is, Abraham.

<sup>323</sup> For example, Yezid bin Muawiya, or various Sufi figures, from Sheikh Adi to Rabia al-Adawiya, Beyazid Basami, Shems of Tebriz, Mansur al Hallaj.

<sup>324</sup> The other word to design them is *mêr* (literally “man”), though in my experience this designation can be found in the sacred hymns, but was not typically used by the Yezidis I interviewed.

<sup>325</sup> *Khas* is originally an Arabic term, meaning “good.” Among the Nusayrîs the so-called “Khâss” alludes to the elect (sons of light) according to the *Kitab al-Usus*, see Bar-Asher – Kofsky, *The Nusayrî-‘Alawî Religion*, 56.

<sup>326</sup> Sheikh Adi’s companions bore the names of the *Heptad*.

<sup>327</sup> This idea of the successive manifestation of the deity (divine essence, light) in human form is also present among contemporary and medieval extreme Shiite groups, where researchers often suggest a strong Gnostic influence. It is indeed very tempting to call this simply a Gnostic/Manichaeic motif, as both taught the periodical manifestation of divine “illuminators” on earth to reveal Gnosis to mankind. However, unlike concrete myths and literary motifs, such a “philosophical” concept could have been born autonomously, leading to what would resemble Gnostic ideas. The fact that the idea of the “manifestation of divine essence” is widespread among religious movements with an Iranian background implies that this may be an autochthon feature, which draws its inspiration, at least partially, from old Iranian beliefs (though this notion cannot be found in Zoroastrianism) or equally, that the two different traditions may have merged and reinforced each other in producing new religious forms. This thesis deals only with concrete myths and mythological motifs, and not with abstract philosophical ideas whose origin is much more uncertain to trace.

on earth from time to time in order to reincarnate in human form: “their soul is from heaven,<sup>328</sup> from the *sur* of God, the *sur* of the Angels, they came into being from the light of God, their souls are not like ours, these (are) heavenly souls.”<sup>329</sup>

The most salient example of the identity between the *khas* on earth, the Angels, and ultimately God, is furnished by what could perhaps be called the “trinity” of Sultan Êzî (one of the names used to designate God,<sup>330</sup> Tawusi Melek, and Sheikh Adi, the three being repeatedly identified or fused with each other in Yezidi hymns. For example, the *Hymn on the Laughter of the Snakes* declares, leaving little doubt as to the essential identity of the three:

Sheikh Adi,<sup>331</sup> Tawusi Melek and Sultan Ezi (God) are one

Don't you regard them as separate,

They quickly make wishes come true.<sup>332</sup>

Arab Khidir's exegesis on these lines was based on the concept of the *sur*. “They are one light, one *sur*. If I say, Melek (angel) Adi, Sultan Êzî and Tawusi Melek are one, it means they they are from the light of God, one *sur*, they are all from the light of God.”<sup>333</sup>

The *Hymn of the Faith* does not state this identity as openly, but its portrayal of Sheikh Adi is one befitting God:

What is the colour of faith?

It is the pre-eternal Word,<sup>334</sup>

It is the name of Sheykh Adi

<sup>328</sup> *Behîst* or heaven for him was the place where the special, divine souls (and they alone) reside, and periodically come forth. Others attribute the same function, as the treasury of holy souls, to the *Qendîl* (“the light Throne of God,) on which see more later.

<sup>329</sup> Qewwal Hussein, *ruhê wan ji beheştî ye, ji sura Xwedê, sura milyaketa, ji nûra Xwedê çêbûne, na wekî yê me ye, ew ruhê beheştî.*

<sup>330</sup> Kreyenbroek (*Yezidism*, 95-96) identifies Sultan Êzî(d) as a holy being other than God, who takes his name from Yazid bin Mu'awiya, the fourth caliph . However, several of my informants claimed that Sultan Êzî was in effect one of the names of God. *Sultan Êzî navê Xwedê ye.* Already Layard reports that a qewwal asserted that the ancient Yezidi name for God was “Azed” (Ainsworth, “Assyrian Origins,” 41.) The description of Sultan Êzî in the hymns also implies this. The *Hymn of Erebeg Entush* 1 opens with the statement that Sulan Êzîd is the King, the perfect one (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 275), King (*padşa*) being one of the terms used to refer to God. He is called the “Yezidi faith” and “Yezidis religion” in the *Hymn of The Mill of Love* 31 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 384.) In *The Hymn of Sheykh Obekr* 11-14 he is not only described as a King, yet again, the Seven Angels are called the Seven Angels of Sultan Êzîd, under his command (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 211.) *The Hymn of the Faith* (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 83-89) depicts his role as the creator in the creation of the world. Also in *The Hymn of the Black Ferqan* Sultan Êzî appears as someone who already existed before the foundation of the world, before the angels and holy beings. Yezidi children are baptized at the White Spring in his name (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 159,) and at circumcision the boy undergoing the ritual also says “I am the lamb of the Red Sultan Êzîd (ibid., 96.) (Feqir Haji, on the other hand, claimed that the light of Êzî came from the Peacock Angel, whose light came from God – thus proving that with oral tradition, especially with Yezidi oral tradition, it is rather difficult to make generalizing statements on any possible question, especially when it comes to the obscure relation between different divine beings.)

<sup>331</sup> On the identity between Sheikh Adi, or other Yezidis leaders, and the Angels, see more below.

<sup>332</sup> *Hymn of the Laughter of the Snakes* 4 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 392.) Furthermore, Tawusi Melek's shrine in the holy valley of Lalish is said to belong to Sultan Êzî as well, for the two are identical, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 96.

<sup>333</sup> *Ek nûr in, ek sur in. Ew car heke me got, Melek Adî, Sultan Êzî û Tawsî Melek ek in, yanî ji nûra Xwedê, ek sur, hemî ji nûra Xwedê ne.*

<sup>334</sup> Pre-eternal Word here is not the Christian Logos (unless indirectly, through influences), but an Islamic notion, it was this Pre-eternal Word which was revealed through the Quran.

Sheykh Adi is truly Sultan<sup>335</sup>  
 He brought forth the fourteen spheres of earth and heaven.  
 There was neither Tablet nor Pen.<sup>336</sup>

Another version of the same hymn compares Sheikh Adi with the ocean, a traditional literary device to describe God, (one that is also employed by the Yezidi *Hymn of the Oceans* 14-15, where god appears as a great, endless, deep ocean<sup>337</sup>):

Sultan Sheikh Adi himself is the faith  
 His ocean is a mighty ocean  
 Divers have brought forth pearls from it<sup>338</sup>

Divers brought forth pearls from it  
 Anyone who shares the secrets of his King  
 Has brought forth a pearl from the oceans.<sup>339</sup>

While Sheikh Adi is the most important of all the *khas*, whose eventual identity with Tawusi Melek and God is emphasized by many hymns, he is by far not the only one whose appearance among Yezidis during their history is interpreted as the earthly manifestation of the divine *sur*. Sheikh Adi's companions, for example, the ancestor of the sheikhly lineages, are considered the incarnation of the six others of the Seven *Sur* or Angels. The basic line is that all the *khas* or holy beings are believed to possess *sur* (or to be the physical manifestation of the *sur*.) This is perhaps the most poetically, and explicitly, expressed in the case of Yezid (or Êzîd, Êzî) bin Muawiya, the manifestation of the “*sur* of Êzî,” that is, Sultan Êzî, God. The fourth caliph (who, after the battle of Karbala became anathema in the eyes of the Shiite, and did not enjoy a too good reputation among most Sunnis either) appears in Yezidi mythology as a subverter of soulless Islamic Shariya, and a true Yezidi leader, who turns people from Islam back to the true religion. According to Feqir Haci, Yezid was conceived when at the order of God the *sur* “entered the body of his mother,”<sup>340</sup> the ninety-year-old wife of Muawiya, who turned into a fourteen year old virgin on her wedding night. “Ezid himself was *sur*, *sur*, which came down from the sky.”<sup>341</sup> The *qewl* and the *çîrok* or “tale” on

<sup>335</sup> *Şêxê Edî xwe sultane* may literally be translated as “Sheikh Adi is the Sultan himself.” Sultan is one of the epithets of God.

<sup>336</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 195. In *The Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 7 it is Sultan Êzî who is identified with the Pen, while Sheikh Hesên (Sin) – one of the Seven and a *khas* as well - is also known as the Lord of the Tablet and Pen, see *ibid.*, 105.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-207.

<sup>338</sup> Pearl as a literary metaphor of the human soul goes back to Late Antiquity. It was employed, for example, by the famous *Hymn of the Pearl*. Sufism continued, though slightly modified, this tradition. The image of the pearl (believed to develop from raindrops that fall in the sea) as human soul, which starts its spiritual journey in the sea, then passes through the clouds, to eventually drop back into the sea “its home, changed into jewels, unable to live without the ocean yet distinct from it” was a much-liked metaphor of Sufi poets for describing the human soul's relation to God, their basic unity and temporary differentiations, A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 284.

<sup>339</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 85.

<sup>340</sup> *Rabul Alemî emrê kir ew sur bkefte bedena wê.*

<sup>341</sup> *Ezîd sur bû, sur ji ezmana hate xwar.*

the birth and deeds of Yezid attribute a great importance to the *sur*.<sup>342</sup> Muawiya chases away his wife, Mehwer, when he realizes she is carrying a being of *sur*, who will turn away people from Islam.

When Sultan Ezi appeared in his  
mother's body  
The mystery (*sur*) became apparent to Mu'awiya  
Mu'awiya was overcome with fear.<sup>343</sup>

Thus Yezid's mother was abandoned in the desert carrying the "mystery (*sur*) of Sultan Ezi."<sup>344</sup> The daughter of the judge of Basra, a most pious and devoted maiden, always performed her prayers to "Tawusi Melek and to the Lord of that Mystery (*sur*)" "on rooftops and hills, so she would be able to see the mystery (*sur*) as soon as it arrived."<sup>345</sup> Then, one day, she saw the pregnant Mehwer riding nearby toward the city with light shining on her forehead, and she realized at once that the other woman was the bearer of the *sur*.<sup>346</sup> She took her home to Basra, and that very night all domestic animals in Basra gave birth to two female young, and all pregnant women had twin sons, a miracle due to the presence of the *sur*. Once grown, Yezidi goes to Damascus to confront his father and Islam and introduces himself saying "I am light, my essence is light... It is I, and my sweet name is Sultan Ezi."<sup>347</sup> Then he goes on to perform a number of miracles, including turning the river into wine, through his *sur*,<sup>348</sup> bemusing the Muslim population of the city, and finally turning them away from Islam (back) to Yezidi faith. Both the hymn and the *çîrok* repeatedly emphasize that Yezidi is the *sur* of Sultan Êzî, manifestation of the Mystery (*sur*) of Truth.

The *Hymn of Abu Bakr* 23-29 expounds the successive manifestation of the eternal divine *sur* in the form of *khas*, or holy beings throughout the course of history:

I say a few things out of many (?)  
They were bewildered by that mystery (*sur*)  
I was present there when  
I was created from the Pearl.<sup>349</sup>  
I existed before all foundations  
When he established earth and heaven  
I was made to inhabit so many animate creatures.

I existed, I was there before all time  
I existed before joy and grief

<sup>342</sup> The title of the *çîrok* translated by Kreyenbroek even bears the title *The Story of the Appearance of the Mystery (sur) of Ezi* (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 131.)

<sup>343</sup> *The Great Hymn* 3, *ibid.*, 158.

<sup>344</sup> *The Great Hymn* 9, *ibid.*, 158

<sup>345</sup> *The Story of the Appearance of the Mystery (sur) of Ezi*, *ibid.*, 144.

<sup>346</sup> The idea that this divine substance can be seen shining on the forehead of the woman pregnant with the true possessor of the *sur* (that is, the person in whom it will become incarnate) is probably showing an influence of the Islamic concept of the "light of Muhammad." For more on this concept and its influence on Yezidi mythology, see Chapter "The Yezidi Creation Myth of Adam"

<sup>347</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi* and 149.

<sup>348</sup> Feqir Haji too says "through the *sur* of God this water became wine" (*bi surek Xwedê ev av(a) bû şarap.*)

<sup>349</sup> That is, existed when God created the Pearl encompassing him before the creation of the world.

He was one; together with him I made two.<sup>350</sup>  
 I exist and shall always exist  
 I am a person whose ego-soul is acceptable  
 I am Hussayn al-Hallaj  
 I am Mansur al-Hallaj;<sup>351</sup>  
 I am the Turkish Tartar<sup>352</sup>  
 I am the ship that came to rest on Mt Judi<sup>353</sup>  
 Gold and silver and copper am I.

I am gold, my origin is copper  
 The ignorant saw this mystery and did not recognise it  
 Thus they rejected the truth of Sultan Ezi.

I am Mullah Abu Bekir of Jezire<sup>354</sup>  
 In essence I am Adi  
 Praise be to God and thanks that I am a Yezidi.

I was Mullah Abu Bekir of Jezire  
 In essence I was a Qurayshi<sup>355</sup>  
 Praise be to God and thanks that I am a Yezidi.<sup>356</sup>

The dividing line between the Angels and the *khas* is often blurred in the hymns. As the historical manifestations of the Seven Angels may wear the same name on earth as their heavenly counterpart, it is often impossible to distinguish if a sacred hymn speaks of the angels in heaven, or their incarnation on earth as historical persons, the *khas*. This is true, for example, of the *Hymn of the Lights*:

What a pristine light it is;  
 My King<sup>357</sup> made it in his mercy and compassion  
 He also made Sheikh Obekir.  
 (literally: He made Sheikh Obekir *from it*)

What a golden light it is:  
 It came from the Throne above  
 Sheikh Obekir became the Mirebbi<sup>358</sup> of  
 Sheikh Shems the Tartar.

What a brilliant light it is:  
 It appeared from heaven

<sup>350</sup> Presumably this means God and his *sur*.

<sup>351</sup> A famous Persian Sufi mystic, executed for his claim "En el Haq" (I am God). Yezidis claim he was a Yezidi.

<sup>352</sup> Shems of Tabriz, a Sufi mystic who was the friend of the great Sufi master, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi. See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 98.

<sup>353</sup> Yezidis, as well as some Muslims Kurds, hold that Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Judi (oday southeast Turkey.)

<sup>354</sup> Possibly Abu Bekr, the father-in-law of Muhammad and the first caliph.

<sup>355</sup> The Quraish are the tribe of Muhammad, enjoying great respect among Muslims. However, Yezidis claim that the Quraish were Yezidis too (probably an indication of strong Islamic influence centuries ago). See the interviews in the Appendix.

<sup>356</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 177-78.

<sup>357</sup> God.

<sup>358</sup> A "master" who leads his followers, this is one of the five obligatory relationships a Yezidi is supposed to have (beside a *sheikh*, *pîr*, brother/sister of the hereafter, and *hosta*.) However, when in Iraq I never heard any Yezidi refer to his or her *mirebbi*, so it is quite likely that this institution no longer exists in practice.

Sheikh Obekir became the Mirebbi  
 Of Shemsedin and Melik Fekhredin.  
 What a significant light it is;  
 It came down from Heaven  
 Sheikh Obekir became the Mirebbi of all four brothers.

What a shining light it is;  
 It came down from the Throne  
 Its guardian is Sheikh Fekhr<sup>359</sup> the black.

What a great light it is;  
 It is the mercy and compassion of my King  
 He also created Melik Sheikh Sin.<sup>360</sup>

This hymn tells how the Seven Angels were successively created from light (i.e. the Light of God.) That is, the text repeatedly refers to angels (*Melik*.) and Sheikh Obekir, Shemsedin, Melik Fekhredin and Melik Sheikh Sin are well-known names of the Seven Angels or Seven Mysteries (*surs*). On the other hand, these angels bore the same name on earth (without the prefix *melik*), the text talks about the light coming “down from heaven,” which would indicate that it is earthly figures the hymn is about, and Sheikh Shems the Tartar is considered an earthly manifestation (*khas*) of Angel Sheikh Shem (also known as Angel Shemsedin.) Furthermore the “four brothers” mentioned in the text probably refers to the four sons of Êzdîna Mîr, Shemsedin, Fekhredin, Sejadin, and Nesradin, companions of Sheikh Adi, who became the eponyms of four branches of the Shemseni sheikhs. Originally Angels (*sur*) in the sky, the word “brothers” is more likely to refer to their manifestation on earth as *khas*. Of course, as both the Angels in the sky and the *khas* on earth are ultimately derived from the light and power of God, are His manifestations, such a distinction is ultimately irrelevant from the point of view of traditional Yezidi faith.

The fact that the angels are in fact emanations of the Godhead, come into being from His *sur*, while the *khas*, personages of Yezidi sacred history are in their turn the earthly manifestations of the same *sur*, explains what has confused so many researchers in the past: Why the different divine and angelic personalities of Yezidi myths and sacred texts are often interchangeable. After all, if they all represent the same divine *sur*, there is not much point making sharp distinctions between the different figures. As Kreyenbroek writes “All holy beings are... regarded as representatives of the Divine which, in the minds of the believers, presumably limits the relevance of their individual personalities.”<sup>361</sup> This fusing of identities, that is, the interchangeability of the different holy beings, is one of the cardinal traits of Yezidi faith (and texts.)

Metempsychosis,<sup>362</sup> that is, the idea that the same angel (or rather his divine essence, *sur*)

<sup>359</sup> Fekhredin.

<sup>360</sup> *The Hymn of the Lights* 5-10, Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 90-91.

<sup>361</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 84.

<sup>362</sup> *Don/kiras guhartîn* (to change one’s clothes.)

was incarnated again and again during the course of history as human being (that is, as a *khas*), further contributes to the blurring of the different identities of Yezidi religious history. Thus, for example, Sheikh Hesên (also known as Sheikh Sin) is simultaneously one of the Seven Angels, one of the companions of Sheikh Âdi (on earth),<sup>363</sup> who became the eponymous ancestor of a lineage of Sheikhs (the Adani sheikhs), and is at the same time, according to Edmond,<sup>364</sup> identified with al-Hasan al-Basri,<sup>365</sup> and with the Prophet Muhammad. This Yezidi form of metempsychosis makes the sort of linear chronology European historicity is based on redundant.<sup>366</sup>

This explains why the same mythical events and acts are often associated with different angelic figures (or rather, names), or why the same angelic person may be associated with events that took place at different epochs of sacred history. Thus, for instance, when I asked the octogenarian Pîr Jafo, the guardian of the shrine of Mem Şîvan, when exactly Pîrê Libnan,<sup>367</sup> the *khas* he was just talking about, lived, he answered: From the beginning of the world until today, for he appeared again and again at different intervals. On another occasion, I was confused when shown two *qobs* or shrines in the village of Kheter, both of them dedicated to Babê Shehid (Shehid Father,) the ancestor of Yezidis.<sup>368</sup> As I was explained there were two shrines, because they were dedicated to two different persons. One was Sheikh Hesên – that is, Angel Sheikh Sin, from whose *sur* Shehid bin Jer was created. The other was a certain Pîr Suleyman, who “recognized himself” and realized that he was channeling the spirit of Shehid, or rather Shehid’s “*sur* and *keramet* has reached him,” and became a religious leader of the region. As they were two different persons, though ultimately possessing the same *sur*, local Yezidis thought it expedient to erect two different *qobs* in their memories, both being dedicated to Babê Shehid.

As this last mention of Shehid bin Jer, forefather of the Yezidis foreshadows, the *sur* played an important role in Yezidi history not only as far as the *khas* are concerned, but both in the creation of the first human, Adam, and the creation of the Yezidi people itself - questions which will be analysed in details in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>363</sup> Though in effect he was one of the successors of Sheikh Âdi as the leader of the community nearly a century later, see Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 31-33.

<sup>364</sup> Edmonds, *A Pilgrimage to Lalish*, 33 and 49.

<sup>365</sup> A famous Islamic scholar and ascetic, one of the most important religious figures of early Islam (AD 642-728 or 737.)

<sup>366</sup> As Edmonds (*Pilgrimage*, 6) writes: “For people who believe in the transmigration of souls what appears to us to be the most appalling inconsistencies and anachronism present no difficulty whatever: it is silly to say that Sheykh X and Shaykh Y whose appearance on earth seems to have been separated by one or more centuries, or even the archangel Gabriel and Shaykh Sajâdin, cannot be ‘the same’ as to try to make out that Mr Jones who was seen last night in tails... cannot be the same as Mr Jones who was seen the day before in a lounge suit or last summer in shorts and an open shirt.”

<sup>367</sup> Pîrê Libnan is another *khas*, whom Pîr Jafo called a *melek*, that is, an angel. He was not one of the Seven Angels, but a “minor” one.

<sup>368</sup> For a detailed study of Shehid, forefather of Yezidis, and his conception from the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin, see chapter 9 on the “Origin Myth of the Yezidis.”

## Chapter 5: Religious Oral Tradition and Literacy among the Yezidis of Iraq<sup>369</sup>

This chapter will analyse how external influences, especially literacy and written texts and the traditions of literate societies, are affecting the religious oral tradition of the Yezidis of Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>370</sup> today. It will look at the issue of canonisation, modernising mythology, adopting new elements for being useful, discarding old ones for being deemed obsolete or non-scientific, and rejecting myth perceived to be of Islamic origin. Finally it will deal with the question of how new myths are constructed to meet the new needs raised by modern education and increased contact with the outside world. Though what is happening today is by necessity different in some ways from what may have happened in the past, when different cultures and traditions met and mingled, still such an analysis can help present-day researchers form some idea on the mechanics of how oral tradition was shaped and affected by “external” influences and how it absorbed alien traditions, often originating in literate cultures.

As has already been expounded, one of the most important characteristics of Yezidi religion is its oral nature. Until quite recently the faith of the Yezidis was based on oral tradition. Sacred texts were memorised and transmitted from father to son by the qewels, the sacred bards of the Yezidis. This oral nature, which shaped the structure and nature of Yezidi belief system, has undergone profound changes in the last few decades, thanks to the spread of compulsory education, general literacy, the interest of outsiders in Yezidi faith, and the interest of literate Yezidis on what outsiders had to say about them. As a result Yezidism can no longer be called a purely oral religion.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in the area of the former Autonomy, school education can be called general today, especially among the young and younger middle-aged generation, and illiteracy is slowly becoming a thing of the past. With school education many modern ideas inevitably intrude into the Yezidi world-view. Even more importantly, educated Yezidis, influenced by the demands of the so-called „written religions” and modern life started putting their own religion into writing – something that was unimaginable not so long ago. The revolutionary change came in the seventies of the twentieth century when two Yezidis university graduates managed to secure the permission of the Yezidi religious leaders to put down Yezidi religious texts. The first

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<sup>369</sup> This chapter has appeared as an article in *Anthropos* 103.2 (2008): 393-404.

<sup>370</sup> That is, in the Duhok and Sheikhan regions in Iraq. On the other hand my research didn't cover the Sinjar mountain west of the Tiger, near the Syrian border, surrounded by Arab and Turkoman settlements. In this isolated refuge of Yezidis, where the influence of the modern world is less obvious, the changes which I have observed among Iraqi Yezidis living in more accessible and affluent regions may not apply, or at least to a lesser degree. It may also be assumed that Yezidis living in other regions, like Syria, Georgia or Germany for example, are exposed to different external influences, and therefore their traditions may see different changes

publication was soon followed by several others. Many of these publications are easily available to most Yezidis in the above mentioned region. (So, for example, *Lalish* and *Roj* magazines, which publish sacred hymns, religious tales, folktales and essays on Yezidi religion can be found in many Yezidi homes.)

The process of putting Yezidi religion into writing was further accelerated by the sizeable Yezidi diaspora living in the West, especially in Germany. These Yezidis are cut off from all the old forms of Yezidi religious life, where holiday rituals, visits to holy places or being visited by religious leaders play a central role. At the same time, living in close proximity to other religions for the first time, Yezidis in the West are becoming more and more acutely aware of the fact that, unlike other religions, they lack a holy book to which they could refer, or a clear idea of the history of their own religion. Their children, brought up in a culture of books and confronted by Western schoolmates or friends with more profound religious education are increasingly turning to books trying to find information.<sup>371</sup> There is also a general wish to be able to present a Holy Book, just like other religions. While in the past even the idea of putting a sacred text into writing would have been anathema, today in Yezidi households in the diaspora it is not unusual, for example, to find the two Yezidi “holy texts”, the *Jelwa* and the *Mes’hefa Resh*, which contain genuine oral tradition albeit written down by outsiders in the nineteenth century.<sup>372</sup> Others claim to have found the original Yezidi holy book in the form of the Zoroastrian *Zend-Avesta*.<sup>373</sup> The diaspora, in its turn, further influences Yezidis back in the home country. This has all led to a changing attitude toward books and oral tradition in general, at least in the Iraqi Sheikhan and in the European diaspora,<sup>374</sup> where the place accorded to oral tradition is fast becoming usurped by books written on and mainly by Yezidis. With this development profound changes have appeared, which seem to alter the centuries-old nature and content of Yezidi religion.

### The Appearance of “Canonical” Texts

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<sup>371</sup> For example, one of the interviewees of Jasim Murad stated (“Sacred Poems,” 384-5): “when in the German school my classmates would ask me about my religion. I would tell them that I am a Yazidi and then they would ask me the details of my religion and I would just remain silent. That of course irritated me for these classmates know who Christ is and the history of Christianity and I did not know, for example, who Sheikh Adi or Ta’us Melek is. Then I decided to search for the history and origins of our religion. I went to the libraries and checked out some books written in German about the Yezidis. From these sources I learned that we worship God and believe in seven angels headed by Ta’us Melek. I also found the two holy books *Mishaf Rash* and *Jalwa*.” Professor Philip Kreyenbroek also confirmed in several conversations that the search for an identity among the young and the need for books was a strong driving force behind the birth of Yezidi religious literature in Germany. On the role of writing in Yezidi culture in the West, see also Kreyenbroek (*Sheikh Adi*: 45-6.)

<sup>372</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 12-25

<sup>373</sup> Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 396. “...many informants have viewed the two manuscripts and declare them to be authentic books of their religion. Those informants wrapped the two books in silk garment and carefully stored them on a sacred shelf beyond the reach of children.”

<sup>374</sup> The isolated and impoverished Sinjar mountain on the Iraqi-Syrian border, that has been a refuge of Yezidis for centuries and was under Saddam’s rule until recently, seems to present a more traditional picture at present, though this may also change in the near future.

As it is well known for all researchers of oral tradition, the most characteristic feature of tradition based on orality is the simultaneous existence of many different versions of the same motif or story. This holds, or at least used to hold, true for Yezidis as well, as many travellers and researchers of the past have noticed. With the publication of Yezidi sacred texts a new development appeared. People have started to insist on the written version as the only correct and authentic one. The written version acquires the nature and reputation of a holy scripture – all other versions are compared to this and any divergence is commented on as „It is wrong” „He (i.e. the source) is mistaken.”<sup>375</sup> It is possible, though it would be hard to prove, that the wish for „one, canonised body of writings” can sub-consciously be connected with a wish to refute one of the most “popular” Muslim accusations against Yezidis, namely that they have *no written scriptures*, and are therefore *kafirs* or unbelievers. This accusation is of such a great relevance in Kurdish culture that even Christians speak about this characteristic of Yezidism in a negative way.

This novel notion of an “authentic version” includes not only the written text itself but is beginning to influence the way sources are viewed as well. The idea, characteristic of all “literizing” societies, that orality is inferior to literacy<sup>376</sup> is extended to religious experts. *Qewels*, the traditional keepers of religious lore, most of whom are still illiterate, enjoy ever less respect.<sup>377</sup> On the other hand, literate persons, who – due to a number of factors – have become known as “experts on Yezidi texts,” that is, they are often quoted in writing in periodicals published by Yezidis, are seen as the only authentic sources, when it comes to differences between two versions. Yezidis repeatedly tried to discourage me from trying to interview other, less well-known persons, on the basis that “they know less than X.” I have repeatedly met with confusion and perplexity, when I wanted to speak with yet another person, after having talked with a more valued authority, especially if he was known to “have published” about Yezidi religion. My explanation that there may be “a different version” was even understood to mean that I found the version already told incorrect.

Such an attitude, which insists on one fixed version, coming from one accredited source will eventually lead to the weeding out of “non-canonised” versions and an impoverishment, or at least simplification of Yezidi lore. But it is not only the mere amount of differing variants that is being affected by these changes.

<sup>375</sup> Similar observations were also made by Christine Allison a decade earlier (Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 19).

<sup>376</sup> D. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Traditions*, 100.

<sup>377</sup> During my trip to Beshiqe-Behzani, the twin-villages where *qewels* traditionally reside, for example, local people generally preferred to introduce me to “laymen,” whom for some reason they saw as knowledgeable about the topic of religion, and accompanied me to meet *qewels* only at my own request. Some even expressed an opinion to the effect that *qewels* (and religious leaders for that matter) were no longer what they used to be, and their knowledge can in no way be compared to the *qewels* of the past. In the Yezidi “Sunday School” in Beshiqe, a school set up in the 90’s to teach the children of the twin-villages their religion, children are now taught from books by laymen, and not by *qewels*.

## Books on the Yezidis as a Source of Knowledge

Another far reaching development of literacy is that the written word has started influencing the self-perception of Yezidis, and it has become a source of knowledge even for so-called religious experts. Books and periodicals are read enthusiastically by many these days. The written word enjoys great respect and is trusted far more than the memory and knowledge of a living person, (I have even seen a *micawir*, or guardian of a shrine, take out his hand-written collection of hymns – despite the traditional ban on writing.)

I would like to quote a few telling examples to demonstrate the general interest among literate (though not necessarily very educated) Yezidis in all forms of literature on the Yezidis, their history and religion. In Shariya, a collective village near Duhok, I was shown the book of the late American researcher, John Guest, *Survival among the Kurds*. My host proudly claimed having read its contents with the aid of a dictionary, and called attention to the fact that it contained a number of sacred hymns. He even offered me the book so that I could gain from it what he called good information on Yezidis and their religion (regardless of the fact that the book belonged not to him, but to his neighbor, as his mother pointed out.) Admittedly, of all Yezidi settlements Shariya is the one where contact with foreigners has been the most frequent in the last decade, and where perhaps there are more people speaking or understanding some English than in other villages. This is due to its proximity to Duhok, in the former Kurdish Autonomy, with its international NGOs and the UN, an important source of jobs for nearly a decade, and also to the fact that Shariya was one of the four Yezidi settlements that foreign researchers could dream of setting their feet into.

But even if the presence of a piece of Western scholarship can be called an exception, books and periodicals written by Yezidis, or even by outsiders in Arabic (provided they wrote of Yezidis in a favourable light) have definitely found their way to many Yezidi households around Duhok and in the Sheikhan. Just like in the case of Guest's book, these writings are often seen by younger people as the best way to obtain knowledge about Yezidi traditions. In the course of my field research I was repeatedly referred to the two Yezidi periodicals, *Lalish* and *Roj*, as the “best sources of information.” In one case a university undergraduate even painstakingly translated a folktale, sentence by sentence, for my sake from *Roj* magazine. Sheikh Mîrza of Baadra, who claimed to be the descendant of the seventeenth-century Yezidi hero, Êzdi Mîrza, leafed through a number of books written in Kurdish to look for his family-tree and other information on his illustrious forebear. (This is all the more surprising, because in my experience family and tribal history generally still belong to the realm of oral tradition among the Iraqi Yezidis.)

This phenomenon poses a new “caveat” for unsuspecting researchers: one that is known as “feedback” among researchers of oral tradition. “Feedback may be defined as the co-opting of

extraneous printed or written information into previously oral accounts”<sup>378</sup> and has been widely studied among oral groups who came under the influence of literate cultures. The influence of books that become sources of new tradition in their turn, that is feedback, is not a recent phenomenon among the Yezidis – it was first noticed when a literate elite appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, though we cannot rule out an earlier appearance. Lescot, writing on the book “*El Yazdîyya*” by the black sheep of the Yezidi Princely family, Ismail Chol beg, published in 1934, warned that “l’auteur a eu connaissance d’articles sur la secte édités dans des revues arabes; il a naturellement accepté toutes les erreurs qu’ils contenaient et les a fidèlement reproduites.”<sup>379</sup> Just around the same time the anthropologist Henry Field purchased a Yezidi book in the Beled Sinjar.<sup>380</sup> Upon showing it to Father Anstase-Marie al-Carmali, an expert on Yezidi texts, he broke out heatedly „this is a very bad joke, an insult... this is a careless translation into Arabic of my article on the Yazidiyah in the Encyclopedia of Islam.”<sup>381</sup>

With the growing influence of literacy such feedbacks have become common phenomenon. For example, on several occasions, I was told by “experts”<sup>382</sup> that the black *khirqe*, the sacred garment of the Yezidi holy men or ascetics, the *feqirs*, was a symbol of the original darkness that surrounded the pearl, that is, God himself, before the creation started. In other words the black shirt symbolizes the primordial darkness covering God. This was something I have never met before in the literature on Yezidis before,<sup>383</sup> and considered it, rather proudly, an interesting new piece of information on Yezidi religion. It was only by chance that later on in Göttingen Dr Khalil Jindy Rashow (known among Yezidis as Sheikh Khalil Jindy), a Yezidi researcher presently living in Germany, but publishing in Kurdish, heard this recorded on my tape. He told me that this was not an original piece of Yezidi mythology, but his own idea or interpretation of the black shirt of the *feqirs*, which he had published in the *Roj* magazine. It was obviously where my two informants had read it, and they passed it on as an authentic bit of Yezidi mythology. (It is worth noting that one of my informants was from Behzani, under Saddam’s rule until 2003 which means that Yezidi publications have reached even there, despite the official policy of trying to repress Yezidi identity.) Through those who read Yezidi publications or publications on Yezidis, usually considered the “local intelligentsia”, the information is quick to reach others and eventually become part of oral traditions.

<sup>378</sup> Henige, *Chronology of Oral Traditions*, 96.

<sup>379</sup> Lescot, *Les Yezidis*, 6.

<sup>380</sup> The “capital” of the Sinjar mountain that has a sizeable Yezidi population, and where Yezidi-Christian relations have traditionally been very good.

<sup>381</sup> Henry Field’s “Foreword” vii to Ahmed, *The Yezidis*.

<sup>382</sup> Once by Sheikh Deshti, the guardian of a shrine in Khanke, and once by Arab KHidir, a village teacher collecting religious texts, see below.

<sup>383</sup> Yezidi hymns do in fact say that the *khirqe* was the garment of God (see chapter “*Khirqe* as a Garment of Faith,”) but it (or its colour) is not connected with the darkness covering God before creation.

Not only do books take the place of oral tradition where gaining concrete information on Yezidi religion is concerned, but they have started influencing Yezidi identity as well. Thus, for example, the English teacher of the high-school in Baadra, Mamoste Sabah, claimed that the content of the Three Holy Books, that is, the Old and New Testament and the Quran, can all be traced back to the sacred books (i.e. mythology) of the Sumerians. At the same time Sumerian sacred texts (just as later Babylonian and Assyrian texts) mention the word “ezid,” which had been solved to mean “pure souls,” “who go on the right path.” In other words, they refer to the Yezidis, who are thus proven to be the fountainhead of Sumerian religion and consequently of the three religions based on the above mentioned Holy Books. According to Mamoste Sabah the source of his knowledge on this matter was a book written by Dr Khalil Jindy Rashow. Unfortunately, I had no way to ascertain the exact content of the book, but this certainly demonstrates the great impact of the written word (especially if written by authors well-known to the community) on disseminating new ideas and forming Yezidi identity as regards their own religion and past.

Interestingly enough, some of the books that seem to have exerted a great influence on how Yezidis view their own mythology and religion were written by non-Yezidis. Such an example is the Christian George Habibi, whose theory of the Assyrian origin of the Yezidis, also put forward by other non-Yezidi authors, enjoys a great popularity among the Yezidis (who quote him, or read from his book, to support their claim of an Assyrian origin.) It may have been in a similar way that the Sufi interpretation of Lucifer’s Fall reached Yezidism. (Lucifer’s role is here taken by the Peacock Angel of the Yezidis, identified with the Devil by Muslims.) Though originally the Yezidi view of Creation very simply does not accept the existence of the Devil or any evil principle, now quite a few Yezidis will repeat a rather daring interpretation of the myth that can probably be traced back to the Sufi philosopher al-Hallaj. According to this interpretation, when Lucifer refused to worship Adam, despite having been ordered to do so by God, he was in fact just being loyal to God, who earlier commanded him not to worship any other being. Though this is a very interesting interpretation of Lucifer’s Fall, it simply does not fit into Yezidi mythology, where there is absolutely no place for the evil. In all probability it was from the work of Muslim authors, who tried to explain the obviously false accusation of Devil worship among the Yezidis that Yezidis picked up this nice sounding story. Today it is repeated by many Yezidis (though not by the most conservative ones<sup>384</sup>) and also by some educated Muslims.

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<sup>384</sup> For example Feqir Haji, one of the best known and most quoted experts on Yezidi religious lore, emphatically denied this story, and none of those older people who acquired their knowledge, much or little, on Yezidi religion in the traditional (oral) way repeated this myth. On the other hand it was quoted by a number of people who read publications on Yezidis and were obviously influenced by what they had read.

## Modernizing Yezidi Mythology: Scientific Interpretation

The other salient feature of this transition from oral to written is a “rewriting,” one could say a modernization of their own mythology by the Yezidis. For long centuries, the Yezidi community was relatively isolated, and had limited contact with their – often hostile – Muslim neighbors,<sup>385</sup> and even less with the world outside the Kurdish mountains. Today, there is an ever-increasing contact with the external world, and what is more important, a growing participation in it (both in Europe and in Iraq.)

This increased contact with the world at large has led to an attempt at modernization and similarly at trying to avoid ridicule. Yezidis, who have attended school and have extensive, everyday contact with non-Yezidis (Muslims or Christians) - tend to modernise or rewrite their legends so that they conform to the expectation of outsiders and also to their new found knowledge of history and science. Some Yezidi intellectuals leading this trend like to refer to it as “reforming” Yezidi faith.<sup>386</sup> As a part of this process some myths are slowly being *discarded* as absurd, while others receive new interpretation. These novel interpretations sometimes seem to contradict the ethos of Yezidi hymns and tales, while they are more in keeping with Christian and Muslim notions on the divine and its relationship with the created world.

An arresting feature of such attempts to make Yezidi faith “up-to-date” is the wish to give a modern scientific interpretation to Yezidi legends, so that they be fit for consumption by people whose world view is determined by compulsory school education. How educated Yezidis of a modern turn of mind wish to see their own religion, and have it seen by outsiders, was eloquently demonstrated by the principal of a school in ‘Eyn Sifni. The principal, who formerly taught in the Yezidi village of Baadra (the Kurdish Autonomy), instructed me to write about Yezidis in a “scientific way” (*alemi*), and not like other researchers. When asked, what exactly he meant by this, he expressed his distaste against what he called “old men’s fancy” about people flying up to the sky and similar absurd tales (or myths as a researcher would call them), and explained that researchers must call attention to the fact that Yezidi hymns express scientific truth only recently known to modern science. For example hymns on the Creation talk of the world first being an endless sea

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<sup>385</sup> This is not to say, of course, that there was no contact at all, even if many Iraqi Yezidis today claim to have lived completely separated from Muslim Kurds in the past. Thus, for example, great tribal confederations included both Muslim Kurdish and Yezidi tribes (as well as Christians), and in some regions there were close contacts between Yezidis and the Turkoman and Arabic population as well. (See Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, 51-54; see also Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 45.) The institution of *keriv* (the *keriv* acts as a sort of “godfather” when a child is circumcised – Yezidi children often had and have Muslims as their *kerivs*, a tactic providing them with a certain measure of protection from outside their own religious group) also implies continuous communication between the two communities.

<sup>386</sup> Thus, for example, Pîr Mamou Othman at a conference on Yezidis at Frankfurt (Yezidism in Transition, 12-17 April, 2007, Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt) talked of the need of “reformation of religion” and repeatedly referred to the influence of Martin Luther and the Reformation of Christianity in Europe, drawing a parallel to the need of a similar “Reformation” in the framework of Yezidi religion.

above which God was travelling in a ship, while modern science has only recently “proven” that water was the beginning of life on earth. Accordingly, he wished me to talk about the ancient scientific knowledge coated in ceremonial language in Yezidi hymns, instead of what he viewed as fairy tale like accounts on incarnated angels and their miraculous deeds.

His endeavours at a scientific interpretation of Yezidi religious traditions are not unique among today’s educated Yezidis. Arab Khidir, a volunteer collector of sacred hymns and a teacher at the religious Yezidi school in Beshiqe-Behzani, who is known for his exceptional interest in Yezidi lore, expressed similar opinions. Rather proudly he related that Yezidi hymns contain a hidden, deeper understanding of the universe that has become known to the great masses only recently. He quoted a hymn on the death of Sheikh Hassan at the hands of Badradin Lulu, mentioning a “black star” (*sterê resh*), which he claimed to refer to the phenomenon known as “black hole” centuries before Western science realized its existence. The “popular” tale of Mîr Mih, the young prince looking for a place where no death exists, and who spends four hundred years at the abode of Fortune as if it were four, was interpreted by him as an allegory of Einstein’s concept of relativity. Similarly he claimed that Yezidi *qewls* speaking of the Seven Angels and God prove that Yezidis had a heliocentric view long before Copernicus. This ancient knowledge was also indicated by the *sema*, the religious dance, as well, where the line of the seven men circumambulating the sacred fire symbolizes the stars turning around the sun. As a further proof he mentioned that while all other religions speak of water as the element out of which the world was created, Yezidi hymns alone name the air (*ba*), which, “as we now know, is the basis of water (H<sub>2</sub>O) and all other elements.” Of course, this latter information is at variance with the one volunteered by the school principal mentioned above, but in both cases we meet the same concept: Yezidi *qewls* indicate a divinely inspired scientific understanding of the universe that is unique among religious texts.

How fast this approach is gaining ground was demonstrated by a young university student of physics from Duhok University. During an interview (concerning the Creation of the world), where she helped me with translation, she referred to the divine Pearl of the hymns from which the world was created as “atom”, to the creation as the “Big Boom,” or the barren period before vegetation was created as the “Ice Age.” Typically, she did not really translate what was said (as I later ascertained listening to my tapes,) rather she told me her own ideas which were clearly influenced by her wish to adjust her faith to her scientific knowledge. Whether such attempts at a modern, scientific interpretation of ancient sacred texts are culturally influenced by similar attempts among Muslims to find references to all modern scientific phenomena in the holy text of the Quran (such as rockets for example) is an open question.

Not only the content, but even the very origin of these sacred hymns has become a “bone of

contention” in the quest of making a “scientific religion” out of Yezidi faith. Some reformist go as far as to claim that Yezidi tradition attributes the authorship of Yezidi sacred hymns to different human beings, and Yezidis have no tradition of their sacred texts being revealed by Angels or sent from heaven, despite clear (and recorded) evidence to the contrary.<sup>387</sup>

## Pre-Islamic Origin and Islam as an Alien Element

Finally this modern “rewriting” of Yezidi lore entails another phenomenon, namely, rejecting any notions of Islamic origin or Muslim influence. Yezidi–Muslim relationships have traditionally been rather strained, as Yezidis were considered either *kafirs* or heretics, that is, Muslims who deviated from the right path, a capital sin in Islam, and even worshippers of the Devil. In fact this view still holds fast, despite the official propaganda of declaring Yezidi faith the “original Kurdish religion.”<sup>388</sup> Today, when understanding and dealing with religion has become more conscious among the educated, Yezidis seem to be “taking their revenge” in a novel way. They claim that anything that appears to be connected with Islam is a “foreign body” added to pure Yezidi religion either to mislead the Muslims, or as a result of aggressive Muslim proselytising.

This is best reflected in the way the figure of Sheikh Adi, the most important religious figure of Yezidi faith, is treated today. Sheikh Adi was traditionally considered a divine being incarnated in human form, the earthly manifestation of Tawusi Melek (The Peacock Angel), the head of the Seven Angels.<sup>389</sup> He has been identified by scholars as a historical person, a twelfth-century Sufi mystic of Arabic origin, and the founder of the al-Adawiyya brotherhood. On the other hand, in the thirties of the twentieth century, the Bedir Khan brothers, in their search for a unified Kurdish identity came up with the idea that Yezidism was in fact the original, pre-Islamic Kurdish religion.<sup>390</sup> During the struggle for Kurdish independence in the last few decades, much was made of this theory, and it was enthusiastically embraced by many Yezidis as well, at least in the Sheikhan region<sup>391</sup>. For Yezidis keen about this “original Kurdish religion image,” the presence of Sheikh Adi, an Arab and a Muslim, proved somewhat confusing, or even embarrassing. All the more so, as the Saddam regime tried to present the Yezidis as people of an Arab origin, and Sheikh

<sup>387</sup> This view was put forward, for example, by Mamou Othman at the Frankfurt conference. It is debatable, however, if such an extremely rationalist view would be embraced by the majority of the Yezidis, especially as they feel the need to become a “religion of the book,” as noticed above.

<sup>388</sup> Some people actually manage to endorse both views simultaneously. That is, they proudly claim that Yezidism, the original Kurdish faith, is much older than Islam and Christianity, or even Judaism and Zoroastrianism while insisting that Yezidis worship the Devil.

<sup>389</sup> See chapter “Yezidi Religion.”

<sup>390</sup> Kamiran Bedirxan, “Zerdeşt û rêya Zerdeşt,” (“Zarahustra and the way of Zarahustra”) *Hawar* 4.26 (1935): 9-10; and “Le Soleil Noir,” *Hawar* 4.26 (1935): 11-14. See also M. Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes, and Patriots, Traitors and Foes* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 167.

<sup>391</sup> I found that in the Sinjar mountain, for example, the situation is somewhat different.

Adi's figure was quite useful for this purpose. As a result, these days educated Yezidis who wish to distance themselves from any allegation that Yezidi faith is a deviation of Islam, not only reject the divinity of Sheikh Adi, but also stress that he was a *reformer*, and no more, of the Yezidi religion. The presence of many elements perceived as coming from Islam is thus attributed to the outside influence of Sheikh Adi. The idea of Sheikh Adi as a mere reformer leads to another curious development. There seems to be a new theory among the Yezidis of there being two clearly separate stages in the history of Yezidis: one before and one after Sheikh Adi. Sometimes the two different versions of the same myth are being explained as one belonging to the substratum before Sheikh Adi and the other to the one after him.

Younger, educated and secular Yezidis, with a strong Kurdish consciousness, go even further in "rejecting" Sheikh Adi. For example, talking of certain taboos, like not eating fish, one young man claimed "these do not have to be followed, because they are not ancient Yezidi ideas, but come from Sheikh Adi, who was an Arab."<sup>392</sup> Even the idea that Sheikh Adi "corrupted" pure Yezidi faith is voiced occasionally. For example, they state Yezidi hymns are not authentic, as Sheikh Adi used the old Yezidi texts and mixed them with quotations taken from the Quran. They base this assertion on the presence of Arabic words and expressions in the hymns, the references to Islam and the Sunna, and some coincidences they claim to see in the Quranic text and the hymns, saying that the two use the same words and expressions.

Such a bias against Islam may even lead to the rejection of legends and hymns which should by rights be considered authentic Yezidi legends, as their content clearly echoes the Yezidi ethos. But these are still rejected by "modernizing" Yezidis – often with their exact content unknown - as "late insertions" simply because the heroes of such works bear the names of Islamic historical figures. The so-called *Qewlê Mezin*, or Great Hymn, is a perfect example. This hymn on Yezid bin Muawiya was declared a "forgery" by a young university graduate, who is an editor of the Yezidi periodical *Lalish*, and writes articles on the faith of the Yezidis. He claimed the hymn was the product of attempts on the part of Yezidis to placate Muslims by inserting the name of a Muslim personage, the second Umayyad caliph into their system. This view was shared by Arab Khidir, mentioned above, who was of the opinion that the Great Hymn itself was an authentic hymn, but the name of Yezid bin Muawiya was inserted into it later on by Muslims. No attention was paid to the fact that the hymn is built around the figure and reputation (as a drunkard given to lewd and irresponsible ways) of Yezid bin Muawiya. Similarly neither of my informants seemed to recall that the caliph has never enjoyed a very good reputation in Islamic history, and the role

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<sup>392</sup> Similar observations were made by Allison (*Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 39). Another solution, among those of a more traditional mind, who are not ready to deny Sheikh Adi, is to claim that his family originally hailed from Hakkari and he was born among the Kurds of Lebanon.

attributed to him in this Yezidi hymn is a plain rejection and mockery of the Islamic *shariya* and could have hardly won over any Muslim heart.

## New Origin Myths of the Yezidis

The idea of a pre-Islamic origin leads almost automatically to a tendency to try and relate Yezidism to other, ancient religious movements of the region, often following the suggestion of non-Yezidi writers.<sup>393</sup> Naturally, the notion of the ancient origin of the Yezidi faith is a traditional one. The above-mentioned Yezidi origin myth traces the lineage of the Yezidis straight to the son of Adam. The words “Our faith is old, very old” is a sentence a researcher is to hear everywhere, from fellow travellers in shared taxis travelling to Yezidi villages to university educated Yezidis. Similarly, most Yezidis will be ready to tell anyone interested that Yezidis used to be far more numerous in the past, and their numbers have been reduced dramatically due to repeated persecutions and forced conversions. Today, many will even mention that originally all Kurds were Yezidis, a notion that enjoys official patronage from the Kurdish state intent on building up a national myth. Of course, these statements do not lack a historical foundation, as persecutions are still vividly remembered, and many people, even younger ones, have some idea when and where their tribe came from (Turkey, other parts of Iraq<sup>394</sup>) following a wave of massacre and forced conversions. However, there is a marked difference between communal memory regarding past, but more-or-less concrete events transmitted by word of mouth and the new Yezidi myth of ancient and glorious past that is being constructed by educated Yezidis who are writing or reading articles about their people and religion. While simple people are satisfied with the stressing of the fact that their religion is very old or the oldest one, and they used to be far more numerous, educated Yezidis try to trace the lineage of their faith to the once glorious cultures and religions of the Middle East, the cradle of modern civilisation, or what is more, they try to vindicate a Yezidi origin for these cultures.

Yezidis are not the only or the first ones to try and trace their descent from the long gone empires of the Middle East. Claiming a glorious ancestry is a source of prestige in the region.<sup>395</sup> In a clear instance of feedback Christians identify themselves with Assyrians since the nineteenth century, when European reserachers first put the theory of their Assyrian origin forward.

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<sup>393</sup> See also Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 36, 40.

<sup>394</sup> Or even, surprisingly, Russia, as an older Dina woman, of the *pîr* class, originally from a Syrian village near the Iraqi border, claimed. According to her, her people originated in Russia, and came to what was once the Ottoman Empire only after a persecution finished off all the *pîrs* of her tribe. Another young Yezidi pointed out on a trip to the mountains just next to the Turkish border, around Kani Masi, that there used to be many Yezidi villages there less than a century ago, and many settlements still have the same names as Yezidi villages today more to the South. I had no way of checking the truth content of this statement. Yet again another Yezidi claimed that Hatra, once an important town of the Assyrians, well South of Mosul, used to be Yezidi until its inhabitants were moved north, to the Yezidi village of Kheter, a few kilometres north of Mosul. This is obviously a case of false etymological reasoning.

<sup>395</sup> Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 36, 41.

Zoroastrian descent is “popular” among Kurds, while others draw their swords to prove that Kurds are no other than the descendants of the Medes. Sumerians A Sumerian origin is claimed by all and sundry in the region (including even some Turkish researchers.) Among Yezidis a disconcerting number of theories are circulating today. Some talk enthusiastically of the Assyrians, who have long been publicized as putative grandfathers of the Yezidis by some Western researchers.<sup>396</sup> Sumerians and the “ancient religions” of Mesopotamia are also often mentioned (boundaries between different deities and nations seem to have become somewhat obscure here). Others put great energy into discovering the Zoroastrian,<sup>397</sup> or even „Mithrean” origins of their faith.<sup>398</sup> A constructed past needs its own myths, and in the attempt to prove such relationships the Yezidi talent for creating myth seems to spring to life again. So, for example, I was told in all seriousness that there were ancient Assyrian pictograms on the wall of the Lalish sanctuary, only they were covered by white plaster so that Muslims would not become jealous. On another occasion I was told that the Assyrian rock carvings in the mountain side above Duhok represented the Seven Holy Angels of the Yezidis (actually each of the three panels showed *eight* figures.) The conviction that the legend of Mîr Mih, a young prince who went in search of eternal life, is in fact the same myth as the Gilgamesh epic was voiced by several people.

Some of the most ambitious are not satisfied with merely tracing the origin of the Yezidis to ancient civilisations, but rather turn the whole thing around, and set out to prove that these very civilisations were in fact Yezidis. The notion, that Yezidis are the “original Kurds,” in other words all Kurds have once been Yezidis, has for some time enjoyed popularity not only among Yezidis, but - since the foundation of the Kurdish Autonomy in 91, and the need for constructing a national myth - among Sunni Kurds as well.<sup>399</sup> But some root-searching Yezidis are no longer content with this and have lately tried to lay claim to more “originality.”

One example of Yezidis having provided other religions with their mythology through the Sumerians has been mentioned above. Another one, rather unsettling for Western ears, is that of Aryan (*Arî*) ancestry. The notion of the Aryan ancestry of the Yezidis, or rather of Yezidi faith being the original and unadulterated Aryan religion, seems to have gained a surprising popularity.<sup>400</sup>

<sup>396</sup> Some Assyrian Christians also embrace the notion of the Assyrian origin of the Yezidis, though it is hard to tell if they do so out of genuine conviction, or political consideration.

<sup>397</sup> Zoroastrians have also been proposed by early researchers, like Rev. Empson (*The Cult of the Peacock Angel*, passim,) as the putative ancestors of the Yezidis.

<sup>398</sup> Yezidis are not the only Kurdish heterodox group to seek links with pre-Islamic cults. The Ahl-i Haqq of Southern Kurdistan also “like to emphasize the endogeneity of their culture and spirituality, and minimise the Arabo-Islamic lore” thus securing themselves a respected space among the Muslim, but nationalist majority. (J.During, “A Critical Survey on Ahl-e Haqq Studies,” 111.)

<sup>399</sup> Allison, *Yezidi Oral Religion*, 38, 41. It must be noted that while Yezidis in the Sheikhan and the Duhok are enthusiastically embracing this notion, Sinjari Yezidis insist that they are a people apart, and since the fall of the Saddam regime has managed to infuriate their brethren by stubbornly refusing to be labelled Kurds.

<sup>400</sup> I can only assume that Yezidis are unaware of the negative images this word, and especially casual references to Germans as Aryans, conjure up in those familiar with European history.

I have heard fleeting references to such ancestry several times (but interestingly, never from Muslim Kurds, though they belong to the group of Indo-European speakers too.) The most coherent picture of Yezidis as Aryans, and Aryans as Yezidis was furnished by Arab Khidir. He gave a very good example of how traditional Yezidi mythology and bits and pieces from modern linguistic and historical writings<sup>401</sup> can be worked into a complex fabric to meet the demands of the new Yezidi self-image. He related that the Forty Men, well-known figures of Yezidi mythology, who travelled in the boat of Noah, became the forefathers of the Aryan people.<sup>402</sup> These Aryan people, who included, according to my informant, the Sumerians, the Hurrians, the Gutti, the Elami, the Mittanni and a host of other ancient peoples of the Middle East, were all Yezidis, that is monotheists, “Ezi” being the name of God, whose unity and oneness they worshipped. Here my informant quoted the story of the destruction of the Tower of Babel. In his interpretation this tale referred to the fact that originally all these people were of the same religion, that is, worshipped God and God alone, but then were dispersed and lost their original faith.<sup>403</sup> In this way an ancient myth combined with modern historiography leads to the birth of a new myth. The story of the Tower of Babel, adapted from one of the Semitic religions, is not rejected, but retold in a different way. With time, and the arrival of the Semi people and the Semitic religions the number of Yezidi Aryans dwindled, and today’s Kurdish Yezidis are their sole survival. Other Aryans, who once peopled Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Caucasia and Europe have strayed from the path of the righteous religion. (A sentiment calling to mind the view Islam takes on the “Religions of Book.”) He claimed that the name of these once glorious peoples survived among the tribe names of the Yezidis, thus proving that Yezidis were in fact the descendants of these groups, who had once played the role of protagonists at the dawn of our culture. Thus the Reshke of Sinjar were the Ashak (??), the Horka were Horri, the Haweri were Hurin, the Haltî were Mittani, and the Smokan were Sumeri originally. Using similar etymological reasoning he pointed at the “fact” that Sumerians used a lot of Kurdish words, a further proof of common origins. Thus the name of Gilgamesh means “buffalo.” The name of Ibrahim Khalil, that is, of Abraham, a Yezidi himself, was in Kurdish as well, meaning the “brother of all” (*birayê hemî*).

Though in the course of my research I heard the most coherent and full exposition of the theory of Aryan ancestry from Arab Khidir, such ideas were presumably not all his own, but more likely they formed a part of the current literature on Yezidis, for similar opinions were voiced by others as well in the Sheikhan-Duhok region. While some contented themselves with an oblique

<sup>401</sup> Unfortunately I don’t know what his sources were, though I managed to ascertain that he read Yezidi publication like *Lalish* and *Roj*.

<sup>402</sup> There are different opinions as to whom the Forty Men, or *Chil Mêr* to whom a high peak in the Sinjar is consecrated, exactly were. According to Feqir Haji they were companions of Sheikh Adi, but the Baba Sheikh also spoke of them in connection of the Flood. See also Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 100-101.

<sup>403</sup> This interpretation of the Tower of Babel was in fact current during the Late Antiquity.

reference to their Aryan descent and their German relatives, others also spoke of the Mittanis, Hurrians and so on. During a debate on the question of mixed marriages, the fact that a Mittani king gave his daughter in marriage to the pharaoh of Egypt was mentioned as a proof that Yezidis had not always been opposed to marriage with non-Yezidis. An article published in the Lalish magazine dispensed with the Aryan origins, but repeated the Kurdish etymology of Ibrahim's name, trying to link the patriarch, an alleged sun-worshipper, to Yezidis, ancient sun-worshippers.

Such academic root-searching can eventually become a part of everyday religious consciousness. The idea that Christians were originally Yezidis seems to have gained quite a currency, no doubt partly due to the traditional good relations between the two minorities. An even more eloquent example is the theory that Yezidism was originally a form of sun-worship – a very “popular” theory if one is to go by the content of Lalish magazine. So, for example, the guardian of a shrine in Khanke, Sheik Deshti, explained me that Bayazid Bastami, a well-known Sufi saint of the ninth century, was a Yezidi, and a Shemseni. The so-called Shemseni sheikhs trace their lineage to Sheikh Shems, a companion of Sheikh Adi, who lived much later than Bayazid Bastami. According to Sheikh Deshti's explanation, however, the tribe of the Shemsenis is in fact much older, for it means „sun-worshippers,” in other words it refers to Yezidis, who were the ancient sun-worshippers of the region, and Bayazid Bastami, a sun worshipper, was one of them.

Though vestiges of sun worship can indeed be found in the Yezidi belief system, it is unlikely that a Yezidi, say a hundred years ago, would have quite put things in this way. At least, there is nothing in the accounts of past travellers to imply this. The notion of Shemsenis as ancient sun worshippers clearly shows an external influence, that is, how non-Yezidi writings on the origins of Yezidis eventually come to influence the self –perception of the Yezidis which - in its turn - reflects on the retelling of the mythology.

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To sum it all up, while in the past it was the oral way of transmitting tradition that shaped Yezidi religion and gave it its peculiar characteristics, today one can witness the very opposite. The sudden appearance of literacy seems to be reshaping not only the way traditions are transmitted, through the vehicle of books and publications instead of the oral way - but the very content of these traditions themselves. While we witness a certain simplification of Yezidi lore, as many variants perceived as “superfluous” are eventually rejected, and the same happens to those myth that would be perceived as ridiculous or unfit to modern, “scientific thinking”, new elements are taking their place. These elements are usually the result of „research” on Yezidis and first appear in some publication then to become a part of Yezidi lore. They aim at constructing (or reconstructing)

Yezidi history and providing Yezidis with a “modern and scientific” religion.

The “modernization” or “rewriting” of Yezidi religious lore can offer a glimpse not only of the future but of the past of Yezidi religion as well. This is not the first time in history that Yezidis came to be influenced by “the outside world.” As researchers have pointed out there are countless motifs in their mythology and religious poetry that can be traced to the religions that succeeded each other in the region. True, it is certain that outside influence has never been as penetrating as now, in the age of mass-communication. But we can still assume that what we witness today may serve as a model for how oral religions in the past managed to incorporate and adapt numerous motifs from other religions.

These days we can watch the mythmaking in the process, in an accelerated way. Above we have seen several instances of how certain new elements can become incorporated into Yezidi mythology, and retold as part of the myth themselves. The idea that the *xirqe* or sacred shirt symbolizes the darkness surrounding the original Pearl is mentioned not as a possible explanation of a motif (taken from a learned article,) but as part of the tradition. The destruction of the Tower of Babel is now retold as the end of the primeval monotheism originally confessed by all Aryans. The concept of Yezidis being sun-worshippers is apparently on its way of becoming a “popular” element, and the same is true about notions that Sheikh Adi’s advent marked a new stage in the history of Yezidi religion and mythology. Many other examples could be mentioned.

While these motifs were probably originally offered as explanations or theories, they are no longer seen as mere hypotheses, attempts at interpreting the mythology or mythical history of Yezidis, but now show all the characteristics of becoming integral part of the mythology. They are being recounted in exactly the same way as, say, the myth of Shehid bin Jerr, or the story of a *khas*, or holy being connected with some sacred place, would be recounted by an older Yezidi.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the process of adopting new motifs and creating new myths, or rather modifying older myths and mythology according to new ideas and concepts coming from outside, is not altogether unlike what happened in earlier centuries, even if the vehicle of transmission, writing, is a new one.

## Chapter 6: The Yezidi Creation Myth of Adam<sup>404</sup>

The Yezidi myth of Adam's creation, his Fall and "punishment" might strike outsiders as an *ad hoc* patchwork of ill-fitting and sometimes senseless details. However, if analyzed with sufficient care and with regard of the religious history of the region, this myth proves to be a repository of the colorful mythological inheritance of the Middle East.

It has never been questioned that the Yezidi myth on the creation and fall of Adam ultimately derives from Biblical (or Quranic) sources. But the "quaint" details, at odds with the version known to all "peoples of the Book" were seen as the mere results of Yezidi imagination, both childishly overactive and theologically uninformed.<sup>405</sup> Accordingly this myth has never received the attention it deserved as a living testimony of how long forgotten myths of another era can live on in a new guise, bridging the centuries and weaving a fragile network between the cultures and religions that followed each other in the region.

### Adam's Creation and Fall

As it is characteristic of oral tradition, the Adam myth has several different versions. The following version collected by me in the course of my field-work from Feqir Haji, famous for his acquaintance with Yezidi sacred lore. This variant has so far not appeared in print, apart from a few sketchy and obscure references.<sup>406</sup>

The myth as told by Feqir Haji starts with a description of how God created the Seven Angels from his own light, as if lighting seven candles from one, then created the world, and then finally molded Adam's body from the four elements, which was first inert and lifeless as it had no soul.<sup>407</sup> In order to revive it, one of the Seven Angels, Sheik Sin, entered Adam's body, albeit reluctantly,<sup>408</sup> on the condition that he, as Adam, would live in Paradise, be guided by the

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<sup>404</sup> A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication by *JOAS*.

<sup>405</sup> As has been mentioned in the Introduction, the editor of Siouffi's article ("Notice sur des Yézidis," 252), employs the term "puérlité" to describe the myths contained in the article, including the one to be described below, while Lescot speaks of the incoherence of the texts, confusion and naïveté. (R. Lescot, *Enquête sur les Yezidis*, 54, 55, 60).

<sup>406</sup> To be mentioned later on.

<sup>407</sup> Both Jewish and Islamic traditions agree that Adam passed through a stage when his body was an immobile, inert body or golem. See L. N. B. Chipman, "Mythic aspects of the process of Adam's creation in Judaism and Islam," *Studia Islamica* 93 (2001): 17.

<sup>408</sup> The idea that the soul was reluctant to enter the body can be found not only in Yezidi tradition, but also among Muslims. According to Muslim tradition the soul was loath to enter the body, for its orifices are cramped and narrow. "Allah forces it enter saying 'as you entered unwillingly, so you shall come out unwillingly,'" Chipman, "Mythic Aspects," 19.

Peacock Angel, and wear the *khirqe*, or holy shirt:<sup>409</sup>

Sheikh Sin is from goodness, he was modeled after the pearl [that hid God before Creation], he existed before men and women, Sheikh Sin was created from Goodness, and his Light was staying in the Divine Light... In heaven he was the king of true religion, on earth he gave power to the prophet of the Ummah<sup>410</sup>

The prophet of the Ummah was no other than Adam, the divine light and mysterious power [*sur*] of Melek [Angel] Sheikh Sin came from heaven into the forehead of Adam.

God created Adam's body between Saturday and Friday. After seven hundred years, a soul entered this body. This soul was an angel that came from heaven. The soul did not want to enter the body. The Seven Angels stood around the body and they said to this angel, you have to enter into this body so that the world (mankind) may be established. This soul was the soul of Melek Sheikh Sin.

For seven hundred years the soul (Sheikh Sin) did not go into Adam, but then God and the Peacock Angel commanded he must go into it. Before the soul [or light, *sur*] of Melek Sheikh Sin entered Adam, it made conditions for entering the body and said to God and the Peacock Angel "take me to Paradise then." They consented. He said "put the *khirqe* [the sacred black shirt of the Yezidi holy men, the *feqirs*] on me" they consented. He said "and let the Peacock Angel be my imam and show my way around Paradise" they consented.

So finally Melek Sheik Sin consented. Then he brought his divine power and light, that is, is his *sur*, and put it into Adam's forehead and stayed in Adam's forehead. And they put the *khirqe* on Adam, the *khirqe* became Adam's cloth. And the Peacock Angel took Adam to Paradise and became his imam.

Adam stayed in Paradise for a hundred years, then God said to the Peacock Angel, "go, and bring Adam out of Paradise, so that mankind may be established. Peacock Angel went to Adam and asked him "have you eaten from the wheat?"<sup>411</sup> Adam said "no" The Peacock Angel said "eat from it." Adam said "I won't." So then the Peacock Angel used a trick, he became invisible and threw a grain of wheat into Adam's mouth, who ate it.<sup>412</sup> Then his stomach became enlarged, and the Peacock Angel took him out of Paradise, for he was not supposed to dirty Paradise with his needs.

Then the Peacock Angel took away the *khirqe* of Adam, and he took away the divine light, the *sur*, in Adam's forehead. As long as Adam was in Paradise, he was like a great angel, for the divine light of Sheikh Melek Sin inside him was great. But after

<sup>409</sup> The myth below is a summary of what I was told during different interviews with Feqir Haji. His style of recounting the myth, in a way truly typical of oral traditions, would take up too much space to be literally quoted here. For a transcript and translation of the myth as told by Feqir Haji, see Appendix.

<sup>410</sup> Ummah is a Muslim expression for the community of believers. Yezidi religious terminology reflects the influence of Islam, especially Sufism. These first lines Feqir Haji recited in verse form, they are probably part of a sacred hymn. It was followed by an explanation and mythical account in prose form.

<sup>411</sup> The Tree of Knowledge often appears in Islamic tradition as a tree of grain or wheat. See J. Knappert, *Islamic Legends, Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 37; and B. Lewis, "An Ismaili Interpretation of the Fall of Adam," *BSOAS* 9.3 (1938): 692. Some rabbinic tradition also identified the Tree of Knowledge as wheat, see Zofja Ameisenowa, "The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2.4 (1939): 336; and Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "The Story of the Fall," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 43.3 (1927): 238. Interestingly, the only mention of tasting the forbidden fruit in Yezidi myth, which comes from the *Evening Prayer* 5, says "Call to mind Paradise and the Tree" (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 221) indicating that the two different versions existed side by side.

<sup>412</sup> The story of Adam's expulsion from Paradise was also told by a *qewwal* during the religious ceremony accompanying the Parading of the Peacock (when the sacred image of a peacock, symbolizing the Peacock Angel, is taken around Yezidi villages.) In his version it was also the Peacock Angel who threw the grain into the mouth of the unsuspecting Adam.

the Peacock Angel took away the *sur* from his forehead, and his *khirqe*, he became like the empty shell of a snail, he became a human.

A part of Feqir Haji's story has already been well known to Western scholarship since the publication of the alleged Yezidi sacred book, the *Mes'hefa Resh*, or *Black Book*, at the end of the nineteenth century. As has already been mentioned,<sup>413</sup> this work was probably a forgery, written by a non-Yezidi, however, its content reflects genuine Yezidi mythological traditions. The myth of Adam as reported by the *Black Book* was then reiterated again and again by many authors on Yezidi religion, while the other variant escaped the attention of researchers.<sup>414</sup> The *Black Book* describes Adam's creation and his expulsion from Paradise as follows:

At this time the Lord came down to the Holy Land (al-Kuds), and commanded Gabriel to bring earth from the four corners of the world, earth, air, fire, and water. He created it and put in it the spirit of his own power, and called it Adam. Then he commanded Gabriel to escort Adam into Paradise, and to tell him that he could eat from all the trees but not of wheat. Here Adam remained for a hundred years. Thereupon, Melek Ta'us asked God how Adam could multiply and have descendants if he were forbidden to eat of the grain. God answered, "I have put the whole matter into thy hands." Thereupon Melek Ta'us visited Adam and said, "Have you eaten of the grain?" He answered, "No, God forbade me." Melek Ta'us replied and said, "Eat of the grain and all shall go better with thee." Then Adam ate of the grain and immediately his belly was inflated. But Melek Ta'us drove him out of the garden, and leaving him, ascended into heaven. Now Adam was troubled because his belly was inflated, for he had no outlet. God therefore sent a bird to him which pecked at his anus and made an outlet, and Adam was relieved.<sup>415</sup>

## Tasting the Forbidden Grain

The two variants, that told by Feqir Haji and the one in the *Black Book*, differ on a number of points (concerning the "incarceration" of Sheikh Sin in Adam's body), but both agree on a striking point: Adam's expulsion from Paradise being part of a divine plan, and being brought about not by the enticement of an evil figure (the Devil) wishing him ill, but by the intervention of a divine being, the Peacock Angel, acting at God's command. This part of the myth is well known among Yezidis today,<sup>416</sup> who like to add that Adam had to leave Paradise, because he needed to go to the toilet urgently, but he could not soil the Paradise with such an unclean act. So the Peacock Angel caught hold of him and put him outside Paradise and then a bird came to help Adam.<sup>417</sup> The

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<sup>413</sup> See chapters "Introduction" and "Origin of the Yezidis."

<sup>414</sup> It must be noted that no effort was made at interpreting even this published variant, or trying to place it in its religious-historical context.

<sup>415</sup> I. Joseph, "Yezidi Texts," *AJSLL* 25.3 (1909), 222-223.

<sup>416</sup> That is, it is well known among older Yezidis, and those who are interested in Yezidi traditions, as many younger Yezidis have only the vaguest notion of Yezidi lore.

<sup>417</sup> Others claim that after putting him outside Paradise, the Peacock Angel advised Adam to stick his own finger into

most interesting motif, though, is that all Yezidis, at least today (starting with the Baba Sheikh, the “Yezidi Pope”), seem to agree that Adam’s expulsion from Paradise was a positive act and a part of the divine plan for mankind. How otherwise, they say, could men have multiplied and filled the earth, after all “in Paradise there is no marriage.”

This is certainly a novel and radically different, almost inverted way of interpreting the Biblical story of Adam’s Fall. However, the Yezidis were not the first to give such a positive interpretation of the Original Sin, seeing it as a part of a greater divine plan aimed at the good of mankind. A very similar “revolutionary” or, if we like, “antinomian” interpretation of the Biblical story of the Fall was one of the core-myths of Gnostic anthropogony in Late Antiquity.

Gnosticism borrowed extensively from Jewish scriptures and exegetical traditions, but reinterpreted the borrowed elements in a revolutionary way, in the spirit of the Gnostic revolt against the material world and its creator. One of the most salient examples of such a treatment is the Gnostic version of the creation and fate of Adam, the first human, which faithfully reflects the Gnostics’ view of the world and man’s place in it.

In the Gnostics’ understanding of the creation of the material world, the Demiurge, or the Gnostic creator, an aborted monster expelled from the *Pleroma*, or the World of Light, stole a part of this Light when he fell below, into the world of soul-less matter<sup>418</sup> from which he later created the material world. This Light is later imprisoned in man, a being created by the Evil Creator from matter. Thus human soul (or rather “spirit”, *pneuma*) is a particle of Light imprisoned in matter, and despite the humble material origin of man’s body, man is still potentially superior to his creator due to the element of light in him. Human history is nothing more than a constant war between the world of Light and the Evil Archons of matter to regain or retain this Light. The Gnostic version of the Fall of Adam is embedded within this struggle.

According to the “classic” Gnostic myth,<sup>419</sup> after the demons of Darkness put together Adam’s body, their product remained inactive and immobile for a long time (an idea paralleled in Jewish Biblical exegesis,<sup>420</sup> until one of the powers of the Light World, Sophia, or Mother Wisdom, devised a plan to get back the part of light stolen by the evil Demiurge. To carry out this plan she convinced the Evil Creator to blow some of his spirit into Adam’s face, so body would

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his backside thereby creating an outlet for his pain.

<sup>418</sup> While some Gnostic sources speak about the theft of Light, others see the descent of Light into matter within the framework of a pre-cosmic fall. Such differences fit easily into Gnosticism that put the stress on its message, that is, on the idea that the human spirit is a particle of Light imprisoned in matter and waiting to be rescued, while the individual myth was simply seen as a vehicle of expressing this truth, and variations in the text and details of the different myths were far more acceptable than in text-based Judaism or Christianity.

<sup>419</sup> On Gnostic creation theory and anthropology, see K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: the Nature and History of Gnosticism*; and Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*.

For Gnostic accounts of Adam’s creation, see for example the following Nag Hammadi texts: *Apocryphon of John*, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *On the Origin of the World*.

<sup>420</sup> See Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism*, chapter “Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature,” 29-38.

rise. When the Creator blew his spirit or power, the stolen light, into Adam, Adam became possessed of a *pneuma*, a light soul. When the powers of Darkness realized that Adam was superior to them they became jealous and clothed him in a material body that served as a prison of forgetfulness and ignorance of his true being. Then they placed this mortal Adam in Paradise. The powers of Light, however, answered trick with a trick. An envoy of the light, that appeared as an eagle,<sup>421</sup> or in other versions took the body of the serpent,<sup>422</sup> convinced Adam and Eve to taste the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Acquaintance (or Gnosis), so that they would know themselves, that is know that their soul (spirit) came from the World of Light, but it was enslaved in its material form:

Then the female spiritual principle came (in) the snake, the instructor, and it taught (them) saying, “What did it (say to) you? Was it, ‘From every tree in the garden (paradise) shall you eat; yet from (the tree) of recognising evil and good do not eat?’”... And the snake, the instructor, said, “With death you shall not die; for it was out of jealousy that it said this to you. Rather, your eyes shall open and you come to be like gods, recognizing evil and good.” And the female instructing principle was taken away from the snake and she left it behind merely a thing of the earth.<sup>423</sup>

There is a very similar description in another work, the *On the Origin of the World*,<sup>424</sup> with the difference that there the envoy is a figure, called the Beast Zoe, who addresses Eve.<sup>425</sup> This latter work also gives a detailed description of what happens after Eve follows the advice of the envoy of light:

Now Eve had confidence in the words of the instructor. She gazed at the tree and saw that it was beautiful and appetizing, and liked it; she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she gave some also to her husband, and he too ate it. Then their intellect became open. For when they had eaten, the light of acquaintance (gnōsis) had shone upon them. When they clothed themselves with shame, they knew that they were naked of acquaintance (gnōsis). When they became sober, they saw that they were naked and became enamored of one another. When they saw that the ones who had modelled them had the form of beasts, they loathed them: they were very aware.<sup>426</sup>

When the Demiurge and his rulers understood that the enlightened Adam had withdrawn from

<sup>421</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II 23.27

<sup>422</sup> In most Gnostic accounts this envoy is Sophia, or Mother Wisdom, but for example in the *Testimony of Truth* 49 the serpent, the saving principle, symbolizes Christ.

<sup>423</sup> *Hypostasis of the Archons* 89.31-90.17, trans. and ed. B. Layton, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7*, vol. 1. (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 243. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is a Gnostic interpretation of Genesis 1-6, dating probably from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and composed in Greek, in Egypt.

<sup>424</sup> This Nag Hammadi text was composed in Greek, probably in Alexandria, and then translated into Coptic. Certain ideas in the tract appear to presuppose Manichaean theology. Thus it was probably not composed before the time Manichaeism started to have influence in Egypt, that is, the end of third century AD, but is presumably not later than early fourth century. See H.-G. Bethge, “Introduction,” 13 (*On the Origin of the World*, trans. B. Layton, and H.-G. Bethge, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II. 2-7*, vol. 2. NHS 21. Leiden, Brill: 1989.)

<sup>425</sup> “What did God say to you? Was it ‘Do not eat from the tree of acquaintance (gnōsis)’?” She said, “He said not only, ‘Do not eat from it’, but, ‘Do not touch it, lest you die.’” He said to her, “Do not be afraid. In death you shall not die. For he knows that when you eat from it, your intellect will become sober and you will come to be like gods, recognizing the difference that obtains between evil men and good ones. Indeed, it was in jealousy that he said this to you, so that you would not eat from it.” *On the Origin of the World* 102-103, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II. 2-7*, vol. 2. 73-5. See also *Apocryphon of John* II 21-24. Irenaeus 1.30.7; 1.30.15; The *Testimony of Truth* 46.

<sup>426</sup> *On the Origin of the World* 104, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II. 2-7*, vol. 2. 73-5.

them, the creators of his body, they cast him and Eve out of Paradise and clothed them in the matter of oblivion, so they would forget all they had learnt when tasting the forbidden fruit of Gnosis.<sup>427</sup> After this the history of humankind is one of constant struggle between the powers of Darkness and Light, and the trophy is the possession of man's soul, that is the Light imprisoned in matter.

Such an inverted, positive interpretation of the Fall of Adam can be found among the Manichaeans as well, the spiritual heirs of the Gnostics, who also professed a radical dualism of two opposing principles, of Light and Darkness. Manichaeans were obviously familiar with the Gnostic version of tasting the forbidden fruit and incorporated it into their own system. Theodore Bar Khoni, the eighth-ninth-century Nestorian bishop from Kashkar (Iraq) when describing the teachings of Mani writes the following: "He says that Jesus the resplendent approached the innocent Adam and awoke him from the sleep of death... He says that Jesus made him rise and taste the the Tree of Life."<sup>428</sup> References to tasting the fruit of the Tree of Life<sup>429</sup> can also be found in the Coptic Manichaean Texts. One Coptic Psalm describes the fight between the powers of the Darkness and the envoy of Light for human soul in the following way:

When Adam and Eve were created and put in Paradise, who was it that ordered them "eat not of the tree" that they might not distinguish the evil from the good? Another fought against him and made them eat from the Tree.<sup>430</sup>

In the *Kephalaia*, or Chapters, Mani, the founder of the movement, describes how the living Paraclete "unveiled to me the mystery of the light and the darkness.... The mystery of the fashioning of Adam, the first man. He also informed me about the mystery of the tree of knowledge, which Adam ate from, his eyes saw."<sup>431</sup> The Good Tree or Tree of Life became a common Manichaean symbol even in non-Christian regions, as attested in texts and even paintings from the Central Asian Turfan Basin.<sup>432</sup>

<sup>427</sup> *On the Origin of the World* says: "now, when the rulers saw that Adam had entered into an alien state of acquaintance... they became troubled... 'behold Adam. He has come to be like one of us, so that he knows the difference between light and darkness... Come, let us expel him from paradise down to the land from which he was taken, so that henceforth he might not be able to recognize anything better than we can.'" *On the Origin of the World* 110-11, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II. 2-7*, vol. 2. 75-77. See also *Apocryphon of John* II.24,7-8. This is a classical example of Gnostic interpretation of the Old Testament, and its Creator or God, whom they rejected as evil, or at least deficient. According to Gnostic logic it could not have been the perfect and good God, the Father of the Fullness, who denied mankind the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Such an act can only be ascribed to an inferior being, the Demiurge, or creator of the imperfect material world.

<sup>428</sup> *Liber Scholiorum* II. Mimra XI.59, In Théodore Bar Khoni, *Livre des Scolies (Liber Scholiorum)*, *Mimré VI-XI*, Recension de Séert, trad. and ed. Robert Hespel – René Draguet. CSCO vol. 432, Scriptorum Syri, tomus 188. (Lovanii: Peeters, 1982), 237.

<sup>429</sup> The Tree of Knowledge was also called the Tree of Life by the Gnostics and the Manichaeans, referring to the idea that knowledge, that is, knowing one's own nature and the nature of the created world led to the salvation of the soul, that that is, real life in the Kingdom of Light.

<sup>430</sup> Psalms to Jesus CCXLVIII, in *Manichaean Psalm-Book: Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection*, ed. and trans. L. R. Allberry (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), vol. 2, 57.7-10.

<sup>431</sup> *The Kephalaia of the Teacher* 15.2-12. The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary. *NHMS* Vol. 37, ed. and trans. Iain Gardner (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 20-21.

<sup>432</sup> See H.-J. Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*, *Iconography of Religions* 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1982).

## Adam and His Digestion

There is another striking motif in the Yezidi myth of the Fall, namely the report on how the digestion of Adam started and his intestines and lower bodily openings were formed after he ate from the forbidden fruit. Adam had to leave Paradise in order not to dirty it with his bodily needs.

It is a little-known fact that the story of Adam's eating from the forbidden wheat, which caused his stomach inflate so he had to leave Paradise to go and answer nature's call is current not only among Yezidis but the Muslims of the region as well. So, for example, the story of how Adam's stomach became inflated after breaking the divine commandment, and how a bird came to open an outlet in his backside is retold in Southern Turkey, in the Mardin region.<sup>433</sup> Diyarbakir Muslims also recount that Adam and Eve refused (or were forbidden) to eat anything while they were in Paradise, so they would not have to go to the toilet. After they broke the commandment, their stomachs blew up, they dirtied Paradise with their need, and as a result were expelled.<sup>434</sup> A young, university-educated Muslim woman from Duhok<sup>435</sup> also repeated this hygienic argument when recounting the Quranic story. Though, as a direct question made it clear, she was aware that this explanation of natural needs wasn't to be found in the holy text, she saw it as an integral part of the story, or rather as a commonplace exegesis.

This motif, which obviously enjoys popularity in the region, is probably of a Gnostic background as well. The formation of intestines as a result of trespassing the divine command is mentioned by Irenaeus in his accounts of the Gnostics, where he repeats the version described above and adds that the Mother of Life (acting as the envoy of life here) put on the body of the snake to get near Adam, and in memory of this act of salvation, human intestines, which feed the body the same way gnosis feeds the soul, resemble the form of a snake:

Some say that it was Wisdom (Sophia) herself who turned into a snake, and therefore she was against the maker of Adam, and introduced acquaintance into humankind... because of the position of our intestines, through which food is processed, and because of their shape, they say this shows the life-producing essence hidden within us in the form of a snake."<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> I owe this information to my colleague, Loqman Turgut, a PhD student at the Georg-August University of Göttingen, who informed me that his grandmother, from the district of Mardin, used to retell two variants of Adam's expulsion from Paradise, a Quranic version, and the folk version expounded above.

<sup>434</sup> My informant was a student from Diyarbakir, presently studying in France, who did not wish to divulge her name. Her reluctance to do so is explained by the second "shameful" part of the tale, according to which when Adam and Eve saw how they had dirtied Paradise, they tried to hide their excrement between their legs and under their armpits. This is why humans have hair in these places today.

<sup>435</sup> She was originally from a mountain village near the Turkish border, from where her family moved to Duhok in the seventies, during the civil war between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish peshmerga.

<sup>436</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.30.15 *Quidam enim ipsam Sophiam serpentem factam dicunt: quapropter et contrariam exstitisse factori Adae, et agnitionem hominibus immisisse.... Sed et propter positionem intestinorum nostrorum, per quae esca infertur, eo quod talem figuram habeant, ostendentem absconsam generatricem Serpentis figurae substantiam in nobis.* Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les Hérésies, Livre I.*, ed. Adelin Rousseau et Louis Doutreleau, Sources Chrétiennes 264 (Paris: Cerf, 1979), 384. As Layton (*Gnostic Scriptures*, 181.) points out, the reading of this,

This notion was probably a further development of the idea that Gen. 3.21 on Adam and Eve putting on garments of skin refers to the first couple putting on material bodies. Such a view, of course, cannot be called exclusively Gnostic, for example it was propagated by Philo, and by Origen of Alexandria, the influential Christian philosopher of the late second century.<sup>437</sup> However, this exegesis did not enjoy much vogue among mainstream Christian writers, and even less in the Syriac church,<sup>438</sup> so a Gnostic source is more likely for this idea in Yezidi mythology than a Christian one.

Although both in the Yezidi and the Gnostic-Manichaean mythologies trespassing the divine command, and the consequent beginning of biological functioning (i.e. bodily existence), occurs at the instigation of God and through the intermediary of a Divine messenger, there are some significant differences as well. In Gnostic mythology this act is a revolt against the creator and a way toward Gnostic salvation through self-knowledge. In the more optimistic, and we could say prosaic, Yezidi religion eating of the forbidden wheat, that is, expulsion from Paradise is simply a precondition for the multiplication of human kind. These differences can, however, be explained easily by the differing ethos of dualistic Gnosticism and Yezidism, termed an anti-dualistic religion by one scholar.<sup>439</sup> In the latter, even the existence of evil, as an autonomous being, is denied. As God says in the *Jelwa*, the other Yezidi sacred “book”: “I participate in all the affairs which those who are without call evil because their nature is not such as they approve.”<sup>440</sup>

Paradoxically it could have been the very difference between the Yezidi and Gnostic message which may have led to the adoption of this myth into Yezidi mythology. In Yezidism there is no need to rebel against the Creator or his creation, but Yezidis, who denied the existence of the Devil (and consequently the possibility of his leading the first couple astray), may have exactly adapted this story to emphasize their point: Everything that happens is according to the plans of God, even apparently bad events form a part of this plan, there is no need to “blaspheme” by assuming that there is another, malevolent power at play, in rivalry with God. A change in the message of the story, while preserving the structure, or plot, would therefore be understandable (just

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probably corrupted text is much debated, but its general meaning is held to be clear.

<sup>437</sup> Philo, *De Allegoriis Legum* III. 69; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.40 “they received garments of skin at the time of the fall; i.e. bodies, since before the fall they were spiritual beings.” A similar statement is found in Zohar 1.36b “Before the fall they were dressed in garments of light, after the Fall in garments of skin, which were useful only for the body, not the soul” quoted in Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* vol. 5 (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1947), 103; see also N. 53.

<sup>438</sup> Sebastian Brock, “Clothing Metaphors as a means of theological expression in Syrian Tradition,” in *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology* (Hampshire: Variorum Reprints, 1992), 17. Furthermore, according to István Perczel (CEU, Budapest), the only occurrence of a similar form of the myth is in an Origenist writing in the *Syriac Book of the Holy Hierotheos*.

<sup>439</sup> See G. Furlani, “L’antidualismo dei Yezidi,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944): 237-67.

<sup>440</sup> Joseph, “Yezidi Texts,” 219. Frayha translates the manuscript in his possession in the following way: “All the phenomena which the outsiders reckon as evil I take part in. They call it thus because these things do not fulfill their designs.” Frayha, “New Yezidî Texts from Beled Sinjâr, ‘Iraq, » 23.

as the Gnostics constructed a new myth from the old Biblical tale), if it were indeed the Gnostic myth that came to be adopted into Yezidi mythology, either directly from Gnostic-Manichaean sources or through the intermediary of “popular” traditions which at one point incorporated the half-understood Gnostic myth as part of their lore.

## Other Texts and Other Details

The case for a relationship between the Yezidi Adam myth and Late Antique literary traditions concerning Adam is certainly made stronger by further analysis of the “strange” details of Feqir Haji’s story regarding the role of Angel Sheikh Sin and the *khirqe* or holy shirt. These were not mentioned in the *Black Book* - and consequently never attracted academic attention. Despite this omission there are some sparse mentions of these details in reports on Yezidi beliefs. While Feqir Haji’s version is the most complete, coherent and detailed account of the myth, these fragmentary versions strengthen our case for such a relationship.

One mention comes from the notes of N. Siouffi, the French vice-consul of Mosul in the 1880s. Siouffi, like many other Europeans, was interested in the exotic teachings of the Yezidis. It is worth noting that his, admittedly short, article on the faith and customs of the Yezidis appeared before the surfacing of the sacred books, so he clearly did not derive his knowledge from these two texts. In his article<sup>441</sup> he writes that God created the body of Adam and asked his companions, the Seven Angels, which one was willing to move into the body: “Je me propose, continuat-il, de créer Adam, mais il faut pur cela qu’un de vous veuille s’incarner en lui.” As none of them was ready to take on this role, God commanded that it should be Angel Sheikh Sin who must move into Adam: “C’est toi qui t’incarneras dans Adam á dit alors Dieu au Cheikh Sinn.” Sheikh Sin first refused, saying that he had no wish to live in a being who, as well as his descendants, would be given to committing all kinds of sin. Finally, at the insistence of God, he accepted on the condition that God himself accompany him to the body and help him enter it, and that he might live in Paradise. “que tu donneras le paradis pur demuere au premier home dans lequel j’habiterai.” God acquiesced and Sheikh Sin entered Adam’s body, which came to life at once and entered Paradise. Then Adam was clothed in the robe (i.e. *khirqe*) and cap of the *feqirs*: “Pendant tout le séjour qu’il fit dans la demuere de la félicité, Adam était vètu et coiffé de la robe et du bonnet des fakirs.” After his

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<sup>441</sup> Siouffi, “Notice sur des Yézidis,” *JA*, 252-68. The quotations below come from his account of Adam’s creation on pages 256-7.

expulsion from Paradise, God took these clothes away.<sup>442</sup> Siouffi's account is rather elliptic although it clearly refers to the same basic myth as the one told by Feqir Haji.

A more detailed, though even less coherent account of the myth can be found in the unpublished doctoral thesis of Dr Murad Jasim, which contains a collection of Yezidi myths as told by Yezidi immigrants in Germany. One of the versions he collected from a certain Feqir Ali says:

The mud then by the order of God became a body of man but lacked spirit. Then, Angel Dardail entered the body of Adam and clapped both of his hands saying: 'Wake up Adam and put on your body the attire of angels.' Adam awoke and Dirdail clothed him in the attire of angels and the clothes were a kharqa, white headgear, a crown and a red belt.<sup>443</sup> Then Dirdail taught Adam the science of God and brought him to Paradise and said unto him: 'Now you are an angel, do not leave Paradise for if you do so, you shall become a man.'<sup>444</sup>

The story continues with the well known question of how Adam would be able to multiply while in Paradise and the Peacock Angel's trick. When Adam tried to return to heaven after having made a hole in his backside by rubbing his back against a tree and after relieving himself, the Peacock Angel stopped him saying:

Now you have become a human being and you have lost your angelic nature." Adam endeavored to once again to re-enter Paradise and Tawusi Melek halted him with the same explanation. Then Tawusi Melek stripped Adam of the angelic clothes and left him only with the pearl on his forehead, and then threw him away from the gates of paradise saying to him: "You have lost your access to heaven."<sup>445</sup>

## The Divine Origin of Adam's Soul

The first point that should be noted is the angelic origin of Adam's soul, on which all three of my sources agree.<sup>446</sup> As has been elaborated in the chapter on Yezidi religion, an angelic origin in Yezidi parlance refers to a divine origin, for the angels of Yezidi mythology are not creatures, as in orthodox Judaism, Christianity or Islam, but emanations, hypostases of the Godhead. As the *Mes'hefa Resh* or *Black Book* says "God... created six gods from his essence and from his light. Their creation took place as a man kindles a candle from another candle."<sup>447</sup> Yezidi hymns also

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 256. It is worth noting that while Siouffi has long been considered one of the most important sources on Yezidis (prior to late 20<sup>th</sup> century publications) his intriguing account of Adam's story never attracted any scholarly interest. This may exactly be due to its fragmentary nature, and the fact that the information it contains is seemingly alien and impenetrable for people schooled in "orthodox" European theology and philosophy.

<sup>443</sup> The white headgear and the red belt are the insignia of religious dignities (e.g. the *Baba Sheikh*, the *Peshimam*, the *Baba Chawush*, etc.)

<sup>444</sup> Jasim Murad, "Sacred Poems," 290-91.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Regarding the origin of Adam's soul a similar tale was related by Shamdin, a Yezidi follower (*murid*) to Jasim Murad ("Sacred Poems," 293.): "Then the seven angels made Adam out of the soil. The seven angels entered the body of Adam. Afterwards, six angels came out of the body and one remained in his forehead. And the six angels put Adam in the Paradise."

<sup>447</sup> Ebied and Young, "An Account of the History and Rituals of the Yazidis of Mosul," 521. Joseph translates "their

elaborate the identity between the Supreme Divine Being and His Angels in many different ways.<sup>448</sup> As Feqir Haji himself said, “the Great Lord created the seven Angels from his own Light, from his own *sur*”<sup>449</sup> (i.e., divine power, mysterious essence.) In other words, all the sources claim that the soul of Adam, the father of humankind, is of divine origin, a part of the divine.<sup>450</sup>

It must be mentioned here that the Ahl-i Haqq, this Kurdish-speaking heterodox movement in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan with close ties to Yezidis, have a very similar myth on the divine origin of Adam’s soul. According to them, when God created Adam he wanted to put a piece of his soul in Adam, however the piece of divine soul refused to go. Then God asked Angel Jibrail to hide in Adam’s body and play on the tambour. The piece of soul became confused. He was attracted by the music and wanted to see where it came from. So he went closer and closer to Adam’s body, until the music pulled him inside the body.<sup>451</sup> A more complicated version of the Ahl-i Haqq myth on the creation of humans recounts that the Seven Angels<sup>452</sup> requested God to manifest himself in human form. But, the Divine Essence was like fire, the material form would have been burnt. Therefore it was decided to place a soul in Adam’s [previously created] body. When the Divine Essence manifests itself in a human body, the soul like water prevents it from being burnt.<sup>453</sup> The soul too refused to enter Adam’s body, so the Haftan entered Adam’s heart and began to play

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creation was as one lights a light from another light.” (“Yezidi Texts,” 225.) The candle simile was repeated to me by Arab Khidir, a Yezidi from Beshiqe-Behzani devoted to collecting sacred texts, though it is possible that he was influenced by publications on Yezidis, which contain and elaborate on the *Black Book*. Another telling description was provided by Feqir Ali in Dr Jasim Murad’s collection: “The universe was a total void in which the light of God was shining. God turned from His right side and prayed to himself and from his shoulder *Tawusi Melek*, i.e. Angel Gabrail, was born.” Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 288.

<sup>448</sup> For example “Sheikh Adi [the earthly incarnation of the Peacock Angel], *Tawusi Melek* [the Peacock Angel] and Sultan Ezi [God] are one; Don’t you regard them as separate; They quickly make wishes come true.” (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 392.) For further descriptions of the divine beings in terms that make clear their identity with the Creator, see the following hymns: *The Hymn of Faith; The Declaration of Faith, The Hymn of the Oceans* (in Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*); *Hymn of Faith, Hymn of Abu Bakr* (in Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*.) The Seven Angels are often referred to as “heft (seven) sur.” *Sur* literally means mystery, but is usually translated by Yezidis as divine light (*nur*), divine power.

<sup>449</sup> (*Rabul Alemî emir kir heft milyaketa xolokandin ji sura xwe, ji nûra xwe*.) Also Sheik Deshti, a guardian of shrines in the Yezidi settlement of Khanke explained that “The Lord of the Universe made Seven Angels from his light, from his miraculous power.” (*Rabul Alemî heft milyaketa ji nûra xwe, ji kerameta xwe çêkir*.)

<sup>450</sup> Though the *qewls* published so far do not mention Sheikh Sin, or his *sur* entering Adam and giving him a soul, they do say that it was the *sur* or divine mystery, light, that animated Adam’s lifeless body, after he was made to drink from the Cup of Mystery, or Cup of Love: “Our Lord, you are merciful. You brought Adam the cup of the Mystery [*sur*], He drank water from the cup, and came to life... Adam drank from that cup, The Mystery of the cup was agreeable to him, He reached the blessing of the cup, and became conscious.” *The Hymn of the Creation of the World* 32, 34 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 189.) As regards the published versions of the *Black Book* (or *Mes’hefa Resh*), they do not make mention of an angel entering Adam’s body to give him a thought, they still seem to reflect on the idea that Adam’s soul was in some way of divine origin. Thus, for example, Joseph’s translation says: “He created it and put in it the spirit of his own power, and called it Adam. Josph,” (Joseph, “Yezidi Texts,” 222.)

<sup>451</sup> C. Bird, *Ezer lâzadâs, ezer sóhaj* (A Thousand Sighs, a Thousand Revolts,) trans. Adam Szieberth (Budapest: General Press, 2005),184.

<sup>452</sup> The *Haftan*, or Seven, who, just like the Yezidi Seven Angels, are the emanations of the Godhead. See Hamzeh’ee, *The Yaresan*, 70-71; and chapter “Yezidi Religion.”

<sup>453</sup> Clearly, the Ahl-i Haqq myth subscribes to the three-part division of humans, consisting of material body, soul (psyche), and spirit (pneuma.) This view was generally accepted by Late Antique dualistic movements, which considered the spirit (pneuma) of divine origin, providing the link between humans and the world of Light.

mystical music. When the soul heard this music, it went into a mystical trance and entered Adam's body. Then the Haftan came out and the soul remained imprisoned there."<sup>454</sup>

The idea of the divine origin of human soul is definitely heretical and untenable in Christianity or Islam (and Judaism) alike, nor is such a feature a part of the Zoroastrian mythology believed to descend from that same Western Iranian mythology to which the core of Yezidis religion probably hails from.<sup>455</sup> On the other hand, the notion of the divine origin of human soul is one of the cornerstones of dualistic movements, be it Gnostic or Manichaeic. These dualistic religions taught that the human soul was a parcel of the divine light imprisoned below in matter.<sup>456</sup> The idea of the divinity of Adam's soul therefore fits in well with the radically "inverted" interpretation of the Fall of Adam where tasting the forbidden fruit becomes a positive act, benefiting mankind and the instigator of this act is a divine being.

The fact that this *sur* representing the divine essence of Angel Sheikh Sin in Adam's body, acting as his soul, can be found on the forehead of Adam, shining as a drop of light,<sup>457</sup> is an exciting example of how mythological motifs of different origin could merge and produce new forms of myth in the Middle East. The motif of the light showing on the forehead probably goes back to the speculations on the notion of the *nūr Muhammad*, or "the light of Muhammad," the "primordial luminous substance" of Muhammad, which shone as a blaze of light on the forehead of his forebears from Adam on down to Muhammad's parents.<sup>458</sup> (Note, however, that in this case there can be no mention of divine essence, as Muhammad, though the first among the prophets, is definitely a human, and the light is merely an exalted symbol of his prophethood, and of his special position vis-à-vis God.) .

From literary theological speculations on the "light of Muhammad" the motif of the light in the forehead seems to have gradually spread to the folktales and the oral (often unorthodox) religion of the Middle East. An Islamic folk legend on Ismail, for example, recounts how: "He had the

<sup>454</sup> Hamzeh'ee, *The Yaresan*, 73-74. Yezidi hymns also talk of how the soul refused to enter the body of Adam until the *shibab* and *def* (tambour and flute, the sacred Yezidi instruments) came down from above and started playing.

<sup>455</sup> See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 54-59; and P. Kreyenbroek, "Mithra and Ahreman," 57-79.

<sup>456</sup> See chapter 2 "Religious Movements in the Middle East."

<sup>457</sup> Feqir Haji, as well as many of my other informants, usually explained *sur* as *nūr*, that is, light.

<sup>458</sup> Already early Muslim sources mention how the spirit of Muhammad, "forming part of the spermatoc substance of his ancestors existed in the world as an integral prophetic entity before his birth." (U. Rubin "Pre-existence and light: Aspects of the concept of Nūr Muhammad." *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 67.) This luminous prophetic substance, represented by the light shining on the forehead of its bearer, was first placed in the loins of Adam, from where it passed on to Eve when she conceived with Seth, then to Seth, and so on, until it reached Muhammad. Several of Muhammad biographers' even recount stories of how the light shining on the forehead of Abdullah, father of Muhammad, attracted women, until he lost it to Amina at the conception of Muhammad. See U. Rubin "Pre-existence and light: *Aspects of the concept of Nūr Muhammad*," 62-117; and "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shi'a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 46-47. Rubin does not deal with the origins of this concept, in my opinion, however, it is possible that it had a Zoroastrian background. See M. Eliade, "Spirit, Light and Seed," *History of Religions* 11.1 (1971), 13-16 on the *xvarenah* (*xwarnah*) the fiery substance (light, glory) of divine beings, giving a radiant aspect to Zoroaster and his mother. In *Yašt* 10.127 dedicated to Mithra, it is stated that from the forehead of the god "goes forth the flaming fire that is the strong royal *xvarenah*." (Eliade, "Spirit," 14.)

luminous disc of divine light on his forehead, for God had decreed that he would be the first prophet of the Arabian nation”<sup>459</sup> An Ahl-i Haqq holy text, on the creation of Adam, explains how the soul first refused to enter the body of Adam until “Jibra’il fixed the light of Muhammad the Prophet in Adam’s forehead and ordered the soul to enter his body, which it refused to do until it noticed the light of that Saint.”<sup>460</sup> Divine light on the forehead obviously also became a motif of non-religious folktales as well. So for example, one of my sources, when asked about the meaning of the *sur*, told me that it was the light shining in the forehead of the Yezidi Angels (yet another indication that Adam, while in Paradise, was in fact a divine Angel). Then he added that he knew this, because in the tales told by his aunt when he was a child, the heroes were described as beings with light shining in their forehead, looking just like the Yezidi Angels.<sup>461</sup>

### The *Khirqe* of Adam

There is one more element that seems incongruent, or at least surprising at first sight: the *khirqe* (and the cap) of *feqirs* that Melek Sheikh Sin demanded to wear as a condition for entering the body of Adam, and which were stripped off Adam after his expulsion in Feqir Haji’s story. Siouffi also mentions the robe and the cap of the *feqirs* as the clothing of Adam while in Paradise. The third version talks of the attire of the angels, which is described as a *khirqe* once again, plus white headgear and a red belt. These latter two are also sacred clothes though worn not by the *feqirs*, but by religious leaders today.

*Khirqe* (or *khirka*) is originally a Sufi term, one of the legacies of Sufi influence on Yezidis. Literally meaning “rag,” “tattered piece of cloth,” it denotes the rough cloak of the Sufis, followers of the mystical branch of Islam.<sup>462</sup> Among the Yezidis *khirqe* is the black shirt of the *feqirs*, the order of Yezidi holy men. Its reputation is so great that no one can strike someone wearing a *khirqe* however great the provocation may be. The word *khirqe*, and of course the Yezidi garment itself, may be of Sufi origin but the story of Adam wearing such a sacred shirt, or the attire of the angels, in Paradise, before his expulsion certainly is not.<sup>463</sup> Are there any parallels to such motifs in Late

<sup>459</sup> Knappert, *Islamic legends*, 78

<sup>460</sup> Ivanow, *The Truth Worshipers of Kurdistan*, 107.

<sup>461</sup> My source was a Yezidi from Behzani, but he claimed that the folk tales recounted by his aunt were not specifically Yezidi folk tales. It has also been mentioned in the chapter on “Yezidi Religion” how Mehwer, the mother of Yezid bin Muawiya had the *sur* of Yezid shining on her forehead as long as he was pregnant with Yezid.

<sup>462</sup> For a more detailed analysis of both the Sufi and Yezidi *khirqe*, see next chapter. The accepted transliteration of the Sufi garment is *khirka* (or *khirqa*), while the Yezidi garment appears as *khirqe*. This is the spelling I will use when referring to the Yezidi and Sufi garment respectively.

<sup>463</sup> Some Sufi traditions hold that the *khirka* was derived from the “prototypical custom worn by Adam and Eve when they were placed upon on earth,” after the Fall. See Jamal J. Elias, “The Sufi Robe (*Khirqe*) as a Vehicle of Spiritual Authority,” in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 277 and 278. However, this refers to Adam’s state *after*, and not *before* the fall, and it refers to the fact that Adam was the first in the chain of prophets, and not to his angelic status. In fact, some Sufi writers claim that Adam adopted

Antique mythology? At this point we can no longer confine our search for the roots of the Adam myth to the realm of Gnosticism or dualistic movements. We are dealing here with one of the many motifs that were held in common by many religious movements in the Late Hellenistic period.

### *Judaism*

The garment of Adam before his Fall and the complex symbolism it is linked with falls into the category of motifs shared by various movements that were rooted (at least partially) in Judaism. This is what some scholars dub the “theology of clothing” or the “metaphor of garment.”<sup>464</sup> The notion of an angelic robe or heavenly garment worn by Adam (and Eve) before the Fall was a *leit-motif* of Jewish apocalyptic tradition, from where it passed on to some schools of orthodox Christian thought. It probably originated with certain interpretations of Genesis 3.21 on the “garments of skin” the Lord made for Adam and Eve. “The older Haggadah speaks of ‘garment of Light,’ which the first pair wore before the fall of man, as bestowed upon them by God in accordance with Gen. 3.21, where עור (skin) is explained as though it were written אור (light). This verse is said to refer to the state before the fall.”<sup>465</sup> Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Targums (Aramaic translations of the Bible) speak of garments of glory (*lbūšîn d-îqâr*), while the *Genesis Rabbah* (or *Bereshit Rabbah*) 20.12, a *midrash* comprising a collection of ancient rabbinical homiletical interpretations of the book of Genesis, tells how Rebbi Meir was said to possess a manuscript reading the word “light” instead of “skin.”<sup>466</sup> The *Targum* of Pseudo-Jonathan for Gen. 3, 7, talking of Adam finding himself naked, refers to the loss by Adam of a purple or onyx-coloured robe.<sup>467</sup> The *midrash*, *Pirqē of Rabbi Eliezer* also speak of shining robes.<sup>468</sup>

Some traditions connected this wonderful garment of Light worn by Adam in Paradise with the shining garments of the angels. The idea of Adam wearing a robe similar to that of the Angels (just as in one of the versions of the Yezidi myth recounted above) is traced by some researchers to the words of Psalm 8. 6: “You created men a little less than the angels, and in honour and glory did you clothe him,” while some writings describe angels as wearing robes of light. For example, in the

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wearing black wool on the advice on the archangel Gabriel as a symbol of his baseness. (Elias, “The Sufi Robe,” 281.)

<sup>464</sup> On this topic, see Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, especially chapters “XI. Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition,” 11- 35 and “IV. Jewish Tradition in Syriac Sources,” 212-232; S. Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), chapter “Some Aspects of Greek Words in Syriac,” 80-108; and B. Murdoch, “The Garment of Paradise: A Note on the *Wiener Genesis* and the *Anegenge*.” *Euphorion* 61 (1967): 375–82.

<sup>465</sup> Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews* 5, 97, Note 69. See also p. 103, Note 96.

<sup>466</sup> Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 14; Murdoch, “Garment of Paradise,” 376.

<sup>467</sup> Murdoch, “Garment of Paradise,” 376.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*; and R.Graves and R. Patai, *Héber mítoszok* (Hebrew myths: The book of Genesis), trans. István Terényi (Szeged: Szukits, 1994) 70.

Syriac translation of the Bible, the Peshitta text of the *Book of Daniel*,<sup>469</sup> Daniel's angelic interlocutor also wears "garments of glory." The "robe of light" was seen as a symbol of Adam's high status before the fall, when he was equal to the angels. "For indeed human beings are not created but to be like angels, permanently to maintain pure and righteous lives"<sup>470</sup>

### *Christianity*

Though later Jewish tradition preferred interpreting the garment as one provided by God after the Fall, the earlier notion was adopted by Christian, especially Syriac speaking Christian literary tradition that liked to dwell on the "robe of Glory" or "robe of light" lost by Adam, (with the difference that the robe of Glory was recovered through the sacrifice of Christ and is put on again by Christians at baptism:)<sup>471</sup>

With radiance and glory was Adam clothed at the beginning, before he sinned; the Evil one was envious, led Eve astray and had Adam rejected from Paradise: he was then covered by fig leaves in place of the glory with which he had been clothed.<sup>472</sup>

The vehicle of transmission might have been the legendary cycle that grew up around the figures of Adam and Eve (the so called *Adam Books*) and enjoyed great popularity both in Jewish and Christian (and probably also Gnostic) circles. Adam's "garment of glory" makes a frequent appearance in the extant Adam-books, particularly those of the Near and Middle East.<sup>473</sup> In the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Moses* (the Greek version of the *Life of Adam and Eve*) that speaks of the tribulations of the first human pair, Eve describes her trespass of the divine command to her son, Seth:

And at that very moment my eyes were opened and I knew that I was naked of the righteousness with which I had been clothed. And I wept saying: "Why have you done this to me, that I have been estranged from my glory with which I was clothed."<sup>474</sup>

The *Adam Books* in their turn influenced Syriac Christian literature. The most eloquent example is the famous *Cave of Treasures*, a Syriac collection of Biblical legends<sup>475</sup> that provides an account of Adam's creation and fall in the following way:

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<sup>469</sup> Daniel 10.5 and 12.7, see Brock, "Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources," 223.

<sup>470</sup> *I Enoch* 69,11, trans. E. Isaac, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 48.. For a more detailed treatment of angelic clothing in Jewish literature, see next chapter.

<sup>471</sup> On the recovery of the "robe of light," see next chapter.

<sup>472</sup> Maronite liturgical text of uncertain date, quoted in Brock, "Jewish Tradition in Syriac Sources," p. 222

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.* 376, N 15.

<sup>474</sup> *Apocalypse of Moses* 20, trans. M. D. Johnson, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol 2. ed. J. H. Charlesworth, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 281.

<sup>475</sup> The *Cave of Treasures* is believed to have been written in Sassanid Mesopotamia, probably at the Nestorian school of Nisibis in the fifth or sixth century AD. However, it was probably based on an earlier work with a similar character and title.

Adam was created in Jerusalem. There he was arrayed in the apparel of sovereignty, and there was the crown of glory set upon his head, there was he made king, and priest and prophet.<sup>476</sup>

We can form some idea as to what this royal robe and crown looked like on the basis of the passage that says:

When the angels saw Adam's glorious appearance they were greatly moved by the beauty thereof. For they saw the image of his face burning with glorious splendour like the orb of the sun, and the light of his eyes was like the light of the sun, and the image of his body was like unto the sparkling of crystal."<sup>477</sup>

Christian tradition also continued the Jewish concept that Adam in this luminous state must have resembled, or been just like the angels.<sup>478</sup> Accordingly, luminous garments like that of Adam were also worn by angels (just as in one of the versions of the Yezidi myth recounted above.) This is made clear by the story of the rebellious Satan, the prince of the lower order of angels in the *Cave of Treasures*, When he and his followers are cast out of heaven:

The apparel of their glorious state was stripped off them. And his name was called... "Daiwa" because he lost the apparel of his glory. And behold, from that time until the present day, he and all his hosts have stripped of their apparel, and they go naked and have horrible faces.<sup>479</sup>

Adam, as we know, fared hardly better. In a twist on the text of the Genesis, after Eve tasted the forbidden fruit "immediately she found herself stripped naked... and when he (Adam) had eaten he also became naked."<sup>480</sup> In other words they lost their luminous garment and crown. A similar statement on the loss of the garment of Light can be found in the *Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan*. While Adam and Eve are looking for skins to cover their cold and bruised bodies with, as instructed by God, they meet Satan who has just tried to steal and destroy the skins, but was bound to the spot and disclosed in his hideous form by God:

Then came the Word of God to Adam and Eve, and said to them, "This is he who was hidden in the serpent, and who deceived you, and stripped you of the garment of Light and glory in which you were. This is he who promised you majesty and divinity. Where, then, is the beauty that was on him? Where is his divinity? Where is

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<sup>476</sup> *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, trans. Wallis E. A. Budge (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1927), 53.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>478</sup> This is for example also expressed by the so-called *Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan*. This is a Christian pseudepigraphical work belonging to the Adam-legends cycle, found in Ethiopic and Arabic, that dates from the fifth century AD at the earliest, and tells the story and tribulations of Adam and Eve after their expulsion from Paradise. In this work God reminds Adam of his earlier state as a luminous angel: "Then God said to Adam, 'While you were under My command and were a bright angel.'" (*First Book of Adam and Eve* 10.5, translated by Dr. S. C. Malan, in *The Forgotten Books of Eden*, ed. R. H. Plat (New York, World Publishing Company, 1927), 10. (Modernized version: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/398/398.txt>) The same text refers to Adam being filled with "bright light," to the angels as "angels of light" and talks about the clothing of Adam and Eve before the Fall as a "garment of Light and glory."

<sup>479</sup> Budge, *Cave of Treasures*, 56. The loss of Satan's glorious apparel is also already foreshadowed in Jewish literature, for example *The Book of Adam and Eve* xii 1-2 (a version of the *Apocalypse of Moses*) speaks of being expelled from his glory: "And with a heavy sigh, the devil spoke: 'O Adam! all my hostility, envy, and sorrow is for thee, since it is for thee that I have been expelled from my glory, which I possessed in the heavens in the midst of the angels and for thee was I cast out in the earth.'" (<http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/adamnev.htm>)

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

his light? Where is the glory that rested on him? Now his figure is hideous; he is become abominable among angels; and he has come to be called Satan.”<sup>481</sup>

However, as shall be seen in the next chapter, in keeping with the Christian theme of Old Adam – New Adam, Adam recovers his robe of Glory when the sacrifice of Christ takes away his sin and he becomes baptized in the water and blood that flowed from Christ’s side:

The blood and the water [from the wound in Christ’s side] ran down into the mouth of Adam, and Adam was redeemed, and put on a garment of glory.<sup>482</sup>

The motif of the loss of glory, or loss of the garment of Light by Adam and Eve became very “popular” in Christian literature, especially in the Syriac-speaking Church. For example, one of the most emblematic representatives of Syriac Christianity, Ephrem of Syria, liked to refer to “the robe of Glory that was stolen away among the trees have you put on in the baptismal water”<sup>483</sup> and often spoke of the first couple as “clothed in glory:”

Because of that glory with which they were wrapped they felt no shame; but when this was taken away from them after their transgression of the commandment, they felt shame because they have been stripped.<sup>484</sup>

And when they transgressed the commandment the garment of glory, which had been like a veil for their nakedness, was removed and taken away from them and they [then] knew and understood whence they had fallen.<sup>485</sup>

This description persisted in the writing of the Syrian, Greek, Coptic and Arabic exegetes<sup>486</sup> and was incorporated into Armenian liturgy, where it appears in the hymn sung while the priest is vesting.<sup>487</sup> As late as the thirteenth century Solomon of Bosra (or Basra) writes in his *Book of the Bee*, a compilation of Biblical legends: “Adam and Eve were stripped of the flair glory and the glorious light of purity with which they had been clothed.”<sup>488</sup>

### *Gnostics*

Gnostics, in all probability influenced by Jewish exegesis, also used the motif of Adam’s garment of Light in building up their mythology. However, in their understanding this garment, often

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<sup>481</sup> First Book of Adam and Eve 51, in *Forgotten Books of Eden*, 34.

<sup>482</sup> Budge, *Cave of Treasures*, 231-32.

<sup>483</sup> Ephrem, *H. Virg.* XVI.9, quoted in Brock, “Jewish Tradition in Syriac Sources,” 221-23.

<sup>484</sup> Ephrem, *Comm. Gen.* (ed. R. M. Tonneau), II.14, quoted in Brock “Clothing Metaphors,” 23.

<sup>485</sup> *The Armenian Commentary on Genesis Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian* [p. 25], trans. Edward. G. Mathews, Jr. CSCO vol. 573, *Scrip. Armen.* tom. 24 (Lovanii: Peeters, 1998), 27.

<sup>486</sup> Murdoch, “Garment of Paradise,” 377, see also N 19. The list of later authors making use of this motif include Johannes Chrysostomos; the ninth century Jacobite bishop Moses bar Kepha from Balad; Sahdona (Martyrius), a Nestorian exegetes from Hakkari; the ninth century Syrian exegetes Ishodad of Merv; The idea is also found in an anonymous Nestorian commentary on *Genesis* of the twelfth century. The legend was less “popular” in the West, but it can still be found both in exegetical literature, apocryphal readings, and medieval German poems, See Murdoch, *passim*.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.* Note 20. The printed form of this liturgy is dated to the fourteenth century, but as Murdoch points out the Armenian Church has had an established liturgy since the fifth.

<sup>488</sup> Solomon of Bosra, *Book of the Bee* 16, trans. and ed. W. Budge (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1886), 21.

described as a kind of luminosity covering Adam's body, refers to Gnosis, or self-knowledge. In a Gnostic twist on *Genesis 2.7*, the *Apocryphon of John* describes, how the heavenly powers tricked the chief Archon, Sophia's fallen offspring, into breathing the divine power, or light, he had stolen from the Realm of Light, into Adam's inert body, which then gains strength (i.e., comes to consciousness) and becomes luminous:

The Mother wanted to retrieve the power which she had given to the chief Ruler... [the heavenly powers helping her] said to Yaltabaoth [the chief archon,] "Blow into his [Adam's] face something of your spirit and his body will arise." And he blew into his face the spirit which is the power of his Mother; he did not know (this), for he exists in ignorance. And the power of the mother went out of Yaltabaoth into the psychic body [of Adam].... The body moved and gained strength, and it was luminous... [the evil powers] recognized that he was luminous, and that he could think better than they.<sup>489</sup>

In the *Apocalypse of Adam*<sup>490</sup> the revelation of Adam to his son Seth starts with the description of his primordial state, when he and Eve were still like the beings of the Realm of Light, the eternal angels, and went about in glory:

When god had created me out of earth along with Eve, your mother, I went about with her in a glory that she had seen in the aeon from which we had come forth... And we resembled the great eternal angels, for we were higher than the god who had created us and the powers with him, whom we did not know.<sup>491</sup>

The loss of this luminous covering is not due to the tasting of the forbidden fruit, but to the jealousy of the evil Ruler (and his angels), who devises scheme after scheme to deprive Adam of his light. In the first attempt a body is fashioned so as to enclose luminous Adam in it:

[The evil powers of Matter]...recognized that he (Adam) was luminous, and that he could think better than they, and that he was free from wickedness, they took him and threw him into the lowest region of all matter...<sup>492</sup> This is the tomb of the newly-formed body with which the robbers had clothed the man, the bond of forgetfulness; and he became a mortal man.<sup>493</sup>

Then Adam is placed in Paradise where the episode of the forbidden fruit of Gnosis occurs. In retribution the Chief Ruler "cast them [Adam and Eve] out of Paradise, and he clothed them in

<sup>489</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II.19,15-20,7, trans. F. Wisse and M. Waldstein, ed. in *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices* II,1; III,1; and IV, 1 with BG 8502,2 (hereafter *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*), NHMS 33. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 113-17.

<sup>490</sup> The *Apocalypse of Adam* is a non-Christian Gnostic work, albeit showing a close dependence on Jewish apocalyptic tradition. In MacRae's view it may represent a transitional stage in an evolution from Jewish to Gnostic apocalyptic, and is thus very early, dating from the first or second century AD. See MacRae, *Introduction to Apocalypse of Adam*, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4* (hereafter *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI*), NHS 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 152. Charlesworth, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the *Apocalypse* should be dated to the fourth century and its theology resembles Epiphanius' description of the Archontics. The teachings of the Archontics originated in Palestine, from where it was carried to (greater and lesser) Armenia. See Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, 708.

<sup>491</sup> *Apocalypse of Adam* 64,6-19, trans. G. MacRae, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI*, 155.

<sup>492</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II 20.6-9, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 117.

<sup>493</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II 21.10-13, *ibid.*, 123.

gloomy darkness”<sup>494</sup> to make them lose their Gnosis, knowledge of origin and become obedient to him again. This is the final loss of Adam’s luminous covering. The Church Father Irenaeus, speaking about the Gnostics, reports that Adam and Eve used to have shining forms, their material bodies being formed only after the expulsion:

Previously Adam and Eve had light, shining bodies, like spiritual bodies, as they had first been formed, but when they came hither, these changed into darker, fatter and more sluggish ones.”<sup>495</sup>

Finally References to Adam’s “garments of light” are frequent in the sacred texts of the Mandaeans, the present-day descendants of Late Antique Gnosticism.<sup>496</sup>

There seem to be enough parallels between the *khirqe* worn and lost by the Yezidi Adam and the garment of Light that Adam wore before his Fall in Judaeo-Christian and related traditions to justify the conclusion that we are facing the same myth. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, Adam, when first created, wore a garment of Light, or robe of Glory that symbolized his high spiritual status before the Fall. According to the testimony of works like the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* and perhaps the Gnostic *Apocalypse of Adam* similar garments of light were worn by the angels as well. After trespassing God’s commandment, Adam lost his garment of Light, had to leave Paradise, and fell from his high moral and spiritual status to a much lower one. In the Yezidi myth, Adam, while in Paradise, wears the *khirqe*, which is mentioned by one source as the attire not of the *feqirs*, but of the angels. Some Yezidi hymns indeed talk of the Seven Great Angels wearing *khirqes*, or even identify the Angels with the *khirqes*, by describing their creation, or rather emanation, as the creation of *khirqes*.<sup>497</sup> Furthermore, Angel Sheik Sin would not enter Adam’s body unless as Adam he could don the *khirqe*, thus preserving his position as an Angel. And when Adam leaves Paradise he has to strip off his *khirqe*, losing his angelic status and becoming a mere human. If Adam’s *khirqe* indeed goes back to the “garment of Light” or “robe of Glory” of Late Antique mythology, this would also explain the curious reference to the *khirqe* in the Yezidi hymns as the “luminous or shining (*nûrani*) black *khirqe*,”<sup>498</sup> and why some hymns talk of the light that

<sup>494</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II 24. 7, *ibid.*, 137. Layton translates “obscure darkness” (*Gnostic Scriptures*, 46)

<sup>495</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.9 “Adam autem et Evam prius quidem habuisse levia et clara et velut spiritualia corpora, quemadmodum et plasmata sunt; venientes autem huc, demutasse in obscurius, et pinguius, et pigrius.” Irénée, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 1, tome 2, 374.

<sup>496</sup> For example, in the *Ginza Rabba*. See Lidzbarski, *Ginza*, 108, 15: 243, 21f.: 261, 7: 488, 12: 489, 31; referred to in Murdoch, “The Garment,” 376.

<sup>497</sup> *Hymn of Qere Ferqan* 9-10: “My King calls out loudly: The Pearl had waves, it became the Ocean; There was activity and the number of *khirqes* became four; For 90,000 years he hid them in the Lamp; But now he made manifest the four Friends. The four wise Friends were made manifest; Born of the Origin: Sheikh Adi and Melik Sheikh Sin, Nasirdin and Sejadin; They set this world in motion.” (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 95-6), cf. *Hymn of the Ocean* 13-16 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 205) describing the creation of the four Companions (Great Angels). Also see next chapter.

<sup>498</sup> *The Hymn of Faith* 16 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 85), *Hymn of Qere Ferqan* 24 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.)

emanated from the (black) *khirqe*<sup>499</sup> which would otherwise be a contradiction of terms.

Of course, the notion that Adam and Eve were clad in clothes of light was not unknown to Muslim tradition, after all this tradition inherited plenty from Jewish, Christian, especially Syriac Christian sources. The Quran (Sura 7.27) mentions merely that the snake made Adam and Eve lose their robes and appear naked, but does not elaborate on the nature of the robe:

O children of Adam, do not let the devil dupe you as he did when he caused the eviction of your parents from Paradise, and the removal of their garments to expose their bodies.

Interestingly, while there is some consciousness of a lost garment, going back to the interpretation of *Gen.* 3.21 as losing garments of light instead of getting garments of skin, the garment in the Quran is not qualified in any way, and certainly not as a garment of Light or glory, a symbol of Adam's elevated state. Rather, the stress seems to be on the "after the sin" state of Adam, his shame at becoming naked.

The tradition of the robe of light, however, does come up in some Muslim works. Al-Ya'qūbi, a ninth-century Muslim historian writes that Adam and Eve were clad in "clothes of light" in Paradise.<sup>500</sup> Wahb bin Munabbih of Yemen, a prolific early eighth-century narrator of legends on prophetic figures, mostly drawn from Jewish lore though presented in an Islamic guise,<sup>501</sup> relates that Allah coated Adam with a very beautiful nail-like substance that shone like the sun. After Adam transgressed God's commandment, this coating was reduced, surviving only on his fingertips.<sup>502</sup> This latter tradition seems to reflect direct Jewish influence. At least the *Genesis Rabbah* compares the smooth surface of the shining robe of Adam and Eve to the smoothness of fingernails,<sup>503</sup> while the later *Pirke of Rabi Eliezer* states:

What was the garment of Adam? Skin of fingernail and the Cloud of Glory covering him. When he ate of the fruit of the tree, the fingernail skin fell off him, and he saw himself naked, while the Cloud of Glory departed from him.<sup>504</sup>

This inevitably raises the question, whether Islam (that is mainstream Islamic literature) could have been the transmitter between Late Antiquity and Yezidism. Such a possibility, of course, cannot be

<sup>499</sup> *The Hymn of Qere Ferqan* 25-6: "They put on that Mystery, that *khirqe*, They declared their faith in Sultan Ezi, By their light things were revealed before dawn. Before dawn things were revealed by their light. Earth and heaven shuddered, The (holy) men sat down in unity. Together they discussed the true path of Sheikh Adi and Melik Sheikh Sin." (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.) Yezidi tradition holds that the black *khirqe* and *kof* ("crown", in this case a conical hat) worn by Sheikh Adi, a divine incarnation and the central figure of Yezidi religious history, used to emanate light. (Tradition also maintains that both the *khirqe* and *kof* worn by the leader of the *feqirs* during the sacred Evening Dance in the Central Sanctuary of Lalish used to belong to Sheikh Adi. They are both made from a black, furry material reminiscent of the attire of Hungarian shepherds.)

<sup>500</sup> See Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 96.

<sup>501</sup> R. G. Khoury, "Wahb bin Munabbih," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 34-36.

<sup>502</sup> Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 96.

<sup>503</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 196, see Graves-Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, 70-71.

<sup>504</sup> *Pesiqta of Rabbi Eliezer* (Warsaw, 1852), 14, quoted in N. Rubin - A. Kosman, "The Clothing of the Primordial Adam as a Symbol of Apocalyptic Time in the Midrashic Sources," *The Harvard Theological Review* 90.2 (1997): 170.

categorically excluded, but does not seem very likely either. In orthodox Islamic tradition<sup>505</sup> the legend of Adam and Eve's light robes never became as popular as in earlier, especially in Syrian Christian literature and religious tradition, and speculations on the lost robe and its consequences (for Adam and mankind) never played a central role, as they did in the other traditions. Even more importantly, there is no place in Islamic salvational and eschatological symbolism for the eventual recovery of this shining robe by (or for) the righteous, unlike both among Syriac Christians and Gnostic-Manichaeans, the parallels of which can clearly be found in Yezidi sacred hymns. As we shall see in the next chapter, in Late Antique tradition Adam's "garment of Light" was far more than merely the garment lost by Adam, just as the *khirqe* of the Yezidis is more than the angelic garment Adam wore. These motifs, to the best of my knowledge, cannot be found in orthodox Islam. The "robe of Glory" or "garment of Light" functioning as a garment of hope, of salvation, that can be (re)gained and worn by all those who prove themselves deserving, shall constitute the topic of the next chapter.

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I have attempted to demonstrate the Late Antique origin of a number of "strange" motifs in the Yezidi Adam myth. The inverted interpretation of the breaking of the Divine Command, and the positive understanding of the fall seem to go back to the Gnostic-Manichaean interpretation of the Adam-myth. The same could be true for the idea, which can also be found in the "popular" Islam of the region, that the creation of the material body, especially the beginnings of the bodily functions and digestive system is linked to this fall. The idea of the divine origin of the soul of Adam, shared by the Ahl-i Haqq mythology, is again something that has its parallels in Gnostic ideology. Finally, to make the horizon wider, there is the thought that Adam used to wear an angelic garment while in Paradise, symbolizing his angelic status. This idea was primarily current in Judaism and Christianity, especially Syriac Christianity, though echoes of it can be found in Gnosticism as well.

The next chapter will concentrate on this angelic garment, the *khirqe*, its role in Yezidi mythology other than the lost clothing of Adam, and the possible connection of this *khirqe* with Late Antique religious language.

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<sup>505</sup> That is in the Islamic tradition of the erudite, literate classes, as we have no way of knowing whether it made its way into "popular" lore.

## Chapter 7: The *Khirqe*, or Garment of Faith

The idea that Adam's *khirqe* was no other than the "garment of Light" of Late Antiquity and that this may explain the curious references in the Yezidi hymns to the "luminous black *khirqe*" takes us to the next stage of research into the mystery of the Yezidi *khirqe*. There are many other references to the luminous *khirqe* in Yezidi hymns - as a divine garment of cosmic dimensions, as a means of attaining religious enlightenment, and as an eschatological symbol - that cannot, at first glance at least, be directly connected with the myth of Adam. This chapter will try to trace the roots of this symbolic use of the *khirqe*, and analyze possible Late Antique influences.

As has already been mentioned, the word *khirka* or *khirqa* originally referred to the patched, woolen shirt of Sufi dervishes, denoting poverty and devotion to God, as well as spiritual adherence to a certain Sufi "path" (*tariqat*, Sufi dervish order). The assumption of the *khirka* symbolized embarking on the "mystical path" or *tariqat*, as well as being a symbol of the spiritual relationship or bond between Sufi master (*murshid*) and disciple (*murid*). The *khirka* was ceremoniously bestowed upon a disciple by his Sufi master, leader on the mystical path, as part of his initiation, and as a recognition of the attainment of a certain spiritual station (*maqâm*.) upon the completion of the disciple's training with the master. In this case the *khirka* "functioned as a kind of credential for the Sufi indicating that he had been trained by an accredited master"<sup>506</sup> (whose spiritual authority could be traced back to the Prophet,) for common Sufi wisdom held, "if a *murid* does not have a *murshid*, the Devil will be his Pîr (spiritual guide.)" In other cases the *khirka* was given to the disciple at the beginning of his training with his *murshid*,<sup>507</sup> in which case it indicated that he had embarked upon the mystical path and had to learn to become utterly dependent upon the sheikh as a means of learning to become dependent upon God."<sup>508</sup> The *khirka* as a concrete object was occasionally also thought to be imbued with the master's spiritual qualities, which could have a transformative impact on the disciple who inherited it, helping him attain a higher degree of spiritual advancement.<sup>509</sup>

Used in a metaphorical sense *khirka* was also a symbol of the chain of transmission (*silsila*) of spiritual, mystical teaching. Being given a *khirka* by one's master could be the proof of being selected as the successor after the latter's death. More importantly, the handing down and

<sup>506</sup> M. Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority in Medieval Nishapur," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26.3 (1994): 434.

<sup>507</sup> Or *sheikh* or *pîr*, these terms being by and large synonymous.

<sup>508</sup> Malamud, "Sufi Organisations," 434. See also J.L Michon, "*Khirka*," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 17-18.

<sup>509</sup> Elias, "The Sufi Robe," 276, 286.

acceptance of the *khirka*, respectively, symbolized the mystical affiliation between successive masters and disciples of a *tariqat*, a chain that ultimately ended in Muhammad, whom all chains of mystical affiliation were traced back to. Through the *khirka* the master transmits to the initiate/successor the blessing inherited from the prophet.<sup>510</sup>

As shall be seen, Yezidi *khirqe* is closely modeled on its Sufi counterpart. However, the significance of the *khirqe* is far more complex in Yezidi hymns than in Sufi terminology, presenting images and ideas that cannot be traced to Sufism or Islam. I believe that the explanation for this intriguing phenomenon is the fact that the Yezidi *khirqe* has conserved traces of a “garment symbolism” that is much older than Sufi mysticism, and has its roots in Late Antique religious language. It was this Late Antique symbolic language of the “theology of garment” that merged with the Sufi *khirka*, producing the unique and extremely complex image of the Yezidi *khirqe*.

### The *Khirqe* in Yezidi Tradition

The quest for the meaning of the *khirqe* in Yezidi texts is as long and difficult as any treasure-hunt in view of the nature of such texts. The language of Yezidi hymns is often enigmatic, and references are hard to understand for the “uninitiated.” Furthermore, as Yezidis don’t have what could be dubbed a “formal theology,” there is no concrete and comprehensive “definition” of the *khirqe*, rather we meet shifting images and (apparently) conflicting descriptions. Perhaps the best way to grasp the manifold meaning of the *khirqe* is to envisage different levels that are built on each other:

- *Khirqe* as the clothing and companion of God at the Creation;
- *Khirqe* as angelic garment and also a symbol of the Great Angels and their essential unity with the Godhead;
- *Khirqe* as the clothing of Adam in Paradise (a function mentioned only in the myths, not in the hymns);
- *Khirqe* as the garment of angels descended on earth as Yezidi *khas* (angels incarnated as Yezidi heroes or religious leaders), symbolizing the gnosis or religious instruction distributed by these *khas*;
- *Khirqe* as the garment of the truly faithful, that is, the *feqirs*, not in the contemporary sense of the word, but rather meaning all those who have reached true religious enlightenment;
- finally, closely connected with the previous point, *khirqe* as the “other-worldly” reward of all those who fight for their faith and strive to reach spiritual perfection

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<sup>510</sup> Sufis knew many different kinds of *khirka*, each with its own name, as there were many different affiliations, and also different stages of spiritual advancement. Yezidis, however, make no such distinction.

That is, *khirqe* is ultimately the symbol of divine *gnosis*, something that first belonged to, was a part of the Godhead and the divine sphere, and eventually served as both the means and reward of religious enlightenment. This perception of the *khirqe* shows many striking parallels with the “garment of glory”, or “robe of Light” of Late Antiquity.

In fact, if we consider that the *khirqe*, the garment of the Yezidi *feqirs*, borrowed many of its characteristics from the “garment of Light” or “robe of Glory” which played such an important part in the theology and salvational eschatology of Late Antique religions, this would explain a great number of motifs connected with the Yezidi *khirqe*, which have so far puzzled researchers.

Before we can embark on a comparison between the Yezidi *khirqe* and Late Antique garment theology, it is necessary to give a detailed analysis of Yezidi *khirqe* as it appears in the sacred texts. It is often referred to together with the luminous black crown or headdress (*tac/tanc* or *kof* - as the one worn by Sheikh Adi and also Adam in some of the myth variants mentioned in the previous chapter:)

Miserable one! What are you doing in Mecca and Medina?  
Your dress is the *khirqe*, you should be clad in the black mantle;  
The crown on your head lights up...

Yezidis do not make pilgrimage, except to Lalish the luminous<sup>511</sup>  
Your dress is the *khirqe*, you should be clad in the black mantle;  
The crown on your head is of gold.<sup>512</sup>

### *The Khirqe and its Creation at the Beginning of Creation*

Yezidi sacred hymns describe the creation of the *khirqe* in different ways, but all descriptions amount to the same thing: the *khirqe* is a part of the divine, inherently connected with it since its moment of creation. Some texts say that the *khirqe* (together with the headdress, and occasionally a mantle or robe) came forth, emanated from the Pearl, the same Pearl that was the dwelling place of God (which is occasionally called luminous – *nūrani*- just like the *khirqe*) before the beginning of creation:

My King separated the Pearl from himself.  
He gazed on it with concentration  
He made a mental image and brought it into existence...

The Pearl comes from the word of the King  
The *khirqe* appeared from it,  
Always holy men receive salutations because of it.<sup>513</sup>

<sup>511</sup> The holy valley of the Yezidis.

<sup>512</sup> *Beyt of Mir Mih* 6-8 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 338;) see also *Hymn of the Faith* 16, 19 (quoted below in the text) (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 85-6.)

<sup>513</sup> *The Hymn of Sheykh Obekr* 5-6 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 209.)

Some hymns describe the *khirqe* as created by God himself, saying that he put his hand into the lamp of power (*Qendil*), brought out a Pearl, and produced from it the crown and the luminous *khirqe*:

Sultan Ezi put his hand to the lamp of power  
He brought out a Pearl  
Sultan Sheikh Adi placed it in his hand  
And produced from it the crown, the robe, and the luminous *khirqes*.  
They were given to Sheikh Adi's holy men;  
As you know, they put them on.”<sup>514</sup>

Another hymn says:

Sultan Ezi brought pearls forth from the Oceans  
Sheikh Adi put them in the palm of his hand  
From them he made: the Crown and the mantle, and the luminous black *khirqe*.  
He brought these forth and put them on himself...  
my Sultan Ezi put on the *khirqe*; he placed a luminous black crown of power on his  
head<sup>515</sup>

Here, Sultan Ezi is one of the epithets of God, and Sheikh Adi is to be understood as the hyposthesis of the Godhead, that is, these actions are to be understood as the actions of God.<sup>516</sup>

Other Yezid hymns state that the *khirqe* first existed together with God, as His sole companion, and the object of his love (which at the same time is His creative power:)

My King separated the Pearl from himself  
He approved of one Companion<sup>517</sup>  
He fashioned a luminous [nūranî] *khirqe*<sup>518</sup>

Melik Fekhredin stands before the King and asked him a question:  
Oh God, you are the One, triumphant  
Before the foundation of the earths, before the heavens  
Before the (holy) men, before the angels  
Love was at your disposal: what did you create with it?

Before the foundation of the earths,  
Before the heavens  
Before the (holy) men, before the angels  
My love worshipped the *khirqe*.<sup>519</sup>

The verse claiming that God worshipped His *khirqe* refers to an identity between God and His *khirqe*, for – as another hymn puts it – it was Himself that God worshipped with love before the creation of the world:

<sup>514</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 24 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.)

<sup>515</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 16-18 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 85.)

<sup>516</sup> On Sultan Ezi (or Êzî), and the identity between God, his angels and the Yezidi *khas*, see the chapter on Yezidi religion.

<sup>517</sup> The word *yar* may also be translated as “lover”, instead of companion.

<sup>518</sup> *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 12 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 59.)

<sup>519</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 6- 7 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 95.)

No world had yet appeared  
By himself [God], he knew himself

He worshipped himself  
Love was always one and conscious  
He became light, worshipping himself.<sup>520</sup>

The *Prayer of Pilgrimage* also expresses an identity between God and the *khirqe* to which He paid a pilgrimage, as the object of His worship, while making clear that this object was in effect no other than He Himself:

The King speaks thus:  
The Throne and Seat are in my hand  
Before the foundation of the earths and the heavens  
Before the holy men and the angels  
Before the mountains and the foundations  
Before the moon and sun  
What I worshipped was the pilgrimage to the *khirqe*...

God made the Mystery of the Tradition the boundary of pilgrimage  
He had prostrated himself before his King<sup>521</sup>  
It was always He himself, he was his own object of worship.  
It was always He himself, he was his own object of worship.<sup>522</sup>

There is no clear statement as to the nature of the *khirqe*, but the same *Prayer of Pilgrimage* may imply that the *khirqe*, the garment of God, was “made” of light, as after talking about God worshipping the pilgrimage to the *khirqe*, another verse adds that it was to His light that God made pilgrimage to:

As yet, earth and sky did not exist  
The King was lonely in the Pearl  
He loved to make pilgrimage to his own light  
The angels bore witness to this.<sup>523</sup>

The idea that the *khirqe* may be identified with the light of God is born out by the *Hymn of A and B* quoted above, which states that God “became light, worshipping himself,” while other hymns claim it was his *khirqe* God worshipped.

The *khirqe* then is baptized by God in the White Spring,<sup>524</sup> the sacred spring of the Yezidis, where Yezidi children are baptized. According to Yezidi tradition the White Spring was the first thing that was created, while others maintain that it flowed from the throne of God.<sup>525</sup> The *khirqe*

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<sup>520</sup> *Hymn of B and A* 2-3 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 72.)

<sup>521</sup> That is before Himself.

<sup>522</sup> *Prayer of Pilgrimage* 1 and 12 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 106, 107.)

<sup>523</sup> *Prayer of Pilgrimage* 9, *ibid*, 107.

<sup>524</sup> It may perhaps be worthwhile to refer here to Christ’s descent into the Jordan at his baptism, which will be discussed later on. As Brock says, “for it is then that Christ deposits the “robe of Glory/light” in the water, thus making available once again for mankind to put on in baptism.” Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 12. The black *khirqe* of the *feqirs* is still baptized in the White Spring in Lalish before *feqirs* can start wearing it.

<sup>525</sup> It should also be noted that some say, it got its name, White Spring, because at the time of the Flood, when everything was covered by “black water” (*ava res*), the water of this Spring alone remained clear, rising like a tower in

then was put on and worn by God himself:

My King ...  
.. removed his *khirqe* at the Kaniya Sipî,<sup>526</sup>  
He baptized it with his own hand.<sup>527</sup>

And:

My King established the pillars on high  
He 'baptised' the *khirqe*  
The status of the *khirqe* is way up above  
My Sultan Ezi(d) the Red put it on.

Sheikh Adi will come with the foundations  
He put them up on high, brought the *khirqe* and 'baptised' it  
The *khirqe* is the garment of my Sultan Ezi(d) the Red.

Sheikh Adi will come with the foundations  
He put them up on high, brought the *khirqe* and 'baptised' it  
The *khirqe* is the garment of my Sultan Ezi(d) the Red.

My Sultan Ezi(d) put on the *khirqe*  
He placed a luminous black crown of power on his head  
The Feqirs set out on a journey to reach him.<sup>528</sup>

The *Hymn of the Khirqe*, a hymn so far published only in Kurdish,<sup>529</sup> simply calls the *khirqe* the cloth of God, calling it a cloth of light (*nuranî*) which was brought forth from the treasury of (divine) power:

Before the world existed  
On that day the *khirqe* was already there  
The *khirqe* was the cloth of God itself (or alone)...

*Khirqe* is a cloth of light (*nuranî*)  
It came forth from the treasury of power.<sup>530</sup>

Contemporary Yezidi lore also maintains – probably based on the content of the hymns – that the *khirqe* was the “cloth of God himself,” (“*xirqe libsê Xwedêye.*”)

All this reinforces the idea that there is a strong connection between the Godhead and the *khirqe*. Not only was it directly created (or emanated) by him, before all the other created (or emanated) beings (and even before the emanation of the angels), the *khirqe* was his chosen

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the dark water. This image is reminiscent of the living water – turbid water dichotomy of Manichaean and Mandaean terminology, See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 97, 99. The sacral importance of the White Spring is attested too by statements like: “our direction of prayer is the White Spring.” *Hymn of the Mill of Love*, (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 381.) Interestingly, Mandaeans derive all rivers and waters from a prototype, a white, pure river, the Light-Euphrates. Drower, *Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq*, xxv.

<sup>526</sup> The White Spring.

<sup>527</sup> *Hymn of Faith* 15 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 197.)

<sup>528</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 17-19 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 85-86.)

<sup>529</sup> Published in Bedelê Feqîr Hecî , *The Faith and Mythology of the Yezidis* (Bawerî û Mîtologiya Êzîdîyan), (Dihok: Hawar - Dihok Publishers, 2002). Bedelê is the son of Feqîr Haji.

<sup>530</sup> My translation. *Berî dinya nebû, wê rojê xeqe hebû, Xerqe libsê Xwedê bi – xwe bû... Xerqe libse nuranî, ji xezîna qudretê deranî. Qewlê Xerqey* 1, 9. Bedelê, *Faith and Mythology*, 332-4.

companion as well. Clearly, here companion refers to something that was an “expression,” a part or aspect of the Godhead, identical with his essence, for God’s Love could have hardly worshipped something inferior, or even merely external to Him. This is what the *Prayer of Pilgrimage* seems to imply, when it talks of the *khirqe* as the object of God’s worship. The idea that God wore the *khirqe* as his clothing, presumably also reflects this close connection between *khirqe* and God, where the two exist in inseparable unity.

### *Khirqe and the Angels*

The *khirqe* that was God’s first companion, or rather the expression of his light, power and love, is also associated with his Great Angels, who are no other than the emanations of the divine Light. Some texts even poetically refer to the angels as *khirqes* themselves. To be more exact, the successive emanation of the Angels mentioned in the *Black Book* as lighting many candles from one, and in some *qewls* as four lamps burning with one wick,<sup>531</sup> is also described as a multiplication of the original, divine *khirqe*:

My King calls out loudly:  
 The Pearl had waves, it became the Ocean  
 There was activity and the *number of khirqes became four*<sup>532</sup>  
 For 90,000 years he hid them in the Lamp<sup>533</sup>  
*But now he made manifest the four friends*

*The four wise Companions were made manifest*  
 Born of the Origin: Sheikh Adi and Melik Sheikh Sin  
 Nasirdin and Sejadin  
 They set the world in motion...

Thus spoke the King, the luminous one  
 Fekhr and Sultan Ezi

<sup>531</sup> *Hymn of the Ocean* 14 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 205.)

<sup>532</sup> I.e. four holy beings came into existence. Many *qewls*, when speaking of the creation, either speak only of the “Four Great Mysteries,” or “Four Angels” (e.g. four lamps with (of) one wick; four Friends or Lovers (*yar*), four cornerstones (*erkan*), or four streams from the Ocean of God) or say that first Four came into existence, and finally it was Seven. The number four probably refers to the four elements, earth, water wind and fire, which are often mentioned in texts on the creation of the world. (See Kreyenbroek *Yezidism*, 100.) The exact identity of these Four Great Mysteries is uncertain,) Kreyenbroek thinks they should be identified with four “historical” Yezidi leaders (that is, incarnated angels), the four sons of Ezdina Mîr: Sheykh Shems, Fekhr el-Dîn, Sejadîn and Nasir el-Dîn, but in the hymn quoted above – ever so typically of Yezidi lore – different identities are given.

<sup>533</sup> *Qendil* is a term hard to translate as it has overlapping meanings. Literally it means “lamp”, but in Yezidi texts it refers to light or a “body of light.” Thus, it may refer to the sun (venerated as an expression of the divine light), but more often it refers to the Light (Essence) of God, from which other divine angels also emanated (see *Hymn o the Lights*), or alternately it is used in a way that parallels the usage of the “throne of God” in Judeo-Christian tradition. According to Sheikh Deshti, for example, divine souls (meaning the members of the *Heptad*, periodically incarnated as important historical figures, *khas*) stay in the *Qendil* and periodically descend from there time and again as “prophets.” See *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 41-42. See also Feqir Haji’s account of the “birth” of Angel Sheikh Sin in the Appendix (Interview of Lalish, 2002.)

Put on the Crown and the Robe  
They brought these out of the White Spring  
From then on (holy) men gave them their allegiance and their faith<sup>534</sup>

And

By means of faith they brought the *khirqes* into being  
They laid ninety-nine foundations  
From then on the angels believed.

The angels brought belief into being  
They took the *khirqes* and put them on  
From then on the angels added their own profession of faith.<sup>535</sup>

It was also seen in the previous chapter on the creation of Adam that the *khirqe* was the clothing of Angels as well. As Melek Sheikh Sin insisted on going on wearing his angelic clothing, that is, the *khirqe*, even while he doubled as Adam's soul, the *khirqe* was also Adam's clothing as long as he retained his angelic nature (that is, he retained Melek Sheikh Sin as his soul, represented by the *sur* in his forehead.)

When it comes to the *Khas* (translated as "holy men" in the hymns,)<sup>536</sup> or Angels incarnated as Yezidi leaders on the earth, the *khirqe* primarily seems to represent their legitimacy as leaders. One hymn refers to the *khirqe* as the symbol of the chain of spiritual authority, a sort of Sufi *silsila*, of Yezidi holy men:

What a cornerstone he made!<sup>537</sup>  
It was pristine at the time of the holy men:  
The *khirqe* came to Sheykh Obekr.<sup>538</sup>

What a cornerstone at that time,  
Came to be held dear among the good men:  
The *khirqe* came to Sheykh Shelal.<sup>539</sup>

What a visible cornerstone,  
Took his turn among the good men:  
The *khirqe* came to Sheims the Tartar<sup>540</sup>

My King created a chain of cornerstones.  
He removed his *khirqe* at the *Kaniya Sipî*,<sup>541</sup>  
He baptized it with his own hand.  
He created the descendants of Red Êzid.<sup>542</sup>

<sup>534</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 9-10, 14 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 95-6.)

<sup>535</sup> *The Prayer of Belief* 8-9 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 105.)

<sup>536</sup> On the *khas*, see chapter 4 "Yezidi Religion."

<sup>537</sup> *Erkan*, Arabic broken Pl. of *arkan*, refers to pristine institutions and their incumbents. See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 199, note 14.

<sup>538</sup> I.e., Sheikh Obekr became the leader of the community (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 199, note 16.)

<sup>539</sup> The identity of Shelal is uncertain, unless it stands for Jelal, and refers to Jalāl al-Din Rūmî, the great Sufi saint and founder of the Mawlana dervish order in Konya. *Ibid.*, 199, note 17.)

<sup>540</sup> Shams-e Tabrîzî, friend of Rūmî, who inspired the latter's poetry. He is another Sufi figure revered by Yezidis. See *ibid.* 199, note 18.

<sup>541</sup> The White Spring.

They bring a cornerstone  
 They invest him with the *khirqe* of Sheykh Adi,  
 They send him to the House of the family of Adi.<sup>543</sup>

A similar transmission of spiritual authority symbolized by the putting on of the *khirqe* is expressed by the *Hymn of Black Furqan* already quoted above, where the expression “Sheikh Adi’s holy men” (*khas - khasêt Şixadî*) probably refers to Sheikh Adi’s companions, who were also considered incarnate angels (and became the eponymous ancestors of the sheikhly lineages:)

Sultan Ezi put his hand to the lamp of power  
 He brought out a Pearl  
 Sultan Sheikh Adi placed it in his hand  
 And produced from it the crown, the robe, and the luminous *khirqes*.  
 They were given to Sheikh Adi’s holy men  
 As you know, they put them on.”<sup>544</sup>

Occasionally the garment image is employed to express this chain of spiritual legitimacy without expressive mention of the *khirqe*. Thus, for example, *The Hymn of the Thousand and One names* uses the expression *khelat* (*khil’a*), a word literally meaning gift, but that often referred to a “robe of honor” or “robe of state” given as a ceremonious gift by rulers.<sup>545</sup> In *The Hymn of The Thousand and One Names* the transmission of spiritual power and legitimacy is described as the “Cup” (the “Cup of Love” is often mentioned by Yezidi hymns as a vessel containing the divine essence or mystery)<sup>546</sup> passing from one *khas* to another, and twice investiture with robes accompanies the receiving of the Cup.<sup>547</sup>

### *The khirqe of Sheikh Adi*

The *khirqe* is often called the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi, the most important holy figure of the Yezidis. As has been mentioned in the chapter on Yezidi holy beings, for traditional Yezidis Sheikh Adi is an incarnation of the Peacock Angel and thus homomorphic with God.<sup>548</sup> He has existed since eternity, and, though not a founder of the faith in a “classical” sense,<sup>549</sup> it is clear from the hymns

<sup>542</sup> Êzid, or Sultan Êzi is often referred to as Red.

<sup>543</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 12-16 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 197.)

<sup>544</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan*, 24 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.)

<sup>545</sup> See, for example, D. Sourdel, “Robes of Honor in ‘Abbasid Baghdad During the Eighth to Eleventh Centuries,” in *Robes and Honor*, 137-45; and G. Hambly, “From Baghdad to Bukhara, from Ghazna to Delhi: The *khil’a* Ceremony in the Transmission of Kingly Pomp and Circumstance,” in *Robes and Honour*, 193-222.

<sup>546</sup> The Cup (of wine) is much employed symbol of Sufi poetry. On this, see next chapter.

<sup>547</sup> *The Hymn of Thousand and One Names* 9-15, 19, 21 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 76-77.)

<sup>548</sup> Thus, Sheikh Adi’s *khirqe* is identified with that of Sultan Ezid, the name *qewls* often use to refer to God: “The status of Sultan Sheikh Adi’s *khirqe* is indeed high, It is the garment of my Sultan Ezid the red.” *Hymn of the Mill of Love* 14 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 382.)

<sup>549</sup> Yezidis see their religion ultimately originating in the time of Adam, as shall be dealt with in the chapter 9 “The Origin Myth of Yezidis.”

and other traditions that the religious beliefs of the Yezidis centered around his person, and his teachings are seen as the foundation of Yezidi faith. When the hymns talk of the *khirqe* as the *khirqe* of Sheik Adi,<sup>550</sup> or belonging to his house,<sup>551</sup> the *khirqe* becomes the symbol of Yezidi faith as the path of righteousness leading to God, and of its divine origin:

We have accepted the authority of the angels  
Whoever believes in the religion and the foundations of the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi  
(Belongs to) the House of Adi, to our Order, for ever and ever.

Don't say: What is the House of Adi?  
Oh naive young man  
You know nothing of the meaning of the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi  
Why do you say: (It takes) a little zerguz<sup>552</sup> and a bit of wool?

Oh naive young man  
You don't know what the meaning of Sheikh Adi's *khirqe* is  
They say: The meaning of Sheikh Adi's *khirqe* is a handful of zerguz and a bit of wool.

Oh young man, young man  
The *khirqe* is made of wool, it is baptised with the zerguz  
The status of the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi is way up above  
The *khirqe* is the garment of my Ezi(d) the Red.

This is a strong foundation  
It appeared among the Saints  
It is the foundation of my Sheikh, Adi<sup>553</sup> ...

Bring the *khirqe*  
Put the foundations on it  
Send it to the Feqirs  
So that the Feqirs will lift it up over their heads.<sup>554</sup>

The Feqirs have lifted up the *khirqe*  
It is a profession of faith in the House of Adi<sup>555</sup>

*Khirqe* represents the true faith:

Let the House of the family of Adi be witnesses,  
The Kaniya Sipî was brought forth  
*Khirqe* is the faith.<sup>556</sup>

<sup>550</sup> On the Luminous nature of Sheikh Adi's *khirqe*, see previous chapter.

<sup>551</sup> E.g. *Hymn of the Mill of Love* 11-12, *Hymn of Faith* 10 (in *Yezidism*) The *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 24-26 even talks of Sheikh Adi as the one who fashioned the *khirqe*;

<sup>552</sup> A special plant used to dye the *khirqe* black.

<sup>553</sup> The text follows with an enumeration of "historical" Yezidi leaders, that is incarnate Angels, such as Melik Sheikh Sin, Sheikh Obekr, Sheikh Shems, Melik Fekhredin etc. for all of whom the *khirqe* served as a foundation. See *khirqe* as a symbol of the chain of spiritual authority above.

<sup>554</sup> I.e., "will put it on." (Kreyenbroek, note 142, *Sheikh Adi*, 88.)

<sup>555</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 24-35 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 87-88.)

<sup>556</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 17 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 197.) Kreyenbroek translates the Kurdish text, *xerqe îmane*, as "It is the *khirqe* of the faith," but I think that the literal translation would be "*khirqe* is the faith." The reason for Kreyenbroek's translation is to render clearer the intended meaning of the verse, that is "this miracle [the birth of the White Spring] was the visible manifestation or attribute of the faith" (Kreyenbroek, note 24, 200.) just as *khirqe* is

And all those who accept the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi, that is, his teachings, and be faithful Yezidis “shall have a share of the protecting hem of the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi.”<sup>557</sup>

*Khirqe – the clothing of gnosis*

As was seen in the *Hymn of the Faith*, quoted above, the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi, as a symbol of religion, offers protection to all his followers. This thought takes us to the next layer of the complex symbol system surrounding the *khirqe*: the role it plays in religion, as a vehicle of religious enlightenment or “gnosis,” ultimately sent by God through his intermediaries (the incarnate Angels.) This is perhaps the most relevant aspect of the Yezidi *khirqe*, as regards our search for symbols and metaphors which presumably date to the religious language of Late Antiquity. The *khirqe* is the symbol of Yezidi faith and its divine origin:

This is the nation that reveres the *khirqe*.  
It has instituted the proper use of the *khirqe*, and has put it on.  
Sultan Êzîd has power over so many religious schools, so many faiths, so many sects.<sup>558</sup>

Sultan Ezi is my Pir of the *khirqe*  
It has a profound meaning  
It is my belief and that of the Mirids

Sultan Ezi is my Pir of the *khirqe*  
That is my creed and that of all believers  
He is the light of both my eyes.<sup>559</sup>

*Khirqe*, just like the *qewls* or hymns, constitutes a part of the divine revelation of God among Yezidis. In the words of one of my sources, Arab Khidir of Behzani, “just as the Christians say New Testament, and Jews say Old Testament (*Ehdit*, Promise, Alliance,) our hymns are like an Alliance of God, God sent us down the hymns (*qewl*) and the *khirqe* instead of Books.”<sup>560</sup> Therefore, *khirqe* is the sign that Yezidi religion is one that was revealed by God, from heaven, through a chain of revelations, with the ultimate aim of showing the Yezidi community the right road to take. It is the means of distributing divine wisdom:

Thus speaks my King, the Lord of Foundations:

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generally understood to be.

<sup>557</sup> *Hymn of Faith* 21, *ibid*.

<sup>558</sup> *The Hymn of Sheykh Erebeg Entûsh* 25 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 279.)

<sup>559</sup> *The Hymn of the Black Furqan* 22-23 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.)

<sup>560</sup> In other words Yezidi religion is a revealed one, or “semavi,” an Arabic expression used for those religions, which have divinely revealed books, which “came down” from heaven, an important distinction in Islam. Of course, it must be mentioned that my source was clearly influenced by the need of expressing Yezidi concepts in terms understandable to (or even modelled on) written religions.

Indeed, Fekhr, I shall reveal to the earth  
The *Qewls* and the *Khirqes*  
So that the House of Tradition may  
Adhere to it, rejoice and believe in it...

The King says: Fekhr, from the sheep and  
the zerguz I shall fashion the *khirqe*  
The Feqirs shall wear it  
The House of the Tradition will believe in it and adhere to it.

He fashioned the *Qewls* and *khirqes*  
And revealed them on the earth  
He entrusted them to Melik Fekhredin  
Melik Fekhredin entrusted them to the holy men of Sheikh Adi<sup>561</sup>  
The holy men of Sheikh Adi adhered to them and had faith in them.

My King fashioned the zerguz  
He revealed it on the earth  
He entrusted it to Melik Fekhredin  
Melik Fekhredin entrusted it to the holy men of Sheikh Adi.

The Holy Men of Sheikh Adi entrusted it to the Feqirs  
The Feqirs dyed their *khirqes* black with it  
The Yezidi community had come to adhere to it and believe in it.

In this way my King distributed his wisdom:  
Among the holy men and the individual souls...

May you be a little mindful of the *khirqe*  
Let the quality of the *khirqe* be such (as it is now)  
And let nothing (bad) come (to it) from me  
And may all four paths come to you as supplicants.<sup>562</sup>

The *khirqe*, along with the crown, then becomes a source of the mystical enlightenment, we could say, of Gnostic knowledge. It is called *sur*,<sup>563</sup> a word which in other contexts designates the mysterious, divine essence of the angelic beings. The light emanating from it – a metaphor for religious enlightenment and instruction - uncovers mystical truth, and shows the way toward the true path of God to Sheikh Adi's holy men (his companions, the *khas*) who have declared their faith in God:

Sultan Ezi put his hand to the lamp of power  
He brought out a Pearl  
Sultan Sheikh Adi placed it in his hand,  
And produced from it the crown, the robe, and the luminous *khirqes*.  
They were given to Sheikh Adi's holy men

<sup>561</sup> Sheikh Adi's companions, the incarnate angels, *khas*.

<sup>562</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 37-46 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 100-02.)

<sup>563</sup> "They put on that Mystery, that *khirqe*" (*Diber xo dikirin ew sure, ew xerqeye*). *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 25 (ibid.)

As you know, they put them on.

They put on that Mystery [*sur*], that *khirqe*  
They declared their faith in Sultan Ezi  
By their light things were revealed before dawn.<sup>564</sup>

Before dawn things were revealed by their light.  
Earth and heaven shuddered  
The (holy) men sat down in unity  
Together they discussed the true path of Sheikh Adi and Melik Sheikh Sin.<sup>565</sup>

This idea of seeing the *khirqe* as a symbol of divine gnosis is expressed in a different way by the *Hymn of the Faith*. Here the *khirqes* are the signs of God left on earth as the “well being” distributed by the angels:

It is morning, the day has five watches,  
The holy men and angels distributed *well-being* [*silev*],  
The symbols of Sultan Ezid were the *khirqes*, they stayed on earth.

It is morning, five (times) a day they brought down (well being),  
The holy men and angels took away well being,  
The symbols of Sultan Ezid were the *khirqes*, these they left on earth.<sup>566</sup>

The word used here “*silev*,” Kurdish for *selam* may also mean “salvation, deliverance.” The text is rather obscure, possibly corrupt, but seems to imply the loss of an earlier, original state, when the world still possessed true religion, gnosis or “spiritual well being,” which was later lost. However, the symbol of God, the *khirqe* that was left on earth indicates that the promise of salvation (*silev*) is still held out to all those willing to put on the *khirqe*, that is, to embrace the true faith.

Another hymn says that the *khirqe* will accrue to all those “who renounce the desolate, transitory evil,”<sup>567</sup> that is, to the *feqirs*, the Yezidi holy men, who reject the riches and illusions of the material world, and who bring religious teaching to their followers (common Yezidis). Presumably here *feqir* (literally: poor one) should be understood in the original, Sufi sense of the word, connoting any man who spurned the material world and chose to follow a spiritual path:

My dear, I have needed this world for a long time;  
As much gold and riches as I can think of,  
I shall give all of it for the sake of the visible *khirqe*.

My dear, I have been listening for this world for a long time.  
As much gold and riches as I can think of,  
I shall relinquish all of it for the sake of the visible *khirqe*.

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<sup>564</sup> The Kurdish text does not state explicitly what it was that was uncovered by the light from the *khirqe*, but one may assume that it refers to the true nature of things.

<sup>565</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 24-26 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.)

<sup>566</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 22-23 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 199.)

<sup>567</sup> *Hymn of Sheykh Obekr* 9 (ibid., 209.)

The feqirs followed it.  
Thus, he who has renounced the desolate, transitory evil,  
on him they will bestow the keys.<sup>568</sup>

Those keys,  
they will bring to the hands of those commoners.<sup>569</sup>  
All five obligatory acts<sup>570</sup> of Truth will bear witness for them on the Last Day.<sup>571</sup>

It would be a *khirqe* representing religious truth that the *feqirs*, who renounce the desultory pleasures of this world, will follow in order to become worthy of the keys, the latter being clearly a reference to spiritual understanding. Then they will pass on this understanding, teaching to their fellow Yezidis, the “commoners,” or soldiers, how to follow the true path of the *khirqe*.

Similar sentiments are expressed by the *Hymn of the Faith*, on the connection between God, his *khirqe* and black crown, and the *feqirs* - that is, those who are seeking to reach religious enlightenment

The idea that the *khirqe* and the crown are the clothing of the Godhead is reiterated here. *Feqirs*, in other words, those who have succeeded in conquering the “ego-soul,”<sup>572</sup> that is, their “lower self” or physical nature, set out on a spiritual journey toward this God wearing the *khirqe*. Whoever manages to complete this journey will be protected by the very same *khirqe* worn by God – represented here by Sheikh Adi, who is the source of the ultimate religious truth, as a being homomorphous with God:

My Sultan Ezi(d) put on the *khirqe*  
He placed a luminous black crown of power on his head  
The Feqirs set out on a journey to reach him.

The Feqirs set out to reach him  
Whoever makes his ego-soul a prisoner<sup>573</sup>  
Will doubtless come before the sight of the Prince.

They descend from that place  
The Four Friends<sup>574</sup> stand before it  
We shall have a share of the protecting hem of the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi.<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Probably the keys of religious enlightenment, gnosis or salvation.

<sup>569</sup> Commoners (*cindi*) may also be translated as soldiers, it is used to refer to the followers of the Yezidi Faith in general; it is usually used in a context that implies fighting for the faith. (See next chapter.)

<sup>570</sup> The five obligatory acts (*pênc ferzêd*) refer not to the “five pillars” (*ferz*) of Islam (confession of faith, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and alms) but to the five obligatory religious relationships each Yezidi must enter (that is each Yezidi must have – or must have had – a sheikh, pîr, mirebbi, hosta and brother/sister of the hereafter.)

<sup>571</sup> *Hymn of Sheyk Obekr* 7-10 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 209.)

<sup>572</sup> *Nefes* of the Kurdish text is the Kurdish variant of Arabic *nafs*, meaning self or soul. In Sufism *nafs* is often described as the “carnal soul” or “lower self,” associated with physical rather than spiritual impulses, by contrast to *ruh*, or “soul,” “higher self” and it has to be conquered by the true mystic.

<sup>573</sup> “whoever dominates his lower nature,” (Kreyenbroek, Note 138, *Sheikh Adi*, 86.)

<sup>574</sup> The Four Angels, who are often mentioned as the Four Friends or Lovers (on the Four, see above.)

<sup>575</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 19-21 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 86.)

## *The Khirqe and Yezidi Eschatology*

Finally, the promise of the *khirqe*, as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment and protection, is held out to Yezidis not only in the here and now, but on an eschatological plane as well. This is best expressed in the eschatological *Hymn of Sherfedin*. Sheikh Sherfedin, one of the early leaders of Yezidis (d. 1257-8 CE), is identified by Yezidis with the Mahdi, a sort of Messianic figure who will usher in an era of justice and true belief, and restore righteousness just before the Day of Resurrection, when the evil will be punished and the righteous rewarded.<sup>576</sup> The arrival of the Mahdi (or Sherfedin) will signify the great, final battle between the followers of God (the *feqirs* and the Yezidis in general) and their enemies, ending with the victory of the former.<sup>577</sup> Those fighting on the side of the Mahdi will then be invested with the *khirqe*:

When the Mehdi arises  
Neither lords nor judges will remain  
On that day the community of the Tradition<sup>578</sup> will be comfortable.

The Tradition will be comfortable  
To whom Melik Sherfedin shows his mercy and benevolence  
He will *invest us with spiritual clothes*.

We have been invested with *spiritual clothes*  
When Melik Sherfedin appears on the face of the earth  
Then (Yezidi) commoners will be happy about it.<sup>579</sup>

Though the text does not literally use the word *khirqe*, instead employs “spiritual clothing,”<sup>580</sup> it clearly demonstrates that being invested with spiritual clothing, an important motif of Late Antique Jewish and Christian eschatology, and Gnostic speculations on the return on the final upward journey of the soul, to be discussed later, was part of Yezidi eschatological language. The verses following almost immediately and still referring to the victorious army of the pious and faithful, do in fact make mention of the *khirqe* when speaking of the virtuous being decked out in splendid clothes, as brides for their wedding:

The riders of the valley are prepared

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<sup>576</sup> The concept of Mahdi is an Islamic inheritance in Yezidi religion. The Mahdi is not mentioned in the Quran, but he is an important figure of Muslim eschatology, especially in Sufi and Shia tradition.

<sup>577</sup> On the fight between the Mahdi and the Tercal (Dajjal in Islamic tradition), a sort of Islamic “anti-Christ” or “false-Messiah,” an evil figure who will try to lead people astray at the End of Time, and on the destruction wrought by the army of the Tercal and by Hajuj (Gog and Magog), see the *Hymn of the False Saviour* (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 364-8.) See also Lescot, *Les Yezidis*, 65-6.

<sup>578</sup> Literally *Sûnetxane*. This is an Islamic expression, but one that is often applied to refer to Yezidi community, yet another indication of the Sufi background of Yezidism. (See Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 62, Note 3.)

<sup>579</sup> *The Hymn of Sherfedin* 2-4 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 368-9.)

<sup>580</sup> *Sûliyêt batinê*. *Batin* literally means “hidden, inner, secret.” In Sufi (as well as Shia thought) it is used to denote the esoteric, hidden, inner aspect of the Quran. In a wider sense, used by Yezidis as well as the Ahl-i Haqq, it came to refer the hidden truth, the spiritual as opposed to the material world (*zahiri*).

Let them come and open the boxes for you<sup>581</sup>  
So as to adorn you like brides.

Let them come and adorn you like brides  
Let them bring out the red and yellow boxes for you  
Let them cause (people) to accept for themselves the true path of Sheikh Adi and Melik  
Sheikh Sin.

Here are the green and red boxes  
In them there are elegant black *khirqes*, consecrated with holy water<sup>582</sup>  
The Feqirs will abolish laments and injustice from this world.

The Feqirs will abolish lamentations from this world  
They will don the elegant, ..., black *khirqes*  
They will take truth and their rightful share to that place.<sup>583</sup>

Similar ideas appear to be expressed by two verses of the *Hymn of the Faith*:

At those times when they will fall out  
At those times when they will fight each other,  
At those times when (even) holy men will have doubts.

At those times when (even) holy men have doubts,  
Whoever seeks the house of the family of Adi, (seeking to touch) the hem of their  
*khirqe*,  
Sultan Êzîd will fulfill his wishes (when he is) with him.<sup>584</sup>

The hymn makes references to a time to come, when people will fall out and fight each other, when all men (or, depending on the translation, even holy men)<sup>585</sup> will be shaken and tried in their faith. It is reasonable to conclude that the hymn implies the time when the Mahdi and the Tercal will come, and the final battle be fought before Judgment Day. This conclusion is reinforced by the comparison with another version of the *Hymn of the Faith*.<sup>586</sup> There are significant differences between the two versions, but their main themes are by and large similar, including verses on the origin of the *khirqe* and its passing from *khas* to *khas*. This second version of the *Hymn of the Faith* makes very clear references to the eschatological battle led by Sherfedin, the Mahdi:

Let me offer praise to beloved Sherfedin  
When will the good tidings come to us  
(That) he will leave his occultation in the tent with the golden sides.<sup>587</sup>

<sup>581</sup> Kreyenbroek comments: “The reference is clearly to the Resurrection, when the virtuous will be decked out in splendid clothes. According to this description the army of the good men—i.e. those who are eminently righteous, possibly Feqirs—will bring forth the festive clothes.” (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 368, Note 31.)

<sup>582</sup> The *khirqe* of the *feqirs* must be first baptized in the White Spring. Cf. God baptizing his *khirqe* in the White Spring at the time of the creation above.

<sup>583</sup> *The Hymn of Sherfedin* 6-9 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 369-70.)

<sup>584</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 9-10 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 195-7.)

<sup>585</sup> The Kurdish original writes *mêra*, literally the oblique form of “men”, but according to Kreyenbroek the word often denotes saints or holy men, and the following verses imply this is the sense in which “men” is applied here. (See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 199, note 10.)

<sup>586</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 83-89.

<sup>587</sup> Sherfedin is said to be in occultation until the eschatological battle, hiding either in a cave or in a golden tent.

He will leave his occultation in the tent with the golden sides  
This world will wage war on him<sup>588</sup>  
Even the House of Tradition<sup>589</sup> itself will have doubts.

The House of Tradition itself will have doubts  
Anyone who is a servant of the Creator  
Will seek the protection of Sultan Sheikh Adi.<sup>590</sup>

There can be no doubt that the hymn here describes an eschatological scene, and what is more important, describes it in terms very similar to the ones in the first version of the *Hymn of the Faith*: it mentions a war to come, a time when even the Yezidi community will have doubts, and people will seek the protection of Sheikh Adi. The literal translation of this latter phrase in the second version of the hymn would be: “will seek the skirt or hem (*daman*) of Sheikh Adi”<sup>591</sup> (that is of Sheikh Adi’s robe.) *Daman* is the word applied by the first version of the hymn to talk about the “hem of the *khirqe*.”<sup>592</sup>

The message, especially after the comparison of the two texts is clear: At that time of fear and hope, when the world comes to an end, and the final battle between evil and good takes place, Sheikh Adi’s *khirqe* will serve to protect all those who have faithfully followed the road of true religion and fought against evil. In other words they will have a share of the *khirqe*, or as earlier hymns already stated they will be invested with the *khirqe*, the garment of spiritual enlightenment brought down on earth by the incarnated divine angels as a source, sign and reward of religion.

### *The Khirqe in Contemporary Yezidi religious lore*

As has already been mentioned several times, *khirqe* is the technical term for the black woolen shirt worn by Yezidi *feqirs*, denoting the sanctity of its wearer. No one can lift his hand against the wearer of a *khirqe* without the danger of instant excommunication, however great the provocation be. However, *feqirs* may not abuse their position, for it is possible to loose the *khirqe* through behavior that does not meet the high moral standards demanded from *feqirs*, or if a *feqir* does not lead a sufficiently pious life. “If a man is Yezidi, and puts the *khirqe* on himself, he has to walk the road of true faith (*iman*), of the faith that was sent down by God for us. He sent this faith through his hymns.”<sup>593</sup> Small wonder that only few people coming from a lineage of *feqirs* actually don the *khirqe*. Most do not seem to find in themselves the requisite amount of piousness and religious

<sup>588</sup> The Mahdi will meet great hostility and unbelief when he comes.

<sup>589</sup> I.e., the Yezidi community.

<sup>590</sup> *Hymn of the Faith*, 11-3 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 84-85.)

<sup>591</sup> *Wê qesta damana Siltan Şixadî bike.*

<sup>592</sup> *Herça questa mala Adiya damina xerqe bike.*

<sup>593</sup> *Mirovî ezdi bit, xirqe ber xwe (bi)ket, lazim pê wê imanê (bi)çit, imana Xwedê bo me nazil kir. Ev imane nazil kir bi qewla.*

ardor to take this road, despite having a birthright to do so.

Among those interested in religion, the *khirqe* is of course imbued with more meanings than merely being the shirt of the ascetics. The meaning of the *khirqe* is interpreted by Arab Khidir of Beshiqe on the basis of the hymns and his understanding of Yezidi religion in the following way:<sup>594</sup>

“*Khirqe* is the cloth of God; it is the form/appearance of God.”<sup>595</sup>

“*Khirqe* is a material clothing, but its meaning is manifold. It means true faith on the road of God, according to the law of God. If a man has *khirqe*, then he has to have faith in God that he is One, that he has no partner.”<sup>596</sup>

“*Khirqe* is the sign of true faith, and the sign of the Oneness of God.”<sup>597</sup>

“Our hymns are the command of God: hymns and the *khirqe* came down in the place of books.”<sup>598</sup>

“Just as the Christians say New Testament, and Jews say Old Testament (*Ehdit*, Promise, Alliance,) our hymns are like an Alliance of God, God sent us down the hymns (*qewl*) and the *khirqe* instead of Books.”<sup>599</sup>

Undoubtedly, these statements on the meaning of the *khirqe* reflect the influence of modern attempts to create a religious system that conforms to the expectations of literary religions. Emphasizing - of all possible things - the oneness of God as symbolized by the *khirqe*, or how *khirqe* and hymns should be considered as equal to the revealed books of other religions, is

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<sup>594</sup> It would be tempting to generalize and say that Yezidis today interpret *khirqe* in this way. However, due to the peculiarities of Yezidi faith, especially today, such a general statement cannot be made in good faith. In my experience most Yezidis, at least in the Sheikhan district of Iraq, where I carried out most of my research, are so little interested in abstract questions of their faith that most of them would not (or could not) venture any kind of opinion on the *khirqe* other than that it is the clothing of *feqirs*. In the case of Yezidis interested in their own tradition, one must progress cautiously as many of them acquired their knowledge of Yezidi faith in an “unorthodox” way, that is through reading, and what they read, both on Yezidism and on other religious and philosophical concepts, influences their views and makes them to strive at formulating their ideas on Yezidism in ways that would be nearer to “Western” or “modern” thinking. This is also true of Arab Khidir. See chapter “Religious Oral Tradition and Literacy” and E. Spät, “Religious Oral Tradition and Literacy among the Yezidis of Iraq,” *Anthropos* 103.2 (2008): 393-404.

<sup>595</sup> *Xirqe libse Xwedê ye, Xirqe surretê Xwedê ye*

<sup>596</sup> *Xirqe maddi lebaze. Mana wê gelek e. Mana wê iman pê rêya Xwedê, bi destura Xwedê. Xirqe hebit, imana wî lazim e bi Xwedê hebit, anahu ek e, Xwede bêşerik e.* The concept of God having no “partner” (*shirk*) is obviously of Islamic origin, where this doctrine disputes with the (probably misunderstood) teaching of the Christian Trinity. As a matter of fact, a statement that the Yezidi God has no partner companion, may not be the best description of Yezidi teachings on God, if we think of the Angels, who are clearly his hypostases, or of the *khirqe* described as God’s companion above. Such a stress on the Oneness of God should clearly be attributed to the requirements of modernization and emerging literacy as described in the chapter on the changes of Yezidi oral religion. The concept of the Oneness of God is extremely “popular” among the “reformers,” who would like to stress that Yezidism is a monotheist religion, or perhaps the first monotheist religion.

<sup>597</sup> *Xirqe nişana imanê ye, nişana yeketiya Xwedê ye*

<sup>598</sup> *qewlê me erd (irada, soz) Xwedê ne, qewl u xirqe hate xware, ji bedela kitaba*

<sup>599</sup> *çawa falat bêjît Ehdi cadid, cih bêjin Ehdi qadim, Qewlên me jî ehdêt Xwedê ye... Wextê Xwedê khirqe û qewl nazil kirin ... ji bedelê kitaba* The notion that hymns and the *khirqe* have the same role in the religion of the Yezidis as the revealed Books of other religions is based on the content of the sacred hymns. As we have seen above, the *Hymn of the Black Furqan* states that God revealed “The *Qewls* and the *khirqes*, So that the House of Tradition may adhere to it, rejoice and believe in it.” However, putting such an emphasis on the *khirqe* and hymns as adequate substitutes for revealed books, probably reflects, yet again, modern Yezidis’ wish to appear as an equal of the “Religions of the Book,” a very important notion in Islamic culture.

probably a new phenomenon, in harmony with the wish to bring Yezidism “on par” with written religions. However, it is still clear behind the modern terminology that *khirqe* is traditionally understood to stand for a lot more than the mere physical clothing of *feqirs*. It is seen as the potent symbol of a divine message. The way the interpretation of this message is framed may be somewhat novel, but the idea that the *khirqe* is its vehicle presumably is not.

This theory is proven by some very interesting references to the *khirqe* among modern Yezidis. One of this occurred during a conversation on *kocheks*, or Yezidi “seers.” *Kocheks* are believed to be able to see events taking place far away in space or time, to tell the cause of mysterious ailments, to talk tongues, and most importantly to be cognizant of the fate of a soul after death.<sup>600</sup> They are able to achieve these marvels through divine inspiration, that is, with the help of their *delil* (divine guide) or *xudan* (owners) who inspire them or even speak through their mouth.<sup>601</sup> The miraculous deeds and true predictions performed by some of the more famous *kocheks* make topics of conversation, and such *kocheks* are referred to as people “who have *khirqe*.” I was explained that “having *khirqe*” in this case does not refer to the physical possession of the sacred garment – as it is strictly only the *feqirs* who are entitled to wear the black woolen shirt. The expression should not be taken in the physical sense, rather it is used to refer to someone who is both good and pure, and possesses some sort of *keramet* (divine grace, miraculous power originating from God) – in this case manifested through the presence of the divine guide, who clearly would never choose to communicate with someone worthless.

Yet another indication of the importance of the *khirqe* in Yezidi religion is that the Yezidis are said to take oaths by the *khirqe*. Taking a solemn oath on the *khirqe* precludes the possibility of any lie or perfidy.

### **The Sufi *Khirkka* and the Yezidi *Khirqe***

The influence of Sufism on Yezidi religion is beyond any doubt. After all, Yezidism, in its current form, would hardly exist if there had not been the *tariqat al-Adawiyya*, that is, the mystical Sufi dervish order founded by Sheikh Adi. The same Sufi influence is clearly detectable in this exciting article of clothing of faith – the *khirqe*. Not only its physical manifestation – as the actual woolen shirt of the *feqirs*, or religious ascetics - can clearly be traced back to the clothing of the Sufi

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<sup>600</sup> Yezidis believe in the transmigration of the soul, and *kocheks* may be able to tell about the former lives of a soul, or occasionally predict where the soul of a deceased will migrate next. (For example, I was told by a *kochek* that in a former life I used to live in Lalish, hence my interest in Yezidis.)

<sup>601</sup> On one occasion I was able to witness a *kochek* “speaking tongues” while in trance. It is believed that it was his *delil* who was speaking through his mouth. While I was not quite convinced as to the authenticity of the trance, it is certain that this is one of the ways traditional Yezidis in general envisage a supernatural being communicating through a *kochek*.

mystics, but the same holds true for many of its symbolic aspects.

The Yezidi *khirqe*, just like its Sufi counterpart, is a clothing of true faith, representing piety and implying detachment from worldly interests in favour of seeking the path leading to God. This meaning is easily discernible in the hymns, which speak of the *feqirs* as believers ready to follow the true religion and spurn the world and give up its riches and gold and all transitory evils (*Hymn of Sheikh Obekr*), and conquer their “ego souls” (*nafs*), or carnal nature (*Hymn of the Faith*), all attributes of the true Sufi.<sup>602</sup>

For Sufis the *khirka* could also represent the spiritual connection between master and disciple, and eventually symbolized the whole *silsila*, the chain of transmission, leading back to the ultimate source of religious knowledge, the Prophet. This idea is reflected in hymns on the *khirqe* passing from one *khas* (angel incarnated as Yezidi leader) to another (*Hymn of the Faith*, *Hymn of the Thousand and One Name*, *Hymn of the Black Furqan*.) *Khirqe* is here seen as a vehicle, or perhaps symbol, of transmitting spiritual authority, legitimizing the *khas* as the head of the community and source of valid religious teaching, eventually constituting the same kind of *silsila* as that of Sufi orders. (Seeing these leaders, the inheritors of the *khirqe*, as incarnate angels is, of course, a Yezidi development or “characteristic,” as no orthodox Islamic Sufism would have countenanced the idea of incarnate angels leading a community.)

The importance attributed to Sheikh Adi’s *khirqe* also fits the language of the Sufi *khirka*. Just as the *khirka* received from the head of a Sufi order symbolizes that the dervish has devoted himself to following that order (or as they said rather literally, the “path” or *tariqat*), so the adherence of Yezidis in general (and of Yezidi *feqirs* in particular) to Yezidi faith/path is represented by the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi, the founder of the dervish order that probably provided the organizational background, which made the emergence of this “Kurdish religion” possible. No wonder that Sheikh Adi’s *khirqe* was (and is) actually venerated in its physical form in Lalish.<sup>603</sup>

We have accepted the authority of the angels  
Whoever believes in the religion and the  
Foundations of the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi  
(Belongs to) the House of Adi, to our  
Order, for ever and ever.<sup>604</sup>

Finally, concerning the idea that the *khirqe* came from the supernatural plane, one can perhaps perceive some distant parallels with the speculation concerning the *khirka* of al-Khidr. Al-Khidr, the mysterious figure of Quran 18.64-81, who shows a wisdom superior to prophetic law,

<sup>602</sup> For example, according to a thirteenth-century Sufi work discussing the *khirqe*, “the basic Sufi cloak is either black or dark blue, signifying that the wearer has conquered and slain his carnal soul (*nafs*), and is wearing black so as to mourn it symbolically.” Elias, “The Sufi Robe,” 281.

<sup>603</sup> Much like the *Khirka-yi Sherif*, the mantle of Muhammad kept in the Topkapi Palace since Ottoman times.

<sup>604</sup> *Hymn of the Faith* 24 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 86.)

was widely respected throughout the Islamic world as an immortal mystical guide.<sup>605</sup> Investiture with the *khirqe* by al-Khidr (*khirka khidriyya*) was used in a metaphorical sense for saying someone had received spiritual direction directly from Khidr himself, that is not from an earthly source, a living teacher, but through direct intervention from the spiritual world.<sup>606</sup> In this respect it is obvious that *khirka* was not always understood as an actual physical object, received through a physical investiture, but as a symbol of divine revelation of a mystical nature – an idea that may be compared to the way Yezidi hymns speak about *khirqe*, and receiving the *khirqe* as being tantamount to attaining true religion, or when Yezidis today refer to *kocheks*, generally believed to be guided by some supernatural entity, as possessing *khirqe* in a metaphorical sense. However, as regards seeing the Yezidi *khirqe* as the complementary part of the same revelations as the *qewls*, or hymns, we can find no such comparison between the Quran (or sacred, revealed texts) and the *khirka* in Islamic/Sufi tradition. Furthermore, while for the Yezidis Khidr - or rather Khidr Ilyas - is an important angelic figure with his own holiday, his figure is not mentioned in connection with the *khirqe* in the hymns or in “popular” tradition. This makes it unlikely that the Yezidi *khirqe* reflects traditions connected with the *khirka khidriyya*.

These similarities notwithstanding, there are some aspects of the Yezidi *khirqe* which would be hard to trace to the traditional Sufi *khirka*, rich as this Sufi tradition is:

- Unlike the Yezidi *khirqe*, the Sufi *khirka* is not a garment of God, nor was it created by God at the beginning of time, nor is it an object of God’s love or pilgrimage.
- There are no references to the baptism of the Sufi *khirqe*, either by God or any other holy being.
- The coarse, woolen shirt of the Sufis is not referred to as “luminous” (*nuranî*), nor is it in any way connected with light, unlike the black Yezidi *khirqe*, that is called “luminous” both when spoken of as God’s garment or as Sheikh Adi’s robe. As for the latter, Yezidi oral tradition maintains light was coming from Sheikh Adi’s *khirqe* when he wore it.
- The Sufi *khirka* is not a garment of angels, even less likely would it be identified with the angels themselves.
- The Sufi *khirka* was not the clothing covering Adam in Paradise, before his Fall (symbolizing his angelic status.)<sup>607</sup>
- There is no crown accompanying the Sufi *khirka* unlike in Yezidi texts.
- The Sufi *khirka* did not function as a “connecting link” between the spiritual (*batini*, hidden,

<sup>605</sup> In some sources he was also referred to as “Tutor of the Prophets,” for, with the sole exception of Muhammad, all prophets were taught by him.

<sup>606</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 105-6. For example, Ibn Arabi, claimed to have received one of his *khirqes* from al-Khidr.

<sup>607</sup> As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, even the sources that see Adam’s clothes as a prototype of the *khirka*, are talking about clothes Adam worn *after* his expulsion from Paradise.

esoteric) and material (exoteric, *zahiri*) world. It is not a source or form of divine revelation on par with the Sacred Texts (Quran) unlike the Yezidi *khirqe*.<sup>608</sup> Nor is the Sufi *khirka* the source of spiritual well-being (*silev*).<sup>609</sup> The *khirka* may be seen as a symbol of having attained gnosis (or, to be more exact, a certain stage of spiritual perfection and knowledge of God), but it was not seen or described as something conferring gnosis (unlike the description of Yezidi *khirqes*).<sup>610</sup> Furthermore there were a variety of *khirkas*, which were awarded to the Sufi in chronological order, that is, they functioned as a sort of “badge of progress,” as outward signs of the individual’s degree of spiritual advancement on the Sufi path, clearly reflecting a kind of hierarchy – hardly compatible with the idea of the *khirqe* conferring gnosis on the believer (or being identical *per se* with divine gnosis or enlightenment).<sup>611</sup>

- Finally, the *khirka* of the Sufis was not utilized in Sufi literature as an eschatological symbol, something to be awarded to those who fight for the true faith, either now or at the last battle preceding the Day of Judgment, as their reward – and symbol of their well-earned salvation.
- At last, perhaps not so much a technical, but rather a literary point, the Sufi *khirka*, unlike the Yezidi one, was not a frequent subject of religious poetry.

## Late Antique Garment Theologies

How can we explain those aspects of the Yezidi *khirqe* that are incongruent with the Sufi tradition concerning the Sufi robe, the *khirka*? Should we see them as independent Yezidi developments, sort of “wild shots,” or can they be fitted into a more complex, far-reaching pattern? As has already been said above, I believe that those aspects of the Yezidi *khirqe* that do not fit the traditions connected with its Sufi prototype (the *khirka*) are rooted in the religious-mythic imagery of Late Antiquity. For it was in Late Antiquity that a most complex “theology of garment” was developed around the theme of the clothing of light (that is, the garment and crown lost by Adam). In a symbolism that grew extraordinarily rich, this garment of Light came to refer not only to the Fall of Adam, and the loss of his original angelic state, but also to the fate and eschatological future of the individual soul, to the saving grace of religion and baptism, and in some systems even to the complex relation between the human soul and the divine, and the Gnosis connecting the two. It was

<sup>608</sup> “I shall reveal to the earth, The *Qewls* and the *Khirqes*, So that the House of Tradition may adhere to it, rejoice and believe in it.” *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 37 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 100.)

<sup>609</sup> “The holy men and angels distributed well-being, The symbols of Sultan Ezid were the *khirqes*, they stayed on earth.” *Hymn of the Faith* 23 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 199.)

<sup>610</sup> “By their light things were revealed before dawn.” *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 25 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 98.)

<sup>611</sup> Though some tradition viewed the *khirka* as imbued with the master’s spiritual qualities, which could have a transformative impact on the disciple, this is merely to be understood as a help in the struggle toward attaining a higher degree of spiritual advancement, but did not confer gnosis on the disciple.

an innovative fusion of two traditions, that is, Sufi and Late Antique concepts regarding holy garments (*khirka* and the “robe of Glory” or “garment of Light”), that eventually gave birth to the Yezidi *khirqe* with its many-layered, elusive meaning.

## Judaism

### *Angelic Garment*

Speculations on the garment of Adam, which some interpreted as a “garment of Light” lost by him at his Fall, have already been mentioned in the previous chapter. As has already been referred to in passing,<sup>612</sup> some traditions also attribute such robes of glory to the angels. As Odeberg writes in his commentary on the Hebrew Enoch, “in early traditions the ‘garment of glory’ (raiment of honour’ etc.) represents the light substance in which the inhabitants of the high heavens appear; the ‘glory’ is light, splendour, probably conceived of as a reflection, outflow of the Divine Glory, the Splendour of Shekina.”<sup>613</sup> Examples can be found in the Enoch literature.<sup>614</sup> The *Hebrew Book of Enoch*, belonging to the tradition of Jewish Merkabah mysticism, describes the transformation of Enoch into the angel Metatron. Enoch is translated from earth to heaven and elevated over all the angels as God’s “vice-regent.” This transformation includes investiture with angelic insignia, including a robe of Glory and a crown:

Metatron, Prince of Presence, said to me:

By reason of the love with which the Holy One, blessed be He, loved me more than all the children of heaven. He made me a garment of glory on which were fixed all kinds of lights and He clad me in it. And He made me a robe of honour on which were fixed all kinds of beauty, splendour, brilliance and majesty. And he made me a royal crown in which were fixed forty-nine costly stones like unto the light of the globe of the sun. For its splendour went forth in the four quarters of the *Araboth Raqia*, and in (through) the seven heavens, and in the four quarters of the world. And He put it on my head. And He called me THE LESSER YHWH in the presence of all His heavenly Household.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> See the paragraph on the clothing of Satan before his Fall in the works *Cave of Treasures* and *Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan* in the previous chapter.

<sup>613</sup> Hugo Odeberg, *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 32.

<sup>614</sup> The Enoch literature comprises three composite works of an apocalyptic nature (also known as the Ethiopic, Slavonic and Hebrew Book of Enoch after their language of transmission), which were attributed to Enoch of the Old Testament, who “walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” according to *Genesis* 5.24. This statement was traditionally understood to mean that Enoch was so righteous that he did not die, but was taken up to heaven by God while still alive, and this tradition gave rise to many Haggadic stories. The so-called *Enoch Books* all describe visionary journeys to heaven, complete with revelations about the mysteries of the universe, the future of the world and the course of human history up to the Day of Judgement. The date of their relative composition ranges from third-fourth century BC (*Ethiopic Enoch*) to the fifth or sixth century AD (*Hebrew Enoch*.) The *Books of Enoch* were immensely popular reading material in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and exerted a great influence not only on Jewish and Christian literature and theology, but also on Manichaean and Mandaean religious literature.

<sup>615</sup> 3 Enoch 12, Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, 32-3. Cf. The translation of P. Alexander: “Out of the love which he had for me, more than for all the denizens of the heights, the Holy One, blessed be he, fashioned for me a majestic robe in which all

The *Slavonic Enoch* is even more specific on how Enoch's transformation into a celestial being includes investing him with glorious garments – reflecting God's glory<sup>616</sup> - that make him like one of the “glorious ones” (angels):

And the Lord said to Michael: “Go extract Enoch from his earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him in the clothes of my glory.” And so Michael did, just as the Lord had said to him. He anointed me and he clothed me... And I looked at myself, and I had become like of His glorious ones, and there was no observable difference.<sup>617</sup>

As the Enoch Literature attests speculations that the angels wore luminous garment of Light were not unknown to Late Antique rabbinical Judaism. Quite likely *The Cave of Treasures*, which likens Adam's robe to that of the angels, also preserves Jewish traditions as is often the case with Syriac literature.<sup>618</sup>

### *Garment of God*

It is not only Adam, the angels or the transformed Enoch who may be conceived as wearing a garment of Light. Late Antique Judaism was also familiar with the notion of God wearing a garment of Light, a tradition that can be linked to the so-called *Shiur Qomah* traditions concerning the corporeal body of God. In fact, as has been mentioned above, the light-substance covering the inhabitants of heaven is probably no other than the reflection or outflow of the Splendour of the Shekina. Some writings, however, are more daring (or more antropomorphic) and, instead of referring to the allusive concept of the Shekina or Divine Glory, speak about the garment of Light of God. This idea is perhaps based on some passages in the Bible, for example, *Psalms* 104.1-2 which says:

Bless the Lord, o my soul. O Lord my God, thou are very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty.  
Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.

Possibly the *Book of Daniel* (Daniel 7.9), which speaks of the Ancient of Days as dressed in a garment white as snow, could have also influenced speculations concerning the garment of God.<sup>619</sup>

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kind of luminaries were set, and he clothed me in it. He fashioned for me a kingly crown in which 49 refulgent stones were placed, each like the sun's orb, and its brilliance shone into the four quarters of the heaven of 'Arabot, into the seven heavens, and into the four quarters of the world. He set it upon my head and he called me, “the lesser YHWH;” .in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, 265.

<sup>616</sup> Some researchers even interpret the text to say that Enoch was actually clothed in God's Glory. See A. Orlov and A. Golitzin, “Many Lamps Are Lightened from the One’: Paradigms of the Transformational Vision in Macarian Homilies,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55.3 (2001): 286.

<sup>617</sup> 2 (Slavonic) Enoch 22.8-9, trans. F. I. Andersen, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, 138.

<sup>618</sup> See for example Brock, “Jewish traditions in Syriac Sources.”

<sup>619</sup> However, Scholem is of the opinion that the garment of light mentioned in the mystical texts of Late Antiquity, quoted below, is not connected with the snow-white garment of the Ancient of the Days in Dan. 7.9, see G. Scholem,

I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire.

White as snow could be interpreted to refer to the color of light, so God's garment shone white with light, while his throne was also burning with a fiery flame. In any case the Inter-testamental *Ethiopic Book of Enoch*, seems to have combined these two different images, white as snow and shining light, when it describes Enoch's vision of God. On his heavenly journey Enoch comes before God sitting on his throne of glory, wearing a white garment shining more brightly than the sun:

And I observed and saw inside it a lofty throne – its appearance was like crystal and its wheels like the shining sun... and from beneath the throne were issuing streams of flaming fire. It was difficult to look at it. And the Great Glory was sitting upon it – as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow.<sup>620</sup>

In some mystical writings this garment of Light, covering God, appears to have acquired cosmic dimensions.<sup>621</sup> The *Genesis Rabbah (or Bereshit Rabbah)*, a midrash comprising a collection of ancient rabbinic homiletic interpretations of the Book of Genesis, contains a passage on the creation of light from the divine garment of God. God wrapped Himself in this garment of Light, and with it He illuminated the earth from one end to the other:

Rabi Simeon asked: "... tell me, whence the light was created." R. Samuel said: "The Holy one, blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a white garment [other texts have: as in a garment] and the splendor of his glory shone forth from one end of the world to the other." He said this in a whisper. R. Simeon was bewildered by this. "Is it not said explicitly in Scripture: He covereth Himself with lights as with a garment [Psalms 104:2]?"<sup>622</sup>

The *Pirke of R. Eliezer*, a Haggadic-Midrashic work of the ninth century, contains a similar thought probably based on earlier material:

Whence were the heavens created? From the light of the garment with which he was robed; He took and stretched it like a garment."<sup>623</sup>

G. Scholem has shown that these Midrashic passages can be linked to certain hymns preserved in the *Greater Hekhaloth (Hekhaloth Rabbati)*, which contain accounts of the mystical ascent into

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*Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism*, 58.

<sup>620</sup> 1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch 14.18-21, trans. E. Isaac, Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, 21. A similar tradition is preserved in Matthew 17.1-2, which describes the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, when the disciples perceive that Jesus is in fact the Great Glory of God: "And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light." Mark 9.3 says "And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them."

<sup>621</sup> Scholem, ch. "Aggadic Sayings and Merkabah Hymns: Garment of God," *Jewish Gnosticism* 57-64. On Jewish mystical literature on God's garment, see also Raphael Loewe "The Divine Garment and Shi'ur Qomah." *The Harvard Theological Review* 58.1 (1965): 153-60.

<sup>622</sup> *Beresith Rabbah*, ed. Theodor, pp. 19-20, in G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58.

<sup>623</sup> *Pirke Eliezer* ch. 3, G. Friedlander's translation (1916), 15, in Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58.

heaven. Scholem claims that at least some of this literature originated no later than the second-third century, and reflect a background, which, while monotheistic, also had strong Gnostic resonances. According to Scholem the hymns in the Greater Hekhaloth “reflect teachings current in at least the third century CE, provide us with several passages that mention the garment of God as a matter of course and as something generally known to the initiate.”<sup>624</sup> The heavenly bearer of this garment is one of the principle objects of the Merkabah vision, and Hekhaloth hymns imply that the vision of this garment arouses the “same numinous qualities as are aroused by the vision of the mystical ‘body of the glory’ itself... the visionary was taught to expect such a garment of Light covering the glory.”<sup>625</sup> Furthermore, just as in the *Genesis Rabbah*, this garment has a cosmic function, stars were created by (from) the light that issues from the garment, while the sun and moon issued from His crown:

Who is like unto our King? Who is like unto our Creator? Who is like unto the Lord our God?  
The sun and moon is cast out and sent forth by the crown of His head.  
The Pleiades and Orion and the Planet of Venus,  
Constellations and stars and Zodiac signs  
Flow and issue forth from the garment of Him  
Who is crowned and [shrouded] in it, sits upon the throne of His glory.<sup>626</sup>

Another hymn preserved in the Greater Hekhaloth describes the wonders of creations stemming from Gods’s majesty, His beauty, His stature, His crown, and His garment.<sup>627</sup> The crown is occasionally substituted by garland.<sup>628</sup> The text of a magical papyrus (in Greek) reads: “Through the power of Jao, the strength of Sabaoth, and the garment of Elohim, and the rules of Adonai, and the garland of Adonai.”<sup>629</sup>

### *The Garment of the Righteous After Ascension to a Heavenly Realm*

Yet another trend of Jewish thought in the Hellenistic period was given to speculation on the garment of glory the righteous would be rewarded with (or wear) in heaven. The *Book of Ben Sira* (or *Ecclesiasticus*) 6.28-32, composed in the second century before Christ, talks about a “robe of Glory” (στολὴ δόξης in the Greek translation) as the reward of those who seek (religious) wisdom:

Search for her [Wisdom], and she shall be made known to thee, and when thou hast gotten her, let her not go: For in the latter end thou shalt find rest in her, and she

<sup>624</sup> Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58.

<sup>625</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>626</sup> *Greater Hekhaloth* ch. 4:2, *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>628</sup> As in Manichaean hymns that speak of the garment/robe of light, diadem, crown and garland as a reward of the true believer, on this see below.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, II.161. In a Coptic Christian charm containing a particularly great wealth of Jewish material the garment and the crown are equally invoked. *Ibid.*, 64.

shall be turned to thy joy. Then shall her fetters be a strong defence for thee, and a firm foundation, and her chain a robe of Glory: For in her is the beauty of life, and her bands are a healthful binding. Thou shalt put her on as a robe of Glory, and thee shalt set her upon thee as a crown of joy.

The *Ethiopic Book of Enoch* is even more explicit on the garment of glory to be given on the Last Day. It offers a vivid description of the Day of Judgment, when the righteous will be clothed with garments of glory which are identified with garments of life:<sup>630</sup>

The righteous and elect ones shall rise from the earth and shall cease being of downcast face. They shall wear the garments of glory. These garments of yours shall become the garments of Life from the Lord of the Spirits. Neither shall your garments wear out, nor your glory come to an end before the Lord of the Spirits.<sup>631</sup>

Similarly the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba*, a semi-mystical tract of the early post-Talmudic period,<sup>632</sup> which echoes the *Hebrew Book of Enoch*, talks about the banquet of the pious in the Garden of Eden in the world to come:

In that hour the wicked come to the door of the Garden of Eden, and stand and watch the happiness of the pious. And they see all the pious, each one with the face of his glory, in royal robes, and with a royal crown, and with jewels of kingly pearls.<sup>633</sup>

In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, probably composed in the first century AD, Abraham is shown visions of the future of his people. The angel guiding Abraham scolds Azazel (Satan) when he tries to mislead Abraham, saying that, unlike him, Abraham belongs to heaven, and the garment of life worn earlier by Satan has been transferred on Abraham:

Disgrace upon you, Azazel! For Abraham's lot is in heaven, but yours is upon the earth

For behold, the garment which in heaven was formerly yours [Satan's] has been set aside for him [Abraham], and the corruption which was on him has gone over to you.

<sup>634</sup>

The text here makes a clear reference to the garment of Light or robe of Glory lost by Satan when he rebelled against God.<sup>635</sup> Though there is no reference to Adam, perhaps we may infer that the angel in the *Apocalypse* offers Abraham, “the Friend of God,” the robe of Glory lost not only by Satan but by his (and mankind's) own ancestor through his folly, upon Abraham's return to

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<sup>630</sup> The *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13.14 (see below) and the *New Testament* (Revelations 3: 5) also identify the heavenly vesture with immortality. See J. Schultz, “Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 61. 4. (1971): 291.

<sup>631</sup> 1 Enoch 62.15-16, Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, 44.

<sup>632</sup> D. Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (1988): 136-7.

<sup>633</sup> *Midrash Alpha Beta of Rabbi Akiba* (BH. 3.34), [www.jafi.org.il/education/anthology/english/print/E2B-midrash\\_otiyot\\_derbi\\_akiva.pdf](http://www.jafi.org.il/education/anthology/english/print/E2B-midrash_otiyot_derbi_akiva.pdf) - Source: Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts*, Wayne State University Press, 1979. Last accessed 13 July 2008. Another text, the *Alpha Beta de Metatron*, quoted by Odeberg in his commentary on the *Hebrew Enoch*, after describing the eight garments made out of the splendour of the Shekina and used to cloth Metatron/Enoch, says: “When the righteous part from this world the Prince of the Presence conducts him to the Garden of Eden and there he clothes him in the eight Garments from the splendour of the Shekina.” *Alpha Beta de Metatron* (Add. 15299, fol. 81b-a), in Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, 32.

<sup>634</sup> *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13.14, trans. R. Rubinkiewicz, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, 695.

<sup>635</sup> See previous chapter, esp. part on *The Cave of Treasures*.

Paradise.

The Jewish portion of the pseudepigraphic work, the *History of the Rechabites*<sup>636</sup> recounts the visit of a virtuous man, Zosimus to a Paradise-like island where the Blessed Ones live in complete bliss, as “mortals” who are “purified and spotless,” and as beings who are “Earthly Angels.”<sup>637</sup> And they are all naked. A human, who comes to visit the island, asks them “Why are you naked?” He is told, that, in effect, he is the one who is naked, for his own garments are corrupted, but that of his interlocutor, who at this moment appears to have the face of an angel, are not, rather he is wearing a clothing of glory.<sup>638</sup> While the other texts, quoted above, make no apparent connection between the lost garment of Light of Adam and Eve, and the robe of Glory given to the righteous, the *History of the Rechabites* provides a link between the two:

these blessed ones are like Adam and Eve before they sinned...<sup>639</sup> ‘we are naked not as you suppose, but we are covered with a stole of glory (similar to that) which clothed Adam and Eve before they sinned.’<sup>640</sup>

In other words these purified mortals had attained the prelapsarian state of blessedness, a state when Adam and Eve were beings covered by glory instead of material clothes. This motif, as we shall see, was a popular theme in Christian, especially in Syriac literature, where they were writing about being redeemed from Adam’s sin by Christ’s sacrifice.

And finally the Qumran texts could perhaps be mentioned here. One of the texts recounts the rewards to be bestowed upon the “Sons of Truth” including the “crown of glory with a garment of splendor in eternal light.”<sup>641</sup>

## Christianity

Christianity’s rich inheritance from Judaism and Jewish literature includes the speculations concerning the garment of Light or robe of Glory: A garment that was like the garments worn by the angels, one that was worn by Adam, and that was going to be given to the purified souls of the righteous elect in the hereafter.

However, Christianity, especially Syriac Christianity, “surpassed” Judaism by far when it came to garment symbolism, and with time there developed a veritable “theology of garment,” a

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<sup>636</sup> The *History of Rechabites* is a Christian document based on a Jewish original, parts of which are preserved in the text. Though this work is little known or quoted today, it used to be very popular in the middle ages, both in the West and in the Middle East, translations existed, among others, in Syriac, Arabic and Armenian.

<sup>637</sup> A. De Conick, and J. Fossum, “Stripped before God: A New Interpretation of Logion 37 in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 45.2 (1991): 131.

<sup>638</sup> *History of Rechabites* 5.3-4, trans. J. H. Charlesworth, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 2, 452.

<sup>639</sup> *HR* 7.2-3, *ibid.*, 452.

<sup>640</sup> *HR* 12.3, *ibid.*, 457.

<sup>641</sup> IQS 4:7-8, quoted by John Reeves, “Manichaica Aramaica? Adam and the Magical Deliverance of Seth,” *JAOS* 119.3 (1999): 433.

complex synthesis of different, previously somewhat disjointed, motifs. The garment, often along with the crown, became an important symbol of the salvation of the soul, a symbol that had its place in every single stage of the drama of mankind, from creation and fall, through the sacrifice of Christ to the salvation of the individual soul and final eschatology.

This rich garment theology is foreshadowed already by the New Testament. In the famous parable of the prodigal son the father tells his servants: “Bring forth the first (usually translated as best) robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:” (Luke 15:22). The Greek for what is today usually translated as “best robe” is τὸν στολὸν τὸν πρώτον. The primary meaning of “protos” is actually “first,” though it may also mean “best.” Many of the early Church Fathers understood the text to say “bring on his first robes” referring to the robe worn before falling into sin (that is, Adam’s robe before his Fall.)<sup>642</sup>

The *Book of Revelations* talks of a “white raiment,” a “raiment of Life” as mentioned above in the *Ethiopic Book of Enoch*, to be given to the righteous waiting for the final Judgment:

3.5 He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

7.9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.<sup>643</sup>

The Crown of Life (or wreath and diadem<sup>644</sup> in Greek) is similarly mentioned along with the white raiment as the reward of the faithful in the *Book of Revelations*:

2.10: Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of Life.

4.4: And round about the throne were four and twenty seats; and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment, and they had on their heads crowns of gold.

Under the influence of Judaism, the idea of a raiment and a crown like that of the angels that is to be given to the just (or the saints) after their death, or rather after the final Day of Judgement is taken up by the *Ascension of Isaiah*, an early second-century AD work. The portion also called *Visio Dei*

<sup>642</sup> Gregory of Nyssa writes “So he <the heavenly Father> runs to him <the prodigal son> and greets him by kissing his neck, which means the rational yoke that is thrown through the mouth [that is, orally] by the evangelic tradition, upon man who had declined the first yoke of the commandment [that is, of the commandment in Paradise] and had shaken off the law that had protected him. And he [that is, man] is also clothed in a garment, no other than the first one, of which he had been stripped because of the transgression, when as soon as he tasted the forbidden fruit, he had to see himself naked.” *De oratione dominica orationes v*, ed. F. Oehler, *Gregor's Bischof's von Nyssa Abhandlung von der Erschaffung des Menschen und fünf Reden auf das Gebet* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1859), 202-314, here: 240. I owe this information and quotation to István Perczel.

<sup>643</sup> The Epistles of Paul, though not mentioning the lost garment directly, make repeated references to clothing metaphors, like putting on the armour of light, putting on the new man, Christ, incorruptibility, which were made much use of later on when the “theology of garment” was developed.

<sup>644</sup> στῆφανος, διῆμα. All three symbolize victory and kingship (royalty), divine glory and honor, see Gregory M. Stevenson, “Conceptual background to Golden Crown Imagery in the Apocalypse of John 4:4, 10; 14:14,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114.2 (1995): 258.

(6-11.) where Isaiah is granted a vision of Heaven and God, is considered a Christian addition to an older Jewish work (1-5.) Isaiah on his ascent is shown by his angelic guide the garments which he will be given once he will be free of his mortal body, garments that will make him equal to the angels:

And he said: "Hear, then, this also from your companion: when from the body by the will of God you have come up here, then you will receive the robe which you will see, and also other numbered robes placed (there) you will see. And then you will be equal to the angels who (are) in the seventh heaven."<sup>645</sup>

For above all the heavens and their angels is placed your throne, and also your robes and your crown, which you are to see.<sup>646</sup>

Interestingly, while Isaiah is promised the garment and crown upon his own ascension (after death) to heaven, the text also implies that others will have to wait for the Christian redemption, that is for the coming of the Son, before they can put on the heavenly robes and crowns which await them:<sup>647</sup>

Then, in the seventh heaven Isaiah has a vision of Old Testament saints, already clad in the garments of glory making them like angels, but not as yet crowned. Others (future Christians) will only ascend with the Son when the time comes and then receive the garments and crowns already set apart for them:

And there I saw Enoch and all who (were) with him, stripped of (their) robes of the flesh, and I saw them in their robes of the above, and they were like the angels, who stand there in great glory. But they were not sitting on their thrones, nor were their crowns of glory on them. And I asked the angel who (was) with me: "How is it that they have received the robes, but are not on their thrones nor in their crowns?" And he said to me: "They do not receive the crowns and thrones of glory, until the Beloved descends in the form in which you will see Him descend [The Lord will indeed descend] into the world in the last days (he) who is to be called Christ. And thus His descent, as you will see, will be concealed even from the heavens, so that it will not be known who He is. And when He hath plundered the angel of death, He will rise on the third day, and he will remain in that world five hundred and forty-five days. And then many of the righteous will ascend with Him, whose spirits do not receive [their] robes until the Lord Christ ascends and they ascend with Him. Then indeed they will receive their robes and their thrones and their crowns, when He has ascended into the seventh heaven."... And I saw many robes placed there, and many thrones and many crowns. And I said to the angel who led me: "Whose (are) these robes and thrones and crowns?" And he said to me: "As for these robes, there are many from that world who will receive (them) through believing in the words of That One who will be named as I have told you, and they will keep them,

<sup>645</sup> *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 8.14-15, trans. M. A. Knibb, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 2, 168.

<sup>646</sup> *Isaiah* 7.22, *ibid.*, 167.

<sup>647</sup> "And the angel who led me knew what I thought and said to me: "If you rejoice over this light, how much more (will you rejoice,) in the seventh heaven when you see the light where the Lord is and His Beloved from where I was sent - who is to be called in the world the Son. Not (yet) hath been manifested he shall be in the corruptible world] and the garments, and the thrones, and the crowns which are laid up for the righteous, for those who trust in that Lord who will descend in your form. For the light which is there is great and wonderful." *Isaiah* 8.25-6, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 2, 169: See also E. Goodenough, "The Crown of Victory in Judaism," *The Art Bulletin*, 28.3. (1946): Note 157, p. 158

and believe in them, and believe in His cross; [for them (are) these] placed.”<sup>648</sup>

The garment (and the crown) offered to the righteous in the Revelations or in the Ascension of Isaiah is not as yet qualitatively different from the garment of the Enoch literature or other Jewish writings, which speculate on the fate and reward of the elect in the hereafter. However, with the passing of time Christianity developed its own distinctive theological literature, and the garment of Light evolved from its biblical roots in novel ways to find its niche in this literature as a metaphor of the Christian salvation drama. As Brock writes “Indeed one can even speak ... of a ‘theology of clothing’, seeing that the entire span of salvation history can be expressed in terms of clothing imagery.”<sup>649</sup> This “theology of clothing” was a complex synthesis of the different, previously somewhat disjointed, motifs. In this tradition, elaborately worked out in Syriac Christianity,<sup>650</sup> ideas concerning Adam’s lost garment, also worn by angels, became dynamically intertwined with notions on the garment of Light/Glory to be given to the righteous in the hereafter or on the Day of Judgement. The (lost and potentially regained) garment, often along with the crown, became an important symbol of the salvation of the soul, a symbol that had its own place in every single stage of the drama of mankind, from the creation and fall, through the sacrifice of Christ to the salvation of the individual soul and final eschatology.

### *Adam’s Fall and Salvation*

As was seen above, the Jewish tradition, which interpreted Gen 3.21 as “garments of glory/light” that Adam took off as a counterpart to the “garments of skin,” which he put on after his Fall, was well known to Christian authors. However, in Christian tradition, where the descent, incarnation and death of Christ redeemed Adam’s original sin, this also meant a return to the original, sinless and angelic state, and to repossessing Adam’s lost garment of Light/Glory. As the Syriac Cave of Treasure so succinctly put it, Adam regained his robe of Glory through the sacrifice of blood, when he was baptized in the water (and blood) flowing from Christ’s side:

The blood and the water [from the wound in Christ’s side] ran down into the mouth of Adam, and Adam was redeemed, and put on a garment of glory.<sup>651</sup>

Adam is restored to his former elevated status, when Jesus: “came to find Adam who had got lost,

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<sup>648</sup> *Isaiah* 9.9-25, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 2, 170-71.

<sup>649</sup> Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 11.

<sup>650</sup> According to Brock (“Clothing Metaphor,” 11 and 21) while individual elements of the garment theology may be found in Greek and Latin writers, “it is in Syriac tradition that the imagery is the most consistently and fully developed.” And “We have... a remarkably consistent use of the clothing metaphor, and its application to the entire span of salvation history gives it a dynamic quality that would seem to be lacking in the Greek and Latin traditions. It is quite clear that this “theology of clothing is deeply ingrained in the Syrian tradition.”

<sup>651</sup> Budge, 231-32.

and to return him in the garment of Light to Eden.”<sup>652</sup>

However, it is not only Adam, who has regained his robe of Glory through the sacrifice of Christ. For Christians, just as Adam’s sin can be redeemed by the sacrifice of God’s Son, so the lost robe of Glory, symbolizing Adam’s sinless, angelic condition (before the Fall) can be regained through the same act.

When Christ puts on Adam (that is, humanity), his aim is to “re clothe mankind in the robe of Glory,”<sup>653</sup> that is, to return it to its original, prelapsarian state.<sup>654</sup> As Ephrem writes, linking the motif of incarnation with the regaining of the garment of Light: “He (Christ) hid his own glory and gave his swaddling clothes as a robe of Glory to mankind.”<sup>655</sup> While in the *Hymns of Paradise* he speaks of the new *stole* as one that was woven for Adam by the mother of Christ: “Mary clothed us with an incorruptible robe of Glory.”<sup>656</sup>

Already the early third century Odes of Solomon speak of a reversal of Gen. 3.21. One of the Odes on the salvation of the soul speaks of removing the garments of skin (symbolizing the sinful position of post-Fall man), identical with stripping off darkness and folly – metaphors for religious ignorance - and being dressed in a garment of Light by Christ, which is in its turn seen as being covered by the spirit of Christ:

And I abandoned the folly cast upon the earth,  
And I stripped it off and cast it from me.

And the Lord renewed me with his garment,  
And possessed me by his light.

And from above he gave me immortal rest,  
And I became like the land that blossoms and rejoices in its fruits.

And I stripped off darkness,  
And put on light.

And even I myself acquired members.  
In them there was no sickness or affliction or suffering.

And I was covered with the covering of your spirit,  
And I removed from me my garments of skin.

<sup>652</sup> Ephrem, HdVIRG XVI.9, quoted in Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 27. In another hymn Ephrem writes: “The wedded pair were adorned in Eden;—but the serpent stole their crown:—yet mercy crushed down the accursed one,—and made the wedded pair goodly in their raiment.—Blessed be He that has mercy on all! They clothed themselves with leaves of necessity;—but the Merciful had pity on their beauty,—and instead of leaves of trees,—He clothed them with glory in the water.—Blessed be He that has mercy on all!” Ephrem, *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany* 12.3-4, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm>, last accessed 18 July 2008.

<sup>653</sup> Brock, “Metaphors of Clothing,” 12.

<sup>654</sup> Or return it, indeed, to a higher, more glorious state. These differentiations and the question of linearity in human history, however, is not the subject of the present work.

<sup>655</sup> Ephrem, *Hymn on Nativity* V,4,5, quoted in Brock “Some Aspects of Greek Words,” 100.

<sup>656</sup> *Hymns of Paradise* IV,5, *ibid.*

Because your right hand raised me,  
And caused sickness to pass from me.<sup>657</sup>

Later, more nuanced writings connected the retrieval of the garment of Light with baptism, linking the recapture of the robe of Glory not so much with the incarnation or Crucifixion of Christ, but rather with his descent and baptism in the waters of the Jordan, to be imitated by the faithful. “The robe of Glory that was stolen away among the trees have you put on in the baptismal water.”<sup>658</sup> When Christ descended into the Jordan to be baptized, he deposited the “robe of Glory/Light,” making it available for mankind to put it on in baptism in the water of Jordan (the baptismal font consecrated by the invocation of the Holy Spirit.) As a hymn attributed to Ephrem says, referring back again to Gen. 3.7, “instead of the leaves from the trees, he clothed them with glory from the water.”<sup>659</sup> Upon baptism the Christian puts on again his robe of Glory just as he puts on the “new man” (Ep. Eph. 4.24) or Christ (Ep. Rom. 13.14).<sup>660</sup> As Aphrahat, a fourth-century Syriac author,<sup>661</sup> put it, this “clothing and garment of glory with which the righteous are clothed” is nothing else but Christ himself.<sup>662</sup>

Many literary texts dealing with baptism reflect the notion of regaining the garment of Light. The close relationship between Adam’s glorious robe, the garment of the angels, and the clothing of glory the baptized puts on in the waters of the Jordan is made explicit in Ephrem’s *Hymn of the Baptized*:

Your garments glisten, my brethren, as snow;—and fair is your shining in the likeness of Angels!  
In the likeness of Angels, you have come up, beloved,—from Jordan's river, in the armour of the Holy Ghost.  
The bridal chamber that fails not, my brethren, you have received:—and the glory of Adam's house today you have put on.<sup>663</sup>

The expression “robe of Glory” became commonplace in Syriac literature, especially in baptismal context. As Ephrem in his *Sermons* writes, “I gaze upon the ‘stole’ of glory that I put on at baptism.”<sup>664</sup> A Syrian Orthodox baptismal service says: “You are anointed as spiritual lamb so

<sup>657</sup> *Ode 21*; De Conick - Fossum “Stripped before God,” 125.

<sup>658</sup> Jacob of Serugh (ed. Bedjan) I.209, quoted in Brock, “Jewish Traditions in Syrian Sources,” 222.

<sup>659</sup> Ephrem, HdEPIPH XII.4, in Brock, “Clothing Metaphors” 19.

<sup>660</sup> See Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 12, 16, 18.

<sup>661</sup> Aphrahat (ca. 270 – ca. 345) was originally from Persia, and was also referred to as the “Persian Sage.” Later Syrian tradition holds that he was the bishop of the Monastery of Mar Mattai (or Matti) near Mosul. (See T. D. Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985): 126.) The Monastery of Mar Mattai (or Matti) is a still functioning monastery on Mount Maqlub, a mountain (or rather hill) separating Beshiqe-Behzani from the Yezidi settlements of the Sheikhan on the other side of the Maqlub. The monastery and Mar Matti figure in some Yezidi religious myths I have collected in Beshiqe. However, it is rather doubtful if Aphrahat could have really been the bishop of the Mar Matti monastery, as it was probably founded by Mar Matti two decades after Aphrahat. Furthermore, Brock is of the opinion that, when Aphrahat speaks of monks, he is referring to ascetics living either individually or in small groups, and not yet in organized, coenobitic monasteries. (See S. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen*, 20.1 (1973): 11.)

<sup>662</sup> *Demonstrations* XIV. 39 (Patrologia Syriaca I) col. 681, in Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 18

<sup>663</sup> *Hymn for the Feast of the Epiphany* 13 (Hymn for the Baptised), 1-3. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm>

<sup>664</sup> Ephrem, *Sermons* I,5,9, quoted in Brock, “Some Aspects of Greek Words,” 100.

that you may put on the robe of Glory from the water;”<sup>665</sup> while a Nestorian baptismal Service exhorts the faithful to keep the robe of Glory they would receive at baptism unsoiled by sins.<sup>666</sup>

### *Garment of Light as an Eschatological garment*

We have seen how in Enochic literature and some of the rabbinical literature the faithful, who have reached their heavenly rest, were to be clothed in white garments. The theme is taken up by the *Book of Revelations*, and can be found in later literature as well, despite the concurrent theme of Christians receiving their robe of Glory upon baptism. For baptism means merely the *potential* recovery of the robe of Glory, but not yet the full realization of repossessing the lost garment. (Just as baptism is a prerequisite of salvation, but not its guarantee. The newly-baptized must then live a life that makes him worthy.) The promise of putting on the robe of Glory will be completely fulfilled only after Resurrection when the deserving righteous will be clothed with the same Robe of Light:

[At the Resurrection] they just will put on that glory and light which we said had belonged to Adam before the transgression: had been covered with it, and Moses and Elijah had appeared in it when they came with Jesus.<sup>667</sup>

As it is up to the individual Christian to realize the promise of baptism through his life and pious acts, the faithful are exhorted to keep the robe they (potentially) received at baptism unsullied by sin, and thereby attain salvation and be able to actually put on the robe of Glory at the last reckoning. A Nestorian baptismal service urges the faithful to act in a way so: “That they may preserve in purity the robe of Glory with which Thou hast clothed them in thy mercy”<sup>668</sup> In Jacob of Serugh’s work Jesus tells the repentant thief “I will clothe you with a robe of light in the marriage chamber on high.”<sup>669</sup> The marriage chamber (or bridal chamber) refers to *Matthew 22*, where the resurrection and entering the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a royal wedding, where only those who have prepared their wedding garments can enter. In the clothing imagery the wedding garment is the robe of Glory that the faithful receive at their baptism, and which they must preserve unsoiled by sin, so when they arrive at the eschatological banquet, they be allowed to enter.<sup>670</sup> Those who do not take good care of their wedding garment will rue their negligence. Ephrem, meditating on the

<sup>665</sup> Syrian Orthodox baptismal service (Homs edition) 42, quoted in Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 27.

<sup>666</sup> Nestorian baptismal service (Urmiah edition) 74, quoted in Brock “Some Aspects of Greek words in Syriac,” 99.

<sup>667</sup> Philoxenus, *Commentary on Matthew* (ed. P. Bedjan) I, 275, quoted in Brock “Clothing Metaphors,” 27. See also Isaac of Antioch (ed. P. Bedjan) I, 275, quoted in Brock “Clothing Metaphors,” 27-8: “Do you, who made garments of skin for Adam and Eve, give garments of light to the departed in your paradise? You allowed Adam to remove his hands from their task of covering his nakedness; thanks to those skins with which you clothed them, Lord you freed their hand by your mercy. Give clothing of glory to the departed, and a robe of light to those buried.”

<sup>668</sup> Nestorian baptismal service (Urmiah edition) 74, quoted in Brock “Some Aspects of Greek words in Syriac,” 99.

<sup>669</sup> Jacob of Serugh (ed. P. Bedjan) V, 669, quoted in Brock “Clothing Metaphors,” 27.

<sup>670</sup> Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 20.

Last Judgment, is assailed by doubts as to his own actions, and describes his vision:

I saw there beautiful people, and I was desirous to of their beauty... I saw their bridal chamber opposite, which no one who has not a lamp may enter; I saw their joy, and I myself sat down in mourning, not possessing works worthy of that bridal chamber. I saw them clothed with the “robe of light,” and I was grieved that I had prepared no virtuous raiment.<sup>671</sup>

However, the reality of putting on the robe of Glory can be anticipated by the saints, who preserve their baptismal “robe” unspotted:<sup>672</sup>

Among the saints none is naked, for they have put on glory, nor is there any clad in fig leaves, or standing in shame, for they have found, through our Lord, the robe that belongs to Adam and Eve.<sup>673</sup>

Thus Christians are called on to lead an ascetic and solitary life, modeled on the life of the saints so that they attain the final reward of their struggles, the state where “Your filth, which has been your clothing, has woven you a robe of light.”<sup>674</sup> For those however, who do not fight to live a sinless, pious existence, the robe of Glory may be lost forever, despite its promise at baptism. Thus Ephrem laments in his *Hymns of Paradise* how his own sins have lost him the “crown,<sup>675</sup> the name, the glory, the robe, and the bridechamber of light.”<sup>676</sup>

Summing up, early Christians were able to consistently employ the garment of Light (and crown) as a metaphor spanning the entire salvation history: From Adam’s sin (loss of the garment), through the restitution of his sinless state (and angelic garments) through the sacrifice of Christ, to the promise of redemption (and of the same garments) to the individual Christian at baptism, finally to the eschatological moment when those deserving to be saved can take part in the divine wedding (and will be awarded the robe of Glory, and become like the angels.) Obviously, the “theology of clothing” was deeply ingrained in Christian, especially in Syriac tradition.

## Gnosticism

The Gnostic garment of Light (also known as garment of life, armour of light, imperishable clothing, wedding robe, etc.) has much in common with its “brethren” (that is the garment of Light in Judaism and Christianity.) The process of salvation of the Gnostic is often described in the terms of stripping off (i.e.. the material body and the earthly soul – which is opposed to the spirit,)

<sup>671</sup> Letter to Publius § 12, quoted in Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 19.

<sup>672</sup> Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 13.

<sup>673</sup> Ephrem, HdPAR VI.9, quoted in Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 27.

<sup>674</sup> Isaac of Antioch (ed. Bedjan) I, 53,14, quoted in Brock, “Some Aspects,” 103.

<sup>675</sup> Note, that here again the crown is a recurrent theme, accompanying the robe of light. Ephrem for example speaks of the “Crown of Righteousness” in his *Hymn for the Feast of the Epiphany* 6.19 “to the priest who has toiled in baptizing,—let there come the crown of righteousness!” (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm>.)

<sup>676</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns of Paradise* VII.5, quoted in Brock, “Some Aspects,” 104.

followed by investiture with the robe of light, and finally the enthroning and glorifying:<sup>677</sup>

O my son, strip off the old garment of fornication, and put on the garment which is clean and shining, that you may be beautiful in it. But when you have this garment, protect it well. Release yourself from every bond, so that you may acquire freedom.<sup>678</sup>

Putting on the robe of light (or body of light) is often used as a metaphor for returning to the Realm of Light, where the human soul, *pneuma*, originates from. It is often mentioned in connection with the Gnostic baptism,<sup>679</sup> as bridal clothing, together with the familiar wedding banquet and bridal chamber allegory:

You will accept robes from those who give robes and the Baptists will baptize you and you will become gloriously glorious, the way you first were when you were <Light><sup>680</sup>

The Lord said... but when you rid yourselves of jealousy, then you will clothe yourselves in light and enter the bridal chamber.<sup>681</sup>

But the soul - she who has tasted these things - realized that sweet passions are transitory. She had learned about evil; she went away from them and she entered into a new conduct... And she learns about her light, as she goes about stripping off this world, while her true garment clothes her within, (and) her bridal clothing is placed upon her in beauty of mind, not in pride of flesh.<sup>682</sup>

All these, the garment of Light as the reward of those who transcend the material world, the connection of the garment with baptism, the metaphor of wedding, bridal chamber and bridal clothing, do not sound very different from the Christian texts quoted above. There is, however, a marked difference between the exact nature of the garment of Light in the Gnostic approach and that of Christianity, just as there is a marked difference between their concepts of salvation (symbolized by the robe of Glory in both of them.) For Gnostics the soul (*pneuma*), a particle of light languishing in the prison of matter, is saved not by the sacrifice of a Saviour,<sup>683</sup> or by obeying

<sup>677</sup> See Alistair H. B. Logan, "The Mystery of the five seals: Gnostic Initiation Reconsidered" *Vig Christ.* 51 (1997), 188; and J. Turner, "Ritual in Gnosticism," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, 1994*, ed. E. Lovering (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 136-181.

<sup>678</sup> *The Teaching of Silvanus* 105, trans. and ed. M. Peel and J. Zandee, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, NHMS 30 (Lieden: Brill, 1996), 333. *The Teachings of Silvanus* is one of the few texts from Nag Hammadi which are not full out Gnostic, though it has gnosticising tendencies. It is a rare example of early Hellenistic-Christian Wisdom literature, which drew its ideas from a synthesis of Biblical, Late Stoic, and Middle Platonic religious and ethical ideas. The text offers a dogmatic instruction on how to "become like God." (Peel, "Introduction," in *Nag Hammadi VII*, 268). The gnosticising tendencies are reflected in the tractate's theology, anthropology, cosmology and ascetic ethic. According to Peel the gnosticising tendencies in the anthropology include the use of the metaphor of sleep. (Peel, Introduction, 269.)

<sup>679</sup> Considered to confer Gnosis on the believer.

<sup>680</sup> *Trimorphic Protennoia* 1.45.16-20, trans. J. Turner in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*. NHS 28, (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 423.

<sup>681</sup> *Dialogue of the Saviour* 50, trans. and ed. St. Emmel in *Nag Hammadi Codex III.5*. NHS 26 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 77.

<sup>682</sup> *Authorative Teaching* 31,24-32,8, trans. G. MacRae, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, NHS 11 (Lieden: Brill, 1979), 281. For descriptions of receiving the garment or body/clothing of light in baptism as an instrument of spiritual enlightenment, see also *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, passim; and Turner, "Ritual in Gnosticism."

<sup>683</sup> Though the Saviour figure exists in Gnostic thought, his main function is to bring Gnosis. Typically, Christian Gnostic schools thought of Christ's incarnation and death on the Cross in docetic terms, teaching that he only

the precepts of religious teachings, but by achieving Gnosis, the knowledge of where it came from, and where it belongs. Gnosis itself is salvation, as it enables the soul to escape the world of matter and return to the *Pleroma* (World of Light.)<sup>684</sup>

It was already seen in the previous chapter how the light enveloping Adam (or his luminous garment) at the beginning of mankind's history symbolized Adam's Gnosis, the divine spark of understanding the true nature of things. The loss of this luminous garment is another way of referring to the theft of this Gnosis by the jealous Evil Ruler, who then clothes the first couple in obscure darkness, that is forgetfulness, ignorance of their true origin. Salvation is no other than a regaining of consciousness (Gnosis) as to the origin of human soul (*pneuma*), and the real nature of the created (material world) as opposed to the World of Light. As the *Authoritative Teaching* says: "She had learned about evil... And she learns about her light." The luminous robe is the symbol of this salvation through Gnosis, as well as (at least in some texts) the bringer of this divine revelation, or knowledge (Gnosis,) a motif not to be found in the literature quoted above. As the baptismal passage in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*,<sup>685</sup> one of the Nag Hammadi texts reads:

He who possesses the Five Seals<sup>686</sup> of these particular names has stripped off the garments of ignorance and put on a shining light.<sup>687</sup>

When the believer gains Gnosis, he breaks out from the "garments of ignorance,"<sup>688</sup> and acquires a true understanding of his true nature. As he puts on the robe of light, he remembers everything he has forgotten, and this remembering simultaneously means his return to the Kingdom of Light. In fact, this saving knowledge of one's origin (Gnosis) is identified with the robe of Light itself:

I gave<sup>689</sup> to him from the Water of Life, which strips him of the chaos that is in the uttermost darkness that exists inside the entire abyss, that is, the thought of the corporeal and the psychic. All these I put on. And I stripped him of it [i.e. corporeal thoughts, the psyche] and I put upon him a shining Light, that is, the knowledge of the Thought of the Fatherhood.<sup>690</sup> And I delivered him to these who give robes, Yammon, Elasso, Amenai – and they [covered] him with a robe from the robes of Light.<sup>691</sup>

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"appeared" to have been born, to have been crucified or to have died.

<sup>684</sup> In Gnostic literature, therefore, there is no place for a Last Judgment, as each soul's escape is an individual one, depending on its eventual enlightenment. Nor is there a Resurrection, as the body as such was seen not only as perishable but also as inimical, a trap tying the soul to the physical world.

<sup>685</sup> Baptism here refers to the baptism practiced by Gnostics, as the *Trimorphic Protennoia* must originally have been a non-Christian Gnostic (possibly Sethian) document that was later Christianized by inserting the name of Christ. See J. D. Turner, "Composition," in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, 393-401.

<sup>686</sup> The Five Seals are associated with the reception of gnosis in Gnostic baptism, a rite consisting of five stages of enlightenment: Investiture, baptism in the spring of the (Living) Water, enthronement, glorification, and ecstatic rapture into the place of Light.

<sup>687</sup> *Trimorphic Protennoia* 1.49.26-32, in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, 453.

<sup>688</sup> The "garment of ignorance" may refer both to the material body in which the soul is imprisoned, and to the dense oblivion of its true origin in which it suffers.

<sup>689</sup> The speaker is Protennoia, or Forethought (of the Father), the Mother of Life, who descends to deliver the imprisoned souls from the prison of matter through gnosis.

<sup>690</sup> Layton translates "acquaintance with thinking about kinship" (Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 99). Kinship, or fatherhood, probably refers to the origin of the soul from the World of Light, the Pleroma.

<sup>691</sup> *Trimorphic Protennoia* 1.48.10-7, in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, 431.

In some of the Gnostic writings the prototype of this light garment of Gnosis is the garment of the Gnostic Saviour, a being of the Light World, who descends to bring knowledge to mankind and awaken it to its condition. The garment of the Saviour encompasses all the saving Gnosis, the secrets necessary for salvation. In the *Untitled Text of the Bruce Codex* the Mother (of Life) gives the Son (the Saviour) a garment in which were shown all the forms the knowledge of which were needed to descend or ascend.<sup>692</sup>

In the *Paraphrase of Shem*<sup>693</sup> the garments of Gnosis, which will help the Gnostics attain salvation, are in effect the garments of Derdekeas, the savior figure who descends from the Realm of Light to bring revelation to the chosen. Derdekeas uses various garments (of light and fire). These garments not only protect him as he travels through the clouds, and throw the evil powers into confusion so that they have to shed the powers of the Spirit, but they will also help the race of Shem (the Gnostics) to ascend through the hostile spheres.

That I may teach you, O Shem, from what blindness your race is protected. When I have revealed to you all that has been spoken, then the righteous one will shine upon the world with my garment...<sup>694</sup> they who have a free conscience... they will strip off the burden of Darkness; they will put on the Word of the Light; and they will not be kept back in the insignificant place... And they will be taken to them by my garments, those which are in the clouds. It is they who guide their members.<sup>695</sup>

Here the garment is not merely a reward but also an essential instrument of salvation.

The same is true of the third-century *Pistis Sophia*,<sup>696</sup> a work ascribed to the *Gnostikoi* of Epiphanius, where the risen Christ reveals his esoteric teaching to his disciples. This work devotes a lot of attention to the garment of Light of the Saviour,<sup>697</sup> which is consistently identified with saving Gnosis and spiritual enlightenment. The Saviour, Jesus, receives his garment of Light that he had left behind in the *Pleroma* (Fullness or World of Light) that is both the instrument of his revelation to mankind and his eventual ascent back to the Light. Even more importantly, one finds

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<sup>692</sup> “Afterwards the mother established her first-born son (...) And she gave to him a garment' in which to accomplish all things. And in it were all bodies: the body of fire, and the body of water, and the body of air and the body of earth, and the body of wind, and the body (of angels), and the body of archangels, and the body of powers, and the body of mighty ones, and the body of gods, and the body of lords. In a word, within it were all bodies so that none could hinder him from going to the height or from going down to the abyss.” *Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, text ed. C. Schimdt, trans. V. Macdermot, in *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, NHS 13 (Leiden, Brill, 1978), 256-7:

<sup>693</sup> This late second or third century text from Nag Hammadi contains the revelations of Derdekeas, a Gnostic Saviour, to Shem. The text is in Coptic, but the original must have been Greek. It is of special interest, because Wisse contends that its theological content shows some similarities with the Manichaean myth. In Wisse’s view this suggests a Syrian or Mesopotamian origin, and he concludes that the “shared concepts and ideas seem to reflect mythological traditions at home in the Persian Empire in late antiquity.”

<sup>694</sup> *Paraphrase of Shem* 28.20-25, trans. F. Wisse, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, NHMS 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 83-85.

<sup>695</sup> *Paraphrase of Shem* 42.24 – 45.12, *ibid.*, 113-15. The garment of Derdekeas in the *Paraphrase of Shem* reminds us in many ways of the way the garment is used in the Syriac *Hymn of the Pearl*, on which see below.

<sup>696</sup> The work is available in Coptic, though probably it was translated from a Greek original. See Schneemelcher *New Testament Apocrypha* I. 362-3.

<sup>697</sup> Chapters 6-10 contain a discourse by Jesus on his garment of light, chapters 11-16 offer an account of his ascension to Heights wearing the garment of light, and chapters 28-31 give yet another account by Jesus of his passing through the aeons wearing the garment of light.

here a curious description of the secret mystery written on the garment: "...and I found a mystery in my garment, written in the manner of writing of those of the height," containing the "gnosis of all gnoses," that is, everything the knowledge of which is necessary for attaining Gnosis<sup>698</sup> - an image that brings to mind the idea in Yezidi tradition that the *khirqe* is just as much a part of the divine revelation as the *qewls*, or sacred hymns, both having descended from heaven with the sole aim of bringing true religion to the Yezidis.

## The Hymn of the Pearl

The most poetic expression of the garment as a metaphor of salvation through enlightenment is the glorious garment in the *Hymn of the Pearl*. This hymn on the soul's incarnation in material form and its eventual liberation stands in a category all by itself in Late Antique literature, while at the same time it is an eloquent example that "the dividing line with respect to the usage of religious metaphors between..." Christianity, Gnosticism and Manichaeism "should not be drawn too sharply in the sands of the Syrian desert."<sup>699</sup> Surviving in a Greek and a Syriac version (of which the Syriac is considered the older and original one), both the date of the *Hymn's* composition and its exact religious provenance are fiercely debated.<sup>700</sup> Some insist its author must have belonged to Jewish Christianity, with strong encratite overtones and tinged by Jewish colors,<sup>701</sup> others that it was a

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<sup>698</sup> "It happened as I was sitting at a short distance from you upon the Mount of Olives, I was thinking of the rank of the service for which I was sent, that it should be completed, and that my garment was not yet sent to me by the First Mystery.... that mystery had not yet sent me the garment, which I had left behind within it until the time was completed..."

But now - it happened through the command of that mystery, it sent me my garment of light... that I should put it on me, and that I should begin to speak with the race of mankind, and reveal to them all things from the beginning of the truth until its completion... these are the completion of all completions and the Pleroma of all Pleromas and the gnosis of all gnoses, these which are in my garment... great power of light came down, in which was my garment which I had left in the 24th mystery, ... *And I found a mystery in my garment, written in the manner of writing of those of the height* :<. > whose interpretation is : 'O Mystery which art outside the world , because of which the All exists - this is the whole coming forth and the whole ascent which has emanated all emanations and all that is within them, and because of which all mysteries and all their places exist - come forth to us because we are thy fellow-members....in this garment which we have now sent thee is the glory of the name of the mystery of the informer... And furthermore, there is in that garment the glory of the name of the mystery of all the ranks of the emanations of the Treasury of the Light, and their saviours... And furthermore there is in it the whole glory of the name (of all those) who are on the right, and all those who are in the Midst. And furthermore there is in it the whole glory of the name of the great invisible one, who is the great forefather... when I saw the mystery, of all these words in the garment which was sent to me, I put it on in that hour, and I gave light exceedingly, and I flew to the height." *Pistis Sophia* I.6-7, I.9-10, I.11, trans. V. Macdermot, text ed. C. Schmidt. NHS 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 9-10, 16-18, 20. Note the emphasis on the divine names contained by the garment. The knowledge of the names of both the beings of light and the evil powers of the matter were of great importance for the Gnostics. See, for example, the list of divine names in the baptismal service and hymn included in the *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit or the Egyptian Gospel* (75.24-80.13), or the abundance of esoteric divine names in Gnostic works in general. In the *Pistis Sophia* when the ascending Saviour meets the archons of the heavenly spheres, and those see the mystery of their name on his garment, their powers are annihilated and they all prostrate themselves before him.

<sup>699</sup> J. Ferreira, *The Hymn of the Pearl*, Early Christian Studies 3. (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 2002), 24.

<sup>700</sup> For the history of research on the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the different origins ascribed to it, see Ferreira, *Hymn of the Pearl*, 9-25.

<sup>701</sup> For example, Quispel, "Gnosticism and the New Testament," *Vigiliae Christianae* 19.2 (1965): 71-72.

midrash on Christian scriptures. It has also been suggested that it was originally written for a non-Christian readership and “presents a Hellenistic myth of the human’s soul entry into bodily incarnation and its eventual disengagement from the body,”<sup>702</sup> or was a work of Iranian mysticism or even a primitive Iranian fairytale. Most researchers, however, see the message of the *Hymn* as fundamentally Gnostic in nature.<sup>703</sup> Presently all that can be said with certainty is that it “originated in a milieu of diverse influences.”<sup>704</sup> While the *Hymn of the Pearl* could be and was read in an orthodox way by Syrian Christians, and was incorporated in the Acts of Thomas, it also became a favourite reading of the dualistic Manichaean community. Its far reaching influence on Manichaean terminology and even on its teaching of soteriology is widely acknowledged by researchers.<sup>705</sup>

The *Hymn of the Pearl*, the soteriological myth of the Saved Saviour, is the story of a young prince of the East sent to Egypt (often presented as the realm of matter and death in Gnostic and related literature)<sup>706</sup> to find and retrieve a precious Pearl (metaphor of the divine soul sunk in matter)<sup>707</sup> guarded by a dragon or serpent. Upon leaving his home, he has to take off his robe:

They made me strip off the glorious garment,  
which in their love they had made for me,  
and my purple toga  
which was measured [and] woven according to my  
stature.<sup>708</sup>

However, he is promised:

If you go down to Egypt  
and bring [back] the one pearl,  
which is in the middle of the sea  
surrounded by the hissing serpent,  
then you will put on your glorious garment  
and your toga which rests (is laid) over it.  
And with your brother, our second in command,  
You will be heir in our kingdom.<sup>709</sup>

<sup>702</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 366.

<sup>703</sup> H. Jonas treats it as a poetic example of Iranian type of Gnosis. Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, Chapter 5 “The ‘Hymn of the Pearl,’” 112-29. Ferreira thinks it “belongs to the Manichaean religious trajectory and, in particular, that in its current form it may describe the spiritual journey of an early Manichaean convert and poet.” (J. Ferreira, *Hymn of the Pearl*, 2.) Earlier scholarship (for example, Bevan, Burkitt, Preuschen) looked toward Syrio-Egyptian Gnosticism, and attributed the authorship to Bardaisan or to one of his followers.

<sup>704</sup> P. Poirier, *L’Hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Centre d’histoire des religions, 1981), 166.

<sup>705</sup> Heuser - Klimkeit, *Studies in Manichaean Literature and Art*, 79-81, Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 361; Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 120, note 89.

<sup>706</sup> See Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 118.

<sup>707</sup> Hans Jonas argues that the pearl is the symbol of the soul (of a divine origin) lost and sunk in the material word, just as the real pearl lies hidden in the dark depth of the sea (symbol of matter or of darkness into which the divine has sunk) and great efforts have to be made to bring it up to the light from there. (Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 125-8.) Similarly Manfred Heuser argues that the pearl symbolizes the soul to be redeemed (Heuser - Klimkeit, *Studies in Manichaean Literature*, 79.) The image of the pearl hidden in the deep ocean is recalled by the Yezidi *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 3, “We shall tell about the great oceans, In it there are pearls and jewels.” However, the ocean in this case is referred to in a positive way.

<sup>708</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 9-10, translation of the Syriac version, John Ferreira, *The Hymn of the Pearl*, 40.

<sup>709</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 12-15, *ibid.* 40-2.

Once in Egypt, he puts on native clothes, so as not to be conspicuous.<sup>710</sup> Still the locals recognize that the prince is not one of them and poison him with their food. He sinks into a kind of deep sleep, or a state of oblivion, forgetting his origin and mission (that is the Pearl.) His family grieves for him and they write him a letter telling him to wake up and remember his mission. The letter takes on the likeness of an eagle and flies to the Prince, where it becomes like a speech of words, with voice and sound. The living letter, or Call, reminds the Prince not only of his family and mission, but also of his lost garment:

Think of your glorious garment,  
Remember your splendid toga  
Which you will put on and wear  
When your name is called out from the book of the  
combatants (athletes).<sup>711</sup>

The Prince awakens, remembers that he is a son of kings and has come to get the Pearl. He manages to overcome the dragon by reading his father's name over the monster, snatches the Pearl and, led by the letter-awakener, return home to his kingdom, where his royal robe is waiting for him at the border. The mere sight of his garment restores the Prince's memory of his childhood, that is, of his true origin and nature (i.e., it confers Gnosis):

And my glorious garment which I had stripped off,  
And my toga which was wrapped with it...  
My parents sent it there...<sup>712</sup>

When he sees it he remembers his childhood and his former splendour:

And I was not remembering its fashion,  
For in my childhood I had left my father's house.  
Then suddenly, as I received it,  
The clothing seemed to me like a mirror of myself.  
I saw all of it in myself,  
And also I received all in it,  
Because we were two in distinction,  
But we were also one in form.

There follows a detailed description of the glorious garment embroidered with splendid colors decorated with precious stones, and more importantly:

And the image of the king of kings  
Was brought up and depicted in full all over it.  
And also like the surface of the sapphire,  
So too were its differing appearances.  
I also saw that all over it,  
The motions of knowledge were stirring.<sup>713</sup>

The garment and the prince hasten toward each other, and the prince puts it on in an act of union that

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<sup>710</sup> The saviour putting on garments of disguise, usually understood as material bodies, so as to trick and confuse the evil powers on his descent, is another frequent motif of gnosticising mythologies.

<sup>711</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 46-7, *ibid.* 48.

<sup>712</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 72-3, *ibid.* 54.

<sup>713</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 86-88, *ibid.* 58.

makes them as one:

And with kingly motions  
 All of it was moved (spread) towards me.  
 And upon the hand of its givers,  
 It hastened that I might receive it.  
 And also my love urged me  
 That I should run to meet it that I might receive it.  
 Then I stretched out and received it,  
 With the beauty of its colours I adorned myself.  
 And [with] my toga of bright colours,  
 I covered myself completely with it.<sup>714</sup>

Thus robed the prince ascends to the palace of his Father the King to appear before him with his pearl.

Hans Jonas argues that the garment put off by the young prince, which later comes to greet the prince and then becomes like one with him, is in fact “the heavenly or eternal self of the person... a kind of double or alter ego preserved in the upper world while he labors down below.”<sup>715</sup> In the *Hymn* this transcendental self of divine alter-ego appears as the garment, and “the encounter with this divided-off aspect of himself, the recognition of it as his own image, and the reunion with it signify the real moment of his salvation.”<sup>716</sup>

However, faithful to the multilayered and complex symbolism of this allegorical journey of salvation, the garment could be reinterpreted to mean more than just the divine alter-ego, or a divine figure symbolizing religious conscience (though the two interpretations are, of course, closely related.) Many researchers are of the opinion that the royal robe or garment is also equated with Gnostic self-acquaintance, and plays a central role as the “main salvific symbol of the *Hymn*,”<sup>717</sup> that is, it is a metaphor of salvation through enlightenment. When the young prince leaves for Egypt, he has to leave his jewel-studded garment behind and put on the clothes of the Egyptians, in other words he loses consciousness of his true origins and mission. When the messenger comes from the royal realm to wake him up, he reminds the prince of his garment, “call to mind your garment shot with gold” (i.e. of his origins,) so different from his present state. Finally, when he completes his mission, and takes the pearl, he is met by his robe that reminds him of his true

<sup>714</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 93-97, *ibid.* 60.

<sup>715</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 122. He traces this image back to the Zoroastrian teaching about the soul having a counterpart in heaven, the “*Daena*,” representing the religious conscience of man. With this counterpart the soul is united at the moment of death. To the righteous it appears as a beautiful maiden, and to the wicked as a withered old whore, reflecting – and being formed by – the deeds of their human counterparts in the world below. Carl H. Kraeling “Apocalypse of Paul and the ‘Iranische Erlösungsmysterium,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 24.3 (1931): 219. This doctrine was also taken over by the Manichaeans, where the divine *alter ego* usually appears at the moment of death, in the form of a shining deity, acting as guide (see Bar Khoni, below); Manichaean hymns call it the “living self”; in the Turfan fragment the Persian word applied to this being is *grev*, translated as “self”, “ego” denoting the metaphysical, transcendent person; in Chinese Manichaean texts it is referred to as “luminous nature” “inner nature” (Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 122-4.)

<sup>716</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 122.

<sup>717</sup> Ferrera, *Hymn of the Pearl*, 30, see also Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 366-7.

origins. Indeed, in the *Hymn of the Pearl* Gnosis is also an attribute of the garment itself,<sup>718</sup> for the prince sees his true self in the garment as in a mirror,<sup>719</sup> as well as the image of the “King of Kings” (God) depicted on it, and motions of knowledge – that is gnosis – stirring all over it. In other words the garment brings the answer to the old Gnostic question “what liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed.”<sup>720</sup> By putting on the garment the prince becomes reacquainted with his own self, his true identity and origin, complete with true Gnosis or understanding of the nature of all things divine, and in turn arises to the realm of peace and is reunited with the Divinity.

## Manichaeism

The garment of Light as a symbol of the divinity of human soul and its eventual salvation from the fetters of matter also played an important role in Manichaean mythology and is frequently mentioned in Manichaean writings, especially in hymns of a salvational character.

The symbolism of the heavenly robe appears on two levels: in the Manichaean creation myth and in salvational and eschatological hymns (the latter level probably being of more interest to the present research.) In the Manichaean creation myth<sup>721</sup> when the powers of Darkness attack the Kingdom of Light, and Primal Man is sent to battle them, he puts on as his armour, also referred to as his garment, his Five Sons representing the divine attributes of the Godhead.<sup>722</sup> The Primal Man is overpowered by Darkness and then subsequently rescued, but his armour or garment stays behind captive in the matter, waiting to be rescued and to return to the Realm of Light.<sup>723</sup>

The second level (not unconnected, of course, with the first) of the robe of light in the Manichaean drama of salvation is probably of more interest for our research here. This aspect of the Manichaean “robe of light” may have been influenced by the “robe of Glory” of Syriac Christian

<sup>718</sup> Ibid. 88, see also 31, 76-7.

<sup>719</sup> Layton’s translation: “Suddenly I saw my garment reflected as in a mirror, I perceived in it my whole self as well, and through it I recognized (gnosis) and saw myself. For, though we derived from one and the same, we were partially divided; and then we were one again with a single form.” (Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 374.)

<sup>720</sup> *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2, quoted in Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 45.

<sup>721</sup> See Chapter 2 “Religious Movements.”

<sup>722</sup> “The Primal Man clad himself with five principles, which are the five deities, the ether (zephyr), wind, light, water and fire. He took them as armament.” Ibn an-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist* vol. II, 779. Cf. Theodore Bar Khonî, *Lib. Schol. Mimrā* XI. 59, trad. Hespel – Draguet, 234 “et le premier Homme appela ses cinq fils, comme quelqu’un qui revêt une armure pour le combat.”

<sup>723</sup> “A part therefore went forth from my robe, it went, it lightened their Darkness... for I await my robe until it comes and clothes him that shall wear it. I will await my enlightening Light until it strips itself of their Darkness... When therefore my shining robe comes and clothes him that shall wear it... then I will strike my foot on the earth and sink their Darkness down... I will uproot the Darkness and cast it out and plant the Light in its place.” Psalms of Thomas, in *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, (ed. and trans. L. R. Allberry. Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 205.22-207.9. See also *Kephalaia* 72 and 175-76, trans. and ed. Iain Gardner, *Kephalaia of the Teacher* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 74 and 185-88.

baptismal and eschatological literature,<sup>724</sup> some Gnostic ideas perhaps, and was beyond doubt influenced by the garment imagery of the Hymn of the Pearl,<sup>725</sup> where the garment is the ultimate symbol of the soul's return to its origin (the word of light) and union with its divine "self." The robe of Glory, together with the garland and/or crown, was a frequent motif of Manichaeian salvational and eschatological hymns as the reward of those who follow the true religion and thereby manage to break the bonds of matter and escape from the material world. These hymns reflect the Manichaeian myth according to which the soul of the righteous (who breaks the fetters of matter and ascends back to Light) sets out on a journey to the Paradise of Light. On the way it receives the garment of Light, which, as Klimkeit puts, is "the symbol of the soul's spiritual garb, or form, which can also appear as its *alter ego*. The *alter ego* represents the new existential condition for which the soul, hitherto clad in the body, had been yearning."<sup>726</sup> It is accompanied by the signs of "victory" or symbols of salvation: the diadem, crown and the wreath. "Finally, the soul can unite with its divine *alter ego*, or clothe itself in the heavenly garment:"<sup>727</sup>

Mani said: When death comes to one of the Elect, Primal Man sends him a light shining deity in the form of the Wise Guide.<sup>728</sup> With him are three deities, with whom there are drinking vessel, clothing, headcloth, crown, and diadem of light. There accompanies them a virgin who resembles the soul of that member of the Elect... Then they take the member of the Elect and garb him with the crown, the diadem and the garments.<sup>729</sup>

The archetype for the victorious journey of the freed Living Soul (the usual term for the light imprisoned in man) breaking free of the material world is provided by the fate of Mani himself, who could be seen not only as the last Prophet, but also as a role-model for all the faithful. A Parthian Manichaeian text describes the death of the Manichaeian Apostle with these words:

Just like a sovereign who takes off armour and garment and puts on another royal garment, thus the Apostle of Light took off the warlike dress of the body and sat down in a ship of Light and received the divine garment, the diadem of Light, and the beautiful garland. And in great joy he flew together with the Light Gods that are going to the right and to the left (of him.)<sup>730</sup>

Inspired by the myth and by the example of Mani's fate, Manichaeian hymns describing the liberated soul receiving its garment of Light (with the garland and/or diadem, wreath) abound from Egypt to Central Asia, written in Coptic, Middle-Persian, Parthian and Turkish:

<sup>724</sup> Brock, "Some Aspect," 98, 103

<sup>725</sup> *The Hymn of the Pearl*, and the *Thomas Literature* (into which it was incorporated) in general, enjoyed a great popularity and circulation in Manichaeian circles; so much that the apocryphal writings attributed to Thomas, twin of Jesus, eventually became discredited in orthodox Christian circles due to their association with Manichaeians.

<sup>726</sup> Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 19.

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>728</sup> The Wise Guide may be a sort of "Second Self" or "personified righteousness," related to the notion of the Divine Alterego in the *Pearl of the Hymn*. (See Klimkeit, *Gnosis*, 18-9.)

<sup>729</sup> An-Nadim, *Fihrist* II, 795.

<sup>730</sup> T II D 79 = M 5569, Parthian: *MM* III: 860-62; *Cat.* p. 111, quoted in Jes. P. Asmussen, *Manichaeian Literature: Representative Texts Chiefly from Middle Persian and Parthian Writings*. (Delmar (NY): Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), 55-6.

One (angel) holds the prize in his hand. The second bears the light garment. The third is the one who possesses the diadem and the wreath and the crown of light.<sup>731</sup>

If thou hast set thyself to love me, then I will set upon thee the robe of Glory and the garland of victory, because thou hast believed in the Truth.<sup>732</sup>

When I reached the Land of (lacuna...) before me, they brought a brightness forth (lacuna...) they brought a [Light], they clothed me in it, (lacuna...) and the garland of victory they brought it and set it upon my head; the Living numbered me in their number and set me down among them, Amen.<sup>733</sup>

You shall put on a radiant garment and gird on Light; And I shall set upon your head the diadem of sovereignty... A palace is the dominion of the primeval First Born, for in it he clothes himself in gladness and binds on the diadem of sovereignty. And all his friends – he binds diadem upon them, and clothes their bodies in the garment of gladness. And all the believers and the pious Elect he clothes in praise, and binds on them the diadem.<sup>734</sup>

They (i.e. the saved) go to the Heaven of Light where the gods abide and are at peace.

They receive their (true) nature (or form), the original splendor of the radiant palace and are joyful.

They put on the resplendent garment, and they live in Paradise eternally.<sup>735</sup>

My soul is saved from all the sins  
which day by day [oppressed] me [ever] in anguish  
And the dark, hot (?) distress is taken from me  
Which at the outset, in the beginning, made me captive in.  
I am clothed with a garment of Light...  
Every kind of... is taken off from me.<sup>736</sup>

## The Garment of Light among Contemporary Heterodox Groups in the Middle East

Yezidis are not the only people among today's heterodox groups in the Middle East whose religious texts speak about a garment of Light. It also appears as an eschatological garment in Mandaean and Nusayrî tradition.

### *Mandaeans:*

<sup>731</sup> Kephalaia 36.12-21, Gardner, *Kephalaia*, 40.

<sup>732</sup> Psalms to Jesus CCXLV, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 53.12-15.

<sup>733</sup> Psalm of Thomas 18, *ibid.*, 224.10-5.

<sup>734</sup> Huwīdagmān VI c.4-13, quoted in M. Boyce, *The Manichaean Hymn Cycles in Parthian*, London Oriental Series 3. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 103. Cf. Huyadagmān (Turkish version), Canto VI, Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 105-6.

<sup>735</sup> A Parthian Hymn, in Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 60.

<sup>736</sup> Boyce, *The Manichaean Hymn-Cycle*, 66 (Parthian).

The “garment of Light” plays an important role in the baptism ritual (*maṣbuta*) of Mandaeans. Mandaeans teach that the water of baptism is an investiture with light garments:

In the name of the Life! Let every man whose strength enables him and who loves his soul come and go down to the *yardna* and be baptised and receive the pure sign, and put on robes of radiant light and set a fresh *klila* [crown or wreath] on his head.<sup>737</sup>

According to Buckley, when Mandaean baptismal texts talk about putting on “robes of radiant Light” and “garment of Light,” they do not refer to material robes but rather to the water of baptism itself, which is the “Lightworld incarnate,” the “garment of Light” for the baptized. “It is in the water we clothe ourselves” says a Mandaean text.<sup>738</sup>

The garment of Light, a garment representing the Lightworld where the Mandaean soul strives to return, is also mentioned in connection with death and the salvation of the human soul (from this material world.) Upon its return to the kingdom of light, its native home, the soul, is invested with a garment and a wreath.<sup>739</sup> According to the Mandaean text, the *Left Ginza*, after death a “helper” (a sort of saviour figure) meets the soul of the righteous – just like in Manichaean myth – bringing with himself certain apparels of clothing. These are a beautiful garment of splendor, a turban of light, a wreath, and such other things as the Great Life presents to its Uthras (shining angelic spirits). The soul is dressed in these garments before beginning its ascent to heaven, back to the Lightworld.<sup>740</sup>

### *Nusayrîs*

The religious literature of the Nusayrîs<sup>741</sup> also makes references to a luminous garment, which Nusayrî souls wore before their fall and imprisonment into the body, and which the soul will eventually regain when it manages to return to its former state of purity. A thirteenth-century treatise of the Nusayrî scholar Yūsuf ibn al-‘Ajūz al-Nashshābî describes the ascent of the Nusayrî gnostic back to the word of light. The soul, on its way up as it rises degree by degree in the spiritual world, and seeks to be completely purified and to follow the instruction essential for a knowledge of

<sup>737</sup> Drower, *Canonical Prayerbook* p. 13, quoted in J. J. Buckley, “Why Once Is Not Enough: Mandaean Baptism (*Maṣbuta*) as an Example of a Repeated Ritual,” *History of Religions* 29.1 (1989): 29.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.* As a matter of fact the garment is present in a material form during the ritual of (repeated) baptism, though there is no ritual of investiture (after the baptism). Instead, those to undergo the rite of baptism wear a white robe (*rasta*) from the beginning of the baptismal ritual. Buckley explains it with the fact that Mandaeans are a baptizing sect, that is baptisms are usually not initiatory, and participants are usually already Mandaeans, they are not entering a new stage of life.

<sup>739</sup> Kurt Rudolph, *Mandaism*, *Iconography of Religions* 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 15.

<sup>740</sup> *Ginza*, p. 516, 14-19, trans. M. Lidzbarski, 1925, referred to in Kraeling “Apocalypse of Paul,” 217-8, and note 29.

<sup>741</sup> On Nusayrîs see chapter “Heterodox Movements.”

God, will remember the spiritual garment that was once in its possession and its entire existence before the fall.<sup>742</sup> When the soul will attain perfect gnosis, “one of the fundamental functions of this gnosis is to evoke in the soul of the Nusayrî Gnostic the memory of its distant past and of the *luminous garments* it wore before its imprisonment in the body.”<sup>743</sup> The so-called “Nusayrî Catechism”<sup>744</sup> also makes mention of the garments of light: enlightened souls return to the world of light and put on garments of light:

Q. 80 Where do the souls of our brethren, the believers go upon their departure from their tombs which are their garment of flesh and blood?

A. They go to the great luminous world where they attain happiness and eternal life for ever and ever, and put on the garments of light, which are the stars.<sup>745</sup>

Bar-Asher and Kofsky are also of the opinion that the garment of Light in Nusayrî tradition reflects direct Christian influence: “The goal of the Nusayrî Gnostic is to restore his lost state in the luminous paradise before the Fall.... The use of the term ‘garments of light’ seems to reflect the author’s awareness of the old Jewish Christian motif interpreting Gen. 3.21. This verse mentions the ‘garments of skins’ (*kutnôt ‘ôr*), which were interpreted as garments of light (*kutnôt ôr*).”<sup>746</sup>

## Comparison of the Yezidi *Khirqe* and the Late Antique Robe of Glory

It has been demonstrated that the garment terminology once enjoyed an immense popularity throughout the Mediterranean, and was a part of the common religious discourse. There is no reason to assume that this motif could not have penetrated what later became Kurdish-Yezidi territory, in the mountains bordering Northern Mesopotamia. Of course, there is no one-to-one correspondence between Yezidi notions concerning the *khirqe* and the different Late Antique “garment theologies” quoted above – nor can there be. After all, Yezidism is a religion of its own, just like Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism or Manichaeism before it, and as such it reworks and creatively transforms elements inherited from older sources. At the same time Late Antique garment symbolism is so multi-faceted itself, with so many threads running through and connecting the different traditions, that unraveling one single thread in this complex woven texture would be more than impossible

Still, just as one can trace the development of the “garment of glory” from the Genesis story

<sup>742</sup> Bar-Asher, *The Nusayrî-‘Alawî Religion*, 77

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78

<sup>744</sup> Researchers are of the opinion that while the question-answer form of this nineteenth-century Nusayrî work was influenced by Western Christian catechisms, which circulated in nineteenth-century Syria, the actual contents of the Catechism are genuine Nusayrî doctrines. See *ibid.*, 166.

<sup>745</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, 192, note 140.

through Judaism, Christianity, dualistic movements to finally contemporary Mandaism, it would also be hard to deny that the Yezidi *khirqe* recalls the “garment of Light” or “robe of Glory” on enough points to make a “genetic” relationship more than likely.

Trying to pinpoint a concrete source for these points of similarity would not be possible (or even necessary.) Syriac Christianity, with a liturgy where garment theology is present to this day<sup>747</sup> would certainly have played a strong influence. Jewish groups, especially the scholars of Mosul, could have made their own mark. Gnostics and Manichaeans are in the race as well. Obviously these different movements would have all influenced the population in Northern Mesopotamia and in the bordering Kurdish mountains throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, with ideas from different sources fusing and fusing again through the contact of different groups and traditions, until it was distilled into what is known today as Yezidi religious tradition.

I would like to briefly sum up here only the most salient examples of possible influence, in order to highlight my contention that notions ultimately deriving from Late Antique garment imagery can be found in Yezidi religious tradition today.

### *God's robe*

As the Yezidi texts quoted above make it clear, the *khirqe* is a part of the divine, inherently connected with it since its moment of creation. It is the clothing of God – by virtue of being both a part of him, and brought into existence by him. It is the very first thing to be created and it is an integral part of the creational process.

Jewish writings mention God's robe of shining light. In the *Hekhaloth* hymns and related literature God's garment of Light has cosmic dimensions, it fills the world with light at the time of creation, or, alternatively, heaven or the heavenly light bodies were created from the light of God's garment.

Yezidi hymns do not explicitly mention light coming from the *khirqe*, but it is repeatedly referred to as *nûranî* – luminous, literally “from light” - and as was seen above, the text of the *Prayer of Pilgrimage* and the *Hymn of A and B* may legitimately lead to the conclusion that *khirqe* was identified with God's light. There are also many references to light coming from God, or from the Pearl in which God was first hidden, and which was simultaneously also created by him,<sup>748</sup> and

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<sup>747</sup> According to Brock: “Although this symbolic approach to theology suffered a set-back with the christological controversies of the fifth and following centuries... it nevertheless continued to be favoured by the liturgical poets... and thus it lives on to the present day, preserved in the liturgical books of the Church of the East” (Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 21-22.)

<sup>748</sup> “One day I was pondering night and day, I seek protection with God. What a great ocean he is! He is also an endless light.” *The Hymn of the Oceans* 1-2 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 203.) “In the ocean there was only a pearl... you quickly gave it a soul, You made your own light manifest in it.” *The Hymn of the Creation of the World* 4 (Kreyenbroek,

from which the *khirqe* appeared.<sup>749</sup>

It may also be worthy of attention that parallels of Yezidi beliefs concerning a sacred garment worn by God can also be found among the Ahl-i Haqq, another heterodox Kurdish speaking group.<sup>750</sup> Ahl-i Haqq texts mention that “for some time He (God) was also in the dress (*libas*) of Adam,” indicating belief in a divine garment that was worn by God, but was also “available” to Adam in his prelapsarian state.<sup>751</sup>

#### *Baptism of the khirqe in the White Spring*

The baptism of the *khirqe* in the White Spring, where all Yezidis must be baptized (as well as the *khirqes* of the *feqirs*,) is another important theme of Yezidi hymns. This association of baptism, sacred spring, garment and God may possibly be traced back to Christian tradition where not only is baptism associated with the garment of Light (just as in Gnosticism,) but Jesus is understood to have deposited the “robe of Glory” in the water upon his descent into the Jordan for his baptism, making it available for all those to be baptized in the “Jordan” in the future.

#### *Angels and the khirqe*

Yezidi angels being in possession of the *khirqe* is part of an old tradition. Angels wearing garments of light – just like the garment of Adam before the Fall, and the garment promised to the righteous as their reward in the hereafter – has been known to both Jewish and Christian tradition.

Identifying the angels with the *khirqes*, in hymns where the emanation of the angels is described as the multiplication of the *khirqes*, is a more exciting development. As far as can be ascertained, this is probably a Yezidi innovation, where material inherited from earlier traditions is reworked in a creative way to help best express Yezidi belief concerning the Godhead and its relation with its angelic emanations. Just as the *khirqe* is an expression of God’s light, love and very being, so are the angels the emanations or expression of this same primordial existence, hence the image of identifying the appearance of the angels with that of the *khirqe*.

It is just possible, that the Gnostic garment, this external, but still integrally connected “accessory” of the saviour figure, which gains an independent existence when the Saviour<sup>752</sup>

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*Yezidism*, 183.) On God inundating the world with his Light, see *The Hymn of the Lights* (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 90-93.)

<sup>749</sup> “My King separated the Pearl from himself, He gazed on it with concentration, He made a mental image and brought in into existence. My King detached the Pearl from himself. The Pearl is a plentiful light, The luminous light is (like) a star. The Pearl comes from the word of the King, The *khirqe* appeared from it. Always holy men receive salutations because of it.” *The Hymn of Sheikh Obekr* 4-6 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 209.)

<sup>750</sup> See chapter on “Heterodox Movements.”

<sup>751</sup> Ivanow, *The Truth Worshipers of Kurdistan*, 169.

<sup>752</sup> The Saviour himself is of course an emanation of the Godhead, as everything in the World of Light.

descends below, to exist then as a tool of Gnosis and also a divine alterego,<sup>753</sup> may have influenced the Yezidi notions of the connections between the *khirqe* and the divine emanations of God.

#### *Adam's lost angelic robe*

The story of Adam's angelic robe and its loss when he transgressed God's command has already been dealt with in the last chapter. There is no need to reiterate the details here.

#### *Khirqe as a garment of Gnosis / spiritual enlightenment*

The comparison of the Yezidi *khirqe* as a garment of divine revelation with the Late Antique garment of Light as a source of religious Gnosis is a difficult task because of possible parallels with the *khirka*, garment of those who choose to follow the path of the true Sufi, who spurns the world and seeks a life of piety, spiritual enlightenment and mystical perfection. Of course, it is exactly these parallels and similarities between the Sufi *khirka* and Late Antique garment of Light that may have made the eventual "marriage" of the two diverse traditions easier, contributing to the birth of the Yezidi *khirqe*. Notwithstanding, some features of this Yezidi garment of religious salvation present characteristics that are peculiar to the garment of Light as a bringer of divine revelation, Gnosis in Late Antique dualistic writings.

The *khirqe* itself is called *sur*, the word used to denote the "mystery," the "essence of the divine," and as a *sur* it is the source of divine revelation.<sup>754</sup> *Khirqe* is a part of divine revelation, it brings gnosis just like (or together with) the sacred hymns,<sup>755</sup> recalling the light garment of the *Paraphrase of Shem, the Untitled Text*, or the *Trimorphic Protennoia*. It is the source of gnosis, the final aim that *feqirs* (all those ready to get rid of their lower soul and seek a higher understanding of themselves and of God) seek for, it is the key to spiritual understanding.<sup>756</sup> The Yezidi *khas*, or incarnated angels (who are themselves the emanations of God's essence, *sur*) bring the *khirqe* (also emanated from God and representing an aspect of his *sur*) to the earth in order to distribute divine wisdom<sup>757</sup> and *silev* (well-being, salvation, deliverance), an image that calls to mind the successive incarnations of divine beings in Gnostic writings, who descend on earth to bring gnosis:

The holy men and angels distributed well-being  
The symbols of Sultad Ezid were the *khirqes*, they stayed on earth.<sup>758</sup>

#### *Khirqe as an eschatological garment*

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<sup>753</sup> See, for example, *Paraphrase of Shem, Pistis Sophia, Hymn of the Pearl*.

<sup>754</sup> E.g. *Hymn of Black Furqan* 25.

<sup>755</sup> E.g. *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 37, 41, 44.

<sup>756</sup> E.g. *Hymn of the Faith* 19-21; *The Hymn of Sheikh Obekr* 7-10.

<sup>757</sup> *Hymn of the Black Furqan* 37-46 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 100-02.)

<sup>758</sup> E.g. *Hymn of the Faith* 22.

Finally there is the eschatological aspect: the garment of Light being given as a reward to the righteous, either immediately after death or when the world comes to an end. This aspect can be found in one form or another in all the religious movements mentioned above, and it is also present in two other contemporary religious traditions, that of the Mandaeans and of the Nusayrîs.

We have seen that Yezidi mythology and hymns paint a similar image. The eschatological *Hymn of Sherfedin* talks about the *khirqe* accruing to those pure souls who fight on the side of the Mahdi at the End of the World. The two versions of the *Hymn of the Faith* attest to similar beliefs.

Having studied the garment imagery in Christian and Gnosticism hymns, another motif in *The Hymn of Sherfedin* can be mentioned now, which helps further reinforce the argument that such a usage of the *khirqe* can be traced back to Late Antique religious language. The passage in the hymn dealing with the conferring of the *khirqes* runs as follows:

The riders of the valley are prepared  
Let them come and open the boxes for you  
So as to adorn you like brides.

Let them come and adorn you like brides  
Let them bring out the red and yellow boxes for you  
Let them cause (people) to accept for themselves the true path of Sheikh Adi and Melik  
Sheikh Sin.

Here are the green and red boxes  
In them there are elegant black *khirqes*, consecrated with holy water  
The Feqirs will abolish laments and injustice from this world.

The Feqirs will abolish lamentations from this world  
They will don the elegant, ..., black *khirqes*  
They will take truth and their rightful share to that place.<sup>759</sup>

Comparing the conferring of the *khirqe* to the adorning of brides in an eschatological hymn is clearly a distant echo of the wedding garment and eschatological wedding banquet, “popular” themes in Syriac Christian eschatological literature (and in Gnostic writings.)<sup>760</sup> The choice of the word “bride” to refer to the *feqirs* is rather curious even so – it should be bridegroom, surely, in such a patriarchic society. The image of a bride is an old Christian (and Jewish) allegory. In Christian texts it usually refers to the Church, while Christ is the bridegroom. But it may similarly refer not only to the “collective community of the faithful,” but also to the individual in it, the human soul. The best known example is the allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. In Jewish tradition it is an allegory of God’s love for the People of Israel (the bride.) Origen, the famous second-century Christian philosopher of Alexandria understands it in his influential

<sup>759</sup> *The Hymn of Sherfedin* 6-9 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 369-70.)

<sup>760</sup> Gnostic literature the wedding imagery seems to refer more to the moment of baptism than to that of death. True, Gnostic texts are little concerned with physical death, as for them the decisive moment is that of receiving the soul-liberating gnosis, also seen as spiritual baptism.

*Homilies on the Song of Songs* as a double allegory of love and wedding between Christ (bridegroom) and the Church (bride), as well as between the believer's soul (bride) and God. This literary background of eschatological wedding garment and "bride"-allegory may account for the surprising image of the *feqirs* (the faithful) being donned in "elegant black *khirqes*" as blushing brides at a wedding in their bridal finery, before taking their rightful place.

\* \* \*

In the previous chapter it was seen how Adam's *khirqe* is closely related to the late Antique ideas concerning the garment of Light that Adam wore in Paradise and lost as a result of his transgression. In this chapter I demonstrated that, beside the myth of Adam, there are many other points where the Late Antique speculations concerning a garment of Light, or robe of Glory have probably exerted a profound influence on the Yezidi concept of *khirqe*. While the concept of *khirqe* as the shirt of Sufis or *feqirs*, men devoted to the quest of God, is of Sufi origin, its Yezidi manifestation displays a number of aspects that can be much better understood if one looks for their roots in the garment theologies of Late Antiquity. Such aspects include the notion that the *khirqe* was originally the cloth of God, a notion well attested in Judaism, being a part of his essence and creative power, as well as the idea that the *khirqe* was then worn by the Angels of God, which can be found in Judaism, Christianity and Gnosticism alike. The association of the baptism of the *khirqe* may go back to the image of baptism in the waters of Jordan, where Jesus deposited the robe of Glory. Seeing the *khirqe* as a means of religious enlightenment, a bringer of divine revelation on par with the sacred texts is best paralleled in Gnostic speculations on the garment of Light. Finally the function of the *khirqe* as an eschatological garment, most likely has, once again, its origins in the rich and long-lasting tradition of the robe of Glory given as a reward to the righteous in the hereafter.

## Chapter 8: “The Song of the Commoner”: The Motif of Sleep and Awakening

### The Title and Composition of The Song of the Commoner (Beyta Cindî)

Already the title (*Beyta Cindî*) of this hymn calling on to the believers to awaken is intriguing. It is called a *beyt*, literally a song, not a hymn. It is a song indeed, in the sense that it has to be sung every morning by men of religion before sunrise.<sup>761</sup> However, as this practice shows, its relevance and sacredness far surpasses that of ordinary *beyts*, which are usually ranked lower than hymns.<sup>762</sup> The *Beyta Cindî* is among the most sacred and respected texts. Translating *cindî* as “commoner” is another interesting point. *Cindî* literally means ‘soldier’ in Kurdish<sup>763</sup> – however, as Yezidi hymns apply this word to “ordinary, hard-working people of no particular distinction,”<sup>764</sup> or to “a godfearing Yezidi, with a connotation of poverty, discipline and simplicity,”<sup>765</sup> Kreyenbroek opted for translating it as “commoner.” (Commoner here corresponds to the English translation of *mirîd*, a Yezidi layman.) Notwithstanding, *cindî* is an appellation that retains a sense of the need to fight for the faith<sup>766</sup> – a sense very much present in the *Beyta Cindî* that calls on the faithful to wake up from sleep, “confront the harsh world head-on,” and go to war.

The song begins with an exhortation to wake up, and throw off sleep. It condemns sleep as “unlawful” for commoners (soldiers), for good men, for discerning people, that is, for those who are wearing the *khirqe*.<sup>767</sup> Sleep is “dark” and leading to “severe punishment and hell” says the song. Next,

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<sup>761</sup> I heard the *Beyta Cindî* at Lalish, at the great, week-long Festival of Sheikh Adi in October. While sharing a room with the female members of the Prince’s family in the guest house attached to the Central Sanctuary, I was woken by some strange and insistent chanting of the *qewels* before dawn. I had no idea what it was, in fact, I was somewhat irritated, what an ungodly hour to sing, until next day, when I learned that what I had heard was in fact nothing else but the *Beyta Cindî*. So I had to return and spend another night there in order to witness and record the ritual. Sadly, there was some uncertainty as to when the song should be performed, so I got up with the help of an alarm clock too early, and spent the next hour worrying if perhaps the ritual was cancelled for some obscure reason. Finally, my endurance brought fruits, and I was rewarded with the sight of men of religion trying to shake all those sleeping in the courtyard in front of the Sanctuary door awake while the *qewels* carried on their singing. I may have heard *Beyta Cindî* on another occasion, on New Year’s dawn while sleeping on a rooftop in Beshiqe-Behzani, but later none of the household could confirm if the distant singing and sound of instruments I had heard before dawn was that of the *Song of the Commoner* sang by the *qewwals* of the village in honour of the holiday. Such an uncertainty about rituals is, by the way, rather typical among lay-Yezidis.

<sup>762</sup> See chapter on “Yezidi Religion.”

<sup>763</sup> It is a word of Arabic origin.

<sup>764</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 241, note 1. According to Dr. Khalil Cindî Rashow (oral information) it means the “soldier of God.”

<sup>765</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 369, Note 29.

<sup>766</sup> Thus, for example, *The Hymn of Sherfedin*, and eschatological hymn on the end of the world and the last battle between good and bad, repeatedly employs this term to talk about those who will fight on Sherfedin’s side.

<sup>767</sup> Again, we must remember the Sufi roots of Yezidism, when the adherents of this Sufi dervish order must have all been considered as *feqirs* at least in a loose sense and, thus, possess the *khirka*.

the song describes how in the middle of the night, a voice comes from high – evidently the wake up call belongs to this voice. It reminds the believers of the job waiting for them. The “owner” of the voice is referred to as a cockerel of many colors, calling from the High Throne, where it is in the company of the Greatest Angel. It repeats the wake up call, saying that nights are not for sleeping, rather it is time for the soldiers to go and confront the world head-on and prepare for war. Further expanding on the theme of sleep, the song declares that the soldier, who was asleep, was slack in his service, not willing, and was therefore dismissed by his master from his job. The injunction against sleep is repeated, decreeing “do not sleep at night,” instead the commoner should look heavenward, to the Eternal Paradise. The next five verses (28-32) leave the subject of sleep, and sing about drinking wine from deep, strong cups - the traditional Sufi symbol of becoming drunk with divine love and ecstasy.<sup>768</sup>

At the thirty-second verse, there is a break in the text. The first part of the *beyt*, the wake up call, ends, and the second begins. This second part, also referred to as the *Hymn of the Headdress*, is said to constitute a separate hymn, though it is recited together with the first part of the *Song of the Commoner*.<sup>769</sup> There is no more mention of sleep and fight or of the cup of divine intoxication, instead the text talks about a luminous, heavenly headdress, crown (*kof*) – around which all the believers and discerning ones have gathered - and future glimpses of heaven. The song ends (44-46) with a description of the holy places in Lalish, though it may be assumed that it is heavenly Lalish (the prototype of the earthly Lalish, also considered the Throne of God) that is being described here, which the soul reaches after ascending to the light of heaven.

To really appreciate this *beyt* and its vague allusions in depth, it is necessary to exceptionally quote all of the song here:

(1) Oh commoner, get up, it is day!  
Enough, throw off (?) this sleep,  
Sleeping (until just) before morning (leads to) severe punishment and hell.

(2) Oh commoner, get up, get up!  
Enough, be content with this (much) sleep,  
Sleeping (until just) before morning (leads to) severe punishment.

(3) Get up from sweet sleep!  
Enough, look at this narrow grave.  
The Feqîrs are without anguish, without anger.

(4) Get up from dark sleep!

<sup>768</sup> “Wine” in Sufi poetry has always stood for divine love and “drunkenness” for mystical intoxication or divine ecstasy. See Omaira Abou-Bakr, “The Symbolic Function of Metaphor in Medieval Sufi Poetry: The Case of Shushtari,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 12 (1992): 46; and A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 58-59.

<sup>769</sup> “According to one of Silêman and Jindî’s informants, the text from here on constitutes a separate *Qewl*, the ‘Hymn of Headdress’, which is normally recited together with the ‘Song of the Commoner.’” Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 242, Note 31. *The Hymn of the Headdress* is also included in the *Hymn of Sheikh Heseni Sultan* with minor variations.

Sleep is now unlawful for commoners.  
Oh you men with a livelihood and payments (to take care of)

(5) Get up from sleep in the morning!  
Sleep is now unlawful because of (the obligation to give) praise.  
Oh you men wearing the *khirqe*.

(6) Get up from the sleep of early dawn!  
Sleep is now unlawful for many  
Oh you men wearing *khirqes* that have been ‘baptised’

(7) Get up from the sleep of evenings!  
Sleep is now unlawful for good men,  
Oh you men with busy lives.

(8) Get up from... sleep!  
Sleep is now unlawful for discerning<sup>770</sup> people  
Oh you men of...<sup>771</sup>

(9) My dear, in the middle of the night.  
A voice from on high is coming

(10) Come, your job is waiting for you (?).  
Your livelihood is a good one,  
It is in the service of the Lord.

(11) My dear, the cockerels call you.  
These nights are not for sleeping.  
The commoners [soldiers] go out into the world.

(12) Commoners [soldiers] do not go to sleep again.  
They will go to confront the harsh world head-on.  
They do not tell lies to their master.

(13) The cockerel, its feathers are white.  
It is calling from the High Throne,  
It is with the pre-eternal Angel.<sup>772</sup>  
Our shouts and cries for help are directed to the assembly of Sheikh Adi.

(14) The cockerel, its feathers are red.  
It is calling from the throne below,  
It is with the Angel who presides over baptism.  
Our shouts and cries for help are directed to the assembly of the *qibla* of the full moons.

(15) The cockerel, its feathers are yellow.  
It is calling from the throne on high,  
It is with the Greatest Angel.

<sup>770</sup> *Zergûn* is translated as “discerning” by Kreyenbroek. According to Dr Khalil Cindî Rashow (oral communication) this word refers to a true Sufi, someone occupying a high step in understanding God.

<sup>771</sup> The Kurdish text has *xudanêd danan û stûna*, which means “gifts and pillars,” but Kreyenbroek was of the opinion that these made little sense in this context. See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 241, note 12.

<sup>772</sup> *Melkê beriyê* – the angel who was before.

Our shouts and cries for help are directed to Sheykh Shems the Tartar.

(16) The cockerel its feathers are green.

Do end this sleep!

Get up and ask Sheykh Adi for a livelihood, for *berat*,<sup>773</sup> and for sustenance

(17) The cockerel of the Throne has crowed,

The one on earth has answered.

Sheikh Adi is in Hakkari,

My King is in the merciful heart.

(18) The cockerel, crowing,

Is calling to the beloved.

It faces the Angel above

Oh my brother, it has made a light I the assembly of Sheykh Adi.

(19) The cockerel, its feathers are many-coloured.

A voice comes from the Throne,

All who are awake are preparing themselves for war!

(20) My dear, the Feqîrs are clever,

They do not see their master with their eyes.

They receive their livelihood from the great Master.

(21) Oh commoner, get up, it is day!

The Feqîrs have gone to face the sun..

The fronts of their *khirqes*, their buttons and their *khirqes* have become wet with dew.

(22) Get up from sleep in the morning!

The Feqîrs have gone to the Doorway<sup>774</sup>

The front parts of the *khirqes*, their buttons and their *khirqes* have become wet with dew.

(23) Get up from darkness, friend.

Head for the streams of water,

Cleanse your hands and eyes,

Such has (always) been our costume, comrade.

(24) Oh commoner, you were asleep.

You are slack in your service,

That is why the great Master has dismissed you from your job.

(25) I was not willing, that is why I slept.

Had I been willing, I would not have slept,

That is why the great Master has dismissed me from my job.

(26) Oh commoner, do not eat by day,

And do not sleep by night.

Each day when the sun comes up,

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<sup>773</sup> Little balls of earth from the Central Sanctuary in Lalish.

<sup>774</sup> I.e., the “‘the doorway of the Prince’ at the Sanctuary, where the Feqîrs stand when they pray in the mornings” Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 241, Note 26.

You shall receive your livelihood from the Great Master.

(27) Oh commoner, do not eat in the daytime,  
And do not sleep at night.  
Lift your head, look at the properties and gardens (above):  
Eternal Paradise is the realm of Sultan Êzîd, peace be upon him.

(28) Oh commoner, you are kind,  
We need wine from the deep cups.  
Come on, brother, (let us go) to this pond, the property of Ebû Bekr the  
Righteous.

(29) Oh, commoner, you are a commoner,  
We need wine from the strong cups.  
Come on, brother, (let us go) to this pond, the property of ‘Eli and ‘Umer.

(30) Oh, commoner, you are the guide.  
We need wine from special cups.  
Come on, brother, (let us go) to his pond, the property of Khidr-Ilyas.

(31) Oh commoner, you are the one who knows the way,  
We need wine from special cups.  
Come on, brother (let us go) to this pond, the property of ‘Eli and ‘Umer.

(32) Oh commoner, you are enlightened,  
We need wine from the discerning cups.  
Come on, brother, (let us go) to this pond, the property of Shems el-Dîn and Fekhr el-  
Dîn.

(33) My heart is full of grief,  
The Pîr whose name is (Pîrê) Libnan.  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
The ornament of the Mystery of Sheykh Mend, the son of Fekhr.

(34) Your headdress is strong,  
The saints have gathered around it  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
The ornament of the mystery of Sheykh Adi.

(35) Your headdress is in place,  
The Mirîds have gathered around it.  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
The ornament of the mystery of Sultan Êzîd.

(36) Your headdress is great,  
The believers have gathered around it.  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
The ornament of the mystery of Melek Sheykh Hesên.

(37) Your headdress is pristine,  
It has come to be commemorated in the world.  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,

The ornament of the mystery of Sheykh Obekr.

(38) Your headdress is luminous  
The discerning ones have gathered around it.  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
The ornament of the mystery of Shems el-Dîn and Fekhr el-Dîn.

(39) Your headdress is in order,  
The good men have taken their share of it.  
O Pîrê Libnan, Khidr-Ilyas himself is (your) *neqîb*.<sup>775</sup>

(40) Your headdress is precious,  
It flew, it went away, it was in Heaven,  
It circled around the Throne

(41) Mîr Seja of Seja,  
Nasural-Dîn of Baban,  
The Lion Mehmed Reshan,  
The Pîr who is the translator,  
Dawûd the son of Derman,  
Have truly surrendered their souls.  
Mîr Hesên Meman  
Is the leader of all forty of us.<sup>776</sup>  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan  
He ornament of the Mystery of Sheykh Mend of Fekhr.

(42) I went towards that light.  
One cries out in deep emotion.  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
Oh the forecourt, of the surrounding wall.

(43) I went towards heaven.  
That sight pleases me,  
The Commoner has become a Prince dressed in Black.

(44) I went on the Roof of the Cave.<sup>777</sup>  
We saw the streams of the ocean,<sup>778</sup>  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan,  
Their cups stood on the *gezîr*.<sup>779</sup>

(45) I went to the *Silavgeh*,<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>775</sup> *Neqîb* is a Persian word, meaning “chief, leader” or “personal servant.” It is often used in connection with Khidr-Ilyas. See Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 240, Note 34.

<sup>776</sup> Hesên Meman is said to have been the leader of the forty *pîrs* who became the ancestors of today’s *pîr* families. The descendants of the Hesên Meman *pîr* lineage are forbidden to marry with other *pîrs*, bringing the lineage to near extinction in our days.

<sup>777</sup> Part of the Lalish Sanctuary above the sacred Cave.

<sup>778</sup> According to Kreyenbroek’s informant “the image refers to the streams of pilgrims coming up to the Sanctuary.” Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 242, note 44.

<sup>779</sup> I.e., a special kind of firewood used in Lalish, which may only be handled by selected people qualified to do so. According to Kreyenbroek “the implication seems to be that all pilgrims had reached such exceptional status.” Ibid., note 45.

<sup>780</sup> The “place of greeting”, the stone marking the place on the path leading to Lalish, from where the valley is first

Our joy in the Spires,<sup>781</sup>  
Oh beloved Pîrê Libnan.

(46) At the eternal place, at the eternal foundation,<sup>782</sup>  
We shall perform worship and prostration for Sultan Sheykh Adi.  
We are deficient, God is perfect.<sup>783</sup>

How can we interpret the Song of the Commoner? Verses 28-32 can easily be disposed of. Wine, and becoming drunk on wine, normally forbidden by Shariya, is a frequently employed symbol of divine love and ecstasy in Sufi poetry. This symbol was borrowed by Yezidi religious poetry where the cup of wine is both connected with divine love and spiritual enlightenment.<sup>784</sup> Intoxication is part of seeking the divine mystery:

I am drunk from three cups,  
I am overflowing from the white cup  
In blackness I found perfection.<sup>785</sup>

I am drunk, I am intoxicated,  
I am a hunter of falcons,<sup>786</sup>  
I am a lover of the precious Mystery.<sup>787</sup>

Yezidi hymns, as has already been mentioned, describe how Adam's lifeless body became animated when he was made to drink from the Cup of Love.<sup>788</sup> Wine also plays an important role as an instrument of spiritual enlightenment in the so-called *Great Hymn* on the deeds of Sultan Ezî (Yazid bin Muawiya), who – running into opposition from the representatives of orthodox Islam and Shariya – turns the river of Damascus into wine, making the whole population drunk:

What a wine!  
Any creature that has a little of it,  
Give his life and his house for it,  
In his eyes this world becomes a feast.<sup>789</sup>

A Shariya Judge is then sent to Sultan Ezî to turn him back to the right road, but upon tasting as

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sighted. Pilgrims used to fire their rifles at his spot and kiss the stone.

<sup>781</sup> The Twins Spires of the Central Sanctuary, many hymns contain references to this conspicuous feature of Lalish.

<sup>782</sup> Kreyenbroek writes: "Both PX and C [his informants] thought that these words referred to actual places in the Lalish valley, although they could only speculate as the identity of these sites." (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 242, Note 47.) We must not forget, however, that earthly Lalish is merely a mirror or counterpart of heavenly Lalish, the Throne of God above, and the words "eternal place, eternal foundation" are far more likely to refer to this heavenly Throne.

<sup>783</sup> *Beyta Cindî*, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 231-9.

<sup>784</sup> Which, as shall be seen later, is the theme pursued in the *Song of the Commoner*.

<sup>785</sup> *The Hymn of Ezdina Mir 1*, Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 184.

<sup>786</sup> Kreyenbroek thinks that "the image of the falcon may go back to that bird's association with the concept of *xwarnah* [light or glory] in Zoroastrian literature" (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 271, note 1.) The falcon is also a Sufi symbol. It may refer to the divine wisdom a man must cultivate in himself. In Rumi's poetry it refers to the soul seeking God. In this Yezidi hymn it seems to refer to the divine mystery, in keeping with both the Sufi concept of divine wisdom, and the Zoroastrian concept of *xwarnah*, and hunting for it can be interpreted as sort of seeking for gnosis, divine mystery.

<sup>787</sup> *The Hymn of Pîr Sheref 1*, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 265.

<sup>788</sup> "The Prophet Adam drank from that cup and came to life, He became intoxicated and trembled, Flesh grew on him, blood circulated in his veins. The Prophet Adam drank from that cup, The miraculous power of that cup manifested itself: Thus the Prophet Adam sneezed and through it he became conscious." *The Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 35-6 (Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 177.)

<sup>789</sup> *The Great Hymn* 87 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 168.)

little wine as the size of a nail, he himself becomes converted to the faith of Sultan Ezî, an initiate of his mystery:

The Shari'a judge no longer reads papers,  
He has become a member of the Friends,  
He became a dancer at the feast.

He became a dancer and danced,  
He became a diver and dove,  
The Shari'a judge became an initiate of that mystery.<sup>790</sup>

Thus the verses speaking of the cup of wine in the middle of the song may be interpreted as referring to religious intoxication, a special, Sufi form of divine enlightenment.

What about the rest of the *beyt*, then? The first part, calling for awakening and inveighing against sleep as unlawful, dark and leading to punishment, and the third part, on the headdress are harder to interpret. Jasim Murad's interpretation that the poem is "a cultural celebration of the Yazidi emphasis on hard work and on living a simple and moral life" and that it "elaborates on the negative consequences of indulging in excessive sleep which, if it occurs will disrupt the daily work of the peasants, deprive the community of the means of production, consequently generating economic crisis"<sup>791</sup> can probably be discarded as a rather too materialist approach. Seeing the song as a call for spiritual awakening is a much more likely solution, one shared by most of those very few Yezidis who are actually aware of the song's content.<sup>792</sup> This is the line I propose to take up here, and demonstrate that once again the theme of spiritual awakening and condemning sleep as an enemy of the truly pious can be traced back to the religious language of Late Antiquity.

## Sleep and the "Call of Awakening" in Late Antiquity

The metaphors of sleep and awakening were part of Late Antique religious language, especially among movements with a dualistic outlook on the opposition of spirit and matter. The image of sleep, being asleep (together with death, oblivion and drunkenness) was understood to symbolize religious ignorance, spiritual unawareness. "It expresses a fundamental feature of existence in the world"<sup>793</sup> namely man's total entanglement in the material world, a complete losing of one's consciousness and awareness of higher things. "The soul slumbers in Matter."<sup>794</sup> Sleep may also serve to describe the sensation that life on the earth is "mere illusions and dreams, though nightmarish ones,

<sup>790</sup> *The Great Hymn* 110-1 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 171.)

<sup>791</sup> Jasim Murad, "The Sacred Poems," 232.

<sup>792</sup> As has been made clear above, the song is not easily accessible to most Yezidis, unless in writing, as very few people would actually hang around at four in the morning in the guest house of Lalish in order to hear it sung.

<sup>793</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 69.

<sup>794</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

which we are powerless to control.”<sup>795</sup> Awakening, on the other hand (or coming back to life, remembering, becoming sober) was a metaphor of conversion, acquiring Gnosis, religious knowledge or spiritual consciousness. The link between sleep and awakening is the “Call from without” intended to break the spell of sleep in this world. It represents the transmudane which “penetrates the enclosure of the word and makes itself heard therein.”<sup>796</sup> Many literary works (especially Gnostic ones) are in effect appeals of awakening themselves, thus constituting a peculiar genre. Homiletic appeals for religious conversion coached in the traditional language of sleep and awakening are often loosely termed the “Gnostic call” in the literature, though “in fact [they] transcend narrow sectarian and philosophical boundaries”<sup>797</sup> and can be found all over the religious palette of the age. Already the Apostle Paul utilized the image of sleep and awakening in his Epistles:

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light (Rom. 13: 11-12)

Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. (Eph. 5:14)

The “call of awakening” can be found in some later Christian works as well. An Armenian manuscript on the Harrowing of Hell paraphrases the words of Paul:

When the earth was cleft down to the foundations, one could see Christ in hell saying: “Awake Adam and arise from the dead; awake, thou that sleepest in darkness that my light may illuminate thee, awake and be strengthened thou that sittest in darkness; awake and be clothed in immortality, thou who sat in the shadow of death; awake and be freed, thou wast bound by poverty (?) as with iron”; And having said this he ascended to heaven.<sup>798</sup>

In an Easter Eve homily ascribed to Epiphanius, which closely parallels the Armenian text, Christ takes Adam by the hand and raises him, saying the words just cited above and adding:

I, thy god, who for thy sake became thy son... now I say... to the prisoners, Go forth; to those that are in darkness, Show yourselves, to those that sleep, Arise, and to thee, O sleeping one, Arise... let us go hence, from death to life, from corruption to incorruption, from darkness to eternal light, from suffering to joy, from bondage to freedom, from prison to the heavenly Jerusalem, from captivity to the delights of Paradise, from earth to heaven.<sup>799</sup>

The “call of awakening” can also be found in some writings of the so-called *Hermetic Corpus*, the Greek pseudepigraphic literature that grew up about the figure of Hermes Trismegistos.<sup>800</sup>

<sup>795</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>796</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>797</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 366.

<sup>798</sup> S. Nersessian, “An Armenian Version of the Homilies on the Harrowing of Hell,” *Dumbarton Oaks Paper* 8 (1954): 218.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid., and see also Migne PG 43, 461-4

<sup>800</sup> Thrice great Hermes – identified with Thoth, the Egyptian god of learning. The texts of the *Hermetic Corpus* were composed in Egypt, probably between the first and third century AD. The *Corpus* contains a wide-ranging subject-

*Poimandres*<sup>801</sup> (*Pimander* for the scholars of Renaissance) is one of the pseudo-philosophical works of the. It deals with the creation of the world and the origins of mankind. At the end of the tract the author is entrusted with passing on to mankind the revelation disclosed to him by the divine intellect, Poimandres. Accordingly he starts his preaching with these words:

“O people, inhabitants of earth! You have given yourselves up to drunkenness and sleep and to unacquaintance with god. Get sober! Stop carousing, all enchanted by irrational sleep.”

And they, when they heard me, came to me with one accord.<sup>802</sup>

## The Gnostics

It is in the works of dualistic character, which were already given to seeing this world as a place of prison, bondage, darkness, spiritual unconsciousness and death, that the metaphor of sleep and awakening becomes really central. In fact, the Gnostic message itself is nothing else but a Call of Awakening, intended to wake up those slumbering in ignorance, hence its modern appellation, “the Gnostic Call.” According to Jonas, the Call connects the command to awaken with three doctrinal elements: reminding the soul of its “root” or origin, a promise of salvation,<sup>803</sup> and a moral instruction to stay awake, that is, to live in conformity with the newly won “knowledge.”<sup>804</sup>

The use of these three elements is well exemplified in the *Apocryphon of John*, where the motif of sleep and awakening stretches through the entire work. Here sleep symbolizes the power of the Evil Ruler over Adam (and man), and Adam’s (man’s) lack of Gnosis (concerning the origin of his spirit), while the Call comes from the perfect Pronoia,<sup>805</sup> a revealer and saviour figure, who repeatedly descends into the lower world to awaken Adam, and later mankind, from his deep sleep. Adam’s sleep and awakening is an integral part of the Gnostic myth, which, as usual, is an inverted interpretation of the Old Testament legend of Adam. After the creation of Adam the powers of darkness realize that – due to the presence of the light spirit (referred to as “luminous afterthought”) in Adam - he is superior to them, so they decide to enclose Adam in matter, making him a body out of earth, water, fire and

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matter from astrological tractates through writings on alchemy, magic or the power of certain gemstones to pseudo-philosophical works, which are based on revelation rather than observation and reason. “Typically, they stress the importance of personal acquaintance (gnosis) with god” (Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 447) and they aim at spiritual rebirth through enlightening the mind. The theological content of these latter works is strongly syncretistic in nature and has been referred to as “intellectualized pagan thought.” It shows some affinity to Middle Platonism, the Chaldean Oracles, as well as to classic Gnostic scripture and Valentinian Gnostic writings. Some scholars have postulated a Gnostic influence, but Layton believes it was rather the Hermetic works that influenced emerging Gnosticism. They show no contact with Christianity, and only rare allusions to Jewish scripture.

<sup>801</sup> *Poimandres* is one of those exceptional Hermetic works that show a dependence on Jewish cosmogony and an influence of Jewish literary style. It also shows a strong Platonic influence, especially as regards Plato’s *Timaeus*.

<sup>802</sup> *Poimandres*, 27f, in Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 458.

<sup>803</sup> This may be constituted by a mere reference to either ascension to heave or baptism.

<sup>804</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 81.

<sup>805</sup> Providence, also referred to as Epinoia, Afterthought or Reflection.

fiery wind, and then put him in the garden of Paradise. “This is the tomb of the form of the body with which the robbers had clothed the man, the fetters of forgetfulness.”<sup>806</sup> Not content with closing in Adam in the fetters of forgetfulness, the Evil Ruler tries to empty him of his light in a passage that gives a typically Gnostic twist to *Genesis* 2.21 on the creation of Eve:

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and from the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

For the Gnostic the sleep referred to in the Old Testament *Genesis* is nothing else but the state of spiritual unconsciousness, and it is the luminous, spiritual power in Adam that the jealous Ruler is after, not simply his rib:

And he [the Chief Ruler] knew that he [Adam] was disobedient to him [the Chief Ruler] due to the light of Reflection<sup>807</sup> which is in him, which made him more correct in his thinking than the Chief Ruler. And the Chief Ruler wanted to bring out the power which he himself had given him. And he brought a “trance” over Adam.<sup>808</sup>

And I said to the saviour “What is ‘trance’”? And he said

“It is not as Moses wrote and you heard. For he said in his first book: ‘He put him to sleep’ but it was in his perception...

And he brought a part of his power out of him. And he made another human form in the shape of a woman... And he brought the part which he had taken from the power of the man into the female form and not as Moses said ‘his rib.’”<sup>809</sup>

Adam is put to sleep, but, according to the Gnostic scheme of Biblical interpretation, deliverance is at hand in the person of Epinoia of light:

And in that moment luminous Reflection (Epinoia) appeared and she lifted the veil which lay over his mind. And he became sober from the drunkenness of darkness...<sup>810</sup>

I appeared in the form of an eagle on the tree of knowledge,

Which is the reflection from the Providence of pure light,

That I might teach them

And awaken them out of the depth of sleep. For they were both in a fallen state and they recognized their nakedness. Reflection appeared to them as light and she awakened their thinking.<sup>811</sup>

The story then continues as has already been expounded in the chapter on the creation of Adam. The Chief Ruler, realizing that Adam and Eve have transgressed his commandment, eaten from the tree of knowledge, and have once again become possessor of Gnosis, becomes enraged: “And he [the Chief Ruler] cast them out of paradise, and he clothed them in a gloomy darkness.”<sup>812</sup>

With this begins the next chapter of mankind’s history that is in fact nothing else than an unrelenting war between the powers of Darkness attempting to keep Adam’s descendants in the sleep

<sup>806</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II.21.10-13, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 123.

<sup>807</sup> Epionia, Layton translates it as “Afterthought,” *Gnostic Scriptures*, 45.

<sup>808</sup> Layton translates “And it caused deep sleep to fall upon Adam,” in *Gnostic Scriptures*, 46.

<sup>809</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II. 22,15-23,4, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 129-31.

<sup>810</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II. 23,5-8, *ibid.*, 133.

<sup>811</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II. 23,26-35, *ibid.*,135-7.

<sup>812</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II. 24, 7-8, *ibid.*, 137.

of oblivion, and the powers of Light, attempting to awaken mankind to its origin and condition. Mankind is divided into groups. Some will be strong in spirit and attain salvation. Other souls, however, will be under the power of the counterfeit spirit created by the powers of darkness in order to keep men in the sleep of oblivion, their heart closed to the truth “until it [the soul] awakens from forgetfulness and acquires knowledge. And if thus it becomes perfect, it is saved.”<sup>813</sup>

The means of this awakening is, of course, the Call from without (from the *Pleroma*), personified by the Epinoia or Pronoia, the Divine Forethought (or Reflection, referred to in the text as Mother as well), who earlier brought help to Adam. Her message is delivered in a first-person speech at the very end of the *Apocryphon of John*, in what Layton termed as the “Poem of Deliverance”<sup>814</sup> but could just as well be called a “Call of Awakening.” G. MacRae argues that this poem must have originally been a Gnostic liturgical hymn, probably recited at a ceremony of initiation or Gnostic baptism.<sup>815</sup> The hymn describes Pronoia’s repeated descents to the material world and her attempts at bringing gnosis, until she finally succeeds on the third try:

I, therefore, the perfect Providence (Pronoia) of the all... I am the richness of the light, I am the remembrance of the pleroma...<sup>816</sup> And I entered into the midst of their prison, which is the prison of the body. And I said, “He who hears, let him get up from the deep sleep.” And he wept and shed tears... and he said, “Who is it that calls my name, and from where has this hope come to me, while I am in the chains of the prison?” And I said, “I am the Providence (Pronoia) of the pure light... Arise and remember that it is you who hearkened, and follow your root, which is I, the Merciful One, and guard yourself against the angels of poverty and the demons of chaos and all those who ensnare you, and beware of the deep sleep and the enclosure of the inside of Hades.”

And I raised him up, and sealed him in the light of the water with five seals, in order that death might not have power over him from this time on.<sup>817</sup>

Both “sleeping themes” of the *Apocryphon of John*, the sleep of Adam and his awakening by an envoy the Light World, and the sleep of man and his awakening by the message of the Saviour were popular themes of Gnostic literature. The sleep of Adam and his awakening to a revelation of knowledge, based on the exegesis of the *Genesis* 2.21 story, is a recurrent theme of Gnostic literary works which display a demonstrable Jewish influence. This makes some scholars conclude that it may even have been the Gnostic (or gnosticising Jewish) interpretation of Gen. 2.21, which gave

<sup>813</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II.27,9-11, *ibid.*, 155.

<sup>814</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 50.

<sup>815</sup> G. MacRae, “Sleep and Awakening in Gnostic Texts,” in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 502. The hymnic quality of the passage was already noticed by J. Doresse, though he did not identify it as cultic (*ibid.*) MacRae points to the hypothetical reconstruction of Gnostic mystery-initiation by P. Pokorny based on the Naasene Homily recorded in Hippolytus’ anti-heretical tract and the Hermetic tractates I and XIII, and contends that the hymn would perfectly fit the framework of such a ceremony, at the heart of which is the Call of Awakening.

<sup>816</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II.30,1-4, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 169.

<sup>817</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II.31.1-25, *ibid.*, 171-175. As MacRae points out (“Sleep and Awakening,” 497) this is a classic example of the Call of awakening, as it contains all the three elements outlined by Jonas.

birth to the metaphor of sleep for spiritual ignorance.<sup>818</sup> In any case, in all the published Coptic Gnostic works expounding the myth of human origins, the sleep of Adam is part of the Paradise story.<sup>819</sup> In some texts the sleep of Adam is taken out of its original framework originating in Gen. 2.21, demonstrating how deeply imbedded this motif became in Gnostic mythological language, taking on a life of its own. Thus, for example, in the *Apocalypse of Adam* the sleep of Adam is mentioned only after Adam has lost his glory, that is after tasting the forbidden fruit. In this work Adam tells his son Seth about his life, how he and Eve went about in glory (a reference to the garment of Light) and resembled the great eternal angels. But then the evil god, the ruler of the aeons (that is of the material world) enslaved them, enveloped them in forgetfulness, and they lost their glory:

After these (events) we became darkened in our heart(s). Now I slept in the thought of my heart. And I saw three men before me whose likeness I was unable to recognise, since they were not from the powers of the who had [created] [us]<sup>820</sup>... saying to me “Arise, Adam, from the sleep of death, and hear about the aeon and the seed of that man to whom life has come, who came from you and from Eve, your wife.”<sup>821</sup>

Describing enlightenment and salvation (that is, the receiving of Gnosis) of the individual man as an awakening, and the Gnostic Saviour, who saves by bringing Gnosis, as a figure who awakens those who are asleep, is another frequent motif. Thus, in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, when Barbelo, the First Thought is described in the opening hymn, which Layton terms the “Wisdom Monologue,”<sup>822</sup> his aspect as a saviour is expressed with the following words:

I am the life of my Epinoia (i.e., afterthought) that dwells within every Power and every eternal movement... I walk upright and those who sleep I [awaken]. And I am the sight of those who dwell in sleep.<sup>823</sup>

In the Paraphrase of Shem, Shem, the receiver of the divine massage, feels as awakened from sleep:

And I, Shem, awoke as if from a deep sleep. I marveled when I received the power of the Light and his whole thought. And I proceeded in faith to shine with me. And the righteous one followed us with my invincible garment.<sup>824</sup>

In the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, a Christian Gnostic homily, where the ascended Christ speaks to his followers on earth, the crucifixion of the Son of Majesty, the ultimate sacrifice of the

<sup>818</sup> MacRae, “Sleep and Awakening,” 498-99. MacRae even goes as far as to tentatively suggest that Eph. 5.14 (quoted above,) which scholars believe is citing an early liturgical work, most likely a baptismal hymn, is actually borrowing its language from some kind of Gnostic liturgical homily or hymn. (ibid., 505-6.)

<sup>819</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>820</sup> That is, they are envoys of the Light World, and not belonging to the rulers of matter.

<sup>821</sup> *Apocalypse of Adam* 65,22-66,8, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI*, 159. The second part of the sentence refers to Seth, the inheritor of the Gnosis lost by Adam and Eve, and his immovable race. On this topic, see the next chapter.

<sup>822</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 86.

<sup>823</sup> *Trimorphic Protennoia* 35.12-22 in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, 403.

<sup>824</sup> Paraphrase of Shem 41.22-3 (see also 47.11) in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, 111. Note the reference to the invincible garment given to the awakened Shem.

divine (albeit in a docetic sense) brings an end to the sleep of mankind:

They nailed him to the cross, and they fastened him with four nails of bronze. The veil of his temple he tore with his hands. There was a trembling that overcame the chaos of the earth, for the souls which were in the sleep below were released, and they were resurrected. They walked about boldly, having laid aside jealousy of ignorance and unlearnedness beside the dead tombs, having put on the new man, having come to know that perfect blessed and perfect one of the eternal and incomprehensible Father and of the boundless light, which I am.<sup>825</sup>

Gnosis is therefore awakening (or rather awakening is Gnosis.) The Gospel of Truth, a homily describing the reception of Gnosis through metaphors familiar from biblical and philosophical traditions, and attributed to the second century Valentinus,<sup>826</sup> even gives what could be termed an “exegesis” of the Gnostic use of the sleep-awakening metaphor. The classic Gnostic myth, as expounded above, is absent from the Gospel of Truth, its place is taken by a mysticism that centers on salvation through Gnosis (acquaintance) of the saviour, the self and God. Dispensing with the mythological scenes known from non-Valentinian Gnostic texts, sleep is described as a void, lacking reality by comparison to truth. It originates in error, the “evil actor” of the Gospel of Truth. Awakening is the turn from ignorance to Gnosis, the very opposite of sleep.<sup>827</sup> “Gnosis awakens one from the intoxication, anxiety, nightmares, and blindness of ignorance and calls one to turn back to the true source of one's existence and repose, the Father of the Entirety:”<sup>828</sup>

Such is the way of those who have cast ignorance from them like sleep, not esteeming it as anything, nor do they esteem its works as solid things either. But, they leave them behind like a dream in the night. The knowledge of the Father they value as the dawn. This is the way each one has acted, as though being asleep at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way he has <come to knowledge> as if he had awakened. {And} Good for the man who will return and awaken. And blessed is he who has opened the eyes of the blind.<sup>829</sup>

Exhortations against sleep addressed at man in general also occur in many Gnostic works:

My son, listen to my teaching, which is good and useful, and end the sleep which weighs heavily upon you.... Do not become desirous of gold and silver, which are profitless, but clothe yourself with wisdom like a robe; put knowledge on yourself

<sup>825</sup> *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 58.24-59.9, trans. G. Riley in *Nag Hammadi Codex* VII, 171-73.

<sup>826</sup> Valentinus (d. circa 170 AD) and his immediate followers, whose aim was to raise Christian theology to the level of pagan philosophical studies, still considered themselves members of the universal Christian church, and not as members of a rival religion in the second and third centuries. Eventually, however, the Valentinian school became far removed from the established Church. Their followers could be found all over the Roman world, including Syria and Mesopotamia. See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 267-70.

<sup>827</sup> The sleep induced by the evil rulers when they tried to steal the spirit hidden in Adam is already referred to as “Ignorance” in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*: “The rulers took counsel with one another and said, ‘Come, let us cause a deep sleep to fall upon Adam.’ And he slept. - Now the deep sleep that they ‘caused to fall upon him, and he slept’ is Ignorance. - They opened his side like a living woman. And they built up his side with some flesh in place of her, and Adam came to be endowed only with soul.” *Hypostasis of the Archons* 89.4-19, in *Nag Hammadi Codex* II,2-7, vol. 1, 241.

<sup>828</sup> A. McGuire, “Conversion and Gnosis in the ‘Gospel of Truth,’” *Novum Testamentum* 28.4 (1986): 345.

<sup>829</sup> *Gospel of Truth* 29.32-30.16, tr. H. W. Attridge and G. W. MacRae, in *Nag Hammadi Codex* I (*The Jung Codex*), NHS 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 99-101.

like a crown, and be seated upon a throne of perception.<sup>830</sup>

Then beware, lest somehow you fall into the hands of robbers. Do not allow sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids, that you may be saved like a gazelle from snares, and like a bird from a trap. Fight the great fight as long as the fight lasts, while all the powers are staring after you - not only the holy ones, but also all the powers of the Adversary ... Listen, my son, and do not be slow with your ears.<sup>831</sup>

## The Hymn of the Pearl

The *Hymn of the Pearl* provides perhaps the most eloquent literary adaptation of the metaphor of sleep and awakening, while the whole work itself is probably nothing else but a literary Call of Awakening. When the young prince, after taking off his glorious garment, descends to the land of Egypt to go and take the pearl from the serpent, he is found out by the “natives” to be a stranger in their midst, and his sufferings at their hand is described in the language of sleep:

But in some way or another,  
They perceived that I was not of their county  
So they mingled their deceit with me,  
And they made me eat their food.  
I forgot that I was a son of kings,  
And I served their king.  
And I forgot the pearl,  
On account of which my parents had sent me  
Because of the burden of their exhortations,  
I fell into a deep sleep.<sup>832</sup>

Seeing their son's plight, his heavenly parents then send a letter to awaken him:

Awake and arise from your sleep,  
and hear the words of our letter.  
Remember that you are a son of kings,  
Consider the slavery you are serving.  
Remember the pearl,  
On account of which you were sent to Egypt.  
Think of your glorious garments,  
Remember your splendid toga,  
Which you will put on and wear  
When your name is called out from the book of the  
Combatants (athletes).  
And with your brother, our viceroy,  
With him, you will be in our kingdom.<sup>833</sup>

As we can see, the letter (which will then become the Call from Without)<sup>834</sup> comprises all the three

<sup>830</sup> *The Teachings of Silvanus* 88.22-89.4, in *Hag Hammadi Codex VII*, 291-93.

<sup>831</sup> *Teachings of Silvanus* 113.31-114.17, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, 357-59. Note the reference to war, a recurrent motif in the text.

<sup>832</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 31-35, trans. Ferreira, 46.

<sup>833</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 43-8, *ibid.*, 48

<sup>834</sup> The letter as a metaphor for the message of salvation can already be found in the Ode of Solomon 23.

elements that make up the Gnostic Call in Jonas' definition: it reminds the prince of its origins, calls attention to the task awaiting him, which he had forgotten about, and finally promises redemption, when it talks of the prince regaining his glorious garment, and of becoming viceroy along with his brother in the heavenly kingdom. Transforming into a "Call," the letter becomes an eagle, making it very clear that this message is no ordinary letter, but a voice coming from outside of our world:

And my letter [was] a letter,<sup>835</sup>  
 Which the king sealed with his right hand...  
 It flew in the likeness of an eagle,  
 the king of birds.  
 It flew and alighted beside me,  
 and all of it became speech (words) for me.  
 At its voice and the sound of its rustling,  
 I awoke and rose from my sleep...  
 I remembered that I was a son of kings,  
 and my free soul longed for its natural state.  
 I remembered the pearl,  
 on account of which I was sent to Egypt.<sup>836</sup>

As we know the awakened young prince then manages to charm the serpent, snatch the pearl and return to him home, led by his letter, his "awakener:"

And my letter, my awakener,  
 I found before me on the road.  
 And as with its voice it had awakened us,  
 So also with its light it was leading me.  
 Because of the royal silk,  
 It was shining before me with its appearance (form).  
 And with its voice and with its guidance,  
 It was also encouraging me to hurry.<sup>837</sup>

Led by the letter, the prince reaches the border of the kingdom, where his glorious garment is already waiting for him so that they can become one again.

## The Manichaeans

According to the classic work of Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, "the symbol of the call as the form in which the transmundane makes its appearance within the world is so fundamental to Eastern Gnosticism that we may even designate the Mandaean and Manichaean religions as 'religions of the call'"<sup>838</sup>

<sup>835</sup> The Greek version says: "Like a messenger was the letter" (Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 75.) The Greek wording makes it even more pronounced that the letter is personified as a savior.

<sup>836</sup> *Hymn of the Pearl* 49-7, *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>837</sup> *Pearl Hymn* 64-7, *ibid.*, 52-4.

<sup>838</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 74. Jonas adds that "'Caller of the Call' is the title of the Manichaean missionary; and as late as in Islam the word for mission is 'call,' for missionary, 'caller.'" Note 27.

Manichaeans went so far as to hypostatize “Call” and “Answer”, who became two separate divinities in the Manichaean pantheon. According to the Manichaean myth, after the Primal Man descended to fight the Power of Darkness, which was threatening the Realm of Light, and was overcome and eaten by Darkness, he fell into a deep unconsciousness. But the King of Light had mercy on the Primal Man and, in order to liberate him, the Living Spirit, a new divine trinity is called forth, and sent to his rescue:

Then al-Bahîjah<sup>839</sup> and the Spirit of Life journeyed to the brink, where they looked into the depths of that nether hall and saw Primal man and the angels, whom the Devil (Iblîs) and the exceedingly evil satanic creatures and iniquitous life had surrounded ... The Spirit of Life called to Primal Man with a raised voice, which was like lightning in its swiftness and which became another deity.<sup>840</sup>

The issuing of the Call and the Answer of the imprisoned light (Primal Man) – henceforward existing as independent deities<sup>841</sup> - are the archetypes in Manichaean mythology of the call of the Saviour and the (positive) response of the one to be saved.<sup>842</sup> The Call of Awakening and the Answer is then repeated again and again in Manichaean history, or rather in the history of the imprisoned light, for even though the Primal Man became free, his armor, his Five Sons, were left behind as light particles enclosed in the matter, which still had to be awakened, that is, to be rescued. Thus, for example, the awakening of the Primal Man by the Spirit of Life is duplicated later on by the awakening of Adam by Jesus the luminous. In this archetypal episode Jesus the Splendour approaches Adam, unconscious after his creation, with the divine light, his soul, trapped inside his body. In this Manichaean version of the tasting the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, one can recognize the Gnostic interpretation of Gen. 3, known from the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, or the *Origin of the World* and other classic Gnostic texts. Jesus awakens the sleeping Adam to the saving knowledge of his own conditions:

<sup>839</sup> I.e., the Mother of Life, see Dodge, an-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist* II, 780, note 172.

<sup>840</sup> An-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist* vol. II, 780. According to the summary of Theodore Bar Khoni: “They came on the earth of darkness, and they found the Primal Man and his five sons sunk in the darkness. Then the Living Spirit called out with his voice, and the voice of the Living Spirit became like a sharp double-edged sword, and it evoked the lifeless effigy of the Primal Man and said to him: ‘Hailings to you, good one among the evil, light among the darkness, god who is staying among the animals of anger, who do not realize what a honour this is for them.’ The Primal Man answered: ‘Hailings to you, who bring peace and salvation in return.’... and the Living Spirit and the Call and the Answer accompanied each other mounted toward the Mother of Life and the Living Spirit, and the Living Spirit re clothed the Call, and the Mother of Life re clothed the Answer, her beloved son.” Theodore Bar Khonî, *Liber Scholiorum* Mimrâ XI. 59, trad. Hespel – Draguet, 235. A Middle Persian hymn writes: “And they (the Mother of the Living Spirit and the Living Spirit) send Khvandag (Call, Khrôshtag) to him (i.e. the First Man), as one shoots a letter with an arrow into a town. Quickly, [in] haste he came down [like] a big rock (thrown) into the sea.” (M 819, Middle Persian: Ed. W. Sundermann, lines 797-805; *Cat.* p. 55, quoted in Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature*, 121.) The letter-saving message simile has already been mentioned above in connection with the letter of the *Hymn of the Pearl*.

<sup>841</sup> “Call and his Answer together form what the texts term ‘the thought of life’ ... ‘The thought of life’ is opposed, then, to ‘the thought of death’ ... which is characteristic of the Realm of Darkness.” Klimket, *Gnosis*, 12.

<sup>842</sup> Thus, for example, even Mani’s message is described as a Cry or Call: “I heard the cry of the physician (i.e. Mani), the cry of an exorcist, coming to [me. I] heard the cry of a physician healing his poor ones” Psalms of Thomas XIV, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book* II, 220.25-30. Similarly, the message of Jesus is described as a Cry, see below, quoted in the text.

(Mani) says that Jesus the Splendour approached the innocent Adam, and awoke him from the sleep of death, so that he might be saved from an excessive nature;<sup>843</sup> as if a righteous man were found to be possessed of a violent devil and might be calmed by one's skill. Thus was Adam also, when the beloved found him in a profound sleep, roused him, and shook him and awakened him... And then Adam looked closely at himself and he knew who (he was). And (Jesus) showed him the Father on high, and his own self... mingled and imprisoned in everything that exists, shackled in the corruption of darkness. (Mani) says that he made him arise and taste the tree of life.<sup>844</sup>

A Coptic Manichaean Psalm giving account of Jesus prompting Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree, writes: "The light has shone froth for you, o you that sleep in Hell, the knowledge of the Paraclete, the ray of Light, drink of the water of memory, cast away oblivion."<sup>845</sup>

Just like the drama of Primal Man's awakening by the Call from the Light World is repeated in the myth of Adam, so again it is repeated in the awakening of the individual soul, a particle of light from Primal Man's armor. Manichaean thinking draws a parallel between the fate of the Primal Man and the individual soul, the former serving as a mythical model for the latter. This is well exemplified by the Coptic Psalm of Heracleides, which is addressed to the First (Primal) Man, but its mention of the "news," that is the Evangelium, the message of true religion brought by the prophet, implies that its real addressee is the individual:

Awake, you that slumber and sleep in the... (lacuna) that you may be told the news.  
Lo, the news-bearer has been sent with the news of the Lord of Light to tell us the news of the skies ...  
'Rise up, o First Man, open thy gates that are shut that I may tell you the news.  
'Rise up, o First Man, arouse thy beloved ones, that I may tell thee the news.  
'Rise up, o First Man, sound, o trumpet of peace, that I may tell thee the news.<sup>846</sup>

Detached from the mythological framework, but echoing its message, the call addressed to the individual human soul, imprisoned in the fetters of matter, is a frequently recurrent theme of Manichaean liturgical texts from Egypt to Central Asia, prompting Jonas to speak of a "religion of the call:"

Let us not slumber and sleep until our Lord takes us across, his garland upon his head, his palm in his hand, wearing the robe of Glory, and we go within the bride-chamber and reign with him, all of us together.<sup>847</sup>

I went forth to plant a garden beyond the confines of this world, choosing and planting in it the plants that grew in the Living ones. I will give orders to the gardener: Attend to my trees, my new plants, attend to my new plants that they sleep not nor slumber, they sleep not nor slumber, [that] they forget not the order that has

<sup>843</sup> That is, of Darkness.

<sup>844</sup> Theodore bar Khonî, *Lib. Schol.* XI. CSCO 69, pp 317,14-318,4, trans. in *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, I. Gardner and S. Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>845</sup> Psalm to Jesus CCXLVIII, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book*, 57.19-21. Note the reference to the "water of memory" and compare it with the references to the cup of wine in the *Beyta Cindî*. A possible merging of Sufi (wine) and Manichaean (water of memory/life) traditions cannot be ruled out here, though this is only a tentative suggestion, one that would need much more research.

<sup>846</sup> Psalm of Heracleides, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 197.16-29.

<sup>847</sup> Psalm of Heracleides, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 193.10

been given them.<sup>848</sup>

Come, oh souls, to this ship of Light!<sup>849</sup>

My most beloved soul, (who is) happy and noble, where have you gone?

Return!

Awake, dear soul, from the sleep of drunkenness into which you have fallen!... reach (your ) home, the (heavenly) earth created by the Word, where you were in the beginning<sup>850</sup>

As was expounded above, the Call of Awakening often contains a moral instruction as to the duties of the believer, the spiritual task awaiting him. Exhortations against being slack in their service – that is in doing their religious duties, and constantly committing everything to promote the liberation of the imprisoned light – and a fear of having failed their duty are frequent motifs of Manichaean hymns:

The Light is come and near the leader. Arise, brethren, give praise!

Abandon sleep, awake, behold the Light which is drawn near.

He has come to the world!

All the sons of Darkness hide.

The Light is come and near the dawn! Arise, brethren, give praise!<sup>851</sup>

Reminding the faithful to give praise is far more than a mere flourish of words.<sup>852</sup> Just like for Yezidis in the *Beyta Cindî*,<sup>853</sup> neglecting one's (religious) dues leads to dire consequence according to the Manichaean teaching. Those, who fail their duties, that is fail to heed the Call or Cry, lose the promise of salvation, will be "dismissed" from the group of those who are to reach the Light world again. *The Psalm of Thomas* describing the Cry of the physician (Mani), says of them: He into whose ears they shall call, if he hears not, shall be divided in all the worlds. He shall suffer, for the called into his ears, he did not hear.<sup>854</sup>

A Manichaean parable even tells the story of such a faithful, who grows slack in his service, with near tragic consequences: A man gave a banquet for his king and his entourage, lavishing them with presents. The king and his men enjoy the banquet, but when dusk comes, the host forgets to light the lamps, arousing the ire of his master:

They went and enjoyed a banquet (and) received presents. They were happy. When the sun set, the man, in his contentment, did not light his lamps immediately. The

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<sup>848</sup> *The Church unto the Apostle*, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book* II.15-21.

<sup>849</sup> The Ships of Light (the sun and the moon) were seen as vehicles transporting the cleansed souls, or light, back to the Realm of Light.

<sup>850</sup> Parthian liturgical hymn, in Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 147.

<sup>851</sup> M 30, Parthian, Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature*, 142.

<sup>852</sup> "Sleep is now unlawful because of (the obligation to give) praise" says *Beyta Cindî* 5.

<sup>853</sup> "You are slack in your service, that is why the Great Master has dismissed you from your job, Oh soldier, you were asleep." *Beyta Cindî* 24.

<sup>854</sup> Psalms of Thomas XIV, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book* II, 220.27-30. The text refers to the final conflagration, when the material world and all those light particles that could not be saved will be devoured by fire. Concerning Manichaean eschatology and the doctrine of "bolos" (a conglomerate and undigested mass of darkness/matter and the small amount of unpurified light mixed with it, to be burned), see Williams Jackson, "The Doctrine of the Bolos in Manichaean Eschatology," *JOAS* 58.2 (1938): 225-34.

king became suspicious. His intimate friends said, “This man has prepared an excellent banquet (and) has given (us) gifts, but he has not lit his lamps. Does he intend to commit a crime?” The man heard them, became afraid (and) fell unconscious.

Luckily for him his servants bring the lamps, and the king realizes that his negligence arose from mere forgetfulness, it was not a deliberate act. As is the habit of Manichaean parables, an interpretation is offered at the end:

The interpretation: The lowly born man represents the auditors,<sup>855</sup> the king is... the messengers of the king(?). The messenger [is the] Apostle... of the gods... The lamp is wisdom. The (lamp) that is not lit immediately is that of the auditors.<sup>856</sup> From time to time they become slack and forgetful in their works. (They) are (then) called to account (for their negligence.) They gain victory (salvation) thereupon and are redeemed.<sup>857</sup>

## The Mandaean

Calls for awakening are also numerous in Mandaean literature. The voice of the transmundane penetrating the world is referred to as the “Call of Life” in Mandaean texts. Sometimes it is addressed to Adam, at other times at the believers:

Arise, ye sleepers who lie there.  
Rise up, ye stumblers who have stumbled,  
Arise, worship and praise the Great Life  
And praise His Counterpart, that is the image of the Life  
Which shineth forth and is expressed  
In sublime light.<sup>858</sup>

They bestowed upon the guardians a sublime call, to shake up and make rise those that slumber. They were to awaken the souls that had stumbled away from the place of light. They were to awaken them and shake them up, that they might lift their faces to the place of light.<sup>859</sup>

Sometimes the call is simply referred to as a “voice,” reminding one of the wording of the *Beyta Cindi*:

According to what thou, great Life, saidst unto me, would that a voice might come daily to me to awaken me, that I may not stumble, if you callest unto me, the evil

<sup>855</sup> Auditor, or Hearer, is given to the Manichaean faithful at the lowest rank of the religious hierarchy, who did not carry any spiritual offices. The term roughly corresponds to the Yezidi *mirîd* or “commoner, denoting a simple follower.

<sup>856</sup> Note the close similarities between the wording of *Beyta Cindi* and this Manichaean parable.

<sup>857</sup> “Parable of the lowly born rich man” (Persian), in Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 191-92.

<sup>858</sup> E.S. Drower, *Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean*, Leiden: 1959. The Rus’hma, chapter 114. The Gnostic Society Library (online), <http://www.gnosis.org/library/ginzarba.htm>, accessed 03.07.2008. See also: “I am a word, a son of words... The great Life called, charged and prepared me... It sent me forth to watch over this era, to shake out of their sleep and raise up those that slumber.” (Ginza 295, *ibid*, 80).

<sup>859</sup> Ginza 308, *ibid*.

worlds will not entrap me and I shall not fall prey to the Aeons.<sup>860</sup>

The call frequently includes a moral instruction, sometimes short, sometimes growing into “lengthy moral homilies which monopolize the whole content of the call:”<sup>861</sup>

I sent a call out into the world: Let every man be watchful of himself. Whosoever is watchful of himself shall be saved from the devouring fire.<sup>862</sup>

Do not slumber nor sleep, and do not forget that thy master hath commanded thee.<sup>863</sup>

The Call for Awakening is of such a crucial importance in Mandaean religion that even the so-called *Rahmia* (the daily prayers recited at the three prayer-times daily for each day of the week) bids the faithful to be aware of sleep and forgetting.<sup>864</sup>

## *Beyta Cindî* and the Call of Awakening

*Wake up call, warning against sleep and the “voice of the without”*

There can be little doubt that the *Beyta Cindî* fits into the Late Antique tradition of the Call of Awakening. Its form as a hymn or song is well in keeping with the literary traditions of the Call. It was seen how often the Call of Awakening is phrased within the framework of a hymn, from the baptismal hymn of the *Apocryphon of John* (the Poem of Deliverance) through Manichaean hymns and psalms calling for the awakening of the soul down to Mandaean prayers. The *Beyta Cindî*, as a hymn/song of awakening (which could even be called liturgical in context, as part of a ritual heralding in the first rays of sun) would perfectly fit as a continuation of this tradition.

Having analyzed the so-called “Gnostic Call” of Late Antiquity, and accepted that *Beyta Cindî* is a perpetuation of this tradition, it is much easier to interpret the often vague or confusing allusions of the wake up call of the *Beyta Cindî*. Now it is easier to understand why sleep is characterized as “dark,” “unlawful for soldiers”<sup>865</sup> and for “men wearing the *khirqe*,”<sup>866</sup> something that “leads to... severe punishment and hell.” Sleep, after all, is nothing else but the state of spiritual unconsciousness, irreligiosity, and idea also hinted at in other Yezidi hymns.<sup>867</sup>

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<sup>860</sup> Ginza 485, in Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 70.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid., 84. In the Ginza 16-27 there are, for example, over twelve pages of exhortations, warning and commandments, see Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 84-5, Note 84.

<sup>862</sup> Ginza 58, *ibid.*, 85.

<sup>863</sup> Book of John p. 225, Ginza p. 387, quoted in A. Altmann, “The Gnostic background of Rabbinic Adam legends,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 35.4 (1945): 389.

<sup>864</sup> E. S. Drower, “Mandaean Polemic,” *BSOAS* 25.1/3 (1962): 445.

<sup>865</sup> I find the word “soldier” more apt here than “commoner,” for it expresses the idea of spiritual fight for faith, much better.

<sup>866</sup> Here again men wearing the *khirqe* doesn’t not just refer to today’s *feqirs*, but all the faithful, those whose behavior makes them worthy of the *khirqe*.

<sup>867</sup> Sleep, as a metaphor of spiritual slackness, ignorance can also be found in a number of other Yezidi hymns, even if there it does not take such a central place as in the *Beyta Cindî*. It is used in *The Hymn of the Mill of Love*, a hymn which

If the *Beyta Cindî* is seen as a literary Call of Awakening, it also becomes clear why it is “in the middle of the night” that “a voice from on high is coming,” despite the fact that the song is not sang in the middle of the night, rather at the very end of it, just before dawn, and other lines speak about “early dawn.” But if one thinks of all the negative spiritual qualities attributed to darkness and night, making it a personification of evil, or at least of lack of spirituality by all the religious-literary traditions that utilized the metaphor of sleep, it becomes evident that the sleep referred to in the Song, which is cut into half by the Call, is nothing else than an immersion in, a total abandonment to this spiritual darkness. The Call pierces through this total darkness, bringing it to an end, bringing morning. Just as the Manichaean hymn containing a Call of Awakening says “Awake, morning has come... morning is the Truth, the truth is the commandments [i.e., of the religion].”<sup>868</sup>

The same interpretation can be used to elucidate the rather mysterious statement “these nights are not for sleeping.” Clearly, nights are meant by nature for sleeping, unless far more is understood by sleep than the mere physical rest of mind and body. Besides the injunction against sleep as a metaphor of spiritual coma, the text seems to retain here a trace of dualistic anti-cosmic tendency, where nature and the natural order is seen as alien, even contrary to God and everything divine.<sup>869</sup> The same anti-cosmic attitude may also explain the even more mysterious lines: “Oh commoner, do not eat by day, and do not sleep by night,” as eating, as well as sleeping, are signs of men’s subjection to the laws of nature, that is the laws of matter.

At this point it is reasonable to ask whose is the voice coming from high in the middle of the night? The text writes a “cockerel,” which is of course the bird singing, or rather crowing, before dawn. But the detailed description of the cockerel leads to the conclusion that the text refers not so much to the alert king of the poultry-yard, but rather to the mysterious voice of the transmundane, whose message is penetrating into our world and being heard here:

The cockerel, its feathers are white.

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deals with the need for the faithful to be pure of heart and loyal to the House of Adi (that is, the true religion.) The hymn opens with a few stanzas declaring that not even the most expensive gifts given as a sacrifice to religious institutions will benefit a man who has no faith in his heart. It accuses the Shariya (orthodox, non-Sufi Muslims, who follow the Islamic law blindly) of only caring for possession, unlike the Sunna (that is, the Yezidis), and it utilizes the metaphor of sleep to describe orthodox Muslims, who only care for material things, and who are incapable of perceiving the mystical truth: “People of the Shari’a are lovers of possessions, The Sunna truly goes its own way, God willing, my King will pardon the Sunna, O lover (of God), I go straight ahead! Their (i.e., the other group’s) hearts are preoccupied with commerce; The chests and heads... are asleep.” (*The Hymn of the Mill of Love* 5-6, Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 380.) The traditional interpretation of sleep as a metaphor of ignorance, of religious unawareness may also help shed light on the mysterious statement in some Yezidi hymns on the connection between baptism and Angels or divine beings preventing the faithful from sleeping. After all baptism may be seen as one of the means to help awaken man from spiritual ignorance: “The baptism of Sheyk Shems falls on one, The holy men and the angels, because they are actively busy, They do not allow one to sleep.” (*They Hymn of Sheikh Shems Tabriz* 11, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 259.) “The baptism of Sheyk Shems falls on one, The Great Ones are (actively) busy, they do not allow you to sleep.” (*The Morning Prayer* 7, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 217.)

<sup>868</sup> *Psalmoi Sarakotôn*, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 146.20.

<sup>869</sup> Cosmos in Gnostic parlance, taken over from the Greeks, refers to the material world. On the negative Gnostic view of the cosmos and nature, that is, “anti-cosmic” Gnostic dualism, see Jones, “The Gnostic Revaluation,” in *Gnostic Religion*, 250-54; and Kurt Rudolph, “Dualism” in *Gnosis*, 59-67.

Is calling from the High Throne  
 It is with the pre-eternal Angel...  
 It is with the Angel who presides over baptism...  
 It is calling from the throne on high,  
 It is with the Greatest Angel...  
 The cockerel of the Throne has crowed,  
 The one on earth has answered...  
 The cockerel, crowing,  
 Is calling to the beloved.<sup>870</sup>  
 It faces the Angel above.  
 Oh my brother, it has made a light in the assembly of Sheikh Adi.

All these references to the Throne on High (God's Throne), to being in the company of the Greatest, pre-eternal Angel (God) make it obvious that the owner of the voice is a divine being, a companion of God himself, one of His Angels, calling from the world of beyond, or to be more exact, from the throne of God. Possibly, the cockerel calling from the Throne of God could be *Tawsi Melek*, the Peacock Angel, who acts as a bringer of gnosis in the creation myth of Adam.<sup>871</sup> The voice of the earthly cockerel is merely an echo of the divine message, heralding dawn, light after darkness, both in its physical and abstract sense.<sup>872</sup> The description of the plumage of the cockerel also points in this direction:

The cockerel, its feathers are white...  
 The cockerel, its feathers are red...  
 The cockerel, its feathers are yellow...  
 The cockerel, its feathers are green...  
 The cockerel, its feathers are many-colored.

Such a riot of colors would generally be associated with peacocks rather than roosters.<sup>873</sup>

### *Moral Instruction: Serving God*

The Call of Awakening has been defined above as often containing one or more of the following three doctrinal elements: reminder of the soul's origin, a moral instruction, and the promise of salvation (or heavenly reward in the case of Yezidis.) As Yezidi hymns do not speculate on the origins of the

<sup>870</sup> Beloved is a common term applied to God by Sufis, who see the relationship between the Sufi (or one seeking religious illumination) and God as that of the lover and the beloved.

<sup>871</sup> See chapter 6 on the "Yezidi Creation Myth of Adam."

<sup>872</sup> Fusing the boundaries between the actual or physical with the abstract or spiritual is one of the charms of the *Beyta Cindî*. Thus, references to a spiritual awakening and fight are mixed with references, for example, to the morning prayer and cleansing (verses 21-3,) which could be taken both in the concrete and abstract sense.

<sup>873</sup> The Cockerel of the Throne is also mentioned in *The Hymn of Rabi'a al'Adawiyya* (the 8<sup>th</sup> century female Sufi mystic from Basra, who is also commemorated by Yezidi religious tradition.) Rabi'a seeks for the mystery of God everywhere, finally finding it when the pregnant mother of Ezi (Yezid bin Muawiyya), bearing the divine *sur* of Ezi, arrives at Basra one dawn, when the divine cockerel crows to announce a new dawn: "Rabi'a is a beautiful young woman, She is yearning very much for that mystery, She had wandered from alley to alley (looking for it), Until the cockerel at the Throne crowed." *The Hymn of Rabi'a al'Adawiyya* 5 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 197.) Mélikoff reports that one of her old informants from Siirt claimed that Tausi Melek was called a "cock" in Anatolia. ("Melek Tavus'a *Horoz* diyolar", Mélikoff, *Soufisme Turc*, 39.)

individual human soul, naturally the reminder of the soul's origin is absent from the *Beyta Cindî*.<sup>874</sup>  
Not so the other two elements of the Call.

The moral instruction, prompting the believer to remember his religious duties, is clearly present in the text:

Get up from the sleep in the morning!  
Sleep is now unlawful because of (the obligation to give) praise.  
Oh you men wearing the *khirqe*.

As was seen above, both Manichaean and Mandaean texts utilize the notion of the duty of giving praise to God in their Calls of Awakening as a means to remind the faithful of their religious obligations. "The Light is come and near the dawn! Arise, brethren, give praise"<sup>875</sup> exhort the Manichaeans, "Arise, worship and praise the Great Life, And praise his Counterpart, that is the image of the Life"<sup>876</sup> counter the Mandaeans. After the reminder of the duty to give praise, the *Beyta Cindî* becomes more explicit and reminds those who have to awaken of the jobs waiting for them in the service of God:

Come, your job is waiting for you  
Your livelihood<sup>877</sup> is a good one,  
It is in the service of the Lord

The usual threat of the dire fate awaiting those who fail to heed the call, prefer to abandon themselves to sleep, and prove negligent in carrying out the job assigned to them in the service of the Lord is also present. They will be dismissed from the service of their Master/God, just like the negligent dinner-host of the Manichaean parable, that is, they will be excluded from among the true believers:

Oh commoner, you were asleep.  
You are slack in your service,  
That is why the great Master has dismissed you from your job.

I was not willing, that is why I slept.  
Had I been willing, I would not have slept,  
That is why the great Master<sup>878</sup> has dismissed me from my job.

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<sup>874</sup> Even though Yezidis seem to have inherited the Gnostic idea of the heavenly origin of Adam's soul in their Adam myth (and as shall be seen later also in the myth concerning Shehid bin Jar, the mythical forefather of the Yezidis), the existing (or published) sacred texts do not seem to be concerned with the origin or nature of the human soul in general. Feqir Haji, talking of the origin of the Yezidis from the *sur* of Adam and his son, Shehid bin Jer (see next chapter) expressed the opinion that this *sur* has been transmitted to Yezidis in general, but he did not offer any opinion on the nature of human soul (Yezidi or otherwise) in general. Some of my informants referred to the humans soul as deriving from the "light (*nîr*) of God," but it is hard to tell if this is a traditional point of view or just a personal conviction, part of the recent effort to create a unified and consistent Yezidi theology.

<sup>875</sup> M 30, Parthian, Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature*, 142.

<sup>876</sup> E.S. Drower, *Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans*. The Rus'hma, chapter 114. The Gnostic Society Library (online), <http://www.gnosis.org/library/ginzarba.htm>, accessed 03. 07.2008.

<sup>877</sup> Livelihood – Arabic *maaş* – literally 'salary' is difficult to interpret. It may refer to the *maaş* Sheikh Adi provided his companions and friends with. These salaries refer to the ability to cure different kind of ills or to bestow fertility, inherited from their angelic forebears by the *sheikh* and *pîr* families. When used in this sense Yezidi *maaş* simultaneously means "salary" and "duty, religious work" with the two meanings interlapping. (On the *maaş*, see E. Spät, *Yezidis* (London: Saqi, 2005), 44. But it is also possible that it simply refers to the reward given to the faithful in the hereafter. In this case this could be a reference to the third element of the Call, the promise of salvation.

<sup>878</sup> Literally *mîr*, Prince.

[Literally, has he dismissed me from my *maaş*]

It is open to debate whether the last sentence, dismissing the slack servant from his livelihood or job, refers to the *maaş* given to Sheikh Adi's companions on this earth, or to some eschatological reward. However, it is clear that it is delivered as a warning against those who are not willing to fulfill their religious obligations, who have abandoned themselves to sleep.

### *Moral Instruction: The Fight for Faith*

The second doctrinal element of the Call (i.e., the moral instruction) referring to the duties awaiting the believer who awakens can also explain the allusions to war and fighting, which give such an eschatological flavor to the song:

My dear, the cockerels call you.  
These nights are not for sleeping.  
The commoners [soldiers] go out into the world.

Commoners [soldiers] do not go to sleep again.  
They will go to confront the harsh world head-on...

A voice comes from the Throne,  
All who are awake are preparing themselves for [lit. coming to] war!

The translation, based on the interpretation of Kreyenbroek's informants, talks about confronting the world in the first two verses. Interesting as this interpretation is from our point of view, the original text makes it even more interesting. According to one of Kreyenbroek's informants, the literal translation of *cindî holê distinin* in the third line of the first stanza would be "the soldiers take (grab) the polo sticks," while the Kurdish dictionary of Izoli translates *hol* as "square, playing field"<sup>879</sup> ("they take the field."). The second sentence of the second stanza, *dê bi serê xo çine gewê*, is translated by one of Kreyenbroek's informants as "they will go with their heads to (meet) a wooden ball."<sup>880</sup> Thus we have two statements on taking part in some athletic competition,<sup>881</sup> which are interpreted by Yezidis versed in the religious language as encouragements to confront the harsh world head-on. This

<sup>879</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 241, note 15.

<sup>880</sup> Ibid., note 16. *Gew* does not figure in my Kurdish-Turkish dictionary (Izoli, Istanbul, 2000), but Kreyenbroek's informant understood it as a variant of *go*, that is ball.

<sup>881</sup> Polo, which first developed in Central Asia, was a favourite game of the Sassanian elite in Late Antiquity. Excelling in polo was an important sign of nobility, a motif much employed in Sassanian literature. (Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 127.) The heroic ideal of Iranian epic tradition, as well as the tradition of peoples influenced by Sassanian cultural and artistic models, are Iranian kings and heroes who excelled on the battlefield, the hunt and the polo field (ibid., 122.) The description of polo found its way even into the 7<sup>th</sup>-c. Syriac work on the life of the Sassanian Christian saint Mar Qardagh, born as a noble man, who first drew the attention of the shah by excelling in polo – thereby showing his superiority to other men – and then lost his ability to play the game when he persecuted a Christian monk (ibid., 21, 25-6.)

is a little later followed by an unequivocal call to go to war.<sup>882</sup>

The language of war and athletic contest was not alien to the Late Antique world of spirituality. Saint Paul actually connects awakening from sleep with going to war in his Call of Awakening (1 Thess. 5: 5-8), where he implies that rejecting sleep (and drunkenness) means going to fight, where faith, love and salvation serve as the protective armour of the soldier:

Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation (1 Thess. 5: 5-8)

The notion that spiritual awakening was a form of going to war was taken up by later generations. A distinctive feature of Syriac Christianity, especially in its monastic (or ascetic) form, was its preoccupation with what they called the “contest,” the struggle that an ascetic had to fight against the temptations and distractions of the world as well as his inner demons. The vocabulary to describe this struggle borrows from the language of athletic contests, as well as from the language of war. “Athletes” (of Christ) was a “popular” denomination to speak first of the martyrs, then of the monks in the Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Martyrs, and then increasingly monks, were described as “athletes.”<sup>883</sup> Thus, for example, his biographer writes about Rabbula, the early fifth-century bishop of Edessa, that after his conversion from paganism “he went into the desert in order to fight there as an athlete ‘with evil spirits within and without’”<sup>884</sup> In the *Syriac Life of St Simeon Stylites* the expressions “athlete” and “combatant” are repeatedly used to describe the saint (as well as his fellow monks.) “For he stood like a valiant man and was brave like a combatant and trained like an athlete and armed like a warrior in the army of the Lord.”<sup>885</sup> The use of “athlete,” however, was not restricted to literature dealing with monasticism or to describing monks and ascetics. It was seen above how the Syriac version of the *Hymn of the Pearl*<sup>886</sup> talks about the “combatants” or “athletes,” when it reminds the sleeping Prince of his splendid toga, which he will put on again when his “name is called out from the book of the Combatants (athletes).”

War was another frequent metaphor. A treatise written by Aphrahat contains portions from a liturgy of baptism, which admonishes those who were called for “contest” to turn their back on the

<sup>882</sup> According to Khalil Cindî Rashow this call to war refers to the time when Muslim rulers came to fight Sheikh Adi (oral communication), but the fact that the song lacks any references to concrete historical events, even if only mythical ones, makes this conclusion doubtful, and suggests that ‘war’ should be understood in a more general sense, as a “form of conduct.”

<sup>883</sup> S. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20.1 (1973): 2.

<sup>884</sup> A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. 2 (Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1958-60), 135.

<sup>885</sup> *The Syriac Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* 45, trans. in Robert Doran, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, Cistercian Publications 129 (Kalamazoo MI: 1992.)

<sup>886</sup> Though of a highly debated origin, the *Hymn of the Pearl* is probably not connected with the monastic movement or monks, despite its possibly encratite nature.

world, as if they were being recruited for war.<sup>887</sup> Only those whose heart is set on the war, and not on what they leave behind, should venture to join the army:

Anyone who is afraid, let him retreat from the struggle... and anyone who plans a vineyard, let him retreat from his work, that he might not think of it and would be conquered in the war... And anyone who builds a house let him retreat to it, that he might not remember his house and would not fight wholly. The struggle is suitable for solitaries,<sup>888</sup> because their faces are set for that which is before them... and anything that they spoil, all (belongs) to themselves, and they receive their profit abundantly.... And anyone who fears this part of the contest, let him retreat... Anyone who loves possession, let him retreat from the army, lest when the battle becomes hard for him, he will remember his possessions and retreat. And anyone who retreats from the struggle, - shame belongs to him... every one who chooses for himself and puts on the armor, if he retreats from the struggle, laughter belongs to him.<sup>889</sup>

As regards the dualistic movements of Late Antiquity, it hardly needs to be said that confronting the (material) world is the constant, underlying motif of these systems. Their very cosmology and anthropology is based on the notion of a non-ceasing war between the powers of light and darkness. Man's ultimate duty, once he is awakened, is to fight relentlessly against the world of matter to free his soul from it. Mentions of the struggle and war against the world and its elements of Darkness are abundant in texts of dualistic origin:

Fight the great fight as long as the fight lasts, while all the powers are staring after you - not only the holy ones, but also all the powers of the Adversary... if you fight the fight and are victorious over the powers which fight against you, you will bring great joy to every holy one, and yet great grief to your enemies.<sup>890</sup>

Only those who have faced this fight against the world bravely can hope to reach (return to) heaven, the world of light: "Fight, o sons of Light, yet a little while and you will be victorious. He that shirks his burden will forfeit his bride chamber."<sup>891</sup>

The reference to the war, which all, who are awake, are going to, explains the title of the *Beyta Cindî*: "The Song of the Soldier." "Soldier" (of God) would express the message implicit in the song much better than the more neutral "commoner." It is a wake up call addressed to those willing to awaken and face the world and the enemies of faith, whether physical or abstract, as good soldiers or athletes. As has been mentioned in the introduction to the *Beyta Cindî*, *cindî* as a general rule appears in texts where there is a reference to the need to fight for the faith, and especially to the final, eschatological battle between the powers of good and evil. For example, it appears in the eschatological *Hymn of Sherfedin* which centers on the topic of the Final War to be fought by the

<sup>887</sup> According to Vööbus, during a period of early monasticism "baptism became the prerogative of the ascetic elite only... the sign of those who had courage to make the radical decision to turn their backs decisively upon the world." Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, vol. 1, 90. In other words this liturgy is addressed at those who are about to embark on an ascetic life.

<sup>888</sup> That is ascetics, who have pledged to live a life of celibacy.

<sup>889</sup> Vööbus, *History of Asceticism I*, 93-94.

<sup>890</sup> *Teaching of Silvanus* 114.1-6, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, 357.

<sup>891</sup> Psalms to Jesus CCXLIX, in Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 58.24-26.

Mehdi and the faithful. It can also be found in the *Hymn of Sheikh Obekr*, where it talks about the *khirqe* and the keys (to the divine mystery, gnosis) being bestowed on the *feqirs*, who “renounced the desolate, transitory evil,”<sup>892</sup> and goes on to talk about the *cindî*, who will also receive the keys of mystery, in connection with the Last Day and God as the leader of a vast army.<sup>893</sup> Such usage of the image of the soldier, as a soldier of God and faith, was wide-spread in Late Antiquity, both among those following a dualistic ideology, and in the so-called orthodox Christian circles.

Those engaged in this fight are soldiers, or at least “combatants.” As has been said above, in Syriac speaking environment, “athlete” or “combatant” was commonly used to refer either to monks or anybody in general fighting for his faith. This usage was then carried over into Manichaeism, where the soul was the central protagonist in the cosmological struggle between Light and Darkness.<sup>894</sup> In its turn, Yezidi usage of *cindî*, whose definition was given as “a godfearing Yezidi, with a connotation of poverty, discipline and simplicity” sounds very similar to the definition of an “athlete of Christ,” that is an ascetic.

#### *Promise of salvation or heavenly reward*

As a counterpoint to the “moral instruction” or rather the demand for future actions befitting a believer and threats aimed at those who prove to be slack in their duty, stands the third element, the promise of salvation. Of course, talking of a heavenly reward may be more correct than using “salvation” when dealing with Yezidis concepts. But if we remember that the notion of salvation is often expressed by the idea of return to heaven or light in Late Antique texts, it cannot be doubted that we meet with the same element in the *Beyta Cindî*. The text clearly promises those ready to heed the wake up call that they will attain the gardens of Eternal Paradise, the Realm of Sultan Êzîd (God):

Oh commoner, do not eat in the daytime,  
And do not sleep at night.  
Lift your head, look at the properties and gardens (above):  
Eternal Paradise is the realm of Sultan Êzîd, peace be upon him.

The fact that reaching heaven, the realm of light, is promised as a reward to the soldiers who wake up and take up the struggle for faith, is made even more apparent by the last part of the song, once its obscure references are interpreted,. In fact this second,<sup>895</sup> seemingly independent part of the *beyt*, the

<sup>892</sup> *Hymn of Sheikh Obekr* 9, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 209.

<sup>893</sup> “Those keys, They will bring to the hands of those commoners (*cindî*). All five obligatory acts of Truth will bear witness for them on the Last Day. My King, ever since he was the Prince, Was the leader of a vast army. With the Seven Mysteries (i. e., the Seven Angels) of Sultan Êzîd, he was the knowing one. *Hymn of Sheikh Obekr* 10-11, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 209-11.

<sup>894</sup> The Manichaean Psalm to Jesus 31 quoted above on the soul arming itself in the commandment of God and going out into the world refers to man (or the soul) as “champion”: “As I was saying these things in tears the Saviour called me: come, o busy champion, and give the garland of Light to me.”

<sup>895</sup> Or third, if we consider the stanzas on wine and divine intoxication as a separate unit.

*Hymn of the Headdress*, (following on the wake up call and the Sufi description of divine intoxication) is nothing else but a literary expression of the third element of the Call of Awakening, the promise of redemption or heavenly reward.

## **The Headdress: The Reward of Awakening – the Crown (and the Robe)**

The *Hymn of the Headdress* is said to constitute a semi-independent part of the *Beyta Cindî*. (It is also included in the *Hymn of Sheikh Heseni Sultan* on which more will be said below.) This part is almost exclusively devoted to the headdress or crown (*kof*) of Pîrê Libnan, a headdress that is “pristine,” “commemorated in the world,” “precious,” and most relevantly “luminous.” What is more, “saints,”<sup>896</sup> “mirîds,” “believers,” “discerning ones” have gathered around this headdress, “good men have taken their share of it.”

I must confess that I am at a loss to explain the role of Pîrê Libnan, the owner of this headdress. He is not much mentioned in everyday discourse on religion among Yezidis today.<sup>897</sup> According to Kreyenbroek’s list of Yezidi holy figures,<sup>898</sup> Pîrê Libnan (Pîr of the Bricks) is believed to have built many of the shrines in Lalish. He is a *khas* of marriage and domesticity, he brings about marriages. He also has strong links with Khidr-Ilyas. One of his epithets is “whose prayers are heard.” According to Feqir Haci, he was the leader of the legendary “Forty Men,” the companions of Sheikh Adi.<sup>899</sup> In Khanke, a Yezidi collective village near the bank of the Tiger, he is prayed to by unmarried maidens and young men, who ask for his help to find a spouse.<sup>900</sup> None of which provides a clue for interpreting Pîrê Libnan’s role in the hymn. Possibly, there is some aspect of Pîrê Libnan that eludes me, and subsequent research will perhaps bring to light details concerning the role of Pîrê Libnan that will explain his association with the luminous headdress. It is equally possible that the information shedding light on Pîrê Libnan’s role has long dropped out from the memory of Yezidi oral tradition, and has been lost for good. All I can ascertain for the time being, based on the text of the *Hymn of the*

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<sup>896</sup> *weli* – Arabic for saints or holy men.

<sup>897</sup> That is, I have never heard him mentioned, though I have to confess that I never remembered to ask directly after his person.

<sup>898</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 112-3.

<sup>899</sup> Other traditions mention Heseni Meman, or Dawude Derman, or Mehmed Reshan as the leader of the Forty. Some traditions connect the forty *pîr* families with the *Chil Mêr* of Forty Men. The Forty Saints are a well known concept in both Sufism and “popular” Islam, though the exact connection with the Yezidi Forty Men is as yet not clear.

<sup>900</sup> Oral information from Pîr Jafo, the guardian or *micewir* of the sanctuary of Mem Shivan in Khanke. It is possible that Pîrê Libnan fulfills the same function in other villages as well, but it does not necessarily have to be so, given the great variability of beliefs concerning Yezidi holy beings. In Khanke those praying to Pîrê Libnan try to balance three round stone balls on top of each other at a spot dedicated to him, near the sanctuary of Sheikh Adi. If the stone balls stay put, their wishes will be fulfilled. Such a custom of balancing stones on each other seems to be widespread throughout the region. For example, I have heard of similar practice in south-East (Kurdish) Turkey.

*Headdress*, is that Pîrê Libnan and his headdress are associated with the *sur*, the mystery, divine essence of the Great Angels. The *sur* of Sheikh Mend, Sheikh Adi, Sultan Êzid, Melek Sheikh Hesên (Sheikh Sin), Sheikh Obekr, Shems el-Dîn, and Fekhr el-Dîn<sup>901</sup> are all mentioned in sequence as to what (or whom) Pîrê Libnan, or his headdress, serves as an ornament. The Kurdish text is rather difficult to interpret at this point, but it may not be too far-fetched to assume that it is the headdress which is the ornament of the mystery of these divine figures (that is, the headdress is worn by the Angels possessing the divine essence, mystery), rather than the ornament being Pîrê Libnan himself.

If we set aside poor Pîrê Libnan and concentrate on this mysterious headdress instead, we may fare better with trying to solve the riddle posed by the hymn. The headdress (*kof* or *tac/tanc*), also referred to as “the luminous black crown,”<sup>902</sup> has already been mentioned in the chapter on the *khirqe* as a garment of faith. It was created by God along with the *khirqe*, baptized and worn by him, and then later worn by his Angels and the *khas*, the Yezidi holy men or incarnate divine beings. It appeared in some versions of the myth of Adam as a part of Adam’s angelic apparel, while he was still in Paradise, with the *sur* or mystery of Sheikh Sin dwelling in his forehead. And finally there was Sheikh Adi’s headdress or crown, still guarded in Lalish, from which light is said to have shined while he was wearing it, just as from his *khirqe*. On the earth, along with the *khirqe*, it represents religious gnosis, divine enlightenment.<sup>903</sup> If the *khirqe* accrues to those who follow the true faith, after their death or on the Last Day as the eschatological hymns analyzed in the previous chapter imply, it is reasonable to assume that the headdress will also be given as a reward to the faithful, when he ascends to heaven. This is, as I believe, the message of the *Hymn of the Headdress*. Just as the promise of heavenly reward is in keeping with the Late Antique tradition of the Call of Awakening, the promise of a headdress (or crown) constituting a part of this reward is probably another Late Antique “inheritance.”

## The Crown of Light in Late Antique Calls of Awakening

It was seen in the previous chapter how in many texts a crown was also promised along with (or occasionally in the place of) the robe of glory to those pious who strove to live the true, sinless life of the faithful. In Jewish and Christian tradition the crown (worn by the angels and also lost by Adam) accompanied the robe as the reward of the righteous in a great number of texts. There is no need to quote again the relevant texts, but it may be worthwhile to call attention to the fact that, just

<sup>901</sup> On these figures, appearing both sometimes as Angels, sometimes as *khas* or holy beings on earth, see Kreyenbroek’s “Survey of Prominent Yezidi Holy Beings,” Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 91-107.

<sup>902</sup> For example, *Hymn of the Faith* 19 “My Sultan Ezi(d) put on the *khirqe*, He placed a luminous black crown of power on his head.” Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 85-6. See also *Beyt of Mir Mih* 6-8

<sup>903</sup> The *feqirs* today also wear a kind of black turban along with the black *khirqe*, symbolizing this divine headdress or crown.

like in *Beyta Cindî*, the crown or crowning is often mentioned in connection with the “war” or “contest” that had to be fought on account of faith. For example, Syriac literature on the life of the martyrs also speaks of martyrdom as “crowning,” being killed for the sake of faith is being “crowned with the crown of victory.”<sup>904</sup> The crown appears as a sort of reward, symbolizing the promise of salvation, for those who fight valiantly: “An everlasting crown is Truth; blessed are they who set it on their head. It is a precious stone, for the wars were on account of the crown.”<sup>905</sup> The Syriac *Acts of Thomas*,<sup>906</sup> which seem to have preserved ancient liturgical formulations, say: “Blessed are the spirits of the holy ones (chaste ones) who have taken the crown and gone up from the contest.”<sup>907</sup> One of the hymns of Ephrem in his *Epiphany Hymn Cycle* not only mentions the crown (and garment) that will be set on the head of the redeemed when he recovers the glory lost by Adam, returns to Eden and becomes again like the angels, but they also echo a number of themes in the *Beyta Cindî* analyzed above, including repeated references made to the war that has to be fought before victory is achieved and the crown conferred:

Your garments glisten, my brethren, as snow; and fair is your shining in the likeness of Angels!  
 In the likeness of Angels, you have come up, beloved, from Jordan’s river, in the armour of the Holy Ghost.  
 The bridal chamber that fails not, my brethren, you have received: and the glory of Adam’s house today you have put on.  
 The judgment that came of the fruit, was Adam’s condemnation: but for you victory, has arisen this day.  
 Your vesture is shining, and goodly your crowns: which the Firstborn has bound for you, by the priest’s hand this day.  
 Woe in Paradise, did Adam receive: but you have received glory this day.  
 The armour of victory, you put on my beloved: in the hour when the priest, invoked the Holy Ghost...  
 The day when he dawned, the Heavenly King opens for you His door and bids you enter Eden.  
 Crowns that fade not away are set on your heads: hymns of praise hourly, let your mouths sing...  
 The Evil One made war, and subdued Adam’s house: through your baptism, my brethren, lo, he is subdued this day.  
 Great is the victory but today you have won: if so be ye neglect not, you shall not perish, my brethren.<sup>908</sup>

<sup>904</sup> See, for example, Walter, *Syriac Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 68 and passim

<sup>905</sup> Odes of Solomon 9. 8-9, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 2, 743.

<sup>906</sup> This third-century New Testament apocryph has survived in Syriac and Greek manuscripts. The Greek version contains some Gnostic undertones, which have been purged from the Syriac version. Consequently, the Greek version is considered older, though the *Acts* were probably composed in Syriac in Northern Mesopotamia.

<sup>907</sup> Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, vol. 1, 91. Vööbus claims that the crown refers to baptism, pointing to the fact that newly baptized persons were dressed in white robes and crowns were placed on their heads, and that liturgical hymns refer to baptism as crown. It has been seen, however, that starting with Jewish texts and the Book of Revelation the crown may have other, including eschatological meanings. As the *Acts of Thomas* talks about “going up from the contest” it is likely that the text wants to confer an eschatological meaning, which would be a bit premature at the moment of baptism.

<sup>908</sup> Hymn for the Feast of the Epiphany 13 (Hymn for the Baptized), 1-7, 10, 11, 19-20. trans. E. Johnston, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 13, ed. P. Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1898.)

The warning not to neglect one's duties is added to the theme of fight in another hymn of Ephrem, which promises receiving the crown as the final reward. In this hymn Ephrem calls on the faithful to live up to the promise of baptism, and not become slack in their duties, or in his language, not become a heathen again, but to remember their baptism, the commandments of God, and fight against evil. Then they shall receive atonement and the crown.<sup>909</sup>

In Gnostic texts one also finds the image of the soul returning to the realm of light being crowned, alongside the metaphor of being invested with a garment of light.<sup>910</sup> Thus, for example, the work *Zostrianos* describes the mystical ascent of the soul toward acquaintance or Gnosis, and at the end of this spiritual journey concludes: I united with them all<sup>911</sup> ... I became all perfect and received power. I was written in glory and sealed. I received there a perfect crown.<sup>912</sup> The theme of contest reappears in the *Teachings of Silvanus*, where those who contend well (are good athletes, combatants) will be crowned by Christ:

And the Life of Heaven wishes to renew all, that he may cast out that which is weak, and every black form, that everyone may shine forth with great brilliance in heavenly garments in order to make manifest the command of the Father, and that he may crown those wishing to contend well. Christ, being judge of the contest, is he who crowned every one, teaching every one to contend. This one who contended first received the crown, gained dominion, and appeared, giving light to everyone.<sup>913</sup>

The *Untitled Text of the Bruce Codex* also makes frequent mention of the ray-emitting crowns<sup>914</sup> of the holy beings of light, which those closed in the body strive to attain:

This is the crown which gives power to every power. And this is the crown for which all the immortal ones pray... those who have received bodies pray, wishing to leave their bodies behind, and to receive the crown which is laid up for them in the imperishable aeon.<sup>915</sup> ... And the all-visible one came forth wearing the crown, and gave (crowns) to those who have believed<sup>916</sup>

Manichaean tradition is of special relevance, for hymna, which can be defined as literary Calls of Awakening, often include the promise of a crown as a reward for those who awaken, symbolizing the promise of salvation inherent in the Gnostic Call. (The crown of light may also appear instead as a diadem or a wreath – these three, crown, diadem and wreath seem to be three different ways of

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm>, last accessed 11 July 2008.

<sup>909</sup> "But our Shepherd has baptized His sheep... The People passed through the water and were baptized.; the People came up on dry land and became as heathen. The Commandment was savourless in their ears; the manna corrupted in their vessels. Eat the living Body,—the medicine of life that gives life to all!... You have gone down to the victorious waters: come up and triumph in the fight! receive from the water atonement, and from the fight the crowning!" Hymn for the Feast of the Epiphany 7.5-8, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm>.

<sup>910</sup> John D. Turner, "Ritual in Gnosticism," *SBLSP* 33 (1994): 136-181, <http://jdt.unl.edu/ritual.htm#fnB33>, last accessed 11 July 2008.

<sup>911</sup> I.e., with the powers of Light.

<sup>912</sup> *Zostrianos*, 129,12-16; cf. 57,13-24, ed. B. Layton, trans. J. H. Sieber, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VIII*, NHS 31 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 221

<sup>913</sup> *Teachings of Silvanus* 112,10-27, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, 353.

<sup>914</sup> *Untitled Text of the Bruce Codex* ch. 11

<sup>915</sup> *Untitled Text of the Bruce Codex* ch. 9.

<sup>916</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 12.

expressing the glorious headdress to go with the garment, and the different texts may mention all three, just two, or only one of them at the same time.)<sup>917</sup> Already some versions of the Call (of the Living Spirit) and the Answer (of the awakened Primal Man) contain allusions to the crown of light, like this Turfan fragment:

[Call:] Shake off the drunkenness in which thou hast slumbered,  
Awake and behold me!  
Good tidings to thee from the world of joy  
From which I am sent for thy sake.

[Answer:] I am I, the son of the mild ones.  
Mingled am I and lamentation I see.  
Lead me out of the embracement of death.

[Call:] Power and prosperity of the Living  
unto thee from thy home!  
Follow me, son of mildness,  
Set upon thy head the crown of light.<sup>918</sup>

Modeled on the fate of the Primal Man, the same crown (and of course the robe of light) awaits those souls (particles of the imprisoned light armor, sons of the Primal Man) who manage emulate their forefather, wake up and break free of the matter:<sup>919</sup>

O Soul... thou sleeping,  
They that sleep (lacuna... ) they that slumber  
Awake. Lo, the morning has come, lo, the sun rises on [thee].  
The morning is the Truth, the Truth is the commandments...<sup>920</sup>  
O Noble one despised. Thy king searches for thee. Where are thy angelic garments,  
thy robes that grow not old? Where are thy gay garlands, the crowns that fall not?<sup>921</sup>

The psalm just quoted has many parallels, concerning its content, with the Yezidi *Song of the Commoner*. The whole Call of Awakening is embedded in a naturalistic scene of the morning coming and the sun rising, just as in its Yezidi counterpart. The call to awaken is then followed by a reminder of Truth and the commandments, that is, faith and the religious precepts, which a Manichaeon has to follow, if he wishes to serve his Lord. The moral instruction is then followed by the promise of salvation, symbolized by the garment of light, the garland and the crown, which await the true believer. Other hymns put the emphasis on the cry or the voice calling from the beyond (like the voice of the cockerel calling from the Throne of God) and add the prospect of

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<sup>917</sup> It is revealing, for example, that in the Coptic *Kephalaia*, the diadem, wreath and crown are held by the same angel, while another holds the garment, and the third one the "prize." One (angel) holds the prize in his hand. The second bears the light garment. The third is the one who possesses the diadem and the wreath and the crown of light." *Kephalaia* 36.12-21, in Gardner, *Kephalaia*, 40.

<sup>918</sup> Turfan fragment M 7, quoted in Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 83.

<sup>919</sup> "Deep is the drunken stupor in which you sleep, awake and look at me. From the World of Peace, from which I have been sent for your sake: Hail... Follow me, son of mildness, and set the wreath of Light upon your head." *Zarahustra-fragment* (Parthian), in Klimkeit, *Gnosis*, 47-8. Zarahustra (Zoroaster) was considered one of the prophets preceding him by Mani, whose message aimed at freeing the Living Soul from the matter.

<sup>920</sup> Psalmoi Sarakotôn, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 146.14-20

<sup>921</sup> Psalmoi Sarakotôn, *ibid.*, 146.38-44.

returning to heaven to the promise of the robe and crown:

When I heard the cry of my saviour, a power clothed all my limbs, their bitter walls I destroyed, their doors I broke down, I ran to my Judge. The garland of glory he set upon my head, the prize of victory he set in my hand, he clothed me in the robe of light.<sup>922</sup>

Finally, just like Manichaean hymns, Mandaean hymns of the Call of Life also hold out the promise of a wreath to be set on the head of those, who rise from their sleep:

Early I arose from my sleep: I stood,  
Into radiance that was great I looked,  
I gazed into radiance that was great,  
Into the Light which is boundless.

When clothed in robes of radiance  
And light was thrown on my shoulders  
A wreath of ether He set on my head  
And set it on the head of all His race  
He hymned, and the 'uthras with Him hymn  
And the Light-rays answer his Voice.  
And it rouseth sleepers and maketh them rise up  
From their sleep.<sup>923</sup>

## The Headdress and the Promise of Heaven in the Beyta Cindî

Admittedly, the Yezidi text, in its present form, does not openly state that such a “luminous headdress” will accrue to those who harken to the voice of the cockerel. However, it is possible to conclude that as much is implied by the text. The song’s claim that saints, believers, *mirîds*<sup>924</sup> and discerning ones have gathered around the headdress, suggests that believers (will) have access to this precious item of divine clothing. This interpretation is reinforced by the sentence “Your headdress is in order, the good men have taken their share of it.” The next few verses further illuminate the circumstances of taking share in the crown:

Your headdress is precious,  
It flew, it went away, it was in Heaven,  
It circled around the Throne...

<sup>922</sup> Psalm to Jesus CCXLIII, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book II*, 50.21. See also: “And while I thus wept and shed tears upon the ground, I heard the voice of the Beneficent King... I shall save you from every... Of the rebellious Powers who have frightened [you] with fear... I shall take (you) eagerly and soar up upon wings, High over all the (Dark) Powers and rebellious Princes, I shall lead (you) into the primeval calm of that land [i.e. the New Paradise]... You shall put on a radiant garment, and gird on Light; And I shall set on your head the diadem of sovereignty.” Parthian Hymn-Cycles, *Huvîdagmân*, Canto VI, in Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature* 85-86.

<sup>923</sup> Drower, *Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans*. The Rus’hma, chapter 114. The hymn continues with the moral instruction to “worship and praise the Great Life and praise His Counterpart,” already quoted above. The Gnostic Society Library (online), <http://www.gnosis.org/library/ginzarba.htm>, accessed 03. 07. 2008.

<sup>924</sup> I.e., Yezidi commoners. In this context they are probably to be understood as believers of the true faith, just like Manichaean *auditors*, who do not possess a special status, but are ready to follow their religious leaders who possess knowledge of the true religion.

I went towards that light.  
One cries out in deep emotion...

I went towards heaven.  
That sight pleases me,  
The Commoner has become a Prince dressed in Black.

The headdress or crown seems to lead the way to heaven, to the throne of God, or at any case is to be found there. And this is where the faithful soldier himself will follow, whose reward of the fight will be to reach heaven and the divine light, just like in the Late Antique texts quoted above.<sup>925</sup> This interpretation is reinforced by the last line, on the commoner (soldier) being dressed in Black. This Black stands to symbolize the clothing of the *feqirs*, who wear the sacred black shirt with a black turban, believed to be fashioned after the luminous black *khirqe* and crown worn by God and Angels of the Yezidi hymns. A commoner becoming dressed in black refers to his winning these sacred items of clothing. In other words, the soldier who has heeded the call of awakening and fought the fight for his Master, will as his reward reach heaven, become like a *feqir*, that is a true man of religion, and put on the sacred clothing, *khirqe* and crown.<sup>926</sup>

The expression “the commoner became a Prince”, which can be found only in the version of the *Hymn of the Headdress* contained by the *Beyta Cindî*, is somewhat of a challenge to interpret. Prince (*mîr*) as a rule refers to God in Yezidi texts. Thus, the statement that the soldier of faith becomes a Prince upon reaching Heaven would seem to imply a sort of apotheosis of the soldier, probably in the sense that the soul of the true believer would eventually unite, become one with the Divine. As had been seen, this idea is one of the cornerstones of Gnostic and related systems. Such an interpretation could also be born out of the idea that in heaven the true believer would wear the *khirqe* and crown. This may, of course, merely imply that the believer becomes like a *feqir*, a truly pious ascetic, but equally it may also mean that he becomes like God and his Angels, whose luminous black *khirqe* and crown is the heavenly archetype of the dress of the *feqirs*. This would be a most interesting thought as far as Yezidi anthropology, its origins and development are concerned. Unfortunately, the texts published so far do not yield enough information to let us decide if there was indeed such a thought of the unification of the soul with the Divine present in Yezidi religion once, or if this is a mere corruption of the text, and “prince” has merely been switched for *feqir*. The question, therefore, must for the time being, remain open.

Should any doubt remain that these stanzas refer to the soldier of faith ascending to heaven and

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<sup>925</sup> Note that in the Calls of Awakening above light (receiving light, being illuminated by light, or ascending back to the world of light) was often associated with awakening.

<sup>926</sup> The same line is repeated in the hymn of the headdress contained in the *Hymn of Sheikh Heseni Siltan* 19: “I went to the realm of heaven, That sight pleases me, The commoner had been dressed in black” (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 360.) In his footnote Kreyenbroek explains: “in heaven the pious commoner was recognised as the equal of a Feqir.” (Kreyenbroek, *Sheikh Adi*, 360, note 111.)

reaping his reward, symbolized by receiving his share of the sacred clothing, it can be dissolved by a comparison with the version of the headdress hymn found in the *Hymn of Sheikh Heseni Siltan*. Though very similar to the one contained in the *Beyta Cindî*, there are some interesting differences:

Your head-dress is big  
Falcons called to it overhead...

I went to the realm of that head-dress  
I sought to reach the shores of the ocean  
Oh beloved Pire Libnan  
Their cup stood on holy wood<sup>927</sup>  
Oh Pir, let me be your slave.

I went to the realm of heaven  
That sight pleases me  
The commoner had been dressed in black  
Oh Pir, let me be your slave<sup>928</sup>

The text makes it clear that the realm of heaven and the realm of the head-dress, where the believer aims to arrive, are ultimately the same. And if heaven is no other than the realm of head-dress, it is probably not too far-fetched to conclude that reaching heaven will mean attaining the headdress, or “taking a share of it” as the hymn says.

The Song of the Commoner then ends with a brief enumeration of the holy Spots in Lalish: the Cave, the *Silavgeh*,<sup>929</sup> and the Spires of the Sanctuary. Keeping in mind that Lalish is nothing else but the earthly reflection of heavenly Lalish, the Throne of God,<sup>930</sup> it would not be too daring a supposition to assume that the text refers to heavenly Lalish (representing the *batini* or spiritual, esoteric world), and not the earthly Lalish, its *zahiri* (material, exoteric) counterpart. The mention of the “eternal place, at the eternal foundation” supports his assumption. Earthly Lalish could hardly be called “eternal foundation” unlike heavenly Lalish, the Throne of God. It is heavenly Lalish where the soldier eventually arrives, following the flight of the headdress. Thus, the third element of the classical Call of Awakening, the promise of heaven, is fulfilled in the hymn of the headdress, where the faithful soldier is rewarded with access to heaven and “investiture” with the headdress, and possibly the black *khirqe* as well, so that the commoner will become “black,” (dressed as in the luminous black *khirqe* and *kof*) in heaven.

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<sup>927</sup> *Gezir*, the special sacred wood used for cooking in Lalish.

<sup>928</sup> *Hymn of Sheikh Heseni Siltan* 16-9, Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 359-60.

<sup>929</sup> The “place of greeting”, the stone marking the place on the path leading to Lalish, from where the valley is first sighted. Pilgrims used to fire their rifles at his spot and kiss the stone.

<sup>930</sup> Yezidi oral tradition relates how the earth at the time of creation settled only when Lalish, the throne of God “came down” on it. According to Dr. Khalil Cindî Rashow the relationship between earthly and heavenly Lalish should be compared to that between God and the human soul. Talking of the connection between earthly and heavenly Lalish, he mentioned the mysterious tree, Ghew(ar) referred to in the *Prayer of Belief* 6 (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 104) as a tree which had “Its head below, its roots above, The angels took the light from the uppermost height.” In his interpretation this was the Tree of Knowledge connecting earthly and heavenly Lalish. With its roots it absorbed divine gnosis in heavenly Lalish to distribute it through its branches down on earth.

Summing up, there can be little doubt that the *Beyta Cindî* is a Yezidi version of the Late Antique literary genre of the Call of Awakening (also referred to as the Gnostic Call). It calls on the faithful to wake up, designating sleep as something dark, unlawful and leading to punishment. In other words, sleep is a metaphor for the state of spiritual ignorance, where the individual inevitably transgresses the divine precepts and commandments due to his lack of religious awareness. Awakening, on the other hand, is nothing else than spiritual conversion, a turning toward religion and accepting its demands. The classical image of awakening is here complemented by the Sufi image of wine, divine intoxication, which leads to a mystical state of gnosis, also a form of awakening and enlightenment. The call itself, a voice calling for awakening in the middle of the night, comes from the word of the beyond, from heaven or the Throne of God, in keeping with the Late Antique tradition of the Call being the voice of the transmundane penetrating this world. Beside the exhortation to awaken and spurn sleep, the song also contains two of the three doctrinal elements of the Gnostic Call. It contains a moral instruction, instructing the awakened believer of his duties toward God and the righteous conduct expected of him. It also calls on the believer, consistently referred to throughout the song as soldier, to fight the war for his faith, yet another common Late Antique motif. Punishment meted out to those who prove to be slack in their service constitutes a part of this moral instruction. As a counterpart to the moral instruction we find the promise of salvation or, in a Yezidi context, the promise of a heavenly reward: ascension to heaven, to the eternal Paradise and the Throne of God (fleetingly mentioned in the first, and elaborated in the last part of the hymn), and being invested with the luminous black headdress (crown,) and perhaps with the black *khirqe* as well. The promise of the headdress and the *khirqe*<sup>931</sup> as a reward for those who heed the call of awakening and take their part in the fight for faith connects the *Beyta Cindî* to the same tradition as the eschatological *Hymn of Sherfedin* and the *Hymn of Faith*. Both of these hymns promise the *khirqe* as a reward to those who are willing to join the fight on the side of the true religion at the battle at the end of the world.

The story of the Yezidi *khirqe* and the crown (*kof, tac*) has come full circle with this. They were the clothing of God at the very beginning of the creation, and the light emanating from them played its role in the creation. They were later inherited by the Angels, symbolizing their share in the divine power. Then they were worn by the angels incarnated on earth as Yezidi leaders, finally

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<sup>931</sup> Though the promise of the *khirqe* is not explicit in the text, it may be inferred from the line stating that the soldier will become black, that is, in heaven he will be dressed in the black *khirqe* and headdress of the *feqirs*.

becoming instruments of distributing faith and divine wisdom among men. They play a role in the myth of Adam's (i.e., man's) creation as well. The sacred clothing is then worn by Adam while he lives in Paradise and possesses the *sur*, divine essence of Angel Sheikh Sin. Upon his loss of the *sur*, that is the loss of his angelic status, Adam is expelled from Paradise and divested of his angelic clothing. These lost garments are finally recaptured as a heavenly reward by the "soldier" of faith, who awakens to the true religion, and takes up the struggle for it. It may even be inferred, even if the Yezidi texts published so far and the extant oral traditions do not state it openly, that the Yezidi who manages to shed the manacles of sleep (spiritual unconsciousness) and follows the true religion, regains the original divine state of Adam, that is he becomes like Adam when he was in Paradise and possessed the divine soul of Melek Sheikh Sin and wore the *khirqe* and the *kof*.

It is hard to miss the parallel between the *khirqe* and *kof* and the garments of light of Late Antiquity, and especially the light garments of Adam, lost at the time of his Fall and eventually regained as a symbol of salvation by those who become victorious in the spiritual fight, regaining man's elevated position lost at the time of the Fall.<sup>932</sup> The appearance of the *kof* and the *khirqe*, the latter designated with a Sufi word but carrying ideas inherited from Late Antiquity, in a hymn continuing the Late Antique tradition of the Call of Awakening is a farther proof of the long-lasting influence the Late Antique religious thought exercised even on its periphery well into the Middle Ages, when Yezidi tradition developed.

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<sup>932</sup> Christian and dualistic systems emphasize different elements of the myth, and their understanding of the human soul's original position also differs (angelic or part of the divine, consubstantial with the Light), but both concur on the notion of the soul's return to its original elevated position, often expressed by the investiture with the garment and crown of light.

## Chapter 9: The Origin Myth of the Yezidis – the Myth of Shehid bin Jer<sup>933</sup>

### The Creation Myth of Shehid bin Jer

#### Creation from the *Sur* in Adam's Forehead

In this chapter I propose to return to the creation myth of Adam as told by Feqir Haji. The first part of this myth has already been analyzed in details in a previous chapter. The second part tells of the creation of the Yezidi race (or rather their forefather, Shehid) from the divine essence, the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin lost by Adam along with his angelic clothing at the time of his expulsion from Paradise. I shall first recount again the myth as told by Feqir Haji, but now focusing on the events that followed the fall of Adam and his loss of the *sur*. The myth as told by Feqir Haji, to the best of my knowledge, has never been published in full in Western literature before.<sup>934</sup>

Sheikh Sin is from goodness, he was modeled after the Pearl, he existed before men and women, Sheikh Sin was created from Goodness, and his Light was staying in the Divine Light. In heaven he was the king of true religion, on earth he gave power to the prophet of the Ummah.

The prophet of the Ummah was no other than Adam, the divine light and mysterious power (*sur*) of Melek Sheikh Sin came from heaven into the forehead of Adam.

God created Adam's body between Saturday and Friday. After seven hundred years, a soul entered this body. This soul was an angel that came from heaven. The soul did not want to enter the body. The seven Angels stood around the body and they said to this angel, you have to enter into this body so that the world (mankind) may be established. This soul was the soul of Melek Sheik Sin.

For seven hundred years the soul (Sheikh Sin) did not go into Adam, but then God and the Peacock Angel commanded that he must go into it. Before the soul [or light, *sur*] of Melek Sheikh Sin entered Adam, it made conditions for entering the body and said to God and the Peacock Angel "take me to Paradise then." They consented. He said, "put the *khirqe* on me," they consented. He said, "and let the Peacock Angel be my imam and show my way around Paradise," they consented.

So, finally, Melek Sheik Sin consented. Then he brought his divine power and light, that is, his *sur*, and put it into Adam's forehead and stayed in Adam's forehead. And they put the *khirqe* on Adam, the *khirqe* became Adam's cloth. And the Peacock Angel took Adam to Paradise and became his imam.

Then follows the story of the Peacock Angel tricking Adam into tasting the forbidden grain:

Then the Peacock Angel took away the *khirqe* of Adam, and he took away the *sur* in Adam's forehead. As long as Adam was in Paradise, he was like a great angel, for the

<sup>933</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Iran and the Caucasus* 6.1/2 (2002): 27-56. A more recent, updated version is soon to be published in *Recalling the Past in Iranian Societies*, ed. P. Kreyenbroek and C. Allison, Harrassowitz.

<sup>934</sup> For the original text of the myth, as recounted by Feqir Haji and others, see the transcriptions and translations in the *Appendix*.

divine light, or *sur* of Sheikh Melek Sin inside him was great. But after the Peacock Angel took away the *sur* from his forehead, and his *khirqe*, he became like the empty shell of a snail, he became a human.

The Peacock Angel then created Eve from the rib of Adam, and Adam married Eve. They had seventy-two sons and seventy-two daughters, who later married each other. This was the beginning of mankind.<sup>935</sup>

When the Peacock Angel tricked Adam, and he had to leave Paradise, Adam swore at the Peacock Angel, pronouncing the forbidden word,<sup>936</sup> a habit that the descendants of his children follow up to this day. So the Peacock Angel wanted to create a people for himself, who would revere him, so his name wouldn't be lost. To this end he took the *sur*, which he had taken away out of Adam's forehead and put it in a jar, for the form of a jar resembles that of a womb. After nine months a boy was born from that jar, who came to be called Shehid bin Jer, or Witness of the Jar. God then sent a *houri* from Paradise, called Leyla, for him to marry. From their union were born Hashim and Quresh.<sup>937</sup> The Yezidis are their descendants. They were brought forth from the *sur* of Shehid, they are the nation of that *sur*. Yezidis are not the descendants of Adam and Eve's twice seventy-two children, like the rest of mankind, with whom they cannot marry. After Shehid they have no prophet, because they are the nation of his *sur*, the nation of God, and the nation of the Peacock Angel. They are the nation of God, and that is why they are called "Ezidis," for Shehid said "God gave (made) me."<sup>938</sup>

A less coherent account of the same event can be found in one of the interviews made by Jasim Murad with Yezidis living in Germany:

Then, Angel Dirdail entered the body of Adam and clapped both of his hands saying: "Wake up Adam and put on your body the attire of angels."... Then Dirdail taught Adam the science of God and brought him to paradise and said unto him: "Now you are an angel, do not leave Paradise for if you do so, you shall become a man."<sup>939</sup>

This is followed by the story of the Peacock Angel tricking Adam into eating from the plant of grain, his ousting from Paradise, and his stripping of his angelic clothing:

"Now you have become a human being and you have lost your angelic nature."... Then, Ta'us Malak stripped Adam of the angelic clothes and left him only with the pearl<sup>940</sup> on his forehead, and then threw him away from the gates of Paradise.<sup>941</sup>

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<sup>935</sup> Yezidis, no doubt under Judeo-Christian-Islamic influence, seem to share the view that there are seventy-two nations (not counting the Yezidis) on earth. Interestingly, many Yezidis I met claimed that Yezidis had weathered seventy-two *fermans* (persecution in this context), a number which probably reflects the traditional number of nations, and implies that they are a people who have been persecuted by all other nations.

<sup>936</sup> That is, he called the Peacock Angel "Sheitan," a word Yezidis are forbidden to pronounce.

<sup>937</sup> Quresh was the tribe of Mohamad, Hashim his sub-tribe. The appearance of these names in a Yezidi myth as the legendary forefathers of the Yezidis, born from the divinely conceived Shehid, reflects the strong influence Islam must have exercised on the ancestors of Yezidis at one point.

<sup>938</sup> This is connected with the word play Yezidis (or as they prefer to say these days: Ezidi/Ezdi) use to explain their name. *Xweda ez dam*. *Xweda* is the etymological explanation of the Kurdish for God (*Xwedê*), understood as *xwe da*, that is "self-created" ("he who gave/made himself). While (*Xweda*) *ez dam* means "(by the Self-created/God) I was made/given," thus Yezidis claim their name, "Ezidi," "Ezdi" comes from *ez dam*, "I was created by God."

<sup>939</sup> Version of Feqir Ali, in Jasim Murad, "Sacred Poems," 290.

<sup>940</sup> There was no previous mention of a "pearl" in the text, but it evidently refers to the drop of light or *sur* representing the power of the angel in Adam's forehead, known from other versions of the myth. Jasim Murad mentions later, when referring to the myth, that according to Feqir Ali the pearl was given to Adam by the Peacock Angel, when he was placed in Paradise ("Sacred Poems," 310.) It is somewhat surprising that the Peacock Angel does not take away the "pearl" right away together with Adam's angelic clothing, only later on, but this is probably due to the fact that the teller of the myth did not associate the "pearl" with the angelic nature of Adam, that is, the presence of divine power in

This is followed by the creation of Eve, the separation of Adam and Eve,<sup>942</sup> and the sending of a *houri* from Paradise to Adam, who made Eve very jealous. Then the text abruptly returns to Adam's forehead:

Ta'us Malak then asked Adam to give up the pearl and Adam did so... Now, the pearl which Adam gave to Ta'us Malak transformed at the order of God into a handsome boy, and Ta'us Malak made the boy and the Houri marry each other and the Yazidis came from their offspring.<sup>943</sup>

The myth of Shehid's creation ends with an account of how Eve tried to induce her children to murder the boy, but the Peacock Angel confused the tongue of the would be murderers, who could no longer understand each other and so the plan failed.<sup>944</sup>

Summing up, Sheikh Sin, one of the Seven Great Angels, emanations of the Godhead, "moved" into the body of Adam, in order to bring him to life, that is, to give him a soul or spirit. His divine essence or light, the *sur*, was manifested in the forehead of Adam, something that can be imagined, perhaps, as a drop of light shining forth from Adam's forehead, or even as a pearl.<sup>945</sup> At the time of his expulsion from Paradise, Adam lost the *sur* in his forehead, along with his angelic clothing and angelic (divine) status. However, the *sur* was not lost for good as far as the history of humans was concerned. It was taken by the Peacock Angel, who made it sure that a special being was born from this *sur*, divine essence or light, who then became the forefather of the Yezidi race. As Arab Khidir of Beshiqe said:<sup>946</sup> "Adam had *sur* in his forehead, this reached Shit (Shehid), this light reached his (Shehid's) children."<sup>947</sup> In other words, Shehid (and his descendants) took the exalted position as a special people of God (in possession of the divine essence, *sur*) initially given to Adam, and which Adam eventually lost (though in the Yezidi version through no sin of his own, but rather to fulfill the inscrutable plans of God.)

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him (which is referred to in this version only in an ambiguous way.) This is a good example of how oral myths are continually being changed and rewritten, when some of the motifs can no longer be interpreted by those retelling them. Another example is furnished by Empson (*Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 47), when he mentions jars filled with blood from the forehead, which again must be the result of his source (sadly unspecified), perhaps not quite understanding the myth, substituting human essence "blood" to divine essence "*sur*" in Adam's forehead.

<sup>941</sup> Jasim Murad, "Sacred Poems," 291.

<sup>942</sup> Many versions of the Yezidi myth of Adam recount that the couple lost each other, or were separated by the Peacock Angel, and spent forty years looking for each other. The motif of separation was already known in Late Antiquity, for example, it can be read in the *Vita Adae*, and it was known in Islamic tradition as well.

<sup>943</sup> Jasim Murad, "Sacred Poems," 292.

<sup>944</sup> *Ibid.*: "But before the young boy married the Houri, Eve advised her children to kill the boy born out of the pearl so that one of them could marry the Houri. But Ta'us Malak came on that night and struck the mouths of Adam and Eve's children with his cane, and thus, they spoke different languages and could not understand each other, and the plot of murdering the young boy was aborted." As Adam and Eve had twice seventy-two children, corresponding to the traditional number of nations on earth, it is clear that this part of the myth is related to the myth of the Tower of Babel and God confusing the tongue of the nations.

<sup>945</sup> On the *sur* shining as a drop of light on the forehead of a Yezidi divine being, and in non-Yezidi tradition of the region, see above, in Chapter 6 on the creation myth of Adam.

<sup>946</sup> After having first claimed that Shehid was in fact Adam, and Yezidis were the children of Adam and Eve.

<sup>947</sup> *Adam, sur hebû li eniya wî, ew gehişte Şit, ew nûr gehişte piçukêd wî.*

## The Creation of Shehid from Adam's Seed

There is another variant of this myth current among the Yezidis. This variant also attributes a special birth to Shehid, forefather of the Yezidi race. However, there are some notable differences. The *sur* of a divine being does not play a role,<sup>948</sup> instead the myth centers around the seed of Adam. This other version has repeatedly been published in Western scholarship, with minor variations.<sup>949</sup> According to the *Black Book* (in the manuscript version translated by Joseph) Shehid's creation took place in this way:

Now Gabriel was away from Adam for a hundred years. And Adam was sad and weeping. Then God commanded Gabriel to create Eve from under the left shoulder of Adam. Now it came to pass, after the creation of Eve and of all the animals, that Adam and Eve quarreled over the question whether the human race should be descended from him or from her, for each wished to be the sole begetter of the race. This quarrel originated in their observation of the fact that among animals both the male and the female were factors in the production of their respective species. After a long discussion Adam and Eve agreed on this: each should cast his seed into a jar, close it, and seal it with his own seal, and wait for nine months. When they opened the jars at the completion of this period, they found in Adam's jar two children, male and female. Now from these two our sect, the Yezidis, are descended. In Eve's jar they found naught but rotten worms emitting a foul odor. And God caused nipples to grow for Adam that he might suckle the children that proceeded from his jar. This is the reason why man has nipples. After this Adam knew Eve, and she bore two children, male and female; and from these the Jews, the Christians, the Moslems, and other nations and sects are descended. But our first fathers are Seth, Noah, and Enosh, the righteous ones, who were descended from Adam only.<sup>950</sup>

Other versions recorded by researchers and travelers on the creation of Shehid from the seed of Adam (and Adam alone) add a few more interesting details. According to one version, Eve was so angry or jealous at the results of Adam's creative action that she tried to destroy the jar, but –

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<sup>948</sup> As has already been mentioned, the myth of enclosing Angel Sheikh Sin in Adam's body to function as his soul is not reported in the *Black Book* or in any other Western publications, except for Siouffi (writing before the publication of the *Black Book*,) who makes a passing reference to it. Some brief mentions of it were also made in the interviews in the unpublished doctoral thesis of Jasim Murad, these, however, failed to attract any attention.

<sup>949</sup> The *Black Book* in Joseph's publication ("Yezidi Texts," 223), Chabot, "Notice sur les Yézidis," 118; Drower *Peacock Angel*, 91; Empson *Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 45-7, 147-48; A. Guérinot, "Les Yézidis," *RMM* 5.8 (1908): 586-7; Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism* 36-7.; Lescot, *Enquête sur les Yezidis*, 59; F. Nau, "Recueil de textes et de documents sur les Yézidis," 245; Siouffi "La Secte des Yézidis," 259-60.

<sup>950</sup> Joseph, "Yezidi Texts," 223. It is worth noting that while the myth of the creation of Adam presented at this point by the *Black Book* clearly talks about the creation of Shehid from Adam's seed, and makes no reference to the *sur*, the same manuscript mentions the creation of Shehid and the Yezidis from the essence of Adam a page earlier: "O Angels, I will create Adam and Eve; and from the essence of Adam shall proceed Sehar bn Jebr, and of him a separate community shall appear upon the earth, that of Azazil, i.e., that of Melek Ta'us, which is the sect of the Yezidis." Joseph, "Yezidi Texts," 222. The manuscript in the possession of Père Anastase Marie (published in French in *Anthropos* 6 (1911), 1-39) also contains this reference to the essence of Adam, see F. Nau, "Recueil de textes et de documents sur les Yézidis," 165. On the other hand, Frayha's manuscript of the *Black Book* simply says, "Of the seed of Adam there shall be born ShHD bin SFR." (Frayha, "New Yezidi Texts," 25.) Dāmlūjī, an Arabic author on Yezidis, also writes that "Shehid alone came by *sur*," and he didn't look like the other children of Adam. Then he recounts the story of Adam and Even quarreling and putting their seed in a jar. (Dāmlūjī, S., *Al-Yazīdiyya* (Mosul, 1949), 4-5. Oral translation by Dr Khalil Rashow.) Possibly Dāmlūjī was using the *Black Book* as his source.

prevented by Adam – she succeeded only in paralyzing one of Shehid’s legs.<sup>951</sup> Siouffi also adds that Adam was a possessor of the true religion, which then he transmitted Shehid (and not his other sons), who “est né d’Adam seul, sans le concours de la femme et sans aucun mélange avec la sange corruptible du sexe féminin.”<sup>952</sup> As regards Shehid’s marriage, some versions also state that he married a *houri* (or *hurryah*, *hûri*) from Paradise,<sup>953</sup> and not a twin sister, and from their union originated the race of Yezidis.

Among Yezidis today both variants can be found, one putting the emphasis on Adam’s seed, and seeing Yezidis as the children of Adam but not of Eve, the other emphasizing that Shehid was created from Adam’s (that is, Sheikh Sin’s) *sur*. However, I had the impression that most Yezidis would lay claim to knowing only one or the other version. In any case, all variants, whether written or oral, agree that the Yezidis spring from this Shehid of miraculous birth, while the rest of mankind is the offspring of the carnally conceived children of Adam and Eve.<sup>954</sup> Therefore the Yezidis, the race of Shehid, are the inheritors of true religion, the tribe of true believers and superior to the rest of mankind.<sup>955</sup>

Though the second variant of the myth has been, as was shown above, widely published and quoted in Western literature dealing with the Yezidis, practically no effort was made at attempting to interpret this myth, other than qualifying it as yet another childish Yezidi myth mixing up a Biblical legend. The sole exception was Lescot,<sup>956</sup> who wished to compare the Yezidi myth to the Zoroastrian tradition of the first human couple having been born from a plant that grew out of the semen of Gayomard, hidden in the earth. He also called attention to a Greek myth according to

<sup>951</sup> Siouffi, “La Secte des Yézidis,” 260; Guérinot “Les Yézidis,” 586. Eve’s wish to destroy the newborn was already mentioned above in connection with the other variant of the myth, told by Feqir Ali to Jasim Murad.

<sup>952</sup> Siouffi, “Notice sur la secte des Yézidis,” 260.

<sup>953</sup> *Ibid.*; Guérinot, “Les Yézidis” 586; Nau, “Recueil de texts,” 245. Ahmet (*Yazidis*, 203) writes that “Adam and Eve then begot Seth and Hurryah, the ‘blessed ones’ were born.” As he repeatedly mentions that Shehid was created miraculously and from Adam alone, this is probably a slip of the pen. On the same page, he recounts another version of the myth mentioning a twin-sister. Others, like Drower (*Peacock Angel*, 91), Empson, (*Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 47, 148), Chabot (, “Notice sur les Yézidis,” 118) speak of a twin sister.

<sup>954</sup> The only surprising exception was Qewwal Qewwal of Behzani, who said that Shehid was created from the *sur* of Adam, but claimed that Adam had no children (except for Cain and Abel, who both died childless,) and *all* mankind originated from Shehid. His remark occasioned some discussion among those present, but as it was in Arabic, I could not follow.

<sup>955</sup> The hymns so far published do not contain anything on the birth of Shehid. In fact, they do not even mention his name. One of my informants in Shariya, who was interested in collecting Yezidi sacred texts, claimed that there was in fact a *qawl* of Shehid bin Jer. (He quoted one stanza from this hymn: *haviniye me batine, ji behra spi ye, ji milyaketa*. That is, “our rennet is from the other world (*batini*, hidden esoteric), it is from the white sea, it is from the angels.” *This* was denied by others. (Though, as no one can be familiar with the whole corpus of existing texts, such denial does not necessarily imply more than that any such hymn, if it really existed, was not among the most important, often recited ones.) On the other hand, one version of the *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 49-50 talks about Eve as a *houri* coming from heaven to marry Adam, and Hashim and Quresh are her sons (and not those of the *houri* Leyla and Shehid.) “The saintly Adam drank from the Cup, The mystical power of that Cup came to him, So (God) sent him the Houri Eve. What a beautiful Houri she is! By the mystical power of that Cup. Both the Hashemites and the Quraysh<sup>955</sup> came from her.” (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 64.) In my opinion this is a good example of how myths get shortened, simplified with time, with complicated extra details discarded. Furthermore, the text translated by Kreyenbroek contains *çawa* (how), instead of *Hawa* (Eve), which is probably a distortion in the transmission.

<sup>956</sup> Lescot, *Enquête sur les Yezidis*, 59, Note 1.

which the god Agdistis was born out of a drop of blood that Zeus let fall on the sun in his sleep. The similarities between these myths, however, are rather superficial, and Lescot offers no substantial argument that would establish any essential link between them. Instead, I propose to trace the roots of the myth back to a Late Antique, and specifically Gnostic/Manichaean background, and to prove that at the time of its adoption into Yezidi (or proto-Yezidi) mythology, this myth was hardly childish and obscure, rather it carried an important message easily decipherable in the given cultural context.

The chapter on Adam's creation has already demonstrated how the Gnostic speculation on the divine origin of Adam's (man's) spirit (*pneuma*) from the Realm of Light may have been the original idea behind the thought that Yezidi Adam's soul was the *sur*, or divine essence of Angel Sheikh Sin, one of the Great Seven Angels (emanations of the Godhead.) It was this divine *sur* which brought Adam's lifeless body to life.

But what of the idea that this lost *sur* of Adam, representing the divine essence, mystery, and light of a divine being (Sheikh Sin, and ultimately of the Godhead) was then used to create another man, who, in his turn, was to become the forefather of a special race? A race, which was clearly distinguished from and superior to all others, both in its origin and in being the possessor of true faith? And why is the place of this *sur* taken by Adam's seed in the alternative variant of the myth, a variant which – while acknowledging the parenthood of Adam – still ascribes a miraculous conception to Shehid, and the status of the chosen race to his descendant?

Here I would like to suggest that the Yezidi myth goes back to the legends that developed around the figure of the Biblical Seth in Late Antiquity, especially in Gnostic circles and enjoyed some popularity even in the Middle Ages, as the forefather of the pious, and ancestor of the chosen race. The Gnostic myth of Seth, which tells of his birth from a miraculous seed, claiming that he was the recipient of the glory lost by Adam, and the foundation of a race or generation<sup>957</sup> of true believers, shows a very close affinity to the myth of Shehid. The similarities between the two myths (both of which have many versions) are so numerous and deeply-rooted as to make it a likely proposition that the later myth is yet one more version of the ancient myth of Seth, this time fitted to the language of Yezidi religion.

## The Gnostic Myth of Seth

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<sup>957</sup> Γενεῖ can mean either 'race', or 'generation', and these two senses seem to overlap in the Gnostic texts. See Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 100.

## The Roots of the Speculations Concerning Seth

Speculations on the figure of Seth were first elaborated in Jewish literature, based on Adam's genealogy in Gen. 5.3, which curiously only mentions Seth by name among his sons, and on the enigmatic sentence of Genesis 4.25, "God has raised up to me *another seed*" pronounced by Adam upon the birth of Seth after the death of Abel, and Gen.1.<sup>958</sup>

Jewish tradition, trying to solve the riddle of the genealogy, arrived at the conclusion that Cain was not the son of Adam, but born from a licentious relationship between Eve and the Devil, or Sammael, thus making Seth the only surviving son of Adam. The generation (or descendants) of Seth as opposed to the generation of Cain was also a matter that received some attention. According to most Jewish texts, the generation of Seth, the pure ones, lived separately from the Cainites, the wicked ones, until the flood, when the latter were all destroyed, thus, making all mankind the descendants of Seth. There was another school, though, which taught that all righteous men, regardless of their race or tribe, are the descendants of Seth, while all the wicked ones come from Cain. We encounter this idea in Philo's *De Posteritate Caini*, the *Pirḳé of Rabbi Eliezer*, and the *Zohar*.<sup>959</sup> In the *Ethiopic Book of Enoch* a mystical battle between white, black and red bulls seems to suggest that Seth was the forefather of the people of God and the Messiah. There are also some scholars who suggest that the Samaritans, who talked about a chain of purity, considered themselves the generation of Seth, though these arguments are not accepted by all. In some Jewish writings, Seth also appears as the transmitter of special knowledge received from Adam (such as the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve*).<sup>960</sup>

However, it is in Gnosticism that speculations concerning the conception of Seth and his offspring came really to life, taking a centrepiece in Gnostic anthropogony.

The core of the Gnostic myth that sprang up around the figure of Seth was the σπῆρμα ἕτερον (sperma heteron) or "another seed" of Genesis 4.25. This is the notion that Gnostics adopted and developed into a key myth of their anthropogony. In the centre of this mythical anthropogony stood the idea of the "other seed," that is, Seth, and his seed or generation, the "unshakeable" "other" race, the race of Seth.<sup>961</sup>

<sup>958</sup> For an exhaustive treatment of the speculations that developed around the Biblical figure of Seth, see A. F. J. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1977.)

<sup>959</sup> Of course, the latter two are medieval works, but reflecting earlier traditions.

<sup>960</sup> See Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature*, chapters "Seth in Jewish Literature," and "Seth in Samaritan Literature," (pp. 1-33).

<sup>961</sup> Until recently there has persisted the conviction, based on the anti-heretical catalogues of the Church Fathers, of the existence of a "Sethian sect" par excellence. Early Christian heresiologists, and in their footsteps modern philologists talked of "Sethianism," and the "Sethian sect." Hans-Martin Schenke has even attempted to create an actual Sethian system of doctrine in his influential works. (H.-M. Schenke, "Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften," in *Studia Coptica*, ed. P. Nagel, Berliner Byzantinische Arbeiten 45 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1974), 165-73; and idem, "The Phenomenon and Significance of Sethian Gnosticism," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism:*

Gnostics believed that in the fight against Darkness and for freeing one's spirit or light soul from the fetters of matter, not all men fared equally well. The cornerstone of Gnostic anthropology was the idea that men were divided into several categories. Gnostics, those who possessed true 'knowledge' (Gnosis), constituted a special, spiritual race destined for salvation, clearly divided from the rest of mankind wallowing ignorantly in the material world. This is where Seth and his seed enter the scene: he is the forefather of this Chosen Race. Many Gnostics based their claim to represent a special race, superior to the rest of men, on the notion that unlike the rest of mankind they originated from Seth, who himself was born from "another seed" that is from a seed, a spark of Gnosis, coming from the spiritual world, not this created, material one. In fact, Seth is repeatedly referred to in various writings as *Allogenes* (ἄλλογενής) literally meaning "another generation" or "of another birth"), evidently a wordplay on "another seed."<sup>962</sup> In its turn, the notion of the "Seed of Seth," (or "Race of Seth"), meaning the Gnostics, or the offspring of Seth, developed from this idea. Gnostics thus often referred to themselves as the "Seed of the Great Seth," "Race of Seth", "Children of Seth", or "the Other Race," and claimed that the "Seed of Seth" had inherited Seth's spiritual nature, as well as his teachings on the true religion.<sup>963</sup>

### The Birth of Seth from "Another Seed"

Gnostics interpreted the "other seed" raised up by God to mean that Seth's real father was not Adam, but a divine being of the Light World, and his celestial paternity implied that he was a bearer of the divine principle.<sup>964</sup> Thus, Seth was intrinsically connected, through his conception and birth, with the divine spiritual world that the Gnostics opposed to the material world, created by the evil powers.

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*Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978.* Vol. 2. Sethian Gnosticism. *Studies in the History of Religions* 41 (Supplements to Numen) (hereafter *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*), ed. B. Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 588-616.) Recent finds and developments, however, make it a likely conclusion that a concrete sect of Sethians, with a single and rigid system of thought and clearly defined boundaries, never existed (outside the writings of the Church Fathers, that is.) A most typical case is the Nag Hammadi texts, our most important source on Gnosticism, which were for a time labeled a "Sethian library." These agree with each other in many details, but still differ from each other to a considerable extent, demonstrating that we cannot talk about "a Sethian myth." Rather these features – the special importance they attributed to the figure of Seth and his offspring, and a number of other mythological motifs – were shared by various Gnostic sects, though in varying degrees and different forms. For example, "some of the themes considered to be typically 'Sethian' also occur in Valentinian texts," see Stroumsa (*Another Seed*, 9). In other words, the core of the "Sethian myth" was part of a common mythological stock these Gnostic movements drew from and further developed according to their own religious, philosophical concepts. On the problem of the existence of "Sethians," see J. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, Bibliothèque Copte De Nag Hammadi 6 (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2001) 3-5, and chapter "The Sethians," 57-59; Wisse, "Those Elusive Sethians," in *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 563-76; Klijn, *Seth*, 81-117 and passim; and Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 1-14.

<sup>962</sup> The Nag Hammadi Gnostic library even contains a piece of writing entitled *Allogenes*.

<sup>963</sup> As Stroumsa put it: for those who talk about a Sethianism "the main characteristics... of the Sethian-Gnostic system is the self understanding of the Gnostics that they were the pneumatic seed of Seth." *Another Seed*, 7.

<sup>964</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Regarding the conception of Seth in Gnostic mythology, we have a bewildering variety of stories, as is typical of Gnostics, who loved to dress the same message in different mythological clothes, the more complicated the better. However, all of them seem to agree on the point emphasized above that some kind of a divine will or providence was involved in one way or another in the conception of Seth, investing him with spiritual power - the divine spark or glory that had been lost by Adam previously<sup>965</sup> - and making him the bearer of the divine principle and Gnosis in the material world. In most cases, this divine plan is realized through the intervention of Sophia (or Mother Wisdom,) the divine creative power active in the material world. In other stories the conception of Seth is attributed to the interference of a power called the Heavenly Seth. Heavenly Seth is the son of Adamas, the “incorruptible first human being,” a being of light, after whom Adam is modelled. Heavenly Seth himself is the divine prototype of earthly Seth, and is called the “seed of the righteous ones,” the “righteous ones” being the heavenly prototype of the Gnostic race.

Irenaeus speaks of some Gnostics, whom he called “others” (*alii*), and who were identified with the Sethians by later heresiologists who drew upon Irenaeus. According to his account, following the murder of Abel by Cain, Seth was conceived through the providence of Prunicius, or vulgar Wisdom (that is, Sophia): “They say that after these Seth was generated through the providence of the vulgar Wisdom.”<sup>966</sup>

The first Patristic account to mention the Sethians explicitly was Pseudo-Tertullianus’ catalogue of heresies, probably based on Hippolytus’ lost *Syntagma*.<sup>967</sup> In his view, Sethians taught that Cain and Abel were born from some powers or angels, and following the death of Abel “that power which is above all other powers, who is called the Mother [Wisdom], wanted Seth to be

<sup>965</sup> The loss of this spiritual power, the source of Gnosis, is usually associated with the loss of the luminous state (covering) or glory (described in the chapter on the Yezidi Creation Myth of Adam) and with man’s incarceration into matter and oblivion, due to the machinations of the enraged powers of darkness., “Now, when the rulers saw that Adam had entered into an alien state of acquaintance... they became troubled... ‘behold Adam. He has come to be like one of us, so that he knows the difference between light and darkness... Come, let us expel him from paradise down to the land from which he was taken, so that henceforth he might not be able to recognize anything better than we can.’” *On the Origin of the World* 110-11, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II. 2-7*, vol. 2, 75-77. “[The evil powers of Matter]...recognized that he (Adam) was luminous, and that he could think better than they, and that he was free from wickedness, they took him and threw him into the lowest region of all matter... This is the tomb of the newly-formed body with which the robbers had clothed the man, the bond of forgetfulness; and he became a mortal man.” *Apocryphon of John* II.20.6-9 and 21.10-13, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 117, 123. However, Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 1.30.8.) reports a tradition where it was the Mother (Sophia) herself who took away the “secretion of light” after Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise and enclosed in matter, in order to prevent it being sullied by the powers of matter. “For he [the Evil Ruler] wished to beget sons to Eve, but he was not able to, because his Mother opposed him in every way. And in secret the Mother emptied Adam and Eve of seeds of Light, so that the spirit [that is, the Light] which was from the Greatest Power would not become cursed and be brought into opprobrium.” Irénée, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 1, tome 2, 374.

<sup>966</sup> *Adv. Haer.* I.30.9: *Post quos secundum providentiam Prunici dicunt generatum Seth.* Irénée, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 1, tome 2, 376. Many of the details in this chapter are corroborated by such Nag Hammadi tractates as the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and other works, suggesting that Irenaeus’ chapter “must be based on early traditions underlying these tractates.” See F. Wisse, “The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971): 218.

<sup>967</sup> B. Pearson, “Seth in Gnostic Literature,” in *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 473; F. Wisse, “Those Elusive Sethians,” in *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 568.

conceived and born in the place of Abel.”<sup>968</sup>

Epiphanius’ account is believed to have been based either on Pseudo-Tertullianus or Hippolytus, though in his work he claims to have met some Sethians personally.<sup>969</sup> Epiphanius writes that “The Sethians proudly derive their ancestry from Seth.”<sup>970</sup> And speaking of the conception of Seth he adds:

Mother Wisdom... took thought and caused Seth to be born... and *deposited her power* within him, establishing in him a posterity of the father from above and the *spark that had been sent from above* for the first establishment of posterity and the alliance... So, it is for this reason that the people of Seth have been set apart and are descended from that origin, as being the elect who are differentiated from other people.<sup>971</sup>

Epiphanius then passes on to the group of the so-called Archontics, whose teachings are generally identified with those of the so-called Sethians by modern scholars,<sup>972</sup> and whom he believed to have infected Greater Armenia as well. He claims that according to the Archontics Seth was born from Adam and Eve,<sup>973</sup> but was in a way snatched up and adopted by the supreme power,<sup>974</sup> where he “experienced a corporeal transformation... He ultimately returned to earth, but in a non-physical form that was immune to the blandishments of the demiurgic archons,”<sup>975</sup> in order to bring revelation for mankind. Consequently, says Epiphanius, Seth was also called Stranger, or *Allogenes*, a term that refers to the “other seed” of Genesis, and is recurrent in many “Sethian” texts.

Cloaked in the obscure wording of Gnostic mythology, a language heavily laden with symbolism (and made even harder to decipher by frequent lacunae) the texts termed “Sethian” from the Coptic Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library seem to convey the same idea.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, Cain and Abel are the results of the seduction of Eve by the chief evil ruler. Then the account passes on to the birth of Seth:

And when Adam recognized the likeness of his own foreknowledge (πρ□γνωσις), he begot the likeness of the Son of Man. He called him Seth, according to the way of the

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<sup>968</sup> Pseudo-Tertullianus, *Liber de Praescriptionibus* 47. PL 2.81.B: *illam virtutem quae super omnes virtutes esset, quam matrem pronuntiant... voluisse concipi et nasci hunc Seth loco Abelis.*

<sup>969</sup> Pearson, “Seth in Gnostic Literature,” 473; Wisse, “Those Elusive Sethians,” 568.

<sup>970</sup> Epiphanius *Panarion* 39.1.3. in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 187.

<sup>971</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.2.4. in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 188. Note the words “deposited her power” and “the spark that had been sent from above,” which recall the *sur* of the Yezidi myth. This divine spark or power here represents the heavenly Gnosis. Being of the “Heavenly Seed” or “Seed of Seth” means, for the Gnostics, possessing the divine Gnosis from above, and the spark or power (Gnosis) that Sophia deposited in Seth is inherited by and resides in Seth’s offspring – the posterity and alliance the text refers to.

<sup>972</sup> B. Pearson, “Seth in Gnostic Literature,” *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*. 474.

<sup>973</sup> Archontics, according to Epiphanius, also taught that Cain and Abel were the children of the evil ruler.

<sup>974</sup> “the higher power descended... and caught up Seth himself, whom they also call “the foreigner”; carried him somewhere above and cared for him for a while, lest he be slain; and after a long time brought him back down into this world, having rendered him spiritual and (only) <apparently> physical.” Epiphanius 40.7.2 in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 197-98. See also Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 114-15.

<sup>975</sup> Epiphanius 40.7.2 in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 197-98.

<sup>975</sup> Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 115.

race in the aeons.<sup>976</sup>

Though it is Adam who is said to have done the begetting, the conception of Seth is not without divine interference. The words concerning Adam getting to know “likeness of his own foreknowledge” refers to the lost Gnosis of Adam, more precisely to the Heavenly Adamas, the Perfect Human Being,<sup>977</sup> Adam’s heavenly counterpart, in whom Adam recognizes his own luminous former self, the one who still possessed the glory and Gnosis.<sup>978</sup> The expression ““according to the way of the race in the aeons” (that is, in the eternal realm)” refers to the “race” or “seed” of Heavenly Seth,<sup>979</sup> after whom the product of Adam’s begetting (earthly Seth) is named – clearly postulating some kind of intrinsic relationship between Heavenly and Earthly Seth. Similarly the “Son of Man” in whose image Seth is created, should probably be understood as Heavenly Seth, son of Adamas, the Perfect Human Being. The presence of a divine agency, after whom the newborn is modeled, and who imparts its divine spirit in him, is made even clearer by the next sentence, which deals with the conception of Seth’s sister,<sup>980</sup> which is said to be like that of Seth, with the Mother acting in the place of Heavenly Seth: “Likewise the Mother also sent down her spirit which is her likeness and a copy of the one who is in the pleroma [fullness, the World of Light].”<sup>981</sup>

The *Apocalypse of Adam*, where Adam invests Seth with a testamentary revelation, relates how Adam and Eve lost the glory and the Gnosis through the machinations of the evil ruler. Then this glory and Gnosis passed to the “other seed” that is Seth and his descendants:

And the glory in our heart(s) left us, me and your mother Eve, along with the first knowledge (γνῶσις) that breathed within us. And it (glory) fled from us... But it

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<sup>976</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II. 24.35-25.2, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 141-43. Layton translates “Now, after Adam had known the image of his own prior acquaintance, he begot the image of the child of the human being, and called him Seth, after the race in the eternal realm,” in *Gnostic Scriptures*, 47.

<sup>977</sup> Or as Reeves sums it up, “while Adam may indeed be responsible for the body of Seth, the “image” associated with Seth (and originally Adam) derives from the heavenly realm. Like his putative progenitor, Seth combines within his person two disparate qualities: he is a corporeal being who bears the “image” of God. This status reinstates the hybrid position that Adam occupies prior to his own disobedience and subsequent forfeiture of the “image.” *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 119-20.

<sup>978</sup> Getting to know his “foreknowledge (πρῶτη γνῶσις)” would mean, in Gnostic parlance, remembering his former self, which possessed an understanding or Gnosis of the true spiritual world, before it (i.e., the soul) was imprisoned in matter and forgetfulness. The image of this former Adam armed with Gnosis would be Adamas, his heavenly prototype.

<sup>979</sup> According to the *Apocryphon of John*, Heavenly Seth is the son of Adamas, the Incorruptible first Human Being of the Light world, and he is the Father of the Incorruptible and Immoveable Race that dwells in the Luminaries. He is simultaneously “a Platonic heavenly prototype of the Earthly Seth, undoubtedly originating in Gnostic Speculation as a projection of the latter onto the transmundane, precosmic plane” (Pearson, “Seth in Gnostic Literature,” 483). Thus, in Gnostic myth, the Heavenly Adam and his son, Heavenly Seth, can be said to have their counterparts in the material world in Adam, and Earthly Seth. Just as the Great Seth is the Father of the Incorruptible Race, so Seth becomes the parent of the Gnostic race, the earthly counterpart of the former. (On the offspring of Seth, see below, “The Seed of Seth”). Thus it becomes clear why Heavenly Seth is assumed to play a part in the conception of earthly Seth, the forefather of the Incorruptible Race on earth.

<sup>980</sup> For a comprehensive treatment on the sister-wife of Seth, see B. A. Pearson, “The Figure of Norea in Gnostic Literature,” in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism*, ed. Geo Windengren (Stockholm: Royal Academy, 1977), 143-52. Also see below.

<sup>981</sup> *Apocryphon of John*, II.25.3-6, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 143-145.

(knowledge) entered into the seed (σπορον) of great aeons. For this reason I myself have called you by the name of that man [Seth] who is the seed (σπορον) of the great generation or from whom (it comes.)<sup>982</sup>

This is again a play on the interpretation of “another seed.” The glory and Gnosis lost by Adam and Eve entered into seed of great Aeons, that is, the earthly seed of Heavenly Seth. The close connection between Heavenly and earthly Seth and their generation is made evident by Adam’s choice of a name for his son.

The *Gospel of the Egyptians*<sup>983</sup> gives a detailed (if somewhat complicated) account of how Adamas, the “great incorruptible human being” the “produced” the Great Heavenly Seth, who is to become the parent of “the immovable and incorruptible race.”<sup>984</sup> Later Adam is created and the text recounts the generation, “a defiled and corrupt sowing” of “his” son (Cain) by the evil ruler. Then, as a counter measure, Seth is created so that his race can serve for the sowing of the holy spirit as a vessel.<sup>985</sup> To achieve this Heavenly Seth sows his seed in Seth and his offspring. This is to become the “source of the seed of eternal life,” that is the seed of the incorruptible race on earth, the Gnostics, who become incorruptible by their awareness of their true origins.<sup>986</sup>

In contrast to the strongly symbolical language of the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons* puts forward the heavenly origin of (the spirit of) Seth and his descendants in a very clear language, though it is Norea, Seth’s sister and wife, whose origin is actually addressed here. However, the contemporary reader would have been aware that any account of the origins of Norea and her descendants would inevitably apply to Seth, her male counterpart.

And Adam knew his female counterpart Eve, and she became pregnant, and bore Seth to Adam. And she said, “I have borne another man through God, in place of Abel.” Again Eve became pregnant, and she bore Norea. And she said, “He has begotten on

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<sup>982</sup> *Apocalypse of Adam* 64.24-65.9, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5*, 155-57.

<sup>983</sup> Also titled: *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*. Translated into Coptic from the original Greek, this work, which belongs to the same tradition as the Apocryphon of John, was probably composed in the second or third century, though some of the pieces of the tradition it preserves may be considerably older. See *Nag Hammadi Codices III, 2 and IV,2: The Gospel of the Egyptians*, ed., trans. and commentary A. Böhlig and F. Wisse (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 24-38.

<sup>984</sup> [Next] Adamas the [great (?)] incorruptible human being made a request for a child (to be produced) for it from out of itself – that for its part, it (the child) might become parent of the immovable and incorruptible race; that, for the sake of this race, silence and speech might be shown forth; and that, at its instigation, the realm that is dead might arise and dissolve. And so the great [...] power of the great light emanated from above. The effulgence engendered four luminaries... together with the great incorruptible Seth the son of Adamas [the great] incorruptible human being. *Gospel of the Egyptians* 62.30-63.16, in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 110.

<sup>985</sup> According to Layton this refers to Jesus. “The begetting of Seth establishes a line of descent... leading ultimately to Jesus and his adoption by the great Seth.” *Gnostic Scriptures*, 115, Note IV 71 f.

<sup>986</sup> “And after the sowing by the ruler of this realm and those [that derive from] that ruler – a defiled and corrupt sowing of the demon-begetting god - and after the sowing by Adam, a sowing that resembles the sun and the great Seth, next the great angel Hormos emanated in order to prepare for the great Seth’s sowing through the holy spirit in a holy, reason-born vessel ... Next the great Seth came, bringing his seed, and he sowed it in the earth-born aeons... This is the race that appeared through the agency of Edökla. For by means of reason, it (Edökla) engendered truth and right (?), i.e. the source of the seed of eternal life and of all those who are going to endure because of acquaintance with their emanation. This is the great incorruptible race.” *Gospel of the Egyptians* 71.6-72.9, in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 114-15.

me a virgin as an assistance for many generations of mankind.” She is the virgin whom the forces did not defile...<sup>987</sup> The <great> angel came down from the heavens and said to her [Norea]... “I have been sent to speak with you and save you from the grasp of the lawless. And I shall teach you about your root<sup>988</sup>....And these authorities cannot defile you and that generation;<sup>989</sup> for your abode is in incorruptibility, where the virgin spirit dwells, who is superior to the authorities of chaos and to their universe<sup>990</sup>.... You, together with your offspring, are from the primeval father; from above, out of the imperishable light, their souls are come. Thus the authorities cannot approach them, because of the spirit of truth present within them; and all who have become acquainted with this way exist deathless in the midst of dying mankind.”<sup>991</sup>

Thus, while we have a number of different accounts concerning the birth of Seth, all the sources seem to agree on the point that he was created by or in the image of a divine being, the origin of his spirit (*pneuma*) is from the divine Realm of Light, and he became the bearer of Gnosis or divine self-acquaintance.

This Seth, conceived in a miraculous way through the intervention of the beings of the Light World, was also often depicted as transmitter of divine revelation, just as Shehid transmitted the true religion to the Yezidis. In some writings, like *the Apocalypse of Adam*, he appears as the conveyor of the divine message revealed to him by Adam on his deathbed.<sup>992</sup> This is clearly modeled on writings like the Jewish *Life of Adam and Eve*.<sup>993</sup> This idea was then further developed. In numerous Gnostic writings, it is Seth himself who is the first revealer of salvatory knowledge. The Church Fathers mention a number of books written under the name of Seth. The veracity of their reports is born out by the findings of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library that contains a number of texts purported to bear the revelation of Seth, even including two writings under the name of Seth: the *Three Steles of Seth*, and the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*.

## The Seed of Seth – the Race of Seth

One of the cornerstones of Yezidi identity is the idea of their descent from the miraculously conceived Shehid,<sup>994</sup> coupled with the notion that as his children, they, and they alone, have inherited the teachings of true religion from him. This is again a notion which can be linked to

<sup>987</sup> *Hypostasis of the Archons* 91.30-92, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, vol. 1, 247.

<sup>988</sup> *Ibid.* 93.2-12, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, 251

<sup>989</sup> That is, the race descending from Norea and Seth.

<sup>990</sup> *Hypostasis of the Archons* 93.28-31, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, 251

<sup>991</sup> *Ibid.* 96.19-26, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, 257.

<sup>992</sup> The closing words of the *Apocalypse of Adam* are “These are the revelations which Adam made known to Seth, his son. And his son taught them to his seed.” *Apocalypse of Adam* 85.19-22, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI*, 195.

<sup>993</sup> The *Life of Adam and Eve* was the most influential and perhaps first exposition of this thought and widely read all over the East. See G. Nickelsburg, “Some Related Traditions in the *Apocalypse of Adam*, *The Books of Adam and Eve*, and *I Enoch*,” in *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 515-40; and M. Stone, “Report on Seth Traditions in the Armenian Adam Books,” in *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 459-72.

<sup>994</sup> This idea is often quoted to explain the strict ban on exogamy.

Gnostic mythical notions concerning Seth, or the “generation of Seth” to be more exact.<sup>995</sup>

As has been mentioned above, for some Gnostic groups their fascination with Seth was not limited to his birth through divine providence. As Pearson puts it: “Probably the most important feature of Gnostic speculation on Seth is the idea that the Gnostics constitute a ‘special race’ of Seth. Indeed this should be seen as ‘the fixed point of what may be called Sethian Gnosticism.’”<sup>996</sup> The Gnostics considered themselves to be fundamentally different from the rest of mankind, to represent a special, spiritual race (or generation - γενεα) that originated from a different seed belonging to the eternal world - the σπέρμα ἄτερον or “other seed.” Seth, born of this “other seed,” was seen as the progenitor of the spiritual race, or Gnostic people. The Gnostics, also referred to as “the seed of Seth” inherited Seth’s spiritual nature and his teachings of the true religion as well.

Modeled after the Heavenly Seth and his seed, the Incorruptible Race, Seth was, to use the opening words of the *Three Steles of Seth*, the “father of the living and unshakable race.”<sup>997</sup> Various other epithets are attributed to this seed or race: “seed of the Great Seth,” “race of Seth,” “children of Seth,” “the other race,” “immovable race,” “incorruptible race,” “living race,” “unshakeable race,” “imperishable seed,” “the living elect,” and so on. The “seed of Seth” or the corresponding titles are repeatedly mentioned in a number of Gnostic texts, many of which do not actually recount the myth itself. It is simply hinted at or implied, demonstrating that the “seed of Seth” was a sufficiently basic idea for the writers and intended readers of these texts to make retelling the myth unnecessary.

There is no space here to enumerate the various instances when the “seed of Seth,” referring to the Gnostic race, is mentioned in Gnostic texts or in accounts of them. For the present purpose, it should suffice to mention only some of the most eloquent and expressive examples.

Some of the Church Fathers explicitly speak of a “Sethian group” that taught descent from Seth. So, for example, Epiphanius writes that “these Sethians proudly derive their ancestry from Seth.”<sup>998</sup> Speaking of the conception of Seth and his receiving the power of the mother and her spark, he states that:

she deposited her power within him, establishing in him a posterity of the father from above and the spark that had been sent from above for the first establishment of posterity and the alliance... So, it is for this reason that the people of Seth have been set apart and are descended from that origin, as being the elect who are differentiated from other people.<sup>999</sup>

<sup>995</sup> For a detailed account of the Gnostics as a “race of Seth,” see Stroumsa, “The Gnostic Race,” in *Another Seed*, 73-134.

<sup>996</sup> Pearson, “Seth in Gnostic Literature,” 489.

<sup>997</sup> *The Three Steles of Seth*, 118.12-13, trans. and ed. J. M. Robinson and J. E. Goehring, in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, NHC 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 387. Layton translates “unmovable race” in *Gnostic Scriptures*, 152.

<sup>998</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.1.3, in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 187.

<sup>999</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.2.4-6. in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 188.

The Nag Hammadi writing, *Zostrianos* clearly equates the seed of Seth with the Gnostics: “O living people! O holy seed of Seth! Understand!”<sup>1000</sup> The *Gospel of Egyptians* speaks of spiritual mankind<sup>1001</sup> as the seed of Seth, that is, the seed engendered on earth by the Heavenly or Great Seth, the parent of the Immovable and Incorruptible race (who dwell in the spiritual word).<sup>1002</sup> The *Gospel of Egyptians* recounts how Seth had brought and sowed his seed, and so his race appeared on earth:

Next the great Seth came, bringing his seed, and he sowed in the earth-born aeons... This is the race that appeared... For it engendered truth and right, i.e. the source of the seed of the eternal life and of all those who are going to endure because of acquaintance with their emanation [origin]”<sup>1003</sup>

### The Birth of Seth and the Enmity of Eve in the Manichaean Myth.

Though neither Feqir Haji’s myth, nor the *Black Book* make any mention of Eve’s reaction to Shehid, other accounts do so, describing it as one of murderous jealousy. In Feqir Ali’s myth recounting Shehid’s creation from a heavenly pearl (in lieu of the *sur*), Eve in her hurt jealousy tries to induce her own children to kill the boy born from the pearl.<sup>1004</sup> Other accounts, narrating Shehid’s birth from the seed of Adam, claim that in her rage Eve tried to destroy the jar, but – prevented by Adam – she succeeded only in paralyzing one of Shehid’s legs.<sup>1005</sup>

These details seem to have little relation to the known versions of the Gnostic myth of Seth, where Eve either does not play a role, or else her role is seen as rather positive. However, if one looks at the Manichaean myth of Seth (or Sethel in its Manichaean form), which builds on traditions associated with the Gnostic Seth, there one finds a strikingly familiar detail: Namely, the enmity of Eve toward the new-born, whom, at the prompting of the evil ruler, she does not accept as her own, and wishes to destroy.

Seth continued to be a central figure in Manichaean mythology, one of the most important figures in the Manichaean cycle of prophets, though some changes can be observed regarding both the myth of his birth and his role in cosmogony (or, rather, anthropogony).<sup>1006</sup> Our main source for

<sup>1000</sup> *Zostrianos*, 130.16-17 in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 139. In Gnostic parlance the expression “living” refers either to the beings of the Eternal Realm of Light, or to the Gnostics, their representatives on earth.

<sup>1001</sup> That is, the *pneumatics* or Gnostics.

<sup>1002</sup> *Gospel of the Egyptians* I.IV.63, in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 110.

<sup>1003</sup> *Gospel of the Egyptians* II.IV.71-72, in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* 115). Though Earthly Seth (of the Genesis) is not mentioned here, the reader was probably assumed to be familiar with the exact content of the myth, and so it was enough to refer to the miraculous appearance of the divine seed on earth.

<sup>1004</sup> Jasim Murad, “The Sacred Poems,” 292.

<sup>1005</sup> Siouffi, “La Secte des Yézidis,” 260; Guérinot “Les Yézidis,” 586.

<sup>1006</sup> For a summary on the figure of Seth in Manichaean religion and its connection with Gnostic Seth, see Reeves, “The Apocalypse of Sethel,” in *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 111-40; Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 145-52; and B. Pearson, “The Figure of Seth in Manichaean Literature,” in *Manichaean Studies. Proceedings of the First International Conference on*

the Manichaean myth surrounding Seth's birth comes from the Arabic historian, Al-Nadim. In his *Fihrist*, he writes that Eve conceived Cain from the evil ruler, and then in turn conceived Abel from Cain.<sup>1007</sup> Then, with the help of the magic taught her by the ruler, she managed to seduce Adam and conceived from him.<sup>1008</sup>

She gave birth to a male child who was beautiful and of a comely countenance. When al-Sindid [the evil ruler] learned about this, it upset him, so that he became ill and said to Eve, "This child who has been born is not one of us, but a stranger."<sup>1009</sup> She therefore desired his death, but, taking hold of him, Adam said to Eve, "I am going to nourish him with cow's milk and the fruit of trees!"<sup>1010</sup>

However, al-Sindid destroyed all the trees and cows, thus leaving Adam without means to nourish the child. Then Adam performed a magical ritual, drawing three rings around the child, which made the evil powers flee.

Then there appeared to Adam a tree called the Lotus, from which came forth milk with which he nourished the boy. He (at first) called him by its name, but later he called him Shatil.<sup>1011</sup>

Later, Adam had intercourse with Eve again but was rebuked by his son, Shatil and brought to the wisdom of God. (In other words, the Manichaean Seth was also a bringer of true Gnosis - in this case to his own father in the first place.)

Al Nadim doesn't explain by what method Eve desired to destroy Seth, but the reference to Adam's plan to nourish the child with cow's milk implies that Eve refused to suckle the child. This is supported by a Manichaean Sogdian fragment from the Central Asian Turfan basin. According to this fragment: "he [Adam] appeared before Šaqlon [the evil ruler], and addressed him thusly: "Command that she give him milk immediately."<sup>1012</sup>

The widespread popularity of this Manichaean myth on the birth of Seth, and Eve's enmity, is attested by a series of Manichaean cosmogonic fragments in Middle Persian also from Turfan,<sup>1013</sup>

*Manichaeism*, ed. P. Bryder (Lund: Plus Ultra, 1988), 147-55.

<sup>1007</sup> This seems to go back to a Gnostic background. Gnostics seem to have inherited the idea from Jewish tradition that Cain was the son of the evil ruler (the Devil) conceived when the latter raped Eve. Unlike Jews, however, they tended to see Abel as the offspring of the same union, or rape, as well. Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 44-46.

<sup>1008</sup> Although Seth(el) is the biological son of Adam in this tradition, his description implies a connection with the world of Light (see also next note) Furthermore, the name Sethel simultaneously connotes a heavenly entity in Manichaean literature, to whom prayers and hymns are addressed. Occasionally he appears as the Light-*Nous* or the heavenly Apostle of Light, the revealer of saving Gnosis, repeatedly manifesting himself on earth in different forms, just like his literary "prototype," the Gnostic heavenly Seth. See Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 37, 112-13.

<sup>1009</sup> According to Pearson "the recognition of the child born to Eve as a "stranger" reflects Gnostic lore concerning Seth as *Allogenes*, of "another seed." Pearson, "The Figure of Seth in Manichaean Literature," 149. The chosen race or "seed of Seth" is also referred to as "strangers" or "aliens" (that is, strangers to the creator of the material world), see for example *Apocalypse of Adam* 69.18. It may simultaneously refer to Seth's role as a bringer of the true revelation, as the word "alien" or "stranger" usually applied to the "messenger of the world of Light," that is, the bringer of the saving knowledge in Gnostic parlance, see Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 50.

<sup>1010</sup> al-Nadim, *Fihrist* vol.2, 785.

<sup>1011</sup> *Ibid.*, 786.

<sup>1012</sup> Trans. W. B. Henning, *Selected Papers*, Acta Iranica 14-15 (Leiden: Brill, 1977): 462, quoted in J. Reeves, "Manichaica Aramaica," 435.

<sup>1013</sup> M 4500, M 5566, M4501 in W. Sundermann, *Mittelpersische und parthische kosmogonische und Parabeltexte der*

as well as by a magic bowl from lower Mesopotamia. This ceramic bowl inscribed with Aramaic magical incantations from Nippur is dated to around 600 A.D. Though it is labeled “rabbinic,” the name of its client (for whose protection it was produced) is Persian. Part of the inscription in the bowl refers to the Manichaean episode of the magical deliverance of Seth by Adam.<sup>1014</sup>

Manichaean Eve’s wish to destroy the beautiful child, whom she sees as an intruding stranger, has its parallel in the Yezidi myth of Shehid. What is more, even her method of trying to bring about the newborn’s demise, that is, her refusal to suckle the newborn, and Adam’s attempt to provide milk in his reluctant wife’s place can all find their echoes in the Yezidi myth. The *Black Book*, as well as some other accounts,<sup>1015</sup> claim that Adam had to suckle the baby himself, this is the reason men have nipples just like women: yet another Yezidi motif that seems to reflect the events of the Manichaean myth.

There is one more Yezidi motif - though one of a somewhat dubious credibility – concerning the feeding of the newborn spurned by Eve which may be worth mentioning in connection with the Manichaean myth. Chol Beg, the “pretender” Yezidi prince, asserts that “Seth was the son of the tree and for this reason... he is called Melik Sajadin (the tree’s name).”<sup>1016</sup> We have seen above how, according to the *Fihrist*, Adam named his son after the lotus tree which nourished him. On the other hand, late midrashic world-plays derive the name Seth (or Sethel) from the Hebrew root to “plant” (*štl*), interpreting the Biblical passage to mean “God has planted (for) me another seed.”<sup>1017</sup> The variant used by Manichaeans (and Mandeans as well): Shatil (Shetel, Shitil) meaning ‘the planted’ might have referred to or played on the same concept.<sup>1018</sup> It is not possible to say if the Yezidi “son of the tree” is simply an echo of the old Hebrew (pseudo-)etymology, or is in some way more directly connected to the Manichaean myth of the tree nourishing the child.

## The Twin-Wife of Seth

While Feqir Haji’s myth, as well as some other accounts, talk of Seth marrying a *hour* from

*Manichäer* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 70-77, quoted in Reeves, “Manichaica Aramaica,” 436.

<sup>1014</sup> Reeves, “Manichaica Aramaica,” 437-38.

<sup>1015</sup> Beside the *Black Book*, see also: Chabot “Notice sur les Yézidis,” 118, and Empson *Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 47.

<sup>1016</sup> Quoted in Ahmet (*Yazidis*, 203). Chol Beg, from the princely family (who vainly aspired to the role of Prince) was the first Yezidi to put down (or rather dictate) the tenets of the Yezidis in writing for the benefit of Western researchers (*The Yazidis Past and Present*, American University of Berlin, 1934). We must keep in mind, however, that he was not a man of religion, and, as is the case with most Yezidi “laymen,” was not very likely to have received a formal religious education, while he seems to have been a man of active imagination. Consequently the information he offers must be treated cautiously. In the opinion of Prof. Kreyenbroek the part concerning the tree is likely to be a pseudo-etymology.

<sup>1017</sup> Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews* vol. 5, 148-49; Pearson, “The Figure of Seth in Manichaean Literature,” 150-52. Stroumsa is of the opinion that the motif of having the child named after the lotus tree reflects this etymology (*Another Seed*, 74.) Reeves, however, does not accept this view, and argues that naming the child after the lotus tree is unconnected with the Hebrew etymological world-lay (*Heralds of that Good Realm*, 113.)

<sup>1018</sup> Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 75. Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 113.

heaven,<sup>1019</sup> other sources maintain that there were two children in the jar, a boy and also a girl, and it was this girl, his twin sister, that Shehid bin Jer married.<sup>1020</sup>

Just like Shehid, Gnostic Seth also had a miraculously conceived sister, whom he later married. The idea that Seth married his sister (or his twin sister) can be found in many Jewish sources<sup>1021</sup> (given the circumstances this seems to be an unavoidable conclusion.) Otherwise, Seth's wife does not seem to play a role of any importance in Jewish literature. The Gnostics, however, present a different picture. Here, the sister-wife of Seth, usually mentioned as Norea, Horaia, or Orea becomes a key figure herself in the Gnostic salvation myth, appearing as a genuine (or even the) Savior figure.<sup>1022</sup> In fact, she is the protagonist of a number of Gnostic works, and the Nag Hammadi library even contains a book written under the name of Norea, the *Thought of Norea*. Just like that of Seth, the birth of Norea is a miraculous one, linking her with the realm of Light. Irenaeus writes that like Seth, Norea was also begotten through the providence of the Vulgar Wisdom, making her his sister.<sup>1023</sup> Epiphanius, on the other hand, writes that some sects honor a certain power called Horaia, whom the Sethians recognize as the wife of Seth.

They [the Sethians] say that a certain woman named Hōraia was the wife of Seth... there are other schools of thought that say there is a power whom they name Hōraia. So, these (Sethians) say that the power, whom others esteem and call Hōraia, was the wife of Seth.<sup>1024</sup>

The conceiving of Seth's sister in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* has already been quoted above, in the paragraph on Seth's miraculous birth.<sup>1025</sup> The *Apocryphon of John* recounts how, following the divine conception of Seth, in the image of Heavenly Seth, his sister was created by Mother Wisdom, and endowed with her spirit:

Likewise the Mother also sent down her spirit (πνεῦμα) which is her likeness and a copy of the one who is in the pleroma [fullness, the World of Light], for she will prepare a dwelling place for the aeons which will come down... thus the seed (σπέρμα) remained for a while assisting him.<sup>1026</sup>

The female being, created by Mother Wisdom after the begetting of Seth, and endowed with her spirit is Norea, Seth's sister and wife, who plays a crucial role (as a wife and mother) in establishing posterity, or race of Seth.<sup>1027</sup> This is demonstrated in the text stating that this female being was

<sup>1019</sup> This may reflect the influence of a Muslim tradition, which counted Seth among the progenitors of Mohamed and claimed he married a *hourī*. On this, see more below.

<sup>1020</sup> *Black Book*, in Joseph, "Yezidi Texts," 223. The twin version is also mentioned by Drower, *Peacock Angel*, 91; Empson: *The Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 47; Chabot, "Notice sur les Yézidis," 118; Ahmed, *Yazidis*. 203.

<sup>1021</sup> Klijn, *Seth*, 37-9.

<sup>1022</sup> For a comprehensive treatment on the sister-wife of Seth and the variations of her name, see B. A. Pearson, "The Figure of Norea in Gnostic Literature," 143-52.

<sup>1023</sup> Irenaeus Haer. I.30.9, *Post quos secundum providentiam Prunici dicunt generatum Seth et Norean*. Irénée, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 1, tome 2, 376.

<sup>1024</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.5.2-3 in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 189-90.

<sup>1025</sup> *Hypostasis of the Archons* 96.19-26

<sup>1026</sup> *Apocryphon of John*, II.25.3-25.10, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 143-145.

<sup>1027</sup> Cf. *Reality of Rulers* 91.34-35; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.1.9.

brought to life with the aim of preparing a dwelling place for the “aeons coming down here.” That this is a reference to the “Great Race of the Heavenly Seth,” or rather its earthly counterpart, the Gnostic race, or “seed of Seth” is made clear by the words “thus the seed remained for a while.” The use of the term σπῖρα (seed) reflects the Gnostic interpretation of the key term “another seed” of Gen. 4:25.<sup>1028</sup> Thus, along with Seth, his similarly miraculously conceived sister also represents the ancestor of the spiritual race.

The name of Shehid’s wife in one of the accounts also points towards a possible Late Antique influence. Ahmet, recounting the Yezidi myth, mentions that in one version Shehid’s wife is called Nama.<sup>1029</sup> He also adds in the footnote that Chol Beg, the pretender Yezidi prince, “makes Nama the wife of Malik Miran.”<sup>1030</sup> There are two different traditions as regards the identity of Malik Miran (or Melekê Miran). According to one he is the ancestor of the Yezidis,<sup>1031</sup> presumably Shehid himself or his son.<sup>1032</sup> The other tradition identifies Malik Miran with Noah, and other sources do actually mention his wife as Na’mi or Na’umi.<sup>1033</sup> In other words, in Yezidi mythology there appears a certain Na’ma (or other variants of the same name) who is sometimes known as the wife of Shehid, but may also surface as the wife of Noah.

As Pearson has pointed out in his article on the Gnostic figure of Norea or Horaia, this name is the distorted Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Na’ama* meaning “pleasing, lovely.”<sup>1034</sup> This Na’ama was well known in Jewish literature. In some Jewish writings Na’ama appears as the wife of Noah, while in other sources she is the twin wife of Seth.<sup>1035</sup> The appearance of the name “Na’ama” in the Yezidi myth of origins can be explained in two ways. It is possible that she reached the Yezidis directly from Jewish circles. But it is equally possible that the source of the name (and the myth) is to be found among Syriac-speaking Gnostics, who used the name in its original form (Na’ama,) and not its Greek translation, which their Egyptian co-religionists used in the extant Gnostic texts.<sup>1036</sup>

<sup>1028</sup> Pearson “Seth in Gnostic Literature,” 481.

<sup>1029</sup> Ahmet, *Yazidis*, 209.

<sup>1030</sup> *Ibid.*, 245, note 13.

<sup>1031</sup> G. Furlani, “I Santi dei Yezidi,” *Orientalia* 5 (1936): 76.

<sup>1032</sup> Edmonds (*A Pilgrimage to Lalish*, 79) says that he was born of a virgin mother, Hürriya (sic!) during the time of Shehid. Presumably, Malik Miran is the son of Shehid and his *hourî* wife, though his birth from a virgin mother may imply that the asexual conception of Shehid himself is behind the story.

<sup>1033</sup> Joseph (*Devil Worship*, 91-92) claims that Na’umi is another name of Malik Miran, whom he identifies with one of the sons of Noah. Guérinot (“Les Yézidis,” 587) actually identifies Na’mi with “le Noé biblique.”

<sup>1034</sup> Pearson, “The Figure of Norea in Gnostic Literature,” 147-50. The original translation would have been Horaia. This was later distorted to Norea.

<sup>1035</sup> Similarly Noreia, the translation of Na’amah, sometimes appears as the wife of Noah in some Gnostic legends, rather than the wife of Seth. See, for example, Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.1.4; cf. *Hypostases of the Rulers* 91-93. In Jewish sources Na’ama was originally the idolatrous daughter of Lamech, and sister of the Cainite Tubal Cain, and her name usually evoked negative connotations.

<sup>1036</sup> Unfortunately, no Gnostic texts have survived from Syriac-speaking territories, and the extant Greek and Coptic primary sources cannot help us on this subject.

## Seth in the Middle East

The figure of Seth, both as a being intimately connected with the divine, and as the forefather or head of a chosen race, custodians of the true religion, was widespread all over the Middle East in Late Antiquity as well as the Middle Ages.

As was seen above, many Gnostics based their claim to be the “other,” “the spiritual race” on the conviction that they were the “pneumatic (spiritual) seed of Seth.”

Among the Manichaeans Seth, as a heavenly figure and ultimate revealer of Gnosis,<sup>1037</sup> was associated with the most exalted class of the believers, that of the *Electi*,<sup>1038</sup> possessors of the true religion and destined to escape the bonds of matter and return to the realm of Light. A Manichaean psalm lists the prayers as addressed by the different categories of believers to different “deities:”

The cry of a Virgin to Sethel, Amen.  
The cry of a Continent One to Adam, Amen.  
The cry of a Married One to Eve, Amen.<sup>1039</sup>

Apparently for the Manichaeans, who placed a high value on purity, Seth is connected with the most elevated class, that of the “Virgins,” that is, the *Electi*,<sup>1040</sup> while his parents, Adam and Eve lag behind.<sup>1041</sup>

Seth continued to exercise a mysterious allure over people’s imagination in the Middle East, even after the coming of Islam. According to Theodore bar Khoni, the eighth-century Audians of Northern Mesopotamia had a book called the *Apocalypse of the Strangers*. Reeves argues that the “strangers” in the title can be connected with the self-designation as “allogenes” (ἄλλογενῆς, ἄλλογενεῖς) of those who saw themselves as the descendants of Seth, the ultimate “stranger” to this world. This claim is supported by the content of the book (dealing with the seduction of Eve by the evil powers) as described by bar Khoni, which bears a close resemblance to earlier “Sethian” works, just as their *Apocalypse of John*, on the creation of the world, shows many parallels to the *Apocryphon of John* (another “Sethian” work).<sup>1042</sup>

He played a role of some prominence even in Muslim tradition, where he is often mentioned

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<sup>1037</sup> Manichaean literary works even included a “Prayer of Sethel” and an *Apocalypse of Sethel*, see Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm*, 37, and chapter “Apocalypse of Sethel,” 111-129.

<sup>1038</sup> The highest class in the Manichaean hierarchy, who were obeyed, served and provided for by the class of the *Auditors*, or Hearers.

<sup>1039</sup> Psalmoi Sarakotōn, Allberry, *Manichaean Psalm-Book*, 179:20-23.

<sup>1040</sup> For the association between the Virgin and the *Electi*, see Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 147.

<sup>1041</sup> Seth, as the forefather of the ‘chosen race’, or the idea of Manichaeans, or the ‘Electi’ constituting a special seed of Seth, does not seem to appear openly in Manichaean lore, which is understandable, as unlike the Gnostics, “the Manichaean religion... does not place such emphasis on spiritual genealogy” (Pearson, “The Figure of Seth in Manichaean Literature,” 151.)

<sup>1042</sup> Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 115-117. The text given by bar Khoni as the *Apocalypse of John* has enough parallels with the *Apocryphon of John* to suggest that it was a possible source, though Wisse also points out that there are notable differences; see *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 194. See also Steve Wasserstrom, “The Moving Finger Writes: Mughîra b. Sa’îd’s Islamic Gnosis and the Myth of its Rejection,” *History of Religions* 25.1 (1985): 10.

as a prophet, one of the forefathers of Muhammad, and the inheritor of Adam's *wassiya*, or universal religious heritage.<sup>1043</sup> Traditions about the designations of Seth as Adam's inheritor, for instance, were widely current in Shiia literature,<sup>1044</sup> displaying an influence of the apocryphal Adam books of Late Antiquity in its turn. In fact, the idea that Shehid married a *houri* may be not unconnected with Islamic tradition, which claimed Seth married a *houri* (*hawra*) from Paradise.<sup>1045</sup> This is due to the great importance attributed to Muhammad's pure genealogical origin,<sup>1046</sup> that is, an unbroken line of Islamic matrimony.<sup>1047</sup> As a result, the view, also known to Islam, that Adam's children married their siblings, posed a serious difficulty. This difficulty was solved and the chain of pure matrimony secured by the claim that Seth was born without a twin sister, and he married in due course a woman descended from Paradise, a *houri*.<sup>1048</sup>

Heterodox groups of the medieval Middle East carried on the tradition of considering themselves, as a group, the "people of Seth," thereby becoming a chosen race, jealously guarding the mystery revealed to them, and to them alone, by Seth. 'Abd al-Jabbâr, an eleventh-century theologian and heresiologist, writes of such a group:

There is among them, in addition to the people of Harran, another group. They claim to follow Seth's religion. They say that he was sent to them, and they possess his book, which God had descended upon him.<sup>1049</sup>

Al-Biruni, around 1000 AD, talking about the Sabaeans<sup>1050</sup> even made mention of claims of a genealogical lineage traced to Seth saying that they "pretend to be the offspring of Enoch, the son of Seth."<sup>1051</sup>

Seth was an important figure among the Nusayrîs as well. A passage in a Nusayrî catechism

<sup>1043</sup> Rubin "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition," 42-9.

<sup>1044</sup> Rubin "Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition," 49.

<sup>1045</sup> Thereby indirectly supplying another proof that the Yezidi Shehid is in fact a later-day avatar of the Biblical Seth.

<sup>1046</sup> So, for example, Ibn Sa'd (I/1 31) ascribes these words to the Prophet: "I emerged from (pure) matrimony and not from fornication. No fornication of the *Jāhiliyya* has ever touched me since Adam. I came out of purity." Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 73. The *Jāhiliyya*, or "state of ignorance" (of pre-Islamic, pagan Arabia) was said to have practiced father-daughter marriage.

<sup>1047</sup> "I was never born from *Jāhiliyya* fornication; what gave birth to me was not other than Islamic matrimony." Suyūti, I, 96; Zurqāni, I, 66, quoted in Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 73.

<sup>1048</sup> Ibid., 74. Rubin puts forward no speculation as to the possible origins of this idea (other than the necessity of pure matrimony). Notwithstanding, it is possible that Islamic writers here relied on earlier traditions. This is reinforced by the fact that Cain was said to have married a demon. This may be an echo of the notion that Eve begot Cain with the devil or a demonic figure.

<sup>1049</sup> *Mughnī*, V, 152-153 (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1965), translated by G. Monnot, *Penseurs musulmans et religions iranniennes, Abd al Jabbar et ses devanciers*, Etudes musulmanes 16 (Paris: Vrin; Cairo- Beirut: Institut dominican d'études orientales, 1974), 126, quoted in Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 116. According to Stroumsa (note 7) the group mentioned "were a branch of Harranian Sabaeans (and not later-day Gnostics) since they upheld the doctrine of the eternity of the world.

<sup>1050</sup> Today Sabaeans are identified with the people of Harran, but were originally a distinct group. Al-Biruni also distinguishes them from the Harranians, and claims that they were originally Jews who "adopted a system mixed up of Magism and Judaism like that of the Samaritans of Syria" Al-Biruni, *Chronology* 8, ed. and trans. E. Sachau (London: William H. Allen and Co., 1879), 188.

<sup>1051</sup> Al-Biruni, *Chronology* 8, 188.

explaining the seven historical cycles of the *ma'nā*'s incarnation<sup>1052</sup> identifies Seth as the name (*ism*) through which the deity manifests itself in its second circle of incarnation.

Q. 5 How many times did our master veil himself and appear in human form?

A: He veiled himself seven times. In the first he veiled himself in Adam, in his cycle he was named Abel; in the second [time] – in Noah, and was named Seth; in the third ... in the seventh and last – in Muhammad, and was named 'Alī.<sup>1053</sup>

Q. 49 What are the exclusive names of our master, the commander of the faithful, the use of which is not permitted to anyone but him, and [through which] the interior meaning of the prayer is to be directed to him alone?

A. They are the *ma'nā*, the eternal, the unique, the primordial.... My lord and master, Abel, Seth... Ali.<sup>1054</sup>

Furthermore, Nusayrīs attribute hidden, esoteric texts to Seth, along with other prophets like Idris (Enoch,) Noah and Abraham.<sup>1055</sup>

Among the contemporary groups of the Middle East Seth still has a prominent position in Mandaean mythology today. Possibly, there were Mandaean groups in the past, who ascribed even greater importance to Seth. At least around the year 1200, the geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi said that the Sabaeans of the Tib, the Mandaean scribal center for centuries, consider themselves the descendants of Seth, son of Adam.<sup>1056</sup> Finally, but most importantly, Ahl-i Haqq tradition recounts a myth about Seth that clearly supports the identification between Seth and Shehid and indicates that the myth of Shehid/Seth's miraculous birth is not confined to the Yezidis. According to this, Sheyth (whom they identify with the Biblical-Quranic Seth) was created from the seminal liquid of Adam put in a jar, while the content of Eve's jar turned into worms. Though the Ahl'-i Haqq do not consider Sheyth their legendary forefather, they talk about his two lines of descendants, some of whom became prophets, while others became worldly leaders.<sup>1057</sup>

## The Myth of Shehid and Its Two Variants

This chapter has demonstrated that the Yezidi myth of Shehid can ultimately be traced back to the Gnostic figure of Seth, whose myth permeated the whole region in one form or another. His

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<sup>1052</sup> The principle of the cyclical manifestation of the *ma'nā* (divine essence) in human figures is a fundamental Nusayri creed. "According to this concept the *ma'nā* revealed himself in each cycle in the lesser person of a pair. This concept evolved to explain the supremacy of 'Alī in Nusayrī theology despite his inferior position in Muslim tradition. In this passage the author describes the principle of the manifestation of the *ma'nā* through the *ism* [name] in each cycle by the *ma'nā*'s historical companion, e.g. the *ma'nā* in the seventh cycle is manifested in 'Alī and perceived through the manifestation of Muhammad." see Bar-Asher - Kofsky, *Nusayrī- 'Alawī Religion*, 171, Note 34.

<sup>1053</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>1054</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>1055</sup> Ibid., 185. The idea that these Biblical figures have left esoteric texts, revealing divine mysteries for the initiated was current in Late Antiquity, especially among the Gnostics.

<sup>1056</sup> Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 5.

<sup>1057</sup> The myth of Seth is retold in the *Firqān al-Akbār* of H.N. Jeyhūnābādi. This book was published in 1902, but is based on earlier oral tradition. I owe this information to Dr. Mojane Membrado, who was working on the edition of this work at EPHE, Paris, when I met her at a conference on Discourses of Memory in Iranian Studies.

myth was a myth that was, once upon a time, known to many people, and could be used to provide a prestigious origin to the Yezidis in the eyes of a wider audience.

Let us now briefly sum up the motifs that are relevant to drawing a parallel between the Gnostic Seth and the Yezidi Shehid: The most important feature of Gnostic speculation on Seth is the idea that the Gnostics, who descend from Seth, constitute a race apart from the rest of mankind.<sup>1058</sup> Seth, in his turn, was conceived in an out of the “ordinary” way, either through Wisdom or/and through and in the image of Heavenly Seth, “seed of the righteous ones.” The miraculous mode of his conception endowed him with a “spark of power,” the *pneuma* from the World of Light. This “spark of power” meant that (along with his twin sister) he was the “inheritor” of the glory and Gnosis lost by Adam, thus making him “a type of *Adam redivivus*, a regenerated Adam.”<sup>1059</sup> Seth is the earthly counterpart of the Heavenly Seth, a being of Light, in whose image he was conceived, and he transmits his spirit and Gnosis to his race, which is the earthly counterpart of the “Great Seed of Seth.”

Thus, we have all the key elements of the Yezidi myth, as told by Feqir Haji, at hand: Yezidis, springing from Shehid, are a race apart from the rest of mankind, created by the Peacock Angel, avid for a people he could call his own.<sup>1060</sup> Shehid himself could “boast” of a miraculous birth, being conceived not in a carnal way – unlike the other children of Adam (and Eve) – but through divine intervention. As a sort of “replacement” of angelic Adam, he was created from the *sur*, that is, the divine essence, light, which used to belong to Adam while he had still been one with Angel Sheikh Sin in Paradise. This notion of *sur* calls to mind Epiphanius’ account of how the Mother deposited “her power” and the “spark sent from above” in Seth, in order to establish a posterity (race) in alliance with the Realm of Light.<sup>1061</sup> Just like Seth is the possessor of the “lost glory,” “the spark of power” and is intrinsically connected with the “race of the eternal realm” and the “seed of the great race” (that is, Heavenly Seth and his seed,) so Shehid is connected with the world of the divine Angels through the *sur* of Sheikh Sin.<sup>1062</sup> Seth’s descendants, the Gnostics, were the race of Heavenly Seth on earth due to the spark of divine power, while Shehid’s descendants,

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<sup>1058</sup> It is not clear whether we should understand the descent of the Gnostic race from Seth in a physical or merely spiritual sense. As Gnostic texts concentrated on the description of the World of Light, the events leading to the creation and its nature, and the way of achieving salvation, they do not provide us with a clear answer on this point. While the second possibility seems more likely, in my opinion, the first one cannot be ruled out either. According to Stroumsa (*Another Seed*, 101) “the term γενησ[ι] [race] is not simply metaphorical, but refers directly to the biological origin of the Gnostics.”

<sup>1059</sup> Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm*, 125.

<sup>1060</sup> Note that being “the people of Peacock Angel” is ultimately the same as being “the people of God,” as is made clear by the account of Feqir Haji (see Appendix.)

<sup>1061</sup> See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.2.4.

<sup>1062</sup> It has already been mentioned in the chapter on “Yezidi Religion” that there were two shrines dedicated to two Shehids in the village of Kheter. One of the two Shehids, the “original one,” was simply described to me as “Sheikh Hesén” (that is, Sheikh Sin), demonstrating the close connection traditional Yezidis perceive on account of Shehid being created from Sheikh Sin’s *sur*.

the Yezidis, became the race of the Peacock Angel through the *sur*, the very essence of divinity, which they inherited. Both Shehid and Seth transmitted the true religion (or divine revelation) to their own people, who constitute a race apart from the rest of mankind born from a simple carnal union.<sup>1063</sup>

What about the “alternative” variant, recounted by earlier published sources (including the *Black Book*) and some Yezidis today? Though Shehid is conceived in a miraculous and non-sexual way in this variant as well, it seems to know nothing of the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin. Instead the myth centers around the seed<sup>1064</sup> of Adam, from which Shehid is then born, without a need for Eve. This version seems to reflect the importance attributed to the Biblical σπέρμα ἄτερον, the “other seed,” on which the Gnostics originally based their mythical speculation concerning the origins of their special “race.” Yezidis, not given to the metaphysical speculations of the Gnostics, understandably gave a literal meaning to the notion of the “other seed:” Shehid is literally born from another (pure) seed - as compared to the other offspring of Adam, who are born from a mixed seed produced by the sexual union of Adam and Eve.

The question of the relation of the two variants to each other inevitably arises. Did the latter (the variant of the seed), develop out of the former (the variant of the *sur*), or does it represent an independent tradition, which evolved from the same basic myth, or perhaps another different - although related - myths,<sup>1065</sup> simultaneously?

At first glimpse, the more simplistic form of the second myth seems to indicate that the second variant is a simplified version of the first. The motif of the *sur*, representing the divinity invested on Adam by Angel Sheikh Sin (that is, the divine principle and Gnosis eventually lost by Adam in Gnostic writing), which is so hard to interpret even for many Yezidis,<sup>1066</sup> is omitted from this version, and the plot is definitely easier to follow.<sup>1067</sup>

However, on further reflection one has to conclude that the importance this variant attributes to the “seed” of Adam may indicate that we deal here with an alternative variant, which evolved independently, putting the emphasis on different motifs than the “myth of *sur*.” As we have seen,

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<sup>1063</sup> No wonder that – according to the Yezidis - all prophets, with the notable exception of Mohamed, were Yezidis, after all they are the descendants of the *sur*. (The exclusion of Mohamed from the Yezidi race, in fact, seems to be a relatively late development, as he is repeatedly mentioned in the Yezidi hymns among with other prophets of Yezidi history.)

<sup>1064</sup> Some variants mention sweat (Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 294, 296), probably as an euphemism for seed.

<sup>1065</sup> The Seth myth produced a number of different versions already during Late Antiquity, so it is quite feasible that there was more than one variant current in the region.

<sup>1066</sup> Interpreting the notion of *sur* must have posed an intellectual puzzle for some time. Thus Empson (*Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 41, 148) talks of jars filled with blood from the forehead, Feqir Ali mentions a pearl given to Adam by the Peacock Angel when first taken to heaven, while the young, university educated Yezidi, who helped me with translation during my first interview, repeatedly translated the taking away of the *sur* from Adam’s forehead, which Feqir Haji mimicked by wiping his forehead, as the Peacock Angel taking the “sweat” of Adam, a mistranslation which caused quite a bit of confusion at the time (see Appendix.)

<sup>1067</sup> Presumably, this is the reason why Western literature published previously was so consequent in mentioning only the second, “seed” version.

the notion of “another seed” was at the origin of the myth of Seth and continued to play an important role throughout its development, with frequent references to it in Gnostic literature. This is the tradition which the variant of the “seed” seems to preserve and continue, while it has let the idea of the seed being connected to the divine world slip into oblivion. On the other hand the first variant, that of Feqir Haji, concentrates on the *sur*, the essence or light emanating from God, which establishes a connection between Shehid (and his descendant) and the Angels, and has discarded the motif of the seed as a superfluous detail.<sup>1068</sup>

Though these two variants of the myth seem to have developed along different lines, independently of each other, they contain many elements which are interchangeable, and can be found in the versions of both variants, in a manner truly typical of oral tradition.<sup>1069</sup> It is also typical of oral tradition that the Gnostic/Manichaean myth of Seth is enriched with motifs taken from other traditions in. Thus, for example, Feqir Haji’s variant incorporates Muslim speculations on the “light of Muhammad,” when it places the *sur*, from which Seth is eventually created, in Adam’s forehead. It may also be under Muslim influence that Shehid marries a *houri* sent from heaven, rather than his own twin-sister.

While it seems fairly certain that the Yezidis’ Shehid is a “descendant” of the Gnostic/Manichaean Seth, colored with motifs from other traditions, and rewritten and restructured again and again according to the needs of the narrator and/or the audience, it would be completely impossible to pinpoint its exact source. It is impossible to tell even if the two variants developed from a common Yezidi myth, or they reached Yezidis already as two distinct mythical traditions. What we can be sure about is that the myths surrounding Seth were widely popular, well into the Islamic period, and Yezidis (or proto-Yezidis) had plenty of material at their disposal to make use of when forming their own myth(s), a myth that underlined their claim to be the special race of God in a way that was easily understandable outside their own community.

<sup>1068</sup> One must keep in mind that oral tradition, which lacks the support of written text, often tends to simplify and shorten, especially if information which makes a motif relevant is no longer retained in memory.

<sup>1069</sup> This is true, for example, for the negative role of Eve, or for Shehid’s sister-wife, which can both also be traced back to Manichaean and Gnostic speculations concerning Seth: Shehid’s wife is a *houri* in Feqir Haji’s version, a twin-sister in the *Black Book*, but some accounts following the “seed” variant also reported in the *Black Book* speak of a *houri*. Eve’s attempt on Shehid’s life is mentioned by versions of the “seed of Adam” as well as by Feqir Ali’s version of the creation of Shehid from the “pearl” (a substitute for *sur*) in Adam’s forehead. The most interesting is Empson’s account (source unknown), which mixes core elements of the two variants. It tells of a quarrel between Adam and Eve (on account of a *houri*, who is sent because Eve is barren): Eve, during a quarrel with Adam, declared that she alone had the power of reproduction, adding that Adam had nothing to do with it. The angel Jabrâ’îl thereupon placed blood from the forehead of Eve and Adam into four jars... Eve’s jars were barren, but Adam’s contained a boy called Shahîd Jayar – son of jar, and a girl, who were suckled by Adam and from whom sprang the race of the Yezîdîs. (Empson, *Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 47.) The account of a quarrel concerning the reproductive powers of man and woman “belongs” to the version recounted by the *Black Book*, the variant of the “seed” (It is the quarrel which induces Adam and Eve to put their seed in jars.) Meanwhile the role of Jibrail (who is often substituted for the Peacock Angel), and the mention of blood (the essence connected with soul) from the forehead (the place of the *sur*) belongs to the variant of Feqir Haji, the “myth of the *sur*.” Finally, in this version both the *houri* and twin-sister make their appearance, as if its teller wanted to fuse all the different elements heard at different occasions into one concise myth.



## Chapter 10: The Birth of Prophet Ismail in the Yezidi Tale of Ibrahim<sup>1070</sup>

### The Tale of Ibrahim

The story of the prophet Ibrahim's birth and life is a good example of the syncretism that characterizes Yezidi tradition, where different elements from diverse backgrounds are woven into a new and complex whole. The "Tale of Ibrahim"<sup>1071</sup> presents a vivid mix of the various traditions of the wider region. It contains a great number of motifs known from Greek mythology, the Bible, Jewish Haggadic literature, the Quran and other Islamic tradition.

The "Tale of Ibrahim" starts with a description of king Nemrud's birth<sup>1072</sup> who was so ugly that his father, the ruler of Canaan, put him into a basket, and threw him into the sea, from where he was rescued by a fisherman. Once grown up, Nemrud returned as King of Egypt, leading an army against Canaan, unwittingly killed his father and married his own mother, who later recognized him by a mark on his back. Clearly, here we are facing a version of the Greek Oedipus myth. It may have been transmitted through medieval Islamic literature. This version of Nemrud's Oedipic beginnings is preserved in the work of al-Kisāi, the author of a famous Arabic work, *The Lives of Prophets*, composed around 1200 A.D. It recounts the legends of the prophets prior to Muhammad, was a vivid expression of "popular" religion and narrative tradition in medieval Islam. The legend is also given at greater length in the introduction to the famous romance of Antar, a model of the Arabic romance of chivalry, based on "popular" literature.<sup>1073</sup> Embittered by his bad fortune Nemrud becomes the enemy of God.

Then follows an account of Ibrahim's birth and his deeds, most details of which can be found, if not in the Bible, then in Jewish literature and the Quran. Ibrahim's birth is foretold by the priests, who warn Nemrud that a man will be born who will take the power away from him. To prevent this, Nemrud orders the bellies of all pregnant women be ripped open, in an episode reminiscent of the Slaughter of the Innocents.<sup>1074</sup> Only Ibrahim, the son of Azir, Nemrud's uncle and an idol maker, survived by miracle, for his mother's pregnant belly disappeared every time she

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<sup>1070</sup> This chapter has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Kurdish Studies*.

<sup>1071</sup> The myth, or rather the "tale of Ibrahim the Friend" (Çîroka Biraħîm Xelîl) was translated by P. Kreyenbroek, in *God and Sheikh Adi*, 239-56.

<sup>1072</sup> The figure of Nemrud (or Nimrod) came to embody the archetype of the pagan idolator – an antithesis of the "monotheist" Abraham – in Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition alike.

<sup>1073</sup> B. Heller, "Nemrud," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 952-53.

<sup>1074</sup> According to some Jewish legends it was Nemrud himself, an accomplished astrologer, who read his fate in the stars, which then led him to have seventy thousand male children slaughtered. L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 186-87. In another version it is the astrologers who draw his attention to the danger, Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews* vol. 1, 207-8. One version of the Islamic legend relates that Nemrud saw a rising star in his dream that outshone the sun, which was then interpreted by his dream-readers, see Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, 72.

appeared in public.<sup>1075</sup> When her time came she fled to a rock above the town to give birth to the baby, whom, out of fear, she left there for the wild animals to eat. The baby Ibrahim was fed by a gazelle's milk sent by God, and he grew up in six months.<sup>1076</sup> As he became conscious of the external world, Ibrahim first worshipped the stars, then the moon, then the sun, but when he saw how all the heavenly bodies disappeared at the horizon at dusk and dawn he understood the futility of his beliefs and recognized God, the maker of all these things.<sup>1077</sup> Then he returned home, where he started his missionary campaign for the One God, against worshipping idols and Nemrud.<sup>1078</sup> Informed by the boys' father and enraged, Nemrud decided to burn him in a fire caused by a ballista.<sup>1079</sup> Preparing for this proved no easy task and took years, for Ibrahim was God's chosen, and the draft animals used for gathering the wood could not carry their loads, the ropes used for fastening the wood broke, and then the wood would not catch fire.<sup>1080</sup> Thus, Nemrud had "to do something that is not according to the law of the world" to counteract these difficulties. So he had donkeys mate with mares to produce mules, reeds sown to produce ropes, and forty young maidens and boys made drunk on *araq* and incited to an orgy. When this last outrage against God's laws happened, the angels removed themselves and finally the wood caught fire and Ibrahim was thrown into it. Ibrahim prayed to God to save him, promising to sacrifice what was special to his heart. God then sent the Angel Jibrail, who "took Ibrahim the Friend to Paradise, to the pastures and meadows... when the fire was over when it was extinguished, Ibrahim the Friend was at Ayn Arus ('The Bride's Spring')"<sup>1081</sup> together with his wife Sarah. From there Ibrahim continued his journey

<sup>1075</sup> In Jewish legends it is from her husband, a prince – in other versions an idol maker and obedient follower of Nimrod, that Abraham's mother has to hide her pregnancy, so he will not betray their child. "When he passed his hand over her body, there happened a miracle. The child rose until it lay beneath her breasts, and Terah could feel nothing with his hands. He said to his wife, 'Thou didst speak truly,' and naught became visible until the day of her delivery." Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews* vol. 1, 188; see also Knappert *Islamic Legends*, 73.

<sup>1076</sup> In Jewish legends Abraham's mother took refuge in a cave in the desert. God then sent Gabriel to feed the child left in a cave, and he suckled the baby from his little finger. His mother, distraught at what she had done, returned after twenty days and found Abraham fully grown. Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews* vol. 1, 1947, 188-91. The cave motif is also retained by Islamic legends, according to which Ibrahim suckled his own fingers on his right hand, Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, 73.

<sup>1077</sup> Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews* vol. 1, 189; Quran 6,76-79, 37.88-89;

<sup>1078</sup> Quran 2.258

<sup>1079</sup> The ballista is an ancient military engine like a catapult used for throwing stones. Here it was used for throwing burning material. Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 244, note 10. In Jewish and Islamic tradition Abraham/Ibrahim meets this fate after having destroyed the idols. Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews*, vol. 1, 213-16; Quran 37.91-95; 21.51-67.

<sup>1080</sup> Nimrod had all the men and women of his kingdom bring wood for the fire. But whoever tried to throw Abraham into the fire, he was consumed by it himself instead, so finally, at the instigation of Satan, they threw him into the fire with the help of a catapult. Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews*, vol. 1, 198-201, 216-17; Quran 37.97-8;

<sup>1081</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 245-46. "The logs burst into buds, and all the different kinds of wood put forth fruit, each tree bearing its own kind. The furnace was transformed into a royal pleasance, and the angels sat therein with Abraham" Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews*, vol. 1, 201; Quran 21, 48-9; 29.24; "God commanded the branches and logs around Abraham to sprout, grow twigs, leaves, flowers and fruit so that Abraham was soon sitting in a shaded cover where colourful flowers spread cool fragrance and sweet fruits offered themselves to the thirsty prisoner. Many years later, when he was an old man, Abraham used to say: 'These seven days in the midst of the fire were the finest of my life.'" Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, 75. In Urfa, where this took place according to the Muslim tradition, the sacred lake that is said to have formed when God turned the fire into a lake surrounded by a garden is still an important place of

to Egypt, where the Biblical incident of the pharaoh trying to wed his wife, passed off as his sister, befell him. The pharaoh, finally realizing the terrible danger he was in, released Ibrahim and his wife, even giving him a slave girl, Hagar. Sarah, who had no children proposed that Ibrahim marry Hagar and beget a child with her. By the grace of God both Sarah and Hagar became pregnant at the same time. However, as the months passed, the child in Hagar's womb, the Prophet Ismail, made Sarah stand up to show respect for Hagar, even when she had her arms and legs covered in sand. Sarah resented this and made Ibrahim get rid of her co-wife. Ibrahim had his servant take Hagar into the desert and abandon her there.<sup>1082</sup> This was where Hagar gave birth to Ismail. As she paced up and down she brought forth water first under her left, then under her right foot. She named the spring that thus sprang up in the desert "Zemzemi."<sup>1083</sup> Mecca was built next to this spring, and Ismail grew up there. When Ismail was already a grown-up, Ibrahim came looking for him. When he arrived at Ismail's home, his son was not there, and his wife failed to invite the stranger to dismount and have something to eat and drink. Ibrahim then left a message for his son, telling him "your house is a good one but its door is not good, ... change it and put in a better door." Ismail, upon his return, understood that his father had come to seek him and his wife had not shown him courtesy, so he divorced her.<sup>1084</sup> He married again, but when Ibrahim came looking for him the whole incident was repeated. When Ibrahim came the third time, however, he was respectfully invited in by Ismail's third wife and he gave her and the marriage his blessing.<sup>1085</sup> Then Ismail and Ibrahim were reunited, but Jibrail came and reminded Ibrahim of his vow to sacrifice what was dearest to him. Ibrahim balked at this demand, but his son, a true prophet, convinced him to heed the divine command.<sup>1086</sup> As Ibrahim prepared to sacrifice his son, first his sharp knife refused to cut Ismail's neck, than a fattened ram kept by the houris in Paradise for seven years descended and took Ismail's place as a sacrifice.

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pilgrimage, and the fish, descendants of the wood of the stake turned into fish, are believed to be sacred and are fed by the pilgrims.

<sup>1082</sup> In Jewish legends Abraham merely sends Hagar and Ismail away, but in Quranic commentaries he actually accompanies them to the desert, as far as where Mecca was later built, before abandoning them. The place of Ibrahim here seems to be taken by his servant. R. Paret, "Ismail," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 184-85.

<sup>1083</sup> In Jewish tradition, God, in response to Ismail's prayers, bade Miriam's well spring up, Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews*, vol. 1, 265. In Islamic tradition, while Hagar ran in despair back and forth between the hills al-Safā and al-Marwa, Ismail scratched the sand and thus helped the water of Zemzem break through. Paret, "Ismail," 184-85.

<sup>1084</sup> In Jewish legends Ismail's wife even refuses Abraham's request for water and bread, saying they have none, all the while cursing her children and husband. Abraham recommends that her husband replace the tent-pin. Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews*, vol. 1, 266.

<sup>1085</sup> Both Jewish and Islamic traditions are familiar with this story, though they mention only two wives. Ginzberg, *Legend of the Jews*, vol. 1, 266-68; Paret, "Ismail," 185.

<sup>1086</sup> Quran 37.101-103; although the Quran does not mention the name of the son to be sacrificed, most Muslim traditions maintain that it was Ismail rather than Isaac.

## The Birth of Ismail

Rich in adventures, most of the details of this tale of Ibrahim's life and tribulations can also be found in Jewish and Islamic legends, which – no doubt – were a part of the oral culture throughout the Middle East. One element, however, surprises the reader or listener, and is very hard to place or to interpret. This motif appears in the description of the birth of Ismail, son of Ibrahim.<sup>1087</sup> As in Muslim tradition, Ismail was born from Hagar in the desert, and the spring Zemzem sprang up at his birth place, but then follows a most intriguing incident. The text transcribed and translated by Kreyenbroek runs like this:

...around that time Rajab, Sha'ban and Ramadan<sup>1088</sup> appeared there. All three were Kurdish merchants, their real names were Rejo, Shebo and Remo, but the Arabs called them Rajab, Sha'ban and Ramadan. They traded in Egypt and India, they came and saw that water flowed there. They said to each other, 'We have traded in these parts for several years but we have never seen water flowing here.' They settled by the water, they brought their wares and said to Rejo (Rajab), 'Squeeze your rump, get on your horse, go to the water and see where it comes from.' They said that Rajab got off his bottom, mounted his horse and traveled on and on until he came to the source of the water; there he saw an old man with a white beard and white clothes, and a white-haired woman. He greeted them and said, 'What people are you, who are you, how long have you been here?' They said, 'Take your water and have a good journey; don't ask questions!' Rejo came back to his friends and told them what he had seen, explaining how things were.

The second time they sent Shebo (Sha'ban), he went to the source of the water and saw a young man of sixteen and a young woman. Again he greeted them and asked, 'May I ask you some questions? What people are you, where do you come from, where are you from?' They said, 'Sir, take your water and have a good journey, there is no need for these questions.' Shebo came back to his friends and explained the situation to them and told them what he had seen with his own eyes.

The third time they sent Remo (Ramadan) like his comrades, he too got off his bottom and rode his horse until he came to the Spring; he saw a baby of three days, sucking on his mother's nipple. He greeted him and said, 'Who are you people, since when have you been here?' The woman said, 'We have been here as long as

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<sup>1087</sup> During my field research, Yezidis knowledgeable on religious tradition disagreed on whether the account of Ismail's birth was a "tale" or a *qewl*, that is, a "hymn." The difference is that "hymns" are considered sacred, as they have a heavenly origin, and they were revealed specifically to the Yezidis, while "tales" are thought of more as accounts of historical events, also shared by other nations. Some informants claimed that the birth of Ismail was to be considered a *çîrok*, and as such was not a Yezidi myth, as it was shared by other people as well (as proof the Bible was quoted) although it was a true story. (*Çîrokekî bash e, na piroz e, na qasure jî. Bas Qewl nine, qewle Ismail na ye me ye.* "It is a good story, it is neither sacred, nor a mistake/faulty. But there is no *qewl*, the hymn of Ismail is not ours.") Others, like Feqir Haji, one of the best known experts on Yezidi religion and texts, called it a *qewl*, *Qewlê Nebî Ismailê*, marking it as a genuine Yezidi myth, despite the fact that in his performance most of the text was in prose form. The version published by Kreyenbroek does in fact contain a hymn about Ismail, which briefly refers to this episode: "It was through the power of the Great One, That Ismail the Prophet appeared in that desert, The water of the Zemzem welled up under his feet... The merchants passed that place, The great ones, like mountains, By God's grace, no one knows how much wealth there is. People who were around the merchant, Went to greet them, (saying:), We would like to know your names. Oh Intelligent child, Are you God or the Prince? Are you a saint or a Feqir?" (Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 251.) Such a relationship between myth and hymns is characteristic of Yezidi oral tradition, where many obscure references in the hymns can only be interpreted if one knows the corresponding myth, or "tale."

<sup>1088</sup> The names of three months of the Muslim calendar, see Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 248, Note 18.

the little one has been born.' He in turn returned to his friends and told them what he had seen. One said, 'I saw an old man.' One said, 'I saw a young man.' One said, 'I saw a baby.' Remo's words were true. They said, 'He is a prophet.' They went to India to fetch their belongings and built Mecca (i.e., *makgeh*, 'the mother's place.')<sup>1089</sup>

The message of this portion of the *chirok* is that when the three merchants realized that the old man, young man and baby they had seen separately were in fact the same person, or rather baby, they immediately identified him as a prophet. It must be noted here that during my field research I found that this motif and its interpretation is still a part of living tradition. Yezidis who were familiar with the details of the story saw the three-form appearance as a proof of Ismail's *keramet*, or divine power, and of the fact that he was indeed a "supernatural being," a possessor of the *sur*, that is, he was a divine figure (*khas*.) His appearing in three different forms (ages) in a short period of time proved that he was a real prophet<sup>1090</sup> and led to the conversion not only of the three merchants, but of all their people.

Appearing simultaneously as a baby, young man and old man is a striking and unusual way to describe or symbolize the status of a prophet. One is tempted to point a finger and declare that this must be an original Yezidi motif, so hard to interpret for an outsider, exactly because it is rooted in Yezidi religious symbolism. Before we get carried away, however, we must take note that Yezidis are not alone in the region to possess such a myth of the three-form appearance of a divine being or prophet.

### Appearance of Ali as a Child, Young Man and Old Man in Nusayrî Mythology

A similar account is found among the Nusayrîs (or Alawites) of Syria. The Nusayrî renegade, Sulaimân Efendî al-Adhanî, recounts this myth in his work *Kitāb al-bākūra al-sulaymānîyya fî kashf asrār al-dîyāna al-nusayriyya*, written in 1834-35. He gives an account of the original Fall of the Nusayrî souls. According to Nusayrî belief, the souls of gnostics<sup>1091</sup> originated in the divine world of light that existed before the creation of the material world. These souls, which were originally luminous spiritual entities emanating from divine light, existed in a pure spiritual form, in complete purity, and in this state they beheld Ali. They fell, however, when they rebelled against the divine will or succumbed to pride. Both faults are said to derive from an imperfect

<sup>1089</sup> Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 248-49. In Islamic tradition, after the spring of Zemzem breaks out, Hagar gives permission to the Arab tribe of Djurhum to settle in the neighborhood, later Ismail takes a wife from there. Paret, "Ismail" 185.

<sup>1090</sup> Some Yezidis are reluctant to use the word "prophet" about their *khas*, those who use it, however, understand it in the sense that Yezidi prophets were invested with the divine *sur*.

<sup>1091</sup> Gnostics here refer to those "knowers" or true believers who have penetrated the secrets of religion, not to be confused with the dualistic Gnostics of Late Antiquity.

knowledge of God (Ali, that is.)<sup>1092</sup> In al-Adhanî's manuscript this came about when they committed the sin of pride stating that "As for creation, there has not been created anything nobler than we," so that Ali withdrew from them. Then, much later, Ali appeared before them, and again they sinned by imagining that Ali was a human like them. (One of the cornerstones of the Nusayrî's debate with "heretics," that is, other Shiite sects, on Ali's nature, is their docetic conviction that Ali, in his cyclical incarnations, merely seemed to take on human form, and that it was only those ignorant of true gnosis, who thought to see him according to a material and human form.)<sup>1093</sup> The third time, he appeared to them in three forms, as a child, young man and old man, and once being deceived by their eyes and outward appearances they failed to understand his true essence, so they were cast down into the material world:

All groups of the Nusairîs believe that in the beginning, before the existence of the world they were shining lights and luminous stars and they used to distinguish between submission and rebellion, neither eating, nor drinking, not excreting, but beholding 'Alî ibn Abî Tâlib in the yellow aspect. They remained in this condition 7,007 years and 7 hours. Then they thought among themselves, "as for creation, there has not been created anything nobler than we," This was the first transgression that the Nusairîs committed. And he ('Alî) created for them a veil (hijâb), keeping them under restraint for 7,000 years. Thereupon, 'Alî ibn Abî Tâlib appeared to them saying, "Am I not your Lord?" and they replied. "Indeed", after that he had made visible to them his Omnipotence. But they imagined they could apprehend him in his fullness on their supposition that he was one of themselves. By that they committed a second transgression... after 7,077 years Ali appears to them again: Thereupon, he appeared to them in the form of an aged man with a white head and beard... then they imagined him to be such as that shape through which he appeared to them. And he said to them, "Who am I?," and they replied "We do not know." Then he appeared in the form of a young man with a twisted moustache, riding on a furious-looking lion, then again he appeared to them in the form of a small child. Again he called them and said "Am I not your Lord?" And he repeated the question to them on each manifestation, in his company being his Name (ism) and his Gate (bâb)... and they (the Nusairî) imagined he was one like unto themselves, and they became confused and did not know what to answer; and so he created them, out of their backwardness, doubt and confusion. And he called them, saying "I have created for you a lower abode and I intend to cast you down into it. And I shall create for you fleshly temples and I shall appear to you in a veil as one of your kind; and he who acknowledges me amongst you, and acknowledges my Gate and my Veil, him will I bring back hither."<sup>1094</sup>

Here the three-form appearance serves to underline the important Nusayrî notion that the deity is eternal and unchanging; it is only the ignorant who see his manifestations in the created as according to human or material form, the true gnostic, however, is the one who is not misled by such outward appearances.

Al-Adhani's work was compiled in the nineteenth century, but evidently this motif is much

<sup>1092</sup> Bar-Asher - Kofsky, *Nusayrî*, 53. On the Fall, see also pages 45-48 and 75-77.

<sup>1093</sup> Ibid., passim, especially the chapter "Nusayrî Trinitarian Theology," 7-41.

<sup>1094</sup> Olsson, "The Gnosis of Mountaineers," 177-78.

older, for it can be found in another, much earlier, Nusayrî work, the *Kîtāb al-usūs*. The date when this work was composed is not known, but internal evidence shows it to have been composed before the thirteenth century.<sup>1095</sup> Speaking of the mystery of divinity and the way God manifests himself to His creatures the *Kîtāb al-usūs* explains that before the creation only God's essence existed, "He was by Himself and did not describe Himself to His creatures, for they did not yet exist." Moreover, in that state God neither needed contact with anyone nor did He have to describe Himself to Himself or to converse with Himself. After the creation of human beings, however, such a need on the part of the deity became imperative and various categories of divine attributes were introduced in order to express the forms of relationship existing between God and His creatures. Since it is impossible for any change to take place in the divine essence, God created an intermediary entity of an external human form through which He communicated with his creatures.<sup>1096</sup> The *Kîtāb al-usūs* further elaborates the idea of intermediary forms; in one place it speaks of twelve human-like forms, which, according to the modern commentary, may be an allusion to the spiritual archetypes of the twelve Imams through which God reveals Himself to His believers.<sup>1097</sup> Elsewhere, however, "the forms through which God reveals Himself are described as angelic persons appearing in various forms... There follows a description of three of these appearances... God first appeared in the form of an old man, with hoary head and beard, possessed of the qualities of dignity, mercy and reverence. In His second appearance God revealed Himself to them in the shape of a young man with a curled moustache, riding upon a lion having the quality of wrath. Then follows the third appearance, when God reveals Himself in the form of a child."<sup>1098</sup>

The parallels or similarities between the two myths are too pronounced to be the results of mere coincidence. Clearly, the two tales are related, but what is their significance? At first glance, such a presentation of prophethood in the Yezidi tradition and divinity in Nusayrî tradition is confusing and hard to interpret. Obviously, if Yezidis and Nusayrîs, share such a peculiar motif, there must be a common source which should be sought in order to understand this motif. While the Yezidi myth, embedded in its oral environment, offers few clues as to the origins of the motif, the Nusayrî myth is more "helpful." It is the Nusayrî myth, with its message that God Himself is eternal and unchanging, opposed to the changing forms of the unstable (moving) created world, which provides the clue to the origins of this curious motif.

<sup>1095</sup> Bar-Asher and Kofsky, *Nusayrî*, 43.

<sup>1096</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>1097</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1098</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

## The Trimorphic Divinity in Late Antique Apocryphal Literature

### Trimorphic Christ

The very same idea, conveyed through the very same description, that of God appearing as a boy, man and old man, representing the cycle of human life time, is found in several apocryphal Acts and the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*. The apocryphal Acts are non-canonized writings of uncertain origin or authorship from the first few centuries of the Christian era, talking about the life and deeds of the Apostles mentioned in the canonized Biblical texts. During Late Antiquity and even the early Middle Ages these apocryphal acts enjoyed great popularity, taking the place of the ancient novel. It is in these Acts that one finds the concept of a divine figure, in this instance Christ, appearing in three different forms: as a boy, young man and old man.

One of the apocryphal works where the three-form, or trimorphic, representation of Jesus appears is the *Acts of John*. The description of Christ appearing in three forms unfolds from the story of Drusiana, one of John's followers, who was resurrected by John after her death through the mercy of the Lord. When John and his friends went to her grave (more likely a catacomb or crypt) on the third day after Drusiana's death to break bread, as was the custom, they were met by a beautiful smiling youth who told John to raise Drusiana. Later, Drusiana told the other brethren that the Lord appeared to her in the tomb in the likeness of John, and of a youth. When her brethren doubted her words, John told them that there was nothing to be perplexed or dubious about, but to make them understand he would tell them about his own experiences, so "that you may see the glory which surrounds him, which was and is both now and evermore."

For when he [Jesus] had chosen Peter and Andrew, who were brothers, he [Jesus] came to me and my brother James, saying 'I need you; come to me!' And my brother <when he heard> this said: 'John, what does he want, this child (παιδῶν) on the shore who called us?' And I said, 'Which child?' And he answered me: 'The one, who is beckoning to us.' And I replied: 'Because of the long watch we have kept at sea, you are not seeing well, brother James. Do you not see the man standing there who is handsome, fair and cheerful looking (ἄνδρα εὐμορφρον καλῶν)?' But he said to me. 'I do not see that man, brother; but let us go, and we shall see what this means.' And when we had brought the boat \*to land\* we saw how he also helped us to beach the boat. And as we left the place, wishing to follow him, he appeared to me again as rather bald <headed> (ἄπυσιλον ἄχων <τῶν κεφαλῶν>) but with a thick and flowing beard (τῷ δὲ γένειον δασύν καταγόμενον), but to James as a young man whose beard was just beginning (ἄρχιγένειος νεανίσκος). So we were both puzzled about the meaning of what we had seen...<sup>1099</sup>

There follows a description of other sightings of the Lord when he appeared in different,

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<sup>1099</sup> Acts of John 88-89, trans. K. Schäferdiek, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2: *Writings Relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, English trans. and ed. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: James Clark, 1992), 180. Cf. Acta Ioannis in *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 1, ed. M. Bonnet (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1898), 194.

ever-changing forms (making one wonder if the author of the tract was a follower of docetism), with eyes that never closed, as a small and ugly man, sometimes with a smooth and soft, at other times rock hard, breast, then stripped of his clothes, and not like a man at all, with feet whiter than snow and a head stretching up to heaven, and then again as a small man. At other times he had a material, solid body, yet again he was immaterial and incorporeal, “as if it did not exist at all,” and his feet left no print in the snow. Still, there was “unity within the many faces,”<sup>1100</sup> for behind all these apparently changing material forms the divine essence/power was always, and unchangingly, the same.

The *Acts of Peter* relate a story about some blind old widows, who called out to Peter, begging him to give them back their sight through the mercy of Christ. Peter then significantly answers:

If there is in you the faith which is in Christ, then see with your mind what you do not see with your eyes... These eyes shall again be closed, that see nothing but men and cattle and dumb animals and stones and sticks; but only the inner eyes see Jesus Christ. And when prayer was made, the room in which they were shone as if with lightning, such as shines in the clouds. Yet it was not such light as (is seen) by day, (but) ineffable, invisible, such as no man could describe... Then Peter said to them ‘Tell us what you saw.’ And they said, ‘We saw an old man (πρεσβιτης), who had such a presence as we cannot describe to you;’ but others said, ‘We saw a growing lad’ (νεανισκος γυναικος); and others said ‘We saw a little boy (παιδριον μικρον) who gently touched our eyes, and so our eyes were opened.’ So Peter praised the Lord, saying ‘.... God is greater than our thoughts, as we have learnt from the aged widows how they have seen the Lord in a variety of forms.’”<sup>1101</sup>

The divinity appearing successively as child, young man and old man can also be found in non-Christian, or to be more exact, in Gnostic literature. The second-century Gnostic *Apocryphon of John* contains a revelation to the narrator, a certain John, by a divine being, called the Forethought, the creative power of the transcendent Father. John describes this revelation in the following way:

Straightaway [while I was contemplating these things] behold, the [heavens opened, and] the [whole] creation (κτισις) [which] below heaven shone, and [the world (κοσμος)] was shaken. 2. [I was afraid, and behold, I] saw in the [light a child who stood] by me. While I looked [at it, it became] like an old man. And he [changed his] likeness (again), becoming like a servant.<sup>1102</sup> There [was not a plurality] before me, but there was a [likeness] with multiple forms (μορφω) in the [light] and [the semblances] appeared through each other [and] the [likeness] had three forms (μορφω)].<sup>1103</sup>

<sup>1100</sup> Acts of John 89-93, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 180-81.

<sup>1101</sup> Acts of Peter 21, trans. W. Schneemelcher, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, 308. Cf. *Acta Petri in Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, vol. 1, ed. R. A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891), 69.

<sup>1102</sup> Layton translates this as “young person” (*Gnostic Scriptures*, 28.)

<sup>1103</sup> *Apocryphon of John II*, 1.30-2.9, in *Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices*, 15-17; Layton (*Gnostic Scriptures*, 28-29) translates “At that moment ... the heavens opened and all the creation shone with light... I... saw within the light a child standing before me. When I saw... like and elderly person. And it changed [its] manner of appearance to be like a

## The Trimorphic Deity and the Hellenic God of Eternal Time, *Aion*

These enigmatic descriptions of a polyphormic, or rather trimorphic, deity in Late Antique texts have for some time aroused the interest of researchers of Late Antique religiosity and religious philosophy. Erik Peterson, the first to devote attention to the topic, sought the explanation of this remarkable Christology, with Christ appearing as child, youth, and old man, in the theology of Tatian, an Encratite Assyrian Christian from second-century Mesopotamia.<sup>1104</sup> He looked at the famous passage in Tatian's *Address to the Greeks*, where the *aion*, or time, appears to man as past, present, and future, while he himself remains ever the same. As Tatian asked his opponents,

Why do you divide time, saying that one part is past, and another present, and another future? For how can the future be passing when the present exists? As those who are sailing imagine in their ignorance, as the ship is borne along, that the hills are in motion, so you do not know that it is you who are passing along, but that time (□ α□ □v) remains present as long as the Creator wills it to exist.<sup>1105</sup>

Henri-Charles Puech, who had new texts at his disposal (such as the translation of the longer version of the *Apocryphon of John*), further elaborated this train of thought, claiming that the trimorphic Christ in the Apocryphal Acts is no other than *Aion*, the abstract Hellenic god of Infinite Time, or Eternity. The same *Aion*, who is described by the dedication on the pedestal of his statue from Eleusis (probably made in A.D. 73/74)<sup>1106</sup> as: "He who by his divine nature remains ever the same in the same things. He who is and was and shall be, without beginning, middle or end, free from change, universal craftsman of the eternal divine nature."<sup>1107</sup>

According to Puech, the trimorphic god, whether Christian or Gnostic is "conçu sur le type de l'A□ □v en qui coexistent passé, présent, avenir, qui englobe et réunit en soi les trois dimensions du temps, les trois stades successifs d'une durée totale, correspondant, pour ce qui est de l'homme, aux trois âges de la vie: enfance ou jeunesse, maturité, vieillesse.... Jésus doit être, en l'occurrence, une figure, une personnification de l'A□ □v ; les trois aspects d'enfant ou d'adolescent, d'adulte, de vieillard, sous lesquels il se manifeste signifient l'éternité, la perpétuité de son être et répondent, du même coup, à autant de modes du vision ou de connaissance proportionnés à l'homme et conformes

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young person... in my presence. And within the light there was a multiform image. And the [manners of appearance] were appearing through one another. [And] the [manner of appearance] had three forms... It said to me ... [Now I have come] to teach you what exists, and what [has come to be], and what must come to be, so that you might [know about] the invisible realm [and the] visible realm."

<sup>1104</sup> E. Peterson, "Einige Bemerkungen zum Hamburger Papyrus-Fragment der Acta Pauli," *Vigiliae Christianae* 3 (1949): 142-62, see also G. Quispel, "The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John," in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 2-3.

<sup>1105</sup> Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 26, trans. J. E. Ryland, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. C. Coxe, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 76.

<sup>1106</sup> A. D. Nock, "A Vision of Aion Mandulis," *The Harvard Theological Review* 27.1 (1934): 83.

<sup>1107</sup> R. Pettazzoni, "Aion - (Kronos) Chronos in Egypt," in *Essays in the History of Religions* (Supplements to *Numen* I), trans. H. J. Rose (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 175.

aux trois principales étapes de l'existence humaine.”<sup>1108</sup>

This Aion, the deified abstraction of Eternity or Eternal Time, was a typical product of the Hellenistic culture. In *Timaeus* Plato defined Aion as the conception of ideal eternity, contrasted with Chronos, empirical time.<sup>1109</sup> Meanwhile, an epigram attributed to Plato claims “Aion brings everything; the long Time knows how to change name and shape and nature as fate well.”<sup>1110</sup> This Platonic Aion then went through a long and gradual evolution, from being first conceived of merely as period of time renewing itself, to acquiring the attributes of a cosmic principle, and was seen at last as the supreme and eternal principle of the universe. The last stage of this development of the Hellenistic Aion is represented by the *Chaldean Oracles*, a second century collection of somewhat fragmentary commentaries on a mystery poem. The *Oracles* are a product of Hellenistic (and more precisely Alexandrian) syncretism, displaying a combination of neo-Platonic elements with others that were Egyptian, Persian or Babylonian in origin. The concept of Aion in the *Chaldean Oracles*, as summed up by Hans Levy, is reminiscent of the concept of Logos as regards his relationship to the ultimate Supreme Beings and to creation.<sup>1111</sup> The Aion of the Chaldeans, the offspring of the (Platonic) Primal Being (“begotten of the Father”), also “forms the primal measure of all temporality, in that he ‘mixes’ the ages (aeons) of the universe (Aeons),” while he himself is in constant motion.<sup>1112</sup>

It would not have been impossible to draw a parallel between the Hellenistic Aion, that the Great Father created out of himself in order to manifest Himself to man, and the Christ of the Christians.<sup>1113</sup> After all, as Hippolytus says, it was “Christ, who stood, stands, and will stand, (that is, was, is, and is to come),”<sup>1114</sup> therefore using the eloquent image of the Aion or Eternal Time, to depict Christ in apocryphal writings may have been appealing.

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<sup>1108</sup> C. Puech, “Histoire de L’Ancienne Église et Patristique,” *Annuaire de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études* (1966/67): 130.

<sup>1109</sup> D. Levi, “Aion,” *Hesperia* 13.4 (1944): 274.

<sup>1110</sup> Ibid. Cf. Plato, “Time the Conqueror,” *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*, ch 9.epig. xviii, ed. and trans. John William Mackail (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1890), 135.

<sup>1111</sup> “Aion is a noetic (subtle) monad with a dual aspect; on the one hand, he, alone is sustained by the Vital Force (‘Strength’) of the Supreme Being, Whose Intellect he, by virtue of his noetic quality, is able to cognize. On the other hand, his function is to transmit the supreme light to the ‘Sources and Principles’ who are... the general and particular ideas, and to keep these in perpetual circular motion... The Great Father has created the Aion out of himself, and manifests Himself in him to man... Aion may accordingly be regarded as identical with the ‘Light’ through which... the Father moves... The Light of Aion is the motion of the Supreme God... For the Chaldaean Theurgists the absolutely transcendent Father manifests himself in him.” H. Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), 100-1.

<sup>1112</sup> Ibid., 402-3. For Hans Lewy, the Aion of the *Oracles* represents the Iranian Zurvan and the peculiar position Chaldeans assign to the god Aion offers proof of the penetration of Zurvanism, a later development of Mazdaism influenced by Babylonian astral religion, into the Hellenistic world. In this Iranian system, Zervan Akarana, or Infinite Time, limitless, eternal and uncreated was the cause and source of all things, a doctrine which “formed the foundation of the cult of Aion practiced by the worshippers of Mithra.” Ibid., 408.

<sup>1113</sup> According to Istvan Perczel (personal communication), Dionysios Aeropagitos and Synesios of Cyrene, representing the Christian Platonic tradition, identified the Aion of the Chaldean Oracles with Christ.

<sup>1114</sup> □ □ στ □ ζ στ η σόμενος Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* VI.1.17, trans. A. Siouville, *Réfutation de Toutes le Hérésies*, vol. 2 (Milan: Archè, 1988), 15.

Though no trimorphic representation of the Aion appears in the *Chaldean Oracles*, a bimorphic representation can be traced. In the *Oracles* the god Aion is identical with god Chronos, and Chronos is called “old and young” (πρεβύτερον καὶ νεώτερον).<sup>1115</sup> There is, however, a most interesting representation of Time, both eternal and finite, which is worth a mention at this point. A mosaic dated to the mid-third century after Christ, excavated in Antiochia,<sup>1116</sup> shows four male figures sitting at a table, three in a group on the right, and one on the left. According to the inscriptions underneath, the lonely figure is Aion, while the group of men is designated as *Chronoi*. The words, Παρω(ι)χημῖνος, ἄνεστῖς, Μῖλλων meaning Past, Present, and Future can be read under the *Chronoi* figures. According to Doro Levi, in this context the *Chronoi* stand for relative time, that is, “time in relation to something, especially human life,” as opposed to absolute time, eternity, Aion. In the group of the *Chronoi*, the man on the right corner is an adult, bearded, “the second figure is a young man, with energetic features, whose black hair is adorned with a rich wreath of sprigs.” The third figure is a robust adolescent, showing his upper body in almost full nudity, whose black hair falls in waving curls on the nape of his neck. Aion, on the left, is a figure of advanced age, with a grayish moustache and flowing beard. In his hand he probably holds a wheel, the symbol of Aion, eternal time.<sup>1117</sup>

A completely different line of argument is followed by Gedaliahu Stroumsa, who takes exception to the idea that the trimorphic God of these texts should be related to the Hellenistic god of Eternity, Aion.<sup>1118</sup> He finds the notion that “a mythologeme may originate in an abstract reflection on the nature of time and eternity” anachronistic.<sup>1119</sup> Stroumsa is of the opinion that the trimorphic appearance of the divinity in these writings should rather be traced to the bimorphy attested in rabbinical texts. He distinguishes not one but two kinds of bimorphy in these texts: young man/old man, and form of God/form of Servant. The latter kind of bimorphy, he claims, can be detected in the *Apocryphon of John*, where the Coptic word *hal* should be translated, in his opinion, as servant rather than child. Furthermore, the Greek παῖς may also be understood both as a “child” and a “servant.”<sup>1120</sup> Hence, these two types of bimorphy were fused into one, giving birth to the threefold, child-young man-old man manifestation of the deity.

Both interpretations of trimorphy have their own merits, and it is also quite feasible that the

<sup>1115</sup> Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles*, 102, note 151.

<sup>1116</sup> D. Levi, “Aion,” *Hesperia* 13.4 (1944): 269-314.

<sup>1117</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-74. According to Doro Levi the Aion-Chronoi mosaic was not a testimony of the philosophical movement in the learned and religious metropolis, rather a testimony of “conceptions which were passing from mouth to mouth, of words which were much in the air, which were used more or less by everybody, *excerpta* of philosophical speculation which together with religious and mystic ideas had passed over, as would often happen in popular philosophy.” Levi, “Aion,” 312.

<sup>1118</sup> G. Stroumsa, “Polymorphie Divine et Transformations d’un Mythologème: L’‘Apocryphon de Jean’ et ses Sources,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981): 412-34.

<sup>1119</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>1120</sup> *Ibid.* 419.

two different traditions, Biblical bimorphy and ideas concerning the Eternal Time, may have reinforced each other. One must argue with Stroumsa's claim, however, that it would be anachronistic to look for the origins of a mythologeme in an abstract philosophical reflection on the nature of time and eternity. There are eloquent instances of exactly such philosophical notions making their appearance in seemingly "naive" apocryphal works.<sup>1121</sup>

## Further Applications of Trimorphy in Early Christian Writings

Whatever the origin of the trimorphic manifestation of the deity, it became a common motif of Late Antique religious language, for it fitted well with the image of the Saviour - who chooses to appear to each man as he can best grasp Him, and the Saviour who took on himself all the lowly humiliations of the human condition, the incarnate divine Word. The true nature of this Saviour is well expressed by these changing forms. As Puech says: "par l'entremise des formes qu'il revêt, ou en quoi il se transfigure, celui-ci s'accommode à la faiblesse des créatures, s'adapte aux diverses capacités qu'ont les spectateurs, les voyants ou les croyants, de l'apercevoir, de le saisir, de le concevoir."<sup>1122</sup> These are exactly the sentiments Peter expresses just before the episode of the blind widows, perhaps proffering an explanation for the trimorphic appearance that is to follow: "For each of us as he was able, as he could see, so he saw (him)."<sup>1123</sup>

The trimorphic manifestation occasionally appears in Christian works in a negative context, associated with heretics or enemies of the faith, probably because it was not only "orthodox" Christians, but also Gnostics who employed the image of trimorphy to express the eternal, unmovable nature of the Divine as contrasted to the changing created world.<sup>1124</sup> For example, exactly such a feast is attributed to Simon Magus, in the *Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*.

<sup>1121</sup> A good example is furnished by the 2<sup>nd</sup>-c. apocryphal *Protoevangelium Iacobi*. Joseph's vision at the time of the Nativity, where he sees the world and time stop, carries a philosophical-theological meaning concerning the relationship between the Eternal (divine) and the created, expressed through the concept of movement and time. The scene of Mary's receiving the Annunciation in the same work is also redolent with Neoplatonic symbols. In other words, this apparently simple apocryphal work puts forward a complex theology clothed in symbols taken from the contemporary philosophical language, ultimately based on Plato, and probably well known and easily interpretable for any educated man of the time. Gy. Geréby, "A világ és az idő megállása Jakab Prótevangéliumában," (The Suspension of Time and the World in the Protevangelium Iacobi) *Vallástudományi Szemle* 2.1 (2006): 93-126. F. Bovon, "The Suspension of Time in Chapter 18 of the Protevangelium Iacobi," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Helmut Koester*, ed. B. A. Pearson, A. T. Kraabel, G. W. E. Nickelsburg, and N. R. Petersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 393-405. György Geréby, "Egy ortodox apokrif műhelyében: A Jakab-ősevangélium (*Protevangelium Iacobi*) filozófiai szimbolikája" (In the shop of an Orthodox apocryphe: The philosophical symbolism of the Protevangelium Iacobi), *Ókor* 6.3 (2007): 50-61

<sup>1122</sup> Puech, "Histoire," 129.

<sup>1123</sup> "Unusquisque enim nostrum sicut capiebat videre, prout poterat videbat," Acta Petri 20, *Acta Apostolorum* I. 67

<sup>1124</sup> The trimorphic appearance in the *Apocryphon of John* quoted above is such an example of Gnostics utilizing this motif, although Quispel is of the opinion that the introduction containing this motif was not part of the original work. Quispel, "The Demiurge," 5-6.

Simon Magus, who made his first appearance in the Bible as the rival of the apostles, later came to be widely considered the founding father of the Gnostic movement.<sup>1125</sup> Simon Magus' duel with the Apostle Peter, rich in magical and miraculous details, is a much-liked topic of many apocryphal Acts. In the *Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, we find a description of Simon's magical tricks that sounds familiar. According to this apocryphe, the dispute between the Apostle Peter and Simon, the magician came to the ear of Emperor Nero, who ordered Simon brought before him:

And he, coming in, stood before him, and began suddenly assume different forms, so that on a sudden he became a child, and after a little an old man, and at other times a young man; for he changed himself both in face and stature in different forms, and was in a frenzy, having the devil as his servant. And Nero beholding this, supposed him to be truly the son of God.<sup>1126</sup>

It is not difficult to understand why such a three-form appearance was associated with Simon, if one reads the Church fathers' account of Simon's teachings. Simon claimed to be the Great Power of God,<sup>1127</sup> that is, the incarnation of God the Father, descended on earth in a human form. And this Father, or the principle of All, the root of all that which exists, the infinite, uncreated, immovable Power containing everything was defined by Simon, with words that evoke the description of the Aion, one that "stands, stood, and will stand" (□ □στ□ς, στ□ς, στησ□μενος).<sup>1128</sup> That is, existing eternally, immovable ("standing"), unlike the changing world. This infinite power that has stood, stands, and will stand is ultimately identical with Simon, who descended to save mankind.<sup>1129</sup> Researchers believe to recognize the Aion or Infinite Time of late Hellenism - that was, is and will be - in this description of the Endless Power. As Simon, in his role as the "father of all heretics," was said to have claimed for himself the same role as Christ, that is, the role of the incarnated Divine Power, it is clear why the three-form appearance, the trademark of the Aion as a manifestation of the Supreme Being in the created, moving world, came to be associated with his

<sup>1125</sup> Simon was considered the "father of all heresies," (*pater omnium haereticorum*), the first to call him so was Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III Pref., perhaps following Justin Martyr. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* II.Pref.1) also asserts that "all heretics drew their impious doctrines from Simon," (*omnes a Simone haeretici initia sumentes impia et irreligiosa dogmata induxerunt.*) Irénée, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 2, tome 2, 24. And *Adv. Haer.* 1.27.4 "all those who in any way corrupt the truth and hurt the glory of the Church, are the disciples and successors of Simon Magus" (*omnes qui quoquo modo adulterant veritatem et praeconium Ecclesiae laedunt Simonis Samaritani magi discipuli et successores sunt*) Irénée, *Contre les Hérésies* livre 1, tome 2, 352. Irenaeus often repeated this sentiment in his work. Other writers followed suit, and it soon became a commonplace that just as all sins stemmed from Satan, all heresies were born out of the teachings of Simon.

<sup>1126</sup> "Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul" 14, trans. A. Walker, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. C. Coxe, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans: 1950), 480.

<sup>1127</sup> *Acts of the Apostles* 8.11: □ δ□ναμις το□ θεο□ □ καλουμ□νη μεγ□λη; Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* I.23.1; Hippolytus *Philosophumena* VI.19.4; Pseudo-Tertullianus, *Adversus. Omnes. Haereses* 1; Pseudo-Clemens, *Recognitiones* III.47.1; Pseudo-Clemens, *Homilies* II.2.

<sup>1128</sup> According to Simon, therefore, this blessed and incorruptible being resides in everything – it is hidden, it is there in power, but not in act. It is He who stands, has stood, and will stand. He that stands above in the unbegotten Power; he, who has stood below, having been begotten through the image (which is reflected) in the streams of the waters; he, who will stand above by the blessed infinite Power, when one will be just like the other, Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* VI.1.17 (Siouville, *Réfutation* vol. 2, 25-26.) See also VI.1.9; VI.1.13; VI.1.19.

<sup>1129</sup> *Ibid.* X.2 "Simon"; VI.1.18; VI.1.19

figure. “This seems to reveal an awareness of the fact that this view is not limited to Christianity. Such a transformation should be considered as the expression of an extraordinary power and an adaptation to the different levels of spiritual capacity in the spectators”<sup>1130</sup> in Late Antiquity.

Photius, ninth-century patriarch of Constantinople, also attributes the description of divine trimorphy to the Gnostics in his *Bibliotheca*, which is treated by Photius as merely another example of those “old wife’s tales” (*anicularum fabulae*)<sup>1131</sup> that Church Fathers had always claimed heretics liked to tell so much. Photius attributes the apocryphal work, *Travels of the Apostles* (τῶν ἁποστόλων περιόδοι), including the Acts of Peter, John, Andrew, Thomas and Paul, to a certain Leucius Charinus, whom he accuses of having Gnostic or at least dualistic sentiments (“He says, in fact, that there exists a God, that of the Jews, who is malicious... and another one, Christ, whom he declares good”).<sup>1132</sup> One of the accusations he levels against the work is the doctrine of docetism, which is attested by the polymorphic appearance of God:

It pretends that Christ was not incarnated in reality, he only appeared to have done so, and he showed himself under different aspects at different times to his disciples: young man (νῶν), old man (πρεσβῶτην), infant (παῖδα), then again old man and again infant, and big and small, then again very big to the point that he was touching the sky with his head.<sup>1133</sup>

## The Motif of Divine Trimorphy in Medieval Texts

The image of the three-form deity did not disappear with the decline of Hellenistic culture of Late Antiquity, but was transmitted both to the literary and “popular” culture of the Middle Ages, Christian and non-Christian alike. Very likely it was the above-mentioned Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles that served as the vehicle of transmission. These Apocryphal Acts, with their descriptions of the wondrous travels, adventures and miraculous deeds of the apostles were the literary inheritors of the antique novel.<sup>1134</sup> Despite the condemnations of religious figureheads, like Photius above, they were enjoyed far and wide by all layers of society, but especially by the less educated classes, whose moral education and amusement they simultaneously aimed at. They were both read aloud and passed on orally. These acts, that one may also consider adventurous biographies, eventually

<sup>1130</sup> Gilles Quispel, “The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John,” in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, ed. R. McL. Wilson, NHS 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 5.

<sup>1131</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I.8.1.

<sup>1132</sup> Photius, *Bibliotheca* cod. 114, tr. and ed. René Henry (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960), vol. 2, 85

<sup>1133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1134</sup> E.g., R. I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight, The Literary Genre of the Acts of Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); T. Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); J. N. Bremmer, “The Novel and the Apocryphal Acts: Place, Time and Readership,” in *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel*, vol. 9, ed. H. Hofmann and M. Zimmerman (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), 157-180.

gave birth to another genre, hagiography, that is, the miraculous accounts of the life of saints.

This latter fact explains why we may find, for example, an almost verbatim copy of the incident of the blind widows contained in the *Apocryphal Acts of Peter* in the *Life of Saint Abercius*, composed by a tenth-century Byzantine writer. Here it is Abercius, instead of Peter, who is visited by three old widows, who ask him to give them back their sight, for they also believe in Jesus. Abercius tells them “If your faith in the true God is true, as you say, you shall see him with the eyes of your heart. Then he prayed to Christ to give back their sight, both physical and intellectual, to the widows. Then “a great light from above spread over that place where they were standing... nor was it light like that of the sun or of lightning, but something not seen before, unusual and amazing.” All those in the room fell down, and the widows regained their sight. Abercius then asked them, what it was that they first saw. “One of them answered ‘I saw an old man, whose form was so beautiful it cannot be expressed by words.’ The other said ‘I saw a young man.’ And the third said ‘a boy touched my eyes.’”<sup>1135</sup>

It is obvious that the episode here was taken over nearly literally from the apocryphal model, including not only the situation itself, but even such details as the reference to the inner eyes, the description of miraculous light filling the room, down to the form of old man, young man and boy seen by the various widows. The only novelty is in ascribing the story to a rather obscure second-century saint, rather than to Peter Apostle. However, we can meet with more creative and innovative use of the trimorphic motif in other literary works, which testify to the popularity of this motif.

## The Abgar Legend

The motif makes a fascinating appearance in the Abgar legend.<sup>1136</sup> This famous legend tells of the arrival of Christianity to Edessa (today Urfa in south-east Turkey) and the conversion of its king, Abgar. Our earliest source, the fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* (I.13) of Eusebius of Caesarea, recounts how the king of Edessa, king Abgar, sent an envoy to Christ, stating his willingness to accept his teachings and inviting him. In response, Christ sent the king a letter,

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<sup>1135</sup> Vita Abercii XI. PG 115 (Paris: Migne, 1899) 1226. Β-Ϟ Ϟ δϞ, ΕϞ Ϟ πϞστις ϞμϞν πρϞς τϞν ϞληθϞ θϞν ϞληθϞς Ϟστιν, Ϟς φατε, τοϞς νοητοϞς αϞτϞν τϞς καρδϞας Ϟψεστι ϞφθαλμοϞς...καϞ ϞδοϞ τϞν τϞπον Ϟνθα δϞ καϞ εϞστϞκεσαν, φϞς Ϟνωθεν περιϞστραπτε μϞγα... τϞ δϞ φϞς οϞχ Ϟιον Ϟξ ϞλϞου καϞ ϞστραπϞς Ϟρχεται, ϞλλϞ καινϞν Ϟλλως καϞ φρικϞν καϞ ϞσϞνςθες... ΤϞ Ϟρα τϞ φανϞν ϞμϞν, Ϟρετο, καϞ τϞ πρϞτον διαβλϞψασαι Ϟδετε; Ϟ μϞν οϞν, ΠρεσβϞτην, Ϟφη, τϞ εϞδος, Ϟρρητον τϞν Ϟραν, φαιδρϞν Ϟ δϞ, ΝεανϞσκος Ϟφτη μοι Ϟ δϞ ϞτϞρα, ΠαιδϞριον κομιδϞ, φησϞν, ϞφατϞ μου τϞν ϞφθαλμϞν.

<sup>1136</sup> On the Abgar Legend see H. J. W. Drijvers, “Abgar Legend,” in *New Testament Apocrypha* vol. 1, 492-99.

blessing him and the city. The slightly later Syriac *Doctrine of Addai*, which probably goes back to the same common source as Eusebius' account, talks about a verbal message sent by Jesus (proving the importance of orality in early Syriac Christian culture), but adds that Jesus also sent a portrait of himself. This image, known to later generations as the "Image of Edessa",<sup>1137</sup> was to become an important part of the legend and to play a crucial role in the development of image veneration in the early Church. While in the *Doctrine of Addai* it is painted by one of the envoys of King Abgar, the painter Hannan, in later tradition it emerged as one of the "non-hand-made" or  $\square\chi\epsilon\iota\rho\pi\omicron\eta\tau\omicron\iota$  icons. Evagrius, writing around 600, talks of the portrait as of miraculous origin ( $\theta\epsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ). More than a century later, John of Damascus gives the full story of its origin. According to him, "when Augarus was king over the city of the Edessenes, he sent a portrait painter to paint a likeness of the Lord, and when the painter could not paint because of the brightness that shone from His countenance, the Lord Himself put a garment over His own divine and life-giving face and impressed on it an image of Himself and sent this to Augarus, to satisfy thus his desire."<sup>1138</sup>

The story of the *Mandylicon* or miraculously created portrait of Christ soon came to enjoy a great popularity and was mentioned in a number of theological works. It is agreed by researchers that the legend, which originally served to support the veneration of images in a Christian Church that was suspicious of such practices, became of even greater importance during the Iconoclast period when it asserted that the prototype of icons was created by Jesus himself. Certainly, both the letter and the image were accredited with attaining feasts of miraculous cures and repelling enemy attacks against the Edessa, and their legend enjoyed a wide circulation in medieval Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, Slavonic, Persian, Coptic and Armenian languages.

What concerns us here is the curious version conserved by two Armenian writers concerning the incident that took place when the painter attempted to put Jesus' countenance to canvas. One is Grigor Anavarzetsi, Catholicos of Cilician Armenia (1293-1307), whose work on the Abgar Legend, *The Fast of the Assumption of the All-blessed Mother of God, and in the Same Day [that of the] Holy and Noble Portrait of Christ, Our God, which [was sent] to Abgar* can be regarded as a pure apology of images, in support of image veneration in the Armenian Church. His account preserved a number of curious details not paralleled anywhere else in the extant Abgar literature.<sup>1139</sup>

The text begins with Abgar sending his messenger, "Anane, his trusted person, and together

<sup>1137</sup> See S. Runciman, "Some Remarks of the Image of Edessa," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3.3 (1931): 238-53; E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images before the Age of Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oak Papers* 8 (1954): 83-150.

<sup>1138</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, IV. 16, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. 9, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1955.) <http://www.balamand.edu.lb/theology/WritingsSJD.htm#Writings>. (Last accessed 04 April 2008). See also Runciman, "Image of Edessa," 240 and 246.

<sup>1139</sup> Irma Karaulashvili, "Armenian Versions of the Abgar Legend," (MA Thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 1996), 49-50. I would like to thank Irma Karaulashvili for drawing my attention to the existence of this version.

with him Hovhannes, the painter and goldsmith” to Jesus with a letter, asking him to visit Edessa. In case he would refuse, they are to bring Christ’s portrait to Abgar. The story continues in the same vein as all the other Armenian accounts, with the messengers’ arrival in Jerusalem on the day of Christ’s entrance, their presentation to Christ, meeting him in the house of the Jewish high priest, and the answer of Christ, written by Thomas Apostle. The attempt of the painter to represent the likeness of Jesus contains novel elements:

When the painter saw that Christ did not promise to go with them, he started to paint His face, in order to bring to Abgar according to the command, [the portrait] of the young man, as the Saviour was. And [the painter] looked up to Him again, and saw a powerful aged man. And he threw away the first sketch and started to paint with fear the portrait of the old man. And he looked up again and saw a beautiful youth. Then he realized that he was unable to imprint the likeness of His face.

Christ then wiped his face on a towel, and his image appeared on it immediately, “*without any dye of human art.*”<sup>1140</sup> This Holy Towel later performed many miracles.

The account of the famous fifteenth-century religious poet, Gregor Khaletsi, seems to preserve a similar tradition in his *The Feast of the Ascension of the Mother of God and the Memory of the Image, which is on the Towel*. Khaletsi relates that when the messengers understood that Christ

did not oblige himself to go to Abgar, the painter started to paint the face of Jesus according to the command received from Abgar to paint His face, if He would not go. When [the painter] started to represent [Jesus’] young age, as He was, and looked at Him again, he saw him to be a boy of tender age. At that time he was frightened and abandoned the painting. Jesus who knew their desire, praised their faith. He took a flax towel of fitting measure... put it onto His divine Face, and immediately the Supreme Face was imprinted on it.<sup>1141</sup>

Though this second account contains mention only of the young man Jesus, and of a boy, while it omits the old man, there can be no question that it relies on the same tradition as the account of Grigor Anavarzetsi. It is equally clear that for these authors the changing appearance of Jesus no longer carried any reference to the principle of Eternal Time, nor even to the idea of God appearing to every man in a form he was best fit to see and understand. What is stressed here is the notion that icons came into being in a miraculous way – despite the OT injunction against images. The trimorphic appearance has become hardly more than a mere literary tool here, signifying that while it is impossible for humans to grasp the form of the divine, their icons are still divinely inspired. .

<sup>1140</sup> G. Bayan, ed. and trans. *La Synaxaire Arménien de Ter Israel* (Turnhout: Brepols., 1971), 391, quoted by Karaulashvili, “Abgar Legend,” 48.

<sup>1141</sup> Quoted in Karaulashvili, “Abgar Legend,” 51, no source is given.

## The Three Magi of the Orient

Another branch of the development of this motif was connected with the legends surrounding the Three Magi or Wise Men from the Orient. Attention to the existence of such a story was first paid to in connection with “popular” oral tradition in Persia, transmitted to us through Marco Polo.<sup>1142</sup>

Marco Polo, traveling through Persia in the second half of the thirteenth century, reports that three-day-journey from the town of Saba,<sup>1143</sup> from where the Three Magi of the Orient had set forth to visit the new-born Jesus, there existed a town, *Kala Ataperistan*,<sup>1144</sup> populated by what he called “fire-worshippers.” These people retained in their memory a version of the legend of the Three Magi, or Three Kings as they called them. Marco Polo tells that these Persian fire-worshippers remembered that once in the distant past three kings of the region set off on a journey to find and worship a prophet born just then in the country of the Jews. They took three kinds of gifts, gold, incense and myrrh to see which the child would choose. For the first symbolizes an earthly king, the second God, the third a man of medicine. When they reached the place where the child was born:

first the youngest of the kings went in to see him, and found the child similar to himself both in his age and looks... Then the second, middle-aged king entered, and just like the one before him, he saw the child as a man of his own age... Finally the oldest king entered, who was of an advanced age, and after the same had happened to him as to the other two, he retreated in wonder. When all three of them were together again, they told each other what they had seen, and were even more amazed. They agreed to enter together, all three of them, and when they did so, they could finally see Christ as he really was, that is a thirteen-day-old child. Then they worshiped him and gave him the gold, incense and myrrh. The child reached for the three presents at the same time.<sup>1145</sup>

This curious account of Marco Polo for a long time didn't draw much interest, apart from passing critical remarks to its “pueril” nature, while some editions and translations even omitted it for being alien to the Christian faith. The first to pay attention to this episode was Leonardo Olschki, who saw Zoroastrian influences in this story. Olschki associated the trimorphic appearance of Jesus, followed by this appearing the way he really was, with the ancient Iranian, or rather Zurvanite theory of Infinite Time, *Zurvan Akarana*, the four-faced god represented by the four figures, Ashôqar, who makes virile, Frashôqar, who makes excellent, and Zarôqar, who makes old, Zurvan

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<sup>1142</sup> Puech, “Histoire,” 131-136.

<sup>1143</sup> Identified as Savah, about fifty miles southwest of Teheran, see A. V. Williams Jackson, “The Magi in Marco Polo and the Cities in Persia from Which They came to Worship the Infant Christ,” *JAOS* 26 (1905): 80.

<sup>1144</sup> It is not certain where this castle was, although Jackson identifies it with Kashan, about three days travel from Savah in the province of Isfahan, on the way toward the province of Yazd. The Italian friar, Odoric of Pordenone, who traveled the same way about 1320, calls Kashan, or *Cassan*, “the city of the Three Kings,” and says the worshippers set out from there. Jackson, “The Magi,” 82.

<sup>1145</sup> *Marco Polo utazásai* (The travels of Marco Polo), chaps. 31-32, Hungarian tr. Endre Vajda (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 69-70. See also *The Travels of Marco Polo*, vol. 1, ch. 13, trans. Henry Yule. Online Gutenberg Project, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/10636> (last accessed 21 November 2008), p. 280.

appearing as himself.<sup>1146</sup>

It was Puech, who pointed out that (apart from such trimorphic representations of Christ in the apocryphal acts) we can clearly trace the story of the Three Magi and the polyphormic baby Jesus in earlier Christian works, both literary and visual. In the Armenian Gospel of Infancy, ch. XI, 17-21 Jesus appears to the Three Magi under three different forms. To Balthasar as the “son of an earthly king”, to Gaspar as a child in the manger, and to Melkon as “Christ sitting on a throne, God become flesh”<sup>1147</sup> We also possess some pictorial representations of the scene. The fresco of a Cappadocian Church, *Eğri Taş Kilisesi* (Church with the Crooked Stone, Ihlara Valley) dated to the seventh- ninth century, probably represents the Three Magi seeing Christ in three different forms.<sup>1148</sup> We have a more evident example in an eleventh-century Gospel manuscript (Paris, Bibl. Nat., ms. Gr. 74, fol. 167), where above the successive words παλαιός τὸν ἄμερον (the well known Old Man or Ancient of Days, of Daniel 7.9), Χριστός ἡμῶν we can see three medallions. The one in the centre is showing Jesus as an old man, the medallion on the left as a grown up, and the one on the right as very young.<sup>1149</sup>

The most interesting example yet is furnished by another eleventh-century manuscript (MS n° 14, fol. 106 from the Library of the Patriarch of Jerusalem). A miniature at the bottom of fol. 106 shows the Three Magi, representing the three ages, in the presence of the Virgin, “le plus proche se courbant sur Jésus figuré sous la forme d’un enfant nimbé, les deux autres debout et portant chacun dans ses bras un petit personnage dont le tête est de même, ceinte d’un nimbe, et le menton orné d’une barbe (noire, en un cas, blanche, dans l’autre), autrement dit: Le Christ vu et saisi sous l’apparence, ici d’un vieillard et là d’un adulte.”<sup>1150</sup> The accompanying Greek text explains that the Three Magi, after having adored him as was his due, returned to their lodgings and there they discussed the way the infant appeared to each of them. One said, “I saw him as a small child (ὄλιον),” the second said, “I saw him as a rather young man of thirty years” (νεῦρον τριακονταετῶν) and the third saw him as a white-haired old man (γῆροντα πεπαλαιωμένον).<sup>1151</sup> This eleventh-century manuscript in its turn is based on an earlier homily on the Nativity, delivered in 744 AD and attributed by the manuscript tradition to a certain John of Euboeia, or else to John of Damascus.<sup>1152</sup>

<sup>1146</sup> Leonardo Olschki, “The Wise Men of the East in Oriental Traditions,” *Semitic and Oriental Studies, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology* 11 (1951): 375-395. Quoted in Puech, “Histoire,” 132-33. Olschki may have been right, in as much as Aion, with whom the trimorphic appearance was associated, may ultimately have gone back to the theology of the Iranian Zurvan, as noted above.

<sup>1147</sup> Puech, “Histoire,” 134.

<sup>1148</sup> Puech, “Histoire,” 134.

<sup>1149</sup> Puech, “Histoire de l’Ancienne Église et Patristique,” *Annuaire de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études, cinquième section* (1967/68): 160.

<sup>1150</sup> Puech, “Histoire,” 135.

<sup>1151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1152</sup> Ibid., 136.

The authors of the Christian manuscripts, especially if their source was indeed John of Damascus, may have employed the motif of divine trimorphie with its multilayered philosophical resonance in mind. The Armenian Infancy Gospel and the Cappadocian church paintings are much more likely to derive from “popular” culture, where the three-form appearance was probably no more than just another feast of miracles performed by the new-born Christ. As for the story of the Three Wise Kings, as collected by Marco Polo somewhere in Persia, among people he termed fire-worshippers, it is a very clear indication that - just as may have happened to many other motifs of philosophical origin – divine trimorphie became incorporated into the oral tradition of non-literary classes even far away.

Thus, the story of the Three Magi and the baby Jesus is of special importance from our point of view, for two reasons. First, it is here that we can pinpoint the appearance of the trimorphic motif in “popular” culture, both in paintings and oral tradition.<sup>1153</sup> Second, we have every reason to assume that it was this legend that served as the final (presently traceable) source of the Yezidi myth on the birth of the Prophet Ismail. The three merchants or travelers, who come, one by one, to see a new-born prophet, who shows himself in different form (and age) to each of them, is clearly an echo of the Three Magi come to worship the new-born Jesus. As the story is present not only in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Armenia, but reached lands as far as the distant province of Isfahan in Persia, there is no reason to doubt that on its way eastward it may have traversed Northern Mesopotamia bordered by the mountainous region of Kurdistan. Furthermore, just as in Persia, if we are to trust Marco Polo (and why not), it was incorporated into the legends of the “fire-worshippers;” so in Muslim lands it may have been taken up by the Muslim population, and become “Islamicized.” For it is clear that the story must have reached the Yezidis through an Islamic or at least superficially Islamicized channel, since the baby Jesus’ place is taken by the baby prophet Ismail. As Yezidis have mostly had good relations with their Christian neighbours, another religious minority, and had no adverse feelings towards Christianity,<sup>1154</sup> they probably would not have had any incentive to change the figure of Christ into that of Ismail, had the legend reached them directly through Christians.

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<sup>1153</sup> This is not to say that the motif of Jesus’ trimorphic appearance, fashioned after the examples cited earlier, may not have been part of “popular” culture in the Middle Ages, especially considering the impact the apocryphal works had. However, as it is usually only the writings of the most educated classes that have reached us, such evidence is hard to come by.

<sup>1154</sup> Christ is even mentioned in the sacred *qewl* or hymn performed on the occasion of the *Sema Evarî* (“Evening Dance”), the ritual dance performed by the religious leaders of the community after nightfall, a fact Yezidis (laymen) have repeatedly and proudly drawn my attention to.

We have followed the motif of a divine power appearing successively or simultaneously as a child, youth and old man full circle, from its Hellenistic beginnings through its Late Antique and medieval career to medieval and modern Nusayrî religious literature, and contemporary Yezidi oral tradition. The story of divine trimorphy serves to demonstrate how Late Antique motifs, possibly originating in the syncretistic milieu of Hellenistic philosophy, and once widely employed but long since forgotten in Christian literature, can to this day be traced in the mythology of heterodox, and isolated, religious communities, where it is still part of a living tradition.

The ways the motif of the divine appearing in the three different aspects of the human life-cycle “survived” and became incorporated into new traditions are varied, depending on the nature of the respective religion. Ali appearing as child, young man and old man in Nusayrî literature is probably a case of “literary inheritance” by a non-Christian group (albeit one that was clearly very much influenced by heterodox Christianity.) Nusayrîs, who possess a rich religious literary tradition, preserve a version that clearly reflects the philosophical speculations connected with the trimorphic appearance, where - as the Acts of Peter say - everybody sees the divinity according to his own capacity. In the Nusayrî myth the ignorant are unable to see behind the material “disguise” of Ali, appearing as child, young man, old man, while the true gnostics, or enlightened ones, understand his divine nature, no matter what his apparent form is. The philosophical aspect of the myth is so pronounced, that it seems likely that the source of the Nusayrî myth was a written text of a theological or philosophical nature.

The case of the new born Ismael in Yezidi mythology represents the very other end of the scale – the popularization of a philosophical-theological motif in oral religious culture. Such a popularization was not rare, and this is not the only motif of philosophical origin that has found its way into “popular” culture, nor the only curious Yezidi motif that originates in Late Antique religious tradition. What makes this case special is the possibility of being able to trace the development and history of the motif at least in broad details.

## Chapter 11: Conclusion

In the five previous chapters I have shown that these “quaint” Yezidi myths and religious motifs, which were either seen as nonsensical vagaries (the creation and fall of Adam; the creation of Shehid, forefather of the Yezidi race; the three-fold manifestation of the deity in Ismail’s story), or simply failed to arouse interest because they seemed too vague and confused (the *khirqe* imagery; the call of awakening) can be traced back to the religious language of Late Antiquity. Placed in context, these elements no longer seem senseless or vague and confusing, but make up a coherent, valid system, making it obvious that Yezidi religion, just like any other, has its own inner logic which controls the content and its expression.

It has also become clear that it would be difficult to pinpoint a single source for these Late Antique motifs. Some elements, such as the divine origin of the human (Adam’s) soul, the tasting of the forbidden fruit as a part of a positive divine plan, the connection between the forbidden fruit and the digestive functions of Adam’s body, and Shehid’s creation from the lost divine *sur* of Adam as the father of a chosen people, display very strong resemblances to crucial mythological concepts in Gnosticism and Manichaeism. The various ideas concerning the “black *khirqe* of light” as the garment of God, of His angels, of Adam before the Fall, and finally of those who are redeemed or reach enlightenment may equally have been rooted in Jewish, Christian, Gnostic or Manichaean “garment imagery,” reflecting the fact that these movements shared a common cultural background and often used the same language to express ultimately different ideas. The same could be said of the trimorphic appearance of the deity, a motif which appears both in Gnostic and Christian works. The “Call of Awakening” is generally understood as the “Gnostic call,” and is widely utilized in dualistic works, though it can occasionally be found in Christian and even Hermetic literature.

How these legends were transmitted from the people of Late Antiquity to the Yezidis, who did not appear on the historical scene before the twelfth - thirteenth centuries would be hard to answer given the present level of knowledge of the religious history of the region. It is widely accepted that there existed countless connections between Jewish, Syriac Christian, Gnostic and Manichaeans legends and religious motifs, while we know very little of the way these elements were transmitted. Similarly, one can see the connection between Late Antiquity and the Yezidi belief system of today, but is at a loss when it comes to the chain of transmission. It is quite possible that already in Late Antiquity (and earlier) such legends were transmitted not only by books, but orally as well. These elements, though today not very familiar to Western educated audience, once must have formed part of “popular” mythical and religious lore deriving from the literary culture of Late Antiquity. The key may lie not with the Yezidis, but with the various, often orally transmitted, traditions of the Middle East in general.

The presence of similar elements among other people of the region indicates, as I contend at the beginning of this work, that such legends are not the exclusive inheritance of the Yezidi people, but are part of a common cultural substratum of the wider region (or at least were a part of it during the formative period of Yezidism.) The popularity of some of these elements well into the Middle Ages is shown by written documents. Other elements, while perhaps not documented in writing, can be found in the oral lore of other groups living in the Middle East today, thus indicating that they must have once enjoyed a wider currency.

- The idea that the digestive function of human stomach and intestines was a result of eating the forbidden fruit (thus, Adam had to leave Paradise in order not to dirty it) can be found not only among the Yezidis, but also among Muslims in the region. Examples have been given from Iraqi Kurdistan, Diyarbakir and Mardin in Turkey.
- Teaching that Adam, the first man, received his soul from a divine angel (an emanation of the Godhead) when this angel, or his divine essence, entered Adam's lifeless body, can also be found among the Ahl-i Haqq.
- Muslim authors like Abd al-Jabbâr and al-Biruni, as well as Nusayrî religious tracts attest to the continuing popularity of the figure of Seth in the Middle Ages. An Ahl-i Haqq myth tells how Sheyth (whom they identify with the Biblical-Quranic Seth), forefather of prophets and leaders, was created from the seminal fluid of Adam collected in a jar.
- The Call of Awakening, or Call of Life as the Mandaeans refer to it, with its condemnation of sleep as sinful, call for a spiritual awakening and promise of heavenly reward, is still an important literary motif in contemporary Mandaean religion.
- The three-fold or trimorphic appearance of a divine figure is well documented throughout the Middle Ages. It can be found in the hagiography of Abercius, in medieval Greek and Armenian manuscripts, in some Armenian versions of the Abgar legend, and finally even in Persian oral lore in the time of Marco Polo. It can also be found in the mythology of the Nusayrîs.
- The garment of Light, which was probably the archetype for the Yezidi *khirqe*, can be found both in Nusayrî and Mandaean religious literature. For Mandeans it is both a baptismal and eschatological garment put on when the soul returns to the spiritual realm, while for Nusayrîs it is the garment the soul wore before its fall, and will put on again upon its ascension back to the light world. The garment of Light also played an important part in Syriac "garment theology," and it often appeared in the literary works of ecclesiastic authors of long lasting influence such as Ephrem and others. Thus, it may be safely assumed that Syriac-speaking Christianity was familiar with at least some of this garment imagery even when the days of a vibrant cultural life were long gone and, where the garment of Light is

concerned, it may have played a significant role in the transmission of ideas.<sup>1155</sup>

If we consider how very little is known about the mythology of most heterodox groups, and about the “popular” legends and beliefs of Christians and Muslims in the region, it must be concluded that even these few examples of shared Late Antique motifs (not taken directly from the Bible or the Quran) are very significant. They allow us to speculate on a common cultural substratum which retained many oral elements that have disappeared from written religious culture. It is not unreasonable to conclude that were the volume of knowledge on these groups less meager, it would be possible to pinpoint many more motifs of Late Antique origin, linking these groups together as the inheritors of an earlier oral tradition which was greatly influenced by the religious literature of Late Antiquity.

While I was working on this study, many have asked why it were these elements in particular which came to be incorporated into Yezidi religion. The question of “why” can never really be answered. However the formulation of some careful hypotheses may be attempted. Certainly, there must have been a number of different motivations at play:

Some motifs, like Adam’s transgression of God’s will which serves to fulfill a divine plan, simply fits into the religious ethos of the Yezidis, one that does not accept the existence of an evil being (Devil, Satan), but sees everything as originating from one principle, God. The “original” interpretation of this event would not have been easily compatible with the extremely strong monotheistic views of the Yezidis, which denies the existence of an evil power acting in opposition to God. The Gnostic version may simply have just made more sense to the Yezidis (or proto-Yezidis) than the orthodox Muslim one.

In the case of other motifs it is probably not Yezidi religion itself one has to keep in mind, rather the religious ideas professed by the population of the region in general. Thus, the popularity of Seth helps explain why and how this myth was incorporated into Yezidi mythology. The adoption of the myth of Seth, probably widely known in different variants throughout the region, as a Yezidi origin myth, can be said to have several important purposes, though of course these cannot very well be detached from each other: First, we have the origin myth per se, explaining the origins of the Yezidis, and attributing them a separate origin from the rest of mankind, which makes them the “chosen people” of God (or rather of the Peacock Angel). This would satisfy the internal needs

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<sup>1155</sup> Unfortunately, I have no idea how well-known the different motifs of the garment theology were to medieval and modern Nestorians, Jacobites and Catholic Chaldaeans of Kurdistan. The sad fact is that while scholarly works on Late Antique and early medieval Syriac literature abound, contemporary Syriac-speaking Christianity (or that of the past few centuries) does not seem to attract the attention of Syriac scholars. Some nineteenth-century travelers mention that they found the Nestorians rather uneducated, while the Chaldaean clergy displayed a better knowledge of the Syriac (Aramaic) language and literature. However, this is of little help. As researching these Aramaic-speaking communities, their religious language and religion in general is not the field of the author of this thesis, the unfortunate lack of such academic works makes it impossible to ascertain how common the use of images taken from a garment theology, once so “popular” in the region, is in contemporary Christian communities of the Kurdish region.

of the group to feel “different,” “special.”<sup>1156</sup> Second, such an origin myth would also serve to explain and reinforce the practice of endogamy, an essential feature of Yezidi religion (which itself is a protective measure against assimilation, at least today.)<sup>1157</sup>

Finally, from the external point of view, we may assume – at least at the time of the myth’s adoption by the group – that this myth was meant to successfully ensure group prestige through association with this important figure in the eyes of the environment. Descent plays, and has always played, an important role in the Middle East, defining personal status and standing in the community.<sup>1158</sup> Let us think of the Sufi *silsilas*, the chain of tradition, where the validity of the whole path and its teachings depended on the – often semi-mythical - founding figure, or the more recent examples of Christians claiming to be Assyrians, or Kurds insisting on their direct descent from the Medes. It is in such an environment that the importance of this myth has to be evaluated. It may be assumed that when it came to be adopted by the ancestors of the Yezidis, the myth of Seth and his race was still, more or less, known in some form(s) to many people in the region. Thus, claiming descent from Seth, or rather a later avatar of his legend, was a bid at prestigious origins that could be easily interpreted by the other groups as well.

The need to acquire prestige, not directly, but in the sense that it provided Yezidis (or proto-Yezidis) with today’s equivalent of “modern scientific religion” may account for the incorporation of many of the other elements. It was seen in the chapter concerning the changes in oral tradition that Yezidis today try to adapt their religion and religious language to what they see as the demands of the modern world, lest they be looked down upon as a “backward religion” of simple, rural people. This leads not only to efforts to form a canon of sacred texts and forge a coherent theology, but also to the adoption of motifs taken from contemporary natural and social sciences (that is, history writing). Thus, Yezidis with some school education will insist that the sacred texts contain references to the ice age, atoms, heliocentric world view, black hole and so on. At the same time, Assyrians, Sumerians, Zoroastrians, etc., that is, nations who “made history” are being incorporated into the retelling of Yezidi myth (“oral historiography”), not only in order to gain direct prestige, but also so that they find the place of Yezidis in history as presented by “mainstream” history writing.

Sometimes the simple motivation of “doing as the other does” may be enough. I have just recently heard of a *qewwal* singing Quranic songs at the one year commemoration of a death by the

<sup>1156</sup> As Jasim Murad, himself a Yezidi, writes of this myth, “This unique birth gives the Yazidis the feeling of self assurance and contentment that they receive the utmost attention of the divine forces.” “Sacred Poems,” 307.

<sup>1157</sup> Of course, given the lack of evidence, it is impossible to tell when Yezidis started to practice endogamy. Presumably this practice could not have arisen before the rupture with Islam became clear and widely felt.

<sup>1158</sup> Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 36, 41.

grave of the deceased.<sup>1159</sup> Despite the strong aversion of Yezidis to Muslims and Islam, he felt tempted to learn and repeat the words of the other (more popular, literate and powerful) religion.

This striving to “measure up to contemporary standards” and to incorporate anything that may seem of value among neighboring communities makes it easier to understand why Yezidis adopted some other motifs which do not seem to carry such important messages as Adam’s Fall, or Shehid’s miraculous creation. As has been seen these motifs were deeply imbedded within the religious culture, “dribbling” down from literary culture into oral circles. *Mutatis mutandis*, they belonged to the “scientific language” or at least the “educated language” of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, which people tried to emulate, or at least build into their own system.

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This study does not pretend to be the last word on Late Antique motifs, Gnostic or otherwise, in Yezidism. Rather it hopes to be the first of its kind, opening the way to further research. Clearly, there is a lot more to be done in this field, especially as regards the possible influence of Gnosticism and Manichaeism. During the course of my research, a number of motifs I suspected as being of possible Late Antique origin had to be put aside due to a lack of sufficient corroborating data.<sup>1160</sup> As scholarly research (hopefully) gathers more information on the various religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East and their oral traditions, new details may appear that would make finding further connections and refining the ones treated by this work possible.

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<sup>1159</sup> After a three day *tazi* or mourning period, Yezidis will hold another *tazi* after forty days and one year. This custom is also known among Muslims.

<sup>1160</sup> The most intriguing of such motifs, which was not analyzed in this study, is the repeated incarnation of the *sur* in the persons of the Yezidi *khas*. The cyclical incarnation of divine beings (from the World of Light) as prophets, or rather as “emissaries of light” was an important concept both to the Gnostics and the Manichaeans. This idea of the successive manifestation of the deity in human form is also present among the Ahl-i Haqq, the Nusayrîs, the Alevis, as well as in medieval Ismaili theology, where researchers often suggest a strong Gnostic influence. It would indeed be tempting to call this a Gnostic/Manichaean motif, however, it cannot be ruled out that it may have been an independent development. Unlike concrete myths and literary motifs, such a “theological” concept could have arisen autonomously, leading to religious features that resemble Gnostic ideas. The fact that the idea of the “manifestation of divine essence” is widespread among religious movements with an Iranian background implies that this may be an autochthonous feature, which drew its inspiration, at least partially, from old Iranian beliefs. Equally, the two different traditions may have merged and reinforced each other in producing new religious forms. Certainly, this is a topic which would need a lot more research than has so far been allocated to it.

## Epilogue: Late Antique Motifs and Modern Yezidism

The fast-paced changes taking place in Yezidi religious tradition under the influence of a new-found literacy and growing contacts with the outside world have not failed to affect the position of Late Antique motifs. Just as once they were adopted because they served some purpose, so today they are being discarded or rewritten and reinterpreted for having become spurious or even embarrassing. The way they are treated by a new generation of Yezidis speaks volumes about Yezidi religion and the way it is changing.

Myths of a presumably Gnostic/Manichaean origin are a primary target of the “modernizers,” destined to be weeded out. The religious views reflected in such myths are incompatible with the teachings of the majority religions, be it Islam or Christianity, and consequently with what is perceived as “modern” thinking.

Such is the fate of the myth on the origin of Adam’s soul, which relates how Angel Sheikh Sin (or his *sur*) was enclosed in the lifeless body of Adam. As has been mentioned, this myth is amazingly evocative of the Gnostic teaching which claims that the human soul is a particle of the Divine Light imprisoned in the body, but it is hardly compatible with either Christian or Islamic teachings. It is hardly surprising therefore that many Yezidis display an ambivalent attitude toward this myth. Arab Khidir, for example, roundly denied this version or even being familiar with it. He quoted the “story of Adam’s soul” as known from the hymns,<sup>1161</sup> how it refused to enter Adam’s body until the sacred musical instruments, the *def* and *şibab* came down from the sky to accompany him, and claimed that the human soul, created by God, was clearly different from the souls of the angels (which are divine) “The soul came into the body. The soul is from the power of God, [but] it is not an angel, it is not *sur*. It is human.” It is feasible, of course, that the version of the *sur* giving life to Adam, related only in the myth, but not in the hymns, was unknown to him, but later - talking of another topic – he referred to the *sur* of Adam in passing.

Sheikh Deshti also declared that Adam was a human, and the father of humans, and his soul was a human soul. Human souls and angelic souls are different. Later on, however, when he recounted the myth of Shehid bin Jer, he said “Adam had *sur* in his forehead, like some divine power, I mean after the fashion of angels, I mean, he wasn’t a human,”<sup>1162</sup> though he did not elaborate how the angelic *sur* got there.

The myth of Shehid bin Jer as the forefather of the Yezidis, created in a supernatural way, proved even more sensitive. This myth presumably posed some difficulties even before the advent

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<sup>1161</sup> He shared the view that only material in the *qewls* or hymns can be considered genuine Yezidi teaching.

<sup>1162</sup> See “Transcript of Interviews” in the Appendix.

of modern education. While the variant of seed of Adam was simple enough to be understood by people, the variant of the *sur*, the divine essence, must have caused plenty of bewilderment among those less well versed in Yezidi religious lore (the majority, that is,) as the concept of *sur* would not have been easy to grasp without some familiarity with religious symbolism.

No wonder that in a number of versions the place of the elusive *sur* is taken by other “props.” One of Jasim Murad’s informants spoke about a pearl in Adam’s forehead, without explaining what it was.”<sup>1163</sup> Two other informants claimed it was the sweat from the forehead of Adam and Eve which was put in jar.<sup>1164</sup> Empson<sup>1165</sup> also mentions jars filled by Angel Gabriel with blood from the forehead of Adam and Eve.

Today, it is no longer the concept of the *sur* that creates confusion in the minds, but rather the concept that Yezidis have an “unnatural” descent, different from the rest of mankind. When I wanted to hear the myth of Shehid bin Jer, many informants hastened to assure me that they believed that all mankind had the same origin, that is, they all came from Adam and Eve,<sup>1166</sup> and though – at my insistence - they finally repeated the Yezidi myth, they stressed that this was just “some old-fashioned tale” and “now we know better.” Arab Khidir was even more adamant in denying the validity of this myth. When asked, he claimed that Shehid was no other than Adam, who was made from water, earth, air and fire according to Yezidi mythology. As Arab Khidir said, water and earth yield clay, which then is put out to dry in the air, and is finally fired. The result is a jar. Thus the epithet, “Witness of the Jar” simply referred to Adam being created from the same four elements as a jar. However, during a later session my informant referred to the unique origin of the Yezidis in passing: “Adam had *sur* in his forehead, this reached Shit (Shehid), this light reached his (Shehid’s) children.” And then he added “Shehid married a *hour*, the Yezidi nation was born from them.” Clearly then, Arab Khidir was familiar with the myth of the *sur* functioning as the soul of Adam, and of Shehid bin Jer and ultimately the Yezidi nation being created from this *sur*. However, he did not seem to think that such a myth fit into the framework of religion that was based on scientific facts as he tended, or wished to see, in Yezidism. His explanation of the jar was probably nothing more than a piece of modern exegesis which tried to resolve this “embarrassing” myth in a “rational” manner.

As I have said, one of the motivations for incorporating the myth of Seth, born of another seed and the forefather of a special race, was to give Yezidis a prestigious origin, one that could be understood and appreciated by the people of a given cultural milieu. This is no longer the case. For

<sup>1163</sup> Jasim Murad, “Sacred Poems,” 290.

<sup>1164</sup> Ibid., 294, 296.

<sup>1165</sup> Empson, *Cult of the Peacock Angel*, 47

<sup>1166</sup> Interestingly, I have never so far heard the myth of Shehid’s creation repudiated in favor of Darwinism, though this may simply be a question of time.

many Yezidis today, any myth about children springing out of jars, born either of Adam's seed or some divine essence, far from conferring prestige, is more likely to be a source of embarrassment, a "childish tale" as has been put forward by some researchers. They feel such stories make Yezidis seem to be professing outlandish, unscientific ideas.

However, Yezidi religion is still essentially an oral one, governed by the same mechanism (for the moment) as in the past. The content may change, but the motivations are often similar. Yezidis still wish for origins that would confer prestige on them as a group. Consequently, the place of the myth of Shehid, or Seth, if one prefers, is "usurped" by new "origin myths" more in keeping with the spirit of the times. Today, when asked about their origins, few of the younger Yezidis would mention Shehid (unless specifically asked). Instead they refer to Zoroastrian, Sumerian or Assyrian origins. To support such theories, stories are told about Assyrian pictograms hidden under the plaster on the walls of Lalish, or about the Assyrian rock carvings in the hillside above Duhok representing the seven Angels. Others claim that the Sumerian cuneiform texts mention the word "ezid," meaning "pure souls," "who go on the right path," referring to the Yezidis as the fountainhead of Sumerian religion. These stories, amusing as they may sometimes sound to an outsider, are in fact new origin myths that are meant to play the same function as the myth of Seth centuries ago: confer a prestigious origin on Yezidis using a language and symbolism that can also be interpreted and appreciated by outsiders.

Other motifs, such as the symbolism of the *khirqe*, the call of awakening, or the three-fold appearance are harder to evaluate when it comes to the question of change in Yezidi tradition. Unlike the myth of Adam and Shehid, which are (or were) cardinal points of Yezidi religious consciousness, serving as a basis for communal identity and helping them orient themselves in the (sacred) past, these other motifs were of little interest for most Yezidis. The trimorphic appearance of Ismail may have been told during "sermons," but is not too likely to have exercised people's imagination any more than miracles in folktales. The *Song of the Commoner* is sung exclusively by men of religion and is of little concern to anybody else.<sup>1167</sup> The *khirqe*, as the shirt of the *feqirs* is still much respected (as is the *khirqe* of Sheikh Adi kept in Lalish), but its symbolism, hidden in the disjointed stanzas of numerous hymns and the myth of Adam, is far too complicated and nuanced to be familiar to most people. Consequently they attract little attention on the part of people who would like mold Yezidism into a religion of the book, and little can be said about how the changes are affecting these elements of traditional Yezidis religion.

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<sup>1167</sup> I am not even sure if it is actually sung every morning, or just on special occasions. Of course, ideally it should be sung every morning, and heard and heeded by the whole community, but no traveler has reported such a wake up call during his/her travels. When I heard it in Lalish I was the only one in the sleeping quarters of the princely family to get up to listen to it, and the attendants of the Sanctuary seemed to have serious difficulties in shaking awake people sleeping in the courtyard before the door of the Sanctuary.

Of all these elements the *khirqe* alone seems to have found at least a small niche for itself in this emerging religion of the book. As the clothing of God mentioned in the hymns, it is said to represent the darkness of cosmos before creation. This may be seen as a part of the effort attempting to give Yezidism a modern scientific aspect and shape it according to the criteria of scientific thinking. Furthermore, for many Yezidis emphasizing the deep moral aspect of Yezidi religion<sup>1168</sup> is almost as important as talking about the scientific side. Consequently, the *khirqe*, in its role as the symbol of moral living, of “walking the road of God,” may still prove to be an important motif in future Yezidi religion.

More than this cannot be said at the moment. Yezidi publications on Yezidi religion are more concerned with their putative roots and the ancient nature of their faith, topics where the *khirqe* does not at present figure much. (This would change of course, if the *khirqe* were proven to link Yezidis to some famous people in the past.) Most people who read such publications, or hear about their contents, would know (or care) little more about the *khirqe* other than the fact that it is worn by the *feqirs* and possibly that it was once the clothing of God.

Researchers should not be discouraged, however. The canonization of Yezidism is only just beginning. It is likely that once the collection and publishing of the texts is finished, and Yezidi intellectuals manage to draw up the outlines of a fixed doctrinal system, we will learn the fate of these elements, whether they will be relegated to oblivion as quaint and useless motifs, or will be filled with novel meaning and given a place within this new form of Yezidism.

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<sup>1168</sup> I recall a long conversation that I had with a young Yezidi man from the Sheikhan region. He was dressed in traditional garbs and was said to be very religious and an “expert” in matters of religion. His conversation focused mainly on the moral aspects of Yezidism, much to the detriment of the mythological detail.

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## Abbreviations

*AJSLL - The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*

*CSCO – Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*

*BSOAS – Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*

*GCS – Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*

*JA – Journal Asiatique*

*JAOS – Journal of American Oriental Society*

*JRAS – Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*

*NHS – Nag Hammadi Studies*  
*NHMS – Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*

*PG – Patrologia Graeca. Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca.* Ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857-. Facsimile reprint, Turnhout: Brepols, 1956-

*PL – Patrologia Latina. Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina.* Ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1844-. Facsimile reprint, Turnhout: Brepols, 1956-

*RMM – Revue du Monde Musulman*

*RSO – Rivista degli Studi Orientali*

*SC – Sources Chrétiennes*

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## Appendix I: Transcript of Recordings of the Myth of Adam and the Myth of Shehid bin Jer<sup>1169</sup>

### The Myth of Adam and Shehid bin Jer according to Feqir Haji

Below are two versions of the myth of Adam and Shehid bin Jer that Feqir Haji of Baadra recounted on two different occasions.<sup>1170</sup> His way of telling the myth exemplifies very well the way myths are recounted in oral tradition. It is clear that each recounting is different, even though the storyline, that is the main message of the myth, remains the same, with many formulas repeated. The manner of recounting seems to presuppose a certain familiarity with the myth. Its “staccato” telling, the lack of linearity, and casual references to events and “protagonists” make it very hard to understand for an outsider listening for the first time. Another feature, peculiar to Yezidi oral tradition, is the mixture of *qewls*, or hymn, with free prose, to the extent, that I was often unable to determine which was which.<sup>1171</sup>

The spelling of the transcriptions posed a serious problem. Standard literary Kurdish is just emerging, and books published in the Latin alphabet show some variations even in Turkey. The dialect spoken in Iraq, Badhini, differs from the dialects spoken, or written, in Turkey. Though mutually understandable, there are some considerable differences not only in vocabulary and grammar, but even in the way the same words are pronounced. Then again, Yezidis in the Sheikhan district speak a Kurdish that is easily distinguishable from its Muslim Badhini counterpart. Some say that it is nearer to the Kurdish spoken in Turkey (many of the Yezidis presently living in Iraq retain orally transmitted memory of having migrated from Turkey in the previous centuries, due to religious persecution.) As Feqir Haji, as well as my other interviewees, spoke local dialects of Yezidi Kurdish,<sup>1172</sup> I finally decided to try and transcribe their Kurdish as I hear it, and not

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<sup>1169</sup> The Appendix contains different versions of the Adam and Shehid myth which have not formerly been published in Western scholarship. These myths form the basis of the chapters on Adam’s creation and the origin myth of the Yezidis.

<sup>1170</sup> He gave me two sort summaries of the myth subsequently, when he was talking of other matters, but as these contained no extra information, I will refrain from giving their transcript and translation here.

<sup>1171</sup> I would like to express my thanks here to Loqman Turgut, a fellow PhD student at the Georg-August University of Göttingen, for helping me painstakingly translate some of the first interview I made with Feqir Haji in Lalish. Working together with him also helped me appreciate how difficult it is for non-Yezidi Kurds to understand the peculiar language of Yezidi sacred texts. Undoubtedly such linguistic difficulties may add to the deep social divide existing between the two communities.

<sup>1172</sup> This dialect was more pronounced in the case of Feqir Haji, who was of an advanced age. Others, who were younger, and probably enjoyed some formal education, tended to approximate the Kurdish spoken in Duhok much more, though far from completely.

according to the rules and spelling taught in Kurdish grammar books. Transcription by a native speaker from the region, preferably a Yezidi, would probably yield much more faithful results, but unfortunately this was not viable.

**Note:** Texts in italics are quotations from sacred hymns. The translations of these, unless otherwise stated, are quoted on the basis of Kreyenbroek's translations.

## Feqir Haji (Lalish, Festival of Sheikh Adi, 2002)

This interview was my first interview with Feqir Haji, one of the best experts of Yezidi oral lore. It was made at the Sheikh Adi Festival, which takes place in every October in the holy valley of Lalish. The festival lasts a whole week, with various rituals taking place during this period. As this is both the most important religious and social event of the year, when the members of widely dispersed community can meet each other,<sup>1173</sup> thousand of Yezidi pilgrims congregate in the tiny valley of Lalish, crowding every spot. Consequently there was a considerable background noise (people, loudspeakers) which make the recording hard to understand. To this one must add that Feqir Haji is often hard to understand due to his age, the difference in dialect, and his tendency to speak rather fast.

At the time of making this recording, as my Kurdish was still poor, I was helped by Segvan Murad, a young Yezidi who majored in English and was working on Yezidi publications at the Lalish Center in Duhok. As it later turned out, once my Kurdish improved, his translation was occasionally incorrect (he was probably confused by being familiar with a different version of the myth), which<sup>1174</sup> led to misunderstandings on my part. I endeavored clearing up the confusing parts with repeated questions on the same motif, hence the occasionally repetitive nature of this interview.

In the transcription and translation of this recording I was helped by Loqman Turgut, then a PhD student at the University of Göttingen, whose help I would like to thank here. Unfortunately some parts of the interview proved unintelligible even to Loqman, but despite some resulting lacuna, most of Feqir Haji's account is clear.

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<sup>1173</sup> This was even more so between 1992 and 2003, when an internal border existed between the Kurdish Autonomy and the rest of Iraq. Those living under Saddam's rule could not legally enter the Kurdish territories, and many of those in the Kurdish Autonomy would have taken great risks to go to Iraq. The Festival of Sheikh Adi was practically the only occasion when families and friends separated by the border could see each other.

<sup>1174</sup> Namely substituting "sweat" to "*suw*" or "mystery", "divine essence" mentioned by Feqir Haji.

Tawusî Melek xweş delîl e  
 Rawesta bû di Qendîl de,  
**Ji berê**<sup>1175</sup> Adam û çendi bedîl e.  
 Ewî heyvî da Adam û Nuh, Ibrahim Xelile.  
 Melek Faxradin delîlekê erife,  
 Ê durra birca sedefe.  
 Min b xwe li meyzand ki bêye ki elefe.  
 Melek Fexredin delîlekê çê ye  
 Rêberê çendi rêye û zer Hasan j hez(i)nê ye.<sup>1176</sup>  
 Hasan ji hez(i)nê<sup>1177</sup> ye, ji fasala durrê

Ji berê nêr û mê ye, Hasan ji hisnê<sup>1178</sup> peyda bû  
 Ê nûra wî li Qandilê rawesta bû  
 Hesn muhabetê Hasan şax (**Hesensay?**) bû  
**Şaybûbê** (Şaxbûbê?) muhabetê<sup>1179</sup>

Li **El** ezmana kire şexê sunnetê

Erd da, quwet da nebîyê Ometê.<sup>1180</sup>

Tawusi Melek is a dear guide,  
 He was staying in the Qendil  
 Before Adam he switched places,<sup>1181</sup>  
 He gave hope to Adam, Noah, and Ibrahim  
 Khalil.<sup>1182</sup>

Angel Fahradin is a knowing guide,  
 The Pearl is a mother-of-pearl fortress,  
 I looked around who is bet who is aleph,  
 Angel Fahradin is a good guide,  
 The guide of so many roads, and golden  
 Hasan<sup>1183</sup> is from the Treasury of God<sup>1184</sup>  
 Hasan is from the Treasury of God, from the  
 model of the Pearl.  
 He existed before male and female, Hasan came  
 into existence from the Goodness of God.<sup>1185</sup>  
 And his light was staying in the Qendil,  
 Hesn was the love a branch of love from Hasan  
 (?)

A branch of love (?)

In the sky he was made the sheikh of  
 Tradition.<sup>1186</sup>

He gave the earth, he gave power to the prophet  
 of the Ummah.<sup>1187</sup>

<sup>1175</sup> The Badhini English dictionary lists “*jiber*” as “because of” and “*ji berê*” as “before.”

<sup>1176</sup> Loqman Turgut understood “*hezîrê ye*” (thought).

<sup>1177</sup> Or “*hezîrê ye*.”

<sup>1178</sup> Loqman Turgut understood “*ji hisnê ye*”. Hisn is Arabic for goodness. The word appears in Yezidi texts, but *xeznê* or *hezînê*, for treasury (the throne) of God, which I hear, is equally possible.

<sup>1179</sup> The version of *Zebûnî Meksûr* 6 transcribed by Kreyenbroek (*Yezidism*, 170) writes “*şaxa mehbê*” meaning “branch of love,” which appears as an expression of his creative divine power.

<sup>1180</sup> The text up to this point gives the impression of being quoted from a hymn, though I couldn’t find anything similar in the published texts. The quotation was very fast-paced, and the words were often hard to understand or to translate. Despite our efforts the translation given on the other side may be incorrect in some places

<sup>1181</sup> I couldn’t interpret this sentence.

<sup>1182</sup> That is, Abraham.

<sup>1183</sup> Sheikh Sin.

<sup>1184</sup> Or: from the Thought of God.

<sup>1185</sup> From the Treasury of God. Perhaps the reference to the *Qendîl* (Lamp of God) in the next sentence makes Treasury of God more likely. *Qendîl* is considered the light and throne of God, as well as the place where the soul of the *khas*, or incarnated angels stay and sometimes descend from. Sheikh Deshti, a *mijewir* in Khanke, actually called the *Qendîl* “the treasury of souls” (*xazîna ruhêd*) for special souls.

<sup>1186</sup> Sunnet, the Kurdish for Sunnah, or Tradition. The Muslim expression signifies established custom, precedent, conduct and cumulative tradition, typically based on Muhammad’s example.

<sup>1187</sup> Islamic expression for the community of believers. The *qewl* like recitation seems to end at this point, to be followed by prose.

Nebîyê Ometê ki?<sup>1188</sup> Adam e,  
ew sure ji ezmana ya Melek Sheikh Sin hate  
enîya Adamêda.  
Here, di çi dbêjit, qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr dbêjit:

*Adam Peygamber ji wê kasê vedixware  
Quwet û kerameta wê kasê hate diyare  
Lew Adam pêygember pêngijî pê dibû şiyare*<sup>1189</sup>

*Adam pêygember ji wê kasê vexwar û vedijiya  
Mestbû, hejîya,  
goşt lê huriya, xwîn tê gerriya*<sup>1190</sup>

*Adam pêygember ji wê kasê vexwar, û lê xweş  
tê  
Quwet u kerameta wê kasê hat û geheştê  
Lewma Adam Peygamber heldidi û bire  
behiştê.*<sup>1191</sup>

Belê, ew sur... li enîya Adamê de, xerqe ber  
Adam kir, ew xerqe lipsê Adam bû, ber kir.  
Boçî? Hingi gote milyaketa şexê sunnetê, gote  
“hun dê xerqêyê li ber min ken.” Gotin, “emê  
berken.” “Dê Tawsî Melek bite delîl, dê min  
bibite beheştê.” Gote, “belê, te bite beheştê, û  
bite delîlê te li behiştê.” ...

Who is the prophet of the Ummah? Adam. This  
*sur*, the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin came from the  
sky into the forehead of Adam. What does the  
hymn of the *Zebûnî Meksûr* say:

The prophet Adam drank from that cup,  
The miraculous power of that cup manifested  
itself:  
Thus the Prophet Adam sneezed and through it  
he became conscious.<sup>1192</sup>

He Prophet Adam drank from that cup and  
came to life,  
He became intoxicated and trembled,  
Flesh grew on him, blood circulated in his  
veins.<sup>1193</sup>

The Prophet Adam drank from that cup and  
liked it.  
The miraculous power of that cup came and  
reached him:  
Thus the Prophet Adam was taken up and born  
to heaven [Paradise].<sup>1194</sup>

Yes, that *sur*... (was put) in the forehead of  
Adam, *khirqe* was put on Adam, this *khirqe*  
was the cloth of Adam, he put it on. Why? The  
sheikh of Tradition said to the angels “You will  
put the *khirqe* on me!” They said “We will.”  
“Tawusi Melek will be (my) guide, will take  
me to Paradise!” They said “Yes, he will take  
you to Paradise, and will be your guide in  
Paradise.”...

<sup>1188</sup> This is where the explanation in prose seems to start.

<sup>1189</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 36, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 176.

<sup>1190</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 35, *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>1191</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 37, *Ibid.* For these three stanzas  
compare also the version of *Zebûnî Meksûr* 44-5, 47  
published by Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 63. The  
three versions closely resemble each other, but there are  
some slight differences in the wording, and more  
importantly, the sequence of the individual stanzas differs  
in all three.

<sup>1192</sup> Tran. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 177.

<sup>1193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1194</sup> *Ibid.* Translating *behişt* as Paradise would perhaps be  
more appropriate.

“Erda Xwedê” gote “dayne min.” Gote “deynim”

Hingi ew sur îna, li enîya Adamê kir. Wexte ma, sed sale, ew sure, d enîya Adamê de li behîştê. Êre dibêjit “ya Tawsî Melek, wexte Adam li beheştê digera, u heke mabu ismê te heba... ew çênabit.”

Sed salê wî tamam bû, bi quweta Rabul Alemî gote Tawusi Melek “here, wî j behîştê derêxe” Wexte ji behîştê derexist, xirqê ji ber îna derê, u sur ji enîyê îna derê. Pişti sur ji enîyê îna derê.

Hawa ji taništa wî xolokand. He. Hawa ji taništa wî xolokand. Hawa lê mer (mêr) kir, Cibraîl lê mar kir. Ji Adam u Hawa çêbûn Habil û Qabil. Habil Qabil kuşt, Habil mir. Piştê wî ji Hawa û Adam çêbûn heftî û dû kur, û heftî û dû kiç, çêbûn, û lê bocivandin.

Şehîd ji kederê çêbû? Ew surek cerekî kir, Şehîdî bin Cer, xelk dbêje Şehîdî bin Cer. (Segvan: çi cerekî kiri?)  
Sur. Ji enîya Adam îna derê.

“The earth of God” he said “give to me.” They said “we will give you.”

Then he brought the *sur*, put it in the forehead of Adam. Then it stayed, a hundred years, this *sur*, in the forehead of Adam in the Paradise. Then he said<sup>1195</sup> “listen Tawusi Melek, as long as Adam walks about in Paradise, and if he stays there, your name will have... this cannot be.”<sup>1196</sup>

His hundred years was over, God in his power said to Tawusi Melek “go, throw him out of Paradise.”

When he (TM) threw him (Adam) out of Paradise, he took away the *khirqe*, and took out the *sur* from his forehead. After that he took out the *sur* from his forehead.

He created Eve from his rib. He. Created Eve from his rib. He married Eve to Adam, Jibrail married him.<sup>1197</sup> From Adam and Eve were born Abel and Cain.<sup>1198</sup> Abel was killed by Cain, Abel died. After that from Adam and Eve were born seventy-two girls and seventy-two boys, and they came together.<sup>1199</sup>

Where did Shehid come from? He (TM) put the *sur* in a jar. Shehid bin Jer,<sup>1200</sup> people say Shehid bin Jer.

(Segvan: what did he put in a jar?)

The *sur*. He took it out form Adam’s forehead.

<sup>1195</sup> The subject is probably God.

<sup>1196</sup> The text here is unintelligible, but probably refers to the idea that if Adam stays in Paradise, there will not be man kind, neither will he Peacock Angel have its own nation to remember his name.

<sup>1197</sup> Note how the role of the Peacock Angel merges into that of Jibrail (Gabriel.)

<sup>1198</sup> Abel and Cain are Habil and Qabil in Islamic tradition.

<sup>1199</sup> Literally “assembled,” here it probably means “married each other.”

<sup>1200</sup> Witness of the Jar. Kurdish *cer* (pron. “jer”) is jar in English.

Cerekî kir, wexte cerekî kir.

(Segvan: yê Adamê b têne?)

Adamê b têne. Hawa na bû, heta, Hawa, heta îna dere, paşî j tanistê xolokand. Hawa hingi nabû.

Sur cerekî kirin<sup>1201</sup>. Ê ew sure wî, heta, heta, ew jî gehiştê me. Li Mosul heqe yekî xeletî bêjit, ya pîremir gotê “were, **pilatek ser jerra**”

Ew surek cerekî kir û jê çêbû Şehîd, Şehîd Pêygember. Nuhu wî milletê me, wî milletê çu pêygember nine ji Şehîd zêdetir. Em Şehîd dnasin bas. Em her milletê Tawsî Melekî, û milletê surê in. Em dzanin, na milletekê cahil bûn hetaneki pêygember bêêt, berê me bidite Xwedê, me fehminit. Em berê pêygember atfahmin, em dzanin.

Şehîd Pêygember çêbû, Lêyle bo Şehîd ji cennetê îna. Navê jinkê Leyle bû, kişka cennetê, navê kişkê Leyle bû, ji cennetê ji bo ra îna, Şehîd mer kir. Cibraîl, e? Şehîd mer kir, jê çêbûn Haşim û Qureş.

Jê çêbûn Haşim û Qureş. **Vê dbêjit Qureşiam navê Sultanî têt bawerî imana.**

Em, waxtekî em Qureşî bûn. Em ji Şehîd û Leyle çêbûn, û bûne Qureşî. Berê ew sura sunnetê, wexte berê Qureşî, sur l enîya...

He put it in a jar. Then he put it in jar.

(Segvan: Only that of Adam?)

Only that of Adam. Eve did not exist yet. Eve, first he brought it (the *sur*?) out, after that he created Eve from the rib. Eve did not exist yet.

He put the *sur* in a jar. And this *sur* of his, this has even reached us. In Mosul, if someone says something wrong, the old men said to him “come, ??? on the jar” (???)

He put the *sur* in a jar, and from it Shehid was created. Prophet Shehid. Now we are his nation. His nation has no prophet other than Shehid. We know only Shehid. We have always been the nation of Tawusi Melek, and the nation of the *sur*. We have knowledge, we were not a nation, which was ignorant<sup>1202</sup> before a prophets came, turned us toward God, made us understand. We had understanding before the prophets, we knew.

Prophet Shehid was created, Leyla was brought from heaven for Shehid. The name of this woman was Leyla, a maid from heaven, the name of this maid was Leyla, from heaven she was brought for him. He married her to Shehid. Jibrail did, eh? He married her to Shehid, from them were born Hashim and Quresh.<sup>1203</sup>

From them were born Hashim and Quresh. They say....???

We used to be Qureshi. We came from Shehid and Leyla, and became Qureshi. First this *sur* of the Tradition, before the Qureshi, the *sur* in the forehead...

<sup>1201</sup> The reason for using the Plural of “*kir*” (put) is not clear.

<sup>1202</sup> *Jahil*, the Muslim word used to designate the spiritual ignorance Arabs lived in before Muhammad and the coming of Islam.

<sup>1203</sup> Quraysh was the tribe of Muhammad, and Hashim was his clan. Yezidi tradition seems to appropriate these famous names for themselves here.

(loudspeaker cuts Feqir Haji's voice)... sur gehište Şehîd, em hingi sunnet bûn, sunnetxane bûn, piştihingi bûne Qureşî, Qureşî... **çend bedîl hate Qureşî,**<sup>1204</sup> piştî, zaman, Cihîn, piştihingi navekî dî girt, er, bûne, er, em her Ezdaine.

Em wexte berê Qureş her Ezdai bûn.

Em sunnetxane bûn, paşi bûne Ezdai, paşi bûne Qureşî, bûne Adawi, bûne Daseni, bûne Mithain (?), bûne Babîli, bûne Aşûri, û bûne... Em Ezidi milletê Leyle û Şehîd in.

Me çu alaçaya gel Hawa û Adam nine. Min gel Adam jî çu alaça nine. Em Ezidi zurretê Leyle û Şehîd in.

(Segwan explains the story in English, first saying that Shehid was created from Adam's spirit. Then, at the question why Shehid is called bin Jer, he answers: because he put his – I don't know what is it in English – he put, err, his like water in a jar. His sweat, and from it Shehid is created.”)

(loudspeaker cuts Feqir Haji's voice)... the *sur* reached Shehid, we were the Tradition, the House of Tradition, then we became Qureshi, Qureshi... many others took the place of Qureshi (?)

after that, at one time, Jews,<sup>1205</sup> after that we took a different name, er, we were, er, we are still Ezdai. We were all Ezdai before the Quresh. We were the House of Tradition, after that we were Ezdai, after that we were Qureshi, we were Adawi,<sup>1206</sup> we became Daseni,<sup>1207</sup> became Mittani,<sup>1208</sup> became Babylonians, became Assyrians, became... We Yezidis are the nation of Layla and Shehid.

We have no connection with Eve and Adam. We have no connection with Adam. We Yezidis are the offspring of Layla and Shehid.

(Segwan explains the story in English, first saying that Shehid was created from Adam's spirit. Then, at the question why Shehid is called bin Jer, he answers: because he put his – I don't know what is it in English – he put, err, his like water in a jar. His sweat, and from it Shehid is created.”)

<sup>1204</sup> This sentence sounds as a quotation from a hymn.

<sup>1205</sup> This is surprising, as it is not very commonplace for Yezidis to claim identity with Jews in the past, unlike with other peoples and civilizations of the Middle East.

<sup>1206</sup> Followers of the Sufi order founded by Sheikh Adi.

<sup>1207</sup> The ancient name of the region around Duhok is Daseni. This was the name of the Nestorian Diocese in the area. The Yezidi tribe living in his region was also known under the name Daseni. Today many Yezidis claim that Daseni was the original name of all Yezidis.

<sup>1208</sup> If *Mithain* indeed stands for Mitanni, this demonstrated that contemporary nationalist discourse on Kurdish origins (which identifies the little-known Mitannis with a Kurdish tribe) has affected even someone as traditional and far from bookish learning as Feqir Haji.

(Şehîd) Sur bû, sur bû, jî enîya Adam îna berê, û cerekî kir, û ji cerekî xolokand Şehîd. Pişti neh ma. (Cerekî kaput<sup>1209</sup> kiribû wekî zikê jinê.) Ew sure, ew sure ji ezmana hat, ew sure ji ezmana hat, keftet d enîya wî de. Na xwêdan bû, na ew bû. Ew ji ezman hat di enîya wî de.

(Segwan: It comes from heaven. Spät: Adam's sweat? Segwan: Yes, according to our mythology.)

Şehîd bin Cer. Yani bav nine, bav zêdetir... hate ji cerekî de, bê dey û bê bav. Em Ezidi hemu milletê wê surê in.

Me tedexullî Nuh nekiriye, me tedexullî ava Tofanê nekiriye, ne me tedexullî Brahim Xalîl jî kiriye.

Hemû cerekê ev milletê me yê hure. Ava Tofanê wexte rabûy em Ezidi hemû li Hindê bûn. Dinya hemû girte avê, wexte gehişte hudûdê Hindê, ew qewmê me, em hemû li Hindê bûn. Ava Tofanê ji me negirtiye. Me mişareke bi sefine jî nekeriye.

(Feqir Haji then talked about Habil and Qabil, the other children of Adam and Eve, their marriage to each other, and how the nations coming from the 144 children of Adam and Eve swore at Tawusi Melek, unlike Yezidis.)

Hemû ji Adam û Hawa çêbûne, zuretê Adam û Hawa xeletit Tawsî Melek... (*qewl*)<sup>1210</sup> Heft û dû millet ji Adam û Hawa çêbûne Tawsî Melek kufirin, em na, em

He (Shehid) was *sur, sur*, taken from the forehead of Adam, put in a jar, and from that jar Shehid was created. After nine month. (The jar was closed like the womb of a woman.) This *sur*, this *sur* came from the sky, went into his forehead. It wasn't sweat, no it wasn't. It came from the sky into his forehead.

(Segwan: It comes from heaven. Spät: Adam's sweat? Segwan: Yes, according to our mythology.)

Shehid bin Jer. Of the Jar. Yani, he has no father (?)... he came from a jar, without a mother and a father. We Yezidis are all the nation of this sur.

We did not join Noah, we did not take part in the Flood, we did not join Ibrahim Khalil.<sup>1211</sup>

All the time our nation was independent. When the Flood rose we Yezidis were all in India. The whole world was covered by water, when it reached India, our nation were all in India. The Flood did not cover us.<sup>1212</sup> We never entered the Ark.

(Feqir Haji then talked about Abel and Cain, and the other children of Adam and Eve, their marriage to each other, and how the nations coming from the 144 children of Adam and Eve swore at Tawusi Melek, unlike Yezidis.)

They all came from Adam and Eve, the children of Adam and Eve swore at Tawusi Melek... (hymn). Seventy-two nations who came from Adam and Eve swore at Tawusi Melek. We did not,

<sup>1209</sup> Kaput or kapat, from Turkish "*kapatmak*" (to close) is used in the Kurdish of the region. Interestingly enough it does not figure in Kurdish-Turkish dictionaries.

<sup>1210</sup> Here Feqir Haji quoted a hymn, which I have not yet appeared in print and I could not transcribe.

<sup>1211</sup> Rather surprising remarks, as Yezidis have a number of myth concerning the Flood, Noah and Ibrahim (Abraham.) What is more, they claim that Ibrahim was originally a Yezidi and was only later appropriated by other groups and creeds.

<sup>1212</sup> The implication is that India was spared by the Flood.

milletê Tawsî Melek in, em milletê wî ne... (*qewl*) Em milletê Tawsî Melek in, milletê wî surrê in, çu alağata me Hawa û Adam gelê nine. Em milletê Leyle û Şehîd in, Leyla deyka me ye, û Şehîd bavê me ye.

(Conversation returns to the *sur*.)

Sur ji ezmana hat, ji ezmana, sur keftet d enîyê da, semave (Ar.) hat. Semave hat. Ew sure Melek Sheikh Sin hat, sura sunnetê. Sura sunnetê hat, keftet li enîya wî de.

(Segvan: Adam diviya tiştekî çêket, ji ber hindi cerekî kir? Ji ber çi çêbû?)

Na, na Adam cerekî kir. Cibraîl. Cibraîl sur ji enîyê îna derê, cerekî kir, na Adam. Tawsî Melek îna derê ji enîyê. Adam na xweş bû, pa bû çi xeletî (?).

Tawsî Melek îna derê ji enîyê, cerekî kir, û Adam derêxist ji cennetê, kire derê. Adam ma qaqulukî xali, wekî ... beşerekî heye. Nepixî, wexte dare genimî xwar, nepixî. Gotê, derkeve, here harice. Sur, Tawsî Melek ji enîyê îna derê. Îna derê û Şehîd jê çêbû, ew surek cerekî kir, û gotê “haqê te xelas,” da qewm pê ava bit. Ma li beheştê zawac heye? Nine.

(Discussion returns to the story of the forbidden fruit. Segvan: Ew tişte Adam xwarî, ma Tawsî Melek gotê “bixwe”?)

E. Tawsî Melek gotê. Çend tamêt cennetî xwarin, wexte Rabul Alemî emir kir, dê Adam jê derexit, îna Tawsî

we are the nation of Tawusi Melek, we are his nation... (hymn) We are the nation of Tawusi Melek, the nation of that *sur*, we have no connection with Adam and Eve. We are the nation of Layla and Shehid. Layla is our mother, Shehid is our father.

(Conversation returns to the *sur*.)

The *sur* came from the sky, from the sky, the *sur* went into his forehead, it was from heaven. From heaven. Angel Sheikh Sin came, the *sur* of Tradition. The *sur* of the Tradition came, went into his forehead.

(Segvan: Did Adam have to do something, was that why he put it in a jar? What was the reason?)

No, it wasn't Adam who put it in a jar. Jibrail brought the *sur* out from his forehead, put it in a jar, not Adam. Tawusi Melek brought it out from the forehead. Adam was unhappy, he swore (?). Tawusi Melek brought it out from his forehead, put it in jar, and threw Adam out of Paradise, put him outside. Adam became like an empty snail-shell, like... a human. He inflated, when he ate the grain, inflated. He said to him, leave, go outside. Tawusi Melek took out the *sur* from his forehead. Brought it out and Shehid was born from it, he put this sur in a jar, and said to him (Adam) “your time (right) is up” so that mankind could be created. For is there marriage in heaven? There is not.

(Discussion returns to the story of the forbidden fruit. Segvan: This thing that Adam ate, did Tawusi Melek tell him “eat”?)

Yes. Tawusi Melek told him. He ate all kind of fruits of Paradise, when the Lord decreed that Adam be thrown out from there, he brought Tawusi Melek, he went...

Melek, çû ... ber xuliya (?) genimî gotê “te jî xwariye?” Gotê “na.” Gotê “bixwe!” Gotê “kafir key (?).” Gotê “sêyda min gote min ‘newxe.’”

Pa Tawsî Melek her delîlê wî bû, bas xwe ji ber çavan xeyirand. Gotê “divêt bixwey.” Gotê “delîlê min gote min ‘nexwe.’” Gotê “ez dibêjime te bixwey.” Hate ev axawî û ew axawî, Tawsî Melek avête devê û xwar. Mecbura xwar, bêxemt.

Xwar, vê neqlê zikê wî nepixî. Çênabit li behîştê pistiyatiya biket, zikê wî nepixî, îna, xerqê ji beri îna derê, sur ji enîyê îna derê...

(Segvan: Çi alaqata heye navbeyna hindê Şehîd bin Cer çêbûy û ew ji behîştê derkeftê Adam.)

Şehîd bin Cer, sureka ezmani, semavî bû. Sureka semavî bû, îna, li enîya Adam kir. Sur bû. Wê surê, karar ji wan sand milyaketa. Gotê “hun dê min bine cennetê.” Gotê “te dêbine cennetê.”

Heft sed salî qalbê Adam peygemberê çêkirî bû, na çû berê, got “ez naçime erd de, naçime ber.”

Heft sed salî ma, qalbê Adam peygemberê çêkir ji şembê hate îniyê, tu zani, şembê hat îniyê çêkir. Pişti heft sed salî ma, milyaketa wê surê gotê “tu biçî ber.” Gotê “naçime berê.”... Rabul Alemî gotê “bicî ber.” Gotê “dehêka wê erda Xwedê dene min?” Gotê “dênime te.” “Dê Tawsî Melek bo min bite imam,

to the (?) of grain, and said to him “Have you eaten of this?” “no. He said to him “eat!” Said to him “you are blaspheming.” Said to him “my teacher told me “don’t eat.” In reality it was Tawusi Melek, his guide, but he hid himself from his eyes.<sup>1213</sup> He said “you have to eat.” He said “my guide told me ‘don’t to eat.’” He said “I am telling you to eat.” He talked and the other talked, and then Tawusi Melek threw (the grain) in his mouth and he ate it. He had to eat it, it wasn’t his choice.

He ate, and at once his stomach inflated. There was no way he could do his dirty business in Paradise, his stomach inflated, his *khirqe* was taken away, the *sur* was taken out of his forehead.

(Segvan: What is the connection between the creation of Shehid and the expulsion of Adam from Paradise?)

Shehid bin Jer was a *sur* from heaven. A *sur* from heaven, it was brought, put in Adam’s forehead. He/it was *sur*. And this *sur* took a promise from those angels. He/it said “you will take me to Paradise.” They said “we will take you to Paradise.” For seven hundred years the body of Adam lay ready, it did not go inside. He/it said “I will not go on the earth, I will not go inside.”

It was seven hundred years. The body of Adam was created between Saturday and Friday, you know, between Saturday and Friday. After seven hundred years the angels said to this *sur* “you go inside.” He/it said “I will not go inside” The Lord said to him “go inside.” He/it said “will you give me a tenth of God’s earth?” He said “I will give you.” “Let Tawusi Melek be my imam, let him take

<sup>1213</sup> That is, appeared in a different form, so Adam wouldn’t recognize him.

dê min bite cennetê?” Gotê “te bibite cennetê.” “Dê xerqe ber min bikey?” Gotê “xerqe ber te dêkem.”... Qana kirin. Wexte çû berda. Ew surek j ... bir .. j wan milyaketan.. Em, em, ji ber xatira wê surrê, Adam ji behîştê derexist, sur ji enîyê îna derê, û Adam pêygember ji behîştê derexist.

Adam pêygember ji cennetê derexist da qewm pê ava bit. Şehîd, sur, cerekî kir da ev qewme jî çêdbit, da sunnetxane çêdbit. Ew qewmê yê Tawsî Melek çêdbit, qewmê me, qewmê Tawsî Melek e, em qewmê Tewsî Melek in. Her heftî û dû milletê dî Tawsî Melek xeletin. Bo qewmîyeta xwe Tawsî Melek em çêkirin.

Û Şehîd. Şehîd cerekî kir, ew suret cerekî kir. Şehîd jê çêbû, j kerameta Tawsî Melek. Û em milleta da çêbit bo xatira navê wî dana wî hinda nabit. Şehîd bin Cer çêkir da ew, nave wî hinda nabit, da ew milletê hemû qewmê wî bit. Milletê wî ye, heta îvroke jî em qewmê Tawsî Melek in. Em na ji Adam û Hawa çêbûna, na.

(Segvan, why did Tawusi Melek need Adam to create Shehid and his own people?)

Sebepa wî heye. Sur hate xwarî b navê Adamî. Bas ji enîyê îna derê. Em bi wê surê bûne binya Adam. Dibêjine me binya Adam. Em bi asawê / asa wê surê çêbûn.

Heta Adam di cennetêde bû, ew jî milyaketekî mezin bû. Sura Melek Şêx Sin ya mezin bû.

me to Paradise.” He said “let him take you to Paradise.” “Will you put the *khirqe* on me?” “I will put the *khirqe* on you.” He accepted. He went inside. This sur... was from those angels. We, we, for the sake of that *sur*, Adam was thrown out of Paradise, the *sur* was taken out of his forehead, and Prophet was thrown out of Paradise.

Adam was thrown out of Paradise, so that mankind could be created. Shehid, that is the sur, was put in a jar so that this nation be created, the House of Tradition be created, our people, the people of Tawusi Melek. We are the nation of Tawusi Melek. All seventy-two nations swear at Tawusi Melek. We were created so that Tawusi Melek could have his own people.

And Shehid. Shehid was put in a jar, this *sur* was put in a jar. Shehid was born from it, from the miraculous power of Tawusi Melek. And so that our nation could be created, so that his (TM) name could be given to them, lest it be lost. Shehid bin Jer was created so that his name not be lost, so that this nation, all of it, be his people. It is his nation, until today we are the people of Tawusi Melek. We are not from Adam and Eve, no.

(Segvan, why did Tawusi Melek need Adam to create Shehid and his own people?)

He had his reason. The *sur* came down in the name of Adam. But he brought it out from his forehead. Through this *sur* we became the sons of Adam. They call us “sons of Adam”<sup>1214</sup> We were created through (?) this *sur*.

As long as Adam was in Paradise, he was like the great angels. He was the great *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin.

<sup>1214</sup> “Binya Adam” is an Arabic, not Kurdish expression.

Wextê jê xali kir, sur ji enîyê îna derê, ew xali ma vêderê. Em zurretê wê surê in. Em sunnetxane ne. Sunnetxanek nine nav musulman, û nav çu dere. Ew bo xwe ji me alemi ne.

When he was emptied of it, the *sur* was brought out of his forehead, he was left there all empty. We are the children of that *sur*. We are the House of Tradition. There is not House of Tradition among the Muslims, or anywhere else. They learnt it from us.

## **Feqir Haji , Baadra (2003)**

This interview was made with Feqir Haji in Baarda, in June 2003. Baadra is a sizeable village of the Sheikhan district situated on the former border of Iraq and the Kurdish Safe haven. Unlike the rest of Sheikhan it remained under Kurdish control between 1992 and 2003. Baadra is traditionally the village where the Yezidi prince resides. The present prince, Mir Tehsin Bey, set up his residence in ‘Eyn Sifni and Mosul, on Iraqi territory, during the years of Autonomy, and exchanged Mosul for Duhok since the war, due to the threats of terrorism. In his stead it was Kamiran Kheiry Bey, the Prince’s nephew and son-in-law, who as the “acting head” of the Yezidis in the Kurdish Safe Haven, had (and still has) his residence in Baadra. Due to his hospitality I could pay several visits to Baadra, where I interviewed Feqir Haji, a resident of this village, several times. The following interview was made in June, 2003. Though this time there were no celebrating crowds around, the interview was still often interrupted by visitor coming to visit the guest-room of Kamiran Bey, and a constant background noise was provided by the “mubarida,” and eastern type of airconditioning working with water, and by the tractor working outside in the yard. During the interview the English teacher of the local highschool, Mamoste Sabah was helping me, explaining (but not translating, rather paraphrasing) what Feqir Haji said, and adding his own insights of Yezidi religion and mythology.

Qalbê Adam pêygember,  
 Şembê dane esase  
 Şembê esase qalbê Adam pêygember dane,  
 Adam çêkir  
 Û îniyê kir xelase

Şembê dane esase  
 Îniyê kir xelase  
 Be'dî heft sed sal Heft Sur hatine durran  
 kase<sup>1215</sup>  
 Piştê heft sed salî ji nû ruh hate qalbê  
 Ji ber çi?  
 Ew qalb cêkir ji şembeyê hate îniyê.  
 Û ev ruh ya milyaketekî bû ji ezmana  
 Milyaketa gote wî milyaketî, lazim e tu biciye  
 ber vî qalbî da qewm pê ava bit  
 Sura Melek Şêx Sin bû, te zani?  
 Ruha milyaketekî divêt biçit di wê qalbî de da  
 qewm pê ava bit

*Adam pêygamber ji wê kase vedxware (Arrival  
 of guests.)*

Heft sed salî ma, ew ruha Melek Şêx Sin na çû  
 ber Adamda, ina Tawsî Melek û Rabul Alemî  
 emir kir lazim e biçite berda, lazim e biçite  
 berda

*Adam pêygamber ji wê kasê vexwar (kas bû,  
 vexwar)*  
*Adam pêygamber ji wê kasê vexware*  
*Quwet û kerameta wê kasê hate diyare*  
*Lew Adam pêygamber pêngijî pê bû şiyare<sup>1216</sup>*

The body of Prophet Adam  
 On Saturday its foundations were laid,  
 On Saturday the foundations of Prophet  
 Adam's body were laid. Adam was created.  
 On Friday it was completed.

*On Saturday the foundations were laid,  
 On Friday it was completed,  
 After seven hundred years, the Seven Mysteries  
 came around the Cup.<sup>1217</sup>*  
 After seven hundred years the soul came into  
 the body. Why? The body was created between  
 Friday and Saturday. And this soul belonged to  
 an angel from the sky. The angels told this  
 angel, you have to go into this body, so that  
 mankind be created.  
 It was the *sur*<sup>1218</sup> of Angel Sheikh Sin, you  
 know? The soul of an angel had to go into the  
 body, so that the mankind be created.

*Prophet Adam drank from that cup  
 (Arrival of guests.)*

Seven hundred years passed, the soul of Angel  
 Sheikh Sin did not go inside Adam, so Tawusi  
 Melek and the Lord of the World gave a  
 command, he must go inside, must go inside.

*The Prophet Adam drank from that cup (it was  
 a/the cup, drank from it.)*  
*The Prophet Adam drank from the cup,  
 The miraculous power of that cup manifested  
 itself.*  
*Thus the Prophet Adam sneezed and through it  
 he became conscious.<sup>1219</sup>*

<sup>1215</sup> Text in italics quoted from *Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr*. Cf. Bedelê Feqîr Hecî, *Bawerî Êzidiyan*, 136; cf. also *Zebûnî Meksûr* 31, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 176; and *Zebûnî Meksûr* 38, Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 62.

<sup>1216</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 36, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 176.

<sup>1217</sup> Cf. text in italics with *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 31, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 177; and *of the Weak Broken One* 38, Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 62.

<sup>1218</sup> Mystery, essence, light.

<sup>1219</sup> *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 36, Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism*, 177.

*Adam pêygember ji wê kasê vexwar û vedijiya  
Mestbû, hijîya,  
goşt lê huriya, xwîn tê gerriya*<sup>1220</sup>

*Adam pêygember ji wê kasê vexwar, û lê xweş  
tê  
Quwet u kerameta wê kasê hat û geheştê  
Lewma Adam Peygamber helgirt û bire  
behiştê.*<sup>1221</sup>

Adam ji çi çêkir? Ji axê, ji avê, û ba, û erdê.  
(Mamoste Sabah cuts in to say, he has already  
told me that.)

Adam pêygember. Wexte ev sura Melek Sêx  
Sin hate ber Adam, tête ber, gote Tawsî Melek  
û Rabul Alemî, gotê “hun dê min bîne cennetê.”  
Gotê “belê.” Gotê  
“xerqeyê ber min (bi)keyn.” Gotê “ber te  
(di)keyn.” Gotê “Tawsî Melek bo min bite  
imam, li cennetê dê min gerit.” Gotê  
“belê.” Gotê “dehêka wê erda Xwedê bidite  
min.” (Yani erda Xwedê hemî.) Gotê “belê.”  
Dayê, hatenikê qana bû, hat, keftet ber Adamda.

*Prophet Adam drank from that Cup and came  
to life,  
He became intoxicated and trembled,  
Flesh grew on him, blood circulated in his  
veins.*<sup>1222</sup>

*The Prophet Adam drank from that cup and like  
it.  
The miraculous power of that cup came and  
reached (him).  
Thus Prophet Adam was taken up and borne to  
heaven.*<sup>1223</sup>

Adam was created from what? From earth,  
water, wind and soil.<sup>1224</sup> . (Mamoste Sabah cuts  
in to say, he has already told me that.)

The Prophet Adam. When this *sur* of Angel  
Sheikh Sin came inside Adam, comes inside, it  
said to Tawusi Melek and the Lord, said to  
them “you will take me to Paradise.” They said  
to him “yes.” He said to them “you will put the  
*khirqe* on me.”  
They said “we will put in on you.” He said “let  
Tawusi Melek be my *imam*, and take me  
around Paradise.” They said “yes.” He said  
“give me a tenth of God’s earth.” (That is, all of  
God’s earth.) They said “yes.”  
It was given to him, so he agreed, came, and  
went inside Adam.

<sup>1220</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 35, *ibid.*

<sup>1221</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 37, *ibid.* For these three stanzas  
compare also the version of *Zebûnî Meksûr* 44-5, 47  
published by Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 63. The  
three versions closely resemble each other, but there are  
some slight differences in the wording, and more  
importantly, the sequence of the individual stanzas differs  
in all three.

<sup>1222</sup> *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 35, *ibid.*

<sup>1223</sup> *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 37, *ibid.*

<sup>1224</sup> The last should be “fire,” this is probably just a slip  
of the tongue.

*Adam pêygember ji wê kasê vexwar, û lê xweş tê*

*Quwet u kerameta wê kasê hat û geheştê*

*Lewma Adam Peygamber helgirt û bire behiştê.*<sup>1225</sup>

Sed sala ma, Tawsî Melek imam bû. Adam Pêygember ma sed û ek sala cennetêde. Sed û ek sal cennetêde ma. Rabule Alemî gote Tawsî Melek “here, Adam ji beheştê derexe, da qewm pê ava bit.” Rabû. Sure yê enîyêde bû, sura Melek Sheikh Sin li enîyê kîrbû, û xerqe ber kîrbû. Sur enîyêde bû, xerqe berda.

Wexte Rabul Alemî emir kir, gote Tawsî Melek “here, Adam ji behiştê derexe,”

Tawsî Melek sur ji enîyê ina der, u xerqe ji berî îna der.

Sur cerekî kir û xerqe ji berî îna der.

(Arabic text: Adam took off his clothes and went out from Paradise.)

Ji beheştê derexist, wextê derexist, Adam xeletî Tawsî Melek, Adam pê xeletî. Galgala (word) xelet got. Hewa hingi heta vêga, em nuhu, heftî û dû millet ji Adam çêbûye, ew wî dixeletîn.

Bas em Êzidi naxeletîn. Em Êzidi na.

Wexte (sur) ji enîyê ina dere, ew sur cerekî kir. Cerekî kir û ma. Jê çêbû Şehîd, ji wî cerrî, Şehîd jê çêbû.

*The Prophet Adam drank from that cup and liked it. The miraculous power of that cup came and reached (him).*

*Thus Prophet Adam was taken up and borne to heaven.*<sup>1226</sup>

He stayed a hundred years. Tawusi Melek was his *imam*. Prophet Adam stayed a hundred and one years in Paradise. One hundred and one year he stayed in Paradise. The Lord said to Tawusi Melek “go, and throw Adam out of Paradise, so that mankind can be created.” He got up. The *sur* was in his<sup>1227</sup> forehead, the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin had been put in his forehead, and the *khirqe* had been put on him. The *sur* was in his forehead, he wore the *khirqe*.

When the Lord commanded Tawusi Melek “go, throw Adam out of Paradise,” Tawusi Melek took the *sur* out of his forehead, and divested him of the *khirqe*. He put the *sur* in a jar, and divested him of the *khirqe*.

(Arabic text: Adam took off his clothes and went out from Paradise)

He threw Adam out of Paradise. When Adam was thrown out, he swore at Tawusi Melek, he swore at him. He said a bad word about him.<sup>1228</sup>

Since then, till now, seventy two nations were born from Adam, and they swear at Tawusi Melek. Only we Yezidis do now swear at him. We alone.

When he (T.M.) brought the *sur* out of his forehead, he put it in a jar. Put it in a jar and left it there. From it came Shehid, from this jar. From it came Shehid.

<sup>1225</sup> Cf. *Zebûnî Meksûr* 37, Kreyenbroek, Yezidism, 176. For these three stanzas compare also the version of *Zebûnî Meksûr* 44-5, 47 published by Kreyenbroek, *God and Sheikh Adi*, 63. The three versions closely resemble each other, but there are some slight differences in the wording, and more importantly, the sequence of the individual stanzas differs in all three.

<sup>1226</sup> *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* 37, *ibid.*

<sup>1227</sup> i.e. Adam’s forehead.

<sup>1228</sup> That is, he called Tawusi Melek “Sheitan” (Satan.)

Û Adam wexte ji beheştê derexist, Tawsî Melek, Adam ji behiştê derexist, ew (?) kelema her digote Tawsî Melek. Adam wexte derexist, Hawa ji taništa wî çêkir. Hawa ji taništa Adam çêkir. Hawa el (?) Adam markir. Tawsî Melek Hawa el (?) Adam markir. Û ji Adam û Hawa çêbûn Habil û Qabil.

Tawsî Melek ruha Melek Şêx Sin jêstand, û ew sur cerekî kir. Cerekî kir, Şehîd bin Cer jê çêbû. Ji Adam û Hawa çêbûn Habil û Qabil. Habil Qabil kuşt, Habil mir, piştihingi Xwede dane Hawa û Adam heftî û dû kur û heftî û dû kiç, û lêk mar kirin. Heftî û dû kur û heftî û dû kiç lêk mar kirin.

Ma wê derê ki? Ma Şehîd, Leyle ji cennetê îna, navê wê Leyle, ji cennetê îna, ji nik hûriya. Wexte Xwede Şehîd xolokand, Şehîd bo Leyle re îna. Ji Leyle çêbûn û Şehîd Haşim û Qureyş. Haşim û Qureyş çêbûn.

Piştê Şehîd min çî pêygember ninin. Çunku em milletê wê sura Melek Şêx Sin in, em milletê wê surê in, u me çu pêygember ninin.

Em, hing ji Adamû herwa, em hemû ji millet jê cûda bûn. Piçukêt Adam u Hawa, fala, û cuhu, musulman, û her milleteki heye. Piçukêt Şehîd em Êzidi ne, bas em Êzidi ne. Ser aslê xwe kadim mayn.

Hinci zuretê Adam û Hawa zuretê kufrê

And when Adam was thrown out from Paradise, by Tawusi Melek, he kept saying that word to Tawusi Melek. When he (T.M.) threw Adam out, he created Eve from his rib. He created Eve from his rib. He married Eve to Adam. Tawusi Melek married Eve to Adam. From Adam and Eve Abel and Cain were born.

Tawusi Melek took away (out) the soul of Angel Sheikh Sin, and put that *sur* in a jar. In a jar. Shehid bin Jer was born from it. From Adam Abel and Cain were born. Cain killed Abel, Abel died, after that God gave Eve and Adam 72 boys and 72 girls, and they married each other. 72 girls and 72 boys married each other.

Who was left? Shehid was left. Leyle was brought from heaven, her name was Leyle, she was brought from heaven, from among the houri. When God created Shehid, Shehid was brought for Leyle. From Leyle Hashim and Quresh were born.

After Shehid we have no prophet. Because we are the nation of the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin. We are the nation of that *sur*, and we don't have any prophets.

We, ever after Adam, we were apart from all other nations. The children of Adam and Eve (are) Christians, and Jews, Muslims, and all kind of nations. The children of Shehid are we Yezidis, we Yezidis alone. We stayed faithful to our ancient roots (beginnings.)

Now the children of Adam and Eve are the children of sin, they married each

ne, ji ek û dû zewicine, xwişk û bira.  
 Şehîd na, Şehîd cûda ye. Şehîd hûri ji ezmanê  
 îna, ji cennetê îna, hûri lê markir, jê çêbûn  
 Haşim û Qureş.

Hate vega me çu pêygember ninin, çunku em  
 milletê Xwedê in. Navê Xwedê ser me: wexte  
 Şehîd Xwedê xolokand î dayî (?), gotê “Xweda  
 ez dam.” “Ez dam.” “Xweda ez dam.”<sup>1229</sup> Em  
 milletê ezdayîn. Ezdayîn.

Hate vê gave...(Arabic) çu pêygember ninin.  
 Em berê Nuh em hebûn, ji Adam û Hawa em  
 cûda in ji milleta hema. Çunku heftî û dû millet  
 kelema xelet dbêjite Tawsî Melek, em nabêjin.  
 Em milletê Tawsî Melek in. Milletê Êzdayîn.

(Spät: Heqe Şêx Adi na pêygember e, çi ye?)  
 Şêx Adi vali ye. Na pêygember e, na. Şêx Adi  
 sur e, **nûr a la nûr** e.

(Mamoste Sabah: Şêx Adi is a person, not a  
 prophet, but give(s) us a secret.)

Şêx Adi ji nûra Êzi ye, Êzi ji nûra Tawsî Melek  
 e, Tawsî Melek ji nûra Xwedê ye.

(Spät: Qendil çi ye?)

Qendil semavi ye. Qendil hate xwar.  
 (unintelligible Arabic and Kurdish text on  
 divine love follows.) Qendil nûra Xwedê ye.  
 Qendil el arşan e. Tê heyn

other. Brothers and sister. Not Shehid. Shehid is  
 apart. Shehid brought a houri from the sky,  
 from Paradise, married the houri, from her were  
 born Hashim and Qoresh.

Until today we have no prophets, because we  
 are the nation of God. We bear the name of  
 God. When God created Shehid, Shehid said  
 “God (he who created himself) created me.”  
 “Created me” (*Ez dam*). God created me. We  
 are the “Ezdayi” nation. Ezdayi (Yezidis.)<sup>1230</sup>

Until now... (Arabic) we have no prophets. We  
 existed before Noah, we are apart from all  
 nations since Adam and Eve. Because 72  
 nations say the forbidden work to Tawusi  
 Melek, but we don't say it. We are the nation of  
 Tawusi Melek. The Ezdayi nation.

(Spät: If Sheikh Adi is not a prophet, what is  
 he?)

Sheikh Adi is a saint. He is not a prophet, no.  
 Sheikh Adi is a *sur*, he is light from light.

(Mamoste Sabah: Şêx Adi is a person, not a  
 prophet, but give(s) us a secret.)

Sheikh Adi is from the light of Ezi. Ezi is from  
 the light of Tawusi Melek. Tawusi Melek is  
 from the light of God.

(Spät: What is *Qendil*?)

*Qendil* is a heavenly thing. The *Qendil* came  
 down. (unintelligible Arabic and Kurdish text  
 on divine love follows.) *Qendil* is the light of  
 God. *Qendil* is the throne. In it there are the  
 souls of the

<sup>1229</sup> A word-play based on the Yezidi (and Kurdish)  
 etymology of the Kurdish word for God. “Xwede” –  
 interpreted as “Xwe – da” “created (gave) Himself.”  
 While “Êzidi” interpreted as “ez Xweda dam” is “I  
 was created (given) by the one who created (gave)  
 Himself”, shortened to “ez dam” as in “I was  
 created (given).” This etymology is not supported  
 by any linguistic speculation on the origins of  
 the name Yezidi/Ezidi. (In any case, one word  
 contains a short, closed “e” (ez), the other  
 contains a long open “ê” (Êzidi.))

<sup>1230</sup> It is worth noting that Joseph (*Devil  
 Worship*, 108) already mentions that some  
 Western Orientalists think the word Yezidi  
 must be “an abbreviated form of *Aez-da-  
 Khuda*, that is, created of God.”

ruhêt xasana. Dû Qendilêt heyn. Qendilek li ezmana ruhêt çaka dçine têda... Xasa, valiye, pêygember diçine têda.

(Spät: Hindek ruh ji Qendilê dzivirine?)

Belê, hatine xware. Ji Qendilê hatine xware... heyn xasa, heyn çaka, ewli hatine, ruhêt ewli hatine. Ruha Wakil ji Qendilê hate xwar. Ruha Şêx Adi, Şêx Şems ji Qendilê îna derê.

holy men (*khas*.) There are two *Qendils*. The *Qendil* in the sky, the pure souls go inside it... *Khas* (holy souls,) saints, prophets go inside.

(Spät: Do some souls return from the *Qendil*?)

Yes, they have come below. From the *Qendil* they have come below... there are *khas*, pure ones, they came first. The soul of Wakil<sup>1231</sup> came down from the *Qendil*. The soul of Sheikh Adi, Sheikh Shems was brought out from the *Qendil*.

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<sup>1231</sup> Al-Wakil, the Trustee, is one of the beautiful names of Allah. This is the only mention I have encountered of it in Yezidi lore, and I am not sure which angel or holy being it refers to.

### **Interview with Sheikh Deshti (2003)**

Sheikh Deshti was the *micawir* or guardian of the sanctuaries of Beyazid Bistami and Mehmedê Jindal in the collective Yezidi village of Khanke, about 30 kilometers from Duhok, near the bank of the Tiger. It was a loosely joined collection of villages, which were originally in other locations, then were later destroyed, and their population was moved to Khanke. Most of the sanctuaries, with the exception of the sanctuary of Mem Shivan, a protector of sheep and cattle, were newly rebuilt in their present places.

During the interview I made with him, I was accompanied by a Yezidi student of physics, Suzan Haji Shmo, from the University of Duhok, whose family (originally from Sinjar) resided in the same village. Her comments and translations can be read in brackets, along with my own questions. These comments are of interest not only because she endeavors to sum up the explanations of Sheikh Deshti in a few words, but also because occasionally they show that lay Yezidis themselves can have problems with understanding traditional Yezidi lore just as much as foreigners. (Her attempts to give modern scientific meaning to Yezidi myths of creation are mentioned in some details in the chapter on “Orality and Literacy among Yezidis Today.”)

Hinge, wexte Adam di behiştê de,  
gava, yani surek eniyêde bû, yani wekî keramet,  
wekî quwetek yani em dbêjin sur. Yani wekî  
sureka eniyêde bû, wekî quweteka îlahi, yani  
wekî **dereca** wî, wekî dbêjin **sêydi** Misahê Isa,  
yani **goreza milyaketa**, yani na beşer bû

(Suzan: He was like an astral man, because God  
made a force, like “sure”, and He give him, and  
Ezdiyans say that “sure.” Sura Tawsî Melekê  
and sura Ezdî, like their force, it is called sur.)

Wexte wissa li emrê Xwedê, Tawsî Melekê ew  
genim dayê, û hate erdê, û Hawa çêbû, u zawac  
navbeyna xwe û Adam çêbû.

Hawayê gote Adam: heke jînek nabit, beşerê  
çênabita..

Yani Hawa, jîna Adam bû, got, heger ne jînek  
bit, piçûk nine.

Adam got, na, heger zalam nabit, her wissa,  
piçûk nabit.

**Nikaş** navbeyna wan çêbû.

Adam gote:ka xwêdan – yani wekî em dbêjin  
“nesel” –

Wissa (gesture: he wiped his forehead off with  
the back of his hand) – biket şerpikêda.

Adam wexte wisa kir (gesture repeated), Tawsî  
Melek wissa kir, puff kir (he blew on his hand)  
ewî ket şerpikêda.

Adam xwêdan wissa kir, kirit şerpekî.

(Discussion on the compatibility of  
taperecorder and gestures. Suzan explains in  
Kurdish and English: Adam put his sur in the  
jar.)

Na, na sur, xwêdan, dbêjin **nesir**, **xoxa** wî.

Û Hawa jî **kreşer bûyda**.

Neh heyv tamam bû.

Ê Hawayê, wexte şikandin, kêzik bû, **kurum**  
bû, naçêbû.

Ê Adam – Şehîd bin Jer bû.

When Adam was in Paradise, I mean, when the  
*sur* was in his forehead, like a miraculous  
power, like a power, that is, we say *sur*. He had  
*sur* in his forehead, like some divine power, like  
his **grade**, as they say ??? of Messiah Jesus, I  
mean *after the fashion* of angels, I mean he  
wasn't a human.

(Suzan: He was like an astral man, because God  
made a force, like “sure”, and He give him, and  
Ezdiyans say that “sure.” The *sur* of Tawusi  
Melek and of Ezdî, like their force, it is called  
*sur*.)

Then, at the command of God, Tawusi Melek  
gave him grain, and he came down on earth,  
and Eve was created, and the two married.

Eve said to Adam: if there were no woman,  
human would not exist.

That is, Eve, the wife of Adam, said, if there  
were no woman, there would be no babies.

Adam said, no, if there were no man, still there  
would be no babies.

There rose a fight between them.

Adam said: where is (my) sweat – like we say  
???

Then like this (gesture: he wiped his forehead  
off with the back of his hand) – so that he could  
put it in a jar.

When Adam did like this (gesture repeated),  
Tawusi Melek did like this, he blew (Sheikh  
Deshti blew on his hand), and it was put in the  
jar.

Adam did like this with his sweat, and put it in  
a jar (Discussion on the compatibility of a  
taperecorder and gestures. Suzan explains in  
Kurdish and English: Adam put his *sur* in the  
jar.)

No, not his *sur*, his sweat, they say his weat

And Eve ???

Nine months passed.

In the jar of Eve, when it was broken, there  
were flies, ??? it was rotten

In that of Adam - Shehid bin Jer.

Bas ew çêbû.

Wexte ew xwê kiri, Tawsî Melek (he blew on his hand)

(Renewed discussion about the utility of gestures.)

Adam wissa kir: Yani xwê kir şerpekîde.

(Sheikh Deshti wiped off his forehead with his hand.)

Wexte kire şerpekîde, neh heyv tamam bû. Hawayê xwe şikand, mêş, murik, kêrik, we tişt têda çêbûn.

Adam, peşi neh heyva, Şehîd bin Cer çêbû, hindek dbêjin Şîd, bas Şehîd safitire.

(Spät: Wexte Adam xwêdan ji sere xwe jêkir, Tawsî Melek çi kir?)

Tawsî Melek puff kir (gestures: he blows on his hand), yani sur jêkir, ka... bike têde.

(Suzan: Also Tawsî Melek put them sur (unintelligible word) with Adam, in that jar.)

Ew sur, çû şerpikê.

(Spät: Yani Adam xwêdana xwe dane jarê. Tawsî Melek hat, bi dizî, û puff kir û sureka Adamê jî çû gel xwêdana wî?)

E, puff kir, u sureka şerpikêda. E, kete şerpik. Ew şerpik, piştê neh heyva, kurek çêbû. Navê kurê bû Şehîd, ew Şîd, yani di cerde, di şerpekî de. Ew Şehîd, zewici hûriya bi jêr hatiya, zawac çêbû, Haşim û Qûreş jê çêbûn.

(Spät: Tê got, sure Adamê. Yani sur yê di sere wî de hebû.)

E, sur.

(Spät: Yani ew sur çi ye?)

Sur xelat e, ew, dbêjin, qudrete. Messelah eme dbêjin: Isa, û beşerî **şef ferke**, Isa qudret hebû, ma na? Beser ew qudret nine, bas, messelah, Isa, qudret hebû.

He alone was born from it.

When he took his sweat, Tawusi Melek (Sheikh. Deshti blew on his hand.)

(Renewed discussion about the utility of gestures.)

Adam did like this. I mean he put his sweat in the jar. (Sheikh Deshti wiped off his forehead with his hand.)

When he put it in the jar, nine months passed. Eve broke her jar, inside there were flies, mostquitos, insects and things like that

Adam, after nine months, Shehid bin Jer was born, some say Shiit, but Shehid (Witness) is more authentic.

(Spät: When Adam wiped the sweat from his head, what did Tawusi Melek do?)

Tawusi Melek blew on it (gestures: he blows on his hand), I mean he took away the *sur*, so... he can put it inside.

(Suzan: Also Tawsî Melek put them *sur* (unintelligible word) with Adam, in that jar.)

This *sur*, it went into the jar.

(Spät: That is Adam put his sweat in the jar. Then Tawusi Melek came, in secret, blew, and the *sur* of Adam went into the jar along with the sweat?)

Yes, blew, and the *sur* was in the jar. Yes, fell into the jar. This jar, after nine months, a boy was born (from it.) His name was Shehid (Witness), Shiit, in the jar. This Shehid, he married a houri who descended on the earth. He married, Hashim and Quraysh were born from them.

(Spät: You said, the *sur* of Adam. You mean the *sur* that was in his head.)

Yes, the *sur*.

(Spät: What is this *sur*?)

*Sur* is a gift, it is, they say, a power. For example, we say: Jesus **????**, Jesus had this power. Humans don't have this Power, but Jesus, for example, had it.

(Spät: yani, ew sure, ew qudrete min nine?)

Nine

(Spät: bas li Adamê hebû?)

Hebû

(Spät: wexte di behîştêde bû, wî jî ew qudrete ji Xwedê hebû?)

Hebû, Rabû. Wexte kete şerpikêde, Şehîd, Şît, Şehîdi bin Cer, dbêjine, jê çêbû, ji cerê, ji wê surê. Wexte Şehîd bin Cer mezin bû, zewici, Haşim û Qureş jê çêbû. Em Ezidi, em dbêjin, em talîya wan kuran.

(Spät: qudrete Adamê na maye? Çunku çû û bûye yê Şehîdê?)

E, e, Şehîdê.

(Spät: yani yê Adamê na maye?)

Na. Em dbêjin, Adam, em dbêjin, lewme, hinge vega gelek milletê hem kelemekî nebaş li Tawsî Melek dbêjine. Em Ezidi, em dbêjine, em ê Şehîdî bin Cerine, silave u selamet...<sup>1232</sup>

(Spät: qudret keramet e?)

E, qudret keramet e, ji nûrê Xwedê.<sup>1233</sup>

(Spät: That is, I don't have this *sur*, this power?)

No, you don't.

(Spät: But Adam had it?)

He had it.

(Spät: When he was in the Paradise, he also had this power from God?)

He had it. It went. When it fell in the jar, Shehid, Shiit, Shehid bin Jer, they say, was born from it, from the jar, from this *sur*. When Shehid bin Jer grew up, he married. Hashim and Qureish were born from him. We Yezidis, we say, we are the tribe descending from these sons.

(Spät Adam had no power left? Because it went to Shehid?)

Yes, to Shehid.

(That is Adam had none left?)

No. We say, Adam, we say, because, that is, a lot of nations say a bad word to Tawusi Melek.<sup>1234</sup> We Yezidis, we say, we belong to Shehid bin Jer. Blessings...

(Spät: Is this power divine power (*keramet*)?)

Yes, this power is *keramet*, from the light of God.

<sup>1232</sup> Arabic formula of blessing addressed to Tawusi Melek follows.

<sup>1233</sup> The interview from here veers toward discussion on parapsychology and on the miraculous feasts of the *kocheks*, that is, Yezidi seers.

<sup>1234</sup> Sheikh Deshti here probably refers to the notion, also told by Feqir Haji, that Adam cursed Tawusi Melek, calling him Satan. Yezidis alone, the descendants of Shehid bin Jer, are free of this transgression, and they are forbidden to pronounce this derogatory word by their religion.

## **Appendix II: Hymns translated by P. Kreyenbroek.**

Appendix II contains the hymns translated by Philip Kreyenbroek and quoted in this study, scanned from his books *Yezidism, Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) and *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2005). Seeing these hymns in full, not only as short quotations may perhaps be of interest to the reader. My thanks to Philip Kreyenbroek for acquiescing to my quoting him in this way.