One of the most intriguing and complex questions in the history of religions is the relationship between Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism. Most explorations of this question have focused on western Gnostic sources and in particular on the writings known as the Nag Hammadi library. Within this broader context, the comparative study of Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism remains a scholarly desideratum of the first order. Although they did not devote entire works to the topic, both Lady Drower and Gershom Scholem, two giants in the fields of Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism, respectively, noted certain parallels between the two traditions and suggested that further study would reveal even more profound links. In the following pages, I will identify and examine a host of significant parallels between Mandaean writings and a wide range of Jewish mystical sources, including the Hekhalot literature and the medieval Kabbalah. Some of these traditions are similar enough to raise the possibility of extensive historical contact and cultural exchange between the two groups in Mesopotamia.

The question of Mandaeism’s relationship to Jewish mysticism may be divided along the following lines: origins, polemics, and parallel traditions. Kurt Rudolph has argued that “Even the oldest form of that which we today call Mandeism was a splintering off from official Judaism.” Rudolph and other scholars have further identified the earliest Mandaeans as belonging to pre-Christian, Palestinian Jewish circles. In contrast to this view, Edwin Yamauchi has proposed an originally Transjordanian or “western proto-Mandaean component” consisting of “non-Jews” who made their way east, eventually arriving in Mesopotamia, where they established communities and incorporated indigenous Iranian and Babylonian elements.

The Mandaeans themselves preserve a number of written accounts and other traditions which evince a complex attitude to the question of Jewish origins. In oral and written traditions, the Mandaeans identify with the ancient Egyptians,

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while condemning the biblical Israelites for worshipping Ruha and Adonai, rather than the true God. According to Drower, this identification even inspired an annual ritual meal dedicated to the Egyptians who perished in the Sea of Reeds. Despite this strident attempt to differentiate themselves from the ancient Israelites, the Mandaeans also claim connections with the Jews, whom they call *iahutaiia*. A text known as *The Scroll of Exalted Kingship*, midrashically connects this Mandaic term for Jews with another word meaning “abortion” or “miscarriage,” implying that Judaism is an incomplete development vis-à-vis Mandaeism. Elsewhere the same text depicts Judaism as a stage which must be “cast off” before arriving at Mandaeism. Both passages suggest a self-understanding in which Mandaeans define themselves over and against Jews and Judaism, even as they acknowledge an intimate connection.

The most important Mandaean account of the group’s historical origins also suggests a close, albeit highly ambivalent, link to Judaism. The *Haran Gawaita* describes how a community of Mandaeans lived in Jerusalem until oppression by Jews forced them to migrate to the East, where they settled in present day Iraq and Iran. Once again we observe the Mandaean tendency to link the two communities historically, while setting them in opposition to one another ideologically.

**POLEMICS**

One of the most provocative and illuminating Mandaean traditions concerning Judaism involves the figure of Miriai. This tradition forms part of the extensive Mandaean polemic against Jews and Judaism. Oral and written sources, including the *Book of John*, depict a Jewish girl named Miriai who lived in Jerusalem. To the dismay of her family and the community, Miriai abandoned Judaism and became a Mandaean. Her Jewish critics portrayed Miriai’s conversion as an act of sexual licentiousness, accusing her of “falling in love with a man” (i.e. an *uthra*). Miriai’s own father was less gentle in his condemnation and called her a whore. The sexual nature of these accusations reflects a common association between worshipping other gods and sexual betrayal. In response to these charges, Miriai cursed the Jews and condemned them as “abortions.” According to the *Book of John*, the Jews’ oppression of Miriai culminated in the divine destruction of Jerusalem and the death of the Jewish “disciples.”

A version of the story recorded by Drower depicts an even more complex relationship between the Jews and Mandaeans. After Miriai converted to Mandaeism, the Jews ordered her to “leave the Nasurai,” to which she responded, “I will not leave the Nasurai! You have not the knowledge that they have.” At this point, the Jews vowed to either “kill them [the Mandaeans] or learn their secrets.” The remainder of the tale involves the Jews’ fruitless at-
tempts to gain this secret knowledge. When confronted by the Jews, who declared “We want your secret knowledge! Teach us and we will not kill you,” the Mandaeans (referred to as Nasurai), responded by concealing their gnosis: “There is no secret knowledge, so how can we teach you? There is none!” The Jews began killing the Mandaeans one by one, offering to stop if they were taught the secret knowledge. Ultimately, the Jews killed all of the Mandaeans and then assembled in the Jerusalem Temple, where, in an echo of the fiery death of Nadav and Abihu in Leviticus, “a fire came from Heaven and consumed all those who had harried and killed the Nasurai.”

A number of important issues are raised by the different legends concerning Miriai. The conversion, itself, illuminates at least two aspects of the relationship between Mandaeism and Judaism. First, some Jews – symbolized by Miriai in these stories – may have become Mandaeans while the group was still in Palestine. Second, the Mandaeans may have actively and, in some cases, successfully proselytized Jews, perhaps while both communities were living in Babylonia.

The Jewish responses to Miriai’s conversion are also highly suggestive. The literary motif of the Jews’ murder of the Mandaeans indicates that physical persecutions may have actually taken place in Palestine and/or Babylonia. Indeed, Kurt Rudolph has written that the strident anti-Jewish polemics in Mandean literature implies “periodic oppressions by Babylonian Jewry.” Yet, even though the Jews oppress the Mandaeans in these stories, they also acknowledge and covet their secret knowledge. Indeed, Drower’s version of the legend suggests that the Jews’ jealousy results in their violent persecution of the Mandaeans. Once again we may ask whether this literary detail reflects a historical reality, in this case, the efforts of certain Jews to acquire the secret knowledge of the Mandaeans. If so, who were these Jews and were any of them successful? Although we do not possess sufficient evidence to answer these questions, they raise the intriguing possibility that members of Jewish mystical circles in Babylonia may have sought out and been influenced by Mandean doctrines. It is equally important to note that the Mandean legends concerning Miriai may lack a basis in historical events. Instead, these tales may reflect the Mandaeans’ desire to link themselves with the ancient traditions of Judaism while still asserting their own separate and superior identity.

In marked contrast to Mandean sources, which frequently and explicitly discuss Jews and Judaism, Jewish literature at first glance appears silent on the question of the Mandaeans. While this may be taken as a sign that Jews were

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uninterested in and/or ignorant of the Mandaeans, the lack of explicit references fits into a broader pattern of Jewish polemics in which competing or heretical groups are not identified by their proper names but are instead referred to by generic titles such as _minim_ (i.e. “heretics”). Thus, at least some of the rabbinic passages which condemn the _minim_ may in fact be directed against the Mandaeans.

Elsewhere, I have argued that certain passages in rabbinic and Hekhalot literature may function polemically, though on an esoteric level, against Mandean cosmological beliefs. For example, Rabbi Akiba’s warning to aspiring merkabah mystics in the Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 14b: “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say ‘Water, Water,’ for it is said, ‘The speaker of lies shall not be established before my eyes,’” may seek to undermine the Mandean view that at the end of its heavenly ascent through the _mattarta_ or “watchouses,” the soul arrives at a body of water called _hafiqia mia_, which serves as a lower boundary for the World of Light. Instead of actual water, as the Mandaeans believe, the talmudic text and its Hekhalot parallels (Schäfer _Synopse_ §§259, 345, 408-410, 672) assert that only the illusion of water exists at the end of the heavenly journey. From the perspective of these Jewish texts, therefore, the ability to identify the appearance of water as an illusion separates the true merkabah mystic from the Jewish pretender and from members of competing traditions such as Mandaeism.\(^6\)

Rabbinic and Hekhalot passages which claim that only enlightened Jewish mystics possess the true knowledge of what exists in heaven may have functioned as a kind of antidote or response to Mandean claims that Jews unsuccessfully sought their gnosis. Phrased differently, some Mandean and Jewish mystical circles in Babylonia may have seen themselves as competing over who possessed the true secret knowledge. This sense of competition may have inspired the Mandean and Jewish traditions discussed thus far which emphasize an exclusive claim to knowledge: e.g., Mandean sources which depict the Nasurai as choosing to die rather than reveal their secret knowledge to the Jews, and Hekhalot passages which promise decapitation by iron axes to anyone who ascends to heaven without proper knowledge of what exists there.

The very stridency of these claims of exclusivity, however, implies that fears of intercultural influence were not merely theoretical. Rather, some Jews and Mandaeans were almost certainly involved in cultural and religious exchange even or, perhaps, especially in the area of what we now call mysticism. A number of factors increases the likelihood of such contact. First, Mandaeans and Jews lived in the same areas of Babylonia for many centuries. Second, as Theodor Nöldeke, the great nineteenth century scholar of the Mandean language noted, “Mandean is closely related to the ordinary dialect of the Baby-

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lonian Talmud. Both the dialects are neighbors, geographically speaking."

Third, similarities in ethics and rituals could have provided common ground for cultural interaction between members of both groups. Finally, individuals involved in magic (including the healing arts) and mysticism are frequently more open to influences from other, even competing traditions, than are their exoterically minded co-religionists.

In the following pages, I will examine a number of parallels between Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism. The possibility that particular parallels reflect cross cultural contact between Mandaeans and Jews is always present. I will point out cases where direct influence seems likely and others where parallels more probably result from similar internal developments based on a common pool of Mesopotamian, biblical, and apocalyptic traditions.

The Mandaean sources I will discuss include magical bowls and various texts, including priestly documents; the Jewish material ranges from the Hekhalot literature to early kabbalistic works. The existence of Mandaean parallels with both branches of Jewish mysticism may shed light on the character of Merkabah mysticism in Babylonia and its impact on the emergence of the Kabbalah in Southern Europe. Although Merkabah mysticism probably originated within Palestinian circles, Jews in Babylonia cultivated its development in both the Talmudic and Geonic periods. This suggests a possible context for cross-fertilization between Mandaean and Jewish traditions in the late antique and early medieval periods in Babylonia. The parallels between Mandaeism and the Kabbalah reinforces the view that originally Babylonian Jewish traditions played a significant role in the flowering of Jewish mysticism in medieval Provence and Spain, a topic I will take up below.

MAGIC, ANGELOLOGY, AND DEMONOLOGY

Both Mandaeism and Judaism evince ambivalent relationships with magic (including astrology). On the one hand, certain sources stridently condemn magic and its practitioners. On the other hand, magic is generally portrayed as efficacious and magical practices permeated both cultures in Babylonia. To some extent, parallels between Mandaean and Jewish magical traditions reflect a common heritage of ancient Mesopotamian traditions. This explains, for instance, the motif of the lilith, a female demon who attacks pregnant women and children. This demon, whose origins may be traced to the Sumerian and Akkadian lilîtu or ardat lilî, appears in both Mandaean and Jewish magical

objects (amulets, bowls, lead rolls) and formulas. While some magical elements in Mandaeism and Judaism reveal a common Mesopotamian heritage, others suggest at least some contact and commerce between the two communities, particularly in the realm of angelological traditions.\footnote{For a debate on this issue, see R. Rudolph, Die Mandäer I, (Göttingen, 1960), p. 84; E. Yamauchi, Gnostic Ethics and Mandaeao Origins, (Cambridge, 1970), p. 55.} Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that Mandaeans and Jews in what is now southern Iraq were sharing magical information well into the twentieth century.\footnote{Based on the author’s discussions with Mandaeans from Iraq.}

A number of Jewish angelic names appear in Mandaeo sources, though sometimes in modified form. These include Yophin-Yophaphin, which derives from the Hebrew Yophiel, one of the names of the angel Metatron, and Gabriel, which appears as a secret name for the Mandaeo demiurge Ptahil. A divine name shared by both traditions is Mara de-Rabutha (“Lord of Greatness”), concerning which Gershom Scholem argued: “It now appears that this designation, like so much else in Mandaeo Gnosticism, derives from Judaism.”\footnote{G. Scholem, On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead, (New York, 1991), p. 33.}

One of the most striking examples of Jewish influence on Mandaeo angelology involves the figure of Metatron, who appears in a magical bowl written in Mandaic, where he is described as serving before the heavenly curtain, as he does in Jewish sources.\footnote{Bowl D (931.4.2) in W. S. McCullough, Jewish Mystics and Mandaeo Incantation Bowls in the Royal Ontario Museum, (Toronto, 1967), pp. 28-47. My thanks to Dr. Erica Hunter of Cambridge University, with whom I have had a number of illuminating discussions on the topic of the Mandaeo magical bowls.} The Mandaic term for “curtain” is bar-god, an analog to the Jewish term par-god, which serves as the barrier between God’s dwelling and the world. Besides his appearance in this bowl, there are a number of important parallels between Metatron and various Mandaeo divine figures, most notably the “Third Life,” also known as Abathur. Both figures serve as heavenly priests, they are installed before the cosmic curtain, are associated with weighing and judging human souls, and, as I will show below, are depicted hypostatically.\footnote{For a lengthy examination of the significant parallels between Abathur and Metatron, including their links to the “Ancient of Days” from the book of Daniel, see N. Deutsch, Guardians of the Gate: Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity, (Leiden, 1999), pp. 25-26, 45-46, 93-99.}

While there is no evidence that traditions concerning Metatron influenced the development of those concerning Abathur or vice-versa, the striking similarities between them indicate several things. First, despite the profound theological differences between Mandaeism and Judaism, certain theological questions were answered in like ways, in this case, through the creation of similar angelic vice-regent figures in both traditions. Second, angelic vice-regent figures in Mandaeism and Judaism were influenced by a common pool of biblical and apocalyptic traditions. Most importantly, both Metatron and Abathur were
implicitly and explicitly identified with the “Ancient of Days” or *atiq yomin* from Daniel 7:9.

Just as certain angelological names appear in both Mandaean and Jewish sources, so do names for demons and malevolent spirits. Once again, Gershom Scholem, whose remarkable scholarly intuition extended to the relationship between Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism, noted this parallel, writing that three of the four classes of malevolent spirits discussed by the Jewish work *Raza Rabba* (“The Great Mystery”) also appear in Mandaean sources. In addition to the *parurim/parukhin, dewim/dewin, and latabhin/latabhayya* mentioned by Scholem, I would add the class of spirits known as *shedim*, which appear throughout Jewish magical literature and in Mandaean sources, including *Alf Trisa Shualiia* (“The Thousand and Twelve Questions”), sec. 256.

HYPOSTATIC TRADITIONS

Hypostatic traditions proliferate in both Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism and form one of the most significant parallels between the two phenomena. Gedaliahu Stroumsa has argued that the original subject of the *Shiur Qomah* tradition, itself, may have been Yahweh-Metatron, who “did not only carry God’s name, but also measured Him – was His *shi’ur qomah*.” Hekhalot and kabbalistic sources also identify Metatron with several parts of the divine corpus, including the phallus and the face – in his role as *sar ha-panim*, a title typically translated as “prince of the face” but whose esoteric meaning may have been “prince who is the face.”

In Mandaean sources, Abathur is identified with the hypostatic phallus, tongue, liver, and perhaps with the entire corpus. For example, *The Lesser ‘First World’*, states that “maleness” (i.e. the phallus) is called by the name “Abatur of the scales but which the worlds and generations call *duna* [Lit. “keg”; Fig. “penis”], for it is more venerated than all the mysteries, and worlds and generations are held (comprised) therein.” Concerning this tradition, Zwi Werblowsky has suggested that “The description of Abathur as the phallic middle which ‘balances’ the other forces is, in some respects at least,

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18 E. Drower, *A Pair of Nasorean Commentaries*, (Leiden, 1963), p. 57. For the possible identification of Abathur with the body (Mand., ‘*stuna*’), see p. 34.
reminiscent of the functions of the kabbalist’s *sefîrah yesod,*”19 Although Abathur is not associated with it, the concept of the hypostatic face or *parsufa* also appears in Mandaeism, “as personification of the Highest Being,” in the words of Drower and Macuch.20

The development of these and other hypostatic traditions points to a shared sensibility, one which views the body of God as a model for the structure of the universe, as well as for the structure of the human body. No where is this idea more visible than in the traditions concerning the Primal Adam, who is known as Adam Qadmon in the Kabbalah and by the analogous title Adam Qadmaia or Adam Kasia (“Hidden Adam”) in Mandaeism.

In difficult to date Mandaean sources such as *Alf Trisar Suialia* (“The Thousand and Twelve Questions”), Adam Kasia functions as at once the hypostatic form of the Great Life, the macrocosmic structure of the universe, and the model for the microcosmic body of Adam Pagria (“Physical Adam”). The first appearance of the phrase *ha-adam ha-qadmon* in Jewish sources is in the thirteenth century work *Sod Yedi’at Ha-Mezi’ut* (“The Secret Knowledge of Existence”) belonging to the Western European kabbalistic group known as the “Circle of Contemplation.”21 Adam Qadmon later became a particularly important part of the sixteenth century Lurianic school of Kabbalah in Sefad. Although the doctrine of Adam Qadmon received its fullest development in these relatively late sources, its origin may be traced to much earlier rabbinic traditions concerning the giant figure of Adam. It is likely that these late antique Jewish sources influenced both Gnostic and Mandaeian traditions of the Primal Adam, only to re-emerge in medieval Jewish sources.22

**COSMOGONY AND THEOSOPHY**

The figure of Primal Adam is one of the many parallels between Mandaeism and the medieval branch of Jewish mysticism known as the Kabbalah. Indeed,

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Zwi Werblowsky has suggested that Mandaeism has even more in common with the Kabbalah than with Merkabah mysticism. As Drower has noted, the most important similarities involve “cosmogony” and “sexual imagery.” Priestly Mandaean texts such as Alma Rishaia Raba (“The Great First World”), Diwan Malkuta ‘Laita (“The Scroll of Exalted Kingship”), and Alf Trisar Shuialia (“The Thousand and Twelve Questions”), link the creation of the world to the alphabet, a phenomenon seen in a number of Jewish mystical sources, most notably the pre-kabbalistic work known as Sefer Yetsirah (“Book of Creation”) and Sefer Ha-Bahir (“The Book of Illumination”), which is generally acknowledged to be the earliest kabbalistic book. As part of the cosmogonic process, the letters of the alphabet are also identified with the limbs and organs of the Cosmic Anthropos.

Both Mandaean and early kabbalistic sources employ a similar set of cosmogonic and theosophic symbols, many of them grounded in the realm of sexuality. According to one priestly Mandaean text, “all worlds and generations” proceed from the hieros gamos between the phallic date palm and the vaginal wellspring or ainu u-sindirka. Once again, the Bahir contains a close parallel in the depiction of the primordial tree (eilan) which is watered by a wellspring (ma’ayan). Elsewhere the Bahir describes the date palm as “including both male and female. How is this? The lulav [the frond of the date palm] is male and the fruit is male on the outside and female on the inside.” As Elliot Wolfson has shown, this androgynous structure is a basic part of kabbalistic theosophy. For example, he writes that “the image of the crown or the process of crowning is used to denote the union of the masculine and feminine aspects of the pleroma” and “involves a reconstitution of the male androgyne.” Like these kabbalistic traditions, the Diwan Malkuta ‘Laita depicts the crown as a symbol of androgyny: “the inner crown that comes to the outer one supports it. Behold the crown of the bridegroom has something internal to it, (something) dwelling in the mystery of the female! (If) there is nothing external within it, its kingship is lost. Behold, the female without male cannot be established!”

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23 Z. Werblowsky, review of The Secret Adam, p. 132, writes, “What is so remarkable about these similarities is the fact that they relate to medieval Kabbalah even more than to the earlier, ‘gnostic’ Hekhalot-mysticism.”
27 For a lengthier discussion of these passages see N. Deutsch, Guardians of the Gate, pp. 103-104; G. Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah, pp. 172-173.
Other theosophical structures appearing in both Mandaean and kabbalistic sources include the Hebrew *shekhinah*/Mandaic *shkinta* ("divine presence"), *demut/dmuta* ("ideal image"), and *awir/ayar* ("ether"). In kabbalistic texts such as the *Bahir*, the Shekhinah functions as the final, feminine sefirah. By contrast, Mandaean texts multiply the concept of the *shkinta*, sometimes employing it to refer to a type of divine being (cf. *Alf Trisar Shuialia*, sec. 254) but more frequently to a place or structure of light.\(^{30}\) The Mandaean concept of the *dmuta* combines elements of the *demut* in Genesis 1:26 and the Platonic doctrine of forms to produce what Drower has defined as "the spiritual or ideal counterpart or double of everything and everyone in the material world."\(^{31}\) In *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Scholem describes a similar phenomenon in the early Kabbalah: "Corresponding to all we find in the terrestrial world, there exist in heaven archetypes, *demuyoth*, or powers, from which they draw sustenance. The number of these powers is limited to that of the sefirot or logoi, while that of the archetypes does not appear to be fixed."\(^{32}\)

The Ether or *ayar* in Mandaeism has both cosmological and theosophical significance. Some sources identify the male element (i.e. the "Father") in the primordial syzygy with *ayar*, also referred to as *ayar-rba* ("Great Ether") or *ayar-ziwa* ("Ether Radiance"). In priestly scrolls, the Ether is frequently personified as a kind of celestial priest and participates in various rituals. This parallels the priestly character of a number of "light beings" including Abathur and Yushamin. The Ether also maintains its cosmological significance, as the *Alf Trisar Shuialia* (sec. 243) indicates: "The outer Ether [ayar *baraia*] is held above the skies and exists below the earth." At the same time, the inner Ether or *ayar gawaia* is the divine breath which inhabits and animates the human body.\(^{33}\) Thus, the Ether has both macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions, an idea captured in the following quotes from *Alf Trisar Shuialia* (secs. 223, 246): "The earth is a Body and air (*ayar*) is the soul therein," and "For pure air (*Ayar Dakia*) is formed therein: if a single (breath) be blocked, the whole Body is injured. Then he taught about Ayar-Rba that it is ‘the rod of upstanding’, for he is the great uniting element by which the whole edifice is held together." Drower notes that she is "uncertain of the exact meaning" of the Mandaean expression *qaina d qumta*, which she translates as "rod of upstanding." In fact, this image, combined with the frequent link between *ayar-rba* and the Father, suggests a phallic connotation.

\(^{30}\) See Gershom Scholem’s comments on this contrast in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 164. Scholem notes that the Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 39b mentions the possibility of multiple *shekhinoth* (Aramaic, *shekkinatha*).

\(^{31}\) E. Drower, *The Thousand and Twelve Questions*, p. 11. Also see the illuminating comments in J. Buckley, *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism*, (Chapel Hill, 1986), p. 29.

\(^{32}\) G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 140.

The concept of the Ether or *awir* appears in a number of early Jewish sources. The expression *awir ziw* occurs in the Hekhalot literature, where it does not refer to a personified being as in Mandaean sources but, instead, to the “marble stones” which are found in heaven. The *Sefer Yetzirah* refers to the *awir* as a primordial substance which “cannot be grasped.” Elsewhere, however, the *awir* is identified with a number of other elements: “Created with the [letter] aleph: *ruah* [‘wind’ or ‘spirit’], *awir* [‘ether’], *reviyah* [‘fullness’ or ‘overflow’], *geviyah* [‘phallus’ or ‘body’], *hoq* [‘circle,’ ‘engraving,’ or ‘law’], and *lashon* [‘tongue’].” A number of these elements are explicitly or implicitly phallic. In several places, *Sefer Yetzirah* depicts one or more of them as “balancing” or “harmonizing” the other primordial elements like a tongue between the two scales of a balance (cf. *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:1).

The symbolic association between the tongue (of a balance) and the phallus appears in both Mandaean and kabbalistic sources. Thus, for example, Elliot Wolfson writes that “the weights of the scale are thought to correspond to the testicles and the tongue in the middle to the *membrum virile,*” while Yehuda Liebes notes that the sefirah *Da’at* “is regarded as a symbol of the tongue, which is considered analogous to the male organ.” The addition of the *awir* to this symbolic matrix by *Sefer Yetzirah* recalls the Mandaean tradition mentioned above in which Ayar-Rba is described as the “’rod of upstanding’, for he is the great uniting element by which the whole edifice is held together.” In both cases, the Ether appears to function as the primordial, phallic element which unites the macrocosmic anthropos.

The next step in the development of the *awir* in Jewish sources occurs in the Babylonian sage Saadya Ha-Gaon’s commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*, where he distinguishes between the material Ether of the atmosphere and the *awir dak* or “Subtle Ether.” Saadya identifies the *awir dak* with the divine Kabod (“Glory”), the Shekhinah, and with the “spirit of the Living God.” Scholem writes that “Within the latter [i.e. *awir dak*], says Saadya, the will of the Creator unfolds itself, moving it as life moves the body.” Here we are re-

35 See N. Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate*, pp. 119-120.
minded of the linguistically parallel Mandaean phrase *ayar dakia*, mentioned above.

Like the concept of Adam Qadmon, the primordial Ether became an important element in the early kabbalistic texts known as the “Circle of Contemplation.” Indeed, in their multiple references to apparently different conceptions of Ether, these sources resemble the Mandaean texts in which ideas and titles for the Ether proliferate. In some texts, the Ether is characterized as one of the lower cosmological forces. For example, the short recension of the *Sefer Ha-Iyyun* (“Book of Contemplation”) refers to “Encompassing Ether” (*awir ha-sovev*) as a cosmological substance located between the wheels of the divine chariot (*merkavah*) and the celestial curtain (*pargod*). Yet, other texts depict Ether as the first substance, i.e. the *awir qadmon* (“Primordial Ether”). Thus, *Ma’yan ha-Hokhmah* (“The Fountain of Wisdom”) describes the *awir qadmon* as preceding everything and giving rise to streams of light and darkness, as well as to five primordial colors which emerge like a “flame.” Elsewhere, the *awir qadmon* is called the “source of all supernal blessings.” 40

The standard recension of the *Sefer Ha-Iyyun* identifies the Ether as follows: “The third camp is Unity itself. It is Uri’el. He is the element of the spirit and the Ether.” This passage recalls depictions of the Ether in both Mandaean sources and the *Sefer Yetsirah* as the primordial element which unites the cosmos.

Before offering some conclusions, I would like to discuss a final kabbalistic tradition concerning the Ether which appears in a fourteenth century codex (Jewish Theological Seminary ms. 1884):

Its name is *araryeta*. And this [refers to] “for the Lord created something new in the land: a woman shall encircle a man” (Jer. 31:22). This is Primal Ether [*awir ha-kadmon*]. She is ascribed by the ancient sages to be the final point. Sometimes she is emanated and sometimes she emanates; sometimes she receives overflow and sometimes she overflows. And she is two faced [*du-parsufin*]: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge…. There is in this the secret of the Cherubs, a hint to one who understands that which the Scripture says “male and female He created them… and He called their name Adam on the day He created them.” [Gen. 5:2] Similarly the men of the esoteric religion called its name the Glory which is above the Glory. And this is the secret meaning of the verse “And the Lord passed before him and he called out, ‘Lord, Lord’” [Exod. 34:6] The latter is the Primordial Ether in the Kabbalah of R. Meshulam the Zadokite of Terayusah, which is in the kingdom of Germany. The sages of the Kabbalah received a tradition from R. Moses b. Nahman, blessed is the memory of the righteous, concerning the Primordial Ether that she is called Mother like Leah [the matriarch] and this is [the significance of] “If you shall call out to understanding [*binah*].” [Prov. 2:3] She is the third sefirah, which has been added to Adam. 41

This text is intriguing for a number of reasons. Most significantly, it depicts the Primordial Ether as a kind of androgyne in which the “female shall encircle the male.” The androgynous character of the Ether is emphasized in a number of ways. It is described as “two faced” (du-parsufin), likened to the Cherubs, and linked to the biblical phrase “male and female He created them.” All of these elements serve as symbols of androgyny in Jewish mystical literature. Within the kabbalistic framework, to emanate and to overflow are masculine functions whereas to receive emanation and overflow are feminine functions; the fact that the Ether does both is a further indication of androgyny. While the Hebrew word for Ether, awir, is masculine in gender, the text alternates between masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to it, even employing the feminine pronoun more frequently.

The phrase from Jeremiah, “a woman shall encircle a man,” symbolically associates the Ether with the vagina which surrounds or encircles the phallus. This image draws on another meaning of the term awir in Jewish sources, namely as an empty or hollow space which can be filled. This structural association appears to contrast with the more common kabbalistic depiction of an androgyne in which the exterior male aspect surrounds the interior female aspect, as in the lulav (the frond of the date palm) which is “male on the outside and female on the inside,” and similarly, the hypostatic phallus in which the female aspect is localized within the opening of the corona.42 As we saw above, the same association between maleness and exteriority and femaleness and interiority was made in the Diwan Malkuta ‘Laita: “Behold the crown of the bridegroom has something internal to it, (something) dwelling in the mystery of the female.”

The text’s identification of the Ether as “Mother” and with the third sefirah, i.e. Binah, further emphasizes its female dimension, although it does not preclude an androgynous interpretation. When Binah receives influx from the sefirah Hokhmah (Wisdom), it functions as a female, but when Binah overflows and generates the lower sefirot it becomes male, as the Zohar states: “Even though that supernal world [Binah] is feminine, it is called male when it emanates all the goodness and all the light comes out from it.”43 The sixteenth century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria, described the androgynous character of Binah as follows: “even though she [Binah] is female she ends with the masculine.”44

42 E. Wolfson, “Woman – The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne”, in The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity, (New York, 1994), p. 186, writes “According to some kabbalists, the corona of the penis corresponds to the Diadem (‘Atarah), i.e. the Shekhinah or feminine Presence. The feminine aspect of God, therefore, becomes localized as part of the phallus itself.”

43 Zohar I:163a.

44 Sha’ar Ma’amere Rashbi 7b.
CONCLUSION

The parallels between Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism are both striking and extensive, ranging from the earlier Hekhalot material to the medieval Kabbalah. What can they teach us about the historical development of Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism? In answering this complex question, it is important to emphasize that because of difficulties in establishing dating and provenance for both traditions any conclusions at this stage must be qualified as hypothetical. With this caveat in mind, it is still possible to suggest several scenarios.

First, early Mandaean and Jewish mystical circles, alike, may have inherited a common pool of traditions – whether biblical, apocalyptic, Gnostic, Mesopotamian, or some combination thereof, which they then transformed, sometimes in parallel ways. Similar cosmological and theosophical structures would then reflect internal developments within Mandaeism and Judaism with little if any significant cultural exchange between the two groups in Babylonia. The advantage of this explanation is that it removes the need for evidence of historical contact and influence in either direction while the groups were living in Babylonia. Yet, this model fails to adequately account for the Mandaean traditions discussed above which suggest a kind of competition between Mandaean and Jewish circles over “secret knowledge.” Nor does it offer any explanation for why the most striking parallels between Mandaeism and Jewish mysticism involve the Kabbalah rather than the earlier Hekhalot material. Finally, it does not explain how certain mystical and magical traditions (for example, the figure of Metatron) came to be shared by Mandaean and Jews.

An alternate scenario would involve continuous contact between Mandaean and Jewish mystics in Babylonia from Late Antiquity to the medieval period. Initially, these interactions resulted in shared magical and angelological traditions. During this phase the parallels which exist between Mandaeism and Hekhalot mysticism would have developed. At some point, both Mandaean and Jewish circles in Babylonia began to develop similar cosmogonic and theosophic traditions involving an analogous set of terms, concepts, and images. At present it is impossible to say whether these parallels resulted primarily from Jewish influence on Mandaean, Mandaean influence on Jews, or from cross fertilization. Whatever their original source, these traditions eventually made their way into the priestly – that is, esoteric – Mandaean texts examined above (which generally appear to be medieval in origin) and into the Kabbalah.45

An obvious question raised by this scenario is how originally Babylonian traditions could have made their way into kabbalistic circles in Western Eu-

45 On the medieval context of the priestly Mandaean sources, see R. Machuch’s comments in J. Buckley, The Scroll of Exalted Kingship, pp. iii-vii.
rope. In fact, several medieval Jewish sources depict the transfer of esoteric material from Babylonia to Europe. In *Origins of the Kabbalah*, his magisterial book on the development of the early Kabbalah in Provence and Spain, as well as in other works, Gershom Scholem speculated on the possible existence of what he called “Oriental” sources for the *Bahir* and the writings of the “Circle of Contemplation,” that is precisely those kabbalistic texts which evince the closest parallels with Mandaeism. According to Scholem, one of the most important of these sources was an Aramaic text called *Raza Raba*, which has only survived in Hebrew quotations. These quotations, as well as references to the work in other texts, indicate that the *Raza Raba* had many parallels with Mandaean literature, including the use of the term *raza*, itself.

In addition to tracing certain elements in the early Kabbalah to Babylonian Jewish traditions, Scholem also raised the question of the early Kabbalah’s link to Mandaeism. I would like to close with a quote from Scholem concerning this issue, one which invokes the rich religious soil of Mesopotamia, where Mandaeans and Jews, alike, once planted and cultivated their own trees of esoteric knowledge:

> it is possible that these ancient gnostic traditions, like others among the kabbalists, go back to different groups in the Orient, concerning whom we possess no written testimony. It is in the neighborhood of Mandaean and Manichaean communities in Mesopotamia, where gnostic materials were kept alive in such varied forms, that we could most easily imagine the existence of such Jewish Gnostics; some fragments from their doctrines, mixed with other materials, may have made their way to Europe. Perhaps the symbolism of the date palm, occurring in some of these texts, points in the same direction.

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46 For example, the *Chronicle of Ahimaz*, which depicts the ninth century figure Abu Aaron of Baghdad as bringing esoteric material from Babylonia to Italy. See J. Dan, “Aaron of Bagh- dad,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2:21; G. Scholem, “Has a Legacy been Discovered”, *Tarbiz*, 32 (1963) [Hebrew].

47 On this work and its relationship to the Kabbalah, see G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 97-123. For a critique of Scholem’s historiographical position on the origins of the early Kabbalah and the “Circle of Contemplation” in particular, see M. Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, pp. 165-201.

48 G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 91-92, “perhaps, there once existed entire systems of a Jewish character parallel to the classic systems of Gnosticism or to the later gnostic ramifications of the kind that survived in the Aramaic-Syrian linguistic area, such as, for example, the Mandaean gnosis. Only obscure traces of these sources, not a system but merely fragments of symbols, seem to have come into the hands of the redactors of the *Bahir*.“ See also p. 119.

49 G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 192-193. Although Scholem follows this statement with the caveat that “we must not underestimate the difficulties raised by such an hypothesis,” he concludes the paragraph with the following sentence: “On the whole I tend to accept the first hypothesis, to wit that we are dealing with fragments of an older Jewish-gnostic tradition that came from the Orient by paths no longer discernible to us and that reached the circles in which the Book *Bahir* originated.”