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It is well known that, according to the Mandaean tradition, the prophet John the Baptist got married and begot scores of children.

It must be said that the prospect of being a married man did not particularly attract John the Baptist. Never has been seen so much resistance, reluctance and recalcitrance with regard to the holy institution of marriage. The Prophet protested and objected that, as a matter of fact, he was an ascetic and that he had to practise, without unjustified hindrances, his nocturnal prayers and vigils all the nights of the week. He knew well that it was impossible to pronounce those prayers in the state of necessary impurity which derives from marital intercourse.

Nevertheless, John the Baptist had to submit himself to the celestial will and to grant his wife at least one night of marital care every week. Anhar, as his wife was called, a woman especially moulded for him, bore him eight children in three pregnancies. Their names have been recorded.

I have searched in vain in Christian and Islamic literatures for any parallel with the Mandaean belief concerning the private life of John the Baptist, until I fell in with an unpublished Arabo-Islamic tale which has been preserved in a miscellaneous manuscript of the Library of Gotha in the former German Democratic Republic. It has the title 'The story of the skull and the king' (حَدِيثُ الْجِنَّةِ مِنْ الْجِلْدِ), but in reality it is a fanciful Arabo-Islamic re-interpretation of the Jewish legend of 'Susanna and the two elders'.

This famous story is not present in the Hebrew Bible, but it is deeply rooted in the Jewish folklore of every age. As a matter of fact the story of Susanna...
Once in the desert she sings psalms in so charming and delightful a way that all the birds stop around her in order to listen to her voice. Then the clouds come down to rest on her. Their passion is so overpowering that they cannot pray anymore. They set a snare to seize her, but astutely she gets out of their plot.

In a rage with her, the two hermits go down to the town, meet the king and slander Susanna, saying that she fornicates with a young man. The king grandfather believes them and orders her to be sent to the stake. But he is grieved and sorrowful and tries to get soleace riding in the orchards. There he notices that six young pickers of kindling wood for the stake are playing at court of justice. One sits as a judge, two stay as the hermits, one as Susanna and the last two stay as attorneys-at-law.

After having observed how they worked out the lawsuit in acquiring his granddaughter Susanna of the charge of fornication and in accusing the two hermits of calumny, the king entrusts the boy who acted as a judge with the task of instituting proceedings in the court-house. The clever boy, like a novel Daniel, fulfills his duty excellently: he interrogates the false witnesses separately, Susanna is acquitted and the two hermits are sentenced to death by ligation and combustion.

When the king asked him who his father was, the boy replied: "Zachariah, upon Him be peace." Then the king said: "You are right: such a fruit comes but from such a plant." He rewarded him generously and gave him in marriage a noble and pretty girl.

Who else could be the son of Zachariah if not Yahyā alias John the Baptist? I think that the unexpected entrance upon the scene of the Baptist in the guise of the prophet Daniel could be explained by the fact that, according to at least one Islamic tradition, Yahyā was contemporary with Daniel. 6

On the other hand, the Koran (sura XIX, 12 (13)) depicts the Baptist as a man who had been wise since his infancy: "O Yahyā, hold fast the Book! And We gave him wisdom while yet a child". This is something that was otherwise only said about Jesus Christ. 7

It may be that the author of the Arabic tale joined the ideals and the tendencies of the Islamic mystics of the early ages, the so-called Ḥāfiz "moaners". 8 They are said to have been fully in tune with the Christian mystics in Syria and in Iraq and with the spiritual leaders of the Baptistics sects. 9 In fact they shared their ideals of poverty and pity as well as the sharp consciousness of sin and the rigorous practice of abstinence. Besides they were devotees of John the Baptist, an unsurpassed pattern of continence and austerity.

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1. In the Koran Zachariah is mentioned in the suras 3:37-41; 6:85; 19:2-41 and 21:89-90.
3. Cfr. sura 3:46 (47): "And he shall speak to the people in the cradle as an adult and he shall be of the righteous".
A marked phobia concerning male and female genitals is evident in three passages of the tale:
1) the conception through the deglutition of a fruit;
2) the birth of Susanna from the right side of the virgin as-Rabah;
3) the enthusiasm of Susanna for having been conceived without the intervention of a carnal father.

Nevertheless, in the Arabic tale John the Baptist is given a beautiful spouse as a reward for his providential intervention and makes no resistance thereto. But we have to keep in mind that in the Koran there is no mention of the beheading of the Baptist⁶⁵ and, since in the sura XIII, 38 (39) we read: 'And, indeed, We sent Messengers before thee, and We gave them wives and children', we may infer that in early times also Muslims, or at least a marginal group of them, believed that John the Baptist had to get married.

One can only wonder that such a transient but suggestive parallel with the Mandaean belief concerning the private life of John the Baptist has come out in an elaborate tale contained in a nearly unknown Arabic manuscript.

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A review of the publication of E.S. Drower's *The Book of the Zodiac*¹ appeared in the premiere journal for the history of science in the United States, *Ibis* vol.41 of 1950, written by George Sarton, the founder and editor of that journal from 1913-1952. The review probably would no longer be remembered, but for Otto Neugebauer, who contributed a now famous one-page reaction in *Ibis* vol. 42, entitled "The Study of Wretched Subjects." There, Neugebauer said, "when the recognized dean of the History of Science disposes of a whole field with the words 'the superstitious flotsam of the Near East,' he perhaps does not fully realize how much he is contributing to the destruction of the very foundations of our studies: the recovery and study of the texts as they are, regardless of our own tastes and prejudices."² Indeed, the content of the Mandaean *Asfari Sfar Malwastia* (henceforth SM) bears rich testimony to many astrological doctrines widespread wherever hellenistic astrology held currency, and in some areas, preserved long after the Greco-Roman period.

While the historical significance of astrology in the Hellenistic, late antique, and mediaeval periods may have been seen primarily in terms of its role as the major vehicle for the transmission of astronomy, its intrinsic interest and importance as a source for ancient cultural belief systems is equally significant. The extraordinary longevity of the acceptance of astral influence as a law of the cosmos and the fluidity of the cultural transmission of forms of this belief is demonstrated by the fact that originally Mesopotamian elements may be traced in a work such as the SM, whose own origins seem to be Sasanian, although to my knowledge no extant copies antedate the 19th century. The earliest copy used by Lady Drower is a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale dated to 1212 A.H.; but her major source was completed in 1247 "according to the computation of the Arabs," as it is stated in the text, or 1869 A.D. The manuscript concludes with the statement of the date of copy and the note that the text is a "compilation from a Greek miscellany (of) calculations about the stars and horoscopes and information about what there is in the heavens ac-

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⁶⁵ John the Baptist (Yahshua) is mentioned in the Koran in the suras 6:85; 19:7, 12-13, and 21:98.