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AN ARABO-ISLAMIC TALE  
IN AGREEMENT WITH THE MANDAEAN BELIEF  
THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST GOT MARRIED

FABRIZIO A. PENNACCHIETTI<sup>1</sup>

It is well known that, according the Mandaean tradition,<sup>1</sup> 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for any parallel with the Mandaean belief concerning the private life of John the Baptist, until I fell in with an unpublished Arabo-Islamic tale which has been preserved in a miscellaneous manuscript of the Library of Gotha in the former German Democratic Republic.<sup>2</sup> It has the title 'The story of the skull and the king' (حديث الجمجمة مع الملك), but in reality it is a fancy Arabo-Islamic reinterpretation 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.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact the story of Susanna

<sup>1</sup> Drašia d-Iahia, 18-33. In this holy book of the Mandaeans it is written that the first two children of John the Baptist were called Handan and Šarrat; the second twins were Bihram and R'imat Hiia, whereas his last four children were Nšab, Sam, Anhar Ziua and Šarrat (?), cfr. E. Lupieri, *I Mandei. Gli ultimi gnostici*, (Brescia, 1993), pp. 258-259.

<sup>2</sup> Gotha, miscellaneous Ms. orient. A 2756, folios 30a-44b, cfr. F. A. Pennacchietti, *Susanna nel deserto. Riflessi di un racconto biblico in una novella araba*, (Torino, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. M. Wurmbrand, "A Falasha Variant of the Story of Susanna", *Biblica*, 44 (1963), pp. 29-45, and H. Schwarzbaum, "Prolegomenon", in M. Gaster, *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel, or the Hebrew Bible Historiale being a collection of apocryphal and pseudo-epigraphical books dealing with the history of the world from the creation to the death of Judas Maccabeus*, 2nd ed., (New York, 1971), pp. 73-74. One finds a collateral variant of the story in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, fol. 93a, translated by Gaster, *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, chap LXIV,

appears as the 13th chapter of the Greek Septuaginta text of the Book of Daniel,<sup>4</sup> whereas in the Greek recension of the same book made by the Jew Theodotion (2nd c AD), as well as in the old Latin version of the Bible known as *Vetus Latina*, it precedes the first chapter of the same biblical book.

According to the Roman Catholic Church since the Council of Trent (1546), the episode belongs to the Canon, though labelled as deuterocanonic. On the contrary the Greek Church stated in the Synod of Jerusalem (1677) that it is an "ecclesiastical" text outside the Canon. In their turn the Reformed Churches consider it to be apocryphal.

Leaving out of consideration idle questions regarding the canonical status of the story of Susanna, there is no reason for wondering that such a popular story has been also reflected by an Arabo-Islamic tale, all the more that the latter seems to have been composed before the half of the 9th c AD.

The Arabic manuscript kept in Gotha tells us how a princess called Susanna, who served God singing psalms in a cell in the desert, was rescued by John the Baptist from two false witnesses who charged her with fornication.

In brief, the tale runs as follows:

In the course of big game hunting, a pious king of the Israelites runs across a gazelle of astonishing beauty and adorned with collar, jewels, earrings and two fluttering silk ribbons.

He pursues it until the animal leads him into a cave at the foot of a mountain. There the gazelle disappears, but the king finds instead of it a huge skull. He carries it to the camp and spends a sleepless night wondering if there is any sense in believing in the resurrection of the dead. In this way disbelief creeps into his heart.

He comes back to the town, consults with the wise men of his kingdom and has the skull buried in his park.

Some days later, from the buried skull sprouts a big tree bearing prodigious fruits which restore youth and health. Old and ill people together with many curious persons rush there from everywhere.

The king had a daughter called ar-Rabāb. She took one of those fruits and became pregnant. She bore a baby from her right side and died. The king called the baby Susanna and told the wet-nurses to bring her up.

When she was twelve years old, she asked his grandfather, who were her parents. The king told her the truth about her birth and she begged him to build for her a lofty cell in the desert. There she would glorify, praise, extol, and laud God that she had been conceived without the intervention of a man.

pp. 200-202: "The Midrash of Ahab ben Qolaya and Zedekiah ben Ma'aseyah". The two false prophets Ahab and Zedekiah, who tried to seduce the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, are mentioned in Jer. 29:21-23.

<sup>4</sup> For the Greek Septuaginta recension of the story of Susanna see A. Geissen, *Der Septuaginta-Text des Buches Daniel Kap. 5-12, zusammen mit Susanna, Bel et Draco sowie Esther Kap. 1,1a-2,15 nach dem Kölner Teil des Papyrus 967*, (Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen 5, Bonn, 1968); C. F. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (The Anchor Bible 44, New York, 1977), pp. 77-116; and H. Engel, *Die Susanna-Erzählung. Einleitung, Übersetzung und Kommentar zum Septuaginta-Text und zur Theodotion-Bearbeitung*, (Freiburg CH - Göttingen 1985).

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 her voice. Two hermits who have their cells in the vicinity fall in love with her. Their passion is so overpowering that they cannot pray any longer. 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 solace riding in the orchards. There he notices that six young pickers of kindling wood for the stake are playing at courts 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 acquitting 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, fulfils his duty excellently: he interrogates the false witnesses separately, Susanna is acquitted and the two hermits are sentenced to death by lapidation 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<sup>5</sup> if not Yaḥyà alias John the Baptist? I think that the unexpected entrance upon the scene of the Baptizer in the guise of the prophet Daniel could be explained by the fact that, according to at least one Islamic tradition, Yaḥyà was contemporary with Daniel.<sup>6</sup>

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

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 *سكّاء* "moaners".<sup>8</sup> 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 Baptist sects.<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> In the Koran Zachariah is mentioned in the *suras* 3:37-41; 6:85; 19:2-11 and 21:89-90.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. M. J. De Goeje (ed.), *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed Ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, 13 vols. (Leiden 1879-1901), vol II, pp. 716-717.

<sup>7</sup> 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'.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, I, 1960, pp. 988-990: the item "Bakkā", pl. bakkā'ūn, bukkā'" by F. Meier; P. Crone - M. Cook, *Hagarism*, (Cambridge, 1977), p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> About Baptist sects from the 2nd century AD see K. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer. I. Prolegomena: Das Mandäerproblem*, (Göttingen, 1960), pp. 222-252; the item "Elkesai" by G. Strecker in *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum*, IV, col 1171-1186; and the item "Šābi'a" by T. Fahd in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, VIII, 1994, pp. 694-698.

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 ar-Rabāb;
- 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 Baptizer<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> John the Baptist (Yahyā) is mentioned in the Koran in the *suras* 6:85; 19:7, 12-13, and 21:90.

## THE BABYLONIAN ORIGINS OF THE MANDAEAN BOOK OF THE ZODIAC

FRANCESCA ROCHBERG\*

A review of the publication of E.S. Drower's *The Book of the Zodiac*<sup>1</sup> appeared in the premiere journal for the history of science in the United States, *Isis* 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 *Isis* 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."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the content of the Mandaean *Asfar/ Sfar Malwašia* (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 Bibliotheque 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-

\* This paper was presented at a conference devoted to the Mandaeans held at Harvard University on 13-15 June 1999.

<sup>1</sup> Oriental Translation Fund Vol. 35 (London, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> *Isis* 41(1950), p.374. See also in G. Sarton, *A History of Science*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1959), p.341 and note 112, where the Mandaeans are defined as "a tribe of Gnostic Christians."