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Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins

Edwin M. Yamauchi

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The texts of the Mandaeans have been used by scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann to support the thesis of a Pre-Christian Gnosticism which influenced the New Testament. In opposition to other leading scholars of the Mandaeans (E. S. Drower, R. Macuch, K. Rudolph), who have assumed a pre-Christian origin of this important Gnostic community, Yamauchi, whose dissertation examined the earliest Mandaic texts (Mandaic Incantation Texts, also available from Gorgias Press), concludes that the Mandaeans could not have originated before the second century CE. He notes that their emphasis upon marriage and procreation distinguishes them from the ethics of other Gnostic groups. He suggests that their Gnostic theology was transmitted by a migration from Transjordan to Mesopotamia, where this was fused with an indigenous cult, from the observation of the many ancient Mesopotamian elements which have been retained in their magic and rites. Indeed, it is probably their strong ritual tradition which has enabled the Mandaean community to become the only Gnostics to survive to this day.

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