

GINZA RABBA

The Great Treasure of the Mandaean Tradition

Revealed to Prophet John (Yahya Yuhana)

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PREFACE

to the

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Introduction to the Reader

The volume the reader holds in his hands represents, without exaggeration, one of the oldest, most mysterious, and most profoundly misunderstood literary and spiritual monuments in the entire history of religions. The Ginza Rabba—whose name, translated from the Mandaean language, literally means "Great Treasure"—is the fundamental sacred scripture of Mandaeism, a religious faith that, due to a series of extraordinary and dramatic historical circumstances, has survived the millennia, through empires, persecutions, wars, and diasporas, preserving its theological and ritual identity intact to the present day.

To discuss the Ginza Rabba is to immerse oneself in a conceptual universe that precedes and, in some respects, transcends the great monotheistic religions that dominated the spiritual scene of the Near East and the Western world. It is a textual corpus rooted in a cultural and religious substratum likely dating back to ancient Mesopotamia, the very cradle of human civilization, that land between two rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates—where, for the first time in history, man raised his eyes to the heavens and sought to give a name and meaning to the mystery of his own existence.

Yet, despite its venerable antiquity and immeasurable doctrinal richness, the Ginza Rabba remained for centuries a text virtually unknown to the general public and even to much of the academic world. The reasons for this marginalization are manifold and deserve brief exploration, as they themselves shed light on the unique nature and troubled history of the Mandaean community that preserved it.

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Mandaeism: The Religion of Knowledge

Mandaeism is a monotheistic religion of Gnostic origin, one of the last surviving Gnostic traditions on the face of the Earth. The very term "Mandaean" derives from the Mandaic root *manda*, meaning "knowledge"—a concept that represents the beating heart of all Mandaean theology. The Mandaeans are therefore, in the most literal and profound sense of the expression, the "knowers," those who possess gnosis, the saving and illuminating knowledge transmitted by the Great First Life through its celestial envoys.

Unlike other ancient Gnostic traditions, which flourished in the Hellenistic period and the first centuries of the Christian era only to disappear under the combined waves of Roman imperial persecution and ecclesiastical orthodoxy, Mandaeism has managed to survive as an organized and practiced religion. The Mandaeans have kept their cult, ceremonies, liturgical language, and sacred texts alive throughout more than two thousand years of history, concentrated primarily in the marshlands of southern Iraq and the Iranian region of Khuzestan, along the banks of those rivers that constitute an absolutely central element in their religious practice: living, flowing

water, the Yardna , is the vehicle of purification and spiritual rebirth.

, the baptismal rite, the Masbuta , is not a sacrament to be received only once in a lifetime, as is the case in Christianity, but rather a practice to be repeated with constancy and regularity, a continuous immersion in the flowing waters that symbolizes and establishes the unbroken bond between the human soul and the World of Light from which it comes. In this sense, Mandaean baptism possesses a cosmic and ontological dimension that goes far beyond simple ritual ablution: it is the primordial gesture with which man reaffirms his belonging to the Light and his rejection of Darkness.

The central figure of Mandaean devotion is not, as one might mistakenly suppose, a historical founder in the conventional sense. Mandeans supremely venerate Yahya Yuhana, or John the Baptist, who in Mandaean tradition is considered the greatest and most authentic prophet ever to appear in the material world—the last and definitive messenger of Truth sent by the Great First Life to instruct souls imprisoned in the flesh and guide them on the path back to the Light. This theological position places Mandaism in a relationship of singular tension with Christianity and Islam, since both religions recognize John the Baptist as an important but subordinate role, while for the Mandeans, he is the pinnacle of prophecy.

The Structure of the Ginza Rabba

The Ginza Rabba, in its traditional form, presents itself as a bipartite work, a duality that symbolically reflects the very cosmic structure the text describes. It is divided into two fundamental sections: the Right Ginza (Ginza Yamina) and the Left Ginza (Ginza Smala). This division is neither casual nor merely organizational, but possesses profound ritual and metaphysical significance.

The Right Ginza constitutes the theological, cosmological, and normative section of the sacred text. It contains the great narratives of the creation of the worlds—both those of Light and those of Darkness—the complex hierarchy of divine emanations, the formation of the material world (the Tibil) by the demiurge Ptahil and the spirits of Darkness, the creation of the human being (Adam) as a shell of flesh destined to contain a spark of divine Light, and the moral and ritual teachings that Manda d-Hayyi, the great Messenger of Knowledge, imparts to humanity. The Right Ginza also contains prophecies concerning future eras, the times of trial and persecution that await the children of Light, and the apocalyptic vision of the end times, when the material world will dissolve and pure souls will definitively return to the World of Light.

The Sinister Ginza, on the other hand, is devoted almost entirely to the fate of the soul after the death of the physical body. It is essentially a funerary and liturgical book, a sort of guide for the soul's postmortem journey through the lower heavens, the demon guard stations, and the scales of judgment of Abatur, until its triumphant return to the World of Light. In this section, Mandaean poetry reaches heights of mystical beauty and emotional intensity unparalleled in Near Eastern religious literature. The tale of the soul freeing itself from the prison of the flesh, soaring beyond its dark guardians, and finally reuniting with its celestial Image (the Dmutha), its luminous Double, represents one of the highest expressions of eschatological poetry in all of human spiritual literature.

This edition includes, in addition to some canonical sections of the Ginza Rabba, extensive excerpts from the Drashia d-Yahia (the Book of John), a complementary Mandaic sacred text that narrates in detail the life, mission, and ascension of Yahya Yuhana, with episodes of extraordinary theological and narrative interest: from his miraculous birth to his growth on the White Mountain, from his preaching on the banks of the Jordan to his critical encounter with Jesus, up to the prophet's peaceful death and glorious ascension.

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Mandaic Cosmology: Light and Darkness

To fully understand the Ginza Rabba, it is essential to familiarize oneself with the cosmological vision that forms its conceptual framework. Mandaean cosmology, like all Gnostic cosmologies, is based on a radical dualism between two opposing and irreconcilable ontological principles: Light and Darkness. However, unlike Zoroastrian dualism, in which the two forces confront each other on a plane of substantial equality, in Mandaeism the Light is unequivocally superior, original, and destined for final victory. Darkness, however powerful and terrifying, is a derivative, secondary reality, ultimately destined for annihilation.

At the absolute pinnacle of the Mandaean universe sits the Great First Life (Hayyi Qadmayyi), a supreme divinity, ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, without beginning or end, who cannot be grasped by any mind nor described by any mouth. The Great Life is the supreme Mana, the pure Mind, the inexhaustible source of all splendor. From It emanate, in successive gradations of light, the celestial entities: Yushamin, the Second Life; Abatur, the Third Life, the judge of the scales; and finally Ptahil, the Fourth Life, the involuntary demiurge of the material world.

The creation narrative is one of the most fascinating and original aspects of the Ginza Rabba. It tells how Ptahil, emanating from the reflection of Abatur in the dark waters of primordial Chaos, descends into the lower world and, with the help of Ruha, the mother of Darkness, and the seven evil planets, shapes the material world and molds the human body. But this body—the shell of flesh, mud, and blood—remains inert, lifeless, until the Great Life itself intervenes, sending from above a pure soul (the Nishimta), a spark of its own Light, which is secretly deposited in Adam's body. The human being is thus, in the Mandaean vision, a tragically dual creature: his body belongs to Darkness, but his soul belongs to Light; he walks the earth, but his true home is heaven; he is a prisoner, but destined for liberation.

This theme of the soul's cosmic imprisonment in matter, of its oblivion and awakening, of its fall and resurgence, is the underlying theme of the entire Ginza Rabba and represents the most original and profound contribution of Mandaean thought to the history of religious philosophy. The soul is a "stranger" in the world, an exile who has forgotten its origins and who can only find its way back through knowledge (manda), baptismal purification, and adherence to the Truth (kushta).

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The Great Figures of the Cosmic Drama

The Ginza Rabba is populated by a gallery of celestial and infernal figures of extraordinary symbolic and narrative power. At the center of it all stands Manda d-Hayyi, the "Messenger of Knowledge" or "Knowledge of Life," the supreme envoy of the Great Life, the one who descends to the material world to awaken souls from the slumber of oblivion, to teach them the truth, and to guide them on their journey back to the Light. Manda d-Hayyi is the Gnostic savior par excellence: he saves not through bloody sacrifice or suffering, but through knowledge, the word, and the rite of living water.

Beside him stands the heroic figure of Hibil Ziwa (Abel the Splendor), the celestial warrior who descends into the infernal abysses to chain Ur, the great dragon of Darkness, and strip Ruha of her power. Hibil Ziwa's descent into the underworld, narrated in Book 5 of the Right Ginza with an epic intensity and rich imagery reminiscent of the great descents into the underworld of Mesopotamian literature—the descent of Inanna, the descent of Gilgamesh—is one of the most powerful and memorable passages in the entire Mandaean corpus.

On the opposite side, the forces of Darkness are embodied by Ruha d- Qudsha , the evil spirit, the mother of demons and wandering spirits, and the seven planets (Sibahia), evil astral entities that govern the fate of men, send diseases, corrupt prophets, and weave webs of illusion to prevent souls from remembering their luminous origin. Ptahil, the demiurge, occupies an ambiguous and tragic position: he is not evil in the absolute sense, but he is an imperfect creator, unaware of the Great First Life, and the world he has built is a world of defect, suffering, and death.

Miriai, the daughter of the kings of Jerusalem who abandons the sacrificial Temple to embrace the Mandaean faith, and Yahya Yuhana himself, the prophet of living water, complete the pantheon of great protagonists of the Mandaean cosmic drama. Their stories, told with a vividness and dramatic force that never cease to amaze, offer models of fidelity, courage, and dedication to the Truth that transcend the historical and cultural context in which they were composed.

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Mandaeism and Other Religions

One of the most surprising and, for many readers, most disconcerting aspects of the Ginza Rabba is the harshly polemical stance it takes toward the other great monotheistic religions. Mandaism, perhaps unique in the history of religions, explicitly and categorically rejects the authority of Moses, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad, viewing them not as authentic prophets of the Great Life, but rather as instruments of the evil planets and of Ruha, the spirit of deception, sent to divert humanity from the path of the Light.

Moses (Misha) is presented in the text as an instrument of Adonai, an entity who in Mandaean theology does not correspond to the supreme God but to a lower planetary entity associated with the Sun demon. His laws of stone and sword, animal sacrifices, and circumcision are considered abominations in the eyes of the Great Life. Jesus (Ishu Mshiha) is described as an unfaithful disciple of Yahya Yuhana, a man seduced by Ruha who distorts baptism, abolishes pure marriage, and preaches erroneous doctrines. Muhammad is identified as the envoy of the Martian demon, bearer of a book written with the sword.

These polemical positions, which the modern reader is encouraged to approach with appropriate critical thinking and historical sensitivity, are understandable in light of the history of a community that for millennia had to defend its identity and survival in the shadow of religious and political powers infinitely greater than itself. They reflect the voice of a minority that, surrounded on all sides, chose to assert its truth with a radicalism that is, ultimately, the expression of a millennia-old spiritual resistance.

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Mandaean Ethics: The Commandments of Light

Alongside its cosmological and mythological dimensions, the Ginza Rabba offers a remarkably coherent and profound ethical system. The moral commandments dictated to Adam by Manda d-Hayyi, contained in the Right Ginza, outline an ideal of life based on purity, nonviolence, justice, and mercy. The first and most solemn commandment is the absolute prohibition on shedding blood, whether human or animal, for sacrificial purposes. The Great Life abhors blood: this statement, reiterated with extraordinary force throughout the text, clearly distinguishes Mandaism from all religious traditions that have practiced or continue to practice blood sacrifice.

The second great pillar of Mandaean ethics is the obligation of marriage and procreation. Celibacy is not simply discouraged, but explicitly prohibited as a ruha deception, aimed at destroying the human race and preventing souls from incarnating to complete their path to liberation. In this, Mandaism is diametrically opposed to Christian monastic asceticism and any form of renunciation of generative life.

The other commandments include the prohibition of magic and astrology, the prohibition of excessive mourning for the deceased (since the death of the body is the liberation of the soul), the obligation of secret almsgiving, the obligation of regular baptismal purification, and the prohibition of wearing black or dark clothing (since white is the color of Light). Taken together, these precepts establish an ethic of purity, transparency, and trust in eternal life that, in its simplicity and rigor, retains a freshness and compelling power that also speaks to contemporary man.

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The Poetry of the Soul: The Lyrical Themes of the Ginza

The Ginza Rabba is not merely a theological treatise or a legal code: it is also, and perhaps above all, one of the most extraordinary poetic works produced by the ancient Near East. The Mandaic language, an Eastern Aramaic dialect of rare phonetic beauty and great expressive richness, lends itself admirably to the creation of images of light and darkness, flight and fall, exile and return, which form the fundamental lyrical fabric of the text.

The image of the soul as a bird imprisoned in a cage, yearning to fly to the freedom of heaven; the image of the Tree of Life, whose roots drink from the fountains of living water and whose fruits are eternal wisdom; the image of the net of the celestial Fisherman who gathers souls from the dark sea of the world; the touching image of the little souls of children who died prematurely, transformed into white birds on the branches of the Shatrin Tree ; the sublime image of the soul encountering its own celestial Image, its luminous Double, and merging with it in an embrace of light—all these images possess an evocative power and beauty that transcend all cultural and religious boundaries.

Then there is the recurring motif of perfume: the scent of the Tree of Life, the scent of pure ether, the intoxicating

aroma of the World of Light that awakens the soul from the torpor of matter. In an age when religion is often reduced to an abstract formula or ideology, the Ginza Rabba reminds us that the experience of the sacred is also a sensorial experience, a thrill of body and spirit before the ineffable beauty of the origin.

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The Mandaean Apocalypse: The End and the Return...

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