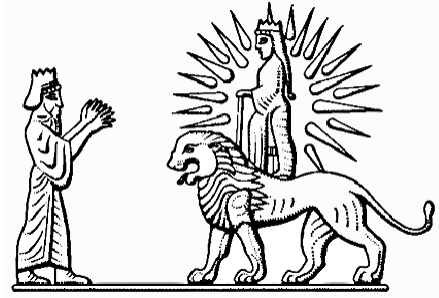


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“Continuity of Pagan Religious Traditions in Tenth-Century Iraq”

JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA

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JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA Helsinki

Continuity of Pagan Religious Traditions in Tenth-Century Iraq

Perhaps nine tenths of sciences belong to the Nabateans
and one tenth to all other nations together¹

It has long been known that Ḥarrān remained a seat of pagan and Hellenistic religion deep into the Islamic period. One of the leading authorities of Hellenistic religions in Syria, H.J.W. Drijvers, has written (1980: 129):

Leaving aside the whole complicated tradition about the Sabians of Harran, it can be stated that they represent a continuation of indigenous religion and that, however philosophically disguised their doctrines may be, the sources of Sabian belief and practice must be sought in the traditional religion of Harran.

It is generally accepted that the local tradition of Ḥarrān flourished, as a mixture of paganism and Hellenistic philosophy, till the 9th-10th centuries, as witnessed by authors such as an-Nadīm and al-Mas‘ūdī. Hence there is, *a priori*, no reason to doubt the existence of pagan traditions in the less accessible countryside (*sawād*) of Iraq, where the Arab

conquerors never settled down *en masse*. Curiously enough, these traditions have remained very little studied.

Jewish and Christian communities apart, the Islamization of rural areas was a slow process,² and it was never completed in the swamp areas, where Mandaeans have a continuous tradition from before the Islamic conquest and ultimately leading back, at least in part, to Mesopotamian religion. Despite their efforts to appropriate the term ‘Sabians,’ reserved in the Qur’ān for an obscure monotheistic group and thus approved of by Muslim authorities, Mandaeans were very close to pagans in the eyes of Muslim observers. Yet they could find a way to live as a separate religious community, tolerated by Muslim rulers, through to the twentieth century, which shows how theoretical the non-tolerance of Islam towards paganism may sometimes have been.³

¹ Ibn Waḥshiyya, *Kitāb as-Sumūm*, fol. 4b.

² I feel somewhat uneasy with the study of Bulliett on conversion (1979), and do not quite find it adequate to study biographical dictionaries of learned men as a basis for speculations about the total population and its conversions. The peasants of the *Sawād* hardly had many offspring that were noticed in the biographical dictionaries. Thus, paganism may well have lived on for a considerably longer time than one might presume on the basis of Bulliett’s book.

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One has also to remember that pagans, like Mandaeans, rarely wanted to advertize their religion. Likewise, the learned authors never showed much interest in peasants, ash-Shirbīnī’s *Hazz al-quḥūf* being a glorious but late exception. The occasional peasant in, e.g., al-Hamadhānī’s *al-Maqāma al-Baghdādhīyya*, is a stereotype to be laughed at, but even in this comic function peasants are rare.

³ Rudolph (1960-61) II:28, takes it for granted that Islam did not tolerate the Mandaean religion, but this

In fact, the existence of pagans in the tenth-century Islamic world was well known to contemporaries and caused no problems to Muslim authors. Thus, even a strict theologian like al-Ash‘arī simply stated the existence of modern Sabians in his *Maqālāt*, pp. 103-104, when speaking about some Khārijites who also called themselves Sabians:

He (their leader) claimed that the religious community (*milla*) of that prophet (whose appearance they awaited) was *ṣābi‘a* – these are not the same Sabians to which some people belong *today* [emphasis added, J.H-A], nor are they the same as those mentioned by God in the Qur‘ān (...).

The existence of Sabians under Islamic domination was neither surprising nor objectionable to al-Ash‘arī, and he even shows himself aware of the tenuous identification of the “modern” Sabians with the group mentioned in the Qur‘ān.

As concerns Harranian paganism we have some information in an-Nadīm’s *Fihrist* and other sources, and it has been established that many Mesopotamian traditions lived on in the area.⁴ Likewise, it is well known, although this knowledge is often not quite internalized, that in the marsh areas of Southern Iraq there was a continuous tradition of Mandaean religion, but it seems to have been totally neglected in scholarship that there was another pagan, or Sabian, centre in the

tenth-century Islamic world, in the countryside of Iraq (*sawād*) around Baghdad.

This is, in fact, curious because there are several important sources which inform us of the existence and importance of a Sabian community or a group of communities in the area. These sources, the Nabatean⁵ corpus, are a group of books purported to be translations from “ancient Syriac” by Ibn Waḥshiyya (see below), who calls these “other Sabians” *bābilī* “Babylonian.” It is only because the Harranian Sabians were the first to draw the attention of scholars that Ḥarrān has been seen as the main centre of paganism during the Islamic period.

In his *al-Āthār al-bāqiya*, p. 206,⁶ al-Bīrūnī (d.c. 1050) sets the picture for us:

It is said that the Harranians are not the real Sabians, nay they are called *ḥanīfs* and idol worshippers in the (holy) books. The (real) Sabians are those who stayed behind in Bābil from among the tribes (of Israel) when they (the other tribes) returned to Jerusalem during the days of Kūrush and Arṭaḥshast. They (the ones who stayed behind) inclined towards the laws (*sharā‘i*) of the Magians (*al-Majūs*) and had a liking towards the religion (*dīn*) of Bukhtnaṣṣar. Thus they have selected a doctrine mixing (*mumtazij*) Magianism with Judaism like the Samaritans did in Syria.

Most of them live in Wāsiṭ and the countryside (*sawād*) of Iraq near Ja‘far and al-Jāmida and the twin rivers of aṣ-

view is gratuitous and not supported by any evidence. The theoretical structure of Islam, created by Muslim theologians, does not tolerate other religions than those coming under the *dhimma* system (Christianity, Judaism, Magianism i.e. the Zoroastrian religion, and Sabianism), but this has rarely led to any practical measures against other religions, especially in the countryside (cf. e.g. the peaceful coexistence under Islamic rule of Muslims and Hindus, who were theoretically not tolerated). Moreover, the Islamic attitude became more rigid in time, and during the first few centuries of Islamic domination in the Near

East Muslims were more tolerant than in later centuries. For Mandaean evidence for this tolerance, see Gündüz (1994): 70 (< Haran Gawaita).

⁴ See especially Green (1992) and Gündüz (1994).

⁵ The term Nabatean (*nabaṭī*) is a word used by Muslim authors to denote the indigenous, Aramaic speaking population of especially Iraq. It does not refer to the inhabitants of Petra. I have kept the Arabic term to avoid being too precise on questions about which we know all too little.

⁶ The passage is duplicated on p. 318.

Şila. They trace their origin back to Anūsh⁷ ibn Shīth and they disagree with the Harranians and criticize their doctrines. They agree with them only in a few things; they even turn their face in prayer towards the North Pole whereas the Harranians turn towards the South.

The passage of al-Bīrūnī strikes one as being accurate. He knows the area of Iraqi Sabians and there is a general overlapping with the information provided by Ibn Waḥshiyya. However, the same region is differently defined, which shows that al-Bīrūnī is not directly dependent on Ibn Waḥshiyya. Furthermore, al-Bīrūnī is well aware of the difference between the genuine Sabians of Iraq and the secondary Sabians of Ḥarrān, even that they have doctrinal differences which, once again, finds confirmation in Ibn Waḥshiyya's main work, *Filāḥa*.⁸

Moreover, al-Bīrūnī is perfectly right in his analysis of their origin, if we remember his frame of reference. For him and for other Muslim authors, monotheistic or Biblically tinged religions derive from a monotheistic origin moulded by

extraneous influences. Thus, what he actually says, translated into modern terms, is that the Iraqi Sabian religion is a syncretistic religion containing elements from Judaism – or better: Biblical tradition – and the Magian religion of Bukhtnaṣṣar, which we would call Mesopotamian religion. Al-Bīrūnī did not have a term for this religion, because the Assyrian Empire had almost been forgotten and for Muslim scholars the local Arameans (the *Nabaṭ*) and the Persian kings were the main constituents in the history of Mesopotamia. Thus, what he is actually saying is that the Iraqi Sabianism contains elements both from the Biblical tradition and local paganism, i.e. Assyro-Babylonian religion. The only thing I would like to add to this is the strong Hellenistic influence on both Iraqi and Harranian Sabianism. Otherwise, I can agree with al-Bīrūnī's opinion.

The question of the identity of the Sabians described by al-Bīrūnī and others⁹ is problematic, and they have all too often been bluntly identified with the Mandaeans. This seems to have been

⁷ One has to keep apart Anūsh and Enoch (Ar. Akhnūkh) – Green (1992): 116, makes the mistake of reading Anūsh as Enoch. In *Filāḥa*, Anūḥā is one of the main prophets, and obviously a contamination of Noah, Nūḥ(ā), and Enoch, Akhnūkh(ā), as already established by Gutschmid (1861): 36.

In al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*, both Seth, Anūsh and Akhnūkh are given as belonging to Islamic lore, but one has to remember that al-Mas'ūdī himself was under Sabian influence. In §56 Seth is called the *khalīfa* of Adam, and concerning Anūsh al-Mas'ūdī writes (§58):

Seth slept with his wife who became pregnant with Anūsh. So the light moved over to her until she gave birth to Anūsh and the light wandered to him.

After Anūsh this prophetic pre-existent "light" continued until it was finally incarnated in Muḥammad. About Enoch al-Mas'ūdī writes (§62):

After Yarad came his son Akhnūkh who is the same as the prophet Idrīs, peace be upon him. The Sabians claim that he is the same as Hermes; the meaning of Hermes is 'Uḫārid [Mercury] (...) [al-Mas'ūdī's own opinions continue:] Thirty

ṣahīfas were sent down to him; before that 21 *ṣahīfas* had been sent to Adam and 29 to Seth, all containing glorification and praise (*tahlīl wa-tasbīḥ*).

⁸ Praying towards the North is also attested with Mandaeans (Rudolph 1960-1961 I: 136, note 4, and Green 1992: 206). Cf. also Gündüz (1994): 164-166.

⁹ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 161, writes:

The Chaldaeans are the same as the Babylonians the rest (*baqiyya*) of whom nowadays live in the lowlands (*baṭā'ih*) between Wāsiṭ and Basra in villages. They turn towards the Northern Pole and the Capricorn (*al-Jady*) in their prayer.

Then he continues to describe "Egyptian Sabians," by which he means Harranians, as their esoteric learning was seen as the continuation of the Alexandrian school, deported to Ḥarrān in 717 by the Caliph 'Umar II.:

The Egyptian Sabians are those whose rest are nowadays the Sabians of Ḥarrān who turn towards the South in their prayer (...)

Al-Mas'ūdī continues with a short exposition on the doctrine of these Sabians.

done mainly because the Mandaeans are the only community which has kept its religion until today, and scholars have been aware of only Harranians and Mandaeans as the possible equivalents of the different Sabians.

Some Islamic authors, though, do seem to have thought specifically of Mandaeans. Al-Mas'ūdī tells how Būdāsf (Buddha) originated the Sabian religion (a frequent error due to the world view of Muslim authors who tried to derive extant religions from a diminishing number of ancestors, ultimately leading back to one, Adamic monotheism) and goes on to define the area of Iraqi Sabians in terms that do fit the Mandaeans (*Murūj* § 535):

It is said that this man [Būdāsf] was the first to originate (*azhara*) Sabian doctrines of Harranians and Kīmārians (*al-Kīmāriyyūn*)¹⁰ who are a group (*naw'*) of Sabians, different from the Harranians in their creed (*niḥla*). They live (*diyāruhum*) between the area of Wāsiṭ and Basra in Iraq, towards (*naḥwa*) the lowlands (*baṭā'ih*) and marshes (*ājām*).

There are, however, few exact correspondences between the religious beliefs of the Iraqi Sabians as described in the Islamic sources and the Mandaeans as we know them from their own tradition. Naturally, there is an overall similarity between both Harranians, Iraqi Sabians and Mandaeans, all of whom exhibit syncretistic religious forms tapping Mesopotamian, Syrian, Hellenistic and Bibli-

cal traditions. – There is also a further group of Sabians, often called in modern literature the Harranians of Baghdad,¹¹ but this term is not used to refer to the peasants around Baghdad, but to the Harranian scholars and philosophers, Thābit ibn Qurra among them, who were brought by the Caliph to the capital to work in the Academy (*Bayt al-ḥikma*). The existence of this group is relevant for the general study of Sabians, but they are an offspring of Ḥarrān, not a local variant of Sabians.

For the time being, before a meticulous comparison is made between the Iraqi Sabians and the Mandaeans, I strongly suggest keeping these two groups separate and seeing the Sabians as an umbrella term for three groups: the Iraqi Sabians, who are the focus of the present study, the Harranians (with their philosophical, Baghdad branch) and the Mandaeans.¹² In Islamic literature the term 'Sabian' is used rather indifferently for all these subgroups, as well as for almost any other pagans who possessed some credentials of belonging to a developed religion.¹³

The study of Sabians has been hampered by many things, not least by a wild goose chase for the identity of the Qur'ānic Sabians, which has taken all too much attention. The monograph of Tamara Green (1992) was welcome in concentrating on the Harranians and working with material which was at least

¹⁰ Throughout *Murūj* (e.g. §§ 1397, 1433) there are several different variants of this name. Rudolph (1960-61) II: 56, derives this from *kamar-* and identifies the *Kīmāriyyūn* as Mandaeans.

¹¹ E.g. Hjärpe (1972): 35ff. Cf. an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 333 = Dodge (1970): 647.

¹² I am excluding the Sabians of the Arabian Peninsula. The information concerning them is extremely dubious. For the general historiographical situation in the studies of early Islam, see the bibliography in Hämeen-Anttila (2000).

¹³ E.g. Buddha is seen as a Sabian teacher, and the sources speak of Chinese Sabians. The pre-Christian Romans (and Greeks, as the word *Rūm* denotes both) are also often called Sabians (e.g. al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 123). This means that before knowing who the author is speaking about we should be very cautious in interpreting the information he provides on (some) Sabians. Only a consistent body of material – as I believe we have in the Nabatean corpus – can be used to build up a system with which we may start comparing other materials.

to some extent consistent, although she, too, has to admit that (p. 145) “none of the Muslim authors who purport to describe traditional Harranian religion have any first-hand knowledge of what was being practiced in Harran during his own lifetime.”

Internal consistency and first-hand knowledge would give us a more secure ground in analyzing one Sabian subsystem and that would help us start building up a clearer view about who and what the Sabians were and what relation their religion had with the earlier religions in the area. Concerning Iraqi Sabianism we have some good sources which, in my opinion, fulfill these two conditions, but which have been neglected due to problems in the dating and evaluation of the material, viz. Ibn Waḥshiyya’s “Nabatean corpus” from the early tenth century, consisting of *al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭiyya* “The Nabatean Agriculture” (abbreviated in the following as *Filāḥa*), *Kitāb as-Sumūm* “The Book of Poisons” (*Sumūm*) and *Kitāb Asrār al-falak* “The Book of the Secrets of the Spheres” (*Asrār al-falak*), together with some minor works. *Filāḥa*, although known for one and a half centuries through the work of Chwolsohn and his critics, has only recently been edited by Toufic Fahd, after the appearance of the facsimile edition by Fuat Sezgin, and the other works remain unedited even now.¹⁴

For the majority of Mediaeval Muslim authors, peasants were totally invisible, be they pagans, Christians or Muslims. Arabic literature is urban in character, which has contributed to a distorted view of Mediaeval Near Eastern society. The

cities were soon Islamized – Christian and Jewish communities excepted – and accordingly, the literature gives an illusion that the whole area dominated by Muslims was free of paganism. Ibn Waḥshiyya is one of the very few authors to write about the largely non-Islamic, or at most only nominally Islamic, countryside of Iraq.

In the present paper, I shall concentrate on the Mesopotamian element in the local rural religion as described in the Nabatean corpus, using two examples – I wish to be able to return to the question of the overall religious system of the Iraqi Sabians in a future study.

Before discussing the Mesopotamian material transmitted to us by Ibn Waḥshiyya, the date and the geographical setting of the Nabatean corpus need to be discussed. In brief, the opinions concerning the corpus, and especially *Filāḥa* on which much of the discussion has centred, have been divided into three positions. First, the books of the Nabatean corpus themselves claim to be translations from “ancient Syriac” (e.g. *Filāḥa* I:5) made by Ibn Waḥshiyya and transmitted to a student of his, Ibn az-Zayyāt.

The real authors of, e.g., *Filāḥa*, according to Ibn Waḥshiyya, were ancient sages. Those responsible for *Filāḥa* he names as Ṣuḡhrīth,¹⁵ Yanbūshādh and Qūthāmā, in this chronological order and with many variants, Qūthāmā being the final author of the purported original – likewise Ibn Waḥshiyya identifies the authors of the originals of his other purported translations in their prefaces.¹⁶ The names are opaque, and I feel very dubious about them. They are given as

¹⁴ I have been able to use the microfilms of these manuscripts in the *Institut für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* in Frankfurt.

¹⁵ This name is also read as Ḍaḡhrīth.

¹⁶ None of these authors can be identified. In each of the books, there are also quotations from other books, again unidentifiable.

ancient sages and that made the first, and clearly overenthusiastic, mid-19th-century European scholars see in the book a remnant of Babylonian literature; Chwolson, the main advocate of this first position, even titled one of his studies “Über die Überreste der altbabylonischen Literatur in arabischen Übersetzungen.” This position has been abandoned by all serious scholars, especially since the cuneiform texts have been deciphered.

The remaining two positions both have their advocates. Some scholars like Fuat Sezgin (in GAS III and IV), Toufic Fahd (1977 and several shorter publications, the most important collected in the third volume of his edition of *Filāḥa*) and Michael Moronyi (1991) take *Filāḥa*, and more or less implicitly the other works of the Nabatean corpus, to be what they purport to be, viz. translations from Aramaic originals, which should thus be dated somewhere roughly around the 5th century A.D. The problem with this is that the books do not show any clear traces of having been translated.

The third position is that of, among others, Manfred Ullmann (1972), viz. that Ibn Waḥshiyya, who, be it mentioned in passing, made himself out to be a descendant of Sennacherib (Sinḥārīb),¹⁷ is in fact the author of *Filāḥa* (and obviously also of the other books of the

Nabatean corpus). Most of those who hold this third position have dismissed the texts as forgeries of little value.¹⁸

In my opinion, however, all of the three positions fail to confront the ultimate problem. Forgeries the books may be, in the sense that they were written or compiled in Arabic in the late ninth or the early tenth century and do not go back each to just one Aramaic source which would have been translated by Ibn Waḥshiyya.¹⁹ On the other hand, they are valuable documents of local traditions circulating at the time and may contain parts which go back to written Aramaic sources. The author quite obviously knew local informants and he may have had access to some written sources; much of the material he adduces is not known from elsewhere, or at least not in so detailed a form, yet it is genuine and conforms with what we know about late paganism and cannot thus be a fanciful invention of Ibn Waḥshiyya's. Also the agricultural parts of *Filāḥa* – the religious parts are a minority – show that he was familiar with and extremely well informed about the Iraqi countryside.

Yet, in order to avoid the tangled question of the date and provenance of the texts, I wish to concentrate here especially on a passage in *Filāḥa*, where Ibn Waḥshiyya speaks as himself, the translator, and which thus definitely

¹⁷ An-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 378 (Dodge 1970: 731). The name Sennacherib was very popular in the tenth century. For an Armenian prince of this name, see Ullmann (1978): 43.

¹⁸ It has even been claimed that Ibn Waḥshiyya is an invented character and his student Ibn az-Zayyāt the real author, but this is based on mere guesswork, see Hämeen-Anttila (1999).

¹⁹ Note that this period was full of Arabic pseudepigrapha, e.g. the *Daniel Apocalypse* or the *Saṭīḥ Apocalypse* (see Hämeen-Anttila 2000), as well as anonymous works showing interest in esoteric traditions like the slightly later *Rasā'il Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'*. Likewise, it saw the coming of Harranian philoso-

phers into the capital; Thābit ibn Qurra (d. 901) was the most famous of the Harranian scholars and translators in Baghdad. His production also shows that translations from ancient languages were in vogue at the time.

One should also remember the flourishing of esoteric Islamic movements at the same time: the Ismailis, on the ascendance for the whole of the 10th century, were the most influential of these movements but less known esoteric trends also existed, see Halm (1982) and Hämeen-Anttila (2001).

Note also Pingree (1968): 1ff., for ancient esoteric texts refound and translated at about the time of Ibn Waḥshiyya.

dates to the early tenth century.

The religious material in *Filāḥa* has an overall resemblance to the Harranian religion and it has earlier been discussed as Harranian paganism by the few who believe in the authenticity of *Filāḥa*, such as Fahd. Yet the book clearly describes the situation in Iraq, not Ḥarrān. The author is very consistent in using geographical names, and all places which he mentions as his own or neighbouring regions, are in Iraq, close to Baghdad.

Other Islamic sources do confirm that the *Sawād* of Iraq – an unfortunately vague term meaning roughly “arable countryside” – was the main area of the Sabians. The slightly later al-Bīrūnī (d. c. 1050) mentions in his *Āthār*, p. 318, that most of the Sabians lived in the *Sawād*, in small local communities, separated from each other. He also mentions that they are different from the Sabians of Ḥarrān who, he says, took the name of Sabians only in 228 A.H. (843 A.D.).

The information given by al-Bīrūnī fits exactly the information in *Filāḥa*, a book whose materials come from the *Sawād* and describe a coexistence of several concurrent pagan communities, the majority belonging, according to the author, to the Sethians, a sect to which Qūthāmā does not belong.

Thus, there is nothing improbable in the existence of contemporary descriptions of early tenth-century paganism. Much of the material of the Nabatean corpus could thus be genuine in the sense that it is either directly observed by the Islamic author, or received from his informants, or finally, in some cases perhaps derived from genuine writings, whether in Aramaic or in Arabic.²⁰ However, the Islamic filter of the author has

to be taken into account. Thus, he is likely to have misunderstood things, and he clearly wishes to present the material in a form as acceptable to Muslims as possible, which may at least partly explain the passages emphasizing the underlying monotheism of the Sabian religion.²¹

As an aside, one might mention that the interest of Muslim authors in the Sabians had flourished since the late ninth century, especially after the coming of the Harranian scholars to the capital. The interest in the local inhabitants as a source for possible esoteric wisdom must have grown in the ninth century, and the local population which had earlier been invisible now became a potential source for this wisdom – and Ibn Waḥshiyya was ready to cash in on these expectations.

After this, I am afraid, rather lengthy prologue, we may now turn our attention to the religious material in the Nabatean corpus and especially in *Filāḥa*, the main work in the corpus. First of all, it is well to point out that agriculture, the use of plants for food, medicine or magic, running a farm and other similar topics form the main part of the bulky book with its one and a half thousand large pages, and religious themes are dealt with only in passing. Only the Prologue and a few chapters in the book provide continuous information on religion, but much more can be gleaned from passages half hidden among other topics.

In general, the cult described throughout the book is a syncretistic and astral one and very similar to the Sabian cult as we know it from Ḥarrān. In a sense it is also ultimately monotheistic, the lesser deities being derived from a Supreme God, yet one must keep in mind the ef-

²⁰ For a possible case of such writings circulating in both Arabic and Syriac versions, cf. the *Prophecies*

of *Bābā* (Rosenthal 1962).

²¹ See also Hämeen-Anttila (1999).

fect Islam may have had on this point: an openly polytheistic cult would more probably have raised opposition than one which was ultimately monotheistic, as it is possible to consider the lesser deities merely as emanations from the One God.

As in Mandaean religion and many Gnostic sects, the astral deities are far from being simply good. In fact, the description (*Filāḥa*, pp. 10-12) of an offering and invocation to Zuḥal, Saturn that is (or Nergal), makes it clear that the deity is a nefarious one. – It should also be mentioned that there are no traces of any baptisms or lustrations in *Filāḥa*, except for just one mention of “living waters” (p. 10: “He [the god Saturn] has made water run like He Himself runs [in His heavenly course] and it [the water] runs, alive like His life”). The lack of interest in water and baptisms naturally makes the cult, like that of Ḥarrān, different from the Mandaean cult, despite other similarities.²² – The one mention of water may be understood in the light of the agricultural background of the local population for whom water was certainly an important element.

The religion, as described by Ibn Waḥshiyya (and the same holds true for Harranian paganism), consists of two separate layers, viz. popular religion and philosophical speculation. The former, often heavily inlaid with magical ele-

ments, consists of popular rites, magic, folklore, aetiologies, etc., and taps the autochthonous Mesopotamian tradition, whereas the latter concentrates on philosophical speculation on planetary movements, their meaning and influence, and is heavily in debt to Hellenistic thought – whether and to what extent itself dependent on Mesopotamian models is another question. Whether the philosophical element was completely restricted to the learned Sabians or whether it had any relevance among the farmers and laics is a difficult question which we cannot answer at present.

The weeping for Tammūz (Dumuzi),²³ which we know from tenth-century Ḥarrān (see Green 1992: 147-158) is also told in *Filāḥa* and, moreover, in more detail than in any other Arabic source. It has been suggested that the Harranian lamentation on Tāwuz²⁴ is a contamination from the cult of the Syrian Mot,²⁵ which may well be the case (but see below), but Ibn Waḥshiyya offers a somewhat different version of it – although he unfortunately tells only part of the story. The relevant passage in *Filāḥa* reads (pp. 296-298 – the beginning is given as the work of the supposed author Qūthāmā):²⁶

The people of the time of Yanbūshādh claimed that all the *sakīnas*²⁷ of gods and idols (*aṣnām*) wept for him after his death, just like angels (*malā'ika*) and

²² Note also that weeping for the dead, which is a central theme in the story of Tammūz, see below, is not practiced among Mandaeans, see, e.g., Gündüz (1994): 88, note 101.

²³ For the Syriac and Christian sources on Dumuzi, see the references given in Drijvers (1980): 110 (+ note 115), and Schiffmann (1986): 68-70. See also the articles *Adonis* (pp. 12-17, S. Ribichini) and *Tammūz* (pp. 1567-1579, B. Alster) in DDD.

²⁴ This seems to be the correct reading for the form T'WZ. For this name form of Tammūz, cf. the Neo-Assyrian pronunciation of the name, see DDD, article *Tammūz*. The possible – though perhaps not very probable – connection between Tāwuz and the Yezidi

Malak Tā'ūs was first brought to my attention by Amir Harrak (personal communication); later, I found the same suggestion already in Gündüz (1994): 152, note 255 (with further references).

²⁵ See, e.g., Haider (1996): 232.

²⁶ The passage is also briefly mentioned in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 319. Maimonides is, Biblical material excepted, totally dependent on *Filāḥa* for his information concerning the Chaldeans.

²⁷ Cf. the same term in Mandaean (*škīmā*, Rudolph 1960-61, II:21, note 4) and Manichaean religion (Syriac *škintā*, the five “dwellings” in the Kingdom of Light, Lieu 1985: 10).

sakīnas had all wept for Tammūzā (TMWZY). Further, they claimed that all the idols came from all regions (*min jamīr aqtār al-arḍ*) to Bayt al-ŠKWL²⁸ in Bābil and all went to the temple (*haykal*) of the Sun, and especially to the great golden idol which hangs between heaven and earth.

The idol of the Sun stood in the middle of the temple and all the world's (*arḍ*) idols stood around him. Closest to him were the idols of the Sun from every region, then the idols of the Moon, then the idols of *al-Mirrīkh* (Mars), then the idols of *Uṭārid* (Mercury), then the idols of *al-Mushtarī* (Jupiter), then the idols of *az-Zuhara* (Venus), then the idols of *Zuḥal* (Saturn).²⁹

Then the idol of the Sun started weeping for Tammūzā and all the idols wept. The idol of the Sun read litanies (*yu'addid*) on Tammūzā and told his story in detail (*yadhkuru sharḥ qiṣṣatihi*), and all the idols wept from sundown till sunrise the next morning. After that they flew back to their regions.

The idol of Tihāma³⁰ was called Nasr.³¹ His eyes keep weeping and his tears flowing since that night when he lamented on Tammūzā with the idol of the Sun, and will do so forever. This is because of the special role (*limā yakhtaṣṣu bihi*) this idol has in that story of Tammūz [sic]. This idol which is called Nasr is the one who gave (*afāda*) *kihāna* to the Arabs so that they were able to tell about secret things (*al-ghayb*) and explain dreams before the dreamer had told his

dream to them.³²

Thus the idols also wept for Yanbūshādh that night in the clima of Bābil, separately in their temples, the whole night till the morning. Towards the end of the night there was a great inundation, with great and heavy thunder and lightning and a great earthquake which extended from Ḥulwān to the bank of Tigris in the region of Binārwayā³³ on the eastern side of Tigris. When the inundation started, the idols returned to their places; they had stirred somewhat from their places. They caused this inundation as a punishment to people (*abnā' al-bashar*) of the clima of Bābil because they had left the body of Yanbūshādh under the open sky on the steppe of Shāmāṣā, until the inundation washed his body to *wādī al-Aḥfar* from where the body was further washed to the sea.³⁴ Famine and plague befell the clima of Bābil for three months until the living had no time to bury the dead.

These are stories which they have written down and read in their temples after the prayers. Then they weep and lament much. When I join the people in the temple, especially in the feast of Tammūz which is in his month and they read his story and weep, I always weep with them, helping them and feeling sympathy with their weeping, but not because I would believe in what they relate. Yet I do believe in the story of Yanbūshādh. When they read his story and weep, I weep with them unlike I weep for Tammūzā. The reason for this is that the time

²⁸ The equation with Hebrew *eshkōl*, made already by Ewald (1857): 151, note, is unwarranted and there is nothing to connect this temple with Dionysos. A reading worth considering might also be *Bayt *al-uthkūl*, from *uthkūl* "a bereft woman" (see Lane, s.v.). Another possibility is to connect it with *ashkāl*, the (celestial) forms, although it is difficult to explain how the common noun form *af'āl* would have been deformed to the rare *'F'WL*. Similar distortions of Arabic words are not used in *Filāḥa*, except for the Aramaizing ending *-ā* added to Arabic words. – Any connection with Esagila is improbable.

²⁹ The scene sounds somewhat similar to a story, told in Islamic lore (itself deriving from earlier models) of how the idols came to Iblīs when Jesus had been born, see Perlmann (1987): 115.

³⁰ Note the Islamic focus, although also fifth and sixth-century authors were aware of a temple of Nishrā in Arabia, see Hawting (1999): 115.

³¹ A well-known pagan god, mentioned in the Qur'ān (71:23), whose temple has been excavated at Hatra.

³² Obviously a reference to the recurrent *kāhin* tales, like the one concerning Shiqq and Saṭīḥ, discussed in Hämeen-Anttila (2000). One is also perplexed by the mention of a vulture in an anti-Islamic biography of Muḥammad from Spain, see Constable (1997): 48, further discussed in Hämeen-Anttila (2000).

³³ Written BN'WDHNR, but cf. below.

³⁴ Throughout *Filāḥa*, the author is concerned with the question of the corruption of the body and burial. I will discuss this point in detail in a further paper.

of Yanbūshādh is closer to our own time than the time of Tammūz, and accordingly his story is more reliable and true. It may also be that part of the story of Tammūz is also true, but I do doubt some of the story because his time is so remote from ours.

Abū Bakr ibn Waḥshiyya says:³⁵ This month of Tammūz is, according to the Nabateans as I found it in their books, called by the name of a man about whom there is a long and amazing story. They claim that he was killed time after time in horrible (*qabīḥa*) ways. In fact, all their months are called by the names of excellent and learned men of the past, who belonged to those Nabateans who lived in the clima of Bābil before Chaldeans (*kasdānī*).

This Tammūz, namely, was neither Chaldean, nor Canaanite (*kan'ānī*), nor Hebrew (*'ibrānī*), nor one of the *Jarāmiqa*, but one of the ancient *ḥasāsin* (*min al-ḥasāsin al-awwalīn*). So they also say concerning each of their months that they are called by the names of men who have passed away. Thus the First and the Second Tishrīn are the names of two others who were excellent in sciences (*'ulūm*) and so also the First and the Second Kānūn. Shubāṭ was a man who married a thousand women, all virgins but who got no offspring and no son was born to him,³⁶ so they set Shubāṭ at the end of their months because of his lack of offspring, and this lack became the lack of the number (of days) in it.³⁷

All Sabians, both Babylonian (*bābilī*) and Harranian (*ḥarnānī*), weep and lament for Tammūz till our days in the month called Tammūz in a feast (*'īd*) of theirs which is attributed to Tammūz.

They read long litanies (*yu'addidūn*), especially the women who, both here and in Ḥarrān, weep and lament together for Tammūz and rave long ravings (*hadhayān*) about him. Yet I have noticed that neither of the two groups possesses any true information (*ḫabar ṣaḥīḥ*) concerning Tammūz and the reason for their weeping for him.

When I was translating this book, I read in it that Tammūz was a man about whom there is a story and that he was killed in a horrible way only once, and there is no more to his story. They have no³⁸ knowledge about him except that they say: "So we have known our forefathers to weep and lament during this feast ascribed to Tammūz."

So I say that this is a memorial feast (*dhukrān*)³⁹ which they held for Tammūz in the ancient times and which has continued until present although the story about him has been forgotten because of the remoteness of his time. In our times, no one of them knows what his story was and why they actually weep for him. The Christians have a memorial feast which they hold for a man called Jūrjīs⁴⁰ who, so they claim, was killed many times in horrible ways, but he returned to life each time. Then he was killed again, and again returned to life, until he died at the end of the story which is too long to be explained. It is written down in a book which the Christians possess and they hold a memorial feast for him which they call the memorial feast of Jūrjīs. The story of this Tammūz which we already mentioned is just like that of Jūrjīs. I do not know whether the Christians heard (*waqa'a ilā*) of the story of Tammūz who lived in the ancient times and

³⁵ From this passage till the end the text is given as Ibn Waḥshiyya's explanatory addition to the "ancient Syriac" text.

³⁶ The passage remotely resembles the frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

³⁷ Twin prophets with the same name are also found elsewhere in the material describing Sabian prophets; e.g. al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* § 1234, knows of two different prophets called Orpheus, viz. Hermes and Agathodaimon.

³⁸ I read *lā* for *lī*.

³⁹ Cf. Syriac and Mandaic *dukhrānā*. For which Mandaean *dukhrānā* "a sacramental commemoration of a person or persons by reciting their name" (Gündüz 1994: 82), see Rudolph (1960-1961): 287-296.

⁴⁰ The name is curiously close to that of the god or demon Jirjās mentioned in *Rasā'il Ikhwān aṣ-ṣafā* IV: 296; see also Green (1992): 208-213. For the feast of St. George, see also al-Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī* VI: 225 (*'īd Maryā Sarjis*, var. *Jarjis*; further references in Elad 1995: 65-66) with a reference to the presence of women in the feast.

they changed the name of Jūrjīs at his place and then related the story of Tammūz under the name of Jūrjīs and disagreed with the Sabians concerning the time (of the feast). The Sabians hold the memorial feast of Tammūz on the first day of Tammūz and the Christians hold the feast of Jūrjīs at the end of Nīsān or a little before it.⁴¹ Now we think (*waqafnā*) that the story of Jūrjīs, how he was punished and killed several times by the king is the very same as that of Tammūz, but the Christians stole it from the Sabians and set Jūrjīs, one of the disciples of the Christ (*ḥawārī l-Masīḥ*) (in his stead) and claimed that he called a king to the Christian religion, and that the king tortured him by killing him these many times. Personally, as far as I know, my opinion is that both stories are lies and impossibilities that cannot be true.

This is what I found in the book of *Filāḥa* about him. After that I happened to come upon another Nabatean book which contained the explanation of the story of Tammūz. He called a king to serve the Seven and the Twelve,⁴² and that king killed him but he returned to life after having been killed. Then the king killed him in many horrible ways but each time he returned to life. In the end he finally died. That story was indeed identical to the last with the story of Jūrjīs which the Christians know. The Sabians hold a memorial feast for Tammūz which they call the memorial feast of Tammūz and the Christians hold a memorial feast for Jūrjīs which they call the memorial feast and *tadhkira* of Jūrjīs.

Abū Bakr ibn Waḥshiyya, the author⁴³ of this book says: When it comes to Yanbūshādh, the Sabians of our time do not know him and they have not heard his story as I have heard from them. I do not know how that has come about, except if it is a pure coincidence because they

have stories about other Nabateans who are more ancient than Yanbūshādh.⁴⁴ Binārwayā⁴⁵ which he [i.e. Qūthāmā] mentioned in the story of the earthquake which, he said, came after the inundation – this Binārwayā is the place of the city of al-Manṣūr which is the same as *Madīnat as-salām* [i.e. Baghdad] (...)

In assessing the meaning of this story, we should, first of all, note the geographical accuracy and consistency; the name Binārwayā mentioned by the author is indicative of this accuracy. Binārwayā is an obscure village known only to the best geographers which, I think, speaks for a local origin of this version; if Ibn Waḥshiyya had only copied Harranian sources, he would hardly have located the story in this obscure place, which otherwise is not mentioned in *Filāḥa*.⁴⁶

Ibn Waḥshiyya also openly admits that the story is told by the Harranians, too, and he does not in the least claim any primacy for the Iraqi version; in fact, he personally disavows the whole story. This would be inconsistent if he were not working with a real, Iraqi version of the story. If Nabatean national spirit (*‘aṣabiyya*) would have been his only motivation, as has often been claimed, it would be curious that he admitted the fictitious character of the story and did not argue for an Iraqi origin of the story. Thus, *‘aṣabiyya* cannot be the driving force in telling the story which leaves us with the assumption that Ibn Waḥshiyya is describing an existing situation in Iraq, not forging a story out of Harranian materials to bolster the Nabatean national spirit.⁴⁷

⁴¹ St. George's feast is on the 23rd of April.

⁴² For the combination of Seven and Twelve in Mandaeism and in Islamic sources, see Rosenthal (1959), esp. pp. 315-317.

⁴³ Var. the translator into Arabic.

⁴⁴ Thus the book of Qūthāmā would not have been known to tenth-century Sabians.

⁴⁵ Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān* I:496: *Binār (...) min qurā Baghdād mimmā yalī ṭarīq Khurāsān min nāḥiyat Barāz ar-Rūdh* (for which see *Muʿjam al-buldān* I:364).

⁴⁶ The place name seems to occur only here in *Filāḥa*. It is also missing from the Index of the edition.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hämeen-Anttila (1999).

In other words, the weeping for Tammūz continued not only in Ḥarrān but also in the Iraqi countryside until the tenth century – although Ibn Waḥshiyya at the same time indicates that the tradition was dying out; not only was it re-analyzed in Christian terms but in pagan circles the myth underlying the ritual started to be forgotten.

The passage also shows the general acumen of Ibn Waḥshiyya. His knowledge is wide, as he is aware of both the pagan Harranian and pagan Iraqi, or Bābilī, tradition and of the Christianized version which, moreover, he is able to connect with the pagan version, and he even manages to get the picture right: the cult of Tammūz is of pagan origin and his story has been appropriated – Ibn Waḥshiyya called it stealing – by Christians.

The transmission of pagan material to Christianity is often obvious. The mechanisms of this transmission are also relatively clear but I cannot refrain from mentioning here that, according to al-Maqdisī (*Bad'* IV:42), some Christians in the vicinity of Ḥarrān had adopted Harranian doctrines (*madhhab*). What he probably should have said, is that some Harranians had converted – sincerely or not – to Christianity, bringing along with them much of their religious lore and wisdom. Instead of weeping for Tammūz they were now weeping for St. George.

The same sober acumen is also seen in the agricultural parts, which are far from the magical mumbo jumbo Ibn Waḥshiyya is often accused of. Instead, they contain highly critical observations and are often even experimental.⁴⁸ That the work does contain elements of magic and folklore does not mean that its author

was uncritical; magic was part and parcel of the tenth-century civilization, and the highly lauded Brethren of Purity, for example, had a long chapter on magic (esp. *Rasā'il* IV:283-335), yet they are generally acknowledged as original thinkers and intellectuals.

On the other hand, Ibn Waḥshiyya's version of Tammūz has already become radically changed from the original. The idea of a missionary propagating the cult of "the Seven and the Twelve" is obviously inspired by the Christian martyrologies,⁴⁹ perhaps specifically by the legend of St. George. Thus, we have feedback from the Christian version back to the pagan version – although naturally the "missionary" version of Tammūz's death may have been fabricated by Ibn Waḥshiyya himself, using the Christian version to reconstruct an explanation for the Sabian ritual. In either case, this version is late, and the more ancient material is found in the lamentation itself, with the gods assembling to weep for the dead Tammūz, and it is mirrored in the story of Yanbūshādh.

The older version, the one not contaminated by the legend of St. George, contains motifs that are found elsewhere in Mesopotamian literature. The journey of the gods to the central sanctuary, the famine which befalls the country after the death of Yanbūshādh, and the story of the inundation – I have avoided the word Flood – all resemble Mesopotamian motifs.

Before turning our attention to another interesting religious custom of the Nabateans, let us briefly translate the other references to Tammūz in Arabic literature. First, there comes another reference to the ritual in Ibn Waḥshiyya's

⁴⁸ Naturally we should not let statements like "I have tried this" to lead us astray. For the genre of magical "empirica," see Ullmann (1978): 110.

⁴⁹ Naturally, there was also a missionary literature in Manichaeism, see, e.g., Lieu (1985): 54-90.

Asrār al-falak (fol. 87b, from the Preface of the “translator,” Ibn Waḥshiyya):

When they mentioned him [Dawānāy],⁵⁰ they used to say “the Lord of Mankind (*sayyid al-bashar*), Dawānāy.” He used to be called “the Lord of Mankind” (already) during his life time. When he died, the people of this clima, I mean the clima of Bābil, wept for him for a whole year⁵¹ and every day they held a ceremony (*ma’tam*) for him in which they wept and lamented for him, like the people of Syria wept for Tammūzā⁵² by which they mean Hermes.

Some Kardānians of the clima of Bābil also wept for Tammūzā, but the Syrians wept for Hermes for thousands of years and till the end of the days of their domination (*dawla*), but the Kashdānians wept for this Dawānāy for a year after his death, each day, as a ceremony.

After his death they did things to his body which it is not proper to mention. They wrote about this to all regions (*aqṭār*) and countries (*buldān*). It is said that they claim that he (Dawānāy) contrived and extracted the secrets of the spheres (*asrār al-falak*) and the wonders of the actions in this world of the two luminous ones (the Sun and the Moon) and the other stars, what none before him had done.

It is conspicuous that Ibn Waḥshiyya also here only refers to the story of Tammūz but ultimately leaves it untold.

The case of Tammūz sheds more light on the schematically told Harranian feast of Tammūz as described in *Fihrist*. The text of *Fihrist* (coming ultimately from “what we have copied from the hand-

writing of Abū Sa‘īd Waḥb,” *Fihrist*, p. 395) reads (p. 392):⁵³

[The month of] Tammūz: In the middle of this [month] there is the feast of *al-Būqāt*, that is of weeping women. It is the Tāwuz, a feast dedicated to the god Tāwuz. The women weep for him because of how his master (*rabb*) killed him and ground his bones in a hand-mill and then winnowed them to the wind. The women do not eat anything ground in a hand-mill: they only eat moistened wheat, chick-peas, dates, raisins and other similar things.⁵⁴

The details of the version of *Fihrist*, connected with the Syrian Mot by many scholars, do not find confirmation in the versions of *Filāḥa* and *Asrār al-Falak*. Moreover, in al-Bīrūnī’s *Āthār*, p. 321, the memorial feast (*dhukrān*) of Tammūz with its lamentations is set on the 7th of Ḥazīrān, whereas the feast of flour (‘*īd ‘urus daqā’iq*) is set on the 17th of the next month, Tammūz, with the following two days marked as ‘*īd daqā’iq*. Thus it is possible that there is some confusion in *Fihrist* between the two different feasts, the memorial feast of Tammūz and the feast of flour.

There is also a short and somewhat enigmatic reference to Tammūz in *Fihrist*, pp. 395-396 (from “the handwriting of someone else [than Abū Sa‘īd] concerning them [the Harranians]”):

From among the gods of the Harranians: (...), the Lady of the Killing(?) (*Rabbat ath-Thall*)⁵⁵ who *killed(?) *Tammūz⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Throughout this late copy, Dawānāy is written Ra-wāyāy; the copyist obviously had no idea how to pronounce the name.

⁵¹ Written SNT, with T instead of *tā’ marbūta*.

⁵² Written both here and later THMWDY, obviously a contamination from Thamūd – the late copyist of the manuscript had great difficulties with the names.

⁵³ Also translated by Dodge (1970): 758.

⁵⁴ Obviously on this day only.

⁵⁵ The note of Dodge (1970): 766, note 107, is without foundation: there is no word *thill* in the sense of “herd” (see, e.g., Lane, s.v.; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, s.v.),

despite the later reference in *Fihrist* to goats. The reference to Dozy I:162, is also erroneous: Dozy only codifies the variants *thulla* and *thilla*, with their plurals *thulal* and *thilal*. Reading “the Lady of the Flocks” would thus need an emendation, either to *Rabbat *ath-Thalla* or to *Rabbat *ath-Thalal*. The translation of Dodge has unfortunately been adopted by later writers, e.g. Green (1992): 158.

The verb *thalla*, from which the infinitive is *thall* also means (see Lane, s.v.) “to pour; to demolish; to take forth the earth from a well.”

⁵⁶ In the edition: *allatī QYLT TMWR*. It is also possi-

(...)

Finally, there are two confused mentions of an idol called Tammūz in ad-Dimashqī's *Nukhbat ad-dahr*. The longer one reads (p. 168):

Its [the land of Šīn aṣ-Šīn] inhabitants are unbelievers who worship idols. They especially respect one idol, made of gold, which they call Tammūz. They say that he is the spouse of the spirit of Sun and they claim that there is a temple for him in the centre of the earth by which they mean Jerusalem (...). They also say that the name of this idol Tammūz is mentioned in the Torah, but here they utter an immense lie, may God curse them because of their words! The Jews know this and they know that his name (is derived) from the name of the month Tammūz.

The second is a brief mention on p. 42:

The Sabians claim the temple of Jerusalem was built (already) before Salomon built himself a temple and that it [the earlier temple] was for Mars and that there was an idol called Tammūz.⁵⁷

As these passages show, Ibn Waḥshiyya is our best source of information for Tammūz in the Islamic period. Interestingly enough, Ibn Waḥshiyya seems slightly to contradict himself in the two passages. It seems obvious that *Asrār al-falak* is an earlier text than *Filāḥa*, and it is in the latter that Ibn Waḥshiyya, speaking as himself, the translator, says he has come by a more complete version of the story.

Also the unwillingness of Ibn Waḥshiyya to tell the whole story is remarkable. It may of course be that he knew less

than he wanted to confess: after all, his informants had, so Ibn Waḥshiyya himself, forgotten the story behind the ritual weeping. What other reasons he would have had to suppress the story is not clear: the cruelty of the story, which he himself mentions, hardly accounts for his repeated refusal to tell it.

In *Filāḥa*, there is another highly interesting description of local rituals, viz. the so-called "The Servant of Venus" (*Filāḥa*, pp. 538-541), translated with its full context in the following:

The chapter on *hadhartāyā*. Qūthāmā has said: This plant grows on the banks of the river called Jordan (*al-Urdunn*) which runs in the land of the Canaanites. Some people brought *hadhartāyā* to Bābil and implanted it in the region of [Bar]sāwyā⁵⁸ and it started growing well there. (...)

[there follows a description of *hadhartāyā* and some recipes using its fruit and roots]

Some of the farmers (*fallāḥīn*) eat the plant itself. They reap it at the end of the first Kānūn, on the occasion of the Birthday of Time (*Milād az-zamān*).

[there follows a recipe]

This they call "eating the *hadhartāyā*" and they eat it on the very night of the Birth, without fail. If some of them⁵⁹ cannot eat *hadhartāyā* that night, they will inevitably do so the next night. They say: "Take your purification (*barā'a*) by eating *hadhartāyā*."

They claim that if someone does not eat *hadhartāyā* in these two nights, he will suffer from fever the following year and

ble to read *allatī qabilat Tammūzan* "who received Tammūz," as Dodge does, loc.cit. I find it improbable that we should read *qayyalat* ("she gave a drink to Tammūz at noon" – see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* XI:375, s.v. QYL). *Tammūz* as a month name is a diptote in Arabic; whether we should here read Tammūzā (as in Ibn Waḥshiyya's texts, although there such names are usually written with a final Y) or as the triptote accu-

sative of Tammūz is not clear. In any case, the edition's TMWR' (*tumūran* "dates") is probably a mistaken effort to make sense of the text.

⁵⁷ Cf. Chwolsohn (1956) II:390 (with notes II:679-681).

⁵⁸ Correction by the editor.

⁵⁹ I read: *wa-[man] minhum lā ...*

his physical condition (*badan*) will collapse after the Birthday. They have a premonition of this and because of their premonition (*istish'ār*), their condition does collapse if they do not eat *hadhartāyā*.

When they eat *hadhartāyā* on the night they are accustomed to eat it, they put *kuhl* (antimony paste) twice on their eyes, first before supper and then afterwards because they say: "If you do not put *kuhl* twice on your eyes, you will have problems with them the following summer."

If one of them can afford it, he keeps *qiththā'* and *khiyār* cucumbers in storage from their season till the time of the Birthday to use them in this food and they give each other *qiththā'* and *khiyār* cucumbers as presents for that purpose. This is especially the habit of the people of Barsāwyā, Ṭīzanābādh and Sūrā, as also of al-Qurayyāt and as far as Qussīn and Junbulā. The habit has spread out to the clima of Bābil, and I have also heard that the people of Bājarmā and the banks (*saqy*) of Jūkhā make it, too, and they cannot do without it.

It has the special property⁶⁰ that when it is eaten as we have described it, it increases the urge for coition and food. The urge for coition comes a little after it has been eaten, and the urge for food comes in the next day: who eats it [for his supper], eats an early lunch, claiming to be hungry.

Woe, yes woe, to someone who makes fun of the people of these regions for eating *hadhartāyā*! If they hear him saying that it is sheer nonsense, they beat him until he dies. They also say that Seth, son of Adam (*Shīthā ibn Ādamā*) used to eat it; yet this *hadhartāyā* came to the clima of Bābil only after his death, but woe to the one who says so, because they will call him a liar and throw stones at him and proclaim him an infidel (*yukaffirūnahu*).

I have myself seen owners of great estates, headmen and lieutenants (*'āmil*) eat it on the Night of the Birth and they have

the same premonition as the ordinary farmers and tillers (*al-akara wa'l-fallāhūn*) and they believe all that is said of it and of what befalls one who does not eat it.

I have been told that once a headman, owner of a great estate from the people of ar-Raḥwatyā, sent a word to his agent that he should bring him some basketfuls of *sābirī* dates. The agent was busy and the owner of the estate forgot the whole thing until a day or two before the Night of the Birth and the following day. Then his family said to him at noon: "The agent has not yet brought us *sābirī* dates nor anything else!"

The owner became furious, because the agent had not bought him the dates and he wrote to his other agents in the countryside where his agent was and ordered them to arrest him, beat him with a hundred sticks and put him in jail for a month as a punishment for not sending him the baskets of *sābirī* dates. He also banished him from his village!

No one can speak sense to these persons! Does not their reason make them realize that before this plant came to them and before they started to eat it, all the people of this clima would have been feverish in the summer and their condition should have collapsed even before that time! Yet who could say this to them and oppose them?

This is just the same as what the people of the religion of Seth (*ahl millat Ṭshīthā*) say about the Night of Nīsān. Everyone of them, man, woman or child, sleeps that night with three pieces of bread, four dates, seven raisins and a bag of salt under his pillow, because an old woman called the Servant of Venus (*az-Zuhara*) comes that night and goes around visiting everyone, touching their stomachs⁶¹ and searching under their pillows.

If she finds an empty belly and none of all these foods under someone's pillow, she makes the subsistence narrow in the coming year and prays to az-Zuhara asking her to make that person ill in the

⁶⁰ *Khāṣṣiyya*, i.e. magical property.

⁶¹ Var. mouths.

following year.

All the people in the clima of Bābil do like this without exception, and I do not know which is more wondrous: that they say that az-Zuhara has an old servant or that this servant should go around that very night visiting everyone or that she would make their subsistence narrow the coming year? How come she would have such power so as to make people's subsistence narrow or wide? Where does this lady come from and who is she?

All these prodigies (*u'jūba*) come from among the followers of Seth because they are the majority in the clima of Bābil, *al-Jazīra*, Syria and the neighbouring areas. Seth's law (*sharī'a*) has been victorious upon all other laws (*sharā'i'*) and I believe it shall remain so forever, having been diffused among all nations (*jīl*) of Nabateans and it shall remain always as I have said.

The same habit is described in *Fihrist* (p. 541 = Dodge 1970: 764)⁶² in a shorter version but containing differences which show that the two versions are independent. According to *Fihrist*, where this is dated to the thirtieth of Ādhār, the Harranians hold their feast as follows (tr. Dodge):

The thirtieth day is the beginning of the month of al-Tamr, I mean the dried dates, and [during] this [month] is the marriage of the gods and goddesses. They divide in it the dates, putting kohl [antimony powder] on their eyes. Then during the night they place beneath the pillows under their heads seven dried dates, in the name of the seven deities, and also a morsel of bread and some salt for the deity who touches the abdomens. The presiding headman (*al-ra'īs*), moreover, takes two silver coins (...) from each one of them for the treasury.

Dodge understands the touching of the abdomen as follows (note 91): "This evidently refers to women who wish to become pregnant." Yet, the fuller version of Ibn Waḥshiyya makes it clear that the touching is to make sure that they have properly eaten, i.e. feasted on the New Year's Eve – proper eating on festive nights belongs both to Jewish and to Muslim customs.

The sumptuous feasting is also implied by the fact that, according to al-Bīrūnī, *Āthār*, p. 320, the last of Ādhār marks the end of a lengthy fast. On the other hand, this thirty-day fasting is sometimes said to have started on the 8th of Ādhār (Green 1992: 157).

In the story, the meaning of the whole ritual is to ensure prosperity for the coming year. The New Year's Eve is seen as the night when the fates are fixed for the coming year, an idea familiar from Mesopotamia and later taken to almost all major religions of the area, including Islam.⁶³

The passage also throws light on the tangled question of the beginning of the New Year and the festivities connected with it. Two festivities are described in these passages, first the feast of eating the *hadhartāyā*, which also involves the use of antimony paste (*kuḥl*) at the end of Kānūn I, and then the New Year festivity in Ādhār/Nīsān. Both of these times have been equated with the beginning of the Harranian New Year in different Arabic texts (see Green 1992: 149-150, drawing on *Fihrist* and al-Bīrūnī, *Āthār*). The passage in *Filāḥa* refers to the rites of Kānūn I as a habit of the

⁶² See also Picatrix, quoted in Hjärpe (1972): 125. – Hjärpe's comments, incidentally, are a good example of the attitude of many earlier scholars towards Ibn Waḥshiyya: "(...) l'imposteur Ibn Waḥšiyya mentionne, en rapport avec un rite magique chez les "nabatéens," une vieille femme "appelée servante de

Vénus"(...)." Ibn Waḥshiyya is an impostor, nothing more!

⁶³ Cf. the so-called *Laylat al-Qadr*, already mentioned in the Qur'ān (97:1-3), although the original meaning of the passage is not necessarily identical with how it was later understood.

author's own community, whereas the belief in the Servant of Venus is given as a "Sethian" belief.

Filāḥa seems to imply that the eating of *hadhartāyā* and the belief in the Servant of Venus are parallel phenomena, and as both of them contain features that would fit New Year's festivities, it gives us some reason to suggest that there may have been different calendars in use, and consequently the different information provided by *Fihrist* and al-Bīrūnī does not necessarily mean that one of them is corrupted and the two feasts should be reduced to one. Following *Filāḥa* one might suggest that some Sabians held their New Year's festivities in Kānūn I, others in Ādhār/Nīsān.

As with the information concerning Tammūz, here, too, Ibn Waḥshiyya proves to be an independent observer. The information in *Filāḥa* and the other works of the Nabatean corpus cannot be derived from the Harranian lore, nor are there any remarkable similarities with Mandaean religion, which seems to support the hypothesis which I made at the beginning of this paper, viz. that the religious habits described in this corpus exhibit a third form of "Sabian" religion, centred in the rural area around Baghdad.

Thus, the Nabatean corpus of Ibn Waḥshiyya is of prime importance for understanding the late manifestations of the indigenous religious traditions. –

Naturally, it should not be forgotten that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all equally significant inheritors of the Mesopotamian religious tradition.

The Nabatean corpus has hitherto been neglected and has remained little known. It is my hope to publish a translation of selected passages of the Nabatean corpus, pertinent to religious beliefs, and I hope that the present paper has made it obvious why such a project is necessary, or in fact, long overdue.

It may also please our modern Assyrian friends and hosts to know that the Nabateans, about whom I have been speaking, are more or less to be identified with the ancestors of the modern Assyrians and Chaldeans. Much of the indigenous population had become Christian much earlier, but the Nabateans discussed in the present paper definitely belong to the same stock as the ancient peoples of the area and were very probably becoming Christians as time passed. Not only was the ritual weeping for Tammūz taken over to Christianity as a ritual connected with St. George – who in his fight against the Dragon resembles more Ninurta, though – but also those who had been weeping for Tammūz must have travelled with him, becoming Christians weeping for St. George. Perhaps it was one of your ancestors who told Ibn Waḥshiyya some of the stories he codified in the Nabatean corpus.

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