Book review

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Burtea, Bogdan: Die Geheimnisse der Vorväter. Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentierung einer esoterischen mandäischen Handschrift aus der Bodleian Library Oxford. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2015. VII, 158 S., Mandäische Forschungen. Band 5. Hartb. € 49,00. ISBN 978-3-447-06466-8.

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The study of the religion, culture, and language of the Mandaean is very much a specialist field. At present, there are hardly a dozen scholars who publish regularly on various aspects of this last surviving remnant of Gnosticism. Since the days of Rudolf Macuch, Berlin has traditionally been one of the academic homes of Mandaic studies, and Bogdan Burtea, the author of the volume under review, continues this tradition. He has published on the religion and religious practice of this small community and, along the way, has edited a number of manuscripts of less well-known Mandaic works. With *Die Geheimnisse der Vorväter*, Burtea unlocks the secrets of yet another Mandaic scroll and presents the scholarly community with a faithful reproduction of the text.

A short introduction precedes the edition (pp. 1–5). Since the text contains priestly wisdom, *naširuta*, and was intended only for the initiated group of the Nasoraeans, Burtea starts off with a brief inquiry into this Mandaean subgroup, which he connects with one of the religious movements from which the Madaeans supposedly emerged – a baptism group from Palestine. Like all other texts of the *diuan* genre, in which a supernatural being from the world of light acts as teacher and answers questions, this text is preserved in a late manuscript, but it certainly contains ancient traditions reaching considerably farther back in time. Similar texts have been edited by Lady Ethel Drower (*alptrisar suialia*, *alma rišaia rba*, and *alma rišaia zuṭa*), Jorunn Buckley (*diuan malkuta elaita*), and Burtea (*zihrun raza kasia*). The remainder of the introduction provides a description of the only known manuscript of the text, Bodleian Library ms. Asiat. Misc. C 13, and covers technical matters of the edition. It would have been beneficial to distinguish vacats from illegible sections (for example p. 14 (37) has a vacat).

The bulk of the volume is made up of the edition with a German translation on facing pages (pp. 8–67) as well as a detailed commentary (pp. 69–115). A word list (pp. 117–22) of lexemes and forms not recorded in Drower and Macuch's *Mandaic Dictionary* is a telling witness to the fruitful collaborative approach among scholars of Mandaic, for it feeds into Matthew Morgenstern's Mandaic Dictionary Project. The bibliography takes up eight pages (pp. 123–30), and an index of keywords from the text (*termini technici*) and a commentary allow for a selective reading of the volume. A number of black-and-white plates conclude the book. They contain reproductions of *drabša* illustrations from other manuscripts (which are relevant to an excursus in the commentary, pp. 73–84) as well as a reproduction of the scroll. The reproduction is small but legible. However, since the manuscript takes the form of a scroll with almost four hundred consecutive lines, it would have been very useful to add the running numbers of every tenth line or so to the photograph. As it is, it is almost impossible to locate and check an individual reading if one has not kept track of the line numbers right from the start.

In the following remarks, I concentrate on the commentary. Since *Die Geheimnisse der Vorväter* is an esoteric text, even those acquainted with Mandaic Aramaic will probably find it difficult to follow the line of thought of the source without consulting Burtea's comments in parallel. In general, Burtea

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has succeeded in making the text more accessible with his comments. He provides context and background for every paragraph, and has identified the sources of the numerous citations or quasi-citations from the liturgy (and sometimes other works) that abound in the second part of the scroll in particular. Additionally, Burtea highlights forms of individual Mandaic words that are attested for the first time (for example p. 113 l. 346) and instances of interference from the Neo-Mandaic vernacular of the scribes (for example p. 110 l. 279, p. 115 l. 377). However, although it is very helpful in general, the commentary is at times repetitive and amounts to nothing more than a summary of the plain meaning of the text (for example p. 96 l. 92, p. 99 l. 123, p. 102 l. 158ff, p. 106 l. 226 *et passim*). These parts could easily have been omitted. In addition, one might take issue with some minor points. P. 72 n. 130: *yphpyh* is attested in Tg. Ps.-Jon. to the verse. P. 80: While it is certainly correct not to translate the Mandaic *drabša* as 'cross', the choice of the translation equivalent cannot be justified simply by referring to instances in the Mandaic literature where the noun *šaliba* occurs with this meaning. In principle, the two words could be synonyms. P. 87 l. 34: Hebrew *tlmyd* is a loanword from Aramaic (ultimately from Akkadian), and hence the semantic connection with Mandaic *tarmida* is not surprising. P. 88 l. 49: The problem with the Akkadian etymology of Aramaic *patura* is not so much the loss of interdental in Aramaic, but rather their loss in Akkadian. Since the voiceless interdental merged with a sibilant at a very early stage in that language, the Aramaic form would have had to be borrowed at least a millennium before the first attestation of Aramaic. This is what gave Kaufman pause in accepting the loan hypothesis. His alternative suggestion that we are dealing with a *Wanderwort*, seems preferable. P. 101 l. 138: Read *paṭiria* for *paṭṭiria*.

Notwithstanding the minor criticisms above, Burtea's book is a valuable contribution to Mandaic studies. In addition, scholars of Aramaic now have yet another exotic primary source to read, and even if they are not carried away by its esoteric content, they will soon be in the grip of the language, which will hopefully trigger further studies. For my part, I have wondered whether it might be fruitful to look closely at the distribution of the construction Noun *d*-Adjective, such as *qinia d-rabata* 'great arrangements' on p. 16 (52), in Eastern Aramaic, and I am sure that anyone else who picks up Burtea's book *Die Geheimnisse der Vorväter* and reads it attentively will also come up with new research questions. Scholars of Mandaeism and Aramaic will surely benefit from the read.