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WHO ARE THE SETHIANS IN THE *NABATEAN AGRICULTURE*?

In memory of Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila

The Nabatean sages of *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭiyya* (*Nabatean agriculture)* were in sectarian conflict with a faction called the Sethians (Banī/Shīʿat Ishīthā). The identity of these Sethians has not yet been established in the scholarship; they may well be a fictional group devised by one of the work's anonymous Syriac compilers, or its fourth-/tenth-century translator Ibn Waḥshiyya (d. ca. 318/930). The *Nabatean agriculture* presents them as a group of pagans with Jewish characteristics, such that they resembled and possibly preceded the Kentaeans who lived in Sassanian southern Mesopotamia in the fifth century CE. The Nabatean Sethians appear to be related to certain groups among the Ṣābians of the Sawād in southern Iraq, mentioned in classical Arabic sources, but not to the Mandaeans. Although the *Nabatean agriculture* may only be used as a historical source with great care, its account of the Sethians may prove valuable to further understand the religious landscape in southern Sassanid Iraq, the history of Mandaeaism, and the development of late antique Sethian attitudes. The Sethians may also advance insight into the several editorial layers of the *Nabatean agriculture* itself.

Nabatean Sethians: Status Quaestionis

Previous scholarship has attempted to identify the Sethians and the biblical patriarchs in the *Nabatean agriculture* in various ways. The French orientalist Étienne Quatremère held that the figures of Adam, Seth, and others were borrowed from the Bible through the mediation of Jews[1]. Daniel Chwolson objected, stating that these

1. Daniel Chwolson, *Über die Überreste der Altbabylonischen Literatur in Arab. Übersetzungen* (St Petersburg 1859), 44.

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characters, who in name vaguely resemble their biblical equivalents, are otherwise completely different and so cannot have been borrowed from the Bible[2]. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila similarly remarked that those characters with biblical names in the *Nabatean agriculture* "have little to do with their Biblical counterparts"[3], but further asserts that similar "changes in the evaluation of Biblical characters are well known from several traditions in the area (Gnostics, Mandaeans, even Hellenistic magic), which does not help us in identifying any particular group as being behind these changes". He argues that "the redactor responsible for these names knew the Biblical tradition, at least by hearsay", and that these names probably derive from the Syriac version[4]. The editor of this version of the *Nabatean agriculture* "was already heavily influenced by either Judaism or Christianity, or both, in some of their forms", as indicated by these biblical elements[5]. Early scholars of the *Nabatean agriculture* indicated the Sethians are a coded term for Muslims, but as Hämeen-Anttila pointed out, numerous other descriptions, especially references to their polytheism, make this not just unlikely but impossible[6].

Ernest Renan recognized a gnostic connection in the Sethians, asserting that they relate to "Seth and the family of Sethians who played such an important role in the first centuries of our era"[7]. In his earlier work Toufic Fahd pointed out that the figures of Adam and Seth in the *Nabatean agriculture* resembled their role in Manicheanism[8]; he posited Pahlavi as a source language for the work. Pinella Travaglia has suggested that the Sethians might be identified as the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān[9]. She argues that Seth in the Ṣābians tradition is identified with Agathodaimon, the Ḥarrānian

2. Chwolson, *Über die Überreste*, 44.
3. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq* (Leiden 2006), 24.
4. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 24.
5. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 29.
6. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 295 n. 276, 274 n. 245.
7. E. Renan, «Mémoire sur le traité de l'agriculture nabatéenne», in *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 4 (1860), 54.
8. Toufic Fahd, «Retour à Ibn Waḥshiyya», *Arabica* 16, no. 1 (1969), 87.
9. P. Travaglia, «Asclepio e la produzione artificiale della vita nella Agricoltura Nabatea», in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism,* from La tradizione ermetica dal mondo tardo-antico all'umanesimo: atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Napoli, 20-24 November 2001, ed. Paola Lucentini, Ilaria Parri, and Vittoria Perrone, (Turnhout 2003), esp. 320-21.

prophet[10]. This idea is found in the sixth-/twelfth-century work of al-Shahrastānī and in the works of other Arabic writers[11]. However, although the Ḥarrānians worshiped a prophet called Seth, he does not typically appear to be viewed as identical with Agathodaimon, whom they acknowledged as a separate prophet. Seth, Agathodaimon, and Hermes were considered the three Urānis, central prophets in the Ḥarrānian tradition[12]. Agathodaimon and Hermes are mentioned in the *Nabatean agriculture*, too, but only twice in one passage[13]. They are presented as foreign to the Nabatean belief system[14], and do not seem to be connected to the Sethians in the work. A fourth Ḥarrānian figure, Bābā, is mentioned, too[15]. This undoubtedly suggests a familiarity with the Hermetic tradition among the Nabateans[16], but does not necessarily tie the Sethians to the Ḥarrānians[17]. Travaglia further points out that al-Birūnī called the Ṣābians followers of Seth, and that some Sethian customs seem similar to those of the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān[18]. Although some customs of the Sethians are no doubt similar to the Ḥarrānian Ṣābians, the Sethians most likely have more affinity with the Ṣābians of southern Iraq, as will be discussed below.

10. Travaglia, «Asclepio», 320.

11. E. Cottrell, «Adam and Seth in Arabic Medieval Literature», *ARAM Periodical* 22 (2010), 545; T. Gluck, *The Arabic Legend of Seth, the Father of Mankind* (PhD diss., Yale University 1968), 97–99.

12. K. Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford 2009), 188.

13. Toufic Fahd (ed.), *Ibn Waḥšiyya*, *L'agriculture nabatéenne. Traduction en arabe attribuée à Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Kasdānī connu sous le nom d'Ibn Waḥšiyya (IV/X^e siècle) [= al-Filāḥa l-nabaṭiyya]*, 3 vols. (Damascus 1993–98), 1:499, 500.

14. Cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 181.

15. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:184.

16. Cf. Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 97.

17. Moreover, as Hämeen-Anttila points out, «Travaglia… identifies Dawānāy with Hermes and, in general, reads the *Nabatean Agriculture* in Hermetic terms. There are some undeniable similarities between the Hermetic tradition and the *Nabatean Agriculture* but they are not conclusive enough to warrant any final conclusions.» Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 169 n. 3.

18. Cf. Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 69–70.

The Origins and Geography of the Nabatean Agriculture

In the early fourth/tenth century, the Nabatean scholar Ibn Waḥshiyya (d. ca. 930) allegedly translated *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭiyya* (*Nabatean agriculture*) into Arabic from what he called ancient Aramaic (*al-siryāniya al-qadīma*). It was subsequently transmitted by his student al-Zayyāt (d. 340/951). Among modern scholars, Chwolson, Ernest Renan, Ullmann, Nöldeke, and others have variously accepted the work's own claims of being an ancient Babylonian compilation or rejected it as a fourth-/tenth-century fabrication. While Ibn Waḥshiyya's role as a translator has long been doubted, Hämeen-Anttila has convincingly argued that the work is a fourth-/tenth-century translation from a Syriac version that can be dated no earlier than the fifth century CE. Based on the Greek material in the work, Hämeen-Anttila argues that it is unlikely that the work dates from a time before such material became widespread in Syriac[19]. Ibn Waḥshiyya and other editors added material from a variety of sources including the Greek Vindianus, Aristotle, and Theophrastus, whose ideas they attributed to Nabatean sages[20]. It is possible, however, that such Greek material was a later addition to older Syriac material, and that Nabatean sages composed material themselves at an earlier date. Hämeen-Anttila agrees that the religious practices in particular probably indicate the presence of older material, as he points out, «[t]here is also a layer of popular beliefs which often sounds Mesopotamian enough and… demonstrably goes back to Ancient Syro-Mesopotamian religion"[21]. Hämeen-Anttila is hesitant, however, to establish an earlier date for the latest Syriac version because there is no trace anywhere in the corpus before it was translated by Ibn Waḥshiyya. Therefore, he says the Syriac version

19. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 29.

20. These editors were compilers responsible for earlier versions of the work. They collected existing material, possibly deleted parts, added other passages, and added their own writing. In the text, two fictional editors are mentioned by name, Qūthāmā and Yanbūshād, in addition to the [fictional] composer of the first version of the work (*ṣadr al-kitāb wa-ibtidā'uhu*), Ḍughrīth or Ṣughrīth. These figures are said to have lived tens of thousands of years apart. See Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:10.

21. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 16.

might even be as late as the second/eighth century. However, the rural location of the last Syriac editor Qūthāmā and the attitudes of secrecy toward religion (*dīn*) and knowledge (*ʿulūm*)[22], may explain why the work did not circulate in other sources.

The *Nabatean agriculture* itself claims it was composed by three editors, whose names appear to be coded. The oldest sage Sugrīth lived thousands of years before the second editor Yanbūshād b. Kāmāṭā. Yanbūshād was a monotheist ascetic, who, as local villagers believed, rose to heaven after his death. Yanbūshād is said to have spoken both Aramaic (Kardānī) and Arabic due to his many travels. He wrote a book called *Kitāb khawāss ʿilāj al-manābit*. He was so loved that after his death people wept for him as they did for the ancient Mesopotamian deity Tammūz. Yanbūshād was not known to Ibn Waḥshiyya's Nabatean contemporaries, and Hämeen-Anttila suggested that Yanbūshād was likely a fictional character invented by Qūthāmā. Although I agree that Yanbūshād was probably a constructed protagonist, some of his descriptions may contain truthful elements.

The most recent sage, Qūthāmā l-Qūqānī, presents himself as the last editor of the work, and is generally taken as the compiler of the Syriac version that Ibn Waḥshiyya translated. Toufic Fahd tried to relate him to the Edessan sect of the Quqites, arguing he was a chief of their sect[23]. However, little in the *Nabatean agriculture* seems to point at a Quqite background[24]. Qūthāmā owned estates in the Iraqi countryside, at Ṭayzanābādh[25] and Bet Garme (Bāgarmā) and lived

22. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:6-7.

23. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 3:327. The Quqites were a sect originating in Edessa in the second century CE, founded by Qūq, who did not use the New Testament, but adhered to the Old Testament. See H. Drijvers, «Quq and the Quqites», in *Numen* 14.1 (1967): 104-29.

24. Hämeen-Anttila finds the connection unwarranted and points out that *nisba*s usually refer to places. A work by Pseudo-Teukros, the *Kitāb Tashkalushana al-Bābilī l-Quqānī fī suwar daraj al-falak* (as mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm) is likewise attributed to one Quqānī. Kayvan Tahmasebian relates this *nisba* to Aqar Quf, as does Hämeen-Anttila. On the identification of this work, see Kayvan Tahmasebian, «Arbitrary Constellations: Writing the Imagination in Medieval Persian Astrology, with Translations from Tanklūshā (11th-12th century)», in *Licit Magic - Global Lit Working Papers* no. 7 (2021), online: http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/mwtj-p261 (consulted 14 March 2024).

25. Ṭayzanābādh was situated one mile from al-Qādisiyya, on the way to the Hijaz (Yohanan Friedman (trans.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol 12: *The Battle of*

in Babylon (Bābil)[26]. In addition, Qūthāmā had some monotheist tendencies that Ibn Waḥshiyya believed he tried to hide out of fear. In Qūthāmā's time, the Kanʿānites, who were connected with the Jordan River and were especially devoted to Jupiter, reigned over Babylon.

Hämeen-Anttila situates an edited layer of the text in northern Mesopotamia, while otherwise he associates the geography of the work with the Sawād of Iraq[27]. The *Nabatean agriculture* was clearly compiled in a central-southern Mesopotamian context. Ibn al-Nadīm describes Ibn Waḥshiyya as belonging to the people of Qussin, which was located near Kufa[28]. This gives Ibn Waḥshiyya himself a central Iraqi location, similar to Qūthāmā. This area formed part of various empires. It was known as Mesene, Maysān, or Charasene under the Seleucids and the Parthians, and part of the Asoristan province in the Sassanid Empire, which was divided into Babylon, Kaskar, and Maysān[29]. This area was known in Sassanid times for its flourishing agriculture thanks to its extensive irrigation systems; these were damaged at the time of the Islamic conquest but restored in Umayyad times. The city of Sūrā, the region in which a Jewish academy was located, is mentioned in the *Nabatean agriculture* as the hometown of the Nabatean sage Māsā[30], although the Jews, according to the Talmud, distanced themselves from the Jews in Maysān, as they viewed that as a separate region.

al-Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine (Albany 1992), 60 n. 233. Al-Qādisiyya was located at the border of the Sawād and the Arabian desert, southwest of Ḥīra, west of the Euphrates River. The historian Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) described it as «a resort, surrounded by vineyards, winepresses, trees, and inns. It was a place of amusement and idleness». Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch*, vol 3 (Leipzig 1868), 3:569-70, as cited by Friedman. It also features in the poetry of Abū Nuwās, *Khamriyyat: poesia bàquica*, trans. Jaume Ferre and Anna Gil (Barcelona 2002), 283.

26. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1046.

27. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 14, 18.

28. Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Ibn al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge, 2 vols. (New York 1970), 2:731.

29. Michael G. Morony, «Continuity and Change in the Administrative Geography of Late Sasanian and Early Islamic al-'Iraq», *Iran* 20 (1982): 1-49.

30. John Simpson, «The Land behind Ctesiphon: The Archaeology of Babylonia during the Period of the Babylonian Talmud», in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Leiden 2015), 18.

Sethians and Ṣābians in Classical Arabic Sources

In the fourth/tenth century and onward several Arabic sources mention "Sethians" living in southern Iraq. Some of these references indicate the Mandaeans, who are also called Ṣābians. The term Ṣābians, which occurs in the Qur'ān, has been widely studied. The fourth-/tenth-century Arabic sources used the term Ṣābian broadly, to describe pagan Ḥarrānians as well as various groups living in southern Iraq[31]. With the exception of the Ṣābian followers of Mandaeaism, Ṣābians and Sethians seem to have adhered to a type of paganism quite similar to what those in the *Nabatean agriculture* followed.

The *Nabatean agriculture* exhibits many Ḥarrānian features. In spite of their distance from the northern Mesopotamian city state of Ḥarrān, the Nabateans resembled the Ḥarrānians in their worship of the astral deities, and their emphasis on the Moon and Sun[32]. The historian al-Mas'ūdī saw at the door of the Ṣābian meeting place in Ḥarrān an inscription in Syriac letters which read "Man is a celestial plant. In fact, man resembles an upturned tree, the root being turned towards the sky and branches [sunk] in the ground"[33]. This statement, *al-shajara insān maqlūb ilā asfal wa-l-insān shajara maqlūb ilā fawq*, is also found in the *Nabatean agriculture*, as noted by Toufic Fahd[34]. The southern Mesopotamians in the *Nabatean agriculture* and the Ḥarrānians undoubtedly shared many pagan beliefs. However, these similarities are not necessarily related to the Sethians, and are not enough to exclusively link the Sethians to Ḥarrān.

Hämeen-Anttila argued that the community Ibn Waḥshiyya describes in the *Nabatean agriculture* "might well be labeled the Babylonian Sabians in contrast to both Ḥarrānian Sabians and Man-

31. K. van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes* (Leiden 2017), 14; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 50. For a discussion of various Ṣābians and the identification of south Ṣābians to Mandaeans, also see Ş. Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relation to the Ṣābians of the Qur'ān and to the Ḥarrānians* (Oxford 1994); Daniel Chwolsohn, *Die Sabier und Sabismus* (St. Petersburg 1856).

32. According to Green, it was only during the Hellenistic period that the Sun gained prominence in Mesopotamia. T. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Ḥarrān* (Leiden 1998), 64.

33. Michel Tardieu, *Le manichéisme* (Paris 1981), 13.

34. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:973.

daeans (the Sabians of al-Baṭā'iḥ)"[35]. Ibn Waḥshiyya references both the Babylonian (Bābilī) and the Ḥarrānian (Ḥarnānī) Ṣābians in the *Nabatean agriculture*. He does not associate either of them with the Sethians, but does seem to consider both as descendants of the Nabateans and the ancient people in the book who cried for Tammūz and Yanbūshād. None of these Ṣābians, he finds, has any precise knowledge regarding the origin of the crying for Tammūz, nor do they know Yanbūshād[36].

Ibn al-Nadīm (d. ca. 385/995) identifies a number of different Ṣābians. He first discusses the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān, and then distinguishes these from the Ṣābians of the marshes of southern Iraq (Ṣābat al-Baṭā'iḥ), whom he describes as a pagan people "who follow the school of the ancient Nabateans (*ʿalā madhhab al-Nabaṭ al-qadīm*), venerate the stars, and possess statues and idols"[37]. These are "generally speaking (*ʿāmmat*) the people of the Ṣābians called the Ḥarrānians, but it is said that they differ from them completely (*jumlatan wa-tafṣīlan*)"[38]. This description matches both the Nabateans and the Sethians in the *Nabatean agriculture*. As Van Bladel points out, these were not Mandaeans[39].

This description is added to that of a group of Ṣābians whom Ibn al-Nadīm identifies as the Mughtasila, who are also among the Ṣābians of the swamps. These are the Elchasites founded by Elchasai (al-Ḥasīḥ). They are numerous in the marshes, wash themselves, and everything they eat. They tell many strange stories (*khurāfāt*), and some of them worship the stars up to the present day[40]. The Elchasites were a sect active in Asoristan between 100 and 400 CE, who performed baptisms frequently and had gnostic tendencies. Epipha-

35. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, «Ibn Waḥshiyya and Magic», *Anaquel de Estudios Árabes* 10 (1999), 42.

36. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 228.

37. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. Ibrāhīm Ramaḍān (Beirut 1997).

38. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. Ramaḍān, 414; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, trans. Dodge, 2:811.

39. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 72.

40. Cf. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 71; Chwolsohn, *Die Sabier*, 11, 543-44; C. Buck, «The Identity of the Ṣābʿūn: An Historical Quest», *Muslim World* 74.3-4 (1984), 179. Dodge translates this as, they «belong to the community of the Sabians known as al-Ḥarnāniyūn», (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 2:811), but the Arabic allows for both translations, and Ibn al-Nadīm makes it clear that these people differ from the Harranians completely. Cf. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. Ramaḍān, 414.

nius equates the Elkasaites with the Sampsaeans, whom he describes as "no longer no longer either Jews or Christians"[41]. "These Sampsaeans… are neither Christians, Jews nor pagans; since they are just in the middle, they are nothing"[42]. He relates these to the Ebionites, who are a sect whose people "immerse themselves in water regularly, summer and winter for supposed purification, like the Samaritans"[43]. Mani, the founder of Manicheanism, grew up among them.

ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) similarly argued there were two groups of Ṣābians, one Ḥarrānian and one from Wāsiṭ[44], the second did not adhere to the eternity of the world. This second group partly came from Greece, and another prayed toward the north, ate pork, and called themselves followers of the religion of Seth, and possessors of his holy book[45]. In his *Kitāb al-āthār al-bāqiya*, al-Bīrūnī (d. 442/1048) distinguishes the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān, whom he did not consider real Ṣābians, from a separate group of Ṣābians, those of the Sawād of Iraq[46]. The latter claimed to descend from Enos, son of Seth[47].

A certain Abū ʿAlī (possibly the vizier Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. Muqla (d. 328/940), describes a sect of Ṣābians, different from the Ḥarrānians who lived in the districts of Wāsiṭ; he met some of them in Baghdad and described them as similar to the Mandaeans[48]. Abū ʿAlī writes that their religion was called the religion of Seth, whom they called their prophet, and they also acknowledged John the Baptist; they had two scriptures, one attributed to Seth and one to John

41. Frank Williams (trans.), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book I (Sects 1-46)* (Leiden and Boston 2009), 55. L. Ginzberg, «Elcesaites», in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York and London 1906), 5:89-90.

42. Frank Williams (trans.), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: De Fide, Books II and III* (Leiden and Boston 2013), 71.

43. Williams (trans.) *The Panarion of Epiphanius*, *Book I*, 60.

44. J. M. Fiey, «Le nabat de kaskar et wasit», in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 51 (1990): 51-87. The new city of Wāsiṭ was founded by al-Ḥallāj across from the Sassanid city of Kaskar (Kashkar in Syriac), which was built in the third century CE.

45. Discussed by Cottrell, «Adam and Seth», 522. Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*, 41. Abū Manṣūr ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb uṣūl al-dīn* (Istanbul 1928).

46. Al-Bīrūnī believed the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān only took the name Ṣābians in 228/843; see Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 51.

47. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 44.

48. Quoted by Bar Bahlul (fl. ca. 950-1000) in *Kitāb al-Dalā'il* (Book of indications), translated and discussed by van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 48-49.

the Baptist. They wrote in ancient Nabatean script, not in Arabic. They prayed in the direction of Jerusalem, and worshiped on Sunday. Their prayers and ordinary speech were in ancient Aramaic (*al-nabaṭiya al-qadīma*). Kevin van Bladel identified Abū ʿAlī's description of the Ṣābian rituals as matching those of the modern Mandaeans. This passage makes a clear connection between a "Sethian religion" as the term used in the *Nabatean agriculture*, the southern Iraqi region of the *Nabatean agriculture*, and the Mandaeans. Thus far, these sources establish that in Ibn Waḥshiyya's time, some Ṣābians were Elchasites, others Mandaeans, while some exhibited a general Ḥarrānian paganism.

The Sethians are again mentioned two centuries later. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. ca. 626/1223) writes about Sethians in his entry to al-Ṭīb, which he describes as a "small village between Wāsiṭ and Khūzistān"[49]. He writes that the people who live there are Aramaeans (*Nabaṭ*) even up until his time, who speak Aramaic (*Nabaṭiyya*). Yāqūt cites Dāwūd b. Aḥmad b. Saʿīd of al-Ṭīb as saying: "It is common knowledge among us that aṭ-Ṭīb was founded by Seth son of Adam – peace be upon him – and its people continued to follow the sect (*milla*) of Seth, which is the doctrine of the Ṣābi'a, until Islam came; then they converted to Islam"[50]. Drower identified this Seth with the Mandaean Shitil[51]. Van Bladel identifies them as Mandaeans. While Michael J. Decker took this as a reference to the Mandaeans or Ṣābians. I believe they could be Mandaeans or a poorly defined group of Sethians.

Another late passage linking the Sethians to southern Iraq is found in Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī, who writes that "the Sabeans who are in the marshes of Iraq claim that they are descended from [Seth] and they acknowledge his prophecy"[52].

Al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), relying on Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925), defined yet another group of Ṣābians in the marshes. He distinguishes these, whom he calls the Kimāriyyūn, from the Ṣābians in Ḥarrān[53]. Kevin van Bladel reconstructed this name as

49. Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. Wüstenfeld, 3:566, line 10 onward.

50. Van Bladel (trans.), *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 75; E. S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasorean Gnosis* (Oxford 1960), 62, 105.

51. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 62, 105.

52. Cottrell, «Adam and Seth», 545.

53. Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-ǧawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat, 7 vols. (Beirut 1965), 1:263, as cited in van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 43.

Kinthāwiyyūn, or Kentaeans[54]. Not much is known about this group. In Bar Konay's account, the Kentaeans are presented as an ancestor of the Mandaeans. They come from a pagan background and "revered the luminaries (sun and moon) and fire"[55]. The Kentaeans used to have a festival in which they gathered to mourn the fall of a figure represented as their idol[56]. Moreover, Bar Konay calls them "Sons of Seth"[57]. They also appear to feature in the Mandaean *Ginza Rabba* as the "people of Saturn"[58]. In addition, they are said to fast frequently and carry a sign of a cross on their left shoulders. They are said to have been active in fifth-century Iraq.

The Ṣābians in the marshes have most often been identified with the Mandaeans[59]. Passages like that of Abū ʿAlī leave no doubt about the presence of Mandaeans in fourth-/tenth-century southern Iraq, and it appears that they were identified as Sethians or followers of the religion of Seth. Van Bladel says the language of Ibn Waḥshiyya is probably Mandaic[60]. This raises the question as to the connection between three groups: (1) one group called Sethians in the *Nabatean agriculture*, located in central-southern Iraq; (2) Mandaean Sethians (called Sethians but not like those referred to in the *Nabatean agriculture*); and (3) Ṣābians (mentioned in other sources, not called Sethians, but resembling the Sethians in the *Nabatean agriculture*), also in southern Iraq.

Many elements of *Nabatean agriculture* are fictional and we must be cautious when using the work as a historical source. If Ibn Waḥshiyya invented the Sethians as a scapegoat for negative sectarian sentiments, then the Sethians could be a group inspired by one of these contemporaries. However, this seems unlikely. Ibn Waḥshiyya's probing of the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān and Babylon about older Nabatean customs does not read as a rhetorical ploy to make a pseudo-translation more trustworthy. Rather, it indicates that the Sethians and Nabateans of the *Nabatean agriculture* actually were an older group. In addition, the work provides a much more detailed account of the

54. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 43.
55. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 45.
56. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 20.
57. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 42.
58. As identified by van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 3.
59. Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*; van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*.
60. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 128.

Sethians than any other contemporary Arabic source, which moreover matches late antique pagan ideas. Although descriptions and statements were attributed to some sages and Sethians, many Sethian characteristics may give us information about this historical group. It is necessary to consider these characteristics and place them in their historical contexts to determine their historical reality.

Who are the Sethians in the Nabatean Agriculture?

The Sethians (*Shīʿat/Banī Ishīthā*) are the hegemonic people of Qūthāmā's time[61]. They were already a powerful group at the time of Qūthāmā's predecessor Yanbūshād, but after a period of sectarian upheaval they became the majority in Babylon, Syria (*al-Shām*), al-Jazīra[62], and adjacent areas[63]. Their supremacy coincided with the arrival of the Kanʿānites who established themselves as rulers and kings over Babylon and the Chaldeans[64]. The Kanʿānites and Chaldeans were presented as descendants from Adam by the same mother[65]. In ancient times, the Kanʿānites from Kanʿān had settled in Babylon under the leadership of Nimrūd b. Kanʿān[66]. This generation is described as the ancestors of Abraham (Ibrāhīm), who was born in the Kūthā Rabbā after their migration[67]. Several wars between the Kanʿānites and the Chaldeans followed, and the Chaldeans pushed the Kanʿānites to "the edges of Syria" for being arrogant and envious. Abraham was among those banished to Syria, partly for his monotheist ideas that posited the existence of a power higher than the sun[68]; in this respect his views were similar to those of Yanbūshād. The Kanʿānites returned as rulers over Babylon, they "behaved well", and Qūthāmā no longer wished to slander them[69].

61. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1337.
62. A region in northern Mesopotamia.
63. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans*, 235; Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:541.
64. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans*, 305.
65. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans*, 280.
66. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 280.
67. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 280, cf. 174 where he was born according to Islamic myth.
68. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:264.
69. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 281.

Although *Nabatean agriculture* does not appear to explicitly associate the Sethians with the Kanʿānites, the two new groups who became dominant in Qūthāmā's time logically needed to be the same. The Kanʿānites might be the ethnic designation and the Sethians the religious appellation.

The Sethians followed the law (*sharīʿa*) of Seth, a law that replaced that of his father Adam, and was used (*al-mustaʿmala al-bāqiya*) from the time of Seth until the time of Qūthāmā. The Nabateans blamed Seth for deviating from his father's doctrines[70]. With the growing influence of the Sethians, Seth's law became increasingly dominant, leading Qūthāmā to think it might obliterate the other Chaldean laws (*nawāmīs* al-Kasdānian) and that of other Nabatean peoples[71].

In Qūthāmā's time, the Sethians joined the followers of the sage Māsā l-Sūrānī, described as a trusted ancient Chaldean sage, and became one interwoven group, who believed in each other's doctrines[72]. Māsā l-Sūrānī was called a sophist (*al-sūfisṭay*) and was considered one of the ancestors of the Chaldeans, and hence also of the Sethians[73]. Māsā was presented as Adam's great-grandson[74] and Qūthāmā believed that Māsā may have lived in Adam's lifetime and known him[75]. Māsā was said to have invented the various uses of the vine plant, by inspiration from Jupiter, and his name is inscribed both at the entry and the sides of the temple of the idol Jupiter, located in Sūrā[76]. This temple was, in Qūthāmā's time, still managed by the offspring of Māsā's own servant.

70. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:322; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 175.

71. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:730.

72. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1106.

73. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraw*, 276.

74. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraw*, 284. Here the Jewish academy of Sūrā was founded in 225 CE. When Abbā Arīkhā, the rabbi who founded the academy arrived, he found there was no Jewish life in Sūrā. Adam is believed to have had «64 children, 22 female and 42 male», Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 280.

75. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 269, 276; Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1237, 1243.

76. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1106; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 265. This probably stems from before Sūrā became a predominantly Jewish town. This vine was loved more than theriac (*diryāq*). Theriac was first coined by the Greeks in the first century CE, see Véronique Boudon-Millot, «Aux origines de la thériaque: la recette d'Andromaque», in *Revue d'histoire de la pharmacie* 58 (2010): 261–70.

The Sethians and the Nabatean sages diverge regarding a variety of legal and religious issues. The Sethians censored these sages, and expressed fear for them[77]. Qūthāmā refused to contradict the sage Ṭāmithrā, as this would imply that he renounced the religion (*dīn*) of Seth, which he thought he should appear to follow and obey[78]. However, this affection for the Sethian religion appears to have been a pretense. It is best, according to Qūthāmā, to let the Sethians think one is friends with them, and follow their religion[79]. Ideally, one would shun them, but if the Sethians noticed, they would slander those who shunned them, like they did Yanbūshād. Elsewhere Qūthāmā said, «if not for the fear of the Sethians I would have related what he mentioned of the causes of the constellation and the causes of the conditions of the planets"[80].

A leading cause of the conflict between the Sethians and the Nabatean sages were confessional differences. The Sethians were polytheists dedicated to Saturn[81], and the worship of astral deities. The planets were viewed as the sole causes of influence on the sublunar world. These ideas were attributed specifically to the Kanʿānite sage Ṭāmithrā; denying them would be "deviating from the religion of Seth"[82]. The Sethians worshiped idols. Ibn Waḥshiyya called them the "servants of the idols of the astral deities"[83]. In Tishrin I, they attended the festival of the idols (*ʿīd tabrīk al-aṣnām*), and in front of each idol, they cried out "we humbly revere the idols"[84]. The Nabatean sages themselves also engaged in idol worship. However, Yanbūshād, Māsā, Jaryānā, and other Kasdānian leaders prohibited animal sacrifice. Instead, they made small animal statues for the idols[85]. According to Qūthāmā, these types of statuette were no

77. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:755.

78. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:729; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 178.

79. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 295.

80. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:755.

81. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 296; for the Sethians, see 137. Hämeen-Anttila refers to the soul with the term «solar matter».

82. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 159. Ṭāmithrā was also credited with the ability to preserve corpses after death, Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 285.

83. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 142.

84. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 296.

85. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1416; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 300.

longer made after the Kan'ānites came to rule the region, and people followed the religion of their kings. It appears that the Sethians did not worship Dawānāy, and Qūthāmā includes an example of a man from among the followers of Seth who turned away from Dawānāy's idol in his temple in Babylon[86].

The Sethians were further said to stay up for the night of light, and believed in the servant of Venus. During a night in the month of Nissan, Sethians slept with "three pieces of bread, four dates, seven raisins and a bag of salt under their pillows, because an old woman called the Servant of Venus comes at night and goes around visiting everyone, touching their stomachs and searching under their pillows"[87]. If this woman does not find these foods, and notices a person's stomach is empty, "she prays to Venus to make this person's life difficult in the next year"[88]. Qūthāmā claims "all people in the clime of Babel do this"[89]. He [Qūthāmā] called this a strange custom and openly questioned its sense, as he was surprised that Venus would have a servant, and that that servant would visit all the people in one night[90]. Ibn al-Nadīm reports this ritual as a Ḥarrānian custom[91]. The Sethians further believed in "an animal" which they called *jinn*, that exists in the sublunar world; some of these are demons, others they called *ghūl*, which are half woman and half donkey[92]. They also believed in the *anqa*, a creature that is a bird on the upper half and whose lower half is human.

Sethian polytheism contrasted with the monotheism of the sage Anūḥā, and especially Yanbūshād. Yanbūshād's commitment to monotheism stirred ongoing animosity between himself and the Sethians, a conflict that is highlighted throughout the work[93]. The Sethians callled him a mad monotheist (*majnūn muwaḥḥid*) because he denied the power of the astral gods and only upheld the influ-

86. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:993.
87. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 234–35.
88. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 235.
89. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 235.
90. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:541.
91. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 201.
92. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:926; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 355, 356.
93. For example, he fears that his words may provoke the Sethians to seek his life (*ittibā' īshītha yastaḥillūna safk dammī li-qawlī hādhā*), Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:360. For other examples, see 1:562, 649, 729, 755; 2:1338.

ence of the Sun[94]. He was also called a delusional madman (*al-majnūn al-muwaswas*)[95], a heretic (*kāfir*), and an infidel (*jāḥid*). Qūthāmā liked him, although he was aware that the Sethians would resent him for his views[96]. Occasionally, Qūthāmā sided with the Sethians and against Yanbūshād. For instance, Yanbūshād believed in a first power in charge of everything (*quwwa awwaliyya qāhira li-l-kull)*. But elsewhere, with the Sethians, Qūthāmā asserted that all (sublunar) processes (*afʿāl*) are effected by the two lights, that is, the sun and the moon, who in some cases are assisted by the other planets[97]. Ibn Waḥshiyya saw both Qūthāmā and Yanbūshād as monotheists (*yu'mūna ilā siḥḥat al-tawḥīd wa-yanṣarūnahu*), but claims they were afraid to express their beliefs because of the people and kings of their time[98]. Although Qūthāmā occasionally seemed to confess his belief in the astral deities, he nonetheless said he liked Yanbūshād, although he was aware that the Sethians would resent him for that[99]. Elsewhere Qūthāmā said he was not from Yanbūshād's school (*madhhab*), upon which Ibn Waḥshiyya comments that in reality he was, but was afraid to admit it. Indeed, later he confessed that he belonged to the school of Anūḥā and Yanbūshād[100].

Another aspect of disagreement was the law of Seth. The Nabatean sages called the Sethians ignorant because they only studied the law of Seth, and what was worse, they said, was their lack of awareness of their own ignorance[101]. According to Qūthāmā, thinking that one is knowledgeable, but being ignorant is the worst kind of condition[102]. He addressed them, saying: "The people at the time of Dawānāy were more intelligent than you, O followers of Seth… They also took care to speak what is proper and true and they forbade the speaking of what is a lie and falsehood. But you are different"[103].

94. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:216; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 142.
95. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:649; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 131, who also thinks this refers to Qūthāmā.
96. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:212.
97. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:562.
98. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:406.
99. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:212.
100. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 308.
101. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1338.
102. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 295.
103. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 275.

Little information about the law of Seth can be derived from the work. In his laws Seth ordained farmers to rest during feasts, and landowners had the responsibility to inform them of this law[104]. Moreover, Seth installed several prohibitions on foods; for example, the meat of small animals such as birds was forbidden because it corrupts the flesh[105]. In comparison, Anūḥā, Adam, and Yanbūshād were known to have disliked eating pork[106]. In terms of marriage, Seth forbade marriage with liars[107].

The Sethians were sometimes identified with the magicians[108]. The Nabatean sages have ambiguous, often negative opinions about the magic (*siḥr*) of the magicians. Qūthāmā claimed he was afraid to give his opinion on magic due to the followers of Seth[109]. The Nabatean sages distanced themselves from negative magic and talismans[110]. Nonetheless Qūthāmā studied with the magician Barīsha, and included magical recipes that may benefit humans and planets. Some of the Sethian magical rituals were astrological in nature. For example, the Sethians believed that those who consumed fennel seeds every day when the Sun was in Aries or Cancer, would never become ill, and would reach old age with a healthy body[111]. They believed Seth brought fennel to Babylon from the region of the Sun.

Another strong point of contention was that of revelation and prophecy. The Sethians thought the Moon revealed knowledge to Adam and Seth[112], and they transmitted a *Kitāb asrār al-qamar* (Book of secrets of the moon). One sage claimed that Adam did not say that his book was revealed to him from God, and the Sethians were wrong to claim that Adam and Seth were the recipients of revelation[113]. Yet, Qūthāmā believed the Moon revealed (astronomical)

104. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:203.
105. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1449.
106. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 343.
107. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:162; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 175.
108. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:322; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 188, 175.
109. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:322.
110. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1394–95; Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 299.
111. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:850.
112. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1337, 1241.
113. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1241.

knowledge to Adam, and this was a foundation for further knowledge accumulation[114]. Yanbūshād appeared to be the main Chaldean sage to have denied Adam's prophethood. He saw Adam and Seth as having been created with wise natures[115], and he only acknowledged the prophethood of Dawānāy. The debate on prophecy appeared to cross sectarian lines. Elsewhere, Anūḥā claimed to have experienced revelation, but Ṭāmithrā denied this[116].

The debate concerned not only the recipients of revelation, but also its medium. The Sethians upheld the possibility of prophecy by means of direct speech from the gods: "Some of the followers of Seth say that the gods have spoken to some people using speech that was heard and understood by them"[117]. However, Qūthāmā denied that it was possible to receive revelation by way of direct speech in a waking state[118]. The Nabatean sages only acknowledge two legitimate forms of prophecy: inspiration while awake, or in dreams[119]. This may have been an addition by Ibn Waḥshiyya. He added a note under his own name that he discussed these ideas with contemporary philosophers (*falāsifa*) who seem to have been impressed[120].

Additionally, the Sethians believed in prophecy about future events. In response to the Sethians, who believed that the Moon informed Adam of future events, Yanbūshād argued that it was impossible for the Moon to have done so, because "the moon does not know the unseen, because it does not know the effects of the other planets"[121]. The planets, especially the Sun, do not know the causes of their actions and therefore cannot know the future, let alone predict it to humans.

114. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:306, 356.
115. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 274.
116. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1241.
117. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 294.
118. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 294.
119. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1243.
120. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1243. See Griffel for an overview of ideas on prophecy among the philosophers (*falāsifa*). Frank Griffel, «Philosophy and Prophecy», in *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Luis Xavier and Richard Taylor (New York 2016), 385-98. Also see Janne Mattila, «Ṣābians, the School of al-Kindī, and the Brethren of Purity», in *Religious Identities in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Walking Together & Parting Ways*, ed. Ilkka Lindstedt, Nina Nikki, and Riikka Tuori (Leiden 2021), 92.
121. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1240. This is in addition to the fact that he did not believe Adam received revelation at all. About this, see below.

Qūthāmā and Yanbūshād both upheld an Aristotelian view on matter as consisting of four elements[122]. Based on this, Yanbūshād believed that everything in the sublunar world was temporary. Bodies that consist of the four elements cannot last eternally (*yabqā al-duhr kullahu*). The Sethians, by contrast, believed that there are many eternal things in this world, which neither die or disappear[123]. Moreover, Ṭāmithrā denied that the four qualities could produce any action[124]. The Galenic principle of innate heat (*ḥarāra gharīziyya*), a force of life in living organisms, which Yanbūshād and Qūthāmā recognized, the Sethians also knew, and referred to as "solar matter" (*mādda shamsiyya*)[125].

Qūthāmā and Yanbūshād further alienated the Sethians by diminishing the role of the astral deities by denying voluntary causation. In particular, the Nabatean sages disagreed with the Sethians regarding the premeditated influence of the astral deities on the sublunar world. Qūthāmā believed, with Yanbūshād, that plants grow because the involuntary planetary rotation influences the mixtures of elements in the sublunar world. This was how all things that did not previously exist came into being[126]. Elsewhere the Nabatean sages denied the influence of Saturn and Jupiter, and pointed to the causal effect of the heat of the Sun and Moon, and the wind[127]. They occasionally emphasized the unique influence of the Sun as "the living one" (*al-ḥayy*), whom they call a voluntary, potent agent (*fāʿil mukhtār qādir*)[128]; this is something the Sethians denied. Yanbūshād, in line with his monotheist ideas, posited a cause (*muḥdith*) above all these causes[129].

These Aristotelian and other ideas are said to have been initially formulated by Yanbūshād, and Qūthāmā was hesitant to mention

122. The element fire, moreover, has its own sphere under the moon (*ʿālam al-nār al-tālī li-falak al-qamar ilaynā*), Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1055, cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 122.

123. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:649.

124. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 158.

125. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:622.

126. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:755–56.

127. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 157; Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:629, 755.

128. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:874. On the Nabatean cosmology and the role of the Sun, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 110–11.

129. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:756.

them out of fear of the Sethians. The Sethians, as seen above, considered the effects of the planets as the sole cause of all growth and decay on earth. The involuntary movement of the planets seems to have been a controversial statement. According to Qūthāmā, planetary movement was random, not intended. Planetary "actions and effects occur according to chance (*alā ḥasab al-ittifāqāt*), not according to intention"[130]. Qūthāmā said: "I know that the followers of Seth wish to shed my blood for saying this about the gods, may the god of gods protect me from their evil"[131]. This is in line with what Ibn al-Nadīm wrote about the Ṣābians, whom he described as having believed in the voluntary movement of planets[132].

The Sethians distinguished themselves not only by their ideas, but also by their fashion. They wore long beards, but shaved their mustaches, plaited their hair in baths, and dyed it with henna. They wore blue and green turbans, as well as long clothes with fringes that dragged behind them while they walked[133]. In each corner of the cloth they made knots with four dots of saffron in each cloth[134]. The Sethians forbade the wearing of the *ṭaylasān* (*libs al-ṭayālisa*)[135].

The Nabateans in the *Nabatean agriculture* generally showed a concern with cleanliness and bathing[136]. The Nabatean sages upheld the view that bodies are "corpses full of stench and filth, because they are mines of filth"[137]. They despise madmen for their lack of bathing:

> being wise we cannot at the same time do to ourselves things which madmen (*majānīn*) do, becoming madmen ourselves, clothing ourselves in

130. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:665, *fiʿluhā ḥādith anha ala ṭarīq al-arḍ lā ala ṭarīq al-qasḍ* («its effect derives from it in an accidental way, not intentionally»), 1:757.

131. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:390.

132. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, trans. Dodge, 2:746–47.

133. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 296; Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 1:338.

134. This description reminds us of the Jewish ritual fringes known as *tzitzit*, as commanded in Num. 15:38; the custom may not have been exclusively Jewish.

135. Muslim writers believed the *ṭaylasān* had a Jewish origin. A *ḥadīth* stated that Jews brought 7000 *ṭaylasān* somewhere, see Judith Kindinger, «*Bidʿa* or *Sunna*: The *ṭaylasān* as a Contested Garment in the Mamlūk Period (Discussions between al-Suyūṭī and Others)», in *Al-Suyūṭī, a Polymath of the Mamlūk Period*, ed. Antonella Ghersetti (Leiden 2016), 74–75.

136. As noted by Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 244.

137. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 243.

wool (*ṣūf*) like madmen do and letting our hair and nails grow long like the hair and nails of madmen, without entering a bath (*ḥammām*) or letting water, cold or warm, touch us or without cleansing ourselves from the dirt of our bodies[138].

The Sethians too are said to plait their hair while taking baths; however, these concerns do not seem strong enough to establish a connection with baptism.

While Qūthāmā followed both Adam and Seth, he was not a Sethian. The Nabatean sages themselves showed Sethian characteristics. Yanbūshād was a follower of Adam, while acknowledging that Seth had valuable works containing some of Adam's teachings (*madhāhib*). However, Yanbūshād did not consider the Sethians to be true followers of Seth. "You, the followers of Seth, attribute to Seth and his father things they did not possess and you are (actually) their enemies, not their true followers, know that"[139]. In the *Nabatean agriculture*, the figures of Adam, Seth, and Noah nonetheless are adjoined to Nabatean sages such as the ancient Kamāsh al-Nahri and Dawānāy.

The Nabateans esteemed Adam highly, especially as a teacher. They believed that he had lived after Dawānāy and added much useful knowledge. Thus, it said that Dawānāy had already taught Nabateans about talismans and other things before Adam, «but he had not expressed clearly any of his teachings in the way Adam did. Neither were the teachings of Dawānāy like those of Adam in clarity and blessing"[140]. In addition to naming "all things on earth", Adam taught people mathematics, botany, talismans, medicine, and other sciences, professions, the basis on which to advance the sciences, and because of this they called him "the Father of Mankind." Thus, people during his time used to call him "my father" or "O our father" in reverence, respect, and glorification and in gratitude for what he had given them, providing them with things that were beneficial both for the common people and the elite[141].

Anūḥā, or Noah, featured as a sage, doctor (*ṭabīb*), and "prophet of the Moon" from Syria who survived the flood that occurred in his

138. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 244.
139. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 278.
140. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 298.
141. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 297–98.

time[142]. After the Moon revealed to Noah that there is only one god, and that god is higher also than the Moon himself, Noah became a monotheist[143]. Anūḥā even wrote a letter to Ṭāmithrā asking him to leave the seven gods to "serve the One God of Gods", something which Ṭāmithrā refused to do[144]. This character of Anūḥā may be a combination of both Enos and Noah[145]. However, based on his characteristics, he seems more likely to be Noah. Enos, the first son of Seth, who features prominently in other Sethian texts, does not appear so much in the *Nabatean agriculture*, and the Sethians claim to be his descendants.

The characters of Adam and Seth are nonetheless presented as historically foreign to the Nabateans. The oldest stories known among Nabateans are those about Dawānāy, the first man to receive wisdom through revelation while sleeping. He was said to have drawn a thousand images of plants that were kept in his temple, of which only 190 remained in Qūthāmā's time[146]. He was said to have had a temple in the lands of al-Shiwānī(?) in the region of Sūrā[147], as well as in Babylon. Hämeen-Anttila carefully suggests a connection between Dawānāy, who was called "the lord of mankind", "merciful father", "Babylonian", and Adonai[148]. In any case, Dawānāy was presented as Nabatean while Adam and Seth were seen as foreign. Dawānāy's Chaldean contemporaries "did not mention at all the claims you (Sethians) make for Adam and Seth" regarding lunar revelation "and they did not know about them"[149]. This passage may be read as an indication that the ancient Nabateans, whenever they may have lived, were not considered to have known about Adam and Seth, and that these were introduced to the Nabateans at a later stage.

142. Cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 174. Hämeen-Anttila remarked that in the Jewish tradition Noah is also known for his medical works.
143. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 273.
144. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 326.
145. As suggested by Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 48 n. 129, 79, 169.
146. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1127.
147. Fahd (ed.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne*, 2:1127.
148. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 172.
149. Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 275.

On Seth and "Sethians"

The Nabatean Sethians, as well as the Nabateans themselves, exhibited an interest in Adam and Seth, characters who also featured centrally in many late antique sects and religions, and especially in texts often referred to as "gnostic". To explore a possible relation with these various traditions, we first compare the roles of the patriarchs. The biblical figure of Seth had a range of followers in late antiquity. He features in various Jewish and Christian gnostic texts, and the Samaritans called themselves Sons of Seth, and he was followed as Sethel in Manicheanism and Mandaeaism. Seth is often presented as a recipient of (astronomical knowledge), either from his father Adam or from a divine source, as well as an ancestor of all of mankind or of a specific race. Many of the earlier more extensive representations of Seth and his followers go back to early 100-300 CE Jewish and Christian works. It is especially around the Sethian works found in the Nag Hammadi papers that some scholars have spoken of "Sethianism" and "Sethians", but this is a controversial term that has not been clearly defined.

The Bible briefly mentions Seth as the third son of Adam and Eve after Cain murdered Abel. In Num. 24:17, reference is made to certain "Sons of Seth" or "Sheth." This appellation does not refer to all of humanity, but to particular enemies of the Israeli monarchy. These Sethians may be connected to the Mesopotamian Suteans who dwelled around Mount Sharshar, a location that is echoed in the mention of the land She'ir[150]. Amar Annus suggests that the story in Numbers may be an imitation of Mesopotamian traditions regarding the Suteans as enemies of civilization. In any case, these Suteans do not seem to be likely candidates for identification with the Nabatean Sethians, who firmly relate to the Jewish narrative in which Seth is the good son of Adam, moreover they also imagine Adam not as a sinner but as a wise recipient of lunar revelation.

Later Jewish pseudepigraphia have filled in the blanks of the brevity of the biblical information on Seth. The common trope of

150. A. Annus, «Sons of Seth and the South Wind», in *Mesopotamian Medicine and Magic: Studies in Honor of Markham J. Geller*, ed. S.V. Panayotov and L. Vacín (Leiden 2018), 12.

Seth as a "recipient and transmitter of divine revelation", as Klijn shows, goes back to Jewish narratives such as those found in the *Life of Adam and Eve*[151]. In various Jewish writings, Seth is presented as an ancestor, and as a possessor of knowledge. While Abel was murdered and left no offspring, Cain's offspring were believed to have died in the flood, leaving Seth as the ancestor of all subsequent human beings. Some writers depicted Cain and Abel as sons of a bad angel, leaving Seth as the only legitimate son of Adam. The Jewish historian Josephus (d. ca. 100 CE) presents Seth as a discoverer of astronomical knowledge. He reports that the sons of Seth lived righteously for seven generations before leaving the right path, at which time they engraved their astronomical and cosmological knowledge on two steles to survive fire and flood; these steles still survive in the land of "Seiris"[152]. In the Jewish apocryphal collection, the *Life of Adam and Eve*, composed between the third and fifth century CE but compromising material from the second century CE, Seth is also said to have received knowledge revealed to his father Adam.

The gnostic Nag Hammadi texts refer to "children of Seth" and "the seed of Seth." Some of these references show similarities with the Jewish portrayal of Seth as the forefather and recipient of knowledge. In the *Three Steles of Seth*, Seth is called "the father of the living and unshakable race"[153]. In another work, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, Seth is presented as a recipient of esoteric knowledge from Adam, which he passes on to his sons. This portrayal also occurs in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*[154]. Finally, there is an early Syriac apocryphal text, *The Revelation of the Magi*, traditionally dated to the second to fourth century CE, which relates the magi to a lineage from Shir in the East "who have pre-

151. Cf. F. Wisse, «Stalking Those Elusive Sethians», in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven*, 2 vols. (Leiden 1980), 571. A. F. J. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature* (Leiden 1977), 48-60.

152. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. H. S. J. Thackeray, vol. 1 (London 1967), 1:33. J. D. Turner, «The Gnostic Seth», in *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*, ed. M. E. Stone and T. A. Bergren (Harrisburg, PA 2003), 37. L. D. Graham, «Which Seth?», in *Pražské egyptologické studie* 27 (2021), 71.

153. Quoted in Turner, «The Gnostic Seth», 48.

154. Wisse, «Stalking Those Elusive Sethians», 571; and Klijn, *Seth in Jewish*, 48-60.

served primordial revelations from Adam and Seth in a remote mountain retreat"[155].

Christian anti-heretical writers, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus of Rome, used the term Sethians in a derogatory way to refer to certain "gnostic" groups of people behind the Nag Hammadi writings and others that centered around Seth. Pseudo-Tertullian and Epiphanius (d. 403) describe a group of Sethians, descendants of Seth, who according to Epiphanius, at some point "were found everywhere", and "flourished for some time but most of them disappeared"[156]. These groups saw Seth as Christ. Turner recognized ancestors of these Sethian people in the Barbeloites and Sethites, whom he describes as "a group of "morally earnest biblical exegetes" who saw themselves as the "seed of Seth" and who touted alleged ancient records recounting revelation given to their ancestor and the history of their seed's enlightenment down through the ages"[157]. Epiphanius reports that a different sect, that of the Borborite gnostics had "many books… in the name of Seth"[158]. The information early Christian writers give is minimal. None of these groups call themselves Sethians, and scholars have wondered whether any ever did[159].

In this gnostic context, the Sethians were not a sect as such and scholars disagree on the meaning and usefulness of the term. Stroumsa, for instance, argues that "the overall presence of Seth in Gnostic mythology, we remain unable to detect the actual existence of a specific group of 'Sethians,' as the Church Fathers described them"[160]. Schenke upholds the existence of a tradition of Sethians related to these texts, which shares characteristics such as the self-identification as the seed of Seth, Seth as a heavenly savior, and the existence of a false god, Yaldabaoth, who tried to destroy the seed of

155. T. Pettipiece, «Manichaeism and the Revelation of the Magi: Syriac 'Christianities' in Late-Antique Mesopotamia», in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 24 (2021), 414.

156. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish*, 84.

157. Quoted in Williams, «Sethiansism», in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'*, ed. A. Marjanen and P. Luomanen (Leiden 2005), 52; J. D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Québec 2001), 255-304.

158. J. Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden 1996), 37.

159. Williams, «Sethiansism», 33. Cf. Wisse, «Stalking Those Elusive Sethians.»

160. G. A. G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden 1984), 172.

Seth[161]. However, others are skeptical of gnosticism as a theological entity, and Sethianism as part of that. Frederik Wisse supposes the hypothesis that the gnostic themes, rather than being made up a closed system were "but 'freefloating' theologumena and mythologumena which one could use as one saw fit[162]. However, as Williams argues, in the early Christian centuries there was, if not a sect, a Sethian tradition with people who placed importance on being descendants from Seth and sharing a certain core of myths surrounding his person[163]. Arguably, the term "Sethianism" may be used to broadly refer to the various traditions in the Nag Hammadi corpus, as well as the early church fathers, who shared a set of specific attitudes toward the figure of Seth, but did not constitute a sect in a more narrowly defined way.

This raises the question of a source for these "freefloating" tropes and their relation to the Nabatean Sethians. Klijn wonders whether it is possible that there was a pre-Christian sect that called itself followers of Seth. While Schenke indeed recognizes a pre-Christian group of Gnostic Sethians[164], others, such as Luttikhuizen, deny this[165]. Gedialahu Stroumsa thinks sects of people existed who called themselves followers of Seth[166]. He, and others such as Beltz, finds evidence for this in the Samaritan Dositheans. Beltz argues that the early Samaritan Dositheans were the first to develop "traditions about the special status of Seth. According to him, the Samaritans considered themselves to be sons of Seth already in pre-Christian times and were so regarded by the Jews"[167]. However, later scholarship has shown his arguments are weak[168]. According to Stanley Isser, Dositheus's followers in the first century CE viewed him as a

161. H. M. Schenke, «Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften», in *Studia Coptica*, ed. P. Nagel (Berlin 1974), 165-73; H. M. Schenke, «The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism», in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, ed. B. Layton (Leiden 1981), 2:588-616.

162. Wisse, «Stalking Those Elusive Sethians», 575.

163. Williams, «Sethiansism», 33.

164. Schenke, «Das sethianische System», 169.

165. G. P. Luttikhuizen, «Sethianer?» in *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13 (2009), 76-86.

166. Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 11.

167. Walter Beltz, «Samaritanertum und Gnosis», in *Gnosis and Neues Testament*, ed. K.-W. Troger (Berlin 1973), 89-95.

168. Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 12.

prophet like Moses, who was "unjustly accused or persecuted by tyranny", performed miracles and died in a cave; "but his body was never found, perhaps an indication that he had ascended to heaven", or never died[169]. However, whether these Dositheans called themselves Sethians, is not clearly proven[170].

After Gnosticism, we see the importance of Seth in various other texts. The Slavonic translation of the Byzantine chronicler John Malalas (ca. 491-578) reads:

> Seth had Wisdom from God, and by God's will he invented the names of the stars and of the five planets [lit. "wanderers"], so that men may know them correctly. The first star he called Kronos [= Saturn], the second Dii [= Jupiter], the third, Areya [= Mars], the fourth Aphrodit [= Venus], and the fifth Ermin [= Mercury]. It is said that all together there are seven, five stars and two [great] luminaries [i.e., Sun and Moon]. He is also the one who invented Hebrew script [= "Hebrew characters"] and wrote them [down]. As for the [two] great luminaries, these are named by God Himself. The ruler of the day He called the Sun and the ruler of the night is the Moon. This is what the wise Fortunus, the Roman chronographer wrote. This work I composed in Constantinople[171].

The notion that Seth received knowledge from Adam is also found in various Manichean texts[172]. Mani knew about an Apocalypse written by Seth, known as Sethel, the son of Adam. Seth is described as having been told the "great mysteries of greatness" by the great angels[173]. Thus, as a recipient of knowledge Seth plays a vaguely similar role here as he does in the *Nabatean agriculture*.

The Mandaean Seth, known as Shitil, is a completely different character from that in the *Nabatean agriculture*. He is elevated to the

169. Stanley Isser, «Dositheus, Jesus, and a Moses Aretalogy», in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults, Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden 1975), 182; R. Pummer, «The Present State of Samaritan Studies: II, Gnosticisim», in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 22, no. 1 (1977), 35.

170. On the origins of Samaritanism see also M. Kartveit, «Theories of the Origin of the Samaritans – Then and Now», in *Religions* 10, no. 12 (2019), 1-14.

171. F. Badalanova Geller, «Astronomical Knowledge in the Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch», in *Culture and Cognition: Essays in Honor of Peter Damerow*, ed. J. Renn and M. Schemmel (Berlin 2019), 114.

172. Tardieu, *Le manichéisme*, 20-22; J. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichean Cosmogeny: Studies in the 'Book of Giants' Traditions* (Cincinnati 1992); Pettipiece, «Manichaeism».

173. Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 146.

status of an *uthra* (a benevolent being that resides in the world of light), together with Hibil and Anush. Rather than Shitil, Hibil is viewed as a savior figure, while Shitil, himself the purest of all souls, is a teacher of the souls on their way to be baptized, who denies the importance of "sun, moon, and fire" as witnesses to baptism, and points them to the importance of the Jordan River and other elements. Their father Adam Pagria is seen as the microcosm. Unlike Adam and Seth in the *Nabatean agriculture*, the Mandaean Adam and Seth are not seen as human beings but as supernatural figures with specific roles[174].

Finally, the Qur'ān does not mention Seth, though he was known widely among classical Islamic scholars. In the classical Islamic period, written reports about Seth were found at the time of Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) onward. These rely on various Jewish, Christian, and gnostic sources. The Muslim scholars present Seth, the son of Adam, as the recipient of divine and astronomical knowledge, as the figure who passed it on, as an inventor of language, and as a father of mankind[175].

Identifying the Nabatean Sethians

The *Nabatean agriculture* incorporates some of the "Sethian" attitudes toward Adam and Seth as recipients of astronomical and divine knowledge, and Seth as the only important son of Adam, and as the father of a people. These attitudes are shared between both the Nabatean sages and the Nabatean Sethians, albeit the latter exhibit a stauncher commitment to Seth. Other gnostic features, however, such as the idea of Seth as savior, the mother Barbeloi, or the evil demiurge, do not feature in the *Nabatean agriculture*. One therefore needs to look elsewhere for the identify of the Sethians.

There are influences of monotheism among the Nabatean sages, even though the Sethians are more devoted to paganism. The Sethian attitudes and knowledge of the patriarchs may be tie back to a Christian or Jewish background. This monotheism does not show any of the characteristics of a Christian background. Little is known about

174. Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 34-38.
175. Gluck, *The Arabic Legend of Seth*; Cottrell, «Adam and Seth».

Christianity in Mesopotamia before the fourth century CE. According to legend, an alleged disciple of Jesus called Mārī brought Christianity to central and southern Iraq in the first century CE[176]. At the council of Nicaea in 325 CE, bishops attended from Edessa, Nisibis, and other Mesopotamian cities; and in 410, bishops from various towns in Mesene and Karkar attended a synod[177]. A Christian presence in southern Mesopotamia before the fourth century likely should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, the *Nabatean agriculture* does not reveal any knowledge of Christianity, and knowledge of the patriarchs probably derives from a Jewish context.

The Sethians Nabatean share more features with the fifth-century Kentaeans mentioned by Bar Konai. As the Kentaeans, the Sethians were known as people devoted to Saturn, and as sons of Seth. They worshiped the luminaries and five planets, and mourned the death of important figures represented by idols in their temples. The Sethians were not, however, described as carrying a cross and fasting intensively. So rather than being identical, they may have been contemporaries, or possibly their ancestors.

Despite the identification in the fourth/tenth century of Mandaeans as "sons of Seth", the Nabatean Sethians cannot be identified as Mandaeans. They do not match the Mandaeaism of the early fourth/tenth century. The rituals of the Mandaeans do not match any of the descriptions of the Sethians in the *Nabatean agriculture*. They do not show signs of baptism beyond a vague non-ritualistic concern with cleanliness. Numerous other Mandaean ideas are absent. The Adam and Seth figures as *uthra*s do not feature in the *Nabatean agriculture*, nor, for instance, do the Sethians seem to have known about John the Baptist.

The lack of Mandaean references in a location where they became so prevalent seems to indicate that the Sethians lived before the arrival or origin of the Mandaeans in this area. Traditionally, following Rudolf Macuch, scholars have supported a Palestinian Jewish origin of Mandaeaism in one form or another, with various early dates

176. M. Streck, «Maisān», in *EI*[1], ed. M. Th. Houtsma, T. W. Arnold, R. Basset, R. Hartmann; consulted 19 February 2024: <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/2214-871X_ei1_SIM_4465>; Richard Raabe, *Geschichte des Dominus Mari* (PhD diss., Leipzig 1893), 57-58.

177. D. G. K. Taylor, «The Coming of Christianity to Mesopotamia», in *The Syriac World*, ed. D. King (London 2018), 80.

between the first and third centuries CE, of migration to Iraq[178]. Kurt Rudolph posited the presence of Mandaeans in Iraq in the third century[179]. Alternatives have been suggested which take into account the possibility of a Mesopotamian origin. Yamauchi supports the idea of a possibly small western gnostic pre-Christian proto-Mandaean group who possessed vague knowledge of the Old Testament and who later merged with a proto-Mandaean group in southern Mesopotamia[180]. Lupieri sees the Mandaeans as an indigenous southern Mesopotamian group with no "direct physical contact" with Palestine but influenced by Christian apocryphal stories[181]. Van Bladel convincingly argues for a fifth-century origin in Iraq where they developed out of a Palestinian group of Nasoraeans[182]. Theories that posit an earlier presence of Mandaeans in Mesopotamia conflict with the existence of a Sethian group of pagans at this place and time who display no Mandaean features. The complete lack of any reference to Mandaeaism in its later form, in a place where Mandaeaism would be so widespread, arguably places the Sethians prior to the fifth century CE.

The Sethians lived, moreover, in a time of abundant idol worship. Even though such worship continued into Ibn Waḥshiyya's time, the various temples and their cults place it before the decline of temple worship in later Sassanid centuries. From the later third century some evidence exists against temple worship. In inscriptions in Fars dating to 280-90 CE, the Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr boasts about the striking of idols[183], however it is uncertain if and how much influence this had in southern Mesopotamia. Subsequently, the Persian

178. R. Macuch, «Anfänge der Mandäer», in *Die Araber in der alten Welt*, ed. F. Altheim and R. Stiehl (Berlin 1965), 2:76-190. Drower, *The Secret Adam*; J. J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford 2002); Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*; K. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer i: Das Mandäerproblem* (Göttingen 1960).

179. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer*, 254.

180. E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI 1983), 140-42.

181. E. F. Lupieri, «Mandaeans», in *EIr*, online: https://referenceworks.brill-lonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/mandaeans-COM_392 (accessed 16 March 2024).

182. Viggo Schou-Pedersen, *Bidrag til en Analyse af de Mandæiske Skrifter, med Henblik paa Bestemmelsen af Mandæernes Forhold til Jødedom* (Copenhagen 1940).

183. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 108.

king Peroz (r. 457–84) issued "an edict against idols and their priests, 'so that only the religion of the magi remain'"[184].

Moreover, Qūthāmā claims he "heard" that worship of Jupiter in his temple was ongoing at Sūrā during his time. Sūrā became a largely Jewish town after Abba Arika (d. ca. 247), who came to Babylon in 219 CE, and founded an academy somewhere between 219 and 247. While on his arrival Abba Arika did not find Jewish life in Sūrā, presumably at some point in the subsequent centuries the active worship of Jupiter ceased and the town became increasingly Jewish. These indications tentatively place the Nabatean Sethians in the first to third century CE in either the Parthian or early Sassanid period, whereas similarity with the Kentaeans pushes them to the fourth or fifth century. This is a period of sectarian change that aligns with the descriptions in the *Nabatean agriculture*. The latest Syriac editor (that is, the person responsible for the hypothetical final Aramaic version of the text that Ibn Waḥshiyya translated) who gathered and edited the Greek and other material at least after the fifth century, could not have been from this period, but the dating of the Sethians indicates that a layer of the text antedates the fifth century.

Questions of Origin of Sethians in Southern Mesopotamia

The Sethians in the *Nabatean agriculture* are presented as foreign to the Nabateans. They share ancestry with the Chaldeans, but are linked to the Kanʿānites who came to Babylonia from the "edges of Syria". Knowledge of Adam and Seth is presented as extrinsic, too. At the time of Dawānāy, older generations did not know Adam and Seth. This may be partly due to the idea that Dawānāy lived before Adam, but it also hints at the foreignness of these patriarchs. Adam and Seth are no doubt extrinsic to Babylonian paganism. This raises questions regarding the origin of Sethian influence in southern Mesopotamia. I offer two suggestions. First, there were plenty Jewish elements in Mesopotamia that make an outside influence unnecessary to account for the Jewish characteristics of the Nabatean Sethians. According to al-Bīrūnī, the Ṣābians of the Iraqi marshes devel-

184. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 110.

oped from Babylonean Judaism with an influence from Zoroastrianism. Al-Bīrūnī identified these "real" Ṣābians as follows:

> It is said that the Ḥarrānians are not the real Ṣābians, nay they are called *ḥanīfs* and idol worshippers in the (holy) books. The Ṣābians are those of the Jewish tribes who remained in Babylonia when the others returned to Jerusalem during the days of Cyrus and Artaxerxes. Those [who stayed behind] inclined towards the laws of the Magians and had a liking towards the religion of Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, they adopted a doctrine mixing Magism with Judaism like the Samaritans did in Syria. Most of them live in Wāsiṭ and the countryside of Iraq near Jaʿfar and al-Jāmida and the twin rivers of al-Ṣila. They trace their origin back to Enos the son of Seth and they disagree with the Ḥarrānians 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 Ḥarrānians turn towards the South[185].

Scholars have understood these Ṣābians as referring to the Mandaeans. Paz reads this as an "extraordinary fictional account" which nonetheless indicates a "tradition that viewed the Mandaeans as descendants of the Jews who lived in Mesene"[186]. Van Bladel interprets al-Bīrūnī's second Ṣābians as Kentaeans, since they revere fire and al-Bīrūnī mentions a Zoroastrian influence. Al-Bīrūnī might also be describing one of the non-Mandaean Ṣābian groups in the Sawād.

It is not necessarily fiction to suppose a Jewish background to the influence of Sethianism, and relate this background to the exile. A full survey of the religious landscape of southern Mesopatiama in Parthian times does not yet exist. However, the Jewish presence in southern Mestopotamia since the exile is not disputed[187]. On this part Paz agrees with al-Bīrūnī's account, «many of the exiles from Judea settled in southern Babylonia, in the region that would later

185. Al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthar al-bāqiya ʿan-il-qurūn al-khāliya*, ed. Eduard Sachau (Leipzig 1878; repr. 1923), 206. Translation adapted from Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, 48; and Edward Sachau, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (London 1879), 188.

186. Y. Paz, «'Meishan Is Dead': On the Historical Contexts of the Bavli's Representations of the Jews in Southern Babylonia», in *The Aggadah of the Bavli and its Cultural World*, ed. G. Herman and J. L. Rubinstein (Providence 2018), 66.

187. Samuel N. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East* (Leiden 2015), 8; Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (Bethesda, MD 2014); Paz, «'Meishan Is Dead'».

become Mesene"[188]. Moreover, Paz demonstrates the existence of several sects in this region with "distinctive Jewish elements" that interacted with local Jews[189]. It is very likely considering the pagan background in this area, that some of these Jews developed pagan tendencies, or that local pagans developed Jewish tendencies. Arguably, glimpses of the latter can be seen in the *Nabatean agriculture*.

However, the Sethian influence could also have been from outside Mesopotamia, for which some inspiration may be taken from the proposed ancestor of Mandaeaism. Van Bladel argues that Mandaeaism in Iraq grew out of earlier Palestinian Judeo-Christian ancestors called Nasoraeans, as proposed by Viggo Schou-Pedersen in 1940[190]. Paz, with van Bladel, views the Jewish elements of Mandaeaism as relating to the Nasoraeans. These Nasoraeans were a Judeo-Christian sect who believed themselves to be descended from Sethel, Hibel, and Anosh[191]. The persecutions of the priest Kerdir also included a group of Nasoraeans (*naṣorāyē*), together with *kristiyānē* in approximately 275 CE. Several scholars have identified these with the Mandaeans[192]. Mandaeans themselves were called *nāṣorāyi* after the religious elite who knew the *naṣeruta* or core doctrines of the Mandaean religion[193]. Van Bladel and Paz, however, believe the inscription may refer to the Jewish Christian sect named by Epiphanius[194]. This places the Nasoraeans in the Sassanid Empire in the third century CE.

We need to consider who these Nasoraeans were more closely before considering a link to the Nabatean Sethians. Epiphanius spoke about two groups of Nasoraeans. In addition to a Jewish Christian group he also speaks of a separate pre-Christian group of Nasoraeans who acknowledged the patriarchs, including Adam and Seth, but did not uphold the Torah and Jewish law. Such a group bringing knowledge of patriarchs, without Jewish law or Christian influence, to Babylonian paganism would be a probable source for

188. Paz, «'Meishan Is Dead'», 84; Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*.

189. Paz, «'Meishan Is Dead'», 55.

190. Schou-Pedersen, *Bidrag*.

191. Van Bladel, *From Sassanian Mandaeans*, 94.

192. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 125-26.

193. C. G. Häberl and J. F. McGrath (eds.), *The Mandaean Book of John* (Berlin and Boston 2019), ix.

194. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 92; Paz, «'Meishan Is Dead'», 63.

pagan Sethianism. The Nasoraeans who influenced the Sethians are unlikely to have been Christian. Moreover, these Jewish Nasoraeans did not eat meat, and they did not offer sacrifices[195], which aligns with some of Seth's food prohibitions as well as the prohibitions against animal sacrifice. Epiphanius writes:

> Nasaraeans, meaning "rebels", who forbid the eating of any meat and do not partake of living things at all. They have the holy names of patriarchs which are in the Pentateuch, up through Moses and Joshua the son of Nun, and they believe in them – I mean Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the earliest ones, and Moses himself, and Aaron, and Joshua. But they hold that the scriptures of the Pentateuch are not Moses' scriptures, and maintain that they have others besides these[196].

However, according to Epiphanius, these Nasoraeans are Jewish, believe in "circumcision, observe the Sabbath and the same feasts, but they do not admit fate and astronomy"[197]. The topic of fate and astronomy is a contested point between the Nabateans and Nabatean Sethians, since the latter believe that the planets can have foreknowledge of future events, but the Nabatean sages deny this is possible. Considering the emphasis on the foreign nature of the Sethians, an influence from a Jewish West Semitic group on Babylonian paganism seems likely to account for the Nabatean Sethians. In this sense, Renan was right to relate the Sethians to this earlier time period. Whether there were two groups of Nasoraeans, of which one influenced the Mandaeans, and the other the Sethians, remains to be ascertained.

From the Nabatean Sethians to the Fourth-/Tenth-Century Ṣābians

Renan considered the Mandaeans as true descendants of the Nabateans[198]. However, the idea that Mandaeaism grew from Babylonian paganism has been discarded in scholarship[199]. It does not

195. Williams (trans.), *The Panarion*, Book 1, 46-48.
196. Williams (trans.), *The Panarion*, Book 1, 12. See also A. Kampmeier, «The Pre-Christian Nasareans», in *Open Court* 2 (1913), 85-86.
197. Williams (trans.), *The Panarion*, Book 1, 46.
198. Renan, «Mémoire», 58.
199. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 98-99; Rudolph, *Die Mandäer*, 195-222.

seem likely that the Mandaeans had much to do with the Nabatean Sethians or the more monotheist Nabatean sages. The patriarchs Adam and Seth played entirely different roles; they did not know about John the Baptist; the planets of paganism find no echo in Mandaeism (except to be rejected); and besides a general concern with cleanliness, the Sethians did not practice baptism. It is hard to find anything the Mandaeans would have taken from the Sethians, apart from a shared name in the fourth-/tenth-century Arabic sources. It is more likely that the Sethians, and their Nabateans adversaries, were ancestors of the non-Mandaean Ṣābians of the southern and central Iraqi countryside mentioned in Arabic sources. "Sons of Seth" in the fourth-/tenth-century and onward appears to have been a common denominator for a variety of separate Ṣābians groups.

Nonetheless, the Sethians would be illustrative of the pre-fifth-century Mesopotamian situation where Mandaeaism later took its form. Van Bladel already mentioned the *Nabatean agriculture* as an exceptional source about paganism in Sasanid Iraq, sources of which are otherwise rare[200]. The Nabatean Sethians possibly lived contemporaneously with the ancestor of the Mandaeans, the Nasoraeans, and inspired the Kentaeans, a contiguous group. Van Bladel argues that "Kentaeans and the Mandaeans claimed as teachers the earliest biblical patriarchs, such as Seth and Enos, who were scarcely characterized in biblical texts and therefore provided slates for new myths"[201]. However, it does not seem that Seth and Enos' slates were that blank anymore at the time of the fifth-century articulation of Kentaeanism and Mandaeaism. Earlier "Sethian" texts, as well as the Sethian pagan traditions such as those described in the *Nabatean agriculture* already provided ample inspiration for these latter groups to adopt these patriarchs in non-biblical ways.

Elements of the account of the pagan Sethians of the *Nabatean agriculture* may be fictional and/or manipulated by several Syriac or Arabic editors. Nonetheless, the work provides a significantly more detailed account on the pagan Sethians than any other contemporary Arabic source. The Sethians appear as idol-worshiping devotees of the astral deities, following ancient Babylonian rituals, who nonetheless abandoned animal sacrifice, distinguished themselves by their

200. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 102.
201. Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans*, 114.

dress, and religiously followed the wise sages Adam and Seth, recipients of lunar revelation. They are relevant informants who provide glimpses of the spread of the elusive "gnostic" Sethian attitudes in Babylonian pagan environments, and some insight into the religious history of Sassanid, and possibly Parthian, southern Mesopotamia.

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ABSTRACT

Elaine van Dalen, *Who are the Sethians in the* Nabatean *Agriculture?*

This article explores the character of the Sethians as they appear in the fourth-/tenth-century Arabic *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* (*Nabatean agriculture*). In the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya*, the Sethians (Banī Aš̱īṯā) emerge as the adversaries of the main, largely fictionalized, Nabatean narrators of the work. Much like the work's provenance, the identity of the Sethians has remained shrouded in mystery and the subject of much scholarly debate. This article analyzes the descriptions of this group in the text, and compares their characteristics to other late antique and early Islamic sects who similarly revered Seth, as well as geographically associated groups such as the Ṣābians in southern Iraq. The article argues that the Sethians discussed in the *Nabatean agriculture* could allude to a historical ancestor of the non-Mandaean Ṣābians who continued to live in this region in the classical Islamic period. The Nabatean Sethians provide further insight, even if they prove fictional, into early Islamic ideas about pagan sects in southern Iraq.

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