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RECOGNITION OR GUIDANCE: TWO ANTHROPOLOGIES OF REVELATION IN SETHIAN GNOSTICISM AND MANDAEISM

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/TiCz.2026.009>

Abstract. This article compares Sethian Gnosticism and Mandaism as two structurally distinct anthropologies of revelation. In the Sethian tradition, revelation is an act of ontological recognition: the revealer discloses to the recipient what the recipient already is—a nature that precedes the act of disclosure and makes it possible. In the Mandaean tradition, revelation takes the form of guidance: the revealer enters into a relationship that must be sustained through repeated ritual practice, and the soul's salvation depends on whether that relationship is maintained. The difference is not one of emphasis but of anthropological structure. The article argues that these two patterns—recognition and guidance—are not extinct historical options but live possibilities that any theology of revelation implicitly inhabits.

Keywords: revelation, Sethian Gnosticism, Mandaism, recognition, guidance, theological anthropology.

Streszczenie. Rozpoznanie czy prowadzenie. Dwie antropologie objawienia w gnostycyzmie setiańskim i mandaizmie. Artykuł porównuje gnostycyzm setiański i mandaizm jako dwie strukturalnie odmienne antropologie objawienia. W tradycji setiańskiej objawienie jest aktem ontologicznego rozpoznania: objawiciel odsłania odbiorcy to, czym odbiorca już jest: naturę, która poprzedza sam akt odsłonięcia i go umożliwia. W tradycji mandejskiej objawienie przybiera postać prowadzenia: objawiciel wchodzi w relację, którą należy podtrzymywać przez powtarzalną praktykę rytualną, a zbawienie duszy zależy od tego, czy relacja ta jest zachowywana. Różnica nie dotyczy akcentów, lecz struktury antropologicznej. Artykuł dowodzi, że owe dwa wzorce – rozpoznanie i pro-

wadzenie – nie są wymarłymi opcjami historycznymi, lecz żywymi możliwościami, które każda teologia objawienia milcząco zamieszkuje.

Słowa kluczowe: objawienie, gnostycyzm setiański, mandaizm, rozpoznanie, prowadzenie, antropologia teologiczna.

INTRODUCTION

What happens to a human being when God reveals himself? The question is deceptively simple. It presupposes not only a theology of revelation – an account of who reveals, what is revealed, and by what means – but an anthropology: a view of what kind of being the human recipient is, and what the act of revelation does to that being. Different answers to this anthropological problem generate different theologies of revelation, even when the cosmological vocabulary is the same. It belongs to the permanent agenda of theological anthropology: whether revelation presupposes a human nature capable of receiving it, or whether revelation itself constitutes that capacity. The traditions examined in this article do not answer that question from within any normative framework. They sharpen it, by demonstrating that the question admits of at least two structurally coherent and internally consistent answers.

This article approaches that question through two religious traditions of the second and third centuries CE that are rarely read together: Sethian Gnosticism and Mandaeanism. Both emerged within the broader religious world of the ancient Near East; both employ a dualistic cosmology structured around the opposition of light and darkness, the descent of a divine messenger, and the possibility of the soul's return to its source. Yet beneath this shared vocabulary, the two traditions develop strikingly different understandings of what revelation does to the human being who receives it. In the Sethian texts examined here, revelation is an act of ontological recognition: the revealer discloses to the recipient what the recipient already is. In the Mandaean texts, revelation takes the form of guidance: the revealer enters into a relationship that accompanies, sustains, and leads the soul toward its destination. The difference reflects two distinct

anthropological structures – two different answers to the question of what kind of being stands on the receiving end of divine self-communication.

The present article does not aim to reconstruct the historical relationship between the two traditions. Its purpose is typological: to ask what each tradition reveals about the other when viewed as an alternative response to a shared anthropological problem. The comparison is not arbitrary. As Dylan Burns has shown, both Sethian Gnosticism and Mandaism developed within a Syrian-Mesopotamian religious environment characterized by baptismal practice, dualistic cosmology, and the figure of a descending revealer.¹ This shared horizon makes the juxtaposition analytically productive without requiring the positing of direct historical dependence. The goal is not to find a common source but to use the difference between the two traditions as a lens: to make visible, through contrast, the anthropological assumptions that each tradition carries and that any theology of revelation inevitably presupposes.

1. THE HORIZON OF COMPARISON: CONVERGENCES AND LIMITS

The basis for this juxtaposition rests on three convergences: environmental, ritual, and cosmological, established in the scholarship of Burns², Rudolph³, and Buckley⁴; their details need not be rehearsed here. Against these convergences, the limits of the comparison must be stated clearly. The dating of Mandaean texts is contested: while the colophons of the *Ginza Rabba* attest to a chain of scribal transmission reaching back to the late second or early third century CE, most surviving manuscripts are considerably later, and the relationship between the textual tradition

¹ Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1–30.

² Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*, 15–22.

³ Kurt Rudolph, “The Relevance of Mandaean Literature to the Study of Near Eastern Religions”, *ARAM Periodical*, no. 16 (2004): 1–12.

⁴ Jorunn J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3, citing her earlier work on the Five Seals and maṣbuta.

and early Mandaean practice is difficult to establish with precision.⁵ The relationship of both traditions to Judaism and early Christianity remains similarly unresolved. These uncertainties are not obstacles but conditions of the analysis: a typological comparison of anthropological structures does not require the resolution of historical questions. It requires only that the structures themselves be identifiable and coherent – which, as the following sections aim to show, they are. The comparison is not, however, merely historical. The two structures identified here – revelation as recognition and revelation as guidance – are not extinct options but live possibilities that any theology of revelation implicitly inhabits. To identify them in their ancient form is to make visible a choice that doctrinal reflection often makes without knowing it is doing so.

2. THE SETHIAN MODEL: REVELATION AS RECOGNITION

The primary witness for the present analysis is *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1), a choice that requires brief methodological justification. The Sethian corpus is not monolithic: texts such as *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1) and *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) represent a later, heavily Platonized phase of the tradition in which the vocabulary of contemplative ascent has been grafted onto an anthropological structure it did not originate.⁶ *Trimorphic Protennoia* belongs to an earlier stratum, one in which the logic of revelation as ontological disclosure is visible without the Platonic overlay. The following analysis focuses on this earlier layer precisely because it exposes the structural grammar of Sethian revelation with the greatest clarity.

The text opens in the mode of the Isis aretology: a cascade of first-person self-predications through which Protennoia, the First Thought of the Invisible Spirit, identifies herself simultaneously as transcendent

⁵ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 6–10; Charles G. Häberl, “Mandaeanism in Antiquity and the Antiquity of Mandaeanism”, *Religion Compass* 6, no. 5 (2012): 262–276.

⁶ The periodization followed here is that of John D. Turner; see “Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History”, in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 55–86.

origin and immanent presence.⁷ What is structurally decisive, however, is not the rhetorical form but the ontological claim embedded within it from the opening lines. Protennoia declares herself “the movement that dwells in the All, she in whom the All takes its stand” (35*, 2–3).⁸ This prior immanence is then specified with anthropological precision: she is “the life of my Epinoia that dwells within every Power and every eternal movement and in invisible Lights and within the Archons and Angels and Demons and every soul dwelling in Tartaros and in every material soul” (35*, 12–18). The rhetorical accumulation serves a single structural purpose: before any act of revelation occurs, Protennoia is already present within the very beings she will address. Her coming does not initiate a relation; it discloses one that precedes it.

This structure of prior immanence is not peculiar to *Trimorphic Protennoia*. The *Apocryphon of John* offers arguably its sharpest formulation within the Sethian corpus: pneuma is deposited in Adam by Sophia without his knowledge, so that ontological ignorance – not moral failure, not inadequate preparation – becomes the primordial condition of the pneumatic. The response of the revealer (Christ/Barbelo) to this condition is not to produce the pneuma that was absent but to awaken what was already enclosed, unseen, within the captive body. The structure is identical, though the register differs: where *Trimorphic Protennoia* foregrounds the revealer’s perspective – her prior presence within those she will address – *Apocryphon of John* foregrounds the recipient’s perspective, the soul that does not yet know what it is. Together the two texts establish that the Sethian model of revelation as recognition is not a feature of a single text’s rhetoric but a structural constant of the earlier Sethian strata.⁹

⁷ All citations from *Trimorphic Protennoia* follow J. D. Turner’s translation: in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, ed. Charles W. Hedrick (Leiden Boston: BRILL, 1990), 371–454. Page and line references follow Turner’s asterisked system.

⁸ On the Isis aretology as the formal template for Protennoia’s self-predications, see George W. MacRae, “The Ego-Proclamation in Gnostic Sources”, in *The Trial of Jesus*, ed. Ernst Bammel (London: Students Christian Movement Press, 1970), 122–134.

⁹ See Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 183–188; Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 92–101.

This structure of prior immanence organizes the three descents that constitute the text's dramatic spine. Protennoia descends three times – as Father and Voice, as Mother and Speech, as Son and Word – in a sequence of increasing articulateness and depth of embodiment. Each descent penetrates a further layer of the cosmos, culminating in the third, in which Protennoia takes on the form of her members and inhabits their tents: “the third time I revealed myself to them in their tents as Word and I revealed myself in the likeness of their shape” (47*, 13–15). The inadequacy of the first two descents is not an inadequacy of the recipients but of the revelatory medium. The progression from Voice through Speech to Word tracks an increasing articulateness of the divine self-disclosure, not an increasing preparation of the human recipient. The addressees are the same throughout; what changes is Protennoia's own capacity to make herself fully heard.

The question of who the addressees are – how they are identified before revelation reaches them – is answered with precision in the first aretalogy. Explaining why her voice is recognizable to those who receive it, Protennoia declares: “I cry out in everyone, and they recognize it, since a seed (σπέρμα) indwells them” (36*, 14–16).¹⁰ Recognition is possible because the recipient already carries the σπέρμα, not because revelation deposits it. The asymmetry between those who can hear and those who cannot is an asymmetry of nature, not of effort or spiritual development.

At the close of the first aretalogy, where Protennoia names those she has reached: “that is, the Sons of the Light. I am their Father” (41*, 1–2). The designation is not conferred by revelation; it describes what they already are. Revelation is recognition in a double sense: Protennoia recognizes her own, and in being recognized, the pneumatic recognizes themselves. The soteriological effect follows directly from this structure. What the descent accomplishes is not a transformation of the recipient's nature but a transformation of the recipient's situation. The pneumatic belongs, ontologically, to the community of Light; what traps them in

¹⁰ B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures A New Translation With Annotations and Introductions* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 82. On the σπέρμα passage, see Paul-Hubert Poirier, *La pensée première à la triple forme: NH XIII, 1* (Québec ; Louvain et al.: Presses de l'Université Laval Peeters, 2006), 203–205.

the world of the Archons is not a deficiency of nature but bondage and oblivion imposed by hostile powers. Protennoia descends, as she states explicitly: “for the sake of my portion that was in that place” (40*, 12–13),¹¹ to reclaim what already belongs to her. The culminating image of the first descent captures this logic with economy: “I reached them and broke the first strands that enslaved them. Then everyone of those within me shone” (41*, 34–36). The shining is not new light but light already within them, now made visible.

The logic here is one of recognition rather than transformation, disclosure rather than production. The Five Seals ritual that marks the culmination of the third descent – comprising investiture, baptism in the Living Water, enthronement, glorification, and transportation into the Light – administers the pneumatic’s return to the Kingdom of Light, but it presupposes rather than constitutes the status of those who receive it. Turner’s analysis of the Five Seals across the Sethian corpus establishes the point with precision: Protennoia administers the rite to those already identified as “her own”, and the ritual sequence moves from investiture to glorification as a realization of a status that was in place before the rite began.¹² The Five Seals presupposes rather than constitutes the pneumatic. Protennoia does not make the pneumatic what they were not; she restores them to what they were before bondage obscured it.¹³

A potential complication arises when one turns to the later Platonized texts of the Sethian corpus. *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* feature a model in which the ascending visionary passes through graded stages of contemplation, receives successive initiations, and approaches the divine through a structured series of epistemic transformations. This might appear to introduce a constitutive dimension into Sethian soteriology: a path the recipient must traverse, implying that arrival at the Kingdom of Light is an achievement rather than a disclosure. The apparent tension dissolves, however, once the function of contemplative ascent in these

¹¹ John D. Turner, “Introduction”, 399 n. ad loc.

¹² John D. Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism”, in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures, and Texts*, ed. John D. Turner and Ruth D. Majercik (Atlanta, Georgia: SBL, 2000), 95. On the five-stage sequence at *Trim. Prot.* 48,15–35 and 45,12–20, see Poirier, *La pensée première à la triple forme*, 348–349.

¹³ The comparison was developed in Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism”, 88 n. 5.

texts is correctly identified. Ascent in the Platonized Sethian texts is not the means by which one becomes pneumatic; it is the means by which one who is already pneumatic comes to know what one is. The opening of *Zostrianos* makes this presupposition visible. Zostrianos does not begin his ascent from a position of soteriological uncertainty – he is addressed from the outset as one whose pneumatic nature is not in question. The angel Ephesech who initiates his ascent tells him: “Why are you so disturbed? You have already received all the things you lack” (NHC VIII,1: 4,21–23). The ascent does not make him pneumatic; it allows him to know, progressively and with increasing clarity, what he already is. The contemplative structure is a new epistemological medium for the same ontological content.¹⁴

The human being, in the Sethian model as *Trimorphic Protennoia* articulates it, is not a self in process of becoming. The pneumatic is an ontologically complete entity whose essential nature – membership in the community of Protennoia, sonship in the Kingdom of Light – precedes both the fall into matter and the revelation that announces the way out. The revealer comes to her own, not to constitute them as her own, but to disclose what they always were. This is the fundamental anthropological claim of the Sethian account, and it will serve as the structural counterpoint to the Mandaean model examined in the following section. The Sethian account answers the question of salvation by first answering the question of nature: who receives revelation is determined before revelation occurs, by what the recipient already is.

3. THE MANDAEAN MODEL: REVELATION AS GUIDANCE

The central figure of revelation in the Mandaean tradition is Manda d-Hayyi – the Knowledge of Life – a light-being who descends from the World of Light into the material world. His descent is not a single intervention but a sustained presence directed toward the believing community: Manda d-Hayyi comes to accompany, protect, and lead. The Right Ginza, particularly books 3 and 5, describes this descent in

¹⁴ Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*, 49–53.

relational terms. The messenger does not disclose a hidden truth but enters into a relationship that will carry the soul through the dangers of earthly existence and, ultimately, through the heavenly watchhouses (*maṭarata*) to the World of Light.

This relational character of revelation has a structural consequence that distinguishes the Mandaean model sharply from the Sethian one. In the Mandaean texts, the question is different: *where are you going, and who will take you there?* The revealer is not a mirror but a guide. The *Canonical Prayerbook* (*Qolasta*) consistently figures this presence in terms of arrival, protective enclosure, and accompaniment – not of disclosure or awakening.¹⁵

The central cultic institution through which this accompaniment is enacted is the *maṣbuta* – baptism in flowing water. As Eric Segelberg's foundational study demonstrates, the *maṣbuta* is not an initiation in the conventional sense: it neither marks entry into a community nor confers a new status that was absent before the rite.¹⁶ It is a repeated ritual, performed weekly on Sundays and at the major festivals of the Mandaean calendar.

Running water, the *yardna*, is not in Mandaean cosmology a symbol of the World of Light but its earthly form. The *maṣbuta* prayer CP 18 makes this explicit: the candidate is invited to “put on robes of radiant light” – a phrase referring not to material garments but to the water itself.¹⁷ Each immersion is therefore not a symbolic enactment but the contact itself, renewed as needed.

Jorunn Buckley's analysis of the baptismal liturgy sharpens this point considerably. The *maṣbuta*, she argues, “confirms an already existing identity” – but this confirmation is not a mere reaffirmation of something

¹⁵ Ethel S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959), CP 163, 141; cf. Brikha H. Nasoraia, “Probing the Relationships Between Mandaeans (the Followers of John the Baptist), Early Christians, and Manichaeans”, *Religions* 16, no. 1 (December 2024): 14.

¹⁶ Eric Segelberg, *Maṣbuta: Studies in the Ritual of Mandaean Baptism* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958), 154–158.

¹⁷ Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook*, CP 18–19, 13–15; Jorunn J. Buckley, “Why Once Is Not Enough: Mandaean Baptism (*Maṣbuta*) as an Example of a Repeated Ritual”, *History of Religions* 29, no. 1 (1989): 29–30.

secure and self-sufficient. Rather, “repeated immersions mark preparations and rehearsals for entry into that world, an entry that properly happens only at the death of the body.”¹⁸ The ritual repeats the relational event itself: each immersion in the flowing *yardna* is a renewed contact with the revealing presence of Manda d-Hayyi. The ritual does not respond to revelation; it is the place where revelation occurs and is sustained.

This has a direct bearing on the anthropological structure the model implies. The *mašbuta* requires a priest. Without a priest who has been properly ordained and who observes the full discipline of ritual purity, no valid baptism can take place. Buckley’s reading of the baptismal liturgy shows that the priest, in performing these acts, impersonates beings in the Lightworld: he is, ritually, Manda d-Hayyi himself in the moment of guidance.¹⁹ The earthly baptism collapses the distance between the two realms. Revelation is not something that happened once and is now remembered in ritual; it is something that happens in ritual, enacted through the priestly body in the flowing water. The rite does not fail to achieve its purpose through repetition; repetition is its purpose, because the *laufa*, the connection between the earthly community and the World of Light, requires continuous renewal so long as the soul remains embodied.

The tension latent in this structure becomes visible when the ritual fails or is withheld. The Mandaean legal and theological tradition treats the abandonment of ritual practice as a loss of belonging to the community of salvation. Mehrdad Arabestani’s anthropological study of Iranian Mandaean communities documents the structural logic of this principle in its contemporary operation: those who cease to receive baptism are, from an orthodox perspective, no longer Mandaean in the salvifically relevant sense.²⁰ The soteriological consequence is stark: one may possess a soul of light by origin and lose the possibility of its return through the cessation of practice. The addressee of revelation is determined not ontologically but

¹⁸ Jorunn J. Buckley, “Polemics and Exorcism”, *History of Religions* 47, no. 2/3 (2007): 159.

¹⁹ Buckley, “Polemics and Exorcism”, 166.

²⁰ Mehrdad Arabestani, “The Mandaean Religious System: From Mythos to Logos”, *Iran and the Caucasus* 20, no. 3–4 (2016): 187–188.

existentially – the person who is present in the ritual, who submits to the water, who extends the right hand in *kušta*.

The Mandaean model thus yields an anthropology of the person as constituted by an ongoing relationship of guidance. The human being is not, in the first instance, a bearer of hidden nature awaiting recognition; he is a soul in transit, requiring accompaniment at every stage of earthly existence and at the passage of death. The *masiqta*, the mass for the dead, extends this logic beyond the boundary of physical life: the soul ascending through the heavenly watchhouses requires sustained priestly intercession to complete its journey.²¹ The revealer who descended into the world did not deposit a saving knowledge that the community now preserves and transmits: he remains present through the ritual life of the community, which is the form his presence takes in time.

4. TWO ANTHROPOLOGIES: JUXTAPOSITION AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this juxtaposition is theological. The anthropological difference between these two traditions corresponds to a structural difference within the problem of revelation itself – a difference that precedes any particular doctrinal answer and conditions what answers are possible. Both models respond to the same question. But they do so by presupposing different answers to a prior question: what kind of being is the human who stands in need of salvation?

In the Sethian pattern, as it emerges from *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the person is constituted by a nature that precedes the act of revelation. The pneumatic recipient of Protennoia's descent already belongs to the World of Light before she arrives; her coming does not create that belonging but discloses it. The revealer answers: *what are you?* – a question whose answer precedes it. Revelation is therefore an event of recognition: it transforms the existential situation of the recipient – return to the source becomes possible – without altering the ontological structure that makes return possible in the first place.

²¹ Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 97–109.

In the Mandaean model, as it emerges from the *Ginza Rabba* and the baptismal liturgy of the *Qolasta*, the person is constituted by a relationship that must be entered into, sustained, and renewed. Manda d-Hayyi descends not to disclose a hidden truth about the recipient's nature but to accompany, protect, and lead. The revealer answers: *where are you going, and who will take you there?* – and the answer depends on whether the relationship of guidance is maintained. The addressee of revelation is determined not by what the person is but by what the person does – by presence in the ritual, submission to the water, extension of the right hand in *kušta*.

The contrast is clear. But it requires qualification on each side. Within Sethian tradition, the anthropological model is not entirely static. The later, Platonizing texts – *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* – introduce a progressive structure: the ascending pneumatic passes through stages of contemplation, receives successive initiations, and approaches the One through a graduated ascent.²² This might seem to move the Sethian model toward the Mandaean one, introducing practice and progression where the earlier texts posit nature and recognition. The qualification, however, is decisive: ascent in these texts concerns the *form* of access, not the ontological status of the one who ascends. The criterion of eligibility remains ontological. Within Mandaean tradition, the cosmological language of light and origin might seem to introduce a parallel ontological determinism. Souls derive from the World of Light; they are, in principle, of a nature capable of return. But this shared cosmological vocabulary does not carry the same anthropological weight in the Mandaean context as it does in the Sethian one. The soul's light-origin is a necessary but not sufficient condition of salvation. It establishes the possibility of return; it does not guarantee it.²³ In the Mandaean case, this means the two traditions do not simply oppose ontological to existential criteria, but presuppose different relationships between nature and its soteriological actualization.²⁴

²² Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*, 155–180, on the relationship between Platonizing ascent and Sethian pneumatic identity.

²³ Buckley, “Polemics and Exorcism”, 167: “no ‘automatic salvation’ awaits them simply because of their Gnostic identity”.

²⁴ On the structural parallel between the Five Seals and the *mašbuta*, see Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism”, 88 n. 5.

A further observation concerns the respective stability of the two models over time. Within the Sethian corpus, the account of the human undergoes a significant shift as the tradition engages more deeply with Middle and Late Platonism: recognition gives way, at least partially, to contemplative ascent. The Mandaean pattern of guidance, by contrast, remains structurally stable across the period in question. The contrast between the two traditions reflects not only different intuitions about the human but different relationships between anthropology and historical development: in Sethianism, the anthropological framework is susceptible to intellectual revision; in Mandaeism, it is embedded in a ritual structure that resists it.²⁵

But they make the underlying structural choice visible with a clarity that doctrinal discourse, precisely because of its normative commitments, often obscures. The tension between these two structures is not foreign to Christian theological reflection. The Augustinian tradition's emphasis on the soul's *capax Dei* – its natural openness to the divine – operates within the logic of the first model, while the Reformation insistence on the radical incapacity of the fallen human being to receive revelation without prior divine constitution of that capacity moves decisively toward the second. The traditions examined here do not originate these tensions; they illuminate their structural grammar.

Both traditions, finally, respond to the question of salvation – but they presuppose different answers to the question that precedes it. The Sethian tradition presupposes that the human being is already, in the deepest sense, what salvation requires it to be: a particle of light awaiting recognition. The Mandaean tradition presupposes that the human being becomes what salvation requires it to be through a relationship that constitutes and sustains it. These are not purely different soteriological strategies; they are different visions of what it means to be human in a world that requires saving.

²⁵ Rudolph, "The Relevance of Mandaean Literature", 6–7.

CONCLUSION

The question posed at the opening of this article – what happens to a human being when God reveals himself? – admits two structurally distinct answers, and the two traditions examined here give one each.

In the Sethian model, what revelation does is reveal: it discloses to the recipient a nature that was always there – light, belonging. The consequence is existential – return becomes possible, but nothing new is brought into being. Salvation is, at its deepest level, a form of self-knowledge – one that remains inaccessible without the revealer's descent, but adds nothing to what the recipient already is.

In the Mandaean model, what revelation does is relate: it inaugurates and sustains a connection between the soul and the World of Light, enacted in the flowing water of the *yardna* and in the priestly mediation of the *maṣbuta*. The consequence of this relation is also existential – the soul is carried, sustained, and ultimately led home, but the relation itself is not the disclosure of something pre-existing. It is something that happens, week after week, in the ritual present. The Sethian model has no precise equivalent to this structure. Salvation here is not an event of recognition but a duration: something that holds, or fails to hold, across embodied existence and beyond it.

The Sethian model is oriented toward *identity*: who is this person, really, beneath the material accretions that conceal their nature? The Mandaean account is oriented toward *journey*: where is this person going, and what will sustain them on the way? What the comparison reveals is that any theology of revelation must discover which of these two questions it is already answering, perhaps without knowing it. What is at stake between these models is not only the content of revelation, but the form of human existence it presupposes: whether truth is something to be recognized, or something that can only be sustained in a relation.

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