Yahia Bihram’s narrative colophons
Part 2: DC 47
Matthew Morgenstern

This article presents an editio princeps and translation of a narrative colophon authored in 1249 AH (= 1833–4 CE) by the renowned Mandaean communal leader Yahia Bihram. The text describes events in his life in the period leading up to the great cholera epidemic of 1831–1832 and in its immediate aftermath. The narrative is composed in the idiom that is characteristic of this genre, i.e., a mixed literary language that combines classicising features with elements drawn from the vernacular. The accompanying notes examine particularly the post-classical elements and their relationship to contemporary Neo-Mandaic.

Keywords: Mandaic, Mandaeans, Neo-Mandaic, Neo-Aramaic.

1. Introduction

This article is the second in a series of editions and translations of the narrative colophons composed by the Mandaean yalufa (learned layman) turned priest Yahia Bihram. Along with his brother-in-law Ram Zihrun, Yahia played a vital role in saving the Mandaean priesthood in the wake of the calamitous cholera epidemic of 1831–1832. While some information on the impact of the epidemic on the Mandaeans may be gleaned from other contemporary sources, the most detailed and vivid accounts of the immediate aftermath of the epidemic come from historical narratives which Yahia and Ram

1 I wish to thank Tom Alfia and Livnat Barkan for their assistance in preparing the texts discussed herein, and Prof. Hezy Mutzafi for his advice on the Neo-Mandaic materials. Dr. Ohad Abudraham and Tatyana Azarova read a draft of this article and made helpful suggestions. Citations from written Mandaic sources are presented in bold characters using Macuch’s transliteration system, e.g. riš, except that Arabic ِ is represented by ٰ. Phonological transcriptions—attested or reconstructed—are presented in italics, e.g. ēšt, and citations from Neo-Mandaic are presented according to Mutzafi’s system. Superlinear insertions in the text are marked with carets, e.g. ^tun, while scribal deletions are marked with double brackets, e.g. {[a]}. Citations from the Rbai Rafid Collection are reproduced by kind permission of the custodian of the collection. This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation grant no. 263/21.

2 The first part was published in Morgenstern (2019a).

3 See Buckley 1999 and in an expanded form Buckley (2010: 121–147) and Morgenstern (2021).
Zihrun appended to manuscripts that they copied or repaired. They tell a desperate tale of loss, persecution, and of a community in disarray. Yahia’s accounts indicate that as well as acting to save the priesthood, at the heart of his scribal efforts lay a desire to preserve and transmit Mandaean literature.

In this article, I present an editio princeps and translation of the narrative colophon that Yahia appended to DC 47. Yahia wrote this account in the year 1249 AH (= 1833–4 CE), i.e., in the immediate aftermath of the epidemic and shortly after the colophon of DC 35 published in Part 1 of this article. The text is composed in the mixed literary idiom employed widely by Yahia and his priestly contemporaries, in which classicizing elements appear alongside numerous Neo-Mandaic grammatical forms, words and phrases (Morgenstern 2017a). The present text has proven particularly difficult to interpret. Yahia’s use of the classical language herein is imprecise, and the Neo-Mandaic and Arabic elements are not always easily interpreted. Moreover, his writing skips from one event to another, often with no indication of their relative chronologies, making it difficult to follow his narrative and to even identify who the subjects and objects of the verbs may be. The meaning of several passages remains opaque, and these ambiguities are reflected in the translation. It is hoped that when all of the available texts have been edited and translated, the sequence of the events that Yahia describes will become more apparent.

The edition here is presented in parallel columns. The text has been divided into sense-units to facilitate the comparison with the translation. Brief philological comments are provided in the footnotes. Particular emphasis has been given to the post-classical, i.e., Neo-Mandaic and Arabic uses. For reasons of space, the comments are kept brief, and in cases where these late forms have been analysed in detail elsewhere, the reader is directed to those discussions. This article is happily dedicated to Professor Pennacchietti, whose love of the Aramaic dialects of Iraq is renowned.

2. The text, translation, and notes

The narrative colophon is appended to Yahia’s copy of Šafa u-Miniana d-Šambra “The Incantation series and Spell” of Rue.” An edition of the exorcism was published in Drower 1946 but without its colophon. Buckley (2010, 142) provides a summary of the colophon’s contents with a partial translation.

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1 DC 36 was copied in 1088 AH (1677 CE), but was repaired by Yahia, who added his own narrative colophon in 1251 AH (1835–1836 CE). Yahia’s text will be published in a future article.

2 See DJBA: 648 s.v. 키יפור def. 5.
already found sporadically in earlier sources (Abudraham 2016:10). I have assumed that Yahia used the phrase here loosely.

I have been from the region of the Persians, of the barbarians up to the Arabs of Media and to the people of Babil and I did not see any master of the Našorean wisdom or well-ordered treasures. Thus it would come about that (that) of the Life would cease in this part of the world.

What should we do? May the Life accept my prayers and praises and not decree against me here! I await my brother uthr and my mother similarly. For my father left me alone for the place of Life, and I cannot (re)count the evil which has transpired in my time. When my elder brother and I and my elder sister were in Basra, my father approached someone –

When I copied this series from the beginning until the very end of this series, I was (going) from place to place (but) I (was) not estranged from the rectitude of Izoţaq, the Knowledge-of-Life. In those days, none of the tarmidi (priests) was (to be found) in these places wherein I was.

When I copied this series from the beginning until the very end of this series, I was (going) from place to place (but) I (was) not estranged from the rectitude of Izoţaq, the Knowledge-of-Life. In those days, none of the tarmidi (priests) was (to be found) in these places wherein I was.

The syntax here is unclear, and it is possible that uthr belongs with the following sentence.

For the correct meaning of uthr, see Mutzafi (2014:89 n.273).


8 The word læqaia is not otherwise attested, and I have interpreted it in light of anašia lægaiia “barbarians” (Gy. 385:19).

7 i.e. the region of Baghdad.

6 Here probably in the meaning of “books”; compare nasaka ʤ-ginza sdîra “copyist of the well-ordered treasure” (colophon to RRC 1A, composed in Shushtar in 1156 AH [1744/5 CE]).

5 Apparently based upon Jb. 262:6, 263:1, 264:3, wherein it means “this is what shall befall him”. See Lidzbarski (1915, 235) and Häberl and McGrath (2020, 319). I have assumed that Yahia used the phrase here loosely.

20 An adaptation of the common Mandaic phrase arqa ʤ-tibil “the earth, the material world”. I have not found the expression elsewhere.


12 NM hazín (Mutzafi 2015:327).

13 The syntax here is unclear, and it is possible that haizin belongs with the following sentence.

14 Yahia here describes an earlier period, probably the 1820s.

15 For the correct meaning of dadai, see Mutzafi (2014:89 n.273).

For the correct meaning of dadai, see Mutzafi (2014:89 n.273).

ana uab uaha d-áb dilià iaìia iìaì br maìnuš šbiqûhì manda d-hìaì haìtaîun d-áb adàm iùhàna br maìnuš

he is an English European, Taylor Bey is his name17—and I went18 with my father and my father’s brother Yahia Yuhana son of Mahnuš, may the Knowledge-of-Life forgive the sins19 of my father, Adam Yuhana son of Mahnuš.

Then two20 Mandaeans came to us, one of whom (was) Karam Adam Yuhana son of Simat by name, (saying) “Now21 in the epidemic, O my brothers, the Mandaeans are perishing—I thought you know this—I rejoice in the Naṣorean wisdom—that this is amongst them, that some of the Mandaeans have remained,22 and they do not know what to do.”23

And my father and I and Karam al-Šabd the gentleman, and Kunar—one was from a family of the farmers from Dezful and the other from the Arab territory, amongst whom I was copying (texts), and in the area of Margab,24 and in the region of the river marshes, which they call here Mučarrâh.25

Also, when we were in Baghdad, the two of us, under the rulership of Dawud Pasha—that man took us26 from Basra to Baghdad after the

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17 On Robert Taylor, see Parry (2013) and Morgenstern (2021: 389 n. 77).
18 On the NM root z-g-y, see Morgenstern (2018: 196) with previous literature.
19 Literally, “their sins”. Yahia has used the plural possessive pronoun for the singular.
21 For CM haštâ, Yahia employs hištâ, apparently under the influence of NM eštó “now” (see Mutzafi 2014: 116).
22 NM tamma, from root t-m-m “to become, remain, stay.” It is already found in the earliest surviving colophons (Morgenstern 2018, 201).
23 The syntax here is very opaque.
24 The Mandean quarter of Sūq eš-Šiūk; see Morgenstern (2019a: 383).
25 This may be identified with the present-day settlement المارِة (colloquially pronounced ilmśarrâh) located around 32 km. east of Amarah. For reasons that are unclear, Yahia marks the š in both this toponym and the following paša “Pasha” with the diacritic that is usually employed with š to indicate a ď̃ or ŋ̃ phoneme.
26 In CM dirian would mean “he took me” (cf. hizian “he saw me” Gy. 164:6, MG 284), but the context here makes it clear that the 1 pl. object pronoun is required here. Accordingly, it is best interpreted as the NM form deryan “he took us.” The NM form for “he took me” would be derye. Compare hezye “he saw me” (Macuch 1993: 166 l. 791) with hezyan “we saw us” (Macuch 1993: 124 l. 251).
The page contains a text in Arabic, with some English annotations. The text is divided into paragraphs and sentences, each beginning with a specific letter. The language appears to be a blend of Arabic and Persian, with some English annotations interspersed throughout.

The content seems to be a narrative, possibly describing a journey or an event, given the use of place names and historical references. The text is rich with cultural and historical references, indicating a deep understanding of the region's history and geography.

The English annotations provide context and corrections, suggesting that the text is being studied or translated. The annotations are numbered, likely correlating to specific sentences or phrases within the text.

The text is challenging to translate without a deeper understanding of the regional language and historical context. It seems to be a scholarly or academic piece, possibly a research paper or a historical account.
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had mn qalas ŏlbiš zaina uatia ḳṭṭia
bšuma ŏ-ṭilir big baliuq qarilia arbadia

English, whose name was Wolff (English) Joseph38 –
who was in Basra—and someone came from Qalas39
who was armed and he brought40 a letter41 in the
name of Taylor; the Arabs call him42 “The Consul-
Bey”.

huā ‘zga ab ŏ’m balhudun uana uiāi ŏ-hu
Âahâi4 Áqâīša udâdai uhunṭai ualma ŏ-
kulan ‘zginia bbaşra tamînia tmania šnia
mn iuma ‘zginia babasra ŏ-hua qaria
umîtrapaš bginza halin trîn gubria had
iusîp ulip ŏ-hu āta mn apraiia Â-Â-ngriz
uhak ŏlîr gabra ŏ-hua bbaşra mn qudam

So, my father and mother went43 alone, and I and
my brother44—who is my older brother—and elder
sister and my (younger) sister45 [stayed]46 until we
all went to Basra.47 We stayed for eight years from
the time we went to Basra, because he was reading
and interpreting the Ginza (to) these two men, one
Joseph Wolff who had come from the English
Europeans; and that Taylor, the man who was in
Basra from before.48

ualma ŏ-‘zginia bbagdad ualma ŏ-kamarni
lhašta ‘tʃa šnia hua
haizak ana hašta baiina mn hiia umn
manda ŏ-hiia ŏ-lahauia mindam ŏ-hiia
snun

And by the time we went to Baghdad and by the
time we returned till now has been nine years.49
Moreover, I now request (of) the Life and the
Knowledge-of-Life that there be nothing that Life
despises.

38 On the correct identification of this person as the German-Jewish-born convert and missionary Joseph Wolff (1795–1862),
see Morgenstern (2019a: 389 n. 74).
39 This is unclear. It is just possible to read qâua, in which case we should translate: “and one kavass came.”
40 NÌ aṭṭi (Macuch 1993: 369, Häberl 2009: 299); CM would be aṭtia (MG 243).
41 Derived from Arabic ḵaṭṭ. It has
previously been attested in post-
Classical Mandaic texts in the senses of “strip of material”
(MD 196) and “writing” (Morgenstern 2018: 197).
42 Yahia uses the digraph –ia to represent the 3 m.s. pronoun –i.
43 NÌ ezga; see n. 18 above.
44 Compare NM yoy “brother (affectionate)” (Mutzaﬁ 2014: 88–89). The spelling uaiay may represents a pronunciation such as
yoe ’yoe.
45 MD 136 mistakenly glossed this “cousin”. For the correct interpretation, see Morgenstern (2017b: 161 n. 101).
46 Yahia has omitted the verb in this sentence. The implication appears to be that he stayed behind with his siblings when his
parents went to Basra.
47 For the use of the preposition b- after verbs of motion, see Morgenstern (2017a: 268).
48 According to Petermann’s account, Adam taught Taylor the Ginza for 12 years. This would imply that four years would pass
before Adam’s initial summons and the arrival of his children.
49 I.e. from the time that Yahia left for Basra, went to Baghdad and returned. This would put his age at 27 at this time (1833–
4), placing his birth around 1806–7. When Petermann visited him in 1854 he assumed Yahia was around 40.
And I, O my brothers, I alone request tranquillity for those who love the name of the one exalted King.

And I remained with my father in Basra, and (then) I left and came to in-Nihirāt after my brother Šīṣa (and) came.

And I—my father and my mother and my father’s sister— I left them and went after the Parwanaia to in-Nihirāt and stayed in a boarding house (?). But my sister and her husband (i.e. her spouse) returned to our house in Basra, and my father and mother were all in our house in Basra.

Then came the epidemic—do not ask! I was in the marshland as much as I could be, and I had faith and was saved from the odious matters.

Nobody remained from all of our home and family and all of them except my younger sister and my brother’s wife, and my sister and her husband with whom I had been in the marshlands.
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Then many⁵⁹ people went; a few went to the marshland where I was.⁶⁰ Now do not ask what persecution I suffered from the left side!

And then we came to in-Nhirāt and I remained. And some Mandaeans came and brought me⁶¹ to that⁶² place of Margab, of the quarter of the Mandaeans alone.

One of the leaders who brought me⁶³ (was) Humud son of Kamas from Huweiza; he came with him (?); they brought me to⁶⁴ Burka son of Sabti and Farḥān son of Ahai, whose brothers were Ṣaralah and Sarḥān. They were the leaders of the Mandaeans of the end of the generation⁶⁶ without tarmidi (priests).

And then they requested of me something that would set their hearts upon the religion of the Life, for the name of that ancient one does not cease and does not die.⁶⁷

They seek baptism, but there is no one with the crown!⁶⁸ Who could possibly judge me before Aḥaṭor and Ptahil the uthra?

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⁶⁰ Alternatively, both examples of the verb zga “went” in this sentence could be a euphemism for “died”. Compare, e.g., in the Yahia’s colophon to DC 35: abatar mutana lahualai ‘niš abihdai kulu zgun bruaha ḏ-hiia “after the epidemic I had no one with me; they all went to the relief of Life” (Morgenstern 2019a: 383 with minor improvements to the translation). Similarly in an early colophon: zgat gud hiia “she went to Life (i.e. died)” (RRC 1C from 1074 AH = 1663–1664 CE, published in Morgenstern 2019c: 109).
⁶¹ NM u aṭonne for CM uatiun (Morgenstern 2017a: 257–258).
⁶² ta is a characteristic post-CM pronoun which is found in the colophons but barely survived into the 20th century (MD 477 s.v., Morgenstern 2018: 189; 2019b: 34).
⁶³ Here Yahia uses the CM form of the transitive verb. It is less likely to be the G-stem 3 m.pl. “who came,” as this would be atun or ‘tun in CM (MD 258) and ʿṭon (Khorramshahr) or ṣṭon (Ahvaz) in NM (Häberl 2009: 299; Mutzafi 2015: 325).
⁶⁴ Here Yahia uses Arabic bin rather than Mandaic bar.
⁶⁵ NM qar (Morgenstern 2018: 204).
⁶⁶ Based upon Gy. 301: 7.
⁶⁷ Alternatively: “of that Ancient one that does not cease or die.”
⁶⁸ I.e. priest.
And then—do not ask, for I was alone and there was no one whose mind/treasure was pure."69

I and another,70 separated from all those (who) were saved.

For71 I went to Basra and stayed for one month, then I returned and went to Mohammara. I came walking72 by foot and reached the town of in-Nihirāt.

Then the Mandaeans came, and all of them—and whoever was able—to (re-)establish73 the religion by74 one coronation75 and to support their hearts, that they may not76 be cut off from Life.77

And they brought us78—there were five or six sons of tarmidi (priests)—and we79 were praying that the house of Hibil Ziwa would save us80 from the Seven (planets) and the Twelve (Zodiac signs) and the five

69 I have not found this expression elsewhere, but it appears to refer to a priest in a state of purity.
70 harina is taken as a variant spelling of hurina, still employed in NM horino (Mutzafi 2014: 96).
71 It is also possible to read ħuā, Yahia’s impersonal “and it came to pass.”
72 Yahia appears to have corrected sigia to sagia.
73 Taking nitaqan as 3 m.s. D imperfect (for nitaqin).
74 The use of ġ here is unclear.
75 L.e. ordination of a priest. Yahia writes ṭrāṣa for standard Mandaic ṭrāṣa. Already in the colophon of RRC 2O from 1077 AH (1666–1667 CE) we find the use of the verbal root ṭ-r-s for ṭ-r-s (Morgenstern 2018: 197). Yahia similarly writes ṭrāṣa in the colophon of RRC 4G: 304 (copied in 1248 AH = 1832–3 CE) and ṭrāṣ̄n̄a “we crowned (i.e. inaugurated)” in the colophon of DC 50: 797 (copied in the same year).
76 The a of the negation Ia- is malformed and looks more like i.
77 The syntax of this sentence is unclear.
78 NM ɑṭoːnɑn.
79 In CM, the form baiin is the 3 m.pl. participle (MG 69), while the 1 c.pl. participle is baiinin (MG 259). However, the context here clearly requires the 1 c.pl., and it is likely that Yahia has conflated the CM forms of b-ʔ-y (< Aramaic b-ʔ-y) with the NM forms, in particular the participle (q)ḥ̄ēn “we seek” (Macuch 1991: 363; Häberl 2009: 305).
80 There is a lack of grammatical agreement between Mandaic dara “house,” the pronoun ha “she, it (f.s.)” and the verb niparqaŋ “let it (m.s.) save us.” Yahia appears to have been influenced by the feminine gender of Arabic dār, while the 3 m.s. niparqaŋ may result from attraction to the subject Hibil Ziwa or from Yahia’s lack of familiarity with the CM imperfect, which, as the Glossarium indicates, no longer survived in the 17th century and may well have been in decline prior to that (Häberl 2015).
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governors in their lot and (that) we would not be held back.

Life rejoiced, and forever Life is victorious over all works!

In the rule of the Arabs—Sīsa son of Muḥammad son of Ṭamir son of Saḍūn. Life is Victorious!

Abbreviations

CS = Codex Sabéen, Bibliothèque nationale de France
DC = Drower Collection, Oxford
DJBA = Sokoloff (2020)
Gy. = Ginza Yamina
MD = Drower and Macuch (1963)
MG = Nöldeke (1875)
NM = Neo-Mandaic
RRC = Rbai Rafid Collection, Nijmegen

References


See Gy. 11: 1 and Morgenstern and Abudraham (2023: 113).


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