

THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF MANDAIC ܡܢܕܝܬܝܐ¹

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Abstract

The most characteristic figures in the Mandaean religion are the beings known as the *eutria*. Unlike the supreme being, who remains largely aloof from the material world, the *eutria* repeatedly intervene in the affairs of mankind to protect the Mandaeans and punish those who threaten them. The origin and precise meaning of this term have been the subject of some debate. The scholarly consensus that has developed over the past fifteen decades, namely that it is cognate with Aramaic *utrā* ‘riches’ and therefore must mean ‘riches’, is not justified either by the internal evidence from the Mandaic literature or by the comparative evidence from the other Semitic languages. By comparing its contemporary spoken form with related words in all other branches

¹ Abbreviations used herein include Akk Akkadian, ASA Ancient South Arabian, CM Classical Mandaic, CS Central Semitic, ES East Semitic, Heb Hebrew, JBA Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, NWS North West Semitic, PM Proto-Mandaic, PS Proto-Semitic, SS South Semitic, Syr Syriac, and Ug Ugaritic. Unless otherwise identified, Akkadian forms come from Black, George and Postgate (1999), Arabic forms come from Lane (1863), and Ethiopic forms come from Leslau (1991). Classical Mandaic words are transliterated according to Drower and Macuch (1963), with one notable exception: the use of the character e to represent their ʿ, which was proposed by Giuseppe Furlani and subsequently endorsed by Rainer Voigt and Bogdan Burtea. My transcription of Neo-Mandaic words follows the conventions I established in Häberl 2009, pp. 48–9, as modified by Mutzafi 2014: 13–14. Translations of Bible verses follow the KJV.

This paper was the subject of one of the first Sessions on Academia.edu. A Session is a virtual space where invited members can discuss a paper or provide feedback on another author’s paper. These members have a limited time (21 days) to participate, at which point their comments become archived for future access. At the time it was archived, the Session had 28 participants who had contributed 46 comments. I would particularly like to thank Ardwan Alsabti, Eleanor Coghill, Rainer Erhardt, Christian W. Hess, John Huehnergard, Alexey Lyavdansky, Matthew Morgenstern, Meir Rotbard, Kevin van Bladel and Samuel Zinner for their helpful comments and encouragement. Any errors of omission, commission, deduction, induction, transliteration, transcription, and/or translation that remain are naturally my sole responsibility.

of Semitic, this contribution will demonstrate that it clearly derives from the Proto-Semitic root **w-t-r* ‘to exceed’, that it is one of an extremely small class of relic Causative deverbal adjectives in Aramaic, that its original meaning with reference to divine beings is ‘excellent’, and that in Classical Mandaic (and only in Classical Mandaic) it secondarily came to be used as a proper noun referring to an entire category of supernatural beings (‘the excellencies’).

The most characteristic figures in the Mandaean religion are the beings known as the *eutria*. Unlike the Great First Mind (*mana rba qadmaia*) and its various emanations, who remain largely aloof from the material world, the *eutria* repeatedly intervene in the affairs of mankind to protect the Mandaeans and punish those who threaten them. Even though the Mandaeans worship the Great Life (*hiia rbia*) as their supreme being, the *eutria*, and particularly the triad Hibel, Shitel and Ennosh, are ever present in their thoughts and prayers.

The *eutria* are so quintessentially Mandaean that the term is entirely absent from the vocabulary of other religions, although the category of beings to which they refer is routinely compared to the angels of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the aeons of western Gnostic traditions.² As a consequence, the origin and precise meaning of the term *eutria* has been the subject of some debate. In his *Mandäische Grammatik*, Theodor Nöldeke identifies it with the common Aramaic word *‘utrā* ‘riches’ (1875: xxviii), a *qutl* pattern action noun from the stative verbal root *‘t-r* ‘to be rich’. Mark Lidzbarski contested this etymology in his contribution to the Nöldeke Festschrift (1906: 538), only to quietly abandon his objections two decades later (1925: 6 fn. 8). Likewise, Stefana Drower (1937: 94–5) proposed an alternative hypothesis to those previously offered, but also abandoned it in favour of Nöldeke’s hypothesis in *A Mandaic Dictionary*, which she co-authored with Rudolf Macuch (1963: s.v. *‘utra*). As a consequence, Nöldeke’s hypothesis continues to be cited as definitive and uncontested in all recent treatments of the Mandaean religion (e.g. Buckley 2002: 8).

An additional and important datum in support of the scholarly consensus, unknown to Nöldeke at the time he published his *Grammatik*, is the account of the eighth century Syriac scholar Theodore

² E.g. Nöldeke 1875: xxviii, *‘עותרא* “Reichtum” [bedeutet] im Mandäischen “Engel”’. There are two other classes of beings that have been compared with angels, *malkia* and *mlakia*, which are the subject of Lidzbarski’s 1906 contribution to the Nöldeke Festschrift.

Bar Konai, who demonstrates his familiarity with the Mandaeans and their traditions in his *Kəṭābā d-'Eskolyon* (Pognon 1898: 233–44; Kruisheer 1993–4: 154–5). In his overview of the texts that were known to him, he regularly glosses the equivalent of the Mandaic word *eutra* with the Syriac word *'utrā*, indicating that he and possibly even his informants identified the two words.³

Although CM *e-* does occasionally appear where an initial voiced pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/ might be reconstructed on the basis of comparison with other languages, more often than not it indicates the presence of a prothetic vowel (e.g. *ebra ebrw* 'son'). The pharyngeal must have merged with the glottal stop /ʔ/ prior to the adoption of the Mandaic script, as *e-* indiscriminately represents the Mandaic reflexes of both sounds. Consequently, any putative Mandaic reflex of Aramaic **'utrā* would have been pronounced **'utrā*, and Bar Konai or his informants would have had to apply their knowledge of other Aramaic dialects to derive a folk etymology.

Notwithstanding the evidence of Bar Konai, there are at least four potential objections to this identification:

1. Apart from Bar Konai, there is no independent corroboration for this identification;
2. The Aramaic verbal root *'t-r* 'to be rich' (from PS **'t-r*) has completely disappeared from Mandaic through merger with the verbal root **y-t-r* (from PS **w-t-r*) 'to exceed' due to the mergers of PS **'* with **'* and PS **t* with **t* in Mandaic;⁴
3. The CM word *eutra* and its NM reflex *otr* refer exclusively to this class of beings, and never to 'riches', which is instead represented by the words *mal* and *minuna*;
4. All the other epithets of supernatural beings refer exclusively to natural phenomena, such as 'radiance' (*ziua*), 'cloud' (*anana*), 'droplet' (*niṭupta*), 'tree' (*elana*), 'vine' (*gupna*), and 'fruit' (*pira*), in addition to 'word' (*malala*).⁵

Lidzbarski additionally observes that these categories all suggest a series of progressive emanations, of radiance from water, of light from radiance, of droplets from clouds, of fruit from trees and vines, and

³ I am obliged to Kevin van Bladel for this observation, from a personal communication on March 9, 2015.

⁴ Macuch and Drower (1963, s.v. ATR II) cite it as an independent root, but the very same examples they cite as evidence for ATR II are later additionally cited as examples of YTR (s.v.).

⁵ Lidzbarski (1906: 538) was the first to register this particular objection, in his discussion of *eutra*.

so forth, in keeping with the cosmology of the Mandaeans as outlined in the *Great Treasure* (*ginza rba*). Drower illustrates this process at the beginning of her chapter on Mandaean cosmology:

In the *GINZA* there are no less than seven accounts of the Creation, viz. in Fragments 1, 2, 3, 10, 13, 15, and 18, and these are far from agreeing. The Supreme Being is named variously Malka d̄ Nhura (King of Light), Mara d̄ Rabutha (Lord of Greatness), Mana Rba (The Great Soul) from whom the First Life and then the Second Life proceed. In the fifteenth fragment the Great Life seems to precede the Mana, Pira Rba (the Great Fruit), &c. Whether these are epithets or separate conceptions is open to debate. In the fifteenth fragment the Life is shown in the World of Light and produces first Water; from Water, Radiance (*Ziwa*), from Radiance, Light; and from Light *'uthri*, the spirits whose function it is to govern natural phenomena (Drower 1937, p. 73).

On this basis, Lidzbarski had at first derived *eutra* from the root *y-t-r* 'to be superfluous, excessive', rather than *'-t-r* 'to be rich', proposing a hypothetical word **iutra* 'abundance', of which *eutra* is a 'secondary' form, in his view influenced by the convention of writing initial *i-* with *e-* (1906: 539). While I would like to propose that Lidzbarski's hypothesis is broadly correct, it still presents several problems, not the least of which is the complete absence of his hypothesized primary form, the incompatibility of this form with its putative NM reflex *otr*, and the lack of precision in defining *eutra* as an epithet associated with this category of beings.

The Mandaic Root *y-t-r*

In contrast to the PS root **'t-r*, the PS root **w-t-r* is abundantly attested in Mandaic as well as all other branches of Semitic, with a transparently stable base meaning of 'to exceed' or 'surpass' across the entire family. In Table 1 below, I have illustrated examples from these branches according to the canonical citation forms from each language.

If we assume that the PS root **w-t-r* is behind the CM form *eutra* and its modern reflex *otr*, we are still left with a philological conundrum: there is no known sound change or series of changes that could have yielded either the attested classical form or its modern reflex from the proposed form **iutra*, *pace* Lidzbarski. The only proto-form from **w-t-r* that could have yielded CM *eutra* is **Vwtar-*.

Table 1: Reflexes of the PS root *w-t-r

ES	Akkadian	(w)atāru G ‘to accumulate; exceed, be greater (than)’; D ‘increase; enlarge; exceed’; C ‘make outsize, surpassing; make excel’
		(w)atru ‘huge; excellent; surplus’
SS	Gəʿəz	C ‘awtara ‘to persevere, continue; be assiduous’
	Amharic	watro ‘always, forever’
	Tigrinya	watru ‘always, forever’
CS	Arabic	G watara ‘to make an odd number’; C ‘awtara and L wātara ‘to make come one after another, without ceasing’; tL tawātara ‘to follow one another in succession’
		‘alā watīratin wāhidatin ‘upon a single (unbroken) course’
NWS	Ugaritic	mtr ‘besides, in addition’; mtrn ‘surplus, remainder(s)’ ‘reserve’
	Hebrew	C hōtīr ‘excel; make abundant’
	Syriac	G ʾītar ‘to have over and above’; D yattar ‘to prefer’; C ‘awtar ‘make excel; achieve something more; overwhelm’; Dt ‘etyattar ‘to be made better; to evaluate positively’
	Mandaic	G etar ‘to be enhanced, increased’; D iatir ‘to increase, multiply; extol’; Dt etiatar ‘to be made better’

The vocalization of Classical Mandaic forms is not an exact science, but between the evidence of Neo-Mandaic and the comparative evidence of the other Aramaic and Semitic languages, we can confidently reconstruct the pronunciation of most words. With regard to the vowel of the first syllable, we can safely discard the PS vowel *i, as the diphthong /iw/ is unstable in Aramaic and would have collapsed to the unattested classical form **ʾitārā **eitra already in Proto-Mandaic. We can likewise discard the PS vowel *u, as that would have yielded the classical form **ūtārā, which would have yielded the form **utrō rather than the attested modern reflex otrō. By process of elimination, that leaves us with one final candidate, the PS vowel *a, which yields the form ʾawtārā, an ʾaqtal pattern noun.

ʾaqtal pattern substantives from diverse origins, such as ʾarbāʾā ‘four’ and ʾarnābā ‘hare’, are uncommon in Aramaic, and all the more so are those deriving from I-w roots. One example, which Lidzbarski (1906: 539) compares to eutra, is the word eušra ‘storehouse’,

cognate with Syriac *ʾawṣarā* ‘granary’.⁶ The comparative evidence suggests that the root of this word was originally PS **-tš-r*, but that it has merged with the I-*w* class of verbs in some contexts, as do other I-’ verbs sporadically. Examples of these include Arabic *ʾaṣara* ‘to confine or restrict s.o. or s.t.’, which gives us the biforms *ʾiṣr-* and *wiṣr-* ‘covenant, contract’, as well as *ʾawṣar* ‘a written statement of a purchase or sale, transfer, bargain, or contract’, and Hebrew *ʾāṣar* ‘to store, lay up’, which yields *ʾōṣār* ‘treasure, store’ (< PNWS *ʾawṣar-*). To this list, we might also potentially assign *ʾawṭarā* as a plausible reflex of the PS root **-t-r* mentioned above (PNWS *ʾawtar-*), having fallen together with PS **w-t-r*, after the medial **t* merged with **t* already in Aramaic and the initial **t* merged with **w* subsequently in Mandaic.

In addition to these *ʾaqtal* pattern substantives, there is also a larger class of *ʾaqtal* pattern adjectives. The only productive exponents of this class are the so-called ‘elatives’ of Arabic, which represent colours, bodily characteristics and defects and adjectives of comparison. Hebrew likewise yields a few tantalizing examples of *ʾaqtal* pattern adjectives, which may also be related to the pattern of Mandaic **ʾawṭarā*. In addition to forms like *ʾakzāb* ‘deceitful’, *ʾakzār* ‘cruel’ and *ʾētān* ‘ever-flowing’, Rubin (2010) has identified Hebrew *ʾašrē* ‘blessed; happy’ as an *ʾaqtal* pattern adjective from a PS root **s-r-w/y* meaning something like ‘to be prosperous’.⁷

Therefore, *ʾawṭarā* most likely belongs to this *ʾaqtal* pattern, and could possibly be derived from either PS **w-t-r* (with Lidzbarski 1906) or somewhat less plausibly PS **t-r* (following the scholarly consensus). Having identified the pattern of *entra* and two potential candidates for its root, the precise meaning of *ʾawṭarā* still remains to be determined.

Attributive Use of the Roots **t-r* and **w-t-r*

Attributive adjectives or adverbs derived from the root **w-t-r* are nearly universal throughout Semitic. Perhaps the most famous example is that of the name of the immortal sage Atra-ḥašis (‘exceedingly wise’), the hero of the eponymous Akkadian epic who is instructed by the god Enki to build a boat to save himself and his family from the coming deluge (Lambert and Millard 1999). In this case,

⁶ Compare also Akkadian *uṣāru* ‘animal pen,’ a common element of Ur III toponyms (Malamat 1963: 183).

⁷ Kogan (2009: 98) furnishes additional examples of *ʾaqtal* pattern adjectives in West Semitic. I am indebted to Alexey Lyavdansky for this reference.

however, the word is being used adverbially to modify an adjective, in contrast to its use in Mandaic, where it directly modifies a personal name.

Examples of the root **w-t-r* used to modify a personal name are perhaps less common, but far from unknown. These generally come in the form of theophoric names, which (in the syllabic Akkadian script) take a decidedly ‘Amorite’ form, as evidenced by the shift of initial **w-* to **y-*:

<i>ia-tar</i> ^{dIM}	<i>Yatar-haddu</i>	Haddu is excellent.
<i>ia-tar</i> ^d <i>a-mi</i>	<i>Yatar-ami</i>	Ami is excellent.
<i>an-nu-ia-at-ra</i>	<i>Annu-yatra</i>	Annu is excellent. ⁸

In a short communication hidden in the back pages of the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Edward Ullendorff notes that this same element appears in connection with the divine names *ʾl* and *ʾtr* in a number of personal names in various South Arabian inscriptions (1953: 158). Citing the evidence of the modern Ethio-semitic languages, in which the same root is principally associated with time (see above, Table 1), and the Ugaritic equivalent *ytr-*, which seemingly appears in connection with divine names such as *ytrhd* and *ytršp*,⁹ he attributes to the element the original meaning of ‘extraordinary’, further positing that it might have come to mean ‘eternal’ or ‘everlasting’ in Ancient South Arabian.¹⁰

In addition to these names, Salem Ahmad Tairan (1992: 57–8) contributes the ASA name *ʾbwtr*, which he identifies with the Biblical Hebrew name *ʾebyātār* Abiathar ‘[my divine] father is excellent’.¹¹ It might be suggested at this point that the Mandaic lightworld being *abatur* Awathor, whose name was popularly etymologized as *aba d-eutria* ‘father of the *eutria*’ already in the *Canonical Prayerbook*

⁸ Streck 2000: 268. I am indebted to John Huehnergard for this reference.

⁹ For these divine names and others incorporating the same element, see also del Olmo Lete and Sanmartin 2003, s.v. **/w/y-t-r/*, Syll. *ia-ta-ri*. del Olmo Lete and Sanmartin opt not to define this element but cite Gröndahl (1967: 147–8), who glosses it as ‘to be unique, outstanding’ and identifies the two Ugaritic names cited by Ullendorff with the names *yatar*(DIR)-*addu*(^dIM) and *ia-tar-rašap*(NERGAL), respectively, from the Akkadian sources, leaving no doubts as to their vocalization.

¹⁰ Ullendorff 1953: 159. Ullendorff’s hypothesis was not recognized in the subsequent literature. In a personal communication on March 5, 2015, Christian W. Hess notes that Ullendorff operates on the (once widely held) assumption that Ancient South Arabian belongs to South Semitic, which (*post* Nebes 1994) has ceased to be the *communis opinio*.

¹¹ I am indebted to Christian W. Hess for this reference.

(Drower 1959: 33; f. 48, ln. 7) recalls both ASA *'bwtr* and Heb *'Ebyātār*, and thus is possibly analysable as *ab etar* 'my [divine] father is excellent', notwithstanding attempts to analyse it as Iranian (*pace* Lidzbarski 1915: xxix).

The appearance of the element *wtr-/ytr-* in divine epithets throughout Amorite, Ugaritic, Ancient South Arabian, Hebrew and Classical Mandaic, separated from one another by great physical distances as well as long spans of time, provides a strong argument in favour of reconstructing it as a common West Semitic (and perhaps even Proto-Semitic) phenomenon. Granted, this element corresponds neither in form nor necessarily in meaning to *'awtārā*.

Fortunately, we have not yet fully exhausted the evidence from the Ancient South Arabian onomasticon. Hayajneh (1998: 261) cites a name *hwtr-ṭt* containing the element *hwtr*, which he identifies as 'a verbal element from the Causative stem', translating the name as 'Att[ar] has given richly'.¹² Müller (1968: 308) identifies this same name with the Hebrew name *Hôtîr* (< **hawtira*), literally 'he has excelled', who is one of the sons of *Hēmān* (< **hayman-*, perhaps 'faithful') listed in 1 Chron. 25:4. Both of these personal names are associated with stative verbal roots that remain intransitive in the *C*-stem (Heb *y-t-r* *G* 'to remain', *C* 'to excel', *'m-n* *G* 'to be faithful', *C* 'to believe').¹³ The evidence of these Ancient South Arabian and Hebrew names strongly suggests that our *'awtārā* is similarly a deverbal adjective derived from the *C*-stem of Mandaic *y-t-r*. As the Middle Aramaic *C*-stem perfect *'aqtel* derives from the earlier form *haqtel*, *'awtārā* would appear to be derived from PCS **hawtar-* rather than PCS ***'awtar-*.

By its very nature, the onomastic evidence is of limited value, as personal names can be passed down over time and across linguistic borders, and thus cannot be adduced as evidence that a particular form is productive in any given language. Fortunately, Standard Babylonian supplies us with an exact parallel to the West Semitic evidence, and a very productive one at that. In his 1952 article on the so-called 'elative' in Akkadian and similar forms in West Semitic, E.A. Speiser identifies *šūturu* 'most surpassing, pre-eminent' as such a form from Akkadian (*w*)*atāru*. While Kouwenberg (1997: 291) has

¹² Once again, I am indebted to Christian W. Hess for this reference.

¹³ While personal names are a rather weak peg on which to hang a theory, there is nonetheless an entire class of intransitive verbal roots in Hebrew which take an intensive meaning in the *C*-stem, including the root *'m-n* (Gesenius, Kautzsch and Cowley 1910, s.v. §53 *d-f*).

criticized Speiser's interpretation of the *šugtul* pattern as a relic elative form,¹⁴ it nonetheless appears to be an *Š*-stem deverbal adjective with an anomalously intransitive meaning, and most commonly applied to gods and kings, just as in the analogous West Semitic personal names, e.g. *dMarduk* [*bēlu*] *kabtu šūturu* '[Lord] Marduk, the puissant, the surpassing' (BA V/3 349.2, cited by Speiser 1952: 84).

The PS root **ʿ-t-r* appears in Akkadian (where its reflex is *ešēru*), but the expected *Š*-stem deverbal adjective form ***šūšuru* is not attested. In West Semitic, this root appears solely in the aforementioned action noun pattern *qutl* and the actant noun pattern *qattīl*, which can be reconstructed back to Proto-Northwest Semitic, on the basis of Hebrew *ʿāšīr* and Aramaic *ʿattīr* 'rich', but no further. As one would expect of actant nouns, this word is more commonly used as a substantive ('the rich one') rather than as an adjective, and is completely unattested in connection with any personal name, divine or otherwise. The anticipated West Semitic *C*-stem deverbal adjective ***haʿtar-* (Heb. *haʿāšār*, Aramaic *haʿtārā*) is likewise completely unattested.

In light of the foregoing evidence from both East and West Semitic, I propose that Mandaic *entra* is a *C*-stem/*Š*-stem deverbal adjective from the Proto-Semitic root **w-t-r*.

The Deverbal Adjective *šugtul-* / *haqtal-*

C-stem/*Š*-stem deverbal adjectives derived from stative roots such as **w-t-r* are attested throughout East and West Semitic. Although no single pattern can be reconstructed for them, these deverbal adjectives (sometimes called 'elatives') take the prefix associated with the causative stem (*C*-stem/*Š*-stem), even though they lack any apparent causative connotations (see Table 2).

Table 2: *C*-stem/*Š*-stem Deverbal Adjectives

Language	<i>G</i> -stem	Gloss	Elative	Gloss
Akkadian	<i>rabû</i>	to be big, to grow	<i>šurbû</i>	very great
Arabic	<i>kabura</i>	to be big, to grow	<i>ʿakbar</i>	bigger; biggest
Hebrew	<i>ʿāman</i>	to be faithful	<i>Hēmān</i>	faithful (?)
Syriac	<i>nəqaḫ</i>	to adhere, to agree	<i>ʿaqqāḫtā</i>	harmony (song genre)

¹⁴ Once again, I am indebted to Alexey Lyavdansky for this reference.

As I noted earlier, this category survives only in relic forms in Northwest Semitic, and is productive only in Akkadian and Arabic. In the latter language, it and its feminine equivalent *qutlā* (<**qutlay*) correspond to three classes of nouns:

1. Colours such as *'aḥmar-* 'red'
2. Bodily defects or imperfections such as *'a'lj-* 'crippled'
3. 'Elatives' proper, an extremely productive class of attributives denoting the comparative or superlative degree of the corresponding adjective, including those not originally from intransitive roots, e.g. *'a'lam-* 'more knowledgeable; most knowledgeable' from *'ālim-* 'knowledgeable, learned'.

On its own, without the comparative preposition *min*, the Arabic elative preserves an echo of its original meaning, for example with *fādala* 'to be surplus, excess':

<i>Zaydun 'afḏalu</i>	Zèid is excellent.
<i>Mā 'afḏala Zaydan!</i>	How excellent is Zèid! but
<i>Zaydun 'afḏalu min 'Amrin</i>	Zèid is better than 'Amr.

In Aramaic, all of these roles are associated with other noun patterns. Possible relics of the second class of deverbal adjectives include JBA *'askarā* 'laryngitis', which is likely derived from *s-k-r* 'to shut up' and Targumic *'akzārā* 'cruel', which is possibly related to *k-z-r* 'to shrink; to be hard; *tG* to loathe', although it may be a loan from Hebrew *'akzār*.

The feminine *qutlay* likewise occurs in Aramaic, but again only as a substantive pattern, e.g. Syr *kukbay* 'owl', *tu'yay* 'error', and *tušyay* 'concealment' (but only in the phrase *bə-tušyay* 'in secret'). While feminine *qutlay* nouns seemingly never correspond to masculine *'aqtal-* nouns, the Biblical Aramaic pair *'ohōrān* and *'ohōrî* 'other (m. and f.)' (< Proto-Aramaic **'uḥrān* and **'uḥray*, possibly with paradigmatic levelling of the initial vowel from the feminine form) is certainly suggestive, particularly in comparison with its Arabic equivalents *'āxar-* (< **'a'xar-*) and *'uxrā* (< **'uxray*). It may also be significant that Syriac *qutl* pattern nouns refer *inter alia* to bodily characteristics and defects, e.g. *'urlā* 'uncircumcised', *ḥuḡrā* 'lame', and *duggā* 'deaf'.¹⁵

The evidence from Akkadian and Arabic suggests that the patterns *šuqtul-* and *haqtal-* originally belonged to a class of *C*-stem/*Š*-stem deverbal adjectives derived from stative roots, perhaps with an originally intensifying meaning. This class only secondarily assumed a comparative meaning in Akkadian and Arabic in connection with

¹⁵ Nöldeke 1904: 67–8, §103–5.

prepositional phrases (*eli* and *min*, respectively), and uniquely in Arabic the pattern was expanded by analogy to encompass transitive roots.

Conclusions

What, then, do *'awtərā*, CM *eutra*, and NM *otrā* actually mean? From a diachronic perspective, there is no need to conflate the three; the meaning of a word naturally evolves over time. For contemporary Mandaeans, the word *otrā* is a proper noun that refers simply and exclusively to the being itself. The Mandaean lexicographer Dr Qays Mughashghash al-Sa'adī's bilingual (Arabic/Mandaic, Mandaic/Arabic) dictionary of the Mandaic language defines it as such (2012, s.v. *'utrā*). When asked about the origins of this word, Mandaeans refer to the Classical Arabic word *'atīr* 'making a large footprint; possessing power and authority; honoured; favourite'¹⁶ or to the scholarly consensus.¹⁷ Given the lack of a Mandaean lexicographic tradition, we cannot be certain what precise meaning the word had in the classical literature. Its use as a proper noun referring to this class of beings must be a specifically Mandaean or proto-Mandaean development, as it is not attested elsewhere.

The scholarly consensus that has developed over the past fifteen decades, namely that CM *eutra* is cognate with Aramaic *'utrā* 'riches' and therefore means 'riches', is not justified either by the internal evidence from the Mandaic literature or by the comparative evidence from the other Semitic languages. By comparing its contemporary spoken form, NM *otrā*, with related words in all other branches of Semitic, I have demonstrated that CM *eutra* clearly derives from the PS root **w-t-r* 'to exceed', that it is one of an extremely small class of relic *C*-stem deverbal adjectives in Aramaic, that its original meaning with reference to divine beings is 'excellent', and that in Classical Mandaic (and only in Classical Mandaic) it secondarily came to be used as a proper noun referring to an entire category of supernatural beings ('the excellencies').¹⁸

¹⁶ Personal communication, Ardwan Shahad Alsabti, March 9, 2015. In its rare *G*-stem form, according to Lane, the root *'t-r* means 'to mark (e.g. a hoof, in order to identify the tracks)'. Lane's sources used the same root as a folk etymology for the final celestial sphere, the *ather*, deriving the (Greek) name from *'atīr* because 'it affects the others' (*yu'attiru fī ḡayrihi*).

¹⁷ Personal communication, Dr Sinan A.J. Abdullah, March 5, 2015.

¹⁸ Samuel Zinner was the first to suggest glossing *eutria* with 'excellencies' during the course of the broader conversation about the meaning of *eutra* (personal communication, March 10, 2015).

Finally, this study illustrates the utility of the living Semitic languages not only for the purposes of historical and comparative linguistics, but also for the elucidation of ancient texts, and the perils of relying exclusively upon the data furnished by those texts without reference to the living traditions that have transmitted them.

A Post-Script on Prosperity Theology

Although I cannot endorse Nöldeke's claim that Mandaic *eutra* is derived from *'utrā* 'riches', I do not feel that it is *a priori* unreasonable to identify the two words. Certainly Bar Konai also connected Mandaic *eutra* with Syriac *'utrā*, an identification that he either derived on his own or learned from some other source. Indeed, I can imagine a four-part analogy on the basis of *eušna* 'strength' that might logically have produced such a form:

Mand *eušna* : Syr *'ušnā* :: Mand *eutra* : Syr X, where X is *'utrā*.

Employing a similar analogy, Mandaic speakers occasionally introduce *'ayns* into Arabic loanwords, even substituting *'ayn* in place of an original glottal stop.¹⁹ Therefore, it is not implausible that Bar Konai and his Aramaic-speaking contemporaries in the eighth century CE Mesopotamia identified Mandaic *eutra* with Syriac *'utrā*, simply as a matter of course, even if such an identification is implausible at an earlier date.²⁰ The possibility of a deliberate wordplay exists, as well: in stark contrast to their *'utrē*, spirits of wealth, Bar Konai describes the Mandaeans as a community of beggars (Kruisheer 1993–4: 165–6), perhaps unintentionally evoking Jas. 2:5 ('Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith?'). I can additionally think of a few other reasons for which a Christian heresiographer writing a polemic against such a community would suggest that they worship 'riches', such as Matt. 6:24 ('Ye cannot serve God and Mammon').

¹⁹ Macuch quotes an example of a spelling of the Arabic word *Qur'ān* with an *'ayn* in §60 of his *Handbook*.

²⁰ Throughout the classical period, *eutra* would have been pronounced *'awtārā*, as diphthongs were retained in open syllables just as in Syriac, but sometime during the postclassical period the classical diphthongs collapsed in all environments, yielding the form *'ōtrā*, which is ancestral to NM *otrā*. Any identification of *'awtārā* with *'utrā* on the basis of analogy is implausible before the collapse of these diphthongs.

Even if Bar Konai identified *eutra* with ‘riches’ for polemical reasons, it does not necessarily stand that his contemporaries would have viewed the identification in negative terms. I do not think that such an identification would have emerged within Mandaean circles, given the complete merger of the PS root **ʿ-t-r* with **w-t-r*, but a theology of prosperity was just as popular in Late Antiquity among Gnostic groups as it is today among Charismatic Christians, who cite verses such as Prov. 8:18–21 (‘Riches and honour are with me [...] I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment: That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance; and I will fill their treasures’), and Phil. 4:19 (‘My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus’) as evidence that Christians are entitled to physical and financial well-being, and therefore that these features are signs of divine favour. In the Peshitta version of these verses, the word ‘riches’ is indeed rendered by *ʿutrā*.

With regard to a specifically Gnostic theology of prosperity, Samuel Zinner cites the Odes of Solomon 41:10 (‘For His riches (*ʿutrā*) begat me [Christ]’) and the Gospel of Thomas Logion 85 (‘Jesus said: Adam came into existence from a great power and a great wealth’). While the latter text has not survived in an Aramaic version, in light of the fact that the following logion (86) parallels ‘wealth’ with ‘place’ (‘a human being has no place to lay his head’) just as the ‘place’ of Logion 30 (‘The place where there are three gods, they are gods’) parallels the ‘wealth’ of Logion 29 (‘I wonder at how this great wealth dwells in this poverty’) he questions whether a play of words between Aramaic *ʿatrā* ‘place’ and *ʿutrā* ‘riches’ might not underlie the Greek and the Coptic, evoking Bar Konai’s possible play of words between *eutra* and *ʿutrā*.²¹

Likewise, in another personal communication (March 9, 2015), Kevin van Bladel cites the long Coptic recension of the Apocryphon of John, which ends with a first-person hymn in which the speaker states ‘For I am the Wealth (Coptic *tm̄n̄tr̄m̄mao*) of the Light’. Van Bladel identifies this phrase with the Mandaic phrase *eutria d-nbura*, which appears in p. 67, ln. 5 of the *Qolasta* according to Euting’s (1867) edition; additionally, I was able to find another example of this phrase on p. 201, ln. 1 of the Mandaic *Book of John* according to Lidzbarski’s edition (1922).

²¹ Personal communication, March 10, 2015. His translations of the Gospel of Thomas are published in Zinner 2012. On the evidence for Semitic wordplay in the Gospel of Thomas, see Zinner Forth., and particularly pp. 65 and 617–18 for Logia 29, 30, 85 and 86.

All this is to say that an identification of *eutra* with *'utrā* within the context of the religious ferment of Late Antiquity is entirely plausible in postclassical times, once the Mandaic diphthongs *aw* and *ay* had collapsed in all environments to *ô* and *ê*, resulting in the shift of *'awtārā* to *'ôtrā* and the attendant merger of I-*w* *'aqtal* nouns with I-*'qutl* nouns.

When I first began working on the question of the origins and meaning of *eutra*, I was intrigued by yet another seemingly plausible Gnostic connection: Ullendorff's argument that the element (*h*)*wtr*- in ASA personal names could be interpreted not only as meaning 'excellent', but also 'eternal' or 'everlasting', on the basis of the Ethiosemitic evidence. If this were indeed the case, that would mean that *eutra* corresponds almost exactly to the Greek term *αἰών* 'aeon; eternity; perpetually', which in Gnostic cosmologies refers to the series of spiritual powers evolved by progressive emanation from the supreme being, who are frequently identified with the Mandaic *eutria*, as I noted above. Unfortunately for this neat correspondence, the restriction of PS **w-t-r* to a temporal sense seems to be a purely internal development within Ethiosemitic, even if the Arabic examples given above in Table 1 likewise have some temporal connotations.

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