

**Review of Jorunn J. Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006),
in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 69.2 (Chicago)**

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The Great Stem of Souls: Reconstructing Mandaean History. By Jorunn J. Buckley. Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias, 2005. Pp. xv + 377. \$76.

REVIEWED BY CHARLES G. HÄBERL, *Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.*

Colophons are the odd men out in manuscript studies. Few editions of Mandaean texts bother to translate them in their entirety. Fewer still subject them to any kind of detailed analysis. Composed, for the most part, in an archaizing form of the vernacular language and written in a tiny, often cramped hand, the colophons consist of lists containing the names of the copyists and short (albeit occasionally precious) information about the Mandaean communities during the lives of these copyists.

One might conclude that the study of colophons in classical and postclassical Mandaic texts should best be left to specialists and that the colophons have little to offer scholars outside the very narrow field of Mandaic philology. One would be very wrong. The period of time covered by the colophons spans eighteen hundred years, and the colophons themselves are a witness to and primary source for the history of the region during this period. More than just a footnote to a study on postclassical Mandaic, more even than mere grist for the text-critic's mill, these colophons have great potential to contribute to the history of the Mandaeans and of the region they have called home for the past two millennia. As such, this book should prove extremely valuable to scholars from a wide array of disciplines.

While the prospect of a book devoted to the study of these colophons might provoke yawns from even the most diligent of scholars, Buckley manages to make this subject surprisingly engaging. Following a mandate from the late Rudolf Macuch, the foremost authority on the Mandaic language, she has been engaged in the study of these colophons for the last two decades, and her research continues still. It has taken her across the world, from the various Mandaean diaspora communities in New York and California, to the Bodleian Library at Oxford, to the Iranian province of Khuzistan on the border with Iraq. While *The Great Stem of Souls* is primarily a synthesis of this research, the subject, which has the potential to be quite dense, is leavened with biographical information about Mandaean priests and some of the principal researchers in the field of Mandaean studies over the last century and a half, including J. Heinrich Petermann and Ethel

Stefana Drower, with sections addressing broader thematic issues, ranging from the origins of the Mandaeans to the role of women in the Mandaean priesthood.

The language of the book is refreshingly down-to-earth and unpretentious, and although there are a few typographical errors, it is hoped that these will be eliminated in the second edition. While even senior scholars will benefit from reading this book, it will also be of interest to younger scholars and graduate students seeking topics for their research. Throughout the book, Buckley repeatedly invites the reader to pick up where she has left off. These suggestions for further research run the gamut, from major undertakings such as a dissertation on the stylized artwork that illustrates many Mandaean manuscripts to small-scale projects such as determining the source of a textual fragment found in the British Museum. In Appendix C, a list of the manuscripts in the Drower collection of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, she notes which manuscripts are published, which are as yet unedited and unpublished, and which are in the process of publication by scholars around the world. The true value of this book, therefore, is in its having made this subject (and Mandaean studies in general) accessible and even attractive to scholars from numerous other disciplines.

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