

# **The Sabians**

From the beginning of the **Islamic era** onwards **Muslims** have been interested in the **Sâbians** since the Sâbians as a religious group are mentioned in **the Qur'an**. Although the Qur'an mentions them only by name among the *ahl al-kitâb* with the **Jews** and the **Christians**, it does not give any information about their identity, cults and believing system. The Muslim scholars from the early period to the modern time have therefore been interested in this term and tried to explain the religious identity of the Sâbians of the Qur'an. The extant Islamic sources do not give any information about the existence of the argument on the Sâbians at the time of Prophet **Muhammad** (PBUH). We know that the opponents of Prophet **Muhammad** (PBUH) who objected to the Qur'anic message asked him many questions about the statements of the Qur'an which were unknown for them. However, they were silent when the Qur'an mentioned the Sâbians with the other religious groups such as the Jews, Christians and Magians. After Muhammad the Muslim commentators of the Qur'an (*mufasssirûn*) tried to explain who the Sabians whom the Qur'an mentioned **three times** were. They were not particularly interested in the Sabians; and their explanation on the Sabians was generally only a few sentences. Their main aim was to give an explanation of some statements and terms of the Qur'an which needed to be explained, and the term *sâbiûn* (or *sâbiîn*) was one of them.

Most of these Muslim scholars who lived in the first two Islamic centuries stated that the Sabians were a religious group who lived in **southern Mesopotamia**. According to their statement the Sabians particularly live in **Kûsâ**, **Sawâd** and **Jazîrah al-Mawsil** in **Iraq**. About the Sabian religion they maintain that the Sabians have a religious system in itself which resembles from many points **Christianity**, **Judaism** and **Magianism**. Some of these early scholars such as **Wahb ibn Munabbih** (d. 728-732 CE) and **'Abd al-Rahman ibn Zayd** even state that the Sabians worship only one true God.

We also see from many sources that during the **first two Islamic centuries** many Muslim scholars believed that the Sabians were among the *ahl al-kitâb*, while some did not accept this for they believed that the term *ahl al-kitâb* was a specific term for only the Jews and the Christians. Likewise, the Muslim rulers during that time treated the Sabian community in Islamic empire as a religious group belonged to **ahl al-dhimma** (the subject people), a status given to the non-Muslims, mainly to the **Christians** and the **Jews**, who live under Muslim government. Some Muslim rulers even thought to recognise an exclusive right to the Sabians because they thought the beliefs of the Sabians were nearer Islam than the other groups among *ahl al-dhimma*. In these Muslim rulers' opinion the most important feature which showed the proximity of the beliefs of the Sabians to Islam was the belief in God of the Sabians.

The following narration is quite important for this. According to the information given by **Hasan al-Basrî** (d. 728), **Ziyâd ibn Abihî** (d. 672), the **governor of Iraq** at the time of the first **Umayyad** Caliph **Mu'âwiyah I**, had met the Sabians and wanted to exempt them from the poll-tax (*jizyah*), but when he was informed that they worshipped the angels (*malâikah*) he changed his decision. It is quite clear that the Sabians of the Qur'an who were described by these early scholars are the **Mandaeans of southern Iraq**. We know that the Mandaeans have been living in this area since the second century CE. They

migrated from **Palestine** first to the mountainous lands of **Media** (Adiabene), then to the marshy region of **southern Mesopotamia**. By the second century CE they were in this new homeland where they settled under **Parthian** protection. Also we know that the **Mandaean beliefs** and cults have many similarities to **Judaism, Christianity** and **Iranian religion**, and carry various elements from these religious traditions. These early Muslim scholars were therefore correct when they stated the Sabians have a religious system resembling Christianity, Judaism and **Magianism**.

The **Abbasid period** has been an important mile-stone for beginning of the speculations on the Sabians. These speculations were mainly based on the claim that the Sabians were the pagans, adherents of the planet cult of ancient Mesopotamia. From this period onwards most of the Muslim scholars have seen a special connection between the term "Sabians" and the **pagans of Harran**.

Even such important Muslim scholars as **al-Mas'ûdî** (d. 957), **Ibn Hazm al-Qurtûbî** (d. 1063), **al-Shahristânî** (d. 1153) and **Abû 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Qurtûbî** (d. 1282) identified Sabians with the **Harranians** whom they called "*the Sabians from Harran*".

Although the early Muslim scholars (commentators of the Qur'an and the jurists) neither mentioned the city of Harran nor the Harranians in relation with the Sabians, the later Muslim writers especially emphasised Harran as the dwelling place of the Sabians whenever they talked about the Sabians. The characteristic features of the **Harranians** such as **paganism, polytheism** and **star and idol worshipping** have therefore been described as the characteristics of the Sabians. This was also contrary to the early scholars since they never, as stated earlier, mentioned the characteristics such as paganism, polytheism and so on when they described the Sabians.

Some Muslim scholars of that time such as **Ibn al-Nadîm** (d. 995), **Abd al-Qâhir al-Baghdâdî** (d. 1037), and **al-Bîrûnî** (d. 1048) maintained that there was another Sabian group, *Sabât al-Batâ'ih*, living in the **southern Mesopotamia**. They also stressed that Sabât al-Batâ'ih were completely **different from the Harranians**. Even some of them emphasised that the Harranians were not the real Sabians, but **pseudo-Sabians**. In spite of this they continued to use the term Sabians as a particular name for the Harranians, and described the characteristics of the Harranians as that of the Sabians. Although the Harranian community has disappeared from the history since the **Mongol invasion** into Harran in the thirteenth century, the common belief that the Sabians were the star and idol worshippers did not change. Thus the Muslims continued to make the same accusation for the **Sabians of the Marsh** (*sabat al-batâ'ih*), i.e. **the Mandaeans**.

Speculations on the **Sabians/Mandaeans** have continued in the Muslim world up to now. Not only the Arab writers like **Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasanî** but also many Turkish writers (especially the commentators of the Qur'an and the historians of Islam) did nothing but simply repeated the speculations found in the medieval Islamic sources. Many modern scholars have seen a religious identity between the Harranians and the Mandaeans, both of whom are called Sabians traditionally, and held the idea that the Sabians, whoever they are and wherever they live, are the star worshippers. For example, following such Muslim writers as **Ibn Hazm al-Qurtûbî, al-Shahristânî** and **Ibn Kesîr** (d. 1372), the famous commentator of the Qur'an, they claim that the Sabians are the star and idol worshippers whom the prophet Abraham invited to the true religion of God. Moreover, just repeating the traditional accusation against the Sabians many modern translators of the Qur'an into Turkish have translated the term *sâbiûn/sâbiîn* as simply "the star-planet worshippers". A modern Turkish scholar, **C. Yıldırım**, has recently identified the

Sabians of the Qur'an with the **Mandaeans** in his commentary on the Qur'an and claimed that the Mandaeans are the pagans and that the temples of the Mandaeans (Mandi) are full of idols symbolising the stars and planetary deities. On the other hand, again following the medieval sources some modern Muslim scholars do not identify the Mandaeans with the Sabians of the Qur'an. A Turkish professor of Qur'anic commentary, **İ. Cerrahoğlu**, has, for instance, claimed that the Mandaeans are not the Sabians but the Christians. He also claimed that both the Harranians and the Mandaeans are not connected with the Sabians. In his opinion the Sabians of the Qur'an are the members of religious group who vanished in history.

Various explanations on the enigmatic term **sâbiûn/sâbiîn** of the Qur'an have been one the most important problem for the Muslim understanding of the **Mandaeans**. We know that during the early Islamic times this term was only used for a religious group who lived in **southern Mesopotamia** and had a religious system resembling the **Christianity, Judaism** and **Magianism**. These characteristics are certainly suitable for the Mandaeans but not for the pagans of Harran whom the early Muslim scholars never mention. If that is the case, we have a problem of when and why the Harranians adopted the name Sabians. A narration found in *al-fihrist* by **Ibn al-Nadîm** states that the Harranians adopted the name "Sabians" after the **Abbasid** Caliph **al-Ma'mun's** threat.

According to this narration **al-Ma'mun** threatened the **Harranian pagans** with death unless they accepted one of the religions which the Qur'an mentioned. **Abû Yusuf 'Isha al-Qafî**, the **Christian narrator** of this account, says that after a time of confusion the Harranians then accepted a recommendation of adopting the name Sabians. He also maintains that before this time there had been no group in Harran or vicinity called Sabians. Some scholars are suspicious about this account, but we have various evidence other than this which supports the idea that the Harranians adopted the name Sabians at a late date, possibly during the Abbasid period. The Muslim writers such as **Hamzah al-Isfahânî** (d. 961), **Ibn Mûsâ al-Khawârizmî** (d. 980-981) and **al-Bîrûnî** also state that the Harranians adopted the name Sabians during the Abbasid period and emphasise that before this adoption they were known under the names of "the Chaldaeans", "heathens", "idolaters" or simply "the Harranians". **Abû Yûsuf** (d.798), the jurist, for instance, records that the Harranian people during the Muslim conquest consist of the **Nabataeans** (the Syriac speaking non-Arabs) and the refugees from **Greece**. All of these points clearly show that the Harranians adopted the name Sabians in a late period possibly in order to continue to live as a minority in Islamic empire.

There are two kinds of Sabians, non-gnostic Sabians (**Sâbi'ûna Hunafâh**) and gnostic Sabians (i.e. the **Sâbi'ûna Mushrukûn Sabians of Harran** and **Mandaeans**). The Sabian faith is also known as *Seboghatullah*, meaning "submersion in the divine mystery".

Despite all this substantial and clear documentation about both kinds of Sabians spanning many centuries from sources as diverse as **Greek Christian, Arabic Muslim, Arabic** and **Persian, Bahá'í**, as well as **Jewish** sources, the actual nature of the Sabians has remained a matter of some heated debate among western orientalists. Their confusion was due to the fact that it was once important for the **Mandaean Nasaraeans** to relate their origins to the **Gnostic Sabians** by adopting **Yazidi beliefs** in order to qualify for the protection of **Shariah Law** by paying the **jizyah** when **Christians** began to object to them being classified as Nosaari. Therefore, "Sabian" has been used mistakenly in many literary references for decades and though, the spelling "**Sabian**" usually refers to one of the "people of the book" mentioned in the Qur'an. The variation "**Sabean**", has been employed in English to distinguish the **ancient Harranian origins** and **Gnostic Yazidi**

**beliefs** of the Sabian "people of the book" prior to their rejection of Gnosticism and adoption of Monotheism. The term **Pseudo-Sabian** has been used not only by orientalists who take the side of the **Mandaeans** against the **Harranians**, but also by orientalists who take the side of the Harranians against the Mandaeans, rendering that term practically useless.

The confusion of Sabaeans with Sabians began with Marmaduke Pickthall's spelling mistake in his translation of the Qur'an. The word "Sabaeans" comes from a completely different root spelling beginning with the letter "Sad" instead of the letter "Sin". The Sabaeans were in fact the people of ancient Saba in Yemen who have been discredited by scholars as to having any connection to the Sabians of the Qur'an except for their Ansar tribe which practiced Qur'anic Sabianism (Seboghataullah: "submersion in the divine mystery").

### **Islamic reference**

The recent debate on who the Sabians were, is directly connected to how to best translate the following verses from the **Qur'an** out of the original Arabic. The Qur'an briefly announces the Sabians in three places and the Hadith provide further details as to who they were as people of the book:

- *"Those who believe, and the **Jews**, and the **Christians**, and the **Sabi'in**, who believe in God and the Last Day and do good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve." **Quran 2:62***
- *"Those who believe, and the **Jews**, and the **Sabi'un**, and the **Christians**, who believe in God and the Last Day and do good, there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve." **Quran 5:69***
- *"Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow **the Jewish** (scriptures), and the **Sabi'in**, **Christians**, **Magians**, and **Polytheists**, - Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgment: for Allah is witness of all things." **Quran 22:17***

With regard to their beliefs, **Ibn al-Qayyim** said: *"The people differed greatly concerning them, and the imams were unsure about them because they did not have enough knowledge of their beliefs and religion."*

**Al-Shaafa'i** said: *"Their case is to be examined further; if they resemble the Christians in basic matters but they differ from them in some minor issues, then the jizya is to be taken from them. But if they differ from them in basic issues of religion then their religion cannot be approved of by taking the jizya from them."* And he elaborated elsewhere: *"They are a kind of Christian."* consistent with a comment about some of them mentioned in **Bahai** writings.

**Ibn al-Qayyim** said: *"The Sabians are a large nation among whom are both blessed and doomed. They are one of the nations who are divided into believers and disbelievers, for the nations before the coming of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) were of two types, **kaafir** (Infidel) nations all of whose people were doomed and among*

*whom were none who were blessed, such as the **idol-worshippers** and the **Magians**; and others who were divided into those who were blessed and those who were doomed, namely the **Jews, Christians and Sabians**."*

According to Islamic scholars, they did not reject the **Prophets of Islam** but neither did they regard it as *obligatory* to follow them. According to the **Hanif Sabians**, whoever followed (the Prophets) may be blessed and saved, but whoever follows a path similar to that of the Prophets *by virtue of one's own reasoning* is also blessed and saved, even if one did not follow the Prophets in specific terms. In their view the call of the Prophets was true but there was *no one specific route* to salvation. They believed that the universe had a Creator and Sustainer, Who is Wise and above any resemblance to created beings, but many of them, or most of them, (i.e. the **Sabians of Harran**) said: we are unable to reach Him without intermediaries, so we have to approach Him through the mediation of spiritual and holy who are pure and free of any physical elements and who are above place and time, rather they are created pure and holy.

Marc Edmund Jones, founder of the modern 'The Sabian Assembly', described the Sabians of Harran as a "Mohammedan" group, that is, acceptable in principle, together with the Jews and Christians. Sabaeans as such worshipped God's Names (El-Esmea) as angels in the stars, a practice which the modern Sabian Assembly as whole does not embrace.

Sabi`ah Hunafa` (Hanif Sabians) follow a somewhat disorganized religion following the **Din of Noah** as a sect who read the **Zaboor (Psalms)** akin to **Christianity**. They appear to be between Judaism and Magianism but are in fact closer to Judaism. Sābi'ūn recognise the practice of the prophet Muhammad in going to the caves prior to his inspiration, as in accordance with the Sabi quest for Tawheed Hunafa' and, in general, many similarities with the Sabians meant Muhammad and his companions were often considered to have been Sabians. Most specifically this was because of the Sabian shahada "La ilaha ila Allah".

The root-meaning of the word Sabi (deriving from their religion Seboghatullah) means Proselyte, and is identical in usage with the Greek words Sebomenoi or Theosebes and to a lesser extent Phobeomenoi.

### **Characteristics of the Sabi religion**

Sābi'ūn know Allah as the Rabb al-'alihah and 'ilah al-'alihah and speak to angels in their meditations, each of whom they believe dwell in different stars, which has led to the erroneous beliefs among some that Sābi'ūn worship angels while others derogatorily call them star-worshippers (and so it is said in Arabic *saba'at al-nujūm*, meaning "the stars appeared"). Sābi'ūn read from the **Zaboor** and use the **sun for a Qiblah facing the equator at mid day**. Their fundamental teaching is "La ilahah il Allah", but besides this ardent Unitarianism, Sābi'ūn are quite akin to Christians. Unlike their **Mushrik Sabian** cousins, who consider themselves the **people of Idris' son Sabi**, **Hanif Sabians** are more universal looking to Noah as their prophet of the Din Sābi'ūn have **five daily prayers**

(though Zohar can join Asr while Maghrib can join Isha giving the appearance of three). They believe in all prophets reiterating the **Din of Noah** and, not in the same way as the Muslims, believe in The Seal of The Prophets. They also fast for 30 days.

Sabians who adopt Abram as a patriarch distinguish themselves from other Sabians by calling themselves Hagarim (Hagarenes) and were based around Petra. The culmination of the journey to enlightenment will be marked by a circumcision ceremony for most of those male Hagarim who get to this level called Yagur. This branch of Seboghatullah has thus been dubbed "Hagarism".

Given the substantial evidence, many scholars contend that the Sabians mentioned in the Qur'an are those we call today the **Mandaeans**. However, as mentioned above, some scholars studying the etymology of the root word Sabi'un have pointed to origins either in Syriac or Mandaic the word Sabian. Thus some scholars have suggested that the Mandaean religion originated with Sabians, who came under the influence of early Hellenic Sabian missionaries but preferred their own priesthood and that the **Mandaeans** have sought to justify application of the term "**Sabian**" to themselves in the hopes of avoiding persecution. Thus the Mandaeans have become known as Subi (Sabian) by their Muslim neighbors in both Iraq and Iran. However, they could just have equally applied to come under the category of Nasaari because the application of this title to them predated the earliest Christians by at least a century.

In March 2007, the leaders of the Mandaeans said their order is facing extinction at the hands of Iraqi Muslim extremists.

### **New-Age Sabians**

Having been attracted to elements of Yazdan beliefs of the Sabians of Harran, today there are various new age groups that use the terms Sabean, Sabaeon or Sabian in the titles of their groups. Naturally, some of these groups claim that their organization's current beliefs and practices are based more or less directly upon the ancient practices of their namesake groups, including such practices as astrology and magic as well as other religious beliefs. **The Sabian Assembly** founded by Marc Edmund Jones is nominally one such group, albeit specifically non-religious in nature, which is perhaps confusingly named, since its main interests as a special-studies group are in the Bible together with philosophy and the essential occult concepts that underlie a relatively modern form of cabalistic thought. A group having an orientation rather divergent from that of the Sabian Assembly is the *Sabaeon Religious Order*.

## Mandaeans *Mandeyānā*



Mandaeans exchanging  
a ritual handshake or **kušta**

### Total population

60,000 to 70,000<sup>[1]</sup>

### Regions with significant populations

 Iraq

 Iran

### Religions

Mandaeism

### Scriptures

Ginza Rba, Qolusta

### Languages

Mandaic

Arabic and Persian are also spoken





*Mandaeans of Iraq*

Worldwide, there are thought to be between **60,000** and **70,000 Mandaeans**, and until the 2003 Iraq war, almost all of them lived in Iraq. The **2003 Iraq War** reduced the population of Iraqi Mandaeans to approximately **5,000** by **2007**. Most Iraqi Mandaeans fled to **Syria** and **Jordan** under the threat of violence by Islamic extremists and the turmoil of the war. The Mandaeans have remained separate and intensely private