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The Sabians (al-Ṣābiʾūn): Origins, History, and Religious Identity

Noor Mohammad Osmani*

Abul Kalam Md Motiur Rahman**

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the enigmatic community of the Sabians (al-Ṣābiʾūn), a group mentioned three times in the Qur'an alongside Jews, Christians, and other confessional communities. The study traces their origin, scriptural references, and classical Islamic interpretations, before turning to their historical development through the Harranian and Mandaean traditions. It discusses their survival into the modern era, particularly through the Mandaean community in Iraq and Iran, and evaluates whether they may be considered recipients of a divine revelation. Drawing on primary Islamic sources and modern scholarship, the paper argues that the Sabians served as a flexible category in Islamic legal and theological discourse, used to incorporate different minority groups into the People of the Book framework. The research concludes that while the Qur'an's Sabians remain elusive, their historical manifestations provide valuable insights into Islamic conceptions of religious diversity.

Keywords: Sabians, origin and history, Ahl Kitab, Harranians, Mandaeans

INTRODUCTION

The Sabians (al-Ṣābiʾūn) occupy a distinctive, though enigmatic, position in the Qur'an and in the religious history of Late Antiquity. Mentioned three times in the sacred text of Islam (Q. 2:62; 5:69; 22:17), they are grouped with Jews, Christians, and other confessional communities under the broad umbrella of divine recognition.[1] Yet their precise identity has remained a puzzle from the earliest centuries of Islam until today. Were they a definable community, like the Jews and Christians, or a vague category that later came to be claimed by disparate groups? Did they possess a revealed scripture, thereby qualifying as Ahl al-

* Associate Professor, Department of Qur'an and Sunnah Studies, AHAS KIRKHS, International Islamic University (Malaysia), abusajid@iium.edu.my

** PhD Candidate, Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion, AHAS KIRKHS, International Islamic University (Malaysia), akmrahman91@gmail.com

[1] The Holy Qur'an, trans. M. H. Shakir (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1985), 2:62; 5:69; 22:17.

Kitāb, or were they tolerated under this rubric for political convenience? These questions shaped the discourse of exegetes, historians, and jurists throughout the Islamic centuries and continue to occupy modern scholarship.[2] The present paper seeks to provide a comprehensive examination of the Sabians by situating them at the intersection of scripture, history, and identity. It begins by exploring the Qur'anic references and exegetical traditions surrounding the term. Next, it surveys classical Islamic interpretations, particularly in the commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, and Ibn Kathīr, as well as later legal opinions that granted Sabians a status analogous to Jews and Christians. Thereafter, the paper investigates historical and archaeological perspectives, including the Harranian star-worshippers and the Mandaean Gnostics, both of whom identified as Sabians under Islamic rule. The analysis also addresses the modern identity and precarious survival of the Mandaeans, who are often regarded as the last living Sabians. Finally, the study reflects on whether the Sabians can properly be regarded as recipients of divine revelation and what their legacy reveals about Islamic notions of religious diversity.[3]

The Problem of Identity

The Sabians illustrate the complex process by which Islam engaged with pre-existing religious communities. The Qur'an presents them as if their identity were already known to the audience, but does not provide detail. This brevity led to a multiplicity of identifications. Some exegetes equated them with monotheists without a scripture; others suggested they were remnants of ancient prophetic traditions, while still others linked them to the People of the Book, especially Christians.[4] Over time, communities as diverse as the Harranian astral cult and the Mandaean baptists appropriated the Sabian name in order to secure legal protection under the dhimma contract. This flexibility of the term made it useful in Islamic governance, but confusing for historians seeking precision.[5]

[2] Christopher Buck, "The Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn: An Historical Quest," *The Muslim World* 74, no. 3–4 (1984): 172–174.
[3] Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābiʾūn," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (1982): 95–96.
[4] Ibid., 97–99.
[5] Tamara M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 1–5.

Scholarly Importance

The question of who the Sabians were is not a marginal curiosity but bears directly on the broader issue of how Islam conceptualized "other" religions. The Qur'anic treatment of Jews and Christians is well documented, but the inclusion of the Sabians opens up questions about the scope of divine mercy, the criteria of salvation, and the classification of communities. Were they considered recipients of revelation? If so, what scripture did they possess? If not, why were they given a place alongside recognized scriptural communities? These are questions that touch on Qur'anic theology, Islamic jurisprudence, and interfaith relations.[6]

Research Approach

The present study takes a diachronic approach. It begins with the Qur'an itself, then proceeds to the early exegetical tradition, continues with medieval historical identifications, and culminates in modern ethnographic realities. Throughout, it engages both primary sources—such as al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* and Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*—and secondary scholarship, including the seminal works of Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Christopher Buck, Tamara Green, Kevin van Bladel, and others. The aim is to integrate Islamic intellectual history with modern academic research in order to provide a holistic portrait of the Sabians.[7]

By weaving together scriptural, historical, and ethnographic perspectives, this study demonstrates that the Sabians function less as a fixed community and more as a conceptual category within Islamic thought, one that illustrates the flexibility and pragmatism of Muslim approaches to non-Muslim minorities.[8]

QUR'ANIC REFERENCES

The Qur'an refers to the Sabians in three distinct verses: **2:62, 5:69, and 22:17**. These passages provide the earliest evidence for their existence within the Islamic worldview.

[6] Jonathan Elukin, "Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002): 619–623.

[7] Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64–71.

[8] Buck, "Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 181–186.

Yet they are also notably sparse, leaving the identity of the Sabians undefined and giving rise to centuries of speculation. This section analyzes the Qur'anic references, explores exegetical debates, and considers the implications for Islamic theology of salvation.

1. The Three Qur'anic Passages

Qur'an 2:62

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ آمَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ وَٱلصَّٰبِـِٔينَ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْـَٔاخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians — whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good — they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve."

Qur'an 5:69

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ آمَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلصَّٰبِـُٔونَ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْـَٔاخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

"Surely those who believe and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians — whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve."

Qur'an 22:17

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلصَّٰبِـِٔينَ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ وَٱلْمَجُوسَ وَٱلَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Magians, and the polytheists — Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection; surely Allah is witness of all things."

These verses are central to any discussion of religious pluralism in Islam. They articulate a universal principle: belief in God, the Last Day, and righteous deeds are the key to divine reward. Yet, by including the Sabians, the text presumes the audience knew who they were — without providing explanation.

2. Position in the Qur'anic List

The placement of the Sabians in these lists is significant. In 2:62 and 5:69 they stand between Jews and Christians, suggesting some affinity with the People of the Book. In 22:17, however, they appear before Christians, but also adjacent to the Magians and polytheists, raising questions about whether their faith was closer to monotheism or paganism.[9] This ambiguity underscores why exegetes could not agree on their classification.

3. Theological Implications

The verses promise salvation to the Sabians — provided they meet the threefold criterion of belief in God, belief in the Last Day, and righteous conduct.[10] This principle has been described as an early Qur'anic theology of inclusivity. However, the openness of the promise contrasts with later Islamic theology, which tended to restrict salvation to Muslims and those who explicitly followed recognized prophets. The Qur'anic inclusion of the Sabians thus served as a touchstone in debates about divine mercy and religious diversity.[11]

4. Classical Tafsīr Interpretations

Early commentators such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) recorded multiple opinions about the Sabians:

- Some said they were a sect of Christians.
- Others identified them as a group between Judaism and Christianity.
- Still others regarded them as people who worshipped angels while praying toward the qibla.[12]

Al-Rāzī (d. 1209) emphasized the diversity of opinions, admitting that their identity could not be settled conclusively.[13] Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), drawing on earlier authorities, reported

[9] Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābiʾūn," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (1982): 96–97.
[10] Buck, "Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 172–174
[11] Jonathan Elukin, "Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002): 620–621.
[12] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1954), 323–325.
[13] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1981), 146–147.

that they "had no particular religion" but "read the Zabur (Psalms)" and prayed at fixed times.[14] These interpretations reflect the effort of exegetes to situate the Sabians within a broader monotheistic framework, while acknowledging uncertainty.

5. Modern Scholarly Debates

Modern scholars have taken several approaches:

- Christopher Buck argued that the Qur'an's Sabians may have been a small monotheistic sect in Mesopotamia, later overshadowed by other claimants to the title.[15]
- Jane Dammen McAuliffe noted that Qur'anic usage deliberately remains ambiguous, functioning more as a category than as a precise ethnonym.[16]
- François de Blois and Kevin van Bladel highlighted that later Harranians and Mandaeans strategically adopted the Sabian name under Islamic rule, which complicates attempts to reconstruct the original referent.[17]

Thus, the Qur'an's "Sabians" might not correspond directly to any surviving community, but the openness of the term allowed it to be reinterpreted across centuries.

CLASSICAL INTERPRETATIONS

1. Early Exegetical Engagement

From the earliest centuries of Islam, exegetes struggled to define the Sabians. Because the Qur'an mentions them without clarification, commentators attempted to fill the gap. **Al-Ṭabarī** (d. 923), in his monumental *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān*, compiled multiple opinions. He cites reports that the Sabians were:

- a sect of Christians,
- or a people "between Judaism and Christianity,"

[14] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1980), 108–109.
[15] Buck, "Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 176–181.
[16] McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification," 100–102.
[17] Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64–71.

- or those who "worshipped angels while praying toward the qibla."[18]

One narration preserved in his tafsīr states:
"The Sabians are a people who worship angels, pray not toward the qibla, and read the Psalms."[19]

This indicates that even in early exegesis, Sabians were associated with some form of scripture (Zabūr) and ritual prayer, though not aligned with Islam.

2. Al-Rāzī's Perspective

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), in *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, dedicated considerable attention to the Sabians. He admitted the wide diversity of opinions: "They differed regarding the Sabians with many opinions… and there is no way to decisively choose one view."[20]

Al-Rāzī lists them as:

1. Those who worshipped angels.
2. Those who had no law, but acknowledged God.
3. Those resembling Christians in some rites but lacking revelation.

His emphasis on uncertainty reflects the openness of Qur'anic terminology.

3. Ibn Kathīr's View

Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) synthesizes earlier material. In *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, he states:

"The Sabians are a faction of the People of the Book, who read the Psalms, pray toward the qibla, and worship the angels."[21]

This classification places them closer to Ahl al-Kitāb than outright pagans, a position that would later justify their inclusion under dhimma protections.

[18] Al-Ṭabarī, 323.
[19] Ibid., 324.
[20] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 146.
[21] Ibn Kathīr, 108.

4. Reports from Companions

Several reports (āthār) from the Companions (ṣaḥāba) also shaped exegetical opinion. A narration from Ibn ʿAbbās states:

"The Sabians are a people between Jews and Christians, who have no scripture."[22]

This view sees them as liminal — neither fully scriptural nor fully pagan.

5. Ḥadīth References

While the term "Ṣābiʾ" appears in some prophetic ḥadīth, it is often as a label applied by Quraysh to the Prophet ﷺ himself. They accused him of abandoning the ancestral faith:

"They said: 'O Sabian!' (قَالُوا يَا صَابِئُ)."[23]

Here, "Sabian" was used generically for someone who had left his people's religion. This semantic usage may reflect why the Qur'an included the term — as a category of those who departed from established traditions.

6. Juristic Treatment

Because of the Qur'an's inclusion of the Sabians, jurists debated their legal status. Abū Ḥanīfa reportedly held that they were a People of the Book, entitled to jizya status.[24] The Ḥanbalīs and Shāfiʿīs were more cautious, often demanding proof of scripture. Yet in practice, Muslim rulers extended dhimma protections to groups like the Harranians and Mandaeans who claimed Sabian identity. This pragmatic approach reveals how exegetical ambiguity translated into legal flexibility.

7. Theological Implications

The ambiguity of the Sabians served several theological functions:

1. It demonstrated Islam's inclusivity of marginal or liminal groups.
2. It allowed Muslims to categorize unfamiliar sects within an Islamic framework.

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[22] McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābiʾūn," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (1982): 98.
[23] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Badʾ al-Waḥy, 3.
[24] Tamara M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 44–46.

3. It provided a theological rationale for pragmatic coexistence.

Classical exegesis thus reveals not confusion, but rather a spectrum of strategies for situating the Sabians in relation to Islam.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. The Sabian Identity in History

While the Qur'an introduced the Sabians without elaboration, historical communities later adopted the name to secure recognition within Islamic society. The most significant were the Harranians, practitioners of an astral cult in northern Mesopotamia, and the Mandaeans, a Gnostic baptist community in southern Mesopotamia. Both groups identified as "Ṣābiʾūn" to benefit from the Qur'anic promise of protection, though their origins predate Islam.[25]

2. The Harranians

The city of Harran, located in Upper Mesopotamia (modern southeastern Turkey), had a long tradition of astral worship dating back to the Assyro-Babylonian period. Classical sources describe Harran as the center of the moon-god cult (*Sin*).[26] Archaeological evidence, including temple remains and inscriptions, confirms its importance as a site of lunar and planetary worship.[27]

Under Islamic rule, the Harranians faced pressure to identify as People of the Book. When the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833) visited Harran, its inhabitants reportedly declared themselves "Ṣābiʾūn" to avoid persecution.[28] This strategic move allowed them to continue their rituals while being granted dhimma protection. As al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) noted:

"They claimed that they were the Sabians mentioned by God in His Book."[29]

[25] Green, *City of the Moon God*, 3–5.
[26] Ibid., 6–9.
[27] F. M. Cross, "The Origins of the Harranian Moon Cult," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (1962): 15–17.
[28] Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.
[29] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1965), 437.

Though their practices were closer to paganism than monotheism, their self-identification as Sabians was legally accepted.

3. The Mandaeans

The **Mandaeans** (Arabic: *al-Ṣābiʾa al-Mandāʾiyyūn*) are another community historically linked to the Sabians. They are a small religious group, practicing ritual baptisms (*maṣbuta*) in flowing rivers and venerating figures such as John the Baptist (*Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyyā*).[30] Their sacred texts, like the *Ginza Rabba*, present a dualistic worldview with strong Gnostic elements.[31]

The Mandaeans likely originated in the early centuries CE in Mesopotamia, influenced by Jewish-Christian sects. When Islam arrived, they too adopted the Qur'anic identity of Sabians to secure recognition. Al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī al-Wazān (Leo Africanus), among others, reported their continued existence in southern Iraq.[32]

Islamic sources occasionally noted this identification. For instance, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995) in his *Fihrist* describes the Mandaeans (whom he calls "Mughtasila" — the Baptizers) and connects them with the Sabians of Qur'anic mention.[33]

4. Archaeological and Textual Evidence

- Excavations at Harran reveal temples dedicated to the moon god, dating into the Islamic period, which corroborates historical reports of Sabian Harranians.[34]
- Mandaean manuscripts in Aramaic script (such as the *Ginza Rabba* and *Book of John*) provide direct evidence of their ancient religious practices.[35]

[30] Jorunn J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4–6.
[31] Ibid., 12–14.
[32] Al-Wazān (Leo Africanus), *Description of Africa*, trans. John Pory (London: Hakluyt Society, 1896), 55.
[33] Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 747.
[34] Green, *City of the Moon God*, 52–54.
[35] Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 22–25.

- Islamic-era records, like al-Bīrūnī's *al-Āthār al-Bāqiya*, preserve detailed descriptions of Sabian rituals, including star worship, animal sacrifice, and astrological rites.[36]

Together, archaeology and texts demonstrate that the "Sabian" label became a legal and social umbrella, under which very different groups sought shelter.

5. Divergent Religious Practices

The diversity between Harranians and Mandaeans illustrates the elasticity of the Sabian identity:

- **Harranians**: polytheistic astral cult, rooted in Mesopotamian religion.
- **Mandaeans**: monotheistic, baptist, with strong Gnostic features and emphasis on purity.

Despite these stark contrasts, both groups successfully claimed the Sabian name in different regions and contexts. This shows how the Qur'an's ambiguity allowed pragmatic adaptation by minority groups.[37]

6. Implications for Islamic Governance

The recognition of Harranians and Mandaeans as Sabians underscores the flexibility of Islamic governance in dealing with religious diversity. By accepting their claim, Muslim rulers extended legal protection without requiring theological uniformity. This pragmatic tolerance reflected both the Qur'anic model of inclusivity and the political need for stability in multi-religious empires.[38]

THE HARRANIANS AND THE MANDAEANS

1. Two Claimants to the Sabian Name

By the Abbasid era, two distinct communities were widely recognized under the name "Ṣābiʾūn": the Harranians of northern Mesopotamia and the Mandaeans of southern Iraq.

[36] Al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār al-Bāqiya ʿan al-Qurūn al-Khāliya* (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif, 1958), 316–318.
[37] Buck, "The Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 181–182.
[38] Green, *City of the Moon God*, 77–80.

Despite their radically different theologies, both used the Qur'anic category of Sabians as a protective shield under Islamic governance. This dual claim to the same identity highlights the elasticity of the Sabian label and its function as a legal and social category more than a fixed confessional designation.[39]

2. The Harranians: Astral Religion and Philosophy

The Harranians, based in the ancient city of Harran, practiced a religion deeply rooted in astral worship. Their rituals centered on the seven planetary deities, with elaborate ceremonies aligned to celestial movements.[40]

Al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048) gives a detailed description of Harranian practices in *al-Āthār al-Bāqiya*:

"Their prayers were directed to the seven stars and planets; they sacrificed animals for them and held festivals in their honor."[41]

Despite the apparent paganism, the Harranians adopted the identity of "Ṣābiʾūn" during Abbasid times, especially under the scrutiny of caliph al-Maʾmūn, who demanded a scriptural identity for legal protection.[42]

Harranian scholars also contributed to the translation movement in Baghdad. Figures like Thābit ibn Qurra (d. 901), a Harranian mathematician and philosopher, became prominent in Islamic intellectual circles, reinforcing their acceptance under the Sabian identity.[43]

3. The Mandaeans: Gnostic Baptists

In contrast, the Mandaeans followed a baptist, monotheistic, and dualistic religion. Their faith emphasizes ritual purification through repeated baptisms (*maṣbuta*) in flowing rivers, symbolizing cleansing from sin and connection to the World of Light.[44]

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[39] Buck, "The Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 176–178.
[40] Green, *City of the Moon God*, 23–26.
[41] Al-Bīrūnī, 316.
[42] Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68–70.
[43] George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 45.
[44] Jorunn J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3–5.

Their sacred book, the *Ginza Rabba* (Great Treasure), composed in Mandaic (a dialect of Eastern Aramaic), contains hymns, cosmology, and laws. They revere figures such as Adam, Noah, and John the Baptist (Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyyā) while rejecting Jesus and Muhammad as true prophets.[45]

A passage from the *Right Ginza* reads:

"*Life is victorious, and victorious is the man who has gone and come forth in the name of Life*."[46]

This dualism reflects Gnostic tendencies, portraying the world as a battleground between the forces of Light and Darkness.

4. Shared Legal Strategy, Divergent Religions

Though their theologies diverged sharply, Harranians and Mandaeans both claimed the Sabian identity to secure status as Ahl al-Kitāb. Under Islamic law, this meant the right to practice their religion, maintain places of worship, and pay jizya in exchange for protection.[47]

- For **Harranians**, the identity was opportunistic: it allowed continued practice of astral rites.
- For **Mandaeans**, the identification may have reflected an older self-understanding as a distinct monotheistic community, reinforced by Qur'anic recognition.[48]

This dual appropriation illustrates how the Qur'an's ambiguity provided space for multiple groups to situate themselves within its framework.

5. Muslim Perceptions of the Two Groups

Muslim scholars treated Harranians and Mandaeans differently. The Harranians were often criticized for their idolatry, yet tolerated because of their utility in science and philosophy.[49]

[45] Ibid., 12–15.
[46] *Ginza Rabba*, trans. Carlos Gelbert (Sydney: Living Water Books, 2011), 45.
[47] Jonathan Elukin, "Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002): 621–622.
[48] McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābiʾūn," 100–102.
[49] Green, *City of the Moon God*, 66–68.

The Mandaeans, meanwhile, were sometimes described more favorably as "Baptizers" (al-Mughtasila), whose practices seemed closer to monotheism.

For example, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995), in his *Fihrist*, distinguishes between Harranians and the "true Sabians" who practiced baptism and revered John the Baptist.[50] Similarly, al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), in *al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal*, reports that the Sabians of southern Iraq emphasized purification and asceticism, unlike the astral cultists of Harran.[51]

6. Cross-Pollination and Confusion

Over time, the coexistence of Harranians and Mandaeans under the same name created confusion in Islamic sources. Some writers conflated the two, while others distinguished them. This multiplicity reflects not scholarly negligence but rather the multi-layered use of Sabian identity — as a Qur'anic category, a legal designation, and a cultural identity.[52]

7. Significance for the Sabian Question

The existence of two radically different communities under the Sabian label demonstrates that the Qur'an's reference was less about a precise ethnonym and more about a category of liminal monotheists or religious outsiders. For Islamic rulers, it was enough that groups could plausibly identify as Sabians to be granted protection. For scholars, however, the diversity of practices fueled debate about who the "true" Sabians were.[53]

This ambiguity preserved the Sabians as one of the most flexible religious categories in Islamic history — capable of sheltering pagans, Gnostics, and proto-monotheists under a single Qur'anic name.

MODERN IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE

1. From Antiquity to Modern Times

Of the communities historically associated with the Sabian identity, only the Mandaeans have survived into modern times. The Harranians disappeared as a distinct group by the

[50] Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 747–749.
[51] Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1992), 228.
[52] Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 71–73.
[53] Buck, "Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 182–186.

12th century, assimilated into surrounding Muslim populations or erased through conversion. The Mandaeans, however, maintained their rituals, scriptures, and communal identity in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran, continuing to identify themselves in Arabic as al-Ṣābiʾa al-Mandāʾiyyūn.[54]

2. Legal Status under Islam

Throughout Islamic history, Mandaeans enjoyed a precarious recognition as Sabians. Muslim rulers often extended *dhimma* protections to them, though not without debate. For example, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb reportedly classified the Sabians with Ahl al-Kitāb, though later jurists debated whether this included the Mandaeans.[55]

In Ottoman Iraq, the Mandaeans were officially registered as *Ṣābiʾūn* in administrative documents, enabling them to maintain their places of worship (called *mandi*) and perform ritual baptisms in rivers.[56] This shows how Qur'anic ambiguity continued to serve as a legal umbrella for their survival.

3. Core Beliefs and Practices Today

Mandaean religious life remains centered on baptism (maṣbuta) in flowing rivers, considered essential for purification and spiritual renewal. Priests (called *tarmida*) conduct the rites, reciting from the *Qolasta* (collection of prayers).[57] Their scriptures, especially the *Ginza Rabba*, continue to be copied in Mandaic script, preserving a link to their ancient heritage.

Doctrinally, Mandaeans uphold:

- A dualistic worldview, with a supreme god of Light opposed by forces of Darkness.
- Veneration of John the Baptist (Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyyā) as their chief prophet.

[54] Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 5–7.
[55] Jonathan Elukin, "Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002): 620.
[56] Green, *City of the Moon God*, 78.
[57] Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 33–36.

- Reverence for Adam, Noah, and other patriarchs, while rejecting Jesus and Muhammad.[58]

This distinct theology distances them from Islam and Christianity, but their Qur'anic recognition as Sabians provided them a protective identity.

4. Population Decline

In the 20th century, Mandaeans numbered around 60,000–70,000 in Iraq and Iran.[59] However, persecution, war, and forced migration drastically reduced their numbers. After the 2003 Iraq War, targeted violence and kidnappings forced many to flee. By 2020, fewer than 5,000 Mandaeans reportedly remained in Iraq, with slightly larger communities in Iran.[60]

Most now live in diaspora communities in Australia, Sweden, the United States, and Canada.[61] The community faces the challenge of preserving its traditions in environments where flowing rivers (essential for baptism) are scarce. In diaspora, they sometimes use constructed ritual pools, but many fear loss of ritual authenticity.

5. International Recognition

The Mandaeans are recognized today as a vulnerable minority by organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Their identity as Sabians is still legally significant in Iraq, where the constitution lists them under "religious minorities."[62] In Iran, however, their status is ambiguous, and they face discrimination as a non-Muslim minority outside the officially recognized groups.

6. Symbol of the Qur'anic Sabians

Modern scholarship largely identifies the Mandaeans as the most plausible continuation of the Qur'an's Sabians. While historical debates persist, their survival preserves a living link to this ancient Qur'anic category. Jorunn Buckley aptly describes them as *"the last*

[58] Ibid., 40–42.
[59] Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 671.
[60] Human Rights Watch, *Iraq's Endangered Minorities* (New York: HRW, 2009), 44.
[61] Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 115–117.
[62] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Minorities in Iraq* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2011), 12.

Gnostics" of the Middle East, and their existence provides a rare continuity with the religious landscape of Late Antiquity.[63]

7. Challenges of Continuity

The main challenges to Mandaean survival include:

1. **Demographic decline** due to emigration and persecution.
2. **Difficulty preserving rituals** in diaspora settings.
3. **Scriptural transmission**, as few young Mandaeans are trained to read Mandaic.
4. **Intermarriage pressures**, threatening the community's endogamous structure.

If these trends continue, the Mandaeans — and with them the last living "Sabians" — may disappear within a few generations.[64]

RECIPIENTS OF DIVINE REVELATION?

1. Qur'anic Framework

The Qur'an places the Sabians alongside Jews, Christians, and other confessional communities in three passages (2:62; 5:69; 22:17). This association raises the question: did the Sabians possess a revealed scripture (*kitāb*)? For Jews and Christians, the answer is clear — the Torah and Injīl. For the Magians, later Islamic jurists debated whether they had a prophet. But the Sabians remain ambiguous. The Qur'an itself neither affirms nor denies their scriptural status, leaving exegetes to speculate.[65]

2. Exegetical Opinions

Early commentators such as al-Ṭabarī included reports that the Sabians read the Zabūr (Psalms of David).[66] Others denied they had any scripture at all. Ibn ʿAbbās is reported to have said:

[63] Buckley, *Mandaeans*, 2.
[64] Buckley, *Religion Compass*, 673–674.
[65] Christopher Buck, "The Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn: An Historical Quest," *The Muslim World* 74, no. 3–4 (1984): 174.
[66] Al-Ṭabarī, 323–324.

"The Sabians are a people between the Jews and Christians, who have no scripture."[67]

By contrast, Ibn Kathīr preserves the opinion that they *"recited the Zabūr and prayed toward the qibla."*[68] This divergence shows that the Sabians could be imagined either as scriptural monotheists or as quasi-pagans with no revelation.

3. Legal Consequences

The question of revelation was not merely theoretical. In Islamic jurisprudence, whether a group had a divine scripture determined whether they qualified as **Ahl al-Kitāb**, eligible for dhimma protection.

- **Ḥanafī jurists**, following Abū Ḥanīfa, were relatively inclusive. They argued that Sabians were recipients of a prophet and thus deserved recognition.[69]
- **Shāfiʿī and Ḥanbalī jurists** were stricter, sometimes doubting their scriptural legitimacy. Yet even they often extended practical protection, especially in the case of Mandaeans.[70]

The Sabian identity thus became a legal bridge, allowing Islamic states to incorporate minority groups without demanding full doctrinal clarity.

4. The Harranians' Claim

The **Harranians** used the scriptural ambiguity to their advantage. When questioned by caliph al-Maʾmūn, they reportedly declared themselves "Ṣābiʾūn" and claimed to follow the prophet Idrīs (Enoch/Hermes).[71] This identification with a biblical figure provided a veneer of legitimacy, despite their astral worship. Scholars such as Kevin van Bladel have

[67] McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābiʾūn," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (1982): 98.
[68] Ibn Kathīr, 108.
[69] Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014), 145–147.
[70] Green, *The City of the Moon God*,77–79.
[71] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1965), 437.

shown how this strategy tied Harranians into the broader Islamic framework by connecting them to ancient prophets.[72]

5. The Mandaeans' Scriptures

The **Mandaeans**, by contrast, possessed clear sacred texts: the *Ginza Rabba*, the *Book of John*, and the *Qolasta*. These works, written in Mandaic, form a distinctive scriptural canon. Mandaeans themselves argued that they were a community of revelation, tracing their tradition back to Adam and Noah.[73]

For Muslims, this made them more plausible candidates for being the Qur'an's Sabians. Their baptist practices also paralleled Christian rites, reinforcing the sense that they were a scriptural sect, even if their theology diverged from Islam.[74]

6. Theological Considerations

The Qur'an's inclusivist verses (2:62; 5:69) promise salvation to the Sabians provided they believe in God and the Last Day and do good works. This formulation implicitly bypasses the question of scripture. For theologians like al-Rāzī, the real issue was whether they met these three conditions, not whether they had a book.[75]

Later thinkers, such as Maimonides (d. 1204) in Jewish tradition, treated the Sabians as idolatrous star-worshippers.[76] But within Islamic theology, the more inclusive views prevailed: as long as the Sabians could be tied to some prophetic tradition, they could be accepted as recipients of divine guidance.

7. Revelation by Association

In the end, the Sabians' status as recipients of revelation was determined less by their own traditions than by Islamic interpretation. Harranians, though pagan, were tolerated under the Sabian label; Mandaeans, with scriptures and rituals, more clearly fit the role. The

[72] Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64–71.
[73] Buckley, *The Mandaeans,* 12–15.
[74] Ibid., 42–44.
[75] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 147.
[76] Elukin, "Maimonides," 619–623.

Qur'an's ambiguity provided theological space for both, reflecting Islam's flexible approach to managing religious diversity.

Thus, while historians continue to debate the "real" identity of the Sabians, within Islamic thought they became functionally equivalent to other scriptural communities, their revelation affirmed by association rather than by direct historical evidence.

CONCLUSION

The Sabians (al-Ṣābiʾūn) remain one of the most enigmatic communities in the Qur'an and in Islamic intellectual history. Their presence in three Qur'anic verses (2:62; 5:69; 22:17) places them alongside Jews and Christians as potential recipients of divine favor, provided they believe in God, the Last Day, and perform righteous deeds. Yet, unlike Jews and Christians, the Sabians are never described in detail, leaving a veil of ambiguity that has invited speculation across centuries.[77]

Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, and Ibn Kathīr preserved diverse opinions — some portraying the Sabians as angel-worshippers, others as scriptureless monotheists, still others as readers of the Zabūr. This plurality of views reflected not merely confusion, but a broader Islamic strategy of accommodating liminal groups under an inclusive theological umbrella.[78]

Historically, the Sabian identity was strategically claimed by two very different communities: the Harranians of northern Mesopotamia, practitioners of astral worship who tied themselves to the prophet Idrīs, and the Mandaeans of southern Iraq, a Gnostic baptist community with distinctive scriptures and rituals.[79] Both secured protection by invoking the Qur'an's recognition of the Sabians, though their religions bore little resemblance to one another.

In the modern era, only the Mandaeans survive, numbering a few tens of thousands globally. Their plight as a vulnerable minority in Iraq, Iran, and the diaspora illustrates the fragile endurance of the last living community historically identified as Sabians. Their

[77] Qur'an 2:62; 5:69; 22:17, trans. M. H. Shakir (Qum: Ansariyan, 1985).
[78] Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Exegetical Identification of the Ṣābiʾūn," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (1982): 95–102.
[79] Green, *The City of the Moon God,* 3–6.

survival offers a rare continuity with Late Antique religious diversity, while also highlighting the challenges of preserving small traditions in an era of displacement and globalization.[80]

Theologically, the Sabians symbolize Islam's pragmatic inclusivity. Whether or not they possessed revelation, the Qur'an placed them within the orbit of divine recognition. This category enabled Muslims to incorporate diverse groups into the *Ahl al-Kitāb* framework, balancing fidelity to scripture with the realities of pluralism.

Thus, the legacy of the Sabians is not simply historical curiosity. It represents a living example of how Islamic thought navigated diversity — preserving ambiguity as a tool for mercy and governance. In this way, the Sabians continue to shed light on the Qur'an's expansive vision of salvation and coexistence.[81]

[80] Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 115–118.
[81] Buck, "The Identity of the Ṣābiʾūn," 182–186.

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