Hibil's Lament from the Book of John

The gnostic text called Hibil's Lament is from the Mandaean Book of John. The Book of John, also referred to as the "book of the kings" (meaning the angels), contains discourses of John the baptizer, who occupies a significant place within Mandaean thought.

In Hibil's Lament the main character is Hibil Ziwa, a heavenly figure who has come down to earth to instruct, punish, and save. His initial failures and dejection dominate the book as he reports to the major Mandaean savior figure, Manda dHayye ("knowledge of life"). The scene is established in the opening words, "I am happy, very happy, though I am hurt in the house of the wicked." In his plaintive discourse, Hibil emphasizes the gnostic struggle of light over darkness and asks how many adulterers and thieves—as well as those poor beings who live in darkness and temptation and fail to find the way to knowledge and light—he will have to send into darkness. He tells us that he made darkness and light, and that he chose Abathur as the high judge to stand at the dread toll stations where he determines what souls are worthy to enter the house of light. By those stations—and there are a stream of them, we learn in other texts—are pots bubbling with liquids to cook the souls of the wicked.

Hibil's Lament describes a Job-like litany of suffering that affects both the punisher and the punished. As Job questions the afflictions cast on him by god, so does Hibil question Manda dHayye's stern mandates. Hibil both condemns
and feels compassion for those whom he must send on to the toll keepers to weigh and destroy: of the frightened and eager souls who reach the toll stations, only one or two among ten thousand will rise to the house of light. Hibil is weary of his duty to punish multitudes of unredeemables. Rather than harm, he would save. “When will they give up killing?” he asks. “When will combat fade, and my heart heal?”

By the tract’s end, Hibil is pleased with his report to Manda dHayye, and his speech rises in poetic transport before those virtuous humans to whom he offers ascension to and communion with the father of light. As for the rest, he states, “There is no rising for those who fall, and the mountain of darkness swallows them.”

HIBIL’S LAMENT FROM THE BOOK OF JOHN

How long must I sink between worlds?
In the name of a better life, may light be everywhere.
I am happy, very happy, though I am hurt in the house of the wicked.
In my heart I will be pleased by the works I have created in this world.
How much longer must I sink between worlds?
How long should I pour light into the world?
How long shall I raise treasure to the house of the leaders?
I will be happy! My soul looks to the father.
I will be pleased by working with the poor and the young.
I will quiet my heart and be calm.

How long must I nourish powerful light world messengers and the leaders’ rhetoric?
How long should I combat demons and murder rebels?

Will one of you release me from Abathur the high judge?
How long must I walk with weights on my neck?
How long will I tramp on Sunday, our holy day, and expel it from existence?
When will I bring authority to the tollhouses?²
How long must I tame stallions and harness them?
How long must I plow and disperse seed around the world?
How long sow, reap, and give away the perishable?
How long must I counter wicked fools, hurl them into pots and cook them?
How long must the scale weigh and Abathur judge us?
How long must I batter Shamish the sun and condemn his earthly appearance and berate him in favor of the select good ones in this world?
How long must I attack tollhouse guards and suffocate them with Sin the moon?
Must I keep hurling him each month into pots of boiling liquids?
How long will the earth accept seed and fruit dropped across horizons?
When will ships no longer sink and rise to the realm of light?
How long must I restrain the living water and throw it into still water?
How long must the messengers of light claw through pollution and wrongdoing?
How long can they stand it?
When will darkness end and light come?
When will I not waste pearls on transitory life?
How many will hang in my fishing nets, and when can I cease dragging up the poor and the hurt?
How long will I punch mountains?
How long will I dress the perishable in darkness?
When will I stop hanging chains on earthly adulterers and thieves?

² Hibil sends people to the high judge at the toll houses or guard posts, where their souls will be weighed and their fate determined.
When will I stop waving my fists, 
killing, stomping on the bad and the liars? 
How soon will I give up disorienting them? 
When will they give up killing? 
When will combat fade, my heart heal? 
When will Tibil's earthly world end, so I can conceal 
my nets?

MANDA DHAYYE'S RESPONSE

After Hibil Ziwa spoke these words, 
Manda dHayye responded, saying to him, 
"When will you no longer stumble, Hibil Ziwa? 
When will your pain in this world end? 
And the works of the sick, when will you no longer 
bear them on your neck?"

HIBIL ANSWERS

After Hibil Ziwa heard this, he sprang from his carpet, 
stood, and opened his mouth to candor, uttering to Manda dHayye, 
"I created Tibil, the earthly world. On whose neck is it now? 
Those I created, what light carriers will have them? 
After I made Adam and his wife, Eve, I formed 
and condemned them and sent them into exile. 
To them I was persecution. 
I made the toll stations and chains for the Jews 
and inside them placed everyday officials. 

"I have smoothed a road from darkness to the dwelling place 
of permanence. 
I have appointed witnesses in the tollhouse of Abathur. 
I made Abathur the judge of the world. 
I placed him among scales 
and gave him power over events on earth. 
I made the river Ksas flowing between earth and the light world, 
and by it I placed Abathur.
I created white fruit into which souls are placed.  
From it they shoot out to sit on the scales.  
I created brooks of brisk water, like Jordan waters,  
in which souls are baptized.  
I made a way so that all souls float on the streams and rise.  
I made a ship for the good,  
a ferry for souls crossing to the house of Abathur.  
Therein strength and permanence will enter them everlasting.

“I brought the holy day, Sunday, and placed it above the customs men,  
and I said to them, ‘Whoever brings this letter of passage  
will reach you,  
but who ventures without it you will hide.  
All wrongdoers and liars will be interrogated in your tollhouse  
until a letter of passage with all its contents  
rises from Tibil, the earth, to life in its being.  
When the letter and its contents ascend to life,  
a letter from life will come.  
When it reaches Abathur they will ascend.’

“I made works and death and life in the world.  
Those with avid souls rise to light,  
but the adulterers and thieves collapse in the dark.  
Erotic Ruha\(^3\) is here to seduce the entire earth.  
When I heard the blatant alarm, I warned against her.

“I made a rope of cable and planted a pole.  
I told the Mandaean scholars to shimmy up the rope,  
to hang from the rope;  
to rise and see the precinct of light.  
Whoever ignores the rope must climb the pole.  
Whoever ignores both rope and pole falls  
and will find no ascension.  
There is no rising for those who fall,  
and the mountain of darkness swallows them.

\(^3\) As the spirit of false wisdom, Ruha is both fallen and erotically compelling, like Sophia in some gnostic texts.
Whoever wishes a second death,
but who is dead to light,
his eye will see no light and his foot feel no firm earth.

"You have prevailed, Manda dHayye, as those who love your name.
Life wins."