

GEOFFREY HERMAN'S FINDS ON THE SASANIANS' TOLERANT ATTITUDE TO CHRISTIANS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

In *Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, edited by Geoffrey Herman, Gargies Press, 2014 – Judaism in Context 17), Sergey Minov (pp. 149-201) reinforces Payne's findings and concludes that “acculturation was an indispensable part of the Syriac-speaking Christian minority’s stand *vis-a-vis* Iranian culture in the context of the Sasanian empire”. In the *Cave of Treasures*, a Syriac Christian composition of the sixth century or so, he finds a salient witness to the Iranian-Christian acculturation which adopted the Zoroastrian notion of “*Rapithwin*” as well as the three Magis in a biblical context. He laments “The focus on the audacious experience of the ‘Persian martyrs’ has made scholars overlook other, positive aspects of Christian interaction with Iranian society and culture. As a result the problem of Christian-Iranian acculturation has received remarkably scant attention in previous scholarships.” He agrees with Payne that the Syrian elites “attempted to articulate their Christian identity in terms of Iranian society and strived to participate in Iranian social practices.” He sees the need for more reviews and analyses of Christian minorities as active agents of history with significant participation in Iranian culture and society as their status “was far from being limited to that of antagonism and denunciation.” He, therefore, sees the need to place “greater emphasis on the positive aspects of Christian – Iranian interaction.” Minov shows in great detail how the description of heaven in the Old Testament and even in the Babylonian Talmud is so much similar to the connection of the 'firmament' described therein with *Rapithwin* mentioned in the *Cave of Treasures*. By inventively rewriting the biblical version of Magi the composer of the *Cave of Treasures* seems to be trying “to re-negotiate the meaning of Christian identity in the context of the late Sasanian empire”.

In this same publication Adam Becker (pp. 7-25) notes that while describing Sasanian Iran and its religious minorities modern-day scholars use anachronistic, modern notions adopted from liberal political philosophy which takes for granted a distinction between religion and politics. He provides many examples of it. He quotes one modern scholar maintains that even the “bureaucratic apparatus” in Sasanian Iran was controlled by the priests while another scholar factually denies it.

Becker quotes Josef Wiesehofer as discarding the concept of “state religion” and “state church” not only for romantic reasons but also on historical grounds. Since the ancient “state” was also a religious institution, a “church”, Becker is not sure whether the criteria or conceptual categories required to distinguish between “state” and “church” even existed. Becker points out another anachronism in the scholarship that refers to Zoroastrianism as a “national religion” and observes that the distinction between national and universal religions has its origin in Christian anti-Jewish discourse. In conclusion, he notes “The ‘rough’ tolerance of the Sasanian Empire was possibly grounded in silence, a practical decision to leave things be, but we may also find that there was a Zoroastrian conceptual language in which this pre-modern ‘tolerance’ was grounded” and hopes that this will enable us to better understand the Sasanian political theology.

In the same publication, Geoffrey Herman questions if the persecution of Christians by the Sasanian King, Yazdgird I, even took place. He examines in detail two conflicting reports regarding it. A report by Theoderet alleges that “Yazdgird began to wage war against the churches” after a certain Bishop, Abda spurred by religious zeal, destroyed a Zoroastrian fire-temple. When the king ordered him to rebuild the temple, Abda refused to do so, which led to the persecution of Christians. However, Socrates, a slightly earlier contemporary of Theodoret provides a very different account. According to Socrates, on the death of Yazdgird, “who in no way persecuted the Christians,” his son, began to persecute the Christians when persuaded by the Magi, which led to the Christians fleeing to the Roman Empire: When the Romans refused to return these Christians to Persia, hostilities renewed between the two nations after forty years of observing peace.

While Eustathius, a Byzantine author was quite aware of these two versions, he did not endorse either one. But some later anthologists harmonized the two differing versions and placing Socrates' version first, and assigning all the persecutions reported by Theodoret to the reign of Waraharan only. Despite Theodoret's poor reputation for providing imprecise chronology and unreliable facts, modern scholars tend to follow Theodoret. However, Herman finds Theoderet's version symptomatic of the genre and thereby revealing how some of the martyrdoms may have been composed in essence fiction and yet providing some useful data. “It is dated to a year in the reign of a Persian king, but the date and the king might just be wrong”. Like many Syriac martyrologies, Theodoret's too was written at least 20 years after Yazdgird I's death. His main theme is the destruction of a fire-temple, and Herman posits “this action, itself, is perhaps the most problematic of all to reconcile with everything else we know about this period. What was at first described as a stray attack on a fire-temple is turned into a

series of attacks by later writers “in a period of unprecedented tolerance”. Another version by Narse which is closer to the Sasanian world “is clearly quite embarrassed by the whole affair, and is little short of a closely argued apology and cautionary tale for something that should never have happened, but only occurred through a misunderstanding. It stresses the lack of innate hostility between the kingdom and the Christian subjects, as well as the confidence of the Christians in the value of the law. As such it was a Sasanian piece, and it is presumably responding to “the current ones we examined, which Herman suspects “were manufactured in the Roman Empire and should therefore be considered in light of the Roman context”, since legislation was passed in 435 by Theodosius permitting destruction of pagan sanctuaries, a subject that preoccupied the Romans, for a long time. “And,” posits Herman, “this, for sure, is the theme of the two extended martyrdom texts”. Here he sees an attempt at extending anti-pagan Roman sentiments to the Sasanian Iran: “Such a response may have arisen in the wake of the change in Sasanian benevolence towards Christians under Varahran and Yazdgird II”. However, it seems to be otherwise: The Roman anti-pagan movements and anti-Sasanian propaganda may have emboldened the Christians in Iran to demonstrate their fealty to the church by striking down fire-temples, which in turn infuriated Varharan against them as at least until then peace had prevailed between the Christians and Sasanian in Iran according to the accounts of both. Herman concludes that the emergence of anti-Sasanian accounts “should therefore be sought in the Roman Christian discourse on active anti-pagan aggression rather than in the Sasanian Empire”.