

Christianity in Edessa and the Syriac-Speaking World:

Mani, Bar Daysan and Ephraem;

The Struggle for Allegiance on the Aramean Frontier

by

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I

Edessa and the Syriac Language

In Late Antiquity the geographical area to the east of Antioch, stretching from the northern reaches of the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers westward almost to the Mediterranean sea, and southward to the environs of Damascus, was often called by the local inhabitants, Aram. The name is that of the biblical son of Shem, the son of Noah, from whom the Christian inhabitants of the area in later times derived their legendary ancestry (Genesis 10:22-23).¹ At some point after the Seleucids gained power in the area in the fourth century before the Christian era, people began to call all, or parts, of this indeterminate territory Syria, probably a shortened form of the ancient name Assyria. The local dialect of the Aramaic language spoken in this territory from the first three centuries of the Christian era onward is the language modern, western scholars call 'Syriac'.²

¹ The earliest textual reference to 'Aram' may actually occur before biblical times, in the archives of Ebla in the 3rd millennium. See Edward Lipinski, The Aramaeans, their Ancient History, Culture, Religion (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 100; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), p. 26.

² On the development of what one might call 'Classical Syriac', see the important remarks of Lucas Van Rompay, "Some Preliminary Remarks on the Origins of Classical Syriac as a Standard Language; the Syriac Version of Eusebius of Caesarea's Ecclesiastical History," in Gideon Goldenberg & Shlomo Raz (eds.), Semitic and Cushitic Studies (Wiesbaden:

During the years when the Severan Dynasty ruled in Rome, Edessa, the ancient Urhay and modern [Sanli] Urfa,³ was the center of Aramean, or Syriac, literary culture. For the Persians, i.e., the 'Parthians', it was the capital of the province of Osrhoene; in the 160's AD the territory came under Roman domination. ⁴ As Steven K. Ross has recently written, "By the end of the century between Trajan (97-117) and Septimius Severus (193-211), the king of Edessa was squarely within Roman *clientela*, and the groundwork was laid for the even firmer incorporation of his realm into the empire." ⁵ King Abgar VIII, 'the Great' (178/9-212), was the king at the time. It was during his reign, as a client king of Rome, that "pre-Christian Edessan culture reached its zenith."⁶ Edward Gibbon gave this still apt description of Osrhoene just prior to the Severan period:

That little state occupied the northern and most fertile part of Mesopotamia, between the Euphrates and the Tigris. Edessa, its capital, was situated about twenty miles beyond the former of those rivers; and the inhabitants, since the time of Alexander, were a mixed race of Greeks, Arabs, Syrians, and Armenians. The feeble sovereigns of Osrhoene, placed on the dangerous verge of two contending empires, were attached from

³ See Amir Harrak, "The Ancient Name of Edessa," Journal of Near Eastern Studies 51 (1992), pp. 209-214.

⁴ See Fergus Millar, The Roman Near East; 31 BC - AD 337 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 472-481; Warwick Ball, Rome in the East; the Transformation of an Empire (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 87-94; Maurice Sartre, D'Alexandre a Zdnobie; histoire du Levant antique, Ive siecle avant J.-C, IIIe siecle apres J.-C. (Paris: Fayard, 2001), pp. 630-637, 961-962.

⁵ Steven K. Ross, Roman Edessa; Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114-242C E (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 29.

⁶ Ross, Roman Edessa, p. 57.

inclination to the Parthian cause; but the superior power of Rome exacted from them a reluctant homage.⁷

Gibbon here put his finger on a salient fact about life in Edessa, and the Syriac-speaking milieu generally. It was life on the frontier.⁸ Wars between the Romans and the Persians were an ever-present factor in this territory, in which the borders between the two empires were constantly shifting, depending on unpredictable military sallies and excursions from one side or the other.⁹ Moreover, another constant feature of life in this milieu was the often-forced transfer of whole populations from one jurisdiction to the other, depending on the fortunes of the wars.¹⁰ Intellectual life was deeply imbued with both 'Roman' and 'Persian' features; 'Hellenism' and the indigenous, 'Semitic' modes of thought and expression often clashed and then intermingled in both religious and more broadly cultural discourse."

In these cross-frontier circumstances, some measure of local identity was preserved in the burgeoning success of the Syriac language; developed in the environs of Edessa, it was spoken and understood on both sides of the indefinite, great divide between Rome and Persia, thereby creating a cross-frontier community. The language carried with it a family relationship to the Jewish world in which Christianity first appeared in the synagogue communities of Mesopotamia and Syria/Palestine. It was this

⁷ Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (David Womersley, ed., 3 vols.; London: Penguin, 1994), vol. I, p. 224.

⁸ See Ernst Kirsten, "Edessa; eine römische Grenzstadt des 4. Bis 6. Jahrhunderts im Orient," Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 6(1963), pp. 144-172.

⁹ See D. Kennedy, "The East," in J. Wachter, The Roman World (vol. I; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 266-308.

¹⁰ See S.N.C. Lieu, "Captives, Refugees and Exiles: a Study of Cross-Frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian," in P. Freeman & D. Kennedy (eds.), The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East (part 2; Oxford: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986), pp. 475-508.

¹¹ See G. W. Bowersock, Hellenism in Late Antiquity (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), esp. pp. 29-40.

language which eventually carried the Christian faith across the trade routes of Central Asia, eastward into China and southward into India.¹² For it was Christianity that provided the cultural elan that made Syriac much more than just the Aramaic dialect of Edessa. From the third century onward it became the *lingua franca* of a sizeable, mostly mercantile population group in Mesopotamia, who, until well into Islamic times, carried their cultural identity in their own distinctive idiom far and wide.

II

Christianity in Edessa

One no longer knows for sure when or exactly how Christianity first came to the Syriac-speaking communities. Modern scholars are divided between supporters of the view that it first appeared among Jews in the kingdom of Adiabene, to the north and east of Osrhoene, who had close ties to Palestine, and those who think that Christianity came first to Edessa, from Antioch. What is clear is that by the time of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (193-211) there was a large enough community of Christians in Edessa to support a church building in the city. The *Chronicle of Edessa* records the fact that in the year 201AD the church of the Christians was destroyed by a flood. The same sixth-century chronicle dates the `apostasy' of Marcion to the year 138 AD, and it records the date of Bar Daysan's birth in Edessa in the year 154 AD.¹³ Both Marcion and Bar Daysan will figure prominently in the discussion to follow of the first notable Christians of Edessa.

¹² See Samuel Hugh Moffett, A History of Christianity in Asia (vol. I: Beginnings to 1500; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992; Ian Gillman & Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, Christians in Asia before 1500 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

¹³ See I. Guidi, Chronica Minora (CSCO, vols., 1 & 2; Louvain: Secretariat du CSCO, 1903 & 1907), pp. 2 & 3.

The *Chronicle of Edessa* presents a retrospective view of the glories of Edessa. It was composed around the year 540 AD, drawn from the records of the city's archives and other sources. It is put together from the perspective of a compiler in the sixth century, anxious to highlight the city's ancient heritage.¹⁴ From it and other sources one learns how from around the year 132 BC to AD 249, well into the Roman colonial period, Edessa enjoyed the rule of a local dynasty of kings. The dynasty is often called the 'Abgarids', after the name Abgar, the given name of a number of the city's kings. But it is more correctly 'the Aryu dynasty', a family of Arab origin, whose rule fostered a dynamic of national consciousness.¹⁵ Inscriptions in Old Syriac and Classical Syriac from the first three centuries of the Christian era preserve the names of many of the noble families of the period.¹⁶ But for the origins of Christianity in Edessa and its environs, the *Chronicle* does not offer much help.

In the first decades of the fifth century, a now anonymous writer working in Edessa, and also using the city archives, as he claims, put together a remarkable narrative which he called *The Teaching of Addai the Apostle*.¹⁷ At the end of the work the author says that he used records written by the scribe Labubna, the son of Senaq, the son of Abshadar, as his source, and that Hannan, the royal archivist, had testified to their

¹⁴ See W. Witakowski, "Chronicles of Edessa," *Orientalia Suecana* 33-34 (1984-1986), pp. 486-498. ¹⁵ See Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC - AD 337*, pp. 472-481.

¹⁶ See Han J. W. Drijvers & John F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa & Osrhoene: Texts Translations & Commentary* (*Handbuch der Orientalistik*, 42; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

¹⁷ The text was first published and translated into English by George Phillips, *The Doctrine of Addai, the Apostle, Now First Edited in a Complete Form in the Original Syriac* (London: Trubner & Co., 1876). It is now also available, in Phillips' edition, but with a new English version, in George Howard (trans.), *The Teaching of Addai* (SBL Texts and Translations, 16, Early Christian Literature Series, 4; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981). For further information about the text and its manuscript witnesses, see A. Desreumaux, "La Doctrine d'Addai; essai de classement des temoins syriaques et grecs," *Augustinianum* 23 (1983), pp. 181-186. See also Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jesus* (Paris: Brepols, 1993).

accuracy.¹⁸ In his work the author undertook not only to tell the story of the coming of Christianity to Edessa, and to demonstrate its apostolic origins, but, perhaps even more importantly for his own purposes, he provided a profile of the doctrine that he represented as the Christian *Kerygma* originally preached in Edessa. At the very beginning the author lists the three main moments of the narrative:

*when Abgar, the king, the son of Ma'nu, the king, sent the letter to Jerusalem, to our Lord;

*when Addai, the apostle, came to Edessa/Urhay, and what he said in the announcement of his *kerygma*;

*the instructions he gave when he was leaving this world, to those who had received the hand of the priesthood from him.¹⁹

Following the third moment of the narrative, the account of Addai's instructions to his Edessene followers, the author provides a brief, concluding recital of developments in the church of Edessa after the time of Addai. Finally, at the very end, there is the notice about Labubna, the king's scribe, "the one writing down these things of Addai, the apostle," and Hannan, the king's trustworthy archivist, who "set down the hand of witness."²⁰ The literary heart of the work, as we now have it, is to be found in the speeches delivered by Addai in Edessa. The major themes in the speeches highlight the following issues: the Roman political and ecclesiastical alignment of Edessa and its territories; a hierarchical church order in communion with the sees of Antioch and Rome; a list of religious adversaries including pagans and Jews; a Christology reminiscent of that of Cyril of Alexandria; and moral imperatives concerned with the proper use of

¹⁸ See Howard, The Teaching of Addai, pp. lii-liii; 105-107.

¹⁹ Howard, The Teaching of Addai, pp. 1 & 3.

wealth in service of the poor. The study of the terms in which these themes are presented in the work leads to the conclusion that the *Doctrina Addai* in its final form comes from the pen of a writer in the entourage of Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (d.436) in the first third of the fifth century.²¹

The *Doctrina Addai* puts forward the several major themes as the component parts of a distinctly Edessan profile of the Christian faith that in its author's opinion went back to the origins of Christianity in that city. He used documentary sources from the city's archives, as well as legendary accounts of the first Christians in the city, to support the political and doctrinal point of view he wished to commend. For this purpose he evokes the memory of King Abgar V, 'the Black', (4 BC - 7 AD & 13 A D - 50 AD) and the legendary account of his having sent envoys to Palestine with a letter for Jesus at the time of his passion. He asked Jesus to come to Edessa to heal the king of an illness. According to the story, Jesus then responded with a message of his own. He promised to send a disciple to Edessa after his ascension into heaven, to heal Abgar and to preach the Gospel in his kingdom. Meanwhile, Hannan the archivist, a member of the king's delegation to Jesus, is said to have brought a portrait he painted of Jesus back to Edessa with him from Palestine.²² And in due course, after Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, according to the story, the disciple Addai came to evangelize Edessa, in fulfillment of Jesus' promise, and to establish the city's claim to an apostolic foundation for her church. The problem with this account, from the historian's point of view, is that

²⁰ Howard, The Teaching of Addai, pp. liii & 107.

²¹ See Sidney H. Griffith, "Writing History in Syriac in Late Antique Edessa: the *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought on the Aramean Frontier of the Roman Empire," in Richard Lim & Carole Straw (eds), The World of Late Antiquity: the Challenge of New Historiographies (Berkeley: University of California Press, in press).

the legendary character of the framework narrative, and the Rabbulan profile of the main body of the work, make it unreliable as a source of information about how Christianity actually first came to the Syriac-speaking world. Of course, the legend may well have a historical *fundamentum in re*, but if so it is now indiscernible beneath layers of narrative color.

From a reading of the *Doctrina Addai*, one goes on in the search for the first Christians of Edessa to other documents. The earliest, independent historical document one might mention, dating from around the year 192 A.D., is the epitaph of Abercius Marcellus, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia. It mentions the presence of Christians in the environs of Edessa from the second half of the second century onward. Finally, Julius Africanus (c. 160-240), who in 195 CE came with Septimius Severus' expedition to Osrhoene, mentions in his *Kestoi* or 'Embroideries', that he had met Bar Daysan in Edessa.²³

Tatian the Syrian (c. 160 CE), who says of himself that he was from Assyria,²⁴ by which he presumably meant northern Mesopotamia, is perhaps the earliest Christian whom we know by name to have come from the Syriac-speaking milieu. He had gone to Rome to study philosophy and there he converted to Christianity under the influence of Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165). Sometime after the latter's death, perhaps around the year 172, Tatian returned to his native land. Therefore, Tatian himself may well have played a significant role in the dissemination of Christianity beyond the Euphrates. In the works

²² On the famous image of Edessa see now Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa in the Syriac Tradition," in H. L. Kessler & G. Wolf (eds), The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation (Villa Spelman Colloquia, Florence, 1996, vol. 6; Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998), pp. 13-31.

²³ See the passage quoted in the prefatory material to M. J. Routh, Reliquiae Sacrae (vol. II, 1844), reprinted in PG, vol. X, cols. 45-46.

²⁴ See Molly Whittaker (ed. & trans.), Tatian, Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), section 42, pp. 76-77

of early Christian heresiographers he is often accused of the 'heresy' of the 'Encratites',²⁵ a somewhat vague doctrine involving excessive ascetical practice. He is also remembered for two works that have survived: his *Oratio ad Graecos*, written in Greek, and the *Diatessaron*, a presentation of the four Gospels in a continuous narrative, which Tatian put together while he was still in Rome. While the original language of the latter is uncertain, it nevertheless had a wide circulation in Syriac, at least until the time of Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (d. 435), when it was officially banned .²⁶

The translation of the Bible into Syriac was an important part of the introduction of Christianity into the Syriac-speaking milieu. It appears that all the translators of the Old Testament into the Syriac version that would come to be called the Peshitta or 'Simple' version by the ninth century, worked primarily from a Hebrew original. Many of them seem also sporadically to have consulted the Greek Bible, and there are parallels with the Targums that suggest dependence on a common oral tradition. As for the translators themselves, the current scholarly consensus is that "they constituted a single school, a non-rabbinic Jewish community, which eventually accepted Christianity. The evidence suggests that the work spanned perhaps one or two generations, towards the end of the second century CE, and that the likeliest location is Edessa."²⁷ The evidence is compatible with a date c. 150 for the earlier books of the Hebrew Bible.²⁸

A number of other Christian works in Syriac from the early period suggest vigorous literary activity by the Severan period. In this connection one might mention

²⁵ See R.M. Grant, "The Heresy of Tatian," Journal of Theological Studies 5 (1954), pp. 62-68; L. W. Barnard, "The Heresy of Tatian - Once Again," Journal of Ecclesiastical History 19 (1968), pp. 1-10.

²⁶ See W. L. Peterson, Tatian's Diatessaron: its Creation, Dissemination Significance and History in Scholarship (Supplement to *Vigiliae Christianae*, 25; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

²⁷ M.P. Weitzman, The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: an Introduction (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, 56; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 13.

²⁸ Weitzman, The Syriac Version, p. 258.

the Odes of Solomon, the Acts of Judas Thomas (including the Hymn of the Pearl), and the Gospel of Thomas.²⁹ But these works are all problematic in terms of our knowledge of their origins; most of what we think we know about them is the product of modern scholarly surmise. The earliest Syriac writer whose name and work we actually know is Bar Daysan (154-222), of whom we will speak at greater length below. For now what is important to emphasize is the fact that all of the earliest Christian texts in Syriac supply ample evidence of a wide acquaintance of the Syrians with the rest of the world. Indeed, the Syriac-speaking milieu in the Severan period (193-235), along with all its heritage from the east and with its continuing fascination with Persia and Persians, was nevertheless busily absorbing Christian ideas from the wider Roman world into which Septimius Severus and his successors were bringing it. To this phenomenon Abercius, Tatian, Julius Africanus and the others also testify. By the time Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-340) was writing his *Ecclesiastical History* (before 300?) Edessa and Osrhoene were seen to be playing a role in the by now empire-wide Christian movement; he reports events in the church there on the basis of documents in the city's archives, including the rudiments of what would become the legend of its apostolic origins.³⁰ Eusebius also reports more ordinary events in the city's ecclesiastical life, such as its participation in early doctrinal and liturgical controversies. This fact has led Steven K. Ross to make the following observation:

Eusebius, however, reports (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.23.4) that the churches of Osrhoene were consulted when a controversy arose in the

²⁹ See Robert Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom; a Study in Early Syriac Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), esp. pp. 24 ff.

³⁰ See Sebastian Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," in Harold W. Attridge & Gohei Hata (eds), Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 212-234.

church over the date of Easter, around 197. If this report is genuine, it offers confirmation for the establishment of at least a small Catholic community in Osrhoene, and probably in its capital of Edessa, around 190-200.³

III

Edessa's Early Christian Teachers

From the later heresiographical literature in Syriac, notably the works of Ephraem the Syrian (306-373), one learns that already in the second century the ideas of Marcion of Sinope (d.c.154), who had become a Christian in Rome c.140, exerted a major influence in Syriac-speaking Edessa and its environs. ³² Given the wide range of his ideas in the Christian world generally, it would be surprising if this had not been the case. At the time Edessa seems to have been absorbing Christianity in its entirety, including the ideas of that other daring thinker from Rome, Valentinus (d.c.165),³³ along with the ever more popular Roman, political suzerainty. Although he was never a resident there, Marcion in particular became so important a figure in Osrhoene that the Chronicle of Edessa mentions it as a notable fact in the city's official memory that "in the year 449 [of the Seleucid era, i.e., 137/138 C.E.] Marcion left the Catholic church." ³⁴

Marcion's ideas had a powerful effect on Edessa's native intellectual, Bar Daysan (154-222), whom Julius Africanus met in Abgar VIII's court in the days of Septimius Severus, as we mentioned above. On the one hand, as we learn from Eusebius,

³¹ Ross, Roman Edessa, pp. 127-128.

³² See Han J. W. Drijvers, "Marcionism in Syria: Principles, Problems, Polemics," Second Century 6 (1987-88), pp. 153-172.

³³ Aphrahat, 'the 'Persian Sage' (fl. 337-345), spoke of the "fraudulent teachings" of both Marcion and Valentinus, along with Mani. See Joannes Parisot (ed. & trans.), Aphraatis Demonstrationes I - XXII (Patrologia Syriaca, vol. I; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), cols. 115-116.

Bar Daysan composed polemical works against the teaching of Marcion.³⁵ On the other hand, this "Aramean Philosopher," as Ephraem called Bar Daysan,³⁶ was himself the author of a formidable system of thought, putting together elements from his own world beyond the Euphrates and the philosophy of the Greeks, as we shall discuss below.

Radiating from Edessa, Bar Daysan's teaching had a wide dissemination in the Syriac-speaking world. In the next generation it was to have a profound effect on a teacher from southern Mesopotamia, who had been brought up in the Aramaic-speaking, Jewish-Christian milieu of the 'Elkasaites' in Iraq, whose name was Mani (216-276). Mani was to become the founder of a major, world religion, with the Persian court as the focal point of his activity. But this fact should not blind us to his Edessa connections. Not only was he indebted in important ways to the thought of Bar Daysan, Edessa's own 'Aramean philosopher',³⁷ but Mani himself is said to have addressed one of his epistles to the community in Edessa.³⁸ By Ephraem's day, in the judgment of Han J. W. Drijvers, Manichaeism had already gained a commanding presence in the environs of Edessa.³⁹

³⁴ Quoted from Drijvers, "Marcionism in Syria," p. 153. See Guidi, Chronica Minora, p. 3 (*npaq Marqyon men `edta qatholiqa*).

³⁵ See the passage from Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History (IV, 30) quoted, translated into English and discussed in H. J. W. Drijvers, Bardaisan of Edessa (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp., 1966), pp. 169-170.

³⁶ C.W. Mitchell, S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan (2 vols.; London & Oxford: Williams & Norgate, 1912 & 1921), vol. II, p. 225.

³⁷ See O. G. von Wessendonk, "Bardesanes and Mani," Acta Orientalia 10 (1932), pp. 336-363; H. J. W. Drijvers, "Mani and Bardaisan; ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte des Manichäismus," in Mdlanges d'Histoire des Religions offerts d Henri-Charles Puech (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), pp. 459-469; Barbara Aland, "Mani and Bardesanes - zur Entstehung des manichäischen Systems," in Albert Dietrich (ed.), Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturgebiet (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), pp. 123-143.

³⁸ See Ron Cameron & Arthur J. Dewey (eds.), The Cologne Mani Codex (P. Colon. Inv. Nr. 4780) 'Concerning the Origin of his Body' (Texts and Translations, n. 15, Early Christian Literature Series, 3; Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 50-51.

³⁹ Drijvers made this point in a number of publications, most succinctly in H. J. W. Drijvers, "Addai and Mani, Christentum and Manichäismus im dritten Jahrhundert in Syrien," in R. Lavenant (ed.), III Symposium Syriacum 1980 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 221; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1983), pp. 171-185.

In Edessa, and the Syriac-speaking world more generally, Bar Daysan and Mani can be seen to represent two responses to the intellectual challenges presented by the irruption of the influences of Roman arms and ideas into the frontier region of Syria in Severan times. In personal terms, these influences came first with Tatian, Julius Africanus, and others who brought ideas from the imperial city to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, including the ideas of their contemporaries, Marcion and Valentinus. But they were not the only ones to come, nor were they the only Christians in evidence in Edessa and its environs. There was, presumably, the presence of a larger community to welcome them. Later Christian legend, recorded in the famous *Doctrina Addai*, as we have seen a work of the first half of the fifth century, puts forward other names from the Severan period as representing the ancestors of those who would come to profess the Nicene faith in Edessa. The most important of these was Bishop Palut (c.200), who was said to have been consecrated bishop by Serapion of Antioch (c.190-209), who in turn was consecrated by Zephyrinus of Rome (d.217).⁴⁰ It was their lineage that was claimed by Bishop Quna (reg. c. 289-313), who, according to Walter Bauer, "organized orthodoxy in Edessa in an ecclesiastical manner and gave to it significant impetus."⁴¹ And the names of both Bishop Quna of Edessa and Jacob of Nisibis ((d.338) are on the list of attendees at the Council of Nicea in 325, albeit that there are many historical problems with the surviving lists.⁴²

Looking back from the second half of the fourth century, Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306-373), who was then the major voice in support of Roman ecclesiastical orthodoxy in

⁴⁰ See George Howard (trans.), The Teaching of Addai (SBL Texts and Translations, 16, Early Christian Literature Series, 4; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), pp. 52 (Syriac), 105 (English).

⁴¹ Walter Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (2nd ed.; trans. & ed. R. A. Kraft & G. Krodel; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), p.33.

the Syriac-speaking world, considered Bishop Palut to have been the man in Severan times who represented the Christian church's best interests. Nevertheless, Ephraem renounced the name 'Palutians' for those whom he considered to be orthodox Christians, maintaining that the true followers of Christ are known simply as 'Christians'.⁴³ Furthermore, Ephraem considered Marcion, Bar Daysan, and Mani to have been the principal 'outsider' adversaries to the 'true' Christian faith in Edessa and its environs in the early years of the Roman imperial hegemony. Here is what he said about them in his *Hymns against Heresies*:

Let them be interrogated about their times, about who is older than his associate. Would Mani seize primogeniture?

Bar Daysan is prior to him. Would Bar Daysan claim to be older? His age is younger than the earlier ones. Marcion was the first thorn, the first-born of the thicket of sin, the tare that was the first to spring up. May the Just One trample his growth.⁴⁴

⁴² See H. Gelzer, H. Hilgenfeld, O. Cuntz, Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina, Latine, Graece, Coptice, Syriace, Arabice, Armeniace (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1898), s.v.

⁴³ See Sidney H. Griffith, "Setting Right the Church of Syria: Saint Ephraem's *Hymns against Heresies*," in W. E. Klingshim & M. Vessey (eds), The Limits of Ancient Christiani; Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 97-114; *idem*, "The Marks of the 'True Church' according to Ephraem's *Hymns against Heresies*," in G. J. Reinink & A.C. Klugkist (eds), After Bardaisan: Studies on Change and Continuity in Syriac Christianity; a Festschrift in Honor of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers (Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta; Louvain: Peeters, 1999), pp. 125-140.

⁴⁴ Edmund Beck, Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses (CSCO, vols. 169-170; Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus SCO, 1957), XXII 17 Occasionally, Ephraem would add the names of other

Ephraem viewed the famous Christian teachers of Severan times in the environs of Edessa, both those from abroad, like Marcion and Valentinus, and those local to the Syriac-speaking world, like Quq,⁴⁵ Bar Daysan, and Mani, to have been anxious to win over disciples to their own doctrines. Here is what he said on this subject:

Valentinus stole a flock from the church and called it by his own name; the 'Potter' (i.e., Quq) made a denomination in his own name. The crafty Bar Daysan stole some sheep and they acted like the flock universal. Marcion deserted his sheep; Mani fell upon them to capture them from him. The one mad man was biting the other one! They called the flock by their own names. Blessed is the One who has thrown them out of his house.⁴⁶

In his polemical zeal, Ephraem even liked to make fun of the names of the great teachers revered in the environs of Edessa whose doctrines he loathed. In this vein, he wrote:

Whoever gave the name of the Daysan⁴⁷ to Bar Daysan,

'outsider' adversaries. For example, in one stanza he wrote of Valentinus and Quq, in addition to the more frequently mentioned troika of Marcion, Bar Daysan, and Mani. See, e.g., *ibid*, XXII:3, quoted below.

⁴⁵ Quq was a native of Edessa, who also lived in Severan times, but whose teachings, so objectionable to Ephraem, are now largely unknown. See Han. J. W. Drijvers, "Quq and the Quqites; an Unknown Sect in Edessa in the Second Century A.D.," Numen 14 (1967), pp. 104-129.

⁴⁶ Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, XXII:3.

⁴⁷ In ancient times, Daysan was the name of the river that flows by Edessa. Its devastating floods that damaged the city and claimed many lives were recorded in the chronicles. See, e.g., the account of one

has caused more to die in Bar Daysan than [in] the Daysan. His volume swelled up to bring forth thistles and tares. Marcion (*Mrgyon*) he rubbed (*mraq*) so much as to make him rusty. He scoured him to the point of blunting his mind with blasphemy. Mani (*Mani*) became a garment (*mana*) fit to wear out its wearers .⁴⁸

This polemical zeal on the part of Ephraem convinced Walter Bauer that Ephraem and the writers against heresies who came after him invented the history of Christianity in Edessa in the third century in order to support the cause of Roman imperial, ecclesiastical Orthodoxy in the fourth century. Bauer proposed the hypothesis that what would later be called `heresy' actually came first in Edessa, and only subsequently the teaching that would be recognized as `orthodoxy', and then only as espoused by a small, embattled group. More specifically, Bauer said that in Edessa "Christianity was first established in the form of Marcionism, probably imported from the West and certainly not much later than the year 150."⁴⁹ Here is not the place to argue about the Bauer hypothesis at any great length. True or false, it does nevertheless call attention to the tremendous intellectual vitality in Edessa and the Syriac-speaking world more generally in the

such major flood in the third century recorded in the *Chronicle of Edessa*, in Guidi, *Chronica Minora*, vol. I, pp. 1-4.

⁴⁸ Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, 11:1. ⁴⁹ Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy, p. 29.

Severan period of Roman history. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that when the exciting ideas of Marcion, Valentinus and the others came from the wider world into Syria and Edessa in the late second century, they must have found an already well-established Christian community there to receive them. Indeed it seems that their very success would have required a prior Christian commitment on the part of many who would have become their admirers, in the light of which their new ideas would have been eagerly received.

Two third century thinkers in particular, Bar Daysan and Mani, both in some ways heirs to the teachings of Marcion, were to have major roles in the struggle for Christian allegiance in Syria in the third century and later. In the fourth century Ephraem portrayed the two of them as his major intellectual adversaries, outside the canonical boundaries of the 'catholic' church of the Roman Empire.

IV

The Struggle for Allegiance on the Aramean Frontier

Bar Daysan, Mani, and St. Ephraem were all frontier figures; they were native sons of the Aramaic-speaking world of the frontier between Rome and Persia, whose minds were challenged by the currents of political and religious thought that circulated in the wider worlds that came together in Mesopotamia.⁵⁰ Their doctrines were made up of elements from both east and west, but they found a common expression in the literary genres of Syriac, particularly in the *madrshd*, a poetic 'teaching song' reportedly favored by all three teachers.⁵¹ The teachings of Bar Daysan (154-222) and Mani (216-

⁵⁰ See Geo Widengren, " 'Synkretismus' in der syrischen Christenheit," in Dietrich, Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturegebiet, pp. 38-64.

⁵¹ Usually called simply a 'hymn' in the west, Andrew Palmer has proposed calling the *madrsha* a 'teaching song', a rendering that certainly comes closer to the original sense of the term. See A. Palmer,

276) dominated the third century.⁵² In the fourth century St. Ephraem emerged as the strongest voice in Syrian Christianity. He espoused Nicene orthodoxy and Roman political allegiance in a flawless Syriac idiom that set the standard for literary excellence in that language ever thereafter and eventually eclipsed the influence of the ideas of the earlier teachers as well. From this perspective St. Ephraem may be seen not only as the champion of Roman imperial Orthodoxy, but also as the one who found the most effective way intellectually to inculturate Christianity into the life and institutions of the Aramean frontier.

Bar Daysan looked west. Epiphanius, the heresiographer, wrote in his *Panarion* that Bar Daysan was "a learned man in both Greek and Syriac."⁵³ While he was well schooled in the astral sciences of the Babylonians and the consogonical myths of the Persians, and was much concerned with planetary influences over human affairs, he was also much concerned with the science and philosophy of the Greeks. In fact, following

"The Merchant of Nisibis; Saint Ephrem and his Faithful Quest for Union in Numbers," in J. Den Boeft & A. Hilhorst, Early Christian Poetry; a Collection of Essays (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. XXII; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 167-233. On the inappropriateness of calling the *madrashd* a 'hymn' see Michael Lattke, "Sind Ephraems *Madrshd* Hymnen?" Oriens Christianus 73 (1989), pp. 38-43.

⁵² For Bar Daysan, see Han J. W. Drijvers, Bardaisan of Edessa (Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 6; Assen: van Gorcum, 1966); Edmund Beck, "Bardaisan and seine Schule bei Ephraem," Le Museon 91 (1978), pp. 324-333; J. Teixidor, Bardesane d'Edesse: la premiere philosophie syriacque (Paris: Cerf, 1992); A. Camplani, "Note Bardesanitiche," Miscellanea Marciana 12 (1997), pp. 11-43; *idem*, "Rivisitando Bardesane: note sulle fonti siriane del bardesano e sulla sua collocazione storico-religiosa," Cristianesimo nella Storia 19 (1998), pp. 519-596. For Mani, see Edmund Beck, Ephraems Polemik gegen Mani and die Manichaeer; im Rahmen der zeitgenoessischen ariechischen Polemik and der des Ausgtnus (CSCO, vol. 391; Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1978); Samuel N. C. Lieu, Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China, a Historical Survey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985); *idem*, Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, vol. 118; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994); Jason David BeDuhn, The Manichaean Body, In Discipline and Ritual (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). See also Sidney H. Griffith, "The Thorn among the Tares: Mani and Manichaeism in the Works of St. Ephraem the Syrian," in M.F. Wiles & E.J. Yarnold (eds), Studia Patristica (vol. XXXV; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), pp. 403-435.

⁵³ Karl Holl, Epiphanius, (Ankoratus and Panarion) (2nd vol., Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller, vol. 31; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1922), LVI, p. 338.

the perception of Ephraem, who called him "the Aramean philosopher,"⁵⁴ modern commentators have been inclined to consider Bar Daysan to have been more of a philosopher than he ever was a religious teacher. 55 They find in his ideas about the origins of the world and human destiny reminiscences of the teachings of the Stoics and the Platonists.⁵⁶ But from a cultural point of view, what is more interesting is that while the notes of his students portray him as almost a Socratic teacher, 57 Ephraem presents him as a successful composer of *madrdshe* in Syriac. Ephraem suggests that these compositions became the effective vehicles of Bar Daysan's ideas in the Aramaic-speaking milieu. He complains of this in the *Hymns against Heresies*. Ephraem wrote:

In the lairs of Bar Daysan are melodies and chants. Since he saw the youth longing for sweets, with the harmony of his songs he excited the children. ⁵⁸

For Ephraem the seduction of Bar Daysan's Syriac melodies was virtually sexual. He said of them,

Bar Daysan's speech outwardly displays chastity.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, Prose Refutations, vol. 11, p. 225.

⁵⁵ See Teixidor, Bardesane d'Edesse, esp. pp. 105-114.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Hans J. W. Drijvers, "Bardaisan von Edessa als Repräsentant des syrischen Synkretismus im 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.," in Dietrich, Synkretismus im siri~persischen Kulturgebiet, pp. 109-122.

⁵⁷ The only sustained record of Bar Daysan's teaching still extant is contained in a work put together by one of his interlocutors, Awida, usually called the *Book of the Laws of Countries*. See F. Nau, Bardesanes. Liber Legum Regionum (*Patrologia Syriaca*, vol. 1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907), cols. 536-611; H.J.W. Drijvers (ed. & trans.), The Book of the Laws of Countries; Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa (Semitic Texts with Translations, 111; Assen: van Gorcum, 1965).

Inwardly it is perverted into the very symbol of blasphemy. It is a stealthy woman; she commits adultery in the inner room. ⁵⁹

The real issue here is that Bar Daysan, according to Ephraem, excelled in the composition of the rhythmically metrical `teaching songs' (*madrdshe*) that were the masterpieces of Aramaic didactic poetry. He goes on to say,

For he composed *madrdshe* and put them to music. He wrote songs, and introduced metres. According to the quantities and measures, He distributed the words. To the innocent he proffered the bitter in the sweet, The sick, who do not choose healthy food. ⁶⁰

Ephraem said that Bar Daysan emulated David, in that he composed 150 such `teaching songs'. But from Ephraem's own point of view they were "the music of the infidels, whose lyre is falsehood." ⁶¹ The reason was that these `teaching songs' became the classical Syriac medium for the effective transmission of religious teaching. The

⁵⁸ Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, 1:17.

⁵⁹ Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, 1:11.

madrdscha was a particularly effective genre in the indigenous, Aramean literary culture in the terms of which any teacher who would commend his views in the Syriac-speaking world would have to express his ideas. Ephraem claims that it was Bar Daysan, the master composer of *madrdshe*, who provided the entree for Mani and his doctrines into the minds and hearts of the Syrians.

Mani looked east. He was born near Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian Empire; Ephraem said he was from Babylon.⁶² While Mani was religiously nurtured in the Aramaic-speaking milieu of the Elkasaites, a Judaeo-Christian group in lower Mesopotamia, the backbone of his mature teaching was the dualism that Ephraem claimed he got from the Hindus.⁶³ For a while Mani enjoyed the protection of the Persian royal court, in the person of the Shah Shapur 1 (241-272), and his teachings spread far and wide, both westward into the Roman empire, and eastward, across Central Asia into China. They exercised a major appeal in the Syriac-speaking environs of Edessa. According to Ephraem, Mani, like Bar Daysan, disseminated his teachings in Nisibis and Edessa in *madrdshe*.⁶⁴ Presumably he had in mind the book of *Psalms and Prayers*, composed originally in Syriac, that was one of the seven works in the official canon of Manichaean scriptures.⁶⁵ But other Manichaean works were also available, and, as John Reeves has shown, Ephraem himself not infrequently quotes from them and alludes to

⁶⁰ Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, LIIIA On Bar Daysan's role in setting the traditional *madrdshe*, a recitative, to music, see K. E. McVey, "Were the Earliest *Madrdshe* Songs or Recitations?" in Reinink & Klugkist, After Bardaisan, pp. 185-199.

⁶¹ Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, LIII:6.

⁶² See Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, XIV:8.

⁶³ See Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, 111:7. Citing other passages, Beck thinks that here Ephraem means 'Persians' rather than 'Indians'. See Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, vol. 170, p. 13, n. 8, and *idem*, Ephraem's Polemik, p. 25.

⁶⁴ See Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, 1:16.

⁶⁵ See Lieu, Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire, p. 6.

them in his polemical writings.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it appears that Ephraem regarded what he called Mani's *madrdshe* to be the most formidable expressions of Manichaeism; they are the only Manichaean scriptures he actually names. According to Ephraem then it was in his so-called *madrdshe* that Mani made his strongest appeal for the allegiance of the Syriac-speaking peoples on the Aramean frontier.

Ephraem himself was a notable composer of *madrdshe*. While he also wrote simple prose, as well as rhythmic prose compositions and `verse homilies' (*memre*), the Syriac *madrdshe* was nevertheless Ephraem's own genre of choice for commending the Nicene faith and Roman political alignment in the frontier area.⁶⁷ The Syriac *Vita of Ephraem* even makes the claim that Ephraem wrote *madrdshe* expressly to counteract the influence of Bar Daysan's compositions.⁶⁸ Concretely this means that he adopted the most compelling literary genre available in his Aramean culture to promote the ecclesiastical, theological, and political interests of the bishops whom he served. He seems to have been proud of his skill in this genre, for he sometimes `signed' his *madrdshe* by the acrostic device of beginning each successive stanza with words the first Syriac letters of which, in sequence, spell out his name.⁶⁹ We learn from Jacob of Sarug's *memrd* on Ephraem, `the Teacher', how important the correct performance of his *madrdshe* was for him. He reportedly spent time and energy rehearsing the singers who

⁶⁶ See John C. Reeves, "Manichaean Citations from the *Prose Refutations* of Ephrem," in Paul Mirecki & Jason BeDuhn, Emerging from Darkness: Studies in the Recovery of Manichaean Sources (Nag Hammadi & Manichaean Studies, XLIII; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp. 217-288.

⁶⁷ For more on Ephraem's *madrdshe* see Andrew Palmer, " `A Lyre without a Voice'; the Poetics and the Politics of Ephrem the Syrian," ARAM 5 (1993), pp. 371-399.

⁶⁸ See Joseph P. Amar, "The Syriac `Vita' Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," (Ph.D. Dissertation; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1988 / Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, #8919389), chap. 31.

⁶⁹ See Andrew Palmer, "St Ephrem of Syria's Hymn on Faith 7; a Ode in His Own Name," Sobornost 17 (1995), pp. 28-40.

would perform them.⁷⁰ And at the end of his *madrdshe* against heresies Ephraem expressed in a prayer what he hoped to have accomplished. He prays,

O Lord, may the works of your pastoral minister (*alldnd*) not be discounted.

I will not then have troubled your sheep, but as far as I was able,
I will have kept the wolves away from them, and I will have built, as far as
I was able, enclosures of *madrdshe* for the lambs of your flock.

The ready appeal of Ephraem's *madrdshe* in the Syriac-speaking milieu in which he composed them is evident in the fact that they were gathered into collections by theme, and also by melody, by his disciples, and by later users and transmitters of his compositions. In the end, by the sixth century, nine comprehensive volumes of Ephraem's collected *madrdshe* were in circulation, arranged by subject matter and distributed according to the forty-five melodies according to which they were written and performed.⁷² This long-term popularity of Ephraem's *madrdshe* testifies both to his success as a composer in the traditional genre favored by Bar Daysan and other writers of Syriac, perhaps including even Mani, and to the power of the ideas Ephraem promoted in this most Aramean of literary genres.

⁷⁰ See Joseph P. Amar, A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug (Patrologia Orientalis, vol. 47, fasc., 1, no. 209; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), #48, pp. 37ff.
" Beck, Hymnen contra Haereses, LVL 10.

⁷² See Andr  De Halleux, "Une cle pour les hymnes d'Ephrem dans le MS. Sinai Syr. 10," Le Museon 85 (1972), pp. 171-199; *idem*, "La transmission des Hymnes d'Ephrem d'apres le MS. Sinai Syr., 10, f. 165v-178r," in Symposium Syriacum 1972 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 197; Rome: Pontificium institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1974), pp. 21-36.

By St. Ephraem's day, in the fourth century, his theological adversaries within the Nicene community were principally the so-called 'Arians'. Against them Ephraem defended the Nicene faith, in terms reminiscent of the theology of St. Basil of Caesarea and of St. Gregory of Nazianzus,⁷³ without ever importing their Greek terminology into his Syriac diction.⁷⁴ Outside his own theological community, Ephraem's adversaries were the traditionally popular teachers in the environs of Nisibis and Edessa, the followers of Marcion, Bar Daysan, and Mania⁷⁵

Inevitably it is from the perspective of Ephraem's works that the history of Christianity in Edessa in its beginnings is finally told. He won the struggle for allegiance at least in part by his success in commending the loyalties he championed in the Syriac idiom of Aram, as he called his homeland.⁷⁶ Ephraem's works have survived, preserved by the church he defended. The works of the earlier teachers, whose influence he surpassed, for the most part have not survived. But enough remains for us to conclude that the struggle for allegiance, both ecclesiastical and political, on the Aramean frontier was carried on in the language of the frontier community, and largely in the literary genre of the *madrshd*, the 'teaching song'. Bar Daysan may well have developed it in its classical form, but Ephraem perfected its use as an effective tool for the full inculturation of the Nicene faith in the Syriac-speaking world of Aram.

⁷³ See Paul S. Russell, St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians (Moran Etho, 5; Kottayam, Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994).

⁷⁴ See Sidney H. Griffith, " 'Faith Seeking Understanding' in the Thought of St. Ephraem the Syrian," in George C. Berthold (ed.), Faith Seeking Understanding: Learning and the Catholic Tradition; Selected Papers from the Symposium and Convocation Celebrating the Saint Anselm College Centennial (Manchester, NH: Saint Anselm College Press, 1991), pp. 35-55.

⁷⁵ See Sidney H. Griffith, "Setting Right the Church of Syria; Saint Ephraem's Hymns against Heresies," in William E. Klingshirn & Mark Vessey (eds), The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus (Washington: CUA Press, 1999), pp. 97-114.

⁷⁶ Ephraem speaks of Aram as 'our country' in a number of places. See, e.g., his boasting of 'our land' in the *madrshd* he wrote in praise of Julian Saba. See Sidney H. Griffith, "Julian Saba, 'Father of the Monks' of Syria," Journal of Early Christian Studies 2 (1994), esp. pp. 201-203.

In later years, well after Ephraem's time, Rome and Persia would continue to pull the Syriac-speaking communities of the Aramean frontier in opposite directions in terms both of political and even ecclesiastical allegiance. One has only to think in this connection of the history of the emergence of the independent Assyrian Church of the East in the early fifth century in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. And one recalls in the next century, in the reign of the Roman Emperor Justinian (527-565), the final tension, begun at the council of Chalcedon in 451, between the communities that in the Syriac-speaking world would come to be called by their adversaries the `Melkites' and the `Jacobites' respectively. Then, in the second half of the seventh century, the Aramean frontier between Rome and Persia disappeared under the burgeoning Commonwealth of Islam. Under Islamic rule the Syriac-speaking communities were not only caught up in theological isolation from one another, but they were effectively cut off from the rest of the Christian world as well. Under the Muslims the Aramean frontier ceased to exist, and a new struggle for allegiance beset the Syriac-speaking churches. This one they had to address in Arabic, the language of the new challenge to their faith. But through it all, in all the Syriac-speaking communities, to this very day no one has ever questioned their allegiance to their ancestral teacher, St. Ephraem the Syrian.