

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND IMPRESSION

LIFE OF BARDAISAN

Unfortunately not much is known about the life of Bardaisan.¹ He was born on 11 Tammuz 465 of the Seleucid era, which is 11 July of 154 CE, and he probably died in the year 222. His provenance is not clear. He may have been of Parthian origin, but he is also called a Babylonian and an Armenian.² It is also said that he came from Edessa,³ which is not unlikely since his name means “son of Daisan”—a river in Edessa. Originally he was an adherent of the ancient cults. One source mentions that he was raised by a priest of Dea Syria in Hierapolis while Bardaisan himself reports in the *BLC* that he practiced Chaldaean astrology. He is said to have converted after he had heard the preachings of Hystaspes, bishop of Edessa. As far as is known Bardaisan spent a great part of his life at the court of king Abgar VIII of Edessa. As a courtier he held a prominent position as we know from Sextus Julius Africanus, who met him when he visited Edessa in 195 in the entourage of the emperor Septimius Severus; also Ephrem Syrus mentions that Bardaisan held a position of distinction in Edessene society.⁴ It seems that at the court of Abgar, who took an interest in the arts and sciences, he assembled pupils and followers around him. At this time Bardaisan also polemised against the Marcionites, against whom he wrote dialogues.⁵ Remains of these dialogues are preserved in the *vita* of Aberkios, likewise an adversary of the heresy of Marcion. According to the *vita*,

¹ Thanks are due to Gerrit J. Reinink for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this introduction.

On the life of Bardaisan, see e.g. Drijvers, 1966, 217-218; Drijvers, 1980, 206-207; Teixidor, 1992, 65-70; Ross, 2001, 119-123.

² Julius Africanus, *Cestorum Fragmenta* I.20.28 (ed. Vieillefond, p. 183)—Parthian; Porphyrius, *De Abstinencia* 4.17—Babylonian; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 73.3.1—Armenian.

³ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 56.1.1.

⁴ Julius Africanus, *Cestorum Fragmenta* I.20.28-53 (ed. Vieillefond, pp. 183-185); Ephrem Syrus, *Hymn. c. haer.* 1.12 (ed. Beck) = CSCO, pp. 76-77.

⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30.1.

Aberkios, a wandering Christian preacher in northern Mesopotamia, and Bardaisan had met.⁶ When in 214 the Roman emperor Caracalla took Abgar's successor, Abgar IX, prisoner and made an end to Edessa's independence as a kingdom, Bardaisan may have taken refuge in Armenia. Moses of Chorene reports in his *Armenian History* (8th century) that Bardaisan resided in Armenia doing historical research and working on the dispersion of Christian beliefs. In the later years of his life, possibly in 218, he came into contact with an embassy from India to the emperor Elagabalus (217-222); it acquainted him with Indian customs and traditions about which he wrote a book.⁷ Bardaisan is said to have had three sons: Abgarun, Hasdu and Harmonius. The latter is alleged to have studied Greek philosophy in Athens.⁸

Bardaisan's doctrine and teachings are a synthesis of the various religious and philosophical convictions that existed in Edessa and northern Mesopotamia.⁹ Bardaisan considers man as essentially good. Central to his life and world view is the element of liberty or free will. Life is determined by the triad of nature, fate, and free will, which corresponds with the triad of body, soul, and spirit. Nature is the same for every man and his fate is determined by his horoscope. But his free will is bound by nothing, so that man can act as he pleases and is therefore responsible for his own actions. Man's spirit, the driving force behind the free will, is a gift of God and connects man with God.

Bound and unbound, and the interplay between them are also reflected in Bardaisan's cosmology.¹⁰ There are four free elements: light, wind, fire, and water. Above them is their Lord and beneath them darkness, which is dead and without knowledge. The four elements intermingle when they come into movement by accident; in the confusion created thereby darkness has a chance to mingle with the elements. The elements call upon their Lord who then sends Word of Thought to bring order to the chaos. The world was created by this Word and the four elements are salvaged, so that chance may be undone. The world thus created is partly free and partly not because the pure elements are mixed with darkness. Man is the highest crea-

⁶ Drijvers, 1966, 170-171.

⁷ Excerpts of it are preserved in Porphyrius, *De Abstinencia*. 4.17 and *Peri Stygos* 1.56 ff. (= Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 1.3, 56 ff.); Jerome, *Adversus Iovianum* 2.14.

⁸ Theodoret, *Haer. Fabul. Comp.* 1.22 (PG 83, 372).

⁹ For the philosophical background of Bardaisan's doctrines see e.g. Dihle, 1984.

¹⁰ Drijvers, 1966, Chapter III; Teixidor, 1992, 74-85.

ture in the world thus created. At creation he is given free will, but he is also bound by nature and his horoscope. The human body is composed of the four elements and darkness. His body perishes when a man dies and does not rise again.

Presumably Bardaisan considered Christ as the Word of Thought which created the world. His christology is docetic and he considers Jesus predominantly as a teacher and law-giver.

Bardaisan's ideas are a fusion of religious and philosophical conceptions that his surroundings and his time offered him. Many of his ideas can be seen as belonging to a Christian tradition of thinking but it is hard to say whether he considered himself a Christian. The impression gained from his writings is that of a philosopher rather than of a religious person.¹¹ He is often called a gnostic but there are too many differences with the Gnosis to justify such a characterization.¹² Bardaisan had followers who are called Bardesanites. It was a rather heterogeneous group which seems to have existed in Edessa for several centuries. Bardaisan and his followers were in later times considered heterodox.¹³ Ephrem Syrus (c. 306-373) wrote against the Bardesanites and bishop Rabbula of Edessa (d. 435) forced them to adhere to the orthodox doctrine. However, in the time of Jacob of Edessa (c. 633-708) there were still Bardesanites in Edessa.¹⁴

BARDAISAN'S WRITINGS

Many works have been attributed to Bardaisan, among them the *Odes of Solomon* and the hymns in the *Acts of Thomas*.¹⁵ Although Bardaisan is said to have written a considerable number of works,¹⁶ no authentic works of Bardaisan have been preserved. Even the *BLC* is not an authentic work in the strict sense of the word (see below). However, titles of his works have been handed down. In particular, the *Hymns contra Haereses* and the *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan* by Ephrem Syrus are important sources

¹¹ Teixidor, 1992, 105 ff.

¹² Drijvers, 1966, 222-224; Drijvers, 1980, 208-211.

¹³ Some sources mention that Bardaisan was a follower of Valentinianism before he started his own sect; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30.3; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 56.2.1; Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.1

¹⁴ Drijvers, 1966, 227-228; Drijvers, 1980, 211.

¹⁵ Drijvers, 1966, 209-212.

¹⁶ Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.2; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 56.1.2.

for reconstructing the subjects Bardaisan wrote about. In these works fragments of Bardaisan's writings have been preserved.¹⁷ Ephrem informs us that Bardaisan had composed hymns—150 in total, the number of the Psalms of the Bible—on religious and philosophical themes. These hymns were composed as poetry and set to music; they were to be performed with musical accompaniment.¹⁸ Ephrem furthermore mentions a *Book of Mysteries* by Bardaisan as well as a philosophical work entitled *On Domnus*,¹⁹ and he refers to astrological treatises composed in the circle of the Bardesanites.²⁰ He furthermore wrote against the Marcionites and other heretics.²¹ He is also said to have written many other works, among them a work about India and a history of Armenia.²² Bardaisan, who probably had no first-hand knowledge of Greek, wrote in Syriac but his works were also translated into Greek.²³ Jerome was clearly impressed by Bardaisan's writings: "If his efficacy is so splendid and great in translation, what do we think it was like in the original!"²⁴ The same author calls the treatise *On Fate*—the title by which the sources denote the *BLC*—Bardaisan's most famous and powerful work,²⁵ and it is therefore not surprising that it was this text that has completely been preserved.

THE BOOK OF THE LAWS OF COUNTRIES

The Book of the Laws of Countries (*BLC*) belongs to the most important writings of early Syriac literature and reflects the various cultures and traditions in existence in northern Mesopotamia: Chaldaean astrology, Greek philosophy, early Christian ideas and the discourse between various religious and

¹⁷ Drijvers, 1966, 127 ff.; also Segal, 1970, 36-38.

¹⁸ Cf. McVey, 1999, 187-190.

¹⁹ On this work, see Teixidor, 1992, 102-105.

²⁰ These astrological works seem to find confirmation by information provided by Ibn an-Nadim (d. 995); see Drijvers, 1980, 207.

²¹ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30.1; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.35, 7.31; Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.2; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 56.1.5.

²² Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30; Porphyrius, *De Abstinencia* 4.17 and *Peri Stygos* 1.56 ff. (= Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 1.3, 56 ff.); Moses of Chorene, *Hist. Arm.* 2.63.

²³ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30.1. Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 56.1.2 who mentions that Bardaisan knew both Syriac and Greek.

²⁴ Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.3 (transl. Halton).

²⁵ Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.2.

philosophical movements. The text, dedicated to a certain Antoninus,²⁶ should be seen in the context of the various philosophical, religious and gnostic debates going on in this region of Roman world. This makes the *BLC* central to our understanding of the culture of northern Mesopotamia, and in particular the culture of Edessa.²⁷

The text of the *BLC* is preserved in a sixth- or seventh-century manuscript.²⁸ The *BLC* was originally composed in Syriac but was probably translated into Greek not long after its inception. Eusebius of Caesarea knew the text in Greek translation. He refers to it in his *Ecclesiastical History* 4.30 and he incorporated parts of it in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*.²⁹ In the Greco-Roman sources the text is denoted as *On Fate*,³⁰ which is a more suitable title than *BLC*. Although the work is generally called a dialogue, it should perhaps be rather considered a monologue. It is Bardaisan who is speaking and the others—Awida, Philippus, and Bar Jamma—only fill the role of interlocutors. The *BLC* was not written by Bardaisan himself but by his pupil Philippus, but it is generally agreed that the text represents the ideas of Bardaisan.

We should probably imagine that a “dialogue” such as represented in the *BLC* took place amongst a group of pupils and adherents of Bardaisan which, in this case, had assembled in the house of Shemashgram, who is mentioned in the first line of the text. We should, however, also realise that the *BLC* was never held in this form, but was a treatise intended for publication and composed as a written text while not reproducing a real oral

²⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30.2; Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.2. See for a possible identification of this person, Drijvers, 1966, 69.

²⁷ The *BLC* is, for instance, anti-Marcionite and goes into debate with Marcionite ideas. It is even supposed that Bar Jamma (564, 20) covers Marcion; Drijvers, 1966, 75 and 82.

²⁸ B.L. Add. 14.658. See for a description of the ms. W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts*, vol. 3 (London 1872) 1154-1160. The following is based on Drijvers, 1966, Chapter II “The Book of the Laws of Countries.” For the *BLC* see also Teixidor, 1992, 86-102.

²⁹ *Praep. Evang.* 6.10.1-10 corresponds with *BLC* 559.11-563.1 and there is a verbatim correspondence between *Praep. Evang.* 6.10.11-48 and *BLC* 583.5-611.8. The latter lines of the *BLC* were also included in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 9.19-29, a text which originated c. 360 in Syria.

³⁰ E.g. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.30.2, *Praep. Evang.* 6.9.32; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 56.1.3; Jerome, *de Vir. Ill.* 33.2. See further, Drijvers, 1966, 63-66.

conversation. It may be a compilation of various conversations and treatises by Bardaisan reflecting his ideas and published under his name, possibly after his death.

The *BLC* can be roughly divided into two parts. In the first part Bardaisan sets out his ideas about nature, fate, and free will. In particular the liberty of man to act as he desires and the responsibility he has for his actions is emphasized by Bardaisan. To demonstrate the human free will Bardaisan used the argument of the $\nu\mu\nu\alpha\ \beta\alpha\rho\beta\alpha\rho\iota\kappa\iota$, the customs of the nations. These form the second part of the *BLC*. An enumeration is given of various tribes, peoples, and nations and their respective customs. The list goes around the world, roughly from east to west, and it is obvious that these nations are geographically and ethnographically described from an Edessene point of view.³¹ Most peoples or social groups are located not far away from Edessa, such as the Parthians, the Persians, or the inhabitants of Hatra. The image of these “barbarian” peoples is very much in line with the inherited categories of classical ethnography as they were developed since Herodotus (5th cent. BCE). It was the image of the “other” which was often characterized as the negative embodiment of the values of one’s own society.

The last pages of the *BLC* are dedicated to the Christians. They have their own laws and customs in spite of the observances of the various nations, and the local laws cannot obligate them to give up the law of their Messiah. A time will come when all evil will have ended and “peace and perfect quiet will reign through the gift of the Lord of all natures.”

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³¹ For an overview of the nations mentioned, see Hegedus, 2003, 340-341.

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