

Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World

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Unlike Egypt, Iraq accommodated not one but two provincial identities, the Assyrian and the Babylonian. Both cultures had of course suffered violent destruction on their fall a thousand years before the Arab conquests as Nabopolassar and the Medes turned Assyria into 'heaps and ruins' in 612 B.C. so Xerxes razed the walls of Babylon, expropriated its citizens and turned its god into bullion after the revolt of 482. Both identities nonetheless survived, the first under a Christian aegis, the second under a pagan.

This unusual division of labour between Christianity and paganism was a result of the differing impact of foreign rule on the two provinces. Assyria, which had neither the fabled wealth nor the strategic importance of Babylon, had been left virtually alone by the Achaemenids and Seleucids; condemned to oblivion by the outside world, it could recollect its own glorious past in a certain tranquillity. Consequently when the region came back into the focus of history under the Parthians, it was with an Assyrian, not a Persian let alone Greek, self-identification: the temple of Ashur was restored, the city was rebuilt, and an Assyrian successor state returned in the shape of the client kingdom of Adiabene. The Sasanids put an end to the autonomy of this kingdom, but they did not replace the local rulers with a Persian bureaucracy: though reduced to obedient servants of the Shahanshah, a native aristocracy therefore survived. In one respect, however, their position in the Persian state was an uncomfortable one. Already under the Parthians the Shahanshahs tended to demand religious conformity in return for political significance; and under the Sasanids they did so systematically, thus imposing a Persian truth on an Assyrian identity. As long as the level of integration remained low this disharmony could be disguised by syncretic manoeuvres; but as the Sasanids brought the local aristocracy into closer contact with the Persian court, the meshes were closed. A Persian monarchy thus did for an ethnic God in the east what an ethnic God did for Greek culture in the west, and here as elsewhere the provincials were faced with the choice between the rectification of genealogy and the rectification of faith, *tashih al-nasab* and *tashih al-din*. Like the provincials of the west, the Assyrians stuck to their genealogy, but unlike them they could not merely go heretical: even a heretical Zoroastrian was still conceptually a Persian, and vis-a-vis the Persians the Assyrians therefore needed a different religion altogether. On the other hand, even an orthodox Christian was still only a Greek by association; vis-a-vis the Greeks a heresy therefore sufficed. Consequently, after a detour via Judaism, the Assyrians adopted Christianity and found their heresy in Nestorianism.

Babylonia, by contrast, had never been left alone. Apart from its massive Jewish diaspora, it was flooded with Persian immigrants under the Achaemenids, Greeks under the Seleucids and more Persians with the Sasanids; the latter built their capital there and in due course added yet another batch of foreigners in the form of Greek and Syrian prisoners of war. As a result the Babylonian polity was dissolved. It is true that the ghost of Babylon haunted lower Iraq for some two centuries in the shape of the client kingdom of Mesene which, though founded by an Iranian satrap, soon went Aramaic; and there were no doubt other Aramean kings under the Parthians. But in the first place the Babylonian identification of Mesene was weak, and in the second place the Sasanid choice of lower Iraq as the centre of their empire hardly left much room for a native aristocracy, and whereas the Assyrians had a clear memory of their own past, the Babylonians did not. One might indeed have expected the Babylonian identity to vanish altogether, and if it did survive it was not because it remembered itself in isolation, but because it transcended itself and won universal respect: the Greeks bowed in deference to Babylonian astrology and borrowed it without disguising its Chaldean origin, and consequently the Chaldeans could borrow Greek philosophy without losing their identity. The fusion of Greek and Babylonian paganism generated a variety of astrological religions which, unlike the parent paganism, could hold their own against the supreme truths of Zoroastrianism, and which unlike Christianity were possessed of an ethnic label: an Assyrian had only an identity, a Christian had only a truth, but a Chaldean had both identity and truth. In Chaldea pagans therefore survived.

Christianity did, of course, spread to Babylonia; but whereas in Assyria it was a way of sanctifying a provincial identity, in Babylonia it was a way of desanctifying two. To the highly cosmopolitan environment of lower Iraq, Christianity, like Manichaeism, was a protest against ethnic religions, not a way of acquiring one: Manichaeism transcended the Chaldean and Persian truths by combining them as lesser insights within a larger and more grandiose scheme of things, and Christianity did the same by rejecting both as identical. The Christians of lower Iraq

never lacked identity: they included Persians, Greeks, Elamites, Arameans, Qatraye, Arabs and others. Like the Assyrians, they might call themselves Suryane in contradistinction to the pagans; but they never shared any single identity between them: the only identity there was to inherit was Chaldean, and on conversion the Chaldean renounced his ethnicity as Magian and his culture as Zoroastrian. The Assyrian Christians have a genuine precedent for their name, but Christians were only called Chaldeans by way of abuse.

There were thus two distinct versions of Christianity within the Nestorian church: on the one hand the local church of Assyria, a chauvinist assertion of a provincial identity; and on the other the metropolitan church of Persia with its centre in Babylonia, a cosmopolitan assertion of a gentile truth. But if the Assyrian church was in this respect comparable to that of Egypt, its chauvinism took a rather different form. Egypt had preserved an ethnicity and a language peculiar to itself among its peasantry, whereas its aristocracy belonged to the larger Hellenised world; Assyria by contrast had an aristocracy peculiar to itself, whereas it shared its ethnicity and language with the larger Aramaic world. Hence where Coptic chauvinism was ethnic and linguistic, that of Assyria turned on the memory of a glorious past. In this connection two timely conversions served to dear the Assyrian kings of their Biblical disrepute. Firstly Sardana the son of Sennacherib, thirty-second king of Assyria after Belos and ruler of a third of the inhabited world, submitted to the monotheistic message of Jonah and instituted the Ninivite fast which saved Ninive from destruction; and the fast having saved the Assyrians from the wrath of God in the past, it was reinstated by Sabrisho' of Karkha de-Bet Selokh to save them from a plague a thousand years later." Secondly, the conversion of Izates II of Adiabene to Judaism was reedited as the conversion of Narsai of Assyria to Christianity. In other words the Assyrians were monotheists before Christ and Christians after him, and the past therefore led on to the present without a break. Thus the history of Karkha de-Bet Selokh begins with the Assyrian kings and ends with the Assyrian martyrs: Sargon founded it and the martyrs made it 'a blessed field for Christianity'. Likewise in the seventh century before Christ all the world stood in awe of Sardana, and in the seventh century after Christ the saints took his place as the 'sun of Athor' and the 'glory of Ninive'.

The church in Babylonia, by contrast, had neither the ethnic and linguistic pride of Egypt nor the historical pride of Assyria. As against Egypt, they identified themselves as gentiles and used both Persian and Syriac. As against Assyria, they renounced the Babylonian past to the pagans: Nimrod, in Assyria an ancestral king commemorated in the names of Christian saints, in Babylonia retained his identification with Zoroaster and was either rejected as the originator of Persian paganism" or conciliated as the oracular guide of the Magians in search of Christ; in either case he remained a foreigner. Likewise the tradition represented by the Christian Isho'dad of Merv is as totally detached from the Babylonian past, for all its considerable learning, as that represented by the pagan Ibn Wahshiyya is totally in love with it, for all its considerable errors.

Both the Assyrian and the Babylonian churches, however, differed from that of Egypt in being aristocratically orientated; the first because its Assyrian identity was vested in a native aristocracy, the second because the disinvestment from a native identity permitted a full acceptance of Persian aristocratic values. Consequently the Nestorian church as such was constituted by its nobles: the endless succession of peasants in the sayings of the Egyptian fathers gives way to the endless succession of magnates in the acts of the Persian martyrs, and whereas the Egyptian magnates could only just redeem their wordly status by going Monophysite, the Nestorian sources virtually brim over with aristocratic legitimism. The awe of Assyria for its local Nimrodids or Sennacheribids is matched by the metropolitan reverence for the royal descent of a Saba, Yuhannan or Golindukht, and the Nestorians were thus united in their high esteem of power, wealth and wordly renown. It is true that from time to time the intolerance of the Shahanshahs precluded service at court; but local magnates could and did stay in power, laymen played a prominent role in the Nestorian church, and tolerant Shahanshahs received the willing services of their Christian subjects: of all laymen it was Yazdin of Kirkuk, the fiscal officer in charge of taxes, tribute and booty for Khusraw II, who was honoured as the 'defender of the church in the manner of Constantine and Theodosius'. Consequently the Nestorians were similarly united in their attitude to the Persian king: all had accepted the political supremacy of the Persian Empire, and even the Assyrians could hardly hope for a Sennacheribid restoration; what they resented was the ethnic intolerance of Zoroastrianism, and what they aimed at was therefore not secession from the rule of the Shahanshah, but his conversion. As members of an aristocratic church the Nestorians likewise differed from the Copts in having a rich secular culture: their high esteem for wordly power was matched by their high esteem for human reason, a point endorsed by Nestorian theology. Their official authority, Theodore of Mopsuestia, did of course know the traditional doctrine of the Fall, according to which an initial state of human immortality and bliss had been disrupted by sin and deteriorated progressively until the dramatic return of grace with the redemptive death of Christ. But he also taught a variant doctrine positing an initial state of imperfection from which man had progressed under divine guidance until immortality was regained with the exemplary resurrection of Christ. One doctrine emphasised man's need of grace, the other his ability to help himself: if the divine instruction was to be of any effect man must necessarily be able to distinguish between good and evil and to act in accordance with his

reason, and sin must therefore be an act of will and an act against better knowledge. It was for this second view that the Nestorians opted, and if they did not go Pelagian or reduce the redemption to a mere symbol of future immortality, they certainly did play up reason at the expense of grace.

The possession of a secure social and doctrinal locus for secular intellection did two things for Nestorian culture. In the first place, whereas the Coptic church was boorish, the Nestorian church was academic. Most strikingly, it acquired one of the few non-monastic schools of theology in the Near East when the school of Edessa migrated to Nisibis, and Nisibis in turn spawned a series of lesser schools; and it similarly acquired a school of medicine with the settlement of prisoners of war in Gondeshapur. In general the foundation of schools recurs again and again in the lives of Nestorian worthies, and few monasteries were without one.

In the second place, whereas the Coptic church rejected Greek thought as morally pagan, the Nestorian church legitimised it as proleptically Christian. For it was not of course an Assyrian culture that was being taught in the Assyrian schools: the cultural impoverishment of Assyria had been hardly less thoroughgoing than that of Egypt, and just as the Egyptian heritage in Coptic literature is limited to motifs of popular stories, so the Assyrian heritage in Christian literature is limited to Ahiqar, the vizier of the Assyrian kings. But unlike the Coptic peasants, the Nestorian elite could replace what it had lost with the universal truths of Greek philosophy. The philosophers were not only translated but also exalted, and in due course the Nestorians became adept enough at philosophy to export it back to the west.

At the same time the fate of asceticism among the Nestorians was correspondingly different from what it was among the Monophysites. Mesopotamian Christianity had begun as an ascetic movement on the Syrian pattern, with the congregational church consisting of Nazirite 'Sons of the Covenant'. But just as the Copts had found that they could rebuild Holy Egypt in the desert, so the Assyrians found that they could recreate an image of their polity around their aristocracy. It is not therefore surprising that, with the adoption of Nestorianism, asceticism was virtually eradicated: the 'Sons of the Covenant' disappeared in all but name, the celibacy of the clergy was abolished, and monasticism discouraged. Equally when asceticism finally returned to stay, it was in a new and different shape. As in Egypt, cenobitism had been organised on a Pachomian pattern; yet in contrast to Egypt the cenobites represented merely a preparatory stage in the spiritual career. As in Syria, it was the anchorites who held pride of place; yet in contrast to Syria their *raison d'être* was Evagrian. Iraq thus had no kibbutzim: the Nestorians were not averse to inhabiting the desert, but they did so for the solitude it afforded, not to grow roses in the sand. But equally, Iraq had no pillar saints: the Nestorians were not averse to mortifying the flesh, but they did so less to punish it for its sins than to spare themselves the cumbersome ministrations to its needs for which they had neither time nor thought in their pursuit of the mystic vision of God.