

# NECESSITY AND FREE WILL IN THE THOUGHT OF BARDAISAN OF EDESSA\*

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*RÉSUMÉ* : Cet article examine la manière dont le philosophe et théologien syrien Bardesane concilie la nécessité du destin et le libre arbitre de l'homme. L'étude est menée sur la base d'une étude du Livre des lois des pays, dialogue sur la liberté et le destin astral mettant en scène Bardesane, quelques-uns de ses disciples et un adversaire.

*ABSTRACT* : We examine here how the Syrian philosopher and theologian Bardaisan conciliates necessary fate and free will in man. Our study is based on an examination of the Book of the Laws of Countries, a dialogue on free will and astral fate, featuring Bardaisan, a few of his disciples and an opponent.

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One of the earliest known figures of Syriac Christianity was the philosopher-theologian Bardaisan of Edessa (c. 154-222 C.E.). Little is known of his life in any detail : during his early life he seems to have had some connection to the royal court of Osrhoene, and following the Roman defeat of Edessa in 216 he went into exile in Armenia, where he died.<sup>1</sup> That Bardaisan came to identify himself as a Christian at some point is evident from his statement referring to “the new people of us Christians.”<sup>2</sup> Bardaisan was a prolific writer of hymns and other works in Syriac, though none of his writings have survived. Nevertheless, we have access to his thought from a text known as the *Book of the Laws of Countries*, written by one of his students, which contains a record of Bardaisan’s teachings in dialogue form.

From the *Book of the Laws of Countries* it is clear that while Bardaisan was interested in theological and cosmological matters the central concerns of his thought

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1. On what is known of Bardaisan’s life and career see H.J.W. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1966, p. 217-218.
2. *Book of the Laws of Countries* (NAU 607 ; DRIJVERS, p. 59). All references to this text are to the columns in the edition of F. NAU, *Patrologia Syriaca* 1.2 (Paris, Firmin-Didot, 1907) 490-658 ; English translations are taken from H.J.W. DRIJVERS, *The Book of the Laws of Countries : Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1965.

were anthropological.<sup>3</sup> As one scholar, David Amand, points out Bardaisan's thought is characterized by the precise demarcation of the domains of nature, fate and freedom in human experience.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in a unique and original combination of seemingly disparate currents of thought Bardaisan affirmed the influence of fate, free will and physical nature upon human beings.

On the one hand Bardaisan affirms freedom of the will with regard to human moral action. Free will is God's gift which distinguishes humans (and also the angels) from the rest of creation. Above all, Bardaisan emphasizes human free will as the basis of moral responsibility : it is because of free will that humans are able to fulfill the two fundamental aspects of morality, *i.e.* (negatively) to keep clear of all that is evil and (positively) to perform that which is good.<sup>5</sup>

Bardaisan also distinguishes between human free will and the physical nature of human beings. Under the purview of our natural constitution lie birth, growing to adulthood, having children, eating and drinking, sleeping and waking, old age and death. These are of course aspects of natural life which human beings also share with the animals.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike animals human beings also possess free will.

[...] in matters pertaining to their body they keep to their natural constitution like the animals do ; as regards matters of their mind, however, they do what they will as free beings disposing of themselves and as God's image.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately following this, in the *Book of the Law of Countries* Bardaisan reasserts his concern to connect free will with moral responsibility : he states that it is only because of free will that people are able to improve their moral behaviour, to avoid attributing the cause of evil deeds to God, and to take full responsibility for their actions.<sup>8</sup>

At this point in the text, Bardaisan's student interlocutors introduce the topic of fate, saying : "Others aver that people are led by the decree of Fate, sometimes ill, sometimes well." Bardaisan replies : "I know there are people called Chaldeans, and others, who love the knowledge of this art, as I once cherished it also."<sup>9</sup> Bardaisan is referring to what was in Antiquity a common concomitant of belief in fate, *i.e.* astrology. Moreover, he says that he himself used to practice astrology, and there is no reason to doubt this statement.<sup>10</sup> Astrology was part of traditional Syrian religion, such as the cult of Hadad and Atargatis, the primary gods worshipped at Hieapolis in Syria

3. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 95.

4. *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'Antiquité grecque*, Louvain, Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1945, p. 244-245.

5. NAU 543-555 ; DRIJVERS p. 11-19. Thus the claim that Bardaisan "taught an astrological fatalism" (*s.v.* "Edessa", *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed., p. 505) is strictly speaking inaccurate.

6. Bardaisan says that it is because of their natural constitution that carnivores eat no grass while herbivores do not eat meat (NAU 559-560 ; DRIJVERS, p. 23).

7. NAU 560 ; DRIJVERS, p. 23-25.

8. NAU 563-564 ; DRIJVERS, p. 25-27.

9. NAU 564 ; DRIJVERS, p. 27.

10. For example, there is no reason to think that it was inserted by some pupil who wished to give Bardaisan's views a more "orthodox" cast (DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 83).

whose cult also spread to Edessa.<sup>11</sup> Bardaisan also says that he is personally familiar with “the books of the Babylonian Chaldaean” and “the books of the Egyptians”, and that in his view “the [astrological] doctrine of both countries is the same.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the immediate mention of astrology in connection with the topic of fate reflects not only the common cultural associations of Antiquity but Bardaisan’s own experience with the practice of astrology. It is likely that he had even written on the topic : immediately following his statement that he “once cherished” astrology, he adds that “in another place” he had expressed his views regarding those who seek to know, and think they can attain, things the general populace does not know — which at this point in the context of the *Book of the Laws of Countries* is clearly a reference to astrologers.<sup>13</sup> Considering the fluidity of the religious context of Edessa<sup>14</sup> it is not necessary to see Bardaisan’s adherence to astrology and to Christianity as mutually exclusive. Thus F. Stanley Jones has recently suggested that “it should be admitted as perhaps more than possible that astrology was part of the Christian heritage as it reached Bardaisan”, and that the real development in Bardaisan’s own views was from a completely fatalistic form of astrology to the more modified teaching evident in the *Book of the Laws of Countries*.<sup>15</sup>

But it is not feasible [...] to derive a general rejection of astrology, and the philosophical determination of the compulsion of the stars which derives from it, over against Bardaisan’s early period of friendliness toward astrology. When he argues against the Chaldeans he does so only in the sense [...] that he limits its ways of looking at things, not in the sense of a fundamental rejection. He explicitly rejects the church’s absolute hostility to astrology [...] it is true Bardaisan criticized astrology but he did not become its opponent.<sup>16</sup>

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11. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 150-151 ; on p. 188, 190-191 Drijvers discusses the tradition of a connection between Bardaisan and Hierapolis. See also H.J.W. DRIJVERS, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1980, p. 42 (on Bardaisan and Hierapolis), p. 26-27, 85-96 (on the cult of Atargatis and Hadad at Hierapolis), and p. 76-85 (on their cult at Edessa).
  12. NAU 580 ; DRIJVERS, p. 39-41. Chaldea and Egypt were each regarded as the “fons et origo” of astrology. By the “books of the Egyptians”, it is uncertain whether Bardaisan is referring to the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (see H.J.W. DRIJVERS, “Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica,” *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux*, 21 [1970], p. 190-191 ; repr. *East of Antioch*, London, Variorum, 1984).
  13. NAU 564 ; DRIJVERS, p. 27 ; F. Stanley JONES, “The Astrological Trajectory in Ancient Syriac-Speaking Christianity (Elchasai, Bardaisan, and Mani),” in Luigi CIRILLO, Alois VAN TONGERLOO, ed., *Atti del Terzo Congresso Internazionale di Studi Manicheismo e Oriente Cristiano Antico*, Louvain, Brepols, 1997, p. 190. The statement recording Bardaisan’s attribution of astrology to Enoch, preserved in Theodore bar Khoni’s *Liber Scholiorum*, may be a quotation from a work of Bardaisan on astrology (*ibid.*). Ephrem Syrus also refers to Bardaisan’s writings on the zodiac in *Hymns Against Heresies* 1.18 (DRIJVERS, “Bardaisan and the Hermetica,” p. 197).
  14. DRIJVERS, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, p. 7 ; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, “The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria,” in Nina GARSOIAN, ed. *et al.*, *East of Byzantium*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 1982, p. 35-43 ; repr. *East of Antioch* ; J.B. Segal, *Edessa : “The Blessed City”*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 41-61.
  15. JONES, “Astrological Trajectory”, p. 194.
  16. “Aber es ist nicht angängig [...] eine allgemeine Ablehnung der Astrologie und der aus ihr hergeleiteten philosophischen Bestimmung des Sternenzwanges gegenüber einer früheren Periode der Astrologie-Freundlichkeit bei Bardesanes herzuleiten. Wenn er gegen die Chaldäer streitet, so tut er es nur in dem [...] Sinne, so nämlich, dass er ihre Betrachtungsweise einschränkt, nicht im Sinne grundsätzlicher Ablehnung. Die unbedingte Astrologiefeindschaft der Kirche weist er ausdrücklich ab. [...] ist Bardesanes zwar ein Kritiker der Astrologie, aber nicht ihr Gegner geworden” (H.H. SCHAEFER, “Bardesanes von Edessa in der

Indeed, as we shall see Bardaisan was able to transcend the common association of astrology with an absolute form of fatalism.

In the *Book of the Laws of Countries*, Bardaisan outlines three distinctive perspectives regarding fate and free will.<sup>17</sup> First he describes the view of the astrologers themselves :

[...] man's soul strives to know something the general populace does not know. And these men think they can attain it. Everything in which they fail and everything good they do, everything that befalls them of riches and poverty, disease, health and physical injury, comes to them through the guidance of those stars which are called the Seven, and they are led by them.<sup>18</sup>

Bardaisan is here referring to the traditional view of astrology which maintained an absolute fatalism, a thoroughgoing submission to fate mediated by the seven planets. In contrast to this view of the astrologers, Bardaisan next mentions those who completely reject the existence of fate altogether :

[...] others maintain that this art is an imposture of the Chaldaeans, or even that Fate does not exist at all but that it is an empty name, and that all things, great and small, lie in the hands of man, and that physical injuries and defects eventuate and come to him by chance.<sup>19</sup>

Albrecht Dihle suggests that Bardaisan may be referring to Epicureanism here.<sup>20</sup> Then Bardaisan raises a third contrasting position which affirms human free will and responsibility while attributing the ills and difficulties of life to divine punishment. Since this latter view corresponds most closely to Christianity, this is the view that reader expects Bardaisan himself to uphold — especially as he has already declared his belief in human free will earlier in the text.

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Überlieferung der griechischen und der syrischen Kirche,” in Carsten COLPE, ed., *Studien zur orientalischen Religionsgeschichte*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968, p. 124).

17. Cf. EUGNOSTOS THE BLESSED (Nag Hammadi Codex III, 3) 70.8-71.5 : “The wisest among them have speculated about the truth from the ordering of the world. And the speculation has not reached the truth. For the ordering is spoken of in three (different) opinions by all the philosophers (and) hence they do not agree. For some of them say about the world that it was directed by itself. Others, that it is providence (that directs it). Others, that it is fate. But it is none of these. Again, of the three voices I have just mentioned, none is true. For whatever is from itself is an empty life ; it is self-made. Providence is foolish. (And) fate is an undiscerning thing” (p. 223, PARROTT, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, third, completely revised ed. by James M. ROBINSON *et al.*, Leiden, New York, E.J. Brill, 1988, 1990). The relationship of Bardaisan to Gnosticism is discussed by Drijvers, who questions whether the opposition “Gnostic and non-Gnostic” is useful for understanding the complexity of Bardaisan’s thought (H.J.W. DRIJVERS, “Bardaisan von Edessa als Repräsentant des syrischen Synkretismus im 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.,” in A. DIETRICH, ed., *Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturgebiet, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse, 3<sup>e</sup> Folge* [96], 114-119, repr. DRIJVERS, *East of Antioch* ; DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 222-224). The charge that Bardaisan was an adherent of Valentinianism seems to have been an invention of western heresiologists, beginning with Hippolytus (*ibid.*, p. 183-184).

18. NAU 564-567 ; DRIJVERS, p. 27-29.

19. NAU 567 ; DRIJVERS, p. 29.

20. “Zur Schicksalslehre des Bardesanes,” in Adolf Martin RITTER, ed., *Kerygma und Logos : Beiträge zu den geistesgeschichtlichen Beziehungen zwischen Antike und Christentum. Festschrift für Carl Andresen zum 70. Geburtstag*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979, p. 125.

Yet in fact Bardaisan's own view concerning fate, presented at this point in the dialogue, comes as a surprise to the reader.

Now to me, in so far as I can judge, these three ways of regarding the matter seem to be partly right and partly wrong. [...] they are wrong because the wisdom of God surpasses them, the wisdom that established worlds, created man, gave the Guiding Signs their fixed order and gave all things the power due to each. Now I maintain that this power is in the possession of God, the angels, the Rulers, the Guiding Signs, the elements, mankind and the animals. Yet to all these orders I have named power is not given over everything. For he who has power over everything is One. But over some things they have power, and over others not [...]. So there exists something which the Chaldeans call Fate.<sup>21</sup>

By the "Rulers" and the "Guiding Signs" Bardaisan means the planets and the stars.<sup>22</sup> Bardaisan's own view of the relation of divine power to that of the heavenly bodies and to human free will involves a nuanced delimitation of their respective domains. He holds that only God has power over everything ; however, under that divine power there is a level of power accorded to fate (exercised through the planets and the fixed stars) as well as freedom of the human will (which operates on the level of moral choice).<sup>23</sup> Bardaisan's affirmation of fate (albeit in a limited sphere of influence under the ultimate power of God) is the most striking element in his Christian system of thought.

At this point in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* Bardaisan naturally seeks to offer evidence as proof for his belief in the existence and power of fate. He goes on to cite numerous examples from daily experience in which human desires and choices are frustrated by unexpected events. Not everyone has wealth or power or physical health. Sometimes the rich become poor, and the poor remain poor even though they desire to have wealth. Some people have children but do not bring them up ; some bring up their children but may not keep them ; as for others, their children bring them disgrace and sorrow. Sometimes people who are wealthy lose their health ; others who are healthy are poor against their will. Thus Bardaisan says : "It is evident [...] that riches, honour, health, sickness, children and everything we covet depend on Fate and that we have no power over these matters."<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, Bardaisan hastens to define the limits of fate. As we have seen, he subordinates the power of fate to God ; as well, he separates fate from the power of physical nature. According to Bardaisan, it is from the power of nature that people

21. NAU 567-568 ; DRIJVERS, p. 29-31.

22. F. NAU, *Bardésane l'Astrologue. Le livre des lois des pays. Texte syriaque et traduction française avec une introduction et de nombreuses notes*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1899, p. 18-19. Cf. the terms διοικητάς τινος ἑπτὰ (seven rulers) in *Poimandres* 1.9 (NOCK-FESTUGIERE, vol. 1, 9.16-20) and αἱ δυνάμεις αἱ διοικητικαί (ruling powers) in CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA's *Stromateis* 6.16.148.2 (p. 507.33-508.4 Stählin).

23. It was this point for which Bardaisan came to be attacked in the Κατὰ Εἰμαζομένης of Diodore of Tarsus in the fourth century. According to PHOTIUS, *Bibliotheca* 223 (p. 8, 45-47 Henry) Diodore argued that the body cannot be under the power of fate because its actions are controlled by the soul, and that neither the giving of the Law through angelic intermediaries (cf. Gal 3.19) nor the incarnation and miracles of Christ could have been accomplished under fate. Photius' report suggests that Diodore did not fully understand Bardaisan's system of thought, especially the power he accorded to nature and his subordination of free will, fate and nature to God.

24. NAU 571 ; DRIJVERS, p. 31-33.

grow and mature physically, have children, require food and drink to stay alive, and so on. Then, at the limits of nature the influence of fate is manifested : the occurrence of changes and modifications of these basic natural processes is due to the power of fate.

But when the periods and modes of nature's work are ended, Fate manifests itself in this field and does things of diverse kind. Sometimes it aids and strengthens nature, and sometimes it hinders and impedes it.<sup>25</sup>

Growing to adulthood derives from nature, but illnesses and physical defects are caused by fate ; the procreation of children comes from nature, but it is through fate that children are sometimes deformed, miscarry or die prematurely ; bodily health derives from nature, while fate brings hunger and other physical complaints.

Be convinced then, that whenever nature is deflected from her true course, it is Fate that is the cause, because the Rulers and Guiding Signs, from which every change called horoscope is deduced, are in opposition. Those of them called the right-hand ones assist nature and heighten her beauty, when their course is favourable and they take a high position in the sky in the sectors belonging to them. And those of them called the left-hand ones are malefic, and when they occupy a high position, they work against nature.<sup>26</sup>

The reference to the horoscope reminds us again that for Bardaisan the working of fate is conceived in terms that are clearly astrological : he says that fate is derived from the influence of benefic and malefic planets<sup>27</sup> (Jupiter, the Moon and Venus were termed "benefic", while Mars and Saturn were regarded as the "malefic" planets<sup>28</sup>) when they occupy the "high position in the sky in the sectors belonging to them" (in other words, when one of these planets is located in a sign of the zodiac directly over head, at midheaven<sup>29</sup>, and at its "term", the part of the sign allocated to that planet).<sup>30</sup> The terms "right-hand" and "left-hand" refer to signs to the right or left of a given point of the zodiac which affect the influence of a sign when it is in aspect, such as opposition, to another sign.<sup>31</sup> Many of the standard astrological associations of the planets (*i.e.* Venus with love, Mars with war, etc.) are also referred to elsewhere in the *Book of the Laws of Countries*. According to F. Stanley Jones, this sec-

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25. NAU 575 ; DRIJVERS, p. 35. The affirmation of fate's favourable effect on nature seems theoretical, however, since in fact Bardaisan only cites examples of fate causing disagreeable occurrences (DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 87-88).

26. NAU 576 ; DRIJVERS, p. 37.

27. Cf. the opposition of malign and benign stars later in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* (NAU 584 ; DRIJVERS, p. 43).

28. Bardaisan does not explicitly identify the benefic planets as Jupiter, the Moon and Venus nor the malefic planets as Mars and Saturn. The teaching of Elchasai recorded in HIPPOLYTUS, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.16.2-4, which has some parallels with that of Bardaisan, also refrained from specifying the malefic planets by name. Perhaps such knowledge was deemed obvious (JONES, "Astrological Trajectory," p. 192).

29. NAU, *Bardesane l'Astrologue*, p. 19 ; see also the use of the term "midheaven" later in the text (NAU 591 ; DRIJVERS, p. 47). We need not accept Nau's other suggestion (p. 43 n. 5 of his French translation) that the "high position" refers to the "exaltation" of a planet (on which see A. BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ, *L'astrologie grecque*, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1899, repr. Bruxelles, Culture et civilisation, 1963, p. 192-199).

30. On the division of signs into parts which were allocated to the five planets (excluding the sun and moon) see BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ, *L'astrologie grecque*, p. 206-215.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 174 and n. 1.

tion of the book provides us with a “trove of astrological information” which “can (and should) be read as presentations of Bardaisan’s positive astrological beliefs.”<sup>32</sup>

Even though Bardaisan regards morality as the realm of human free will, some of the events which Bardaisan regards as deriving from fate have a decidedly moral quality. Thus he claims that marriage and procreation come from nature, but disgust and divorce, impurity and immorality come from fate ; so too he says that “intemperance and unnecessary luxury stem from Fate”.<sup>33</sup> According to Bardaisan, it is nature which ordains that elders have superiority over young people, the wise over the foolish, strong people over the weak, and those with courage over cowards ; the reversal of such norms of social order, however, is caused by fate.<sup>34</sup> It is clear from his attribution of these latter situations to fate that Bardaisan will have to clearly distinguish the effects of fate from actions which are caused by free will.

Indeed, this distinction is the predominant point of the rest of the *Book of the Laws of Countries* :<sup>35</sup> to demonstrate the power of free will against fate, Bardaisan makes extensive use of the argument of the “customs of the nations” (νόμια βαρβαρικά) in the latter half of the work. The argument of the “customs of the nations” (νόμια βαρβαρικά) asserts that the common laws, practices, customs, physical characteristics and temperaments which are shared by nations, tribes and peoples contradict absolute fatalism.<sup>36</sup> The argument goes as follows : (1) all individuals belonging to a particular social group have the same customs ; but (2) these individuals cannot all possess the same horoscope ; therefore (3) it is impossible that their customs are determined by fate.<sup>37</sup>

Bardaisan introduces this section of the *Book of the Laws of Countries* as follows :

Now listen, and try to understand that not all people over the whole world do that which the stars determine by their Fate. [...] For men have established laws in each country by that liberty given them from God [...] [and] this gift counteracts [...] Fate.<sup>38</sup>

Bardaisan then proceeds to list the customs of various tribes, peoples and national groupings. The sequence of nations presented in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* goes around the known world roughly from east to west<sup>39</sup> and reflects the point of

32. JONES, “Astrological Trajectory,” p. 192.

33. NAU 575-576 ; DRIJVERS, p. 35.

34. NAU 576 ; DRIJVERS, p. 35-37.

35. NAU 583-599 ; DRIJVERS, p. 40-53.

36. AMAND, *Fatalisme*, p. 55-60. Franz BOLL (*Studien über Claudius Ptolemäus*, Leipzig, 1894, p. 182) termed this argument “der Beweis e coloribus et moribus gentium.”

37. This argument is found earlier in CICERO, *De Divinatione* 2.46, SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Adversus Mathematicos* 5.102, and FIRMICUS MATERNUS, *Mathesis*, 1.2.1-4. Another parallel is the treatise *On the Gods and the Universe* 9, where the author rejects absolute determinism, asking “Why do the Massagetae eat their fathers, and the Hebrews circumcise themselves, and the Persians preserve their nobility by begetting children on their mothers ?” (διὰ τί γὰρ Μασσαγέται μὲν τοὺς πατέρας ἐσθίουσιν, Ἑβραῖοι δὲ περιτέμνονται, Πέρσαι δὲ τὴν εὐγένειαν σώζουσιν ἐκ μητέρων παιδοποιούμενοι) (p. 18-19 Nock).

38. NAU 583 ; DRIJVERS, p. 41.

39. *Ibid.*

view of a resident of Edessa.<sup>40</sup> Among the customs and practices listed by Bardaisan are the following :

- the Seres (*i.e.* the Chinese<sup>41</sup>) never commit murder, fornication or idolatry.
- The Brahmans in India also do not commit murder, idolatry or fornication, and practice vegetarianism and abstain from wine.
- The Persians marry their own sisters, daughters, granddaughters, and sometimes even their mothers (N.B. in the tradition of the argument of νόμιμα βαρβαρικά the Persians were commonly associated with the practice of incest.<sup>42</sup>)
- The Parthians kill their wives, brothers and sons with impunity. (This practice is contrasted by Bardaisan with the death penalty imposed on murderers among the Romans and the Greeks.)
- Among the Geli, women sow, reap, build houses and perform manual labour ; refrain from colourful clothes, shoes and fragrant oils ; and are promiscuous. By contrast, their husbands wear colourful clothing, as well as gold and jewels, and anoint themselves with fragrant oils.
- Among the Bactrians, women wear male attire, gold and beautiful ornaments ; receive better service from their slaves than do their husbands ; ride on horses caparisoned with gold and jewels ; and are promiscuous. Moreover, their husbands do not reproach them for this.
- Among the inhabitants of Petra<sup>43</sup>, and also among Edessenes and Arabs, wives who are convicted or even suspected of adultery are executed.
- In Hatra thieves are stoned and spat upon ; in the same vein, it is also mentioned that among the Romans thieves are whipped and then set free. (It is significant that the Romans are not clearly distinguished from other nations in Bardaisan’s list ; the lack of distinction between “barbarians” and Romans reflects his Syrian perspective.<sup>44</sup>)
- On the eastern side of the Euphrates, says Bardaisan, no man called a thief or murderer will become very angry but if he is accused of pederasty he revenges himself and does not even shrink from murder.
- Turning to the northern peoples, Bardaisan reports the Germans and their neighbours practice pederasty.
- On the other hand, the Britons practice monogamy.

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40. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 91.

41. W. and H.G. GUNDEL, *Astrologumena*, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1966, p. 327.

42. In one example of the argument of νόμιμα βαρβαρικά (PHILO, *De Providentia* 1.85) incest is referred to the Scythians ; however, from his *De Specialibus Legibus* 3.13 it is clear that Philo was also familiar with the traditional attribution of incest to the Persians.

43. The text has Rakamaeans : Petra was formerly called Rekeme (DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 91 and n. 4).

44. Javier TEIXIDOR, *Bardesane d'Édesse. La première philosophie syriaque*, Paris, Cerf, 1992, p. 96. Later in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* the idiosyncratic behaviour attributed to the Romans is their custom of “always conquering new territories” (DRIJVERS, p. 53).

— Still on the theme of marriage (though out of geographical sequence) he returns to the Parthians who, he says, practice chaste polygamy.

— Then come the Amazons, who of course have no husbands. Bardaisan informs us that once a year the Amazons travel to a mountain to have intercourse with men of that region. Then, returning to their own country, when their children are born the Amazons expose the sons and raise only the daughters. “Yet none of the stars can save all the little boys who are born from being exposed”, argues Bardaisan.<sup>45</sup>

— In Media, he says, when people die they are thrown to the dogs, even while there is still life in them, and the dogs eat the dead of all Media.

— Hindus burn widows alive along with the bodies of their deceased husbands.

— Finally, all Germans were believed to die by strangulation, aside from those killed in war.

The *Book of the Laws of Countries* also presents the same argument in reverse form, *i.e.* that there are groups of people where the effect of fate mediated by the planets is not evident, such as in the regions around the edge of the known world.

It is written in the book of the Chaldaeans, that when Mercury stands with Venus in the house of Mercury, this gives rise to sculptors, painters and money-changers, but that when they stand in the house of Venus they produce perfumers, dancers, singers and poets. But in the whole region of the Tayites, of the Saracens, in Upper Libya, among the Mauretani-ans, in the country of the Numidians which lies at the mouth of the Oceanus, in Outer Germany, in Upper Sarmatia, in Spain, in all the countries to the North of Pontus, in the whole region of the Alanians, among the Albanians, and among the Sasaye and in Brusa, which lies across the Duru, no one sees sculptors, or painters, or perfumers or money-changers or poets. The influence of Mercury and Venus is powerless along the outskirts of the whole world.<sup>46</sup>

In conclusion, Bardaisan summarizes his overall argument against absolute fatalism as follows :

In all places, every day and each hour, people are born with different nativities [*i.e.* horoscopes], but the laws of men are stronger than Fate, and they lead their lives according to their own customs.<sup>47</sup>

The customs and common practices of nations and peoples must be independent of fate, because all the members of a particular nation must be born at different times and hence have differing horoscopes. It does not matter at all whether or not the customs which Bardaisan adduces are historically accurate ; many of them manifestly are not. Rather, the extensive, colourful — even luxuriant — variety of customs portrayed in this text proved to be especially striking for its readers. (Indeed the very title *Book of the Laws of Countries* derives from the extensive portrayal of customs among the nations within the text.) Moreover, it is not surprising that this part of the *Book of*

45. NAU 595 ; DRIJVERS, p. 51.

46. NAU 595-596 ; DRIJVERS, p. 51.

47. NAU 596-599 ; DRIJVERS, p. 53.

*the Laws of Countries* was quoted extensively by Eusebius of Caesarea in his antifatalistic argument in *Praeparatio Evangelica* (6.10.48).<sup>48</sup>

To sum up, three spheres or domains are delineated in Bardaisan's thought as expressed in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* :

[...] it is evident that we men are led in the same way by our natural constitution, in different ways by Fate, but by our liberty each as he will. [...] It is fitting, then, that these three things, nature, Fate and liberty keep each their own mode of being, until the course is completed and measure and number have been fulfilled. For thus has it been resolved by Him, who ordained what was to be the way of life and the manner of perfection of all creatures, and the condition of all substances and natures.<sup>49</sup>

While I have emphasized the anthropological focus of Bardaisan's thought, the eschatological aspect of Bardaisan's thought (evident in the previous quotation) should not be minimized.<sup>50</sup> For Bardaisan, the human condition of being under the mutual influences of nature and fate, and also possessing free choice at the same time, is temporary. He held that the world had been brought into being through the mixture of the four elements with evil darkness ; however, this present condition will one day end, after which a new mixture will come about without the presence of darkness or evil.<sup>51</sup> (Amand sees this as a "curieuse anticipation" of Origen's doctrine of apoca-

48. It is also closely paralleled in the PSEUDO-CLEMENTINE *Recognitions* (9.19-29) and in the *Dialogue* of PSEUDO-CAESARIUS (2.109-110). These parallels, along with that in Eusebius, are presented synoptically in A. HILGENFELD, *Bardesanes, der letzte Gnostiker*, Leipzig, 1864, p. 92-123 ; and in REHM's ed. of the PSEUDO-CLEMENTINE *Recognitions*, p. 270-317 (*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*).

49. NAU 571, 579 ; DRIJVERS, p. 33, 39. Albrecht DIHLE has compared the threefold separation between free will, nature and fate in Bardaisan's thought to the distinction between free will, nature and chance in the book on fate by Bardaisan's contemporary, the Peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias ("Schicksalslehre der Bardesanes," p. 128-130 ; A. DIHLE, "Astrology in the Doctrine of Bardesanes," in Elizabeth A. LIVINGSTONE, ed., *Studia Patristica*, 20, Leuven, Peeters, 1989, p. 166). However, Alexander does not mention astrology, and so "le caractère hautement théorique du traité exclut toute comparaison avec le livre du philosophe syriaque" (TEIXIDOR, *Bardesane*, p. 92). See also JONES' criticisms of Dihle's approach to Bardaisan in "Astrological Trajectory," p. 191, n. 31 and p. 193, n. 42. That Bardaisan was influenced by the Stoic view of fate is plausible, though of course it would be incorrect to call him a Stoic (DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 222).

50. See the reference to the "termination of all" (NAU 572 ; DRIJVERS, p. 33) and the conclusion of the *Book of the Laws of Countries* (NAU 611 ; DRIJVERS, p. 63), as well as Drijvers' introduction to his translation (p. 1).

51. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 89-90, 94-95, 194, 219-220. According to a letter of the Syriac writer Severus Sebokt (d.666/7) to the Cypriot priest Basilius, Bardaisan held that the present world would last for 6000 years ; this information was later quoted by Georgios bishop of Arabia (d.724). The letter of Severus (edited and translated by F. NAU, "Notes d'Astronomie Syrienne," *Journal Asiatique*, 2 [1910], p. 210-214) deals with the question of whether there were conjunctions of the seven planets : according to the tradition cited by Severus, Bardaisan asserted that in the 6000 years of this age there would be 100 conjunctions of the seven planets, and he offered a justification of the number 6000 on the basis of the sum of the orbits of the planets that would be required for 100 conjunctions. In fact, the notion that the world would last 6000 years was common in the ancient world (DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 90 n. 1). Nau's article further showed the dependance of Georgios of Arabia on Severus Sebokt for this point ; thus Georgios' claim that Bardaisan's wrote about his belief in the 6000 year duration of the world "in quodam tractatus quem fecit de conjunctionibus astrorum coeli inter se" is unreliable. (Georgios' letter is found immediately following Nau's edition of the *Book of the Laws of Countries* in *Patrologia Syriaca* 1.2, Paris, 1907, col. 612-615.) This undermines the use of Georgios' claim by W. and H.-G. GUNDEL (*Astrologumena*, p. 326) as attesting ("[s]icher bezeugt") that Bardaisan wrote a work "Über die Konjunktion (σύννοδος) der Planeten" (JONES, "Astrological Trajectory", p. 189-190, n. 25).

tastasis.<sup>52</sup>) Paradise, the place of the soul's origin and the final home to which it returns, also seems to have been identified by Bardaisan with the region of heaven among the fixed stars.<sup>53</sup>

Bardaisan's interest in fate and free will is also evident from the attacks on the teachings of Bardaisan in the *Hymns Against Heresies* of Ephrem Syrus (306-373). The followers of Bardaisan were still active at Edessa during Ephrem's lifetime.<sup>54</sup> In Hymn 1.18 Ephrem says that Bardaisan and his followers read and expounded books about the signs of the zodiac rather than the prophets.<sup>55</sup> As well, in Hymn 6 Ephrem attacks Bardaisan's view of fate as subordinate to the power of God :

But him who proves to have no power over his own movement  
Thou shalt not make out to be lord : he is a servant without feet.  
Bardaisan is cunning, who put that Fate under restraint  
Through a Fate that is greater, as it describes its course in liberty.  
The thralldom of the lower, refutes him with the upper,  
Their shadow refutes their body,  
For that intent which restricted the lower,  
Crippled the unrestricted freedom of the upper.<sup>56</sup>

Ephrem's argument here is that Bardaisan's claim that God assigns the movements of the planets in effect binds and limits God's own freedom.

The relationship between God and the planets is that of the body and its shadow ; one depicts the other ; if the shadow is not free, this shows that the body is not free. Ephrem sees in this a restriction of God's sovereign power.<sup>57</sup>

In the same hymn, Ephrem also condemns Bardaisan for conceding too much power to fate and nature ; here Ephrem's words may imply knowledge of not only Bardaisan's ideas but even the terminology of the *Book of the Laws of Countries*.<sup>58</sup> In Hymn 51.13, Ephrem writes that Bardaisan has "established seven beings" (the planets), proclaims the zodiac, observes horoscopes, teaches the Seven (planets) and examines times (*i.e.* hours of birth) ; with regard to the latter charge, it is true that the calculation of the horoscope at the moment of birth is assumed in many of the examples of the νόμῶν βαρβαρικῶν cited by Bardaisan in the latter half of the *Book of the Laws of Countries*.

52. AMAND, *Fatalisme*, p. 244, n. 2.

53. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 195 ; his source for this is the statement recorded by Severus Sebokt that Bardaisan and his adherents refer to the Isles of the Blest in the west as "Isles of Blissess" (*i.e.* Elysium) (see NAU, "Notes d'Astronomie Syrienne," p. 215). The location of the heavenly after life among the stars is discussed by Franz CUMONT in *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans*, New York, G.P. Putnam's sons, 1912, repr. New York, Dover Publications, 1960, p. 109-110.

54. Walter BAUER, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., translated by a team from the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, ed. Robert A. KRAFT and Gerhard KRODEL, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971, p. 25.

55. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 157-158, also citing Hymn 22.22 where Ephrem attacks a teacher of false doctrine (likely Bardaisan) for adding astrology to the true faith.

56. *Hymns Against Heresies* 6.9,10, quoted in DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 158-159. In the lines preceding Ephrem maintains that God bestowed free will upon the stars themselves.

57. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 159.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 159-160.

According to H.J.W. Drijvers, the central theme in Bardaisan's thought is freedom.<sup>59</sup> The human spirit is free because it is of divine origin. However, it becomes enmeshed with the soul and the body as it descends into the world through the seven planetary spheres ; thus fate (mediated by the planets) as well as nature have an effect on the spirit's innate freedom so that in this world its freedom is limited.<sup>60</sup> Adam's misuse of his spiritual freedom has meant that the soul is unable to ascend once again through the heavenly spheres ; however, the coming of Christ has brought salvation, so that the soul can return to its divine origin.<sup>61</sup> Belief in "die Himmelsreise der Seele", that the soul or spirit comes under the influence of fate during its descent through the seven planetary spheres to the physical body, was widespread in Antiquity.<sup>62</sup> However, Bardaisan's careful delineation of fate, free will and physical nature according to their respective domains under the rule of the Christian God was quite remarkable and seems to have been unique within early Christianity.

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59. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

60. NAU 572 ; DRIJVERS, p. 33 : "For that which is called Fate is really the fixed course determined by God for the Rulers and Guiding Signs. According to this course and order the spirits undergo changes while descending to the soul, and the souls while descending to the bodies. That which causes these changes is called Fate and native horoscope of that mixture which was mixed and is being purified to the help of that which, by the grace and goodness of God, was and will be helped till the termination of all."

61. DRIJVERS, *Bardaisan*, p. 219-227.

62. The classic study is Wilhelm BOUSSET, "Die Himmelsreise der Seele," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 4 (1901), p. 136-169, 229-273. Among more recent works see A.F. SEGAL, "Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment," in Hildegard TEMPORINI, Wolfgang HAASE, ed., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2.23.2, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1980, p. 1333-1394 ; I.P. CULIANU, *Psychanodia I*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1983.