

PHD Project

Portrayals of Zoroastrianism in Syriac Christian Sources during the Sasanian Era

This doctoral proposal seeks to understand the way Zoroastrianism functioned within the Syriac Christian discourse in Late Antiquity.

Syriac literature by eastern Christians contains a wealth of description of, and commentary about contemporaneous Zoroastrian religion and practice.

Problem Statement

The dominant religion practiced within the Sasanian Empire (3 – 7 Centuries) unfortunately does not have many concurrent sources. There are royal inscriptions and other epigraphic sources as well as material evidence however the problem is that they rarely concern religious issues. We also possess a large proportion of Zoroastrian texts originated in the Islamic period however since they are not contemporaneous with Sasanians, they cannot be considered as primary sources for us.

As a consequence non-Zoroastrian sources are fundamental to the study of the Zoroastrian religious reality in the pre-Islamic times. It is evident that, no systematic study on Zoroastrianism considering Syriac texts has been conducted so far and has to be done.

This project will compare our data with respect to diverse genres (like hagiography, martyrdom accounts, chronicles, ecclesiastical histories, canons, and biblical interpretation). At the same time, it will consider chronological developments within the Syriac literature in the course of the 4 centuries of Sasanian rule. In addition, it will try to understand whether geographical variations led to different images in the Syriac perspective.

Its comparative aspect would be consideration of other well documented religious minorities under the Sasanians, (that is to

say the Jews, through the Babylonian Talmud and incantation bowls, and the Manichaean religious writings). The aim is to construct a paradigm of religiosity within a Sasanian milieu.

Objectives

As a matter of fact Syriac sources can inform us of Zoroastrian practice (by that I mean sun and fire worship, exposure of the Dead, marriage, etc..). These testimonies of Christian inhabitants of the Sasanian Empire help us understand – to some extent - the reality of Zoroastrianism.

Simultaneously, the project will try to examine how the Zoroastrian religion was perceived or consciously depicted by the Syriac Christianity. It is an opportunity to study the Syriac Christian mentality toward the Persian religion. In other words we could study both *réalité* and *mentalité* on the Sasanian Zoroastrianism.