

Giovanni Lenzi, ed., *Afraate, Le esposizioni*, 2 vols. (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 2012). Pp. 516. €27.50 and €31.90.

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This book, the result of a collective work, provides the Italian translations, with short introductions and essential notes, of the 23 *Demonstrations*, or *Expositions*, by Aphrahat, “the Persian sage,” for his fellow ascetics, the “children [i.e. members] of the covenant.” Besides Lenzi (general introduction, *Dem.* 3, 4, 6, 10, 11, 13, 18, 21, 23), the translators and commentators include Vittorio Berti (*Dem.* 1), Monica Casadei (*Dem.* 2), Sabino Chialà (*Dem.* 8), Ignazio de Francesco (*Dem.* 12), Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev (introductory letter), Alessandro Mengozzi (*Dem.* 16), Marco Moriggi (*Dem.* 15), Manel Nin (*Dem.* 19, 20), René Roux (*Dem.* 17), Claudia Tavolieri (*Dem.* 14), and Emidio Vergani (*Dem.* 5, 7, 22). The introduction by Lenzi (pp. 7–45) provides a helpful contextualization. It explains what is known about Aphrahat and his name, his historical and religious context, and the expansion of Christianity in Mesopotamia. A general presentation of the *Demonstrations* follows, including a discussion of their grouping and the authenticity of *Dem.* 14, which Lenzi upholds. Comments are devoted to Aphrahat’s Creed, his notions of faith and sacraments, his ecclesiology, soteriology, and “theology of substitution,” his use of the Bible, and the manuscripts, editions, and ancient translations of the *Demonstrations*. While there seems to be no new, ground-breaking research offered, this is a useful and detailed introduction; the intended audience is learned though not specialized readers; all Syriac is transliterated and translated. The *Demonstrations* had already been translated into English, German, and French.¹ The present translation is generally good and careful; most introductions to single *Demonstrations* are little more than resumes of the contents of the *Demonstration* at stake, though some, such as that by Casadei, offer a somewhat more extensive analysis of the main themes.

¹ Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010); Peter Bruns, *Aphrahat. Unterweisungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991–92); Marie-José Pierre, *Aphraate le Sage persan. Les Exposés* (Paris: Cerf, 1988–89).

In his Introduction, Lenzi rightly takes the epitaph of Abercius as evidence that by the end of the second century Christians were found not only everywhere in Syria, but also in Nisibis and all beyond the Euphrates (17).² Similar documentary evidence concerning the diffusion of Christianity toward the end of the second century is correctly deduced by Lenzi also from the *Liber legum regionum* stemming from the school of Bardaisan of Edessa.

Also in the Introduction, Lenzi's dating of the oldest layers of the *Vetus Syra*—the Old Syriac version of the New Testament—to the second century is the most probable. Aphrahat was acquainted both with Tatian's Gospel harmony, the *Diatessaron*, and with the four separate Gospels. Besides remarking upon the archaism and simplicity of Aphrahat's creed, Lenzi also observes that the Persian sage was far from the Logos theology of Justin, Clement, Origen, and the like—to whom I would add also Bardaisan, with whose ideas, however, Aphrahat seems to have been familiar (as I suggest below). Aphrahat, I would observe, renders *logos* simply with "word, discourse" or even "voice."³ On the contrary, Bardaisan used a rich double translation of *logos*, which takes into account not only the meaning "word," but also the meaning "reason, reasoning": "the Word of Thought," attested in the so-called cosmological traditions.⁴ In other respects, however, Aphrahat displays impressive similarities with Bardaisan. In *Dem.* 4.5–6 Aphrahat employs twice the very same expression that was used by Bardaisan in reference to the Cross of Christ: "the Mystery [*raẓā*] of the Cross." Aphrahat is speaking of the ladder of Jacob and affirms: "essa è anche il Mistero della Croce del nostro Salvatore" ("it is also the Mystery of the Cross of our Savior," section 5) and "Giacobbe vide la scala che è il Mistero della Croce" ("Jacob saw the ladder, that is the Mystery of the Cross," section 6). Bardaisan

² On the complexity of this document and the interpretive problems surrounding it, see Margaret Mitchell, "The Poetics and Politics of Christian Baptism in the Abercius Monument," in David Hellholm et al., eds., *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 1743–1777, not cited by Lenzi, and my "L'epitafio di Abercio," *Aevum* 74 (2000), 191–206, cited.

³ In this connection I add Jesús Luzarraga, *El Evangelio de Juan en las versiones siríacas* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2008).

⁴ See my *Bardaisan of Edessa. A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 314–352.

employed exactly the same expression in reference to Christ's cross and its symbolic meaning both in the "cosmological traditions" and in a Greek fragment preserved by Porphyry.⁵

In *Dem.* 23, which is the last extant and perhaps was meant to be the beginning of a new series, in section 67 Aphrahat launches into a series of Ecclesiastes-style remarks on the instability of the world. He gives several examples, such as that some people desire wealth but never attain it, since this is taken away from them and given to others. And some beget children but cannot rejoice in them, because these die or are deported, or else dishonor their parents. It is striking, although not noted in the volume under review, that the very same examples were produced by Mara bar Serapion (probably writing in the late first century A.D., although later dates are also supported by scholars) in his own remarks about the instability of the world in his letter to his son: "Let your mind not turn to the desire of wealth, something which is not true. For wealth does not endure...Some acquire wealth with much labor, and others inherit what they did not own...What things can one mention as enduring? Abundant wealth? This is taken away. Children? They die...I have experienced men, and I have done so in the following way: that they only aim at abundant wealth...They are attached to the majesty of riches, the serious vice of the corrupt." A passage from the *Liber legum regionum* by the school of Bardaisan, too, comes very close to Aphrahat's reflections both about children and about riches: "And many beget children and yet do not bring them up, and others do bring them up, and yet they do not retain them, and others retain them, and these become a tribulation and a source of afflictions. And others are wealthy, as they wish, and yet are ill, as they would not want." Even the reference to deportation, which is repeated twice in Aphrahat's passage, perfectly corresponds to the historical setting of Mara's letter, which entailed a deportation of people from Samosata by the Romans.⁶

The impression of a possible relation between Aphrahat and Mara (and Bardaisan) is reinforced by a similar catalogue in Aphrahat's *Dem.* 22.9–10, likewise focused on the instability of this

⁵ See my *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 107–124.

⁶ See my "Gesù tra i sapienti greci perseguitati ingiustamente in un antico documento filosofico pagano di lingua siriana," *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica* 97 (2005), 545–570, and *Stoici romani minori* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 2555–2598.

world. Those who are rich—says Aphrahat—cannot enjoy their wealth; those who have children are afflicted by death. No generation has ever been spared by death, nobody has ever been able to bring his riches with himself after death. But wisdom is a perpetual richness. Mara bar Serapion likewise maintained that “nobody has ever been deprived of his or her wisdom, but rather of his or her riches...Apply yourself to wisdom, source of all goods and inexhaustible treasure.”⁷

Moreover, in *Demonstration* 14, on preaching, which Adam Lehto has entitled “An Argument in Response to Dissension,”⁸ Aphrahat lists several just who were unjustly persecuted and killed, including Jesus (*Dem.* 14.45). The same did Mara in his letter (again the parallel is not noticed in the volume), and he too included Jesus, “the wise king of the Jews,” in Mara’s words. Mara introduces the section on the persecuted wise as follows: “For what else should we say when the wise are treated with violence by tyrants, and their wisdom is made prisoner by slander, and in their intelligence they are oppressed without the opportunity of defending themselves?” In addition, Aphrahat’s comments on these persecuted just are the very same as Mara’s. Aphrahat remarks: “They have survived by virtue of their teaching, and their good name endures for future generations.” It is surprising that the Christian Aphrahat does not rather claim that these saints enjoy eternal life with God as a reward for their being persecuted iniquitously. He focuses, instead, on the “earthly” survival of these just in the memory of posterity. But this is precisely what Mara, the “pagan” Stoic, maintained about the persecuted just and Jesus himself, in line with his sentence, “The lives of human beings pass away from the world, my son, but their praises and virtues endure forever.” According to Mara’s letter, Jesus has survived in the new laws (in relation to the Mosaic law) that he promulgated. Very interestingly, in *Dem.* 2, on Christian love, Aphrahat claims with regard to Jesus and the Jewish people: “poiché ripudiarono la sua regalità, sollevò da loro la regalità” (“because they rejected his being king, God removed from them their kingdom,” section 6). Now, once again, this connection is the very same as that established by Mara in his

⁷ See Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman, eds., *Mara bar Serapion in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), here especially the contributions by David Blank, Ilaria Ramelli, Pancratius Beentjes, and Peter Pokorný.

⁸ Lehto, *Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, 315.

letter: because the Jews rejected their own king (*malkā*), they were deprived by God of their kingdom (*malkutā*): “What advantage did the Jews have from the execution of their wise king, since from that time onward their kingdom was removed?” The parallel is striking, even though of course it cannot demonstrate by itself a sure dependence of Aphrahat on Mara.

In the same *Demonstration*, Aphrahat returns to the theme of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as a punishment. He states: “Quando essi però versarono il sangue del giusto, non ebbe pietà di Gerusalemme, ma la consegnò nella mano dei suoi nemici” (“But when they shed the blood of the just, God did not take pity on Jerusalem, but He delivered it into the hands of its enemies,” *Dem.* 14.13). No comment is found in the footnotes about the identity of this “just,” and in light of section 6, cited above, I deem it probable that this is again Jesus. At any rate it is worth remarking that there was an early Christian tradition that identified this “just,” whose killing determined the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, with James the Just, the so-called brother of Jesus, who was killed by will of the high priest Ananus (Hannah) in A.D. 62. The causal connection between his murder and the siege of Jerusalem was established by the second-century historian Hegesippus, who was known to, and quoted by, Eusebius in the early fourth century. Hegesippus, indeed, just after narrating the execution of James, adds that the Romans “immediately” began to besiege Jerusalem. This is a patent anachronism, since eight full years in fact elapsed between the two events, but Hegesippus clearly intended to construe the unjust killing of the Just as the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem.⁹ This tradition, which was known to Origen before Eusebius, might have been known to Aphrahat as well.

While it is possible, and even probable, that Aphrahat knew Mara’s Syriac letter, it is unlikely that he knew Origen’s works. Although in *Dem.* 21 he expresses the same ideas as Origen, the convergence is too small to be indicative of a dependency. Indeed, in this *Demonstration* Aphrahat indicates that the saints may well be

⁹ See full analysis in my “Jesus, James the Just, a Gate, and an Epigraph,” in Markus Tiwald, ed., *Kein Jota und kein Häkchen des Gesetzes werden vergeben* (vgl. *Q* 16,17). *Das Gesetzesverständnis der Logienquelle auf dem Hintergrund frühjüdischer Theologie*, BWANT 200 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 203–229.

suffering, but this is not a sign that they are persecuted by God. Likewise, Origen remarks that one cannot think that the righteous are abandoned by God when some illness or disability or the like befalls them, because “such things usually happen precisely to the just!” (*haec maxime iustis accidere solent, Hom. in Ps. 36.4.3*). And these are not abandoned by God.

Not only Mara bar Serapion is possibly echoed by Aphrahat in more than one *Demonstration*, as I have suggested, but also Bardaisan. I have already mentioned a possible parallel, and I shall now point out more parallels and probable interactions. All of these possible references go unnoticed in the book under review, perhaps because of their elusiveness and lack of certainty, but they are definitely worth noticing. In *Dem. 14*—the same in which I have already detected possible echoes from Mara, whose letter by the way was preserved in the very same manuscript as the *Liber legum regionum* from Bardaisan’s school—Aphrahat seems to be not only alluding, but also explicitly responding, to an argument put forward by Bardaisan precisely in the *Liber*. Indeed, in sections 36–37 Aphrahat notes that all other creatures of God do the will of God, but human beings often do not. He adds that these creatures, such as heaven, earth, waters, fire, and animals, behave like that not simply by nature, but specifically in abidance of God’s will: “If someone claims, ‘They are prisoners of their nature,’ let him understand what happened in the days of Noah...” (*Dem. 14.36–37*). I deem it very probable that the “someone” whom Aphrahat has in mind here is Bardaisan, as represented in the *Liber*. For there he precisely argued that animals and natural elements such as water, earth, fire, and so forth are governed by nature and obey its law (as distinct from both fate and free will). Aphrahat wants to correct this thesis: he maintains that they are not governed by nature, but directly by the will of God. In *Dem. 13*, however, which is devoted to the Sabbath, Aphrahat agrees with Bardaisan that animals, albeit they do the will of God, are not endowed with free will, and therefore they have no moral law and no sin (*Dem. 13.2*).

It is probable that also in *Dem. 8* Aphrahat is referring to Bardaisan and his followers, in this case to criticize their notion of the resurrected body. This specific criticism was suggested, I think

rightly, by Thomas McGlothlin,¹⁰ on the basis of my analysis of Bardaisan's notion of the resurrection in *Bardaisan of Edessa*. Indeed, Aphrahat here observes that some unnamed Christian adversaries maintained that the dead will rise, to be sure, but take up a heavenly body and spiritual forms, because Paul declared that heavenly bodies are different from earthly bodies (1 Cor 15:40). Also, in *Dem.* 8.17–19 Aphrahat clearly embraces the notion of spiritual death—the death of the soul—as the real death, an idea shared by Bardaisan, Origen, and earlier by Philo, some Platonists, and Stoics.¹¹

Like Gregory of Nyssa, Aphrahat presents the life of ascetics as a prelude to eschatology (*Dem.* 7.18), and the volume under review in general is justly attentive to asceticism in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*. In the same *Dem.* 7, on conversion, which is here presented in the fine annotated translation by Emidio Vergani, one could add to n. 6 on p. 179, on the motif of *Christus medicus* in Ephrem, the important treatment by Aho Shemunkasho.¹² Another tiny addition could be suggested for p. 79, on *Dem.* 1.18. Since Biblical references are usually indicated in the notes, when Aphrahat states that faith “has humbled the superb and has exalted the humble” one may add a note with a reference to the Blessed Virgin's Magnificat Hymn in Luke 1:51–52: “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the humble.” In addition, concerning possible quotations of, and echoes from, 3 Corinthians in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*, it is now worth adding a fine study by J. Edward Walters that the authors could obviously not take into consideration.¹³ Walters argues that Aphrahat indeed quoted this pseudepigraphon, considered it to be a letter by St. Paul, and drew from it important motifs.

¹⁰ In a communication at the Syriac Symposium at Duke University in June 2011.

¹¹ See my “1 Tim 5:6 and the Notion and Terminology of Spiritual Death: Hellenistic Moral Philosophy in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Aevum* 84 (2010), 3–16 and “Spiritual Weakness, Illness, and Death in 1 Cor 11:30,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011) 145–163.

¹² Aho Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of St. Ephrem* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), esp. 381–419.

¹³ J. Edward Walters, “Evidence for Citations of 3 Corinthians and Their Influence in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013), 248–262.

This is a careful book, also from the editorial point of view. There are very few typos, but note that on p. 229 “termine” should be deleted in the phrase “è terminata termine l’esposizione sui pastori,” so as to read, “The Demonstration concerning the shepherds is finished.” Italian readers who do not know Syriac or any of the other languages into which the *Demonstrations* had been already translated, will be grateful to this team of scholars for making Aphrahat’s inspiring work accessible to them.