Bardaisan of Edessa
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
THE RESEARCH AND ITS PROBLEMS

In 1855 W. Cureton published his Spicilegium Syriacum from the Syriac Ms. BM add. 14,658 of the sixth or seventh century, containing the "Book of the Laws of Countries". The latter seemed to him to be the lost Syriac original of Bardaišan of Edessa's famous treatise on Fate. Since then, scholarly attention has again been directed upon this intriguing figure. So far, the shock of often diametrically opposed opinions has not resulted in a generally accepted view of the life and teaching of Bardaišan. Thus G. Widengren could remark that a modern monograph on Bardaišan was lacking, which did not prevent him from making a critical examination of H. H. Schaeber's essay on Bardaišan, and styling it a makeshift for the desired monograph. A year later this lack was not yet supplied, and O. Klima calls Bardaišan "eine ziemlich âûnigatische Persönlkeit", whose full teaching is unfortunately not yet exactly known.

In these circumstances both the motive for and the justification of the present investigation will be clear enough; however, all the riddles

1 W. Cureton, Spicilegium Syriacum, London 1855. Syriac text: pp. 1-34; the work is subsequently indicated by the abbreviation BLCS. Bardaišan probably lived 154-222 A.D. and passed the greater part of his life in Edessa. Eusebius H.E. IV, 30 mentions his διάλογος περι εἰμεραλής. The earlier literature concerning him is disregarded here; see for that: Cureton, o.c., p. V, n. 1. In the present work the name is given as Bardaišan, a transcription of the Syriac form ـ١٤١٤٢٤; the Greek form Bardesanes is common.

For preliminary orientation see RGG4, Bd. I, s.v. Bardesanes, kol. 870f. and RAC, Bd I, s.v. Bardesanes, kol. 1180-1186 (L. Cerfaux).


of Bardaiṣlan's personality will certainly not be solved, if indeed this be possible, while some parts of his teaching will still, we fear, remain unknown. What can be carried out, is a survey of the history of research regarding Bardaiṣlan until the present time, and a new examination of all the available sources, with the addition of those which had escaped attention or have never been confronted with the others. After this, a fresh attempt may be made to portray the life and teaching of Bardaiṣlan and to determine his place in the religious and cultural life of Edessa in the second half of the second century of our era. All the cultures and religions which have exercised their influence in that town will require discussion in this comparative review, for Edessa was one of the points of contact between East and West, and for centuries was a centre of cultural exchange and mutual influence.¹ 

In the historical account all the points of controversy concerning the life and doctrine of Bardaiṣlan will emerge, examination and comparison of the sources will supply new data or permit of new combinations, whereupon we may attempt a sketch of Bardaiṣlan's life and teaching in the setting of his time.² The history of the group that took his name will also need some attention, the more so as it has become evident that there were differences within this group during the centuries of its existence, while all claimed to be Bardaiṣlan's spiritual heirs.

Research regarding Bardaiṣlan may be divided into three periods. Each of these is distinguished from the others either by a specific approach to the problem or by the scholars who dominated each period. The first period exemplifies this with its almost bewildering number of publications.

**The first period: 1855-1897**

In the Preface of his Spicilegium Syriacum Cureton devoted some space to Bardaiṣlan, of whom some authors report that he wrote a dialogue on Fate, dedicated to Antoninus. The latter Cureton held to be the emperor Marcus Aurelius.³ Parts of this dialogue were known from the material advanced by Ephrem (306-373) in parts from the Ps. Clem. Recogn. IX, 19-28; Caesarius titles of these works are printed synoptically in A. E. 1864, ss. 92-123.

At this point there was a prosecution of scholars accepted the BLC against Bardaiṣlan; but thus arrived at a totally new interest in this matter is the presentation of Ephrem and other philologists. The only useful work of Ephrem's works: J. S. 6 Vol. Romae 1732-43 (= Op. Syr. 21, 437-560).

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³ Cureton, *o. c.*, p. ii.