PREFACE

Outside of the Babylonian Talmud, Aphrahat (fl. ca. 300-350 A.D.), a Christian monk in Mesopotamia, provides the only substantial literary evidence on the state of Mesopotamian-Babylonian Judaism in Sasanian times. His Demonstrations furthermore were given final form by the end of the fourth century, if not earlier, and hence antedate the Babylonian Talmud by a hundred years or more. They moreover testify about Judaism and Jews who probably were little affected by rabbinical influence, as we shall see, and thus constitute especially rare and valuable data. In connection with my History of the Jews in Babylonia, it therefore seemed useful to prepare an English translation of Aphrahat’s Demonstrations relevant to Judaism, together with studies of some pertinent issues. The result was to serve as an appendix to vol. V, comparable to vol. III, pp. 339-353, Armenian traditions on Babylonian and Mesopotamian Jewry; vol. III, pp. 354-358, Adiabenian Christianity; and vol. IV, pp. 403-424, Zoroastrian traditions on Judaism. Since Aphrahat’s Demonstrations and related studies proved too long for an appendix to the foregoing volume, I decided to allow them to stand separately.

It is hardly necessary to point out that only a small aspect of the life and thought of Aphrahat is under consideration here. Although he was the first Father in the Iranian Church known to us, Aphrahat is practically ignored in histories of patristic Christianity. Not all of his demonstrations are available in English, only a few in other Western languages, except for Parisot’s Latin and Bert’s German. Mine are the first English translations of Demonstrations XI, XII, XIII, XV, XVI, XVIII, XIX, and parts of XXIII.

My effort is to make use of Aphrahat as a source for the study of Judaism east of the Euphrates. To do so, I have had to discuss his place in the context of both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. My argument—for the study is intended as an argument—is that Aphrahat was not a “docile pupil of the Jews” but a Christian, standing in important ways within the conventional structure of the argument of the Church on the matter of Judaism, completely original, however, in his development and application of that conventional argument. He was truly a “docile pupil” of no one, but a powerful, independent mind.

The Christianity of Aphrahat requires further study. The shape of his piety and spirituality needs to be appreciated, placed into relationship
with the religious life of the Christian tradition in all its immense variety and richness. For such a study, Demonstrations XIV and XXIII are primary, those treated here far less important. Demonstrations I through X, in which he presents something like a systematic account of the faith, need to be read in the light of the piety of XIV and XXIII.

Aphrahat provides a glimpse into the perception of reality shaping the mind of a particular kind of Christian, living in a world alien to much of Christianity West of the Euphrates, but in important ways similar to Palestine in the early centuries A.D. (This was F. C. Burkitt's view, here seconded.) It may not be too much to allege that, if not Jesus, then certainly the writer of the Fourth Gospel and of Revelation would have understood Aphrahat on Judaism more readily than he would have comprehended the Alexandrian, Cappadocian, Antiochian or North African fathers on the same matter. Yet if this is true, then we must reconsider our conception of the distances and discontinuities separating the Christianity of those centers from the Semitic Middle East, for in one very central aspect, namely the Christian theology of Judaism, Aphrahat reveals the persistence of widely-followed conventions.

For an outsider, the most moving, indeed spiritually affecting writings of Aphrahat are, as I said, Demonstrations I through X, XIV, and XXIII. Here the believing man stands forth, the defense of the faith and critique of the opposition are muted. For the study of the history of religions, the ways in which various sorts of Christians took up the cross and imitated Christ, the morphology of the Christ-centered human experience, the perception of the world shaped by the New Testament and its reading of the Hebrew Scriptures—these are important, illuminating issues. Aphrahat seems to me a richer source of insight for the consideration of such questions than do those systematic theologians, writing in Latin and Greek, who receive substantially more attention. But it is for historians of Christianity to raise these issues in the study of Aphrahat himself.

My translation depends upon the texts of Wright and Parisot (below, p. 7), and especially on R. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, edited by J. Payne Smith (Mrs. Margoliouth) (Oxford, repr. 1957 of 1903 ed.). My knowledge of Syriac, as of Armenian, Pahlavi and Pazend, is elementary and by no means sufficient to the task. While what follows hopefully is an accurate and careful translation, I do not claim to contribute in any detail to the study of Syriac literature, philology, or text-criticism. I am grateful to my teacher Professor Franz Rosenthal,
Yale University, for instruction in Syriac, but he in no way bears the onus for either my limitations or errors.

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