CHAPTER TWO

HARRANIAN RELIGION FROM ALEXANDER TO THE MUSLIM CONQUEST

HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS: 539 B.C.E. – 640 C.E.

Alexander the Great and the Seleucids

Persian rule of Mesopotamia, which began with Cyrus in the sixth century, continued until the arrival of Alexander in 331 B.C.E., but Harran is not mentioned in our available sources at any time during that interval. Although it is doubtful whether Alexander himself ever came to Harran, a Macedonian military colony was stationed on the ancient site, now transcribed as Karran, by its Seleucid rulers. It was here that Eumenes, Alexander’s secretary, spent the winter of 318 B.C.E., vainly scheming for the reunification of the dead conqueror’s empire; Diodorus Siculus reports that Seleucus, in his attempt to make himself master of Babylon, came to the city in 312 B.C.E., where he persuaded some and compelled others of the Greeks who had been settled there to join his forces.¹

To the north was the city that would become Harran’s bitter rival in late antiquity, Edessa, built first, according to later Christian tradition, by Nimrod as Orhay, but at least refounded by Seleucus Nicator in 303 B.C.E. and named after the old Macedonian capital, although it was also called for a time Antioch on the Callirhoe. Edessa’s role was to serve as a Greek bulwark of the Seleucid kingdom in the Near East, and although Seleucid political domination of the region began to erode by the early 2nd century B.C.E. with the coming of the Parthians, Edessa remained an outpost of Hellenic culture and learning in Northern Mesopotamia to the end of antiquity; and as a center of political and military activity in the Graeco-Roman period, its importance easily eclipsed that of its older neighbor to the south, Harran.

In fact, the increasing importance of Edessa in the Hellenistic,

¹ Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca, XIX.91.
Roman and Byzantine eras complicates any attempt to reconstruct the history of Harran after the coming of the Greeks, for although the former’s well-established prominence in the political, cultural and religious life of the region guaranteed it a place in a great variety of contemporary accounts, Harran seems no longer able to make such claims. Periodically, but at no regular intervals, we may find references to the city, but her history often can be reconstructed only through the more general history of Northern Mesopotamia or the remarkable chronicles of Edessa, composed for the most part in the medieval period. The problem, as we shall see, is especially acute after the reign of Julian, and the collapse of organized pagan resistance to Christianity. Nevertheless, the cautious use of these sources makes it possible, at the least, to construct a frame of reference by which we might investigate the history of Harran during this period.

Parthians and Arabs

The Seleucid Greeks managed to keep an at least tenuous hold on the area until the destruction of the army of Antiochus Sidetes in 129 B.C.E. by the Parthians brought an effective end to Greek hegemony in the region; the political vacuum was filled in a variety of imaginative ways by the Parthians, who had arisen out of the ruins of the Achaemenid empire in the mid-third century B.C.E. and quickly overran the Greek states of the Far East, establishing an empire whose boundaries encompassed Semites, Iranians and Greeks. The true founder of the Parthian empire, Mithridates I (171–138 B.C.E.), wholeheartedly embraced the inheritance of both the Seleucid and Achaemenid domains, for he designated himself as both philhellenos and “the Great King.”

Culturally and religiously tolerant, the Parthians adopted Greek as their official language, although they employed the lingua franca, Aramaic, in Mesopotamia. More often exercising their dominion through alliances with independent kingdoms that had gained autonomy after the collapse of Seleucid power, the Parthians were, by and large, content to leave things as they were. But not always: in the early years of his reign, Mithridates II (123–87 B.C.E.) took direct control of Mesopotamia, and in 94 B.C.E. annexed the regions around Adiabene, Gordyene and Osrhoene, the last including Edessa and Harran. Nevertheless, despite the imperial