THE CHRISTOLOGY OF APHRAHAT, THE PERSIAN SAGE: 
AN EXCURSUS ON THE 17TH DEMONSTRATION

BY

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Aphrahat (* c. 270 - † c. 345) is indisputably one of the giants of early Christianity. His twenty-three Demonstrations define classical Syriac, and are the most significant literary monument of Syrian Christianity before Ephrem. The alert reader of literature about Aphrahat is struck by a paradox in many descriptions of his theology, especially his Christology. Three examples will illustrate the point.

The first sentence of the Vorwort of Ortiz de Urbina’s 1933 dissertation asserts that Aphrahat’s writings “sind für die Dogmengeschichte ausserordentlich wertvoll; sie bieten ein unicum für die Geschichte der christlichen Lehre.” This is because Aphrahat is “unabhängig von Nizäa und...[der] Entwicklung der griechisch-römischen Christologie.” Aphrahat was and remained “ein reiner Semit.” “In der ganzen christlichen Frühzeit...ist uns...kein anderer christlicher Schriftsteller rein semitischer Kultur bekannt ausser Afrahat.”

After such a beginning, one might presume that Ortiz de Urbina would contrast this “ausserordentlich wertvoll” Semitic theology with the Nicene and post-Nicene theology of the Hellenistic “Great Church.” Instead, however, his study, titled Die Gottheit Christi bei Afrahat, quickly acquires a defensive tone; one hundred and forty pages later it climaxes with this italicized sentence: “Also war Christus nach Afrahat eigentlich Gott.”

Three questions are raised by Ortiz de Urbina’s conclusion. First, why italicize and make the capstone of one’s argument what is today simply orthodox Christian theology—unless there is some question about it? Second, if Ortiz de Urbina’s conclusion is correct, then does it not mitigate the “uniqueness” he claims for Aphrahat? Third, how can Ortiz de Urbina use such patently Nicene language to summarize Aphrahat’s theology, which he himself has characterized as being so distinctly Semitic, an “unicum,” untouched by the Hellenistic world and Nicaea?
The second example comes from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. The article on Aphrahat contains this sentence: "(Aphrahat’s) writings show...that, at least in intention, he was orthodox in his theology." "In intention" only? The logical inference is that the *letter* of Aphrahat’s theology is not "orthodox," for if it were, then there would be no need to speak of "intent." What does the author of the article know that forces him to qualify his statement in this disingenuous way? Moreover, what early Christian writer did not *intend* to be "orthodox"?

The third example is found in *De viris illustribus* of Gennadius of Marseilles. Writing between 461 and 469, Gennadius gives the only ancient report of Aphrahat in the West, and lists the title of Aphrahat’s 17th Demonstration as "De Christo quod filius Dei sit et consubstantialis patri." However, according to both known Syriac manuscripts of this Demonstration, as well as all eight manuscripts of its Armenian translation, its title is—with minor variants—"De Christo dei filio." Heretofore, no one has remarked on the *theological* significance of this discrepancy. This is surprising, for already in 1756 the difference was apparent to anyone who examined a synoptic table in N. Antonelli’s edition of the Armenian tradition, which placed the titles of the individual Demonstrations from the Armenian MSS alongside those found in Gennadius. What in the 17th Demonstration motivated someone—as early as the fifth century, almost within a century of Aphrahat’s lifetime—to modify the title by interpolating the Nicene watchword "*consubstantialis*" (= *δυναμε一方面*)?

An examination of the 17th Demonstration, written in 343/344, answers these questions. This Demonstration, like the other twenty-two, claims to have been occasioned by questions put to Aphrahat by Syrian Christians. The title of the 17th Demonstration, "Of Christ that he is the Son of God" (*καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*), indicates the subject. It is an extended excursus on Christology, which, when seen from the vantage point of Nicaea and the Graeco-Roman world, is indeed unusual, but hardly—when put in its proper context—an "unicum."

The beginning of the Demonstration (XVII.1) states the charge made by Jews against Christians:

...they (the Jews) say thus: "You worship and serve a man (τὸν Ἰησοῦν) who was begotten, and a son of man (ὁ ἄνθρωπος) who was crucified, and you call (ὁ Ἰησοῦς θεός) a son of man ‘God’