

## Bardaisan

### Book of the Laws of Countries

Anthony Alcock

The Syriac text, with French translation, of this text was published by F. Nau in *Les livres des lois des pays* (1899).<sup>1</sup> The text has clearly been damaged in one small section, so no translation is forthcoming. The English translation that follows has been made largely from the French but with reference to the Syriac. I write as a non-expert for the benefit of other non-experts, and this is not intended to be a work of scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

In his translation Nau has indicated the page numbers of the Syriac text, and I have done the same. I have also followed the paragraph divisions of his translation, but without the numbers. The text is 6th-7th cent. and was acquired by the British Museum and first identified by William Cureton in 1845. The catalogue no. is B.L. Add, 14.658.

Bardaisan, whose name means 'son of the Daisan',<sup>3</sup> was born in 154 AD and probably died 222 AD at Edessa (Urha/Urfa), which at one point was known as *Edessa Parthorum*, so his 'nationality' can be described as Syrian or Parthian. He was a friend and courtier of Abgar VIII (177-212), under whose influence he seems to have converted to Christianity. He is said to have been a skilled archer. His first language was Syriac and he was competent in Greek. He made the acquaintance of Indian legates, the so-called gymnosophists, to the court of Antoninus Heliogabalus (218-222). He wrote books (*libros*) attacking the gnostic Marcion (85-160) that were translated into Greek, but none has survived. He, together with Marcion and Mani, incurred the displeasure of Ephrem, and I think this may have been because his Christianity was a bit suspect. He says of himself, for example, in §25 that he once pursued the study of astrology.

The text, largely about free will, is in the form of a dialogue between Bardaisan and Avida and Philip, the writer of this text. The optimistic views of Bardaisan on man's free will are echoed about a century later by Pelagius from the part of Britain now known as Wales. The views of both Bardaisan and Pelagius stand in stark contrast to the gloomy views of Mani and Augustine. The 'laws of the countries' do not become a subject of discussion until about the last third of the dialogue: they are mentioned for the first time at bottom of p. 18 of the Syriac text. The

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1 I have used a PDF copy, in which there is a certain amount of confused pagination.

2 H. J. Drijvers *Book of the Laws of Countries* (1965) is a work of scholarship, but I have not consulted it because I have no access to it.

3 A river near Edessa that regularly burst or 'leapt' over its banks until it was brought under control in the 6th cent. : 'leaping' ܠܡܝܢ

initial two thirds of the text are devoted to major questions, posed by Avidas and Philip and answered by Bardaisan:

- (1) Was God unable to create man in such a way that he would not sin ? (10-20)
- (2) Does not evil come from our nature ? (21-24)
- (3) Does not evil come from destiny ? (25-34).

35-60 contain a series of considerations of the various laws or customs from China to Europe and, to some extent, how they interact with the movements of astral bodies.

Nau makes substantial use in his notes of the 4th cent. writer on astrology Firmicus Maternus, in particular the books entitled *Mathesis*.

9.<sup>4</sup> Several days ago we went up to visit Shemashgram<sup>5</sup> our brother, When Bardaisan came and found us, he examined<sup>6</sup> him and found him in order, and then he questioned us: 'What were you talking about, for I heard you outside as I was coming in ?' It was his habit to question us when he found us discussing something, so that he could discuss it with us.

10. We replied: 'A certain Avida<sup>7</sup> said to us: "If God, as you say, is one, if he created man, if he wishes you to do what you have been ordered to do, why did he not create man in such a way that he is not able to sin but always does what is good so that God's will is fulfilled ?"'

11. Bardaisan said to Avida: 'Tell me, my son, what is your opinion ? Is not the God of the universe one ? Or is he unique ? And does he not want people to behave righteously and virtuously ?' Avida replied: 'There are those of my age, master, whom I asked to give me a reply.' Bardaisan said: 'If you wish to learn, you have to ask men older than them. If you wish to teach, it is not suitable for you to ask them, (2) but to let them ask you what they want, for the masters are those who are asked not those who ask. And if they do ask, it is to form the intellect of their pupil by careful questioning to get to know what they are thinking, for it is very important for each one to know how to ask,'

12. Avida replied: 'I certainly wish to learn. But I began by asking my friends because I was too embarrassed to ask you.' Bardaisan said: 'You are speaking of appearances, but know that the one who asks good questions and wishes to be convinced<sup>8</sup> and uncontentiously<sup>9</sup> approaches the way of truth should feel no blame or shame, for your questions give pleasure to the one you are asking. So, my son, if you have ideas about the questions you are asking, develop them. If we like them, we will agree with you. If not, we will be obliged to show you why. If you merely wish to know this matter,<sup>10</sup> without any preconceived ideas about it, like someone who has just taken his place among his disciples and asks little, I will speak to you so that you do not leave us without some benefit. If

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4 It is not clear to me why Nau's translation starts with this number, but I have kept it for the sake of convenience

5 This person is also mentioned in G. Philips *The Doctrine of Addai the Apostle* (1876) p, 1 (Syriac). Gk form is Σημησιγράμμος. It means 'the sun has decreed', where the verb is ܫܘܡܘܢܐ

6 A cursory medical examination. Nau suggests 'feeling his pulse'.

7 A common name in Edessa cf. *Doctrine* p, 18 of the Syriac text.

8 According to Payne-Smith *Syriac Dictionary* p, 444b this seems to be related to Gk παιθεΐν.

9 ܠܘ ܕܢܘܨܐ

10 Without discussion.

you like what I tell you, we will continue to talk. If you do not like that, we will refrain from speaking.<sup>11</sup>

13. Avida replied: 'I too want<sup>12</sup> to listen (3) and be convinced, for I have never heard this question from anyone else, but I have put it to my friends, and they were unwilling to convince me and said to me: 'Believe firmly and you will be able to know everything', but I cannot believe if I am not convinced.'

14. Bardaisan said: 'Avida is not the only one who does not want to believe, but there are many others, and since they do not have faith, they cannot be convinced. They are always constructing and destroying and they find themselves without any knowledge whatever of truth, Consequently, since Avida does not wish to believe, I am going to speak to those of you who do believe on the question he has put, and in this way he will learn more.' And Bardaisan began to talk to us: 'There are many who do not have faith and have not received the science of knowing the truth, so they are not able to discourse and draw conclusions and do not easily have the courage<sup>13</sup> to listen, for they lack the basis of faith on which to build and are not sure what to hope in. Because they do not believe in God, they do not have the safeguard of his worship to keep them from superstition. He who does not fear God fears everything else. As for their not believing, they are not even sure that they are right not to believe, but they are mistaken in their thinking and cannot be firm. The taste of their thoughts is insipid in their mouths. They are always afraid, they tremble (4) and they rebel.

15. I will now address the question put by Avida: why did God not make man in such a way that we would not sin and not be guilty ? If man did not belong to himself, he would be the instrument of the one who made him move, and it is hence quite clear that he who made him could make him move towards good or evil. How would he be different from a lyre played by another or a vehicle driven by another ? Praise and blame are attached to the operator: the lyre and the vehicle have no idea if they are being operated well or badly. God in his mercy did not want to create man in this way, but he raised him above many creatures and made him equal to angels. Look at the sun, the moon, the celestial sphere and all the other things greater than us, they are not free but are bound by

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11 <sup>سبحر كحتم</sup>

12 Nau p. 29 n.1 discusses a matter of translation.

13 Nau suggests an alternative: 'do not manage to': <sup>لا يدرج</sup>

the precept of doing only what they have been told to do, and nothing else.<sup>14</sup> The sun does not say: 'I am not going to rise today'. The moon does not say: 'I am not going to wax and wane.' The stars do not say: 'I will not rise and set'. The sea does not say: 'I am not going to carry ships. I will stay in the area assigned to me.' The mountains do not say: 'We are not going to remain in the places where we have been put.' The winds do not say: 'We are not going to blow'. (5) The earth does not say: 'I am not going to support and bear all that is on me.' All these are servants and are subject to an order, they are the instruments of the wisdom of God which cannot err.

16. If all is made to serve, who is the one to be served ? And if there is one to be served, who is the servant ? One thing would not be different from another. A thing that would be one and have no distinction in it is a being that has so far not been created, but everything required for service has been supplied to the power of man, for man is made in the image of God.<sup>15</sup> These things have been given to him as a favour to serve for a period of time. He has the gift of the power to act in accordance with free will, and everything that comes within this power, he can do it if he wants or not do it if he does not want. He will justify or condemn himself. If he had been created not to be able to do evil and thus not to become guilty, then the good that he does would not be his and he could not justify himself through it. Justification and condemnation of the one who is not free to choose depends only on the spirit of the one who moves that person. Think also of the great mercy shown by God to man, who was given greater freedom than all the other elements<sup>16</sup> of which we have spoken to conquer himself, with the help of this freedom, to behave divinely and mingle with the angels, who also have free will (6). As we understand it, the angels had free will, because otherwise they would not have associated<sup>17</sup> with the daughters of men, would not sinned and would have fallen from their place.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it was through their free will that the other angels did the will of their master, were elevated, sanctified and received great benefits. Everything that exists needs the master of the universe. His bounty knows no limits. But know that the things of which I have said that they are subject to command are not completely deprived of free will and, for that reason, will be subject to judgement on the final day.'

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14 In the list that follows I have deliberately used rhetorical repetition, with a focus on the verbal construction 'am going to', which explicitly expresses intention.

15 According to Nau the form used here indicates that the writer of this was probably more familiar with the Hebrew than with the LXX: 𐤀𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤃

16 𐤀𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤃

17 𐤀𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤃

18 Gen. 6, 1-6

17. I said to him: 'How can the things that are determined be judged ?' He replied: 'The elements will not be judged according to how they are joined together, Philip,<sup>19</sup> but according to their own power. Beings are not deprived of their nature when constituted but only of the strength of their essential quality,<sup>20</sup> for they are mingled with each other and restrained by the power of their creator.<sup>21</sup> They will not be judged in that they are subject but according to what is their own.

18. Avida responded: 'Everything you say is fine, but the commandments given to men are difficult and not easy to obey.' Bardaisan said: 'This is the word of someone who does not wish to do good, and especially someone who obeys and is already subject to the Adversary, because men are ordered to do only what they can. Two (7) commandments are given to us, which are acceptable and conducive to freedom: one is to avoid all that is wicked, which we would not want to happen to us; the other is to do good, which we would want to happen to us. Who is not capable of not stealing, lying, committing adultery and fornication, being envious or deceitful. It all depends on how one thinks, not the strength of the body but the will of soul. However poor, ill, old, impotent, one can always not do any of that, And just as one can always not do any of that, one can also love, bless, tell the truth, pray for the good of those one knows. If one is in good health and it is within one's power, one can give what one has and help with the strength of one's body to him who is sick and broken. I do not know what it is that he cannot do and that gives rise to the complaints of the unbelievers. I think that man has greater strength in the matter of these commandments than in other things, for they are easy and there is no obstacle in them. In fact, we have not been commanded to carry heavy burdens of stone or wood, which only athletes can do, or to build strong towns and cities, which only a king can do or to steer a ship, which only sailors can do, or to measure and divide the earth, which is the skill proper to surveyors (8) or to do any of the jobs known to specialists but unknown to the rest of us. But thanks to the goodness of God, we have been given commandments involving no difficulty and everyone can do them with ease, for there is no-one who does not rejoice in doing good and who is not perfectly happy to avoid doing evil, except for those not created for good, who are called tares.<sup>22</sup> Only an unjust judge would accuse somebody of not doing what he was unable to do.

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19 The name of the person who wrote this dialogue and refers to himself as 'I'

20 אֱלֵמֶנְטָא

21 אֲדַיְרָא

22 Matth. 13, 38

19. Avida said to him: 'You maintain that these things are easy to do ?' Bardaisan replied: 'For those who wish to do them, I maintain as before that they are easy to do, for that is the good path for free will and the soul that does not rebel against its guides. But, as for the action of the body, he is troubled by many things, such as old age, sickness and poverty.'

20. Avida said: 'I agree that man can refrain from hateful acts. But who can do good ?' Bardaisan continued: 'It is easier to do good than avoid evil. Good is proper to man, so he rejoices when he does it; but evil is the work of the devil,<sup>23</sup> so man commits evil acts only when subject to his passions and his nature is not healthy. Know, my son, that to praise and bless one's soul is easy (9), whereas not to pursue or curse enemies is not easy, even if it is possible. If someone does good, his spirit is satisfied and his conscience at ease. He wants everyone to see what he has done. If someone sins, from that time<sup>24</sup> he is troubled and anxious, full of anger, his spirit and body sick. While he is in this state, he does not wish to be seen by anybody, and even the things that he likes, which bring glory and blessing, he now despises them. After the trouble and anxiety come the curse of reproach.<sup>25</sup> Somebody will say to me at this point that the mentally unbalanced are content after having done wrong, but this contentment does not come from their action or from their being praised or from their being hopeful. So ultimately, it does not last with them, for the contentment of the healthy person, based on good hope, is one thing and the contentment of the sick, based on bad hope is another. Concupiscence is one thing and charity another. Passion is one thing and friendship another, and we should have no difficulty understanding that false love is also called concupiscence and, while it might bring momentary relief, it is far from the true love that gives us eternal, incorruptible and unfailing<sup>26</sup> contentment.'

21. I said to him: 'Avida here claims that man sins naturally: if it were not natural for him to sin, he would not sin.' Bardaisan replied: 'If all men acted in the same way and employed (10) one mode of thought, it would be clear that that they are guided by their nature and that they do not have the freedom of which I have spoken. To help you understand what nature is and what freedom is, I will repeat: It is natural for man to be born, grow up, reach maturity, procreate, grow old eating and

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23 <sup>ⲉⲃⲓⲛⲁ</sup>

24 <sup>ⲉⲃⲓⲛⲁ</sup>

25 <sup>ⲉⲃⲓⲛⲁ ⲉⲃⲓⲛⲁ</sup>

26 <sup>ⲉⲃⲓⲛⲁ</sup>

drinking, sleeping and keeping watch<sup>27</sup> and then die. These are the things of nature that happen to all men, and not only to men but also to animals that have life, and some of them happen to plants. It is the work of nature,<sup>28</sup> which acts, creates and produces everything it has been ordered to produce.

Nature is conserved by animals in their very actions. The lion naturally eats meat, and all lions are carnivores. Sheep eat grass, and all sheep are herbivores. The bee makes honey and lives on it, so all bees are honey-producers. The ant collects food for nourishment during the winter, and all ants do the same. The scorpion uses his sting to strike the one who has not wounded him, and all scorpions do the same. All animals follow natures: carnivores do not eat grass and herbivores do not eat meat.

22. Men do not follow the same laws. They follow the same laws as animals in matters of the body, but in matters (11) of the spirit they do what they want, for they are free, masters of themselves and images of God.<sup>29</sup> There are some who eat meat and not bread and some who distinguish between various types of meat. There are some who do not eat the meat of a living animal.<sup>30</sup> Some have intercourse with their mothers, sisters or daughters, while others stay away from women. Some take revenge like lions and panthers. Others, like scorpions, attack those who have done them no harm. Some are led like sheep and do no harm to the one who leads them. Some behave well, some justly and others wickedly.

23. If anyone says that it is the nature of each person that makes him act in this way, one will see that he is wrong, for certain people were once debauched drunkards and, after having been reprimanded by good monarchs, became pure and temperant and came to despise their bodily desires. Others lived in purity and temperance and the departed from orthodox teaching, rebelled against the divine commandments and their teachers, fell from the path of truth and became debauched sybarites. Some arose once again from their fall, became subject to fear and returned to the truth which they had once professed.

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27 **מחכים**

28 Used in the most general sense: **טבע**

29 'Image of God': here **תבנית אלהים** and on page 5 **לפי אלהים** . , where the latter is a citation using the vocabulary of the Hebrew OT: **צלם** and **אלהים**

30 i.e. in which there is blood. Gen. 9,4

So, what is human nature ? All people differ from each other in their actions and their expressions of will. Those who submit to one intelligence and one will do like things. But the people who have so **(12)** far let themselves be deceived by their desires and guided by their passions want to blame the creator for the sins they commit so that they appear blameless and vainly attribute guilt to the one who made them. They do not see that for the works of nature there is no law. One man cannot be accused<sup>31</sup> of being tall or short, for being white or black, for having large eyes or small eyes, or for having bodily impairments. But if a person steals or lies, if he does things that are wrong, if he poisons or insults, or does anything of this sort, he is reproached. So one can see that neither guilt nor justification has anything to do with what is beyond our control or happens naturally. But things that we do of our own free will: if they are good, we incur no blame and we may even gain glory in them; but if they are bad, we are censured and accused.'

25. We asked him another question: 'There are some who claim it is fate that controls man, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad.' He replied: 'I know for certain,<sup>32</sup> Philip, I know that there are people called Chaldeans and others who love knowledge of this sort, as I too once did. I have said elsewhere that the human soul wishes to know what most do not know. These people think that they can do this, and all the sins of men and their good actions **(13)**, all that happens to them, wealth and poverty, sickness, health, bodily deformities happen through the control of the stars called the Seven, by which they are governed. Others think that this is mere Chaldean trickery and that fate does not exist and that it is only an empty name, that all the great and small things depend only on man and that physical deformities and vices happen to him by chance. Others maintain that everything man does he does with the free will granted to him, whereas vices, faults and disasters are a punishment sent by God.

26. In my humble opinion, these views<sup>33</sup> are both right and wrong. They are right when they confine themselves to speaking of appearances men see, for they can see that they are only temporary appearances. But they are wrong because the wisdom of God is superior to theirs; it created the worlds, man and the order of those who govern and gave to each the power suitable to each. By

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31 ܠܘܘܢܐ

32 Looks like a name Bar Yama, but Nau believes that it should be understood as ܠܘܘܢܐ

33 Greek ἀίρεσις in Syriac form: ܐܝܪܝܫܝܢܐ

which I mean that power belongs to God, the angels, those who dominate and those who govern,<sup>34</sup> the elements, man and animals. But all the orders of which I have just spoken do not have power over everything. The one who has power over everything is unique. They are powerful in some respects but not in others, (14) as I have said, inasmuch as the power of God is evident in them when they are powerful and the subservience to a master when they are weak.

27. There is thus fate,<sup>35</sup> as the Chaldeans say, and not everything depends on our will. This is clear from the fact that most people wish to be rich, give orders to their fellow man, be healthy and be obeyed by things as they wish. But only a few are wealthy and have power to command. Not all people enjoy good health and not all people who have wealth have it completely and not all powerful people are served by events as they would wish. Sometimes, to their distaste, they are disobeyed. Sometimes the rich become richer, as they wish, and sometimes they become poorer, as they do not wish. Those who are completely destitute remain unwillingly in that condition and live in the world as they do not wish, envying what they cannot have. Many have children which they do not bring up. Others bring them up without keeping them. Others keep them and they become a source of shame and sadness to their parents. Some are rich, as they wish, and sick, as they do not wish. Some are healthy, as they wish, and poor, as they do not wish. There are some who have a lot of what they want and only a little of what they do not want, and vice-versa. Thus, it is clear that riches, honours, health and sickness, (15) children and all our wishes depend on fate and are not in our power. When certain things happen as we want, we give thanks and rejoice. To things that we do not want we are drawn forcibly. However, the things that happen against our will show us quite clearly that the things that we want do not happen because we want them, but they are what they are, and we are glad of some but not of others. In short, we are all guided in the same way by nature and in different ways by fate. Each one behaves as he wishes with the help of freedom.

Let us add a few words to show we are not controlled by fate. In fact, what is called fate is the mode of action<sup>36</sup> that has been given by God to the rulers and the elements. This mode and this action modify the intelligence as it descends into the soul and the soul as it descends into the body. This agent of modification is called fate and the birth house of the totality<sup>37</sup> that has been sieved and

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34 Nau has a note on these terms, with particular reference to Eph. 1, 21

35 *سما*

36 *سما و سماء و سماوات*

37 Nau uses 'horoscope' : *سما و سماوات*

purified for the advantage of those who, by the grace and mercy of God, exist and will continue to exist until the end of the world.<sup>38</sup>

29. Thus, the body is guided by nature and the soul suffers and feels with it, but is neither constrained nor helped by the fate we have just spoken of, in all things, one by one. So, a man cannot become a father until he is fifteen and a woman cannot become a mother until she is thirteen. There is a law for old age, by virtue of which woman stop being able to give birth and men are deprived of the natural power (16) to procreate. Certain animals, also guided by nature, can produce offspring before the ages I have just mentioned and become too old to procreate. Let us further say that when the human body has become too old for procreation, human beings cannot have children by fate when their body is too old. Equally, fate cannot keep the body alive with food and drink nor can it prevent the body from dying while it is still eating and drinking. All of these and many other things depend on nature.

30. But while times and modes of action are completed, fate comes, reveals itself and produces various effects: sometimes it helps and reinforces nature, sometimes it afflicts and contradicts it. From nature comes growth and the perfection of the body. But external to nature and as a result of fate come illnesses and bodily defects. It is from nature that male and female come together to satisfy their desires.<sup>39</sup> But fate gives rise to repulsion and separation<sup>40</sup> and defiled passions in the act of intercourse. From nature comes birth and children, but by virtue of fate children may be deformed. sometimes rejected and sometimes premature. Nature provides enough food for all bodies, but fate brings about shortages and suffering. Fate is also responsible for gluttony and unsuitable luxury. Nature requires (17) the old to judge the young and the wise the mentally impaired, the strong to lead the weak and the courageous the timid. But fate ensures that the young command the old, the foolish, the wise, and in times of war the weak guide the strong, the timid the valiant.

31. Let it be enough for you to know that it is always fate that is responsible for the malfunctioning of nature, because the 'leaders and guides', on whom the influence called the birth house<sup>41</sup> depends,

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38 Nau has a note that there is a commentary on this passage in §58: essentially God has mixed good with bad in the creation of the world to mitigate the noxious effect of the bad. 'World' translates 𐤎

39 Nau has a note on this passage.

40 𐤎𐤍𐤏𐤃

41 The same word occurs earlier, and in both passages Nau uses the term 'horoscope', which he explains in his note here (p. 42 n.3) as the zodiacal point situated on the eastern horizon.

are opposed to each other. Those on the right are called 'the ones who help nature': they enhance its beauty, provided that their course is appropriate, that they are situated in the elevated positions of the celestial spheres in the degrees that are proper to them. Those on the left are called 'bad', and when they occupy the elevated positions, they are opposed to man and harm not only men but also sometimes animals, trees, fruits, the fruits of the harvest and sources of water, in a word everything in nature that is under their control. This division and the disagreement between the 'dominators'<sup>42</sup> led many to believe that the world is guided without providence because they did not know that this disagreement and division, the innocence and the defects belong to the actions that God left as a matter of free will so that the agents might be able to preserve their innocence or incur their own guilt by the exercise of free will.

32. We have just seen how fate can harm nature. We will learn that man's freedom can repel fate and shackles, but not entirely, as (18) fate is not able to destroy nature completely. It is therefore necessary that these three things, nature, fate and freedom, retain what is proper to them until the courses<sup>43</sup> are completed and the measure and number are accomplished in such a way as appears good to the one who decrees life<sup>44</sup> and the end of life of all creatures and the state<sup>45</sup> of all beings and all natures.<sup>46</sup>

33. Avida said: 'I am convinced by the demonstration you have just given that man does not sin because of his nature and that all men do not behave in the same way. Now, if you can show me that men do not sin because of fate or necessity, I will have to believe that man has free will and that he tends towards good and avoids evil because of his nature, whence he will be judged on the Last Day.'

Bardaisan replied: 'Because people do not act in the same way, you are convinced that it is not natural for them to sin, But you will also have to acknowledge that people do not sin because of their fate if we can show you that the fate of the planets does not act in the same way over all men, but that we have our free will so as not to have to obey the natural order of the world and not be set

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42 Nau adds 'planets' in brackets: ⲉⲗⲓⲛⲁⲓ

43 ⲛⲁⲩⲓⲛⲁ

44 ⲛⲁⲩⲓⲛⲁ

45 ⲛⲁⲩⲓⲛⲁ

46 At this point Bardaisan appears to concede that the planets exercise a guiding influence. cf. Nau p.43 n. 3

in motion by the "powers".

Avida said: 'Show me, and you will have convinced me and I will do all that you command.'

34. Bardaisan said: 'Have you read the books of the Chaldeans of Babylon (19) that describe the effect of the planets in their mutual relationships on the birth house of man or the books of the Egyptians that describe everything that can happen to men ?'

Avida replied: 'I have read those of the Chaldeans, but I do not know those of the Babylonians or the Egyptians.' Bardaisan; 'They have to do with the teaching of both countries.' Avida said: 'Yes, this is known.'

Bardaisan replied: 'Listen and learn that the people who cover the face of the earth do not all do what the planets decide in their fates and according to their sectors.<sup>47</sup> For men in each country have devised for themselves laws with the help of the freedom that was granted to them by God and was opposed to the 'powers', which appropriated to themselves what had not been given to them. So, I will now speak, as far as I can remember, about the laws from the Orient, the beginning of the whole world.

35. *The laws of the Seres (Chinese)*. It is against the law to kill, fornicate, worship idols and in all of China there are no idols, prostitutes or murderers, even though they are born on all days and at all hours and the powerful Mars,<sup>48</sup> when at the meridian, does not prevent a man from shedding the blood of a neighbour with an iron weapon. And Venus,<sup>49</sup> in conjunction with Mars, does not prevent any Chinese man from having intercourse with his neighbour's wife or another woman. But there are in China rich and poor, sick and healthy, masters and servants (20), because all of that is left to the 'guides'.<sup>50</sup>

36. *The laws of the Brahmins<sup>51</sup> of India*. The Brahmins in India, of whom there are thousands and

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48 The planet and zodiac constellation seem to be used interchangeably. I cannot find any of them in Payne-Smith: 

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50 Nau has a note on this term.

51 The third consonant looks like a velar plosive: 

tens of thousands, are ordered not to kill, worship idols, fornicate, eat meat or drink, and nothing of the sort is done among them, and people have been observing this law for thousands of years.

37. *Other laws in India.* There is another law in India, in the same climate<sup>52</sup> for those who are not the Brahmin<sup>53</sup> caste<sup>54</sup> and teaching, to worship idols, kill, fornicate and commit acts that are repellent Brahmins. There are also people in India who regularly eat human flesh as other people eat animal flesh. The bad planets do not compel the Brahmins to do bad and unclean things and the good planets do not persuade the other Hindus not to do bad things. The planets well positioned in places that suit them and in the human signs of the zodiac<sup>55</sup> are unable to persuade the cannibal to refrain from their unclean and odious food.

38. *The laws of the Persians.* Persians had a law that allowed men to marry their sisters, daughters and grand-daughters (21), some going even further and marrying their mothers. Some of these Persians dispersed and went to live among the Medes, in Atrapatene,<sup>56</sup> among the Parthians, in Egypt and in Phrygia. They are called Magi, and wherever they are they obey the laws of their fathers.

We<sup>57</sup> cannot say that for all the Magi and the rest of Persia that Venus was placed with the moon<sup>58</sup> and Saturn<sup>59</sup> in the house of Saturn in its degree in the presence of Mars.

39, There are many regions of Parthia where men can kill their wives, brothers and children with impunity, whereas among Romans and Greeks there is a considerable financial penalty for murder.

40. *Laws of the Gelae.*<sup>60</sup> Among the Gelae women sow, harvest, build and do all the things that

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52 *سالم*

53 *براهمین*

54 *سومالی*

55 Those elements of the zodiac that represented human beings, such as the Water Carrier.

56 The eastern boundary is the Caspian Sea.

57 This item of commentary appears several times later.

58 *قمر*

59 *سатурن*

60 Nau writes 'Gèles'. Are they Scythian perhaps?: *سکوتیان*

workers do. They wear plain garments, do not wear sandals and make no use of agreeable perfumes. They are not reproached if they fornicate with foreigners or the servants in their household. Gelae men,<sup>61</sup> on the other hand, wear coloured garments and ornaments of gold and precious stones and anoint themselves with agreeable perfumes. They do so not because they are effete but because of a law. The men love hunting and fighting.

We cannot say of all Scythian women that Venus is in Capricorn or Libra instead of the evil spirit and we cannot say that for all the Scythians Mars and Venus are in Aries, where it is said that men are born courageous or lascivious.

41 *Laws (22) of the Bactrians*.<sup>62</sup> Among the Bactrians known as Kushans<sup>63</sup> women wear men's clothing and ornaments of gold and pearls. They are waited on by their servants rather than their husbands. They ride mares decked out in gold and precious stones. But these women are not chaste and they have intercourse with their servants and foreigners. Their husbands do not reproach them and the women are not afraid. We cannot say, however, of all Bactrian women that Venus is placed with Jupiter in the house of Mars at the meridian, where rich, adulterous and husband-dominating women are born.

42. *Laws of the Raqameans,<sup>64</sup> Edessenians and Arabs*. Among these peoples an adulterer is executed and the woman accused of adultery is punished.

43. *Laws of Hatra*.<sup>65</sup> According to a law of Hatra anyone stealing a small object, even of little value, is liable to be stoned. Among the Kushan, if anyone commits a robbery of this sort, people spit in his face. Among the Romans, one who commits petty theft is whipped and left. In the area between the Euphrates and the Orient, anyone accused of theft or murder does not become angry, but anyone

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61 Nau suggests that one might read 'husbands of Gelae women: 𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣

62 Bactria is between the Hindu Kush and the Pamir mountains, one of its cities now familiar to many of us being Kunduz. It is interesting to compare the writing of the second consonant here (pharyngeal fricative) with the third consonant of 'Brahmin' (velar plosive) in § 36: 𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣

63 In the late 1st cent. BC there was a fairly large empire to the north of India, which later fragmented, named Kushan: 𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣

64 Nau has a reference to Syriac version of Judges 6, 3, which I do not have. The verse in question refers to attacks by Midianites and Amalekites on Israelites as they are sowing their crops.

65 Near the Tigris.

accused of intercourse will take his revenge by killing.

44. *Laws of the Greeks*.<sup>66</sup> (23) Passage missing.

In the whole Orient those who are defiled or known as such are put to death by their fathers and brothers, and very often they are not allowed burial.

45.<sup>67</sup> In the north, on the other hand, among the Germans and their neighbours, handsome young boys are married by men like women, who even celebrate the event, The act involves no shame or opprobrium because of their law. It is impossible, however, that the birth house of all who are in this state of disgrace<sup>68</sup> places Mercury<sup>69</sup> with Venus in the house of Saturn, in the confines of Mars and the zodiac signs situated on the west, for it is written that men born in these circumstance will prostitute themselves like women.

46. *Laws of the Britons*. Several men share one woman.<sup>70</sup>

47. *Laws of the Parthians*. Among the Parthians a man marries several women and all obey him chastely, in accordance with the law.

48. *Laws of the Amazons*. Of the Amazons, an entire people, none has a husband. But once a year at springtime, like the animals, they leave their home, cross a river and on the other side celebrate a great feast on a mountain. The men of the region join them and spend fourteen days copulating with them. The women conceive and return (24). When they give birth, they throw away the male children and keep the female. It is clear that since they all conceive in the same month, they must all naturally give birth in more or less the same month. As we have heard, they are all courageous warriors, and no planet has ever been able to prevent them from abandoning their male children.

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66 Nau (p. 49 n.1) maintains that this passage was scratched with a knife by a 'Greek'. The passage has been summarized by Eusebius, who accuses the Greeks of feeling no shame at their practice of pederasty.

67 There seems to be some dispute (Nau p, 49 n. 3) about whether this passage ought to be removed.

68 س ح ك

69 م م م

70 Caesar *De Bello Gallico* 5,14: 4 seems to understand that the Britons practised polyandry, but this may be a form of matriarchy. Nau calls them 'Breton': ب ر تون

49. *Book of the Chaldeans*. It is written in the Book of the Chaldeans that if Venus and Mercury are together in the house of Mercury, painters, sculptors and bankers are born. If they are in the house of Venus, perfumers, dancers, musicians and poets are born. But in the countries of the Arabs and Saracens, in Upper Libya, Mauretania, Numidia, on the coast of the ocean, Outer Germany, Upper Sarmatia, Spain, in the countries north of the Black Sea,<sup>71</sup> among the Alans, in Albania, among the Saxons<sup>72</sup> and the Brusoi on the river Dur,<sup>73</sup> nobody has ever seen sculptors, painters, poets, perfumers, bankers: the influence of Mercury and Venus is non-existent on the circumference of the world.<sup>74</sup>

50. In all of Media, when people die, they are thrown to the dogs while still breathing. So the dead in Media are consumed by dogs, but we cannot say that all Medes are born when the moon is with Mars in Cancer during the day under the earth. For it is written that that is how those consumed by dogs are born.

51. Hindus, when they die are burned (25) and their numerous wives are burned alive with them. But we cannot say that the birth house of all these women contains Mars and the sun in Leo during the night under the earth, because this is how those to be burned are born.

52. Germans all die by strangulation, except for those killed in battle, and we cannot say that the birth house of all German comprises the moon and the hour between Mars and Saturn. But in all countries, on all days and at all hours, people are born with the most different birth houses and the laws carry them beyond fate and they behave according to their customs.

53. Fate does not force the Chinese to commit murder against their will; or the Brahmins to eat meat; or the Persians not to have intercourse with their sisters and daughters: or the Hindus not to have themselves burned: or the Medes not to let themselves be eaten by dogs; or the Parthians not to practise polygamy; or the Britons to abandon polyandry; or the Edessenians not to be pure; or the Greeks not to fight entirely naked; or the Romans not to constantly occupy new countries; or the Gauls not to have intercourse with each; or the Amazons to bring up their male children. Similarly,

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71 فلسط

72 This is only a guess.

73 Nau suggests Borussi (Prussians) and Oder.

74 فلسط

the birth house does not force people all over the world to cultivate the arts of the Muses, but, as I have said, people in every country make their own use of the freedom of their nature and they pay tribute to fate and nature because of (26) the body they have put on,<sup>75</sup> sometimes voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily, for in all these countries and among all these peoples there are rich and poor, leaders and subjects, healthy and sick, according to fate and the birth house allotted to them.'

54. I said to him: 'Father Bardaisan, you have convinced us about this and we acknowledge that it is all true. But you are aware that the Chaldeans have divided the world into seven parts called climates and each one is dominated by a planet, whose will is prevalent in each part, and it is called 'law'. He replied: 'My son Philip, know that this invention of the Chaldeans is merely a mistaken expedient. It is true that the world is divided into seven parts, but in these parts one finds numerous laws that are all different from each other. You must not think that there are only seven laws in accordance with the number of the planets or twelve laws in accordance with zodiac of thirty-six in accordance with the number of decans. But there are many laws in each kingdom, country, each circle and each inhabited area, and these laws are different from each other. Do you recall what I have just said ? In the Hindu climate there are people who do not eat animal flesh and others who eat human flesh. I have already told you about the Persians and Magi that it is not only in the Persian climate that they marry their daughters and sisters but that in all countries where they have settled (27) they have observed their ancestral laws and retained their ancestral religious practices. Remember too that many peoples around the world who inhabit not one climate but are exposed to all winds and climates do not have the arts endowed by a united Mercury and Venus. If the laws were bound to climates, that would not be possible, while it is clear that, since these people are so far from contact with others, they have quite different ways of living.

55. Think also of how many people have abolished laws of their country that seemed bad to them, how many laws have been repealed of necessity, and how many kings after having occupied countries that did not belong to them repealed the laws of their constitution<sup>76</sup> and replaced them with others as they wished, and during all of this the planets were unable to keep the laws. And to give you an example from a region that is not far away: the Romans recently occupied Arabia<sup>77</sup> and

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75 Like a garment: لثوب

76 Or 'previous'.

77 Under Septimius Severus 195-196

suppressed all existing laws, including circumcision, that was being practised at the time. For the one who enjoys free will submits to a law made by some else who enjoys free will.

56. I will give you another example that might convince more than anything the foolish and the faithless: All Jews who have received the Law of Moses circumcise their male children on the eighth day and do not wait for the stars to arrive, pay no attention to the law (28) of the country where they are or the planet that controls their climate. Whether they are in Idumaea, Arabia, Greece or Persia, they obey the law that they have received. So it is clear that they do not act in accordance with their birth house, for it is not possible that when they are circumcised, the eighth day after birth, Mars is not positioned in such a way that the knife strikes their skin and their blood is shed. All of them, wherever they may, do not worship idols and on one day of the week abstain from all work, travel, buying and selling. On the Sabbath they do not kill animals, light fires or conduct legal business. Among them you will find nobody who is obliged by fate on the Sabbath to plead, to be acquitted or condemned, to demolish or build or do any of the work done by others not subject to their laws, and there are many other things they do that others do not do. Nevertheless, on the Sabbath children are conceived and born, are sick and die, because none of these things is in the control of human beings.

In Syria and at Edessa certain men have suppressed their virility for Tharatha.<sup>78</sup> When Abgar was converted, he ordered the hand of any man who had emasculated himself to be cut off, and from that day to this nobody in Edessa has castrated himself.

57. What are to say of this new family of Christians created by the Messiah in every country and in every place (29) with his Coming<sup>79</sup> ? We Christians, wherever we are, are designated by the name of Christ. We celebrate the Lord's Day and abstain from eating on certain days. Our brothers in Gaul do not marry men. In Parthia they do not marry two women. In Judea they are not circumcised. Our sisters among the Gelae and the Kushan do have intercourse with foreigners. Our brothers in Persia do not marry their daughters. In Media they do not flee from the dead or bury them alive or feed them to the dogs. In Edessa they do not kill sisters or adulterous wives, but they remove themselves from them and leave them to the judgement of God. In Houtra they do not stone thieves. But wherever they are, the laws of the land do not alienate them from the Law of Christ, and fate does

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78 Nau p. 55 n.1: *ܐܘܪܝܫܐ*

79 *ܐܘܪܝܫܐ*

not force them to do what they consider to be impure, but they can be sick or healthy, wealthy or poor wherever they are because these things are not contingent on fate.

58. As human freedom is not controlled by the planets and, when it is controlled by them, can always resist them, so also man as we see him cannot escape immediately from the power of his planets, for he is a servant and submissive. If we were able to do everything, we would be all-powerful, whereas if nothing depended on us, we would merely be the instruments (30) of others. If God wills, everything is possible without confusion. Nothing can resist this great and holy will. This lasts for a short time because he is good and he allows all natures to remain in their essence and be led according to their will. They are bound by things that have been done and structures that have been established for their convenience. For that order and the direction that is given and the mixture of one with another prevents the force of natures from becoming completely harmful or completely susceptible to harm, as they were harming and being harmed before the creation of the world. The time will come when the harm that endures in them will be dissipated because of the teaching that will be in another mixture. In the constitution of this new world all movements will cease and all strife come to an end. The foolish will be persuaded and defects will be repaired and there will be peace and quiet from the bounty of the Lord of all natures.