

JOSEPH WIESHOFFER'S VIEWS ON CHRISTIANS UNDER THE SASANIAN RULE

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Christians had already spread themselves in Eranshahr around Edessa as their center long before the Sasanian rule, possibly in order to escape their persecution under the Roman Empire, but the important role for Christianity in the Sasanian empire was not played by them as much as by the deportation of several hundred thousand Christian craftsmen of Roman Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia to Iran by Shapur for pure economic reasons. Shapur settled them in fertile, but not very populated regions such as Khuzistan or Meshan. As Joseph Wiesehoffer (*Ancient Persia*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1996, pp. 201-2) comments: "By this policy, Shapur unintentionally promoted the spread of their Christian faith and Christian community. The process may have been accelerated by the king's steps to support the new settlers economically, the feeling of solidarity among the fellow-believers themselves, their sense of social advancement, and perhaps also by the idea of having thus escaped religious persecution (under Valerian). According to all our sources, the period of peace and prosperity for the Christian community lasted until the reign of Bahram II (276-293), under whom the first persecutions began. But even then, martyrdoms like the particularly well attested case of Bahram's concubine Candida remained exceptional until the fifth decade of the fourth century. At the beginning of this new century, the Sasanian empire became a refuge for many a Christian from the eastern Roman empire who sought protection from the persecutions of Galerius. The end of the third century already marked the first internal tensions among the Christians of the Sasanian empire, tensions brought about by a question of ecclesiastical organization, namely whether or not the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was entitled to the primacy among the bishops of the Sasanian empire. In this conflict, it is true, personal ambitions and animosities appear to have played a much greater part than historical considerations or problems of administration and ecclesiastical law. For all that, the arguments resulted in only one bishop of the (Sasanian) empire, presumably Yohannan bar Maryam of Arbela, being represented at the Council of Nicea of 325.

"For the Christians of the Persian empire, a new political situation emerged at the time. On the one hand, they had a new sovereign in Shapur II, who saw his main task as revising the dictated peace of Nisibis (297/8 AD) and was preparing with all his might for a war against Rome; on the other hand, the Roman emperor Constantine, who

considered himself the sovereign of *all* Christians, had made them his proteges without their asking. Their possible role as vanguards of Rome was also perceived by Shapur. On 17 April 340 or 341, after the first failures of the Sasanians in their renewed fight against Rome, Shem'on (Simeon) bar Sabba'e, the new metropolitan of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was urged by the king to collect a special tax from the Christians to finance the costs of war. His refusal was the prelude to the first systematic persecution of the Christians in the Sasanian empire. In the martyrology of Simeon, Shapur accuses the bishop of having political motives for his attitude:

[The king] said: 'Simeon wants to make his followers and his people rebel against my Majesty and become slaves of the emperor (Constantin) who shares their faith. That is why he will not obey my command.'

That the Christians were not quite groundlessly exposed to the suspicion of being Rome's 'fifth column' is shown in an excerpt from the *Demonstrationes* of the 'Persian sage' Aphrahat, the most important intellectual representative of Christianity in the Sasanian empire at that period:

The good comes to the people of God, and well-being remains with him through whom the good comes [Constantius]. Evil was also roused because of the forces massed by the evil, the overbearing and proud [Shapur]...That [Roman] empire will not be conquered, for the hero whose name is Jesus will come with his powers and his armour shall uphold the whole army of the empire.

In view of the barely controllable borders between the two empires in Mesopotamia and Armenia, another reproach levelled at the Christians also appears as not quite unfounded. The Chronicle of Arbela says among other things:

And they [the Jews and Manichaeans] explained to them [the Magi] that the Christians were all of them spies of the Romans. And that nothing happens in the kingdom that they do not write to their brothers who live there."

When in 410 the Christians in Iran created their own church completely independent of the eastern Roman State Church, the Sasanian rulers fully supported it. However, the Christians denied their support to the Sasanians when the Arabs arrived, presumably, per Wiesehoffer, because of their affinity with Christian Arab tribes (p. 205), but for all I know they were converted to Islam by that time. However, as I have shown elsewhere, Christians suffered considerably under the Muslim rule.

What Wiesehoffer adds in the Postscript, (pp. 243-4) reflects the

Zoroastrian response to “the others” in a positive light: “The Sasanians, though deporting Greeks and Romans from Syria, at the same time offered protection and refuge to persecuted minorities of the Roman empire, guaranteeing religious freedom and the chance of economic and social promotion to all those who proved loyal. ---

--- “As the empires of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians always embraced territories where non-Iranian groups of populations were at home, the problem of dealing with foreign languages, traditions and religious concepts, as well as with the political hopes and ambitions of previously independent nations, existed for all dynasties from the very beginning. On the whole, the long duration of their reign over 'Iran (and non-Iran)' speaks for a rather gentle, farsighted and altogether successful policy of the kings with respect to cultural, religious or political minorities. Their religious policy may stand as one of the many proofs for this theory. Religious conformity was never demanded as a means to safeguard the reign, and the ruling principle was always the advancement of reliable groups and communities and the punishment of disloyal ones. Thus the Jewish communities of Mesopotamia experienced a time of undreamt-of prosperity and cultural-religious creativity.”

He concludes: “Even if Zoroastrianism was soon reduced to a minority religion in Iran itself, --- Zarathustra's message has at all times found its admirers and followers.” (pp. 243-4).