The Persian Persecution:
Martyrdom, Politics, and Religious Identity in Late Ancient Syriac Christianity

by

Kyle Richard Smith

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

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Kalman Bland

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James Rives

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2011
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

According to the Syriac *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, the Sasanian king Shapur II began persecuting Christians in Persia soon after Constantine’s death in 337 CE. Previous studies of the *Acts* (and related material) set Shapur’s persecution within the context of Constantine’s support for Christianity in the Roman Empire. Religious allegiances are said to have been further amplified during the Roman-Persian war over Rome’s Mesopotamian provinces that followed Constantine’s death. According to most interpretations, by the mid-fourth century *Christianitas* had become coextensive with *Romanitas*: Persian Christians were persecuted because they worshipped Caesar’s god and, thereby, allied themselves with Rome.

By contrast, this dissertation reconsiders Christian historical narratives, the rhetorical and identity-shaping nature of the martyrlogical genre, and assumptions about the clear divisions of religious groups in late antiquity. Although the notion of Christianity as a “Roman” religion can be found in some of the historiography of persecution in Persia, our knowledge about Christians in fourth-century Persia is a harmonized event history woven from a tapestry of vague and conflicting sources that often exhibit later religious, political, and hagiographical agendas.

To demonstrate how Shapur’s persecution came to be interpreted as the result of religious changes within the Roman Empire, the dissertation first reconsiders how Constantine is imagined as a patron of the Christians of Persia in Syriac and Greek sources. The second part looks at the ways by which constructed imperial ideals territorialized “religion” in the post-Constantinian era. Finally, the third part presents the first English translations of the *Martyrdom* and *History of Simeon bar Šabbāê*, a fourth-century Persian bishop whose martyr acts are central to the historiography of the period.
Dedication

For my parents, who got me here.

And for Maggie, who has carried me since.
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# Abbreviations

**Classical Authors and Texts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Author/Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amm. Marc.</td>
<td>Ammianus Marcellinus <em>Res gestae</em></td>
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<td>Aph.</td>
<td>Aphrahat <em>Demonstrations</em></td>
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<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Aurelius Victor <em>Caesares</em></td>
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<td>Cons.</td>
<td>Emperor Constantine <em>Oratio ad sanctorum coetum</em></td>
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<td>CS</td>
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<td>Eph.</td>
<td>Ephrem the Syrian <em>Hymns against Julian</em></td>
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<td>CJ</td>
<td>Carmina Nisibena</td>
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<td>CNis</td>
<td>Memre on Nicomedia</td>
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<td>Euseb.</td>
<td>Eusebius of Caesarea <em>Demonstratio evangelica</em></td>
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<td>Historia ecclesiastica</td>
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<td>HE</td>
<td>Laus Constantini</td>
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<td>LC</td>
<td>Praeparatio Evangelica</td>
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<td>PE</td>
<td>Vita Constantini</td>
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<td>Fest.</td>
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<td>Heliod.</td>
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<td>Hippol.</td>
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<td>Julian</td>
<td>Emperor Julian <em>Orationes</em></td>
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<td>Lactant.</td>
<td>Lactantius <em>De mortibus persecutorum</em></td>
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<td>De mort. pers.</td>
<td>Martyrdom of the Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāṣe</td>
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<td>Soc.</td>
<td>Socrates <em>Historia ecclesiastica</em></td>
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<td>Soz.</td>
<td>Sozomen <em>Historia ecclesiastica</em></td>
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<td>Suet.</td>
<td>Suetonius</td>
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Dom. Life of Domitian
Theod. Theodoret of Cyrrus
  HE Historia ecclesiastica
  HR Historia religiosa
Theoph. Theophanes
  Chron. Chronographia

Journals, Serials, and Multi-Volume Publications

AAntHung Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae
AB Analecta Bollandiana
AES Archives européennes de sociologie
AF Altorientalische Forschungen
AJP American Journal of Philology
AJSL American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures
BAI Bulletin of the Asia Institute
BAR British Archaeological Reports
BHO Bibliotheca hagiographica orientalis
Bizantinistica Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi
Britannia Britannia. A Journal of Romano-British and Kindred Studies
BRL Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester
BSOAS Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
ByzF Byzantinische Forschungen
Byzantion Byzantion. Revue internationale des études byzantines
ByzZ Byzantinische Zeitschrift
CH Church History
CI Critical Inquiry
CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSEL Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSHB Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae
CP Classical Philology
CQ Classical Quarterly
DOP Dumbarton Oaks Papers
DR The Downside Review
ETSE Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile
Florilegium Florilegium. Journal of the Canadian Society of Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes
GCS Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller
GRBS Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
Historia Historia. Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte
HTR Harvard Theological Review
HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual
Hugoye Hugoye. Journal of Syriac Studies
HUJS Harvard Ukrainian Studies
IA Iranica antiqua
ICMR Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations
IJAIS Name-ye Iran-e Bastan. The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies
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Introduction

The year is disputed, but on Good Friday, sometime between 339 and 344 CE, the executioners of Shapur II beheaded Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē. Shapur was the king of Sasanian Persia for most of the fourth century, from 309-379. And Simeon, whose surname means “the Son of Dyers,”¹ was the Christian bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon—the twin cities and Persian winter capital on the alluvial plains of central Mesopotamia, some thirty-five kilometers down the Tigris from modern-day Baghdad.²

Simeon was among the first to be killed in Shapur’s “Great Persecution,” as the forty-year period of oppression came to be known in Persian Christian martyrlogical literature. As the bishop of the capital city, Simeon was Shapur’s most prominent victim. From the literary perspective of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, even though others may have been killed before him, Simeon was clearly the protomartyr whose death inaugurated Shapur’s long persecution in earnest. The opening line of the longer (and later) of Simeon’s two martyr acts, the History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē, refers to him as “the first one to excel in the land of the East as a blessed martyr of God.”³

¹ There is a play on Simeon’s surname in his acts: “He is rightly called by this name because his parents dyed silk with foreign blood as clothing for the impious kingdom. But Simeon dyed his garments with his own blood as a garment for the holy kingdom” (Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē 7). The intent behind the image of Simeon’s parents dyeing silk “with foreign blood” is unclear; a metaphorical interpretation, “for foreign blood” (i.e. for the king and the Persian court), would make more sense, but this interpretation is not sustained by the Syriac. Irrespective of how the text intends to express the work of Simeon’s parents, it is clear about Simeon himself: through his martyrdom, he dyed his own garment red with the blood of faith.

² By the fifth century, Seleucia-Ctesiphon was the patriarchal see of the “Church of the East.” It was the administrative center of Babylonia under the Parthians, and remained so with the rise of the Sasanians in the early third century CE. “The cities,” as they were known, were, however, demographically different from other, more “Iranian,” parts of the Sasanian Empire. As Jens Kröger notes: “Although situated in the heartland of the Sasanian empire … Ctesiphon and the surrounding area were inhabited mainly by Arameans, Syrians, and Arabs, who spoke Aramaic and were predominantly Christian or Jewish.” See J. Kröger, “Ctesiphon,” Encyclopaedia Iranica Online, 2005. Available at wwwiranica.com.

³ History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē 1. Although Simeon was the bishop of the capital, the reference (in the same section of the History) to him as the “catholicos of the Church of the
While Simeon’s name is unlikely to be familiar to most historians of Christian antiquity (especially by comparison to his well-published, Greek-speaking contemporaries in the Roman Empire—such as Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea), the Mesopotamian bishop’s martyr acts are nevertheless key for obtaining a full grasp of the hagiography and historiography of the people and tumultuous events of the early post-Constantinian era.4

The tumult of the era often found Shapur II at its center. The Persian king’s lifelong reign spanned the rules of multiple Roman rulers, all of whom knew Shapur’s name only too well. Over a quarter century of Shapur’s time on the throne was spent engaged in a mostly simmering (but occasionally boiling) border dispute with the Roman Empire. At the time of Simeon’s martyrdom, the zone of Roman control in northern Mesopotamia crossed the Tigris and encroached uncomfortably upon the Persian frontier and, not too much further to the south, the Persian capital at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Shapur aimed to wrest the Roman Transtigritanian provinces back into Persian control, thereby buffering and enhancing his own realm while at the same time vindicating his grandfather, from whom the Transtigritanian provinces had been


4 Most recently on historiography and hagiography as the two main narrative approaches to writing about the past in late antiquity, see the collection of articles in Writing ‘True Stories’: Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East, ed. A. Papaconstantinou (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). For present purposes, see especially the contribution of M. Debié, “Writing History as ‘Histoires’: The Biographical Dimensions of East Syriac Historiography,” 43-75.
ignobly appropriated at the end of the third century.\(^5\)

Four Roman emperors, in particular, were forced to deal warily with their Persian counterpart: 1) the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine the Great; 2) Constantine’s son and the defender of the Roman East, Constantius; 3) the “Apostate” Julian, who was killed in Persia while campaigning against Shapur; and finally 4) Jovian, a general in the Roman army and Julian’s short-reigned Christian successor who is perhaps most remembered for agreeing to the embarrassing and one-sided terms for peace with the Persians in the aftermath of Julian’s tactical follies. For at the time of Julian’s death, the Roman army was seriously beleaguered. It was stuck on the wrong side of the Tigris and fleeing northward with no easy means of egress to the safety of Roman territory. The peace accord to which Jovian hastily submitted saved the army from near-certain death or capture, but at the great expense of the whole of Roman Mesopotamia: five entire provinces and over a dozen fortified and strategically-important cities—including Nisibis, the home of the Christian poet Ephrem the Syrian and the crown jewel of Roman Mesopotamia.

Although it is unlikely that conflicts over religious allegiances, especially during Julian’s reign, were anywhere near the forefront of the Roman-Persian war or on the minds of those conducting it, according to many of the Christian sources that narrate the period, religious conflicts were never very far beneath the surface. If Simeon’s martyr acts and the attendant Greek and Syriac ecclesiastical histories that speak about the fourth-century confrontation between Shapur and his Christian subjects are to be believed, then Simeon was killed for refusing to collect taxes from the Christians of Persia. According to many of these same sources, what led to the taxation (and persecution) of the Christians of Persia was the suspicion that all Christians everywhere

were, by dint of their religion, surreptitiously allied with the Christian caesars of Rome.

The question (which is more of a statement than a question) is often posed this way: after Constantine’s conversion, how could Christians living in Persia be trusted to support a Magian (Zoroastrian) shah over and against a Christian caesar—their co-religionist and the protector of a Christian empire? Such a question, and the obvious conclusion that it implies, sounds eminently reasonable. But, as this dissertation will argue, the idea that the Christians of fourth-century Persia were persecuted because of their presumed religio-political allegiances to the Roman Empire is a pious fiction. It is an *ex post facto* theological story that reflects the presumed “triumph” of Christianity in the Roman Empire under Constantine. It is, moreover, a harmonized event history woven from a tapestry of vague and conflicting sources that were often written decades (even a century or more) after the events that they narrate.

To make the case for re-reading fourth-century history in a way that is perhaps more attendant to its hagiographical dimensions, this dissertation examines multiple historical and hagiographical texts that address three interconnected themes: the last days of Constantine; the Roman-Persian war following Constantine’s death; and the persecution of the Christians of Persia that is believed to have resulted from the incipient Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine’s rule. An extended analysis of the sources shows that there is not (and has never been) just one history of fourth-century Mesopotamia, but rather a series of multiple and fragmented histories—each with its own historiographical, hagiographical, and ideological agendas—that tend to be further fragmented and subverted as they are appropriated for source material by later historians.

As the central narrative of the early days of Shapur’s persecution, the martyr acts of Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē are the cornerstone around which much of the historiography relevant to Constantine, Shapur, and fourth-century Persian-Christian identity turns.
Yet, although Part III of this dissertation provides the first English translations of Simeon’s martyr acts, the overriding concern of the dissertation is not the historical events that precipitated, accompanied, and ultimately stemmed from Simeon’s death. Rather, the focus is on the varying, and often contradictory, explanations of these events. This project is, therefore, two things: 1) a re-examination of the historical memory of a set of events—events whose chronology, sequence, causality, and even actuality are a matter of some dispute—and 2) an analysis of how a particular Christian and Roman memory of these events became reified as the only “true” history of the early post-Constantinian era.

The story of Simeon’s death, this dissertation contends, is part of a grander historical narrative about Christian identity in late antiquity—a narrative that encompasses the Roman and the Persian Empires and exemplifies how the Roman Empire began to be conceived as an imperium Christianum. Indeed, the equation of Romanitas with Christianitas, an association first and most prominently made by Christian historians writing in the Roman Empire, soon, but by no means immediately, became the intellectual and theological paradigm for explaining the troubled times endured by the Christians of the Sasanian Persian Empire as well. This dissertation seeks to show how that paradigm, in the wake of Constantine’s conversion, roiled Christian historiography with ripple effects as far away as the Iranian plateau.

**Constantine: The Savior of the Christians of Persia**

It is not an overstatement to say that historians of late antiquity have often regarded Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, and his subsequent patronage of the Christian cult, as one of the most consequential events in the history of Europe. But this

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“event,” it hardly needs to be said, has not always been seen in a positive light. To use the most obvious example, Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is premised largely on the idea that Rome’s supposed “decline” was hastened by the rapid expansion of Christianity, an expansion that was possible only because of Constantine. As Arnaldo Momigliano once claimed, under Christian Roman emperors beginning with Constantine, “money which would have gone to the building of a theatre or of an aqueduct now went to the building of churches and monasteries.”

Unquestionably, the social ascent of Christianity in the Roman Empire occasioned the forging of new loyalties, new allegiances, and a new social order, but scholars still disagree about how quickly these changes took place and how rapidly old Rome became in any real sense a “Christian” empire. Nevertheless, the idea that Constantine’s embrace of Christianity represents an historical watershed as obvious as a ridge rising high on an otherwise unbroken plain is a theme that runs deep. Oddly, however, the question of how Constantine’s religious reforms may have transfigured Roman foreign policy towards Persia, or directly affected the Christians living there, is not one that is often discussed among scholars whose primary interest is the reign of Constantine. When Persia and Persian Christians are addressed, the perspective is often

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8 Typically, questions about Constantine’s conversion and religious reforms focus on the emperor’s reforms within the Roman Empire, not their effect (or even their intended effect) elsewhere. If the emperor’s reforms “outside” the Empire are discussed, it is typically with reference to Constantine’s campaigns in Germanic lands rather than any new policies towards Persia. Sasanian Persia, especially Christians in Sasanian Persia, hardly get mentioned. See, for example, these major (English-language) studies of Constantine and his reign: N.H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (London, 1931); A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1948); T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); H. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore:
an Orientalist one. That is, it is a description of Persia and Persian Christians from the perspective of the Roman Empire—a description that universally privileges the witness of Roman ecclesiastical historians writing in Greek or Latin over and against Persian Christian sources written in Syriac.

Although the points of emphasis vary somewhat, the facts of the prevailing scholarly narrative about Shapur’s persecution of Christians typically begin at some point prior to Constantine’s death in the spring of 337 CE. As early as the mid-320s, so the argument goes, Constantine’s public patronage of and support for Christianity was growing steadily and was well-known throughout the Roman Empire. According to Eusebius, Constantine had even trumpeted his Christian bona fides beyond the borders of the Roman Empire when he sent a curious letter to the Persian king in which he warned Shapur that no good comes to those who persecute Christians—this apparently before Shapur began his persecution of Christians in the early 340s.

In his laudatory Life of Constantine (VC), Eusebius claims to have translated Constantine’s letter to Shapur into Greek from the emperor’s original Latin.⁹ As a result of the letter—in which Constantine not-so-subtly implies that a heralded military victory over the Romans by Shapur’s great-grandfather was, in fact, providentially orchestrated by the God of the Christians—we seem to have evidence that the Persians had been put on notice that the Roman emperor was both a “Christian” and a patron of the Christians of Persia. How Shapur would have understood what being Christian meant is another issue entirely, but, if Constantine’s letter is authentic, then it at the very least provides evidence that Shapur would have known that Christians were important to Constantine

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and, by extension, presumably to the Roman Empire as well.

Although the authenticity and date of Constantine’s letter are disputed, it is generally believed that shortly before his death the emperor set out to the east on what would be the final campaign of his life. Constantine’s march toward the Mesopotamian battlefield where he would meet Shapur—a setting-out that was, and often still is, interpreted in strikingly religious terms—was ill-fated. The emperor died hardly a hundred kilometers from Constantinople and nowhere near the Roman eastern frontier where he might have clashed with Shapur.¹⁰

Soon after Constantine’s death—perhaps within months, or at least during the campaigning season of 338—Shapur’s armies began ravaging cities and fortresses in the Transtigritanian provinces of Roman Mesopotamia. In particular, Shapur laid siege to the city of Nisibis. Shapur’s siege of the city, as related by Ephrem the Syrian’s eyewitness account and a number of other contemporary sources, was a failure. It was to be the first of three unsuccessful sieges of Nisibis over the next dozen years.¹¹

Once again, the precise date is unclear, but, according to Simeon’s martyr acts, either immediately after or at least within a few years of Shapur’s return from his first siege of Nisibis, he levied a heavy tax on the Christians of Persia. Although there is no contemporary Persian source attesting to the “double poll tax” and “double tribute” that

¹⁰ VC IV.56-57 explains that Constantine discussed the Persian campaign with a number of bishops who promised to fight alongside the emperor (in prayer) during his expedition. Timothy Barnes has perhaps most strongly emphasized the religious nature of Constantine’s final campaign, suggesting that Constantine intended to liberate the Christians of Persia. See Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” JRS 75 (1985): 126-136. Cf. R. Blockley, “The Romano-Persian Peace Treaties of AD 299 and 363,” Florilegium 6 (1984): 28-49, who does not go nearly as far as Barnes, and suggests only that the introduction of Christianity into Roman and Persian relations complicated the allegiances of citizens and vassal states in the Mesopotamian borderlands—a point that is certainly not without merit.

¹¹ I discuss the assaults on Nisibis, and their retelling in historical sources, in chapter four. In most Christian literary accounts, it was the prayers of Christians (namely, Jacob of Nisibis and Ephrem) that saved the city from the Persian onslaught. As I indicated, while the city never fell to Shapur’s military assaults, the Persians did ultimately win the city under the terms of the peace treaty negotiated by Jovian following Julian’s disastrous incursion into Mesopotamia.
is recounted in Simeon’s *History*, the prevailing scholarly view is that the taxes were imposed either as a means of punishment—because the Christians of Persia worshipped the same God as those who had just vanquished Shapur—or possibly as a test of loyalty to ensure that there was not a Persian Christian “fifth column” lying in wait to rise up and assist an invading Roman-Christian army.\(^{12}\)

Indeed, the standard interpretation of the *Demonstrations*, a series of twenty-three homiletic exhortations composed in Syriac by Aphrahat, the “Persian Sage,” is central to helping maintain the idea that Shapur had reason to believe that the Christians of Persia were somehow in league with, or fundamentally allied with, the Christians of Nisibis and the rest of the Christian Roman Empire. Aphrahat was likely writing just as, and just after, the events in Nisibis took place. His fifth *Demonstration*, “On Wars,” and his twenty-first, “On Persecution,” are often read as non-martyrological (and hence “historical”) contemporary witnesses that verify that there was a persecution and that the Christians of Persia were of one mind with Caesar and their fellow Christians in the Roman Empire.

Aphrahat’s apocalyptic interpretation of the Book of Daniel underscores (according to most scholarly readings) that Shapur was justified in believing that the Christians of Persia were covert Roman sympathizers. In “On Wars,” Aphrahat is assumed to construe Daniel in such a way so as to seem to be welcoming a Roman invasion of Persia as part of a divine plan. Jacob Neusner, for example, claims that

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Aphrahat assures his readers in the “Church of Iran” that Rome would triumph over Shapur. This leads Neusner to conclude that the Christians of Persia “regarded Shapur's wars as those of Satan, and the victory of Byzantium as the triumph of Christ.”13

**Taxes and Persecution in Fourth-Century Persia**

The witness of Aphrahat and various Roman texts—including Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*, as well as non-Christian histories of Constantine—align with Simeon’s martyr acts to give the impression that it was Constantine’s clamorous commitment to Christianity that caused trouble for the Christians of Persia.

Simeon’s martyr acts survive in two versions: the *Martyrdom*, which dates to the late fourth or possibly the early fifth century; and the later, much longer, and much more rhetorically complex *History*, which was unlikely to have been written before the middle of the fifth century.14 Although the narratives of the two texts are generally similar enough that they were (in ancient and medieval ecclesiastical histories and chronicles) and still are (in scholarly studies) harmonized into a single story about Simeon’s death, there are crucial differences between the texts. The most important

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14 The dates of authorship of Simeon’s acts are discussed in the introduction to Part III. References to the short version of Simeon’s martyr acts are abbreviated throughout as “Martyrdom” followed by the corresponding section number. Similarly, references to the long version are abbreviated “History” followed by the section number. The section numbers were originally supplied by the editor of Simeon’s acts, Michael Kmosko, in his Syriac-Latin edition. See M. Kmosko, *S. Simeon Bar Sabbâ’ê: Martyrium et Narratio*. PS 2 (Paris, 1907). I follow Kmosko’s section numbers (rather than Syriac column number) in my translations of the *Martyrdom* and *History* in Part III of this dissertation. When citing other edited and translated martyr acts, I retain the practice of referring to the editorially-imposed section numbers; by contrast, I refer to untranslated acts by volume and page number in P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (AMS), vols. II and IV (Leipzig; Otto Harrassowitz, 1891 and 1894).
differences—especially for attempting to parse the history of Christians in fourth-century Persia and to discern how that history has been written, and re-written, over the centuries—are the details about how and why Shapur’s persecution began.

Both the *Martyrdom* and the *History* indicate that Simeon was brought before Shapur for refusing to pay taxes, although the *History* is more clear about the course of events than is the *Martyrdom*. The *Martyrdom* simply states, “suffering came upon our people and they were oppressed by taxes,” without explaining—as the *History* does—that burdensome taxes were the result of a formal edict of the king that was levied specifically on Christians.\(^\text{15}\) In fact, in the *Martyrdom* Simeon views Shapur's taxation itself as a form of religious persecution, and so he writes to the king to inform him that he will not collect any taxes at all from his flock, much less quite burdensome ones.\(^\text{16}\)

The *Martyrdom* does not explain how long the authorities had been attempting to impose taxes on Christians, whether these taxes had been paid in some capacity before, or whether they were part of the institution of a new and unprecedented tax regime. The *History*, however, indicates that the king had recently promulgated a new edict that was composed solely for Simeon and the Christian people—or, as Shapur derisively calls them, the *nasrāye*.\(^\text{17}\) According to the *History*, from his summer palace in Karka d-Ledan, a city in the Iranian province of Bet Huzaye in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, Shapur sent a letter to the authorities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon detailing his edict. The letter ordered the authorities to arrest Simeon and not free him until he agreed to collect a

\(^{15}\) Cf. *Martyrdom* 6 and *History* 4

\(^{16}\) *Martyrdom* 10

\(^{17}\) *Nasrāye* as a term of opprobrium and marker of Christian identity is discussed in chapter six. The word is often translated and understood as being coextensive with the geographic epithet “Nazarenes,” thus paralleling Julian’s term “Galileans” as something of an ethnic slur for Christians.
By contrast, the Martyrdom never mentions that the Christians were assessed with a “double” tax, just oppressive taxes.

After Simeon was arrested by the Persian authorities and told that he had to sign the king’s edict and promise to collect the double tax, Simeon openly defied the king. He pointedly refused to collect the tax, claiming that Christians were unable to pay such a steep penalty on account of their poverty. Further, Simeon insisted that he, as the spiritual leader of the Christian people, did not have the authority to collect taxes from other Christians in the first place. His dictated letter in response to Shapur’s edict reminds the king, “I believe that even you know that it is not appropriate for me to be put in charge of the taxes from the people of Christ, my Lord. Indeed, our authority over them is not in the things that are seen, but in those things that are unseen: the faith of our Lord, the truth of our teachings, the humble word that counsels the fear of God.”

In the Martyrdom, Simeon makes his case to Shapur in biblical terms. As in the History, he claims that Christians live in poverty at the very command of their Lord; he goes on in the Martyrdom, however, to suggest that even if Christians were rich that paying taxes would be equivalent to betraying Jesus’ ransom on the cross: “‘He [Jesus] commanded us: do not acquire gold or silver for your purses [Mt 10:9], thus we have no gold to give you, nor money to bring to you for taxes. His Apostle warned us, you were ransomed with a heavy price, so do not become servants of men [1 Cor 7:23].’”

After learning of Simeon’s intransigence, Shapur commanded the authorities of Bet Aramaye to bring Simeon before him in Karka d-Ledan. The texts say nothing

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18 History 4
19 History 5
20 Martyrdom 10
21 Martyrdom 12; History 19
about the trip from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Karka other than that the journey of roughly five hundred kilometers by river and overland took just a few days.\textsuperscript{22} When Simeon arrived before the king, he heightened Shapur’s fury by refusing to bow before him:

The king was greatly angered again by this and said to him, ‘Well! So all the things I have heard about you turn out to be true! Why, in the past, did you bow down but do not do so now?’ Simeon responded to him, ‘Previously, I did bow down because I was not arriving in chains, nor was I being summoned to deny my true God as I am today!’ The Magi then said, ‘This man pays no taxes and clearly wants to rebel against your kingdom, therefore he does not deserve to live.’\textsuperscript{23}

If such insolence were not enough, Simeon calls the Magi “wicked ones” who strayed into “evil impiety” and maligns the Persian sun god as undeserving of the worship of rational creatures.\textsuperscript{24}

Public defiance of the king, his authority, and his gods would have been enough to get anyone killed. But Simeon, according to his martyr acts, was the influential leader of an entire group of people who flouted the king’s attempts to collect taxes. As a result, the \textit{History} indicates that Shapur became wary of all Christians who lived in the land of the Persians and sought to further suppress them. In the \textit{Martyrdom}, the Magi warn Shapur that Christian defiance on the matter of taxes is only the beginning: “‘Whoever does not want to take upon himself the payment of taxes wants to incite his people to rebellion with him!’”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Martyrdom} 15; \textit{History} 19

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Martyrdom} 15

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Martyrdom} 16-17. Simeon explains: “‘I did not worship you [Shapur], one who is greater than the sun and in whom there is at least soul and intellect. So why would I worship the sun in which there is no mind even to distinguish and give respect to you, who worships it, from me, who reviles it?’”

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{History} 38. Simeon is often referred to as a “rebel” who is bent on instigating the “rebellion” of the Christians. See \textit{Martyrdom} 11, 15, 38; \textit{History} 8, 11, 16, 35, 36, 42, 79.
As the persecution takes a more violent turn, Shapur insists that the blood of Christians will not stain his hands. He tells Simeon, who repeatedly refuses to collect taxes or to formally bow before the king and his gods, “This is not wisdom that you embolden your will such that many will be destroyed for your sake! Spare yourself from being killed along with the thousands that I am going to destroy; restrain me from taking your blood and the blood of the masses who goad me to destroy them!” In this instance, as in others, the texts indicate that the deaths of many “thousands,” as Shapur claims, were the direct result of a confrontation between shah and bishop, each at odds over the reach of the authority of the other. The Great Persecution, the History seems to indicate, stemmed from a tax revolt.

**Accounting, and Re-Accounting, for Fourth-Century History**

Of the two texts that narrate Simeon’s martyrdom, only the fifth-century History—not the earlier Martyrdom—implies a causal relationship among Constantine’s Christianity, Shapur’s military defeat (presumably at Nisibis, although no specifics are given), and his subsequent taxation and persecution of the Christians of Persia. Neither text makes any mention of a letter from Constantine to Shapur. The History does explain that Shapur “continually raided the land of the Romans,” contending against Constantine’s sons in the months following their father’s death, “and for that reason became increasingly incensed with hatred for the servants of God who dwelled in the regions he possessed.” From the perspective of the History, the Persians understood the

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26 Martyrdom 20. Soz. HE II.14, notes that sixteen thousand Christians were killed before Constantine finally wrote to Shapur in an effort to stay the persecution. Sozomen’s chronology, as I discuss in chapter two, is problematic in that Constantine was dead before Shapur’s “persecution” ever began.

27 History 4; my emphasis.
Roman Empire as the ally of the Christians of Persia. In other words, Shapur was turned back at Nisibis not just by the city’s defenders, but by the Christians of Nisibis—he was defeated by the Christian citizens of a Christian city who were defending the borders of a Christian empire.²⁸

The interest in determining specific dates—of Constantine’s letter, of the siege of Nisibis, of the imposition of Shapur’s taxes, of the destruction of Persian Christian churches, of Simeon’s death—is the major interest of much of the scholarship on Simeon’s martyr acts and the persecution of Christians during Shapur’s reign. In fact, the evidence for these dates (and the persecution of the Christians of Persia itself) is based almost entirely on the highly-tendentious martyr acts themselves, namely Simeon’s History, with the support of the circumstantial evidence in Constantine’s letter to Shapur, other sections of Eusebius’ Life of Constantine, the Demonstrations of Aphrahat, and later ecclesiastical histories and chronicles in Greek and Syriac that draw from and summarize the acts.

It is imperative to point out that contemporary scholars, when they repeat the broad event narrative that I have outlined, are not rehearsing the account of any one ancient source. Rather, they are recounting a harmonized and selective summary of the ancient sources—a harmonized version of Simeon’s two very different martyr acts among them—and tacitly conceding the historicity of these texts while simultaneously

²⁸ Jerome, for the year 338 CE in his continuation of Eusebius’ Chronicle, notes that Shapur “besieged Nisibis for two months after destroying Mesopotamia” and that the city was delivered through the prayers of its bishop, Jacob of Nisibis. See Jerome, Chronicon, s.a. 338, p. 234, sec. 17-18, 24-25. Theodoret of Cyr rus explains that Shapur did not attack Nisibis until after Constantine’s death because he viewed Constantine’s sons as militarily and strategically less competent than Constantine to thwart Persian advances. Once Shapur did lay siege to Nisibis, however, Theodoret indicates that he marched on Roman Mesopotamia with a vast army that included foot soldiers, cavalry, and even elephants, which terrified the defenders of the city. See Theod. HR I.11; cf. HE II.30, 1-14.
confirming the texts’ religio-political categories. This is precisely the problem. There is a collective presentation of evidence that requires little interpretation, only confirmation and re-confirmation of what has already been assumed to be the only plausible explanation: Christians in Persia were persecuted because of their religious ties with Rome.

**Constantine’s Conversion as ‘Casus Persecutionis’**

The history of the Christians of the East is largely a narrative of persecution, from the earliest Christian centuries until the present day. In the middle of the First World War, Abraham Yohannan, Professor of Oriental Languages at Columbia University, wrote a brief survey history of the Church of the East and called it *The Death of a Nation or the Ever Persecuted Nestorians or Assyrian Christians.*\(^{29}\) As the title and publication date suggest, Yohannan’s book is a history of the centuries of suffering endured by the Christians of Persia and northern Mesopotamia up through the massacres at the hands of the Turks and Kurds in 1915.

In the view of many Christians of the East, their persecution is the result of belonging to a relatively powerless minority community in lands that are predominantly non-Christian, and even committedly anti-Christian. Quite recently, on October 31, 2010, nearly sixty Iraqi Christians were killed in a siege and hostage-taking at Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral in Baghdad. This awful event was reported by many print, television, and radio journalists as an instance of “religious” violence in post-Saddam Iraq. Not as a sectarian struggle between Christians and (isolated?) radical Sunnis, but as persecutory violence directed at Christians.

Iraqi Christians have been attacked before. In 2008, Monsignor Paulos Rahho, the

\(^{29}\) A. Yohannan, *The Death of a Nation or the Ever Persecuted Nestorians or Assyrian Christians* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1916).
Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Mosul, was kidnapped in a brazen attack that killed his driver and armed bodyguards. The events are murky, but as the security situation marginally improved in the north of Iraq in late 2007, the archbishop apparently stopped paying the “protection money” that he had been paying to a group of militants for some years. As a result, he was kidnapped and held for ransom. Two weeks later, after no money was paid, his body was found. Immediately, Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister, blamed al-Qaeda for committing an act of religious violence. Following the prime minister’s reaction, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad sent out a press release saying essentially the same thing.

What these attacks have in common—on the one hand a massacre in a church and, on the other, the kidnap-for-ransom of a prominent Christian cleric—is that both have consistently been interpreted within the context of a causal connection between the presence of Western armies in Iraq and violence against Christians. One widely-circulated story from the Associated Press put it this way: “Since the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraqi Christians have been targeted by Islamic extremists who label them ‘crusaders’ loyal to US troops.” Indeed, the “Islamic State of Iraq,” the group that claimed responsibility for the latest attacks in Baghdad, has been cited as derisively

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referring to Iraqi Christians as “Westerners” and “Agents of the Occupiers.”

My point in bringing up Christians in contemporary Iraq in the context of a dissertation on Christians late antique Iraq is this: it is a shared religion that is imagined to link Iraqi Christians to the West. Whether this is “actually” the case or not is beside the point. The point is that there is this discourse, this belief that Christianity is a Western religion, and that those who profess it must thereby be allied with the West. This idea has a long history. The first glimmers of this history—the first instances of this discourse—that bind Christianity to the West and cast suspicious glances on the non-Westerners who espouse the faith are imagined to have begun with Constantine’s conversion. Only months before his death, Archbishop Rahho lamented, “We, Christians of Mesopotamia, are used to religious persecution ... After Constantine, persecution ended only for Western Christians, whereas in the East threats continued. Even today we continue to be a Church of martyrs.”

As Rahho implies, the role of Constantine as a bridge—and perhaps even as one who inadvertently exacerbated the suffering of the Christians of the East just as he ended the persecution of the Christians of the West—is a theme that is ingrained in the collective memory of the Christians of Mesopotamia. Yohannan, for example, returns to Constantine again and again in his book. And although Death of a Nation seems to have been intended less as a work of scholarship and more as a popular account of the plight of the Christians of the East, Yohannan’s book nevertheless represents what still remains the predominant scholarly explanation for Shapur’s persecution and the causal forces behind it. Yohannan’s summary of how the conflict between Rome and Persia affected

34 Internet search of November 15, 2010.

the Christians of Persia in the days of Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē is thus worth citing at length:

As long as the Roman Empire was pagan, the Persian Church was tolerated, but with the Christianization of the Emperor himself and his empire, things were changed. Christians in Persia were looked upon by the Zoroastrians as political suspects and as sympathizers with their co-religionists in Rome. The suspicion became their death warrant. Thus, when Shapur returned from the war with Rome, sore at his humiliating defeat, he turned furiously upon Christians, declaring: ‘At least we will make these Roman sympathizers pay.’ A firman [edict] was issued requiring the Christians to pay exorbitant taxes, as a contribution to the cost of a war in which they were taking no part, the Mar Shimun Bar Sabbāʾi, Catholicos, being ordered to collect the same. He refused to obey the order on the double ground that his people were poor, and that tax-collecting was no part of a Bishop’s business. On this it was easy to raise the cry, ‘he is a traitor and wishes to rebel’; a second firman was issued, ordering the arrest and death of the clergy and the general destruction of all the Christian churches. Finally another firman was given, commanding that all Christians should be imprisoned and executed. The persecution lasted forty years, during which period men of all ranks suffered martyrdom, among them officers of the King who had embraced Christianity.\(^\text{36}\)

There is a clear causal chain in Yohannan’s recital of the events that leads to the conclusion that there was a persecution of Christians in fourth-century Persia that was premised upon a religio-political alliance (or at least a perception of such) between the Christians of Persia and the Christian caesars of Rome. In the received narrative that Yohannan summarizes, Shapur is said to have been quite aware that it was Christians who had defeated him in Roman Mesopotamia when his siege of Nisibis proved fruitless. If not a Christian army, then at least Christian citizens under the authority of a Christian king were (as the story goes) his downfall. Upon returning to Persia, Shapur first began taxing, then persecuting, the Christians of his realm because they were, as he says in Simeon’s martyr acts, “of one mind with Caesar, our enemy.”\(^\text{37}\)

For the persecution to have come about as Yohannan indicates, Shapur had to have known that Constantine (“the Emperor” to whom Yohannan refers) worshipped the Christian God, and, as a necessary corollary, that this meant something not only

\(^{36}\) Yohannan, Death of a Nation, 45-46.

\(^{37}\) History 4
about the Roman Empire but also about the Christians of Persia: namely, that the god
one worshipped was directly determinative of one’s “political” allegiances and that all
the worshippers of that god could be seen as a collective whole. In this reading of the
events, Shapur began growing suspicious of the Christians of Persia immediately upon
Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, a conversion that entailed the burgeoning
financial, political, and architectural patronage of the Christian cult in the Roman
Empire.

The political balance between the Roman and Persian empires had a long history
of teetering precariously between war and peace, but, according to the ancient sources,
Shapur was not seriously bothered by the Christians in his empire until there were open
hostilities between Rome and Persia in the years following Constantine’s conversion.
According to the classic study of Christianity in Persia by Jérôme Labourt, “la reprise de
la lutte contre Rome changea en hostilité déclarée l’attitude bienveillante ou, pour le
moins, neutre que Sapor avait observée à l’égard des chrétiens.”

In R.W. Burgess’s analysis, the Great Persecution did not commence—no tax

38 In 299 CE, forty years before Shapur’s assault on Roman Mesopotamia, a peace treaty
ceded the Transstigritanian provinces from Persia to Rome. According to a letter from Shapur to
Constantius that is preserved in the Res gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus, Shapur’s motivation in
contending against Roman Mesopotamia was to recover the lands that had been taken from his
grandfather, Narseh. See Amm. Marc. XVII.5,6. On the peace treaty, see Blockley, “Romano-
Persian Peace Treaties,” and idem, “Constantius II and Persia,” in Studies in Latin Literature and

39 There are a few martyr acts from the time of Shapur that are set prior to Simeon’s death
and the commencement of the “Great Persecution.” One of these, the Martyrdom of Zebina and his
Companions, is dated to the 18th year of Shapur’s reign (327 CE). According to the acts, the martyrs
were not persecuted for any political reasons or because of their purported allegiances to Rome,
but simply for refusing to worship “fire, the sun, and water.” See AMS II, 39-51.

40 J. Labourt, Le christianisme dans l’empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide, 224-632 (Paris:
Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1904), 56. Labourt addresses Shapur’s persecution at length in the third
chapter of his book. Sebastian Brock also notes the connection between war and persecution:
“Significantly, persecution was most likely to take place in the Persian Empire during times of
hostility between the two empires, and this was particularly the case in the mid fourth century,
when it continued on and off during the last 35 years of the long reign of Shapur II (309–79).” S.
Gorgias Press, 2009), vii.
edict was issued, no church was destroyed, no cleric was persecuted—until Shapur returned from his initial campaign against Roman Mesopotamia in the year of Constantine’s death. Burgess succinctly claims that “the general outline of these events is not in dispute.” And he is right—there is no dispute. The overwhelming consensus is that the Christians of Persia suffered under Shapur mainly while Rome and Persia were at war, and that their suffering was the direct result of their perceived or actual allegiances to the Roman Empire, either on the basis of “religion,” or “politics,” or some combination of the two.

In a recent sourcebook that provides an overview of Roman-Sasanian relations in late antiquity, Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter emphasize the particularly religious nature of the conflict, arguing “the religious policy of the great powers formed an important part of Roman-Persian relations,” and further suggesting “that the state of religious affairs in the East and in the West affected the neighbour’s course of action.”

Beginning with Constantine’s conversion, Dignas and Winter argue, there were “dramatic religious changes” that helped draw a clear borderline and escalate a


mundane border dispute into an ideological conflict between “Christian Rome and the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire.” Others have said as much. According to Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “waging war against Rome and persecuting the Christians” were “two facets of one struggle” for the Persian kings. Timothy Barnes, heralding a Eusebian construction of Constantine, explains the course of events this way: “in 337 Constantine was preparing to invade Persia as the self-appointed liberator of the Christians of Persia … and the hopes which he excited [among them] caused the Persian king to regard his Christian subjects as potential traitors—and hence to embark on a policy of persecution.” More recently, Barnes has suggested that Constantine, in what would be the last year of his life, set out towards Persia intent on abdicating his throne after his baptism in the river Jordan and subsequently seeking death as a martyr in battle against the Persian foe.

Another, rather more circumspect, narrative among scholars focuses less on

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45 Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 126.

46 Following the presentation of his paper “New Light on Constantine,” delivered at the annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society in Chicago on May 29, 2010, I asked Professor Barnes about Constantine’s aims in waging war against Persia. Barnes candidly proposed the following. Citing Richard Burgess’s argument that Constantine had already arranged for a tetrarchy of Christian emperors to succeed him, Barnes suggested that Constantine planned to stop off at the Jordan on his way to Persia where he would ritualistically abdicate his throne by shedding the imperial purple for the white alb of baptism. Once Constantine and the Roman army had continued on and reached Persia, Barnes claimed that Constantine intended to die a martyr’s death on the battlefield. I cannot explain the basis for Barnes’s theory about Constantine’s desire for martyrdom, but for the theory about the planned college of Christian emperors, see R.W. Burgess, “The Summer of Blood: The ‘Great Massacre’ of 337 and the Promotion of the Sons of Constantine,” DOP 62 (2008): 5-51.
Constantine’s intentions and more on Shapur’s. This (recent) alternative narrative raises questions about the extent of the “religious” nature of the persecution and the religious commitments of the Roman and Sasanian Empires qua empires in the fourth century, but it still tacitly accepts that there was a persecution of Christians in the Persian Empire and that Constantine’s conversion was the major factor leading to it. For example, Karin Mosig-Walburg, who has been the most critical of the standard event narrative that I have outlined, explains Shapur’s persecution by emphasizing “political” over “religious” considerations and by more soberly characterizing Shapur’s violence as primarily a limited and temporary fiscal measure that was undergirded by religio-political tensions. Following other commentators, however, Mosig-Walburg assumes that there was a tax directed specifically at Christians, that it was implemented as a result of Shapur’s defeat in battle against the Roman Empire, and that the ensuing persecution was largely the result of a perceived link between the Christians of Persia and the Roman caesar.

What can account for such certainty about the events that occasioned Shapur’s

47 See Shayegan, “On the Rationale.” See also K. Mosig-Walburg, Römer und Perser: Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr. (Gutenberg: Comptus Druck Satz & Verlag, 2009), which addresses the historical context of the late third century and the motivations for (and complexities behind) the fourth-century conflict between the two powers at greater length and in more meticulous detail than any previous study of which I am aware.


Geoffrey Greatrex, in his review of Dignas and Winter’s Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity, recognizes the authors’ overemphasis on religious issues and Mosig-Walburg’s important corrective, noting, “Rivalry between Zoroastrianism and Christianity undoubtedly played an important role in their dealings [i.e., the dealings between Rome and Persia], although we must be wary of ascribing religious motives to wars or persecutions: Karin Mosig-Walburg has rightly expressed scepticism both regarding the historicity of Constantine’s famous letter to Shapur II and as to whether Shapur’s persecution of the Christians was motivated by religious reasons rather than pragmatic political ones.” See G. Greatrex, Review of Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals, by B. Dignas and E. Winter, Sehepunkte 8.5 (2008), www.sehepunkte.de/2008/05/13793.html.
persecution? In part, a number of ancient sources—such as ecclesiastical histories, martyr acts, and Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*—suggest that Constantine's conversion, and that of the Roman Empire, had repercussions for Christians beyond the eastern *limes* of Rome. The events narrated in these histories melded together, often in different chronological order or with the juxtaposition of event elements that were unrelated in previous histories, to form later histories that were then narrated and re-narrated frequently enough and in different enough contexts for there to emerge an undisputed amalgam of interrelated events: Constantine's conversion and concern for the Christians of Persia; Shapur's defeat by "Christian" cities and "Christian" armies; and then Shapur's persecution of the Christians of Persia. The sense one gets from much of the scholarly literature on Constantine, Shapur, and the Christians of Persia is that the events of the time are so straightforward (and so incontrovertibly connected) that their structuring in the form of an historical narrative is almost superfluous.49

The perceived immanence of deep structure underlying the events creates a patina of the real by paving over and sealing the gaps and fissures that are the contradictory literary accounts. But the effect of the *real*—the evidentiary effect of an accurate barometric reading of the religious tensions suffusing the air of late antiquity—becomes possible through a presupposed "notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of

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49 Consider, for example, Hayden White's analysis of historical chronicles and annals wherein he argues: "Common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that comprise its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events *all along*. What I am trying to establish is the nature of this immanence in any narrative account of *real* events, the kind of events that are offered as the proper content of historical discourse. The reality of these events does not consist in the fact that they occurred but that, first of all, they were remembered and, second, that they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence." See H. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Clt* 7 (1980): 23.
narrativity.” As Hayden White points out, “real events do not offer themselves as stories.” The narrativization of real events in the form of a story makes for more compelling—more realistic—reading, but the distinction between events and narratives about events is often forgotten. With respect to Christian martyrological texts, we would do well to heed Daniel Boyarin’s admonition: “Being killed is an event. Martyrdom is a literary form, a genre.”

In this dissertation, I contend that the textual evidence so far considered need not lead to any one conclusion, and that, in light of other texts that have not been fully acknowledged alongside some of those already named, there are in fact reasons for positing very different interpretations of the ancient sources.

This is not, however, to suggest that there were no “events” in late antiquity, or that the textual evidence of these events needs to be completely abandoned or reread solely as “rhetoric” without any underlying “reality.” It is not Constantine’s patronage of Christianity, nor Shapur’s raids on Roman territories, nor even the idea that Christians may have died violently in fourth-century Persia to which I object. Instead, it is the conclusion that these events can be linked causally and narratively to account for and to verify the claim of the martyrological sources that there was a religious persecution of the Christians of Persia because of their ties with the Roman caesar. Such a conclusion entails that identity, “religion,” political allegiances, and the battle lines between West and East—good and evil—are natural, evident, and straightforward and

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51 “Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult.” See White, “Value of Narrativity,” 8.

that they require no prior or ongoing discursive sustainment. According to the prevailing scholarly reading, by the time of Constantine’s death and Shapur’s siege of Nisibis, a Christian bishop such as Simeon, no matter where he lived, could effectively be construed as a Roman.

I argue, to the contrary, that such a reading is erroneously based on three things: 1) ancient sources, namely later—sometimes much later—ecclesiastical histories and martyr acts that themselves are later re-tellings and re-narrations of the events in question; 2) a scholarly disposition to accept the binary language (Christian vs. Zoroastrian, Roman vs. Persian) that is inherent in these texts as a reflection of mid-fourth-century actualities, rather than as textual constructions; and 3) a willingness to impose a plausible narrative and cognitive frame around these sources by using other ancient sources (e.g., Constantine’s letter, Aphrahat’s Demonstrations) and thereby interpreting those sources in the context of an event narrative that has already been assumed to be self-evident.

**Martyrology as Literature: Sources and Their Interpreters**

The extent of recent scholarly reconsiderations of Greek and Latin martyrological texts only further underscores the tremendous amount of work that remains to be done on Syriac martyrological texts, mostly from Sasanian Persia, but even from the Roman Empire. This is to say nothing of the social-historical work that begs to be done on fourth-century Persian Christianities. By contrast with Greek and Latin martyr texts, few editions or translations of the constituent texts of the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* exist.\(^{53}\)

Recently, a number of groundbreaking studies and re-interpretations of martyr acts from the Roman Empire have added to (and often substantially revised) earlier

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\(^{53}\) See the introduction to Part III for a brief overview of scholarship on the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. 

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research. Studies by Daniel Boyarin, Elizabeth Castelli, and Judith Lieu—to name only a few of the most prominent scholars—have led to new ways of understanding not only martyr texts themselves, but also the historical circumstances that occasioned their composition and the ways in which their rhetorical devices were employed to create and further hone particular Christian identities.\footnote{Though the work of Boyarin, Castelli, and Lieu on martyrdom and identity has been the most influential for my analyses here, they are not the only ones to have contributed to substantially revising standard assessments of martyr acts and the martyrological genre. In addition to Boyarin, Dying for God; E.A. Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); J. Lieu, Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity (London: T&T Clark, 2002), and eadem, Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), see I. Sandwell, Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and J.M. Schott, Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). The work of Sandwell and Schott are not specifically about early Christian martyrdom, but they are helpful for constructing revised understandings of Christian identity as mediated through martyrological texts.}

The narrative genre of Christian martyrdom, as much in Syriac as in Greek and Latin, is premised upon two things: the (unjust) persecution of Christians for specifically religious reasons, and the piety of those who suffer persecution. What is sometimes forgotten is that the very genre of the work in question demands a martyr—or at least a confessor.\footnote{The History of the Holy Mar Ma'ın, for example, is included among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs even though Mar Ma'ín is not killed by the Persians, just severely tortured. As Muriel Debié rightly notes, “There is no regular Syriac equivalent to the Greek bios, designating saints’ Lives, nor to martyrion for the martyr acts, but all Syriac hagiographical texts are indiscriminately entitled taš'ītā, “story,” or šarbā, “account” or “tale,” whatever the literary genre to which they belong.” In her note to this sentence, Debié slightly downgrades her claim from “all” to something more like almost all, explaining: “The Syriac equivalent of martyrion, sāhdītā is almost never used in the actual titles of East Syriac hagiographical works.” Generally speaking, Debié is correct: sāhdītā is rarely used in the titles of East Syriac hagiographies, but it must be noted that Simeon’s Martyrdom does in fact use the word sāhdītā in the title. By contrast, Simeon’s History (in which Simeon still dies the same death) refrains from using sāhdītā in the title, and opts for the word taš‘ītā instead. The latter term, meaning “history,” is the one employed in the title of the History of Mar Ma`in. See Debié, “Writing History as ‘Histoires,’” 43, n. 2.} If the text does not establish that the martyr is being killed for the faith, then it fails as piece of martyrological literature. But the study of Syriac martyr texts from the Persian Empire is still mostly based on Bollandist-style analyses that tend to neglect, or at least minimize, the inherent rhetoricity of the martyrological genre in a search for the...
kernels of historicity within a text. This search for historicity within the *Acts* is, however, only partly a result of the Bollandist legacy; the other major reason such a methodology is still employed is more a matter of practical necessity: in the absence of contemporary Middle Persian texts, Iranian historians often turn to Syriac sources (albeit customarily with some reserve) for an account of the religio-political views of the Sasanian ruling elite.

**Ethnic Groups and Religious Groups in Late Antiquity**

Throughout the following chapters, I read the Simeon texts in a way that is antithetical to most of the extant scholarship on the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* by considering the texts as discourses that interpretively imagine historical circumstances in order to help solidify blurred boundaries, invoke a collective memory, and shape an idea of what it means to be Christian—and what it means to be Roman or Persian—in a post-Constantinian context. In addition to the work of Boyarin, Castelli, and Lieu, three articles by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker have been instrumental in shaping my reconsideration of the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* and their attendant interpretation in light of the events (real and perceived) of the mid-fourth century. While I only occasionally address Brubaker’s work directly in the chapters that follow, several of his critiques and insights are foundational for my analysis.

Brubaker’s research deals mainly with violence—or, rather the rhetorical basis that reifies an underlying foundation for violence—among ethnic “groups” in

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contemporary Eastern Europe. His critique of prevailing studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity is directed predominantly at what he calls “groupism”—an essentialist way of thinking about the world that tends to see “groups” (ethnic, national, or religious) “as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed.”

The problem, Brubaker argues, is that even though it is “commonsense” to “understand ethnic conflict … as conflict between ethnic groups,” when we do so we are adopting the language of the participants embroiled in the conflicts, those who have a vested interest in construing and narrativizing the conflict as one between neatly bounded groups—Christian Romans and Zoroastrian Sasanids, for example. It is, Brubaker continues, understandable that participants in violent struggle would “cast ethnic groups … as the protagonists—the heroes and martyrs—of such struggles.” Nevertheless, he continues, “this does not mean analysts should do the same. We must, of course, take vernacular categories and participants’ understandings seriously, for they are partly constitutive of our objects of study. But we should not uncritically adopt categories of ethnopolitical practice as our categories of social analysis.” In other words, we must not unwittingly adopt the reified language deployed by the participants, and thus further contribute to the reification of religio-political “groups.” Rather, we must adopt what Brubaker calls a “cognitive perspective” in order to better understand the narrative “event schema” of the texts we are studying. That is, a one-step-removed perspective

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57 See, for example, Brubaker’s most recent book, Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), which is a case study applying his more theoretical work toward the end of breaking down the grand, reifying ethnic narratives that are accepted as constitutive of “Hungarian” and “Romanian” ethnic identities.

58 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 2 and 8.

59 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 11.

60 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 10.
dedicated to interpreting “the social and mental processes that sustain the vision and division of the social world” in religious, political, or ethnic terms and thereby frame the narration of a particular event history and identity.  

As Brubaker readily concedes, even identity itself is problematic as a category of analysis. Imbricated as it is with the social constructivist operations that give it force, the idea of a socially and rhetorically constructed group identity is not wrong, Brubaker argues, but “too obviously right.” In this dissertation, I assume that Christian identity in late antiquity is—insofar as historians can access it—largely a textually constructed category. But what is interesting is not that particular Persian Christian identities were constructed in late antiquity, but rather how they were constructed and why. Yet even this latter task is perilous and fraught with argumentative difficulties.

As Brubaker points out, the term “identity” has been so irredeemably softened by stances that discuss it as processual—an unstable, evanescent, “constructed, fluid, and multiple” product of fractured discourses—in order “to acquit it of the charge of ‘essentialism,’” that we have been left “without a rationale for talking about ‘identities’ at all and ill equipped to examine the ‘hard’ dynamics and essentialist claims” about identity. Which is to say, a “soft” constructivism allows putative ‘identities’ to proliferate. But as they proliferate, the term loses its analytical purchase. If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. If it is fluid, how can we understand the ways in which self-

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61 Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 77-79.


63 As studies on “identity” have been one of the major trends in recent scholarship on late antiquity, the bibliography on this topic is huge. Some of the more recent studies particularly influential for my work include those of Boyarin, Castelli, Lieu, and Sandwell cited above as well as Boyarin’s *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2004). See also D.K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), and A.P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
understandings may harden, congeal, and crystallize?"\(^{64}\)

The key problem that I have been attempting to highlight with the causal event narrative typically used to explain Shapur’s persecution is that it assumes a nearly immediate crystallization of Christian identity upon Constantine’s conversion—an identity that spanned from Rome to Persia and included the contested Mesopotamian, Armenian, and Arabian borderlands between the two major empires. In this reading, a pan-Christian identity was compounded and, in fact, fostered by Shapur when he returned from Nisibis and issued his tax edict. A unification of peoples along religious lines might make some sense in a contemporary context, but in late antiquity, Christian identity—or “self-understanding,” to use Brubaker’s preferred descriptor—was so fluid and multiple and geographically, chronologically, and textually contingent that it is hard to discuss with any real meaning. Indeed, even “Christianity,” as a categorical term, hardly makes any sense in a late antique context.

That said, there are instances of crystallization and moments of galvanization: the emperor Constantine and the city of Nisibis are two such examples. Not the historical Constantine and buildings and inhabitants of Nisibis of the mid-fourth century, but the Constantine and Nisibis of later textual memory that used the man and the city to such brilliant rhetorical effect and around which particular (albeit fleeting) Christian self-understandings could be constructed. The ensuing chapters explain how such constructions were manifested literarily and how they might now be read. Following Brubaker, I argue that historiographical and hagiographical language of reified, bounded groups centered around “great men” and “great events” was not deployed “because it reflects social reality, but precisely because groupness is ambiguous and contested.” Put another way, textual rhetoric is performative and

\(^{64}\) Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 28-29; 34-35.
contributes to the very making of the religious and political groups and categories that it literally deploys.\footnote{Brubaker, \textit{Ethnicity without Groups}, 59. On this point, Brubaker’s debt (which he acknowledges) to the work of Pierre Bourdieu is self-evident. See, especially, P. Bourdieu, \textit{Language and Symbolic Power} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 203-228.}

The martyrs of Persia were made in multiple ways by the communities that remembered them, and, in turn, the memory of the martyrs made these religious communities.

\textbf{Chapter Outline}

Part I of the dissertation, “Constantine and Christians of Persia, Reconsidered,” examines how the Christians of fourth-century Persia are traditionally presented in various late antique histories, but does so by focusing mainly on how Constantine is presented in the literary sources as their patron and defender.

The first chapter, “Patronizing Persians: Constantine’s Letter to Shapur II,” in tandem with the second, “Constantine the Crusader: Political Theology and the Persian Campaign,” examines an excerpt of an imperial letter sent by Constantine to Shapur II. As I have noted, Eusebius preserves the letter in his \textit{VC}, and it is often cited as the proximate cause of Shapur’s persecution of Christians in Persia. Constantine’s announcement in his letter is a bold one. Not only does he bill himself as a representative of the Christian God, but he also declares that the entirety of the Roman army under his command bears the sign of this God, the one responsible for Constantine’s military successes. As a result of such rhetorical chest pounding, Constantine is said to have endangered all the Christians of Persia, who were then regarded by the Persian authorities as a Roman fifth column—traitors, rebels, and partisans of Caesar’s God who constituted an internal threat to the stability of the Persian Empire.
I challenge the idea that Constantine’s letter hastened a religious persecution in Persia. Instead, I argue that the letter—whose authenticity I do not dispute—was originally only a small part of a Eusebian construction of Constantine that was subsequently co-opted and stretched to different ends by later Christian historians. The modified Eusebian portrait of Constantine in the ecclesiastical tradition is typically contextualized within a preconceived narrative that pits Constantine and Christian Rome against Shapur and Zoroastrian (Magian) Persia. The historicity of a binary establishing such monolithic religious identities is, however, hardly tenable in a mid-fourth-century context. I contend that the epistemological categories “Roman” and “Persian” have, in light of subsequent history, been conflated with ontological groups “the Romans” and “the Persians” and centered around the person of the sovereigns—Constantine and Shapur.66

In the third chapter, “The Idea of Rome: Christian Portraits of Constantine in the Acts of the Persian Martyrs and the Ecclesiastical-Historical Tradition,” I address how a religious binary is further worked out literarily. I examine images of Constantine (and, more vaguely, a nameless “caesar”) in late ancient Syriac martyrological literature in order to consider how, when, and under what circumstances references to Constantine are deployed. I am interested in showing who the Constantine of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs really is—in my view, at once a multiple and ephemeral construction—and the ways by which the authors of Syriac martyr texts position the Christians of Persia vis-à-vis the Roman Empire. Constantine, other Christian emperors of Rome, and even the

66 Cf. Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 21, referring to the “ethnonational conflict” in Transylvanian Romania: the conflict is not “best understood as a conflict between ethnic or national groups. To think of it as a conflict between groups is to conflate categories (‘Hungarian’ and ‘Romanian’) with groups (‘the Hungarians,’ ‘the Romanians’); to obscure the generally low, though fluctuating, degree of groupness in this setting; to mistake the putative groups invoked by ethnonational rhetoric for substantial things-in-the-world; to accept, at least tacitly, that nationalist organizations speak for the ‘groups’ they claim to represent; and to neglect the everyday contexts in which ethnic and national categories take on meaning and the processes through which ethnicity actually ‘works’ in everyday life.”
Christians of the Roman Empire are, it turns out, both less important and much more complexly (and contradictorily) presented in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* than has previously been acknowledged.

The fourth chapter, “Rereading Nisibis: Narrating the Battle for Roman Mesopotamia,” begins the second part of the dissertation, which is focused on showing how the Christians of Persia were “created.” In this chapter, I zoom in to a ground-level view of a particular place and literature about that place. I am interested in reexamining how the battle over the Roman East in the mid-fourth century was narrated both by contemporary observers—namely, Ammianus Marcellinus and Ephrem the Syrian—and other chroniclers including the emperor Julian and the anonymous sixth-century author of a Syriac novel called the *Julian Romance*.

I do not re-narrate this period in order to reconfigure how the conflict between the Romans and the Persians might have affected Christians in Roman Mesopotamia or in Persia. Rather, I am interested in considering how a reified idea of a Christian Roman Empire in Syriac texts was both an heir of and a contributor to a larger discourse in the Roman Empire that functioned to “territorialize” religion in late antiquity—at least rhetorically. In many ways, the religious “groups” in the texts are contingent upon the embodiment of that group in the person of the sovereign, as explained in the first part of the dissertation. Instead of a history of Christianity versus Zoroastrianism, what the texts often narrate are clashes between kings: Constantine and Constantius versus Shapur, and, later on, the problematic (for Christians anyway) confrontation between Julian and Shapur that resulted in Julian’s death and a peace treaty that ceded the “Christian” city of Nisibis to the Persians. What is most interesting is how Shapur’s role changes, even in Christian texts, depending on the narrative aims of the texts. In some Syriac sources, Shapur is presented quite paradoxically as a *providential* figure who helps bring about the downfall of a much more worrisome persecutor of Christians—Julian
the Apostle—while subsequently assisting the return of a Christian line of kings with the Roman army’s promotion of Jovian.

The fifth chapter, “Rhetoric and Religious Groups: Taxes, Jews, and Religious Authority in the Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Šabbā’e,” is focused, at the same time, on the differences between Simeon’s Martyrdom and History and more recent scholarly considerations of the “disembedding” of religion as a category in late antiquity. I argue that one of the main problems in dealing with the sources that narrate the plight of Persian Christians in the fourth century is the emphasis on constructing them as a discrete group, members of an embattled “minority religion” set against other minority groups (e.g., Jews) and the broader Sasanian, Zoroastrian society as a whole. The chapter addresses a number of important theoretical concerns in late ancient religious studies by (perhaps counter-intuitively) focusing more narrowly on Simeon’s martyr acts.

At the same time that I look at the sparse “historical” evidence for early Sasanian tax policy, I read this evidence along with Simeon’s martyr acts and selected analogues from the Roman world to further a larger discussion intended to problematize the idea of discrete and clearly bounded religious “groups” in fourth-century Persia. Part of the central rhetorical force of Simeon’s acts is how they help shape a notion of a minority religious group—one that (as I address in the sixth chapter) may co-inhere with the “captives” who were deported to Persia from the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries. This “group,” one centered around the spiritual authority of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, functions textually to set Christians apart from other groups within Persia and to shore up the importance of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the center of Christian

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67 This idea of the disembedding of religion as a category had its genesis in Seth Schwartz’s Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and was pressed to more controversial rhetorical ends—in part as a critique of Talal Asad—by Daniel Boyarin in Border Lines. I tend to be more sympathetic to Asad than is Boyarin.
authority in Persia.

As important as any specific Christian identity arising from an identification with the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon is the idea of Christians as Roman “captives,” a theme that arose in the martyrrological literature after the loss of Nisibis and the evacuation of the city’s inhabitants into Roman territory. The sixth and final chapter, “Roman Captives and Persian Envoys: The Church of the East and the Territorialization Christianity,” addresses the theme of “captivity” in some of the fifth-century Acts of the Persian Martyrs, including Simeon’s History.

The early fifth century was a time of relative peace for Persian Christians—at least according to our sources. And what makes it so interesting for the purposes of this dissertation is the presence of Maruta of Maipherqaṭ, a Roman bishop sent by Theodosius II who served as the invited envoy to the nascent Persian Church at a council in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410 CE. In light of the situation of Persian Christians under Shapur II, at least as presented by the martyrrological literature, this was a radical shift. Not only does Christianity become, for all intents and purposes, a legal “religion” in early fifth-century Persia, but the acts of the earliest councils of the Church of the East, as preserved in the Synodicon Orientale, suggest that the Persian king Yazdgard I had personal dealings with Christians who cured his headaches and performed other miracles. In Christian sources, Yazdgard even becomes a “second Constantine” who freed the Christians of Persia. And yet, according to the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, by the end of his reign Yazdgard had turned to persecuting Christians. There are, simultaneously, competing narratives of Yazdgard as both protector and persecutor of Christians, and a fluidity in the links between “religion” and “empire.” I argue that the way in which the lives and deeds of Maruta and Yazdgard are described in later Christian sources ultimately, and paradoxically, strengthen and begin to dissolve the “territorialization” of religious groups between Rome and Persia in late antiquity.
Note on the Transliteration Scheme

Greek is employed in this dissertation without transliteration. Syriac, however, is transliterated in order to facilitate pronunciation for those who have no knowledge of the language. When transliterating from Syriac, I generally follow standard convention: a single quotation mark (‘) renders the letter ‘ālaph; a sub-linear dot marks the emphatic letters heth, teth, and sade; a superscript ‘c’ indicates the letter ‘ayn; the letter shin is rendered by means of a caron over the letter ‘s’ (as in ‘ś’); and supra-linear macrons indicate long vowels.

There are some exceptions to these conventions. When possible, I use common English equivalents instead of more orthographically correct transliterations—for example, ‘Simeon’ rather than “Šem’on.” Other frequently-used personal and place names are also rendered in a simplified way—for example, “Shapur” rather than “Šāpur” and “Aphrahat” rather than “Aphrahat.” Proper names, titles, and terms taken from Middle Persian are infrequently cited; when they are, they are taken from the Syriac sources I am citing—not Persian texts—and are thus transliterated according to the Syriac transliteration scheme noted above.
Part I.
Constantine and the Christians of Persia, Reconsidered

Chapter 1.
Patronizing Persians: Constantine’s Letter to Shapur II

From the outset of the fourth and final book of his panegyrical *Life of Constantine* (VC), Eusebius of Caesarea is keen to present the emperor as a philanthropist of boundless generosity. Constantine, Eusebius tells us, insisted on “persistently providing repeated and continuous good works of every kind for all the inhabitants of every province alike.” So generous was the emperor that none who sought his favor was ever “disappointed in his expectations.” While Constantine bestowed rank, honor, and other benefits of land and riches on those closest to him, he also “showed general fatherly concern for all.” He granted formal titles to so many thousands that his bureaucrats had to invent new honorifics just in order for Constantine “to promote more persons.”

The emperor slashed taxes on landowners and readjusted the financial contributions required from those who complained “that their estates were overburdened.” Indeed, Constantine’s greatness was so bewilderingly remarkable that,

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2 VC IV.1

3 VC IV.1. Such generosity was not unique to Constantine. Simon Corcoran points out that Constantine’s role “as giver of justice and distributor of benefits, whether largesse, offices or immunities” was “hardly new” and not different in kind from that of his predecessors. See S. Corcoran, “Emperor and Citizen in the Era of Constantine,” in *Constantine the Great: York’s Roman Emperor*, ed. E. Hartley, J. Hawkes, and M. Henig (York: Lund Humphries, 2006), 49.

4 VC IV.2-3
according to Eusebius, he even granted the losing party in the disputes that he adjudicated money or land from his own personal holdings. For the emperor fervently believed that none who had been in his presence should ever “depart disappointed and bitter.”

Towards those who did not serve Rome, Constantine was less beneficent. While his predecessors kept the incursions of the Goths and other barbarians at bay through tributes and annual payments, this extortionate system was unacceptable to Constantine. Through brute force, or its threat, he compelled barbarian tribes to submit to Rome. As a result of the emperor’s efforts to convert the barbarians “from a lawless animal existence to one of reason and law,” Eusebius concludes that God granted Constantine “victories over all the nations” (θεὸς αὐτῶ τὰς κατὰ πάντων ἔθνων ἐδωρεῖτο νίκας).

Constantine’s victories over enemies abroad and challengers at home did not go unnoticed. His name was renowned throughout the world. There were “constant diplomatic visitors who brought valuable gifts from their homelands.” Foreign emissaries streamed to pay homage to Constantine in such droves that there formed outside the palace gates a long line of distinctive-looking barbarians wearing exotic clothes, strange haircuts, and long beards. Those who waited in the line came from every corner of the earth: some had red faces, others complexions “whiter than snow,”

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5 VC IV.4
6 VC IV.5
8 VC IV.7
while still more were “blacker than ebony or pitch.”

In the context of all these diplomatic visitors to the seat of Roman power, Eusebius explains that the Persian king (whom Eusebius leaves unnamed, but who can only be Shapur II) “also saw fit to seek recognition by Constantine through an embassy” and so sent a representative bearing “tokens of friendly compact.” What Eusebius says the Persian king received in return for his friendly tokens and peace offerings is striking. As with other emissaries, Constantine treated the Persian ambassador well, and sent him back to his master with a successfully negotiated peace treaty and gifts whose splendor far outshone those that the ambassador had brought with him. But, as far as Eusebius is concerned, Constantine’s presents to the Persian king were standard fare—mere material manifestations of Rome’s power and Constantine’s greatness. Much more important was the letter that accompanied the gifts.

**Constantine as Patron and Protector of Christians**

According to Eusebius, Constantine originally wrote the letter to Shapur himself

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9 VC IV.7. Eusebius was surely not the first to play upon the trope of the in-gathering of all nations in homage to the one, divinely-appointed king. Bruce Lincoln gives a fascinating account of ancient Persian theologies of empire through his study of Achaemenid relief sculptures depicting long lines of variously-clad supplicants coming to pay homage to the king. See B. Lincoln, “The Role of Religion in Achaemenian Imperialism” in *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, ed. N. Brisch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 221-241. For a more extended treatment of this theme, see *idem, Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a Postscript on Abu Ghraib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), wherein Lincoln comments on Darius and “the very model of empire” whereby the king dominated all kinds of people “who retained their ethnic identity but were politically and economically subordinated to him” (23).

10 VC IV.8. It is noteworthy that Eusebius never specifically names the Persian king as “Shapur II,” but refers to him indeterminately as “the Persian emperor.” While the date of Constantine’s letter is uncertain, the Shâhânhâh of the Sasanian Empire during the entirety of Constantine’s reign as senior Augustus of the Roman Empire was Shapur II. He was, according to Sasanian history, crowned in utero, and the dates of his kingship extended from 309 to 379 CE, thus he would have been the only “Persian emperor” known to Eusebius during the time of Constantine’s reign.

11 VC IV.8: “the Emperor negotiated treaties to this [i.e. peaceable] end, outdoing in lavish munificence the initiator of honorific gesture by what he did in return.”
Presumably, the copy entrusted to the Persian ambassador was not in the emperor’s Latin, but was a Greek translation, the same language as the version of the letter that Eusebius says is “in circulation among us” and is duly transmitted in the VC so as to be “more readily understood by the reader.” Indeed, this is not the only place in the VC wherein Eusebius claims Constantine wrote something in Latin that was later translated into Greek. Shortly after his citation of the letter to Shapur, Eusebius comments, “Latin was the language in which the Emperor used to produce the texts of his speeches. They were translated into Greek by professional interpreters” (VC IV.32). In this same section of the VC, Eusebius explains that he has appended to his panegyric another of Constantine’s translated works, “so that none may think our assertions about his speeches to be mere rhetoric.” It is a “speech which [Constantine] entitled, ‘To the assembly of the saints.’” As I discuss below, the major themes and much of the language in the letter to Shapur are markedly similar to that of Constantine’s own Oration to the Saints, which is in fact appended to the earliest manuscripts of the VC.

Constantine’s letter to Shapur is essentially an announcement that the emperor of Rome worships the Christian God. In itself, such a proclamation of personal religiosity would have been notable by its oddity, but the letter is more than just an imperial statement of Constantine’s Christian bona fides. The emperor goes much further. He regales the Persian king with reminders of what happens to those who persecute Christians, and suggests in no uncertain terms that Shapur would be wise to care for all Christians living in the lands of the East.

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12 VC IV.8

13 Greek, in contradistinction to Latin, was a well-known language among the literati of the Sasanian Empire. Inscriptions from the Sasanian period, including the time of Shapur, were often trilingual—Parthian, Middle Persian, Greek.

14 VC IV.8
According to Eusebius, prior to writing his letter to Shapur, Constantine had learned from the Persian ambassador “that the churches of God were multiplying among the Persians and that many thousands of people were being gathered into the flocks of Christ.” The emissary’s report about the growth and wide diffusion of Christianity in Persia seems to have been heretofore unknown to Constantine, who says in his letter, as if in response to recent news, “how pleasing it is for me to hear that the most important parts of Persia too are richly adorned [with Christians]!” In his introduction to the letter, Eusebius is sure to emphasize just how pleased Constantine was to hear this good news, noting that Constantine, “as one who had general responsibility for [Christians] everywhere … took prudent measures on behalf of them all.” As Eusebius presents it, Constantine’s patronage and concern for Christians knew no limits: he took personal responsibility and “prudent measures” for all Christians in all places—even those who were the subjects of a foreign king.

**The Authenticity of Constantine’s Letter**

The textual problems of Constantine’s letter may alone provide sufficient reason to question the extent of its role as tinder for Shapur’s supposed suspicion towards Christians in Persia. The excerpt that Eusebius provides is our only source for the letter—later ecclesiastical historians who quote from or allude to the letter ultimately derive their knowledge of it from Eusebius (or his heirs) and not some other, independent source. As Fergus Millar points out, imperial letters dealing with foreign relations in late antiquity are very rare and quite infrequently cited: “whereas we know that there was correspondence between Emperors and their legati on matters of frontier

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15 VC IV.8
16 VC, IV.13
17 VC, IV.8
policy, no texts of such letters survive. There were also letters between Emperors and kings, but our only texts of these are offered by literary sources of the fourth century (the letter of Constantine to Shapur II, and Shapur’s exchange of letters with Constantius in 358), and are of uncertain authenticity.\textsuperscript{18}

Rare as imperial letters addressing foreign policy may be, there are nevertheless over a dozen Constantinian documents cited at length in the VC. Among these documents, the letter to Shapur is the obvious outlier. Miriam Vivian, whose dissertation examines the role of Constantine’s letter on Roman-Persian relations, comments that the letter “has been viewed as so unique that many scholars have not known how to explain it.” Indeed, she continues, “it seemed so unthinkable that a document with such Christian witness should come out of the chancery of a Roman emperor that in the 1930’s Henri Grégoire made it a crucial point in his arguments against the authenticity of the entire VC.”\textsuperscript{19}

Perhaps partly on the basis of Grégoire’s legacy, even the assumption that Shapur II was the letter’s addressee has been questioned. It has been argued that Eusebius inadvertently misconstrued the identity of the recipient and that Constantine was writing not to any pagan, Persian king at all, but rather to a Christian vassal of the Roman Empire—the Armenian king Tiridates.\textsuperscript{20} Although this argument has not been

\textsuperscript{18} F. Millar, “Emperors, Frontiers and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378,” \textit{Britannia} 13 (1982): 2. In his conclusion, Millar claims that the letter to Shapur is the first tangible symbol of how Christianity \textit{changed} Roman foreign relations.


\textsuperscript{20} D. de Decker, “Sur le destinataire de la lettre au Roi des Perses (Eusèbe de Césarée, \textit{Vit. Const.}, IV, 9-13) et la conversion de l’Arménie à la religion chrétienne,” \textit{Persica} 8 (1979): 99-116. Barnes, referring to de Decker’s work, notes that the tone of the letter—“polite, tactful, allusive, and indirect”—is such that one might be led to conclude that Shapur was not the recipient. This would seem to imply that politeness is something that would be out-of-place in a letter to a
met with much acceptance, the role of Tiridates’ conversion to Christianity has been regarded as having played an exacerbating role in Roman-Persian relations.\(^{21}\)

Armenia’s role in the religio-political machinations of the fourth century was discussed even by ancient historians. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen immediately precedes his assessment of Shapur’s persecution by noting that certain regions of Persia were led to embrace Christianity in part through the influence of “Tiridates, the sovereign of [the Armenian] nation” (Τηριδάτην τὸν ἠγούμενον τότε τού ἔθνους), which Sozomen pointedly acknowledges as the first “nation” to have accepted Christianity.\(^{22}\) Georg Blum connects the dots to propose what is a commonly-accepted conclusion: he suggests that Constantine’s conversion, and his subsequent heralding of it in his letter, coupled with the conversion of Tiridates and Armenia, must have led Shapur to feel as if Persia was becoming surrounded by “Christian states.”\(^{23}\)

Persian king. The letter from Constantine’s son, Constantius, however, that was written to *fratri meo Sapori*, and is known to have been written at the height of war, is, while direct, neither impolite nor tactless. See Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 131, and Amm. Marc. XVII.5,10-14.

\(^{21}\) Karin Mosig-Walburg discusses the role of Armenia throughout her work on the confrontation between Rome and Persia in the fourth century, but see especially her account of Armenia during the time of Constantine in *Römer und Perser: Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.* (Gutenberg: Computus Druck Satz & Verlag, 2009), 240-266.


While Tiridates was unlikely to have been the recipient, the letter to Shapur is nonetheless a truly puzzling document. It is the only document in the VC that is addressed beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, and, even though Eusebius suggests that it was written in response to an official emissary’s presence at Constantine’s court, the letter’s date as well as the circumstances of its composition are uncertain.24

Because of Eusebius’ reference to a Persian embassy, it has been suggested, however, that the letter was written in 324 CE, when there is evidence for Persian envoys in the Roman Empire. In fact, most of the Constantinian documents in the VC are likely to have been written during the first few years of Constantine’s sole rule over the Roman Empire—between 324 and 326 CE. Timothy Barnes suggests, for example, that Eusebius had amassed copies of most of the documents that he used in his work no later than 326 CE.25 Later dates, even as late as 337 CE, the last year of Constantine’s life, cannot be definitively ruled out, but are less likely than the mid-320s for two reasons: first, the letter reads very much like an announcement of Constantine’s Christianity—a celebration of the Christian God for leading Constantine on to what seem to have been relatively recent victories—which would of course better suit a mid-320s context than one of the late-330s; and, second, the overly laudatory and fraternal tone of the letter is more difficult to reconcile with a date closer to the end of Constantine’s life when the


emperor may have been (as I discuss in the next chapter) in the midst of planning a campaign against Shapur. 26

If the letter was written in the mid-320s, then such a date would seem to militate against its direct role in aggravating Shapur to tax and persecute Christians. At least fifteen years would have elapsed between Shapur’s receipt of the letter and any subsequent persecution of the Christians of Persia. Such an extended chronology of events makes it hard to read Constantine’s letter as a document that could have galvanized any immediate concern over the Christians of Persia among Shapur and his governors.

While it is true that the letter to Shapur is unique by comparison with other Constantinian documents in the VC, and that it is unattested outside of Eusebius and his continuators, these facts are not sufficient to dismiss the letter as either inauthentic or a Eusebian invention. 27 Nevertheless, it is unquestionably the case that Eusebius errs well on the side of hagiographical hyperbole when describing Constantine’s life; as Averil Cameron aptly comments, the VC “has to be read as a text before it can be read as a source.” 28 And while Cameron is certainly correct, her reminder has often gone unheeded. Consider Cameron’s critique of scholars who are primarily interested in


27 David Frendo comments, “the general trend [in Eusebian studies] has been toward acceptance of the Eusebian authorship of the Vita Constantini and of the authenticity of the greater part of the documents contained therein.” See Frendo, “Constantine’s Letter to Shapur,” 58 and 60, where arguments for and against the authenticity of Constantine’s letter to Shapur are discussed at length.

Constantine and view Eusebius as merely a “source” for the emperor: if Eusebius’ comments about Constantine are upheld as historically accurate or, conversely, discredited as spurious, then Constantine’s biography is interpreted accordingly. Cameron’s not-so-subtle implication is that Eusebius is often approached (and accepted or discredited) with predetermined ideas about Constantine already in mind, ideas that the church historian either proves to be true or, as the case may be, misunderstands and wrongly interprets.  

Although Cameron’s important distinction between a text and a source is one that must be maintained, the discovery of an early fourth-century papyrus (P. Lond. 878) in 1950 helped to confirm that the Constantinian documents that Eusebius cites—while they, too, must be read as texts—are nevertheless likely to be authentic sources from which Eusebius faithfully quotes. In fact, the fourth-century London papyrus, which was discovered by T.C. Skeat, independently preserves part of Constantine’s decree to the provincials of Palestine. Eusebius reproduces this decree in full in the VC, and his quotation is perfectly consistent with that found in the papyrus. The discovery of this papyrus, according to Cameron and Hall’s commentary on the VC, “greatly reduc[es] the likelihood that the documents [preserved in the VC] as a group should be regarded as suspect.” In other words, although Eusebius was certainly writing a hagiography, and although his interpretations of Constantine must thereby be questioned all the more closely, the church historian does not seem to have invented his Constantinian sources. Rather, Eusebius, as the evidence of the decree to the provincials of Palestine suggests,

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31 Cameron and Hall, Life of Constantine, 239.
quoted faithfully from the sources that he had before him.

Not surprisingly, not everyone agrees that the sources that Eusebius’ claims he is citing can be accepted as authentic. Karin Mosig-Walburg, for example, concludes that Constantine’s letter to Shapur cannot be authentic—although she leaves (slightly) open whether Eusebius should be considered guilty of simple negligence or outright forgery:

Verschiedene Indizien sprechen gegen die Authentizität des fraglichen Briefes. Es drängt sich die Vermutung auf, daß es sich bei dem Schreiben, das, wie Eusebius bekundet, in christlichen Kreisen in Umlauf war, um eine reine Propagandaschrift aus christlichem Umfeld gehandelt hat, die dem Kaiser zugeschrieben wurde. Da sie bestens dazu geeignet war, die von Eusebius angestrebte Darstellung des Kaisers beispielhaft zu illustrieren, nahm er sie in die *Vita* auf. Ob er sich damit einer bewußten Fälschung schuldig gemacht hat oder ob er wirklich daran glaubte, daß dieses Schriftstück von Constantin I. stammte, läßt sich nicht sicher entscheiden, doch spricht die Nachlässigkeit in seinem Umgang mit dem Inhalt, den er nur paraphrasiert, für die erste Möglichkeit.\(^{32}\)

As this quotation suggests, Mosig-Walburg believes that it is unjustified “im christlichen Glauben eine Waffe zu sehen,” and she thereby denies the authenticity of the letter to Shapur as evidence that no such religious motivation existed in the fourth century. She concludes her short chapter on the role of religion by asserting that there was no religious motive behind Constantine’s planned campaign against Persia near the end of his life, nor to the prosecution of the war that would fall to Constantius after Constantine’s death: “Weder hat sich Constantin I. zum Schutzherrn des persischen Christen aufgeschwungen noch plante er einen religiösen >Kreuzzug< um das Perserreich zu christianisieren, noch trieb die Not persischer Christen seinen Sohn Constantius II. in die Offensive.”\(^{33}\)

While I agree with Mosig-Walburg’s ultimate conclusion that the conflict between Rome and Persia that began at the end of Constantine’s life was not a


“religious” one, I disagree with her method for reaching such a conclusion. Mosig-Walburg’s reading assumes that Constantine’s letter must be read as evidence of some sort of caesaropapism, and that if the letter’s authenticity can be questioned on those grounds, then so can any “religious” motivation on Constantine’s part vis-à-vis the Christians of Persia. In fact, arguing against the authenticity of Constantine’s letter does not prove anything about the war between Rome and Persia one way or another. The letter is a red herring: it may not be authentic, but even if it could be proven that it was neither written by Constantine nor ever sent to Shapur II, that in itself does not preclude Constantine from understanding himself as the protector of the Christians of Persia. Nor does it (necessarily) preclude the prospect that Shapur persecuted Christians because of their perceived link with Rome.

As I detail in chapters two and three, a better way of undermining the idea that Constantine waged a “crusade” on behalf of the Christians of Persia is to look at how this idea took hold among Roman historians after Constantine’s death and to what rhetorical ends Constantine’s letter was used in conjunction with Greek translations of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs. In any case, as I discuss below, there are themes and language in parts of Constantine’s letter to Shapur that mirror other documents (namely, Constantine’s Oration to the Saints) that more recent scholarship has generally accepted as being authentically Constantinian. (As a result, it seems to me that the letter can be assumed to be authentic.)

In sum, although we cannot be entirely certain that Constantine wrote the letter

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34 For Mosig-Walburg’s arguments against the authenticity of the letter, see Römer und Perser, 267-278.

35 As Horst Schneider indicates, however, the letter to Shapur is nonetheless an anomaly among the documents in the VC: “Stil und Sprache [of the letter to Shapur] unterscheiden sich deutlich von den übrigen kaiserlichen Erlassen und Briefen, die in der v. C. zu finden sind.” See Eusebius von Caesarea, De Vita Constantini Über das Leben Konstantins, ed. B. Bleckmann and H. Schneider (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 420, n. 287.
to Shapur, there is not substantially more reason to doubt the authenticity of this letter than the other Constantinian documents that Eusebius cites. For the sake of the argument that I wish to advance in this chapter, I will assume that the letter is genuinely from Constantine’s hand, that it was sent to Shapur sometime between 324-337 CE (with an earlier date more likely), and that the Greek translation cited by Eusebius is not an injustice to the emperor’s Latin such that the sense of the letter has been misconstrued. In other words, I wish to assume that Shapur really did receive a letter from Constantine in which the Roman emperor formally stated his allegiance to the Christian God, critiqued past persecutors of Christians, and expressed concern for the Christians of Persia. Even given such robust assumptions, I wish to suggest that it is still difficult to construe the letter as a spur towards the persecution of Christians in Persia.

**The Contents of Constantine’s Letter**

Eusebius quotes from Constantine’s letter at length, but he has certainly not preserved all of it. It seems, in fact, that Eusebius begins quoting from the letter mid-stream. Eusebius fails to include any formal opening or greeting to the addressee in the portions of the letter that he cites—literary elements that must have been included under the most basic standards of late ancient epistolary writing.36 The first line that Eusebius quotes begins a long confessional section wherein Constantine explains that he guards “the divine faith” (τὴν θείαν πίστιν), participates “in the light of truth” (τῆς ἀληθείας φωτὸς μεταλαγχάνω), and acknowledges “the most holy religion” (τὴν ἁγιωτάτην

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36 Cameron and Hall comment, “Taken with the absence of a heading or introductory greeting such as we have with every other letter of Constantine in Eusebius’ account, this may suggest that Eusebius has this document from a secondary history or source.” See Cameron and Hall, Life of Constantine, 314, and B.H. Warmington, “The Sources of Some Constantinian Documents in Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History and Life of Constantine,” *SP* 18 (1986): 93-98, who suggests where and from whom Eusebius may have acquired his copy of the letter—namely, an imperial official named Marianus, who is mentioned by Eusebius with high praise at VC IV.44.
θρησκείαν γνωρίζω). More forebodingly—at least in terms of how the letter has been traditionally read vis-à-vis the Christians of Persia—Constantine tactfully, but nonetheless clearly, proclaims that he has “the power of this God as ally” (τούτου τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δύναμιν ἔχων σύμμαχον). He declares that his army carries the sign of this God on its shoulders, and that by means of his own allegiance with the divine that he has “raised up the whole world step by step with sure hopes of salvation.”

Constantine portrays the victories that God has granted him as therapeutic and restorative, implying that his rise to sole rule over Roman lands has healed the world of its wounds, reviving it “like a patient after treatment” from the “slavery of such great tyrants.” The “great tyrants” to whom Constantine refers are not foreign kings, but his own predecessors and rivals who persecuted Christians. Contrary to the haughty tyranny of these emperors, the God of the Christians “takes pleasure in works of kindness and gentleness,” and yet this God is quick to “shatter all ostentatious power” and destroy the proud and the arrogant. Rome’s pagan rulers were defeated, Constantine explains, because God “values highly righteous empire,” and so “strengthens it with his own resources, and guards the imperial mind with the calm of peace.” Addressing Shapur as “my brother,” Constantine insists that he is justified and unmistakable to confess “this one God the Author and Father of all.” The emperor makes a point of establishing a new era by directly contrasting himself with “many of those who have reigned here” (i.e., the Roman Empire) and, “seduced by insane errors,”

37 VC IV.9
38 VC IV.9
39 VC IV.9
40 VC IV.9
41 VC IV.10
denied God and persecuted his faithful followers.

Up to this point, the letter reads mostly as the self-aggrandizing bluster of a king thanking his divine patron while touting his own prowess on the battlefield. Constantine has heretofore failed to explain to his recipient why he is waxing on about his love for the “most holy religion” and the God who so majestically carried his armies to victory.

The emperor’s rhetoric goes well beyond the more perfunctory, but equally self-serving, recognition of the divine that Shapur himself exemplifies in his letter to Constantius. According to Ammianus, who preserves that letter, Shapur formally greets Constantius and identifies himself by citing his fraternal relationship to the heavens—“Shapur, King of Kings, partner with the Stars, brother of the Sun and Moon”—before quickly turning to the business at hand.42 Constantine, by contrast, is concerned with detailing his relationship to the divine and explaining how his alliance with the Christian God distinguishes him from all the earlier impious emperors of Rome.

Although the preliminary sections of Constantine’s letter are a series of reminders of what happens to those who persecute “the people devoted to God” (τὸν τῷ θεῷ ἄνακείμενον λαὸν),43 it is only near the very end of the letter that Constantine utters the name “Christian” and finally reveals to Shapur the identity of the nameless God that he has been extolling at such length. Indeed, after much pomp and brass, Constantine acknowledges at what seems to be the close of his letter that his “whole concern” is “for them” (ὑπὲρ τούτων ὁ πᾶς μοι λόγος), adding by way of explanation:

42 Amm. Marc. XVII.5,3: Rex regum Sapor, particeps siderum, frater Solis et Lunae, Constantio Caesari fratri meo salutem plurinam dico. Such a greeting, from a “barbarian” king no less, further indicates that Eusebius cannot have preserved Constantine’s letter in its entirety.

43 VC IV.12
"I mean of course the Christians" (λέγω δὴ τῶν Χριστιανῶν).\textsuperscript{44} It takes even further explanation for Constantine to disclose to Shapur that the God who led Constantine to victory, the God whose followers were oppressed by the Roman tyrants, is the very same God who is worshipped among the people that Shapur's ambassador had informed him were "multiplying among the Persians."\textsuperscript{45} Only in the last lines of the letter does Constantine at last exclaim what seems perhaps to be his real purpose for writing: "how pleasing it is for me to hear that the most important parts of Persia too are richly adorned [with Christians]!"\textsuperscript{46}

If he actually received it, one cannot help but wonder what Shapur would have made of such a strange letter. Constantine singles out a specific group of people in Persia for special consideration after long-windedly proclaiming to Shapur that his own recent military successes are thanks to the god that these people worship. At the same time that Constantine praises Shapur because Persia is "richly adorned" with Christians, he reminds him of what happens to those who persecute Christians. At the same time that he glorifies the goodness of the Christian God, he rails against the errors of non-Christians and the sickness of the cultic sacrifices of his predecessors.\textsuperscript{47}

More than anything else, the letter is informed by the persistent sense that benefits accrue to those who support Christians (or at least refrain from persecuting

\textsuperscript{44} VC IV.13  
\textsuperscript{45} VC IV.8  
\textsuperscript{46} VC IV.13  
\textsuperscript{47} VC IV.10: "Him I call upon with bended knee, shunning all abominable blood and foul and hateful odours, and refusing all earthly splendor, since by all these things that lawless and unmentionable error is tainted, which has overthrown many of the nations and whole peoples, dropping them in the nethermost depths." For a summary and analysis of the other Constantinian references in Eusebius that speak disdainfully of pagan sacrifices, see T.D. Barnes, "Constantine’s Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice," \textit{AJP} 105 (1984): 69-72, and S. Bradbury, "Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century," \textit{CP} 89 (1994): 120-139.
them), while dire consequences await those who treat Christians poorly. But it is imperative to note that Constantine’s letter is not an indictment of Shapur or the Persian king’s gods—Constantine never alludes that he suspects Shapur of persecuting Christians in Persia, and he actually entrusts these Christians to Shapur.\(^4^8\) Constantine, in fact, is clear to indicate his pleasure in hearing that the choicest parts of Persia are overflowing with Christians, and he attempts to secure their continued safety through rhetorical persuasion and fraternal cajoling. Indeed, the close of Constantine’s letter rings with a tone of congratulatory well-wishing: “May the very best come to you therefore, and at the same time the best for them, since they are also yours.” The emperor continues in this vein, saying: “These [Christians] therefore, since you are so great, I entrust to you, putting their very persons in your hands, because you too are renowned for piety. Love them in accordance with your own humanity. For you will give enormous satisfaction both to yourself and to us by keeping faith.”\(^4^9\)

Constantine’s language at the end of his letter is somewhat patronizing towards Shapur, but a patronal attitude towards Christians everywhere is precisely the one he intends to adopt—and the one that Eusebius fashions throughout the \(VC\). Yet Constantine never lays claim to the Christians of Persia. Instead, he regales Shapur’s piety and entrusts the Christians of Persia to him, emphasizing at the close of the letter

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\(^4^8\) There are several martyr acts set earlier in Shapur’s reign that predate the “Great Persecution” by as many as two decades, but all are late compositions, and there is no evidence that Constantine was aware of any specific Christian martyrs in Persia. The \textit{History of Sultan Mahdukt} (AMS II, 1-39), for example, claims to tell the story of a Persian (Christian) nobleman persecuted in the ninth year of Shapur’s reign (317/318 CE), but the final redaction of the text dates to the late seventh century. The \textit{Sultan Mahdukt} is in fact more concerned to weave a narrative constructing an ancient, biblical past for the nobles it celebrates than it is to relate any historically credible details about fourth-century Persia during Shapur’s early reign. For more on this text and the context of its composition, see R. Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500-700 C.E.” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010), 126 ff.

\(^4^9\) \(VC\) IV.13: τούτους τοιοφαύς, ἐπειδὴ τοσοῦτος εἶ, σοὶ παρατίθεμαι, τούς αὐτοὺς τούτους, ὅτι καὶ ἐστεβεία ἐπίσημος εἰ, ἐγχειρίζων· τούτους ἀγάπα ἀρμοδίως τῆς σεαυτοῦ φιλανθρωπίας· σαυτῷ τε γὰρ καὶ ἡμῖν ἀπερίγραπτον δώσεις διὰ τῆς πίστεως τὴν χάριν.
that so long as Shapur is a worthy and beneficent ruler, he will personally receive
“enormous satisfaction” from the Christian god. The Christians of Persia, Constantine
strives to explain, are a divine gift to Shapur and his empire.

**Constantine’s Letter and the Beginning of Imperial Religion?**

While Eusebius may have had reason to celebrate the emperor’s overweening
care for Christians beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, most scholars have
read Constantine’s letter with more trepidation. For, so the argument goes, in claiming
to be so concerned about the Christians of Persia, Constantine effectively marked them as
clients of Rome. Roger Blockley suggests, for example, that the obstreperous religiosity
of Constantine’s letter was “threatening” to the Persian king and must have “fuelled
Persian suspicions by emphasising the universal mission of the Christian Church and
[Constantine’s] ‘episcopal’ responsibility for those without it.”

Likewise, Timothy Barnes reads Constantine’s letter to Shapur as evidence of an astonishing change in the
Roman Empire’s outlook on the rest of the known world. He argues that the letter
demonstrates that Constantine’s conversion and the concomitant Christianization of the
Roman Empire had already begun “to affect foreign policy” as soon as Constantine
became sole emperor of Rome in 324 CE. Following Eusebius, Barnes declares that the
emperor “regarded himself as a divinely ordained protector of Christians everywhere,
with a duty to convert pagans to the truth, and this fundamental assumption about his
mission in life inevitably shaped his policy towards Persia, where a large number of
Christians lived under a Zoroastrian monarch.”

50. R.C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to

51. T.D. Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 131. With respect to the treaties
promulgated between Rome and the Goths and Sarmatians that Eusebius mentions in VC IV.5-6,
Barnes claims that Constantine “insisted on including religious stipulations, which enabled him
But to what extent can we say that Constantine’s foreign policy was fundamentally any different from that of his predecessors? Persia, indeed, was always on the forefront of Roman diplomacy. And the two empires were frequently on the verge of war. In 299 CE, just twenty-five years before Constantine’s letter to Shapur was likely to have been sent, a treaty ending a war over strategic border territory was formalized between the Roman Empire and Shapur II’s grandfather, Narseh. This treaty ceded large parts of northern Mesopotamia and Armenia to Rome. Its terms endured for over thirty years, but, because it was agreed upon when Narseh was under duress and had little bargaining power, it was never an agreeable treaty to the Persians. In a letter (ca. 358 CE) to Constantine’s son, Constantius, that Ammianus Marcellinus preserves in his *Res gestae*, Shapur explains his purpose in challenging the Roman Empire as a “duty to recover Armenia with Mesopotamia, which double-dealing wrested from my grandfather.”

(and his panegyrist Eusebius) to claim that he had *converted* the northern barbarians. My emphasis.


53 Amm. Marc. XVII.5,6. Often, Roman historians of late antiquity reckoned Persian territorial aims more grandly and with a classical context in mind, imagining Shapur’s designs as akin to those of Darius or Xerxes, and suggesting that the Persian king aimed to march all the way to Macedonia. See D. Frendo, “Sasanian Irredentism and the Foundation of Constantinople: Historical Truth and Historical Reality,” *BAI* 6 (1992): 59-66. For a thorough assessment of Shapur’s motives, see M.R. Shayegan, “On the Rationale behind the Roman Wars of Šābuhr II the Great,” *BAI* 18 (2004): 111-133, and Mosig-Walburg, *Römer und Perser*. Citing Shapur’s letter to Constantius, Alireza Shahbazi claims that the “memory of the Achaemenids” lingered in the Sasanian imagination until the time of Shapur II, but that this memory “was lost with the rise of the ‘State Religion’ under Šāpūr II … [when] Zoroastrianism and Iranian sovereignty were threatened when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire.” Through promoting Zoroastrianism as the primary marker of Persian identity, Shahbazi argues that memory of the Achaemenids was slowly lost and replaced by a particularly religious and Avestan memory of early Persian history. See A.S. Shahbazi, “Early Sasanians’ Claim to Achaemenid Heritage,” *IJAIS* 1 (2001): 61-73. For a more moderate view, but which also suggests that a Sasanian “National History” of the Achaemenid period changed as a result of later Zoroastrian re-writing, see chapter five (“Grecs, Romains et Byzantins dans la tradition ...
For non-Christian historians such as Ammianus, the fourth-century conflict between Rome and Persia was (and always had been) more territorial in nature—a mundane border dispute. But even the relatively temperate Ammianus suggests that Constantius, Julian, and finally Jovian were left to clean up a mess that had ultimately started on Constantine’s watch. Still, Ammianus gives little suggestion that what might be called “Constantine’s war” was one predicated on religious conflict. According to Barnes, however, Constantine’s letter to Shapur had tipped what was already a precarious balance. Constantine’s letter fundamentally altered the nature of Rome’s conflict with Persia: “it was Constantine, not Shapur, who brought Christianity into play as a political factor in relations between Rome and Persia. … It was Constantine who injected a religious dimension into the normal frontier dispute, by seeking to appeal to Shapur’s Christian subjects.”

Sebastian Brock shares the perspective that Constantine’s vocal role as a patron for the Christians of Persia had negative repercussions, but Brock considers the problem more to have been the legacy of Eusebius’ portrayal of Constantine “as advocate for the Christian minority living under the Zoroastrian Sasanids” rather than Constantine’s

actual letter itself. Throughout all of his works, the \textit{VC} and the \textit{Ecclesiastical History} included, Eusebius' overarching focus is, truly, on Christianity in the \textit{Roman} Empire. This lopsided territorial emphasis, Brock argues, leaves “the reader with the impression that Christianity was essentially a phenomenon restricted to the Greco-Latin cultural world.” What Eusebius creates in his literary and historical works is, according to Brock, a “picture of the history of the Christian church as being inextricably interwoven with the history of the Roman empire,” a concatenation of religion and place that had enduring consequences for the Christians of Persia and “a pernicious influence on the writing of almost all subsequent ecclesiastical history down to our present day.”

Barnes and Brock, as well as the many others who have similarly assessed the Constantinian/Eusebian role in exacerbating specifically “religious” tensions between Rome and Persia, certainly make a very important point, but it is one that I believe requires further examination within a broader interpretive context. Unquestionably, Eusebius’ legacy colored (to some extent) all subsequent ecclesiastical history, both in Greek and in Syriac. But it is the “Eusebian” and post-Eusebian hermeneutic context in which Constantine’s letter was read that has shaped contemporary estimations of the letter itself and its historical implications. Constantine’s letter and Eusebius’ rehearsal

\begin{itemize}
  \item[58] While the evidence of Eusebius’ influence is extensive, it is not unique. For a recent study surveying the influence of Greek historiography on Syriac historical writing more generally, see M. Debié, “L’héritage de l’historiographie grecque,” in \textit{L’historiographie syriaque. Études syriaques} 6 (Paris: Geuthner, 2009), 11-31.
\end{itemize}
and contextual placement and analysis of it must be kept separate. If we can peer through the interpretive haze, or at least more clearly acknowledge that there is an interpretive haze through which we are peering, the idea that a fourth-century war between Rome and Persia was sparked by religious suspicions begins to appear less as historical reportage and more as hagiographical imagination.

In their literary works, Constantine and Eusebius certainly evinced a new idea of a Christian Rome, an idea that, while apparently not intended solely for internal consumption within the limes of the empire, was not (at least initially) intended as a way of injecting “religion” into mundane border disputes either. The logical leap from Constantine as a Christian, and, as the letter suggests, Constantine as a concerned father for Christians everywhere, to the idea of Rome as a fundamentally Christian empire with new-found subjects spread throughout Persia represents Eusebius’ construction of Constantine. Only in the fifth century, when tales about Christian martyrs in Persia began to reach the ears of Roman ecclesiastical historians did Constantine’s letter come into play as a supposed factor in Shapur’s persecution of Christians—and then, as I will explain in the next chapter, not as the cause of, but rather as the response to the persecution.

Reassessing Constantine’s Letter

Irrespective of how one interprets Constantine’s intentions in sending the letter to Shapur, it is not likely to have caused an immediate rift in Roman-Persian relations. While the letter is undeniably unique (we possess no other letter, or parts of letters, between Constantine and Shapur) it is doubtful that the excerpt that Eusebius transmits represents the entirety of Constantine’s correspondence with Shapur—surely other letters changed hands via Roman and Persian ambassadors. And, as Constantine’s letter itself indicates, it was the Persian ambassador who alerted Constantine to the presence of
“the churches of God” in Persia in the first place, noting that the “flocks of Christ” were gathering many thousands of members and, presumably, converts to their ranks. At least insofar as Eusebius’ account is concerned, the Persians hardly needed a letter from Constantine to alert them to the presence of Christians in their midst—howsoever they may have understood just who or what “Christians” were and what the emperor’s feelings about them were. In addition, merchants routinely passed from one realm to the other, and the merchant-missionary (not a novel phenomenon in the mid-fourth century) was one among the many vehicles of Christianization in the Sasanian Empire.59

A political or cultural border between Rome and Persia would not have been any hindrance to Persian awareness that changes may have been afoot in the Roman Empire. The Sasanians were acutely attuned to power struggles in Rome and information about relevant goings-on moved across an inevitably porous zone of contact.60 As A.D. Lee points out, even though the absence of documentary evidence makes ascertaining both the existence and means of transmission of strategic military intelligence difficult, “the


The famous Manichaean period of Augustine of Hippo’s spiritual life is but the most obvious example of how religious ideas passed in the opposite direction, well beyond the border areas from Persian into Roman territory. On the spread of Manichaicism westward, Peter Brown’s classic article is still instructive. See P. Brown, “The Diffusion of Manichaemism in the Roman Empire,” JRS 59 (1969): 92-103. More recently, and much more exhaustively, see J.D. BeDuhn, Augustine’s Manichaean Dilemma. 1: Conversion and Apostasy, 373-388 C.E. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

very despatch of certain embassies implies that there was movement of information between the two empires.” Notably, Lee comments that the Persian embassy that arrived at Constantinople seeking to dissuade Constantine from marching to war in 337 is one indication “that the Persians had somehow learned of Roman preparations.”

If Constantine’s conversion to Christianity resulted in the immediate changes that are so often claimed about his reign by both ancient and contemporary historians alike—changes such as an abolition of pagan sacrifices, an exceptional redistribution of wealth favoring Christians and Christian sites, and the promotion of Christianity above and beyond all other cults—then is it really plausible that such raucous and radical transformations would have gone completely unnoticed by the Persians? Indeed, the Persian ambassador with whom Constantine entrusted his letter to Shapur may well have witnessed the burgeoning religious transformation of the Roman Empire firsthand. But if, on the other hand, the religious changes within the Roman Empire were not nearly so overwhelming, either in their scope or intensity, as some make them out to be, then Constantine’s announcement to Shapur about his own Christianity and his concern for Christians everywhere may yet have been newsworthy—or at least utterly puzzling. In either case, the more important question is whether Constantine’s personal claim to an allegiance with the Christian God was sufficient to inexorably establish a link between that god and the Roman Empire such that the name “Christian,” at a stroke, became interchangeable with the name “Roman.” Those who would take such a position seem to be reading the fourth century through Byzantine-colored glasses—through the anachronistic lens, that is, of a brand of caesaropapism inapplicable to Constantine’s

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Persecution and Divine Justice in the Letter to Shapur

There is no disputing the fact that Constantine’s letter indicates a concern for the Christians of Persia—indeed, he declares that they are the very reason for his letter. This concern for Christians far and wide is a theme that runs throughout VC, and it may be most keenly encapsulated in a story that Eusebius relates about a quip that Constantine made to an assembly of bishops gathered for dinner. Constantine, Eusebius says, “let slip the remark that he was perhaps himself a bishop too, using some such words as these in our hearing: ‘You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside.’”

In their commentary on this passage, Cameron and Hall refer to it as “one of the most famous and puzzling statements in the VC.” To whom was Constantine referring when he called himself the bishop “over those outside”? Did he mean Christians outside of Rome, those beyond the reach of the Church of the Empire? Or did he mean to anoint himself with a missionary role as the shepherd who would lead non-Christians within the Roman Empire to the Church?

While this passage—which Eusebius seems to regard as an intriguing, but only anecdotal, aside—may reinforce the view that the letter to Shapur is expression of

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62 VC IV.13: Τούτου τοῦ καταλόγου τῶν ἀνθρώπων, λέγω δή τῶν Χριστιανῶν (ὑπὲρ τούτων ὁ πᾶς μοι λόγος).


64 Cameron and Hall, Life of Constantine, 320. It is also a passage that has helped to fuel the characterization of Constantine as a “caesaropapist.” Claudia Rapp says that this passage, coupled with others wherein Constantine is referred to as a “bishop,” seems “to encapsulate the Byzantine vision of imperial authority in its relation to Christianity.” See C. Rapp, “Imperial Ideology in the Making: Eusebius of Caesarea on Constantine as ‘Bishop,’” JTS 49 (1998): 685.
Constantine’s sense of religious mission, the letter is not an oblique or surreptitious way of claiming the Christians of Persia as Roman clients, or of girding Shapur for a religious war on their behalf. Constantine writes to Shapur seeking to ensure that the Persian king will remain one who does not persecute Christians. As I have noted, Constantine remarks that the Persian king is “renowned for piety” (εὐσεβείας ἐπίσημος εἶ) and, by commending the Christians of Persia to Shapur’s protection, how he hopes “the very best” will come to him (i.e. Shapur) “since they [the Christians] are also yours” (σοί τ’οὖν ὃς ὅτι κάλλιστα ἐκείνοις θ’ώσαυτως ὑπάρχοι τὰ κάλλιστα, ὅτι σοὶ κάκεινοι). The letter warns Shapur, but it does so in a way that is judiciously phrased as being helpful, not threatening. It is important to note, too, that, according to Eusebius, Constantine accompanied his letter with peace guarantees and magnificent presents.

Constantine does focus largely on war and military victories in the opening sections of his letter, but the reasons behind the militarism in the letter have been misunderstood. The references to Constantine’s victorious army must be read less as imperial saber-rattling and more as a straightforward presentation of evidence that would have been readily intelligible to a leader (and reader) like Shapur. Constantine offers tangible proof—his own triumph over his adversaries—of the benefits that accrue to rulers who are benevolent toward Christians. He is insistent that Christians will be a boon to Shapur and to the Persian Empire, if Shapur is only wise enough to refrain from persecuting them: “For so you will keep the sovereign Lord of the Universe kind, merciful and benevolent.” In any case, in Constantine’s estimation, those who failed to keep the Lord benevolent were not Persian kings, but Roman emperors who persecuted

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65 VC IV.13
66 VC IV.8
67 VC IV.13: οὕτω γὰρ ἔξεις τὸν τῶν ὅλων δεσπότην ἰπράονι, ἢλεο καὶ εὐμενή.
Christians. One emperor, in particular, is singled out for special condemnation: Valerian.

Even though Valerian is never actually named in the letter (neither is Shapur, for that matter), he is one of the most important characters in Constantine’s missive and the person on whom the whole message of the letter hinges. In transitioning from the sections that tout the power of the Christian god and account for God’s patronage in ushering Constantine to victory, Constantine turns to critique “many of those who have reigned here”—erroneous Roman emperors—who were “seduced by insane errors” and denied God. Constantine strives to present the death and punishment of these persecuting emperors in dire, providential terms, and he anticipates that Shapur will likewise account for their deaths as a direct result of divine vengeance. Constantine explains, “all mankind since has regarded their fate as superseding all other examples to warn those who strive for the same ends.”

One of these former Roman rulers would have been especially well known in Persia. Referring to Valerian, Constantine tells Shapur that the Roman persecutor of Christians was “driven from these parts [the Roman Empire] by divine wrath as by a thunderbolt and was left in yours, where he caused the victory on your side to become very famous because of the shame he suffered.”

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68 On the common rhetorical practice of keeping enemies unnamed in order to purposefully refer to them in a more allusive fashion, see R. MacMullen, “Roman Bureaucratese,” Traditio 18 (1962): 364-378, a point brought up by Vivian (“A Letter to Shapur,” 66) as well.

69 VC IV.11

70 VC IV.11

71 VC IV.11: τούτων ἔκείνων ἐνα ἠγούμαι γεγονέναι, ὅν ὅσπερ τις σκηπτός ἢ θεία μήνις τῶν τηδὲ ἀπελάσασα τοῖς ὑμετέρος μέρεις παραδέδωκεν, τῆς ἕπ’ αὐτῷ ἀισχύνης πολυβρύλητον τὸ παρ᾽ ὑμῖν τρόπαιον ἀποφήγασα. Later commentators had no trouble understanding the identity of the person driven out by a thunderbolt. Sozomen, who summarizes Constantine’s letter within a larger discussion about Shapur and the Christian martyrs of Persia, specifically names Valerian as the referent of Constantine’s ire. See the discussion about Valerian’s death below and Soz. HE II.15,4 for the reference to Valerian.
single out other persecutors of Christians—Decius or Diocletian, for example—but the rhetorical use of Valerian would have been obvious in the context of a letter to a Persian king. Shapur II’s own great-grandfather, Shapur I, defeated Valerian’s army in 260 CE, and—as numerous sources attest—the elder Shapur is said to have either killed Valerian or led him off into a captivity from which he would never return.

Shapur I’s victory over Valerian was, literally, a monumental defeat for the Romans. The victory was soon commemorated in several massive relief sculptures cut directly into the cliffs at Naqsh-i Rustam, near the ancient Achaemenid capital of Persepolis. The rock reliefs there, as well as others near the city of Bishapur, depict a suppliant Valerian before a triumphant Shapur. In a trilingual inscription (Middle Persian, Parthian, Greek) on the famous Ka’ba-ye Zartosht (“Cube of Zoroaster”) near Persepolis, Shapur claims to have defeated Valerian and his army and deported both the emperor and scores of Roman officers to the Persian heartland. Indeed, the very city of Bishapur itself—which, according to an inscription at the site, was founded by Shapur I in 266 CE after his victory over Valerian—seems to have been built by Roman soldiers who had been captured by the Persians. That Roman captives built the city is not just the chaff of historical legend: the plan of Bishapur, as well as the city’s mosaics, demonstrate ample Roman influences, and the capture of Valerian and many of his soldiers is well-


In turning to consider the fate of Valerian and his captivity in Persia, Constantine moves from extolling the power infused into Rome’s armies by the Christian God, to acknowledging that that same god once supported the Persians (apparently unbeknownst to them) in a war against a Roman army that was led by an emperor who persecuted Christians. Constantine’s intent is clearly didactic: Rome was once an empire enslaved by tyrants, but with the elevation of a Christian emperor it has “enjoyed the general restoration of right” and been “revived like a patient after treatment.”\footnote{VC IV.9: ὡς ἄπαντα ὡσα ὑπὸ τοσούτως τυράννοις δεδουλωμένα ταῖς καθημεριναῖς συμφοραῖς ἐνδόντα ἔξειπηλα ἐγεγόνει, ταῦτα προσλαβόντα τὴν τῶν κοινών ἐκδικίαν ὥσπερ ἐκ τινος θεραπείας ἀναζωπυρηθήναι.} Constantine’s own rise to power is thereby contrasted with the downfall of his non-Christian predecessors. Those who persecuted “the people devoted to God” came to a bitter end as the example of Valerian indicates—an emperor whose name is well-remembered by Romans and Persians alike. And while Valerian’s paganism is surely called to task in Constantine’s letter, the errors of his cults and their sacrifices—Constantine calls them “abominable blood and foul hateful odours”\footnote{VC IV.10}—were not alone responsible for Valerian’s downfall. Rather, it was Valerian’s persecution of Christians that brought about God’s vengeance.

This is a crucial point. For, throughout his letter, Constantine demonstrates no

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\[75\] VC IV.9: ὡς ἄπαντα ὡσα ὑπὸ τοσούτως τυράννοις δεδουλωμένα ταῖς καθημεριναῖς συμφοραῖς ἐνδόντα ἔξειπηλα ἐγεγόνει, ταῦτα προσλαβόντα τὴν τῶν κοινών ἐκδικίαν ὥσπερ ἐκ τινος θεραπείας ἀναζωπυρηθήναι.

\[76\] VC IV.10
interest in critiquing Shapur’s gods or the cults of the Persians—again, he even remarks that Shapur is “renowned for piety.” The emperor is not proselytizing to non-Christian Persians, but, instead, is intent solely on demonstrating to Shapur that rulers who persecute Christians enrage God, while those who protect them earn God’s munificence.

That Valerian’s death was a direct result of his oppression of Christians—and not just his paganism—is a theme born out by other Christian sources from the Roman Empire. In his Chronicle, composed ca. 380 CE, Jerome suggests a clear, causal connection between Valerian’s persecution and his untimely death, indicating that the latter followed immediately from the former. Likewise, Augustine’s disciple Orosius places Valerian as the eighth in a long line of persecuting emperors beginning with Nero. He says that from the commencement of Valerian’s reign there flowed throughout the empire the blood of martyrs—saints, he calls them, who refused to be coerced into idol worship—and that soon after Valerian issued his persecutory edict, he was enslaved by the Persians.

Sozomen, too, claims that Valerian’s reign was untroubled so long as he did not persecute Christians. But as soon as the emperor began his oppression, the wrath of God delivered him to the Persians, who killed him.

Valerian surfaces in Christian texts outside of the Roman Empire as well. The extensive East Syrian Chronicle of Siirt finds a providential purpose for the persecuting emperor. The whole of the Chronicle, in fact, begins with Valerian’s death. According to

77 VC IV.13


79 Orosius, ad. Paganos VII.22,3-4

80 Soz. HE II.15,4: ὁ δὲ Οὐαλλεριανὸς, ἐφ’ ὅσον οὐκ ἔκακούργης τὰς ἐκκλησίας, εὐθυμερῶν διετέλει τὴν ἁρχὴν· ἐπεὶ δὲ διωγμὸν ἔγειρεν ἐβουλεύσατο κατὰ τῶν Χριστιανῶν, θεία μήνις ἔλασασα αὐτὸν ὑπὸ Πέρσας ἐποίησε, παρ’ ύπν ἀἰχμαλωτος λιπθείς ἐλεεινῶς τὸν βίον κατέτπαυε.
the Chronicle, there was a divine, double purpose in the emperor’s demise. After the death of “the evil Valerian,” the priests that he had exiled were allowed to return to their episcopal sees; more importantly, however, the many Roman captives taken by Shapur, especially the citizens of Antioch, “multiplied in Persia” and (perhaps rather anachronistically for the mid-third century) “built monasteries and churches.” Valerian’s death, at least according to East Syrian Christian legend, hastened the spread of Christianity in Persia, and Shapur I was himself an unwitting tool of Christian expansion by deporting the citizens of defeated Roman cities en masse to Persia.81

**Lactantius, Constantine, and a New Roman History**

From the perspective of the Chronicle of Siirt, Christianity flourished in third-century Persia in ways that would have been impossible at the same time in the Roman Empire under emperors such as Valerian. As much as Constantine indicates an ignorance in his letter that Christians were prospering in Persia under Shapur II, he at least seems to have known that Christians had fled the Roman Empire for other lands during times of persecution—territories that presumably included those of the Persians. In his letter to the provincials of the East, for example, Constantine laments the persecutions of Diocletian, and refers to “the boast of the barbarians who at that time welcomed refugees from among us, and kept them in humane custody, for they provided them not only with safety but with the opportunity to practise their religion in security. And now the Roman race bears this indelible stain, left on its name by the

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Christians who were driven at that time from the Roman world and took refuge with barbarians."\(^{82}\)

One way by which the "indelible stain" on the Roman race was exorcised was through a celebration of the gory, but divine, vengeance taken on emperors such as Valerian. In fact, Vincenzo Poggi goes so far as to refer to Constantine’s letter itself as an exercise in “purificazione della memoria,” a way of making amends for past persecution of Christians and of, perhaps surreptitiously, welcoming back those who had fled (or were taken captive from) the Roman Empire during times of persecution.\(^{83}\)

Noticeably, in addition to a connection between persecution and divine punishment, there is a relationship between the stridency of an author’s Christianity and the gruesomeness of Valerian’s demise. The pagan historian Zosimus, for example, mentions only that Valerian shamed himself and the Roman Empire through the disgrace of his capture. But Zosimus provides no details about the emperor’s death.\(^{84}\)

On the other end of the spectrum, is the polemical work of the Latin rhetorician Lactantius. His *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* is a graphic litany of the deaths suffered by emperors who persecuted Christians—Valerian among them. Lactantius’ pamphlet reads less as a celebration of the oppression of the oppressor (though it is certainly that), and more as a new sort of historical tract, a definitive rewriting of Roman history along Christian lines, designed to show how God intervenes in history and severely punishes

\(^{82}\) VC II.53; see also Frendo, “Constantine’s Letter to Shapur,” 62.


\(^{84}\) Zos., *Hist. Nova* I.36,2
those who persecute Christians. More importantly for present purposes, Lactantius’ celebration of Valerian’s death may be the hermeneutical key to unlocking and interpreting Constantine’s letter to Shapur.

Lactantius reviles Valerian, saying that no Roman, not even Valerian’s own son, bothered to avenge his dishonorable imprisonment. But this was only the beginning of Valerian’s humiliation. Lactantius claims that Valerian was forced into serving as a human footstool for the Persian king so that whenever Shapur wished to mount his horse, Valerian would be forced to kneel down on his hands and knees and bear the weight of the Persian king’s foot upon his back. As Shapur mounted, he would smirk at Valerian and remind him that this was the truth—Roman subjection to Persian victors—not the imaginative false victories that the Romans painted on their walls. Most shockingly, Lactantius claims that after Valerian’s death, his skin was peeled from his body, dyed red, and hung up in templo barbarorum deorum as a warning to all future Roman ambassadors.

85 The ideas developed in this section on Lactantius were part of a formal response to a symposium paper presented by Elizabeth Castelli entitled “Religious Identity through the Prism of Spectacle in Early Christianity” (paper presented at the Center for Late Ancient Studies symposium “Constructing and Contesting Late Ancient Identities,” Duke University, February 20, 2009).

86 Lactant., De mort. pers. V.5: Etiam hoc ei accessit ad poenam, quod cum filium haberet imperatorem, captivitatis suae tamen ac servitutis extremae non invenit ultorem nec omnino repetitus est. The Chronicle of Siirt, by contrast, indicates that Valerian’s son, Gallienus, sent Shapur magnificent presents. In return, Valerian’s body was delivered back to the Roman Empire. The Chronicle also specifies that Gallienus recalled those whom his father had exiled and repealed the edicts against the Christians. See Chronicle of Siirt I (1), 223.

87 De mort. pers. V.3: Nam rex Persarum Sapor, is qui eum ceperat, si quando liberavit aut veliculum ascendere aut equum, inclinare sibi Romanum iubebat ac terga praebere et imposito pede super dorum eius illud esse verum dicebat exprobrans ei cum risu, non quod in tabulis aut parietibus Romani pingerent.

88 De mort. pers. V.6: Postea vero quam pudendum vitam in illo dedecore finivit, derepta est ei cutis et exuta visceribus pellis infecta rubro colore, ut in templo barbarorum deorum ad memoriam clarissimi triumphi poneretur legatisque nostris semper esset ostentui, ne nimirum Romani viribus suis siderent, cum exuvias capti principis apud deos suos cernerent. On this episode, see E. Reiner, “The Reddлинг of Valerian,” CQ 56 (2006): 325-329. For an overview of the varying accounts of
Lactantius’ rhetorical project pairs closely with Constantine’s—both the emperor’s letter to Shapur and his Oration to the Saints. So much so that, as Harold Drake notes, “the enthusiastic identification of parallels” between Constantine’s Oration to the Saints and that of “other writers such as Lactantius was beginning to sound like yet another search for alternative authors [of Constantine’s Oration] until T.D. Barnes came to the sensible conclusion that words delivered by the emperor, no matter who wrote them, could safely be considered to be the emperor’s own.”

Constantine, far from denying that Valerian’s death was as shameful as the Persians would have it, in fact verifies, but then reclaims, his predecessor’s notorious humiliation to laud the power of the Christian God. He writes to Shapur in his letter, “it would appear that it has turned out advantageous that even in our own day the punishment of such persons has become notorious. I have myself observed the end of those next to me, who with vicious decrees had harassed the people devoted to God.”

For Constantine, Valerian’s shame is educative and the divine punishment that he suffered is a spectacular warning (a very gruesome and very literal red flag) flying to everyone in the future.

Just as the organizers of the bloody spectacles of the Roman arena sought to re-stage ancient myths, thereby renewing mythological reality by discursively and viscerally sustaining their narratives, Lactantius is attempting to re-stage (anew) a truer Valerian’s capture and death, see B. Isaac, “The Army in the Late Roman East: The Persian Wars and the Defence of the Byzantine Provinces,” in The Near East Under Roman Rule: Selected Papers (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 440-441. Isaac indicates that Lactantius was the first to add the grisly detail that Valerian was flayed. On the practice of hanging up human trophies in Persian temples, see also the Syriac Martyrdom of Barshebya (AMS II, 281-4), which I translate in full in chapter six.


90 VC IV.12
account of Roman history. In so doing, he presents not only a more pedagogically-inclined spectacle of punishment, but, at the same time, he corrects the historical record by showing how, in his words, God raised up emperors such as Constantine to rescind the impious edicts of tyrants.\textsuperscript{91} Lactantius seeks to display the power of God, and to make clear that it is God who punishes the persecutors, judging the impious in order to “teach posterity” that he alone is God.\textsuperscript{92}

With respect to Lactantius’ understanding of punishment, Elizabeth Castelli argues, “divine punishment combines … elements of Roman penal violence—retribution, humiliation, correction, prevention, and deterrence. But punishment is also educative … simultaneously a form of display and a form of teaching.” And, “the object of correction,” Castelli argues, is ultimately “mistaken theological understanding.”\textsuperscript{93} Correcting such mistaken theology is, for Lactantius, part of his methodical re-narration of Roman history. As I have indicated, Valerian’s mistaken theological understanding, manifested less in his paganism than in his persecution of the people of God, garnered many afterlives in Christian discourse. And yet, as Castelli emphasizes, there is no “anti-imperial character” to Lactantius’s history. Lactantius distinguishes between “emperors” (like Constantine) and “tyrants” (like Valerian), but, Castelli argues, he “never calls the notion of empire into question.”

In his \textit{Oration to the Saints}, Constantine echoes Lactantius’ portrayal of God’s “righteous judgment” over Valerian while touting his own divinely-inspired victories and rule over the Empire as a Christian. According to Eusebius, Constantine’s \textit{Oration

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item De mort. pers. I.3: Excitavit enim deus principes qui tyrannorum nefaria et cruenta imperia resciderunt [et] humano generi providerunt.
\item De mort. pers. I.6: Distulerat enim poenas eorum deus, ut ederet in eos magna et mirabilia exempla, quibus posteri discerent et deum esse unum et eundem iudicem digna videlicet supplicia impiis ac persecutoribus inrogare.
\item Castelli, “Religious Identity.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
was initially written in Latin and then translated into Greek. Eusebius also claims that a Greek version of the *Oration* was transmitted as an appendix to his *VC*.\(^{94}\) Moreover, Constantine confirms Lactantius’s reading of history and Shapur’s horse-mounting jibe at Valerian. Eager to see past defeat—*even past defeat of the Roman Empire*—as divine retribution, present victory thereby becomes divinely sanctioned.\(^{95}\) Constantine, in the *Oration to the Saints*, likens Valerian to Decius and condemns the emperor who died at the hands of the Persians, saying, “But you Valerian, who showed the same murder-lust toward those who heeded God, you made the holy judgment manifest when you were caught and led as a prisoner in bonds with your very purple and all your royal pomp, and finally, flayed and pickled at the behest of Sapor the King of the Persians, you were set up as an eternal trophy of your own misfortune!”\(^{96}\)

As Jeremy Schott indicates, Constantine draws from Lactantius in his *Oration*, but he diverges from him “by drawing connections between the persecutors and biblical

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\(^{94}\) *VC* IV.32. In his study of the *Oration*, Harold Drake acknowledges “A number of the manuscripts of Eusebius’ *vita Constantini* do include an oration bearing that title.” More importantly, Drake also suggests that the history of the *Oration* “is a microcosm of classical scholarship in the modern age,” with the text’s authenticity moving from an early “period of hypercriticism (during which scholars freely dismissed whole passages for not conforming to what their science told them the emperor should have said)” to cautious admission “as a representative piece of fourth-century propaganda, though still held unlikely to be Constantine’s own,” and finally to more recent scholars “willing to concede authenticity.” See Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 292.

\(^{95}\) Jeremy Schott comments “This portion of the *Oration* [XXIV.1-3] most certainly owes something to Lactantius’s *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*. Lactantius and Constantine identify the same set of emperors (although Constantine omits the pre-Decian persecutors) and point to their ignominious destruction as evidence of God’s retributive justice.” See J. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008), 116. Schott affirms and expands upon the work of Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, and both, as suggested, are attuned to the role of Lactantius in laying the rhetorical groundwork of Christian empire. See E.D. Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius & Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

tyrants.” In the Oration, Constantine refers to the destruction of the Assyrian Empire as a result of thunderbolts from heaven (᾽Αναιρεθείσης κεραυνῶν βολαίς), thanks to the impious rule of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar, whose “whole line was wiped out” and whose power was “passed to the Persians.” Just as one tyrant’s kingdom was lost by the thunderbolt, the persecutor Diocletian, too, lived his life in perpetual dread of the thunderbolt because his palace and bedchamber had been destroyed, consumed by “the thunderbolt and the fire from heaven” in retribution for his persecution of Christians. This idea of a thunderbolt that comes up twice in the Oration, pairing a biblical tyrant with a persecutor of Christians, is used again in the letter to Shapur when Constantine explains that Valerian “was driven from these parts by divine wrath as by a thunderbolt.”

Divine retribution results not only in the punishment of the tyrant or persecutor, but in the apotheosis of the divine drama and a restoration of proper order—the calm after the storm. In his letter, Constantine refers to his victory over his enemies as “the general restoration of right,” a restoration of peace in which all humanity can exalt, reviving the world “like a patient after treatment.”

In his analysis of the Oration, Harold Drake notes that the “real subject” of Constantine’s speech is a demonstration of God’s providence, “the care that God exercises on behalf of those who worship him with true piety.” Citing the emperor’s

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97 Schott, Christianity, 116. My emphasis.
98 Or. XVII; Edwards, Constantine and Christendom, 39.
99 Or. XXV; Edwards, Constantine and Christendom, 59.
100 VC IV.11. My emphasis.
101 VC IV.9
102 VC IV.9, 12
remarks at Or. XXV, Drake points out that for both Eusebius and Constantine, God’s providence consistently includes the Christian emperor’s victories as much as it does the defeats of his opponents: “The world itself cries out and the pageant of stars shines brighter and more conspicuous, rejoicing (as I believe) in the fitting judgment of unholy deeds. The very times that succeed the wild and inhumane life are reckoned to rejoice because of their own good lot, and show the goodwill of God toward humankind.”\textsuperscript{103} Drake acknowledges that if a modern politician were to make such claims they would be dismissed as “shameless self-promotion.” But part of the result of Constantine’s conversion and his concatenation of divine justice with his own rise to power was a need to emphasize the providential aspect of his rule along with his concern for Christians everywhere. It is in this vein that Drake comments, “close association with divinity was an important part of a late Roman ruler’s claim to legitimacy”—Christian and pagan alike.\textsuperscript{104} Christians who suffered under persecuting emperors needed reassurance of Constantine’s fundamental difference from his predecessors, an acknowledgment that he was their emperor.

Looking back on Constantine’s role as promoter of Christianity, Drake notes that the modern West “has made up a label for imperial intervention in church affairs, 
\textit{caesaropapism}, applying it pejoratively and anachronistically.” In the fourth century, the idea of church and empire as discrete, but somehow conjoined, categories would not have made sense: “At the time, a Christian emperor seemed simply to have put things back in their right order again.”\textsuperscript{105}

This restoration of right—a rhetoric of empire intended as much for internal

\textsuperscript{103} Drake, \textit{Constantine and the Bishops}, 296. Edwards, \textit{Constantine and Christendom}, 51; my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{104} Drake, \textit{Constantine and the Bishops}, 296.

\textsuperscript{105} Drake, \textit{Constantine and the Bishops}, 297.
consumption as it was for those outside—was all Constantine intended to announce to Shapur in his letter. This was no precursor to a crusade, nor even a declaration of any fundamental shift. As David Frendo suggests, Constantine’s letter was novel, as, “undoubtedly, new forces were at work, but one must not exaggerate their intensity or extent. What we are witnessing are the first beginnings of a slow process of historical development and change.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{106} Frendo, “Constantine’s Letter to Shapur,” 65.
Chapter 2.
Constantine the Crusader: Political Theology and the Persian Campaign

In the first chapter, I argued that Constantine’s letter to Shapur, while probably authentic and certainly novel, was unlikely to have been a casus persecutionis of the Christians of Persia. Indeed, the letter is unremarked upon outside of Eusebius and his heirs. More importantly, I suggested, Constantine’s letter can be better appreciated by recognizing its parallels with the emperor’s own Oration to the Saints and Lactantius’ On the Deaths of the Persecutors. As a result of the similarities between these treatises and the letter, Constantine’s epistle reads more as a re-conceptualization of Roman history and a repudiation of the emperor’s anti-Christian predecessors—and not a saber-rattling prelude to a crusade against Shapur in the defense of the Christians of Persia.

In this chapter, I extend the line of argument developed in the first. I provide further evidence of how the letter to Shapur has been mis-read (or over-read) on the basis of the associated testimony of later martyr acts, church histories, and inflated conceptions of the triumph and spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire at the time of Constantine. Additionally, I suggest that the claim that Constantine’s final days were spent preparing for a war to liberate the Christians of Persia is also based on a selective re-reading and harmonization of our sources, both Christian and pagan. Two assumptions seem to be behind the idea that Constantine was readying his armies to march on behalf of the Christians of Persia: first, the notion that Constantine saw himself as a religious campaigner; and, second, the idea that later church historians also thought of Constantine as a religious campaigner, but nevertheless tried to hide this fact in their accounts of Constantine’s last days since the emperor died before reaching Persia. By contrast, I argue that even if one assumes that Constantine was, in fact, preparing for war against Persia when he died (at an imperial villa in western Asia Minor) on May 22,
337, that the emperor’s plans need not be read as anything more than preparatory measures intended to shore up the defense of Roman Mesopotamia against an imminent Persian threat.

Ultimately, the opinion among some that Constantine had the Christians of Persia in mind when he set out to engage Shapur seems to stem from Eusebius’ comparison of Constantine to Moses in the first parts of the *Vita Constantini*. But Eusebius does not depict Constantine as a second Moses in the later books of the *VC* that address Constantine’s dealings with the Persians and the last days of the emperor’s life, nor does Eusebius ever suggest that Constantine intended to wage war on behalf of the Christians of Persia. So while it is true that Eusebius does draw a parallel between Constantine and Moses in the first two books of the *VC*, this is during Constantine’s youth and, more importantly, with respect to the emperor’s victory at the Milvian Bridge. Moses goes virtually unmentioned or un-alluded to in the later books of the *VC* that address the last days of Constantine’s life. In fact, there is virtually no credible evidence for Constantine as a religious campaigner against Persia, either in Book IV of the *VC*, or in later church histories. Furthermore, the chronology of events—as well as the general idea of Constantine as a second Moses—that is advanced by fifth-century church historians such as Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret actually contradicts Eusebius in many key ways. While the vision of Constantine as a Christian crusader has a nice sheen to it for later portraitists of the emperor, the evidence of the reality of this picture in the *fourth* century is quite minimal indeed.

**Eusebius as Political Theologian: Constantine’s Uniqueness**

Scholars have often demonstrated interest in the extent to which Eusebius played a “role as a political theologian … a blithering panegyrist for the new Christian emperor, willing to subsume the Church into the State since the imperial office was a model on
This idea of the emperor’s rule as a reflection of divine authority was unique neither to Eusebius nor to Christian historians. The bishop of Caesarea relied heavily on a long tradition of Hellenistic theories of kingship, although it is true that he was the first to substantively develop the idea of a Christian king in this role. Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall discuss, for example, how a “key element in Eusebius’ thought is the idea of mimesis, whereby the Christian ruler and his Empire are held to mirror or imitate God in heaven”—again, an idea that is not unique to Christian discussions of Constantine but one that was inaugurated largely by Eusebius.

Contrary, however, to the notion that Eusebius was some sort of proto-caesaropapist, Aaron Johnson suggests that Eusebius’ appropriation “of the mimetic model of the imperial image did not preclude criticism or even outright rejection of some earthly rulers. ... Eusebius details [in the Laus Constantini] a narrative of historical decline under the influence of foul and violent daemons that reached a nadir in the impious superstition of the persecuting emperors. ... The persecuted Church, deemed ‘the soldiers of God’ and ‘his personal army,’ remained faithful until God rescued them

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3 See A. Cameron and S.G. Hall, Eusebius’ Life of Constantine (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 35, who note further that Eusebius’ “theology of empire” is a product of his later works—such as the VC. See also A. Cameron, Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) for a synthetic discussion of how a “totalizing” Christian discourse developed from, yet modulated, rhetorical and historiographical themes from classical antiquity. For the middle and later Byzantine periods, see the collection of articles reflecting on how Constantine (and other “Christian” emperors such as Theodosius and Justinian) were appropriated as models and symbols of imperial legitimacy among later emperors in New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th Centuries, ed. P. Magdalino (London: Variorum, 1992).
from further violence through his ‘attendant’ (theraponta), Constantine.”

While it is true that Eusebius’ did play a major role as the midwife for later Byzantine political theology and its subsequent conceptions of the mimetic function of the emperor, it is nevertheless misleading to retroject later political-theological theories back into Eusebius’ work. For Eusebius, Constantine was God’s instrument, and the emperor’s victory over Roman paganism was a divine reestablishment of cosmic order after decades of persecution, but it is also clear that for Eusebius Constantine was a unique savior of the Christian people—not a model of all future imperial rule. Indeed, Bruno Bleckmann, the most recent translator and commentator on the VC, dismisses the idea that Eusebius was charting an institutional role for Christian emperors. Instead, Bleckmann contends that Eusebius demonstrates, especially through the VC, the “unrepeatable historical uniqueness” of Constantine.

**Constantine as the Second Moses**

If Constantine played a unique role in the divine drama, and if we are to understand the emperor as a solitary victor who led the Christian people out from under the yoke of the tyranny of persecution, then the obvious biblical analogue for Constantine is Moses—another single savior and deliverer of his people. Claudia Rapp refers to the passages in Eusebius’ works that liken Constantine to Moses as attempts at furthering a one-to-one correspondence between the two men “with all that that

4 Johnson, *Ethnicity*, 193, with reference to LC VII.7,10 and VII.12.

entailed: military and political leadership as well as spiritual authority in a role comparable to that of a bishop."" But Eusebius also compares Constantine, albeit only glancingly, to Alexander the Great and Cyrus (the Achaemenid Persian king). These are kings who conquered vast territories and they are names that Michael Hollerich rightly calls "predictable … in a work that bears many features of royal panegyric."

Nevertheless, the choice of Moses as a third kingly comparison, and as a juxtaposition that is much more extended than any comparison to another king, is, Hollerich argues, such a departure from the norm that it demonstrates that Eusebius had no intention of crafting Constantine "by traditional imperial standards.""8

The re-crafting of the imperial image to which Hollerich refers is evident in Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History (HE) in addition to the VC. In the HE, Eusebius presents Constantine’s heralded victory at the Milvian Bridge as a recapitulation of Moses’ victory over the Egyptians. Just as Moses led his people through the parted Red Sea only to have it close up behind them to swallow Pharaoh’s armies, similarly, Maxentius and his infantry drowned when a bridge of conjoined boats collapsed and sank them “like lead in much water” (Ex 15:10) as punishment for rejecting the divine power that accompanied Constantine."9

Eusebius returns to the parallel between Constantine and Moses, namely

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7 VC I.7-8


9 HE IX.9,3-8; see also Hollerich, “Religion and Politics,” 320 ff.
between the Milvian Bridge and the Red Sea, in Book I of the VC. Indeed, Eusebius’ comparisons between Constantine and Moses are much more pervasive in the VC than they are in the HE. The references to Moses in the VC are not, however, peppered throughout Eusebius’ panegyric of Constantine. Rather, they are clustered almost entirely in Book I and the first parts of Book II and they virtually disappear by Book IV wherein the letter to Shapur and Constantine’s last days are narrated. In other words, Eusebius does not present Constantine as a Moses figure for the Christians of Persia, just the Christians of the Roman Empire. In fact, Eusebius does not so much as mention the Christians of Persia in the context of Constantine’s last days, and he provides no evidence that Constantine intended to wage a war against Shapur on their account.

Still, the idea of Constantine as Moses is one that is hard to forget. Rapp, for example, accounts for the dearth of references to Moses in the third and fourth books of the VC by suggesting that Eusebius did not have a chance to fully develop the parallel between Constantine and Moses in these sections of his work. She further suggests that when, in the VC, Eusebius re-used the comparison between the Red Sea and the Milvian Bridge that he had employed to great effect in the HE, it “provided him with an underlying theme that he planned to exploit throughout the work. But,” she continues, Eusebius “left the Life of Constantine unfinished. This explains why the Moses comparisons are more carefully executed at the beginning of Eusebius’ narrative, in the description of Constantine’s youth.”

Rapp’s suggestion that Eusebius intended to develop parallels between Moses and Constantine in Books III and IV of the VC, but never completed them, is a difficult proposition to argue. Is there any evidence internal to the text of the VC that could lead

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10 VC I.38

11 Rapp, “Imperial Ideology,” 695.
one to conclude that Eusebius intended to continue the theme of Constantine-as-Moses beyond Constantine’s youth but failed to do so? That is, are there instances of attempts at likening Constantine to Moses in the VC that peter out inexplicably and without resolution? As far as I can tell, the answer is no: there is no textual evidence to suggest that Eusebius meant to continue the Moses-Constantine analogue in the latter books of his Life of Constantine.

While the prevailing scholarly opinion that the VC is not a completely polished work is probably correct, neither is the text a compendium of half-finished notes to be further developed at another time. Given the absence of evidence to the contrary, it thus seems unwarranted to conclude that the absence of detailed references to Moses in the latter parts of the VC must, therefore, mean that Eusebius intended to more fully expand upon a Moses-Constantine comparison but was never able to do so.

A more plausible explanation is that the Moses analogy employed in the VC is simply better suited to the narrative of Constantine’s youth and the emperor’s triumph at the Milvian Bridge than it is for Constantine’s later life and rule. For example, the Moses analogy works excellently near the beginning of the first book of the VC, when Eusebius comments that the story of Moses, “which most people regard as a kind of myth,” is a tale about a man whom God raised “as leader of the whole nation” (καθηγεμόνα τοῦ παντός ἔθνους) to free “the Hebrews from bondage to their enemies.” Eusebius claims that through Constantine a story “more certain than any myth” became true for all to see and believe. As a child, Constantine embodied the ancient Moses as a myth made manifest: “Tyrants who in our time set out to make war on the God over all oppressed his Church, while in their midst Constantine, soon to be the tyrant-slayer, still

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12 VC I.12.1-2; Hollerich suggests that Eusebius reckoned Constantine’s victory as “a valuable antidote to the critique of Exodus as myth” by pagan philosophers such as Porphyry. See Hollerich, “Myth and History,” 422, 436-445.
a tender young boy and blooming with the down of youth, like that very servant of God [Moses], sat at the tyrants’ hearth, yet though still young he did not share the same morality as the godless.” The arcing story as Eusebius tells it is one of Constantine as a God-sent attendant, and as such it must begin with the glimmering signs of a divine hand even in Constantine’s youth. But the analogue between Moses and Constantine mostly exhausts its rhetorical force once Constantine defeats the persecutors of Christians in the Roman Empire and claims sole rule over Roman lands since there is no accompanying biblical account of Moses ruling over the promised land—quite the opposite. Beyond the narrative high point at the Milvian Bridge, the analogy between Constantine and Moses begins to collapse under its own weight and is simply ill-fitting as a narrative device in Books III and IV of the VC.

The idea of Constantine-as-Moses might, however, have more purchase if the emperor can be said to have developed it himself—rather than it being mere hagiographical invention in the mouth of Eusebius. Which is to say, if Constantine referred to himself in his own writings as a second Moses and truly saw himself in biblical terms as a deliverer of the Christian people, and if, further, he believed that Christians were suffering in the Persian Empire under Shapur’s rule, then it might be plausible to suppose that Constantine did envision grandiose plans for their liberation. According to Rapp, it is not outside the realm of possibility that the idea of Constantine-as-Moses was the emperor’s idea: “It is impossible,” she writes, “for us to determine whether the idea for the literary representation of Constantine as resembling Moses and as holding the position of a bishop originated with the emperor himself or whether it must be attributed to Eusebius.”

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13 VC I.12,1-2

14 Rapp, “Imperial Ideology,” 694-695.
While it may not be possible to know whether it was Constantine or Eusebius who first initiated the idea of Constantine-as-bishop (Constantine refers to himself as a bishop to “those outside” at VC IV.24), the evidence for the idea of Constantine-as-Moses, on the other hand, lies squarely (and solely) at the feet of Eusebius. By contrast to Eusebius, Constantine never once compares himself to Moses, although he does, like Eusebius, compare the tyrants who preceded him on the throne to biblical persecutors.\(^{15}\) In fact, in his *Oration to the Saints*, Constantine brings up Moses, who defeated Pharaoh through prayer alone, and Daniel, who gave godly counsel to Nebuchadnezzar.\(^{16}\) In neither instance, however, is Moses (or Daniel) construed in such a way as to be reminiscent of Constantine, nor does Constantine ever suggest that his own saintliness and victories are akin to those of Moses. Rather, his point, as in his letter to Shapur, is the terrible end to which tyrants who *ignore* divine prophecy and persecute the people of God will come—not that he himself, as a Christian emperor of Rome, should be counted among the prophets.

Without question, then, the comparison between Moses and Constantine was *Eusebius’* narrative innovation that was necessary for charting a new historiography of a new sort of emperor who ( nevertheless) had deep roots in the past. Indeed, the *VC* as a whole is *Eusebius’* vision of Constantine the Christian emperor, not Constantine’s self-conception, and, as Harold Drake argues, “historians must remain alive to a difference in priorities between the two [Constantine and Eusebius].”\(^{17}\)

\(^{15}\) Constantine, *Or.* XXVII

\(^{16}\) For Moses and Pharaoh, see *Or.* XVI; Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar are discussed in *Or.* XVII.

\(^{17}\) As Drake memorably suggests, although “Eusebius and Constantine spoke a common language … it may have been just enough of a common language for them to completely misunderstand one another.” See H.A. Drake, “What Eusebius Knew: The Genesis of the *Vita Constantini*,” *CP* 83 (1988): 37-38; and, *idem*, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), especially chapter 10, wherein Drake
burgeoning appreciation for the interrelationship and interpenetration of church and empire in the person of Constantine during the latter years of Constantine’s reign—an idea expressed most notably in Eusebius’ later works such as the VC—but the reality of this quite nascent idea was not manifest by the end of Constantine’s life, nor even immediately thereafter. Eusebius, as Cameron phrases it, was writing about a novel sort of emperor and had to find a fresh way of presenting him: “In writing the Life, Eusebius was not composing a scientific history, he was writing as a believer, with the avowed aim of revealing to the world Constantine’s actions and the march of Christian providence.”  

By the end of Constantine’s reign there existed neither any pronounced, widespread sensibility that Christianity was coextensive with the Roman Empire, nor any widespread supposition that Constantine was the second Moses who was sent to deliver all Christians everywhere from oppressive tyranny—and would continue to lead its people to victory over all foes. Although re-imaginings of Constantine, his reign, and his legacy as an analogue to that of Moses did take root among later Christian authors, the VC was, at the time, a unique presentation of Constantine. It was an original discourse and lone panegyric of an altogether new species: the Christian king. Indeed, Rapp acknowledges this when she writes that Moses as “a model for those who hold political and spiritual authority … became particularly prominent” only in the centuries after Constantine’s death. In sum, the idea of the Christian emperor as a second Moses discusses how Eusebius created a portrait of the emperor that extends well beyond Constantine’s own use of Christianity to mostly politicizing ends. Though his reading of Eusebius is ultimately quite different from Drake’s, Sansterre similarly emphasizes that Eusebius exceeded Constantine’s self-conceived vision of his role. See Sansterre, “Eusèbe de Césarée.”

would not be as pronounced as it is in the first part of the VC until at least the turn of the fifth century.\footnote{For Moses as a model, see Rapp, “Imperial Ideology,” 691, with reference to her own “Comparison, Paradigm and the Case of Moses in Panegyric and Hagiography,” in The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity, ed. M. Whitby (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 277-298. For the rarity of Moses as a model in the fourth century, see “Imperial Ideology,” 693 n. 44 where Rapp explains that F. Heim “has demonstrated that the interpretation of Christian emperorship was significantly ‘toned down’ between the time of Constantine and the end of the fourth century.” See F. Heim, “Les figures du prince idéal au IVe siècle: du type au modèle,” in Figures de l’Ancien Testament chez les Pères (Strasbourg: Centre d’analyse et de documentation patristiques, 1989), 277-301.}

Caesaropapism, the sense that the Roman Empire was “Christian,” and the idea that there was some sort of religio-political alliance between the Roman Empire and Christians everywhere, was still a long way from having any serious purchase in the fourth century. As the rest of this chapter and the next will show, the sources—both Greek and Syriac—that summon ideas about Constantine that might be reckoned as caesaropapist are, almost without exception, from the fifth century, not the mid-fourth. In other words, Shapur was dead before the idea of Rome as a Christian Empire could have been articulated with any deep degree of meaning and, as a result, our conception of the causes underlying Shapur’s “persecution” need to be reconsidered.

**The Eusebian Legacy: From Rome against the Christian Ethnos to Christianitas as Romanitas**

Aaron Johnson highlights the novelty of the VC—and the problem of reading it as a model for all emperors who would follow Constantine—when he argues that even Eusebius once put considerable distance between “the Roman emperors and spread of Christ’s teachings.” Pointing to the so-called “Augustus-Christ synchronism” in Eusebius’ early works, Johnson argues that, for Eusebius, even though the Roman Empire did provide “an environment conducive to the spread of Christianity through its political unification of the oikoumenē, [Rome] nonetheless plays the role of the enemy of
piety.” There is, Johnson continues, “a sharp distinction between Christians and the forces of Rome, even in the very act of synchronizing the rule of Augustus with the reign of Christ. This can hardly be a sacralization of the imperial office.”

Likewise, Jeremy Schott argues that prior to Constantine, “the empire is simply propitious” for Eusebius, “a tool in God’s hands, a useful but ancillary aid to proselytism.” While Schott reasonably suggests that with the rise of Constantine “empire and church proceed in lockstep” for Eusebius such that Roman imperialism and the conversion of pagans to Christianity “become two prongs in the same offensive against native error and barbarism,” it might be more appropriate to say that it is Constantine and the church that “proceed in lockstep.” The office of the emperor had yet to be sacralized, even while the first Christian emperor was being dutifully and hagiographically celebrated.

In much of Eusebius’ work, Christianity has little to do with Rome, but rather finds its essential genesis in biblical forerunners. In this light, constructing Constantine as Moses in the VC is a natural complement to Eusebius’ earlier works, and it is an expected Christian nuance on more traditional means of lauding an emperor—duly nodding to Cyrus and Alexander, but focusing on Moses. The emphasis on Moses as the leader of a particular people, an ethnos, also resonates with other Eusebian works. According to Johnson, in the Praeparatio Evangelica (PE), Eusebius’ reasoning and account of the history of Christianity is fundamentally ethnic in nature. Johnson suggests that the argumentative style of the PE, which he terms “ethnic argumentation,”

20 Johnson, Ethnicity, 179; see 174-186 for his discussion of the Augustus-Christ synchronism and, in particular, 182-184, where he discusses Eusebius’ comparison of Rome to Gog and Eusebius’ treatment of the visions of Daniel which draw stark contrasts between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of God.


22 VC I.7-8
is based on “a construal of the *ethnē* (or nations) of the world and upon the construction of Christianity as an *ethnos* which stands as a stark alternative to those other *ethnē*.”

Johnson counters the prevailing view of the *PE*, which posits that Eusebius was condemning pagan “religions” in the text, and argues instead that Eusebius is really constructing the history of a Christian *ethnos* that is at once old and new—and has little to do with Rome. Christians, instead, are heirs of the ancient Hebrews, and “it was the distinctively Hebrew way of life that made the Christians a new—and yet the most ancient—nation.” Effectively, Eusebius wrote a history of the Christian people not only by explaining Christianity as a new manifestation of the ancient Hebrew *ethnos*, but by contrasting this history with the histories of other peoples, including “the particular ways of thinking about the world and the gods, and the distinctive customs and religious practices centered around particular local shrines and cult sites.” For Eusebius, “theology and philosophy are equivalent to national character traits. To be a member of a certain nation is to think a certain way about the world and about the gods. Theology is embodied, therefore, in an ethnic way of life, and this is thoroughly rooted in the stories of a nation’s past.”

If Christians in Eusebius’ early works do, in fact, constitute an *ethnos*, but not one premised upon a concomitant Roman identity, then what sort of change comes about with the rise of Constantine to power? In other words, at what point does the Christian *ethnos* elide into one in being with the Roman *ethnos*? Cameron and Hall suggest that the

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26 Johnson, “Identity,” 47.
VC “presents a distinctive view of Constantine and a conception of the Christian Empire which was to become standard in the Byzantine Empire.”\(^{27}\) This is certainly true, but the operative words in this sentence are *was to become*. Eusebius’ construction of Constantine in the VC is indeed distinctive, but it is later re-readings and re-interpretations of Constantine *through* Eusebius that have shaped not only our assessment of Eusebius’ project but of Constantine himself as an historical figure.\(^{28}\)

One need not, for example, focus solely on the presentation of Constantine in the VC to understand why Christianity and Romanness became intertwined in Eusebius and even more so in his heirs. In developing a template for ecclesiastical history that largely ignored Christians outside of the Roman Empire, Eusebius, in the words of Sebastian Brock, “had an insidious effect on almost all subsequent histories of the early church.” According to Brock, such histories “leave the reader with the impression that Christianity was essentially a phenomenon restricted to the Greco-Latin cultural world.”\(^{29}\)

As the later church historians who appropriated not only the Eusebian Constantine but the Eusebian template for the writing of church history show, the framing of the confrontation between Shapur and the Christians of Persia as a fundamentally religious one creates what Rogers Brubaker would call “a powerful feedback effect, shaping subsequent experience and increasing levels of groupness.” The “groupness,” in this case, extends beyond the confines of being solely a “religious” group and entails the political and ethnic manifestation of the group in a broader notion of “Romanness.” As Brubaker points out, however, the effect of “struggles over the

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\(^{27}\) Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 34.

\(^{28}\) See Cameron, “Rethinking of History,” 72.

interpretive framing and narrative encoding of conflict and violence” are not secondary aspects of a conflict, but primary parts of the conflict itself: “To impose a label or prevailing interpretive frame—to cause an event to be seen as a ‘pogrom’ or a ‘riot’ or a ‘rebellion’—is no mere matter of external interpretation, but a constitutive and often consequential act of social definition.”

The religious or religio-political nature of Shapur’s “persecution” was crystallized by later ecclesiastical historians who appropriated precisely this Eusebian model of the Christian people and a re-fashioning of Constantine as the defender of Christians wherever they may be.

There are, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, two interconnected examples of this retrospective re-fashioning of Constantine that are relevant for the Christians of Persia. Both arise from the VC. The first is the later interpretations of Constantine’s letter to Shapur. The second is the problematic presentation of the final days of Constantine’s life as the emperor, so it seems, set out on a military campaign against Shapur. The letter to Shapur and Constantine’s “campaign” against Shapur—which I suggest have nothing to do with one another—are often connected in assessments of Shapur’s persecution of Christians. Timothy Barnes, as I have discussed, reads Constantine’s letter as a warning to Shapur, claiming that the Persian king “had good reason to suspect that the Roman emperor was planning to make war against him” and, moreover, that Constantine intended “to conduct his Persian expedition as a religious crusade.”

Barnes explains, “Bishops were to accompany the army, a Christian version of the Old Testament tabernacle was prepared to accompany [Constantine], and he proclaimed his intention to be baptized in the River Jordan before he invaded


Mesopotamia.”

These claims merit reevaluation. Barnes is certainly correct that bishops were to accompany the army, and there is allusive, though hardly pronounced, evidence for a tabernacle as well; further, Constantine suggests that he had wished to be baptized in the Jordan, but never is this wish connected with an invasion of Mesopotamia. Religious elements are thus present, but the conjoining of Constantine’s letter with the last days of his life and a purported war against Shapur represents a chronological compression and a picture of Constantine that has been touched-up and revised by later historians.33

On the Fourth-Century Roman-Persian Wars

In describing Constantine’s preparations for war against Persia in the early spring of 337, Eusebius presents them as primarily defensive in nature, noting “there were reports of disturbances among the eastern barbarians,” and, as a result, Constantine was spurred into taking “military moves against Persia.”34 He continues:

Once the decision was made [Constantine] set the military officers to work, and also discussed the campaign with the bishops at his court, planning that some of those needed for divine worship should be there with him. They said that they would only too gladly accompany him as he wished, and not shrink back, but would soldier with him and fight at his side with supplications to God. He was delighted with their promises and made arrangements for their journey … 35

At this point, as indicated by the ellipses above, there is a substantial (half-page) lacuna in the text of the VC in all the extant manuscripts. Once the narrative resumes, it

32 Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 132. The references are to VC IV.56 and 62.

33 The best and most comprehensive recent survey of the fourth-century wars between Rome and Persia is surely K. Mosig-Walburg, Römer und Perser: Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr. (Gutenberg: Computus Druck Satz & Verlag, 2009).

34 VC IV.56,1. Robin Seager emphasizes that Constantine’s posture toward Persia was, up until Julian’s death and Rome’s defeat at Shapur’s hands in 363 CE, perceived as a defensive one by all commentators—not just Eusebius. See R. Seager, “Perceptions of Eastern Frontier Policy in Ammianus, Libanius, and Julian (337-363),” CQ 47 (1997): 253-268.

35 VC IV.56,2-3
is clearly in middle of a completely different topic—a description of a glorious shrine to the Apostles in which, Eusebius divulges to his readers, Constantine secretly intended to be interred.  

36 Eusebius does not again return to the topic of the war with Persia, and, at least in the manuscripts of the VC that we possess, he gives no indication that the war was even prosecuted at all—although there are indications that Constantine received a Persian ambassador suing for peace at this time.

Garth Fowden has argued that we should be very suspicious of this lacuna in the text of the VC as well as of Eusebius’ apparent reluctance to discuss Constantine’s campaign against the Persians. Fowden regards the lacuna as evidence “that something is being hidden from us” both by Eusebius and the person (apparently not Eusebius) responsible for the lacuna. Further, Fowden insists that it is “beyond doubt” that Constantine died while on the way to challenge Shapur’s army, and notes that “Libanius, Julian, the Origo Constantini, Sextus Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and Festus all state or suggest that Constantine died on campaign”—an “unfortunate and embarrassing” truth that, in Fowden’s view, Eusebius and all later Christian commentators preferred to hide or avoid outright.  

37 Fowden’s perspective is quite common among those who have written on Constantine and the Christians of Persia: for example, Vincenzo Poggi (following Fowden) suggests that the lacuna is intentional and that whoever is responsible for it evidently intended to hide something about Constantine’s intentions and actions vis-à-vis the Christians of Persia.  

38 If Constantine was, in fact, on his way to confront the Persian threat in the spring

36 VC, IV.58


of 337 CE, he never reached the Persian frontier to challenge Shapur himself. The emperor died, just after Easter, in Bithynia at an imperial villa near the eastern edge of the Propontis. The troubles in Roman Mesopotamia would be left to Constantine’s son, Constantius.39

While the subsequent conflict between Constantius and Shapur was not inconsequential, the Persian sieges of various eastern Roman cities and fortresses did little to advance any grander territorial goals. This was less a “war” in the traditional sense of two full-fledged armies clashing on the battlefield, than it was a border dispute at a low simmer—a series of relatively minor confrontations at frontier fortresses and, occasionally, a garrison town that was unluckily situated along the marches. Shapur was a nuisance, but he was not an existential threat to the Roman Empire during Constantius’ reign. And besides, Constantius had other concerns: wars in the west against Germanic tribes and bloody power struggles within the Empire itself.

Not until 359 CE, two decades after Constantine’s death, when Shapur began to gain more of a foothold in Roman Mesopotamia, did he start to command the full attention of Rome’s might. To deal with the re-emergent Persian threat, Constantius requested reinforcements from among Julian’s army in the west. This request was met with resistance both from the western army—which had no intention of trekking all the way from Gaul to Persia—and, it seems, from Julian himself. Julian’s rebellious troops proclaimed him emperor in 360 CE, and, by the summer of the following year, he and Constantius were on the verge of civil war. But after Constantius’ unexpected death Julian found himself alone atop the Roman Empire.

In the spring of 363 CE, seeking personal glory and perhaps the respect of Constantius’ former army in the east, Julian set out on an ill-fated mission to end

Shapur’s harassment of Roman Mesopotamia once and for all. Winning the support of Constantius’ former troops and acquiring the prestige of victory over a respectable foe may have had more than a little to do with Julian’s decision to march on Persia.\textsuperscript{40} The emperor and a huge contingent of troops left Antioch with the grand aim of capturing Ctesiphon, the Persian capital on the Tigris in central Mesopotamia. Needless to say, the Christians of Persia were nowhere at all in the mind of the anti-Christian Julian.

Just two months after leaving Antioch, Julian’s goal was, surprisingly enough, already within reach: his army had won a major battle within sight of Ctesiphon’s walls and the Romans seemed poised to take the city and, with it, a strategic hold on the whole of Mesopotamia. But the victory was short-lived. Julian and his generals were unable to consolidate their gains against the heavily-fortified Ctesiphon, and the Persian army, gathering reinforcements, was still strong enough to force the Romans into retreat. Falling back to the western side of the \textit{limes} quickly became an intractable proposition since the Roman army was stuck on the far side of the Tigris with no easy way of fording the river. Before Julian could lead his army north out of Persia and \textit{around} the Tigris back to the safety of Roman territory, he was wounded by a spear and died shortly thereafter, leaving his Christian successor, Jovian, to negotiate the terms of a humiliating defeat. Several provinces and strategic eastern Roman cities, including Nisibis, were ceded to the Persians.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Ammianus, whose history lauds Julian at the expense of other emperors, was especially negative toward Constantius. For a summary of Ammianus’ views, and those of other ancient historians, vis-à-vis Constantius, see H.C. Teitler, “Ammianus and Constantius: Image and Reality,” in \textit{Cognitio Gestorum: The Historiographic Art of Ammianus Marcellinus}, ed. J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst and H.C. Teitler (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992), 117-122.

Christian historians of the period forgave Jovian’s territorial concessions as lamentable, but unavoidable, given the precarious situation of his beleaguered army, and these historians quickly sought to pin ultimate responsibility for the resounding loss on Julian, “the Apostate.” As Fowden details, however, non-Christian historians tended to see things differently, shifting their perspective to the long view following Julian’s defeat.

Looking back over the course of the quarter century between Julian’s death and Constantine’s false start against Persia, non-Christian historians began to regard Constantine as the warmonger who had needlessly initiated an improvident campaign: according to Fowden, what “had seemed a justifiable response to Sasanian aggression [in the late 330s], came to be represented, in the light of the dismal subsequent history of Romano-Iranian relations, as frivolous and culpable aggression.” The struggle over how to represent Constantine and history of the fourth-century had begun.

*Breaking Camp: Constantine’s “Tent” and the Exodus of the Christians of Persia*

Although we learn very little directly from Eusebius about Constantine’s actual preparations for war, there is further information in what Fowden calls “a Renaissance scholar’s attempt to plug” the lacuna in the *VC* that occurs in Eusebius’ account of Constantine’s machinations against Persia. Given the relatively small size of the lacuna, the “plug” can be little more than an abbreviated expansion of the chapter headings—

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provides an overview of the perspectives of all the late ancient commentators on the “abandonment” of Nisibis; the general sentiment among most is that it was necessary, or at least sensible, albeit terribly regrettable.

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42 Fowden, “Last Days,” 150.

43 Fowden, “Last Days,” 147.
headings which themselves are likely to be authentically Eusebian. One heading indicates that Constantine had a tent in the shape of a church constructed for the campaign.\textsuperscript{44} This tent-church, which Barnes interprets as a “Christian version of the Old Testament tabernacle,” and the heading that mentions it follows naturally from the preceding discussion among Constantine and the bishops. They had agreed “that some of those needed for divine worship” should accompany Constantine to Persia.\textsuperscript{45}

This is not the only place in the \textit{VC} where Eusebius refers to Constantine’s “tent.” Elsewhere, however, Eusebius is more explicit in stating that Constantine’s tent had something in common with Moses’ tabernacle. In Book II, narrating Constantine’s war with Licinius, Eusebius mentions that Constantine “pitched his tent outside the camp a long way off, and there he observed a chaste and pure rule of life, offering up his prayers to God, just like that ancient prophet of God, who, so the divine oracles assure us, pitched the tent outside the encampment.”\textsuperscript{46}

The later ecclesiastical historical tradition is largely silent about the connection that Eusebius makes between Moses and Constantine and the parallel between their respective prayer tents. Pointing to one notable exception, Fowden argues that the fifth-century church historian Socrates preserves “a clear reference” to Eusebius’ chapter heading about the tent in the shape of a church.\textsuperscript{47} And Socrates does clearly describe

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} See Fowden, “Last Days,” 147, n. 4-7, with reference to analyses by F. Winkelmann; see also the commentary of Cameron and Hall, \textit{Life of Constantine}, 335-337.
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{VC} IV.56,2-3
\item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{VC} II.12,1
\item \textsuperscript{47} Fowden suggests that Socrates may have gleaned his information not from the \textit{VC} itself, but from an intermediary source—namely, the late fourth-century \textit{Historia ecclesiastica} of Gelasius of Caesarea. See Fowden, “Last Days,” 147. Fowden bases this argument on the contention that the late-fifth-century church historian, Gelasius of Cyzicus relates a similar story and seems to be drawing on the same source as Socrates—the earlier \textit{History} of Gelasius of Caesarea. Gelasius of Cyzicus, like Socrates, also mentions Constantine’s campaign and goes on to claim that Constantine decided against an invasion of Persia out of concern for the possible repercussions on the Christians living there (\textit{HE} III.10,26-27).
\end{itemize}
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Constantine’s tent-church as a portable house of prayer. He even adds that it was made from “embroidered linen” and designed to be akin to the tabernacle that Moses set up during the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness—a house of God available in even the most deserted regions.48

As Rapp points out, Socrates is the only fifth-century church historian to explicitly invoke Moses as a parallel to Constantine. Rapp also remarks on the oddity of Socrates referring to Moses in a discussion about Constantine’s tent, while failing to invoke the same parallel, “as one might expect, with regard to the Battle at the Milvian Bridge.”49 Even though Socrates explains that the tent was constructed prior to a war with Persia—a war that Socrates says was ultimately avoided—the church historian gives no indication that this war was brewing during Constantine’s last days. According to Fowden, Socrates’ failure to specify that the preparations for a war against Persia occurred shortly before Constantine’s death is evidence of sinister designs—Fowden even claims that the relationship between the tent and Constantine’s final campaign is “studiously suppressed” in Socrates’ history.50

Whether Socrates can be reckoned as an example of the purposeful suppression of Constantine’s last days is debatable, but it is true that the reference to the tent loses its punch with repeated retellings of the story by later ecclesiastical historians who are concerned with their own historical accounts rather than with preserving the coherence

48 Soc. HE I.18,12: Τοσούτως δὲ ἣν ὁ τοῦ βασιλέως ζήλος περὶ τὸν Χριστιανισμόν, ὡς καὶ Περσικοῦ μέλλοντος κινεῖσθαι πολέμου κατασκευάσαι σκηνήν ἐκ ποικίλης ὥθους ἐκκλησίας τῶν ἀποτελοῦσαν, ἦσπερ καὶ Μωϋσῆς ἐν τῇ ἔρημῳ πεποίηκεν, καὶ ταύτην φέρεσθαι, ἵνα ἔχῃ κατὰ τοὺς ἔρημους τόπους εὐκτήριον ἰστρεπτισμένον. Ἀλλ’ οὐ προῆβη τότε ὁ πόλεμος· ἔρηθι γὰρ δέει τοῦ βασιλέως σβεσθεῖς.

49 Rapp, “Imperial Ideology,” 693.

50 Fowden, “Last Days,” 152.
of Eusebius’ narrative themes or those of their other sources. Sozomen, for example, does not fail to emphasize that Constantine carried a prayer tent into battle with him, but he makes no reference at all to Moses, or, for that matter, to the context and occasion of the tent’s supposed construction.

In Sozomen’s presentation, Constantine’s tent was something that the pious Christian emperor customarily carried with him on all his military campaigns—it was hardly the trappings or the advance guard of any religious crusade. 51 As Sozomen presents it, Constantine’s tent was brought along as a pious precaution to be used only when the emperor and his army found themselves in some deserted place that was beyond easy reach of a church. Like Socrates, Sozomen does not associate the tent with Constantine’s final campaign against the Persians (indeed, he says nothing at all about the Persians in the context of his discussion of Constantine’s tent), nor, for that matter, does he mention the tent in connection with any particular war. Sozomen seems to assume that a tent-church was, quite simply, part of the standard field kit for a campaigning king who honored his Christian commitments.

According to Fowden, however, whereas Socrates suppressed the connection between the tent and the Persian war at the end of Constantine’s life, Sozomen went even further and fully dismantled Socrates’ account of the tent-church from its original (Eusebian) narrative “and therefore of any reference to Iran.” 52

Fowden contends that there were two reasons that Christian authors purposefully suppressed Constantine’s campaign in their histories: initially, it was out of a desire to hide the supposed ignomony of Constantine’s death before reaching the

51 Soz. HE I.8,10-11: ἡνίκα πολεμίως ἐπεστράτευεν, ὥστε μηδὲ ἐν ἐρημίᾳ διάγοντα αὐτὸν ἡ τὴν στρατιὰν ἱερὸν οἶκον ἀμοιρεῖν, ἐν θεοὶ τὸν θεοῦ ύμνεῖν καὶ προσεύχεσθαι καὶ μυστηρίων μετέχειν.

52 Fowden, “Last Days,” 152.
battlefield. As noted above, Fowden suggests it was an “unfortunate and embarrassing”
truth that Constantine died while setting out on a war against Persia. The desire to hide
the occasion of Constantine’s death was, then, for Christian historians, subsequently
coupled with a desire to vilify the anti-Christian Julian. Castigating Julian was
apparently a primary rhetorical move that helped absolve Constantine from any
responsibility for beginning the war in the first place. The inverse was also true:
castigating Constantine became the primary rhetorical device for the pagan historians
who wished to absolve Julian from his responsibility for losing Roman Mesopotamia.\(^{53}\)

**Narrating Constantine’s Last Days: The Emperor’s Baptism and
the Persian Campaign**

While Fowden is correct that Eusebius’ continuators do not mention the Persian
campaign at the end of Constantine’s life,\(^ {54}\) not all share Fowden’s view that Eusebius
and his heirs *purposely* hid information about Constantine’s last days. In their
commentary on the *VC*, Cameron and Hall concede that a number of church historians
“omit or play down the Iranian campaign for their own reasons,” but they dismiss the
notion that someone “deliberately removed the offending passage from Eusebius’ text.”
To the contrary, Cameron and Hall insist there is “no reason to suspect deliberate
tampering with the text or to suppose that Eusebius himself is hiding something.”\(^ {55}\)

\(^{53}\) “Eusebius’ continuators, the ecclesiastical historians from Gelasius of Caesarea (d. 395)
onwards, responded [to later accusations that Constantine was a “warming”] by suppressing
all reference to the Iranian campaign, at least in connection with Constantine’s last days.” See
Fowden, “Last Days,” 152.

\(^{54}\) “Rufinus (d. 410) [*HE* X.12] says nothing of the Iranian campaign in his account of
Constantine’s death; neither do Philostorgius (d. c. 439) [*HE* II.16], Socrates (d. after 439) [*HE*
I.39], Sozomen (d. after 450) [*HE* II.34,21], or Theodoret (d. c. 466) [*HE* I.32].” See Fowden, “Last
Days,” 152.

\(^{55}\) Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 336 and 339. On the other hand, Richard Burgess
agrees with Fowden, pointing to “Eusebius’ omission of Constantine’s Persian campaign and his
reworking of the narrative to cover the omission” as evidence for a cover-up. Burgess concludes
that in addition to his “failed Persian expedition,” Constantine’s baptism at the hands of Eusebius
To resolve the scholarly impasse over the interpretation of Constantine’s “campaign,” a preliminary question needs to be answered: what was Constantine doing away from the capital and out beyond the far side of the Bosphorus at a villa near Nicomedia? In Eusebius’ construction of the narrative, Constantine’s journey to Nicomedia is not presented as being connected with a military campaign in the first place; the emperor heads to Nicomedia only after the Persian issue is resolved (apparently peaceably), and for health and religious reasons—not military or strategic ones.

Eusebius suggests that at some point after Easter, when the dispute with the Persians had been successfully negotiated, the emperor took ill, and so went to the hot baths in Constantinople. He soon realized that he was dying, and thus decided to retire from the political hustle and bustle of the capital for the more peaceful air of Nicomedia—a city that, in fact, had been Constantine’s interim capital and main residence from 324 to 330 CE. At Nicomedia, Constantine gathered the bishops together and received baptism. In Constantine’s speech to the bishops prior to his baptism, he acknowledges that he “once intended to receive [baptism] at the streams of the river Jordan” but concedes that God, “who knows what is good for us” has determined that

of Nicomedia was also cause for concern among later Christians. See R.W. Burgess, “ἌΧΥΡΩν or ΠΡΟΑΣΤΕΙΟΝ: The Location and Circumstances of Constantine’s Death,” JTS 50 (1999): 156, 161.

56 See VC IV.61-64; Cameron and Hall, Life of Constantine, 339-341; Bleckmann and Schneider, De Vita Constantini, 90-91. That the Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia presided over Constantine’s baptism was perhaps the most embarrassing aspect of Constantine’s last days for some commentators writing centuries later. In the ninth-century Byzantine Chronicle of Theophanes, for example, the Greek monk explains that it is a lie that Constantine was baptized by the Arian Eusebius, and that, in fact, the emperor was baptized in Rome by bishop Sylvester. See Theoph., Chron. A.M. 5828; the translation and commentary on Theophanes’ Chronographia by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott is invaluable for making sense of the historian. See The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813, trans. C. Mango and R. Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
this will not come to pass. In the context of Eusebius’ discussion of Constantine’s baptism, there is no mention of any military campaign, nor is there any indication that Constantine’s former intention to receive baptism in the Jordan had anything to do with it being a stopover during a military expedition to Persia.

The crucial point is this: there may be a very simple explanation to account for why not one of the church historians writing one hundred (or more) years after Eusebius mentions Constantine’s “Persian” war. If the mid-fifth-century ecclesiastical historians took Eusebius’ account of Constantine’s last days at face value, then there would not have been any “cover up” of Constantine’s war, because, as far as they could gather from Eusebius, there was no war during Constantine’s reign.

Although Eusebius does not say so, there is, however, reason to believe that Constantine was in the process of staging a campaign, as the litany of non-Christian historians cited by Fowden all seem to believe. Nicomedia was on the road to Antioch, the city where Constantius was in residence and from which any assault on Persia would necessarily begin. Further, Eusebius directly acknowledges that Constantine had convened his war council in preparation for “military moves against Persia,” but the notorious lacuna follows soon after this statement, and neither Persia nor any war is mentioned again.

The chapter headings of the lost sections do, however, note that Constantine

57 VC IV.62,2

58 Burgess, “AXYPΩΝ,” 159-160, who adds that Nicomedia “was the standard launching point for a journey across Asia to Antioch.”

59 VC IV.56,1. Cf. Aur. Vict. Caes. 41, 16: “In the thirty-second year of his reign, and after thirteen years of sole rule and having completed more than sixty-two years of his life, he marched against the Persians, with whom he would have begun open hostilities, when he died in a region near to Nicomedia called Achyrona, since this catastrophe was portended by a star of the realm which was called a comet.” My emphasis. Translation by M.H. Dodgeon in The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363: A Documentary History, ed. M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu (New York: Routledge, 1991), 159.
“took with him bishops and a tent in the form of a church” and that the emperor “received an embassy from the Persians.” The expansion of these headings in the VC (by an anonymous later author, or authors) explains them this way:

Thereupon with much embellishment he also equipped for the conduct of that war the tent to form the church in which he intended to make supplications to God the Giver of victory together with the bishops. Meanwhile the Persians, learning of the Emperor’s preparations for war, and being much afraid of doing battle with him, asked him by an embassy to make peace. At this the most pacific Emperor received the Persian embassy, and gladly came to friendly terms with them.

In other words, the war ended before it started. Socrates, one of the few later Christian historians to mention the campaign—and, again, not in the context of Constantine’s last days—seems to repeat the explanation that a peace agreement prevented the war. After discussing the construction of the tent-church and comparing it to Moses’ Tabernacle, Socrates concludes his account by noting that “the war was not carried out at that time” because the Persians feared Constantine.

So does Eusebius’ account of the Persian campaign contradict those of the non-Christian historians? That is, can we say that Eusebius was covering up Constantine’s preparations for war? A confrontation had, by all accounts, been brewing for some time and whether or not a Persian embassy arrived to stave off the conflict, Constantine died—even according to Eusebius’ own chronology of events—within weeks of his initial preparations for war. As a result, claiming that Constantine died while on campaign, or at least while beginning preparations for war, would, in fact, be a legitimate way of rendering and narrating the last major political act of the emperor. The epitome of the Latin historian Festus, for example, notes that Constantine “prepared an expedition against the Persians toward the end of his life,” but Festus also seems to

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60 Headings of VC IV.56-57. See also Fowden, “Last Days,” 147.

61 VC IV.57

62 Soc. HE I.18,12
indicate that the war never happened. Festus explains that upon hearing that Constantine was marching toward Persia, “the court at Babylonia went into such a panic that a suppliant legation of Persians went to him with all haste, promising to do what he commanded.”

By the very nature of the sort of history they were writing, to say nothing of their own personal views about the importance of the emperor’s Christianity, Festus, Libanius, and other pagan historians would have had no interest in continuing their narrative of the end of Constantine’s life by discussing the emperor’s baptism or his supposed speech to the bishops gathered at Nicomedia. In fact, in marked contrast to Eusebius, several non-Christian historians explain in their accounts of Constantine’s last days that the emperor’s death was foretold by the sighting of a comet—an astrological sign that Eusebius would have shunned for the same reasons that non-Christians historians might have omitted any discussion of the emperor’s baptism. But Eusebius, as I have noted several times already, was writing a fundamentally different sort of history. It goes without saying that the bishop of Caesarea would have been much more inclined than Festus or Libanius to leave his readers with an account of Constantine’s piety and the emperor’s formal submission to the fold of Christ. Thus, Eusebius can hardly be faulted for focusing on the emperor’s baptism—and not astrological omens or Constantine’s negotiations with Persian envoys over a border dispute—as the most memorable episode of Constantine’s last days.

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64 See, for example, Aur. Vict. Caes. 41, 16; Eutr. Brev. X.8.2

65 In Horst Schneider’s analysis: “Denn der Feldzug gegen die Perser stellt zwar das letzte politische Projekt Konstantins dar, spielt aber—weil die Perser eingelenkt haben—beim Aufbruch des Kaisers dann keine Rolle mehr. Vielmehr hat die letzte Reise Konstantins bei Eusebius
Neither the Christian historians, nor the pagan ones, need necessarily have been concocting any wholly invented history, but rather just focusing on what parts of the narrative that concerned them most while at the same time glossing and interpreting such events accordingly. In fact, Fowden concedes that the late ancient historians who claim Constantine died while preparing for war against Persia were not acting on some sort of “anti-Constantinian” impulse to impugn the memory of the emperor. Their histories were problematic for Christians only insofar as their “admission that Constantine died on campaign … seemed embarrassing to their hero’s reputation.” This much, at least, is plausible. But Fowden goes on to overstate the case, claiming that if Christians were to have admitted that Constantine died while on campaign, they might have thereby inadvertently legitimized “a much more serious accusation”—namely, that Constantine was a warmonger and Julian could not be held fully responsible for the war’s outcome.66

Although unlikely, it is possible that later church historians had Julian in mind when they each made the same calculated decision not to mention a Persian campaign at the end of Constantine’s life. But if Eusebius (who died in 339) was the first to obscure the circumstances of Constantine’s death by not acknowledging the “real” reason Constantine was in Nicomedia, then Julian (who would not become emperor until over twenty years later, in 361) clearly could not possibly have been a factor in such a narrative choice. So if it is true that Eusebius purposefully omitted mentioning Constantine’s campaign, then it was not just because it was “embarrassing” that Constantine died while on his way to war, but—and this is the key point—because

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66 Fowden, “Last Days,” 149.
Constantine died while setting off on a religious war on behalf of the Christians of Persia.

If the whole point of the VC was to trumpet Constantine’s victories and his defeat of persecutors as a divinely-ordained restoration of the cosmic order, then the emperor’s death on his way to face a king whom later hagiographical imagination would depict as one of the most terrible persecutors of Christians anywhere would hardly make any sense. More than just embarrassing, it would be theologically cumbersome and inexplicable, a paralyzing setback to the march of the providential narrative constructed throughout all of Eusebius’ later works. But, as I have been arguing, there is little reason to believe that Constantine was intending a war on behalf of the Christians of Persia. Thus, to claim that Eusebius is covering up Constantine’s preparations for war—on account of the emperor’s ignominious end well short of the Roman frontier—is to assume the veracity of the claim that Constantine was intending a religious crusade for Christians in barbarian lands, and, as a corollary, that Eusebius knew this and further realized that he had to somehow present Constantine’s last days in a more favorable theological light. Yet, this is precisely Fowden’s assumption as well as that of others who have written about the puzzling, so-called “omission” of Constantine’s Persian war from Christian ecclesiastical history.

Invariably, the discussion about Constantine’s last days among scholars comes full circle to a discussion of the emperor’s letter to Shapur. Early in his article, Fowden cites a section from Constantine’s letter to Shapur and comments that the letter “subtly encourages the idea that Iran’s subjection to Christ was foreordained.” This is on par with the standard scholarly view characterizing Constantine’s letter as the bellicose spoutings of a Christian who was intent on declaring his authority over Christians in Persian lands. But, as I have argued, that is not the sense of Constantine’s letter, nor is it

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even the characterization of the emperor that is implied throughout the final chapters of the VC narrating the end of the Constantine’s life. So even though Eusebius does not suggest that the war council near the end of the emperor’s life had anything to do with the Christians of Persia, that Constantine “discussed the campaign with the bishops at his court” has been taken to mean that he was planning a religiously-sanctioned war premised on a plan of Christian conquest and liberation.68

For Eusebius, Constantine may have had the full support, even in war, of the Christian hierarchy, but this is a very different idea from that of a “religious war” or a “crusade.” Barnes, for example, points to VC IV.5-6 (among other places), on Constantine’s dealings with the Goths and Sarmatians, as an instance of how Christianity affected Roman negotiations under a Christian emperor: “When Constantine concluded a treaty with the Goths in 332, and again when he concluded a treaty with the Sarmatians in 334, he insisted on including religious stipulations, which enabled him (and his panegyrist Eusebius) to claim that he had converted the northern barbarians.”69 While there may have been “religious” elements to Constantine’s pacification of the barbarians such that Constantine’s victory could be couched in religious themes, it hardly entails that the emperor’s military or diplomatic advances were fundamentally religious per se.

Consider Sozomen’s account of the northern barbarians at the conclusion of his summary of the life of Constantine: he explains that the emperor “was a powerful protector of the Christian religion ... more successful than any other sovereign in all his undertakings; for he formed no design, I am convinced, without God. He was victorious in his wars against the Goths and Sarmatians, and, indeed, in all his military

68 VC IV.56,3
69 Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 131.
enterprises.” In other words, all Constantine’s victories, according to Sozomen, were thanks to the providence of God. But what is remarkable about that? As Harold Drake notes, “close association with divinity was an important part of a late Roman ruler’s claim to legitimacy”—any late Roman ruler, Christian or pagan.

As I believe these examples suggest, there is a persistent sense that Constantine’s actions must be defined primarily via the undercurrent of the emperor’s Christian commitment and that Eusebius was always waiting or intending to further develop and explain Constantine’s fundamentally religious proclivities. For example, Rapp, as I mentioned above, argues that the incomplete character of the VC explains why, at IV.57, “the mere mention of the ‘tent’ still awaits embellishment into a more elaborate evocation of Moses.” But why, other than out of a sense that Constantine’s preparations for war (and Eusebius’ characterizations of them) must have been on behalf of the Christians of Persia, should we assume that Eusebius intended to develop the tent reference here but never had the opportunity?

Eusebius never suggests that the Christians of Persia needed a liberator, and in his letter to Shapur Constantine himself commends them to the protection of the pious king of kings. Even Ammianus, who wrote half a century after Constantine’s death and was certainly no supporter of Christians, is silent about any religious motive in Constantine’s military preparations against Persia. Ammianus, in fact, cites only Constantine’s avarice in claiming “it was not Julian, but Constantine, who kindled the Parthian fires, when he confided too greedily in the lies of Metrodorus.” On this point,

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70 Soz. HE I.34

71 Drake, Constantine and the Bishops, 296.

72 Rapp, “Imperial Ideology,” 695. My emphasis.

73 Amm. Marc. XXV.4.23. The “lies of Metrodorus” is an apocryphal tale preserved only in the twelfth-century history of George Cedrenus (and this glancing mention by Ammianus).
J.W. Drijvers—continuing the assumptions about Constantine’s religious aims—remarks how strange it is that Ammianus mentions the lies of Metrodorus, but fails to cite Shapur’s persecution of Christians as a reason why Constantine would have sought war.74

Had Constantine and Eusebius both lived longer, and had the war that Constantine seems to have initiated ended differently under Constantine’s leadership than it did under Constantius and Julian, then perhaps Eusebius may have had both reason and opportunity to more fully develop the one-off reference to Moses’ tent in Book IV of the VC. As it stands, however, we are left making guesses about Constantine’s motivations based solely on how we have already imagined the emperor.

**The Letter to Shapur in Sozomen and Theodoret**

Later ecclesiastical historians could not blatantly adopt completely counterfactual history, no matter how they interpreted Eusebius’ account of Constantine’s last days, but—as three prominent fifth-century church historians attest—the writing of chronologically-inaccurate and subtly-mistaken histories are another

The section of the *Res gestae* in which Ammianus relates the story of Metrodorus in full is lost, but, as we gather from Cedrenus, Metrodorus was a philosopher who traveled from the Roman Empire to India. He brought home from the east many precious jewels for Constantine, some of which had been sent from the king of India, some duplicitously acquired by Metrodorus himself. When Constantine saw the jewels and was amazed by their fineness and beauty, Metrodorus boasted that he had sent back many more precious jewels that were, alas, confiscated by the Persians. When Constantine heard Metrodorus’ account of the theft, he demanded that Shapur return the stolen jewels. Shapur ignored Constantine’s request, and—so the story goes—Constantine began preparing for war. Cedrenus also mentions Shapur’s persecution, claiming that eighteen thousand Christians were killed in the “twenty-first year” of Constantine (326/327), but he cites the jewel heist as the primary reason that the peace between the Persians and the Romans was broken. See George Cedrenus, *Synopsis Historiarum* I.516-517, ed. I Bekker, *CSHB* (Bonn, 1838), and B.H. Warmington, “Ammianus Marcellinus and the Lies of Metrodorus,” *CQ* 31 (1981): 464-468.

matter entirely.

As I have already discussed, Socrates mentions Constantine’s tent-church in the context of an indeterminate conflict with Persia, omitting any mention of Constantine’s concern for the Christians of Persia or the emperor’s letter to Shapur. When Socrates does speak of events relevant to fourth-century Persia, it is almost exclusively with respect to Julian’s campaign and “the Apostate’s” subsequent death on the Mesopotamian plains. By contrast, Sozomen, who typically relies quite heavily on Socrates’ history for source material, does mention the tent-church (albeit without contextual references to Moses or Persia), while, elsewhere, discussing Constantine’s concern for Persian Christians at length.

Sozomen’s history, written in the early 440s, provides the most extensive account of any late Roman ecclesiastical historian about Shapur’s severity toward the Christians of Persia. After claiming that Christianity came to Persia in part as a result of the conversion of Armenia and its king, Sozomen spends several chapters relating numerous details about Shapur’s persecution. At the end of his narrative about the persecution of Persian Christians, Sozomen reckons that Shapur killed some sixteen thousand among the faithful. In Sozomen’s account, in some areas of Persia the dead were piled so high that the Persian, Syrian, and Edessene Christians—all of whom kept careful records of the persecution, according to Sozomen—had difficulty in maintaining a list of the names of all the dead.

75 Soc. HE III.13-21, presents, for example, a nine-chapter survey that begins with Julian’s heavy taxation of Christians to fund his Persian expedition and ends with various accounts of the identity of the spear-thrower (Persian? Roman? demonic?) whose weapon ended Julian’s life.

76 Soz. HE II.9-14

77 Soz. HE II.14,5: φιλοτιμουμένοις, ὡς ἑνὶ δὲ συλλήβδην εἴπειν, λέγεται τῶν τότε μαρτύρων τοὺς ὀνομαστὶ φερομένους, ἄνδρας τε καὶ γυναίκας, ἐναι εἰς μυρίους ἔξακισχίλιους, τὴν δὲ ἔκτος τούτων πληθὺν κρείττῳ ἀριθμῷ, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἔργῳς φανῆναι
When discussing these Christian martyrs of Persia, Sozomen summarizes several of the most renowned stories among the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, beginning with the martyrdom of Simeon bar Šabbāē.⁷⁸ Sozomen’s summary of the deaths of the Christian martyrs in Persia demonstrates sufficiently broad and deep knowledge of the martyr acts so as to compel the conclusion that he, or his source, clearly must have had access to some sort of written narratives of the martyrs—possibly already in Greek translation.⁷⁹

Hewing closely to the account given in the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Šabbāē* (as opposed to the later *History*, which Sozomen did not know), Sozomen does not mention the name “Constantine” in the context of his summary of Simeon’s martyrdom, although he does name Constantine when providing an account of the letter that the emperor wrote to Shapur.⁸⁰ Sozomen suggests that the reason that Christians were τὰς αὐτῶν προσηγορίας ἀπαριθμήσασθαι Πέρσαις τε καὶ Σύροις καὶ τοῖς ἄνα τὴν Ἐδεσσαν ὀικούσιν, οἱ πολλὴν τούτου ἔπιμελείαν ἐποιήσαντο.

⁷⁸ The majority (*HE* II.9-12) of Sozomen’s reflections on the martyrs of Persia stems from Simeon’s acts and from the cycle of acts of other martyrs from Bet Huzaye who are mentioned by name in Simeon’s martyrdom—Gushtazad, the Persian eunuch; Pusai, the head of the craftsmen; and Tarbo, Simeon’s sister.⁷⁹


⁸⁰ Gernot Wiessner proposes that Sozomen’s account of Simeon’s martyrdom, while seeming to be closer to “A” (the *Martyrdom of Simeon*), rather than “B” (the *History of Simeon*) is actually closer to Wiessner’s hypothesized “ABx” source. The likelihood that there was an “ABx” source, and, moreover, that Sozomen knew that material, is improbable. While there is of course a great degree of similarity between Simeon “A” and Simeon “B” at the level of the general textual narrative, they are, as I detail in my fifth chapter, ultimately very different sources with markedly different approaches and goals. If Sozomen, as Wiessner hypothesizes, did have access to an “ABx” source, it was composed (as Wiessner acknowledges) almost entirely of “A” with very little (if any) “B” mixed in. See G. Wiessner, *Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte I: Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967). See also P. Devos, “Sozomène et les actes syriaques de S. Syméon bar Šabbāē,” *AB* 84 (1966): 443-456.
persecuted was because the Jews and the Magi accused Simeon of furtively communicating Persian affairs to an unnamed “Caesar of the Romans.” After recording the trials of Simeon and several others at length, Sozomen then explains that Constantine was furious once he heard about the suffering of the Christians of Persia, and sought to render them his assistance, but was at a loss as to how best to be of help. Around that time, Sozomen says, some Persian ambassadors arrived at Constantine’s court, and after the emperor dutifully “granted their requests” (ἐπινεύσας τοῖς αἰτομένοις), he penned a letter to Shapur on behalf of the Christians of Persia.

The letter to Shapur that Sozomen cites is clearly an outline version of the letter that is presented by Eusebius in the VC. But Sozomen’s quotations from the letter are short, somewhat garbled, and only very roughly in accord with the language of the letter as it is preserved by Eusebius. (On this point, the gruff textual note in the Nicene Fathers edition of Sozomen’s HE bears repeating: “As usual, Soz. quotes briefly, and with no regard to the language and little to the thought.” Sozomen’s summary does, however, sufficiently provide the general sense of Constantine’s letter and it successfully encapsulates the letter’s main points, but it is most certainly a very tepid approximation of the original letter’s rhetorical force. Sozomen’s Constantine—in contradistinction to Eusebius’ self-assured and confident leader—seems deferential and suppliant. Rather than magnify his own accomplishments or win Shapur over with unassailable reason,

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81 Soz. HE II.9,1-2: καὶ διαβάλλουσι πρὸς Σαβώρην τὸν τότε βασιλέα Συμεώνην τὸν ἄρχιπέσκοπον Σελευκείας καὶ Κτησιφόντος τῶν ἐν Περσίδι βασιλευουσῶν πόλεων ὡς φίλον ὄντα τῷ Καίσαρι Ῥωμαίῳ καὶ τὰ Περσῶν πράγματα τούτων καταμηνύοντα.

82 Soz. HE II.15,1: καὶ βοηθεῖν αὐτοῖς σπουδάζων ἠπόρει δὲ τι ποιῆσοι, ώς ἄν καὶ αὐτὸι βεβαίως διάγοιεν.

83 Soz. HE II.15,1

Constantine pleads with the Persian king to recognize that Christianity is a pure religion and that God will help Shapur if only he would change his ways and demonstrate kindness to the Christians. Sozomen’s version of the letter does, however, retain the example of Valerian as an example of what might happen if Shapur refuses to be kind towards Christians.\(^\text{85}\)

Sozomen’s Constantine seems to have no idea how to address the persecution or to effectively win the safety of Persian Christians. Indeed, rather than take immediate diplomatic measures when he learns of the events in the East—perhaps by threatening or preparing for war against the Persians—Sozomen says that Constantine *waited* for a favorable opportunity (namely, the imminent departure of the Persian ambassadors) to pen a letter to Shapur in which he meekly requests an end to the violence.\(^\text{86}\) More interestingly, whether through guile or ignorance, Sozomen completely *inverts* the order of events. All the grisly executions of Christians in Persia that Sozomen recounts in his work are believed by most to have occurred *after* Constantine’s death, but, in Sozomen’s re-telling of the story, Constantine’s letter becomes a response to an ongoing persecution—a means of pleading to end the violence against the Christians of Persia.

Rather than connecting Constantine’s letter to Shapur with a possible war for Christians near the end of Constantine’s life, the letter is instead connected to a persecution of Christians that Constantine seems to have been unable—and only passively willing—to stop until it had already run its course. If Sozomen was purposefully trying to hide Constantine’s preparations for a campaign against Shapur so as not to embarrass the emperor, he certainly did little to advance Constantine’s legacy

\(^{85}\) Soz. *HE* II.15,3: ἔπειτα δὲ τῇ περὶ τὸ δόγμα προνοίᾳ ἔλεω καὶ αὐτὸ ἦσειν τὸ θεόν ὑπισχνεῖτο, τεκμηρίως χρώμενος τοῖς Οὐαλλεριανῷ καὶ αὐτῷ συμβεβηκόσιν.

\(^{86}\) Soz. *HE* II.15,2: εὐκαίριον δὲ τὸ τότε νομίσας παραθέσθαι Σαβώρῃ τοὺς ἐν Περσίδι Χριστιανοὺς, ἐγράψῃ πρὸς αὐτὸν, μεγίστην καὶ ἀνάγραφτον ἄει χάριν ὑμολογῶν ἦσειν, εἰ φιλάνθρωπος γένοιτο περὶ τοὺς ὑπ’αὐτὸν τὸ δόγμα τῶν Χριστιανῶν θαυμάζοντας.
by presenting several detailed chapters’ worth of Christian bloodshed that unfolded on Constantine’s watch. From Eusebius to Sozomen, Constantine gets transformed from a champion riding the wave of providence to victory over the enemies of the people of God into an impotent king whose too-little, too-late response to overwhelming violence is to entrust a flaccid letter of protest with the returning Persian ambassadors whose requests have been already granted. There is, moreover, no indication in Sozomen’s account that Constantine’s letter was even successful in ending the persecution.

Sozomen’s chapters on the Christians of Persia end abruptly. Before discussing (in his next chapter) how Constantine’s baptizer, Eusebius of Nicomedia, was restored to his see after his temporary exile for Arianism, Sozomen simply states that Constantine, by writing to Shapur, sought to express his care and concern for Christians of every place, Roman or foreign.87

It is important to note how Sozomen’s report accords with what Eusebius relates in the VC. Sozomen, like Eusebius, mentions that Constantine’s letter was sent to Shapur with a returning Persian ambassador who had been well-received by the emperor. And while Sozomen’s exposition of such a widespread persecution of Christians might have been interpreted by his readers as grounds for Constantine, the patron of all Christians everywhere, to march against Persia, Sozomen never mentions, or even alludes to, any war against Persia near the end of Constantine’s life. Perhaps Sozomen intended to communicate that Constantine’s diplomatic measures ended the persecution and, with it, any need for a military confrontation—but the reader is left to speculate.

Writing over a century after Constantine’s death, Sozomen’s chronological confusion over closely-linked events is excusable. In fact, his eliding of Eusebius’

87 Soz. HE II.15,5: τοιαύτα Σαβώρη γράφας Ἰωσήφος Ἐπειράτο πείθειν αὐτὸν εὑνοεῖν τῇ θρησκείᾳ. πλείστη γὰρ ἐχρῆτο κηδεμονίας περὶ τοὺς πανταχοῦ Χριστιανοὺς, Ῥωμαίους καὶ ἄλλοφύλους.
references to Persia in the VC makes perfect sense. Rather than reading Constantine’s letter as an announcement of his Christianity and a response to hearing from the Persian embassy that Christians were flourishing in Persia, Sozomen, with the perspective of hindsight, assumes that the context for the letter could only have been an imperial response in a time of persecution. Sozomen’s new chronology more reasonably situates the letter nearer to the end of Constantine’s life, when, according to Eusebius, he received an embassy from Persia that resolved the war before it began. Sozomen’s reading escapes the necessity of having to mention either an impending war or Constantine’s last days, leaving it to the reader to conclude that not only does Constantine care for all Christians everywhere, but also that a mere letter (albeit quite late in the day) from this most powerful of emperors may have been sufficient to frighten the Persians into compliance. Perhaps this explains, too, why Sozomen dwells on Constantine’s example of what happened to Valerian while casually omitting any hint that the letter (as recounted by Eusebius) actually closed with fraternal well-wishing and a salute to Shapur’s piety. Sozomen’s Constantine is thus absolved of any charges of warmongering (even while conveying the impression that Constantine had just cause to go to war), and the persecution of Christians in Persia is explained away as a troubling episode that Constantine eventually found out about and was able to end.

Theodoret of Cyr rus, the only other fifth-century ecclesiastical historian to engage the plight of the Christians of Persia during Constantine’s reign, reads the letter to Shapur within the same chronological framework that Sozomen outlines. But Theodoret, unlike Sozomen, quotes the letter accurately and in full—or, accurately and in full at least insofar as we have the letter from Eusebius.88 Like Sozomen, Theodoret stresses that Constantine wrote to Shapur, explaining that the emperor took it upon

88 Theod. HE I.24
himself to protect the Christians of Persia after he learned that they were being persecuted.  

These similarities aside, however, Theodoret’s account is otherwise remarkably different from Sozomen’s: whereas Sozomen seems to have had knowledge of a number of Syriac martyr acts and takes time to discuss the trials of the Christian martyrs of Persia in detail, Theodoret does not mention them at all. He gives no approximation of the scale of the violence, nor does he mention a single name of those who were among the dead, much less tell any story about how Christians were captured, imprisoned, or killed. According to Theodoret, Constantine wrote to Shapur by his own accord and out of a desire to protect the Christians of Persia once he learned that they were being persecuted and that the impious Persian king—a slave to all sorts of errors (τῆ πλάνη δεδουλωμένον παντοδαπάς)—was concocting further plans to destroy them. It is all the more bizarre that Theodoret would preface Constantine’s letter in this way (that is, by calling Shapur a slave to error) since Theodoret quotes the letter so accurately. The letter, as preserved in both the VC and Theodoret’s HE, expresses Constantine’s pleasure that the choicest parts of Persia are filled with Christians, and Constantine directly commends the Christians of Persia to Shapur’s pious care.

As in Sozomen’s synopsis of Constantine’s dealings with Shapur, Theodoret also concludes by emphasizing that Constantine was such a solicitous emperor that he watched over Christians who were subjects of other kings. Yet, again, neither Sozomen

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89 Theod. HE I.23

90 Theod. HE I.23: Τῶν ἐν Περσίδι δὲ τῆς εὐσεβείας τροφίμων αὐτόματος προονόθη, μαθὼν γὰρ αὐτούς ὑπὸ τῶν δυσσεβῶν εξελάυνεσθαι καὶ τὸν ἐκείνων βασιλέα τῇ πλάνῃ δεδουλωμένων παντοδαπάς αὐτοῖς καττύειν ἐπιβουλάς ἐπέστειλε, καὶ παραινών εὐσεβείν καὶ τοὺς εὐσεβοῦντας τιμῆς ἀπολαύειν αἰτῶν.

91 Soz. HE II.15,5; Theod. HE I.24: Τοσαύτην ὁ πάντα ἀριστος βασιλεὺς τῶν εὐσεβείας κοσμοιμέμνων ἐποιεῖτο φροντίδα, οὐ μόνον τῶν ὑπηκόων ἐπιμελούμενος ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ὑφ᾽ ἔτερα σκηπτρατελούντων εἰς δύναμιν προμηθούμενος.
nor Theodoret directly indicates whether Constantine’s letter had the desired effect of putting an end to the persecution. Theodoret, more so than Sozomen, stresses that Constantine overcame all foreign adversaries, either through war or diplomacy, and that trophies of the emperor’s victories had been erected everywhere. As a result, Theodoret’s implication at the end of his report seems to be that Persia was among the nations that submitted to Constantine, but he is far from explicit on this point and never declares that Constantine’s letter ended the persecution or led to any Roman sovereignty over Persia’s Christian inhabitants.

If Constantine was plotting a religious crusade and seeking to advance the exodus of the Christians of Persia à la Moses, then neither Sozomen nor Theodoret seems to have gotten the message. Constantine’s letter, rather than igniting the spark for Shapur’s persecution, was an attempt to douse the flames. Rather than covering up the beginnings of a providentially-frowned-upon war, Sozomen and Theodoret present an idealized account—complete with snippets from “real” events, letters, and martyr acts—of Constantine as they imagined him based on the history they had received: an emperor who was a patron and protector of Christians. If they confused all the details, mangled their sources, or misunderstood what happened when and to whom, all of this can more reasonably be apprehended as the messy maneuverings of piecemeal late ancient historiography—not the machinations of imperial propagandists erasing Constantine’s preparations for war from history like an ousted Soviet general from a photograph.

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92 Theod. HE I.24: καὶ μὲν δὴ καὶ τῶν βαρβάρων οἱ μὲν ἑκόντες ἐδούλευον, οἱ δὲ πολέμῳ κρατοῦμενοι καὶ πανταχοῦ τρόπαια ἱστατο καὶ νικηφόρος ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀνεδείκνυτο.
Chapter 3.

The Constantine presented by the Greek ecclesiastical historians of the fourth and fifth centuries is a pious and powerful king who is variously portrayed as a protector of all Christians; a second Moses who delivered the people of God from the persecutions of pagan emperors; a letter writer and patron-from-alone who sought to end the oppression of Christians in Persia; and a military leader of such fearsomeness that he could frighten foreign emissaries into suing for peace before war had even begun. The Constantine of Greek ecclesiastical history is a king who took on the role that Eusebius is often said to have intended for him, becoming both an icon and a “mirror for princes.”

Commenting on this idea of Constantine as a “mirror for princes” in the context of the emperor’s claim that he was “the bishop of those outside the Church” (*VC IV.24*), Aaron Johnson explains that Eusebius “sought in effect to delimit and control the duties and character of a Christian emperor. The emperor was to do the work of God in the political, legal, and military spheres (as represented in his letter to Shapur, for instance), while the ‘bishops of those within’ the Church were to control ecclesiastical affairs.”¹ In the later Byzantine Empire, Constantine was often portrayed as the ideal “bishop of those outside.” Moreover, he was the perfect emperor—rather, he was imagined as such—to whom court panegyrists could turn by way of rhetorically bolstering the lesser virtues of their own imperial patrons.²

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² See, for example, Alexander Kazhdan’s classic article, “‘Constantin imaginaire’: Byzantine Legends of the Ninth Century about Constantine the Great,” *Byzantion 57* (1987): 196-250, which traces how the constituent elements of the Constantine legend developed among
“Constantine” and the Great Persecution

If the Constantine of Greek history and legend had the presence of a lion and was celebrated as the patron and savior of Christians everywhere, then the Constantine of the Syriac martyrologists, as the Acts of the Persian Martyrs attest and as this chapter will show, was someone altogether different. At least most of the time.

In fact, Constantine rarely shows up in the Acts. An unnamed “caesar” does appear, albeit infrequently, as an anonymous proxy standing in for any generic—but apparently Christian—king of Rome. But Constantine, by name, is almost entirely absent from the Acts. Of the roughly forty martyr acts in Syriac that are set during the reign of Shapur II (309-379 CE), just four refer to “caesar.” Only one of these four (Simeon’s Martyrdom) is likely to have been composed by the turn of the fifth century; the Martyrdom is also the only one text wherein “caesar” might refer to Constantine. Of the remaining three texts among this subset that mention “caesar,” none is set earlier than 360 CE, and none was composed until at least the mid-fifth century.3

Byzantine historians and chroniclers. To a certain extent, Theodosius the Great and Justinian were also portrayed as embodiments of the imperial ideal. See the collected essays on this theme in New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th Centuries, ed. P. Magdalino (London: Variorum, 1994), especially J. Harries, “‘Pius princeps’: Theodosius II and fifth-century Constantinople,” 35-44, in which the author argues that Socrates’ and Sozomen’s constructions of the kingly piety of Theodosius are emblematic of Eusebius’ idea of Constantine.

3 The sixth-century Vatican Syr. 160, which includes thirteen martyr acts of Christians killed in Persia, is the sole manuscript known to have been written before the ninth century that preserves Simeon’s Martyrdom, and thus any reference to “caesar.” The other martyr acts set during the Great Persecution that mention “caesar” include the Martyrdom of the Captives [AMS II, 316-324]; the History of Saba Pirgushnasp [AMS IV, 222-249]; and the Martyrdom of Forty Holy Martyrs [AMS II, 325-347]. All three are set at least twenty years after Simeon’s death, although the chronology is slightly confused. The Martyrdom of the Captives, which is discussed at length in chapter six, details the trials of a huge contingent of Roman Christians enslaved after Shapur’s capture of the Roman fortress (qastā) of Bet Zabdai in 360 CE Saba’s History, a seventh-century composition that is discussed briefly in chapter four, is set in the same year as the Martyrdom of the Captives (Shapur’s fifty-third regnal year), but narrates the conversion of a Sasanian noble at Nisibis after Julian’s death and Shapur’s acquisition of that city in 363 CE Forty Martyrs, which draws heavily on themes from Simeon’s acts and in which Simeon even appears in a dream, is set later still—in the thirty-sixth year of the persecution, or sometime in the late 370s CE. On the
In fact, just two texts among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs specifically name and
discuss the emperor Constantine. Again, neither was written until many decades after
the emperor’s death. The first of the two Acts to specifically discuss Constantine is the
mid-fifth-century History of Simeon; the other is the sixth-century History of the Holy Mar
Ma’īn. Intriguingly, Mar Ma’īn was not written in Persian-controlled territory at all, but
in a Syriac-speaking region of the Roman Empire along the upper Euphrates. As
Sebastian Brock notes, “the author [of Mar Ma’īn] is clearly writing at a time when the
Byzantine emperor controlled the area.”

What can we conclude from this? One crucial point that should give us pause when re-considering the role of Constantine in any
discussion of the persecution of the Christians of Persia is this: Simeon’s History is the
sole text to discuss Constantine from among all the Acts of the Persian Martyrs that are set
during Shapur’s persecution and that were written by Persian Christians from within the
Persian Empire.

Mar Ma’īn, the other text to discuss Constantine, in addition to being a product of
an author who was living under a Byzantine emperor, bears the further curious
distinction of being the only text among the Acts to mention a letter sent from
Constantine to Shapur. Although Constantine’s letter in Mar Ma’īn plays on themes that
are found in Eusebius and his continuators, the tone and content of the letter in its Syriac
martyrological context is radically different from how it has been preserved in Greek.
Yet, inasmuch as Constantine’s letter in Mar Ma’īn differs from the “authentic” letter of

basis of internal evidence, Forty Martyrs could not have been composed until at least the second
half of the fifth century.

4 A Syriac-English version of Mar Ma’īn was recently published by Sebastian Brock. Brock
points out that there are sufficient indications within the text to assert that it is “self-evident” that
the author of Mar Ma’īn “was writing within the Roman Empire.” See S. Brock, The History of the
Holy Mar Ma’īn with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts (Piscatway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 5-6, as
well as his commentary in the textual endnotes numbered 55, 57, and 76-77.
the *VC*, it nevertheless fits perfectly within later *Roman* literary tradition that inverts the chronology as we have it in Persian martyrrological and historiographical sources in order to *re-imagine* Constantine’s zealous patronage of the Christians of Persia and his epistolary confrontation with Shapur on their behalf.

In this chapter, my primary goal is to give an overview of how the Syriac texts (mainly martyr acts) that address Shapur’s persecution narrate and conceptualize the role, importance, and influence of Constantine, “caesar,” and the Roman Empire. To a lesser extent, I also survey how Constantine’s dealings with Shapur and the Christians of Persia are memorialized in the Byzantine ecclesiastical-historical tradition by way of showing how two very different literary traditions about Constantine emerged and were subsequently perpetuated.

I must stress that I am not attempting to chart or to definitively determine the particular details of what “actually happened,” or what Constantine did or did not do on behalf of the Christians of Persia. Attempts at uncovering the kernels of historicity buried in the loam of textual rhetoric is, in my view, an inherently problematic way of approaching martyrrological and hagiographical histories. Instead, my major interest lies in demonstrating the ways by which “Rome” and “Constantine” are idealized and narrated in the sources relevant to Shapur’s persecution. Necessarily, however, by cataloguing how Constantine and his role have been idealized and imagined in various texts, at least one “historical” claim is implied: namely, that the traditional presentation of the “events” in fourth-century Persia is a synthetic literary account—*not* an “historical” one.

What I further attempt to make clear in this chapter by means of a survey of the sources is that, with the notable exception of *Mar Mā’in*, there is no attestation in the *Acts* (or related sources from Sasanian Persia) either that the Christians of Persia welcomed a Roman conquest, or that they thought of Constantine as a patron and protector in any
way comparable to the role outlined for the Christian emperor in Roman ecclesiastical histories. It is an image that is peculiar to the Roman Empire that is created by the construction of Constantine in Eusebius, Sozomen, Theodoret, and various later chroniclers in both Greek and Syriac—such as the ninth-century Byzantine historian, Theophanes, and the twelfth-century Syrian Orthodox patriarch of Antioch, Michael the Syrian. And this image of Constantine, I argue, is one that made little headway in the Persian martyrological literature about Shapur’s Great Persecution.

I address three interwoven themes throughout this chapter, each of which builds upon the others in order to show the problems inherent in the traditional view of fourth-century Persian Christians and their relationship with Constantine and the Roman Empire. They are as follows:

1. **Aphrahat on “War” and “Persecution”**

   The first major theme of this chapter centers on two treatises by Aphrahat, the Persian Sage. Aphrahat’s work also happens to be the only Syriac source discussed in this chapter that was actually written during the period in question.

   Although very little biographical information is known about Aphrahat, it is generally believed that he must have been a Persian Christian of some standing—possibly a bishop—who hailed from somewhere in northern Mesopotamia. His only known work, the *Demonstrations*, is a series of twenty-three homiletic treatises. These treatises, which purport to be written in response to the queries of an interlocutor, address in authoritative fashion what seem to be pressing issues of theology, community, and church order. But the *Demonstrations* address these issues in an oblique and allusive way: Aphrahat focuses almost entirely on complex biblical exegesis and rarely invokes or directly discusses the “actual” issues or events of the day.

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5 In Syriac, the noun *taḥwidaṯā* means an “argument,” “example,” or “demonstration.”
According to notes within his work, the *Demonstrations* were written over the course several years from the late 330s to the early 340s—a crucial period that covers the last days of Constantine up through the first paroxysms of persecution in Persia. As a result, Aphrahat has traditionally been read as a Persian Christian “witness” to the build up to the Roman-Persian war that followed Constantine’s death and to the early days of Shapur’s oppression of Christians. Of special interest, therefore, is Aphrahat’s fifth *Demonstration*, “On Wars,” and his twenty-first, “On Persecution.”

Oddly (although in keeping with Aphrahat’s practice of focusing first and foremost on biblical interpretation rather than the events of the day), “On Persecution” provides no information about Shapur or the extent or form of Shapur’s persecution. Neither does Aphrahat have anything to say about the Christian martyrs who may have been killed under Shapur’s reign. Likewise, “On Wars,” while gesturing more specifically to current Romano-Persian events than “On Persecution,” is still nonetheless primarily concerned with biblical exegesis rather than any direct assessment of the brewing war between Constantine and Shapur.

Although “On Wars” has typically been read as evidence that some Christians in Persia held out hope that they would soon be delivered by Constantine, I suggest that the text is better interpreted as a piece of apocalyptic literature that is attempting to find biblical warrants and explanations for the turbulent times that are expected to soon arrive. Contrary to how it has been presented by some, “On Wars” is *not* a text that heralds the imminent rise of a Christian emperor or rejoices in some sort of coming liberation of the Christians of Persia by a Christian-Roman army.

2. Late Syriac Martyr Acts on Shapur’s Persecution

The second theme of this chapter focuses on the conceptions of “Rome” that are to be found in the sixth-century *History of the Holy Mar Ma’in* and the seventh-century
Martyrdom of Mar Qardagh. Both Mar Ma‘in and Mar Qardagh tell the stories of their eponymous heroes. According to the texts, Ma‘in and Qardagh were converts to Christianity and both (prior to becoming Christians) were high-ranking Sasanian military officers well known to Shapur.

Although each of these two texts is set during Shapur’s persecution, it is certain that neither was composed until centuries after the fact. Indeed, the disjunction between the texts’ chronological setting and the much later time of their actual composition is self-evident, particularly in Mar Qardagh. Perhaps as a result of the traditional scholarly

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6 For a translation of Mar Qardagh with a comprehensive study of the text’s social-historical context see J.T. Walker, The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Ancient Iraq (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Walker surveys the previous scholarship on Mar Qardagh in a brief section from pages 115-117. As is the case with most of the scholarship on the Acts, Walker notes that the previous scholarship on Mar Qardagh “has largely focused on issues of historicity and dating.” For the Syriac text, see J.B. Abbeloos, Acta Mar Ḫardaghi Assyriae praefecti (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1890).

7 The complexity of dating the Acts has been avoided almost as much as it has been acknowledged and engaged. For instance, in his review of Gernot Wiessner’s detailed philological treatment of Simeon’s acts, Sebastian Brock points out that Wiessner seems to studiously avoid any question of historical problems, dating, or when a particular martyr act may have reached the form in which it was finally preserved in the manuscript tradition. See S. Brock, Review of Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte I: Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II, by Gernot Wiessner, JTS 19 (1968): 307.

This may have been a wise omission of an intractable problem on Wiessner’s part as definitively dating many of the Acts is notoriously difficult. For example, in another study published a decade after his Märtyrerüberlieferung, Wiessner examines the History of Mar Behnam and Sarah and concludes that it is a late ancient text. More recent studies have, however, argued that Behnam and Sarah could not have been composed before the twelfth century. For the text, see AMS II, 397-34; for studies, see G. Wiessner, “Die Behnam-Legende,” in Synkretismusforschung: Theorie und Praxis, ed. G. Wiessner (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), 119-133; H. Younansardaroud, “Die Legende von MarBehnam,” in Syriaca: zur Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirchen, 2. Deutsches Syrologen-Symposium, Juli 2000, Wittenberg, ed. M. Tamcke (Hamburg: Verlag, 2002), 185-196; and H. Younansardaroud and M. Novák, “Mar Behnam, Sohn des Sanherib von Nimrud: Tradition und Rezeption einer assyrischen Gestalt im iraquischen Christentum und die Frage nach den Fortleben der Assyrier,” AF 29 (2002): 166-194.

In yet another study, Wiessner directly addresses the difficulty of dating the Acts, arguing that the Martyrdom of Pusai—which details the trials of Pusai the qarib (“head of the craftsman”), who is mentioned near the conclusion of both of Simeon’s acts—is a text that probably did not reach the form in which we have it until around the turn of the sixth century even though it is set in the mid-fourth century and may have been circulating in some form by the fifth century. See G. Wiessner, “Zum Problem der zeitlichen und örtlichen Festlegung der erhaltenen syro-persischen Märtyrerakten: Das Pusai-Martyrium,” in Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte (Göttingen: Lagarde Haus, 1968), 231-251.
interest in determining the elements of “historicity” within martyrological texts, there has been very little scholarship on either text until quite recently.8

This dearth of scholarship on later martyr acts that are set during Shapur’s persecution is unfortunate. For excluding these texts from the discussion about fourth-century “events” obscures how ideas about the role of Constantine and the Roman Empire during Shapur’s persecution have developed and have been conceptualized diachronically. Reintroducing these late texts into discussions about Shapur’s persecution thus helps to distinguish how Constantine and Rome came to be understood in contradistinction to how they were understood in earlier eras.

3. The Church of the East between Rome and Persia

The third and final major theme in this chapter deals broadly with how the Christians of Persia, particularly once the Church of the East was formally established in the fifth century, stood very much between Rome and Persia—a church that was not fully Persian, but not Roman either. This “in-between” status is certainly evident in Mar Maʾīn and Mar Qardagh, but even Simeon’s History, when it invokes Constantine, purposefully establishes a certain distance between the Roman emperor and Persian Christians while yet praising Constantine as “blessed.”

This distancing from the Roman Empire and its rulers is not unique to Mar Maʾīn, Mar Qardagh, and the History. In some later texts, the distance between Roman and Persian Christians is a product of different theologies in a post-Chalcedonian era. For example, the Martyrdom of Gregory Pirangushnasp—a text that is set in the mid-sixth century and is thus wholly unconnected to Shapur’s persecution—clearly acknowledges

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“Rome” and “caesar” as Christian, but nevertheless puts forth a willful separation of Persian Christians from Roman Christians on theological grounds. Adam Becker explains that Gregory, a general responsible for the northern regions of Georgia (Iberia) and Caucasian Albania, comes from an elite Zoroastrian family. When he confesses Christ and openly blasphemes [King] Hormizd, the king strips him of his property and places him in a pit. Eventually his position and status are restored, but he then is taken prisoner by the Romans. ‘Caesar’ treats him as a guest, but Gregory decides to return [to Persia] because of the false Christology he finds in the west.

The vacillating between Rome and Persia that is evident in texts such as the Martyrdom of Gregory has often been read as an example of how post-Constantinian Persian Christians tried “to belie governmental suspicions of their loyalty by distancing themselves from the dominant orthodoxy of the eastern Roman Empire.” Such ambivalence about Rome and Persia is evident not just in the later Acts, but in Simeon’s History, too. This “distancing” of Constantine from Persian Christians further demonstrates two things: first, how the role of Constantine as a central figure was moderated, or even rejected, in the East at the same time that it was being affirmed in the West; and, second (as I argued in chapter two) how the idea of the Christian Roman emperor as the patron and protector of the Christians of Persia is almost entirely a product of fifth-century Roman re-interpretations of mid-fourth-century events in the Persian Empire—and not a product of the Persian martyr acts themselves.

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9 For Gregory’s Martyrdom, see P. Bedjan, Histoire de Mar Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d’un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1895; repr. as The History of Mar-Jabalaha and Rabbān Sauma, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 347-394. Although there is no full translation of the Syriac in any modern scholarly language, there is a German summary in Hoffmann, Auszüge, 78-86.


Aphrahat the Persian Sage on Constantine and the Looming War

Other than being incorrectly identified in fifth-century Armenian scholia as Jacob, the bishop of Nisibis, little is known about Aphrahat’s identity beyond that he lived in the Persian Empire in the first half of the fourth century and was sufficiently steeped in the bible and its interpretation to have written an authoritative series of twenty-three argumentative homilies—the Demonstrations.¹²

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Aphrahat is typically read as being representative of fourth-century Persian Christian opinion concerning the Roman Empire and the impending war between Rome and Persia near the time of Constantine’s death. It is, however, impossible to say that Aphrahat’s views are in any way “normative” of Syriac Christianity, or Syriac-Persian Christianity, as a whole since we have no other contemporary Christian sources from the Persian Empire that might serve as a yardstick by which to measure Aphrahat. Yet, while any monolithic categorization of “Roman Christians” or “Persian Christians” as coherent and readily definable groups is undesirable—as such an enterprise whitewashes and paves over difference in an attempt to present a uniform perspective—Aphrahat is, lamentably, our only contemporary Persian Christian witness of the period. As such, his work has been freighted with a lot of importance. Still, its composition during precisely the period in question does, in fact, make it worthy of close scrutiny: the first ten of Aphrahat’s Demonstrations are dated right around the time of Constantine’s death in 337 CE; the remaining discourses are likely to have been written a few years later, ca. 343/344 CE, at

¹² Aphrahat’s baptismal name was “Jacob,” hence the misidentification. For a discussion of Aphrahat’s identity, and the ancient reasons for (and the modern, scholarly reasons against) thinking he was Jacob of Nisibis, see the introduction to the French translation of the Demonstrations by M.-J. Piere, Aphraate le Sage persan. Les Exposés I-X. SC 349 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1988), 33-41. The Syriac edition of Aphrahat’s work (with a Latin translation) was published by J. Parisot as Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstraciones I-XXII. PS 1.1 (Paris, 1894); Parisot published the twenty-third and final demonstration, along with a glossary and an index, in PS 1.2 (Paris, 1907), 1-489.
the beginning of Shapur’s persecution.\textsuperscript{13}

As a re-evaluation of the literary evidence shows, however, there may not be as much reason as some have supposed to believe that the Christians of Persia were waiting to welcome Constantine and the Roman army with open arms. For Aphrahat, Constantine was no Moses. And Aphrahat’s suspicion that war was on its way was not the herald of an exodus—although, as I will explain, the coming war \textit{is} interpreted as a herald of the eschaton.

\textit{Demonstration XXI: “On Persecution”}

Like most of Aphrahat’s discourses, “On Persecution” is an intricate set-piece of biblical interpretation that was supposedly inspired by contemporary events. In this case, the text is believed to have been written as a result of the oppression of Christians in the early days of Shapur’s persecution, even though neither Shapur, nor any other Sasanian authorities, nor any Christian martyrs, \textit{nor even one single detail} about any actual persecution is ever mentioned throughout the entire discourse. It is only at the very end of the twenty-third (and final) \textit{Demonstration}—not the twenty-first, “On Persecution”—wherein Aphrahat relates that he wrote “in the thirty-sixth year of Shapur, king of Persia, who instigated the persecution, and in the fifth year after the churches had been uprooted, and in the year in which there was a great ravaging of martyrs in the land of the east.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} The dates of Aphrahat’s \textit{Demonstrations} have long been one of the main sources of scholarly interest and debate regarding the text. For discussions of the dates of the various \textit{Demonstrations}, their historical context, and their relevance to the \textit{Acts of the Persian Martyrs}, see, most notably, M.J. Higgins, “Aphraates’ Dates for the Persian Persecution,” \textit{BZ} 44 (1951): 265-271; Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 126-128; and R.W. Burgess, “The Dates of the Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Sabbâē and the ‘Great Massacre,’” \textit{AB} 117 (1999): 9-17.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Dem. XXIII.69}. For the translation, see A. Lehto, “Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat’s \textit{Demonstrations} with a Complete Annotated Translation of the Text and Comprehensive Syriac Glossary” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2003). All translations of the \textit{Demonstrations} in this chapter generally follow Lehto with occasional slight modifications.
Primarily, “On Persecution” is an exercise in anti-Jewish polemic that seems to have had little (if anything) to do with Shapur’s persecution. Aphrahat uses the testimony of the prophets and the example of the persecuted righteous ones to concoct a series of ripostes directed at the Jews.\textsuperscript{15} The text suggests that the Jews of Persia, or at least those with whom Aphrahat was familiar, had categorized certain unnamed trials that the Christians were enduring as evidence that God had abandoned them.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, this text (among other Demonstrations) has often been read as an attempt to refute Jewish criticism of Christians, and, more importantly, as a means of forestalling Persian Christians from “returning to their native Judaism in the face of martyrdom.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Demonstration V: “On Wars”}

The fifth Demonstration, “On Wars,” was written several years prior to the twenty-first, “On Persecution,” and likely within months of Shapur’s first siege of Nisibis in 338 CE. “On Wars” is usually read as a furtive, allusive, and apocalyptic interpretation of the Book of Daniel in the context of an impending Roman-Persian war.\textsuperscript{18} Further, Aphrahat is said to advance an interpretation of Daniel in “On Wars” that foretells and—much more forebodingly—\textit{welcomes} the victory of the Christian king of Rome over the pagan king of Persia: “If Aphrahat may be presumed typical, then the

\textsuperscript{15} On Aphrahat and Judaism, see J. Neusner, \textit{Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran} (Leiden: Brill, 1971); more recently, Koltun-Fromm, “A Jewish-Christian Conversation.”

\textsuperscript{16} For example, \textit{Dem. XXI.1} begins: “I heard a reproach that greatly distressed me. The unclean say, ‘This people that has been gathered from the peoples has no God.’ And the wicked say, ‘If they have a God, why does he not seek vengeance for his people?’ The gloom thickens around me even more whenever the Jews reproach us and magnify themselves over our people.”

\textsuperscript{17} Such is the analysis of Naomi Koltun-Fromm with respect to the anti-Jewish tenor of Aphrahat’s work. See N. Koltun-Fromm, \textit{Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23 ff.

\textsuperscript{18} Most notably, see C. Morrison, “The Reception of the Book of Daniel in Aphrahat’s Fifth Demonstration, ‘On Wars,’” \textit{Hugoye} 7 (2004), \url{www.syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol7No1/HV7N1Morrison.html}. 
‘homily is a clear proof of how the Christians of Persia stood completely on Rome’s side with their sympathies.’” In Jacob Neusner’s words, the Christians of Persia “regarded Shapur’s wars as those of Satan, and the victory of Byzantium as the triumph of Christ.” Neusner’s suggestion that Shapur believed that Christians “hoped for his defeat” is not a reference to Roman Christians, but to Shapur’s own Christian subjects in Persia, as represented by and read through the “historical” Aphrahat.

Biblical Interpretation and Apocalyptic in Aphrahat

As much as Aphrahat’s work is said to be reflective of and inspired by the tumultuous events during the time in which he was writing, “On Wars” and “On Persecution” very clearly show just how rarely Aphrahat speaks to contemporary historical events directly. Rather, he is interested in drawing vague, apocalyptic parallels between ancient biblical prophecy and his own present concerns. Aphrahat focuses much more on presenting a nuanced exegesis of the bible than he does on explaining how or why he understands the passages in question (usually from the Old Testament) to be directly relevant to a mid-fourth-century Persian context.

With respect to “On Wars,” for example, Aphrahat begins by speaking quite elliptically about the turmoil that is about to take place, only gradually revealing

19 See Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 136, with further reference to the nineteenth-century studies of Theodor Nöldeke and Georg Bert. Craig Morrison seems to accept the general scholarly assessment on this point, but he is less interested than Barnes (et al.) in either the persecution or its social-historical context and more focused on relating how Aphrahat draws upon and interprets the Book of Daniel.


21 Burgess, for example, refers to Aphrahat as a “contemporary local witness with no evident bias,” thus setting him apart from the literary accretions inherent in “later martyr acts.” See Burgess, “The Dates of the Martyrdom of Simeon,” 11.
through his discourse that he is referring to a conflict between Rome and Persia.\(^{22}\) Primarily, Aphrahat is centered on providing an exposition of the Book of Daniel that blends and constantly shifts among the narratives of Daniel 2, 7, and 8—chapters that describe Daniel’s vision of the four beasts and his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue whose component parts are made from gold, silver, brass, and iron mixed with clay. Of special interest to Aphrahat is the identity of the fourth kingdom (the fourth beast) that is variously described as the kingdom of iron mixed with clay, the descendants of Esau, and, ultimately, the Roman Empire.\(^{23}\) This kingdom of the fourth beast, Aphrahat contends, will conquer the ram (Persia) and will rule and “will not be killed until the Ancient of Days sits on the throne and the Son of Man comes before him and is given authority.”\(^{24}\)

Barnes acknowledges Aphrahat’s veiled language, but cuts through the Sage’s subterfuge in that Aphrahat himself, as Barnes puts it, “protests that because the times are evil he must speak in symbols.”\(^{25}\) “Yet,” continues Barnes, “it needs little percipience to see that his arguments imply that Shapur will be defeated, and that Constantine will soon rule over Persia in his stead.”\(^{26}\) This much does seem to be the case.

In his analysis of “On Wars,” Craig Morrison agrees with Barnes and acknowledges that Aphrahat is, indeed, speaking in veiled language about an impending war between the Romans and the Persians—or, to more synecdochically

\(^{22}\) On Aphrahat’s “gradualness” in revealing that he is speaking about Rome, see Morrison, “The Reception of Daniel,” 7 and 15.

\(^{23}\) Dem. V.6 and 14

\(^{24}\) Dem. V.6

\(^{25}\) Dem. V.2; cf. Lethto: “Therefore, because the time is evil, listen in secret to what I am writing you.”

\(^{26}\) Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 133.
embody the war in the sovereigns themselves, an impending war between Constantine and Shapur. Further, Aphrahat is attempting to interpret the looming cataclysm through the Book of Daniel in order to develop, according to Morrison, “a reassuring message” for the Christians of Persia.27

Following Barnes, Morrison emphasizes the hope that is evident in Aphrahat’s homily, suggesting that Aphrahat composed his treatise “in hope that the Roman Emperor would soon bring his protection to the Christians in Persia living under Shapur II.” Morrison further comments that Aphrahat thereby sought a biblical warrant in Daniel to support his longing for Constantine’s victory.28 Similarly, Barnes argues that the central antecedent to Aphrahat’s secrecy and mysterious symbolism is premised upon the idea that Constantine “was preparing to invade Persia as the self-appointed liberator of the Christians of Persia” and that the Christians of Persia knew this and were anxiously waiting to be liberated by the Christian emperor of Rome. Aphrahat was certain that Constantine would defeat Shapur, and, according to Barnes, “the hopes which [Constantine] excited caused the Persian king to regard his Christian subjects as potential traitors—and hence to embark on a policy of persecution.”29

This idea of a Constantinian revolution—affecting not just the religious and

29 Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 126. My emphasis. In Dem. XXI, Aphrahat refers to the persecution of “our brothers in the west” (ʿahayn ʿa-b-mʿrbd) during the reign of Diocletian, and further remarks that after the death of many martyrs and the destruction of many churches, God “came to them in mercy” (lāyhon b-rḥmə). While the reference to “our brothers” may be taken as an indication that Aphrahat had some sense of pan-Christian unity that spanned the Roman and Persian empires, it is important to note that Aphrahat does not mention that Constantine came to them in mercy, but God. If the dating of Dem. XXI as 343 CE is correct, Constantine would have been dead at the time of the homily’s composition, but the Roman-Persian hostilities would have been far from over. If Aphrahat truly believed there was a biblical warrant in thinking of the Christian Roman Empire (or the Christian Roman emperor) as a liberator, then he presumably would have mentioned that in “On Persecution,” or at least somewhere in Dem. XXI. That he fails to do so seems to be good evidence that Aphrahat’s “hope” in the Roman Empire as a liberator of the Christians of Persia is an idea without much merit.
political situation of the Roman Empire, but extending the hope of liberation throughout a non-Christian empire as well—is virtually omnipresent. While it is undeniable that Aphrahat can be referring only to Constantine and Shapur—although neither is ever named in the text—and that Aphrahat does find in Daniel a prophetic message of the imminent triumph of the Roman Empire, more needs to be said. For Aphrahat does not begin with contemporary events and then turn to the Bible for proof texts or warrants to support his views; rather, he does just the opposite: he begins with the Bible and seeks to find how its prophecies may be becoming manifest in his own days. The distinction is subtle, but consequential.

Two things become apparent when one realizes that Aphrahat starts with the Bible and then turns to contemporary events. First, one can see that the interpretation of Aphrahat’s “hope” in “On Wars” is misplaced. The Persian Sage does not turn to Daniel to express his hopes for a Roman victory, full stop. In fact, there is no evidence in “On Wars” that Aphrahat believes that the Roman Empire and its Christian king will “liberate” the Christians of Persia at all. Aphrahat is not so shortsighted. Rather, his view about the coming war—filtered through the lens of biblical prophecy—is one that is apocalyptic and eschatological: he sees in Daniel and in the growing tensions between the empires evidence that the end times are drawing nigh. A Roman victory is merely a stepping stone toward a grander providential hope, a move toward the reign of the

30 As Paul Russell notes, “It is generally agreed by modern scholars that the motivation of Shapur II in oppressing Christians in his realm was, at base, political and that its religious element was taken on as a means of heightening the contrast between his realm and Christian Rome. In other words, the persecution of Christians by Persia is seen as a by-product of the renewed desire for war with Rome.” Sebastian Brock proposes that Dem. V shows that some Persian Christians were guilty of “disloyal hopes” once a Christian became the emperor of Rome. Likewise, Christopher Buck contends that Persian Christians became a “political vanguard” of the Roman Empire; citing Dem. V, Buck notes that the precarious position of the Christians of Persia was aggravated by their “overt pro-Roman sympathies.” See P.S. Russell, “Nisibis as the background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian,” Hugoye 8 (2005), www.syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/ Vol8No2/HV8N2Russell.html, n. 19; Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire”; and C. Buck, “The Universality of the Church of the East: How Persian Was Persian Christianity?” JAAS 10 (1996): 59-60.
kingdom of God. The Roman Empire, *per se*, is not a liberator at all, but only an expedient, a tool, that advances the aims of the true Liberator. Rome, the fourth *beast*, is, at root, no different from other empires—the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks.

The second thing that becomes apparent in Aphrahat’s exegesis is that the connection between the war and the supposed disloyalty of the Persian Christians that leads to their persecution is *not* a link that is made by Aphrahat. In “On Persecution,” there is no mention of the Roman-Persian war, no suggestion that ill-advised hopes for a Roman victory were the driver behind Shapur’s decision to turn against the Christians. Indeed, there is, as I have said, no mention of Constantine or any other Roman emperor at all. As with “On Wars,” the point of “On Persecution” is to comfort Christians with the assurance that God cares for his people and that any present trial should be understood within a providential scheme as expressed biblically. Neither Rome, nor the hope of a Christian deliverer such as Constantine, is anywhere in Aphrahat’s mind when he is discussing persecution with his Persian Christian readers.

Further, even if one were to accept the thesis that Constantine thought of himself as a liberator and was planning to invade Persia to free the Christians under Shapur’s dominion, there is little reason to further conclude that *Aphrahat* would have thought of Constantine in that way. As “On Wars” reveals, Aphrahat was clearly aware that a Christian led the Roman Empire. Indeed, he freely acknowledges that the “banner” of Jesus “is everywhere in that place,” and that Rome’s armies “are clothed with his [Jesus’] armour and will not be defeated in war.” Nevertheless, as Sebastian Brock points out, Aphrahat does not speak in terms of binary that invokes “Romans” and “Persians” but

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31 The war was a border dispute—nothing more. See Shapur II’s letter to Constantius as preserved by Ammianus (Amm. Marc. XVII.5) and the analysis of the war in M.R. Shayegan, “On the Rationale behind the Roman Wars of Šābuhr II the Great,” *BAI* 18 (2004): 111-133.

32 *Dem.* V.24
in one that refers to the “people of God” and those “outside.” Even an empire that is led by a Christian and flies the banner of Jesus is not, therefore, an empire that, *qua* empire, is equivalent to the “people of God.” In fact, even in conceiving of Rome as “the kingdom of the descendants of Esau,” Aphrahat does not claim that it is Rome that “will not be conquered,” but rather that the descendants of Esau will not be conquered until the time at which they are conquered by the kingdom of God. In other words, it is the people of God (the descendants of Esau) who are coming from the Roman Empire (not the Roman Empire itself) who will rule.

Furthermore, Aphrahat’s focus throughout “On Wars” is entirely an exercise in presentist biblical exegesis relying on Daniel and a distinction is made at the same time an equivalence is invoked: while Esau will be spared, according to Aphrahat, the kingdom of Rome is still a beast. Earlier, this beast was conquered and “subdued for a little while but not killed” because the previous rulers of “the kingdom of the descendants of Esau did not want to take with them to war the man who was recorded with them in the census [i.e., Jesus].” Ultimately, however, even though some among the descendants of Esau now take Jesus’ banner to war with them, “the beast will be killed at its (appointed) time” when the descendants of Esau “hand over the deposit to the one who gave it” and when “the keeper of the kingdom” is “subjected to the one to

33 Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire.”

34 *Dem. V.24*; Aphrahat closes *Dem. V.22* by saying, “And at his [Jesus’] coming, he handed over the kingdom to the Romans, who are called the descendants of Esau. These descendants of Esau will keep the kingdom for its giver.” Thus, even though the banner of Jesus is now born aloft by the armies of Rome, the descendants of Esau were chosen as the keepers of Jesus’ kingdom “at his coming.” This seems to speak to an earlier interpretative tradition pointing to the Christ-Augustus synchrony—or the correlation between Jesus’ birth and the beginning of the Roman Principate under Caesar Augustus—that is found in a number of early Christian authors, notably Melito of Sardis, Origen of Alexandria, and Eusebius. See J. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008), 154f.

35 *Dem. V.24*
This is apocalyptic language. The links between Romanitas and Christianitas that most interpreters have found in Aphrahat are links that were only in the process of being created in the Roman Empire at the time Aphrahat was writing. It strains credulity to suggest that Aphrahat, who presumably lived and was writing within the shadow of the Zagros Mountains, could have “out-Eusebiused” Eusebius and produced a triumphal narrative of Constantine before the VC was even in circulation. For Aphrahat, Rome is a temporary dominion, an empire that itself inherited the kingdom from Alexander the Great, and is thus the last in the line of temporal rulers.

Daniel in Christian and Jewish Interpretation

Rather than reading Aphrahat as presenting a fundamentally new take not only on the Book of Daniel, but on the Roman Empire as well, it is both simpler and more logical to read “On Wars” within the context of traditional interpretations of Daniel. For when Christian authors used Daniel to speak about the various kingdoms of the world, it was always strongly apocalyptic in flavor—never in support of the Roman Empire.

As Robert Markus explains, Hippolytus of Rome’s third-century Commentary on the Prophet Daniel “stands within an ancient tradition of historiography.”

36 Dem. V.25 and 24

37 Dem. V.10; “The young goat [Alexander] broke the horns of the ram [Persia], (and) now the young goat has become the mighty beast [Rome] … the fourth beast has swallowed up the third.”

38 It is worth noting that Simeon’s Martyrdom refers to Daniel on several occasions, typically by way of reckoning the Sasanian Empire in the same terms as previous “Persian” empires. The focus of the Martyrdom is not, however, on Rome as the fourth beast—Rome is never mentioned—but more specifically on the “small horn that grew and fell off” of the fourth beast (Martyrdom 1; Dan 7:20). According to the Martyrdom, the “small horn” of the fourth beast represents Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ruled the Seleucid Empire from 175-164 B.C.E., and whose decrees in favor of the Hellenizing Jews helped inspire the Maccabean revolt. The History, which omits the Martyrdom’s extensive references to the Maccabees, does not discuss Daniel’s vision of the four beasts or the “small horn,” but the History does say that the martyred eunuch Gushtazad, who served Shapur and “was not afraid of the sword,” should be regarded as “equal in rank to Daniel the faithful one,” who served Darius and “did not fear lions” (History 65).
reads the last of the four beasts of Daniel 7 as the Roman Empire, “and Hippolytus pauses to note the coincidence that it was under Augustus, the founder of the Empire, that Christ was born and summoned all nations to his heavenly kingdom.” Further, for Hippolytus, the Roman Empire is “a Satanic imitation of the kingdom of Christ … in virtue of its claim to unity, universality and unlimited duration.”

Eusebius, writing his *Demonstratio Evangelica* in a later (but not-yet-fundamentally-different) context, speaks similarly of the Roman Empire in his discussion of Daniel 2. Eusebius is, however, more explicit than Hippolytus in demonstrating, as Markus says, the “clear and necessary place” of the Roman Empire “in the historical unfolding of [God’s] providential plan.” Eusebius’ interpretation squares with traditional readings of Daniel 2:34-35. According to Eusebius, the stone “hewn from the mountain not by human hands” that smashes the iron and clay feet of the statue—the Roman Empire—represents the kingdom of God as manifested by the Church. As Aaron Johnson comments, “Eusebius’ treatment of the prophetic visions recounted by Daniel, his application of the kingdom of iron to Rome and the iconoclastic stone to the Church, further highlights the boundary between Rome and Christianity … the kingdom of God clashes with the empire of Rome and gains a shattering success.”

Rome, for Aphrahat, too, is an ephemeral kingdom. He writes: the stone “is the kingdom of Christ the king, which causes the fourth kingdom to pass away.” Aphrahat goes on to explain that Daniel “did not say that (the stone) struck the image on its head [Nebuchadnezzar], or on its chest or arms [the kings of Media and Persia], or even on its belly or thighs [Alexander and the Greeks], but on its feet [the kingdom of the

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40 Markus, “Roman Empire,” 343.

descendants of Esau]. (This is) because, when the stone came, of the image as a whole it would find only the feet … when Christ the king rules, he will then humble the fourth kingdom and shatter the whole image.”

The exegetical tradition of reading the fourth beast and the feet of iron and clay in Daniel as icons of the Roman Empire is one with which Aphrahat may have been familiar not through the likes of Hippolytus or Eusebius, but through Persian rabbinic interpretation. As a number of scholars have proposed, Jacob Neusner most voluminously among them, Aphrahat seems to have been directly engaged with Jews, or was at least familiar with rabbinic methods of biblical exegesis. Moreover, as David Lane argues in his analysis of apocalyptic material in Aphrahat, when Aphrahat suggests in “On Wars” that Rome will triumph over Persia, he is merely reiterating a “commonplace among Jews of the Babylonian diaspora.” Aphrahat, Lane proposes,

42 Dem. V.14


As the work of Koltun-Fromm and Becker suggest, the idea of Aphrahat as distant, isolated, and unaware of goings-on in the Roman Empire (a view typical of earlier scholarship), is in the process of being reassessed. In the early twentieth century, Francis Burkitt expressed shock that Aphrahat had no knowledge of the Council of Nicaea; see F.C. Burkitt, Early Christianity outside the Roman Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899). But given that the council was not particularly popular in many parts of the Christian world, Aphrahat’s seeming ignorance of Nicaea may have been a purposeful omission. Recently, Bogdan Bucur has argued that Aphrahat’s “angelomorphic Pneumatology” is strikingly reminiscent of an earlier Alexandrian tradition, thus suggesting that although Aphrahat’s theology may not have been fully “orthodox” by Western, post-Nicene standards that does not entail that he was ignorant of Christian theology beyond a context limited to a northern Mesopotamian environment. See B. Bucur, “Early Christian Angelomorphic Pneumatology: Aphrahat the Persian Sage,” Hugoye 11 (2008), www.syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol11No2/HV11N2Bucur.pdf.
operates out of an “exegetical disposition … which, broadly speaking, may be called Targumic,” and he approaches eschatological ideas within a fundamentally “Jewish context of material and thought.”

Jacob Neusner has also suggested that Aphrahat’s exegesis of Daniel in “On Wars” relies on rabbinic forerunners—even if Aphrahat and the rabbis were not always in agreement in their hermeneutical strategies. Of particular importance is Neusner’s comment that even though “for exegetical reasons the rabbis supposed that the Romans were the stronger of the two empires,” such an interpretive position “did not indicate that they hoped for a Roman victory.” But, Neusner explains, Aphrahat goes beyond the rabbis by willing prophecy onward and not simply recounting the traditional exegesis of Daniel’s vision of the four beasts. To some extent, this is of course true: as an especially apocalyptically-minded Christian, Aphrahat hopes for the coming of Christ’s kingdom, and his reading of the prophet’s vision entails that a Roman victory is a necessary, and providentially decreed, precursor to that.

In Morrison’s apt assessment, Aphrahat wrote “On Wars” to “reassure” his community that they should fear neither the coming war, nor the Persian king, since all history is directed by God. In that sense, then, “On Wars,” “On Persecution,” and,  

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44 Although Lane’s claims are very difficult to prove textually since the “Jewish” material to which he refers post-dates the fourth century, they should not be dismissed as implausible. See D.J. Lane, “Of Wars and Rumours of Peace: Apocalyptic Material in Aphrahat and Subhalmaran,” in New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium. Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston, ed. P.J. Harland and C.T.R. Hayward (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 240, 244-245. Barnes, (“Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” 133) also acknowledges that Aphrahat’s interpretation is not novel, but he does not mention the rabbinic connection: “The fourth beast in Daniel’s vision, he [Aphrahat] maintains, following established conventions of exegesis, is the kingdom of the sons of Esau, i.e. the Roman Empire.” On the “Judaizing” tendencies of Aphrahat and his exegetical approach and style, see M.-J. Pierre, “Thèmes de la controverse d’Aphraate avec les tendances judaïsantes de son Église,” in Chrétiens en terre d’Iran II: Controverses des chrétiens dans l’Iran sassanide, ed. C. Jullien (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 115-128.


indeed, all the rest of Aphrahat’s discourses can be legitimately understood as simply perspicacious preaching on Aphrahat’s part. For the benefit of his audience, he commandeers their attention with pressing contemporary issues but then quickly moves on to his real enterprise—biblical interpretation.

By Aphrahat’s own admission in the last section of his homily (Dem. V.25), the proposal that this war and this Roman Empire are those prophesied by Daniel are open to discussion—although he cautions that his exegesis should not be dismissed out of hand by those who are not yet convinced by the verity of his interpretation. To the anonymous recipient of “On Wars,” Aphrahat writes: “(With respect to) these things that I have written to you, my friend, which are recorded in Daniel, I have not reached the end of them, but (have stopped) short of the end … hear these things from me, and also discuss them with our brothers, the sons of our faith.”

Aphrahat’s reason for stopping short of explaining what will happen during and after the coming war is simple: “the words of God are infinite and cannot be sealed,” he tells his friend. Aphrahat goes on to admit that his interpretation of Daniel does not come from a divine revelation, but from a sense that the words of God will always come to pass, perhaps not now, but some time: “With respect to what I have written to you about these armies that are being stirred up for war, it is not as something that has been revealed to me that I make known to you these things. Rather, listen to the words at the beginning of (this) letter: ‘Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled’ [Lk 14:11; cf. Dem. V.3]. For even if the [Persian] armies go up and conquer, keep in mind that this is God’s correction, and even if they conquer, (these armies) will be condemned in a righteous judgment. And know this: the beast [i.e., the fourth beast, the Roman Empire] will be killed at its (appointed) time.”

47 Dem. V.25
Aphrahat, as this final passage makes abundantly clear, is guilty of calling Shapur prideful, but he cannot be said to envisage Constantine as the coming liberator of Christians in Persia. Nor, for that matter, can the Christians of Persia be accused—en masse via the words of Aphrahat—of disloyal hopes for a Roman victory. Overt pro-Roman hopes are conspicuously absent, and Aphrahat concedes in advance that his apocalyptic interpretation may not be accepted even by those Christians to whom he is writing. Rather than the liberation of the far-flung Persian-Christian citizens of the Roman-Christian kingdom, what Aphrahat finds in Constantine’s accession to the throne, and in Shapur’s militant arrogance, are the signs of the end that he has been awaiting—the signs of “the times [that] have been set in place beforehand by God.”

**Constantine between Rome and Persia**

**The Acts of Simeon bar Šabbāē**

Although Constantine’s name does not appear in Aphrahat’s “On Wars,” the emperor is referred to glowingly in Simeon’s History (a century later) as an “angel of peace” (malakā da-shlāma) and as the “blessed” (ṭubānā) and “victorious” (naṣṣihā) Constantine. The History contrasts the pacific rule of the Christian emperor with the oppressive rule of the Persian king, noting “from the moment that blessed Constantine began to rule and up until his death, a span of thirty-three years that he reigned over the Romans, there were no martyrs to be found in the land of the West. But immediately upon the death of the victorious Constantine, Shapur, the king of the Persians, began to harrow the Christian people and to harass and persecute the priests and the qaṭmā and even to destroy all the

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48 Dem. V.1

49 Constantine is called “blessed” in History 2 and 4, and “victorious” in History 2 and 14; History 3 refers to Constantine as a God-sent “angel of peace.”
churches in his realm.”

While this is clearly a statement in praise of Constantine, even this warm invocation can be understood, somewhat paradoxically, as an implicit rejection of Constantine when the text and the circumstances of its composition are more closely examined.

That Christians are necessarily pro-Roman partisans of a Christian king is an accusation that is implicitly denied in Simeon’s acts. Simeon himself never utters the name “caesar” or “Constantine” in either the Martyrdom or the History. Only the anonymous narrator of the History mentions Constantine, while it is Shapur and “the Jews” who adduce the name “caesar” in connection with Persian Christians. It is true that because Simeon is accused of being in league with “caesar” against Shapur that Simeon’s acts might encourage the idea of re-reading Constantine’s letter to Shapur as it is presented in the VC as a commitment by the Roman emperor to fight for the Christians of Persia. Sozomen surely thought so. But neither the Martyrdom nor the History mentions a letter from Constantine, either to Shapur or to the Christians of Persia, and both texts are notorious for presenting the Jews, who are calumniated as the “adversaries of our people” and “our enemies,” as the bearers of “false witness” against Christians for suggesting that there was a relationship between caesar and the Christians of Persia. According to the texts, the Jews fabricated false accusations of treachery; they

50 History 2. The bnay and bnät qyámá, or “sons” and “daughters of the covenant,” is an ascetic order unique to Syriac Christianity. Unlike monks, they seem to have been attached to the church, typically in urban areas, and closely overseen by the bishop. Aphrahat writes about the qyámá in the mid-fourth century in Demonstration VI “On Covenanters” (tahwytāt da-bnay qyámā), which is often incorrectly referred to as his Demonstration “On Monks.” In the fifth century, bishop Rabbula of Edessa developed a set of rules for the behavior of the qyámá that restricted their manual labor and stipulated that they were to serve the church through prayer and be materially supported by the wider community. See S.H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in Asceticism, ed. V.L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-245; G. Nedungatt, “The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church,” OCP 39 (1973): 191-215, 419-444; and A. Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding the Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism (Stockholm: ETSE, 1960).

51 History 12; Martyrdom 13. My emphasis.
did not divulge a religio-political allegiance to which Simeon (or the narrator of the texts) confessed.

That said, the Martyrdom and the History both repeat accusations that the king of Rome would (hypothetically, it seems) gladly receive a letter sent from Simeon. The History takes these accusations a step further, revealing allegations of Simeon’s treachery on the basis of religious allegiances. Simeon is accused not only of sending furtive letters to an ambiguous “caesar,” but in so doing betraying the secrets of the Persian Empire to a Christian king.52 In both texts, the Jews are said to have told Shapur: “If you, King of Kings, lord of all earth, were to send splendid and wise letters of your royalty and were to give glorious gifts and desirable presents of your magnificence to caesar, they would not be seen as much in his eyes; but if Simeon were to send to him a single curt and trivial letter, he would rise and bow and receive it with both his hands and diligently fulfill his command.”53 The History adds that Simeon and caesar are close not just because they worship the same god, a vexing point that the text suggests Shapur already seems to have known, but because Simeon is an agent of Rome who has been funneling confidential information to caesar: “In addition,” the Jews charge before Shapur, “there is no secret in your kingdom that [Simeon] does not write down and make known to Caesar.”54

52 Forty Martyrs repeats the accusation that Persian Christians betray the secrets of Shapur and Persia to “caesar.” Unlike Simeon’s acts, however, which suggest that it was the Jews and, to a lesser extent, the Magi who charged Christians with such treachery, in Forty Martyrs it is the nephew of a Christian bishop who first apostasizes from his faith and then claims before the Sasanian authorities that his uncle, the bishop, harbors Roman spies and uses them to convey the secrets of Persia back to caesar. See AMS II, 333-334.

53 History 12; Martyrdom 13

54 History 12
Intriguingly, these accusations go completely unaddressed in the dialogue of the text: the narrator denies them, and Shapur never questions Simeon directly about his alleged relationship with Caesar. The charges are gratuitous accusations that serve, textually, as much as a means by which to compare Simeon and Jesus—by commenting on the perceived likenesses between “the false witnesses against Simeon as compared to the iniquitous witnesses against his Lord”55—as they do a means to explain the cause of the persecution. Border-crossing sectarianism that trumps allegiance to the Persian king is the folly of Persian Christians in the mind of Jews, at least according to Martyrdom and History, but neither Simeon nor the narrator ever espouses any allegiance to the Christian Roman emperor—this contrary to what one might have perhaps expected from martyrological literature that is otherwise so stridently sectarian.

The History of the Holy Mar Maʿin

As I have mentioned, the other text among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs that discusses Constantine in the context of Shapur’s persecution is the History of the Holy Mar Maʿin. Mirroring Simeon’s History, Mar Maʿin twice refers to Constantine as “victorious.” Further, the text refers to the Christian king as the “believing emperor” (malkā mhaymnā), and to the ambassador whom Constantine sends to the Persian court as the “believing man” (gabrā mhaymnā) or simply the “believer” (mhaymnā).56

The text, which is preserved in a sole manuscript that was written at the end of the twelfth century, but which, on linguistic grounds, was probably composed in the sixth century, tells the story of a Christian confessor and prolific founder of

55 Martyrdom 13

56 Mar Maʿin 47 and 62 (on Constantine as “victorious”); 46 and 65 (on Constantine as the “believing emperor”). The Syriac term that Brock translates as “believing” or “believer” (mhaymnā) can be rendered “faithful,” which is what I use in my translations of the Martyrdom and History.
monasteries. According to the text, Mar Ma’in was formerly one of Shapur’s generals. But he converted to Christianity, abandoned his military duties, and—after enduring interrogation, imprisonment, and torture—was later responsible for founding ninety-six monasteries in and around Sinjar in central Mesopotamia.

It is important to emphasize that Mar Ma’in was composed somewhere to the west of Sinjar among Syriac-speaking Christians in the Roman Empire. To be sure, other texts among the Acts may have been composed in Syriac-speaking Roman cities, such as Edessa or its environs, but Mar Ma’in is unique in that it is the only text set during Shapur’s persecution that presents such a clamorously pro-Roman perspective.

**Constantine’s Letter to Shapur in Mar Ma’in**

Putting aside the question of the historicity of the allegations set forth and memorialized in Simeon’s Martyrdom and History, one thing is clear from his acts: according to the martyrrologist’s account of the way that the Magi and the Persian Jews understood the relationship between Persian Christians and the Roman caesar, the

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57 Brock comments, “The sole manuscript to transmit the History of Ma’in is British Library Add. 12,174, a large hagiographical manuscript, dated Teshri I, 1508 of the Seleucid era (= October AD 1196), containing 71 lives.” (Simeon’s History is found in this manuscript as well.) Brock proposes a sixth-century date of composition based on a series of verbal constructions and other linguistic evidence that militate against dates both earlier and later than the sixth century. In the only previous study of Mar Ma’in, J.-M. Fiey also proposes a sixth-century date of composition. While Brock rejects Fiey’s methods and his rationale for reckoning the date of the text, he ultimately agrees with him that a sixth-century date is, in fact, most likely. See Brock, History of the Holy Mar Ma’in, 10 and 4-6.

58 Mar Ma’in 29-30 (on Mar Ma’in’s conversion); 33-34 (on Shapur’s search for his general); and 70 (on Mar Ma’in’s founding of many monasteries).

59 Mar Ma’in explains to Constantine’s ambassador: “once I have made converts here [Persia] and have built sanctuaries and monasteries for him [Christ], I will leave in them disciples of his, and I myself will come to your region [the Roman Empire] and make disciples there too; and there I shall complete my course” (Mar Ma’in 63). Later, Mar Ma’in travels to a village near Dura Europos. There, he makes good on his promise to “make disciples” in the Roman Empire because he finds a village full of people who worshipped idols, but “would hold feasts and festivals for idols in secret” because they feared Christians and did not wish to be seen violating “the [anti-pagan] decree of Constantine, worthy of good memory” (Mar Ma’in 73). In his note to this section, Brock explains that the author “retrojects Theodosius I’s anti-pagan legislation to the time of Constantine.” See Brock, History of the Holy Mar Ma’in, 70-71.
emperor would treat a scribbled note from even a non-Roman Christian—the son of humble dyers, no less—with vastly more respect than a royal communiqué from a pagan king. The emperor’s interest in the Christians of Persia, and, according to the allegations in Simeon’s History, Simeon’s acquiescence in providing the emperor with information, forms the basis for the decisive action taken against Simeon and his fellow believers.

This curious trope of letters being exchanged between Persian Christians and the Roman emperor comes up again in Mar Ma’in. But, in contrast to Simeon’s acts—which, tellingly, do not present evidence of such letters or indicate that Constantine or “caesar” actively intervened in the affairs of Persia—Mar Ma’in is over-the-top in demonstrating Constantine’s superciliously belligerent patronage of all Christians in all places. Surely no narrative history is unmediated by rhetoric, but Mar Ma’in, in particular, shows how rhetoric becomes reality and martyrology history.\(^{60}\) When examining Mar Ma’in, it is imperative to maintain a distinction between an event and literature about an event: the narrative presented in Mar Ma’in illumines how the incredible events narrated in the text sustained, and further produced, a Constantin imaginaire and a Syriac-Roman version of the events in Shapur’s Persia.

Constantine, Mar Ma’in indicates, was worried about the plight of Christians in Persia, and he exercised no small role in securing their protection. The text suggests that the conversion of Mar Ma’in (a high-ranking military man) to Christianity so troubled the Persian king that Shapur himself interrogated Mar Ma’in in order to get him to renounce his new faith.\(^{61}\) Shapur ordered that his general be scourged and have salt and


\(^{61}\) Mar Ma’in 37-44.
vinegar rubbed into his wounds.\textsuperscript{62} At the time of Mar Ma‘in’s scourging, an anonymous envoy of “the believing emperor Constantine” happened to be at the Persian court “to make peace with Shapur and to receive tribute [\textit{maddata}] from him. Shapur had received him with magnificence, giving him gifts and numerous tokens of honour; he even gave him a royal crown to take back to his master, the believing emperor.”\textsuperscript{63}

In his note on this passage about the “tribute” that the Roman ambassador received, Brock comments it was “clearly wishful thinking” that Shapur would have sent Constantine tribute. In fact, the reverse was often the case. Brock explains, “it was normally the Romans who \textit{paid} subsidies to the Persians … in order for them to guard the Caucasian Gates against incursions of the Huns.”\textsuperscript{64} Indeed, a number of Byzantine Roman emperors grudgingly accepted these sorts of payments \textit{to} the Persians—even though they sometimes broke the terms of such agreements—as a means of financing the shared defense of both empires by creating a bulwark across the northern gates leading south from the barbarian steppe into Armenia.\textsuperscript{65}

The use of the term \textit{maddata}, however, as a “tribute” purportedly paid from Shapur to Constantine in \textit{Mar Ma‘in}, is intriguing in light of Simeon’s martyr acts: for it

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The scourging and the vinegar suggest a parallel between Jesus/Mar Ma‘in and Pilate/Shapur. This parallel is further emphasized in that the ascetic Benjamin, who catechizes Mar Ma‘in in the faith, specifically relates in his teaching how Jesus was scourged and given vinegar to drink on the cross. See \textit{Mar Ma‘in} 22 and 45. Notably, the only texts among the \textit{Acts} to mention Pilate are \textit{Mar Ma‘in} (22) and Simeon’s \textit{Martyrdom} (13).
\item \textit{Mar Ma‘in} 46
\item See, for example, Z. Rubin, “Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century AD,” in \textit{The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East}, ed. P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (Oxford: BAR, 1986), 677-695. Often, payments bypassed the Persians and went directly to the Huns as a sort of bribe-to-not-invade. Theodosius II’s refusal to continue paying Attila the payments that he was due is said to have resulted in a declaration of war in the mid-fifth century. See E.A. Thompson, \textit{The Huns} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 281.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
was precisely the maddata that Simeon refused to collect from his people to pay to Shapur at the outset of the persecution. According to the History, Shapur wrote a letter to the authorities in Bet Aramaye (the region that includes Seleucia-Ctesiphon) saying,

‘As soon as you see the edict of ours, gods, in this letter that we have sent you, arrest Simeon, the head of the nasrāye, and do not release him until he signs a document that makes it incumbent on him to collect and to give to us a double poll tax (ksep rēšā, literally “head money”) and a double tribute (maddata) from all the nasrāye people, a people that is in our land, gods, and inhabits the land of our authority. For to us, gods, there are tribulations and wars, while to them is life and luxury. They dwell in our land, yet they are of one mind with caesar, our enemy. And while we fight, they rest.67

Just as intriguing as the “tribute” in Mar Maʿin are the “gifts,” the “numerous tokens of honour,” and the “royal crown” that the text says were bestowed upon the Roman envoy “to take back to his master.” For, according to Simeon’s Martyrdom and History, it was precisely such “glorious gifts and desirable presents” that the Jews told Shapur that “caesar” would dismiss as dross in favor of a “curt and trivial letter” from Simeon.68

Mar Maʿin transforms the allegations in Simeon’s acts from mere hearsay into historical actuality, demonstrating that information about the Christians of Persia was, in

66 Ideas about taxes and authority in Simeon’s acts are considered in chapter five.

67 History 4. The idea that Christians dwell in the land of the Persians, but do not contribute to its defense, is seemingly contradicted at the end of the History. After Simeon and all the clergy with him are killed, “some among the faithful from different regions, and who happened to be in the army of the king, asked for relics from the bodies of the holy ones” (History 98, my emphasis). Moreover, the History (unlike the Martyrdom) speaks of Simeon as an “army general” on several occasions. While the text is clearly referring to Simeon as a general in a metaphorical sense—perhaps even as a general of an army set against the Magi—it is still a noticeable literary device. The narrator describes Simeon as leading the martyrs-to-be “as an army general,” and Simeon himself—explaining why he refuses to retreat from his impending martyrdom—invokes the example of the consequences that would befall a general who deserted his troops on the battlefield. See History 84 and 78, as well as 97 where the narrator refers to Simeon with the epithet “Simeon the army general.” Mar Maʾin and Mar Qardagh were both formerly officers in the Sasanian army, but each left after converting to Christianity. Richard Payne notes two other examples of references to Christians in the military in the Acts, but comments that the “descriptions are too vague to make firm conclusions” about the social status and role of these Christians. See Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society,” 38 n. 90.

68 History 12; cf. Martyrdom 13
fact, more valuable to Constantine than any Persian tribute or tawdry token of honor. The Roman envoy in *Mar Maʾin*, fulfilling his ascribed role as emissary of a Christian king, reported back to Constantine (with said gifts in tow) and conveyed information to him about the events in Persia. The envoy had witnessed Mar Maʾin’s trials, and he detailed for the emperor the suffering endured by Christians throughout Persia—in particular, the tortures of Mar Maʾin.\(^{69}\) In direct contrast to Constantine’s pleasure in hearing from the Persian ambassador in the *VC* “that the most important parts of Persia” were “richly adorned” with Christians,\(^{70}\) Constantine was “greatly distressed” to hear the report from his own ambassador about the plight of Christians in the East. Constantine was so distraught to hear the bad news about the Christians of Persia—and so uninterested in the gifts and presents from the Persian king—that he wept and refused to eat.\(^{71}\) From a literary perspective, *Mar Maʾin* joins Constantine to the Christians of Persia in both body and spirit, claiming that the emperor spent a restless night “fasting in sympathetic mourning for the servants of God … [lying] on sackcloth and ashes, supplicating Christ for his fellow-believers, asking that they be not further afflicted.”\(^{72}\)

The following morning, strengthened with the resolve imbued by a prayerfully ascetic night, Constantine arose and wrote a letter to Shapur, the vehement tone of which is nothing at all like the Constantinian letter preserved by Eusebius. In the letter cited by *Mar Maʾin*, Constantine demands that Shapur issue an edict protecting all the Christians of Persia, specifically the Persian king’s former general. Constantine threatens

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\(^{69}\) *Mar Maʾin* 46-47

\(^{70}\) *VC* IV.13

\(^{71}\) *Mar Maʾin* 47

\(^{72}\) *Mar Maʾin* 47
Shapur with a glowering ultimatum, saying,

‘If you do not release all the Christians you have shut up in prison, and in particular your general, Ma‘īn, who is greatly oppressed, I will put to death the sons of your nobles who are here with me, and I will send you their heads. I will also annul the treaty which exists between you and me, and I will invade your whole country, causing destruction and devastation. I will pursue you and kill you; I will dismember you limb by limb, and not a hair from the head of anyone will escape, without my cutting off your limbs with the sword.’

As if these gruesome threats were insufficient, the text further indicates that the sons of the Persian nobles, who had been “confined and treated badly,” were forced to write “letters to their families informing them of the hardships imposed on them by the emperor.” Constantine then collected the letters of his young hostages and bundled them together with his own, dispatching the lot back to Persia via the same Roman envoy. He instructed his ambassador:

‘Do not return from there before all the Christians who are incarcerated are released from prison, and (before Shapur) and his nobles put down in writing that anyone who oppresses or kills the Christians shall be required to pay three thousand pounds (litra) of gold. As for the blessed old man Ma‘īn, escort him out in honour, and if he wants to, let him come and live with me in honour. But if he is going to stay there, give him my royal seal, so that he may travel about without fear.’

In the section prior to the citation of Constantine’s letter (Mar Ma‘īn 48), the sons of the Persian nobles are referred to as “hostages” (himayrē). In his note on this section of the text, Brock cites an article on hostages and diplomacy in which the author, A.D. Lee, suggests that the taking of hostages was a customary way of formalizing a treaty, but that hostages were often used only as a “short-term, localised guarantee preliminary to a formal peace settlement.” Lee, in turn, cites Mar Ma‘īn as the only “explicit statement” that “Romans held Persian hostages in the capital (and therefore presumably on a longer-term basis),” but also acknowledges that using hagiographical texts for such information is to cite evidence of a “highly dubious nature.” See Brock, History of the Holy Mar Ma‘īn, 68, with further reference to A.D. Lee, “The Role of Hostages in Roman Diplomacy with Sasanian Persia,” Historia 40 (1991): 370, 372.

An exchange of hostages described by Ammianus that is worthy of mention concerns the hostages taken during the formal ratification of Jovian’s treaty with Shapur following the Roman defeat in Mesopotamia under Julian. Ammianus explains that in order to prevent either side from breaking its word, several noble Romans were temporarily traded for several high-ranking Persians (Amm. Marc. XXV.7,13).

Mar Ma‘īn 49; my emphasis.

Mar Ma‘īn 48; 50

Mar Ma‘īn 50
Meanwhile, back in Persia, Mar Ma'in’s trials and interrogations had been temporarily suspended for “a period of about fifty days” because Shapur had become “involved in the clash of war with the Greeks [yawñâyê] who wanted to go up against him.”77 Although it is, of course, not stated in the text, claiming that Shapur had to go off to war for fifty days is a clever way of inserting some lag time between the Roman envoy’s departure and his subsequent return before final judgment could be passed on Mar Ma'in.

Shapur’s fifty-day “clash of war with the Greeks” is thus an interesting textual device, but it raises more questions than it answers. Who are “the Greeks” if not the Romans? And if Shapur is going off to battle the Greeks (read: Romans), how are we to make sense of Constantine’s future-tense threat—“I will also annul the treaty which exists between you and me, and I will invade your whole country”—in the letter which is en route to Shapur via the Roman envoy?

In an attempt to find an element of truth in this reference to Shapur’s fifty-day departure, Brock cites (and ultimately agrees with) Fiey’s suggestion that this could refer to the fighting over parts of Armenia in the early 370s.78 Another option, also cited by Brock, is Georg Hoffmann’s proposal that yawnâyê (“Greeks”) is an inadvertent corruption of kyawnâyê (“Chionites”) that resulted from the omission of the initial kāf in kyawnâyê.79 Indeed, the Persians paid the nomadic, Central Asian Huns (also known as

77 *Mar Ma'ìn* 54


79 Hoffmann, *Auszüge*, 28-33, and especially n. 243 on the Chionites. If “Chionites” is the correct reading, then another possibility that would make much more sense (and would be closer to the time of Constantine) is Shapur’s brief defensive war against an invasion of the Chionites in 338 CE, a dangerous threat that Arthur Christensen reckoned as the reason why the first siege of Nisibis by Shapur (in that same year) was aborted. See A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1944), 236.
the “White Huns” or “Hephthalites”) tribute in the late fifth century, and, at that time, fought a series of wars against them under the Sasanian king Peroz. Given the sixth-century date of Mar Ma‘in, the textual references to tributes and hostages are thus all the more intriguing: as David Goodblatt notes, the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite (ca. 507 CE) explains that Peroz imposed a special tax specifically “intended to raise ransom for his son Kavad who was a hostage with the Huns.” In Brock’s note about the maddată given by Shapur to the Roman ambassador, he cites Joshua’s Chronicle as a source that attempts to refute the embarrassing (but nevertheless historically accurate) idea that Persian kings, such as Peroz, “could levy tribute” on the Romans.

Rather than debate whether or not “the Greeks” is the correct reading here—and further propose that the author of Mar Ma‘in may be referring to the war over Armenia in the 370s—or concede Hoffmann’s simple solution that “Greeks” is simply a misspelling of “Chionites,” perhaps a better way of resolving the problem is to set aside attempts at definitive historical references altogether and leave (k yawmâyê indeterminate. This solution helps advance an intertextual way of reading Mar Ma‘in. For the author of Mar Ma‘in, as the foregoing discussion has shown in several instances, threads of other histories and events are woven into a Constantinian tapestry: Constantine is memorialized as a king who did not pay tribute to any foreign king, but received both tribute and honor from them, keeping their sons hostage.

It is true, as Brock acknowledges, “that the author [of Mar Ma‘in] had no clear


81 Brock, History of the Holy Mar Ma‘in, 67, fn. 23, with further reference to the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, IX.
conception of the chronology of events in the fourth century.” Indeed, Constantine presumably died before the commencement of Shapur’s persecution and Mar Maʿin is said to have converted, at the age of sixty, in the first year of Constantine’s reign—an odd chronology, indeed. But in a martyrological text such as Mar Maʿin, chronological accuracy and the historicity of the text’s claims are beside the point. What seems more relevant here, in this and other texts written from within the Roman Empire, is the insistent sense that Constantine was alive when the Great Persecution began and that he did something to try to stop it—either by sending a stern letter, by threatening war, or even, as some later chroniclers attest, by actually invading Persia and defeating Shapur.

**Constantine as the Protector of Persian Christians in Roman Historiography and Memory**

The author of Mar Maʿin, suffused by a historical consensus that insisted that Constantine had challenged Shapur over the Christians of Persia, weaves his whole narrative around ambassadors, hostages, tributes, imperial letters, and war (or threats of war) between the Persians and the Romans—or “Greeks.” All of these elements were prevalent in the historical discourse at the time Mar Maʿin was written. Even the idea of “hostages” (or “captives”) is evident in Simeon’s History, as I explain in chapter six. When we look at Mar Maʿin’s version of Constantine’s letter, questions about the dating, authorship, authenticity, and circumstances of the letter must fall by the wayside in favor of a literary assessment of the afterlife of “the letter to Shapur” in one text among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs. In other words, we must consider how the portrait of Constantine as the chastiser-of-Shapur and the patron-of-Christians lives on and continues to be influential in a sixth-century construction of Persian Christian identity penned, ironically, by a Syriac-speaking Christian writing within the Roman Empire.

Like Eusebius, the author of *Mar Maʿin* sees Constantine as a protector of all Christians, even those outside of his own empire. Similarly, *Mar Maʿin* indicates that Constantine received some sort of tribute from Shapur, or at least “gifts” and “tokens of honour.” While Constantine’s letter in *Mar Maʿin* is the only place in the *Acts* where there is any suggestion that Shapur bowed to Constantine, much less that the emperor threatened (or engaged in) a full-scale invasion of Persia, neither idea was novel among historians writing in the Roman Empire. Various late ancient chronicles—written in both Greek and Syriac—attest to exactly such events.

**The Chronicle of John of Nikiu (7th c.)**

The seventh-century *Chronicle* of the Egyptian bishop, John of Nikiu, claims that although Julian ultimately incited Shapur to war, Shapur “was of a pacific disposition and had paid tribute to the God-loving Emperor Constantine.” John claims, moreover, that Constantine *conquered* “the cities of Persia,” and, having kindly received the Christians there, “built beautiful churches in all the cities and villages,” replacing Persian magistrates and officials with Christian administrators. John’s assessment, as Garth Fowden points out, is probably an expansion of the sixth-century *Chronicle* of John Malalas, whose more muted remembrances of Constantine recall only that Constantine initiated, and was victorious in, a campaign against Persia that resulted in a peace treaty

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83 *Mar Maʿin* 46; cf. VC IV.8: “When the Persian emperor also saw fit to seek recognition by Constantine through an embassy, and he too dispatched tokens of friendly compact, the Emperor negotiated treaties to this end, outdoing in lavish munificence the initiator of honorific gesture by what he did in return.”

84 For a discussion of John of Nikiu (that does not include this quotation) see Brock, *History of the Holy Mar Maʿin*, 68, with reference to the translation by R.H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu* (London, 1916), LXXX.3. It is unknown whether the *Chronicle* was originally written in Greek or Coptic, but the only known version is in Ethiopic (Ge’ez) and it was likely translated via an Arabic intermediary. For the Ethiopic text with French translation, see H. Zotenberg, *Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiou. Texte éthiopien publié et traduit* (Paris, 1883).

85 John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXVII.61-62
with Shapur.86

**The Chronicle of Theophanes (9th c.)**

The Byzantine historian Theophanes the Confessor, whose massive ninth-century *Chronicle* covers the years 284-813 CE, wrote similarly about Constantine and the Christians of Persia. Theophanes, however, pushes back the time of Constantine’s baptism and his dealings with Shapur to an earlier period—one that is not at the very end of the emperor’s life. According to Theophanes, who was intent on portraying Constantine as a staunch anti-Arian, the emperor was baptized in Rome by bishop Silvester, prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325, but “the easterners, on the other hand, claim that he was baptized on his death-bed in Nicomedia by the Arian Eusebios of Nicomedia, at which place he happened to die. They claim that he had deferred baptism in the hope of being baptized in the river Jordan.”87 In so dating Constantine’s baptism—and placing it in Rome—Theophanes completely disconnects the emperor’s baptism and death from his Persian campaign.88

Constantine’s dealings with Shapur over the Christians of Persia are also disconnected from the emperor’s baptism and his final days. Theophanes, who presents

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86 John Malalas, *Chron.* XIII.317; see also G. Fowden, “The Last Days of Constantine: Oppositional Versions and Their Influence,” JRS 84 (1994): 153. With respect to the general thesis of his article, Fowden summons the chronicles of Malalas and John of Nikiu as later evidence of the literary “devices by which many Christian writers, especially in the fifth century, avoided having to engage with the view … that ultimate responsibility for the disastrous course of Romano-Iranian relations in the fourth century lay, not with Julian, but with Constantine.”


88 Roger Scott compares the sixth-century *Chronicle* of John Malalas to that of Theophanes in order to show how later visions of Constantine were nuanced and re-imagined to fit particular rhetorical and theological agendas. For Malalas, Scott argues, Constantine was just a Christian, but for Theophanes he had to be an orthodox, anti-Arian, and anti-iconoclast emperor. See R. Scott, “The Image of Constantine in Malalas and Theophanes,” in *New Constantines*, ed. P. Magdalino, 57-71.
a distilled version of Sozomen’s narrative on this episode, claims that in the year 324/325 CE, “the Jews and the Persians, seeing that Christianity was flourishing in Persia, brought an accusation before the Persian emperor Shapur against Simeon, archbishop of Ctesiphon, and against the bishop of Seleucia. They were charged with being friends of the Roman emperor and spies of Persian affairs. As a result a great persecution took place in Persia and a great many people were adorned with martyrdom for Christ’s sake.” Theophanes does not quote Constantine’s letter in response to this report of a “great persecution” (and it truly was a great persecution according to Theophanes—he notes that more than eighteen thousand martyrs endured “tortures of an unnatural kind which destroyed them at the hands of the utterly godless Shapur”), but he does say that Constantine wrote a “brilliantly composed and most godlike” missive to the Persian king.

Unfortunately for the Christians of Persia, Constantine’s letter was not successful in persuading Shapur to end his violence. Following this dismal conclusion to the affair as it is relayed by Theophanes, the Christians of Persia are not spoken of again during Constantine’s life. From the Byzantine chronicler’s presentation, the reader concludes that not only did Constantine’s letter fail to end Shapur’s persecution, but that the emperor must have subsequently abandoned the Christians of Persia to the whims of Shapur and his Magi. In his account of the end of Constantine’s life, Theophanes does

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89 Theoph. Chron. A.M. 5817 [AD 324/325]; the translation here is that of Mango and Scott, but the personal and place names have been modified to accord with spellings used throughout this dissertation.

90 Theoph. Chron. A.M. 5817 [AD 324/325]. In a note to this section, Mango and Scott comment that while Theophanes may in fact have the correct date for the letter, the circumstances in which the historian places the letter’s composition are less certain. As noted in chapter one, a 324/325 CE date for Constantine’s letter is a widely-held view, but the circumstances in which Eusebius frames the letter—at a time when many nations were sending representatives to the Roman Empire to pay their respects to Constantine—clearly differ from the circumstances as they are presented here by Theophanes.
explain that because “many of the Assyrians in Persia were being sold in Mesopotamia by the Saracens,” and because “the Persians declared war on the Romans … pious Constantine went out to the city of Nicomedia on his way to fight the Persians, but became ill and died in peace.”

Whether “Assyrians” should be understood here as “Christians” is unclear and, from the context, unlikely. Theophanes presents the final conflict between Constantine and Shapur as turning on Shapur’s border raids and the Persian king’s declaration of war. Nevertheless, for the following year—A.M. 5829 [AD 336/337]—Theophanes explains that after Constantine died, “Shapur, the Persian emperor, invaded Mesopotamia, planning to destroy Nisibis, and besieged it for 63 days. But lacking the strength to capture it, he then withdrew. Jacob, bishop of Nisibis, remaining true to the proper worship of God, by his prayers easily achieved his purpose.” Even if Constantine’s war was not on behalf of the Christians of Persia, the defense of the Roman Empire—through the prayers of Jacob of Nisibis—was fundamentally Christian in nature, according to Theophanes. But, whatever the circumstances, Theophanes’ Constantine—however much he was constructed as an orthodox, anti-Arian emperor—was unable to quell Shapur’s violence against Christians in Persia and unable even to meet him on the battlefield.

The Chronicle of Michael the Syrian (12th c.)

The late twelfth-century Syriac Chronicle of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Michael I Rabo (who is better known as Michael the Syrian), seems to harmonize the accounts of several historians before him. Drawing upon accusations

91 Theoph. Chron. A.M. 5828 [AD 335/336]

92 Both Michael’s Chronicle and that of Theophanes draw from the (lost) eighth-century work of Theophilos of Edessa—with Michael gleaning elements of Theophilos’ narrative (according to J.-B. Chabot) via the ninth-century Dionysios of Tel Maḥre. See the introduction to
similar to those leveled against Christians in Simeon’s acts, and subsequently repeated in other texts, Michael indicates that “pagans” (not Jews) accused Christians of sending an envoy to “the Roman emperor.” These were accusations that angered Shapur enough to inspire him to begin oppressing Christians in Persia, destroying churches throughout his realm.

Following the reading of Sozomen, and, effectively, the consensus among the ecclesiastical historians of those writing from within the Roman Empire, Michael notes that in response to Shapur’s persecution, Constantine wrote to Shapur. The very brief snippet of the letter that Michael cites is clearly an attempted quotation of the first two lines of Constantine’s letter that Eusebius preserves in the VC. According to Michael, Constantine wrote to Shapur, saying: “‘Considering that I guard the divine faith, I dwell in the light of truth. Conducting myself according to the light of the truth, I profess the true faith, and so forth.’”

Not only was Shapur unmoved by Constantine’s letter, but, according to Michael, the Persian king immediately set out on a campaign against Nisibis. The prayers of “Mar Jacob and Mar Ephrem” turned back Shapur’s assaults, but as he withdrew in defeat from the city, he pillaged the Mesopotamian countryside and


93 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle VII.3*, p. 132 (Syriac). Cf. VC IV.9: “‘Guarding the divine faith I participate in the light of truth. Led by the light of truth I recognize the divine faith.’” Chabot published the Syriac of Michael’s *Chronicle* from a handwritten copy that he arranged to be made from the sole (sixteenth-century) Syriac manuscript that preserves the text. Of Chabot’s four-volume publication, the first three volumes contain the French translation and notes, the fourth volume (to which the page number in this citation refers) is the handwritten Syriac. See Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*. See also the translation of this passage by Sebastian Brock in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363: A Documentary History*, ed. M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152.
took captives with him back to Persia.\textsuperscript{94} The account of these events in Michael’s Chronicon concludes by noting that following Shapur’s failed siege of Nisibis, Constantine prepared to meet the Persians on the battlefield. As in Eusebius’ telling of the story in the VC, Michael relates that the emperor fell ill upon arriving at Nicomedia “and was baptized in this place because he had not yet been baptized since he had desired to be baptized in the Jordan.”\textsuperscript{95}

**Varying Visions of Constantine**

Commenting on these passages in Michael’s Chronicon, Fowden suggests, “Clearly there was a view that Constantine’s baptism and (intended) triumph over Iran constituted, together, one of the defining moments of his reign—a view he himself had encouraged by declaring at Nicomedia that his original intention was to be baptized in the River Jordan, presumably on his way to or return from an Eastern victory.”\textsuperscript{96} As I suggested in chapter two, while it is clear that there was a temporal link in the mind of some Roman and Byzantine historians between Constantine’s (real, alleged, imagined?) Persian campaign and his deathbed baptism at Nicomedia—in that both happened at the end of the emperor’s life—the further presumption that baptism in the Jordan was intended as part of the Persian campaign is simply not borne out by the texts, either the VC or any of the later chronicles. Indeed, that Michael the Syrian explicitly pairs a planned campaign against Persia with Constantine’s death and baptism at Nicomedia would seem to contradict Fowden’s claim that these two events were purposefully dislodged from one another “as the polytheist and Christian narratives evolved.”\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} Michael the Syrian, Chronicon VII.3, p. 132 (Syriac)

\textsuperscript{95} Michael the Syrian, Chronicon VII.3, p. 133-134 (Syriac)

\textsuperscript{96} Fowden, “Last Days,” 168.

\textsuperscript{97} Fowden, “The Last Days of Constantine,” 168.
Fowden’s sense that certain Christian narratives about Constantine were invented to intentionally obfuscate the potentially embarrassing failure of his campaign against Persia is, admittedly, rather compelling as a hypothetical historical conspiracy. But, for their own reasons, neither Michael the Syrian nor Theophanes found it necessary to avoid talking about Constantine’s death at the outset of his campaign against Persia.

As I have shown, the accounts of Constantine’s baptism, his dealings with Persia, and his last days play on similar themes, but are far from monolithic. John of Nikiu, who tells of Constantine’s successful Persian campaign and of the Christianization of Persia is an extreme example, but other Christian narratives—to return again to Mar Ma‘in—also avoid the “historical” questions that preoccupied other chroniclers by omitting any discussion whatsoever of Constantine’s death or of Shapur’s militant and scoffing response to Constantine’s letter.

*Mar Ma‘in*’s Constantine, as opposed to Michael the Syrian’s, is a Constantine to be feared and obeyed. Even the emperor’s anonymous envoy merits dread. The text describes the envoy as riding into the Persian court on horseback just as Mar Ma‘in is enduring horrendous tortures before Shapur’s approving gaze. After dismounting his horse, the envoy orders the Persian torturer to cease what he is doing, “whereupon he [the envoy] immediately gave the letter from the believing emperor to Shapur and to all the nobility of his kingdom.” The envoy’s command, like Constantine’s seal of safe passage that the envoy was entrusted to give to Mar Ma‘in, should have had no authority in Persia. But the author of *Mar Ma‘in* is clear: the jurisdiction of Constantine’s word spans the whole world.

On reading Constantine’s letter and the plaintive missives from the sons of the Sasanian nobles, “Shapur shook with fear, all the more so because the believer [the
Roman envoy] had seen the blessed man under torture."  

Constantine’s letter had the desired effect, and the fear of Constantine that it inspired induced Shapur to make a gaudy show of humility before the Roman envoy. After listening to the envoy’s repetition of the threats contained within the Roman emperor’s letter, Shapur ordered that heralds should cry out in every town of the realm that anyone who so much as uttered an evil word to a Christian would be beheaded. The Persian king then invited everyone to a feast in the palace with him and with the freed Christian prisoner—a reconciliatory invitation that Mar Ma’in initially refused, but to which he acceded after the Roman ambassador gave him “bread and cheeses and dried fish that had come with him from the west” so that the holy man would not have to consume Persian food.

In its visceral narration of Constantine’s concern for the Christians of Persia, Mar Ma’in is utterly unique among the Acts: once the Roman ambassador finally bids Mar Ma’in leave, it is only after begging the Persian confessor to give him “the garment he was wearing that was full of blood from his wounds and lacerations, so that it could travel with him to the west.” Along with the blood-stained relic of a Persian confessor, Mar Ma’in sent the ambassador back to his master with instructions to “tell the believing emperor Constantine that ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ in whom you have believed and have established his faith, shall preserve you and your crown, as with king

98 Mar Ma’in 57
99 Mar Ma’in 58
100 Mar Ma’in 59
101 Mar Ma’in 60-61
102 Mar Ma’in 66. Cf. Martyrdom 7: “In this very time, Simeon, who is called ‘the son of dyers’ was the bishop of Seleucia and Cteisphon, the Cities. He is rightly called by this name because his parents dyed silk with foreign blood as clothing for the impious kingdom. But Simeon dyed his garments with his own blood as a garment for the holy kingdom. He poured out his will unto death for his God and his people.”
The History of Mar Qardagh

Outside of Mar Ma‘in, the Christian Roman emperor is, by and large, a ghost, a rhetorical device, summoned by later commentators seeking to re-envision the bonds and allegiances of Christians and Christian communities in fourth-century Persia. Far from being courted by the Christians of Persia, Constantine and other Christian emperors were kept at arm’s length. And, as I have indicated, the list of Acts that narrate events during the Great Persecution and invoke Rome or its rulers is short. Moreover, the few Acts that meet these two criteria are exceptional and should be flagged with a metaphorical asterisk. For example, just as Mar Ma‘in is a sixth-century text that tells the history of an earlier century, so, too, the History of Mar Qardagh is a text that is set during Shapur’s persecution, but is unquestionably a seventh-century work that deals with localized social and religio-political questions about Christian identity in the late Sasanian Empire.

Mar Qardagh, who, like Mar Ma‘in, was a Christian convert and former military leader, was a member of the Sasanian elite who did not become a partisan of the Christian Roman Empire upon his conversion. Quite to the contrary. After becoming a Christian, Mar Qardagh shunned “battles, ceased from conflicts, and loved a life of peace.” Even while the Romans and their Arab allies prepared for war against Persia, Mar Qardagh retreated in prayerful tranquility and went “up on the mountain to his teacher, Mar Abdisho.” In the subsequent “great pillaging raids” of the united Roman-Arab forces, Mar Qardagh’s entire family was “led away into captivity” and the lands under his authority were destroyed “up to the frontier city of Nisibis.”

103 Mar Ma‘in 65

104 Mar Qardagh 41; all citations follow Walker, The Legend of Mar Qardagh.
When Mar Qardagh heard what had transpired, he girded himself for battle once more and wrote to the Romans, saying,

From when I put on Christ, the peace of the world, I did not want of my own volition to clothe myself in the rage of battles. But send me my father, my mother, my wife, my brother, and my sister and all the men of my household and all the captives whom you led away from the lands beneath my rule. Take for yourselves the possessions, turn away, and depart from me. And do not force me to pursue you.

In response to this letter from a Sasanian nobleman—who had clearly identified himself as a peace-loving Christian and as one who was happy to allow the Roman soldiers to keep their spoils of war so long as they returned his family—the Romans “cut off the head of his brother and sent it to him.”\(^{105}\) Enraged by the brutality of the Romans, Mar Qardagh ordered that the trumpet of war be sounded, and, taking two hundred and thirty-four of his soldiers with him into a church, “he extended his hands and prayed, saying, ‘Judge, Lord, my case and fight against those who fight against me. … Unsheathe the sword and make it flash against my pursuers.’”\(^{106}\) If the crown of David was to be preserved on Constantine’s head in the prayer of Mar Ma‘in, here David’s psalm is on the lips of one about to “unsheathe the sword” against the armies of the Roman emperor.

News of Mar Qardagh’s heroic victory against a far superior Roman-Arab force soon reached king Shapur. But so, too, did accusations that, following the recovery of his family, Mar Qardagh “tore down the fire altars in which the fire was carried in procession by the impious magi and set up shining altars to Christ.”\(^{107}\) That Mar Qardagh could have become a Christian and yet still fought against the Roman armies seems to

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\(^{105}\) *Mar Qardagh* 43

\(^{106}\) *Mar Qardagh* 43, with reference to Ps 35:1-3.

\(^{107}\) *Mar Qardagh* 47
have made no sense to Shapur—the king cannot believe that someone could slay Romans and yet also be a Christian. The author of the text depicts the Persian king as incredulous when he heard accusations that Qardagh—his “paḫahša of Assyria and marzban in the land of the West”—had become a Christian and had overturned fire altars to set up altars to Christ: “How can you say these things?” he rails at the anonymous magus who informs against Mar Qardagh. “Have you not heard of that great victory Qardagh made, when with two hundred thirty-four men he destroyed thousands of Romans and tens of thousands of Arabs?”

After the Greeks: The Acts of Simeon bar Ṣabbāē

In many ways, Mar Maʿin and Mar Qardagh—as well as the Roman ecclesiastical-historical tradition—demonstrate just how ambivalent the relationship between the Christians of Persia and “Rome” really was. Or, rather, how ambivalently presented the relationship between Rome, Constantine, and the Christians of Persia was literally, and how that relationship was less a product of fourth-century historical realities, but later rhetorical constructions that were retrojected to the fourth century.

Unlike Mar Maʿin and Mar Qardagh, which have universally been read as being mainly “legendary” products of later times, Simeon’s acts have often been used as evidence of “real” events during the fourth-century confrontation between Rome and Persia. Simeon’s History, especially, is turned to as a document rather than a text, while texts such as Mar Maʿin and Mar Qardagh are dismissed as being representative of later social and political concerns. But the very oddity of Mar Maʿin and Mar Qardagh demonstrate how unique Simeon’s History is as well. For Simeon’s History—the earliest text among the Acts to mention Constantine by name—was not composed until the second half of the fifth century. And when Constantine is named in the History, the text

108 Mar Qardagh 48
stresses that not only was the emperor dead before Shapur began persecuting Christians, but that Constantine’s death—and Shapur’s persecution—were, in fact, providentially necessary for the Christians of Persia.

“Roman” Histories vs. “Persian” Histories

To survey the scene as it has been presented so far: there are effectively two histories that are told about Constantine, Shapur, and the persecution of the Christians of Persia. The first, as a matter of shorthand, can be called the “Roman” account. It is the historical narrative exemplified by Mar Ma’in and outlined by other historians and chroniclers writing in both Greek and Syriac, from Sozomen to Michael the Syrian. While the details of these histories vary, their common thread is that Constantine was alive when Shapur began oppressing Christians. Moreover, the sense one gets from these histories is that Constantine’s role vis-à-vis the Christians of Persia was as a “bishop of those outside,” and so he reacted to Shapur’s persecution as a concerned shepherd—either by sending a letter, launching a military campaign, or otherwise intervening to exercise some combination of patronage and protection on behalf of the Christians of Persia. While it is true that the results of such patronage differ enormously in the historical sources—from John of Nikiu’s tale of the complete conquest and Christianization of Persia; to Michael the Syrian’s more sober, Eusebian-inflected report about Constantine’s premature death at Nicomedia; and Theophanes’ account of Constantine’s ineffectual letter to Shapur—all are united in insisting that Constantine was alive and did something to stem Shapur’s violence against Christians.

The second stream of the two general historical approaches I am proposing—the one that will be detailed in the remainder of this chapter—can be called the “Persian” account. It is represented, explicitly or implicitly, by all the Acts of the Persian Martyrs (except Mar Ma’in) as well as, for instance, by the medieval Chronicle of Siirt, a Christian-Arabic history typically dated to the eleventh century, although likely based in large
part on earlier Syriac historiography. In contrast to the “Roman” account, the “Persian” account, following the example of Simeon’s History, generally indicates that Constantine died prior to the commencement of Shapur’s oppression, and thus that the Roman emperor could not possibly have interceded as the protector of Persian Christians once Shapur’s persecution had begun.

As with the “Roman” account of Constantine’s dealings with the Christians of Persia, the “Persian” account is not entirely consistent either. For example, John bar Penkaye—a late seventh-century East-Syrian monk and eyewitness to the Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire—because he believed that Shapur’s persecution must have spanned the entire seventy years of the king’s reign (309-379 CE), thus places the beginning of Shapur’s persecution (in a slightly confused chronology) in the third year of Constantine’s reign. Even so, John says nothing about Constantine attempting to end the persecution—by means of a letter or a war or anything else—and claims that the persecution did not end until Jovian surrendered the city of Nisibis to Shapur after Julian’s death on the battlefield in 363 CE.

Constantine’s role (or lack thereof) in the “Persian” account of the events of the mid-fourth century merits some qualification: because he was not alive, Constantine obviously could not have intervened to defend the Christians of Persia during Shapur’s


persecution. But neither is the emperor dismissed as one who was dead and gone and, thereby, irrelevant with respect to the events that occurred after his death. Rather, the “Persian” account establishes Constantine’s death as a distinct chronological turning point with extended repercussions. For example, in describing the temporal setting of the events it relates, the narrator of Simeon’s History invokes the year of Simeon’s martyrdom through a series of calendrical reckonings that are then explained with reference to Constantine’s death: “In the 655th year of the kingdom of Alexander—which is the 296th year after the crucifixion of our Lord, the 117th year of the kingdom of the Persians, and the 31st year of King Shapur, son of Hormizd—after the death of blessed Constantine, king of Rome, Shapur took the opportunity to contend against Constantine’s sons who were still young.”\(^{111}\) Constantine’s death is used to similar effect in an earlier section of the History, but in a way that seems to emphasize the emperor’s death less as a temporal marker and more as a causal one: “immediately upon the death of the victorious Constantine, Shapur, the king of the Persians, began to harrow the Christian people and to harass and persecute the priests and the qa‘mā and even to destroy all the churches in his realm.”\(^{112}\) Constantine seems to have been the bulwark who—for reasons that are left mostly unexplained—had held back Shapur’s violence against the Christians of Persia. After his death, the floodgates opened.

**Constantine in Simeon’s History**

It is crucial to note that both of these passages in the History speak to the unique power and importance of Constantine in particular, not to Christian Roman emperors more broadly, and they may be read together as indicating that Constantine himself deterred Shapur from mobilizing against both Rome and the Christians of Persia. As in

\(^{111}\) *History* 4; my emphasis.

\(^{112}\) *History* 2; my emphasis.
the History, the Chronicle of Siirt—in a long section that details Simeon’s martyrdom and draws from the History—also specifies that Constantine died prior to Simeon’s arrest.

Yet, unlike the History, the Chronicle of Siirt speaks separately about Constantine at quite some length and further emphasizes that, while he was alive, his mere presence on the throne thwarted any Persian aggression towards Christians living in the East. While neither Simeon’s History nor the Chronicle mentions any “letter” or other formal statement of patronage from Constantine, both texts indicate that Shapur’s oppression of Christians, and his assaults on the eastern Roman frontier, began soon after news of Constantine’s death arrived.¹¹³

Sandwiched between these two references to Constantine’s death in Simeon’s

¹¹³ See Scher, Chronique de Séert, 297 ff. (in section XXVII) on Simeon’s martyrdom and 288 (in section XXIII) on Shapur and his hatred for Christians more broadly. Section XV and following addresses Constantine’s life, Helena’s discovery of the True Cross, and other stories.

Later Syriac and Christian-Arabic chroniclers discuss Simeon’s life in terms similar to how he is presented in the Chronicle of Siirt (via Simeon’s History). The details of these twelfth-, thirteenth-, and fourteenth-century summaries of Simeon’s martyrdom go beyond the scope of this chapter, but the important point to note for present purposes is that none of these chronicles suggests that Constantine was alive when Shapur began persecuting Christians.

In Syriac, the thirteenth-century maphrian of the Syrian Orthodox Church—most commonly known today by his Latinized nickname “Barhebraeus”—briefly mentions Simeon in his Ecclesiastical Chronicle; see Barhebraeus, Chron. Eccl. III.33-35 in Gregorii Barhebraei chronicon ecclesiasticum, ed. J.-B. Abbeloo and T.J. Lamy (Louvain: Peeters, 1872-1877). In Christian Arabic, the East-Syriac chronicles of Mār b. Sulaimān, ‘Amr b. Matai, and Salība b. Johannān should be noted. Mārī was the twelfth-century patriarch of the Church of the East; ‘Amr the fourteenth-century patriarch whose Chronicle is said to have been plagiarized (in the fourteenth century) by Salība, although alternative interpretations of the textual transmission have been proposed.

History is an intriguing explanation of why Shapur’s persecution had to occur at all—an explanation that emphasizes the divine necessity of the Persian persecution, that links Shapur to three centuries of pagan emperors in the Roman Empire, and that compels a re-reading of the passages in the History that praise the “blessed” and “victorious” Constantine. The History’s explanation of the persecution creates a conceptualization of the Christian emperor that is very different from the “Roman” account found in Sozomen or Mar Ma’in.114 As much as Constantine’s rise to power ended the persecutions in the West, his death hastened those in the East. The History provides, however, a providential explanation for this turn of events.

The text acknowledges that Constantine brought peace to the Christians of the West, explaining: “from the moment that blessed Constantine began to rule and up until his death, a span of thirty-three years that he reigned over the Romans, there were no martyrs to be found in the land of the West.”115 But once Constantine died, Shapur’s persecution of Persian Christians began:

yet God allowed the persecution to overcome us so that there would be no opportunity for Satan or his minions to say: ‘It is peace that makes people worship God, and prosperity that causes the church of Christ to grow. Kings extended a helping hand to the church and exalted it. For, lo, peace reigns in each region, and there is no one who persecutes or oppresses.’116

Peace, the narrator of the History argues, “brought prosperity to [Christians] so that they grew in number,” allowing them to count among their ranks “kings, lords, princes, judges, and governors.”117 The peace that Constantine brought to the West was, however, purchased with a steep price. The History relates that prior to the ascendance

114 History 2-3
115 History 2
116 History 2
117 History 2
of the Christian king, the “faithful were tested by persecution” and “God, the venerated one who orchestrates all in his wisdom, allowed there to be a persecution in the land of the Romans for three hundred years.”118 After three centuries of turmoil, “God gave them calm and sent them an angel of peace, Caesar Constantine,” a move that “confounded the Devil since Jesus, not out of any inability to prevent it, had previously allowed his worshippers to be persecuted.”119

The History further explains that once Constantine ended the persecution, there was peace between Rome and Persia throughout his entire reign, but upon the emperor’s death,

while memory of the first persecution had not yet been forgotten but was still in the mind of those who had witnessed it, so that one generation would not pass away and another come and the memory of the persecution be erased, thereby allowing Satan to spread his false beliefs throughout the world, God, who is wise in everything, allowed it to come about so that after thirty-three years of peace there would be a persecution of the faithful wherein evil men showed their evil will against God.120

According to the narrator of the History, therefore, the terrible events in the East that began with the death of Simeon and the deaths of the dozens of other bishops and clerics killed with him are to be understood as a recapitulation of the events in the West. In this way, persecution becomes purificatory.121 And the Christians of Persia are to understand that they, too, must undergo a trial of their faith before an “angel of peace”

118 History 3
119 History 3
120 History 3
121 This idea of necessary suffering and gladly enduring persecution is reminiscent of similar arguments in Aphrahat’s Demonstration XXI, “On Persecution.” As with the author of the History, Aphrahat also links the suffering of those in the East with their Christian brethren in the West: “And there was also for our brothers in the West in the days of Diocletian a great oppression and persecution upon the entire Church of God throughout its whole realm. Churches were torn down and uprooted, and many confessors and martyrs confessed” (my translation). Aphrahat goes on to say that after the persecution in the West, God came in mercy. See Aphrahat, Dem. XXI.23, in Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes I-XXII, PS 1.1, ed. and (Latin) trans., J. Parisot (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), cols. 989-990.
might rescue them. The blood of the martyrs is, moreover, the glue that binds the Christians of the East to their brothers and sisters in the West.

In light of all the Greek, Syriac, and Arabic chronicles I have surveyed, as well as the “anomalous” History of the Holy Mar Ma’in, what must ultimately be concluded is that there is no single history of Shapur’s persecution, but only an interconnected web of sources each with their own narrative interests and hazy history of transmission and interplay.

122 The “angel of peace” for Persian Christians may have been, in some sense, Yazdgard I, who reigned from 399-420 CE. and presided over the formal institutionalization of Christianity in Persia. Yazdgard as a “second Constantine” is discussed in chapter six; on this idea, see S. McDonough, “A Second Constantine? The Sasanian King Yazdgard in Christian History and Historiography,” JLA 1 (2008): 127-141.
Part II.
Creating the Christians of Persia

Chapter 4.
Rereading Nisibis: Narrating the Battle for Roman Mesopotamia

According to Simeon’s History, it was soon after Constantine’s death that Shapur took advantage of the power vacuum left by the absence of the great emperor to begin waging war “against Constantine’s sons who were still young.”¹ The History provides little in the way of information about how or where Shapur challenged Constantine’s sons, noting only that the Persian king “continually raided the land of the Romans.”² Shapur’s raids on the Roman eastern frontier are, however, well-attested in other ancient sources besides Simeon’s History.³

After Constantine’s death, Constantine’s middle son, Constantius II, spent the better part of the next quarter century defending against Shapur’s repeated incursions

¹ History 4. At the time of Constantine’s death, in May of 337 CE, Constantine’s middle son, Constantius II, was not yet twenty years old. It was Constantius—and not Constantine II or Constans—who won the East and who would be Shapur’s rival in the eastern Roman territories until his (Constantius’) death in 361. On the upheaval following Constantine’s death and the theory that Constantine had planned “an unassailable college of Christian emperors” to succeed him and who would pursue his policies, see R.W. Burgess, “The Summer of Blood: The ‘Great Massacre’ of 337 and the Promotion of the Sons of Constantine,” DOP 62 (2008): 5-51.

² History 4: ‘a’amidʾit b-gaysāʾ ‘alʾ arʾā d-romāyē sāleq (h)wāt. There is no mention of a conflict between Rome and Persia in Simeon’s Martyrdom.

³ In this chapter, I focus mainly on the eyewitness accounts provided by Ammianus Marcellinus (Res gestae) and Ephrem the Syrian (Hymns on Nisibis; Hymns against Julian); additionally, I examine the accounts of Theodoret (Ecclesiastical History) and Julian (Orations). These are not the only ancient authors who discuss the turmoil in the Roman east during the time of Shapur, but they are some of the most important. For an overview of the ancient commentaries on the fourth-century Roman-Persian war, see the chronologically-organized compendium of sources compiled and edited by M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu, The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, AD 226-363 (London: Routledge, 1991); for a particularly helpful survey with specific attention to Nisibis see C.S. Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction: The Third Siege of Nisibis (A.D. 350),” Historia 37 (1988): 105-125.
into various regions along the frontier.\textsuperscript{4} And, as the author of the \textit{History} suggests, the long-running conflict between Constantius and Shapur was not a “war” in the traditional sense of two grandly-outfitted armies clashing on a battlefield plain. Rather, the conflict was a low-simmering border dispute that was confined (for the most part) to Persian sieges of strategic fortress towns in Roman Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{5}

Of special interest in the fourth-century Roman-Persian war are the three sieges of the city of Nisibis in 337/338, 346, and 350 CE.\textsuperscript{6} At the time, Nisibis was the crown jewel and defensive linchpin of Roman Mesopotamia. By all accounts, the city’s defense was paramount if the Romans wished to retain the Transtigritanian provinces that were won from Shapur’s grandfather at the end of the third century. Nisibis was already an old settlement in the fourth century, and, as it changed hands over the centuries, it was

\begin{itemize}

\item \textsuperscript{5} Such is also the thesis of Karin Mosig-Walburg in her detailed study that cuts through later rhetoric to get to the heart of the Roman-Persian conflict in the fourth century. See K. Mosig-Walburg, \textit{Römer und Perser: vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.} (Gutenberg: Computus Druck Satz & Verlag, 2009). Pagan Roman writers also agreed, at least in the immediate aftermath of Julian’s death in 363 CE, that the war had been an “essentially defensive … containment of persistent Persian aggression.” See R. Seager, “Perceptions of Eastern Frontier Policy in Ammianus, Libanius, and Julian (337-363),” \textit{CQ} 47 (1997): 253.

\item \textsuperscript{6} The date of the first siege is variously set as either 337 or 338 CE. Ancient authors (e.g., Jerome, \textit{Chron.} ann. 338) generally suggest that the siege occurred in 338, whereas T.D. Barnes and R.W. Burgess argue for a date of 337—in part on the presumption that Constantine was on his way to deal with Shapur when he died at Nicomedia in the spring of 337, but mainly because they reckon the death date of Jacob of Nisibis to have been 337. Jacob was the Christian bishop of Nisibis who died during the siege and whose prayers were credited with saving the city from the Persian army. He is said to have been buried in the city walls. See R.W. Burgess, “The Dates of the First Siege of Nisibis and the Death of James of Nisibis,” \textit{Byzantion} 69 (1999): 7-17; and T.D. Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” \textit{JRS} 75 (1985): 133, with further reference to P. Peeters, “La légende de Saint Jacques de Nisibe,” \textit{AB} 38 (1920): 285-373.
\end{itemize}
constructed and re-constructed many times over on the site that it occupied—one ideally-suited for a fortress. The city guarded the main east-west highway traversing the northern Mesopotamian marchlands between the Syrian desert to the south and the rugged mountain terrain of Armenia to the north. Its role as a primary operating base of the Roman military in the fourth century is highlighted in that it was, as Ammianus Marcellinus tells us in his sweeping history of the period, the mustering point for Ursicinus—the *magister militum per Orientem* under whom Ammianus served.

In addition to the city’s obvious strategic importance, Nisibis was commercially important as well. As an easily accessible border town, it was an imperially designated site of trade and commerce between Rome and Persia where goods both mundane and exotic changed hands. As Hugh Elton points out in his insightful study of the Roman frontier, the eastern frontier, in particular, dealt with a booming trade in fine luxury goods. In order to insure that the Roman Empire controlled the trade in luxuries and collected as much money as possible from their exchange, such imports were heavily

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taxed and “from Diocletian onwards, merchants were required to pass through various gateway towns. Romans were supposed to trade with Persians at Nisibis, Callinicum and Artaxata.”

**Nisibis as Christian City?**

Irrespective of the social-historical, military, and economic evidence suggesting a certain cosmopolitanism in mid-fourth-century Roman Nisibis, there remains a lingering perception that the border between the Roman and Persian empires, even as early as the mid-fourth century, somehow represented a readily apparent religious border.

For example, in his study assessing the motives behind Shapur’s persecution of Persian Christians, Wolfgang Schwaigert claims, “the border between the eastern Roman Empire and the Sasanian Empire was a border between two social systems with different religious traditions and commitments.” To be sure, late ancient Christian texts do imagine Nisibis as having been largely a Christian city in the time between Constantine and Julian. But the border lines were never so clear as some of the Christian texts—themselves retrospective narratives of the period—would have us believe. Both empires, especially at the borders, were a religious and ethnic mélange. If only on the basis of the city’s location, the intermingling brought about by trade, and the presence of several Roman legions, we have reason to conclude that Nisibis was in fact substantially more cosmopolitan and ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse than one might have otherwise expected of a continentally-isolated garrison town on a minor river in

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northern Mesopotamia.\footnote{On this point see, most notably, F. Millar, “Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East, AD 325-450: Language, Religion and Culture,” *MedArch* 11 (1998): 159-176, who questions whether many in the “Roman” Near East would have considered *themselves* Roman. Millar concludes, based on the sheer diversity of the area, that we are on unstable ground in attempting to speak of “Syrian” (or even Syriac Christian) ethno-linguistic religious identity in this time and place.}

**Remembering Nisibis**

While Roman Nisibis was an important stronghold and trading center in the days of Constantius, the city was equally (if not more) important to later memory after it was ceded to the Persians following Julian’s defeat in 363 CE. Written in exile by the city’s most renowned Christian citizen, Ephrem the Syrian, some of the *Carmina Nisibena (Hymns on Nisibis)* as well as the *Hymns against Julian* lament the loss of the city while simultaneously detailing its heroic defense.\footnote{See the edition and German translation of E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena*. CSCO 218-219, 240-241; *scr. syr.* 92-93, 102-103 (Louvain, 1961-1963). Only a few hymns mention details about the three sieges and the defense of Nisibis (and then the focus is primarily on the third siege in 350); see CNis I-III, XI-XIII, with further details in Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 111.} An extensive set of *madrashe*, or “teaching hymns,” Ephrem’s works were composed in allusive and poetically theological language.

But the loss of Nisibis was painful, and painfully important, all around. Not just to the city’s educated Christian inhabitants such as Ephrem, but also to the ego and identity of Rome’s pagan historians. When Nisibis was finally given over to Shapur without a fight—as a result of the terms of the treaty with Jovian following the debacle of Julian’s bungled retreat from central Mesopotamia—Ammianus decried the decision as “betraying Nisibis” (*Nisibi prodita*). He chastised the terms of Jovian’s abandonment of the city as an act “unworthy of an Empire” (*indignum imperio*), particularly since Nisibis had, for so many years, been the bulwark against Persian occupation of the Roman east:
ne orien a Persis occuparetur, viribus restitit maximis, Ammianus insisted.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to the “eyewitness” accounts of the events in northern Mesopotamia that are provided by Ephrem and Ammianus, other late ancient authors drew upon the stories about Shapur’s great sieges of Nisibis to re-narrate an epic tale complete with supernatural visions, stampeding elephants, divinely-directed gnats, and even a naval battle fought beneath the city walls on an artificial lake that was created by the damming of the river Mygdonius. As Paul Russell comments in his survey of the city’s history during the time of Ephrem’s residence, there is an obvious conclusion to be drawn from the fact that Shapur tried and failed—at great expense of blood and treasure—to take the city on three separate occasions: “so great a value was placed on possession of Nisibis by Shapur that he was willing to waste armies and move rivers to acquire it.”\textsuperscript{14} In successfully repelling Shapur’s forces three times, Nisibis duly earned the epithet “Shield of Empire.”\textsuperscript{15} But, per the terms of the peace treaty between Jovian and Shapur, Nisibis was evacuated and all of the city’s inhabitants (including Ephrem) were compelled to relocate to Edessa, Amida, or other cities on the western side of the re-drawn limes.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the various narratives written about the fourth-century struggle for northern Mesopotamia certainly make for compelling reading, what I am primarily


\textsuperscript{14} Russell, “Nisibis,” 69.

\textsuperscript{15} Lieu, “Nisibis.”

\textsuperscript{16} Ammianus dolefully describes the evacuation of Nisibis, noting that the citizens of the once-proud city were cast to the wind without any imperial support or help in moving their families and belongings to other places: Et vertere solum extemplo omnes praecepti, manusque tendentes orabant ne inponere tur sibi necessitas abscedendi, ad defendendos penates se solos sufficere sine adiumentis publicis adfirmantes et milite, satis confisi adfuturam iustitiam pro genitali sede dimitaturis, ut experti sunt saepe (Amm. Marc. XXV.9, 2).
interested in addressing in this chapter is how the narration and re-narration of the
defense, loss, and evacuation of the city of Nisibis was central to creating two
interrelated ideas: first, that Rome was fundamentally a Christian empire by the time of
Constantine’s death (and shortly thereafter); and, second, that Shapur’s persecution of
Christians was incited, at least in part, by his inability to capture the “Christian” city of
Nisibis from its devoted Christian defenders. I argue that both of these ideas are
rhetorical constructs that have unduly influenced evaluations of Shapur’s supposed
persecution as well as fourth-century history more generally. Departing from the
communis opinio, I contend that there was little reason for Shapur to have conceived of
Rome as a Christian empire: indeed, the inadvertent role of the “Christian” defenders of
“Christian” Nisibis in hastening the persecution of the Christians of Persia is purely the
stuff of hagiographical invention.

“Christian” Nisibis as the Cause of Shapur’s Persecution

The passage from Simeon’s History that claims that Shapur “continually raided
the lands of the Romans” contains an interesting corollary: as a direct result of his
struggles in Mesopotamia, Shapur is said to have become “increasingly incensed with
hatred for the servants of God” who dwelled in Persian lands.17 The History does not
specify that Shapur’s defeat at Nisibis was the proximate cause of his persecution of
Christians, but the text does suggest that Shapur’s frustrated designs on Roman
territories were, in fact, at the root of his decision to turn against the Christians of Persia.
In other words, the author of the History intends to convey that Shapur believed that
there was some sort of religio-political connection between the defenders of Nisibis and

17 History 4. In full, the passage reads: “He continually raided the land of the Romans and
for that reason he became increasingly incensed with hatred for the servants of God who dwelled
in the land of his dominion” (‘aminā’t b-gayṣa ‘al ārā d-romāyē sāleq (h)wāt, w-men hadē ‘ellā
yattirā tīt ‘etgarri b-senetā d-luqbal ṣabdaw(hy) d-‘alāha da-b-atrå d-‘uhdānēh).
the Christians of Persia and that the latter suffered specifically because of Shapur’s inability to conquer the former.

Jérôme Labourt, in his still oft-cited account of Christianity in Persia, confirms the conclusions made by the *History*. Labourt claims that Shapur reveals “one of the principal motives of the persecution” when, after returning from the first siege of Nisibis, he resolved to tax the Christians of Persia to pay for a war against caesar, whose god they worshipped. ¹⁸ Similarly, Jacob Neusner proposes that the Christians of Nisibis were acutely, albeit inadvertently, responsible for stoking Shapur’s anger against the Christians of Persia: “Returning from the fruitless campaign of 337, [Shapur] recalled that the bishop of Nisibis had led the defense, and that the Christians of his own empire [such as Aphrahat] had hoped for his defeat.” ¹⁹

Other ancient sources besides the *History* summon a connection between Nisibis and Shapur’s persecution of Christians, but as two very different chronicles suggest—the *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian* and the *Chronicle of Siirt*—the connection between Nisibis and Shapur’s persecution was not always one that was causal. In Michael the Syrian’s account (as I explained in chapter three), the chronology is inverted: rather than the defeat at Nisibis leading to the persecution, the persecution came first, then Constantine’s letter to Shapur, and then, immediately after Shapur’s receipt of the emperor’s letter, the attack on Nisibis that spurred Constantine to ready his forces and

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¹⁹ J. Neusner, “Babylonian Jewry and Shapur II’s Persecution of Christianity from 339 to 379 A.D.” *HUCA* 43 (1979): 79. The assumption that there was such a clear binary between Christian Rome and non-Christian Persia remains pervasive. As Paul Russell points out, Gustave Bardy “thinks that the border conflicts between Rome and Persia/Parthia threw the Syriac-speaking Christians of the area back toward their Greek brethren to the West. He does not expand on this point, but it seems to come from an idea of the border as a hostile barrier.” See Russell, “Nisibis,” n. 94, with further reference to G. Bardy, *La question des langues dans L’Église ancienne*, 1 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1948), 26.
set out for the east.\textsuperscript{20} By contrast, the *Chronicle of Siirt* mentions all three major event elements (Constantine’s death, Shapur’s decision to persecute Christians in Persia, and the siege of Nisibis) all together and in single breath as if to suggest that Constantine’s death immediately allowed Shapur a free hand to war against Christians in both the Roman and the Persian empires.\textsuperscript{21}

Of course, neither Michael’s *Chronicle* nor the *Chronicle of Siirt* was written until centuries after the events in question. These chronicles are thus all the more unreliable as accounts of what happened when and why. But they nevertheless serve to illustrate a crucial (yet obvious) principle: histories are inherently and necessarily fallible literary constructions that tell us more about the sources, rhetorical agendas, and beliefs of the *historian* than the event history of the period that the historian is attempting to narrate.

In the same way that Constantine’s role as a patron of the Christians of Persia changes radically from one historian’s reckoning to the next, so, too, does the role of the city of Nisibis. The Christian religious core of Nisibis—supposedly the very fulcrum on which Shapur’s ire turned—is conceptualized in fundamentally different ways not only among different authors, but among different treatises written at different times and under different circumstances by the same authors.

As a survey of Ephrem’s hymns and their influence on later sources—such as the Syriac *Julian Romance*—demonstrates, Nisibis became a Christian-Roman city only in the later re-tellings of the city’s history. Undoubtedly, as any quick glance at Eusebius or Lactantius demonstrates, *Christianitas* as *Romanitas* was an idea that had arisen by the time of the first siege of Nisibis—Ephrem’s own, slightly later, writings demonstrate

\textsuperscript{20} Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* VII.3, p. 132 (Syriac). The chronological compression of Michael’s *Chronicle* is evident in that he also explains that after Shapur heard that Constantine had died at Nicomedia, he launched a second siege on Nisibis. The second siege was not until 346 CE, nine years after Constantine’s death. See *Chronicle* VII.3, p. 134 (Syriac).

this, too. But the concatenation of religion and empire in the person of Constantine such as is presented in Eusebius is an idea that developed more fully in Mesopotamia only in the decades following the Roman evacuation of Nisibis and the subsequent framing of the city—and, indeed, of the entirety of the Roman Empire—as Christian territory.\textsuperscript{22}

**Persian Histories of Nisibis and the Fourth-Century Wars**

The evidence that Shapur may have regarded the Christians of Persia as a “fifth column” of the Roman Empire is, as I have been insisting throughout, circumstantial at best. And yet this idea of a clear breakdown of allegiances along religious lines in the wake of Constantine’s death has had tremendous staying power among late ancient historians, medieval chroniclers, and modern scholars alike. Aphrahat’s supposedly pro-Roman sentiments are, as I showed in chapter three, not as clear-cut as they have been made to seem. Aphrahat, in any case, provides no details at all about the actual events of the war between Rome and Persia or about Shapur’s persecution of Christians.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} On Ephrem’s zeal to bring his community in line with the imperial Church under the protection of Christian emperors, see S.H. Griffith, “Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire,” in Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer, ed. T. Halton and J.P. Williman (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 22-52. I find no evidence suggesting that Christians in fourth-century Persia viewed the Roman Empire and Christian emperors in any way approximating how Griffith characterizes the beliefs of Ephrem.

\textsuperscript{23} In his article assessing the circumstances of Constantine’s letter to Shapur, David Frendo rightly comments that the inclusion of Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* is out-of-place in any discussion of Roman military policy. He comments that Aphrahat’s “veiled prophetic musings (if that is what they are) might tell us something about the plight of the Christians of Persia; they can tell us nothing about Constantine’s policy towards Iran.” See D. Frendo, “Constantine’s Letter to Shapur II: Its Authenticity, Occasion, and Attendant Circumstances,” *BAI* 15 (2001): 69 n. 73.

Frendo is right, but I would press his conclusion further to say that gleanings any historical evidence from Aphrahat concerning the “plight” of Christians in Persia is a relatively fruitless endeavor. Aphrahat’s interpretation of the Book of Daniel tells us nothing about any actual war or the preparations for it; he gives no details about Shapur’s persecution, and alludes to it in only the vaguest of terms; he draws no connection between Shapur’s siege of Nisibis and the supposed persecution that ensued following the king’s return to Persia in defeat. Indeed, at least insofar as Aphrahat’s views are presented in the *Demonstrations*, there is no link between Christianity in the Roman Empire (or the cult’s appropriation by caesar) and the persecution of Christians in the Persian Empire. This connection—particularly the sense that the loss at Nisibis fueled the persecution of Persian Christians—is an idea hinted at in Simeon’s *History,* but developed much more explicitly only in hagiographical and historical texts that
But what about non-Christian Persian evidence? What might it tell us about Shapur’s motivations and Persian sentiments toward Christians in the fourth century? Unfortunately, aside from what little we find in the Demonstrations—and the later Acts of the Persian Martyrs—there is no contemporary “Persian” literary evidence about the purported religious dimensions of the wars with Rome and the trials of the Christians of Persia. And, it should go without saying, trusting the Syriac hagiographical literature to accurately portray the mood and reasons behind the actions of the Persian court is a perilous historiographical strategy. The only evidence attesting to how Sasanian political elites may have conceptualized the war with Rome and the Christians who were living in Persia is what can be understood (or hypothesized) from relatively sparse insciplonal, numismatic, and sillographic evidence.

originated predominantly from among Greek- or Syriac-speaking Christians writing from within the Roman Empire.

24 Josef Wiesehöfer acknowledges the trove of (largely untapped) evidence that is Syriac hagiography from the Sasanian Empire, but he also warns that if such evidence is to be used to extrapolate any historical conclusions about Sasanian governance or political machinations that it has to be appropriated with caution: “Was die Christen angeht, so geben vor allem die zahlreichen Märtyrerakten Aufschluß über die Frühgeschichte der Christenheit im Sāsānidenreich, ihr Selbstverständnis und die Religionspolitik der Herrscher. ... Dies gilt es zu betonen, obgleich späte Veröffentlichungsdaten, dürftige Handschriftenüberlieferung und hagiographische Tradition im allgemeinen bestimmende Überzeichnungen und Formalhaftigkeit zu behutsamer historischer Auswertung zwingen.” J. Wiesehöfer, “‘Geteilte Loyalitäten’. Religiöse Minderheiten des 3. und 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. im Spannungsfeld zwischen Rom und dem sasanidischen Iran,” Klio 75 (1993): 364-365.

25 Richard Payne explains that the dearth of literary and material evidence for late antique Iran has typically led scholars to turn to Syriac Christian texts as sources from which to chart the history of the Sasanian Empire: “If convential sources of late antique urban history, such as inscriptions, are unavailable for Iran, we nonetheless possess significant interventions in the urban imaginary in the form of Syriac hagiographies.” See R.E. Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500-700 CE,” (Ph.D. diss, Princeton University, 2010), 93-94. This lack of “Persian” sources, coupled with the often free use of Syriac hagiographical sources as historical documents, has led to much debate. Phillipe Gignoux, for example, attempted to establish a prioritized account of the literary sources for the study of Sasanian history, putting texts written in (and in the languages of) the Sasanian Empire first; post-Sasanian documents in the languages of the Empire second; and texts in non-Sasanian languages (e.g. Greek and Latin) third. See P. Gignoux, “Problèmes de distinction et de priorité des sources,” in Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia, ed. J. Harmatta (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó,
But even if we possess material evidence—such as coinage—that may (or may not) demonstrate symbolically the heightened patronage of the fire cult during the reign of Shapur II, few conclusions can be drawn from such evidence about how the Persian king would have treated the Christians of Persia or dealt with them vis-à-vis the Roman Empire on the basis of a supposition about their shared religious identity.\(^{26}\) In other words, merely an increased emphasis on Mazdean symbology—if that is what we find during Shapur’s reign—does not entail certain Sasanian imperial positions toward Christianity one way or another.\(^ {27}\) Bo Utas puts the difficulty of ascertaining Sasanian views regarding contemporary events vis-à-vis the Roman Empire quite simply: “the material about Byzantium in pre-Islamic Iranian sources is scanty.” According to Utas, even texts (such as Zoroastrian religious texts) tend to be “strangely silent on Byzantine matters. Although hrôm, i.e. both the original and the Eastern Rome, now and then appears [in Middle Persian (Pahlavi) literature], it is generally a mere cliché, a label for


\[\text{26 Guitta Azarpay has shown that Mithra, in fact, played a role in Sasanian depictions of Shapur II, suggesting that the idea of a clear religious binary between Christian Rome and an in any way defined or orthodox “Zoroastrian” Persia is difficult to reconcile with such evidence of religious flux, hybridity, and indeterminacy. See G. Azarpay, “The Role of Mithra in the Investiture and Triumph of Shapur II,” IA 17 (1982): 181-188.}\]

\[\text{27 Kenneth Holm argues that the “long-cross solidi” (which were not struck in the Roman Empire until 420 CE, just prior to Theodosius II’s brief war with Persia) represented the first clear instance of Christian imperial ideology in Roman coinage. Holm further proposes that Theodosius’s war itself was conducted against the backdrop of a Christian ideological background. As I discuss in chapter six, the circumstances and ideology of Theodosius’s war can be usefully considered in conjunction with the formal establishment of the Church of Persia (with the help of Roman envoys) from 410-424 CE. It was during and following this period that many of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs set during the time of Shapur II were written, and, I argue, it was post-Theodosian ideological conceptions of empire that largely informed how the Constantinian (and immediately post-Constantinian) era of war and persecution were narrated. See K. Holm, “Pulcheria’s Crusade A.D. 421-22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory,” GRBS 18 (1977): 153-172.}\]
the sundry barbarian countries of the West, just like ὲν represents the East in general, not just the Chinese Empire.”

Attempting to determine the Persian perspective—that is, Shapur’s aims in prosecuting military advances on the eastern Roman frontier and in persecuting the Christians of Persia—is all the more opaque and difficult to assess in that the “Persian” literary evidence for this period that we do have is mostly piecemeal, post-Sasanian, and not even written in Middle Persian but Arabic. Moreover, some of the Arabic historians of the Sasanian Empire—such as the tenth-century al-Ṭabarī—seem to have been influenced more by a diverse array of sources (including Syriac Christian sources) than by any coherent, non-Christian, Persian or Mazdean historical-literary tradition.

Ṭabarī, for example, leaves out primary pieces of the fourth-century confrontation between Rome and Persia and suggests that the emperor Julian was the foremost persecutor and threat to Christians. Constantius’ defense of the Roman east is entirely omitted in Ṭabarī’s account: Ṭabarī claims, instead, that Constantine and Shapur reached a truce that was broken only by Julian’s assaults on the Persian Empire twenty-five years after the fact. Julian, Ṭabarī insists, revived the “Roman religion,” ordered the destruction of churches, and had Christian clerics in the Roman Empire put to death. Ṭabarī is silent, however, about any parallel anti-Christian decrees by Shapur in the Persian Empire. Ṭabarī even indicates (following the Arabic version of the sixth-century Syriac Julian Romance) that Jovian, when he was still a Roman general under Julian’s command, was complicit in conveying sensitive military information to Shapur out of his desire to bring about the downfall of a pagan Roman emperor.

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29 On the reign of Shapur II as depicted by Ṭabarī see The History of al-Ṭabarī, vol. 5, The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 50-66.
As these anecdotes illustrate, there are deep and intractable problems in using post-Sasanian “Persian” histories to talk in any meaningful way about how the history of the fourth century was narrated in late antiquity. And, given the lack of more contemporary Sasanian sources, we are forced to rely on Greek and Syriac Christian sources, as well as non-Christian “Roman” sources, to forge any explanation of why Shapur is believed to have begun persecuting the Christians of Persia following his failed first siege of Nisibis.

**Roman Sources on Roman Mesopotamia**

In re-examining—albeit by no means comprehensively given the abundance and variety of the sources—how the battle for Roman Mesopotamia was narrated by contemporary witnesses (Ammianus and Ephrem) and other authors (Julian, Sozomen, and Theodoret), it is possible to get a sense of how the history of Nisibis was “packaged” and how, thereby, certain historical narratives persisted.

As I suggested at the outset of the chapter, a re-examination of the sources makes two things clear: first, that it is unlikely that Shapur would have regarded Nisibis (and, by extension, the Roman Empire) as “Christian” to such an extent that the Christians of Persia would have been seen as a fifth column of Rome; and, second, that the idea of the “Christian” defense of Christian Nisibis ultimately stems from the heavily theological perspective of Ephrem the Syrian. Quite surprisingly, however, it is also Ephrem who provides tantalizing evidence that, at least among Christians in the eastern Roman Empire, Julian was in fact considered much more of a threat to Christians than was Shapur. Indeed, Ephrem’s complete and total silence about any persecution of Christians in Persia strongly impels the conclusion that the Persian king’s reputation as a persecutor was not known in Nisibis (or Edessa) even three decades or more after the
Great Persecution is said to have begun.\textsuperscript{30}

**The Res gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus**

Whatever veiled “crusading” impulses may have undergirded Constantine’s interest in Persia, such motivations had disappeared by the time Constantius assumed full control of the Roman East. In Shapur’s letter to Constantius, as well as in Constantius’ response, the conflict is presented as one that was solely territorial in nature. According to Shapur’s letter to Constantius, as preserved by Ammianus, Shapur’s territorial aims were well-known to the Roman emperor.\textsuperscript{31} While acknowledging that the empire of the ancient Achaemenid Persians reached—as the Romans knew—as far west as the “river Strymon and the boundaries of Macedonia,” and, moreover, that Shapur should be entitled to demand the return of all these lands since his rule surpassed in grandeur those of the “kings of old,” the Persian king nevertheless humbly contented himself to recovering only Armenia and Mesopotamia, territories he claims that the Romans duplicitously acquired from his grandfather.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} This is not to suggest that Shapur did not have a reputation among late ancient Roman historians as a vicious and brutal king. Ammianus, for example, claims that Shapur was known to have been a cruel and terrifying ruler. This accusation is not, however, leveled against Shapur uniquely because of how he dealt with Christians, but rather reflects the “barbarization” of Rome’s enemies that is standard practice in Ammianus’ history. See Amm. Marc. XVIII.10,4 and the analysis of J.W. Drijvers, “Ammianus Marcellinus’ Image of Sasanian Society,” in Ērān Anērān: Studien zu den Beziehungen zwischen dem Sasanidenreich und der Mittelmeiwelt. Beiträge des Internationalen Colloquiums in Eutin, 8-9 Juni 2000, ed. J. Wiesehöfer and P. Huyse (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006), 45-69.

\textsuperscript{31} Amm. Marc. XVII.5,4: \textit{Quia igitur veritatis oratio soluta esse debet et libera et celsiores fortunas idem loqui decet atque sentire, propositum meum in pauca conferam, reminiscens haec quae dicturus sum me saepius replicasse.}

\textsuperscript{32} Amm. Marc. XVII.5,5-6: \textit{Ad usque Strymona flumen et Macedonicos fines tenuisse maiores meos, antiquitates quoque vestrae testantur: haec me convenit flagitare (ne sit arrogans, quod affirmo) splendore virtutumque insignium serie vetustis regibus antistantem, sed ubique mihi cordi est recta ratio, cui coalitus ab adulescentia prima nihil umquam paenitendum admisi. Ideoque Armeniam recuperare cum Mesopotamia debo, avo meo composita fraude praeceptam.}

According to Shayegan, “The impetus for Šābuhr’s large-scale Roman campaigns in the second half of the fourth century CE undoubtedly lies in the inherent inequity of the peace treaty of Nisibis in 298 CE, concluded between the Sasanian king Narseh and Diocletian’s Caesar in the East, Galerius.” Shayegan further explains that Narseh “was under duress” and “was thus forced
Constantius’ lofty rhetorical response to the Persian king ignores Shapur’s suggestion that he should be able to demand the return of the dominion of Darius and Xerxes. In his letter to Shapur, Constantius emphasizes that although the Romans do, indeed, seek peace with the Persians, it would be ridiculous (absonum et inspiens) for them to freely give up Armenia and Mesopotamia; further, Constantius warns Shapur, Rome will surely not be bested in battle if the Persians foolishly persist in their militant course of action.\(^{33}\)

According to Ammianus, when Constantius’ letter was met with no response, the Roman emperor sent several ambassadors to Shapur, among whom was included the philosopher Eustathius, a sophist whom Ammianus describes as being a “master persuader” (opifex suadendi).\(^{34}\) Constantius’ decision to send a philosopher to speak with Shapur was a choice that was not lost on Eunapius, a vigorous opponent of Christianity and the author of the duly famous *Lives of the Sophists*. Eunapius explains that Eustathius was so skilled in the arts of persuasion that Constantius, even though he was “held fast by the books of the Christians” (τοῖς τῶν χριστιανῶν ἐνεχόμενος βιβλίοις), purposefully sent for the renowned philosopher in order to more effectively manage the Persian threat.\(^{35}\) In detailing the philosopher’s pacific disposition and eloquence, Eunapius remarks that Eustathius—alone among the Roman ambassadors at the Persian
court—gained the trust of Shapur and was even invited to dine with the Persian king. He so dazzled the previously savage Shapur that the Persian lord came close to renouncing his crown (μεταβαλεῖν τιάραν) and putting on the tribonian, the philosopher’s cloak of the sort worn by Eustathius (τὸ τριβώνιον Ἐὐσταθίου μεταμφιάσασθαι). But Shapur was, Eunapius claims, prevented from trading the crown for the cloak by the Magi who accused Eustathius of being a sorcerer (γόητα).36

The general contours of this account of the near-conversion of a Persian king to a life of philosophy thanks to the gentility and wisdom of a Roman ambassador can be compared to an intriguing recapitulation of the story several decades later when Marutha, the Christian bishop of Maipherkat in Roman Armenia, was sent to formally establish the Church in Persia.37 According to Maruta’s Life, the Roman bishop cured the Sasanian king Yazdgard I of his headaches and nearly converted him to Christianity. Yazdgard was held back in his conversion, however, by the accusations levied by his Magian courtiers who—mirroring the charges against Eustathius—claimed that Marutha was merely a sweet-talking sorcerer.38

Although the tales of their audiences with Persian kings are remarkably similar, the major distinction between Eustathius and Marutha seems to be that we can readily conceive of a conversion to Christianity—and, further, of the Roman Empire as having embraced and become identified with the Christian cult. But we have much less facility

36 Eunap. VS VI.5,7-9

37 Marutha’s Life is preserved in both Greek and (more completely) Armenian. For a translation of the Armenian Life and an overview of the sources that deal with Marutha, see R. Marcus, “The Armenian Life of Marutha of Maipherkat,” HTR 25 (1932): 47-71. For an analysis of Marutha’s role, as well as that of other clerical ambassadors, see L. Sako, Le rôle de la hiérarchie syriaque orientale dans les rapports diplomatiques entre la Perse et Byzance aux Ve-VIIe siècles (Paris, 1986). Marutha and other Roman Christian envoys are the focus of my sixth chapter.

in conceiving of a conversion to philosophy, or of even thinking of Rome as the imperial patron of philosophical schools. To ask the question whether Shapur or the Magi might have turned against “philosophers” living in fourth-century Persia—especially during Julian’s reign—because such seekers after wisdom may have been a fifth column of the Roman Empire seems patently absurd. And yet the question sounds perfectly legitimate with respect to Persian concerns about Christians living in their empire in the mid-fourth century.

As the detailed historical account of Ammianus and the anti-Christian, philosophical hagiography of Eunapius implies, however, Rome was still being narrated as Rome—classical, pagan Rome—in the late fourth century. A Christian king may have been on the throne both when Ammianus was serving in the war and, later, when he was memorializing it in his Res gestae, but the historian portrays neither the war nor the negotiations about it as having had anything to do with Christianity. Indeed, Constantius’ primary envoy was, as Ammianus and Eunapius are keen to make clear, not a Christian.

That Ammianus thought of the conflict in more “classical” historiographical terms, unclouded by the supposed Christian interests on either side of the border, is bolstered by the seemingly innocuous comment that he makes about the boundaries of the Persian empire in the context of Shapur’s reference to the former boundaries of Achaemenid Persia. In narrating the exchange of letters on this point, Ammianus gives no hint that either Constantius or Shapur thought of the conflict in “religious” terms or as one being waged, in part, on behalf of the Christians of Persia. And this was, for

39 As any reader of the Res gestae knows, Ammianus does mention Christians and Christianity, but not in the context of the means and ends of the imperial struggle that he is narrating. See, for example, E.D. Hunt, “Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus,” CQ 35 (1985): 186-200. Hunt acknowledges that Ammianus is exceptional among late ancient pagan historians in even mentioning Constantius’ Christianity: other Latin historians (such as Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and Festus) “managed to write about Christian emperors without so
Ammianus, clearly not a meaningless aside.⁴⁰

Later in the Res gestae, Ammianus engages in a long excursus on Persian culture and customs—a section that is typically referred to as his “Persian digression.”⁴¹ This so-called “digression” is an ethnography of the Achaemenids that makes little reference to (or demonstrates much understanding of) contemporary Sasanian society. As Jan Willem Drijvers points out, Ammianus’ depiction of “Persia” in this section of his history tells us vastly more about the persistence of earlier Greco-Roman literary tropes and methods of historiographical representation than it does about Sasanian society in the fourth century.⁴² Importantly, Ammianus’ digression helps to show that Shapur’s forays into Roman lands—howsoever muted their territorial ambitions even by Shapur’s own acknowledgment—were still conceived of within the Roman historiographical imagination as part of a Persian longing to reestablish the glory of the ancient Achaemenid Empire.⁴³

much as a word about their Christianity (186). But Hunt nevertheless argues persuasively against those who would put “the pagan/Christian issue at the heart of the historian’s purpose … [as] part and parcel of the last pagan reaction at Rome in the late fourth century” (188).


⁴¹ Amm. Marc. XXXIII.6


The Nisibis of Fantasy: Julian’s *Orations* in Praise of Constantius

Relying on their predecessors in the historiographical arts and the standard methods of presenting the historical-literary genre that they were writing was the way by which classicizing Roman historians such as Ammianus were able to understand and explain the events of their own times. Before he became emperor, Julian wrote in a similar vein—even with reference to his cousin Constantius, a Christian emperor. The first two of Julian’s famed *Orations* are his “Panegyric in Honor of Emperor Constantius,” and his closely-related “Heroic Deeds of Constantius.” Both texts are ornately-structured rhetorical exercises that painstakingly follow all the classical rules for a panegyrical speech in praise of an emperor.

Julian was not present at Nisibis—or anywhere else in Roman Mesopotamia—during Shapur’s three sieges, but substantial sections of *Or. II* recount the third siege of Nisibis—in the style of a Homeric epic. Since the Romans (the Greeks) are the heroes of the tale, the Sasanian Persians (the sons of Darius and Xerxes) must logically be presented as the Persians of old. In fact, Julian refers to Shapur as “the king of the Parthians,” and he depicts him as “imitating Xerxes” in that just as the ancient Persian

Philip Huyse argues that Roman historians (such as Ammianus and the sources on which he relied) invented the idea that the Sasanians had an interest in attempting to reclaim former Achaemenid territories. See P. Huyse, “La revendication de territoires achéménides par les Sassanides: une réalité historique?” in *Iran. Questions et Connaissances. Actes du IVe congrès européen des études iraniennes, organisé par la Societas Iranologica Europaea, Paris, 6-10 septembre 1999*, vol. 1. *La période ancienne*, ed. P. Huyse (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 297-311.


45 Both *Orations* were likely written during a protracted period of conflict between Julian and Constantius while Julian was in Gaul and Constantius in the East. According to Robert Browning, Julian wrote *Or. II* “perhaps in an attempt to bridge the growing gap between his cousin and himself. It is a cold, technically competent piece of work … launching into a series of comparisons between Constantius and various Homeric heroes, in which Constantius naturally always comes off best.” See R. Browning, *The Emperor Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 97.
king watched the battle of Salamis from on high, so, too, did Shapur observe the siege of Nisibis from a hillside vantage point.\textsuperscript{46}

Julian further describes Shapur’s army as a transparently inauthentic replica of the true Persians. Indeed, in an odd chronological inversion, Julian presents the Sasanians as the usurpers of Seleucid lands. But by wearing throwback, Achaemenid battle dress, the Sasanians “try to evade the truth and to make it appear that they have not revolted from Macedon, but are merely resuming the empire that was theirs of old.”\textsuperscript{47} As C.S. Lightfoot comments, “it is not surprising that the historical facts get distorted by Julian as he strives to exploit every possible device in the well-developed and highly literary genre of panegyric. … The intention is clearly to flatter Constantius by implying that the repulse of Sapor’s army at Nisibis was as great an exploit as the defeat of Xerxes in 480 BC.”\textsuperscript{48}

The true motives behind Julian’s Orations in praise of Constantius aside, what is important to note here is that (as in Ammianus) the presentation of both the emperor and the defense of Nisibis is fully “classical.” Neither Julian nor Ammianus harbored warm feelings toward Christianity as a cult, that much is self-evident, but both—even though they knew that parts of Roman Mesopotamia were populated with Christians—are noticeably silent about the relevance of Constantius’ Christianity with regard to his defense of the Roman East. Neither claims that there were any Christian or religious

\textsuperscript{46} Alain Chauvot notes that the both Philip the Arab and Julian insisted on the cognomen “Parthicus” rather than “Persicus,” thereby highlighting what Chauvot explains was a constructed image of Persia that resulted in the purposeful negation of (not ignorance of) Sasanian political realities. See A. Chauvot, “Parthes et Perses dans les sources du IV\textsuperscript{e} siècle,” in Institution, société et vie politique dans l’empire romain au IV\textsuperscript{e} siècle ap. J.-C., ed. M. Christol, et al. (Rome: École française de Rome / Palais Farnèse, 1992), 115-125.


\textsuperscript{48} Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 123.
underpinnings to the war with the Persians; neither remarks in any way upon the Christian population of Nisibis.

One may conjecture that the silence of Ammianus and Julian on these points represents an attempt to hide or to refute a prevailing Christian interpretation of the war by veiling it under the veneer of a classical, pagan past. But, it seems much easier to conclude simply that neither Julian, who wrote from far-away Gaul, nor Ammianus, who witnessed the events firsthand, had any reason to see this war as different in kind from any previous Roman engagement with raiding barbarians on the imperial frontier. Insofar as how Julian and Ammianus conceived of and wrote about the war, Christianity was irrelevant.

When, after Constantius’ death, Ammianus rehearses the emperor’s vices and virtues and pointedly acknowledges his Christianity, he refers to it as but a “plain and simple religion” that Constantius foolishly made complex by engaging in abstruse questions of doctrine. Nevertheless, criticism of the dead emperor’s religious proclivities is not broached in the context of the emperor’s defense of the Roman East,

49 Timothy Barnes, for example, believes that Ammianus tried to conceal his fundamental antipathy toward Christianity but that an anti-Christian outlook nevertheless colors his historiography. While there is much to admire about Barnes’ study of Ammianus, I do not find his arguments about Ammianus’ hidden religious views compelling. See T.D. Barnes, Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

50 Amm. Marc. XXI.16,18: Christianam religionem absolutam et simplicem anili superstitione confundens, in qua scrutanda perplexius quam conponenda gravis, excitavit discidia plurima, quae progressa fusius aluit concertatione verborum, ut catervis antistitum iumentis publicis ultra citroque discurrentibus per synodos, quas appellant, dum ritum omnem ad suum trahere conantur arbitrium, rei vehiculariae succideret nervos. On this point, see the discussion of V. Neri, “Ammianus’ Definition of Christianity as absoluta et simplex religio,” in Cognitio Gestorum: The Historiographic Art of Ammianus Marcellinus, ed. J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst and H.C. Teitler (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992), 59-65. Neri suggests that Ammianus may be referring to Constantius’ Arianism by way of currying favor with a Theodosian audience at the time he was writing the Res gestae. In my view, a more likely explanation (which Neri also proposes) is that Ammianus is simply criticizing Constantius’ over-involvement in frivolous and inconsequential religious affairs that distracted him from more pertinent imperial governance.
even if, according to Ammianus, Constantius handled foreign wars rather badly.\footnote{Amm. Marc. XXI.16,15: \textit{in externis bellis hic princeps fuit saucius et adflictus.}} So while it is certainly true that Ammianus did not lose any sleep over Constantius’ death, in Ammianus’ eyes the emperor’s Christianity did not directly factor into Constantius’ motives or his incompetence in defending Roman Mesopotamia against Shapur.\footnote{On this point, see Hunt, “Christians and Christianity,” 187.}

As we read in other sources, Constantius, irrespective of his religion or his support for Christianity, is still depicted as a divine emperor of old by pagan rhetoricians: “Indeed, the writers of imperial panegyrics,” notes Lightfoot, “drew very little distinction between the emperor and the divine.” Further, Lightfoot points out, “there persisted into the fourth century a tradition of pagan worship of the emperor. So we find the eulogist [and pagan philosopher], Themistius, emphasizing Constantius’ god-like virtues as the reason for the Persian failures on the eastern frontier.”\footnote{Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 122-123, with reference to Themistius, Or. I.13. More generally on the idea of “divine kingship” as one shared and negotiated between the Romans and the Persians throughout late antiquity, see M. Canepa, \textit{The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).} Even Ammianus himself describes how the defenders of Amida extolled Constantius as \textit{dominus rerum et mundi}—without qualifying that such praise may have come from “Christian” citizens who were claiming such lordship for a “Christian” king.\footnote{Amm. Marc. XIX.2,11; cf. Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 123 n. 120.}

**Christian Eyewitnesses and Nisibis Divine**

Christian authors, on the other hand, in contradistinction to pagan authors such as Ammianus and Julian, were often much more explicit in their regard for the divinely-inspired defense of the Roman East, crediting the prayers of Jacob, the bishop of Nisibis,
with preventing the Persians from breaching the walls during Shapur’s first siege.55

The Historia Ecclesiastica and Historia Religiosa of Theodoret of Cyrrus

Theodoret, who wrote in the mid-fifth century and, according to Lightfoot, “conflates elements of the first and third sieges,” correctly believed that, at the time of the wars between Shapur and Constantius, the Roman soldiers among the professionally-trained legions defending the city were not Christians at all but pagans from the western hinterlands of the Empire.56 Theodoret is keen to point out that it was not the martial skill or discipline of these pagan legions that defeated Shapur and his armies; instead, Theodoret claims, Nisibis was rescued by the One who was worshipped by the pious from among the Roman citizens.57

According to Theodoret, the successful defense of Nisibis was all the more miraculous in that Shapur’s tactics to win the city included incredible feats of engineering and formidable amounts of manpower. The Persians, Theodoret claims, constructed a series of massive earthen levees in order to dam the river Mygdonius, the city’s water source. Their intent was to collect enough water so that when they broke the dam the reservoir stored up behind it would become an unstoppable hydro-ram directed (via channels created by more levees) against the walls of the city. This far-

55 As Lightfoot notes (“Facts and Fiction,” 111), the “three sieges of the mid-fourth century are variously treated in the surviving sources. Little is known of the first siege, which probably occurred in the spring of 338; it is referred to mainly in the works of Christian hagiographers. The second siege has left even less trace in the historical record; the only certain fact known about it is its date, 346. By contrast, the third siege has almost an overabundance of material.” On the legends about Jacob of Nisibis and the use of his hagiography in the establishment of Nisibis as a divinely-defended Christian city, see Peeters, “La legende de saint Jacques de Nisibis”; P. Kruger, “Jacob von Nisibis in syrischer und armenischer Überlieferung,” Mus 81 (1968): 161-179; J.-M. Fiey, “Les évêques de Nisibe au temps de Saint Éphrem,” PdO 4 (1973): 123-135; and D. Bundy, “Jacob of Nisibis as a Model for the Episcopacy,” Mus 104 (1991): 235-249.

56 Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 112; for the dual accounts of Theodoret see HE II.30,1-14 and HR I.11-12.

57 Theod. HE II.30,1

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fetched attempt at breaching the walls of Nisibis proved brilliantly successful.

According to Theodoret, once Shapur ordered his men to unleash the power of the water, the raging torrent obliterated the bulwarks on the sides of the city into which, and out of which, it flowed. Upon seeing that his laborious scheme had, in a single gush, destroyed meticulously constructed walls that had undoubtedly taken months to build, Shapur rested his army for the remainder of the day in order to allow the mud to dry and to thereby ease the next-day’s crossing into the exposed, and now completely indefensible, city.\textsuperscript{58}

Theodoret was far from the only late ancient historian to weave tales about the Persians’ use of the river Mygdonius in their assault on the city. In Julian’s telling of the story, Shapur, “the King of the Parthians” \textit{encircled} Nisibis with levees, “then he let the Mygdonius flow into these, and transformed all the space about the city into a lake, and completely hemmed it in as though it were an island, so that only the ramparts stood out and showed a little above the water. Then he besieged it by bringing up ships with siege-engines on board.”\textsuperscript{59}

A number of scholars have remarked upon the similarities between Julian’s account of a ship-borne assault on Nisibis via an artificial lake and Heliodorus of Emesa’s tale of a comparable offensive on the Egyptian city of Syene in his Greek novel the \textit{Aethiopica}. Some have argued that the scene in the \textit{Aethiopica}—which recounts the channeling of the Nile into a ring of embankments around Syene—is a fictionalized version of the \textit{real} events at Nisibis as reported by Julian. Others have concluded precisely the opposite, suggesting that it was \textit{Julian} who must have absorbed elements of the assuredly fictional \textit{Aethiopica} in order to construct his account of Shapur’s marvelous

\textsuperscript{58} Theod. \textit{HE} II.30,6-7

\textsuperscript{59} Julian, \textit{Or.} II, 62c
efforts against Nisibis. Like Theodoret, Julian also mentions that the Mygdonius was used as a battering ram, thus giving the river a narrative role that, in Lightfoot’s words, “agrees very closely with that described by the other sources.”

In Theodoret’s version of the events, after successfully bringing down the walls of Nisibis, Shapur’s army spent the night resting and preparing for the following-day’s pillaging of the city. But when the sun rose and the morning’s first light fell upon

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60 In addition to Julian, Or. II, 62c, see Or. I, 28b on the waters around Nisibis; cf. Heliod. Aeth. IX.3-11. For a brief discussion of the similarities between the two accounts, see Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 117-119. The two most notable studies of the issue are T. Szepessy, “Die ‘Neudatierung’ des Heliodorus und die Belagerung von Nisibis,” in Actes de la XIIème Conférence Internationale d’Études Classiques, “Eirene” (Bucharest/Amsterdam, 1975) 279-287, and idem, “Le siège de Nisibe et la chronologie d’Héliodore,” AAntHung 24 (1976): 247-276. Szepessy’s argument that Julian drew upon Heliodorus hinges upon the premise that Heliodorus wrote in the early third century and not contemporaneously with Julian in the mid-fourth century as others have argued. Glen Bowersock pulled no punches in castigating Szepessy’s thesis as “nonsense that has done much damage.” The issue of dating aside, Bowersock calls the idea that Julian would have purposefully used a fictional account to describe an historical event in a speech in praise of an emperor a notion “so obviously absurd that it is hard to believe that either Szepessy himself or anyone else could have believed it.” See appendix B (“The Aethiopica of Heliodorus”) in G.W. Bowersock, Fiction as History. Nero to Julian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 153-155.

In defense of Szepessy, however, it should be noted that only part of Bowersock’s critique is correct. Bowersock is right that Szepessy misreads Ephrem’s Syriac when Szepessy attempts to show how Julian and Heliodorus differ from Ephrem’s account in the same mistaken way. But Bowersock’s refusal to even entertain the idea that Julian’s narrative could have drawn upon a fictitious tale is less warranted. Szepessy takes Ephrem’s term for the earthworks (tellâ) built by Shapur as “mounds” (see Eph. CJ II.19), whereas he takes the Greek term (χωματα) used by both Julian and Heliodorus (Julian Or. I, 27b; Aeth. IX.3) as something much stronger—not just “earthworks” but a “dam.” Although Bowersock is right that tellâ and χωματα can both mean “earthworks,” and that the philological basis for Szepessy’s argument that Ephrem could not have meant “dam” is therefore wrong, Bowersock’s further insistence that the shared reference to “earthworks” thereby proves that Julian and Heliodorus are reflecting events that occurred during the “actual siege of Nisibis” does not make much sense. As Lightfoot indicates (110-111), while it is true that Persian earthworks and the river Mygdonius factor prominently in most accounts of the sieges of Nisibis, “the ships [mentioned by Julian] are wholly absent from the works of Ephraem. … The omission of ships carrying towers is incomprehensible if they were actually part of a major attack on the city … Szepessy, therefore, concluded that the ships and lake which figure so prominently in Julian’s account must be fictitious, since the Christian tradition would not have failed to mention them if they were based on fact in order to enhance the story of Nisibis’ wondrous and divinely-inspired salvation” (117).

61 See Or. I, 30a, and Lightfoot, “Facts and Fiction,” 119. Lightfoot reasonably concludes that some of Julian’s material “accurately reflects the events at Nisibis.” As historically accurate as some of Julian’s material might be, Lightfoot also notes that the emperor “added to this material certain aspects that can only be regarded as pure invention, and Heliodorus remains the most plausible source for the episode involving the embankment, the lake and the ships.”
Nisibis, Shapur and his army realized with utter dismay that the huge breaches in the city walls had been repaired during the night—in Theodoret’s telling, miraculously repaired thanks to the prayers of Jacob, the bishop of Nisibis.62

As he gazed in wonder upon the rebuilt walls, Shapur saw Constantius adding insult to injury by parading atop the battlements wearing the imperial diadem and his robes of kingly purple. Since the Roman emperor was supposed to have been away at Antioch at the time, Shapur berated his advisors for failing to inform him that the Roman caesar was in fact present and opposing him here in Mesopotamia. When the Persian king’s attendants insisted that Constantius really was at Antioch, Shapur realized that he was not seeing the emperor himself, but only an apparition, which Theodoret says led Shapur to exclaim: “[the Christian] God is fighting for the Romans.”63

Shapur’s realization that he was engaged in a battle with the divine became all the more clear (in the Christian recounting of events) when bishop Jacob of Nisibis summoned swarming clouds of flies and mosquitoes “so that through these little creatures [the Persians] might understand the power of the Protector of the Romans.”64 The thousands upon thousands of insects called up by Jacob filled the trunks of the fearsome Persian elephants and the noses and ears of their horses, sending the battle-clad animals into a frenzied stampede and summarily ending the siege with the Persian army fleeing in disarray, overrun by their own terrified elephants and cavalry.65

As with Theodoret’s story of Shapur’s use of the Mygdonius in his siege of the city, the story about the flies and mosquitoes is also echoed and re-told in the non-
Christian historical tradition. Ammianus very clearly indicates that the Persians had endured a mosquito-caused stampede of their own animals. The Roman historian explains that in light of the debacle that the Persians had suffered at Nisibis a dozen years earlier, the Persian elephant drivers who pursued the Romans as they retreated from Mesopotamia after Julian’s death carried knives bound to their right hands so that they could quickly sever the spinal column of any beast that became uncontrollable.66

The Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian

Whatever the “facts” of the matter, Theodoret’s account of the miraculous defense of Nisibis likely derives (directly or indirectly) from the original Syriac Life of Ephrem the Syrian.67 Ephrem’s Life is a hagiographical portrait of the renowned theologian that preserves the stories about the flood of Nisibis, Shapur’s vision of Constantius upon the city walls, and the two miracles wrought by Jacob. By way of highlighting the extremely complex interplay among the various sources, it is important to note that there is also a sixth-century Syriac Life of Ephrem that, according to Sebastian Brock, descends from Syriac translations of Greek translations of Syriac stories about Ephrem that are transmitted by Sozomen. Theodoret may, therefore, have gleaned his information about the siege of Nisibis either from Sozomen or a shared Greek source rather than directly from the earlier Syriac Life.68

66 Amm. Marc. XXV.1,15: Quibus insidentes magistri manubriatos cultros dexteris manibus inligatos gestabant, acceptae apud Nisibin memores cladis, et si ferociens animal vires exuperasset regentis, ne reversum per suos, ut tunc acciderat, confisam sterneret plehem, vertebram, quae caput a cervice disterminat, ictu maximo terebrabant.


68 Soz. HE III.16; S. Brock, “St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” Hugoye 2 (1999), www.syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html. For references to Sozomen in Brock’s article, see paragraphs 4 and 14 as well as the appendices that outline the parts of the later Syriac Life that likely descend from the stories preserved by Sozomen. According to Sidney Griffith, the sixth-century Syriac Life of Ephrem paints a portrait of an anachronistic “Ephrem byzantinus” as opposed to an earlier, and more “authentic” (if such a
The account of the defense of Nisibis in Ephrem’s *Life* differs from Theodoret’s version, however, in that it champions Ephrem as a co-hero and credits Ephrem’s prayers (in addition to those of Jacob) with the city’s salvation. Ephrem’s *Life*, in turn, seems to be based upon Ephrem’s own literary accounts of the siege of Nisibis—the only extant eyewitness tales of the trials of Nisibis during the mid-fourth century. Lightfoot summarizes the nature of all our sources this way:

we should recognize two distinct traditions in dealing with the evidence for the siege of 350. The first is based on the eyewitness accounts of local Christians, written in Syriac; the second appears in the works of pagan authors who, as educated men from the higher ranks of society, followed the main stream of Greek and Roman literature. Although they, too, may have drawn to some extent on reliable contemporary reports, either in the form of official dispatches or personal memoirs, the loss of the relevant section of Ammianus’ *Histories* deprives us of a secure basis on which to judge this pagan tradition. Indeed, we are left to depend almost entirely on the passages in Julian’s highly rhetorical speeches, and faith in his account has in the past led to considerable misunderstanding of the nature of the siege.

Ephrem’s reminiscences—written in exile in Edessa after the loss of Nisibis to the Persians in 363 CE—are theological *hymns*. Although every mention of Nisibis and the city’s defense in Ephrem’s hymns is allusive and theological—rather than, for example, the more straight “historical” narrative found in Ammianus and Theodoret—Ephrem clearly refers to the flooded Mygdonius, the fallen walls of the city, and the formidable Persian elephants. He cites the three bishops of the city—Jacob, Babu, and Vologeses—

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71 Portions of a number of Ephrem’s hymns refer to the third siege of Nisibis: CNiṣ I.3, 8; II.9, 17-19; III.6; XI.15-17; and XIII.4-6, 17-18. *Mēm. Nic.* XV.97-120, 145-170 refer to the leadership of bishop Vologeses of Nisibis during the third siege. *CJ* deals with the battle for Nisibis and the aftermath of its loss.
during each of the three sieges as the true defenders of Nisibis, saying: “The first siege was defended by the first glorious priest; the second siege was defended by the second merciful priest; and the prayers of the last one repaired our ruptured (walls) secretly.”

Ephrem, moreover, is insistent that mere “sackcloth” defeated the warriors of Persia who were clad in full battle regalia: “The seas invaded and were conquered by sackcloth; hills were raised and they humbled them. Elephants arrived and were defeated by sackcloth, ashes and prayer.” In the second of his Hymns against Julian, Ephrem again says that the “sackcloth of the blessed one preserved the city that was head of the region of Mesopotamia, and it was magnified.”

**Christianity and the Roman East in Ammianus’ Res gestae**

The differences in the narrative approaches of Julian, Ammianus, Ephrem, and the Christian historians (such as Theodoret) who derive their account of the sieges of Nisibis from Ephrem could not be more striking. Ammianus is concerned with conveying the history of the Roman army, and he does so with more than a modicum of deference to the historiographical tradition in which he was trained. Similarly, for Julian, the tales that he knew about the defense of the East afforded him an opportunity to laud his cousin Constantius and to indulge in the welcome intellectual diversion of writing a fantastical narrative set-piece from his post in far-off Gaul. For Ephrem (and his heirs), however, the whole conflict is one of Christians against powerful adversaries. Indeed, the opponents of Nisibis (we find out later on from Ephrem) were summoned by God as punishment for the sins of the city. And yet the opponents of Nisibis were also,

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72 CNis. XIII.17


paradoxically, the force behind the recommitment of the city’s citizens to Christ: “He afflicted us by the breaches that He might punish our crimes,” writes Ephrem. “He raised the mounds that thereby, He might humble our boasting. He made a breach for the seas that thereby, He might wash away our pollution. He shut us in that we might gather together in His Temple.”

For Ephrem, as with most Christian historians of the period, all is to be interpreted against a backdrop of providence. By contrast, when Ammianus mentions the citizens of Nisibis, he says nothing about their Christianity—particularly Christian religious concerns are not within the narrative purview of traditional pagan historiography. And yet there are, however, two instances wherein Ammianus does reveal that Shapur had direct dealings with the Christians of the eastern frontier.

The first instance occurs in the context of the surrender of two Roman fortresses—Reman and Busan. According to Ammianus, Shapur had learned that the fortresses were the repositories for much of the wealth of the people who lived in the area, and that the wife of Craugasius of Nisibis—a highly-distinguished and influential citizen of the city—was in residence there. After sacking the two fortresses, Shapur sought out and captured Craugasius’ wife, believing that through a husband’s love for a

75 CNis. II.9; trans. J.T. Stopford in Dodgeon and Lieu, Roman Eastern Frontier, 194. My emphasis.

76 See Hunt, “Christians and Christianity,” 188: “Self-consciously the classical Roman historian, Ammianus displayed a reticence in discussing contemporary Christian affairs because, whatever their importance for the history of the Roman empire in his day, they were no part of his literary heritage. Moreover, when Christian matters are mentioned, Ammianus may be expected (although he does not always do so) to deploy periphrastic formulae, such as the ‘ut appellant’ expression in the passage quoted about Constantius: this practice does not imply ignorance on his part concerning Christian institutions, but is his way of adhering to classical models—Christians and Christianity are thus distanced from the appropriate subject matter of the Roman historian, admitted to the narrative only with an apologetic affectation.”

77 Amm. Marc. XVIII.10,1-4
wife Craugasius might be pressured into betraying Nisibis. Craugasius’ wife is not described as being Christian, but, according to Ammianus, when Shapur was interrogating her, he discerned that some other women among those present at the fortresses of Reman and Busan were “Christian virgins.” Just as Shapur sought to persuade Craugasius that it was in his own self-interest to turn traitor, he surmised that being kind to these Christian virgins—by keeping them unharmed and by allowing them to practice their religion unhindered—would be good way of guilefully demonstrating that he was a kind and genteel ruler.

One wishes Ammianus would have said more about the Christian virgins of Reman and Busan. While some have read this passage as evidence that Ammianus knew that Shapur was a persecutor of Christians, such an interpretation is unwarranted. In mentioning Shapur’s good behavior toward Christian virgins—specifically within the context of the story about Craugrasius’ wife—Ammianus does not suggest that only Christians thought Shapur was cruel. Rather, Ammianus says that Shapur acted in the way he did so that all the inhabitants of Roman Mesopotamia, all of whom had endured

78 Amm. Marc. XVIII.10,3: Audiens enim coniugem miro eius amore flagrare, hoc praemio Nisibenam proditionem mercari se posse arbitrabatur. According to Ammianus, Craugasius did desert to the Persian side to be with his wife (XIX.9,3-8). In fact, he became an advisor to Shapur and was regarded by the Persian king as the most useful Roman deserter second only to Antoninus. Antoninus is described as having been a rich merchant (and subsequently the accountant and bodyguard of the governor of Mesopotamia) who ran into serious debt with a rough bunch of creditors. To save his skin and his station, Antoninus learned all that he could about the movements of supplies and soldiers and money along the Roman eastern frontier and then took that knowledge, along with his family, and fled across the border to offer it to Shapur in exchange for asylum (XVIII.5,1-3).

79 Amm. Marc. XVIII.10,4: Inventas tamen alias quoque virgines Christiano ritu cultui divino sacratas custodiri intactas et religioni servire solito more nullo vetante praecepit, lenitutinem profecto in tempore simulans, ut omnes, quos antehac diritate crudelitateque terrebat, sponte sua metu remoto venirent exemplis recentibus docti humanitate eum et moribus iam placidis magnitudinem temperasse fortunae.

80 Hunt (“Christians and Christianity,” 189, n. 19) suggests that this passage indicates that Ammianus “is obviously aware of the reputation of Sapor II as a persecutor of Christians.” I am not so sure that the passage can be read as being so obvious, particularly since there is no other evidence in the Res gestae to suggest that Ammianus was “obviously aware” that Shapur was known as a persecutor.
Shapur’s raids and the danger of war for years, might lay aside their fears and be persuaded to support the Persian side. In demonstrating that neither he nor his soldiers would harm neither the wealthy wives of well-connected citizens, nor consecrated Christian virgins, Ammianus means to imply that Shapur believed that he had stumbled upon a good way of insidiously winning over the populace of the region: through a sly combination of blackmail, false humility, and calculated magnanimity.

As much as we can speculate about the Christian virgins mentioned by Ammianus, there is another instance of Shapur’s direct dealings with Christians that is perhaps more interesting and more relevant to the present discussion. Ammianus provides an account of the siege (and loss) of a qasṭra (fortress town) called “Bezabde,” which was located about one hundred kilometers to the northeast of Nisibis.⁸¹ According to Ammianus, Shapur marched to Bezabde in 359 CE—purposefully bypassing the well-defended city of Nisibis—just after he took another Roman garrison town called Singara.⁸² Ammianus explains that Singara, which had been defended by the First Flavian and First Parthian legions as well as many native citizens, fell to the Persians because it was insufficiently defended. In fact, the lion’s share of the Roman army was guarding Nisibis.⁸³

Bezabde’s defenses were stronger (in terms of numbers) than those of Singara: three legions, rather than two, defended Bezabde, including a large contingent of archers who hailed from the region.⁸⁴ When Shapur arrived before the walls of the fortress of

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⁸² Amm. Marc. XX.7,1: Exciso itaque oppido rex Nisibin prudenti consilio vitans, memor nimirum quae saepius ibi pertulerat, dextrum latus itineribus petit obliquis, Bezabden.

⁸³ Amm. Marc. XX.6,8-9

⁸⁴ Amm. Marc. XX.7,1
Bezabde, he hoped to persuade the citizens with “sweet promises” (promissorum dulcedine), an approach that mirrored his initial entreaty to the citizens of Singara, as well as his false piety toward the captured women of Reman and Busan. But Shapur’s promises fell on deaf ears. So his armies attacked, and the battle for the fortress raged intermittently for several days.

After substantial losses by both sides, Ammianus relates that the Christian bishop of the fortified city went out to discuss the intractable situation directly with Shapur. The unnamed bishop (unsurprisingly) had little success in persuading Shapur that preventing further loss of life on both sides was a sufficient reason for the Persian king to end his siege. Clearly, the fact that a bishop—rather than a magistrate of the city or an embassy from among the army—served as the peace envoy to Shapur is striking, and Ammianus’ report is intriguing evidence of Shapur’s direct dealings with Christians in frontier towns governed by the Roman Empire.

Even more striking is the malevolent rumor that Ammianus repeats concerning the details of the bishop’s brief audience with the king. The peace-seeking bishop of Bezabde, Ammianus claims, was suspected by many of having confided to Shapur which parts of the city’s walls were the weakest, since, upon the resumption of the Persian siege following the bishop’s return to the city, the weakest parts of the walls were

85 Amm. Marc. XX.7,1; XX.6,3; XVIII.10,4
86 Amm. Marc. XX.7,7: Christianae legis; XX.7,9: episcopum
87 Amm. Marc. XX.7,8: Ubi data copia dicendi quae vellet, suadebat placido sermone discedere Persas ad sua, post communes partis utriusque luctus formidari etiam maiores adfirmans forsitan adventuros.
attacked.\textsuperscript{88} Once the city finally fell to the Persians—after vicious fighting atop the crumbling walls and hand-to-hand combat in the narrow alleyways of the town—even mothers and children were butcheted. Those who were not killed were led off into captivity.\textsuperscript{89}

Although Ammianus repeats the rumor about the bishop’s betrayal of Bezabde (a rumor that Ammianus, again, claims was widely spread), the historian does not seem to believe it himself. As David Hunt notes in his article about Christians and Christianity in the \textit{Res gestae}: “Apart from the fact that the rumour about the bishop is mentioned at all, there is nothing in Ammianus’ account to indicate that his purpose was to incriminate him on a charge of treachery: he goes out of his way, in fact, to say that he did not believe the story.”\textsuperscript{90}

In both of Ammianus’ asides about Christian inhabitants of the fortress-cities of Roman Mesopotamia—that is, the brief mention of the Christian virgins of Reman and Busan and the story about the bishop of Bezabde—Ammianus had the opportunity to malign Christians, to broadly characterize the citizens of Roman Mesopotamia as “Christian,” or to suggest that Constantius’ motives in the East may have been (at least in part) religiously motivated. In neither instance that I have cited, however, is it clear that the references to Christians in Roman Mesopotamia either mean very much or are some sort of backhanded way of critiquing Christians.

Nevertheless, Ammianus’ relative neutrality on religious matters has been called

\textsuperscript{88} Amm. Marc. XX.7,9: \textit{Perstrinxit tamen suspicio vana quaedam episcopum, ut opinor, licet adseveratione vulgata multorum, quod clandestino conloquio Saporem docuerat, quae moenium adpeteret membra ut fragilia intrinsecus et invalida. Hocque exinde veri simile visum est, quod postea intuta loca cariue nutantia cum exsullatione magna, velut regentibus penetrualium callidis contemplalibiter machinae feriebant hostiles.}

\textsuperscript{89} Amm. Marc. XX.7,15. The “captives” of Bezabde are discussed in chapter six.

\textsuperscript{90} Hunt, “Christians and Christianity,” 196.
into question. Timothy Barnes, for example, argues that Ammianus, when he mentions Christianity, “assiduously tries to appear to deliver a balanced verdict” but in fact reveals a deep-seated antipathy towards Christians. Disputing Hunt’s assessment of the episode involving the bishop of Bezabde, Barnes contends “it is a serious misreading of Ammianus to argue that Ammianus … had no intention ‘to incriminate him on a charge of treachery.’” Instead of omitting the rumor about the bishop that should have been unworthy of repeating, especially if Ammianus did not agree with it, Barnes proposes that Ammianus deliberately and calculatedly chose to repeat the story about the bishop’s treachery:

[Ammianus] had learned from Tacitus how to use rumors to suggest disreputable conduct or a dishonest motive while taking no authorial responsibility for the dubious information thus conveyed. … Ammianus could neither know nor report what the bishop actually said to Shapur; yet he states very clearly that after the interview the Persian king attacked the defenses of Bezabde where they were weak and could be breached. In Ammianus’ opinion, Christians were intrinsically unpatriotic.

Barnes’ theory about Ammianus’ motive in repeating the rumor is tantalizing. It is also a subtle and very intriguing way of unpacking Ammianus’ account of the loss of Bezabde. But if Ammianus did see Christians as unpatriotic, and if he does intend to communicate as much by relating a rumor about the supposedly traitorous bishop of Bezabde, then that only further reiterates the broader points that I have been attempting to make. For if Constantius, following his father Constantine, was even partly motivated to engage Shapur on the basis of religious concerns and the plight of the Christians of Persia, then surely the bishop and the Christian citizens of towns such as Bezabde would have been supporters of the Romans against the Persians. That Christians could be roundly rumored to be unpatriotic, even traitorous, thus helps call into question any

91 Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, 87-88.

notion of a “Christian” Roman Empire in the mid-fourth century. Furthermore, if the bishop of Bezabde had known of Shapur’s reputation as a persecutor of Christians in Persia, then he surely would not have freely given over information that might have hastened Shapur’s capture of Bezabde and its (Christian?) citizens. Therefore, if, as Ammianus reports, a rumor was circulating that the bishop of Bezabde betrayed the city’s weaknesses to Shapur, then perhaps the larger conclusion to be drawn is not one about a fork-tongued Ammianus subtly slandering Christians, but about the defenders of Bezabde and others known to Ammianus who believed that a Christian bishop of a town on the Roman frontier would rather be subject to the whims of the Persian army than stand with the defenders of Constantius’ Empire.

**Losing Nisibis: A Second Alexander, the Triumph of Shapur, and a Second Constantine**

In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to return to Ephrem’s account of the fall of Nisibis while introducing a related Edessene source—the sixth-century Syriac Julian Romance. I am particularly interested in considering the roles of Julian and Shapur in the loss of Nisibis, a city that Ephrem simultaneously constructs as being Christian and lamentably pagan. Intriguingly, the role of Shapur as a “persecutor” is muted or completely unmentioned in our sources—it is Julian who is of far graver concern.

**Julian as Alexander the Great**

“The Final Campaign,” the appropriately-titled final chapter of Glen Bowersock’s crisp narrative of the life and nineteen-month reign of Julian the Apostate, begins:

Like Alexander the Great, Julian had turned his eyes irrevocably to the East. He had gone to Antioch to prepare for a campaign against the Persians, who had for so long menaced the armies of Constantius. … When the Persians, who viewed Julian’s presence at Antioch with understandable concern, offered to send an embassy empowered to work out a peace settlement, the emperor rejected the proposal at once. An embassy was unnecessary: the Persians would be seeing him soon.\(^93\)

Julian, who became the undisputed Augustus of the Roman Empire following
Constantius’ death in November of 361 CE, had his sights set on Persia almost
immediately. Julian had already left Constantinople and was on his way to Antioch by
May of 362. Ten months later, preparations for his ambitious and dangerous Persian
campaign were complete and Julian and his army were marching towards the central
Mesopotamian plains.

Julian’s reign, though brief, is one of the best documented of any late Roman
emperor, including that of Constantine. The primary source material on Julian is, as
Bowersock notes, “so abundant that novelists and dramatists, not to mention historians,
have to choose from a wide variety of important witnesses who represent a spectrum of
prejudices and preconceptions about the emperor.” Julian’s own writings, however, are
a gauge for measuring some of the widespread prejudices and preconceptions against
him.

In the emperor’s letter to the eulogist Themistius, he likens himself to Alexander
and Marcus Aurelius. In his satirical work, The Caesars, composed in Antioch as
preparations for the Persian campaign were underway, Julian’s Constantine is made to
play the pious fool, but Julian’s caricatures of Alexander and Marcus Aurelius seem
purposefully designed as representations of Julian himself. As Bowersock aptly notes,
“Once a man has chosen his heroes, it is remarkable how efficiently they are cast in his
likeness.”

94 Bowersock, Julian the Apostate, 1.
95 Julian, To Themistius, 253A
96 Bowersock, Julian the Apostate, 16.
In her intellectual biography of Julian, Polymnia Athanassiadi-Fowden remarks that in the emperor’s writings at Antioch he displayed a progressive identification of himself with Alexander: Julian was “increasingly mesmerized by an Alexandrian vision of Persian conquest,” she writes. Indeed, in The Caesars, Julian portrays Alexander as someone on a quasi-religious mission, someone who, in Bowersock’s words, “subdued the Persians in the name of Hellenism.” After the time he left Antioch for Persia in the early spring of 363, Julian, according to the church historian Socrates, was so under the sway of his own daydreaming that he believed that his Persian expedition would not only rival but exceed Alexander’s. The utter fixation on the idea of Julian-as-Alexander is so pervasive in the emperor’s own writings that Athanassiadi-Fowden reckons Julian’s war in terms that are clearly intended to summon both Constantine and the idea of a religious crusade. She writes that Julian “thought himself responsible towards his God for the spiritual salvation even of those outside the embryonic pagan Church, whether Christians within the empire or pagans without.”

The military-historical details of Julian’s Persian campaign have been analyzed and written about at length by others, so for present purposes it will suffice to say little more than that the campaign did not end as Julian had hoped. As his army was hastily retreating to the safety of the Roman Mesopotamian provinces, the emperor was wounded by a spear and succumbed to his injuries soon thereafter. Unsurprisingly (and

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99 Soc. HE III.21.6: καὶ ὀνειροπολήσας τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνος δόξαν λαβεῖν ἢ καὶ μᾶλλον ὑπερβαίνειν.

100 Athanassiadi-Fowden, Julian and Hellenism, 192, with further reference to Lib. Or. XVIII.282, wherein Libanius explains the expectation that Persia would not just be governed by Rome but that Persians would become Romans in everything from language, dress, and hairstyle to law, cult, and even penchant for sophistry.
following the “spectrum” of prejudices mentioned by Bowersock), the supposed identity of the spear-thrower varies widely depending upon which source one consults—accused culprits run the gamut from Persian soldiers to Christians from among Julian’s own army.\(^{101}\)

As a result of Julian’s death and the intractable situation in which the beleaguered Roman army found itself, Jovian, Julian’s successor, was left with only one option: to spare his army from annihilation, he had to sue for peace. With the Romans trapped and under obvious duress, Jovian was in no position to negotiate even mildly unfavorable terms; as a result, the treaty to which Jovian was forced to accede was as bad for the Romans as the previous treaty (in 299 CE) had been for the Persians.\(^{102}\)

Ammianus, the most detailed source for the treaty of 363, explains that five entire provinces on the eastern side of the Tigris (\textit{nostra quinque regiones Transstigritanas}) along with fifteen fortresses (\textit{cum castellis quindecim}), including Nisibis, were handed over to the Persians.\(^{103}\) Additionally, according to Ammianus, Jovian agreed to give Shapur what amounted to a free hand in Armenia—as part of the treaty, Jovian pledged not to aid the Rome’s Armenian allies against any Persian incursion into the territory. The only

\(^{101}\) Amm. Marc. XXV.3,6 indicates that Julian was hit in the liver with a spear. But Ammianus also notes that it was uncertain whence (\textit{incertum unde}) the spear came. While Ammianus blames no one in particular (he does not suggest that it may have even been \textit{rumored} that Julian’s assailant might have been a Christian), Libanius (\textit{Or.} XVIII.274,5), by contrast, proposes that Christians from among the Roman army were likely to have been responsible. That Christians killed Julian is not an idea from which Christian historians sought to distance themselves. Quite the opposite. Sozomen (\textit{HE VI.1-2}) quotes Libanius directly and confirms that a Christian may well have been the one who killed Julian. See further Bowersock, \textit{Julian the Apostle}, 116; McVey, \textit{Ephrem}, 247 n. 119.


\(^{103}\) Amm. Marc. XXV.7,9-12. Jovian does not come off well in Ammianus’ account; the new Christian emperor capitulates readily to all Shapur’s demands. Eunapius speaks about how lazy Jovian was: contrary to later Christian accounts, Eunapius claims that Jovian gluttonously used up all the resources in Nisibis, maligned the city’s inhabitants, and even burned a temple in the city. See Eun. fr. 29, trans. R.C. Blockley, \textit{The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire}, vol. 2 (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983).
concession that Shapur made, and one that even then was extracted with difficulty, was to allow the Romans to evacuate the citizens of Nisibis and the nearby city of Singara before the fortress towns were given to the Persians.¹⁰⁴

**Ephrem in Nisibis: The Raising of the Persian Standard and the Fall of Julian**

Shapur’s concession allowing the relocation of the citizens of Nisibis unwittingly contributed to the literary coming-to-terms with the loss of the city as it is narrated by Ephrem in his *Carmina Nisibena* and, more poignantly, his *Hymns against Julian*. Both sets of hymns were composed during Ephrem’s ten-year exile in Edessa—sometime between his forced deportation from Nisibis in 363 and his death in Edessa, while ministering to plague victims, in 373. The influence of Ephrem’s lamentations on the later literary tradition (in both Greek and Syriac), combined with Julian’s death and the elevation of Jovian, has deeply colored our view of fourth century history. Ephrem’s perspective—particularly by way of its transmission and transfiguration in later ecclesiastical histories and other sources—has, moreover, contributed to a skewed perception of the city of Nisibis and its former inhabitants as well as to the role of the city in initially energizing Shapur’s supposed persecution of the Christians of Persia. While Ephrem’s *Hymns against Julian* are often cited by those interested specifically in Julian and the aftermath of the emperor’s death, little attention has been paid to how Ephrem narrates, describes, and conceptualizes Shapur’s role in the *Hymns against Julian*. What Ephrem says about Shapur in not just surprising, but completely flies in the face of the idea of the Persian king as a persecutor of Christians. For Ephrem, *Julian* was the true threat to Christians.

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As Lightfoot correctly noted about the history of the third siege of Nisibis, there are two traditions: one that arises from Ephrem; a second that stems from Ammianus.

¹⁰⁴ Amm. Marc. XXV.7,11: *difficile hoc adeptus ut Nisibis et Singara sine incolis transirent in iura Persarum.*
The same can be said about the religious nature of the city itself: according to Ephrem, Nisibis was a Christian city; for Ammianus, Nisibis was an important Roman stronghold, full stop—as we have seen, he says nothing about the “Christianness” of the city one way or the other.

Were Ammianus our only source for the history of Nisibis from Shapur’s first siege of the city (in 337/338) up to the Roman evacuation of the city twenty-five years later, we would have no reason at all to think that Nisibis was particularly “Christian” in the mid-fourth century. In fact, we know perplexingly little about the actual religious composition of Nisibis during the time of Ephrem’s residence—so little that Paul Russell, citing Fergus Millar, can summarize our ignorance this way:

It is certainly clear that a variety of cultural influences was at work throughout the life of the city of Nisibis. However, how to describe these in any detail, and even the period in which each was most particularly active, is impossible for us to map. As Millar says, ‘A social and economic history of the Near East in the Roman period cannot be written. None of the conditions for such a history are present.’

While ongoing and yet-to-be-done archaeological work may prove to be something of an antidote to such pessimism about our knowledge of the social history of Nisibis and other parts of Roman Mesopotamia, the comments of Russell and Millar are not an overstatement.

While the actual state of social and religious affairs in mid-fourth-century Nisibis remains perplexingly murky to the historians of today, late ancient Christian historians were certain of the city’s fundamental devotion to Christ. So certain, in fact, that Sozomen claims that when the citizens of Nisibis begged for Julian’s help against the advancing Persian threat that the emperor refused to send reinforcements because the city was wholly Christianized (ὡς παντελῶς Χριστιανιζουσι) and because the...

Nisibenes would neither reopen the temples nor agree to take refuge in the pagan holy places in the city (καὶ μήτε τοὺς ναοὺς ἀνοίγουσι μήτε εἰς τὰ ἱερὰ φοιτῶσιν).\textsuperscript{106}

Inasmuch as Julian’s own writings and other sources (such as Sozomen) attest, Julian’s rule was not one that was benevolent towards Christians. But the emperor’s \textit{Orations} for Constantius also show that just a few years prior to becoming emperor Julian had no qualms about rhetorically celebrating the defense of Nisibis against Persian aggression. The idea that Julian, once he became the sole ruler of the Empire, might have abandoned such a strategically important city merely out of spite for the supposed Christian leanings of its citizens is thus anti-pagan invention pure and simple. Still, without necessarily accepting Sozomen’s obvious smear of Julian’s pagan zealotry, modern historians do still tend to believe that Nisibis was a Christian city, but on little evidence other than what is suggested by later Christian sources. Samuel Lieu, for example, refers to the Nisibene evacuees in Edessa and Amida as “mainly Christian citizens,” but provides no evidence for why he assumes this to have been the case.\textsuperscript{107}

In fact, contrary to Sozomen’s insistence that Nisibis was a stalwartly Christian city during Julian’s rule, the second of Ephrem’s \textit{Hymns against Julian} decries just how \textit{pagan} Nisibis had become during Julian’s brief reign—or, perhaps, how pagan the city \textit{continued} to be. While Ephrem accounts for the successful defense of Nisibis against Shapur’s three sieges by pointing to the city’s faith and to the piety of the city’s three bishops during those days, he accounts for the city’s eventual \textit{loss} as a result of the city’s reversion to the pagan altar during Julian’s rule:

For thirty years the truth encompassed it [Nisibis].

\textsuperscript{106} Soz. \textit{HE} V.3,5. Similarly, Theodoret (\textit{HE} III.21), who explains in detail how Nisibis was protected by the prayers of its Christian leaders, remarks that Julian bypassed \textit{Edessa} because it was a Christian city.

\textsuperscript{107} Lieu, “Nisibis,” who further mentions that a suburb in Amida that was filled with Nisibene refugees was actually re-named “Nisibis.”
In the summer in which an idol was set up in the city, compassion fled from it and anger overran it. For empty sacrifices emptied its fullness.

The [pagan] altar that was built rooted out and expelled that altar whose sackcloth had delivered us.\textsuperscript{108}

The pagan “altar” (singular) mentioned here by Ephrem does not seem to have been just a solitary place of sacrifice set up by imperial decree, but rather—as Ephrem’s subsequent remarks attest—a widespread phenomenon embraced by the Nisibenes.

Most intriguingly, Ephrem claims that although the citizens of Nisibis may have wandered from Christ and astray into paganism during Julian’s reign, \textit{Shapur} was wise enough to know that it was the Christian god who had protected Nisibis for so many years. Ephrem relates that when Shapur finally entered Nisibis in victory that he personally witnessed the Persian king pay homage to \textit{Christian} churches while bypassing or destroying the pagan shrines of the city, including—Ephrem seems to imply—the place of the \textit{fire cult} in Nisibis!

The Magus who entered our place regarded it as holy, to our disgrace. He neglected his fire temple but honored the sanctuary. He cast down the [pagan] altars built by our laxity; he destroyed the enclosures to our shame. For he knew that from one temple alone emerged the mercy that had saved us from him three times.\textsuperscript{109}

As this remarkable passage indicates, although Shapur is presented as the destroyer of churches and the arch-persecutor of Christians in the \textit{Acts of the Persian Martyrs}, according to Ephrem he was—to the shame of the Nisibenes—the \textit{protector} of churches and the \textit{honorer} of the altar to the god who had wrought miracles against the fearsome Persian sieges. For when Ephrem refers to “our disgrace,” “our laxity,” and “our shame,” he suggests that certain Christians of Nisibis may have \textit{themselves} returned

\textsuperscript{108} \textit{CJ} II.20-21 (McVey, 240)

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{CJ} II.22 (McVey, 240)
to paganism, or at the very least that they were such an outnumbered and powerless
force in the city that they were unable (or unwilling) to stanch the upwelling of
paganism in Nisibis under Julian. Ephrem further suggests that God intended to reveal
the fickleness of Christian commitment in Nisibis through Shapur. He claims that God
delivered the city to the Persian king purposefully in order to show the Christians of the
city that even an idolater understood which god it was that had kept the city safe:

Whereas the [Roman] king became a [pagan] priest and dishonored our
churches,
the Magian king honored the sanctuary.
His honoring our sanctuary has doubled our consolation.
[God] saddened and gladdened us but did not exile us.
He reproved that errant one [Julian] by means of his erring counterpart
[Shapur];
since the priest [Julian] oppressed, He rewarded the Magus. 110

In the third Hymn against Julian, Ephrem further explains God’s motives during
the years that Nisibis endured war with the Persians. Ephrem understands that if he is
going to suggest that Shapur was a divinely-sent expedient who was brought to bring
down a pagan Roman king, he first needs to answer the perplexing question of why God
would have sufficiently aided the defense of Nisibis under Constantius, but then failed to
assist Constantine’s son in fully neutralizing the Persian menace. Ephrem’s rather
tortuous explanation is that victory had to be forestalled in order to allow time for Julian
to come to the throne, invade Persia, and then be killed:

He prevented the cross that came down from gaining victory,
not because the victorious [Jesus/Cross] was unable to gain victory,
but so that a pit might be dug for the evildoer [Julian]
who came down with his conjurers to the east.
But since he came down and was struck [by a javelin], the discerning saw
that the battle in which he would be put to shame had been lying in wait for him.
Know that because of this the time was long and delayed
so that the pure one [Constantius?] might complete the years of his kingship
and the accursed one might also complete the measure of his paganism. 111

110 CJ II.27 (McVey, 242)

111 CJ II.7-8 (McVey, 245)
Putting aside the obvious theological problem of divine foreknowledge and free will that Ephrem stumbles into in this passage, what is interesting to further note is the similarity between Ephrem’s view of Shapur II (as one who is used as a divine tool against Julian) and Lactantius and Constantine’s view of Shapur I (an unwitting tool used against Valerian).

The power divinely granted to Shapur to enable him to bring down Julian takes on a striking visuality when Julian’s corpse passes through Nisibis. The pagan emperor’s body was on its way back to Tarsus for burial when it passed through Nisibis, and the scene of Julian’s lifeless arrival in the city is described (by Ephrem and Ammianus) as occurring within the context of the official cession of Nisibis to Shapur.\textsuperscript{112} Ammianus notes that with Jovian’s permission, Bineses, a Persian noble, entered Nisibis and raised the Persian flag over the citadel, thereby signifying to the city’s inhabitants and all other Roman onlookers that the city had formally passed into Persian hands. Upon the raising of the flag, the Romans, in keeping with the terms of the treaty, were to evacuate the city immediately.\textsuperscript{113}

Preserving proper decorum, Ammianus does not dwell on the arrival or departure of Julian’s corpse during the flag-raising, but Ephrem exclaims his wonder how “by chance the corpse of that accursed one, / crossing over toward the rampart met

\textsuperscript{112} Amm. Marc. XXV.9; CJ III.1-7 (McVey, 244-245). Ammianus explains that Julian, prior to his death, had confided to his general Procopius that he wished to be interred in Tarsus (XXV.9,12), the city in which he had planned on wintering had his retreat from Mesopotamia been successful (XXIII.2,5). On the conveyance of Julian’s corpse and its ultimate burial, see M. Dimaio, “The Transfer of the Remains of the Emperor Julian from Tarsus to Constantinople,” Byzantion 48 (1978): 43-50.

\textsuperscript{113} Amm. Marc. XXV.9,1: Bineses, unus ex Persis … principe permittente Romano, civitatem ingressus, gentis suae signum ab arce extulit, submigrationem e patria civibus nuntians luctuosam.
me near the city!” Ephrem strangely delights in the simultaneity of “the standard of the captor set up on the tower” and “the corpse of the persecutor laid in a coffin,” asking rhetorically: “Who indeed set a time for meeting / when corpse and standard-bearer both at one moment were present?” As Sidney Griffith explains,

in Ephraem’s paradoxical view, the image of Nisibis, with her symbolic Persian flag standing out in the breeze, came to stand as a symbol for the defeat of the very paganism which, by the poet’s own account, had been the ultimate cause of the city’s surrender to the Persians. In her role as a symbol Nisibis became a sister-city to Jerusalem. … According to Ephraem’s way of thinking, Jews were responsible for [Jerusalem’s] destruction, because of sinfulness and failure to accept the Messiah. Nisibis surrendered and Jerusalem in ruins, therefore, served Ephraem as symbols to proclaim the surrender and ruin of Christianity’s principal rivals, paganism and Judaism respectively.

Shapur as the Savior of Roman Christians?

As important as Griffith’s study of Ephrem’s Hymns against Julian is, what Griffith does not address in his article is the proposition that must necessarily follow from the remarkably odd celebration of the upraised Persian flag over the fallen Julian. For the Persian standard represents not just the defeat of paganism in the Roman Empire through the loss of Ephrem’s own (Roman) city, but the concomitant interpretation of Shapur—most paradoxically, indeed—as a useful adversary for Christians. The twist in Ephrem’s vision of the Persian flag flying over Julian’s javelined corpse is that while Shapur is still an errant Magus and worshipper of fire, he is not once described as a persecutor of Christians. In Ephrem’s eyes, Julian is the persecutor of Christians, not Shapur.

If Ephrem had reason to believe that Shapur was a persecutor of Christians, then he would have been beset with a formidable hermeneutic task: for what would be the

114 CJ III.1 (McVey, 244)
115 CJ III.2-3 (McVey, 244)
providential or theological utility of a pagan and a persecutor (Shapur) triumphing over another pagan and persecutor (Julian)? True, Julian’s death hastened the rise of the Christian Jovian to the throne, which may have been some succor to the Christians of Nisibis. But if Shapur, in addition to Julian, had been known to the Nisibenenes as a pagan and a persecutor of Christians, then Jovian’s elevation would have come at the expense not only of Roman Mesopotamia but also the triumph of a persecutor of Christians and the abandonment of the Christians of Persia to this now-triumphant persecutor. Therefore, if one reads the Hymns against Julian with the idea of Shapur as a persecutor of Christians in mind, then the Persian king’s victory over Julian can be nothing short of utterly perplexing. In Ephrem’s interpretation of the events, however, Shapur is not characterized as a persecutor, but rather, as we have seen, as a pagan king who understands the power of the Christian god and who, by defeating Julian, defeats a persecutor of Christians.

Ephrem’s presentation of Shapur compels a vexing question: since Ephrem never alludes to Shapur as a persecutor of Christians, then did Ephrem—perhaps for his own literary and interpretative purposes?—purposefully omit mentioning Shapur’s reputation as the persecutor of Christians in Persia, or was Ephrem simply ignorant of the “thousands” of Christians who were said to have been martyred in Persia following Constantine’s death? Either alternative should give us pause.

Although there may be no conclusive way of answering whether Ephrem ignored or was ignorant of Shapur’s persecution, if the persecution of the Christians of Persia was as rampant as the Acts of the Persian Martyrs attest, and if Shapur was so widely known to have despised Persian Christians as a traitorous threat to his realm, then it seems highly unlikely that Ephrem would have—or could have—ignored the Christian martyrs of Persia in discussing Shapur’s victory over Julian. Furthermore, even though a written narrative of Simeon’s Martyrdom was unlikely to have been
circulating prior to Ephrem’s death, the text is clear that Christians were accused of treachery because they faithfully worshipped *caesar’s* god. According to Griffith (and others), Ephrem was deeply invested in bringing an “almost Eusebian doctrine of the Church of empire” to the Syriac Christian communities of Nisibis and Edessa—and to Roman Mesopotamia more broadly. In Griffith’s estimation, in the mid-fourth century “the idea of a Christian church, living in a Christian Roman Empire, awaiting the second coming of Christ, was an idea whose time had come.”¹¹⁷ And Ephrem, again according to Griffith, “died with his dream intact, of an orthodox Nicene world, governed by pious emperors and orthodox bishops.”¹¹⁸

If Griffith is correct in his estimation of Ephrem’s view of emperor and Empire as necessary companions of bishop and Church, then the narrative of Persian Christians who chose death rather than renounce the god of caesar is surely one that could not have escaped Ephrem’s attention—had such a narrative been circulating in Roman Mesopotamia in the mid-360s for Ephrem to know it. That Ephrem (who was religiously, linguistically, geographically, and culturally closer to the Christians of Persia than any other fourth-century Roman writer) fails to present Shapur as a persecutor is, to my mind, strong evidence that even a quarter century after Simeon’s execution Roman Christians had no knowledge of any persecution of Christians in Persia. Ephrem’s ignorance, it hardly needs to be said, thus raises questions not only about the historicity of the Persian persecution (as presented in the *Acts*), but also any presentation of mid-fourth-century history as premised on “religious” grounds or following from Constantine’s desire to liberate the Christians of Persia.


The Loss of Nisibis and the Christians of Persia in Roman Christian Historiography

One way of shedding further light on what Ephrem may or may not have known about the Christians of Persia is by considering how some later sources narrate the death of Julian, the elevation of Jovian, and the handing over of Nisibis. How, if at all, is the plight of the Christians of Persia considered in the larger context of Roman-Persian political maneuverings?

Generally, the Christians of Persians are ignored. Ephrem is thus not the only late ancient author who fails to consider, or even mention, the Christians of Persia in the context of the handing over of Nisibis to Shapur. Jovian’s decision to relinquish Nisibis, along with the other Roman fortresses and Transtigritanian provinces, is often understood in isolation as an unfortunate, but necessary, choice that saved the entire Roman army in Persia from certain death. What, if any, effect that Jovian’s decision would have on the Christians of Persia is rarely addressed.

Even in the later Byzantine period, Theophanes, for example, portrays the thirty-year peace agreed upon by Shapur and Jovian as one brought by God following the death of the Apostate Julian. Theophanes notes that Jovian—acting in unison with his Persian counterpart to secure the peace—handed over Nisibis to protect the army and to formalize the peace between the two empires. Much earlier, Socrates and Sozomen evinced a similar perspective on the necessity of the treaty to save the Roman army—neither historian says a word about how the treaty may have affected the Christians of Persia.

Indeed, in the narratives of fifth-century Roman historians, Jovian hardly seems to have known that there were Christians in his own army, much less in Persia. When the

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119 Theoph. AM 5856 [AD 363/4]; trans., C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 84. Amm. Marc. XXV.7.14 also specifies that the agreement was to last thirty years. For an assessment of the late ancient views of Jovian’s treaty, see Turcan, “L’abandon de Nisibe.”
army chose Jovian to succeed Julian, he initially demurred being draped in the purple, piously stating that it was not fit for a Christian to rule over a non-Christian army. Jovian’s army then raised him on the shield to the revelatory shout, “But we are Christians, too!”

In the Latin West, Augustine—as late as 415 CE, when he was writing the fifth book of his *City of God*—discusses Jovian’s cession of Nisibis as a necessity, but he makes no mention of how the treaty may have affected Christians *either* in Roman Nisibis or farther afield in Persia. In fact, as Robert Turcan notes, Augustine “still felt the need to excuse Jovian, but in a rather flippant tone toward [traditional] Roman patriotism.” Throughout *City of God*, Augustine is critical of pagan ideas about the basis of the strength and stability of the Roman Empire and its boundaries—ideas that often centered on the cult of Terminus, the god of boundary markers, who was said to yield not even to Jupiter. And yet twice in *City of God*, Augustine remarks bitterly that the supposedly powerful Terminus had to yield to the “temerity of Julian and the necessity of Jovian.”

Augustine was, of course, far removed both temporally and geographically from the events relevant to Nisibis in 363, but his concern over Roman paganism (the *proximate* enemy of Christianity in the Roman Empire) rather than for Shapur or any persecution of Christians in the Persian Empire, is clearly one shared even by Ephrem

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120 Soc. *HE* III.33; Soz. *HE* VI.3

121 Turcan, “L’abandon de Nisibe,” 888: “En Occident, un demi-siècle après l’événement (vers 414-415), saint Augustin éprouve encore le besoin d’excuser Jovien, mais sur un ton assez désinvolte envers le patriotisme romain.”

who personally witnessed the events in his own city following Julian’s death.\textsuperscript{123} Again, the only conclusion that can reasonably be drawn is either that Ephrem had no concern for the Christians of Persia (which seems unlikely) or that the idea of Shapur as a persecutor of Christians simply did not exist—even in a Syriac-speaking “Christian” city right on the border with Persia—decades after the Great Persecution is said to have begun.

\textbf{Shapur as the Helper of Jovian and Jovian as the Patron of the Christians of Persia}

The general concern about Julian as the true persecutor of Christians over and against Shapur, about whom little is said, is reconsidered in a later polemical work in Syriac known as the \textit{Julian Romance}. This novelistic account of Julian’s reign draws upon Ephrem’s \textit{Hymns} and advances an even more detailed and narratively sophisticated account of Shapur’s providential role in bringing down the pagan king of Rome, while (unlike Ephrem) acknowledging Shapur’s role as a persecutor of Christians.

Although scholars have posited various theories about the text’s date (from the fourth century to the sixth) and its language of composition (Greek or Syriac), it seems more likely than not that the text was written in Syriac, not before the fifth century, and in Roman Edessa or its environs where the memory of both Ephrem (as an important

\textsuperscript{123} In a characteristically wide-ranging essay, J.Z. Smith argues that distinctions among “others” (in this case religious others) are often most sharply drawn between the “proximate other,” or the “near neighbor.” Smith proposes that otherness “is a relativistic category inasmuch as it is, necessarily, a term of interaction.” Given this interaction of the “other” with the one defining the “other” as such, definitions of the “other” \textit{qua} “other” are thus, for Smith, fundamentally political. He gives the example of the political radicality of a Scotsman choosing to speak Scots Gaelic rather than English—versus the mere oddity of the same Scotsman choosing to speak Chinese, for example. “The radically ‘other,’” Smith contends, “is merely ‘other’; the proximate ‘other’ is problematic, and hence, of supreme interest.” Perhaps the proximate “other” of Roman paganism versus the more distant and less understood “other” of Persian Mazdaism can be used in consideration of Syriac Christian responses to Julian’s rule and the loss of Nisibis. See J.Z. Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in \textit{To See Ourselves as Others See Us\textemdash Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity}, ed. J. Neusner and E.S. Frerichs (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 5 and 15. My emphasis.
Christian theologian) and Nisibis (as an important Christian city) remained strong.\textsuperscript{124}

The \textit{Julian Romance} has three distinct narrative parts, but it is only the third part that addresses Julian’s downfall, Jovian’s elevation, and the loss of Nisibis.\textsuperscript{125} The text begins by portraying Julian (who is eagerly assisted by the Jews) as the persecutor of Christians in the Roman Empire. The text even claims that Julian was such an anti-Christian zealot that he marched to war against Shapur because the Persian king had \textit{stopped} persecuting Christians in Persia! Indeed, the \textit{Julian Romance} specifically contrasts Julian’s letter to Shapur—which expresses the emperor’s fury that Shapur’s sword was no longer wet with the blood of the Nasrāyē (Christians)—with Constantine’s letter to Shapur which had successfully ended Shapur’s persecution decades earlier by means of

\textsuperscript{124} Although the late fourth century date suggested by H.J.W. Drijvers seems impossibly early given the scope of the text and its way of handling Shapur II, Drijvers’ conclusions about the text are otherwise reasonable: “The so-called Romance of Julian was written at Edessa, in the School of the Persians, where Ephraem and other exiles from Nisibis had a great influence. Ephraem’s typological view of history and the rôle of the Christian emperor laid the foundations for the elaborate form they took in this Romance. It was originally written in Syriac, made use of Syriac sources like the Abgar legend and its legendary local offspring, and came into existence probably shortly after Shapur II’s death, when persecution of Christians in the Sassanian empire had stopped for a time.” See H.J.W. Drijvers, “The Syriac Romance of Julian: Its Function, Place of Origin and Original Language,” in \textit{VI Symposium Syriacum 1992}, OCA 247, ed. R. Lavenant (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994), 213-214.

For a summary and full bibliography of the competing narratives about the text’s origins, see A.M. Butts, “Julian Romance,” in \textit{The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage}, ed. S.P. Brock, A.M. Butts, G. Kiraz, and L. Van Rompay (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 208-209. The Syriac of the text is problematic in that the main manuscript witness (BL Add. 15,641) is acephalous and contains parts written in the sixth century along with other folios written centuries later. A transcription of the manuscript is readily available; see J.G.E. Hoffmann, \textit{Iulianos der Abtrünnige} (Leiden: Brill, 1880). Parts of the Syriac text were also published by P. Bedjan in \textit{AMS VI}, 218-297. The only published English translation (which is also the only complete translation) has not been well received by contemporary scholars and is typically criticized as being inaccurate; see H. Gollancz, \textit{Julian the Apostate. Now translated for the first time from the Syriac original} (London: Oxford University Press, 1928).

Constantine’s threats to march against Shapur over the plight of Christians in Persia.\textsuperscript{126}

Julian’s adversary in the first two parts of the text is Eusebius of Rome, who, as Jan Willem Drijvers points out, “undoubtedly finds his legendary origin in Eusebius of Nicomedia, who baptized Constantine on his death-bed and was in charge of Julian’s education.”\textsuperscript{127} Effectively, the first two parts of the Romance are a litany of pagan affronts towards Christianity—attacks that were encouraged by Julian and heroically defended against by Eusebius, who “prophesied Julian’s death in the country of the Chaldeans brought about by God’s justice.”\textsuperscript{128}

The Romance, however, goes well beyond Christian prophecy concerning the divine justice that Julian would receive in Persia, or the notion commonly bandied about by pagan Roman historians, such as Libanius, that a Roman Christian assassinated Julian. According to the text, Julian was, in fact, killed by an arrow sent by God. But, of much greater interest than the divine hand behind Julian’s death is the intrigue prior to it: the Romance relates that Jovian, Shapur, and Shapur’s general and chief mobed “Arimhar” (who becomes a Christian under Jovian’s influence) were secretly communicating with one another while Julian was still alive. The trio was attempting to forge a peace agreement between Rome and Persia that would entail the overthrow of Julian and the return of a Christian (namely, Jovian) to the Roman throne.

In reading the text, what quickly becomes clear is that the Romance is a novelistic attempt at explaining away all the theologically difficult questions that must have arisen during Julian’s reign and over the course of its aftermath: Why did Jovian (and other Christians) serve in Julian’s army? Why did Jovian hide his Christianity from Julian?

\textsuperscript{126} Gollancz, 111.

\textsuperscript{127} H.J.W. Drijvers, “The Syriac Romance of Julian,” 208. Amm. Marc. XXII.9,4 indicates that Julian was “brought up” by Eusebius and was distantly related to him. After Constantine’s death, Eusebius did become bishop of Constantinople, “New Rome.”

Why was Julian *initially* successful against the Persians before losing so mightily? Why did Nisibis have to be surrendered to the Persians? What was Shapur’s role in Jovian’s rise to the throne?

In answering these questions and others, the *Romance* minimizes the importance of the fall of Nisibis by doing two things: first, by interpreting Julian’s death as providentially decreed; and, second, explaining the elevation of Jovian, with the help of Shapur and Arimhar, as the means by which Christians in both the Roman and the Persian Empires were freed from persecution.

According to the *Romance*, even though Jovian knew that Shapur was a persecutor of Christians, he was willing to work with him and with Shapur’s mobed in order to secure the peace between Rome and Persia and to remove Julian from the throne. The operative theory in Jovian’s mind, according to the text, seems to have been something along the lines of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ One of the main narrative devices in the text is the hiddenness of Jovian’s secret plotting against Julian. Jovian has to *seem* to Julian to be a loyal general, and so the *Romance* goes to great lengths to explain how Jovian contrived all along to topple Julian, save the Christian people, and make peace with Persia. For example, Jovian and Arimhar develop a relationship that is described as filled with loving peace and friendship; they exchange multiple letters throughout the *Romance*, and twice Jovian even proposes that Arimhar should assassinate Shapur by way of proving that the mobed’s conversion to Christianity had been made in truth.\(^\text{129}\) As Drijvers notes, this is “a very ingenious narrative plot: two pagan kings assisted by two crypto-Christian subordinates.”\(^\text{130}\)

\(^{129}\) Gollancz, 167. Later, Jovian again attempts to persuade Arimhar to kill Shapur, but in the convoluted sequence of events that follows, Jovian himself ends up *helping* Shapur so that—on Arimhar’s advice—Shapur will later owe Jovian a debt of gratitude (Gollancz, 192-193). For the love between Jovian and Arimhar see Gollancz, 113ff.

On one occasion, a messenger bearing a letter from Arimhar to Jovian is apprehended by Julian’s officers. It seems that Jovian’s double-dealing is about to be exposed, but, in a plot-twist worthy of a James Bond movie, the letter from Arimhar to Jovian turns out to be a fake. Arimhar and Jovian intended for the letter to be intercepted and had thus composed it accordingly: rather than revealing Jovian’s treachery, the letter indicates that Jovian was, in fact, working diligently behind the scenes with Arimhar (who had betrayed Shapur) and toward the success of Julian’s expedition.\footnote{For this episode, which includes an account of those spying on Jovian being kind to the Christians of Edessa and not persecuting them as Julian wished, see Gollancz, 167-171. Elsewhere (Gollancz, 151), Jovian is described as fasting in sackcloth and ashes for the Christians of Edessa while he himself is resident in Nisibis. According to the Romance (Gollancz, 161-163), the Jews of Nisibis complained to Julian that Jovian declined to persecute the city’s Christians.}

As much as Jovian seems to have sought Shapur’s death, the text demonstrates just how savvy Jovian was diplomatically in that he colluded with the Persian king in the event of Arimhar’s refusal (or inability) to assassinate Shapur. For example, in the interregnum following Julian’s death, the Romance explains that Shapur (with Jovian’s full knowledge) sent a letter to the Roman camp in which the Persian king touted Jovian as the most qualified person to select as the successor to Julian. Far from reading Shapur’s letter in support of Jovian as evidence of the latter’s treachery, the Roman soldiers understood it as a sign: Julian’s death and Shapur’s endorsement of Jovian, the soldiers exclaimed, must be the will of the God of the Christians.\footnote{Gollancz, 207.} After it is revealed that Jovian is himself a Christian, and that he refuses to rule over a pagan empire and a pagan army, the soldiers renounce their paganism and raise him aloft on the shield. The narrator of the text then concedes that, even though the majority of the Roman soldiers were and had been Christians all along, that they had hidden their faith and consented to...
Julian’s paganism out of fear of his tyranny.\textsuperscript{133}

By this point in the Romance, the only remaining major “event” element of the story is the ratification of the peace treaty and the Roman cession of Nisibis. Following the common theme in the Romance that no event would turn out to be what it had initially seemed, the text presents Shapur in a whole new light—as a peacemaker.

According to the Romance, Jovian had penned a bellicose letter to Shapur saying that God would lead the Persians to sue the Romans for peace—this, apparently, to avoid the embarrassing concession that Jovian actually had no alternative but to beg for Shapur’s mercy. Shapur, however, discarded Jovian’s real letter and read aloud a completely different and fabricated one to his assembled Persian nobles. In the invented letter, Shapur presents Jovian to the Persian nobles as suppliantly begging for peace and as referring to himself and to the Roman army as the servants of the Persian kingdom. Shapur fabricated such a humble letter, according to the text, because he was a peacemaker and because he knew that presenting the image of a respectful and submissive Roman leader was the only way that the Persian nobles would relent in their push for continued war and agree to a peace settlement.\textsuperscript{134}

The key to peace was, of course, the city of Nisibis. In every other source that deals with the consequences of Julian’s death, Jovian’s cession of Nisibis and the Roman Transtigritanian provinces are a regrettable but necessary way for the Christian emperor to purchase the safety of the Roman army. In the Romance, however, Jovian and Shapur

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{133} Gollancz, 211-212.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{134} Gollancz, 218-220. Following the scene that presents Shapur’s recitation of the false letter from Jovian, Shapur sends another letter to Jovian demanding the emperor’s blood as a sacrifice for peace (Gollancz, 223). Jovian, having already seen in a vision that Julian’s sacrifice would end the war (Gollancz, 192), seems to understand the ruse and thus consents to come before Shapur. Once in the presence of the Persian king and his nobles, Jovian is at the same time so fearless and so deferential to the Persians that the nobles insist that Shapur must refrain from killing him. Shapur and Jovian then embrace and Shapur declares that Jovian’s act of submission before him is sufficient to erase the debt of sacrifice owed by the Romans to the Persians (Gollancz, 224-225).}
are presented as having a conversation similar to that of a father and a son: the fatherly Shapur does not demand Nisibis as the price for the safety of Jovian’s army, rather he asks for the city as a means of recompense for the ravages Persia undeservedly endured thanks to Julian. In return for the city, Shapur offers his “son” Jovian anything he wishes. Jovian’s sole request is that during the time that Nisibis is to remain a Persian city that no Christian anywhere in Persia be persecuted.135

This notion of a limited occupation of Nisibis (a period of one hundred years, according to the Romance) is, in Drijvers’ assessment, an idea about the city that is unique to Syriac histories and historians with an Edessene background.136 Similarly, the idea that Jovian’s cession of Nisibis ended the persecution of Christians in Persia is one that also seems to be unique to later Syriac histories and chronicles.137 On this point, the late-seventh-century History of John bar Penkaye, for example, appears to draw heavily on earlier sources such as the Romance and Ephrem’s Hymns against Julian. As in the Romance, John portrays Jovian as the deliverer of Christians both East and West and further suggests that Jovian gave Nisibis to Shapur by way of securing the end of the persecution of the Christians of Persia. As in Ephrem’s Hymns, John acknowledges that Shapur honored the Christian altars of Nisibis, whereas Julian persecuted Christians and

135 According to the Romance (Gollancz, 237), the citizens of Nisibis had already departed for Edessa by the time that Jovian and Shapur reached the city. The Persian historian al-Tabart explains that Shapur immediately established a formidable presence in Nisibis after Jovian ceded the city to him, repopulating Nisibis with 12,000 Persian families. See Bosworth, History of al-Tabart, vol. 5, 62-63; cf. J. Teixidor, “Conséquences politiques et culturelles de la victoire sassanide à Nisibe,” in Les relations internationales: Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, ed. E. Frézouls and A. Jacquemin (Paris: De Boccard, 1995), 504. The Syriac martyrlogical tradition comments upon Shapur’s resettlement of Persians as well: the History of Saba Pirgushnas (AMS IV, 222-249), the composition of which dates to the early seventh century, details the martyrdom of a Persian noble and convert to Christianity who was one among the large contingent of Persian families sent to Nisibis after Julian’s death.


destroyed Christian churches.\textsuperscript{138}

According to the Romance, Shapur readily agreed to Jovian’s request that the Persians refrain from persecuted Christians for the duration of the treaty. Right then and there Shapur issued an edict—oddly, one quite similar in tone to the one that Constantine forcibly obtained from Shapur in the History of the Holy Mar Ma’in—that declared a penalty of death for any citizen of Persia who might harm or steal from a Christian. Shapur further commanded that all the Christian churches of Persia that were damaged or destroyed during his persecution were to be rebuilt at the expense of the royal treasury.\textsuperscript{139}

**Conclusions**

Through the various accounts of the defense and loss of Nisibis presented in this chapter, I have tried to show that while it makes for a compelling story to believe that Nisibis was a wholly Christian city, and that its Christian defenders spurred Shapur into turning against the Christians of his own empire, that it is just that—a good story and a good bit of hagiography. There are plenty of late ancient narratives that cloud the idea of a stalwartly Christian Nisibis in the mid-fourth century, not the least of which is Ephrem’s own ex post facto account of why the city was lost as a result of its paganism. Moreover, Ephrem is the one person among all the late ancient Christian writers whom we would most expect to malign Shapur as a terrible persecutor of Christians, and yet he says nothing about the martyrs of Persia or Shapur as their persecutor. Ephrem’s remarkable omission, I argued, strongly suggests that the stories about Christian martyrs in Persia were not circulating among Syriac-speaking Christians on the Roman


\textsuperscript{139} For the polite conversation about Nisibis between Jovian and Shapur, and for the edict outlining the the protections accorded to Christians, see Gollancz, 233-237.
frontier until at least the end of the fourth century. Ephrem’s apparent ignorance of Shapur’s persecution makes the idea that Shapur persecuted Christians because of their ties to Caesar and the Christians of Nisibis increasingly hard to swallow.

Without question, the sixth-century Julian Romance is a fictionalized, novelistic account of Roman and Persian kings and the loss of Nisibis. Nevertheless, elements of the narrative persisted—with parts of the story to be found later in the Syriac History of John bar Penkaye, and, via an Arabic translation, the Annals of al-Tabari. There is an insistence throughout the Romance that Rome was Christian all along, and that Julian’s army was Christian as well, albeit too timid to say so. The clarity of Christian Rome, temporarily under the sway of a pagan king, and set against another pagan ruler in Shapur comes across strongly. Despite what seemed to have been Jovian’s humbling submission to the Persian king (Jovian’s “necessity” as Augustine and other Roman writers put it) the Romance insists that Jovian and Shapur reached a mutual peace, with the Romans freely turning over Nisibis as an apology for Julian’s rampage. But the people of Nisibis, Christians all, were not part of the deal. They were able to depart westward to escape the rule of a pagan king, with Jovian—a second Constantine—staying behind to negotiate the safety of the Empire’s fellow Christians in Persia.

The idea of Jovian as a liberator of Christians (in both Rome and Persia) is striking: clear boundaries, the surety of group identity, and the fundamental Christian religiosity of the Roman Empire becomes the rule in the Syriac sources that I have discussed. And yet, the competing narratives of Julian, Libanius, Eunapius, and, above all, Ammianus Marcellinus, were no less clear in defining who Romans were as a people and what Rome was as an empire. In writing the history of the fourth-century, however, it is a harmonization of the multiple iterations of later Christian narratives that have won the day.
Chapter 5.
Rhetoric and Religious Groups: Taxes, Jews, and Religious Authority in the Martyrdom and History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʿē

In chapters three and four, I show how both Constantine and the “events” that ensued after the emperor’s death are variously presented across a number of late ancient and medieval sources: Roman, Persian, Christian, pagan, Latin, Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. My survey of these sources demonstrates that just as there is no one “Constantine,” neither is there one history of the events of the fourth century—nor one history of the Christians of Roman Mesopotamia and Persia who were caught up in the tumult of the age.

There are, in other words, fundamental problems inherent in accepting the historicity of the standard scholarly narrative of the events that precipitated Shapur’s persecution. As a result, it is doubtful whether we should continue to speak of Shapur’s persecution qua “persecution.” For “persecution,” by the very nature of the term—and especially as it is applied for present purposes—entails hostility toward a particular, definable, and circumscribable group of people. If a persecuted “group,” such as the Christians of fourth-century Persia, can be encompassed only vaguely, or even contradictorily, in heterogeneous literary reminiscences, then the grounds for accepting the boundaries and historiographical instantiations of that group on the basis of the witness of any one text (or any one distillation of a group of texts) is tenuous indeed.

In this chapter, and much of the next, I put aside analysis of the various historiographical accounts of fourth-century Roman Mesopotamia and Persia in order to present an extended comparison of two interconnected hagiographies: the Martyrdom and the History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʿē. Up to this point, I have not yet considered Simeon’s martyr acts at any great length. They are, however, assuredly the two most
central martyrologies to narrate the beginning of Shapur’s “persecution.” In addition to being two of the longest texts among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, they are also the most comprehensive in their attention to the purported circumstances that occasioned and motivated Shapur’s antipathy towards the Christians of his realm.

In the third chapter, I briefly discussed Simeon’s acts by way of showing how it is only the later (mid-fifth-century) History, and not the earlier Martyrdom, that makes any direct reference to Constantine. In so doing, I sought to demonstrate how the two different narratives found in Simeon’s Martyrdom and History reveal the diachronic development of Persian Christian awareness of a link between Christianity and Romanness over the course of the century following Constantine’s death. In surveying how Simeon’s two martyr acts deal with Constantine, I also hinted at the extent of other major differences between the texts. Moreover, I suggested that a tacit acceptance among scholars of the general historicity of Simeon’s History has been influential in constructing the received event narrative of the fourth century even though, by all accounts, the History was not composed until many decades after the events in question and quite clearly reflects the much later historical circumstances of its composition.¹

Although Simeon’s two martyr acts are very different from each other, the texts are often presented as if a single, static religious group—“the Christians of Persia”—emerges in both texts. This is the case because the Martyrdom and the History have not been read and interpreted as independent literary constructions, but rather in harmony as a composite hagiographical history. More often than not, however, it is the narrative of Simeon’s death and Shapur’s persecution as it is presented in the History that takes

precedence over a similar presentation in the Martyrdom. But when the two accounts of Simeon’s martyrdom are kept apart and intentionally read as separate accounts in order to question their idiosyncratic historical claims about unjust taxation and persecution, then two strikingly different narratives—and two strikingly different conceptions of the Christians of Persia—emerge. In this chapter, by attending to the differences between the two texts, rather than to the similarity of their general narratives, I seek to show how each conceives of the persecuted and oppressed group of “Christians” that it memorializes.

The central difference that is key to understanding the overarching presentation of the “Christians of Persia” in each text is the extended historical and exegetical parallel with the Maccabees. This is a highly-stylized and rhetorical comparison that forms the basis for the Martyrdom’s account of the Christians of Persia. But the comparison with the Maccabees is, however, entirely absent in the History. Right from the outset of its narrative, the Martyrdom carefully develops a juxtaposition of Sasanian-dominated Persian Christians and Seleucid-dominated Maccabean Jews. The History, by contrast, rather than promote such a unique and protracted analogue between Persian Christians and their Jewish biblical forerunners, incorporates a tirade of anti-Jewish invective in its

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2 There is one place in the History where a remnant of the Maccabean parallels in the Martyrdom seems to be preserved. It is in a passage that describes Shapur’s anger after hearing of Simeon’s refusal to abide by the king’s “second edict.” That edict, a re-issuance of Shapur’s first edict doubling taxes on Christians, further demanded that Simeon explain why he was willing to face martyrdom rather than collect the taxes required from his people. The narrator of the History explains Shapur’s response to Simeon’s intransigence in the face of death this way: “Then, as a vicious lion who tasted the blood of man, a great anger was forged in his heart and he sharpened his canines and gnashed his teeth and became furious to kill and enraged to destroy and he roared with his mighty and terrible voice and made the earth tremble with his fiery word. He commanded that the priests and the Levites be cut asunder at once by the sword and that churches be demolished, altars be polluted, and the liturgy be despoiled.” (History 18, my emphasis.) This passage preserves, nearly verbatim, a similar account of Shapur’s anger (and command about the priests and the Levites) from Martyrdom 12. The reference to the Jewish priesthood and the pollution of the altar makes sense when it occurs in the Martyrdom. But the passage is totally out of place in the History, which never discusses the Maccabees, nor compares Simeon’s priesthood to Judah’s, such that a reference to the Levites might be read as part of the narrator’s biblical hermeneutic.

3 Martyrdom 1-9
narrative that vehemently declares the essential differences between Christians and Jews. The History, further, accuses Jews of being Christ killers, the long-time persecutors of Christians, and the ones who, by concocting allegations of Christian treachery, incited Shapur to oppress Simeon and his people.4

In the History, the emphasis is largely on the idea that Christians and Jews (and other religious groups, including the ruling Magians as well as Manichaens, Marcionites and other “Christian” heretics) are warring religious factions set against one another. This idea is not one that is prevalent in the Martyrdom. In the Martyrdom, there is no multiplicity of fractured (and fractiously querulous) religious groups, but rather a single community of Christians under Simeon who are set against their fire-worshipping pagan oppressors under Shapur. The Martyrdom’s Christian-pagan binary, while at first glance a “religious” conflict, is actually something beyond that in the narrative of the text. It is fundamentally a clash of two peoples, with the Christians gathered together and separated from their Sasanian overlords like a bead of oil in a pool of water. Seen this way, one can understand that, inasmuch as the Martyrdom does elide the differences between Christians and biblical Jews in startling and novel ways, the Maccabees are invoked primarily because they are a biblical people who valiantly resisted the oppression of the prevailing regime—oppression that, in modern terms, has been variously described as religious, cultural, ethnic, political, and otherwise.

Following Shaye Cohen, I am hesitant to term the oppression endured by the Maccabees (and the Christians of the Martyrdom) as necessarily “religious” in nature. Cohen describes the outcome of the Maccabean revolt this way:

Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his supporters tried without success to destroy, change—or cause the Judaeans to abandon—the ancestral politeia [2 Macc 4:11, 6:1] and the ancestral laws [1 Macc 2:19, 3:29; 2 Macc 6:1, 8:17]. After their successful

4 History 22
revolt the Judaeans were granted the right to ‘follow their laws as before’ [1 Macc 6:59] and to ‘conduct their politeia in accordance with their ancestral customs’ [2 Macc 11:25].

In so citing Cohen’s study that tracks the development of the idea of *ethnos* into what he terms “ethno-religion,” I do not mean to suggest that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the Maccabean (or Seleucid) idea of *politeia* and the Christian group boundaries that are nebulously drawn by the *Martyrdom*. Nevertheless, in relying so heavily upon the Maccabean literature, the *Martyrdom* does impart to the reader the persistent sense that Christians are more of a *politeia* than they are a “religious community.” (And, here, I use “religious community” in the restrictive, post-Enlightenment, and Christian sense of the term.) Indeed, that the Maccabees happened to have been *Jews* seems almost beside the point for the author of the *Martyrdom*. For the *Martyrdom* strives to present the Christians of Persia as a *people* apart, a subjugated *politeia* under Shapur’s dominion, that strives to uphold its ancestral laws and so sees in the plight of the Maccabees an historical icon of present suffering.

Although, on this point, the differences between the texts have been blurred by scholars, the ambivalence about who Christians are and where their allegiances can and should lie are emphasized very differently in the *Martyrdom* and the *History*. For example, the *History*, while keen to show that Christians are an unjustly persecuted group (one persecuted in part by Jews), is also clear that Christians are willing to obey the authority of the king so long as such obedience does not intrude upon or otherwise override the spiritual authority of priests and bishops. The subtle distinction between kinds of authority (spiritual versus worldly) and the specifically religious (but not solely “ethnic” or, necessarily, “political”) commitments of Christians in the *History* plays no

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role in the Martyrdom. In the Martyrdom, Christians are presented as an oppressed and persecuted people, full stop. For the author of the Martyrdom, there does not seem to be a middle way of being both a Christian and an obedient subject of Shapur. Noticeably, for the author of the Martyrdom, the apostasy inherent in being submissive to the Persian king does not entail that Christians thereby turn to become subjects of the Roman caesar.

In addition to the peculiar literary points of emphasis differentiating the texts, I address in this chapter the historical evidence for taxation in fourth-century Persia. Unfortunately, as there is very little contemporary evidence, there is not much to discuss. But the evidence of other periods is helpful. Later evidence of tax policies in Persia seems to suggest that the existence of a code centered on the taxation of religious communities in fourth-century Persia was highly unlikely. Finally, a third (more oblique) way I attempt to get at the differences between “the Christians of Persia” as presented in the Martyrdom and the History is by addressing two analogues from the Roman Empire, each of which claims to detail the assessment of specific taxes, or other disdainful requirements, uniquely on Christians. In turning to these analogues, I seek to further explain how the two groups of Persian Christians that are constructed in the Martyrdom and the History, while quite different from one another, are nonetheless readily understandable according to the internal logic of each text and from within the specific historical context that each was composed.

The differing narrative aims and understandings of Christian community in the Martyrdom and the History, as explained over the course of this chapter and the next, provide evidence of remarkable changes in the awareness of the relationship between “religion” and “empire” between the last quarter of the fourth century and the middle of the fifth. Beyond helping to demonstrate an evident shift in Persian Christian self-identity by the middle of the fifth century in the wake of the slowly increasing obviousness of a Roman-Christian Empire, the differences between Simeon’s two martyr
acts also highlight the difficulty of accepting an historical narrative that is premised upon a religious conflict in fourth-century Persia.

Ultimately what becomes clear is that the Martyrdom has come to us in many layers of wrapping. Not only has the History been injudiciously used in lieu of the Martyrdom to create a particular view of fourth-century Persian history, but the History itself has been read through later categories of analysis that, in turn, have been applied to the Martyrdom as it is then read through the lens of the History. By attending to the Martyrdom as a text distinct from the History, as well as to the very limited evidence (outside of Simeon’s martyr acts) for taxation in fourth-century Persia, I propose a different historical narrative. This narrative charts the Martyrdom and the History separately along a spectrum of Persian Christian group formation and communal identity, and, in so doing, compels a reconsideration of how the so-called “religious communities” of fourth-century Persia can be conceived.

Sources, Similarities, Differences

Although, as I have suggested, the details of the two narrative versions of Simeon’s trial and death are quite different from one another, the general outlines of the texts are similar enough such that the History is often, but erroneously, read as a later recension of the Martyrdom rather than a fundamental re-conceptualization and re-writing of it. While it is true that the texts do narrate essentially the same events, with the same protagonists, in many of the same ways, there are unmistakable differences. The most obvious difference presents itself before one has read a word of either text: the History is over twice the length of the Martyrdom. Nevertheless, insofar as the main narrative contours of the texts are concerned, the differences that the History introduces in its expansion of the Martyrdom seem, on the face of things, to be relatively modest. Indeed, the majority of the History’s additional length is the result of long-winded
theological orations and prayers that seem to have little bearing on the “events” that are described in each text.

The events that are narrated in Simeon’s two acts are so similar, in fact, that Gernot Wiessner—in his meticulous philological study of Simeon’s acts and several related Syriac martyrologies from Sasanian Persia—argues that the Martyrdom and the History should be classed as siblings. Both texts, Wiessner argues, are indebted to the same sources, and, therefore, inasmuch as the particular tendencies of one might differ from the other, each still springs from the same font. Wiessner uses the stemmatic method in order to posit a common “ABx” source for both “A” (the Martyrdom) and “B” (the History), a Vorlage that, in turn, goes back to two primary sources: the Steuerquelle and the Judenquelle. These two hypothesized sources represent, for Wiessner, the two fundamental reasons why the Christians of Persia were persecuted. Wiessner does discuss other elements—and he does argue that the History is not a development of the Martyrdom, but is a text that draws upon other sources in addition to the Martyrdom—but the non-payment of “taxes” and the accusations of Christian treachery leveled by the “Jews” are the main explanations for the persecution. Indeed, according to Wiessner, “taxes” and “Jews” do not just explain the persecution, but are the very ground upon which the texts are based. Yet, even as he proposes such a complex account of the texts’ redaction, Wiessner concedes that the hypothesized Judenquelle plays a more minor role in both texts by comparison to the (equally hypothesized) Steuerquelle.

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7 Wiessner, Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung, 72: “Der Verfasser dieses ABx-Textes hat sie grob miteinander verbunden, ohne sie untereinander ganz ausgleichen zu können. Es besteht dabei auf Grund der festen Terminologie die größte Wahrscheinlichkeit, daß beide Überlieferungen dem ABx-Verfasser schriftlich fixiert vorgelegen haben und man in ABx also zwei Quellen unterscheiden muß, die Steuerquelle S und die Judenquelle J, wobei S die eigentliche Grundlage von ABx zu sein scheint, J dagegen nur als Ergänzung benutzt wurde. Über den Text und den
Wiessner’s philological analysis remains far and away the most comprehensive and detailed assessment of any of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, but especially of the Simeon texts. With good reason, therefore, his work is still the touchstone for the study of Simeon’s martyr acts and the small circle of other Syriac martyrological texts related to them. Yet the root of Wiessner’s theories about the connections between the Martyrdom and the History—namely, his proposal that there was an “ABx” source from which both descended—has left a problematic legacy. Thinking of the Martyrdom and the History as having evolved literarily from the “historical” events that are relayed in the texts entails that each text goes back to some earlier ur-source and, by extension, to actual fourth-century events.

This search for literary sources that stem from historical events has, in my view, skewed our reading of the texts. As Michael Penn points out, “Although the production of critical editions that attempt to recover an ur-text remains the focus of most manuscript work, researchers in fields ranging from biblical text criticism to early modern studies have become increasingly interested in also analyzing how later revisions reflect changing social and political contexts.” While the differences between the Martyrdom

8 The martyr acts from Bet Huzaye are based around and draw from the themes introduced in Simeon’s martyr acts. The other Bet Huzaye martyr acts are related primarily to the History, and, as a result, Wiessner refers to them as the “B-Zyklus.” The B-Zyklus includes: the Martyrdom of Pusai, the craftsman mentioned at the end of Simeon acts [AMS II, 208-232]; the Martyrdom of Martha, Pusai’s daughter, who is also mentioned (although not by name) at the end of Simeon’s Martyrdom and at the beginning of Simeon’s History [AMS II, 233-241]; the Martyrdom of Tarbo, Simeon’s sister [AMS II, 254-260]; and several other texts, including the Great Slaughter, which details a large-scale massacre of Christians in Persia [AMS II, 241-248].

9 M.P. Penn, “Monks, Manuscripts, and Muslims: Syriac Textual Changes in Reaction to the Rise of Islam,” Hugoye 12 (2009): 235-236. My emphasis. Penn continues: “Such work, often categorized under the monikers new philology, new medievalism, or the history of the book, has led to a greater recognition of the malleability of manuscript text and has begun to challenge the
and the History do include the sorts of later manuscript “revisions” to which Penn refers, the texts’ distinctions go well beyond mere manuscript alterations. But just how the sharp differences in the texts “reflect changing social and political contexts” has been largely ignored in studies of Simeon’s martyr acts.

Perhaps the distinct social-historical and political contexts of the two texts have been overlooked specifically because of the texts’ evident narrative and textual similarities? Indeed, given the relationship between Simeon’s martyr acts and their sources as outlined in Wiessner’s study, it is understandable why, among both contemporary scholars and those of previous generations, the History would take precedence over the Martyrdom as the primary historical “source” for Simeon’s death and the early days of Shapur’s persecution. For although the Martyrdom and the History are often harmonized as if they were in effect a single source for fourth-century events, more often than not it is the narrative presented in the History that is alone summoned to do double duty for both texts.10 As a result, crucial events that are narrated in the History are often read as reflections of mid-fourth-century historical realities—even though some of these “events” are not mentioned at all in the Martyrdom.

Oskar Braun, writing fifty years before Wiessner, does not state directly why he

primacy of original authorship. Although rarely examined from such a perspective, Syriac sources are particularly rich sources for this type of analysis.”

10 As I have discussed in earlier chapters, Timothy Barnes certainly gives preeminence to the events as they are narrated in the History, but the same is true for more recent analyses as well. Adam Becker, for example, in an otherwise perceptive article, notes that Simeon’s martyr acts survive in “two recensions.” While this is the case, Becker nonetheless refers to the “Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Sabbã‘ē” as if it were one text, but almost always with evident reference to what I have been calling the History. As I discuss later in this chapter, Becker is particularly interested in Simeon’s discussion of “two distinct jurisdictions,” or two types of authority (what might be called “religious” and “worldly”), but he does not make clear that these notions about two realms of authority are discussed solely in the later History and not at all in the earlier Martyrdom. See A. Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the Martyrdom of Gregory and the Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh,” JLA 2 (2009): 318-319.
omitted the *Martyrdom* and chose to include solely the *History* in his German translation of nearly two dozen Persian martyr acts, but one can readily assume why Braun would have made such an editorial decision.\footnote{O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1915). Braun’s German translation of the *History remains the only published translation of the text in any language other than Latin.*} Namely, because the *History* is longer, more theologically developed, more narratively comprehensive, and more nuanced than the *Martyrdom* in accounting for the causes and consequences of the events that it describes.

In fact, the *Martyrdom*, as I will explain, hardly offers any explanation at all for the motivation behind Shapur’s persecution other than the implied sense that Shapur is akin to Antiochus IV Epiphanes and therefore the oppression of Christians is akin to that of the Maccabees. Other, more specific, historical (i.e. not biblical) details that might offer up reasons *why* the persecution of Christians is like that of the Maccabees are not addressed in the *Martyrdom*.

To be sure, Braun can hardly be faulted for excluding the *Martyrdom* from what he never intended to be more than a selective survey of some of the more particularly compelling texts among *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. Still, all the similarities between the *Martyrdom* and the *History* aside, neither text can stand in for the other without obscuring important differences and privileging one narrative over the other, all the while assuming the existence of stable “sources” that somehow predate both texts and are, in any case, purely hypothetical.\footnote{I should emphasize again that this is not to say that Wiessner did not understand the differences between the two texts. Quite to the contrary. As he says himself, “Wie unten in Einzelheiten gezeigt werden wird, unterscheidet sich der längere Bericht B seinem Inhalt nach deutlich von der Fassung A, wobei es sich auf den ersten Blick jedoch nur um eine Verschiedenheit der Form zu handeln scheint.” (Wiessner, *Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung*, 72.) Nevertheless, the sense that the *events* narrated in the texts (even if narrated differently) ultimately go back to fourth-century actualities is misleading.}

In fact, as an analysis of Simeon’s *Martyrdom* and *History* shows, even the
“events” that are narrated in both texts differ substantially from one text to the other. For instance, the very unfolding of the persecution is remembered in unmistakably different ways. According to the History, Shapur sent three edicts to Simeon following his unsuccessful siege of Nisibis in the late 330s CE. The king’s first edict doubled the taxes with which Christians were to be assessed; his second edict threatened violence for non-compliance with the first; and his third edict ordered Simeon’s arrest and the destruction of Christian churches.\textsuperscript{13} But Shapur’s edicts (that is, special and particular rescripts from the king) are not mentioned in the Martyrdom.\textsuperscript{14} The Martyrdom indicates only that “the tax collectors began to harass the priests … [and] suppress the freedom of a free church with a heavy yoke,” with no further explanation as to why this was the case, what motivated such action, or how it came about by the command of the king.\textsuperscript{15}

Other examples of such differences abound, and a close reading of the two texts reveals that the devil is in the details. It is not so much the long narrative expansions, or the addition of extended prayers, theological orations, and sectarian anathemas in the History that set it apart from the Martyrdom (although these elements are important), but the seemingly inconsequential minutiae—the rate and kind of tax assessed on Christians, for example—that ultimately reveal the crucial differences between the two texts. While the events that each text narrates might be essentially quite similar on the surface, the

\textsuperscript{13} History 4, 16, 18

\textsuperscript{14} Richard Burgess clearly regards the earlier Martyrdom as the more historical of Simeon’s two martyr acts. Positing a self-evident divide between historical and hagiographical modes of writing, Burgess claims that the History is worthless for historians and can be of interest only to students of hagiography. He refers to the History as “obviously a later hagiographical pastiche, reworked, supplemented, and barnacled with many later accretions.” Yet, even as Burgess maligns the History as but a confused mishmash of sources and influences, he nevertheless uses that text (and not the Martyrdom) to give a synopsis of fourth-century events all the while claiming that the “general outline of these events is not in dispute.” See R.W. Burgess, “The Dates of the Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Ṣabbāʾē and the ‘Great Massacre,’” AB 117 (1999): 9 and 29.

\textsuperscript{15} Martyrdom 6
ways by which the narrators of the two texts present and interpret and nuance these events are almost always different.

Simeon’s martyr acts, in sum, are more readily understandable if they are thought of not as two versions of the same events, but as two different ways of presenting “events” that are not prior to the texts themselves but originate only in and through their narration.

**Simeon, Judah Maccabeus, and the “People” of God**

What is perhaps the single most significant difference between the *Martyrdom* and the *History* is evident from the initial sections of each. The first nine sections of the *Martyrdom* present an extended rhetorical juxtaposition of Simeon and Judah Maccabeus, the military leader of the Hasmoneans. By contrast, the Maccabees are never mentioned once in the *History*. As I discuss in chapter six, the *History* begins by listing the other Christian bishops who were killed alongside Simeon (none of whom are mentioned in the *Martyrdom*) and then gives a defense of the salvific and purificatory value of persecution. Persecution, according to the *History*, binds the Christians of the East to their formerly-persecuted brethren in the West.¹⁶

These differences right from the beginning of each text are pivotal and they take the *Martyrdom* and the *History* down two dissimilar paths. The *Martyrdom* says nothing about other Christians beyond the small circle of Persian Christians who are killed during the course of events that the text narrates, and the *Martyrdom* certainly makes no allusion to persecuted Roman Christians or martyrs. Rather, the “people” invoked by the *Martyrdom* are Jews.

Turning to the Maccabees certainly helps to explain contemporary strife with

¹⁶ *History* 1-4
reference to historical parallels, but it does little to explain *why*—at least from the perspective of the *Martyrdom*—the Persians were keen to tax and oppress Christians (if the analogy is to be followed) more so than any other group. Indeed, the likeness of Persian Christians to the Maccabees that is promulgated in the *Martyrdom* goes beyond a “they-were-persecuted-for-their-faith-too” expository model. The sense that one gets from the emphasis on the Maccabees in the *Martyrdom* is that the assessment of taxes is *itself* equivalent to a form of forced idolatry or a forcible violation of ancestral laws.17 The burden of taxes is a means of persecution from which Jesus was supposed to have *freen* Christians by his death. In refusing to pay the burdensome taxes with which Christians had been saddled, Simeon writes to Shapur and says, “‘Christ liberated his church through his death and set free his people by his blood. … Jesus is king of kings and we will not put the yoke of your oppression upon our shoulders. Far be it from us now liberated people to work once more in the service of a man!’”18

What can account for this emphasis on the Maccabees and the sense that Christians were a persecuted people who were being called upon to violate their freedom in Christ merely by paying taxes? The presumption that Christians in Persia (like Christians in the Roman Empire) had to rely upon the Maccabean literature as an example of how to construct the martyrological genre is an insufficient explanation for the *Martyrdom*’s use of the Maccabees. Yet, the idea that the seeds of Christian narrative conceptions of the martyr lie in their Jewish (Maccabean) forerunners is often one that is

17 *Martyrdom* 6, immediately following a section explaining the dark days endured by the Maccabees, begins: “In the very same way, suffering came upon our people and they were oppressed by taxes. The tax collectors began to harass the priests, the haughty raised themselves up over the humble, and the impure subjugated the holy. The deceitful and the iniquitous overcame the true and the pure, and the evil tax collectors strove to suppress the freedom of a free church with a heavy yoke. In their impudence they yearned to gradually stifle the worship of God, and in their power and their trickery they sought to cause the sincere to stumble and to be led astray from the path of truth.” My emphasis.

18 *Martyrdom* 10
used as an explanatory device for Christian martyrrological texts. It is the premise of W.H.C. Frend’s seminal study of early Christian martyrdom, and Frend’s arguments have had tremendous staying power. But, if one surveys Greco-Roman martyrrological literature, it is clear that Maccabean heroes are specifically mentioned only rarely.

When Christian martyr acts in Greek and Latin do invoke the Maccabees, it is almost always with little more than a glancing nod to the seemingly “passive,” innocent, and pious victims of the Seleucids—not the sustained attention to deep similarities such as we find in the first nine sections of Simeon’s Martyrdom. Moreover, while it is perhaps true that, as Brent Shaw has argued, “manliness” (andreia) and “endurance” (hypomonē) were classical virtues that were re-defined in the Maccabean literature, and subsequently expanded upon and championed in Christian martyrrological texts, never do Greek and Latin martyr acts rely upon Jewish warriors by way of highlighting the “manly” endurance of Christian martyrs. Instead, without mentioning the specific ethno-

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19 See W.H.C. Frend, Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus (London: Blackwell, 1965). Thirty years after Frend published his work, his major premises were disputed by Glen Bowersock—see G. Bowersock, Martyrdom and Rome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). A few years after that, the theories of both Frend and Bowersock were turned on their heads by Daniel Boyarin. In a passage worth quoting at length, Boyarin argues: “It would be fair to say that at present there are two major theses with regard to the origins of Christian martyrology, which, for the sake of convenience, we can refer to as the Frend thesis and the Bowersock thesis, although neither of these scholars is the originator of ‘his’ thesis. According to W.H.C. Frend, martyrdom is a practice that has its origins securely in ‘Judaism,’ and the Church ‘prolongs and supercedes’ the Jewish practice. For G.W. Bowersock, on the other hand, Christian martyrdom has virtually nothing at all to do with Jewish origins at all. It is a practice that grew up in an entirely Roman cultural environment and then was ‘borrowed’ by Jews. It will be seen, however, that both of these seemingly opposite arguments are founded on the same assumption, namely that Judaism and Christianity are two separate entities, so that it is intelligible to speak of one (and not the other—either—one) as the point of origin of a given practice,” an assumption that Boyarin fundamentally problematizes. See D. Boyarin, Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 93.

20 Although some of Shaw’s conclusions about the prominence of “endurance” in the Maccabean texts has been challenged, his article is nonetheless an excellent exposition of how Christian conceptions of manly endurance were set against prevailing Greco-Roman views. See B. Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs,” JECTS 4 (1996): 269-312. More broadly on themes of manliness and gender in martyrrological texts, see L.S. Cobb, Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
religious and legal context of the those who were killed for refusing to eat pork, the Greco-Roman martyrological tradition tends to summon the exemplary heroism of a Maccabean woman as a portrait of endurance. This woman is, of course, the unnamed mother of 2 Maccabees 7 who is said to have witnessed the torture and execution of her seven sons while urging them on to remain steadfast in the face of exhortations to violate the Law.21

Christian authors seized upon the witness of the Maccabean mother. The Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius exclaims about her: “O matrem religiose piam! O Matrem inter uetera exempla numerandum! O Machabaeicam matrem!”22 Indeed, more often than not, in Christian martyrological texts it is not the woman’s seven brave sons, but this “Machabaeica mater” who becomes the biblical image of what is co-opted as “Christian” piety. Perhaps this is because the mother’s endurance goes beyond just the non-consumption of pork and can be generalized into an account of a woman whose identity as a pious daughter of the Most High demonstrably trumps her earthly identity as a wife and mother.23 The mother of the martyr Marian, for example, is directly compared to the Maccabean mother. Once the woman’s son, Marian, had met his end as a martyr, his mother, far from lamenting her son’s fate, is said to have “rejoiced like the

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21 The mother of the seven boys is not named in the text of 2 Maccabees itself, but various names have been attributed to her in later Jewish and Christian literature, including “Hannah” and “Miriam.” In Syriac, she is known as “Shmuni,” and is mentioned by this name (along with the old man Eleazar and Judas) in Aphrah’s Dem. V.20, “On Wars.” See W. Witakowski, “Mart(y) Shmuni, the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs, in Syriac Tradition,” in VI Symposium Syriacum, OCA 247, ed R. Lavenant (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994), 153-168.

22 Passio Sanctorum Montani et Lucii, 16.4; my emphasis.

23 On the idea of a woman’s Christian identity taking primacy over the identity brought about by the bonds of being a wife, a daughter, a sister, or a mother, the example of Perpetua in her martyr acts is certainly the most striking. As Elizabeth Castelli notes about Perpetua, “the renunciation of motherhood will liberate her, not only emotionally, but also physically from the ties that have bound her to family, society, and the world.” See E.A. Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 87.
mother of the Maccabees, congratulating not only Marian but also herself that she had borne such a son.” Blandina, too, a woman well known among scholars of Greco-Roman martyrdom from the account of the Martyrs of Lyons, is typically interpreted to embody the Maccabean mother even though the connection is not explicitly drawn in the text. Blandina is described as being “like a noble mother encouraging her children,” who, “after duplicating in her own body all her children’s sufferings … hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and glorying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beasts.” This passage suggests that the connection between Blandina and the Maccabean mother is one that must have been self-evident among late ancient Christian readers who, undoubtedly, were steeped in the stories of the Maccabees.

Yet, inasmuch as the Maccabean literature would have been well known to Christians, Arnaldo Momigliano, in a study of 2 Maccabees, points out that because the Maccabees were (after all) Jews that a number of “Christian Fathers had to make some effort to persuade their flock that the Seven ‘Maccabean’ Brothers deserved to be treated like Christian saints.” While certain figures among the Maccabean martyrs—such as the mother of the seven sons—as well as certain elements of the Maccabees’ struggle against paganism, could be readily appropriated to serve Christian narrative ends, Momigliano argues that quite a lot remained “exclusively Jewish in II Maccabees.” Specifically, according to Momigliano, what “may well have produced some hesitation in its Christian readers, is the extreme importance attributed to the temple and to its

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25 Martyrs of Lyons, 55; trans. Musurillo, my emphasis.

purification by Judas Maccabaeus.” Indeed, Judah (or Judas) Maccabeus does not appear in any Greco-Roman martyr text of which I am aware, although it is the case that he was upheld as an example of a pious warrior—on the order of Joshua, Gideon, and David—by medieval knights. Beyond just producing “hesitation in its Christian readers,” however, Momigliano suggests that the emphasis on the importance of Judah Maccabeus and the purification of the Temple was an insurmountable stumbling block for Christian interpreters. In fact, as Momigliano sees it, Christian interpreters, virtually by definition, were able to access and appropriate just limited sections of 1 and 2 Maccabees: “Insofar as the notion of individual martyrdom is closely related to the purity of the Jewish cult, II Maccabees could be read with full appreciation only by Jews,” claims Momigliano.

The long account of Judah’s similarity to Simeon in the Martyrdom—a text that Momigliano must not have known—clearly demonstrates, however, that not only were certain “Christians” willing to use Judah Maccabeus as an image of Christian resistance to paganism, but also that “the purity of the Jewish cult” in 2 Maccabees was no barrier to the use of the text towards Christian interpretative ends. That said, the twinning of Simeon and Judah in the Martyrdom is, admittedly, unique in Syriac martyrological literature. In fact, Simeon’s Martyrdom is the lone text among the entire corpus of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs to even mention the Maccabees, much less to make the military leader of the Jewish rebels and the Jewish priesthood so rhetorically central.


But the author of the *Martyrdom* does not seem to be using the Maccabees to invent a Christian past or to otherwise appropriate biblical Jews solely in order to fulfill a particularly Christian interpretative agenda. Rather, the use of the Maccabees in the *Martyrdom* is one of historical recapitulation—a biblical example that is held up in its own right as a true parallel of present trials. Indeed, the opening lines of the *Martyrdom* make it clear that the Christians of Persia should understand their suffering as directly akin to that of the Maccabees: “Now then, let us clearly make known the origin of our people’s oppression and demonstrate the punishments we have suffered from the start. For the hard times that came upon us are similar to the difficult and burdensome times that came upon the Maccabees.”

The rebellion of the Maccabees as a model of Christian group identity and endurance is portrayed in similar fashion by later (Christian) Armenian historians who were predominantly concerned with producing a “national” history of Armenia. The obvious analogue for the historical presentation of the Armenians’ struggle against Sasanian dominance in the mid-fifth century was the Maccabees. As Robert Thomson notes, fifth- and sixth-century Armenian historians write at length about the centrality of the interconnectedness of a land, a people, and a people’s ancestral laws and traditions—in Armenian, an idea encompassed by the term *awrenk*. Indeed, these historians saw a clear parallel between the Maccabees and the covenant (*uxht*) of the Armenian nobles who had pledged to fight together to preserve the laws, cult, and ancestral traditions (again, *awren’*) that they held dear. The parallel was so self-evident that stories about the militant heroism of Judah Maccabeus are said to have been read to Armenian soldiers as rousing exhortations prior to their own battles with the Sasanians.

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30 *Martyrdom* 1

For the author of Simeon’s *Martyrdom*, as well, turning to the Maccabees allows for a narrative approach that provides an imagined historical link between Persian Christians and a biblical people who were also persecuted by and struggled against “Persians”—albeit Greek-speaking heirs of Alexander, not the sons of Darius and Xerxes.\(^{32}\) Whereas the tendency among Christian texts that invoke Old Testament heroes or Jewish predecessors is to treat them as prototypes that are then fulfilled or in some way Christianized, here, in the *Martyrdom*, the comparison with the Maccabees seems to be more along the lines of an exhortative and historical analogue, not a Christian reinterpretation.\(^{33}\)

Simeon, it is true, does differ from Judah, and the text is clear about these distinctions, but the *Martyrdom* also presents Simeon alongside Judah—not simply as the Jewish warrior’s realization in Christian dress. Christians, in the eyes of the author of the *Martyrdom*, are to see themselves as the Maccabees, and Simeon as Judah, the differences in the sort of priesthood between the two leaders notwithstanding. This is truly a novel move. By invoking Judah, the author of the *Martyrdom* can present Simeon in parallel with another “priest” who battled on behalf of his people, even though Simeon’s method of warfare is less a mirror of Judah’s and more a marked *inversion* of the Maccabean leader’s. The *Martyrdom* declares:

O two priests, Judah and Simeon! One saved his people in battle; the other saved his people in death. One was glorified while conquering, and the other was glorified

\(^{32}\) Whether the distinction between the Achaemenids and the Seleucids would have been apparent to the author of the *Martyrdom* is unclear. In fact, Susan M. Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt argue that the empire built by Seleucus might be better understood as a colonialist enterprise that, while steeped in Hellenism, would have been more naturally understood as the heir of the Achaemenids. See S.M. Sherwin White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

\(^{33}\) Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski has suggested that Christians colonized and textually manipulated the Maccabees in order that they might serve as a “usable past” for Christian interpreters. Joslyn-Siemiatkoski is certainly not off the mark in seeing this general tendency, which only serves to further highlight the uniqueness of Simeon’s *Martyrdom*. See D. Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009).
while being conquered. Judah exalted his people while killing, and Simeon liberated his people while being killed. They became high priests and prelates clad with the ephod\textsuperscript{34} of the sanctuary. Judah was strengthened by El, the God of the Spirits, and withdrew his people’s taxes from the hands of the King of Greece and Syria [Antiochus IV Epiphanes]. Simeon was victorious in Jesus, the Son of God, and withdrew his people’s taxes from the oppression of the King of Persia and Syria [Shapur II].\textsuperscript{35}

The Martyrdom thereby envisions Christians as a distinct people (\textit{amma}), a race set apart, that is yet quite close to the people of the books of the Maccabees, who were also on their own against a vastly more powerful foe. As Judith Lieu remarks, “The sense of being a race or people is one that is proudly held in Jewish literature from the Maccabean period, often in a context of suffering and persecution.”\textsuperscript{36} Just as Judah urges his people to fight for the ancestral laws, for the Temple, for the city, for the land, for the very politeia (2 Macc 13:14), Simeon, too, is presented as battling for a similar collective identity. The “two priests,” as the Martyrdom calls Judah and Simeon, were priest-kings and stewards of the holiness of their people. They were, at one and the same time, ministers and warriors of God:

holily they served the altar, splendidly they honored the liturgy, righteously they cleansed it with water, boldly they displayed the blood of grapes, eagerly they encouraged their people, mightily they bore arms, assuredly they called out to death, valiantly they summoned killing, heroically they sought destruction, gloriously they rushed toward the sword, nobly they were baptized in blood, joyfully they gave the cup to drink, blessedly they distributed gifts, befittingly they gave crowns, scrupulously they upheld the commandment of their Lord, and purely they kept the law of their God. For one fulfilled the law uprightly in that he killed a soul for a soul [Cf. Ex 21:23; Lev 27:18; Deut 19:21] and, by being killed, thereby saved. The other acted obediently in response to ‘if anyone hits you on the cheek’ [Mt 5:39] in that he stretched out his neck to the sword. One, while avenging, was avenged; the other, while being humble, was humbled. One absolved Sheol’s dead through his

\textsuperscript{34} There are numerous biblical references to the ephod, which is variously described as a linen vestment or an element made from gold, and it is typically understood as a garment reserved to be worn (or somehow otherwise used for oracular purposes) by the high priest. David, for example, girds himself with an ephod before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:14). For a comprehensive discussion, see A.G. Scherer, “Das Ephod im alten Israel,” \textit{UF} 35 (2003): 589-604.

\textsuperscript{35} Martyrdom 8; my emphasis.

priesthood; the other resurrected those who died in sin through his priesthood. By killing, one forayed into an open battle; the other, by being killed, entered into a hidden battle. O killing of the holy ones! How great are you!\textsuperscript{37}

**Rethinking the Maccabees: Anti-Judaism in Simeon’s Acts**

**Caesar and the Jews in the Martyrdom**

The use of the Maccabees in the first nine sections of the *Martyrdom* inaugurates an interpretative theme that is carried throughout the rest of the text even when the Maccabees are not directly referenced. As I have noted, the author of the *Martyrdom* sees the imposition of taxes as a form of religious persecution in itself, envisioning Simeon’s refusal to collect taxes as somehow akin to Judah’s revolt against the paganism imposed by Antiochus. Explaining his refusal to collect taxes, Simeon sends word to Shapur and says: “Jesus died on behalf of the whole earth and freed it, and I will die for these few people whom I shepherd. For the purpose of your taxes, I will not willingly give over my flock to you.”\textsuperscript{38}

Still, according to both of Simeon’s martyr acts, the *Martyrdom* and the *History*, the physical oppression of Christians began only after Simeon resisted the attempts of the Sasanian authorities to collect the taxes required of the Christians of Persia. The *Martyrdom* narrates the consequences of Simeon’s refusal to collect taxes from his flock in a most fearsome way, presenting Shapur as a “cruel and destructive lion.” Once Shapur’s couriers informed him of Simeon’s intransigence, the Persian king “sharpened his molars and gnashed his teeth and became enraged to kill. He became wrathful to destroy, thirsty to lick innocent blood, and hungry to devour the flesh of the holy ones. He roared with his mighty and terrible voice and made the earth tremble with his fiery word.” Shapur commanded “the priests and Levites … be cut asunder at once by the

\textsuperscript{37} *Martyrdom* 8

\textsuperscript{38} *Martyrdom* 12
sword. Churches were demolished, altars were polluted, and the liturgy was despoiled and laid bare. And (Shapur) said, ‘As for Simeon, the head of the sorcerers, bring him to me, for he has rejected my kingdom and chosen that of Caesar by worshipping his god but mocking mine.’

Shapur’s reference to “Caesar” in this section is the first of only two such references in the Martyrdom and it comes completely out of the blue. Nowhere, up to this point, have Caesar, the Romans, or Christians who hail from anywhere other than Seleucia-Ctesiphon been mentioned. The whole parallel thus far has been to the Maccabees, not to persecuted Christians or martyrs from other lands, and certainly not to the “Christian” identity of Rome and Caesar.

The second mention of Caesar immediately follows the first in the next section of the Martyrdom—section 13. This time, however, it is not Shapur who accuses Simeon of worshipping Caesar’s god, but rather a group of nameless “Jews” who apparently have the king’s ear. The section is worth quoting in full:

Now our enemies, the Jews: as is their wont, they accused Simeon and us. Indeed, they are accustomed to turning toward evil rather than toward good in times such as these, just as they clamored against Pilate at the killing of Christ. For they were impudent and they said to Shapur, “If you, King, were to send splendid royal letters and glorious offerings and delicious, majestic gifts, they would not be well received or much revered in the eyes of Caesar. But if Simeon were to send to him a curt and trivial letter, he would rise and bow and receive it with both his hands and diligently attend to his requests.” How alike are the false witnesses against Simeon as compared to the iniquitous witnesses against his Lord! They killed our Lord and were repudiated, being dispersed throughout the earth as strangers and pernicious people. They accused Simeon and were mocked, and an injury fell upon their skulls in the desolation of many thousands, an oppression that suddenly came upon them because they were gathered together in order to go to the rebuilding of Jerusalem at the word of a person who led them astray.  

39 Martyrdom 12; according to Martyrdom 14, Simeon’s church in Seleucia was “destroyed by the Magi in the company of the Jews.”

40 Martyrdom 13
The Rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple

There are several things that are striking about Martyrdom 13. Most immediately noticeable, perhaps, is the vehemence with which the author of the Martyrdom turns to castigate the Jews as “our enemies,” and as “false” and “iniquitous witnesses.” Such a turn against Jews is particularly unexpected given the tenor of the first sections of the Martyrdom that invoke biblical Jews in a most brotherly and empathetic way. Especially odd is the reference at the end of Martyrdom 13 to the “injury” that came upon the Jews who were “gathered together in order to go to the rebuilding of Jerusalem.” This remark about the “rebuilding of Jerusalem” is an oblique reference to the emperor Julian’s attempt at rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple in 362/363 CE, supposedly by way of supporting and promoting non-Christian cults and ebbing the tide of Christianity that had begun to flow over the Roman Empire during the reigns of Constantine and Constantius.41

There are several dozen ancient and medieval sources that mention Julian’s attempt at rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple. Virtually all of them are Christian.42 Ammianus, the lone non-Christian historian to speak of the emperor’s ambitious plans for Jerusalem, notes that Alypius of Antioch, the overseer whom Julian entrusted to carry out the massive project, was unable to do so because “great balls of fire” kept emanating from the Temple’s foundation, thereby making work impossible.43 The fire balls that thwarted Julian’s planned reconstruction of the Temple became a central

41 Julian’s Ep. 204, “To the Community of the Jews,” ends with the emperor making a promise to the Jews that he will help rebuild (and bring settlers to) the “ancient city of Jerusalem” after he has successfully ended his war with Persia.

42 For what is, to my knowledge, by far the most thorough and systematic inventory of these sources, see D.B. Levenson, “The Ancient and Medieval Sources for the Emperor Julian’s Attempt to Rebuild the Jerusalem Temple,” JSJ 35 (2004): 409-460.

43 Amm. Marc. XXIII.1,2-3: ... metuendi globi flammarum prope fundamenta crebris adsultibus erumpentes fecere locum exustis aliquotiens operantibus inaccessum.
element among the narratives of the major Greek ecclesiastical historians, who saw these terrifying orbs as clear evidence that a divine hand was at work in preventing any reestablishment of the Jewish cult in the city of Jesus’ death and resurrection.\(^\text{44}\)

A story about fire, lightning, and an earthquake miraculously foiling the Temple’s reconstruction is evident very early on in Syriac. Ephrem the Syrian, writing within a decade of Julian’s death, alludes to the attempt at rebuilding the Temple in several places throughout his *Hymns against Julian*. In Ephrem’s most direct discussion of the episode, he says this:

> Jerusalem trembled when she saw her demolishers entering again and disturbing her calm. She complained to the [Most] High about them, and she was heard. Winds He commanded, and they blew; He beckoned to earthquakes, and they came into being, to the lightning bolts and they blazed forth, to the air and it became dark, to the walls and they were overthrown, to the gates and they were opened. Fire came out and devoured the scribes who read in Daniel that [Jerusalem] would be destroyed forever, who read but did not learn; they were severely stricken, and they learned.\(^\text{45}\)

In addition to the harrowing poetic record of Ephrem in the fourth century and the lengthy accounts of Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret in the fifth century, other anti-Jewish and anti-Julian tales about the failed attempt at reconstituting and purifying the Temple abound: Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Rufinus, and the Syriac *Julian Romance* all discuss the incident.\(^\text{46}\) Because of this wide proliferation of early Christian sources—including early Syriac sources—that attempt to glean


\(^{46}\) This list is only partial. For a detailed list of sources with more specific citations, see Levenson, “The Ancient and Medieval Sources.”
theological meaning and score points against Jews on the basis of this strange episode, it is not entirely surprising to find a reference to “the rebuilding of Jerusalem” in a martyrological text from Sasanian Persia. What is surprising, however, is finding such a reference in Simeon’s *Martyrdom*.

Although the early sections of the *Martyrdom* never specifically refer to the Maccabees as “Jews,” that biblical Jews are being exalted as akin to contemporary Persian Christians is inescapably obvious. Dozens upon dozens of elements in the comparison between Judah and Simeon involve *celebrating* the parallels between the Jewish and Christian priesthoods and *lamenting* the shared fates of the Jewish and Christian altars and cult. The author of the *Martyrdom* quotes directly from 1 Maccabees at the outset of his narrative—and makes it very clear that he is referring to the pagan defilement of the *Jewish* Temple—when he relates that Antiochus “the Iniquitous went up to Jerusalem and took the golden sanctuary and all their ritual vessels [1 Macc 1:23]. He defiled the Temple and built pagan altars on it [1 Macc 1:50]. He brought in foreigners and expelled the local citizens [1 Macc 1:40]. He oppressed the priests and defiled their holiness. He shed innocent blood in the land of their inheritance [1 Macc 1:39].”

In other sections of the *Martyrdom*, Matthias, Judah’s father, is referred to as a “pure priest.” Judah himself is called a “priest and valiant warrior” whose “memory is a blessing unto the ages” and whose glinting sword hastened the purification and sanctification of the land.

Given all these references to the Jerusalem Temple and to the fundamental historical parallel between its defilement by Antiochus and the destruction of Christian

47 *Martyrdom* 1
48 *Martyrdom* 3
49 *Martyrdom* 5
churches by Shapur, it seems truly bizarre for the author of the *Martyrdom* to swivel so suddenly in the opposite direction in order to malign Jews and gloat over “the desolation of many thousands … [who] were gathered together in order to go to the rebuilding of Jerusalem.”

Even given the completely changed historical circumstances between the time of the Maccabean heroes and the fourth-century Christians of Persia—and the possibility that the author of the *Martyrdom* may have read contemporary “Jews” as being different from and unrelated to the Maccabean heroes he celebrates in his text—this shift in the *Martyrdom* still makes very little sense. Why would the author of Simeon’s *Martyrdom* spend so much time praising the son of a Jewish high priest for sanctifying the defiled Temple if, later in the text—and with reference to a completely unrelated event that occurred a quarter century after Simeon’s death—he intended to slander a Jewish attempt at sanctifying the very same Temple? In a stroke, *Martyrdom* 13 erases, confuses, and renders impotent the long introductory excursus on the Maccabees. Is the reader to understand the parallel with the Maccabees as having been, after all, merely an appropriation of biblical Jews to serve as a “usable past” for contemporary Christians? This hardly seems plausible.

**Changing Social and Religious Contexts: Anti-Judaism in the History**

The most reasonable solution to the puzzle that is *Martyrdom* 13 is that it is a secondary insertion into the text of the *Martyrdom*. The *Martyrdom*, otherwise, is too coherent—too rhetorically stylized, intentional, and deliberate—to accept the proposition that section 13 is an original part of the narrative. *Martyrdom* 13 sticks out like a sore thumb. And, although the section numbers are, of course, not original to the Syriac text, but were inserted by Michael Kmosko in the preparation of his Syriac-Latin

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50 *Martyrdom* 13
edition, the numbered section breaks do help to highlight what seems to be an intervention in the narrative. For it is Martyrdom 14, not 13, that follows seamlessly from Martyrdom 12. Martyrdom 12 ends with Shapur’s command that Simeon be arrested and brought to Bet Huzaye. Martyrdom 14 begins straightaway with the fulfillment of the king’s command ordering Simeon’s arrest: “Then Simeon, the bishop, was bound in chains on the way out of Seleucia in order to be brought to Bet Huzaye …”\(^{51}\)

If it is the case that Martyrdom 13 represents a later insertion into the text, then perhaps Momigliano was not mistaken in claiming, “Insofar as the notion of individual martyrdom is closely related to the purity of the Jewish cult, II Maccabees could be read with full appreciation only by Jews.” Which is to say, Momigliano was not mistaken in his claim if more rigid boundaries between what constitutes a “Jew” and what constitutes a “Christian” inform who would, and who would not, be able to fully appreciate the Maccabean literature. Writing with orthodox “Christian readers” along the lines of Gregory Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Ephrem the Syrian in mind, Momigliano is certainly right to say that they would have had great difficulty finding interpretative utility in “the extreme importance attributed to the temple and to its purification by Judas Maccabeus.” But, as Simeon’s Martyrdom demonstrates, the border lines between Christians and Jews in some Christian texts were fuzzier than the clear religious boundaries we often find in more intentionally apologetic Christian literature.\(^{52}\)

As Judith Lieu notes, for example, the earliest (Greek and Latin) martyr acts do not corroborate the anti-Jewish invective that is present in Christian apologetic literature.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{51}\) Martyrdom 14

\(^{52}\) On this point, the most seminal recent study is of course that of Daniel Boyarin, Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

\(^{53}\) J. Lieu, “Accusations of Jewish Persecution in Early Christian Sources, with Particular Reference to Justin Martyr and the Martyrdom of Polycarp,” in Tolerance and Intolerance in Early
To be sure, not corroborating anti-Jewish invective is one thing, but actively celebrating a Jewish-Christian connection as the Martyrdom does is quite another. So how are we to explain how and why Martyrdom 13 was added to the text—if such a theory can legitimately be entertained?

In the changed social, political, and religious context of mid-fifth century Persia, anti-Jewish language rhetorically seeking to draw a more hard and fast boundary between Jews and Christians may make more sense. As Judith Lieu’s work shows, while there is hardly any anti-Jewish language in most of the early Greek and Latin martyr acts (the Martyrdom of Pionius is a notable exception), there is a slow shift such that in “later martyrdom acts, Jews become regular antagonists.” A similar shift in perspective towards the Jews can account for the differences between Simeon’s Martyrdom and the later History.

The History is, most certainly, much more comprehensive than Martyrdom 13 both in its anti-Judaism and in its detailed account of the Martyrdom’s rather vague reference to the “oppression that suddenly came upon” the Persian Jews when they tried to leave Persia to assist with rebuilding Jerusalem. In the History’s version of the story, the narrative begins with what seems to be a recapitulation of Martyrdom 13, much of it word for word. The History adds that the Jews told Shapur, by way of further vilifying Simeon, “there is no secret in your kingdom that [Simeon] does not write down and

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55 History 12-15
make known to Caesar.”⁵⁶ According to the History, the Jews had the opportunity to accuse Christians of treachery because they were confidants of the Persian queen, “who was of their way of thinking.”⁵⁷ In other words, the queen of Persia was a Jew.

Furthermore, the History directly mentions Julian and sets the stage for his attempt at rebuilding the Temple:

After twenty-four years, once the sons of victorious Constantine—Constantius and Constantine II—had died, Julian reigned over the Romans. From the outset of his reign he sacrificed to idols. In order to provoke the Christians and to thereby falsify the words of Christ, who prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem and said, “There will not be left on it a stone upon a stone that is not destroyed” [Cf. Mt 24:2; Mk 13:2; Lk 21:6], Julian commanded all the Jews of his empire that they should go up and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple and give sacrificial offerings as the Law commands. Many went out and began to dig the foundations of Jerusalem. While these things were being done, a deceiver came to the land of the Persians and called all the Jews and said, “This is the time of return, which was predestined by the prophets! [Cf. Dan 9:24-27; Is 27:13] I have been commanded by God to announce the return to you so that you would go up (to Jerusalem)!”⁵⁸

According to the History, the unnamed “deceiver” went to “Maḥuza in Bet Aramaye and led astray masses of Jews, and they set forth and went out from Maḥuza in the belief of the return. They had gone only three parasangs from the city when word of their departure reached King Shapur, who sent out a force and destroyed many thousands of them.”⁵⁹ After providing this tantalizing introduction, replete with the suggestion that there was a Jewish queen on the Persian throne (which was apparently

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⁵⁶ History 12
⁵⁷ History 3
⁵⁸ History 14
⁵⁹ History 15; “Maḥuza,” a suburb of greater Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was known to have had a large Jewish population. If the Jews of Maḥuza were apprehended three parasangs from the city (about fifteen kilometers), that would have been at approximately the location of Maiozamalcha. According to Ammianus, on the outskirts of the Maiozamalcha was a low-walled town that had been abandoned by its “Jewish inhabitants” immediately prior to the arrival of Julian’s soldiers, who burned it. Amm. Marc. XXIV.4,1: In hoc tractu civitas ob muros humiles ab incolis Iudaeis deserta iratorum manu militum conflagravit.
of little consequence in stemming Shapur’s violence against those Jews who tried to leave Persia), the History concludes its interlude by saying, “Concerning the destruction that took place among the Jews in the time of King Shapur we have described it as briefly as we are able. Let us now return to our story.”  

This is, however, not the end of the story, nor is it the end of the History’s anti-Jewish invective. Later, in a prolonged speech to the one hundred clergymen who would be martyred before him, Simeon warns Christians against associating with heretics, particularly the erroneous, greedy, and back-biting Jews, to whom Simeon refers as kalbē paqrē, “rabid dogs.”  

Several other times in the narrative, Jews are referred to as “killers”—not just of Jesus, but of the prophets, and even Paul.

While, as I have noted, plenty of Greek and Latin martyr acts trafficked in similar anti-Jewish language, the History is quite rare among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs in its employ of such slanderous discourse. As Jacob Neusner concludes based on a survey of the Acts: “Jews occur only in the martyrologies of Simeon bar Ṣabbāēe and his sister Tarbo. I find no references to Jewish instigation of, or participation in, any other aspect of the persecution of Christianity by Shapur II.”  

Tarbo’s martyr acts, part of the so-called B-Zyklus, which, on philological grounds, Wiessner showed were closely related to Simeon’s History, also mention a “Jewish queen” of Sasanian Persia. (According to

60 History 15

61 History 22

62 History 43, 44, 74, 89, 90


64 AMS II, 254-260. Sozomen’s summary of Tarbo’s acts mentions the Jewish queen of Persia as well. Soz. HE II.12,2: ἡ δὲ βασιλέως (φιλεῖ γὰρ πως τὸ νοσοῦν τοῖς ἀπευκταίοις παρέχειν τὴν ἀκοήν) ὑπέλαβεν ἀληθῆ εἶναι τὴν διαβολήν καὶ μάλιστα παρὰ Ἰουδαίων γεγενημένην, ἐπεὶ ταύταν ἐφρόνηει καὶ Ἰουδαϊκὸς ἑβίω καὶ ἀμεθεῶς πρὸς Ηγείτο καὶ εὐνόους αὐτῇ. For an overview and examination of the theme of a “Jewish queen” during
her acts, Tarbo was accused of using sorcery in a physical assault against the Persian queen in revenge for her role in Simeon’s execution.)\textsuperscript{65} In other words, besides the \textit{Martyrdom of Tarbo}, which grows out of Simeon’s \textit{History}, the theme of Jewish involvement in Shapur’s persecution is otherwise non-existent in the \textit{Acts of the Persian Martyrs}—except, of course, for this vague and out-of-place aside in \textit{Martyrdom} 13.\textsuperscript{66}

The anti-Jewish language of the \textit{History} demonstrates the perspective of an author writing from among a Christian community in a changed social and political context from the community that produced the \textit{Martyrdom}. As I will explain at greater length in the next chapter, the \textit{History}, by abandoning what had come to be seen as a theologically-problematic parallel with the Maccabees, turns instead to draw a parallel—or at the very least a theologically-sympathetic link—with the Christians of the Roman Empire. Whereas the Christians of the \textit{Martyrdom} can celebrate their shared struggle with biblical Jews, the Christians of the \textit{History} seek to find common cause (albeit tentatively) with other Christians—most certainly not with any Jews. The \textit{History}, as a result, is able to answer the “why” question about Shapur’s persecution in a way that is impossible for the \textit{Martyrdom}, which adduces the analogy with the Maccabees as the


\textsuperscript{65} Shapur charges Simeon with being the “head of the sorcerers” (\textit{History} 18, 34; \textit{Martyrdom} 12, 15). The king also warns Gushtazad, a Persian eunuch who had converted to Christianity, not to “persist in the opinions of these sorcerers” (\textit{Martyrdom} 30; \textit{History} 54).

\textsuperscript{66} Jews are mentioned derisively in some other texts among the \textit{Acts of the Persian Martyrs}, but with reference to the Jews who crucified Jesus. Jewish accusations of Christian treachery are, as I have said, unique to Simeon’s acts and the \textit{Martyrdom of Tarbo}. Outside of these texts, when Christians are accused of being traitors, rebels, and partisans of Caesar and his god, it is typically from the mouths of the Magi or other non-Christian (and non-Jewish) Persians.
extent of its explanation.

As the stories about Simeon’s death and Shapur’s persecution developed and changed, the mere holding up of a parallel with the Maccabees became insufficient—especially in the stark light of the well-known story about the failure of a pagan Roman emperor’s attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. The History, by invoking Christian emperors and Christians in the West, could thus better explain “oppression” as the result of suspicions over their allegiances. If Christians, in the person of Simeon, were to be brought before Shapur for questioning, trial, and execution, then a reason for their oppression could easily be found in their shared religious tie with the Roman enemy. And if Simeon, as in so many of the stories of other martyrs, was now to be presented as another Christ, rather than another Judah, then who else to level the charges against him besides Jews? In the words of the author of the History, “the Jews are accustomed to bearing false witness all the time. Just as they bore false witness against our Lord, so too did they against the servant of Christ [Simeon].”

Such accusations make little sense in the Martyrdom—which introduces them suddenly and ambiguously in Martyrdom 13 and then never again breathes a single word about “Jews” or “Caesar.” But such charges originating from a community of Persian Jews are, as Wiessner perceived, at the very core of the narrative of the History. For the author of the Martyrdom, the Jewish Temple was an interpretative key for explaining and understanding the destruction of Christian churches; for the author of the History, however, the Temple—and with it the extended parallel with the Maccabees—had become, as Momigliano suggested, something that could produce only “hesitation in its Christian readers.”

67 History 13
Explaining Shapur’s Persecution: Taxation as/and Oppression in the Martyrdom/History

Assuming I am correct that Martyrdom 13 is a later insertion into the text, then one of the main ways by which the Martyrdom differs from the History is that the former text employs solely the historical situation of the Maccabees as an explanation for the reason why Christians were supposedly saddled with heavy taxes. Left unexplained in the Martyrdom is why the authorities attempted to assess the harsh taxes, or whether this was the first time that Christians had rebelled against paying them.

The History, on the other hand, as I discussed in chapter four, very clearly indicates that Shapur’s anger toward Christians was stoked by his own military defeats along the Roman eastern frontier. Accordingly, Shapur is presented in a slightly different light. As in the Martyrdom, the initial issue appears to be taxes. But, unlike the Martyrdom, the History is careful to explain what first motivated Shapur to impose heavy taxes on Christians to begin with, even portraying Shapur’s tax edict as a dilemma purposefully concocted for use against the Christians: Shapur, by issuing a tax edict against the Christians, would thereby force Simeon into either collecting the excessive taxes that were required or refusing to do so and thus revealing himself as a rebel allied with Caesar.68

Besides the problematic, one-time accusation of an alliance with Caesar, the Martyrdom is not in any way keen to establish links between Persian Christians and their Roman co-religionists. As I outlined in chapter three, there is no suggestion in the Martyrdom of ongoing hostilities between Rome and Persia; no allusion to Shapur’s failed siege of Nisibis; no suggestion that losses to Roman forces spurred Shapur to furious action against the Christians of Persia; and, for that matter, no implication that

68 History 4

265
the Christians of Persia would pay taxes to Caesar were he to require such homage as a condition of his patronage from afar.

The History, however, claims that Shapur composed an unusual edict demanding that Simeon be arrested and held by the authorities of Bet Aramaye until he agreed to collect a “double poll tax [ksep rēšā] and a double tribute [maddata]” from all the Christians of Persia.69 The text strongly implies, moreover, that Christians were the only ones subject to the doubling of their taxes and that the tax was, in effect, a tax on Christianity. During Simeon’s trial, he declares to the king, “‘Behold, we should not be asked to pay a tax for our faith, rather we should be asked to give a defense of our faith and our teaching.’”70 According to the History, the imposition of the two sorts of double taxes was, in reality, only a pretext for and a precursor of a larger, more violent persecution. Shapur, the narrator of the History claims, “‘wanted, and schemed for, an occasion to persecute the faithful. So, he devised reasons to oppress all the Christians in the Persian lands with a double tax.’”71

As the History attests, Simeon’s refusal to collect taxes or bow to the king confirmed that the bishop and his flock were rebels, something that was already suspected about Christians. From the narrator’s point of view, the double tax on Christians was thus as much a way for Shapur to punish Persian Christians for their presumed allegiances to Christians in the West as it was an impromptu financial measure intended to raise capital that would help defray the expense of the ongoing war with Rome.72 As the History explains it, following Shapur’s return from his initial raids

69 History 4
70 History 38
71 History 4
72 For an interpretation of the double tax as a way of testing the loyalties of Christians while serving as a mechanism by which to keep them under strict imperial control, see N.
on the Roman eastern frontier, he was filled with anger toward the Christians of Persia:

He wanted, and schemed for, an occasion to persecute the faithful. So, he devised reasons to oppress all the Christians in the Persian lands with a double tax, and he composed an edict from Bet Huzaye to the authorities in Bet Aramaye that said this: ‘As soon as you see the edict of ours, gods, in this letter that we have sent you, arrest Simeon, the head of the nasräyē, and do not release him until he signs a document that makes it incumbent on him to collect and to give to us a double poll tax and a double tribute from all the nasräyē people, a people that is in our land, gods, and inhabits the land of our authority. For to us, gods, there are tribulations and wars, while to them is life and luxury. They dwell in our land, yet they are of one mind with Caesar, our enemy. And while we fight, they rest.’

While the king still provides Simeon with multiple opportunities to save himself and his people in the History, Shapur’s concern that Simeon is not merely a rebel against harsh taxation, but is also a traitor and a Roman conspirator, is much more pronounced. Once Shapur heard that Simeon refused to collect the double tax, he announced: “Simeon wants his disciples and his people to rebel against my kingdom and he wants to make them into servants of Caesar, whose devotion he shares, and for that reason he does not obey my commands.” The reader is to thus understand that the reason for Shapur’s initial tax edict against the Christians had to do with their presumed religious allegiance (as a group) to a foreign king.

Contrary, however, to Shapur’s claim that the Christians of Persia avoided, or, perhaps, were disqualified from, the military service of the king (“And while we fight, they rest’’), the narrator of the History indicates that there were in fact “some among the faithful” who served “in the army of the king” and who sought “relics from the bodies


73 History, 4

74 History 11; my emphasis.
of the holy ones” (da-b-‘atar ‘atar d-‘estaqbal(w) ba-plaggā d-malkā, š’el(w) burktā men pagrayhon d-qaddišē) who were killed along with Simeon.\textsuperscript{75} Nowhere in the History does the narrator suggest that the Christian soldiers in Shapur’s army were compelled to keep their true faith hidden, but neither does the narrator say that these soldiers were open about their Christianity. And yet Simeon’s martyr acts, especially the History, presuppose that at least Christian clergymen, if not the broader population of Christians in Persia, were identifiable as a group.

The History further demonstrates that Shapur and the Persian authorities knew who was in charge of the “nāsrāyē people” and assumes that Christians were sufficiently numerous in the empire—or at least the environs of Seleucia-Ctesiphon—that it was reasonable to compose a special rescript forcing Simeon into collecting a steep tax from his flock. The self-evident identifiability of Christians (or nāsrāyē) is a presupposition tacitly advanced in scholarly studies of Shapur’s persecution as well. But who Christians were and that the boundaries separating them from other religious groups (in an apparently monolithic block as a separate category of people) were clear enough in mid-fourth-century Persia such that the Sasanian authorities could not only levy particular taxes on them as a corporate entity, but also know who from among the general populace to hold accountable when taxes were not paid, is a premise that, as the next section will show, cannot be accepted merely on the basis of the evidence internal to the Acts of the Persian Martyrs.

Oddly, even though Simeon’s refusal to collect taxes from Christians is perhaps the most important narrative element of each text (at least at the outset), the issue of taxes is also something of a red herring. Taxes are not discussed at all in the second half of the History, and the issue drops from the picture completely only a third of the way

\textsuperscript{75} History 98
into the *Martyrdom*. Even Shapur dismisses the subject of taxes. Instead of pressing Simeon to collect the taxes that had been levied upon Christians, the king relents and offers to forgive all outstanding debts and to allow Christians to worship as they please—with one important caveat. Shapur tells Simeon that if he would agree to make a public act of obeisance to the sun, then all the Christians of Persia would be forgiven and freed from oppression. The king says to the bishop, "put aside the issue of taxes. But in this I advise you, Simeon: worship the sun god with me today and you and all your people will live." Near the conclusion of the text, just before Simeon is beheaded, Shapur again pleads with the bishop to stay the executioners’ swords. This time the king makes no mention of taxes: "Worship the sun just this once and you will not have to worship it again! I will deliver you from those [i.e., the Magi] who seek your life." Simeon, Shapur insists, ultimately has the power to forestall his own martyrdom and the suffering of his flock *not* by agreeing to collect the taxes that were demanded from him, but by bowing to the sun. And yet, as Simeon is keen show, apostasy—however perfunctory—is no choice: he insists that the culpability for the deaths of Christians belongs to Shapur. Dismayed by Simeon’s intransigence, Shapur says to Simeon, "This is not wisdom that you embolden your will such that many will be destroyed for your sake! Spare yourself from being killed along with the thousands that I am going to destroy, and restrain me from taking your blood and the blood of the

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76 Taxes are not mentioned after *History* 41 or *Martyrdom* 17. That said, the issue of taxes is unquestionably more pronounced in the *History* than it is in the *Martyrdom*. In the *History*, the non-payment of taxes is linked, multiple times, with the characterization of Simeon and his people as "rebels." In one instance, *History* 38, the Magi surround Simeon and shout, "Whoever does not want to take upon himself the payment of taxes wants to incite his people to rebellion with him!"

77 *Martyrdom* 17

78 *Martyrdom* 39
masses who goad me to destroy them!” In response, Simeon speaks to the necessity of submitting to martyrdom: “If you shed innocent blood, as you have said, then you will know it when you have to justify and explain it on the day you are interrogated about all you have done and all you will still yet do. For my part, I know this: in their death, they will rule; in their death, you will die. For all that, I will not give my life in Christ over to you for their death. Yet you do have power over my life in this world, so, in your perverse desire, take this life quickly by any manner of death you wish.”

As these quotations show, the overt theme of taxes and their non-payment appears to fall by the wayside in the Martyrdom as more pressing matters, and concerns more naturally endemic to the martyrological genre, take precedence—issues such as allegiance, authority, apostasy, group identity, and the clarity of religious boundaries. Once Simeon is brought before Shapur, taxes are pushed aside as a secondary issue; religious allegiance and the recognition of Shapur’s authority over Christian laws become the primary basis by which Christians will be judged. Nevertheless, taxes are an excellent group-making device. The assessment of taxes on a particular group functions literarily to hasten the discussion toward the more self-evidently “religious” issues invoked by Shapur’s demand that Simeon bow to him and to the sun god. Indeed, the common bane of taxes, and the corporate responsibility that Simeon invokes in standing against their payment, lassoes all “Christians” together under the collective banner of a powerless people oppressed by the ruling elites.

While the Martyrdom emphasizes that the oppression of Christians did indeed begin via harassment and heavy taxes, the text never claims that pre-existing taxes were “doubled.” Nor does the Martyrdom explain what kinds of taxes were imposed,

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79 Martyrdom 20

80 Martyrdom 21. The idea of Shapur having power “in this world” plays a central role in the History, as I discuss below.
neglecting to mention whether it was a land tax, a poll tax, some other new tax on Christians, or just an episode of general extortion via the tax collectors’ inappropriate use of their office. We are left to surmise, thanks to the evidence provided in the History, that the overzealous tax collectors were taxing Christians at an oppressive rate at the explicit command of the king. But if the evidence of the History is held to one side, it becomes obvious at once that the Martyrdom does not mention Shapur’s anger towards Christians, or even that the king has addressed them directly, until Shapur receives Simeon’s letter in which the bishop overtly challenges the authority of the king’s men to tax Christians.

With his congregation already wearied by the merciless tax collectors, Simeon writes to Shapur and declares: “Jesus is king of kings and we will not put the yoke of your oppression upon our shoulders.”\(^{81}\) The Martyrdom, through Simeon’s statements to the king, rejects the payment of taxes altogether, as a matter of staying true to the authority of Jesus. Were Christians to bow to the authority of a king by paying taxes, they would be betraying Christ and apostasizing from their faith. Jesus, according to Simeon’s analysis in the Martyrdom, freed Christians from taxes:

> Far be it from us now liberated people to work once more in the service of a man! Our Lord is the lord of your lordship; therefore, we will not assume upon our head the lordship of our fellow man. Our God is the creator of your gods, and we do not worship his creatures, such as you. He commanded us: ‘do not acquire gold or silver for your purses’ [Mt 10:9], thus we have no gold to give you, nor money to bring to you for taxes. His Apostle warned us, ‘you were ransomed with a heavy price, so do not become servants of men’ [1 Cor 7:23].\(^{82}\)

In the perspective advanced by the author of the Martyrdom, the demand that the Christians of Persia pay taxes is no different in kind from the demand that Christians bow before a pagan god. When, in the Martyrdom, the discussion shifts from the

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\(^{81}\) Martyrdom 10

\(^{82}\) Martyrdom 10
payment of taxes to Shapur’s insistence that Simeon bow to the sun god, the shift is merely to another, less tangible, means of paying homage to the king and his realm. From Shapur’s point of view, however, this is a gift: he is offering to absolve Christians from taxes and to protect them from the Magi so long as Simeon makes a token display of allegiance to the king and his god. From the Christian point of view, however, at least insofar as it is narrated in the Martyrdom, Shapur has upped the ante and required an even more egregious act of apostasy than the payment of taxes from which Christians have been divinely delivered. The Martyrdom thus proposes a theological argument about taxation and authority that is radically different from the History’s much more modest claim that Christians would pay taxes and did respect imperial authority, but would not (and could not) be strong-armed into paying a double tax levied exclusively upon them.

In the History, Simeon pleads with Shapur to give him a reason why Christians were being asked to pay a double tax. In a letter to Shapur, Simeon asks whether it is because the king thinks that Christians are wealthy, and answers his own rhetorical question by reiterating a similar claim of Christian poverty that is made in the Martyrdom: “‘If we are asked [to pay increased taxes] as [i.e., because we are] wealthy people, then everyone knows that we are poor and that we lack abundant wealth.’” But, in the History, Simeon continues his humble inquiry, wondering if the king perhaps believes that Christians do not sufficiently contribute to the health of the imperial economy: “If it is as lazy people [that we are asked to pay a double tax], then you are aware that there is not anyone among us who abstains from the work of the king, because all of us are under the yoke of the tax collector.’” Christians, in other words, labor for their daily bread, and that labor is already more than accounted for in the imperial coffers. As

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83 History 5; my emphasis.
far as the History is concerned, whatever burdens Jesus may have lifted, taxes were not among them.

**Worldly Authority, Spiritual Authority: The Role of the Bishop in Simeon’s History**

Beyond the sort of taxes that were imposed, and the discrepancy over whether or not Christians were divinely exempt from paying them, is the History’s claim that the authority of bishops simply did not extend to the collection of taxes and, for that reason, Simeon could not collect them. In the History, the question thus becomes not whether Christians should pay taxes—yes, they should, just not double taxes—but whether bishops have the authority to collect taxes. The History’s answer to this question is no: bishops do not have the authority to collect taxes because tax collection is a task left to those who have worldly authority, not spiritual authority such as that of bishops.

Simeon, in the Martyrdom, refuses to acknowledge the authority of the king to require acts of allegiance that entail paying taxes or bowing to the sun. Apparently, however, Simeon had previously acknowledged Shapur’s authority, but this seems to have been prior to being asked to pay taxes, which initiated the oppression of the Christian people:

When he was hurriedly deported all that way in just a few days and entered the city called Karka d-Ledan, the chief Magi told the king, “Lo! He is arriving, the head of the sorcerers!” The king commanded that they bring Simeon before him, and when he came in he did not bow. The king was greatly angered again by this and said to him, “Well! So all the things I have heard about you turn out to be true! Why, in the past, did you bow down but do not do so now?” Simeon responded to him, “Previously, I did bow down because I was not arriving in chains, nor was I being summoned to deny my true God [by paying taxes] as I am today!” The Magi then said, “This man pays no taxes and clearly wants to rebel against your kingdom, therefore he does not deserve to live!”

The Martyrdom’s near-full rejection of the king and his authority to require acts of

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84 Martyrdom 15
allegiance is substantially tempered in the History. The History, moreover, is also quite clear that Simeon was once a good friend to Shapur and would remain so if friendship with the king did not, at Shapur’s insistence, also entail worshipping the sun. In response to Shapur’s threats, Simeon says, “Concerning that which you said to me—do you intend to turn the king’s friendship toward you into enmity because of your disobedience, so that he will spill your blood upon the earth?—truly I say before your authority: I would be glad if the king continued to love me, if only he would allow me to love my God.”85

Near the outset of the History, Simeon takes care to explain that Christians “embrace” the authority of the king and even “pray for the king under whose kingdom God subjected us.”86 Whereas in the Martyrdom Simeon cites passages that he interprets as enjoining the non-payment of taxes, in the History Simeon explains that by the very command of the scriptures Christians are to be subject to governing authorities, so much so that if Christians were to spurn the governing authorities, they would also risk spurning God:

‘Truly, our scriptures command this of us: ‘Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and whoever defies that authority will receive judgment.’ [Rom 13:1-2] We are commanded to pray for kings and authorities. One of our teachers said to us: ‘Before all things, offer prayers for kings and authorities.’ [1 Tim 2:1-2] Therefore, when our scriptures command this of us, how are we able to be despisers and enemies of the King of Kings without at the same time becoming adversaries of God who commands these things through our teachers?’87

Given the accusation that Christians are partisans of Caesar’s god, it is perhaps not surprising that, in giving a defense of Christian submission to worldly authority, Simeon wisely chooses to cite Paul rather than Jesus’ admonition in Matthew to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt 22:21). In any case, Simeon makes clear that

85 History 10
86 History 5
87 History 5
far from prohibiting the payment of taxes the scriptures “have taught us to be subject (to authority), and they have even shown us how far we should go in our subjection. Concerning this matter, they have taught us: ‘Give all men their due. To whom is due the poll tax, give the poll tax; to whom is due tribute, give tribute.’ [Rom 13:7] But they do not command us to pay a double poll tax.”

Beyond emphasizing that Christians are required to pay a fair rate of tax to the authorities, but are nonetheless exempt from oppressive taxes, the History introduces a more practical, procedural matter: Simeon refuses to collect double taxes from Christians not only because they are unjustified, but more so because a bishop’s authority simply does not hold sway over such mundane matters. As Adam Becker notes about the History, “there is a persistent emphasis on the existence of two distinct jurisdictions, šultāne: one, that of the Catholicos Simeon, pertains to people’s souls and the invisible world, and the other, the shah’s, is ‘ālmānāyā, ‘worldly,’ and concerns visible creation.”

Several times in the History, Simeon, in fact, refers to Shapur as “your authority.” But, with seeming reference to his fellow bishops, Simeon declares to the Magi: “‘We do not accept the payment of taxes because our authority is not worldly so that we can exert force upon our brothers, but rather our authority is from God, who teaches us humility in all our books.’”

88 History 7


90 History 5, 9, 10

91 History 38; my emphasis. In the preceding section (History 37), Simeon suggests—not very subtly—that it would be a betrayal of the nature of the bishop’s office to collect taxes from poor people, and that such oppression is better left to those who are already thieves and oppressors: ‘Blessed Simeon answered and said to the king, ‘Far be it from your servant, my lord King, to be a tyrant over the humble people of God! And far be it from your august majesty that it would command me—a poor man, who always teaches my people poverty and humility, and who teaches them if someone hits you on your cheek, turn to him the other one; and if someone takes your cloak, offer him your tunic [Mt 5:39-40]—to be their oppressor and thief and one who
This is a new argument that is not broached in the Martyrdom. It is, moreover, an argument that is necessary to help explain why Simeon is so opposed to collecting taxes when, as the text has made clear, the king’s authority is to be obeyed by the command of scripture. Again, what this change in the History demonstrates is a completely different rendering of the “events” as they are described in the Martyrdom. The discussion is transformed from one over taxation as oppression into one about double taxation as oppression and, moreover, the lack of the authority of a bishop to collect even legitimate taxes. In so doing, the History turns the persecution of a politeia (as it seems to be described in the Martyrdom) into the persecution of a religious group because of their connection with their co-religionists in the Roman Empire and a bishop’s refusal to abide by the procedural directives demanded by the worldly authorities.

**The Taxation of “Religious Groups” in Sasanian Persia**

As both the Martyrdom and the History reveal, the discussion about taxes in a fourth-century Persian context is less of a discussion and more of a monologue: we hear the Christian side of the story (and the Christian version of Shapur’s perspective), but only silence from the Persian authorities themselves and, indeed, other non-Christian sources as well. We possess no imperial documents that suggest Christians were regarded as a threat to the Persian Empire: there is no Shapurian edict preserved in Middle Persian that levies a double tax on Christians; there are no rescripts that authorize the destruction of Christian churches. Thus, if Simeon’s acts are the only evidence we have for the levying of taxes specifically on Christians in fourth-century Persia, then the fundamental question that having only hagiographical evidence raises is

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\text{takes their cloaks and strips them of their tunics! Far be it from me, my lord King, that this would happen to me!}^\prime \prime
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this: Is it reasonable to suppose that “religious groups” were, or even could have been, singled out for taxation in this period?

As David M. Goodblatt demonstrates in an influential article, there is, in fact, hardly any evidence about taxes and how they were assessed in the Sasanian Empire prior to the tax reforms of Khusro I Anoshirvan in the mid-sixth century.92 Most of the evidence, if it can be called that, does in fact come from Simeon’s martyr acts. Indeed, Simeon’s acts have even been used in attempts to reconstruct how taxes were assessed on other religious communities in Sasanian late antiquity.

It is generally assumed, Goodblatt explains, that the head of the exiled Jewish community in Sasanian Babylonia “was responsible for the collection of taxes from the Jews.” But, “this assumption is based almost entirely on the example of the Christian catholicus (and on the further assumption that taxes in the Sasanian empire were collected separately from each religious community). There is no BT [Babylonian Talmud] evidence at all for the role of the exilarch in tax collection.”93 Further, as Zeev Rubin argues, even Khusro’s sixth-century reforms and attempts at uniform and regular taxation throughout the empire ultimately proved fruitless because the king tried “to superimpose the framework of a centralized state with a salaried civil bureaucracy and an army, financed by an efficient and easily manageable taxation apparatus, on a realm that was too weak to carry burden of such reforms.”94

Given the paucity of evidence for fourth-century forms and methods of taxation, and the difficulty of imposing uniform taxation even two centuries later, as suggested by

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Rubin’s study of Khusro’s reforms, it becomes all the more difficult to believe that Christians would have been singled out for special taxes that did not apply to other “religious groups.” Yet, inasmuch as the two sources narrating Simeon’s martyrdom are even themselves inconsistent with one another about who the Christians were as a people, the self-presentation of Christians in each text seems to rest upon the idea of religion and religious allegiances as the defining marker of identity and the reason why Christians were taxed excessively. The taxation of a particular people or religious group, especially as narrated in the Martyrdom and the History, is self-reinforcing; it makes it seem as if Christians are quite separate, quite clearly definable as a people, and quite clearly set apart from other religious groups. And while it is true that religious allegiances may have more concretely determined one’s socio-political identity in later centuries, such a social typology cannot be applied to a mid-fourth-century Sasanian context.

In the centuries following the Islamic Conquest, Christians, as a protected non-Muslim minority community, or dhimma, living under Muslim rule were, in fact, compelled to pay a discriminatory “protection tax,” or jizya, in lieu of military service. And because there are no contemporary, fourth-century Sasanian sources by which to adjudicate the claims of Simeon’s martyr acts, it has often been implied, if not declared outright, that the circumstances described (and yet contradicted) in the History—that is, Christians enjoying the fruit of Persian lands, while not participating in the empire’s defense—are akin to the later situation of Christians living in Persia under Islamic rule. With respect to studies of the ecclesiastical-legal systems that developed in late-fifth-century Sasanian Persia, for example, Richard Payne notes that a number of scholars “go

95 One of the classic studies of the jizya was that of D.C. Dennett in his Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), although in light of more recent studies (e.g., those of Chase Robinson) Dennett’s claims must be reconsidered.
so far as to suggest that communal legal institutions foreshadowed, or indeed were the genetic predecessors of, the Ottoman millet system.”

Neither the Martyrdom nor the History describes the imposition of a new fiscus Christianus or any special jizya-like tax. But the History (unlike the Martyrdom) does describe a unique, Christian tax in relating that existing taxes were doubled solely for Christians. Moreover, the determination of who was and who was not a Christian, even though Simeon was charged with collecting the taxes, does not seem to have rested with the bishop himself. According to both of Simeon’s acts, “the Christian people” were harassed by the tax collectors and the Magi. It did not require a bishop for the authorities to decide who was a Christian and who was liable to pay the oppressive (or double) taxes. The History, indeed, creates the perception of a neatly bounded religious community to which one’s social identity was concomitantly tied and on which it was wholly based. How is this to be interpreted?


It should be noted that the sorts of assumptions that retroject later groups and later group boundaries to much earlier periods are also used in studies of Constantine’s letter to Shapur. Vincenzo Poggi, for example, draws a parallel between Constantine’s letter to Shapur and the letter of Pope Pius II to Sultan Mahomat II in which the former begs the latter to convert to Christianity. Constantine’s letter, Poggi further claims, would have been read in much the same way as the Ottoman sultan would have read a letter from the French or the Russians in which he was told how to behave vis-à-vis his Christian subjects. See V. Poggi, “Costantino e la chiesa di Persia,” in Costantino il Grande nell’età bizantina. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio, Ravenna, 5-8 aprile 2001 (=Bizantinistica V), ed. G. Bonamente and A. Carile (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo, 2003), 84 and 94.

97 That said, two prominent characters in each text—Gushtazad, the converted eunuch and advisor to Shapur, as well as Pusai, “the head of the craftsmen”—held positions of honor and were not known to be Christians until they declared themselves as such before Shapur and the authorities.
The idea of such clear-cut religious groups informs the third part of Michael Morony’s exhaustive study, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, in which he examines the “religious communities” of pre- and post-Conquest Iraq—Christians being among these communities. What one finds, according to Morony, are effectively self-contained and autonomous religious groups. As a result of the clarity of the religious community, Sasanian bureaucrats could identify specific communities for particularized rates of taxation. Morony writes that the idea of considering “the poll tax as a levy on non-Magians appears underway by at least the fourth century when Šāpūr II, in order to offset the expense of his wars and arguing that the Christians in his empire were living in peace even though their faith differed from the established one, required the bishop of Ctesiphon (Madaʾin) Šemʾōn bar Sabaʾē, to collect a double poll tax (Syr. ḫṣaf Ṳʾshā) and land tax (Syr. ṅʾdāṭa) from Christians.” In Morony’s interpretation, the “religious dimension of the poll tax” only increased throughout the Sasanian period and then “merged easily with the tribal Arab definition of jizya as the personal ransom paid by a person defeated and captured in battle, and with the Qurʾānic use of jizya as the collective tribute paid to Muslims following political submission by those non-Muslims with a revealed scripture.”

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98 M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984; repub. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), 109. In a separate article on religious communities in late Sasanian Iraq, Morony explains how discrete religious communities were sanctioned off and how the Sasanian Empire came to be a segmented society of clearly distinguishable religious communities each with its own legal and social institutions. “Ethnic identities,” he claims, sometimes survived “because they coincided with religious communities which gave them institutional form.” In Morony’s view, the head of each religious community was “responsible for the behavior of the members of their own communities.” For example, the Jewish exilarch “represented to the state” the Jewish community, and the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy “corresponded to the structure of the Sasanian state and to the Magian hierarchy.” While Morony concedes at the end of his article that he has presented an impression of “a society composed of self-contained, isolated religious communities,” he nevertheless acknowledges that such a model of clearly bounded religious communities based on “bonds of a religious communal identity” is limited by “those who followed religious professions,” and that the “distinctions built up by religious leaders were broken down by the ordinary faithful in their everyday relations with the members of other religions.” See M. Morony, “Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq,” *JESHO* 17.2 (1974): 113-135.
Yet, as Chase Robinson has argued, “sophisticated ideas,” such as specific taxes regularly levied on and collected from members of minority religious communities, “usually take some time to become sophisticated.” At least in northern Mesopotamia, the focus of Robinson’s study, a more systematic approach to taxation was unlikely to have existed prior to even the late seventh century. Only in the eighth-century Chronicle of Zuqnin, Robinson argues, do we first hear of “the introduction of an entirely unprecedented tax regime—the levy of the gizya—rather than simply an increase in the rate of a pre-existing tax.” As a result of analyses such as Robinson’s, the idea of a religious group being singled out for taxation in fourth-century Persia is one that seems ever more flimsy. Much more recent phenomena, such as the jizya tax and the idea of minority religious groups approximating the dhimmi communities under Islamic law, have colored our reading of late ancient texts and the pre-dhimmi context of events that they purport to describe.

**Roman Analogues: “Edicts” Imposed upon Christians**

Even if it is historically unlikely that there was a tax levied particularly on the Christians of fourth-century Persia, the texts do still suggest that this was the case. But

The distinction that Morony makes between what one might call the “rhetoric” of religious elites and the everyday “reality” of the faithful is put well by Richard Payne (“Christianity and Iranian Society,” 12) when he notes, “Based on straightforward readings of religious texts, static models of religious community overestimate the power of religious authorities and underestimate the complexity of the diverse and contentious relationships concealed by textual representations of communal unity and consensus.” Payne’s corrective to Morony’s approach is similar to the argument made by Brubaker in his *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) wherein Brubaker contrasts a microanalytic, bottom-up approach at understanding “ethnicity” through everyday life with the more commonly investigated top-down approach via large-scale nationalist politics.


100 Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 45-46.
rather than assume that Simeon’s *Martyrdom* and *History* accurately relate that the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was responsible for collecting an increased (or double) tax from Christians—and that they alone were the subjects of such taxation because they were, like the emperor of Rome, Christian—perhaps another explanation is possible. Even if we assume that Shapur did assess a tax to help fund the war against Rome following his failed siege of Nisibis in 337/338 CE, we need not assume that Christians were the only ones saddled with this new financial burden. The tax may have been a more wide-ranging requirement intended to raise revenues for war expenses, but nevertheless perceived by Christians as a tax levied specifically on them. This would not be unprecedented. There are other examples in late ancient Christian literature of Christians presenting themselves as a persecuted group, when the actuality of the situation belies such a conclusion. Two examples, one from the fourth century during the time of Julian, the other during the Decian persecution in the third century, might serve to illustrate this point.

**Julian’s Fiscus Christianus**

Constantine, as I outlined at the beginning of chapter one, is said to have substantially reduced taxes on everyone and even created a tax exemption for Christian clergy.\(^{101}\) When Julian took power, however, he ended the clerical tax exemption and even, at least according to Sozomen, made Christian widows and virgins repay that which had been provided to them from the public coffers.\(^{102}\) Moreover, Sozomen complains, Julian heavily taxed Christians in order to pay for his campaign against

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\(^{102}\) Soz. *HE* V.5. In his *Letter to Arsacius* (Ep. 22), Julian prescribes that pagan priests in Galatia should live a chaste life and set up social welfare—such as hostels where wheat and wine could be distributed—all in order to mimic Christian practices that had won converts.
Persia.\textsuperscript{103}

While much of Julian’s anti-Christian legislation is lost, we know from numerous sources—including Julian himself—that the emperor sought to prevent Christians from teaching classical rhetoric and literature.\textsuperscript{104} Ammianus, who does not seem to have held Christianity (as a cult) in very high esteem, nevertheless considers Julian’s prohibitions on Christian teachers with evident dismay, referring to the new law as \textit{inclemens}.\textsuperscript{105} But the question remains: even if Julian was an over-zealous enemy of Christians, did he actually attempt to require those who worshipped the Christian God to pay higher taxes than everyone else?

The \textit{Theodosian Code} preserves evidence that Julian \textit{did} discontinue some of the exemptions put in place by Constantine and Constantius—immunities that had previously allowed Christian decurions to avoid some of their duties by claiming a religious exemption—but whether Julian actually \textit{raised} taxes on Christians is less clear.\textsuperscript{106}

In fact, Gregory of Nazianzus, in the first of his two \textit{Invectives against Julian}, provides strong evidence to the contrary: while vilifying Julian for his anti-Christian decrees, Gregory nevertheless praises Julian for administering the Roman bureaucracy with fiscal moderation—and for \textit{lowering} taxes.\textsuperscript{107} If Gregory had had any reason to believe that Julian had singled out Christians for additional taxes, he undoubtedly would have commented on it here—and such an attempt surely would have been noted.

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\textsuperscript{103} Soz. \textit{HE} III.13-21; cf. Theoph. \textit{Chron. AM} 5855
\textsuperscript{104} Julian, \textit{Ep}. 36, 423A-D
\textsuperscript{105} Amm. Marc. XXII.10,7
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Cod. Theod.} XII.1,50
\textsuperscript{107} Greg. Naz. \textit{Or}. 4.75
\end{flushleft}
among other Christian writers of the fourth century. That Gregory, instead, praises Julian’s financial conservatism is almost sure proof that, at least to Gregory’s mind, Julian never taxed Christians exclusively. Rather, this idea about Julian’s supposed fiscus Christianus is one that came into circulation only among later historians eager to further paint Julian as an anti-Christian zealot.

Decius’ Edict to “Christians”

In some of the Roman Christian martyrologies set a century before Julian, during the Decian persecution of the mid-third century, we again hear that the Roman emperor was bent on singling out Christians. Recent research on primary sources other than Christian martyrologies has, however, muddied the waters, indicating that Christians may not have been singled out at all. Indeed, the evidence for any prolonged persecution, specifically and aggressively directed at Christians in the mid-third century, is becoming more and more piecemeal, forcing us to distinguish between “persecutions” actively organized and carried out against Christians (of which there were few) versus Christian sentiments about Roman decrees, arrests, and killings of Christians.

The emperor Decius, rather than seeking out Christians, seems to have issued a general edict in 249 CE that, according to James Rives, “was an order that all the inhabitants of the Empire sacrifice to the gods, taste the sacrificial meat, and swear that they had always sacrificed. It further arranged for a formal procedure to ensure universal compliance.” As Rives argues in his study of Decius’ decree, it is true that the Roman emperor issued an “unprecedented” and innovative “edict that did not simply enjoin the general observance of a particular occasion, but instead required a

particular cult act of all the inhabitants of the Empire and established a mechanism to ensure its performance on an individual basis.” Rives notes, it represented a primary instance of a move away from the traditional localism inherent in even widespread religious cults toward a universalizing, empire-wide conception of cultic responsibilities that displaced “the city from its central position in religious life.”

What motivated Decius to issue an empire-wide decree that required everyone in the Empire, except perhaps Jews, to offer sacrifice to the gods is unclear. What does seem clear is that the edict was not directed solely at Christians, irrespective of how the so-called Decian persecution was interpreted in Christian martyrological and historical sources. Other religious groups were affected, too, although one would hardly know it if one read only the likes of Eusebius or Lactantius, who understood Decius’ decree as a direct attack on the church. Rives, bypassing Christian martyrological and historiographical witnesses, points instead to the discovery of several dozen Egyptian papyrus certificates. These, he argues, can be used to reevaluate the Christian historiographical tradition about Decius’ decree: “Although it had always been assumed that Decius’ measure affected Christians alone,” Rives writes, “there was little to suggest that the people who appeared in the papyri were Christians; one of them, Aurelia


110 Rives, “Decree of Decius,” 152. Rives concludes his article by suggesting that it was Decius’s decree, “whether or not Decius himself was clearly aware of it, that first addressed the problem of defining the religion of the Empire” (154).

111 Rives speculates that the Jews were probably exempt, and that Decius “followed the long established principle of making allowances for the ancestral traditions of the Jews.” Rives, “Decree of Decius,” 138, fn. 16. This is a reasonable assumption. Pliny’s famous exchange of letters with Trajan (Pliny, Ep. X.96-97) in the early second century indicates rather clearly that nearly one hundred and fifty years before Decius the Roman Empire was already seeing “Christians” as different in kind from Jews. Exemptions allowed to Jews on the basis of the antiquity of their community and their religio would not have been extended to the new Christian superstition.
Ammounis, describes herself as ‘priestess of the god Petesouchos.’”\textsuperscript{112}

This is instructive for two reasons: first, Rives provides us with not just a warning but tangible evidence against reading Christian texts from late antiquity too credulously; second, and more importantly, he forces us to reevaluate the reasons for Decius’ edict. As the papyrus certificates indicate, Decius’ decree was Empire-wide and was not directed solely against Christians.\textsuperscript{113} The effect of the edict was, nevertheless, clearly a negative one for Christians, who were put into a position of either disobeying an imperial order or, as they saw it, apostasizing. It is no wonder, then, that Christian sources contemporary with Decius’ edict, as Rives notes, “consistently describe the situation as a persecution” even if, in hindsight, such a description is unwarranted.\textsuperscript{114}

While acknowledging that it is possible for us only to “speculate on Decius’ motivations,” Rives reminds us that Decius’ edict on sacrifices probably did not loom nearly so large in his mind as it has in modern scholarship,” and, we should hasten to add, the Christian sources contemporary with the edict. As Rives points out, “neither the decree itself nor the consequent persecution of Christians left any trace in the non-Christian historical tradition.”\textsuperscript{115} The same can be said about the taxes upon Christians in Simeon’s martyr acts: outside of the Christian martyrological tradition, there is simply no evidence for Christian-specific taxes is fourth-century Persia.

\textsuperscript{112} Rives, “Decree of Decius,” 135 ff; 140.

\textsuperscript{113} Rives is somewhat circumspect on this point in that, nodding to earlier scholarship, he acknowledges that Decius possibly intended his edict “primarily as an anti-Christian measure.” Rives ultimately concludes, however, that even though a direct anti-Christian intent was possible, that there is “no compelling reason” to see the edict as having been specifically directed against Christians (141-42). Indeed, the papyrus certificates seem proof enough that the edict was not addressed to Christians alone. There would have been no need for Decius to cautiously couch an anti-Christian edict in more universal terms. If the edict were really intended as solely (or even primarily) an anti-Christian measure, then the time and effort involved in requiring non-Christians, such as a priestess of the god Petesouchos, to verify their sacrifice would be a remarkably illogical waste of imperial resources.

\textsuperscript{114} Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” 141.

\textsuperscript{115} Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” 151, my emphasis.
Conclusions

In this chapter’s survey of the differences between Simeon’s *Martyrdom* and *History*, I have tried to make a number of interconnected points. Foremost among them is that Simeon’s martyr acts present two very different groups of Christians that cannot be harmonized together. Moreover, Simeon’s acts are extremely useful for demonstrating the changes in outlook and perspective on “religious” matters among the Persian Christian communities responsible for the two texts over the likely period during which each text was composed—from the later fourth century to the second half of the fifth century. As the practice of intentionally keeping the texts apart demonstrates, the *History* has been inappropriately “read back” into the *Martyrdom*. But when the texts are read separately, we can become more aware of not only the radical differences between Simeon’s two martyr acts, but also how later ideas—such as the *jizya* tax and the clarity of religious communities in fourth-century Persia—have been read back into and have colored our interpretations of both texts.

Ultimately, the texts’ use of taxes as a way of describing Shapur’s persecution of Christians must be seen as a narrative device that is typical to the martyrological genre. In the absence of other evidence, the *Martyrdom* and the *History* should thus no more be used to narrate the history of the fourth century than Greek and Latin martyr texts or Christian ecclesiastical histories should be used to narrate the fiscal measures of Julian or Decius’ apparently rather inconsequential decree mandating sacrifice.
Chapter 6.

Roman Captives and Persian Envoys: The Church of the East and the Territorialization of Christianity

In the previous chapter—by focusing on how the differences between Simeon’s Martyrdom and History reflect two different ideas about who Christians were and what the nature of the Christian community was in the mid-fourth century—I showed why it is perilous to use the History as an account of the actual events of the period that the text narrates. The History, I argued, was written in a changed cultural, political, and religious context from the Martyrdom. The History discards all connections between the Christians of Persia and the Maccabees and is vehement in its anti-Jewish language. In place of a connection with the Maccabees, the History initiates a series of subtle, and not-so-subtle, associations between the Christians of Persia and the Christians of the Roman Empire.

Yet, even in turning to Christians “in the land of the West,” the History still expresses an ambivalence about the Roman Empire.¹ Constantine is honored, but the Roman caesar is kept at arm’s length. Neither Constantine nor Constantius is ever said to have meddled in Persian Christian affairs or attempted to exercise any sort of patronage—from afar—nor, for that matter, does it seem that the author of the History wishes that a Christian caesar would have intervened. From the History’s perspective, the Roman caesar, however “blessed” and Christian he may have been, was not out to liberate the Christians of Persia.² Nonetheless, the author of the History is keen to interpret Constantine as an historical bridge. The History deftly narrates an historical

¹ History 2. Later in the text (History 65), Simeon prays that he “might be a son of the apostles and a brother of the martyrs who were crowned in the West, and a good example for your people in the East, so that they will not weaken or lapse from the true faith.” Simeon repeats the line about the “martyrs who were crowned in the West” in yet another prayer (History 97) immediately prior to his execution.

² The History refers to Constantine as the “blessed Constantine” (History 2, 4) and an “angel of peace” (History 3) who was sent by God.
association between, on the one hand, the time of Constantine’s rise to power and the end of the persecution of Christians in the West, and, on the other hand, Constantine’s death and the beginning of the persecution of Christians in the East.\textsuperscript{3}

**Constantine between Christians West and East**

In reading the life of the first Christian Roman emperor as the bridge between two persecutions, the *History* establishes common cause between the Christian communities of the East and the West. With the persecutions of the Christians in the West not yet an historical memory, Simeon, the *History* claims, was crowned as “the first one to excel in the land of the East as a blessed martyr of God.”\textsuperscript{4} By exhibiting a shared experience of persecution between Christians East and Christians West, the *History* is able to argue that the guiding hand of providence is purposefully refraining from thwarting those who bring suffering upon the people of God. The *History* claims that God “allowed there to be a persecution in the land of the Romans for three hundred years.” Such a lengthy period of persecution was a means of testing the mettle of the faithful. Following this period of trial and tribulation, God “gave [the Christians of the West] calm and sent them an angel of peace, Caesar Constantine, who allowed them to live in comfort.”\textsuperscript{5}

As the *History* narrates it, there was a brief period of peace (an auspicious “thirty-three years,” the traditional length of Jesus’ life) from Constantine’s rise to power until the emperor’s death during which time neither Christians who were “subject to the Christian king,” nor those “who were servants of the pagan king,” were persecuted. Even so, “while memory of the first persecution had not yet been forgotten but was still in the mind of those who had witnessed it, so that one generation would not pass away

\textsuperscript{3} *History* 2

\textsuperscript{4} *History* 1; my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{5} *History* 3
and another come and the memory of the persecution be erased,” God allowed a persecution to come upon the Christians of Persia. The History interprets this as an act of “wisdom” and adduces two examples: first, that of Joseph, whom God allowed to be sold into slavery in order to provide “bodily life through the collection of grain for many people”; and, second, that of Christ, who “was sold into his passion,” but, in so being bartered, “gave freedom through his price to our slavery which had been sold to sin.”

Qualifications such as these form the basis of the History’s defense of “the persecution and death of the holy martyrs,” and, on the basis of the link with previous persecutions in the Roman Empire, the historical importance of Shapur’s persecution in the march of providence. At the same time that the History accords the martyrs of Persia a gravitas that would have been undue were they to have suffered alone and not as a part of a providential plan with deep historical significance, the author of the text is able to defend the God of the Christians against those who might say that he is vengeful or, worse, powerless to stay the hand of persecutors: “no one who should come across these histories should think and consider and say that it was improper that God allowed us to be turned over to the hands of the persecutors,” the narrator insists. Indeed, “God allowed the persecution to overcome us so that there would be no opportunity for Satan or his minions to say: ‘It is peace that makes people worship God, and prosperity that causes the church of Christ to grow. Kings extended a helping hand to the church and exalted it. For, lo, peace reigns in each region, and there is no one who persecutes or oppresses.’”

Whereas the Martyrdom is able to explain Shapur’s persecution only by drawing a

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6 History 3. On Joseph’s slavery, see Gen 27:37; on the death of Jesus as destroying the slavery of sin see Gal 5:1.

7 History 3

8 History 2, my emphasis. The Persian Sage makes a similar argument for the salvific value of enduring persecution; see Aph. Dem. XXI, “On Persecution.”
biblical parallel with the Maccabees—but without further justifying why the persecution (of either Simeon’s people or Judah’s people) came about or how the persecution is to be historically or providentially intelligible—the History is able to show how God tested his people in the Roman Empire and then delivered them through Constantine. This argument in the History, it hardly needs to be said, is premised on the idea that the Christians of the West were saved, in part, through the political machinery of the Roman Empire, and also on the notion that the Empire itself had become Christian. As a result, it logically seems to follow—even though it is not stated in the text—that God will at some point arrange for a savior along the lines of Constantine to rescue the Christians of Persia. For in the History’s account of the past, and its conception of Shapur’s persecution as a means of mingling the blood of Christians of the East and West, it is Constantine’s conversion and death that are the watershed moments.

Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that historians of late antiquity have often regarded Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, and his patronage of the Christian cult, as one of the most consequential events in the history of Europe. Without question, the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire occasioned the forging of new loyalties, new allegiances, and a new social order. But, as I have shown, the idea that the Christians of fourth-century Persia were persecuted because of their presumed religio-political allegiances to the Roman Empire is not borne out by an analysis of the ancient sources. Rather, the sense that Persian Christians must have been a potential fifth column of the Roman Empire is an ex post facto theological story that reflects the presumed “triumph” of Christianity in the Roman Empire under Constantine and reads that triumph as epoch-making event, an utter and monumental break from the past. The reign of Constantine, contrary to what we read in the ecclesiastical-historical tradition and Simeon’s History, was not a clear-cut dividing line between two periods—the immediate rift and split from the classical, pagan past and the resultant movement
towards the Byzantine, Christian future—but was rather a beginning of a long period of transition and transformation following a continuous spectrum of cultural history.

**Persian Christians as “Roman Captives”**

Just how the beginnings of this long period of transition became intelligible in the Persian Empire decades after Constantine’s death is illuminated by looking, yet again, at the differences between Simeon’s two martyr acts. Simeon’s *Martyrdom*, as I have shown, exhibits no concern for Rome. But the later *History*, in addition to explicit references to Constantine and the Christians of the West, employs other textual devices that are crucial for understanding how Christianity came to be thought of as a Roman religion in fifth-century Persia. The *History* introduces the idea that Christians in Persia were “captives” from the Roman Empire who were being held in Persia. The *Martyrdom* does not mention captives, nor does Sozomen stress that there were Persian Christians whose identity was premised upon being Roman captives.

In this chapter, I wish to examine this theme of “captivity” that arises in Simeon’s *History*. In addition to the *History*, I am interested in considering the witness of two other fifth-century texts from among the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* that also emphasize that Persian Christians are “Roman captives”—the *Martyrdom of Pusai* and the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Bet Zabdai*. Pusai, who is mentioned in both of Simeon’s acts, is known by his Persian title as the *qarugbed*, or “head of the craftsmen,” a position of honor conferred upon him directly by the king. Given Pusai’s title, we can infer that, at least according to the text, the craftsman’s Christianity did not prevent him from holding significant social prestige as an artisan.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) *History* 25, 85, 98

\(^10\) For the references to Pusai in Simeon’s acts, see *Martyrdom* 44-48 and *History* 1 and 96. *Martyrdom* 44 relates, “[Pusai] was of the rank *qarugbed*, which is translated, ‘The One Who is in Charge of the King’s Workers,’ and he had taken the honor of this position from the king in those
Whereas Pusai had established himself within Persian society, the “captives” of Bet Zabdai were new arrivals captured by Shapur during the king’s incursions into northern Mesopotamia late in Constantius’ reign. After their capture, these Roman Christians were deported from their homeland to the Zagros Mountains in the heart of Persia. According to the text, they were offered fertile land (and their lives) on the mountain of Masabadan, but on the condition that they renounce caesar’s god and pay homage to the gods of the Persians. For refusing such an exchange, and thereby demonstrating that they would not accept Shapur’s authority, they were killed.

Intriguingly, besides the Syriac Martyrdom of the Captives, there is a non-Christian witness who mentions the captives of Bet Zabdai—Ammianus Marcellinus. In Ammianus’ telling, the captives of Bet Zabdai are those who were captured after the fall of Roman Bezabde, a northern Mesopotamian gastra (fortress-town) that the Roman historian discusses in detail in his Res gestae. As I explained in chapter four, Ammianus tells the woeful tale of the Christian bishop of Bezabde who had a brief audience with Shapur in an unsuccessful attempt at bringing to an end the Persian king’s siege of the city. The meeting was one that during which some said the bishop betrayed the city’s very days.” For Pusai’s acts, see AMS II, 208-232; German translation in O. Braun, Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1915), 58-75. Sozomen (Soz. HE II.11) refers to Pusai in a brief account that distills the little information about him that is available from Simeon’s Martyrdom. The form of Pusai’s acts as we have them may date to the sixth century. On the difficulty of dating Pusai’s Martyrdom, see G. Wiessner, “Zum Problem der zeitlichen und örtlichen Festlegung der erhaltenen syro-persischen Märtyrerakten: Das Pusai-Martyrium,” in Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte (Göttingen: Lagarde Haus, 1968), 231-251.

AMS II, 316-234; German translation in Braun, Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer, 110-115. Sozomen (Soz. HE II.13) mentions the martyrs of Bet Zabdai briefly, but seems to know little about them.

weaknesses to Shapur.\textsuperscript{13}

While the idea of Persian Christians as Roman captives is quite literal in the \textit{Martyrdom of the Captives}, the theme emerges in Simeon’s \textit{History} and the \textit{Martyrdom of Pusai} as the result of other factors. In addition to a long history of actual deportations of captive Romans (although not all of them Christian), two factors, in particular, hastened the conceptualization of Christianity as a Roman religion: first, the translation into Syriac of fourth- and fifth-century texts from the West that rhetorically concatenated Christianity and the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{14} Second, and much more directly relevant for the purposes of this chapter, the arrival of bishops from the Roman Empire who were sent to Persia (namely Seleucia-Ctesiphon) as imperial envoys in the early fifth century. These ambassador-bishops—among them Maruta of Maipherqa, an envoy from Roman Armenia whom Theodosius II sent to the court of the Persian king Yazdgard I—were influential in co-convening three East-Syrian synods (in 410, 419/420, and 424 CE) that formally organized what would come to be known as the Church of the East. These Roman bishops helped to establish clear ecclesiastical, theological, and political links between the Christians of Sasanian Persia and the Christians of the Roman Empire.

In this chapter, I wish to show how Simeon’s acts are a testament to a significant \textit{shift} in the language of Syriac martyrological discourse in the mid-fifth century. In light of early fifth-century events, such as the first councils of the Church of the East that were co-convened by Roman envoys to Persia, and yet another Roman-Persian war (this time

\textsuperscript{13} Amm. Marc. XX.7

\textsuperscript{14} For accounts of how Roman imperialism began to be shaped by the Christian rhetoric and ideology that took root soon after the rise of Constantine see, most notably, E.D. Digeser, \textit{The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), and J.M. Schott, \textit{Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). We know, for example, that some of Eusebius’ works were translated into Syriac by the early fifth century: the earliest dated literary manuscript in any language [ms. London, British Library, \textit{Add. 12,150}; see Wright, II, 631a ff] is a Syriac manuscript dated 411 CE that contains Eusebius’ \textit{Theophany} and \textit{Martyrs of Palestine}. 
in 420 and between Bahram V and Theodosius II), the underlying explanation in the martyr acts for why Christians were persecuted finally becomes clear: Christians were intent on presenting themselves as Roman captives in Persia. Following the establishment of the Church of the East and the wars of Theodosius in the fifth century, Romanitas, by the reckoning of Persian Christians themselves, could finally be understood as being coterminous with Christianitas.

**The Genesis of the Idea of Christians as Roman Captives**

Well before the time of Constantine, Christians came to Persia willingly, as missionaries, merchants, or both. But there is also historical evidence of the capture and forced deportation of Roman citizens by various Sasanian rulers. As Michael Morony and a number of others have argued, the demand for labor in the massive, continental Sasanian Empire well outpaced the available human supply. As a result, Sasanian kings from the third century through until the sixth found a useful mechanism in the kidnap of artisans, farmers, and other laborers in order to produce in Persia what

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otherwise would have had to have been imported from the Roman Empire or elsewhere.\textsuperscript{17} Christians must have been among the deportees taken from the Roman Empire, but what percentage of the captives were Christian is impossible to determine.\textsuperscript{18} That said, the growth and spread of Christianity in the post-Constantinian Roman Empire suggests that captives who were taken in later periods (the fifth and sixth centuries) would have counted more Christians among their numbers than those deported in earlier periods—for example, in the third century under Shapur I.

As I discussed in chapter one, the soldiers of Valerian’s army who were captured and held in Persia by Shapur I are said to have helped build the city of Bishapur, as is evidenced by the distinctively Antiochene style of the mosaics there.\textsuperscript{19} While only a token percentage of Valerian’s soldiers can realistically be assumed to have been Christian, later East-Syrian historical accounts, such as the Chronicle of Siirt, reckoned Shapur I’s deportations of the citizens of Antioch as a fundamental part of the seeding of

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\textsuperscript{17} M. Morony, “Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire,” in La Persia e Bisanzio (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2004), 161-162. For an overview of the differences between the Roman Empire (which, among other things, had the advantages in trade, travel, and communication accorded by the Mediterranean Sea) and the Sasanian Empire (a continental realm which, although served by the Persian Gulf, was bisected by difficult-to-navigate mountain terrain), see J. Howard-Johnston, “The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison,” in The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, vol. 3, States Resources and Armies, ed. A. Cameron (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 157-226. It was, according to Parvaneh Pourshariati, precisely these sorts of “internal weaknesses” in addition to the “decentralized dynastic system” of the Sasanian Empire that led to its easy collapse at the hands of invading Arab forces in the seventh century. See P. Pourshariati, Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

\textsuperscript{18} This is not to say that attempts have not been made to estimate the number of Christians in certain periods of late antiquity. Most notably, see R. Stark, The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and K. Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” JECS 6 (1998): 185-226.

Christianity in Persian lands.  

In addition to material evidence (such as mosaics) and much later, largely legendary, literary histories (such as the *Chronicle of Siirt*), there is also insessional evidence that may refer to the presence of Greek-speaking Roman Christians in the Persian Empire. The well-known third-century inscription of Shapur I’s *mobed* Kirdir, for instance, has traditionally been read as promoting “Zoroastrianism” over and against other religions in Persia, including the cults of the *nasrāyē* and *krestyānē.* Although these terms have been much debated among scholars, *nasrāyē* and *krestyānē* are usually taken to refer to two different religious groups in Persia—the Nazarenes and the Christians—with geographical implications about each group’s place of origin resting just beneath the surface. In Marie-Louise Chaumont’s study of Kirdir’s inscription, she suggests that the former term (as an obvious epithet for Jesus’ hometown) refers to Syriac Christians, whereas the latter term was used to indicate Greek Marcionites. 

Although the term *nasrāyē* is not found in Simeon’s *Martyrdom*, the *History* employs the term in spades, as does the *Martyrdom of Pusai*. In neither the *History*, nor the *Martyrdom of Pusai*, however, is *nasrāyē* used as an auto-designation for Christians. Rather, it is used as a term of opprobrium in the mouths of the Persian persecutors. In Simeon’s *History*, when Shapur writes to the authorities in Bet Aramaye, he says:

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20 *Chronicle of Siirt*: Part I (1), in A. Scher, *Histoire nestorienne* (*Chronique de Séert*), *première partie 1. PO 4* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908), 220-221. As Michael Morony has pointed out, the mosaics at Bishapur certainly “attest to the presence of secular and pagan Hellenistic culture.” Yet, according to Morony, there is little evidence for a significant Christian presence in Antioch during the time of Shapur I’s deportation of many of the city’s inhabitants in the mid-third century. See Morony, “Population Transfers,” 167 ff.


As soon as you see the edict of ours, gods, in this letter that we have sent you, arrest Simeon, the head of the nasrāyē, and do not release him until he signs a document that makes it incumbent on him to collect and give to us a double poll tax and a double tribute from all the nasrāyē people, a people that is in our land, gods, and inhabits the land of our authority. For to us, gods, there are tribulations and wars, while to them is life and luxury. They dwell in our land, yet they are of one mind with Caesar, our enemy. And while we fight, they rest.23

Later in the History, Simeon directly engages the Persian king in a theological dispute. Shapur has apparently become quite befuddled by intra-“Christian” debates and seems unable to keep straight which group believes what. In response to Simeon’s claim that the sun grew dark, as a rebuke to the Jews, at the hour of Jesus’ crucifixion, Shapur is mystified and says, “(but) they [Marcionites] said that the Jews crucified the god of the Christians.” Simeon, aghast that the king thinks that Christians believe that God was crucified, quickly counters Shapur and says, “Far be it from Christians to say this, my lord King!24 It is Marcionites who say this, and they falsely call themselves by the name ‘Christian.’”25

The accusation that Marcionites unjustifiably call themselves “Christian” and, further, that there is evident confusion on the part of others about who is and who is not a “Christian” is reflected quite clearly in the Life of Mar Aba. Daniel Boyarin uses the story of Mar Aba by way of indicating just how fuzzy the boundaries were between various religious groups—including Christians and Jews—even as late as the sixth century when Mar Aba’s Life was written. Before he converted to Christianity, Aba was a Zoroastrian and an ardent persecutor of Christians. One day, when he was in a ferry

23 History 4

24 This is one point, among others, in the text where the History presupposes some form of a dyophysite Christology. At another point in the same section, Simeon explains to Shapur that Jesus “‘clothed himself with the body of man and in it he taught and did good things for men, and he healed their infirmities and turned them away from the error of idolatry. The Jews became jealous of the one who was seen, rather than of the one who was unseen, so they arrested and crucified him.’” My emphasis.

25 History 44; my emphasis.
crossing the Tigris, Aba happened upon a disciple wearing the habit of a *bar qaʿmā*. As Aba questioned the man about the particulars of the religious identity indicated by the habit of a *bar qaʿmā*, the disciple claimed that he was a Jew, a Christian, and a worshipper of the Messiah. Aba was bewildered by such a seemingly contradictory claim and demands that the disciple provide an explanation as to how he can be all three of these things at once. In Boyarin’s account, the disciple explains himself this way:

I am a Jew secretly [cf. Rom 2:29]; I worship the living God, and I believe in his son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. And I run away from idol worship and all filth. I am a Christian truly, not like the Marcionites, who defraud and call themselves Christians. For Christian is a Greek word. And the interpretation of ‘Christian’ in Syriac is *mšiḥaya*. And [therefore] with respect to what you have asked me: ‘Do you worship the Messiah?’, I worship him truly.²⁶

As a result of the introduction of other terms for Christian (such as *mšiḥaya*), the confusion over the referent of *krestyānē*, the use of the terms *nasrāyē* and *krestyānē* in the Kirdir inscription, and the indeterminate meaning of some of these same terms in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, some have suggested that *nasrāyē* and *krestyānē* may not be references to two different sorts of “Christians” at all. Rather, these terms might be a way of referring to two different communities of Christians: a native, Syriac-speaking community, and a more recently arrived Greek-speaking community who are descended from Roman captives.

Sebastian Brock, for example, gets beyond the theological distinctions believed to be inherent in the terms and suggests instead that the terms are likely to refer to Christians from two different ethno-linguistic backgrounds: the Syriac-speaking *nasrāyē* and the Greek-speaking *krestyānē*, since, as the unnamed disciple on the Tigris also notes, *krestyānē* is the Syriac transliteration of the Greek word for “Christians.” Brock’s

solution to the meaning of the terms nasrāyē and krestyānē—not only as they may have been used in Kirdir’s inscription, but also in the Acts of the Persian Martyrs—thus invokes the existence of two communities of Christians separated along ethnic and linguistic lines.27 According to Brock’s hypothesis, however, once nasrāyē came to be known as a derisive term, the “native” Persian Christians eschewed nasrāyē in favor of the Greek krestyānē along with other Syriac monikers for “Christians,” such as mšīhāyē—“the worshippers of the Messiah.”28

More recent research has suggested that nasrāyē and krestyānē demonstrate less of an ethno-linguistic divide among the Christians of late antique Persia, but something more along the lines of an historical memory of cultural divisions that were subsumed by patently political factors. Christelle Jullien notes that there are longstanding “traces” of the idea of Roman Christian captives in Persia that can be found in Syriac Christians martyrologies and chronicles.29 Furthermore, Jullien argues (in a separate article co-authored with her sister) that the nasrāyē might even be considered “comme des sujets de l’empire iranien passés au non-iranisme du fait de leur conversion au christianisme.”30 For conversion to Christianity to entail passing from “iranisme” to “non-}

27 More broadly on the use of the term nasrāyē—including how a variant of the term is still employed today as an auto-designation of the Christians of India, the Syrian Malabar Nasrani—and how the term is imbricated in ethnic discourse, see F. de Blois, “Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Ḥanīf (EMPLARYΟΥ): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” BSOAS 65 (2002): 1-30.


Iranism, as the Julliens suggest, then the *nasrāyē* must be understood as a circumscribed religious community within Persia who had become dangerous only with the rise of Christianity in the West: “Le substantif nazaréen présente le groupe sous l’aspect de sa dépendance à l’égard des faveurs royales, protégé toléré, dans une relation de clientélisme moral; le principe du don et du contre-don doit alors nécessairement être respecté: le roi dans ses garanties de sécurité, le suject dans son comportement pacifique et fidèle.” Only once “les déportés hellénophones [krestyāne] implantés dans l’empire se présentent de fait comme non-iraniens,” did it begin to follow that “les araméophones [nasrāyē] déportés ou résidents se considéraient à leur tour comme étrangers au sein de l’empire.”

The Julliens’ argument is compelling as it accounts for both the actuality of Roman captives in Persia and the idea that even those Christians in Persia without a “Roman” lineage came to be seen as Roman as a result of their religious association with Roman captives who worshipped the god of Caesar. But the Julliens situate a Sasanian political shift vis-à-vis Persian Christians much earlier than is warranted—to the early fourth century and Constantine’s Edict of Milan. This re-situation of Sasanian attitudes towards Christianity and Christians in Persia is premised not only upon the clarity of religious boundaries (something belied by the *Life of Mar Aba*) but also upon a rather clear idea of what constituted “iranité” in the early fourth century.

Although Gherardo Gnoli has argued that a burgeoning Sasanian emphasis on the idea of “Ērānšahr” (“the land of Iran”) pressured Christians in Persia to conceptualize...
their own identity as one that was fundamentally non-Iranian—since the religio-imperial “idea” of Iran had no place in it for Christianity—exactly when the Sasanian emphasis on Ėrānsahr arose is much less certain. Following Gnoli, other commentators have indicated that the “religious” elements in this ideal conceptualization of “the land of Iran” were, in fact, not stressed with the rise of the Sasanians in the early third century, or, for that matter, even in the third century at all. Touraj Daryaee refers to the “selective amnesia” of later Sasanians in creating a “sacred historiography.” Daryaee aptly characterizes the later religious idealization of the early centuries of the Sasanian Empire as a “Zoroastrianization of memory.” By contrast, the actual “Zoroastrianization” of the Sasanian Empire occurred much more slowly and, it must be emphasized, in the centuries that followed the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Needless to say, neither transition can be said to have happened immediately following the promulgation of the Edict of Milan.


34 T. Daryaee, “Memory and History: The Construction of the Past in Late Antique Persia,” IJAIS 1 (2001): 13. See also a similar analysis by Daryaee that suggests a fourth-century shift in Sasanian perspectives by analyzing the (religious) idea of kingship in Sasanian inscriptions and coins: idem, “Kingship in Early Sasanian Iran,” in The Idea of Iran, vol. 3: The Sasanian Era, ed. V.S. Curtis and S. Stewart (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 60-70. In the same volume, see S. Shaked, “Religion in the Late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and Other Religious Designations,” 103-117, wherein Shaked argues that the early Sasanian Empire was not founded on any religious identity. Although the designation “Aneran” (non-Iranian) became “synonymous with people of Bad Religion” (111), it was a term that “is never described or defined in … precise historical terms” and which “could be applied quite freely to opponents within or without the official boundaries of Zoroastrianism” (112). My emphasis.

35 The sources for the more formal establishment of Zoroastrianism in Persia are quite late and almost entirely “religious” in nature. But one way of obliquely getting at the Zoroastrianization of Persia is to look at the Christianization (and the rhetorical constitution of religious allegiances) of the ever-shifting vassal states between the Roman and Persian Empires—especially Armenia. The historiographical sources that celebrate the Armenian struggle against an encroaching Zoroastrianism are, however, as Robert Thomson notes, self-serving, anachronistic, and fundamentally a distortion of political reality. Nevertheless, these sources (and others) demonstrate how politicized “religion” had become by the fifth and sixth centuries and how the history of the deeper past was written with the terms of present struggles in mind. See R.W. Thomson, “Mission, Conversion, and Christianization: The Armenian Example,” HUS 12 (1988): 28-45. Slightly farther afield, see C. Haas, “Mountain Constantines: The Christianization of
While the Julliens may, therefore, be correct in suggesting that Christianity came to be looked upon as “Roman” by the Persian authorities, this was not a viewpoint that could have been mustered very easily or with much cause in the early fourth century. Even though there were both “Christians” and “Roman captives” in Persia at the commencement of Shapur’s persecution, it was only once these two ideas became fused—that is, only once Christianity was understood as the religion of Rome, of caesar, and, indeed, of these Roman captives in Persia—that Christianity could be more definitively presented as an example of “non-iranité.” This happens only in the fifth-century martyr acts that reflect an upheaval in Persian Christian identity following the “Romanization” of the Church of the East.

**Simeon’s History on “Roman Captives” and “Other Bishops”**

Whereas the Martyrdom begins straightaway with an extended parallel between the Maccabees and the Christians of Persia, the History begins with a preliminary list of all the martyrs whose names will be mentioned in the text, including the apostate and Persian eunuch, Gushtazad—who begs Simeon for forgiveness, returns to Christianity, and dies a martyr’s death—as well as two laypeople: the qarugbed Pusai and his unnamed daughter.\(^3^6\) Perhaps more importantly, after reverentially acknowledging Aksum and Iberia, “JLA 1 (2008): 101-126, which details a “prolonged process of Christianization” that began in the fourth century but continued well into the sixth.

\(^3^6\) *History* 1; 96. Both texts mention Pusai at the conclusion of their narratives, but Pusai’s daughter—a *bat qyamā* who is called Martha in her own martyr acts, but who is unnamed in Simeon’s acts—is mentioned in different places: she appears at the end of the Martyrdom (48) and at the beginning of the History (1). For Martha’s acts, see *AMS* II, 233-341; English trans., S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 67-73. The opening section of the History seems to suggest that Gushtazad, Pusai, and Pusai’s daughter, coupled with “ninety-seven priests and deacons,” add up to the “one hundred holy ones” who are so often mentioned in the text, but the History’s accounting is contradicted later in the text. History 96, for example, indicates that the one hundred holy ones were crowned prior to the martyrdom of Simeon, the two priests with him, Pusai, and Pusai’s daughter, so these “one hundred” would not seem to include Simeon and the two priests, Bedhaikla and Hanina.
Simeon as “the archbishop and catholicos of the Church of the East, who was the first one to excel in the land of the East as a blessed martyr of God,” the narrator of the History lists five bishops from four cities in and around Bet Huzaye who were also martyred at that time: “Gadiahb and Subina, bishops of Bet Lapat; Bishop John of Hormizd-Ardashir; Bishop Bulida of Prat-Maishan; Bishop John of Karka d-Maishan. … All of them, together with the blessed Simeon, were crowned as blessed martyrs of God.”

The list of other bishops from important sees in the Church of the East is a way by which the History, in contradistinction to the Martyrdom, emphasizes the coherence of all the Christians of Persia who were united under the leadership of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. It is, furthermore, evidence that the History could not have been written until sometime after the three major fifth-century councils that were held in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and that formally established the Church of the East and the primacy of the capital city’s bishop. The Martyrdom, for example, mentions the “one hundred men of the city [Karka d-Ledan]” who were bound and killed with Simeon only near the very end of its narrative, and the narrator explains in the most vague and impersonal terms that some of the one hundred were “bishops of other regions” (episqope d-‘atrawātā (‘)hrāne), while others were priests, deacons, and bnay qaṭma.

These “other bishops,” as the Martyrdom anonymously calls them, are not mentioned as an afterthought in the History, but are included at the outset by name and episcopal see. By invoking the memory of the “one hundred holy ones” and some of the most important bishops right away, at the very beginning of its narrative, the History

37 History 1
38 Martyrdom 42
demonstrates that its story is not just about Simeon, but has a much broader scope with consequences that ripple throughout Shapur’s realm. In so doing, the History expands the geographical range of Shapur’s persecution—making it a more regional, rather than localized, phenomenon—and thereby raises the prestige of cities other than Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Karka d-Ledan. At the same time, however, the prestige of Simeon as the “the archbishop and catholicos of the Church of the East” is reinforced in that he is spoken of as the protomartyr of Shapur’s persecution—“the first one to excel in the land of the East as a blessed martyr of God”—even though the text also clearly states that scores of Christians were martyred prior to Simeon.

Additionally, the very title—“catholicos”—by which Simeon is called multiple times in the History, but not once in the Martyrdom, would have had no purchase whatsoever in the mid-fourth century. In using the honorific title, the narrator of the History bolsters the idea of a broader communion of Christians, supported by the hierarchy of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the subordinate bishops, all during a period when the East-Syrian Church qua church had not yet been formally established. In Stephen Gerō’s analysis of the development of the terms (such as “catholicos”) for the ecclesiastical hierarchy of East-Syrian Christianity, a substantial amount of editing and interpolation is evident in the sources. For example, in the Synodicon Orientale (the records of the ecclesiastical synods of the Church of East between 410 and the late eighth century), the references to Peter and the stress on ecclesiastical titles such as “catholicos” are, according to Gerō, anachronistic even for fifth-century synods. That

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39 History 1; 25; 29; 63; 92; 98; and 99 all refer to Simeon as the “catholicos” of the Church of the East.

40 For the Syriac text of the synodal reports and decrees, with French translation, see J.B. Chabot, Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de synodes nestoriens (Paris, 1902).

“catholicos” is employed in the History as Simeon’s official title provides all the more evidence for the long period over which the text was received, reworked, and reinterpreted and its distance from the fourth-century events that it purports to describe.

Going beyond the emphasis on Simeon’s role as the bishop of bishops, a broader, more binding group identity among the Christians of Persia is reinforced later in the History when the narrator claims that none of the bishops who were actually from Karka d-Ledan were killed with Simeon. The narrator explains this remarkable occurrence as Shapur’s own doing. The city “had recently been built and the king wanted its peace,” thus, as a result, those who were slain were, like Simeon, brought into Karka d-Ledan from other cities in Persia to be judged. As the narrator elucidates, the bishops from the other cities, along with many priests and deacons, had actually been “captured in those days.” Shapur’s henchmen bound the clerics and took them “to the king’s gate in Karka d-Ledan,” a city that the narrator again emphasizes as one that “Shapur had recently built and in which he had settled many captives from Arabia, Singara, Bet Zabdai, Arzun, Qardu, Armenia, and various other places.”

These many regions from which the Christian “captives” were brought in order to be settled in Karka d-Ledan would have all been under Roman control in the early 340s: “Arabia” refers not to the Arabian Peninsula, but to Bet ‘Arbaye, a province that includes the city of Nisibis; “Singara” and “Bet Zabdai” (Bezabde) are two Roman Mesopotamian fortresses that, according to Ammianus, were taken by Shapur in 359 CE


42 History 98

43 History 25; my emphasis.
after fierce resistance; and “Arzun” and “Qardu” (or Corduene) are south of Lake Van along the southern border of Greater Armenia in modern-day Kurdistan. None of this is present in the Martyrdom. There is only one vague reference to “bishops from other regions,” with no mention of their names or sees; there is nothing about captives from other regions; and Simeon is accorded no title beyond that of “bishop.” Additionally, the History, which begins its narrative with a parallel between the persecutions that had ended in Rome and the persecution that had just commenced in Persia, concludes by drawing yet another connection between Christians East and

44 Amm. Marc. XX.6-7

45 Ammianus mentions a hostage, Jovinianus, from Corduene who was held by the Romans in the 340s. A.D. Lee hypothesizes that Jovinianus was “a hostage provided by Corduene itself as a guarantee of that principality’s allegiance to the Roman Empire.” See Amm. Marc. XVIII.6.20, and A.D. Lee, “The Role of Hostages in Roman Diplomacy with Sasanian Persia,” Historia 40 (1991): 371-372, with further reference to J.F. Matthews, The Roman Empire of Ammianus (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 55-56, who relates that Jovinianus’ time in Antioch, the period during which he became known to Ammianus, “had been as a hostage, evidently to secure the good behaviour of his family or people.”

46 Beyond towns on the Roman-Persian border, there are scores of place names throughout the Acts that are less well known than those few that are mentioned in the History. Wiessner intended a follow-up, second volume to his work on Simeon’s acts and related texts that was to be a handbook of Persian words and titles found in the Acts—as well as a catalog of personal and place names that occur in the Acts. Unfortunately, Wiessner died prematurely before finishing this volume and, to my knowledge, none of it was ever published. We do, however, have the recent work of several other scholars to complete the useful catalog that Wiessner intended. Sebastian Brock’s Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts—published as an addendum to his translation of the History of the Holy Mar Mārin (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008)—lists all personal, place, and biblical names in the Acts. Additionally, Christelle Jullien published a two-part guide to the place names in the Acts, and, along similar lines, Philippe Gignoux published an article cataloging the miracles wrought by the saints and martyrs of Persia. Also of interest is Gignoux’s brief article noting the titles and functions of Sasanian religious authorities as described in the Acts. For these resources, see C. Jullien, “Contributions des actes des martyrs perses à la géographie historique et à l’administration de l’empire sassanide I,” in Contributions à l’histoire et la géographie historique de l’empire sassanide, Res Orientales XVI, ed. R. Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l’Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 2004), 141-169, and eadem, “Contributions des actes des martyrs perses à la géographie historique et à l’administration de l’empire sassanide II,” in Des Indo-Grecs aux Sassanides: données pour l’histoire et la géographie historique, Res Orientales XVII, ed. R. Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l’Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 2007), 81-102; P. Gignoux, “Une typologie des miracles des saints et martyrs perses dans l’Iran sassanide,” in Miracle et Karama: Hagiographies Médievales Comparées, ed. D. Aigle (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 499-523, and idem, “Titres et fonctions religieuses sasanides d’après les sources syriques hagiographiques,” AAntHung 28 (1980): 191-203.
West: once Simeon and the one hundred other martyrs were slaughtered by the executioner’s sword, the narrator claims, “the corpses of glorious Simeon bar Șabbațe, the catholicos, and of the bishops, and of all the holy ones who were with him were taken away on that very night by some people—Roman captives who lived in Karka d-Ledan—and they were buried with honor.”

That Simeon’s History begins and ends with references to Roman Christians is hardly accidental, but the text offers little explanation about these “Roman captives” other than the cryptic claim that none of the bishops or Christian laypeople of Karka d-Ledan were killed at that time because “that city had recently been built and the king wanted its peace. Moreover, the people whom [Shapur] had settled in it were recently taken captive and resettled from different regions, so he had mercy upon them because they were exiles.” The narrator of the History does not say exactly when these captives were taken from the Roman Empire, but the implication seems to be that they were newly-arrived prisoners who were themselves Romans, not that they were merely the offspring of Roman captives who had been captured under previous Sasanian kings.

Among these new arrivals, the narrator seems to include “the bishops who were in Karka at that time,” who, he notes, “alone among all the inhabitants of the East had not been delivered unto tribulation and killing.” If this is the case, then, according to the narrator of the History, there were two communities of Christians in Persia at the time of Simeon’s martyrdom: the “Roman” community, whose numbers are not specified, but who may have had their own bishops and who were localized in Karka d-Ledan; and an established “Persian” community that included Simeon, the clerics

47 History 98
48 History 98
49 History 98
mentioned at the outset of the text who were from various other cities proximate to Karka, and an indeterminate number of faithful laymen “from different regions,” who are described as being “in the army of the king” and who “asked for relics from the bodies of the holy ones.” It is important to note how the narrator describes the events after the executioners had decapitated so many dozens of Christians: it is the “Roman captives” who are said to have buried the martyrs, and “the bishops who were in Karka at that time” who gave the “relics from the bodies of the holy ones” to the “faithful” from the king’s army. Although the text is not explicit, one can presume that if these bishops “who were in Karka” were not themselves also “Roman captives,” that they were at least closely associated with them.

**The Martyrdom of Pusai-Qarugbed, Son of a Roman Captive**

Near the end of Simeon’s *History*, when only Simeon and the two priests (Hanina and ‘Bedhaikla) had not yet been killed, we hear the story of Pusai, the “head of the craftsmen.” Pusai is not called a “Roman captive” in Simeon’s acts, and, in fact, the story of Pusai’s death is one instance among only a few wherein the *Martyrdom* provides more information than the *History*. The *History* explains that one of the two priests with Simeon, Hanina, had been stripped and bound by the executioners of the king, and that, although the priest’s body shook, his mind was calm. As Hanina stood before his executioners naked, bound, and trembling:

A great man named Pusai—who held the honor of being ranked as the head of the craftsmen, called *qarugbed*, which in those days was an honor given to him from the king—stood there and partook in the spectacle of the sacrifice of the holy ones. When

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50 *History* 98

51 *History* 96. Simeon also seems to have been personally connected to craftsmen; his surname (bar  Şaḇbaḵē) means “Son of Dyers,” and *Martyrdom* 7 explains that Simeon’s parents were in the employ of the Sasanian authorities: “(Simeon) is rightly called by this name because his parents dyed silk with foreign blood as clothing for the impious kingdom.” The *History* does not discuss Simeon’s surname.
he saw the old man whose body was shaking, he said to him, ‘Do not fear, Ḥanina, do not fear! Close your eyes just for a moment and, lo, you will see the light of Christ!’ And then that blessed one was crowned. Then Pusai was seized at once on the order of the head mobed, who was there as the king’s envoy. He was chained until his words could be relayed to the king. After Ḥanina and ‘Bedhaikla, he, too, was crowned in Christ, his hope.\textsuperscript{52}

Simeon’s Martyrdom says just as much, but the Martyrdom includes the account of Pusai’s trial before Shapur. After Pusai’s outburst and exhortation to Ḥanina to stand fast, the Martyrdom says that Pusai was seized, brought before the king, and accused of shouting encouragement to a condemned prisoner. Dismayed by Pusai’s rash and inexplicable actions, Shapur says to the head of the craftsmen:

\textsuperscript{44} ‘Did I not give honor to you [by appointing you qarugbed] and did I not send you to do your work? Why do you scorn me and remain to watch these worthless ones while they are dying?’ \textsuperscript{45} Pusai responded and said, ‘I did it in order that my work might benefit through their worthlessness and that my life might be given to me through their deaths. I deny this honor that you gave me because it is full of grief, and I confess the death that you give to them because it is full of joy.’ \textsuperscript{46} The king said to him, ‘You seek death instead of honor as they do, O unhinged mind?’ Then the glorious one said, ‘I am a Christian and I hope in their God, therefore I have come to love their death and I repudiate your honor.’\textsuperscript{47} In a tremendous rage, (Shapur) gave a command regarding him and said, ‘He will not die the way everyone else will die, but because he rejected my honor and spoke to me as with an equal, bring him forth and draw out his tongue from the back of his throat so that all those who behold him may be deterred.’ This was done brutally, as was commanded. And this one died at that time as well. \textsuperscript{48} He had a daughter, too, a bat qaṭamā, and she herself was accused of being a Christian. They sent for her and brought her in and even she was killed for Christ, her hope.\textsuperscript{54}

The Martyrdom of Pusai itself is a text that Wiessner established as part of the B-Zyklus of martyr acts that are connected to Simeon’s History.\textsuperscript{55} While the connection with Simeon’s acts is beyond dispute, the Martyrdom of Pusai may not have reached the form

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} History 96
\item \textsuperscript{53} The use of the perfect tense in this passage (“I have come to love”) suggests a process. That is, Pusai has come to a love of Christian martyrdom by witnessing it manifest before him.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Martyrdom 44-48
\item \textsuperscript{55} G. Wiessner, Untersuchungen zur syrischen Literaturgeschichte I: Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 94-105.
\end{itemize}
in which we have it until the sixth century. Nevertheless, the text continues the idea from Simeon’s acts that Shapur had bestowed honor upon Pusai the craftsman. Pusai’s *Martyrdom* further emphasizes that Pusai was the son of a Roman captive. An expert weaver and embroiderer of gold filigree, Pusai was married to a Persian woman, but, under his tutelage, she had converted to Christianity, and so the couple’s children were baptized and raised in the faith. Following Simeon’s *History*, which explains that a number of Roman captives lived in Karka d-Ledan and that the king had recently relocated a number of other captives from different regions of Persia to Karka, Pusai’s *Martyrdom* relates that Pusai and his family were among those who were taken from Bishapur and re-settled in Karka. According to the text, Shapur moved Pusai and his family from one city in the Empire to another because the king had recently built Karka d-Ledan and wished to populate it by bringing in captives from among various groups of people who were from many cities in the Empire, “so that as a result of intermarriage, the captives would be bound by family ties and affection, and it would therefore not be easy for them to flee gradually back to their homeland.”

While, again, the date of the text as we have it is very uncertain, what the *Martyrdom of Pusai* does suggest is that being a Roman captive had become virtually synonymous with being a Christian. Still, Pusai seems not to have been encumbered by any edict prohibiting the practice of Christianity—not even the conversion of his “Persian wife” or the baptism of his children seems to have been an issue. Indeed, the narrator of the texts notes that although Shapur cleverly tried to intermingle various groups of captives in new cities so that they would feel bound by ties of kinship and not seek to return to their homelands, “God in his mercy used [Shapur’s plan] to the good,

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56 Wiessner, “Zum Problem der zeitlichen und örtlichen Festlegung.”

so that through this mixing of those deported with the pagans, the latter were caught in
the recognition of the truth and converted to knowledge of the faith.\textsuperscript{58} In other words,
Roman captives and their descendants were vehicles of the further Christianization of
Persia.

\textbf{The Martyrdom of the Captives of Bet Zabdaï}

Another, presumably fifth-century, martyrology that centers on the co-
extensiveness of Christianity and one’s status as a Roman captive is the \textit{Martyrdom of the
Captives of Bet Zabdaï}. The text, which gives the history of Christians who were deported
from Roman Bezabde after Shapur’s capture of the city, provides a narrative link
between an event mentioned by Ammianus and its purported denouement in a Syriac-
Christian literary context. In Ammianus’ account of the fall of Bezabde, the unnamed
bishop of the city who met with the Persian king in order to seek an end to the fighting
was rumored by some to have told Shapur which parts of the city walls were most
vulnerable to attack.\textsuperscript{59} The crumbling of the city’s walls is repeated at the beginning of
the \textit{Martyrdom of the Captives}, although of course without the suggestion that the
Christian bishop of the city may have been partly responsible. Once Shapur’s army took
the city and killed many of its defenders and inhabitants, Ammianus remarks that the
Persians plundered what remained of Bezabde and led away a great many captives.\textsuperscript{60}

Where Ammianus leaves off, the \textit{Martyrdom of the Captives} begins. According to
the text, Shapur took nine thousand captives, including the bishop of the city, whose

\textsuperscript{58} AMS II, 209; trans., Brock.

\textsuperscript{59} Amm. Marc. XX.7,9: Perstrinxit tamen suspicio vana quaedam episcopum, ut opinor, licet
adseveratione vulgata multorum, quod clandestino conloquio Saporem docuerat, quae moenia adpeteret
membra ut fragilia intrinsecus et invalida.

\textsuperscript{60} Amm. Mar. XX.7,15: Inter tam funesta gens rapiendi cupidior, onusta spoliorum genere omni,
captivorunque examen maximum ducens, tentoria repetivit exultans.
name, rather ironically, was “Heliodorus.” As the text later indicates, only about three hundred of the nine thousand captives seem to have been Christian. While the Persians were leading their captives towards Bet Huzaye, Bishop Heliodorus became ill and, before slipping into death, consecrated “Dausa” as bishop in his place. As the Christians of Bezabde continued their trek towards Karka d-Ledan in Bet Huzaye, the new bishop began to lead the slowly marching Christians in the singing of psalms. Shapur’s chief mobed, Adarfarr, upon hearing what the Christians were singing, reported to Shapur that the bishop was leading his congregation in the recitation of curses against the king and the Persian gods.

Soon after Adarfarr’s report to the king, the Persian army and their captives stopped “in the area of Daraye.” It was here that Shapur issued an ultimatum. He ordered his mobed and another official to bring all the Christians together up onto the mountain of Masabadan and then instructed his subordinates to say to them:

> ‘It pleases the king to do good things for you, and he commanded that you settle here on this mountain; the land is fat, its villages are beautiful, the ground is well watered; that will give you constant peace all the days of your lives. ... Those who do my will, who worship the sun and the moon and who deny the god whom the Caesar prays to, may settle according to their wish in these villages. But whoever disobeys this order shall be delivered to the sword.’

Unsurprisingly, the Christians understood that they had been led away to the mountainside to be killed. The choice land Shapur offered them in return for their religious fealty was not an exchange that the king expected that they would take. While on the mountainside, and while refusing to bow down to the sun and the moon, Dausa denounces his captors, saying:

> ‘O people, which swims in the blood of its own land and which revels in the blood of other lands, see, your own people and foreigners are being killed; natives and immigrants are being slain. ... Since you have been covered with blood of the martyrs of the East, are you going to sprinkle yourselves with the blood of the martyrs of the

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West ... to join the victorious blood of the holy martyrs which you have (already) slain?  

In Simeon’s History, Shapur’s persecution is presented as the way by which the Christians of the East could be united in blood and providential history with the Christians of the West. Here, in a Syriac text that was written in Persia, Christians of the West are not just remembered in the land of the East, but are martyred in the land of the East. The unification of the Christians of the Roman and Persian Empires comes full circle as blood is joined with blood and Roman Christians declare, in the land of Persia, that they will never desist from worshipping the god of Caesar.

**The Utility of the Idea of Christians as Roman Captives**

As I have suggested, there is plenty of historical evidence that Roman captives (or their descendants) were, in fact, scattered throughout the cities in the Persian Empire in late antiquity. But, as the Martyrdom of the Captives implies, there must have been quite a number of other Roman captives, and sons and daughters of Roman captives, who not only were not Christian, but who also failed to leave a written testimony of a life in exile from their Roman homelands. Even still, from the evidence of the texts that we do have, the Christians of Persia did not begin to reflect on their faith as something that made them “Roman” until sometime in the fifth century. Assuming the accusations of the Jews are a later interpolation, Simeon’s Martyrdom never mentions the idea that Christians are Romans or Roman captives. But there is a very significant shift in Simeon’s History. Yet, although neither Simeon’s History, nor the Martyrdom of Pusai, nor the Martyrdom of the Captives of Bet Zabdai was written until well into the fifth century, each of these texts—and they are the three most prominent texts among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs to portray Persian Christians as Roman captives—stresses the Romanness of Christians not

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in the fifth century, but in a time of war many decades earlier.

What did the Christians of Persia stand to gain by introducing this emphasis on their Romanness and their social position as “captives” over and against such titles as Pusai’s kingly-bestowed qarugbed? For, as Pusai’s Martyrdom demonstrates, there was no evident barrier preventing Christians from achieving a relatively high social status in the Persian Empire. Likewise, both of Simeon’s martyr acts reveal that Simeon had, at one point, been a friend to Shapur. In the History, Simeon tells the king that he would gladly remain in friendship (rehmtā) with him so long as he was not required to manifest the verity of his friendship with Shapur by worshipping the sun: “‘My lord King,’” Simeon says, “‘truly I am your friend and I and my people always pray for your kingdom as our scripture commands us. But being the friend of my God is better to me than your friendship, King!’” Even the Martyrdom of the Captives stresses that the Persians had offered the captive Christians of Bet Zabdai good land in abundance. But the text also emphasizes that Christians rebelled against Sasanian authority and insisted on clinging not just to the Christian god, but to the god of caesar. The bishop Dausa flaunts his allegiance to the Roman Empire, telling his captors, “we worship our true God, whom the Emperor worships as well.”

Simeon’s History, Pusai’s Martyrdom, and the Martyrdom of the Captives demonstrates a turn to an emphasis on the Romanness of Christianity that is just not evident in the earliest acts such as Simeon’s Martyrdom. In fifth-century Persia, both Constantine and the earlier conflict between Rome and Persia began to be seen as a

63 That Christianity was in no way a stumbling block to achieving positions of prestige in the Sasanian Empire has now been shown definitively by Richard Payne, whose work “contends that the institutions of Christian community did not insulate Christians from Iranian society but rather provided novel means of negotiating their position in the broader society of the empire.” See R.E. Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500-700 C.E.” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010), i.

64 History 80; cf. Martyrdom 38, 40
turning point—the moment at which Christianity became Roman and, therefore, the moment at which being a Christian in Persia entailed a concomitant Roman identity.

This turn to the West and the weight accorded to the idea of Christians as Roman captives would, however, prove to be short lived. As Richard Payne details in his social history of sixth- and seventh-century Persian martyrological and legal texts, Christian communities in Persia sought to “shed their status as foreign ‘captives’” in order to appropriate more particularly Iranian modes of identity.65 According to Payne, prior to the sixth century, the “ongoing description of Christians as captives” in the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, “suggests the limitations placed on Christian belonging.” This was, Payne indicates, partly a result of the Sasanian idea of “Ērānšahr,” which was “a concept that subsumed the individual lands of the empire into a single entity.” Additionally, Payne argues, “The places in which the [Roman] captives were settled were themselves often emblems of the religiously exclusive ideology of empire elaborated by kings and mowbeds. The ideological force of an adjective [Ērānšahr] Christians could not apply to themselves may have hindered the emergence of forms of identity tying captives to their localities.”66

The corollary that stems from the limitations on the ability of Christians to articulate a Persian-Christian identity is that Christians in Persia were forced to imagine their identity as Roman. But, by the end of the fifth century, Christians could begin to ignore the Roman Empire and create a religious identity tied to holy places in the land of Iran. By the end of the fifth century, “the religion of communities of foreign captives had emerged as a major force in competition and conversation with traditional Iranian

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65 Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society,” 43.

Christianity could thereby be categorized not as a foreign cult, but as one fully imbricated within a local, Iranian milieu as well as a Persian discourse of religiosity. Until this later period, however, an intermediate “captive” status was prevalent in a number of the Acts, a status and an idea that, not surprisingly, was also concurrent with most of the more developed references to “Constantine,” “Caesar,” and the “Romans” in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*—and namely in Simeon’s *History*, Pusai’s *Martyrdom*, and the *Martyrdom of the Captives*.

Notably, vestiges of the idea of Persian Christians as Roman captives remained even when the “captive” status of a Christian was completely unconnected to the Roman Empire or the Roman caesar. For example, on the basis of a reference to another martyr mentioned in the text, we can gather that the *Martyrdom of Abbot Bar Shebya* relays events that are supposed to have occurred during the time of Shapur II. Although the abbot’s name, “Bar Shebya,” literally means “Son of the Captivity,” the text does not otherwise connect his Christianity to any explicitly “Roman” identity. Indeed, the accusations against Bar Shebya have nothing to do with political allegiances, but with the corrupting influence of Christian sorcery that turns people away from Zoroastrianism—a charge similar to that leveled against Simeon in his acts.

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67 Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society,” 42.

68 *AMS* II, 281-4. For the acts of the other martyr (Miles) who is mentioned in the text and who helps date the setting of the *Martyrdom of Bar Shebya* to the time of Shapur II, see *AMS* II, 260-275; Soz. HE II.14.

69 The *Martyrdom of Abbot Bar Shebya* is relatively brief and worth translating here in full:  

*At the time when blessed Miles was crowned, there was an abbot in the land of the Persians whose name was Bar Shebya (“Son of the Captivity”). He dwell in a monastery and with him were ten disciples. Impious and evil men accused them before the mobed of the city of Istakhr, saying: “He corrupts many people and he teaches sorcery in our land, destroying the teachings of the magi with his instruction.” (The mobed) ordered that (Bar Shebya) be arrested, he and the brothers with him, and they brought them to (the mobed) in shackles. He imposed cruel tortures and intense suffering upon them until even their knees were hacked down with a hammer. He destroyed their shins, arms, and sides with a spiked staff and he mutilated their faces, ears, and eyes.*

*When the iniquitous judge saw—during all this destruction of their limbs and all the suffering they endured—that the true ones were not defeated, nor were the upright ones shaken, or turned from their God,*
Oddly, however, as much as the emphasis on Persian Christians as Roman captives is stressed in some fifth-century martyr acts, no such connection between Romanness and Christianity is made by the one Greek ecclesiastical historian who discusses the martyrs of Persia at length—Sozomen. Even though Sozomen incorporates Simeon and Pusai (and, briefly, the Christian captives of Bet Zabdai) in his account of the persecutions in fourth-century Persia, Sozomen fails to emphasize that the “two hundred and fifty” clerics who were “captured by the Persians” and “brought from a place called Zabdaeus” were Roman Christians who had been deported from an eastern Roman city. Sozomen does not even seem to be aware that “Zabdaeus” was a Roman stronghold whose Christian citizens were killed for insisting on worshipping caesar’s

or lapsed in their faith, he ordered that they be taken to the outskirts of the city to be executed. While they were being led away they sung psalms and glorified God, and a great crowd surrounded them.

When their executions had begun, a certain magus came out of the city and passed by along the road. With him was his wife, who was sitting on a mule, and two of his sons, and some of his servants. He raised up his eyes and saw the assembled multitude of people and he said to those who were with him, “Come this way for a moment so I can find out the reason for this gathering.” And he went ahead on his horse with one of his servants with him. He went over and stood beside the martyrs while they were being killed and he saw the courageous abbot holding the hands of each of the disciples whom he chose, one after the next, and whom he then gave over to be killed. (The abbot) comforted them with madrashe sung in sweet and dulcet tones.

Then the Lord opened the eyes of this magus and he saw tongues of fire standing up in the form of the cross, and the fire blazed and flared and stood upon the corpses of those who had been killed. He was terrified and, trembling, he got down from his horse. He exchanged his clothes for those of his servant, and he drew near to the glorious one and whispered to him, “I have seen a strange vision and your god has truly chosen me to die with you because he is God, he alone, and in him I put my faith with all my heart. So now let no one know that I have not come from among you, and hold me as (you held) each of your disciples and give me over to be killed. For I have a great longing to be killed with you, the holy and true and believing people.” And the blessed one believed him all the more because a wondrous vision was shown to him.

After the nine others, (Bar Shebya) took him by the hands and gave him to be killed, and the killers did not know. And after him, the eleventh was killed as well, with the abbot killed last of all as the seal of the twelve. In this the magus was perfected.

Then (the executioners) brought their heads into the city, and they hung them upon the temple of Anahid, the goddess of the Persians, to display them for the masses in order to deter them. Wild animals and birds of the heavens devoured their bodies. Afterward, what had happened became known about this magus, and there was great amazement throughout the land. Many converted to the truth because of him, and even his wife and sons and servants became true believers because of him, and they lived all the days of their lives in the fear of God.

These holy ones were crowned on the seventeenth day of the lunar month Haziran.
god.\textsuperscript{70} Had Sozomen known Simeon’s History, or the Martyrdom of Pusai (rather than just the aside about Pusai found in Simeon’s Martyrdom) he surely would have recognized, and addressed, the extent to which the texts portray Persian Christians as Roman captives.\textsuperscript{71} For at the outset of his Ecclesiastical History, Sozomen explains and defends his decision to recount not only those events relevant to the Church “under Roman rule” (τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχήν), but also the religious history of the Persians and barbarians (τά παρά Πέρσαις καὶ βαρβάροις συμβάντα ἐπὶ τῇ θρησκείᾳ ἱστορήσαι).\textsuperscript{72} Sozomen freely admits that he had to deliberate whether or not to include events that occurred outside of the Roman Empire in his history, and he evidently believed it was necessary to explain and defend his decision to his readers why he decided to include foreign events in what is fundamentally a history of the Church in the Roman Empire. Given his apologetic deliberations, it is thus not surprising that Sozomen emphasized a Roman connection to the Christians of Persia whenever possible, especially by inaugurating the idea—one that stuck prominently in the Roman ecclesiastical-historical tradition—that Constantine responded to reports of Shapur’s persecution with a letter. That Persian Christians (at least in Simeon’s History, Pusai’s Martyrdom, and the Martyrdom of the Captives) were insistent on portraying the Romanness not only of their faith but also their...

\textsuperscript{70} Soz. HE II.13

\textsuperscript{71} There is, in fact, plenty of other evidence that Sozomen’s account of Simeon’s death is based solely on the Martyrdom, and Wiessner argues as much in his assessment of Sozomen’s dealings with the Acts of the Persian Martyrs. Wiessner, in fact, states specifically that Sozomen is relying on Simeon’s Martyrdom, and he even provides a full-page footnote that compares Sozomen’s summary to elements of Simeon’s Martyrdom. See the subsection (“Der Bericht des Sozomenos über die Anfänge der Schapurschen Christenverfolgung”) that focuses primarily on the relationship between Simeon’s Martyrdom and Sozomen’s redaction of it, in Wiessner, Märtyrerüberlieferung, 148-157. Wiessner explains: “Die Simon-Erzählung des griechischen Historikers steht in einem engen Verhältnis zu dem erhaltenen syrischen Simon-A-Martyrium, an das sie sich sowohl in ihrem Aufbau wie in ihrem Inhalt so eng anlehnt, daß der syrische Text als Vorlage des Sozomenos gedient zu haben scheint” (149). See also, P. Devos, “Sozomène et les actes syriaques de S. Syméon bar Ṣabba’e,” AB 84 (1966): 443-456.

\textsuperscript{72} Soz. HE I.1,18
own ancestry seems, however, to have been unknown to Sozomen. Why?

**Roman Bishops as Persian Envoys: Maruta of Maipherqaṭ at the Court of Yazdgard I and the Council of Ishaq in 410 CE**

Perhaps the major reason why Sozomen is ignorant of the fifth-century Persian martyrologies’ emphasis on Christians as Roman captives is because Sozomen’s story is primarily about Constantine—not the Christians of Persia. It is Constantine who writes to Shapur to end the persecution and Constantine who is portrayed as the humble Christian bishop to those outside the Roman Church.73 Were Sozomen to mention that the captives of the place called Zabdaeus were taken near the end of Constantius’ reign, his chronology would immediately be revealed as suspect.

In Sozomen’s assessment, Christianity first arrived in Persia shortly before the time of Constantine, during the time of the Armenian king Tiridates, whom Sozomen honors as the king of the first nation to embrace Christianity. It was the Armenians, Sozomen claims, who converted the Persians to Christianity in the early fourth century, and, as Christianity quickly took root and bore the fruit of many converts in the lands of the Magi, Shapur’s persecution of Christians was soon to follow.74

Sozomen’s reconstruction of fourth-century history is not entirely without merit. For it was the Armenians, at least from the Roman point of view, who brought Christianity to Persia—only not in the early fourth century, but in the early fifth with the arrival of Maruta, the bishop of Maipherqat in Roman Armenia. Maruta, apparently with the welcome of the Persian king Yazdgard I, was sent by Theodosius II to make peace with Persia and to co-convene the first official council of the Church of the East in 410 CE. The synod, held at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, would come to be known as the Synod of

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73 Soz. HE II.15

74 Soz. HE II.8-9
Ishaq in honor of “Isaac,” the bishop of the capital city at the time.

While these events took place nearly a century after Constantine’s conversion and declaration of official support for the Church, and only a few decades before Sozomen wrote his *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen read back the “conversion” of the Persians much earlier and omits Maruta from his account of the Christianization of Persia. Sozomen was, however, not the only one who wished to see Constantine’s hand at work in the protection of Persian Christians. Later Arabic chroniclers, for example, also discussed a standoff between Constantine and Shapur over the Christians of Persia, but they manage to insert Maruta into the story as well, thereby placing his life and work a century earlier. According to the twelfth-century historian Ibn al-Azraq, Maruta, whose abilities as a doctor were legendary, was brought to the capital of Persia to heal the daughter of Shapur II and, following his successful cure of the girl, negotiated the peace between Shapur and Constantine.75

Although later ecclesiastical historians may have omitted Maruta from the historical record or, included him, but retrojected his work to an earlier era, he is duly famous for two reasons: his work as an envoy to the court of Yazdgard I and the bishops of Persia, and his transmission of the martyr acts of Persian Christians killed under Shapur II to a western audience. According to his Armenian *Life*, Maruta asked Yazdgard I for the bones of those martyred by Shapur and brought them back to Maipherqa, enshrining the relics in the cathedral and renaming the city “Martyropolis” in honor of the heroic Christians of Persia.76 Not only is Maruta credited with


transmitting the relics of the martyrs to the West, the authorship of the martyr acts themselves was commonly attributed to him by later Arabic chroniclers. In the fourteenth century, ‘Abdisho’ bar Brikha mentions a list of works written by Maruta, among them a “book concerning martyrs.” Although Wiessner definitively put to rest Maruta’s authorship of any of the Acts, it was commonly accepted among scholars for some time that many of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs under Shapur II were composed by Maruta. 77

While Maruta did not write the Acts, it is, however, quite possible that he was responsible for the Greek translations of them that Sozomen would come to know. And the interest of Christians in the West not only with the stories of the martyrs of the East, but also with the relics of those killed in the East is repeated in the History of the Holy Mar Ma’in—a sixth-century Syriac text that was written in the eastern Roman Empire. 78 But Sozomen, as I have indicated, does not mention Maruta as his source. 79 It is perhaps


78 Constantine’s envoy to Shapur II, who helps free Mar Ma’in from prison and torture, asks the Persian confessor to “swear that he would give him the garment he was wearing that was full of blood from his wounds and lacerations, so that it could travel with him to the west.” History of Mar Ma’in, 66. Trans. S.P. Brock, The History of the Holy Mar Ma’in with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008), 44.

the case that Sozomen was unaware that the Acts he knew represented Maruta’s literary efforts, and thus that Sozomen did not intend to obscure the Armenian bishop’s role in bringing the Acts of the Persian Martyrs to Western audience—decades after Constantine’s death. Nevertheless, Socrates, the source for three-quarters of Sozomen’s Ecclesiastical History, discusses Maruta’s role in the East at length.⁸⁰

According to Socrates, who recapitulates much of the material from the Life of Maruta as preserved in Greek and Armenian sources, Maruta was one among a number of frequent envoys to Persia in the early fifth century.⁸¹ Sozomen relates that the Persian king, Yazdgard, treated Maruta with honor, which inflamed the jealousy of the Magi who were anxious that Maruta might convert the king to Christianity. Maruta, whose Life indicates that he had been trained as a physician, was apparently able to cure the headaches of the king—a remedy that the Magi had been unable to effect.

More important than the good favor shown to Maruta by Yazdgard, however, is the bishop’s role in inaugurating the ecclesiastical bond between the Christians of the West and the East. With the approval of Yazdgard, who is celebrated in the conciliar canons of the Synod of Ishaq (410 CE) as the victorious king of kings who reestablished peace and tranquility for the churches of God in the East, Maruta shepherded the Persian bishops to adopt the canons of Nicaea and recognize the primacy of the bishop


of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.\textsuperscript{82}

The question that Maruta’s warm reception and work in Persia raises, however, is why—if there had been such a violent persecution of Christians under Shapur II, supposedly \textit{because} of their association with Roman Christians—would Yazdgard want to invite a Roman bishop to help formally establish a Persian Church that would have direct ecclesiastical and organizational ties to the church in the Roman Empire?

In the early fifth century, it is true that there was peace between Rome and Persia, but this is far from the whole story, for the bond between the empires in the early fifth century has been presented as going well beyond merely a peace. Procopius, for example, reports that Yazdgard was, at least in part, responsible for caring for the young Theodosius II—who was just a boy when he came to the throne in 408. Procopius claims that Yazdgard “adopted” the boy king at the request of Theodosius’ father, Arcadius, in order to protect him after his father’s death until he was of sufficient age to rule on his own.\textsuperscript{83} As Geoffrey Greatrex and Jonathan Bardill have discussed, there is even a tradition among Byzantine chroniclers that Yazdgard sent an envoy (Antiochus) to the Roman Empire who had strict instructions to defend the interests of the young Theodosius.\textsuperscript{84}

Among later Christian historians, Yazdgard is presented as both a “sinner,” for his later role in the renewed persecution of Christians, and a “second Constantine,” for his legalization of Christianity in Persia and role as a patron of the councils that would

\textsuperscript{82} On the celebration of Yazdgard and the role of Maruta in the composition of the canons, see Chabot, \textit{Synodicon Orientale}, 18-23, 253-262. For the canons attributed to Maruta, see A. Vööbus, \textit{The Canons Ascribed to Maruta of Maipherqat}, CSCO 440, scrip. syr. 192 (Louvain: Peeters, 1982).

\textsuperscript{83} Procopius, \textit{Wars I.2.7-10}

establish the Church of the East. Indeed, the Syriac account of the Synod of Ishaq quotes Yazdgard as claiming that the East and the West have become one power under the king’s authority. In the analysis of Scott McDonough, Yazdgard’s accommodation of Christians in Persia was a calculated political move: by claiming the right to summon the synod, to enforce communal discipline, to designate the head of the Persian Church (in Yazdgard’s own capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, no less), and to have Persian Christians pray for the king’s reign, Yazdgard can control the Christians of Persia even as they become nominally under the ecclesiastical control of the church in the Roman Empire.

“Pulcheria’s Crusade”: War, Politics, and Roman Christianity

While things were looking up for the Christians of the East in the early years of the fifth century, their political situation as a group teetering between Rome and Persia would become precarious by the end of Yazdgard’s reign just ten years later. Whereas later Persian historians (such as al-Tabart) suggest that the war between Rome and Persia that began in 420 shortly after Yazdgard’s death was spurred by a mundane dynastic crisis in Persia, the war in the Roman tradition has been portrayed as one fundamentally about religion.


Chabot, Synodicon Orientale, 19 In. 8-9.

Around 419-420, the persecution of Christians in Persia began again. According to Lucas Van Rompay, Yazdgard’s patronage of Christian bishops and the newfound freedom of Christians to worship as they pleased in Persia “constituted a real threat to the Persian religion and to the feudal Sassanian society.”88 While the actual extent of the threat represented by Persian Christians is perhaps open to speculation, several (but by no means all) of the Christian martyr acts written about this period present Christians who openly maligned the fire cult—some went as far as to tear down and destroy fire temples. As a result of the “impetuousness” of some Christians, earlier generations of scholars read the “persecution” as one that Persian Christians brought upon their own heads.

The Martyrdom of ‘Abda is the account usually summoned by scholars as the example of how Christians in Persia, empowered by the protection they believed they had under Yazdgard, turned violently upon the non-Christians of Persia. Theodoret preserves a summary of ‘Abda’s acts and recounts how the martyr-to-be, zealous for the true faith, destroyed a fire temple.89 Yazdgard ordered ‘Abda to rebuild the temple, which, of course, the Christian bishop refused to do. As a result, he was killed.90 In retelling the brief story, Theodoret inserts his own (more moderate) feelings, and remarks that ‘Abda’s actions were foolhardy. Theodoret gives the example of Paul, who did not destroy altars to false gods while he was in Athens, but rather convinced the

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89 For the Martyrdom of ‘Abda, see AMS IV, 250-253 (the ending is lost) and Theod. HE V.39, with German translation in Braun, Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer, 139-141.

90 The Martyrdom of Narsai the Ascetic presents a very similar story. Narsai, a Zoroastrian convert to Christianity, also destroyed a fire temple and extinguished the fire it held within, building a church on the site. He was arrested, told to remove the church and rebuild the fire temple, which, unsurprisingly, he refused to do. See Martyrdom of Narsai, AMS IV, 170-180, with German translation in Braun, Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer, 142-149, and French translation in P. Devos, AB 93 (1965): 305-310.
pagans of the city of the verity of Christianity through an appeal to their logic and reason. Nevertheless, Theodoret is willing to grant that once the fire temple had been destroyed, ‘Abda was right in refusing to rebuild it since re-building the altar is akin to honoring the fire cult itself and thereby committing a grave act of apostasy.

Once the persecution of Christians spread in the wake of ‘Abda’s martyrdom and the stories of others who had committed similar deeds, a number of Christians are said to have fled to the Roman Empire—which was now viewed, in the long light of the Empire’s Christian emperors and bishop-envoys sent to help organize the Church of the East, as an ally and safe haven. According to Roman accounts of the war that began in 420, hostilities began “as a result of the refusal of Theodosius II to return to the Persians the Christians who had sought refuge from persecution in his empire.”91 According to Socrates (who retains the pious account of Yazdgard as a protector of Christians), Yazdgard had died before the renewed persecutions had begun and it was Yazdgard’s son, Bahram V, who, under the influence of the Magi, initiated anew the oppression of Christians.92 Furthermore, in the telling of Socrates, Theodosius would never agree to return the Christian refugees from Persia and put them under the strain of persecution. As a result, war was renewed with the Persians.

Socrates’ interpretation of the war as one fundamentally over the Christians of Persia is, of course, not the only account of the events. In the analysis of Zeev Rubin, Socrates’ account of the reasons for war is, of course, a pious fiction. In fact, Rubin argues, part of the reason for the war was that Roman missionaries were attempting to entice Persia’s Saracen allies, via “Christian missionary propaganda,” into changing


92 Soc. HE VII.18
their allegiance to the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that the war was, at the time, used as an ideological tool to promote Roman-Christian political identity. In the analysis of Kenneth Holum, on the basis of both textual and numismatic evidence, the “ideological background” for the war was intentional. It was, as he puts it, a war not in defense of the Empire, but a war constructed to “strengthen the dynastic pretensions” of Pulcheria, Theodosius’ sister.

In light of the war, the third synod of the Church of the East, in 424 (a second synod had met in 420 and promulgated many of the same canons as had been issued in 410), convened in a time of calamity for Persian Christians. The bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Dadisho, had been slandered and jailed during the war, and, perhaps because of this, the Synod of Dadisho effectively declared the autonomy of the Church of the East, insisting that no Persian bishop had the right to formally complain to the bishops of the West about the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In other words, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was the patriarch and highest authority of the Persian Church who was not under the control of any Roman bishop or even any council of Roman bishops.

As a result of the first three councils of the Church of the East and the Roman-Persian war that began in 420, it is possible to conclude that a connection with Rome and

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95 See Synodicon Orientale, 296; and Sako, Le rôle de la hiérarchie syriaque orientale, 11. It is important to note that the Synod of 410 produced acts, a creed, and canons, but for the two later synods (420 and 424) we have only the synodal acts without any canons.
the idea that Persian Christians were “Roman captives” came about only in light of early fifth-century events. The Roman Empire’s direct influence on Persian Christian affairs via the dispatch of bishop-envoys marked Christians in Persia as “Roman” both in the minds of Persian Christians and in the view of the Sasanian authorities, like Yazdgard and his heirs, who allowed the councils in the first place. When, through the course of the fifth century, Roman wars took on a Christian ideological edge—irrespective of whether religion was in any way an “actual” factor in the conflicts—Persian Christians came to be seen as more and more suspect in the eyes of the Sasanians. It was therefore necessary to sever ties with the Roman Empire and, in the ensuing decades, begin to get beyond the presentation of Christians in Persia as “Roman captives.”

Later in the fifth century, following the further theological division of the Persian and Roman churches, allegiances could be presented along Christological lines. For example, Baršawma, the East-Syrian bishop of Nisbis, could denounce the Catholicos Babowai for supposedly contacting the Roman emperor via letter. Baršawma, in seeking to advance a “Nestorian” theology and to further separate the Church of the East from Rome both theologically and politically, charged Babowai with promoting the “faith of the Romans” (haymānūtā d-rhomāye). Through such a charge, Baršawma was able to imply that only those who held theological opinions similar to his could be thought of by the Persians as “loyal” Christians.6 As I noted in chapter three, later Persian martyr acts—such as the Martyrdom of Gregory Pirangushnasp and the History of Mar Qardagh—would also put forth the idea that Persian Christians were separate from Roman Christians along theological lines. And, as Richard Payne argues, the Martyrdom of Pethion, Adurhormizd, and Anahid, among other later Persian martyr acts, would begin to present Christians not as “Roman captives,” but as full-fledged members of Sasanian

society who were practicing a religion that was deeply connected to the land of Iran.

Stirring and marked as these changes in Christian self-presentation and identity may have been, old connections died hard. As the Roman Empire continued to stress the centrality of its Christian theological and political identity, Christians outside of the West could not help but be subsumed under the suspicion of being allied to the West.

Epilogue: The Territorialization of Religion

Near the end of winter, in 2008, the body of Monsignor Paulos Rahho, the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Mosul in northern Iraq, was found in a shallow grave on the outskirts of his city. As with many accounts of violence in post-Saddam Iraq, the details of the archbishop’s death are sketchy—even contradictory. One of the few constants among the various descriptions of the event is that gunmen attacked the archbishop’s car as he was leaving his church in Mosul and killed his driver and two bodyguards. Some media sources suggested that Rahho was mortally wounded by gunfire, as well, at the time of the attack. The New York Times, citing eyewitness testimony, said that the archbishop’s car was indiscriminately “sprayed with bullets.”\(^{97}\) Quoting an Iraqi police chief, the Los Angeles Times said that the archbishop was “shot when kidnapped and died of his injuries.”\(^ {98}\)

Later reports indicated that Rahho was not, in fact, killed during the attack, but was thrown alive into the trunk of a getaway car. According to Louis Sako, the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Kirkuk, not only was Rahho still alive after the attack, but he even had the wherewithal to surreptitiously use his cell phone to call his church from the darkness of his attackers’ trunk. Sako and other Chaldean clerics said that Rahho

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clearly had a sense of what was happening, who his kidnappers were, and what their demands were going to be. They claimed that when Rahho spoke with church officials from the trunk of the car that he implored them—in what must have been hushed and hurried tones—to pay no ransom money to the gunmen. Such payments, Rahho said, would only encourage more violent acts.99

This was not the first time that gunmen had attempted to extort money from the Christians of Mosul. While some Iraqi Christians claimed that Rahho was kidnapped and held for ransom because he had refused to pay the “protection tax” that militants had levied on his people, both the archbishop and other clerics had apparently been bowing to the extortion of militant gangs and paying the “tax” for some time. Reflecting on the aftermath of Rahho’s kidnapping and death, the New York Times began one report this way: “As priests do everywhere, Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, the leader of the Chaldean Catholics in this ancient city [Mosul], gathered alms at Sunday Mass. But for years the money, a crumpled pile of multicolored Iraqi dinars, went into an envelope and then into the hand of a man who had threatened to kill him and his entire congregation. ‘What else could he do?’ asked Ghazi Rahho, a cousin of the archbishop. ‘He tried to protect the Christian people.’” According to the Times, Rahho may have stopped paying the protection tax as the security situation in northern Iraq marginally improved in late 2007, thereby spurring the much more violent attempt at extortion that resulted in his death.100


Two weeks after the attack, an anonymous caller directed church officials to the site outside of town where the archbishop was buried. After Rahho’s remains were recovered, conflicting reports arose concerning the wounds on his body. Initial accounts, bolstered by the testimony of the archbishop’s family members and Iraqi authorities, indicated that bullet wounds were evident. CNN reported that when “relatives and authorities went to the location and found the body,” it had “gunshot wounds.”

Later on, other sources, including anonymous representatives of Mosul’s morgue, insisted that there was no evidence at all that Rahho had been shot. Instead, they claimed, the archbishop died of natural causes. It was well known that Rahho was in poor health, they said, and that he was unable to access his heart medication while being held hostage. A priest associated with Rahho, Father Najeeb Mikhail, lent credence to the morgue’s account, saying that just two days prior to the attack Rahho was hardly able to stand for more than a few minutes before he needed to sit down again to rest. According to Mikhail, Rahho’s heart problems were exacerbated by “the stress of constant threats from militant gangs demanding extortion money.” Mikhail claimed, however, that Rahho had never paid any money to these gangs. According to Mikhail, the archbishop always said “it was against his religion to pay money that

Iraq last year [2007], Archbishop Rahho, 65, stopped paying the protection money, one sliver of the frightening larger shadow of violence and persecution that has forced hundreds of thousands of Christians from Iraq. That decision, the officials say, may be why he was kidnapped in February.” Kramer cites Canon Andrew White, the Anglican vicar of Baghdad, who claims that the financing behind the “protection money” paid by Monsignor Rahho (and other Christians) came largely from the charitable contributions of Christians in Europe and the United States: “People deny it, people say it’s too complex, and nobody in the international community does anything about it.”


102 Reuters noted, “Police at the Mosul morgue said he appeared to have been dead a week and his body bore no bullet wounds.” See J. al-Taie, “Iraqi police, Mehdi militia clash despite truce,” Reuters, March 14, 2008, www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSL14360960.
would be used to finance violence.”

As Mikhail’s account implies, the identity of Rahho’s attackers, and even the archbishop’s history of paying them off, seems to have been unknown to—or at least publicly unacknowledged by—some of those who knew the archbishop well. When asked who might be to blame for the attack and kidnapping, Monsignor Shlemon Warduni, a senior bishop of Baghdad, was quoted as saying, “I don’t know who they are. … We have doubts about everyone.”

Perhaps as a result of this indeterminacy, some media outlets circumspectly labeled those who had kidnapped Rahho and killed his companions “militants” or “unknown gunmen,” and provided no further speculation on their associations or motives, other than extortion. One reporter for the Associated Press, while stressing that Rahho was seized in Mosul, “a city considered by the US military the last urban stronghold of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” nevertheless conceded that not only had al-Qaeda not claimed responsibility, but that there had been “no claims of responsibility for the archbishop’s kidnapping or his death.”

But rarely were the attackers left so nameless. Within hours after the discovery of the archbishop’s body, although there still had been no claim of responsibility for the brazen attack, no less a figure than Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister, declared his certainty that al-Qaeda in Iraq was to blame. The following day, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad sent out a press release

104 Parker, “Iraqi Christians mourn archbishop.”
blaming al-Qaeda and further suggesting that the attack was religiously motivated:

“[The Archbishop’s] demise at the hands of al-Qaeda in Iraq is one more savage attempt by a barbaric enemy to sow strife and discord in Iraq. ... We will continue to work with the Iraqi government to help bring to justice the perpetrators of this brutal crime and to help protect all Iraqis, regardless of their religious affiliation.”

Even in the absence of clear evidence, the international media quickly seized upon and perpetuated the idea disseminated by Iraqi and American officials that the attack was orchestrated by al-Qaeda and, moreover, was premised upon religious intolerance. Along with elements of the media and the Iraqi and American governments, many Christian clerics in Iraq also saw the attack on Rahho less as the tragic crescendo of a long period of opportunistic thievery and extortion in a lawless land, and more in the broader trajectory of “religious persecution” organized and carried out by a transnational, umbrella organization of religious militants. One Chaldean priest commented, “There are some Muslims that want to put Christians out of Mosul. So through these criminals, they try to intimidate the relationship between Muslims and Christians.”


108 Lamprecht, “Kidnappers Demand Huge Ransom for Iraqi Bishop,” quoting Father Najeeb Mikhail again. In October, 2009, an Iraqi Christian health care worker in Kirkuk was kidnapped, held for ransom, and ultimately killed. CBS reported two very different analyses of the event this way: “There have been no clear clues on the background of the gangs. But [Archbishop of Kirkuk] Sako pointed the finger at Islamic extremists whom he claims want to drive out Kirkuk’s remaining 10,000 Christians. ‘These acts are really malicious. Extremists are using religion as a pretext to target Christians,’ he said. ‘We call upon the government to provide necessary protection to Christians because these acts are meant to frighten Christians out of the country.’ ... But Kirkuk police Maj. Gen. Jamal Tahir called the charges ‘baseless.’ ‘There is no flight of Christians from Kirkuk because of violence. Christians normally leave willingly to other areas or other countries to live in better conditions, but not because of any escalation of violence especially in Kirkuk’s Christian neighborhoods.’” See “Iraq Christian Leader Denounces Latest Attacks,” CBS News, October 5, 2009, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/10/05/ap/middleeast/main5364546.shtml.
that the archbishop was targeted because of his religion, *per se*—that the violence and extortion was *religiously* motivated—and not as a result of the fact that he and his community were relatively wealthy and yet largely unprotected.

Prior to Rahho’s kidnapping, Christian leaders in Iraq had already been sharply critical of Maliki’s government for failing to prevent violence against Christians. After the attack on the archbishop, however, the government wasted little time in attempting to convince the Iraqi Christian community that it was on their side against a mutual enemy. Only two months after the discovery of Rahho’s body, Ahmed Ali Ahmed, described as “a leading al Qaeda militant,” had already been captured, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by the Iraqi Central Criminal Court for the attack on the archbishop and his associates.109

Yet, the extent to which “al-Qaeda” was actually to blame may not have been as self-evident as some would like to believe. The very term “al-Qaeda,” as has become obvious over the recent decade, is frequently exploited as a convenient way of naming nearly any militant act perpetrated by a Sunni Muslim. But using “al-Qaeda” as a shorthand way of describing violence in Iraq reifies such violence as an intractable conflict with a monolithic, “barbaric enemy.” It oversimplifies “the hydra-headed nature of the insurgency in Iraq in a way that exploits the emotions that have been aroused by the name ‘Al Qaeda’” following the September 11th attacks.110

Obituaries lamenting the archbishop’s death at the hands of “al-Qaeda” quickly


110 M. Cooper and L. Rohter, “McCain, Iraq War and the Threat of ‘Al Qaeda,’” *New York Times*, April 19, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/04/19/us/politics/19threat.html, is but one of many articles critical of the indiscriminate use of the term “al Qaeda.” This piece in the *Times* is particularly notable because it was written only a month after Rahho’s body was found.
made the rounds as an example of the specifically religious hostilities in Iraq, with journalistic eulogizing setting Rahho’s death in the context of an ongoing persecution of Christians. The London Guardian, in their obituary of the “brave Iraqi Christian leader determined to stand with his flock,” emphasized the dramatic details of the events, explaining that even when Rahho was “imprisoned in the boot of his kidnappers’ car, he managed to pull out his cellphone and call his church, instructing officials not to pay a ransom.”111 Another obituary, written by a spokesman for the group “Aid to the Church in Need,” referred to Rahho’s tenure as archbishop as one that took place during “mounting persecution of Christians.”112 The London Times quoted Dr. Suha Rassam of a similarly-named group, “Iraqi Christians in Need.” Rassam put the ramifications of Rahho’s death in historical terms, invoking the Roman catacombs: “The only way for the Church in the Mosul area to survive might be if it goes underground, like it did in the first and second centuries.”113 In the writing of Rahho’s obituary, the eliding of certain events, the emphasis on others, and the equation of them all with the insistence that Rahho died a martyr’s death is not surprising. Such martyr making is to be expected.

Elizabeth Castelli’s work is one recent example of scholarship that examines how ancient martyrological discourses are employed in constructing the martyrs of today. In the last chapter of her book that is otherwise devoted to martyr narratives from late antiquity, Castelli focuses on how a young girl who was killed in the 1999 shooting rampage at Columbine High School in Colorado became the focus of a modern-day

111 O’Mahony, “Obituary: Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho.”
martyr cult. In purposefully summoning and meticulously detailing an example far removed from the world of early Christianity, Castelli shows how martyrdom cannot be read as an ontological category, but rather must be understood as a discursive and rhetorical one. The disjointed and contradictory accounts of the school shooting and the subsequent heralding of one of its victims as a virgin martyr à la Perpetua undermines “the scholarly focus on questions of ‘what really happened.’” The scholarly “obsession,” Castelli calls it, “of separating the historical kernel from the chaff of legend.” As Castelli notes, “it is one thing to reach the limits of the question of historicity when one is concerned with very distant events for which there are fragmentary and competing sources of information. It is quite another to be immersed in the moment itself—surrounded by newspapers, magazines, videotape, and eyewitness testimony—and still to have the question of ‘the real’ emerge almost immediately.”

The question of what actually happened in the case of Archbishop Rahho is also one that emerged almost immediately. Not only were the events themselves unclear, but there were wildly different interpretations of why what happened did happen. Some said the archbishop died in a hail of bullets; others said he died because he was off his medications. Some said he was mortally wounded while being kidnapped; others said he was well enough while being kidnapped to think to phone his church to remind whoever answered of his views on the payment of ransom money. Some said he had been paying off extortioners for years; others claimed that he would never have encouraged violent acts by giving money to militant gangs. All tended to agree that al-Qaeda was responsible and that their motivation was “religious.” The writers of Rahho’s obituaries tacitly penned his martyrdom. Even though his kidnapping was witnessed

firsthand, the actuality of the event was quickly subsumed by a more important narrative: the hagiographical memorialization of Rahho as a Christian martyr who courageously resisted thuggish Islamic extremists.

Harrowingly, several months before his kidnapping, Rahho unknowingly began writing the account of his own martyrdom. In an interview, he set the persecution of Iraqi Christians within a trajectory that stretched back to the days of the catacombs. In Constantine, Rahho found the bridge between the ancient persecution of Christians in the West and the still ongoing persecution of Christians in the East. The Christians of the East are still a “Church of martyrs,” and have been so for centuries, he lamented. “We, Christians of Mesopotamia,” Rahho said, “are used to religious persecution. ... After Constantine, persecution ended only for Western Christians, whereas in the East threats continued. Even today we continue to be a Church of martyrs.”

In addition to the sense that the attack on Rahho was part of a broader “persecution” of Christians in Iraq, the idea of Iraqi Christians as Western agents in league with the U.S. military also became a prominent theme in the news reports detailing the attack on Rahho. The same AP reporter cited above included in his article a larger pronouncement about Islamic militancy in Iraq and suggested a causal connection between the presence of Western armies in the country and violence against Christians: “Since the US-led invasion in 2003,” he wrote, “Iraqi Christians have been targeted by Islamic extremists who label them ‘crusaders’ loyal to US troops.”


116 S.N. Yacoub, “Abducted archbishop found dead in Iraq,” Boston Globe, March 14, 2008, www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2008/03/14/abducted_archbishop_found_dead_in_iraq/. Other sources reported that the gunmen had demanded that Rahho organize a Christian militia to fight against coalition forces in order to prove that the Christians of Mosul were not traitors—this according to a Kurdish news outlet citing an unnamed source “close to the family of the deceased archbishop.” See “Archbishop’s kidnappers demand to form Christian militia,” Kurdish Aspect, March 14, 2008, www.kurdishaspect.com/doc031408VOI.html.
On the day Rahho’s body was found, this sentence about Iraqi Christians as “crusaders” appeared in copy on the websites of numerous major American television and print outlets, dozens of local American papers affiliated with the AP wire service, and countless blogs that range across political and religious spectrums. Of course, such a broad swath of exposure is not unique to this article about Rahho’s death; the same proliferation of a single story is true for scores of AP wire stories everyday. Still, the snowball of a single narrative became an avalanche: hundreds of English-language news outlets all over the world were running the same story on March 14, 2008. This story specifically acknowledged that no group had yet claimed responsibility for Rahho’s death, and yet implied that the archbishop was targeted by al-Qaeda because he was the leader of a group of people in Iraq who were presumed to be loyal to U.S. troops on the basis of their shared, Western religion.

Tellingly, the AP reporter’s sentence commenting on the perception that Iraqi Christians were allied with Westerners had a life longer than one day in the news cycle. The very same sentence appeared in print not just on the day that Rahho’s body was found, but two weeks earlier—on the day that he was kidnapped, and when little was known beyond the actual events of the attack, which were also highly uncertain. In fact, the same sentence first appeared at least four months before Rahho’s kidnapping, in an AP story about Prime Minister al-Maliki’s vow to protect Christians in Iraq. If the recycling of this sentence is any indication, Rahho was already a stock character in the

117 Internet search of June 12, 2009.


drama over his kidnapping and death before the event even happened. Similarly, Ali Ahmed’s conviction and stature as a “leader of Sunni Islamist al Qaeda” merely confirmed one of the known knowns that was known all along: Rahho was kidnapped by those seeking to wage a religious war pitting Muslim East against Christian West and the West’s Iraqi vassals.

There is a bizarre cycle at work here. Rahho’s obituaries and the press depicted him as a martyr who died because he was a Christian in a non-Christian land; in other words, he was killed because of his Christianity. But such reasoning impels a necessary corollary: if Rahho was killed because he was a Christian, then what is it about Christians that makes them so distasteful to militant Islamists? One of the primary answers seems to be that Christianity is a Western religion.

Indeed, the identity of contemporary Iraqi Christians is, as Rahho indicated a few months before his death, inextricably linked with a narrative that makes the martyrs of today the immediate heirs of the martyrs of centuries past. This connection between ancient events and recent ones—between the crumbling shrines of martyrs long dead and the freshly-turned earth over those just killed—is central to the collective memory of Iraq’s Christians. It is a form of memory that Elizabeth Castelli calls “a framework of meaning that [draws] upon broader metanarratives about temporality, suffering and sacrifice, and identity.”

Such “collective memory” runs deep among the Christians of Mesopotamia. Hardly lacking for “metanarratives,” they have traced their ancestry as a people beyond even biblical times, back to the ancient Assyrians. This continuity between modern Chaldean and Assyrian Christians and the ancient Assyria is, as Adam

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120 Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory, 25.
Becker pointedly remarks, “worthy of a study of Benedict Anderson.” Nevertheless, it is the link between the Christians of Iraq and the West, not ancient Assyrians, that persists in broader discourse about Christianity in the land of Islam.

Sustained temporal compression going back across modern, medieval, and late ancient narratives about the Christians of Mesopotamia reveals why it is not difficult to resuscitate the past in more recent events. For, as Castelli is quick to note, even a collective identity as striking as that of a persecuted community of martyrs does not arise naturally or spontaneously from certain events, irrespective of how violent and traumatic they might have been. Rather, identity is “rhetorically constituted and discursively sustained.” The expressed identity of a given community is not a secondary rhetorical move following the prior constitution of the community itself, but is necessarily concomitant with the very origins—and constant reiteration—of that community as a community.

The idea that identity does not arise spontaneously, but is constructed discursively and performatively, has, unquestionably, become a rather hackneyed scholarly concept: that identity is constructed is a given. So much so that the most recent studies about identity in late antiquity skip quickly from arguing that identity is constructed and on into the more interesting questions of how and to what ends identity is constructed, and what this might tell us about late ancient authors, communities, and


122 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 173.
conflicts. Yet, even though “identity studies” has thoroughly penetrated scholarly analyses, it is still difficult to shake loose from and see beyond the essentializing inherent in ancient texts and the calcified interpretations of them. This difficulty has at times resulted in an entrenched (and ultimately rather misleading) binary between those who stake out positions on a text’s “rhetoric” versus those who are concerned with its “reality,” wherein neither position fully attends to how rhetoric creates, reflects, and sustains the intangible and yet very real realities it represents.

Attending to the literary and rhetorical qualities of a text—and distinguishing it from being understood in a hyper-inflated sense as objective, documentary evidence of an event—does not lessen or obviate how a text represents, understands, and furthers (in the late ancient and contemporary imaginations) an account of reality. It is true that some more recent scholarship eschews concern for establishing the historicity of these texts (what “actually happened”) and takes a more literary-critical, “rhetorical” approach, but I am not convinced that this is an altogether different project. In detailing how religious communities are shaped by narratives of martyrdom, Daniel Boyarin explains why a distinction must be made between events and literature about events when he cautions: “Being killed is an event. Martyrdom is a literary form, a genre.”

While Boyarin is absolutely right, his warning should not be over-read. In making just


124 Boyarin, Dying for God, 116.
such a distinction between events and literary forms, Boyarin by no means intends to minimize the importance of texts as vehicles of realia. Indeed, the major premise of Boyarin’s work entails a recognition of how communities (real communities) come into being (real being) discursively—textually, as we are able to trace it. For Boyarin, it cannot be said that “rhetoric” tells us nothing about “reality” because the two inseparably co-inhere: rhetoric is imbricated in reality.

Still, the discursiveness of identity becomes all the more evident when it can be shown that present identities are interpretively based upon and read through the lens of ancient hagiography—as in the case of Archbishop Rahho. While “the real” of Mosul, or Columbine, or Seleucia-Ctesiphon is of undeniable importance and consequence to those who are intimately connected to the events, it is, as I have tried to show, less relevant (even irrelevant) for the narratives that arise from the events. To understand the place of narrativized events within a broader rubric of Christian identities, what is more important than the immediate “real” is the hermeneutic circle of how events are interpreted and how such interpretations not only reflect other interpretations of earlier events but subsequently shape the interpretation—and the interpreters—of events to come and events that have already happened.

In Mosul, the narrative that emerged in the aftermath of Rahho’s death is an example of what Rogers Brubaker would call the result of a predetermined cognitive schema that categorizes and classifies the world into groups—in this case mutually antagonistic, clearly identifiable, religious groups that are putatively the real players in and forces behind the events: “Despite the constructivist stance that has come to prevail among sophisticated analysts,” Brubaker argues, “the study of ethnicity [or religious identity] remains informed by ‘groupism’: by the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and even races as things-in-the-world, as real, substantial entities with their own cultures, identities, and interests.” To the contrary, Brubaker contends, “Race,
ethnicity, and nationality exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world—not ontological but epistemological realities.”

Religious identity must be added to Brubaker’s list of things that, like race and ethnicity, exist only as perspectives “on the world.” And martyrological texts are especially pointed narrative accounts that constitute religious identity as a fundamentally ontological reality. Interpreters of ancient and modern martyrological narratives must first, however, attend to the epistemological realities that such texts create via their ontological terminology. The groups described in texts that are as rhetorical as martyrologies cannot, in other words, be accepted as anything more than epistemological realities without “uncritically adopting the folk sociological ontology that is central to racial, ethnic, and national movements.”

Although late ancient Christianity was often rendered by its own apologists as something universal, something that anyone could become, “Christian history” among late ancient historiographers is, in the words of Denise Kimber Buell, “treated precisely as the history of a people.” Simeon’s Martyrdom certainly presents Christians as a people.


126 Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups, 79. Again, I would add “religious” movements to Brubaker’s list.

127 Buell, Why This New Race, 27. My emphasis. Buell offers the example of Tertullian who somewhat paradoxically employs ethnic reasoning when arguing for the very universality of Christianity. Because he “inhabits a context [third-century Carthage] in which the imperial interests of defining Romanness require him to frame his definition of Christianness explicitly in relation to Romanness,” he insists that it is only non-Christians, or anti-Christian polemicists, who portray Christians as a third type of humanity—a tertium genus distinct from both Romans and Jews—because of their odd religious practices. To combat this idea, Tertullian employs a rhetorical strategy that describes Christians, in Buell’s words, as “the best representatives of the Roman Empire, the followers of the God who makes possible the success of the empire.” In this analysis, Christians “are not a distinct natio but the true natio” (154-55, with further reference to Tert. ad Nationes, 1.8). Buell further argues that Tertullian’s concept of Christians as the true natio,
But this sort of language, while appropriate in the context of the martyrrological genre in which it is deployed, is precisely the sort of ontology that we have to be on guard against accepting. The “people” of late ancient Christian texts, according to Buell, must be examined “not as an evolving totality but rather as a series of ongoing struggles, negotiations, alliances, and challenges.”

The “people” as a group set apart, but yet nonetheless linked by virtue of their peoplehood to a broader group of people—the Christian people, or the people of God, in the West—is part of what informs the discourse equating contemporary Iraqi Christians with “crusaders.” Similarly, much of the discussion about Christians in late ancient Persia is fundamentally premised on the idea of discrete, identifiable religious groups—and, in the case of Christians, the idea of a “religious minority group” existing among a larger, hostile majority and even other hostile minority groups such as Jews, Marcionites, and Manicheans. Simeon’s martyrdom, idealized this way, becomes eerily similar to that of Rahho: both bishops refused to pay a protection tax levied on their people—people who were singled out for putatively religio-political reasons—and both were killed for their intransigence at the hands of opposing religious “groups.”

... a people that is all people, is rooted in a classical concept of Romanness that is rendered as equivalent with and fundamentally encapsulated by humanity more generally—Romanitas as humanitas. Buell points to the influential work of Greg Woolf on this point. See Buell, Why This New Race, 152, as well as eadem, “Race and Universalism in Early Christianity,” JECS 10 (2002): 462-464, and G. Woolf, Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55. If Romanness is humanness, then, for Tertullian—by suggesting that Christians are the true natio, the most humane of all Romans—to be Christian is essentially to embody Romanness, properly understood.

128 Buell, Why This New Race, 29.

129 Cf. History, 22 and 44. As Parvaneh Pourshariati points out, there was a great variety of religious practices in late ancient Sasanian Iran. Moreover, the study of “religion” in Sasanian Iran, she notes, is “hampered by the long-established paradigm of church-state collaboration and the theory that the Zoroastrian church ... had entrenched itself in Sasanian society.” Pourshariati, Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire, 324.
Part III.

Translations of the 
*Martyrdom* and *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē*

**Introduction to the Translations**

The translations that follow are, to my knowledge, the first full English translations of the *Martyrdom* and the *History of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē*. They were compiled under the supervision of Lucas Van Rompay over the course of numerous weekly meetings held from the spring semester of 2008 through to the end of the spring semester of 2009.

Simeon’s martyr acts are known by several names. The *Martyrdom* is typically referred to as the “Short Version,” the *Martyrium*, or the *recensio antiquior* (following Kmosko), or “Simeon A” (following Wiessner); likewise, the *History* is known as the “Long Version,” the *Narratio*, or the *recensio recentior* (Kmosko), or “Simeon B” (Wiessner). The translations provided here are based on the Syriac text (with Latin translation) edited and published in *Patrologia Syriaca* by Michael Kmosko.¹

**Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs**

According to the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, the oppression of Christians during the reign of Shapur II continued with intermittent intensity for forty years, extending from the time when Simeon was killed (variously interpreted as anywhere between 339-344 CE²) until the Persian king’s death in 379.³ The long duration of the persecution—or

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² See the section below on “The Date of Simeon’s Death.”
perhaps the long reign of the persecutor—helped spawn a substantial literature of martyr acts in Syriac. Some of these acts probably took on written form relatively soon after the death of the martyr, or martyrs, that they commemorate. For example, of the two texts that narrate Simeon’s death, the Martyrdom was probably written around the turn of the fifth century. We know that Simeon was remembered as a martyr by at least the early fifth century on the basis of a dated Syriac manuscript (British Library, MS Add. 12150) that was written in Edessa in November of the year 411 CE. The manuscript contains a list of the names of over one hundred Persian martyrs, including Simeon. From the same manuscript, which contains a Syriac translation of Eusebius’ Martyrs of Palestine, we know that Syriac-speaking Christians (at least in Roman Edessa) possessed Syriac versions of Greek martyr acts that may have been used as literary models.

References in the Martyrdom to the emperor Julian’s reign suggest, however, that the text was not written until after 363 CE. Without mentioning Julian by name, Martyrdom 13 alludes to the attempt at re-building the Jerusalem Temple, an endeavor that was supposed to have been encouraged by Julian. Unless this anecdote was a later addition—which is unlikely, but certainly possible considering that this section of the

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3 The latest dated martyr act set during Shapur’s reign is that of ’Aqebshema in “Persecution Year 37” (ca. 377 CE). Sozomen refers to him as “Bishop Acepsimas” (Soz. HE II.13).


5 On this point, see J.W. Drijvers, “Ammianus Marcellinus 23.1.2-3: The Rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem,” in Cognitio Gestorum: The Historiographic Art of Ammianus Marcellinus, ed. J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst, and H.C. Teitler (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992), 19-26. Drijvers notes that the report of Ammianus is the only pagan source to mention the attempt at rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, although there are numerous Christian sources (including both the Martyrdom and the History) that decry Julian’s encouragement of the Jews as a way of attempting to undermine Christians and Christianity.
Martyrdom could be removed without noticeably changing either the narrative or the flow of the text—then the year 363 CE thus represents the terminus post quem of the Martyrdom. The terminus ante quem of the Martyrdom’s composition can be set by Sozomen’s Ecclesiastical History (ca. 440 CE), the second book of which includes several long passages about the martyrs of Persia, including a detailed section (HE II.9) about Simeon that clearly demonstrates that Sozomen must have known some version of the Martyrdom—either in Syriac or in Greek translation.

By contrast, the much longer History could not have been written, at least in the form in which we have it, until nearly a century after Simeon’s death. In the more overtly theological sections of the History, there are many phrases that seem to be representative of the later, fifth-century Christological formulations of the Church of the East that would have had no currency in the fourth century. In a debate with Shapur, for instance, Simeon insists that “God” neither suffered nor died, and thereby seems to espouse a more characteristically dyophysite (“Nestorian”) Christology.6 Further, when Shapur calls Simeon a liar for claiming that his god did not die on the cross, Simeon responds: “Far be it from God, my lord King, to suffer or die! Anything that suffers and dies is not God because the divine nature is beyond suffering and even beyond death. He does not suffer either in his nature or in anything else” (History 44).7

Other martyr acts among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs have an even more intriguing literary lineage. Some are set during the time of Shapur’s persecution, but are legendary, epic tales not composed until several centuries after the deaths of their

6 The term “Nestorian,” while still often used to refer to the Church of the East, or even Persian Christianity more generally, is one that should be discarded. See S.P. Brock, “The Nestorian Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” BRL 78 (1996): 23-35.

7 Both Kmosko and Wiessner argue that the History could not have been written until at least a few decades into the fifth century.
heroes. The *History of Mar Qardagh* is one example. According to Joel Thomas Walker, who translated the text and analyzed its literary context, the account of Mar Qardagh, a Persian nobleman and convert to Christianity in the time of Shapur II, "preserves few, if any, reliable details about the fourth century," presenting, instead, a "window into the cultural world of seventh-century Iraq."  

As the late date of authorship of *Mar Qardagh* suggests, the texts that make up the full corpus of the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* span several centuries. In fact, acts of Christians martyred in Sasanian Persia are set well before and long after Shapur's Great Persecution (340-379 CE), extending from the time of Vahran II in the late third century all the way through to the reign of Khosro II who ruled until the brink of the Islamic conquest of Persia.  

While the *Acts* span nearly the entire course of the Sasanian Empire itself, their chronological diffusion is neither even nor constant. If the *Acts* were construed linearly as a timeline indicative of the literary representation of the suffering of Christians in the Persian Empire, then the resulting record would read like the electrocardiograph of someone with a seriously irregular heartbeat: there are long periods of calm punctuated by spikes of what appear to be severe (and not-so-severe) violence against Christians—episodes that often coincide with periods of conflict between Rome and Persia. There is, for example, only one text that details the witness of a Christian martyred in the third

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8 J.T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1. Another example is the *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, which narrates the life of one of Shapur's military generals who converts to Christianity and goes on to become a founder of many monasteries. Sebastian Brock, who edited and translated the text, suggests that it could not have been written prior to the sixth century and, moreover, that it was likely written by a Syriac scribe writing from within the Roman Empire. See Brock, *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 4-6.  

9 Sebastian Brock appends a chronologically-organized guide to all the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* to his translation of the story of Mar Ma'in. See Brock, *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, 78-84.
century. It is the story of a Christian woman named Candida who had been taken captive from the Roman Empire and forced into the harem of Vahran II. But, just as with the *History of Mar Qardagh*, which was set centuries before it was written, Candida’s martyrdom—in the form in which we have it—was unlikely to have been written until the fifth century.  

By contrast with the third century—for which time Candida is the only martyr about whom we know—there are over forty stories of martyrs, or groups of martyrs, who were killed during Shapur II’s persecution in the mid-fourth century. But for the forty years after Shapur’s death there are hardly any texts that recount violence against Christians. In fact, from Shapur’s death in 379 CE until the supposed re-commencement of persecution at the end of the reign of Yazdgard I around 420 CE, we hear nothing about the oppression of Christians. According to the received history of the Church of the East, these four decades from the death of Shapur II until the death of Yazdgard I were a time of rebuilding—rebuilding, in the literal sense, of churches and monasteries, and rebuilding, in a more metaphorical sense, of the priesthood and ecclesiastical hierarchy that is said to have been decimated by Shapur’s oppression.  

From about 420 until 457 CE, we have textual evidence for two episodes of violence directed at Christians—the first around 419-421 CE under Yazdgard I and his successor, Vahran V, and the second about thirty years later, in the 450s under Yazdgard  

10 The text has been edited and translated by Sebastian Brock, who proposes the fifth-century date of authorship. See S.P. Brock, “A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida,” *AB* 96 (1978): 167-181.  

Stories of, or references to, deported prisoners from the Roman Empire is a persistent theme in the *Acts*, and one I discuss in the dissertation. The *History*, for example, indicates that “Roman captives who lived in Karka d-Ledan” stole Simeon’s body from his executioners in order to bury his remains properly. The same text goes on to explain that the bishops (plural) of Karka d-Ledan were the only ones “among all the inhabitants of the East” who were not persecuted because Shapur wanted peace in his newly-established city: “Moreover, the people whom he [Shapur] had settled in it were recently *taken captive* and resettled from different regions, so he had mercy upon them because they were exiles” (*History* 98). There is no parallel account of Roman captives in the *Martyrdom*. 
II. Following the reign of Yazdgard II, there was a period of nearly two hundred years (from 457 CE until the Islamic conquest) during which time there does not seem to have been any “persecution” of Christians in Persia. There are martyr acts set in this “post-457” period, but they are few and far between: only a dozen acts remain. Indeed, even the periods of strife in the fifth century can hardly be classed (literarily, at least) as “persecutions,” especially when compared to the literature detailing widespread death and destruction under Shapur II.

After a period of calm following Shapur’s death, when violence did recommence in the early 420s, the Christians of Persia seemed to bring death upon their own heads. We hear that Bishop ʿAbda, zealous to overturn paganism, destroyed a Zoroastrian fire temple.\(^{11}\) When king Yazdgard heard what ʿAbda had done, he ordered him to rebuild the fire temple. At great personal peril, ʿAbda refused.

This story was well-known outside of Persia. Theodoret comments on the case of ʿAbda in his Ecclesiastical History, remarking that it was rash and inexpedient for the bishop to have destroyed the fire temple, for, Theodoret says, “not even the divine Apostle, when he came to Athens and saw the city wholly given over to idolatry, destroyed any one of the altars that the Athenians honored, but rather convinced them of their ignorance by his arguments, and made manifest the truth.”\(^{12}\) Theodoret is not entirely critical of ʿAbda, however. He concedes that since the fire temple had already been destroyed, even if was by ʿAbda’s own hand, that were ʿAbda to re-build the temple he would have directly aided the spread of the fire cult. For refusing to accept the legitimacy of the fire cult, and refusing to rebuild the temple, ʿAbda is “worthy of the martyr’s crown” in Theodoret’s eyes, irrespective of the imprudence of the bishop’s

\(^{11}\) AMS IV, 250-53.

\(^{12}\) Theod. HE V.39.
initial actions.\(^\text{13}\)

As with the story of ‘Abda, most of the other martyr acts from the fifth century are thematically very different from the stories of those who were killed during Shapur’s persecution. These later acts, written after the official establishment of the Church in Persia, tend to narrate the pious deaths of often very high-ranking Zoroastrians who converted to Christianity. The martyrs’ crime in the eyes of the Sasanian authorities (at least according to the Acts) was not being Christian, but rather abandoning the ancestral form of piety and refusing to renounce Christianity and return to the fire altar. The martyrdom of Jacob “the Sliced” (Jacobus Intercisus) in the first year of the reign of Vahran V (421 CE) is one example.\(^\text{14}\) Jacob, who was of high rank in the Persian court, renounced his new Christian faith before the king only to be subsequently rejected by his Christian wife and mother once he returned home. Fearing that God, too, would reject him in a way similar to the rejection shown to him by his wife and mother, Jacob went back to the king and renounced his renunciation of Christianity. As a result, his arms and legs were sliced off.

\(^\text{13}\) The story of Narsai the Ascetic is similar, involving the destruction of a fire temple and the martyr’s refusal to rebuild it. AMS IV, 170-180. Lucas Van Rompay comments on this period of Christian history in Persia, and suggests that it is unlikely that Christians were killed solely for a sporadic assault on a fire temple. Van Rompay argues instead that the real issue was the growing prominence of Christianity in Sasanian Persia in the last decade of Yazdgard I’s reign, a prominence that represented an existential threat to “feudal Sasanian society.” Richard Payne has recently challenged this view that Christianity was regarded as a threat to the Sasanian Empire by pointing to the deep integration of Christianity within Iranian society, at least in the sixth and seventh centuries. The circumstances of the early fifth century, as I discuss in chapter six, remain vague and “accessible” mainly only through hagiography. See L. Van Rompay, “Impetuous Martyrs? The Situation of the Persian Christians in the Last Years of Yazdgard I (419-420),” in Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective: Memorial Louis Reekmans (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 117), ed. M. Lamberigts and P. Van Deun (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 363-375, and R.E. Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500-700,” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, Princeton, 2010).

A similar story figures prominently in the Martyrdom and the History with the account of Gushtazad’s apostasy, repentance, and martyrdom. Gushtazad was a eunuch and an argbed, a high-ranking member of the Persian court, who had reneged upon his conversion to Christianity in order to retain his status and position. When Simeon arrived in Karka d-Ledan in chains (having been arrested and deported from Seleucia-Ctesiphon), Gushtazad ran to greet him, but Simeon refused to see him. Gushtazad is shamed by Simeon’s rejection and thus realizes that God will likely reject him, too. He repents of his apostasy, and goes before Shapur to proclaim his return to the Christian faith, a re-conversion that met with predictable results.\textsuperscript{15}

Because the acts written about the martyrs under Shapur constitute well over half the entire corpus of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, and because Simeon was the protomartyr of Shapur’s Great Persecution, the enduring literary importance of the acts of Simeon bar Šabbā‘ē cannot be overestimated. Simeon, by his death, became the touchstone of Shapur’s persecution: a number of other acts explicitly mention Simeon—more so than any other martyr commemorated among Persian Christians—and they speak woefully of Simeon’s death under Shapur. The martyr acts of Tarbo, Simeon’s sister, attest that she was accused of attempting to avenge her brother Simeon’s death by waging a campaign of malicious sorcery directed at the Persian queen.\textsuperscript{16} Sozomen wrote

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\textsuperscript{15} Gushtazad’s name, according to Simeon’s acts, means “Noble One of the Kingdom.” This definition accords with that of F. Justi, Iranisches Namenbuch (Marburg, 1895), 340, who indicates that Wahištāzdāh means “der beste Edle.” There is a play on Gushtazad’s name in History 65, when, via his martyrdom, Gushtazad is transformed from a noble one of the Persian kingdom to a noble one of the kingdom of God. A diminutive of the name, Azad, appears in several other martyr acts, and it seems to refer to the same person—a prominent eunuch of Shapur’s court. For an explanation and analysis see P. Peeters, “S. Eleutherios-Gushtazad,” AB 29 (1910): 151-156.

\textsuperscript{16} AMS II, 254-260, and Sozomen’s account in HE II.12. See also the English translation of Tarbo’s acts in S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 73-76. In addition to being mentioned in the Martyrdom of Tarbo, Simeon is also mentioned in the acts of Pusai, Azad, Shahdost, Barba’shin, the “Forty Martyrs,”
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extensively about Simeon and about Shapur’s persecution, and the memory and importance of Simeon’s death extends well beyond the end of the Sasanian Empire, as we know from (among other sources) a Christian chronicle written in Arabic in eleventh-century Persia.17

The two Syriac texts that narrate the circumstances surrounding Simeon’s death, the Martyrdom and the History, differ quite substantially from one another in their details, notwithstanding the similarities of their main themes and the general outline of their narratives.18 According to the texts, Simeon was killed along with several dozen other Christians. The History, more so than the Martyrdom, details many of the names of those who were killed with Simeon, including the bishops of several prominent Persian cities and episcopal sees: Bet Lapāṭ, Hormizd-Ardashir, Prat-Maishan, and Karka d-Maishan.19 In addition to Simeon and the other bishops, nearly one hundred priests,20 deacons, and members of the qyāmā (or “covenant”),21 the convert Gushtazad, who was...
both a trusted advisor to Shapur and the head of the eunuchs who served the Persian court; a Christian named Pusai, whom Shapur had recently appointed qarubged, “head of the craftsmen”; and Pusai’s daughter, Martha, who is identified in the texts as a bart ayāmā, or “daughter of the covenant.”

Topography

The texts, especially the History, refer to a number of cities in the Persian Empire. Two cities and two regions should be singled out for special note. The texts agree that Simeon was the bishop of Ctesiphon on the left bank of the Tigris River, about thirty-five kilometers south of modern-day Baghdad and near the confluence of the Tigris and Diyala Rivers in the province of Bet Aramaye. Simeon was arrested in Ctesiphon by Shapur’s authorities and taken to the king’s summer palace in the city of Karka d-Ledan in the province of Bet Huzaye, now the southwesternmost province of Iran known as “Khuzestan.” The city of Karka d-Ledan was in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, near the Dez River, just south of the modern city of Shush (ancient Susa), and approximately 200 km north-northeast of Baṣra, Iraq.

The Date of Simeon’s Death

According to the Martyrdom, Simeon’s arrest, trial, and execution took place in the 31st year of Shapur the Great, and Simeon was killed on Good Friday of that year. In


Both Pusai and Martha are memorialized independently in their own martyr acts. For Pusai (also known as Posi or Pusiq), see AMS II, 208-232; Martha follows her father at AMS II, 233-241, and both are mentioned by Sozomen in his summary of their deaths in HE II.11. Martha’s acts also exist in an English translation. See S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 67-73.
fact, Simeon is said to have died not just on Good Friday, but on 14 Nisan, the date of the Jewish Passover—a connection that is emphasized in the texts. This corresponds (as Martyrdom 7 details) with the 117th Sasanian regnal year: “In the 117th year of the reign of the Persians, which is the 31st year of Shapur, King of Kings, this oppression came upon our people.” Similarly, History 4 relates: “In the 655th year of the kingdom of Alexander—which is the 296th year after the crucifixion of our Lord, the 117th year of the kingdom of the Persians, and the 31st year of King Shapur, son of Hormizd …”

As Shapur’s reign began in 309 CE, the date of Simeon’s death is generally reckoned as 340 CE. But this is not without controversy: Simeon’s death has been dated anywhere from 339 to 344 CE. Indeed, several of the studies that deal exclusively with Simeon acts have very little to say about the text itself and are almost entirely concerned with debating the precise day and date that Simeon was killed.23

Perplexingly, there are disagreements even among the agreements. Sacha Stern, for example, concurs with Richard Burgess that 344 CE is probably the correct date of Simeon’s death, but he critiques Burgess unstintingly because he disagrees with Burgess’ reasoning for why 344 is the correct date. Stern argues that none of the Acts of the Persian Martyrs specifies which calendar the text is using, and notes that Jewish, Alexandrian, and idiosyncratic local calendars were all possibilities. As Stern further explains, the propensity for martyrs’ deaths to fall on Fridays “appears suspicious, and certainly raises the question of historicity,” further warning that Simeon’s death on Good Friday

is possibly just “a martyrological topos reminiscent of the crucifixion dates.”\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, it should perhaps go without saying that the tendency of the Acts to narrate Friday as the death day of so many martyrs can hardly be reflective of historical actuality and must certainly be a martyrological topos.

**Manuscripts, Editions, and Non-English Translations**

The Martyrdom is preserved in four manuscripts: Vatican Syr. 160 (6\textsuperscript{th} c.),\textsuperscript{25} Vatican Syr. 161 (9\textsuperscript{th} c.), which preserves parts of both the Martyrdom and the History; British Library Add. 14,645 (AD 932); and British Library Add 14,655 (10\textsuperscript{th} c.).

There are two editions of the Syriac text other than that presented by Kmosko: S.E. Assemani, Acta Sanctorum et Martyrum (ASM) vol. I, 10-36 (Rome, 1748); and the first few sections (1–9 of Kmosko’s text) in P. Bedjan, AMS II, 123-130.\textsuperscript{26} An Armenian version also exists.\textsuperscript{27} Kmosko and Assemani (although not Bedjan) provide Latin translations, but there is no translation of the Martyrdom in any modern language. (There is, however, a French translation of the Martyrdom that was made not from the Syriac, but rather from Assemani’s Latin translation of the text.)\textsuperscript{28} A partial German translation of the History

\textsuperscript{24} Stern, “Calendars,” 455.

\textsuperscript{25} Assemani suggests that the part of Vat. Syr. 160 in which the Martyrdom is preserved is a later, tenth-century, addition. According to Lucas Van Rompay, while it is true that the manuscript is not entirely a sixth-century production, Assemani’s proposal of a tenth-century date for this section “seems too late.” See L. Van Rompay, “Shem’on bar Ṣabba’e,” in The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage, ed. S.P. Brock, A.M. Butts, G. Kiraz, and L. Van Rompay (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 326. As Van Rompay notes, the Monastery of the Syrians (Dayr al-Suryān) in Wadi Natrun, Egypt, “played an important role in the transmission of the texts, as mss. Vat. Syr. 160 and 161 (the latter containing portions of both texts) were kept there, and ms. Brit. Libr. Add 14,645 (which contains the ‘Martyrdom’) was written there in 932.”

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{BHO} 1117.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{BHO} 1118.

\textsuperscript{28} F. Lagrange, Les Actes des Martyrs d’Orient (Paris, 1852).
exists,\textsuperscript{29} as does a German summary of the text.\textsuperscript{30}

Parts of the History are preserved in the later of the two Vatican Syriac manuscripts that contain the Martyrdom (the ninth-century Vatican Syr. 161), and there is a full version in a late twelfth-century manuscript from the British Library, Add. 12,174 (AD 1197). Assemani does not reproduce any part of the History, but, following the first nine sections of the Martyrdom, Bedjan provides the full text of the History in AMS II, 131-207.\textsuperscript{31} Sozomen (HE II.9) preserves a summary account of Simeon’s martyrdom in Greek that Gernot Wiessner argues partly reflects the Martyrdom and partly reflects what would become the History—in other words, Sozomen knew an “ABx” source. In fact, the History was unlikely to have been circulating until after Sozomen wrote his Ecclesiastical History (ca. 440 CE), and I find no compelling reason to believe that Sozomen knew anything other than the Martyrdom.

Of additional note: several hymns attributed to Simeon by the East Syrian breviary are appended to Kmosko’s edition of the Martyrdom and the History. According to the Synaxarium of Constantinople, Simeon’s death is commemorated on April 17.\textsuperscript{32}

Note on the Translations

The Simeon texts are often referred to in scholarly studies by citing the Syriac column and line numbers from Kmosko’s Patrologia Syriaca edition. I do not retain this numbering system. Kmosko inserted section numbers into both the Martyrdom (48

\textsuperscript{29} O. Braun, Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer (Kempten/Munich, 1915), 5-57.

\textsuperscript{30} G. Hoffmann, Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 7:3 (Leipzig, 1880).

\textsuperscript{31} BHO 1119.

\textsuperscript{32} Kmosko, 1048-55; H. Delehaye, Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanæ (Brussels, 1902).
sections) and the History (99 sections), and, as I provide the entire text, and not just certain portions, my translations follow Kmosko’s section-by-section numbering system.

While I have consulted Kmosko’s apparatus criticus, this translation does not deviate from the main text Kmosko prepared, or opt for any alternate readings that he provides. For the most part, the variants that Kmosko notes have little (if any) bearing on the content of the text. Only occasionally are there substantive differences between Kmosko’s text and the variants in his notes. I do not translate these variants here, but I do plan to translate and note any relevant variants for the published edition of this translation.

On rare occasions, there seem to be errors of transcription in Kmosko’s Syriac text; equally rarely are questionable interpretations of the Syriac revealed by Kmosko’s Latin translation. As I am not working with his Latin translation, but rather using his Syriac text to provide a fresh English translation, I typically do not note where I diverge from his Latin. Very often, however, one does find errors with biblical citations—Kmosko either neglects to cite, or mis-cites, quite a number of biblical passages. I do not note where I correct his biblical citations or add to those citations he missed; I have probably still missed many myself.

The Syriac of both texts, but especially that of the History, is often quite difficult—this is perhaps one reason why there is no previous English translation. In the more “rhetorical” sections of the text, particularly Simeon’s intricate speeches in the History, I break up the longest sentences into several shorter ones. The author frequently introduces so many dependent and subordinate clauses when constructing his sentences that a literal rendering into English would result in nearly impenetrable prose. Some restructuring of the component parts of a sentence allows for intelligible (but long) sentences in English translation. Where, for ease of English comprehension, I add or repeat words that are not in the Syriac, such additions are bounded by parentheses.
Finally, the odd capitalization scheme: the words “god,” “king,” and “lord,” for example, are capitalized only when they are part of a formal title, such as “King Shapur” or “Lord Jesus,” or when they are used in lieu of a proper name in direct address. When King Shapur is speaking to Simeon, for example, and refers to “Sun, God of the East,” I capitalize the formal title of that god. But when Simeon responds to the king and asks, “How is the sun a god?” I do not use any capitalization. In this translation, I have taken the liberty of assuming that Shapur’s references to the sun are intended to be formal—just as if he were referring to the sun by its name, as one might when calling it “Apollo.” On the other hand, I have assumed (rather reasonably from the context of the dialogue, I think) that Simeon refers to the inanimate object, “the sun,” not the formally named god, “Sun.” I think this simple change in the capitalization scheme makes the debates between Simeon and Shapur more lively and, perhaps, easier to understand and follow. Incidentally, the same scheme holds for references to the Christian god. When the god of the Christians is named or referred to by a Christian speaker, then “God” is capitalized. But when Shapur or the Magi refer to “your god”—as one among a class of thing—then “god” is not capitalized.
The Martyrdom of Blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē

Précis

1-9 Extended rhetorical parallel between Simeon and Judah Maccabeus
10-25 Discussion between Simeon and Shapur about taxes; Simeon insists that Christians prefer death to worshipping the sun
26-34 Trial and death of the king’s eunuch, Gushtazad, an apostate who returned to Christianity and was martyred
35-48 Simeon called before the king; he refuses to worship the sun; Simeon and 99 clerics are martyred along with a layman and his daughter

(1) Now then, let us clearly make known the origin of our people’s oppression, and demonstrate the punishments we have suffered from their start.¹ For the hard times that came upon us are similar to the difficult and burdensome times that came upon the Maccabees, who likewise found themselves in a era to which the prophets had pointed in anger. In his speech, Balaam said, “Woe! Who will live in the days when God prepares these things? Because, lo, legions go out from the land of Kittim and destroy the land.” And these are the Greeks who attacked them; Ezekiel prophesied about Gog

¹ What I have translated as “the punishments we have suffered” reads more literally as “the disciplining of our passions.” The latter phrase is, however, clumsy in English and the clear intent of the author, given the context, has to do with the things the Christians of Persia suffered under the persecution. Additionally, it is important to note that the author repeats himself frequently throughout the text, often saying in only slightly different words what has just been said. It is reasonable, then, to read this first sentence as a repetition as well, thus seeing the two halves of the sentence as parallels.

² Cf. Num 24:23-24, loosely approximated in the Peshitta. “Them” in this sentence evidently refers to the Maccabees, and the “Greeks” who are “from the land of Kittim” refers to Alexander the Great and his army, cf. 1 Macc 1:1-7. For another reference to Kittim see Dan 11:30. The author is clearly trying to create a parallel between “persecutors” mentioned in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the Greeks (Seleucids) who persecuted the Maccabees. In so doing, the author interprets Balaam, Ezekiel, and Daniel as prophesying the oppression of the Maccabees, an event that he thereby reads as parallel to his own people’s ongoing persecution under the Sasanians.
and Magog. And these are the same! Daniel prophesied about the small horn that grew and fell off before the other three and spoke words against the Most High. And this is Antiochus the Iniquitous! In the 143rd year of the kingdom of the Greeks, which is his own sixth year, Antiochus went up to Jerusalem and took the golden sanctuary and all their ritual vessels. He defiled the temple and built pagan altars on it. He brought in foreigners and expelled the local citizens. He oppressed the priests and defiled their holiness. He shed innocent blood in the land of their inheritance and gave the flesh of the holy ones over to the beasts of the land and the birds of the heavens. Indeed, at his command many turned from the truth of their law and offered sacrifice; a few, however, confessed the faith of their God and were killed. Lo, indeed, one thousand men died in a single day for not breaking the Sabbath while they said to those who strangled them, “We die in the innocence of our hearts. Today heaven and earth testify against you that without justice and without offense you destroy us.” Even women who circumcised

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3 Cf. Ezek 38
4 Dan 7:20
5 Dan 7:25
6 1 Macc 1:21
7 1 Macc 1:23
8 1 Macc 1:50
9 1 Macc 1:40
10 1 Macc 1:39
11 Ps 79
12 1 Macc 2:35
13 1 Macc 2:37-38
their sons were killed, and the infants who clung to their necks were strangled. Others were slain because they did not defile themselves with impure food and did not break the holy vow. There was great mourning in Israel: the leaders and the elderly lamented, the youths and virgins fell weak with sickness, and the beauty of the women was shriveled up. Every bride who sat on a bridal bed wailed, and the entire house of Jacob was put to shame.

(2) Matthias sighed and said, “Woe unto us! What has happened such that we have to see evil fall upon our people, the Holy City ruined and its temple turned over to foreigners? Look! Our glory and harmony have been destroyed! What have our lives come to?”\(^\text{14}\) But he took heart and said, “Understand that in every generation all who confide in God will not fear. Do not now fear the words of a lawless man, because his glory will turn to dust and the worm. Today he is exalted, but tomorrow he will no longer be found, for he will return to his dust and all his scheming will come to ruin.”\(^\text{15}\)

(3) When Matthias saw one of his people sacrificing and denying his God, he took courage and was filled with zeal. His kidneys quaked and he brought out his anger as a judge.\(^\text{16}\) He sacrificed the man because he had sacrificed in defilement; he shed his blood because he had fallen into idolatry. He slaughtered him on the lifeless altar and polluted it with him because he had defiled the holy law. Matthias killed even the one who was forcing them to sacrifice. (Matthias) is a pure priest who brought an impure offering in order to appease the anger and quell the furor of his people.

(4) In the time when oppression was all encompassing, strife followed upon

\(^{14}\) 1 Macc 2:7

\(^{15}\) 1 Macc 2:61-63

\(^{16}\) Cf. 1 Macc 2:24. The text has “dyna” for “judge,” and this reading is paralleled in the Peshitta; the Greek, incidentally, reads “krima.” Most English translations of this passage leave out the word “judge.” Presumably, the understanding here is that Matthias is acting in judgment of the man because he has violated the law by sacrificing.
strife, adversity was unceasing, and groans were many. Joy had fled. Cheerfulness was abolished, peace was expelled, and tranquility was driven off. There was no help. Relief was nowhere near, pride was brought down, ostentation was humbled, delight was crumpled, humility was increased, riches were poured out, the kingdom was brought to an end, death arrived, and Sheol hastened to gape open her mouth to devour. She flung out her tongue to gobble up and bring down the glorious and the honorable in her destruction. For her food she ate the impious and the sinful. She concealed the bodies of the just in her stomach and chewed up the flesh of the impious with her teeth. In her intestines she hid and corrupted the flesh of the perverse and cast them down into her dark depths. She tortured those who had tortured their friends and she beat those who had beaten their brothers. She encased them in her gloomy dungeon and plunged them into deep abysses because they had plunged Jacob into impiety and had cast Israel into defilement.

(5) When grace was put away and justice was unsheathed, then anger expanded, furor was increased, the sword was sated, and the blade was fulfilled. Sins were revealed, debts were displayed, contracts were opened up, and books were read. Then came the rain of mercy: the flood of forgiveness became strong, it washed and purified their books, it cleansed and whitened their spots, so that the vengeance of his judgment would not be prolonged and their revenge would not be increased in his retribution. Then all at once the hot sun shone and extended its rising rays. It melted the ice of paganism, dammed the trickling streams of infidelity, dried up the swamp of idolatry, and desiccated the sogginess of defilement. The sun cleansed the rotting stench and tempered the putrid miasma. It purified the earth and sanctified it; it washed the land and redeemed it. It spread out its cloak of peace and warmed the earth. It extended its

17 That is, the revenge they would suffer.
garment of tranquility and made the land pure. The sun roared in the face of evil beasts and they were dispersed. The lion’s whelp, Judah, increased the glory of his people and exalted the horn of his church: O priest and valiant warrior who wears the noble ephod for atonement as a holy one,\(^1\) who is bound with the breastplate of power to slay as a mighty one, and who is girded in the garments of war as a hero! In his vigor he became like a lion. He knelt upon the ruin of the people; he reclined and devoured the flesh of the powerful. His blade became drunk with the blood of the slaughtered and he sated his sword with the necks of enemies. In his anger, he plucked out the impious; in his furor he dispelled the haughty by means of his fearsomeness. The lofty ones cowered down in fear of him. He gave freedom through his hand and made many kings bitter. He killed one thousand in the mountains and destroyed ten thousand on the plain. Jacob was gladdened by his works, Isaac exalted in his deeds, and by his salvation the land was calmed and came to rest after the oppression. His fame went out unto the ends of the earth. Even he was killed heroically for his God and for the struggle of his people. His memory is a blessing unto the ages.

\(6\) In the very same way, suffering came upon our people: they were oppressed by taxes. The tax collectors began to harass the priests, the haughty raised themselves up over the humble, and the impure subjugated the holy. The deceitful and the iniquitous overcame the true and the pure. The evil tax collectors strove to suppress the freedom of a free church with a heavy yoke. In their impudence they yearned to gradually stifle the worship of God. In their power and trickery they sought to cause the sincere to stumble and be led astray from the path of truth.

\(7\) In the 117th year of the reign of the Persians, which is the 31st year of Shapur, \(^{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) The ephod is mentioned extensively in the Hebrew Bible as a priestly garment of some sort. David, for example, is said to gird himself with an ephod when in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:14).
King of Kings, this oppression came upon our people. In this very time, Simeon, who is called “Bar Ṣabbāʾē,” was the bishop of Seleucia and Cteisphon, the Cities. He is rightly called by this name because his parents dyed silk with foreign blood as clothing for the impious kingdom. But Simeon dyed his garments with his own blood as a garment for the holy kingdom. He poured out his will unto death for his God and his people. When he saw these things that were done in injustice against the church of God, he gave himself over to be killed, just as Judah Maccabeus did in the time of the oppression of his people.

(8) O two priests, Judah and Simeon! One saved his people in battle; the other saved his people in death. One was glorified while conquering; the other was glorified while being conquered. Judah exalted his people while killing; Simeon liberated his people while being killed. They became high priests and prelates clad with the ephod of the sanctuary: holily they served the altar, splendidly they honored the liturgy, righteously they cleansed it with water, boldly they displayed the blood of grapes, eagerly they encouraged their people, mightily they bore arms, assuredly they called out to death, valiantly they summoned killing, heroically they sought destruction, gloriously they rushed toward the sword, nobly they were baptized in blood, joyfully they gave the cup to drink, blessedly they distributed gifts, befittingly they gave crowns, scrupulously

19 Shapur II reigned from 309-379 CE, so his 31st year would correspond to either 339 or 340 CE. The beginning of the reign Ardashir I, the first ruler of the Sasanian dynasty is typically reckoned as 226, so the 117th year of the Persians would be 342 or 343. Simeon’s death, however, has been reckoned as anywhere from 339 to 344.

20 “Bar Ṣabbāʾē” translates literally to “Son of Dyers.” The mention of “blood” here, though, is unclear. It is not evident whether “foreign blood” is a way of referring to foreigners (in which case the reading might be “for foreign blood,” but that is not what the text says), or whether it might mean something else. For example, the purple blood of the murex was traditionally used for dying in late antiquity. Phoenicia in the eastern Mediterranean was, of course, most renowned as a site for the harvesting of this dye, but it was not the sole producer of murex dye. Alexander the Great is said to have mentioned the abundance of purple robes in Persia, so perhaps the easiest explanation is that Simeon’s parents were dyers of royal, purple garments. This is contrasted in the next sentence with the blood by which Simeon dies garments—his own blood for a holy garment of martyrdom.
they upheld the commandment of their Lord, and purely they kept the law of their God.

For one fulfilled the law uprightly in that he killed a soul for a soul\textsuperscript{21} and, by being killed, thereby saved. The other acted in obedience to [the command] “if anyone hits you on the cheek”\textsuperscript{22} in that he stretched out his neck to the sword. One, while avenging, was avenged; the other, while being humble, was humbled. One absolved Sheol’s dead through his priesthood; the other resurrected those who died in sin through his priesthood. By killing, one forayed into an open battle; the other, by being killed, entered into a hidden battle. O killing of the holy ones! How great are you! Especially because in you our savior won an open victory over hidden sin! Judah, after he was exalted in victory, in you did he descend in order to stand and be absolved as a high priest through his own blood. And Simeon, too, after he had fallen in triumph, in you did he stand so that he might kneel and be purified as a high priest through his own blood. Judah was strengthened by El, the God of the Spirits, and withdrew his people’s taxes from the hands of the King of Greece and Syria.\textsuperscript{23} Simeon was victorious in Jesus, the Son of God, and withdrew his people’s taxes from the oppression of the King of Persia and Syria.\textsuperscript{24}

(9) These are true shepherds and wise leaders who gave themselves for their flocks so that they would not perish! They themselves perished in order that their flocks would be found and saved from loss by their victory. They were trampled while sparing their flocks from having to eat the grass trodden down by the heels of foreigners. They were thrashed about as a result of their love for their lambs so that they would not have

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Ex 21:23; Lev 27:18; Deut 19:21

\textsuperscript{22} Mt 5:39

\textsuperscript{23} Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

\textsuperscript{24} Shapur II.
to drink seething water muddied by the feet of infidels.

(10) Now the glorious bishop Simeon was strengthened in his Lord and took courage in his God and sent word to the king and thereby informed him: “Christ liberated his church through his death and set free his people by his blood. Through his passion, he relieved those who carry heavy burdens; by his cross he lightened the yoke of subjugated people.\textsuperscript{25} He made a promise to us that in the age to come his lordship would abide for eternity. Jesus is king of kings and we will not put the yoke of your oppression upon our shoulders. Far be it from us now liberated people to work once more in the service of a man! Our Lord is lord over your lordship; therefore, we will not take upon our head the lordship of our fellow man. Our God is the creator of your gods, and we do not worship his creatures, such as you. He commanded us: \textit{do not acquire gold or silver for your purses}.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, we have no gold to give you, nor money to bring to you for taxes. His Apostle warned us, \textit{you were ransomed with a heavy price, so do not become servants of men.}”\textsuperscript{27}

(11) When this word was delivered to the king, he was filled with great anger and he churned in a tremendous rage and sent word to the blessed one as follows: “Why, in your audacity, do you imperil your own life along with the lives of your followers,\textsuperscript{28} and summon to Sheol your death along with theirs? Indeed, why, in your pride and your arrogance, do you wish to make your people rebellious against me? So,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Cf. Mt 11:28-29
\item \textsuperscript{26} Mt. 10:9
\item \textsuperscript{27} 1 Cor 7:23
\item \textsuperscript{28} Lit., the “sons of your teaching” or the “sons of your doctrine.” The word “\textit{bnay}” (“sons”) carries a strong collective sense, and might be thought of more clearly in English as simply something like “those who,” as in “those who adhere to your teaching.” This is the first of many ways of saying something akin to what might be anachronistically rendered as “co-religionists.”
\end{itemize}
then! I will deal with you and finish you off from the earth and remove you from the world of men!"

(12) Then Simeon, mighty in power, sent a response and said: “Jesus died on behalf of the whole earth and freed it, and I will die for these few people whom I shepherd. For the sake of your taxes, I will not willingly give over my flock to you. What is life worth to me if it is lived in iniquity and persists in sin, such that those who were liberated by my Lord are oppressed while I go free? Far be it from me to spare my life by means of the lives of those saved by the blood of God, and enliven my soul by means of the souls of those who have received compassion through the mercy of Christ our savior. Nor will I make my flesh joyful by means of the flesh of those who were redeemed by the killing of Jesus! Certainly, I will neither hold back my feet\textsuperscript{29} from walking the way of a death such as his, nor will I restrain myself from the sacrifice through which the true high priest was sacrificed. Rather, I give my blood to you for my flock and I bend down my neck for them under your sword. My own death is very little compared to the great death of the Lord of my flock who died for their sake. And this thing you said? Namely, ‘I am going to kill your companions.’ This is on you and not me; it will be put on your head, and my people and I are absolved of it. They indeed, they stand for themselves, and when you interrogate them you will know it.” This cruel and destructive lion, having tasted the precious blood of men, summoned a great anger in his heart and put it on as armor about his limbs. He sharpened his molars, gnashed his teeth, and became enraged to kill. He became wrathful to destroy, thirsty to lick innocent blood, and hungry to devour the flesh of the holy ones. He roared with his mighty and terrible voice and made the earth tremble with his fiery word. As for the

\textsuperscript{29} Lit., “I will not cherish my feet.”
priests and Levites, he commanded that they be cut asunder at once by the sword. Churches were demolished, altars were polluted, the liturgy was despoiled and laid bare. And (Shapur) said, “As for Simeon, the head of the sorcerers, bring him to me, for he has rejected my kingdom and chosen that of Caesar by worshipping his god but mocking mine.”

(13) Now our enemies, the Jews: as is their wont, they accused Simeon and us. Indeed, they are accustomed to turning toward evil rather than toward good in times such as these, just as they clamored against Pilate at the killing of Christ. For they were impudent and they said to Shapur, “If you, King, were to send splendid royal letters and glorious offerings and delicious, majestic gifts, they would not be well received or much revered in the eyes of Caesar. But if Simeon were to send to him a curt and trivial letter, he would rise and bow and receive it with both his hands and diligently attend to his requests.” How similar the false witnesses against Simeon are to the iniquitous witnesses against his Lord! They killed our Lord and were repudiated, being dispersed throughout the earth as strangers and pernicious people. They accused Simeon and were mocked. An injury fell upon their skulls in the desolation of many thousands, an oppression that suddenly came upon them because they were gathered together in order

30 It perhaps sounds odd that ‘Levites’ would be included with the Christian priests of Persia, but this can be explained in that the author is furthering the parallel with the Maccabees, who were led by Levitical priests, and condemned by Antiochus. Even so, the use of ‘Levites’ here in what seems to be a reference to some part of the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy is striking.

31 Or, “ministry” or “cult.”

32 Calling Simeon the “head of the sorcerers” (ḥarrāšē) is consistent with the accusations throughout many of the Persian Martyr Acts that Christians are “sorcerers.”

33 “Caesar” is used throughout this text as a specific name—never is it just “the caesars” or “the kings of Rome,” but always the singular “Caesar”—but which caesar is never specified.
to go to the rebuilding of Jerusalem at the word of a person who led them astray.\(^{34}\)

(14) Then Simeon, the bishop, was bound in chains on the way out of Seleucia in order to be brought to Bet Huzaye along with two old priests from among his apostles, one of whom was called ‘Bedhaikla and the other Hanina . When Simeon was taken out into his city, his guards headed toward the neighborhood of the church—which had been built by Simeon in great honor—but he asked that they not lead him out by that gate because a few days earlier the church had been destroyed by the Magi in the company of the Jews. “Do not,” he said, “let me see it in its destruction. Do not let my heart be broken and troubled and my mind be worried and beaten, for I will soon have to endure even harder things than this.”

(15) When he was hurriedly deported all that way in just a few days and entered the city called Karka d-Ledan,\(^{35}\) the chief Magus told the king, “Lo! He is arriving, the head of the sorcerers!” The king commanded that they bring Simeon before him, and when he came in he did not bow. The king was greatly angered again by this and said to him, “Well! So all the things I have heard about you turn out to be true! Why, in the past, did you bow down but do not do so now?” Simeon responded to him, “Previously, I did bow down because I was not arriving in chains, nor was I being summoned to deny my true God as I am today!” The Magi then said, “This man pays no taxes and clearly wants to rebel against your kingdom; therefore, he does not deserve to live!”

(16) Simeon said to them, “O you wicked ones! Is it not enough that you yourselves went astray, and caused even this kingdom to turn from God? Would you

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\(^{34}\) The reference here is to the attempt at rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem during the time of Julian (361-363 CE). Shapur supposedly put a violent stop to the departure of any Persian Jews, as § 15 of the History illustrates.

\(^{35}\) To get to Karka d-Ledan from Ctesiphon, one would likely sail down the Tigris for about 400 kilometers and then make an overland journey to the east of approximately 150 kilometers.
now also require us to participate in your evil impiety?"

(17) Then the king said, “For now, put aside the issue of the taxes. But in this I advise you, Simeon: worship the god Sun with me today and you and all your people will live.” The blessed one answered and said, “I did not worship you, one who is greater than the sun and in whom there is at least soul and intellect. So why would I worship the sun in which there is no mind even to distinguish and give respect to you, who worships it, from me, who reviles it? And as for what you said: ‘on account of you, your people will live’? Well, my lord and the lord of my people is Christ who was crucified. I am his little servant, and I am going to die on my own account and for him and for his people. I will not back down, but I will persist in strength. I will not stand in shame, but I will sit in honor. I will not be enticed with words as a child, but instead I will fulfill my task, as it is proper for an old man to do. And I will not take advice from all of you because my judgment is greater than yours.”

(18) The king said, “Had you confessed the living god, then you might have an excuse. Instead, you believe in a crucified god, as you have said. Now then, obey me and worship Sun, here at whose rising all creation lives, and I will give you the most resplendent gifts, numerous presents, and greatness and power in all my kingdom.”

(19) Simeon said, “When Jesus, the lord of the sun and the maker of men, suffered at the hands of the iniquitous, this very sun, which is his creation, suffered and mourned as a servant for his Lord. After three days he arose and ascended to heaven in glory. Concerning those ‘resplendent gifts and presents,’ with which you allure me, and concerning ‘the power and greatness’ that you promised me? Lo, honor and greatness that surpass yours—and gifts and presents of the sort that tales cannot be told—are prepared and stored away for me on the path that I will take.”

(20) The king said: “This is not wisdom that you embolden your will such that many will be destroyed for your sake! Spare yourself from being killed along with the
thousands that I am going to destroy, and restrain me from taking your blood and the
blood of the masses who goad me to destroy them!”

(21) Simeon said, “If you shed innocent blood, as you have said, then you will
know it when you have to justify and explain it on the day you are interrogated about all
you have done and all you will still yet do. For my part, I know this: in their death, they
will rule; in their death, you will die. For all that, I will not give my life in Christ over to
you for their death. Yet you do have power over my life in this world, so, in your
perverse desire, take this life quickly by any manner of death you wish.”

(22) The king said, “If, by your pride that has now been shown before all, you
will not pity yourself, then I will terrify your disciples with your horrific death and then
they will do my will and go free.”

(23) Simeon said, “It will not happen that they will live with you and die away
from God. Go ahead with their trial by the furnace of your sword and see that their good
will is firmer than your evil will because each one of them holds the truth in himself and
in it they are steadfast and will not be shaken. Know and see, King, that we will not
exchange our great and abiding name—which is Jesus, our savior—for your illustrious
but fleeting crown.”

(24) The king said, “Tomorrow, I will swiftly destroy your desirable beauty with
the blade and splatter your adorned body with your blood unless you pay homage to
me before my nobles and revere me and Sun, God of the East.”

(25) Simeon said, “How is it that the sun is a god? For you equate its worship
with yours—you who are a man—when, if you really wanted to understand, you are
greater than it. As for what you said, ‘I will destroy your beauty,’ there is one who will
resurrect and restore it, and he will give glory to its unworthy splendor because he
created it and shaped it from nothing.”

(26) Then the king commanded that Simeon be bound until dawn, and said (to
himself): Perhaps he will be convinced and obey us? And while they were dragging him out in chains through the king’s gate\textsuperscript{36} there sat an old believer, the king’s tutor and mentor, who held the rank of arzabed.\textsuperscript{37} He was honored in the eyes of the whole kingdom, and he was called Gushtazad, which means “Noble One of the Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{38} He had once been a Christian, and during this very persecution he had worshipped the sun under compulsion. When he saw Simeon, he rose up in front of him and bowed down to him. Yet the blessed one did not look at him, and instead turned his face away in indignation. At that moment, Gushtazad repented. Groaning and weeping he said, “If Simeon, who used to be my dear friend, has all this anger toward me, what will God, whom I denied, now do to me?” Then he hastily went to his house, stripped off his beautiful vestments, put on black clothes of mourning, and returned again and sat in his place. This strange sight bewildered all who passed by, and this story did not remain hidden from the king for long. He sent word to Gushtazad and said, “What is this madness? For I am alive and well and my crown sits on my head, yet you sit in mourning and are dressed in black! Has one of your sons died? Or was your wife’s corpse cast before you? Are you deprived of, and are thus mourning over, any of them?” Gushtazad sent back word and said, “I deserve to die. Give the order and have them kill me.”

\textbf{(27)} Then the king, in amazement, commanded Gushtazad to come before him so that he might learn from his own mouth what was the reason for this. When he came in, the king said to him, “Is there a demon in you such that you brought this bad omen

\textsuperscript{36} This phrase, the “king’s gate” or “the gate of the king” is used only once in the \textit{Martyrdom}, but occurs frequently in the \textit{History}. It seems to be a metonym for the royal palace.

\textsuperscript{37} Or “argbed.” The precise nature of this title is unclear, but its use in other texts suggests that it was a very high-ranking position in the Persian court.

\textsuperscript{38} In § 65 of the \textit{History}, the meaning of “Gushtazad” as a “Noble One of the Kingdom” gets transformed into a Christian meaning indicating a “Noble One of the Kingdom—of God.”
upon my kingdom?”

Gushtazad said, “There is no demon in me. Rather, I act with the wisdom and the prudence of an old man.” The king said, “Then why are you clothed in black as a madman and say to me, ‘I deserve to die’?”

(28) Gushtazad said, “The reason that I am doing this is because I have been sincere neither toward God nor toward you. Indeed, I have lied to God by renouncing his truth and doing your will, and I have lied to you and worshipped the sun outwardly but not in heart.” Hearing these words, the king was filled with anger and said, “Is this all that you mourn, you stupid old man? I will really give you mourning and lamenting if you persist in this impious state of mind!”

(29) Gushtazad said, “Truly, I have sworn by God who possesses heaven and earth that as much as I have done your will (in the past), I cannot do it any longer. I am a Christian, and I will no longer trade the true God for you, a false man!”

(30) The king said, “I have respect for your old age and for your career with my father and with me. This is why I am being patient in convincing you not to persist in the opinions of these sorcerers and, as a result, to lose your life as they will.”

(31) Gushtazad said, “Believe, King, and be sure that neither you nor the kings and princes who sit before you now will once more incline my true thoughts to worshipping creatures and abandoning their creator.” The king said, “Do I worship creatures, you impious evil one?” Gushtazad said, “If only you adored animate and living creatures! But you adore inanimate creatures in which there is no intellect (of the sort) that has been given for the use of men.”

(32) Then the king, in a great furor, commanded that his head be cut off with a

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39 Being dressed in black is understood here as an augury that someone would die, and Shapur seems to believe it might be him.
sword. And after the princes made him run to the place of execution, 40 he said to them, “I have word to send to the king, allow me just one moment!” So, they held themselves back and stepped away, for they hoped a false hope about him. 41 Gushtazad summoned a believer 42 and through him reported to the king, saying, “I have been true and sincere to all your hidden secrets, and I have been sincere both to you and to your father—as you yourself have said. Now grant me this one wish that I request of you: let a herald go up 43 and proclaim, ‘Gushtazad is being killed not because he divulged the royal secrets, nor because he was found at fault in anything else, but rather he dies because he is a Christian and did not deny God.’” For the illustrious man thought to himself: Now the rumor, ‘Gushtazad has apostasized,’ has already gone out about me, and I know that many have lapsed because of me. If I am killed now, they will not know why I am killed, but I want them to know and to see and to be comforted. So now I will leave this uplifting thought behind so that all the Christians may hear that I am being killed for Christ and they may find comfort in this. This is the good thought that was sent out from a wise old man for the benefit of the community! This is the summons trumpeted by an experienced man, shining for the benefit of the church, so that the heroes of justice would be awakened and armed for battle!

(33) Then the king ordered that they go up and announce as Gushtazad had instructed, thinking that the more who heard about this, the more fearful they would be of being killed and would desert the opinion that they held. 44 The stupid (Shapur) did

40 Lit., “the place prepared for the snare of killing.”
41 Namely, that he would repudiate his Christianity and spare his own life.
42 “A believer” is a common way of referring to “a Christian” in the Persian Martyr Acts.
43 Presumably “up” onto the walls or ramparts of the city, as is specified in § 58 of the History.
not know that he made saltbush for the sheep, making them eager to run together towards their death bleating and baaing.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, this old man was killed with a good name for Jesus on the 13th of Nisan on the fifth day of the week (Thursday), in the great week of the unleavened bread.\textsuperscript{46}

(34) O Simeon, who like Simeon the Fisherman caught the divine catch for life! Simeon was informed in prison about (Gushtazad’s death). He was glad and exalted, he was astounded and marveled, and said, “Great is your love, Christ! Manifold is your mercy, our God! Glorious is your power, Jesus! And excellent is your authority, our Savior! He enlivens the dead and raises those who fall. He converts sinners and gives hope to the hopeless. For the one who was last according to my reckoning became first according to my wish; the one who was an outsider to my service became an insider to my work. The one who was far away from my truth became a companion of my faith, and the one who had gone out into the dark became a guest at the feast. The one whose will cast him away from me, lo, his confession brought him back to me. While I was in front of him, he overtook me; and while I wanted to outdo him, he caught me. He breached the fearful wall of death and made me joyful, and the path of life was seen in him and made me glad. He has become the guide for my feet on the narrow path, and he

\textsuperscript{44} The “opinion” concerning Christianity, that is.

\textsuperscript{45} Saltbush, the text suggests, is a food that sheep enjoy, so the clear analogy here is that Simeon’s “flock” will come running as eagerly toward martyrdom as sheep to saltbush. Biblically, the referent here might be to Job 30:4 where the outcasts who roam the wastelands are said to gather saltbush for their food. Incidentally, recent agricultural research has shown that saltbush is very good for sheep, helping them to maintain levels of vitamin E in drought conditions. See K.L. Pearce, et al., “The effect of grazing saltbush with a barley supplement on the carcass and eating quality of sheepmeat,” \textit{Meat Science} 79.2 (2008): 344-354.

\textsuperscript{46} The day and date are auspicious: Friday, the 14\textsuperscript{th} of Nisan, the day Simeon is killed, is the date of the Jewish Passover and, according to the text, the same day and date on which Jesus was crucified.
has straightened my steps and set them along the way of tribulation. Why should I linger behind? And why should I wait? He left his pledge to me: ‘Arise!’ He left behind his face for me: ‘Come!’ He says to me in joy, ‘Simeon, no longer can you rebuke me, and no longer will my face become sad before yours. Enter joyfully with me into the house that you prepared for me and into the rest that you arranged for me. Just as we used to rejoice here in transitory things, let us rejoice there in the things that abide.’ Now, away from me, hindrance, that I may hear him! Away from me, delay, that I may reach him! Blessed is the hour at which they will come to rush me toward killing and run me toward death, especially since I will escape from the tribulations that encompass me and from the temptations that encircle me!”

(35) He rose in prayer and said this: “Give me, our Lord, this crown. For it is clear to you that I have desired it because I have loved you with my whole soul and my life. So let me see you and let me be glad. May you give me rest and no longer let me live in this world and see the misfortune of my people: your churches that are being destroyed; your altars that are being overturned; your holy qyāmā47 while it is being tortured in many places; the apostates who are being defiled; the weak-hearted while they are turning from truth; my once fat flock that has been found thin in its testing; my wrathful friends who are friends on their face but have become despisers and killers in their hearts; and those who were my beloved for a while, who time turned away in its trial, especially when crucifiers were behaving arrogantly and mocking our people. I will stand courageously in that for which I have been called, and I will carry out

47 The “qyāmā” has a long history in Syriac literature. The root of the word (q-w-m) means either “to stand” or “a covenant,” hence the understanding of the “qyāmā” as “covenanters,” or some sort of proto-monastic ascetic community. For an overview, see S.G. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in V. Wimbush and R. Valantasis, eds., Asceticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-245.

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mightily that to which I have been summoned. I will be an example for all your people in the East. I have eaten at the head and I will die at the head giving my blood in front of them. I take my life with them, they who have no care or anxiety, nor grief nor worry. There is not one of them who oppresses or is oppressed, nor is there in them one who defrauds or is defrauded, nor even one who deals harshly (with others) or is dealt with harshly (by others). For there is not the terror of kings or even the dread of princes. There is no one who summons me or makes me afraid. There is no one who makes me run or who frightens me. The stumbling blocks for my feet will be aligned in you, the way of all. The exhaustion of my limbs will be brought to rest in you, Christ, our exquisite anointment. The sadness of my heart will be blotted out in you, cup of our salvation. The tears of my eyes will cease in you, consolation of our gladness.”

(36) Then the two old men who were bound with him were speechless at his prayer. They were amazed that he stretched his hands to heaven and his face was transformed in joy as a rose in its season and as a blossom in full bloom.

(37) In the night of the dawn of the 14th day of the passion of our savior, sleep did not overcome him with its troubles nor did thoughts hinder him with their emptiness. Rather, this is what he asked and sought: “Jesus, make me worthy so that on this, your day, and in this, the hour of your passion, I also might receive this cup and drink from it.” I wish that generations after me might say, ‘On the day of his Lord, he was killed.’ I rejoice that parents might teach their sons, ‘Simeon was heard and, like his God, was sacrificed on the 14th, a Friday.’”

48 This reference to “the East” gets repeated several times in the History, a text that makes a more explicit relationship between the Christians of “the East” and the martyrs of “the West” (the Roman Empire) in whose example those in the East are following.

49 In other words, late at night before the dawn of Friday, the 14 of Nisan, the same day that Jesus was killed.

50 Cf. Mt 26:39; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42; Jn 18:1

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(38) Then, at the third hour of the day, a command for Simeon was issued and they brought him quickly to the king. When he came in before the king, again he did not bow. The king spoke and said to him, “In what manner of thought did you spend the night, rebel? Such that you remain with us in friendship, or such that I am to send you to Sheol in enmity?” The holy one said to him, “I spent the night dwelling on this beneficial thought: it is preferable to have you as an enemy than as a friend.”

(39) The king said, “Worship Sun just this once and you will not have to worship him again! I will deliver you from those who seek your life.” Simeon said, “This will not be heard in all the universe, nor will it be mentioned in the whole of creation, nor will my senseless enemies rejoice in it, nor will my iniquitous adversaries dance and say, ‘Simeon strayed from God and worshipped nothingness from fear of being killed!’”

(40) The king said, “Simeon, know that I was friends with you and because of that I was patient and counseled you, and yet you did not hear me. But now you must understand!” Simeon said, “All these things are irrelevant to me, King, but let me go quickly and send me off swiftly because it is the moment of my banquet and my table is prepared and my place is reserved.”

(41) While Simeon stood in their midst, beautiful in appearance and shining in countenance, the king said to the princes and the nobles who were seated before him: “I have seen foreign people and far off lands and, lo, our land of our people, and yet beauty and natural elegance such as this I have not seen! See how he does not have pity on himself on account of this error that he holds!” They all responded and said to him, “Our lord, King, do not behold the beauty of his body, but see (instead) the beauty of the many souls he corrupts and leads away from our teaching!”

(42) Then the sentence of the sword was brought upon him and the nobles took him forth to be killed. One hundred men of the city were bound with him, some of whom were provincial bishops, others of whom were priests, and yet others of whom
were deacons and bnay qyāmā, and these, too, he brought forth to be killed at that hour. The chief mobed, at the word of the king, came out and interrogated them: “If you worship the great god Sun, you will live and you will be spared from death.” They all responded in a loud voice and said, “Little is your death for our faith in God; trivial is your killing for our love of Christ; and short is your knife that cuts us off from the hope of the resurrection of our lives. We will not worship the sun, nor even listen to your advice. Do quickly what you have been commanded, (you) enemy who despises our people!”

(43) Then the command was issued that all the holy ones be killed in front of Simeon, the virtuous hero, so that he might see them in the fear of their death. For the king said (to himself), Perhaps he will be terrified and do my will. When they brought out this glorious band of martyrs and they began to be slaughtered, Simeon stood at their side and exhorted them and said this: “Be strengthened in God, brothers, and do not fear! For your resurrection will be buried with you, so that it will raise you up at the coming of his horn. Your resurrection will sleep in you so that it will raise you at the sounding of his trumpet. Our Lord was killed and he lives. Likewise, you, being killed, live with him. Recall the word that he spoke, ‘do not fear those who kill the body, for they are unable to kill the soul.’ And, ‘every one who loses his soul because of my name will find it in life everlasting.’ In this will the truth be known: ‘when someone

51 Or, “sons of the covenant.” See the note on qyāmā in § 35.

52 The mobed is a priestly or religious title, and it is mentioned often in the Persian Martyr Acts.

53 Cf. Mt 10:28; Lk 12:4

54 Cf. Mt 10:39
puts forward his soul on behalf of his friend."\textsuperscript{55} Now that you have put forward your soul as true ones, you will be rewarded as friends. Consider the Apostle who said, ‘remember Jesus Christ who rose up from among the dead. If we die with him, we also live with him.'\textsuperscript{56} If we persevere in our endurance, we also reign with him. If we, being alive, are delivered unto death for Jesus, likewise the life of Jesus will be revealed in this our body that dies. Now, as is apparent, death is at work in us and it lives in you,\textsuperscript{57} but know, beloved, that this our death lives in eternal life, but for the one who denies God the existing one, this life dies in eternal death and that one (who denies God) does not even exist. So even if we are now afflicted for a moment, we will yet increasingly inherit eternal glory and honor. If our outer self is destroyed, our inner self will be more and more made new. The one who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from death will raise us as well with him in the kingdom.\textsuperscript{58} For as long as we are in the world we are dead to our Lord, but now when we go out from it, we will be with our Lord in glory. Ours is love, and his is the reward. Ours is fellowship, and his is grace. Ours is toil, and his is recompense. Ours is suffering, and his is the resurrection. Ours is our blood, and his is the kingdom. While he gives rest and joy, support and sweetness, he says to us in a loud voice, ‘O good servants, enter in joy to your Lord, for you have earned beautifully with the talent. Take ten talents as your inheritance.’\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{(44)} After all these heroic men were felled by the blade of the sword and the right hand (of God) held crowns for them, one hundred in number, it stretched out to give

\textsuperscript{55} Cf. Jn 13:34; 15:13
\textsuperscript{56} Cf. 2 Tim 2:8, 11
\textsuperscript{57} Cf. 2 Cor 4:12
\textsuperscript{58} 2 Cor 4:14
\textsuperscript{59} Cf. Mt 25:23
(the crowns) in a threefold way to the three of those who were killed—Simeon and the two wise men with him, for the three of them were crowned last. While he was being stripped (naked) in order to be bound, the body of one of these old men trembled; his mind, however, did not. And a great man named Pusiq was standing there. He was of the rank qarugbed, which is translated, “The One Who is in Charge of the King’s Workers,” and he had taken the honor of this position from the king in those very days. He said in response to the old man, “Do not fear, Hanina, do not fear! Close your eyes a little and, behold!, you will see the light of Christ.” And at that very moment Pusiq was seized and they brought him to the king and they accused him of the things that he had said. The king said to him, “He deserves to die! Did I not give honor to you and did I not send you to do your work? Why do you scorn me and remain to watch these worthless ones while they are dying?”

(45) Pusiq responded and said, “I did it in order that my work might benefit through their worthlessness and that my life might be given to me through their deaths. I deny this honor that you gave me because it is full of grief, and I confess the death that you give to them because it is full of joy.”

(46) The king said to him, “You seek death instead of honor as they do, O unhinged mind?” Then the glorious one said, “I am a Christian and I hope in their God, therefore I have come to love their death and I repudiate your honor.”

(47) In a tremendous rage, he gave a command regarding him and said, “He will not die the way everyone else will die, but because he rejected my honor and spoke with

60 The History mentions Pusiq (or Pusai) in § 96 and for the most part repeats what is said here. The acts of Pusai’s martyrdom are preserved separately, and Sozomen refers to him as well (HE II.11); in his Syriac acts, he is said to have died the following day, on 15th Nisan. See AMS II, 208-32.

61 The use of the perfect tense in this passage (“I have come to love”) suggests a process. That is, that Pusiq has come to a love of Christian martyrdom by witnessing it manifest just now.
me as with an equal, bring him forth and draw out his tongue from the back of his throat so that all those who behold him may be deterred.” This was done brutally, as was commanded. And this one died at that time as well.

(48) He had a daughter, too, a bart qyama, and she herself was accused of being a Christian. They sent for her and brought her in and even she was killed for Christ, her hope.

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62 Or “daughter of the covenant,” the female equivalent of a bar qyama.

63 The acts of Pusiq/Pusai’s daughter, Martha, who is not named here, are also extant in Syriac; see AMS II, 233-41.
(1) Now we come to the lamentable story of the death of a holy martyr of God, Mar Simeon, the archbishop and catholicos\(^1\) of the Church of the East,\(^2\) who was the first one to excel in the land of the East as a blessed martyr of God, and whom we commemorate in this very memra of ours.\(^3\) We remember as well these other martyrs:

1. The use of the title “catholicos” is probably anachronistic, most certainly for the mid-fourth century when Simeon was a bishop, and probably even still for the fifth-century context when this version was composed. Thus, the term here likely reflects later redaction of the text post fifth-century.

2. Likewise, the term “Church of the East” reflects a fifth-century context, and is not an accurate descriptor for the church of the Christians in Persia in the mid-fourth century.

3. The memra is a form of non-stanzal, Syriac verse poetry commonly used as the form for narratives and homilies. See S. Brock, An Introduction to Syriac Studies (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 9.
Gadiahb and Subina, bishops of Bet Lapat; Bishop John of Hormizd-Ardashir; Bishop Bulida of Prat-Maishan; Bishop John of Karka de Maishan; the ninety-seven priests and deacons; Gushtazad, the head of the eunuchs, who held the rank of arzabed; and Pusai-Qargbed, who was the head of the craftsmen, and whose daughter was a bart qaūma. All of them, together with the blessed Simeon, were crowned as blessed martyrs of God.

(2) For, as we said in the previous memra, from the moment that blessed Constantine began to rule and up until his death, a span of thirty-three years that he reigned over the Romans, there were no martyrs to be found in the land of the West. But immediately upon the death of the victorious Constantine, Shapur, the king of the Persians, began to harrow the Christian people, to harass and persecute the priests and the qaūma, and even to destroy all the churches in his realm. Yet God allowed the persecution to overcome us so that there would be no opportunity for Satan or his

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4 Bet Lapaṭ (Gundeshapur) is about twenty-five kilometers northeast of Karka d-Ledan, on the eastern bank of the Dez River.

5 Near present-day Ahwaz, on the Karun River between Bet Lapaṭ and Karka d-Maishan in Bet Huzaye.

6 On the Tigris/Euphrates about one hundred kilometers north of where the rivers empty into the Persian Gulf.

7 On the Karun River, about seventy-five kilometers east of Prat-Maishan.

8 This odd number can be explained with reference to the Martyrdom. The text indicates that one hundred “crowns” of martyrdom were handed out on the day Simeon was killed (§ 44). Simeon and the two old priests with him, Bedhaikla and Hanina, are mentioned by name in the Martyrdom (§ 14), so the “ninety-seven priests and deacons” make up the anonymous remainder when Simeon, Bedhaikla, and Hanina are not counted. This group of one hundred martyrs does not include Gushtazad, who is killed earlier in the narrative (§ 33 of the Martyrdom), or Pusai (called “Pusiq” in the Martyrdom) and his daughter, who are killed after the first one hundred (§ 47-48 in the Martyrdom). These three (Gushtazad, Pusiq/Pusai and his daughter) are listed separately here in the History, too.

9 On Gushtazad the Eunuch and the rank arzabed, see the notes to § 26 of the Martyrdom.

10 On Pusai and the rank qargbed see § 46 of the Martyrdom.
minions to say: “It is peace that makes people worship God, and prosperity that causes
the church of Christ to grow. Kings extended a helping hand to the church and exalted it. For, lo, peace reigns in each region, and there is no one who persecutes or oppresses.”11 In the same way, they accused the blessed Job before God and said, “Does Job fear you without any reason? For, behold, you have rested your hand over him and over his house and his sons and all that he has everywhere. You blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have become great in the land. Yet if you reach out your hand and touch anything he has, then he will curse you to your face.”12 Does not Satan say similar things to God now? Such as, “You have honored these Christians in this world. There are among them kings, lords, princes, judges, and governors, so as a result they have prospered and multiplied, increased and grown powerful. Peace brought prosperity to them so that they grew in number. Peace has given them the opportunity to become strong. Who would not follow in the ways of kings? Who would not act in the same way as princes? Who would not love to be known in the world? Who would not love comfort and luxury? Who would not long for riches? Who would not lust after the glory of this desirable world? Who would choose adversity over calm and torment over comfort? Who would choose contempt over honor and reproach over praise?”13

(3) So that there would not be an opportunity for the Devil to exploit such sayings as these, God, the venerated one who orchestrates all in his wisdom, allowed there to be a persecution in the land of the Romans for three hundred years. The faithful were tested by the persecution, and the mettle of those who were persecuted was

11 Aphrahat makes a similar argument for the salvific value of suffering persecution in his Demonstration XXI, “On Persecution.”

12 Job 1:9-11

13 It seems that the author is referring to the Christians of the West under Constantine, but he could just as well be referring to the Christians of the East in a context post-410 once the church was officially set up in Persia.
revealed, which muzzled Satan’s mouth. Then God gave them calm and sent them an angel of peace, Caesar Constantine, who allowed them to live in comfort. This confounded the Devil since Jesus, not out of any inability to prevent it, had previously allowed his worshippers to be persecuted. But now, behold! Jesus’ sign went out and from the midst of darkness and the murky gloom of tribulation and persecution a glorious light suddenly shone forth. In its splendor it cleansed the night of persecution. For thirty-three years peace reigned throughout the two realms, both among those who were subject to the Christian king and among those who were servants of the pagan king. Then, while memory of the first persecution had not yet been forgotten but was still in the mind of those who had witnessed it, so that one generation would not pass away, and another come, and the memory of the persecution be erased, thereby allowing Satan to spread his false beliefs throughout the world, God, who is wise in everything, allowed it to come about so that after thirty-three years of peace there would be a persecution of the faithful wherein evil men showed their evil will against God. Nevertheless, he always shows the grace and judgment of his economy through his wisdom, which is not understood because of the great depths of their evil. He also shows his power, which is not pressed out by the weakness of his servants’ bodies. For just as when God allowed Joseph to be sold, and his slavery provided bodily life through the collection of grain for many people, so, too, when Christ was sold into his passion he gave freedom through his price to our slavery which had been sold to sin. In his suffering, he annulled our suffering; in his death, he slew our death; and in the powerlessness of his crucifixion, his dominion was proven. In a similar way, through the

14 Cf. Gen 27:37 ff
15 Cf. Gen 41:47-57
16 Cf. Gal 5:1
persecution of his servants, his truth is shown; through their tribulations, faith in him is confirmed; through their tortures, knowledge of him is proclaimed; through their death, life in him is revealed; through their endurance, his strength is shown. Through all these things deceit is exposed, Satan is defeated, and mouth of the Devil is muzzled. And because of these things that I have discussed briefly here, no one who should come across these histories should think, consider, or claim that it was improper that God allowed us to be turned over to the hands of the persecutors. So let us begin the history of the persecution and death of the holy martyrs, whose names we have already commemorated.

(4) In the 655th year of the kingdom of Alexander17—which is the 296th year after the crucifixion of our Lord, the 117th year of the kingdom of the Persians, and the 31st year of King Shapur, son of Hormizd18—after the death of blessed Constantine, king of Rome, Shapur took the opportunity to contend against Constantine’s sons who were still young. He continually raided the land of the Romans19 and for that reason he became increasingly incensed with hatred for the servants of God who dwelled in the regions he possessed. He wanted, and schemed for, an occasion to persecute the faithful. So, he devised reasons to oppress all the Christians in the Persian lands with a double tax, and

17 Alexander the Great, who defeated Darius III in 333 BCE and conquered and ruled over the Achaemenid Persian Empire, looms large even in literature from the late Sasanian Empire.

18 Hormizd II, the father of Shapur II, ruled from 302 until his death in 309 CE, when Shapur had been conceived, but not yet born. According to legend, the throne was reserved for the unborn son of one of Hormizd’s wives, who is said by certain sources to have been Jewish. Shapur was crowned in utero, and ruled his entire life until his death in 379. His 31st year (the same year the Martyrdom gives as the beginning of the persecution) would have been 339/340 CE. The reckoning of the other years is unclear. The “655th year of the kingdom of Alexander,” the “296th year after the crucifixion of our Lord” and “the 117th year of the kingdom of the Persians” all come relatively close to 340 CE, but not exactly. On the date of Simeon’s death, and the various arguments surrounding it, see §7 of the Martyrdom.

19 The first siege of Nisibis and other cities of the five Roman Transtigritanian provinces began in 337/338 CE.
he issued an edict from Bet Huzaye to the authorities in Bet Aramaye\(^{20}\) that said this: “As soon as you see the edict of ours, gods,\(^{21}\) in this letter that we have sent you, arrest Simeon, the head of the nasrāyē,\(^{22}\) and do not release him until he signs a document that makes it incumbent on him to collect and give to us a double poll tax\(^{23}\) and a double tribute from all the nasrāyē people, a people that is in our land, gods, and inhabits the land of our authority. For to us, gods, there are tribulations and wars, while to them is life and luxury. They dwell in our land, yet they are of one mind with Caesar, our enemy. And while we fight, they rest.” King Shapur wrote these things to the authorities in Bet Aramaye. When the king’s letter came to their attention, they arrested the blessed Simeon bar Ṣabbāʾē and read before him what the king had written, and (then) they demanded that he do those things that were written.

(5) Even though his resolve was in no way shaken, holy Simeon responded in great humility and said, “I bow to the King of Kings, and I honor his commands with all my power, yet concerning these things that are asked of me in the edict, I believe that even you know that it is not appropriate for me to be put in charge of the taxes from the people of Christ, my Lord. Indeed, our authority over them is not in the things that are seen, but in those things that are unseen: the faith of our Lord, the truth of our teachings,

\(^{20}\) In other words, from his summer palace in Karka ḫ-Ledan in Bet Huzaye, to his winter palace and the seat of Sasanian administration in Ctesiphon in Bet Aramaye.

\(^{21}\) Several times in this text Shapur refers to “us” as “gods.” It is unclear whether this is “royal we” (although Shapur does not otherwise refer to himself in the first person plural in direct discourse) or whether Shapur means to refer to the Sasanian authorities collectively. “The authorities,” are prominently mentioned in the *History*, but are not mentioned a single time in the * Martyrdom*.

\(^{22}\) The definition of the term nasrāyē is much debated, with interpretations ranging from a slur based on a geographical epithet for Jesus to a term for Jewish-Christians to merely a way of differentiating Syriac-speaking Christians from Greek-speaking Christians taken captive from the Roman Empire.

\(^{23}\) Lit., “double head money.”
the humble word that counsels the fear of God,24 the pious persuasion that does not corrupt the mind of its hearers, prayer both chaste and unceasing, sorrowful vigils, pining supplication, powerful invocation, and the abundant love of God. We ask for mercy upon the king, all his servants, and all his territories so that wars will end and peace might abound in the world. If we had the power of this world, then we would not conduct ourselves in the ways I have just mentioned, but according to your worldly ways instead. Moreover, I ask your authority and your nobility to inform us in what capacity we are asked to do these things that you have required of us.25 If we are asked as wealthy people, then everyone knows that we are poor and that we lack abundant wealth. If it is as lazy people, then you are aware that there is not anyone among us who abstains from the work of the king, because all of us are under the yoke of the tax collector. If it is as enemies, then surely there are people among you who know that we are friends to all, and to the King of Kings most especially. It has been written for us that we should love our enemies and pray for those who hate us and bless those who curse us.26 If the law of our teacher requires this of us, how much more ought we to embrace your Authority and pray for the king under whose kingdom God subjected us and in the land of whose dominion has made us dwell? Truly, our scriptures command this of us: ‘Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except

24 “Fear of God,” or dehltā d-*alāḥā is used many times (in various ways) throughout the text as a way of saying something akin to “Christianity.”

25 The main argument in Shapur’s edict for imposing a double tax on the nasāyē (the Christians) is that they enjoy the benefits of the land without having to fight in the army. Not only that, they are “of one mind with Caesar,” the enemy against whom Shapur is fighting. Simeon gets to that accusation here, but he first tries to more clearly discern what sort of people Shapur thinks that the nasāyē are—wealthy people, or lazy people, or just enemies of the king? In so doing, Simeon is able to dispatch possible accusations and attempt to show that the charges against the Christians and the imposition of a double tax are unwarranted.

26 Cf. Mt 5:44
from God, and whoever defies that authority will receive judgment.27 We are commanded to pray for kings and authorities. One of our teachers said to us: ‘Before all things, offer prayers for kings and authorities.’28 Therefore, when our scriptures command this of us, how are we able to be despisers and enemies of the King of Kings without at the same time becoming adversaries of God who commands these things through our teachers?”

(6) Then after the blessed Simeon had said these things, the head of the authorities that were assembled there responded and said, “Although your words are beautiful and wise, Simeon, your words ought to be conjoined with your deeds. I recall that you said, ‘Our books require this: everyone shall be subject to the supreme authorities and there is no authority that is not from God.’ Therefore, because all authority is from God, be subject to Shapur, the King of Kings, lord of the entire earth, whose nature is also from God. Seal the edict and take it upon yourself to pay the tax, as the King of Kings commanded, and do not oppose your books which prescribe obedience to you. If you owe obedience to those in authority, then how much more is it owed to the King of Kings?”

(7) Holy Simeon responded and said, “There is no reason for us to go outside our scriptures. For our scriptures have taught us to be subject (to authority), and they have even shown us how far we should go in our subjection. Concerning this matter, they have taught us: ‘Give all men their due. To whom is due the poll tax, give the poll tax; to whom is due tribute, give tribute.’29 But they do not command us to pay a double poll tax,

28 Cf. 1 Tim 2:1-2
29 Cf. Rom 13:7; perhaps it is not surprising that Simeon quotes Romans rather than Jesus’ admonition in the Gospels (cf. Mt 22:21) to “render unto Caesar.”
so why are we now being required to pay a double poll tax and tribute?”

(8) After blessed Simeon had said this, the authorities replied: “Look what you are doing to yourself while you resist the commands of the King of Kings and refuse to seal the edict and accept the double poll tax that you are required to pay the King of Kings on behalf of his nasrāyē subjects. Surely you know that there is no way for the King of Kings to be merciful toward those who rebel against his will. Consider and understand this: instead of (maintaining) your former friendship, do you really intend to provoke the King of Kings such that as a secret enemy of your life he will spill your blood like water? This is King Shapur whose renown is feared by all people! And yet you, who are his subject, how do you dare to oppose his commands? So listen to our words: preserve your former friendship, seal the edict, and do not oppose the orders of the mighty king any longer!”

(9) Then the heroic Simeon said, “You have heard the things I said before, so write down the very things you heard and make them known to the king. His command surpasses our abilities, and we are not able to accept the double tax placed on us because we are poor. Nevertheless, our lives and our possessions are spread out before him and they are in his land, so let him order your authority and let them take from us. As for us, all that we have we leave before him because our bodies, property, homes, and all that is ours are his, except for our souls. Only let him not force us to become evil tyrants and worldly rulers over our brothers, who are the people of God. For we have not taken our authority from the kings of this world, but from the eternal king whose authority cannot be destroyed. Indeed, our power is not of this earth because our authority is heavenly. Therefore, let the king not force us weak ones to be powerful, nor us gentle ones to be harsh.”

(10) “Concerning that which you said to me—‘do you intend to turn the king’s friendship toward you into enmity because of your disobedience, so that he will spill
your blood upon the earth?’—truly I say before your authority: I would be glad if the king continued to love me, if only he would allow me to love my God. My obeying his command is perfect to me if only I could be allowed to follow the commands of both my king and my God. My life is dear to me if only he would allow me my humility and the teachings of my Lord. But if, through his friendship, the king wants to turn me away from the love of my God and make me into (God’s) opponent; and if he advises me to obey only (the king’s) will, while I would be resisting the will and the commands of my Lord; and while he justifies my life for me with his friendship and wants to kill me from the true life which has been promised to me by the giver of life—the one who is the living one and who is the life giver (who) gives temporal life and also promises future life—then his enmity would be better to us than his friendship, and disobedience to his commands better than obedience. Various deaths of any sort for my God and his people are better to us than the temporal life.” These are the words that were spoken by the blessed Simeon before the authorities, and they wrote them down as they were spoken and sent them to King Shapur in Bet Huzaye via the couriers.

(11) When this was read before the king, he became greatly angered and gnashed his teeth and pounded one fist into the other and said, “Simeon wants his disciples and his people to rebel against my kingdom and he wants to make them into servants of Caesar, whose devotion he shares, and for that reason he does not obey my commands.” After the king spoke, the news spread quickly, and the harsh words that the king had spoken against Simeon and all the Christian people became known. Immediately, the enemies of our people were unleashed to malign us and to speak the

30 The phrase translated here as “whose devotion he shares” more literally reads, “who is a son of their fear.” The use of “son” (bar) in this case strongly implies cooperation, or corporate action, as could be suggested by translating it “who is one of their co-fearers.” Their “fear” (dehld) means their Christianity. The use of “fear” to describe a particular cult comes up again in § 22 by way of describing the “fears” (read: heresies) that should be avoided.
words of the Enemy against Simeon and the Christian people before the king and his princes.

(12) Now the Jews, who have always been adversaries of our people—who killed the prophets and crucified Christ, who stoned apostles, and who are always thirsting for our blood—\(^{31}\) they found an opportunity to accuse us because of their confidence in being close to the queen, since she was of their way of thinking.\(^{32}\) So they began to vilify the heroic Simeon with accusations and they said, “If you, King of Kings, lord of all earth, were to send splendid and wise letters of your royalty and were to give glorious gifts and desirable presents of your magnificence to Caesar, they would not be seen as much in his eyes; but if Simeon were to send to him a single curt and trivial letter, he would rise and bow and receive it with both his hands and diligently fulfill his command. In addition, there is no secret in your kingdom that he does not write down and make known to Caesar.”

(13) For sure, the Jews are accustomed to bearing false witness all the time. Just as they bore false witness against our Lord, so too did they against the servant of Christ. Those who bore false witness against our Lord were rejected and fell under the sword of the Romans in the time of the destruction of their city. And those who witnessed unjustly against Simeon fell under the sword of the Persians.\(^{33}\) (In Jerusalem) they shouted, “We have no king but Caesar!”\(^{34}\) and they fell under the sword of Caesar. Here, they took pride in King Shapur and yet they were killed by him. And what is the reason

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\(^{31}\) Cf. Mt 23:37

\(^{32}\) Lit., “who was a daughter of their doctrine,” another way of saying that Shapur’s mother, the queen, was Jewish.

\(^{33}\) The narrator explains why in § 14.

\(^{34}\) Jn 19:15
that they were killed? We ought to briefly show it.

(14) After twenty-four years, once the sons of victorious Constantine—Constantius and Constantine II—had died, Julian reigned over the Romans. From the outset of his reign he sacrificed to idols. In order to provoke the Christians and to thereby falsify the words of Christ, who prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem and said, “There will not be left on it a stone upon a stone that is not destroyed,” Julian commanded all the Jews of his empire that they should go up and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple and give sacrificial offerings as the Law commands. Many went out and began to dig the foundations of Jerusalem. While these things were being done, a deceiver came to the land of the Persians and called all the Jews and said, “This is the time of return, which was predestined by the prophets! I have been commanded by God to announce the return to you so that you would go up (to Jerusalem)!”

(15) So that deceiver also went to Maḥoza in Bet Aramaye and led astray masses of Jews, and they set forth and went out from Maḥoza in the belief of the return. They had gone only three parasangs from the city when word of their departure reached King Shapur, who sent out a force and destroyed many thousands of them. Concerning the destruction that took place among the Jews in the time of King Shapur we have described it as briefly as we are able. Let us now return to our story.

(16) After the authorities read aloud to the king the notes that they had

35 Cf. Mt 24:2; Mk 13:2; Lk 21:6
36 Cf. Dan 9:24-27; Is 27:13
37 Maḥoza, mentioned in the Talmud, was part of the greater Seleucia-Ctesiphon metropolitan area, located near the confluence of the royal canal and the Tigris.
38 A “parasang,” an Iranian measure of distance, is approximately thirty stadia. Although the measure of one stadium is not always uniform, thirty stadia equals roughly five kilometers. Thus, three parasangs is about fifteen kilometers, or, as the text suggests, not far from Maḥoza.
transcribed about blessed Simeon, the king issued another edict for Simeon and prescribed a second way (of dealing with Simeon) to the authorities. “As soon as you see this edict of ours, gods, summon Simeon before you and explain our commands to him. Why, in your insolence, do you destroy your life and the lives of your disciples? And why do you give yourself over—and them at the same time!—to a bitter death? In your arrogance and pride, do you want to incite your people to rebellion against me? For that reason, I will make sure you are devoured from the earth and I will expel you from among men if you do not accept my command.”

(17) This second edict was sent to the authorities in Bet Aramaye and Bet Huzaye. When the edict came, holy Simeon was sought out by the authorities so that the edict could be read in front of him. When Simeon came in they read the king’s edict before him and poured threats in his ears. An answer to what he had heard from the king in the edict was demanded of him. Yet neither did the vigorous one fear, nor did the heroic one tremble, nor was the warrior of our Lord troubled. But he responded and said, “My previous word and my word now are one and the same. I do not surrender the people, whom Christ my Lord entrusted to me, for taxes rather than for the truth. I accept all kinds of death on their behalf. Just as Christ was crucified for peoples in every land and in every realm of kings in order to give them life through his cross, in this same way I will die for his people who have been entrusted to me in this kingdom so that they will not be dead to his truth. Indeed I speak truth before your majesty, and I do not lie: death is better to me than life that persists in misery. To me, it is rewarding to see neither the light of this world nor the freedmen of my Lord who are being afflicted. Far be it from me to spare my own life from death and to surrender the lives of the servants of God to the harsh and bitter tax! Far be it from me that I watch the affliction of my sons!

39 Lit., “the lives of the sons of your teaching,” or “the lives of those who share in your teaching.”
Far be it from me that I see the betrayal of my brothers and the selling of my sons! I will not withhold my feet from walking the way of death on my own behalf and the behalf of my people, and neither will I be prevented from being offered in sacrifice for my truth and for the faith of my disciples. On behalf of my flock I will give my blood to you, and for them I will bend down my neck under your sword. That which was written by the King of Kings—‘I will kill your companions with you’—this belongs to the will of the king and he has power over his subjects. But they and I, we are absolved from blood. For they, too, stand for themselves on behalf of the truth of their Lord.”

(18) When the authorities heard the response that Simeon gave to the second edict, they wrote and informed the king, and they read their documents before the king. Then, as a vicious lion who tasted the blood of man, a great anger was forged in his heart and he sharpened his canines and gnashed his teeth; he became furious to kill, enraged to destroy, and he roared with his mighty and terrible voice and made the earth tremble with his fiery word. He commanded that the priests and the Levites be cut asunder at once by the sword, and that churches be demolished, altars be polluted, and the liturgy be despoiled. And, he said, “As for Simeon, the head of the sorcerers, let him be bound and brought to me, for he has rejected my kingdom and chosen that of Caesar by worshipping his god and mocking my gods.” Immediately, a third edict was sent from King Shapur in Bet Huzaye and it came to the authorities in Bet Aramaye. This is what was written in it: “As soon as you see this edict of ours, gods, arrest Simeon, the

40 Lit., “the faith of the sons of my teaching.”

41 This parallels § 12 of the Martyrdom, both in its phrasing and in its odd use of “Levites,” which, in this instance, is completely removed from any parallel with the Maccabees.

42 Or, “ministry” or “cult.”
head of the nasrāyē, and bind him and send him swiftly to the gate⁴³ and destroy his church.” These things that the king wrote were done.

(19) When blessed Simeon heard this he was not alarmed nor did he fear. When he saw with his own eyes the destruction of his church, his resolve was not diminished, but he was strengthened and encouraged. He gave glory to God, rose up, walked over to the heads (of the authorities), and presented himself to them before they could arrest him. They set a time for him: “Three days from now you will go to the king’s gate.”⁴⁴ Holy Simeon accepted even this cheerfully. And immediately there was a great uproar in the cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon when the persecutors came to uproot the churches. The qyāmā went into hiding and the flock sought shelter, and Simeon, who was their head, was seized and the place fell into the hands of the evil ones. The church was filled with the uncircumcised.⁴⁵ Instead of the sound of prayer and majesty, the voice of terror and strife was heard in that time while the roof of the church was destroyed. Instead of the rising up of incense, the dust of the walls that had been pulled down ascended to heaven. There was a great commotion and trepidation in all the churches of the land. In all these places the bishops did not succumb, nor did the resolve of the priests diminish, nor was the truth of the qyāmā weakened, but rather they were strengthened and encouraged for the name of Jesus, our redeemer, and were hardened

⁴³ Apparently, Shapur means the gate of his palace in Karka d-Ledan.

⁴⁴ As noted in § 26 of the Martyrdom (the only instance in that text when the phrase “king’s gate” is used), the “king’s gate” seems to be a metonym for the royal palace and is used frequently in the remainder of this text.

⁴⁵ The word I have translated here as “uncircumcised” can also mean, more generically, “gentiles” or “pagans,” but the author could have easily used another word to convey such a meaning rather than using a word that primarily means “uncircumcised.” This is possibly an indication that, at least to the mind of this author or his source, circumcision was a marker of Christians, while the uncircumcised were pagan Persians. Lacking other evidence, however, I would be reluctant to press such an argument very far. Perhaps the easiest explanation, in light of the use of “Levites” and the criticism of the Jews in the text, is simply to say that what it meant to be a “Christian” or a “Jew” was still unclear in fifth-century Persia.
against the persecutors. None of the churchmen gave in to the will (of the persecutors), but each was armed with the breastplate of confession and held in his hand the lance of Jesus’ cross in order to pierce enemies with it.47

(20) Simeon convened the whole qūmā, with priests and deacons among them, and spoke with them and encouraged them and said to them, “Be comforted and strengthened and do not fear! It is to this that you have committed yourselves, for you have become disciples of our Lord Jesus. Look at the disgrace that he suffered for you! Consider his cross: see the debt you owe to him that cannot be repaid! Who, indeed, is able to repay this debt that the holy one has imposed upon us through his death on our behalf? Therefore, let us repay what we can, our death for his death, even if it is insufficient. Consider the prophets who were killed, as well as the apostles who were stoned, in order that you may know that God is not weak, nor is his Christ feeble or infirm. Rather, he wants to show his strength through the weak and to reveal his life through their death. If you lift up the eyes of your heart to him, then he will diligently consider you and strengthen our weakness and make us triumphant and victorious in this struggle.

46 Lit., “none of the sons of the church,” which is probably a way of saying “clergy” rather than a generic term encompassing all Christians. Possibly, the “sons of the church” could include the laity and thus mean any Christian; however, given the list of bishops, priests, and qūmā right before this phrase it seems to make more sense to think of “sons of the church” as a collective way of speaking about all the different sorts of clergy, rather than a way of transitioning to include the laity. It seems such a reading is confirmed at the beginning of § 20 when Simeon convenes “the whole qūmā (clergy).”

47 The obvious explanation for “the lance of Jesus’ cross” is to see it as an oblique reference to the lance used by the Roman soldier to pierce Jesus’ side while he still hung on the cross (Jn 19:34). If this is the case, then the Christian clergy in Persia are metaphorically and spiritually arming themselves with a literal Roman weapon used against Jesus and now directed against the Persians.

48 Until a better explanation of the qūmā is formulated, passages such as this one will be obscure. Does “the whole qūmā with priests and deacons among them” mean “all the bishops and clergy, including priests and deacons,” or does it mean something like “all the ascetics and monks, as well as priests and deacons”?
(21) “This you should know as well, my beloved: this tribulation is transitory and after it there will come times of quiet. The church that was pulled down will be restored to glory and adorned in all beauty. Let us not be saddened by the destruction of our church in the land of our gathering. For we have a building in heaven not made by human hands, a church of the first-born that was built not in Seleucia or Kokhe but in the heavenly Jerusalem. Now I depart to the king’s gate, and I do not know what will happen after I am gone, but be prepared while always being clothed with the good armor of confession so that when the battle comes against you none (of their) arrows will find a place to enter into the armor of anyone among you, but will be broken on your armor.

(22) “So then remove yourselves from the cults of the servants of Satan: Manichaeans, Marcionites, Katāyē, and Manqarāyē and from the rest of the pagans. Set yourselves apart from acquaintance with Jews who are enemies of the Father, haters of the Son, and adversaries of the Holy Spirit; who always embittered the spirit of God, as the prophet Isaiah testified; who spoke iniquity against the Most High, as the psalmist

49 Cf. 2 Cor 5:1 and Heb 9:11

50 Cf. Heb 12:23

51 An area of Ctesiphon that housed the patriarchal see of the Church of the East.

52 Lit., “the fears (dehltā) of the servants of Satan.” This is surely to be contrasted with the “fear of God” as a way of saying “Christianity,” so it seems the “fears of the servants of Satan,” is just a way of saying something like “unorthodox Christianities.”

53 The first two in this lists of “fears” to be avoided need no explanation. The latter two pose more of a problem. In his Latin translation, Kmosko calls the Katāyē the “Kantaeis” and suggests in a note to his preface (col. 709) that Theodore bar Koni refers to the Katāyē as a pagan sect that originated following the death of Goliath. He refers to the Manqarāyē as Novatians, the rigorist Christian sect that began in the third-century and forbade readmission to the Church to those who lapsed and sacrificed to pagan gods during the Decian persecution.

54 Cf. Is 63:10
David testified,\textsuperscript{55} who spoke vile words against Moses and God, as we have learned in scripture from the Book of Kings,\textsuperscript{56} who killed prophets and crucified Christ and stoned apostles,\textsuperscript{57} who are enemies of the cross of Christ and envious of the salvation of the human race;\textsuperscript{58} and who are accusers of our people and betrayers of the servants of God! Keep yourselves from all the cults,\textsuperscript{59} and, as I have said to you before, beware in particular of the error of the Jews and the teaching of Marcion/Mani.\textsuperscript{60} For, indeed, these two groups are audacious and rabid dogs! Speaking through the spirit of God, both prophets and apostles called the Jews “dogs.” Prophet Isaiah said, “They are dogs whose soul is greedy,”\textsuperscript{61} and the Apostle taught us to beware of them when he said, “Beware of the dogs!”\textsuperscript{62} Rightly have they been called dogs! They were rabid against prophets, and they killed them. They were rabid against Christ, and they crucified him. They were rabid against the apostles, and they stoned them. Likewise, lo, through their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Cf. Ps 50:16-21
\item \textsuperscript{56} Cf. 2 Kgs 18:12
\item \textsuperscript{57} Cf. Mt. 23:37; Lk 13:34
\item \textsuperscript{58} Lit., \textit{gensā}.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Lit., “fears” (\textit{dehītā}).
\item \textsuperscript{60} There is a possible error in the text here. The Syriac clearly reads “Marcion,” but Kmosko’s Latin reads “Manichaearum.” There is no note to a variant manuscript suggesting competing possibilities, so either Kmosko misread the Syriac and mistakenly thought it was a reference to the Manichaeans, or the Latin is in fact correct and the Syriac was somehow mistakenly transcribed. Without consulting the manuscripts, it is difficult to be certain, but Simeon’s subsequent discussion in this section suggests that “the teaching of Mani” was probably intended since he immediately draws another parallel between the Jews and the Manichaeans. On the other hand, the Marcionites are mentioned at the end of this section, so it is hard to say definitively whether, here, it was Mani or Marcion’s teaching that was intended. In either case, what is beyond dispute is that Simeon regards both teachers as heresiarchs.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Is 56:11
\item \textsuperscript{62} Phil 3:2
\end{itemize}
blasphemies the Manichaeans bite the body of Christ, and they despise it and do not
dearn it worthy of assumption, resurrection, and salvation. They attacked even the
maker of bodies and souls in their rabidity, and they are like rabid dogs that bite their
Lord. The Marcionites were also unable to bite their Lord since his nature is exalted, so
they bark at him with their blaspheming.

(23) “Thus I have said this to you and warned you just as a father warns his son.
Keep the commandments of our Lord who has kept you! Love the one who has loved us
and who gave up his life for us so that he might give us life through his death. Guard
carefully with all your soul the faith in the Trinity—the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.
Endure harsh suffering and all kinds of death for this faith and be mindful of the word
of the Apostle: ‘The word is faithful and it is worthy of being received.’ If we die with
Christ, we will also live with Christ. And if we suffer with him, we will also reign with
him; and if we deny him then he will also deny us. And if we do not have faith in him,
he yet persists in his faith for he is not able to deny himself.” I have given you these
warnings at this time knowing that you will not see my face again, because for the
people of Christ and for my faith in God I am going to be sacrificed. Who will make me
worthy of this if not the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will be with you as well as
with us through your prayers, always and forever! Amen.”

(24) When the congregation heard this, they all wept mournfully over the
separation of the vigilant shepherd, over the departure of the dedicated leader, over the
removal of the strong and solid guide, over the taking away of the wise teacher, and
over their separation from the gentle and merciful father. All of them lamented unto

63 Cf. 1 Tim 1:15
64 Cf. Rom 6:8
65 2 Tim 2:12-13
themselves saying, “Woe to us for Simon Peter is being taken away from us! In you we saw the apostles! Who will give us a bishop like you?” For they wept particularly bitterly over what they heard him say: “You will not see my face again because I will be sacrificed.” Then blessed Simeon rebuked and silenced them. Drawing them close, he embraced them, prayed, raised his hands over them, blessed them and said, “May the cross of our Lord be a guard for the people of Jesus, and may the peace of God be with the servants of God. May he strengthen your hearts in the faith of Christ in times of both anguish and ease, in life and in death, now and always and forever! Amen.” When he finished his prayer the blessed Simeon, he and some of the priests, set out for Bet Huzaye in order to go to the king’s gate.

(25) Captured in those days were Gadiahb and Subina, bishops of Bet Lapat; John, bishop of Hormizd-Ardashir; Bulida’, bishop of Prat; John, bishop of Karka d-Maishan; and many priests and deacons.66 They were bound and taken out to the king’s gate in Karka d-Ledan in Bet Huzaye, which Shapur had recently built and in which he had settled many captives from Arabia,67 Singara,68 Bet Zabdai,69 Arzun,70 Qardu,71

66 Note that the captive bishops listed here (a list that repeats the list given in § 1) are all from Bet Huzaye; they are sent to Karka d-Ledan, a city, as the narrator points out, that Shapur settled with captives from northern Mesopotamia.

67 Presumably, not the Arabian Peninsula, but the province of Bet ‘Arbaye, which is on the northwest Persian frontier and would include the city of Nisibis.

68 Southeast of Nisibis, presently in Iraqi Kurdistan near the Syrian border.

69 On the right bank of the Tigris between the Great and Lesser Zab Rivers in north-central Mesopotamia.

70 Approximately 125 kilometers north-northeast of Nisibis; north of the Tigris and southwest of Lake Van.

71 A mountainous region south of Lake Van and north of Adiabene that was once a vassal kingdom of Armenia. Also known as Corduene or Gordian, among many other spellings.
Armenia, and various other places. In those days blessed Simeon, the catholicos of Bet Aramaye, was bound and sent to Karka d-Ledan.

(26) In this time they had even accused a man, the head eunuch of the king who held the rank of arzabed, and they said to the king about him, “He is a Christian!” And the king immediately summoned and called him before him, and the king said to him: “Gushtazad!” And Gushtazad said, “Here I am, your servant, my lord King, who lives forever and whose power is everlasting!” The king said, “Are you being sincere with me? Are you not the greatest of all the eunuchs? Have not I and my father given you much honor made you great?”

(27) Gushtazad responded and said, “It is as the King says, good King. But why is it that the King says these things to me?” The king said to him, “I have heard it said about you that you are a Christian.” Gushtazad said to him, “So it is, good King, live forever! What the King of Kings has heard is true.”

(28) The king was furious with him and said to him, “But will you now do my will and worship the god, Sun? If you do not do this you will be killed immediately.” All the king’s princes and his fellow eunuchs surrounded him and forced him to the side (of the king’s court), and they cajoled him with deceitful persuasion and said to him, “Do the will of the king just for the moment and then remain in your cult.” And Gushtazad listened to their advice and was caught up in the web of their seducing, and he did the will of the king.

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72 Presumably not Roman Armenia, but Greater Armenia north of Qardu between the Black and Caspian Seas.

73 Note that all the regions listed here as those from which captives were taken are in northern Mesopotamia and beyond—traditionally areas where Christianity was widespread, and which, on occasion, were controlled by the Roman Empire.

74 A high official position in the Persian court; cf. § 26 of the Martyrdom.

75 Lit., “remain in your fear,” a reference to Christianity.
It happened that that day the heroic Simeon arrived in Bet Huzaye in the city of Karka d-Ledan and he heard about these things to which Gushtazad had consented and he was distressed. His soul was troubled and he mourned bitterly for him. When Gushtazad heard that Simeon, the bishop-catholicos, had come to Karka, he stood up at that very moment and went to the door of the house where Simeon was imprisoned. (The guards) entered and said to Simeon, “Look, Gushtazad is at the door and wants to come before you.”

Simeon said, “Close the door and do not let him come in to me, this one who has denied Jesus, my Lord, and has forsaken the true God, who is the true being, and exchanged the creator for creatures. (He exchanged) the maker for the things that he made, the king who reigns eternally for the king whose days are as grass, the lord of kings for carnal men, he whose essence is eternal life for a man who dies, and he who is impassible and eternally immutable for a king who suffers, changes, and becomes corrupted.”

Then Gushtazad sent word to Simeon and said, “Please, my lord, let them bring me in before you and I will show your fatherhood how this great evil has occurred!” This was relayed to Simeon, but Simeon was not persuaded to allow Gushtazad to come in before him.

So, Gushtazad sent word again a second time and said to him: “Forgive me this my sin this time and never again will I commit it!” Simeon answered and sent word to him: “This is not a sin for which I can pardon you, nor is it an offense for which I can forgive you. You have committed sacrilege, not a sin! You have denied God; who can forgive you? You have turned from the Christ who gives you life; what mortal man is able to give life to your mortality? Where is your faith to which your beautiful life was committed, such that from a little tribulation you took fright and you lost your life in a single moment? You deserve an evil punishment because your sight was terrified by
transient glory rather than the fear of the one who is glorious and holy, the hidden being, the king of all ages, on whom the Seraphim do not dare to gaze because of the vehemence of his glory!

(33) “Now there is no way for your mortal life to live unless you stand up in the place where you fell, and unless you enter into the gate where you went out, and unless you become victorious in the place where you were led astray. I weep for you! I lament for you! Today I have to dance! Woe to me for your ruin, son of my people! Woe to me for your wretchedness, you diligent one! Woe to me for your lowliness, heroic one! Woe to me for your shame, honorable one! Woe to me for your destruction, beautiful one! Woe to me for the evil death of your soul! Woe to me for your pearl that has been lost! Go and do not return to me unless you find your pearl that you lost because it had no price, except if one would surrender his temporal life for it, because the pearl itself was also bought by the blood of Jesus, my Lord.”

(34) When Gushtazad heard these things, his mind was moved to sorrow and he thought to arm himself with repentance. From that very moment, he began to weep bitterly, just as Simon Peter did when it happened to him that through his lack of knowledge (he denied) God, the only begotten. He went out to his house and put out ashes for himself and cast sackcloth down upon it; he put his bed on top of the sackcloth and ashes, sat down among them, and lamentation overcame him. He emaciated his body through vigils and tearful compunction and contrite fasting. While he cried out he said, “Have mercy on me, my Lord, because I am sick. My wounds grow foul and

76 The reference to dancing here is not to a dance of joy but to a funeral dance.

77 Cf. Mt 13:45-46

78 Lk 22:62
fester. He selected and recited these and the rest of the words of the Psalms that are similar to them. For two days he did not go to the king or even to the place among his colleagues. On the third day, Simeon was summoned before the king because the head mobed had said in the presence of the king, “Simeon, the head of the sorcerers has arrived.” So Simeon was summoned before the king because on the third day after Simeon had entered into Karka, they showed him to the king.  

(35) When Gushtazad heard that Simeon had been summoned, he stood up from his sackcloth and went out to the king’s gate in the hope that perhaps there would be an opportunity for him to see (Simeon) and speak with him. The king commanded that Simeon be brought before him. When he came in he bowed before him and the king said to Simeon, “Simeon, what is this rebellion that you have demonstrated against me? Is this the love that I get for my love of you? Is this the result of the honor with which I have honored you? Is this the praise with which I praised you before my noble ones, saying about you, ‘This is a wise and enlightened man’? So much have I honored you that I even made you into an object of envy before the Magi! Why did you act as an enemy, and why did you incite your people to rebellion against me, and why did you disobey the edict that I issued?”  

(36) Then once again he bowed to the ground before the king and said to the king: “My lord King, who is this who scorns the edicts of the King? Who is this who dares to oppose even the commands of your authorities and your servants if their

79 Cf. Ps 38:6
80 Cf. Ps 6:3
81 Or, “high priest.” See § 42 in the Martyrdom.
82 This odd bit of circular logic seems to refer back to § 19 where the authorities tell Simeon, “Three days from now you will go to the king’s gate.”
commands conform to the will of God? Truly, my lord King, because I have been honored by your majesty and glorified by your goodness, such treachery would be detestable before both God and you, blessed among men. For your glory, however, I will not deprive myself of the glory of God, who glorifies and honors you. For your honor I will not reject the honor of the true God. He appointed you the King of Kings over peoples and over their kings and he gave this great and powerful and wondrous authority into your hands. And for what reason am I, a weak and insignificant servant of the servants of your kingdom, called a rebel against your majesty?” The king said to him, “Because you have not forced your people to pay the tax that you have been commanded to pay by us, gods.”

(37) Blessed Simeon answered and said to the king, “Far be it from your servant, my lord King, to be a tyrant over the humble people of God! And far be it from your august majesty that it would command me—a poor man, who always teaches my people poverty and humility, and who teaches them if someone hits you on your cheek, turn to him the other one; and if someone takes your cloak, offer him your tunic—83—to be their oppressor and thief and one who takes their cloaks and strips them of their tunics! Far be it from me, my lord King, that this would happen to me!”

(38) After Simeon had said this, the Magi and the officials and the tyrants surrounded him on all sides and they said, “Whoever does not want to take upon himself the payment of taxes wishes to incite his people to rebellion with him!” The heroic Simeon responded and said to them, “Now, is it not enough for you that you oppress and steal, treat poor people unjustly, and violently compel the weak, but that you even want to subdue us under the harsh yoke of your tyranny? In what capacity are we required to pay a double tax? As wealthy people? We are poorer than all peoples!”

83 Mt 5:39-40
The Magi said to him, “Because you are not fearers\(^{84}\) with the king of kings, whose nature is from the gods.” The truly wise Simeon said to them, “Behold, we should not be asked to pay a tax for our faith, rather we should be asked to give a defense of our faith and our teaching. Be sure that for the truth of our teaching we are even prepared to give not only our property but also our lives. We do not accept the payment of taxes because our authority is not worldly so that we can exert force upon our brothers. Rather our authority is from God, who teaches us humility in all our books. We teach to give to the poor, not to steal from them; we teach to help the afflicted, not to oppress them!”

(39) When the king heard this, he said to him, “Speak to me, Simeon, who is your lord, and ignore your fellow servants! You were not called before me so that you could speak with your fellow servants, but so that you could give me a response to the questions you were asked!” Then Simeon bowed and said, “Speak, my lord King, whatever you want!” And the king said to him, “Wars are many and hardship is pressing, and yet you live in comfort while you are my opponent in your faith. So, you and your people: obey my command and agree to pay the double poll tax from your people and (thereby) be freed and return to your house in peace!”

(40) Simeon responded and said, “Our bodies are servants of your majesty and our houses and all our possessions are yours, King. For we have nothing in this land of tribulation. Let my lord King issue an edict and take them, if it pleases him, because truly I say that I will not oppress my people and subject them to taxes because of their faith—even if your mighty majesty orders that my skin be flayed from my body.\(^{85}\) I would rather my own skin be peeled from my body than be made to strip the clothes

\(^{84}\) The use of “fear” is a way of indicating that the cult of Simeon and his people differs from that of the king of kings; in other words, they “fear” different gods and Simeon does not participate in the worship of the sun with the king.

\(^{85}\) The way in which Mani was executed.
from a pauper and oppress those who were freed by my Lord.”

(41) The king said to him, “Well then, let me put aside (the question of) taxes and let me advise you (about) that which is useful to your life.” Simeon responded and said, “Truly whatever command that your majesty gives me that is useful to my life, even if it would lead to death, I would not throw it away!” The king said, “From now on, do according to what I command you. For I do not want to kill you, because you are a wise and enlightened man as even I have said many times before. Listen now to my counsel, be convinced by my command, and do not persist in obstinacy. Do my will at once and worship Fire and Sun!”

(42) Then Simeon responded in strength and in love of his Lord and said, “Is this the counsel that you promised would be useful for my life, my lord King? For this command is a detriment to my life, not a benefit to it!” The king said to him, “This counsel is of no use to you?” Simeon said to him, “By my God, who made your kingdom great, I swear that there is no counsel more harmful to me than this one!” The king said to him, “I have praised you as one who is wise, but now you appear to be foolish. You rebel against my edict! Fools, indeed, are those who repudiate the edicts of us gods!”

(43) Heroic Simeon responded and said, “Far be it from Simeon, the servant of the one living and true God, to take account of other gods and to worship the sun and the moon, whose course will be brought to naught. Or the fire that dies everyday and is extinguished and burns out in the material in which it is contained. I will not obey this command, my lord King, even if you order that all my bones be burned in the fire. I, a rational being, will not worship that which is irrational; and I, a living one, will not worship that which is dead.” The king said to him, “If you do not worship Fire because it is mortal, then neither should you worship your god, Io, who died when the Jews crucified him. For you should look upon the mortality of Fire in the same way as the mortality of your god.”
When victorious Simeon heard this he was amazed and said, “Far be it from God, my lord King, to suffer or die! Anything that suffers and dies is not God because the divine nature is beyond suffering and even beyond death. He does not suffer either in his nature or in anything else.” The king said to him, “In (saying) this, lo, I have found you out as a liar! Namely, in that you said your god does not die.” Holy Simeon said to him, “I have not lied, my lord King!” The king said to him, “Did not Jesus, whom you call ‘Christ,’ die?” Simeon said to him, “Truly Jesus died and returned to life and rose, however God neither died, nor returned to life, nor rose.” The king said to him, “So who is this Jesus Christ of whom you speak?” Simeon said to him, “God and man.” The king said to him, “How did he become both a god and a man?” Simeon said to him, “Because God wanted to turn men away from error and to heal their infirmities, and men were unable to see God and to be saved. Therefore, he clothed himself with the body of man and in it he taught and did good things for men, and he healed their infirmities and turned them away from the error of idolatry. The Jews became jealous of the one who was seen, rather than of the one who was unseen, so they arrested and crucified him. And God allowed that body to die so that he could bring it back to life and thereby impart through it proof of the resurrection to all men. He came back to life, rose up and ascended into heaven, and will come again and give life to the dead. Even this sun that you now command me to worship, it grew dark at the moment he was crucified in order to rebuke the Jews (by showing) that that holy body did not deserve to be crucified, but to be worshipped!” The king said to him, “I have heard you now, (but) they said that the Jews crucified the god of the Christians.” Holy Simeon said to him, “Far be it from Christians to say this, my lord King! It is Marcionites who say this, and they falsely call

86 Shapur does not specify who “they” are, but Simeon, as his response indicates, takes them to be Marcionites.
themselves by the name ‘Christian.’”

(45) The king said to him, “If you do not worship Fire because it is mortal, then worship Sun, which is immortal!” The holy one responded and said, “How can I worship the sun which does not persist in its dominion? Everyday its dominion passes over and then darkness follows it. In its measure it is sometimes long and other times short. Second, how can I worship something that, even if it might be immortal, has neither knowledge nor reason? Third, there is this: how can something be understood to die if it never lives?”

(46) The king was exacerbated over these things that were said, but he subdued his inclinations nonetheless and said to Simeon, “Enough with your words now! Do what I have commanded you: worship the gods, Fire and Sun, and live and do not die!” Heroic Simeon said, “You have heard from your servant, my lord King, that I will not do this even if all my bones are burnt in the fire at your majesty’s order.” The king said to him, “Now, Simeon, for worshipping Fire and Sun you will be freed from being killed and not turned over to death, but (instead) you will live.” Holy Simeon responded and said, “To be killed for God is better to me than all life. Not in fear do I accept this, but in all the joy of my heart. Blessed is one the one who is deemed worthy of this: to suffer dishonor for God, to be oppressed with imprisonment, or to endure torture for truth. Especially blessed is the one who is killed for God, for to him is promised eternal life!”

(47) The king said, “This is not wisdom, Simeon, that you are so obstinate that

87 The accusation that Marcionites falsely call themselves “Christian” and that there is clear confusion on the part of others about who is a Christian is reflected in the sixth-century life of Mar Aba. Daniel Boyarin uses the story of Mar Aba to point up how unclear boundaries were between various religious groups. Mar Aba, before he became a Christian, met a disciple who claimed to be a Jew, a Christian, and a worshipper of the Messiah. The disciple explains that he is secretly a Jew, that he is a true Christian (unlike the Marcionites who use this term falsely about themselves), and that he is a worshipper of the Messiah because that is what Christians are called in Syriac. See D. Boyarin, Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 22-23; for the text see P. Bedjan, Histoire de Mar Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d’un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens (Leipzig, 1895), 211-214.
many people will be destroyed with you. Take pity on your own death and on that of the thousands I am prepared to bring to death. Because I swear by Sun, the judge of the entire earth, that if you, who are my friend, force me to kill you by your disobedience, then I will not have pity for anyone upon whom there is this name! So keep me away from your blood so that I will also be kept away from the blood of the multitude! And if, because of the hardness of your heart, you do not have pity on your own soul, then at least have pity on the souls of others!”

(48) Courageous Simeon responded and said, “The King rightly said that one who does not have mercy upon his soul or upon the souls of his brothers is crazy. And I, because I do have mercy upon myself and upon the souls of my brothers, it is for that reason that I hold firm to my doctrine, because our doctrine teaches us this: ‘What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’ For you have power over our lives and our bodies, my lord King; so, if it is your will, take them from us swiftly through a death by which you will be satisfied.”

(49) The king said to him, “If even now, in your stupidity, you do not have mercy for your own soul, (then) those who share your mindset and doctrine will be fearful by your death and they will do my will.” Heroic Simeon responded and said to him, “Far be it from them to live this life and be cast away from the life to come! Now you will see, my lord King, how truthful they are toward their God. By their death, their love will be made known to their Lord and creator because they will not reject or substitute the glory of the faithful God for your honorable and illustrious crown!” The king said, “Why, in

88 Meaning, the name “Christian.”

89 Mt 16:26

90 Lit., “the sons of your mind (or will) and your teaching,” which is yet another oblique way of saying, “Christians.”
your insolence, do you force me to destroy your desirable beauty with the sword and to splatter your graceful figure with blood? And now, unless you pay homage to me before my princes and worship Sun, God of the East, tomorrow your beauty will quickly be corrupted by killing.” Simeon, strong in his spirit, responded and said, “I will not worship the sun. Indeed, take my life from me today if you wish, or, if it pleases you, tomorrow. As for what you said, ‘I will destroy your beauty,’ this beauty of mine has one who resurrects it and constitutes it and gives it beauty, of whom one is not able to speak in a belittling way.”

(50) Then the king ordered that he be bound until daybreak because he said to himself: Perhaps he will accept my counsel and listen to me? And it was when he was bound in chains and led out from the king’s gate that Gushtazad was standing off to one side. Because he was eager to exchange peace with holy Simeon, he ran forth and came near and bowed down before him. Holy Simeon was enraged and turned his face from him saying, “There is no peace for me with one who denied God, the true king, because he feared and honored Shapur, the King of Kings! Nor will there ever be peace for me with one who is a rebel and denied my God and his Christ, Jesus my Lord!”

(51) At that moment Gushtazad lamented bitterly. He cried out and wept, saying, “Woe is me! What has happened to me! If Simeon—who was my beloved more than anyone else, and who loved me as he loved himself—now directs so much anger at me, then how much more is God angry with me? What will the one whom I denied do to me? What is the point of putting on sackcloth at my house? What is the use of putting on ashes in secret? Today, I will confess Jesus, the one whom I denied, before the one whom I denied.91 Steadfast to me is my God, from whose truth I strayed. Today, through my own lips, which I defiled, I will sanctify them by confessing his name.” At once he

91 In other words, Gushtazad intends to confess Jesus before Simeon.
hastily went off to his house and stripped off his clothes and put on black vestments of mourning. Then, he went and sat down in his place at the head of his fellow eunuchs. It was known that it was his place because he was not just the head of the eunuchs, but also the son of one of the tutors of King Shapur. All who passed by were bewildered when they saw him, and this story did not remain hidden from the king for long. The king sent word to him and said, “What is this madness that has overcome you? For I am alive and well and my crown sits on my head and yet you sit in mourning! Has someone from your house died? Is it your wife or one of your sons that you mourn—though your very nature testifies that you have neither a wife nor sons.”

(52) When Gushtazad heard these things from the messengers of the king, he sent back word and said, “Rightfully do I mourn because I am deserving of death.” Then the king inquired and said, “What is this that Gushtazad says?” Some of the eunuchs, his colleagues, answered and said, “We will not hide it from you, King of Kings, that for three days, from the time that Simeon, the head of the nasrāyē, came into Karka, Gushtazad has not come to the king’s gate until just now. For we heard that he had been sitting in his house in sackcloth and ashes.” When the king heard this, he ordered Gushtazad to be brought before him so that he could learn from Gushtazad himself what it was that had caused his mourning.

(53) When Gushtazad came in before the king and the king saw him he said to him, “There must be a demon in you that you bring this bad omen upon my kingdom!”

92 The latter part of this section closely parallels the account of Gushtazad’s actions in § 26 of the Martyrdom, with one rather humorous exception here at the very end. The author (or redactor) of this text seems to have recognized the obvious problem inherent in the head eunuch having a wife and sons. Rather than leaving such a problematic passage on the cutting room floor, he deals with it by having Shapur correct himself by “remembering” that a eunuch, by nature, would not have a wife or sons. This nature of Gushtazad the Eunuch comes up again at length, and in lofty rhetoric, in § 60 below where the idea of the eunuch who begets spiritual sons is expounded. On this topic, a particularly important study is M. Kuefler, The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
Gushtazad said to the king, “Let my lord King not say this, because not only is there no demon in me, but through the wisdom of my old age, I am yet able to give wisdom to my insipid mind.” The king said to him, “For what reason are you clothed in black as a madman when it is not the time for mourning, and that you even announce to me ‘I am deserving of death’”? Gushtazad said to him, “Truly I am deserving of death because I have harmed myself with many severe wounds and I have committed many great sins.” The king said to him, “Is your wound so severe that you must sit in sackcloth and ashes, and your sin so great that you must be clothed in black?” Gushtazad said, “It is so, my lord King, that my wounds are so severe that they cannot be healed, and that my sins are so great that they cannot be forgiven. I have committed a murder willingly, a terrible and bitter one.” The king said to him, “Against whom have you sinned?” Gushtazad said to him, “Against God, lord of all, whom you have traded for his creatures.” The king said again to him, “What is it that you lost?” Gushtazad said to him, “The course of my faith from my youth until now.” The king said to him, “And whom have you killed?” Gushtazad said to him, “I have killed my own soul because I worshipped the sun!” In a great rage, the king said to him, “Is it not right for you to worship Sun?” Gushtazad said to him, “It is not in truth that I worshipped it because I worshipped it as a false worship. It is for this reason that I am in mourning: I have not been sincere either toward God, my creator, or toward you, the greatest of men. I have been false toward my God and deserted his truth and have done your will. To you, King, I have been deceitful in that I worshipped the sun outwardly but not in my heart!”

(54) When the king heard these words, he was filled with anger and he said, “This is the cause of all your mourning, stupid old man? Surely, I will soon really give you mourning and lamenting if you persist in this frame of mind and do not turn from it!” Gushtazad, the true penitent, said, “If the good king so wills, let him hear me. If it pleases you, I will confirm my oath again because by the God who possesses heaven and
earth I swear and attest that no more will I do your will and carry out your commands, for I will not apostasize from my God again.” The king said to him, “I have mercy, Gushtazad, on your excellent service for my father and for me until now. For this reason, I have been patient in persuading you not to persist in the opinions of these sorcerers who are called ‘Christians’ so only that you would not perish from life and from friendship with the lord of all the earth!”

(55) Gushtazad bowed and said, “Long live the King! May you retain your rule forever, most excellent of men! This what you said to me, I will do it quickly, so that I will not perish from life and from friendship with the Lord of all the earth, who is the God of truth, the creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them. Believe me, my lord King, I will confirm my word with truth, namely that there is no one who will separate me from friendship with the Lord of heaven and earth—not you, my lord King, nor the kings or princes who stand before you. And why should I say kings and princes? Not even the angels of God—if they wanted to counsel me to remove myself from the love of my God—would be able to bend my steadfast will to renounce the creator and worship creatures.” The king said to him, “O stupid and impious old man! Do I worship creatures? Is it not known that I worship the sons of God?” Blessed Gushtazad said to him, “Do you command me to speak truth or lies?” The king said to him, “Speak truth!” Heroic Gushtazad said to him, “If only, my lord King, you worshipped a creature in which there were soul and life and perception, rather than mutable creatures in which there is neither soul nor discernment and which have been given over to the service of men!”

(56) Then the king, in a great furor, commanded that his head be cut off of him. When the executioners brought him swiftly to the place where he was to incline to his snare of death, Gushtazad spoke in a loud voice to the official of the king and to those who were holding him: “Wait just a few moments!” And they stopped and halted
because of the vain hope that they hoped about him. He called one of the eunuchs and said to him, “Go and say to the king that Gushtazad said, ‘I have a word to say to your majesty.’” And the eunuch went and said before the king what he had heard from Gushtazad. When the king heard this, he was greatly pleased because he hoped that his will had been done. The king sent an order and had him brought in.

(57) When Gushtazad came in he bowed and said, “You know, my lord King, that I was true and sincere to all the hidden secrets of your kingdom. I kept sincerity with you, great man, and not only with you but also with your father earlier on, as you, great man, have heard from the queen your mother. Even your majesty a little while ago attested (to my sincerity) when you said, ‘I have mercy on you because of the sincere service with which you served me and my father, and because of this I am patient with you.’ So because of these things, I now plead one petition from you. Let your majesty give the order that my request be fulfilled.”

(58) The king said to him, “What do you request?” Gushtazad said to him, “Let your clemency command that a herald ascend the city walls and go around the ramparts calling out and saying, ‘Gushtazad, who has been killed, was killed not because he divulged the secrets of the kingdom, nor because he was found at fault in anything else for which the laws would condemn him to death, but he is killed because he is a Christian. The king commanded that he do his will and worship Sun, but he did not wish to deny his god.’”

(59) For the wise old man thought to himself: Now, the rumor ‘Gushtazad has apostasized’ has already gone out about me, and many have lapsed because of me. If I am killed now, my death will not be able to compensate for what I have done because of the scandal that I

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93 Shapur’s father, Hormizd II, died before Shapur was born. See the note on Shapur’s mother and his crowning in utero above in § 12; Shapur’s genealogy is further explained in a note to § 4 above.
have propagated. But, if this is made known to everyone about me through the herald, then those
who fell away will take courage, and those who became weak will be strengthened, and all will
know that I was killed for Christ.

(60) Look at the wise old man! What a lovely trick he contrived in such a time—a
time full of tumult and terror, a time of fear and trembling, a time full of trepidation and anxiety! In a time in which, even with regard to things that one knows before they
happen, and that one understands before they occur, he is troubled by fear of them only
when hearing about death! This wise man had this wise and holy thought that befits the
wisdom of his witness. For he judged as follows: There are many reasons that call to death
those who stand in this high-ranking position in which I stand, one that is full of risk. But let
everyone learn that I am killed for my faith in Christ! O prudent old man who thought such a
good thought! O wise old man who gave such a gift to the people of God! O shrewd old
man who left such a heritage for the church of Christ! O old man whose mind did not
fade, but rather became greater and stronger and seasons insipid minds with his
wisdom, and who, with his mind, enlightens those who are in darkness! O old man, frail in body, who strengthens the thoughts of the weak! O eunuch without seed whose seed becomes abundant on the earth! O eunuch without sons whose sons became many
in the entire inhabited world! O eunuch without fruits whose confession produced fruit
in creation! O eunuch and faithful one of the faithful! O eunuch lacking a member and

94 There is a witty play on words here. The verb maddek means “to season” or “to salt,”
both literally and, as it is deployed here, metaphorically. In other words, Gushtazad “salts
tasteless minds.” This evokes the Gospel saying attributed to Jesus: “You are the salt of the earth.
But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be
thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Mt 5:13; cf. Lk 14:34-35). Traditionally, Jesus’ saying has
been interpreted as an indication of the cost of discipleship: if the disciple falters, there is nothing
that can “re-season” him. Gushtazad apostasized, but in his willingness to die for Christ, he
becomes “salt” again, a witness seasoning the “salt of the earth.”

95 There is another play on words here. Gushtazad is referred to several times as a
“eunuch,” but the word for eunuch that is used here (m-hymna), and is carried on throughout this
section, has two layers and means both “eunuch” and “faithful.” As a result, this passage can
victorious eunuch (faithful one) perfected in truth! O eunuch (faithful), son of Abraham, who in his image begot sons that he did not beget! O eunuch whose faith gave to him those whom his nature did not give him! The thousands of those who were strengthened on his account became as sons to him! O father who did not beget! O sons who were not begotten! Freedom (nobility) denied him offspring and his freedom (free choice) rewarded him his generations (spiritual offspring), because the freedom (inherited nobility) of his parents rejected him, and his own freedom rewarded him. This is a philosopher and a philosopher in truth, who added to the service of his philosophy a miraculous deed. He prepared life for those who heard him and heeded him. His philosophy was used not only in thoughts and words, but until its realization in deeds.

(61) Then the king, when he heard these things from Gushtazad, became more and more glad because he thought that many would hear of his killing and, as a result, would fall away from the opinion of the Christians and do his will. Gushtazad had thought about these things at first and the king thought about (them) only now. The

96 As a signal to his readers that he is playing with the meaning of m-hymna in this and the previous passage, the first use of “eunuch” in this sentence is not m-hymna, but the Syriac transliteration of the Greek word eunoukhos, which means only “eunuch” and nothing else. The second use of “eunuch” in the sentence reverts to m-hymna.

97 Cf. Gen 15

98 This passage is a bit obscure, but the text seems to suggest that Gushtazad had already considered what the king’s thoughts would be concerning his request and that the king was only actually thinking those thoughts now. In other words, Gushtazad knew the king would think it was a good idea to announce Gushtazad was being killed because he was a Christian because, in the king’s thinking, that would dissuade other Christians from persisting in Christianity. Gushtazad knew, of course, that this would only encourage the Christians, not dissuade them.

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thinking of a wise old man brought to naught the thinking of the stupid king. The king
gave an order and it was proclaimed from the ramparts as heroic Gushtazad had
wished.

(62) Then they brought him to the procurator of the king, so that his head could
be cut off. When he came near to the place so that he could be crowned, he knelt and
worshiped God facing the east and said, “I praise you, Lord Jesus, who brought me
back—a sheep who was lost from your holy sheepfold. (I praise you who) found me
through the diligent Simeon, your pastor, who went out in search of me and led me
among the company of your heavenly sheep so that I might be a son of the apostles and
a brother of the martyrs who were crowned in the West, and a good example for your
people in the East, so that they will not weaken or lapse from the true faith of the Father
and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the true being and the king of glory, to whom there
should be praise from the mouths of all who worship the Holy Trinity who are in
heaven and on earth, now and forever and ever. Amen.”

(63) He concluded his prayer with a shining face and he looked at those who
stood there and said, “Today, God, the giver of life, will rejoice in a dead one who
returned, and his Christ will exalt over a lost one who is found, and the angels will
dance for a sinner who repents. Our spiritual father, the holy catholicos Simeon, will
rejoice and give thanks from all his heart and will laud and magnify God who looked
upon the abasement of his own soul and brought back to him his son who had thrown
away the richness of his faith. Now Simeon runs to me through the voice of my
confession and will fall upon my neck through the sword, embrace me in the cutting off
of my head, and kiss me in my martyrdom.” And after he had said this, he bent his head
to the sword and in this way was perfected in beautiful martyrdom.

(64) This was done on (Thursday) the fifth day of the week on the thirteenth day
of the lunar month Nisan.
This is the faithful son of the faithful Daniel, who is similar to him in all ways. He served Darius, this one Shapur. He served the king of Media and Persia, and this one served the king of Persia and Media. He did not fear lions, and this one was not afraid of the sword. O to you eunuch (faithful one), splendid old man, you who have become equal in rank to Daniel the faithful one! With Hananiah the faithful, you should dance! With 'Azariah you will rejoice! With Mishael you will glorify! With the powerful eunuch of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, you must rejoice! With those five men you are immanent in the kingdom, for you have received your name upon you in a symbolic way. In Persian your name is known as “Noble One of the Kingdom,” and you have been deemed worthy to be a noble one of the kingdom of heaven. To you is being given a name that is better than the name sons or daughters, as in the words of the prophet. You will be given a place in the house and within the walls of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah testified. To you will be given a name that will abide for eternity, as according to the word of the Lord.

99 Cf. Dan 6

100 Hananiah, 'Azariah, and Mishael (or Shadrach, Abednego, and Meshach) are the three young men from Dan 3 who defy Nebuchadnezzar's order to worship the golden idol and are thrown into the furnace.

101 Lit., Kushāṭyē.

102 Cf. Acts 8:26-40. In this passage, Philip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch reading from Isaiah and offers to explain to him the passage about the sheep led to its slaughter.

103 Cf. § 26 in the Martyrdom.

104 Cf. Is 56:1-7, worth quoting in full: “Thus says the Lord: Observe what is right, do what is just; for my salvation is about to come, my justice, about to be revealed. Happy is the man who does this, the son of man who holds to it, who keeps the Sabbath free from profanation, and his hand from any evildoing. Let not the foreigner say, when he would join himself to the Lord, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ Nor let the eunuch say, ‘See, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: ‘To the eunuchs who observe my sabbaths and choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; an eternal, imperishable name will I give them. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, ministering to him, loving the name of the Lord, and
(66) This is the end of glorious Gushtazad! This is the horn calling our people to prepare for spiritual battle. This is the true martyr of the land of the East, who through Simeon, who is the bishop of the East, was caught as a fish for life.\(^{105}\)

(67) At the time Simeon, the blessed catholicos, left the king, holy Gushtazad came to him and bowed before him and heard from him the words that have been quoted earlier. And (Simeon) came to his brother bishops, those whose names we mentioned at the beginning of our memra, and came also to the priests and the deacons from various regions who were imprisoned with them prior to blessed Simeon’s arrival at the king’s gate—they who mightily and courageously and joyfully and readily descended to the fight for the fear of God and were victorious and were crowned. When they saw him, they rejoiced greatly because they saw the father of bishops and because they were very eager to see him from the moment they heard that he had been brought to Karka. He greeted them and kissed all of them and began to speak to them: “What should I say to your wisdom and your knowledge? Prior to my words you have already accomplished deeds. You have already been victorious in great suffering! Of what should I remind those who already dwell in heaven? What should I say about your deeds that have already been exalted from the earth and are dwelling with the most high? For, lo, before you came to the king’s gate, you were already perfected in your martyrdom, in the suffering that you endured from your persecutors, and you had already seen with your eyes the uprooting of your churches, and you had no hesitation in your mind. So now, my brothers, take courage, be strong, and persist with hope in all becoming his servants—all who keep the sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer. Their holocausts and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

\(^{105}\) Cf. Mt 4:19
your heart.

(68) “Now behold indeed: your crowns are prepared and the gate of the banquet hall is open before us. Come, let us adorn ourselves with the crowns of martyrdom! Come, let us enter the banquet hall of God! Crowns are placed on high, and the way that leads there is narrow and the door that gives access to heaven is small, as our lord has said, “How small is the gate and how narrow is the path that leads to life, and few are those who walk on it.”¹⁰⁶ Come, let us take wings and hasten our flight! Come, let us narrow our bodies and enter in through this gate, proceed along this path, fly away, and be lifted up on high! Let us not heed our race¹⁰⁷ or our families. Let us not consider our brothers or our relatives. Let us not fix our gaze upon our parents in the flesh, but come, let us heed the assembly of angels, the choir of the Seraphim, the order of the Cherubim, the rank of the Principalities, and the station of the Dominions, in whom we will be joined if we fulfill our struggle! Come, let us fix our eyes on the assembly of the apostles and on the company of the disciples. (Let us) even turn our minds and the gaze of our thoughts to the prophets and see that some of them were killed, some were cut asunder, some stoned, some crucified, some put to death by the sword, some starved to death by hunger and thirst. They were oppressed and subjugated, men of whom the world was not worthy.¹⁰⁸ If we want to prevail and to be taken up and perfected in martyrdom, we will join with them in the enjoyment of the good things to come in the kingdom of heaven, which has been prepared for us through Christ, who suffered and was tempted and is therefore able to aid those who are tempted, according to the word of the Apostle.

¹⁰⁶ Mt 7:14

¹⁰⁷ Lit., “nation” or “family,” transliterated from the Greek as gens in Syriac; in other words, this is an exhortation not to be held back by human nature and to begin assuming a divine, or angelic, nature.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Heb 11:36-38
If we suffer for his name, he will strengthen us and help us in this struggle and we will be perfected in the martyrdom of Christ and completed in the confession of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

(69) When victorious Simeon had said these words to his brothers, right at once someone came to them and said, “Rejoice, O blessed ones, because victorious Gushtazad is perfected in martyrdom and is crowned!” All the confessors marveled at what they heard and (the messenger) recounted to them all the things that had happened. When they heard these things they rejoiced greatly and Simeon stood up to praise God in prayer for all that was done for glorious Gushtazad, and he said to all his brothers in the prison: “Come, let us give glory to the Lord! Come, let us sing psalms to our God the savior! Come, let us praise Christ and revere his exalted name for the great joy that God gave to us, for he restored the sheep that had strayed from the flock to the sheepfold of Christ.\(^{109}\) He restored the coin that fell from the church to the purse of his splendor.\(^{110}\) He restored the son who was profligate with his wealth to the dwelling place of his father’s house.”\(^{111}\)

(70) Simeon began again in prayer saying, “Great is your hope, our God! Glorious is your strength, our creator! Most exalted is your power, our savior! For you bring the dead to life, you raise up the fallen, and you bring hope to the hopeless. The one who was last in my thoughts has done my will before me.\(^{112}\) The one who was estranged from my deeds became a companion of my work. The one who was distant from my truth is now near to my faith. The one who had gone out into the outer

\(^{109}\) Lk 15:3-7

\(^{110}\) Lk 15:8-10

\(^{111}\) Lk 15:11-32

\(^{112}\) Meaning, Gushtazad has preceded Simeon in martyrdom.
darkness is now one who rests in the bridal chamber. The one whose will drove him far away from me, lo, his confession brought him back to me. While I was ahead of him, he went beyond me. While I sought to pass him, he has now overtaken me. He has breached the terrible wall of death and has made me joyful. The path of life was shown in him and he made me glad. He became a guide for my feet on the straight path and he directed and brought forth my feet along the narrow way. Why would I delay? Why would I remain any longer? He left his pledge for me: stand up! He left behind his gaze for me: come! While he says to me in joy, ‘Simeon, you no longer have an accusation against me, nor can you keep me any longer at the door of the house where you dwell. No longer am I mourning on account of your anger against me! Enter happily with me into the house that you prepared for me, and to the rest that you arranged for me, and let us rejoice in each other’s company in the place of light, because in that world of afflictions we used to rejoice with one another in body and spirit.’ What is the impediment to hearing him? What is the delay to reaching him? Blessed would I be if they would come to hurry me along to death, and blessed would I be at the moment they hasten me to death—all the more so since I will escape from the afflictions that encompass the people of Christ, my lord, and the trials that overcome the faithful of Jesus, my savior.”

(71) (Simeon) knelt deeply and began to say with a loud voice: “My Lord Jesus, give me the crown of martyrdom because it is clear to you that I have sought it with my entire heart. You, inspector of kidneys, you know that I have loved you with all my soul. You, the inquisitor of the heart, you are convinced that with all my strength I have desired you and have yearned greatly for you and have entreated you for this

\[\text{113} \text{ Cf. Ps 139; “inspector of kidneys” is a very strange phrase, but, as the subsequent passage here implies, it seems to be a way of expressing how Jesus knows both outward actions and inmost thoughts.}\]
crown and have asked for this wish from you! Give me sight of the sword and joy! Give me rest in your kingdom and consolation in your glory! Give me life in this world no longer! Give me sight of the misfortune of my people no more! Let me not live to see your churches that are destroyed, your altars that are overturned, your holy books that are torn to pieces, the liturgy that is despoiled and disgraced, your holiness that is trodden under foot, your qyāmā that is oppressed and afflicted everywhere! Let me not live to see the weak defiled and the uncourageous turned from the truth! Let me not live to see my abundant flocks ripped apart by ravenous wolves! Let me not live to see my many false friends who, lo, have today been turned into my enemies and killers. Let me see no longer my transient friends who disappeared from me in the moment of trial. Let me not live to see the impure people of the crucifiers who mocked and insulted your holy people and were insolent toward your servants! My Lord, let my confession be perfected in martyrdom! Let me stand heroically at the head of all those of the East and be a good example for all your people in the realm of this powerful kingdom! My Lord, I have been called on behalf of your name to be at the head of all my brothers and your people in this realm, and I will die at the head of them all while I am giving my blood for them and while I am beginning my life with those in whom there is no thought or concern, sorrow or worry, and among whom there is neither one who oppresses or is oppressed, nor one who is unjust or is treated unjustly. For you, my Lord, have prepared that world for your chosen ones and my soul waits for you. Give me, my Lord, an escape from this life, in which the blasphemy of kings terrifies me and the iniquity of the powerful against your lauded name discourages me. The stumbling of my feet will be healed in you, O way of truth! The weariness of limbs will be eased in you, O Christ, our anointing oil! The sadness of my heart will be forgotten in you, Jesus, cup of our salvation! The stream of tears from my eyes will be held back by you, consolation of our joy!"
The bishops and priests and deacons who were imprisoned there with him marveled at the strength of his holy spirit and his perseverance in prayer. They were amazed that he endured so long with his hands extended to heaven and they observed his face, which was transformed from its customary visage and appeared in the form of a rose.

He completed his prayer by giving thanks to God, and all responded and said, “Amen!” He turned to his brothers and blessed them, and after he blessed them he said to them, “Rejoice in our Lord, my brothers! Rejoice, I say again! Be comforted and raise up your heads because the time of our salvation has come: tomorrow, on the day of his passion, we will be killed.” And he also said to them many other things from scripture.

After he finished instructing them, he said to them, “Arise! Let us again praise the Lord and sing for God our savior, who redeemed his servant Gushtazad from death and delivered him from the hands of Sheol. Let us stand before his face in thanksgiving, for his mercy has hastened him along, freed him from the power of error, and released him from the bondage of demons and from the darkness and gloom of Satan. He led him to that light from which he strayed and brought him to the kingdom of his son Jesus from which he had been expelled. He became worthy of that portion that comes to the holy ones in the land of light! Come, let us commemorate him in joy and let us unite his Passover with the Passover of Jesus Christ and let us delight in the body and blood of the living lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, for he revealed it to us in a symbol in order to teach us the mystery of the sacrifice. His body was sacrificed not from among the Jews but from among his holy ones, the servants in the church.”

They stood in prayer and they offered the mysteries in the prison through their clasped hands because for fear of persecution no one was able to bring the vessels of the liturgy in to them. In this way they joined Passover with Passover and memorial
with memorial. Holy Simeon said, “Let this mystery of the body of our Lord be to us, friends, a companion until the day that we receive his revelation when he comes upon the clouds of heaven with the host of his holy angels, restores our souls to our bodies, raises them from dust, guides us up with him to heaven, and lets us delight in his gratifying vision, share in his glory, and rejoice in the kingdom of heaven forever and ever. Amen!”

(76) All the holy ones who were with him responded and said, “Amen!” They began again in prayer for the whole night that includes the dawn of the Friday of the passion of our Lord, Jesus. With psalms and hymns and canticles they spent (the night) standing on their feet. Neither did sleep overcome them by making them miserable, nor did anxiety hinder them by keeping them worried, but all were kneeling and praying and beseeching: “Give us, our Lord, on this day of your passion, our passion, too, and let us taste this cup of death on behalf of your name so that generations after us might say, ‘Simeon and his brothers hearkened unto Jesus, and, as Jesus, they were sacrificed on Friday the fourteenth.’” At Friday’s dawn, on the first hour of the day, all of them were summoned from prison to the gate of the king’s courtyard.

(77) When they came in, the king sent word to Simeon and all his brothers: “Worship Sun through whose rising the world lives and you will live, too!” Simeon sent word to the king on behalf of all the blessed who were with him and said to the king’s prefect, “Why should we worship that which does not see our worship, and why should we pray to that which does not hear our prayers? Why should we glorify that which is not even aware of its own light? Far be it! It is not for Christians to offer the worship due to the maker to the things that are made, and to exchange the creator for his creatures. Even if we are forced with all sorts of coercion and are made to die any manner of death, we will not apostasize from God. As for what my lord King said—‘Through Sun’s rising the world lives’—it is not through the sun’s rising that the world lives! How can that
which itself does not live impart life? For the world lives by the will of God, who is the living one in his very essence. For even the blind, those who do not see the sun, they still yet live. The sun, were it to possess intellect, would have to give thanks to the eyes. For were the eye not open to the light, the use of the light of the sun would be useless.”

These things, which were said by blessed Simeon, were transmitted to the king, and the king sent word to them again and said, “Obey that which I command you, and do my will, and I will magnify your primacy and multiply your honor!”

(78) Simeon and the holy ones with him sent word to the king and they said, “You, my lord King, you know that if you were to send out a general to war and that if in the middle of the battlefield—through fear of death and love of life—he were to turn his back and retreat from the ranks, that you would surely deliver him to death. If a deserter from the rank of your servants is killed, then what kind of death would one deserve as punishment for his defection if he were to retreat from God, the judge of the living and the dead, and were to turn his back in the battle on behalf of the truth of the one who is the king of all kings and whose kingdom is without end? Such a person would take fright at the sight of men and would not look at God, at the glance of whose gaze heaven and earth and all that is in them fear. The glory of his greatness is such that not even his servants of fire and spirit are able to look upon it. Such a God we ought to fear, my lord King, not mortal men. This Lord of heaven and earth one must worship and praise, rather than the sun that darkness covers everyday. Had (the sun) understanding, it would have to give thanks to us, for it is because of us that God

114 The sixth-century History of the Holy Mar Maʿin recounts the story of one of Shapur’s generals (Mar Maʿin) who abandons his military career for life in Christ as an ascetic and founder of many monasteries. It is probably not too much to suggest that that story may have been inspired by, or at least have some link to, this reference to army generals. Below, in § 84 and 97, Simeon’s leadership of Christians is directly likened to that of an army general.

115 This in contrast to the Magi who serve the god, Fire.
enlightened it and placed it in the firmament of the heavens in order to shed light upon the earth. Concerning the ‘honor and primacy’ that you promised us, we have in the house of heavenly treasures all the better treasures that exceed all the honor and comfort of the world, and when we are killed for God, then we will be called princes of justice and governors of righteousness.”

(79) When holy Simeon had said these things before the king and his blessed companions, the king then ordered victorious Simeon to be brought before him alone. It was the third hour. They brought him in quickly and led him before the king. When he came before the king, he bowed to him. The king said to him, “Simeon, you rebel! In what frame of mind did you spend last night? Do you remain with us in friendship, or shall I send you to Sheol in enmity?”

(80) Holy Simeon said, “Live, King, live! I, your servant, spent the night in a fruitful state of mind.” The king said to him, “In which one?” Holy Simeon said, “That it is better for me to be killed than to live in denial of God.” The king said to him, “Where, then, is your friendship with me?” Simeon said to him, “My lord King, truly I am your friend and I and my people always pray for your kingdom as our scripture commands us. But being the friend of my God is better to me than your friendship, King! For friendship with the King cannot be compared to being a friend of God, just as a little star cannot be compared to the sun even though they are both light. In the same way, while your friendship is called friendship, O King, and that of God is called friendship, too, his friendship is different from yours. Your majesty I love as a King and as one who is a guardian of his realm. God, however, I love as God and Lord, creator and giver of our lives, guardian, overseer, nourisher, and even resurrector and giver of unending glory to his friends and to those who keep his commandments.” The king said to him, “Worship

116 Cf. Jas 4:4
Sun just once and you will not have to worship it anymore and I will free you from the Magi who seek your soul!”

(81) As he heard this, blessed Simeon was dismayed and said, “O my lord King! Let not this be heard in the world, nor told in creation, nor spoken of in the land, and let not those who are my enemies without cause rejoice in it, nor those who hate me in iniquity exult and say, ‘Simeon turned from his god and worshipped Sun because he was afraid of death and was terrified of being killed. He loved temporal life!’” The king said, “Know, Simeon, that because you were my friend I was patient with you and I gave you counsel, but you did not listen to me. Henceforth, however, you will know!” Simeon said, “My lord King, such counsel is irrelevant! It comes to this: if you order them to kill me because of the truth of my God, then your friendship toward me will effectively become visible. For friendship with the King, which entails rejection by God, is of no use to me!”

(82) Then the king, when he heard this, was amazed by his fortitude and he stared at the kings and princes and nobles who sat before him and he said to them while sighing, “I swear by God and by Sun, who is the judge of righteousness, that I have seen foreign peoples and far off lands and the sons of our land who live among us. Yet, I have never seen such radiance of face and beauty of body! Look how he does not spare himself because of this error that he clings to!” And they all responded and said, “Our lord King, do not gaze upon the beauty of his body, but consider the beauty of the many souls that he corrupts and deprives of our teaching!”

(83) Then the edict went out from there concerning him and all his brothers—that they should be taken by the sword. It was Friday, the day of preparation, at the sixth hour. It was at that moment that our Lord went to his passion of crucifixion, and in that very moment that they also went out and were victorious in being killed. The head mobed went out and asked the group of confessors who were with holy Simeon and said
to them, “Will you worship the god Sun and do the will of Shapur, King of Kings and lord of all the earth, so that you will live?” All of them responded in a loud voice and said, “Truly, we will do the will of the king of kings and the lord of all the earth who is king forever!” When the head of the mobeds heard this, he was glad and said to them, “Then worship Sun!” Then all the blessed ones laughed at him in loud voices and said, “Did you not tell us to do the will of the king of all the earth? We are doing his will right now by not worshipping the sun!” The head mobed said to them, “And who is the king of kings and lord of all the earth if not Shapur, the King of Kings?” The holy ones said to him, “You speak a manifest lie! The king, the lord of all the earth, is God, creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them, and he is king of kings forever. Shapur possesses a part of the earth; today he is, but tomorrow he is no longer on the face of the earth. If King Shapur is lord of the earth, then he should issue a command and produce seed without seed, or agricultural labor, or the rain that comes from clouds. Let him give the order and bring forth trees that are not planted! But in order not to weary you with many things, listen to us briefly: may God keep it from us that we worship the sun or some other creature and turn from God!” The mobed responded and said to them, “Watch what you are doing—the king has decreed death upon you!” The holy ones replied and said, “It would be a blessing upon us if the decree of which you speak comes to pass upon us and if our lives, which are in God, would be given unto us because of death for God. For you and also the king with you should know that we will not worship the sun and renounce God!”

(84) The head mobed conveyed these things to the king, and the king ordered that all of them be killed in front of victorious Simeon. For perhaps, as a result of seeing the killing of many, he would retreat from his belief. When they led out the holy ones, there was a great commotion in Karka d-Ledan when they saw the successive groups of confessors who were exhausted and afflicted. As a result of the torments of the tortures
that they had endured their faces were stricken, but their thoughts and words were strong. When they were brought out, blessed Simeon walked at the lead as an army general\(^{117}\) mighty in power and in a loud voice encouraged them on their path, saying, "Be strong in God, my brothers, and do not be afraid! Behold, our Lord encourages you when he says, 'Take courage! I have overcome the world!'\(^{118}\) For we die for the resurrector and we are killed for Christ. He is our resurrection and our life, as he says, 'I am the resurrection and the raising and the life, and whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live.'\(^{119}\) How much more, then, will live the one who is killed for his holy and glorious name?"

(85) All of them went out and came to the outskirts of the city of Karka d-Ledan, and many thousands of pagans and Christians, the sons of the captivity,\(^{120}\) surrounded them because it was a marvelous spectacle—multitudes of men of God who were killed for God. All eyes gazed upon the heroic ones, for there was no fear in them but they were cheerful and laughing. Holy Simeon’s face was jubilant, and amid that terrible scene he did not cease from teaching. He began to exhort them after they came to the place where they would be sacrificed. He said to them, “Do not fear, brothers! Do not be

\(^{117}\) Simeon obliquely compares himself to an army general above in § 78 and is directly called an army general again in § 97.

\(^{118}\) Jn 16:33

\(^{119}\) Jn 11:25

\(^{120}\) The “sons of the captivity” refers to those deported from northern Mesopotamia, as mentioned in § 25, to help build and settle Karka d-Ledan; more broadly, the reference possibly hearkens back to the deportations of Shapur I in the mid-third century. Notably, Shapur I (Shapur II’s grandfather) captured and deported many skilled workers from Antioch to the Persian Empire at that time. See, for example, S.N.C. Lieu, “Captives, Refugees and Exiles: A Study of the Cross-Frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian,” in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, vol. 2, ed. P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (Oxford: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986), 475-505.
afraid of those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul.\textsuperscript{121} Remember the truthfult one who said: ‘Anyone who loses himself for me will have life eternal.’\textsuperscript{122} Remember as well the word of the teacher of truth, who said, ‘There is no greater love than this: that one would lay down his life for his friends.’\textsuperscript{123} Indeed for us, enemies, Jesus laid down his life. So we should take pains to lay down our lives for him, our friend Jesus. If our killers, in the zeal of error, bring us to death not as their enemies, then we have great consolation in the prophetic word of our Lord who said, ‘There will come days on which everyone who kills you will think that he is offering a sacrifice to God.’\textsuperscript{124} If they do this as enemies and persecutors, then this word will serve as encouragement, the word that says, ‘If they hate me, then they will also hate you. And if they persecute me, they will persecute you as well.’\textsuperscript{125} Remember the word that was spoken in the spirit by the chosen Apostle Paul: ‘I think that the suffering of this age cannot be compared to the glory that is going to be revealed in us.’\textsuperscript{126} And again, ‘If only we suffer with him, so that we may (also) be glorified with him.’\textsuperscript{127} And again, ‘If you confess our Lord Jesus with your mouth, and if you believe in your heart that God resurrected him from among the dead, then you will live.’\textsuperscript{128} And again, ‘There is no one who lives for himself, and there is no one who dies for himself, because if we live, we

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Mt 10:28
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Cf. Mt 10:39
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Jn 15:13
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Jn 16:2
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Cf. Jn 15:20
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Rom 8:18
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Rom 8:17
  \item \textsuperscript{128} Rom 10:9
\end{itemize}
live for our Lord, and if we die, we die for our Lord. And whether we live or die, we belong to our Lord because Christ died and was brought back to life and rose in order to become the lord of the dead and the living."¹²⁹

(86) “Remember, my brothers, the blessed apostles, as in the words of Paul, the chosen one: ‘They were a spectacle to the world, to angels and men alike. They were hungry and thirsty, just as you are. They were naked and oppressed, just you are. And they were shamed and wearied by the work of their hands, just as you are. They were reviled and yet they blessed. They were persecuted and yet they endured. They were slandered and yet they were petitioning for their slanderers. They were like the rubbish of the earth and the scum of all until now,"¹³⁰ as the Apostle testified. Hear him again when he says, ‘The time has grown brief and those who weep (should live) as though they were not weeping, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, for the present form of this world is passing away.’¹³¹ Remember what he said, ‘Run as one who is striving, because everyone who is in a contest abstains from all things, and they run to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.’¹³² And he shouted and said, ‘I do not run aimlessly, and I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. But I subdue my flesh and I train it, lest I, who preached to others, should myself be rejected.’¹³³ Let us put our trust in him when he says, ‘Faithful is God who does not let you be tested more than you can bear, but provides a way out with your trial so that you will be able to

¹²⁹ Rom 14:7-9
¹³⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 4:9-13
¹³¹ Cf. 1 Cor 7:29-31
¹³² 1 Cor 9:24-25
¹³³ 1 Cor 9:26-27
endure.'\textsuperscript{134} Hear him when he says, ‘Imitate me just as I imitate Christ.’\textsuperscript{135} For he was sacrificed just as Christ, so let us be sacrificed just as he was. Hear him when he says, ‘If for this life alone we have hope in Christ, then we are the most miserable people of all.’\textsuperscript{136} For you have read and found trustworthy the encouragement he gave with regard to the dead when he called them sleepers, so that you might know that death is slumber. Christ has been raised from among the dead, and is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.\textsuperscript{137} And again, ‘Just as we believe that Jesus died and was resurrected, so also God will take with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.’\textsuperscript{138} Let us hear how he comforts us in truth when he says, ‘Wake up and stand firm in faith, be strong, and be courageous!’\textsuperscript{139}

\textbf{(87)} “Let us glorify God, my brothers and my beloved, in this moment in which we are sacrificed, and let us say ‘Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all tribulations so that we are able to console others in all their tribulations through our consolation that we receive from God. Just as the passions of Christ overflow into us, so, too, the consolation that we receive through Christ.”\textsuperscript{140} Let us recall, my brothers, that verse in which he calls our bodies ‘vessels of clay’ enflamed in fire and the Holy Spirit when he says, ‘There is to us this treasure in a vessel of clay so that the immensity of power

\begin{enumerate}
  \item[134] 1 Cor 10:13
  \item[135] 1 Cor 11:1
  \item[136] 1 Cor 15:19
  \item[137] 1 Cor 15:20
  \item[138] 1 Thess 4:14
  \item[139] 1 Cor 16:13
  \item[140] 2 Cor 1:3-5
\end{enumerate}
would be God’s and not ours.’\(^{141}\) The power of God that is in us is clearly shown when he says, ‘For everyday we are subjected to tribulation, but we do not succumb; we are chastened, but we are not vilified; we are oppressed, but we are not broken; we are cast down, but we do not perish. For we bear the death of Jesus in our bodies always so that the life of Jesus might be revealed in our bodies. If indeed while we are still alive we are given over to death for Jesus, so also the life of Jesus, too, will be revealed in our this body of ours that dies while we know that he who raised up our Lord Jesus will also raise us through Jesus and offer us up with you to him.’\(^{142}\) Furthermore, he says, ‘Therefore it does not bother us. For even as our outer self is becoming corrupted, our inner self is yet being renewed day by day. The tribulation of this time, while it is quite little and light, will prepare for us a great glory without end forever and ever. We do not rejoice in that which is visible but in that which is invisible. Visible things are transitory, invisible things are eternal. We know that if this body that houses us on earth is dissolved, there is yet to us a building that is from God, a house not made by hands, but everlasting in heaven.’\(^{143}\)

\(^{(88)}\) ‘Let us listen further to him, how he longed to depart from the body, this Apostle of wonder, namely, ‘As long as we dwell in the body, we are dead to our Lord; for this reason we are longing to depart from the body and to be with our Lord.’\(^{144}\) While being eager to show about himself in which ways he was known to be a servant of God, he says, ‘Let us prove ourselves servants of God in all things: in great endurance; in tribulations; in distress; in imprisonment; in flogging; in chains; in turmoil; in fatigue; in

\(^{141}\) 2 Cor 4:7

\(^{142}\) Cf. 2 Cor 4:8-11; 14

\(^{143}\) 2 Cor 4:16-5:1

\(^{144}\) Cf. 2 Cor 5:6
vigils; in fasting; in purity; in knowledge; in patience; in kindness; in the Holy Spirit; in a
love without deceit; in the word of truth; in the power of God; with the weapon of
righteousness at the right and at the left; in glory and in disgrace; in praise and in blame;
as deceivers and as truthful ones; as those who are unknown and as we are known; as
we are dead and, lo, still living; as we are scourged but not yet killed; as we are
saddened and yet always joyful; as poor ones and yet making many rich; as those who
have nothing and yet possess everything.”145

(89) “Let us remember, my brothers, this blessed Paul, who was lashed with
whips by the Jews five times, and was beaten with rods by the gentiles146 three times and
was stoned once.147 He was prepared to be thrown to the beasts,148 and he died everyday,
as he testified.149 He saw many perils, as is written, and at the end was sacrificed by
Emperor Nero in the middle of Rome.150 Let us die in joy, my brothers, with Christ! And
let us take courage, my brothers, in our Lord and in the strength of his power! If we die
with our lord and with his holy apostles, then we will be united with them in glory.
This, my brothers, has been given to you by God, so that you not only truly believe in
Christ but also that he will be a guide for us and that he has made us believers and
teachers. Not just in order to be guides and teachers, but also to suffer for his name and

145 2 Cor 6:4-10
146 Lit., ‘amme, “peoples.”
147 Cf. 2 Cor 11:24-25
148 Cf. 1 Cor 15:32
149 Cf. 1 Cor 15:31

150 The Bible is silent on how and when Paul died, but early Christian tradition holds
that he was killed by Nero in Rome; Eusebius is the earliest witness to suggest that Paul was
beheaded (HE II.25.5), the same manner of death to which the martyrs of this text are subjected.
For more on the traditions of Paul’s martyrdom, see D.L. Eastman, Paul the Martyr: The Cult of the
to endure this contest of martyrdom.\footnote{Cf. Phil 1:29} Therefore, let us regard this world, all that is in it and its life, as dung in order that we may gain only Christ, as did Paul.\footnote{Cf. Phil 3:8}

(90) “Rejoice, my brothers, in our Lord. Rejoice greatly always. Let our martyrdom for Christ and our sacrifice before him be known by all!\footnote{Cf. Phil 4:4-5} Our Lord is near, for he will crown our killed bodies with his resurrection. Let us rejoice in this suffering on behalf of the people of God. Let us fulfill the martyrdom of Christ’s tribulations in our bodies on behalf of his body, which is the church, as the Apostle taught us.\footnote{Cf. Col 1:24} Therefore, my beloved, let us look up and seek the place where Christ is at the right hand of God. From there he will be revealed to us, for even our death and our life is kept secret in him.\footnote{Cf. Col 3:1-3} When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then we also will be revealed with him in glory. Behold, today we imitate the prophets and the apostles who were stoned and killed, as blessed Paul mentioned concerning the persecution of the Thessalonians: ‘For you, my brothers, have imitated the churches in Judea, which are in Christ, in that you have endured the same from the gentiles\footnote{Lit., ‘ammē, “peoples.”} as they have from the Jews, who have killed our Lord Jesus and who have persecuted their own prophets as well us.’\footnote{1 Thess 2:14-15} Let us not despair, my brothers, in suffering and death for Christ because for this we are destined. We endure tribulations and persecutions and killings as a demonstration of the just judgment of God so that we might be esteemed worthy of his
kingdom for which we are suffering. ‘And if it is just before God,’ as the Apostle said, ‘tribulation will repay our tribulations, and to us who endure tribulation, he will give us life through the revelation of our Lord from heaven along with the host of his angels when he comes to take vengeance with flaming fire on those who did not acknowledge God and did not hearken to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will receive eternal separation from the gaze of the Lord and from the glory of his power as their punishment in judgment on that day when he comes to be glorified among his holy ones in order to show his wonders among his believers, because our witness has been believed.’158 Faithful and true, my brothers, is the word of Paul: ‘If we die with him, then we shall live with him. And if we persevere, then we shall reign with him. And if we deny him, he also will deny us. And if we are faithless, he will yet remain faithful for he cannot deny himself.’159

(91) “Let us not be sad or distressed on this day on which we depart from this world, neither about our persecution, nor about of the uprooting of our churches, while yet something good will happen to them, as to us, on behalf of Christ. For the holy Apostle said, ‘All who wish to live in Jesus Christ will be persecuted.’160 Even though our churches are destroyed, lo, there is our building in heaven that is not built by hands.161 A multitude of upright and righteous people has died in deaths on behalf of the fear of God. In order not to prolong my words—for, lo, our killers hasten us unto the mouth of the sword!—I will also mention briefly now the witness of the Apostle that concerns us so that it will always be known that I have not said anything from my own

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158 Cf. 2 Thess 1:6-10
159 2 Tim 2:11-13
160 2 Tim 3:12
161 Cf. 2 Cor 5:1
mind, but from the scriptures of God. For about righteous men who endure tribulation, he says as follows, ‘Some were killed by torture, others were stoned, others cut in half. Some were killed by the sword and they were in need and in tribulation and distress, men of whom the world was not worthy.’ Let us also imitate them, my brothers, now in death, just as we imitated them in tribulation! Behold, the acceptable day; behold, the hour of salvation! Let no one fear the glinting sword! Let us remember the word of our Lord that is sharper than the blade. Let no one from our rank stay behind. Let us all go together so that we may rejoice all together there. Let us be prepared with all our soul in order to show the things to which we are committed. Our things, those of God, are already prepared for us. Ours is love; his is recompense. Ours is awe; his is gift. Ours is labor; his is wages. Ours is suffering; his is delight. Ours is blood; his is the kingdom. Ours is death; his is life while he gives comfort and joy, rest and pleasure; while he says to us in a loud voice, ‘Well done, good servants who have earned well with your talents that were entrusted to you. Take ten mina each.’”

(92) When blessed Simeon spoke these words, the executioners drew near in order to sacrifice them. One from among the company of the confessors said to

162 Throughout Simeon’s long speech (beginning in § 84) to his brothers before their martyrdom, he goes through the Pauline (and deuto-Pauline) epistles systematically, and generally in the order in which the books are arranged, picking out relevant quotations. He begins with the Gospels (namely, John and Matthew), and then moves on in order, citing: Romans; 1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 Thessalonians; 2 Thessalonians; and 2 Timothy before concluding with several references to Hebrews and then finishing his speech by returning to the Gospels to quote a saying of Jesus’.

163 Cf. Heb 11:35, 37-38
164 Cf. Heb 4:12
165 Lit., “fear” (dehîn), as in “fear of God.”
166 As in the giving of a reward.
167 Cf. Lk 19:17; Mt 25:21, 28
victorious Simeon in a loud voice in the midst of his brothers, “Our father, my lord catholicos, your teaching greatly delighted us. So let us carry out the deed!” Holy Simeon came near and kissed him and said, “My son, your holy mouth is blessed by God, for, lo, a courageous word came out of your mouth, which is a testimony to the truth of your soul.”

(93) Then blessed Simeon turned his face to the East, he and all the victorious ones with him, and they knelt and bowed down to the ground and Simeon said, “Lord, Lord, the only truly extant being! We confess the nature of your essence and the distinction of the persons of your Trinity, which created us in your grace, and did not abandon us in our error to the subjection of the Slanderer, but (instead) turned us away from error through the rational vestment with which you clothed yourself from our humanity. (A vestment) which you also anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, and through it you saved us from death, and you wrested us from Sheol, and you prepared through its resurrection the general resurrection of all humanity. You promised the kingdom of heaven to your holy ones and you chose us faithful ones from among your people so that we would be those initiated into the mysteries, and (so that we would be) priests and guides and leaders in the church that you linked with Christ, the first fruit of our salvation. You made us worthy to suffer for the confession of your name and to die for ourselves and for your church, which is ransomed by the blood of your beloved one, our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept, my Lord, this sacrifice of our bodies. May they be pure and acceptable offerings to you. Make us worthy of that lot that came upon the holy ones in the light of eternity! Strengthen the weak among your people and bolster the faithful with your confession in the time of their tribulations. Set up for them a good sign so that their enemies might see it and be ashamed that you are Lord and our helper and our comforter, and (so that they) might see that the beings above and the beings below owe glory and honor and exaltation to you on behalf of your entire
governance, which is full of wisdom, now and always and forever and ever!"

(94) All those who were gathered responded and said, “Amen!” Furthermore, they said, “Bless, bless, bless my Lord!” And (Simeon) extended his hand to them and said, “An invincible power will aid us forever! Amen!”

(95) After this, ten executioners came forth at once and each one killed ten of them with the sword. These holy ones were offered up joyfully while their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues were full of praise. Those who stayed behind kissed those who set off, and, in this way, ten were born up at a time. The blessed Simeon encouraged them, shaking each one’s hand while saying, “Trample down the sting of death, my sons, because Jesus has broken it by his death!”

(96) After the one hundred holy ones had been crowned, Simeon shouted in a loud voice while watching their corpses as they were being thrown into piles, “Death, where is your sting? And where, Sheol, is your victory?\(^1\)\(^6\) Thanks be to God, who gives us the reward of victory through our lord Jesus Christ.” He continued further and said, “How good and how beautiful is it for the brothers who have been crowned at once!\(^1\)\(^6\) How becoming is the crown of martyrdom, that is fulfilled in these one hundred!” There remained then only the victorious and holy Simeon and two old priests who were with him—one named Ḥanina, the other ‘Bedhaikla. When Ḥanina was stripped in order to be bound, his body shook but his mind did not. A great man named Pusai—who held the honor of being ranked as the head of the craftsmen, called qarugbed, which in those days was an honor given to him from the king—stood there and partook in the spectacle of the sacrifice of the holy ones.\(^1\)\(^7\) When he saw the old man whose body was shaking,

\(^1\)\(^6\) 1 Cor 15:55
\(^1\)\(^6\) Cf. Ps 133:1
\(^1\)\(^7\) On Pusai (Pusiq) and his rank as qarugbed see the notes to § 44 in the Martyrdom.
he said to him, “Do not fear, Hanina, do not fear! Close your eyes just for a moment and, lo, you will see the light of Christ!” And then that blessed one was crowned. Then Pusai was seized at once on the order of the head mobed, who was there as the king’s envoy. He was chained until his words could be relayed to the king. After Hanina and ‘Bedhaikla, he, too, was crowned in Christ, his hope.

(97) At that time, Simeon the army general\(^\text{171}\) drew near and prayed saying, “Our Lord Jesus—who prayed for his crucifiers,\(^\text{172}\) taught us to pray for our enemies,\(^\text{173}\) and accepted the spirit of Stephen, his deacon, who prayed for those who stoned him\(^\text{174}\)—accept the spirit of these our brothers, and accept even my spirit with all of them, your martyrs, who were crowned in the West with the holy apostles and with the blessed prophets. Do not hold up the sin of the persecutors of your people and those who kill our bodies, but give to them, my Lord, so that they might turn to knowledge of your divinity and understanding of your lordship! Bless, my Lord, the cities and all the towns in the realm of the East that you entrusted to me, and guard all the faithful in them as the apple of your eye. May they be protected under the shadow of your wings until the turmoil has passed. Be with them until the fulfillment of the world, according to your promise! Bless as well, my Lord, this city in which we have been received and in which we have been crowned, and may your cross guard it in the true faith, now and always and forever and ever. Amen!” In this way, along with his words, the victory of glorious

\(^{171}\) On Simeon as an army general, see § 78 and 84 above.

\(^{172}\) Cf. Lk 23:34

\(^{173}\) Cf. Mt 5:44

\(^{174}\) Acts 7:59
Simeon was perfected in the cutting off of his head. It was the ninth hour of the day of preparation on the Friday of the passion of our Lord. When this happened, it became dark, and the sun was eclipsed all at once, and fear and trembling overtook all the spectators.\textsuperscript{175}

\begin{quote}
\textbf{98} The corpses of glorious Simeon bar Šabbā‘ē, the catholicos, and of the bishops, and of all the holy ones who were with him were taken away on that very night by some people—Roman captives who lived in Karka d-Ledan—and they were buried with honor.\textsuperscript{176} Likewise, some among the faithful from different regions, and who happened to be in the army of the king, asked for relics from the bodies of the holy ones.\textsuperscript{177} And they were given to them by the bishops who were in Karka at that time—those (bishops) who alone among all the inhabitants of the East had not been delivered unto tribulation and killing because that city had recently been built and the king wanted its peace.\textsuperscript{178} Moreover, the people whom he had settled in it were recently taken captive and resettled from different regions, so he had mercy upon them because they were exiles.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textbf{99} These things were done in this way up to this point. Thus, we bring to an
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{175} The account of Simeon’s death is clearly intended to be read as a reflection of the crucifixion of Jesus, which is itself intended (in part) as a fulfillment of the prophesy of Isaiah. Cf. Is 13:10 and Mt 24:29 on prophesying the darkening of the sun and cf. Mt 27:45, Mk 15:33, and Lk 23:44 for the darkening of the sun until the ninth hour on the Friday when Jesus was killed.

\textsuperscript{176} Inhumation was a practice anathema to Mazdean Zoroastrians, who preferred to expose their dead on rocky outcroppings. The implication here is that the “Roman captives” (read: Christians) stole away the martyrs’ bodies so that they could be buried and not suffer the ignominy of exposure.

\textsuperscript{177} This seems to imply that there were Christian deportees from various regions who served in Shapur’s army, which would contradict the claims earlier in the memra that Christians do not help with the war effort.

\textsuperscript{178} The claim here is that the bishops of Karka d-Ledan were not killed, but only those who had been brought in from other regions. Possibly, this could be taken as an indication of those who preserved and transmitted the story of Simeon’s martyrdom—i.e., those who had been brought to Karka from other regions, not Christians from Karka itself.
end—as much as God’s grace has allowed us to do with the help of the information that we found in the stories that painstaking men narrated before us—the summary history of the heroic deeds of the holy Simeon, the catholicos of the East, who is called “bar Ṣabbāʿē,” and of the whole community of that blessed troop of holy martyrs who were with him. The history of the holy Simeon bar Ṣabbāʿē, the catholicos, and the martyrs who were crowned with him is finished. May their prayers assist the entire community of the faithful as well as this sinful scribe. Amen!
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Biography

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