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CONSTANTINE AND THE CHRISTIANS OF PERSIA*

By T. D. BARNES

The twenty-three *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat are not likely to be familiar to most students of Roman history or of Constantine. Aphrahat was head of the monastery of Mar Mattai, near modern Mosul, with the rank of bishop and, apparently, the episcopal name Jacob:¹ as a consequence, he was soon confused with the better known Jacob of Nisibis, and independent knowledge of his life and career virtually disappeared.² Fortunately, however, twenty-three treatises survived, whose attribution to 'Aphrahat the Persian sage' seems beyond doubt.³ Aphrahat wrote in Syriac and composed works of edification and polemic for a Mesopotamian audience outside the Roman Empire.⁴ Nevertheless, he provides crucial evidence not only for the attitude of Persian Christians towards Rome,⁵ but also for the military situation on Rome's eastern frontier at the end of the reign of Constantine.⁶ It is worth the effort, therefore, to set Aphrahat's fifth *Demonstration*, which bears the title 'On wars' or 'On battles', in its precise historical context.⁷ The present paper begins by considering the place of this *Demonstration* in Aphrahat's *oeuvre* and its exact date (I–III); it then argues that in 337 Constantine was preparing to invade Persia as the self-appointed liberator of the Christians of Persia (IV, VI), that Aphrahat expected him to be successful (V), and that Constantine's actions and the hopes which he excited caused the Persian king to regard his Christian subjects as potential traitors—and hence to embark on a policy of persecution (VII).

I

The twenty-three *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat fall into three groups composed at different times:

(1) I–X are addressed to an unnamed enquirer who is frequently addressed as 'my dear friend'.⁸ The addressee (whose letter survives complete only in the Armenian version), wrote to Aphrahat and received from him ten treatises arranged alphabetically by their

* Earlier versions of the present paper were delivered in Toronto and New York, in Oxford and Cambridge, and in Marburg, to audiences whose varied questions and comments have greatly clarified and improved the over-all argument. I am especially grateful to Sebastian Brock for his advice on textual matters. The final version was largely written during my tenure of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1983/4.

¹ See the notice in BL, Orient. 1017, fol. 160a (dated A.D. 1364), printed by W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since the year 1838* II (1871), 401; 896. Episcopal rank is presupposed by Aphrahat's composition of the synodical letter which comprises *Demonstration* XIV, cf. J. Forget, *De Vita et Scriptis Aphraatis, Sapientis Persae* (Diss. Louvain, 1882), 82 ff.

² Within a hundred and fifty years of Aphrahat's death, Gennadius can summarize the content of the *Demonstrations* (albeit not quite accurately), but ascribe them to 'Jacobus cognomento Sapiens Nizebenae nobilis Persarum modo civitatis episcopus' (*De viris illustribus* 1). BL, Orient. 1017, fol. 159a confuses Aphrahat with Jacob of Tagrit.

³ Edited by W. Wright, *The Homilies of Aphraates* 1 (1869); R. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca* I, 1 (1894); 1, 2 (1907), 1–489 (with Latin translation).

⁴ On the literary context of Aphrahat, see R. Murray, 'The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity', *East of Byzantium. Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Dumbarton Oaks Symposium 1980, publ. 1982), 3–16.

⁵ See, recently, G. G. Blum, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* XCI (1980), 27 ff.

⁶ See *ZPE* LII (1983), 234.

⁷ Translated into English by A. E. Johnston in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series XIII, 2 (1898), 352–62. (For the identity of the translator, sometimes mis-stated as J. Gwynn, see *ibid.* 116.) The translations offered here are my own: references are to the paragraphs in Parisot's edition.

The fifth *Demonstration* survives in Armenian and Ethiopic as well as in the original Syriac: for the former, see G. Lafontaine, *CSCO* CCCLXXXII = *Scriptores Armeniaci* VII (1977), 88–114 (text); *CSCO* CCCLXXXIII = *Scriptores Armeniaci* VIII (1977), 46–60 (translation); for the latter, F. M. E. Pereira, 'Jacobi, episcopi Nisibeni, Homilia de adventu regis Persarum adversus urbem Nisibin', *Orientalische Studien Th. Nöldeke zum siebzigsten Geburtstag gewidmet* II (1906), 877–92 (based on only one of the two extant manuscripts, and with no translation). The Ethiopic is throughout a paraphrase rather than a translation: see F. Thureau-Dangin, reported by R. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca* I, 1 (1894), xl. The Armenian translation appears to belong to the fifth century, even though none of the numerous manuscripts which preserve it antedates the seventeenth: see G. Lafontaine, 'Pour une nouvelle édition de la version arménienne des "Démonstrations" d'Aphraate', *Basmaev, Revue des études arméniennes* CXXXIII (1975), 365–75. To judge from the Latin translation provided by Lafontaine, the Armenian translator tried to stay close to the Syriac, but resorted to paraphrase where he found Aphrahat obscure: he is also guilty of some careless lapses (e.g., confusing Roman emperors with Seleucid kings).

⁸ *Dem.* I, 1, etc. The address is combined with a claim to be systematic in *Dem.* II, 11.

initial letters. The closing paragraph of the tenth *Demonstration* makes it clear that Aphrahat was doing more than responding to a private request for advice:

These ten tiny books which I have written for you receive from one another and build on one another: do not separate them from one another! I have written for you from alaph to yodh, letter following letter. Read and learn, you and the brothers, the sons of the covenant and adherents of our faith, from whom mockery is far removed, as I wrote to you above (vi, 20). Remember that I told you that I have not brought these words as far as the end, but short of the end (v, 25). These words are not sufficient. But listen to these words from me without disputing and examine our brothers, who can be persuaded, about them: everything you hear which is truly edifying, accept, everything which establishes other teachings, refute and destroy utterly. For a dispute cannot build. But I, my friend, like one who quarries, have brought stones for the building: skilled masons will cut them and put them in place in the building, and all the workmen who labour on the building shall receive payment from the Lord of the house (x, 9).⁹

(2) XI–XXII complete the alphabetic series and were written six years after I–x. Towards the end of *Demonstration* XXII, Aphrahat describes the whole corpus of twenty-two treatises and dates the two stages of composition:

These twenty-two treatises I have written according to the twenty-two letters. I wrote the first ten in the year 648 of the rule of Alexander the son of Philip the Macedonian, as is written at the end of them;¹⁰ these other twelve I have written in the year of 655 of the rule of the Greeks and Romans, that is of the rule of Alexander, and in year 35 of the Persian king (XXII, 25).

That the remaining *Demonstrations* were in fact written some time later than I–x is confirmed by their differing content. Whereas the first ten *Demonstrations* comprise a systematic exposition of doctrinal and disciplinary matters for a monastic community (with titles such as 'On faith' (I), 'On Christian love' (II), 'On fasting' (III), 'On prayer' (IV)), the next twelve are less systematic and more controversial, concerned with practical problems in the world, above all with the rival claims of Christianity and Judaism at a time when Christians, but not Jews, were being persecuted.¹¹

(3) XXIII stands by itself and begins a second alphabetic series. Its concluding paragraph states that Aphrahat wrote it in the month Ab of the year 656 of Alexander and 36 of Shapur (XXIII, 69).

In addition, three individual *Demonstrations* carry dates which correspond: the fifth and the twenty-first refer to the time of writing as years 648 and 655 of the Seleucid era respectively (v, 5; XXI, 4), while the fourteenth concludes with a colophon, not written by Aphrahat, stating that 'this letter was written in the month of Shebat in the year 655 of the rule of Alexander the son of Philip the Macedonian and in year 35 of Shapur, king of Persia' (xiv, 50).

The chronology of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* thus seems both clear and consistent. J.-M. Fiey, however, has impugned the whole chronological structure by arguing that the synodical letter which stands as *Demonstration* XIV was not written in 344, and perhaps not even written by Aphrahat, but belongs to a council of bishops, priests and deacons which met at Seleucia long before 344 to consider the conduct of the *catholicos* Papa, who died in 329. Moreover, Fiey contends, the present twenty-third *Demonstration* is the original fourteenth.¹² These are disturbing conclusions. As Fiey expressly concedes, they entail not merely that someone removed the original fourteenth *Demonstration* and replaced it by something which Aphrahat may not have written: the postulated interpolator must also

⁹ *Dem.* x, 7, taken with III, 1; VI, 6–10, implies that the addressee is to use the *Demonstrations* for instructing a monastic community. Note also I, 20: 'so that you may learn and teach, believed and be believed'.

¹⁰ No such statement in fact stands at the end of x in either of the extant manuscripts of that treatise.

¹¹ J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism. The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (*Studia Post-*

Biblica XIX, 1971), 4 ff.

¹² J.-M. Fiey, 'Notule de littérature syriaque. La Démonstration XIV d'Aphraate', *Muséon* LXXXI (1968), 449–54. Two centuries ago, when publishing the Armenian version, N. Antonelli, *Sancti Patris nostri Jacobi episcopi Nisibeni Sermones* (1756), 401 ff., segregated the synodical letter and denied that it could be from the same hand as the other *Demonstrations*.

have tampered with the opening words of both *Demonstrations* XIV and XXIII (to preserve alphabetical order) and with Aphrahat's description of the corpus of twenty-two *Demonstrations* (XXII, 25), and must himself have written the last paragraph of XXIII (69). If that were indeed so, then it would be unwise to trust the remaining passages which provide dates—and the whole chronology of Aphrahat would be cast adrift from its apparently secure mooring.

Fortunately, Fiey's conclusions need not be accepted. His arguments have been subjected to a searching scrutiny by G. Nedungatt and R. J. Owens, who have shown that *Demonstration* XIV can be exactly what it claims to be, viz. a letter written by Aphrahat in 344 in the name of 'bishops, priests, deacons and the whole church of God, with all its offspring in different places who are with us' (XIV, 1).¹³ Moreover, Nedungatt stresses two passages which appear to allude to persecution:

What we have done has happened to us. We have been plundered, persecuted and scattered. Those who did not show any propensity to give, ask us to give to them more than is proper. Because we hated one another, those who hate us gratuitously have been multiplied (cf. Psalm LXIX (LXVII) 5); because we mocked, we have been mocked; because we despised, we have been despised, because we lied cheated, because we exalted ourselves humiliated, because we oppressed oppressed ourselves, because we did wrong wronged. In the midst of this, dear friends, some have abandoned us, not judging correctly and not seeking out justice: no one has recalled the prophet who said 'Seek out judgement, and do good to the oppressed' (Isaiah 1, 17). (XIV, 4)

These things, dear friends, it was necessary for us to write, in order to remind ourselves and you that all these things have happened to us at this time because we neglected the service of the holy one. Because we did not honour him, he has exposed us to derision before our enemies and has made us despised, as he said: 'Those who despise me shall suffer dishonour' (I Samuel 12, 30). (XIV, 21)

These allusions to persecution are important, not only as telling heavily against Fiey's early date for *Demonstration* XIV, but also because they contradict the argument that, since the synodical letter presupposes 'a church living in the open', it was written before Shapur began to persecute the Christians of Persia—and hence that persecution began in the summer or autumn of 344, not in 340 as the surviving passions of Persian martyrs assert.¹⁴

II

A serious textual problem is relevant to the chronology of the persecution under Shapur and requires explicit discussion.¹⁵ Aphrahat refers to a great massacre of martyrs which occurred either in year 656 of the Seleucid era or in the fifth year before that (XXIII, 69). Both W. Wright's *editio princeps* and J. Parisot's edition print the relevant passage as follows:

I have written you this letter, dear friend, in the month of Ab of the year 656 of the rule of Alexander the son of Philip the Macedonian, and in the year 36 of Shapur, the Persian king, who caused persecution, in the fifth year after the churches were destroyed, in the year in which occurred a great massacre of martyrs in the eastern region, after I wrote those former twenty-two chapters arranged in alphabetical order.

¹³ G. Nedungatt, 'The Authenticity of Aphrahat's Synodical Letter', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* XLVI (1980), 62–88; R. J. Owens, *The Genesis and Exodus Citations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage* (Monographs of the Peshitta Institute, Leiden III, 1983), 2 ff. Observe, however, that not all of Nedungatt's arguments are valid, in particular his claim that 'In epistolary language, the Syriac *kethbeth*, like its Latin equivalent "scripsi", can mean "I wrote or I dispatched", or "I am writing/dispatching"'. . . . When *kethbeth* is taken in the sense of *dispatching* or sending, the actual time of the

composition of the letter or letters is left out of consideration' (65–6).

¹⁴ The thesis of M. J. Higgins, *BZ* XLIV (1951), 265 ff.; *Traditio* IX (1953), 48 ff.; *Traditio* XI (1955), 1 ff., cf. G. Kmosko, *Patrologia Syriaca* I, 2 (1907), 690 ff.

¹⁵ G. Nedungatt, op. cit. (n. 13), 69 n. 11, draws attention to the problem, ignored to the detriment of their arguments by P. Peeters, *Anal. Boll.* LVI (1938), 131 ff.; P. Devos, *Anal. Boll.* LXXXIV (1966), 246 ff.

Persian *acta martyrum* record two massacres during the early years of Shapur's persecution of the Christians.¹⁷ One occurred in the fifth year of persecution and in Adiabene¹⁸—which Aphrahat, writing in nearby Mar Mattai, could never have called 'the eastern region'. The other, however, corresponds exactly to Aphrahat's allusion. Persecution began with the arrest of Simeon, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in the thirty-first year of Shapur, year 651 of the Seleucid era. Simeon was executed on 14 Nisan of that year, and with him no less than a hundred martyrs, including bishops of Susiana and Mesene, all at Karkâ d' Ledan (Susa).¹⁹

... Shapur, the Persian king, who has caused persecution with the destruction of our churches, in the fifth year, in the year in which occurred the great massacre ... (BL, Add. 14169, fol. 173^v = A)

III

(A) the official Seleucid era in use in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, reckoned from a starting date of 1 Dios (October) 312 B.C.;

(B) the official Seleucid era of the Sassanid kingdom with the new year adjusted to coincide with the Persian New Year on 1 Fravartin, which fell on 29 August from 336 to 339, on 27 August from 340 to 343, on 26 August from 344 to 347;²³

(C) the Seleucid era normally employed in Babylonia in the Hellenistic and Parthian periods, with the new year in the spring and reckoned from a starting date of 1 Nisan 311 B.C. (= 3 April 311 B.C.).

¹⁶ P. de Lagarde, *Analecta Syriaca* (1858), 111; W. Wright, *Homilies* (1869), xxii. For translations of the whole letter, B. H. Cowper, *Syriac Miscellanies* (1861), 61 ff.; V. Ryssel, *Georgs des Araberbischofs Gedichte und Briefe* (1891), 44 ff.

¹⁷ The only systematic published collections of these *acta* are by S. E. Assemani, *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum Orientalium et Occidentalium* I (1748), 10 ff.; P. Bedjan, *Acta martyrum et sanctorum* II (1891), 131 ff.

¹⁸ BHO 718 (Assemani, *Acta* 105 ff.; Bedjan, *Acta* II, 292 ff.).

Patrologia Syriaca I, 2 (1907), 715 ff.

²⁰ The connection was seen by J. Forget, *De Vita et Scriptis Aphraatis* (1882), 19.

²¹ The relevant part of the relative clause in A reads:

ԺԱՅԿ . ԺԱՅԻ ԻՍԺԻԿ ԵՎ ԿԱԶՈՂԻ ԵՎ ՈՐՈՒՆ
 ԿԺԱՅԻ ԿԺԱՅԻ ԺՈՐՈՒՆ ԿԺԱՅԻ ԵՄ

²² V. Grumel, *Traité d'Études byzantines* 1. *La Chronologie* (1958), 209 f.

²³ T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden* (1879), 436.

one or two of the three entail impossible or improbable corollaries. Unfortunately, however, there seems to be no reliable independent evidence for the precise date of Shapur's birth or accession, and the correspondences stated by Aphrahat comprise the best evidence for the Seleucid and Julian equivalents of the regnal years of Shapur.²⁴ Nevertheless, Aphrahat ought to be using either computation (A) or computation (B). First, *Demonstration* XIV was written in the month of Shebat, which is the eleventh month in computation (C): since *Demonstrations* XI–XXII were all written in year 655 of the Seleucid era and composed consecutively, use of computation (C) would imply that Aphrahat wrote the whole of *Demonstrations* XIV–XXII in somewhat less than two months. Secondly, computation (C) produces a potentially awkward discrepancy between Aphrahat's chronology and the official regnal years familiar to his audience.

On *a priori* grounds, therefore, Aphrahat should have written *Demonstration* v some time before September or October 337. The text confirms that he was in fact writing in the spring or early summer of that Julian year. The opening sentence states clearly that fighting between Rome and Persia has not yet commenced:

This thought has come to me at this time about the disturbance which is about to take place (v, 1).

Aphrahat deliberately uses words which stress that the event of which he speaks lies in the future (*da'tidh l'mehvâ*). And later on Aphrahat warns Shapur of the futility of attacking the Romans:

You who are raised up and exalted, do not be deceived by the proudness of your heart, and do not say: 'I will go up into a fertile land and against the strong beast.' For the beast will not be killed by the ram, since the horns of the latter are broken (v, 10).

It is important to put such utterances in their correct context. G. Bert provided what remains the fullest and most explicit discussion of the date of *Demonstration* v, and his conclusions seem not to have been challenged in the century since he propounded them: he dated the work to June or July 337, when he supposed that Shapur was using the opportunity afforded by the death of Constantine (22 May) to mobilize in order to seize Mesopotamia.²⁵ That is seriously misleading. The war whose coming Aphrahat heralds was not an ordinary frontier campaign initiated by the Persian king, and Aphrahat was not writing in the knowledge that Constantine was already dead. He wrote about a war in which he expected Constantine to invade Persia and to conquer the area in which he lived.

IV

When Constantine defeated Licinius, he established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.²⁶ Since defeating Maxentius in 312, he had been remoulding Roman law and the attitudes of society in a Christian direction. In 324, his defeat of Licinius, 'the last of the persecutors', offered the opportunity to make decisive changes, at least in the newly acquired territories of Asia Minor and the East. There was a purge of prominent pagans.²⁷ Then Constantine forbade officials, whatever their rank, to perform the customary act of sacrifice before commencing official business, even if they were pagans. He instructed governors and financial officials to co-operate with bishops in providing churches for the numerous converts which he expected. He prohibited the erection of cult statues, the consultation of pagan oracles, divination, and sacrifice to the pagan gods on any occasion whatsoever—and he reiterated the prohibition when pagans protested.²⁸ He sent out commissioners to survey and confiscate the treasures and

²⁴ T. Nöldeke, op. cit., 410 ff.; H. Lewy, *Orientalia*, N.S. x (1941), 45. No Sassanian coins earlier than Peroz bear the kings' regnal years, cf. R. Göbl, *Sassanian Numismatics* (1971), 23.

²⁵ G. Bert, *Aphrahat's des persischen Weisen Homilien* (*Texte und Untersuchungen* III, 3/4 (1888), 1–431), xvi,

69–70, cf. recently R. N. Frye, *History of Ancient Iran* (1984), 310.

²⁶ T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981), 208 ff.; 245 ff.

²⁷ Eusebius, *VC* II, 18.

²⁸ Eusebius, *VC* II, 44 ff., cf. *AJP* cv (1984), 69 ff.

valuables of every sort to be found in pagan temples and shrines throughout the East, and he forcibly suppressed some famous cult-centres which Christians found offensive on moral as well as religious grounds.²⁹

This establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire and of the emperor soon began to affect foreign policy too. 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.³⁰ Constantine 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.

Constantine's dealings with Persia are incompletely documented. Nevertheless, it is clear that the eastern frontier was inherently unstable. The victories of Galerius had brought Rome great gains in Mesopotamia, but Persia was unlikely to continue to acquiesce in the terms of the dictated peace of 299, which annexed territory and created a Roman protectorate to the east of the Tigris, unless Rome applied constant diplomatic and military pressure.³¹ Licinius (it seems) campaigned in Mesopotamia in 313 and 314, and the official conversion of Armenia to Christianity in 314 cannot be totally unconnected with these campaigns.³² Moreover, although Persian envoys had visited Constantine around 320, the poet Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius wrote in 324/5 as if Constantine were on the point of mounting an expedition against Persia.³³ It was probably on this occasion that Shapur sent to Constantine an embassy, recorded by Eusebius, which brought gifts and tokens of friendship and obtained a treaty.³⁴

While offering peace, however, Constantine was determined to assert himself, at least implicitly, as the protector of Shapur's Christian subjects. He wrote a personal letter to Shapur, in his own hand, not dictated as official correspondence normally was—though the fact that Eusebius possessed a text suggests that Constantine must at some time have had copies made for wide distribution.³⁵ The letter is polite, tactful, allusive, and indirect—so indirect indeed that one scholar has recently identified its recipient as the Christian king of Armenia.³⁶ That is to misunderstand both the political situation and the content of the letter.

The letter falls into three sections.³⁷ Constantine begins by affirming his devotion to God—the God whose sign Constantine's army, dedicated to God, bears on its shoulders, the God who protects Constantine, who sent Constantine from the far shores of the Ocean to rescue the whole world from oppression and misery. God has made clear how he wishes men to behave: he prizes virtue, piety, reasonableness, humanity, belief, humility and toleration, but punishes disbelief, arrogance and pride: 'he honours highly and strengthens with assistance from himself a just kingdom, and preserves a wise monarch in the tranquillity of peace.'

With an invocation of Shapur as 'my brother', Constantine appeals to recent history for proof of his general propositions: those Roman rulers who denied God have all encountered disaster, especially the one whom the wrath of God 'expelled from here and transferred to your territory' to exhibit his shame as a captive in war. Constantine refers of course to Valerian. He then reminds Shapur of the fate of the emperors who attacked

²⁹ Eusebius, *Triac.* 8, 1 ff.; *VC* III, 54, 4 ff.

³⁰ Constantine, quoted by Athanasius, *Apol. c. Ar.* 86, 10/11; Gelasius, *HE* III, 10, 10; Eusebius, *VC* IV, 5/6.

³¹ *Constantine* (1981), 18.

³² *ibid.* 65.

³³ *Pan. Lat.* IV (x), 38, 3; Porfyrius, *Carm.* XVIII, 4: 'et Medi praestas in censum sceptrum redire'. The Persian prince Hormizd, a brother of Shapur, had recently fled from Persia and arrived at the imperial court (Zosimus II, 27, cf. John of Antioch, frag. 178).

³⁴ Eusebius, *VC* IV, 8. This section of the *Life* is arranged thematically, not chronologically.

³⁵ Eusebius, *VC* IV, 8.

³⁶ D. de Decker, 'Sur le destinataire de la lettre au roi

des Perses (Eusèbe de Césarée, *Vit. Const.*, IV, 9–13) et la conversion de l'Arménie à la religion chrétienne', *Persica* VIII (1979), 99–116.

³⁷ viz. Eusebius, *VC* IV, 9–10 (Winkermann's first paragraph), 11–12 (Winkermann's second and third paragraphs) and 13. Eusebius writes as if he translated the letter from Latin into Greek himself: on his competence as a translator, see E. Fisher, *YCS* XXVII (1982), 200 ff. Eusebius may slightly have distorted Constantine's undoubtedly often obscure Latin, but it is unlikely that he rewrote the letter entirely, as argued by P. A. Barceló, *Roms auswärtige Beziehungen unter der Constantinischen Dynastie* (306–363) (*Eichstätter Beiträge*, Abteilung Geschichte III, 1981), 77.

God's people in his own day: they were overthrown, and God is now, with the worship of his people, gathering all men to himself.

In his last paragraph, Constantine becomes more explicit. He has throughout been talking about the Christians, whom he here names for the first time: he was delighted to discover that the most important districts of Persia are full of them. But he closes with a felicitation and an exhortation which seem to conceal a veiled warning:

Thus you will have the Lord of all kind, favourable and merciful. These then (i.e. the Christians of Persia) I commend to you because you are so great, committing the very same to you because you are eminent for piety. Cherish them in accordance with your usual humanity: for by this gesture of faith you will confer an immeasurable benefit on both yourself and us.

The letter should probably be dated very shortly after October 324.³⁸ Shapur's response is unknown, but he cannot have viewed with pleasure the conversion of the Caucasian kingdom of Iberia to Christianity, which appears to belong to the period around 330.³⁹ He may also have been apprehensive of Constantine's ultimate intentions. In campaigns north of the Danube, Constantine was comporting himself like a new Trajan.⁴⁰ In his youth, Constantine had fought under Galerius, had served in the Roman army which advanced to Ctesiphon, and had visited the ruins of Babylon:⁴¹ might he not, like Trajan, embark upon an eastern war? And did Constantine not allude, even in his letter to Shapur, to a career of conquest which began in the far west and proceeded eastward?⁴² Where would Constantine cease his conquests?

Shapur had good reason to suspect that the Roman emperor was planning to make war against him. He decided, therefore, to strike first. While Constantine was still occupied on the Danube, border raids began, and the Caesar Constantius was sent to reside in Antioch and guard the frontier.⁴³ In 336 a Persian army invaded Armenia and installed a Persian nominee as ruler.⁴⁴ Constantine seized the opportunity with enthusiasm, and may have attempted to put Shapur even more in the wrong by supporting the claims of Metrodorus, that Persians had stolen the royal presents which he was bringing from India to Constantine.⁴⁵ More significantly, Constantine proposed to conduct his Persian expedition as a religious crusade. Bishops were to accompany the army, a Christian version of the Old Testament tabernacle was prepared to accompany him, and he proclaimed his intention to be baptized in the River Jordan before he invaded Mesopotamia.⁴⁶ Persian ambassadors arrived in Constantinople, but were repulsed.⁴⁷ Further, Constantine proclaimed his half-nephew, Hannibalianus, not merely king, but *rex regum*,⁴⁸ coins which associate an obverse of Hannibalianus as *rex* with a reverse depicting the personified Euphrates and bearing the legend *Securitas publica* imply a deep and sinister significance in this proclamation, viz. that Hannibalianus was to replace Shapur as king of Persia, or at least as ruler in Ctesiphon, when Constantine had defeated him in war.⁴⁹ Death, however, overtook Constantine before the expedition set out: he fell ill in April 337 and died on 22 May near Nicomedia.⁵⁰

³⁸ Constantine (1981), 258 f.

³⁹ On which, see now F. Thélamon, *Païens et chrétiens au IV^e siècle. L'apport de l'Histoire ecclésiastique de Rufin d'Aquilée* (1981), 85 ff.

⁴⁰ RIC VII, 331, Rome 298; Victor, *Caes.* 41, 18; *Chr. min.* 1, 233 (rebuilding of Trajan's bridge on the Danube); *AE* 1934, 158 (title of *Dacicus maximus*).

⁴¹ Constantine, *Oratio* 16, 4, cf. *Phoenix* xxx (1976), 186 ff.

⁴² Eusebius, *VC* IV, 9.

⁴³ For Persian aggression, Libanius, *Orat.* LIX, 62 ff.; Eutropius, *Brev.* x, 8, 2; Festus, *Brev.* 26. It is significant that Libanius in 349 presents the Persians as plotting to renew warfare for the whole of the four decades since their defeat in the 290s (*Orat.* LIX, 65). On the other hand, both the date and the significance of the capture of Amida alleged by Theophanes, p. 20, 20 ff. de Boor, remain uncertain: Theophanes puts the

capture in 324, but couples it with the death of Narses—which occurred nearly twenty years later.

⁴⁴ Faustus III, 21, cf. W. Ensslin, *Klio* xxix (1936), 102 ff.

⁴⁵ Ammianus xxv, 4, 23; Cedrenus I, 516 Bonn. However, the whole story is argued to be an invention by Eunapius, without any factual basis at all, by B. H. Warmington, 'Ammianus Marcellinus and the Lies of Metrodorus', *CQ* xxxi (1981), 464–8.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, *VC* IV, 56; 62, 2.

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *VC* IV, 57, chapter-heading (the text is lost); Libanius, *Orat.* LIX, 71 f.; Festus, *Brev.* 26.

⁴⁸ *Origo Const. Imp.* 35; *Epitome* 41, 20.

⁴⁹ RIC VII, 584; 589 f., cf. O. Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt* IV (1911), 25.

⁵⁰ Eusebius, *VC* IV, 60 ff.; Festal Index 10; *Chr. min.* I, 235; Socrates, *HE* I, 39, 2; 40, 3.

The Caesar Constantius left Antioch as soon as he heard that his father was dying, and was not able to return to Syria until very late in the year.⁵¹ Shapur took immediate advantage of this unexpected change in the political and military situation: he ravaged Mesopotamia and besieged Nisibis for sixty-three days.⁵² The exact date of the siege is not directly attested, but Jerome's *Chronicle* puts it before the death of Dalmatius Caesar, which belongs to August 337,⁵³ and if Shapur had already prepared an army to resist Constantine, there was no reason to delay. The siege of Nisibis may have begun as early as May 337; at all events it belongs to the summer of 337 (not 338),⁵⁴ so that there was no long interval between the arrival of news that Constantine was dead and Shapur's invasion of Roman territory. Aphrahat wrote *Demonstration* v, not merely before Shapur invaded Roman Mesopotamia, but while he still believed that Constantine was alive and about to lead a crusade to establish a Christian on the Persian throne.

v

The main argument of *Demonstration* v is threefold, interlocking and largely scriptural. Aphrahat argues that God always casts down the arrogant and impious; that God has ordained the defeat of Persia, and has revealed his intention to do so in the book of Daniel, which predicts the outcome of the impending war; and that the now Christian Roman Empire will exist till the end of time, when it will surrender its power to Christ at his second coming.⁵⁵ At the outset, Aphrahat protests that because the times are evil, he must speak in symbols (v, 2). Yet 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.⁵⁶

Aphrahat identifies the fourth kingdom of Daniel's vision (vii, 23) with the Roman Empire, but in an ambiguous fashion. The fourth beast in Daniel's vision, he maintains, following established conventions of exegesis, is the kingdom of the sons of Esau, i.e. the Roman Empire. But Aphrahat also equates the Roman Empire, which is the fourth kingdom, with the third kingdom of the Greeks. After he has identified the third beast as Alexander the Great (v, 18), he continues:

After Alexander the Macedonian ruled, there was the kingdom of the Greeks, Alexander being a Greek. But with him the vision of the third beast is completed, since the third and fourth are one. Alexander ruled for twelve years, and after Alexander there were seventeen Greek kings, whose years total two hundred and sixty-nine, from Seleucus Nicator to Ptolemy, and there were Caesars from Augustus to Philippus Caesar, twenty-seven kings, whose years total two hundred and ninety-three. But the years of Severus are eighteen (v, 19).

Beneath the confusions of this bizarre computation, there seems to hover an assumption that the central fact of Roman imperial history is the conversion of the empire to Christianity. Aphrahat himself reckoned by the Seleucid era, which he called 'the years of the rule (or kingdom) of Alexander', and which he believed to commence with Alexander's defeat of the Persian king (v, 5). Hence it was natural for Aphrahat to identify the third and fourth kingdoms, which belonged to an unbroken chronological continuum. Now 269 years take one from the inception of the Seleucid era in 312/11 B.C. to 44/3, when Octavian entered political life, and it was a common view in antiquity that that event marked the beginning of the Roman Empire.⁵⁷ Another 293 years from 44/3 B.C. bring one to A.D.

⁵¹ Julian, *Orat.* 1, 16 ff.; Socrates *HE* II, 2 ff., cf. *Phoenix* xxxiv (1980), 162.

⁵² Jerome, *Chronicle* 234^d Helm; *Chron. Pasch.* 533 Bonn, cf. *ZPE* LII (1983), 229 ff.

⁵³ *Constantine* (1981), 261 f.

⁵⁴ Jacob of Nisibis died in the Seleucid year 649 after taking an active part in the defence against Shapur's first siege: see P. Peeters, 'La légende de Saint Jacques de Nisibe', *Anal. Boll.* xxxviii (1920), 285–373.

⁵⁵ F. Gavin, *Journal of the Society of Oriental*

Research VII (1923), 98 ff.; R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (1975), 241 ff.

⁵⁶ That Aphrahat's argument is not allegorical was rightly stressed by C. J. F. Sasse, *Prolegomena in Aphraatis Sapientis Persae sermones homileticos* (Diss. Leipzig, 1878).

⁵⁷ The *Chronicle of Edessa* notes that Augustus began to rule in year 266, i.e. 47/6 B.C. (*CSCO, Scr. Syri* III, 4 (1903), 3, 17–18).

250/1, only a year after the death of Philip, and a total of twenty-seven emperors can easily be obtained by judicious inclusion and exclusion of short-lived rulers. The significance of Aphrahat's calculation lies in the fact that many in the fourth century believed that Philip was the first Christian emperor.⁵⁸ And what of Severus? It may be suggested that Aphrahat, whose knowledge of Roman history is abysmally confused, has mixed up Septimius Severus and Galerius. Both Severus and Galerius reigned eighteen years (respectively, 193–211 and 293–311), and both invaded Mesopotamia successfully. But Galerius was also the moving force behind the Diocletianic persecution⁵⁹—and hence relevant in the context.

What is the purpose of Aphrahat's laborious calculation? It seems to imply that he identifies the fourth kingdom with the pagan Roman Empire rather than with the Roman Empire which used to be pagan and is now Christian.⁶⁰ What then of the present in which Aphrahat is writing? If the fourth kingdom were already past, then the present would be the interim period, just before the end of the world, and the second coming of the Messiah and the Last Judgement would be very close at hand. On that assumption, Aphrahat's opening chapter acquires a pointed relevance:

This thought has come to me at this time about the disturbance which is now about to take place, and (about) the forces which have gathered themselves for slaughter: The times were fixed beforehand by God. The times of peace are fulfilled in the days of the good and just; and the times of many evils are fulfilled in the days of the evil and wrong-doers. For thus it is written 'good must happen, and blessed is he through whom it shall come; and evil must happen, but woe to him through whom it shall come'.⁶¹ Good has come to the people of God, and blessedness awaits the man through whom the good came. Evil has been aroused because of the forces collected by the evil and arrogant one who has pride in himself, and misery is reserved later for him through whom the evil has been stirred up. Nevertheless, my friend, do not complain (openly) of the evil one who has roused evil against many, because the times were fixed beforehand and the time of their fulfilment is at hand (v, 1).

In the context of early 337, the good man and the evil man are instantly recognizable as Constantine and Shapur. Constantine is the benefactor of 'the people of God.' The blessedness which awaits him presumably includes both success in this world and felicity in the hereafter. Shapur, on the other hand, is the evil man who has gathered together an army. But there is no point in complaining or obstructing his actions, because what he is doing is in accordance with God's plan—and Aphrahat devotes the bulk of his treatise to an intricate argument from scripture that Shapur will be defeated in the imminent war.

Elsewhere, Aphrahat had voiced a firm conviction that the world would come to an end after six thousand years (II, 14), and the fifth *Demonstration* employs as its predominant assumption the belief that the Romans hold the fourth kingdom in trust for Christ, who aids them in war, and that the fourth kingdom will endure until Christ's second coming (v, 6; 14; 23–4). From this assumption it equally follows that God will not allow their enemies to overcome the Romans. Nevertheless, Aphrahat's confidence is not unbounded. At the very end, he anxiously contemplates the possibility against which he has argued so vigorously and consistently:

Even if the forces go up and are victorious, know that it is a punishment from God; if they are victorious, they will be condemned (later) by a just decision. Yet be certain of this, that the beast will be killed at its (destined) time. You, my brother, at this time be earnest in imploring mercy that there may be peace for the people of God (v, 25).

Perhaps Aphrahat added this sombre conclusion when he heard fresh news of the progress of the war, possibly when he heard that Constantine was dead. For the death of

⁵⁸ Jerome, *Chronicle* 217^c Helm: 'primusque omnium ex Romanis imperatoribus Christianus fuit'.

⁵⁹ Lactantius, *Mort. Pers.* 10, 6 ff.; 31, 1; Eusebius, *HE* VIII, App. 1; 3.

⁶⁰ Daniel VII, 23 stresses the difference between the

third and fourth kingdoms which Aphrahat equates.

⁶¹ A saying of Jesus quoted in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* XII, 29 (PG II, 324) and *Epitome* 96 (A. Resch, *Agrapha. Aussercanonische Schriftfragmente* (Texte und Untersuchungen, N.F. XV, 3/4, 1906), 106 f.

Constantine shattered his hopes of a Roman victory. Already mobilized for war, Shapur took the initiative in the summer of 337 and besieged Nisibis.

VI

A Latin text not adequately exploited by recent historians of the fourth century A.D. shows that, at least in some quarters, the hopes which Constantine aroused and which Aphrahat expressed survived the emperor's death and the changed fortunes of war.⁶² One manuscript of Julius Valerius continues with the text known as the *Itinerarium Alexandri*—a title which disguises its true nature.⁶³ For the work originally comprised accounts of the exploits not only of Alexander, but also of Trajan, and it is only through an accident of transmission that the text breaks off just after the death of Alexander from overdrinking. The author confesses that the work is a *breviarium* rather than an *itinerarium*: he dedicated it to the emperor Constantius when he had begun his reign successfully and was about to embark on a Persian expedition (p. 1, 1–5 Volkmann). The choice of Alexander and Trajan as examples for the young emperor to emulate can only have one significance: the writer believed that Constantius too was about to invade Persia in an attempt at conquest. He declares his conviction that Constantius will surpass the achievements of the most famous emperors:

hau scio an maiora longe felicioraque profecta sint vobis exempla de maximis Constantinis patre vel fratre: certe quae priora sunt tempore etiamsi meritis secunda tu feceris, ipsos illos, si quis functis est sensus, voto accessuros existimo; tibi quae in Persas hereditarium munus est, ut, qui Romana tamdiu arma tremuerunt, per te tandem ad nostratum nomen recepti interque provincias nostras civitate Romana donati, discant esse beneficio iubentium liberi, qui omnes illic fastibus regiis milites bello, servi pace censentur.⁶⁴

The date must be close to 340, since the writer goes on to assert that Constantius is the same age as Alexander was when he invaded Asia. But he is clearly not a man close to the court or attentive to imperial etiquette and propaganda. For after the younger Constantius invaded Italy and was killed in 340, his memory was damned. The dead emperor's name was erased on inscriptions, and panegyrists of Constantius pretended that he had only ever had one brother.⁶⁵ When the alert Athanasius addressed Constantius he studiously refrained from direct mention of Constantinus.⁶⁶

The language of the unknown writer is confident and unambiguous. The Persians have long stood in fear of Roman arms, but now at last Constantius will make them Romans, incorporate them among the Roman provinces and give them Roman citizenship, that they may learn to be free. None of these steps is possible without a prior military conquest. In 338, Constantius supervised the installing of a Roman nominee on the throne of Armenia.⁶⁷ The *Itinerarium Alexandri* alludes to that and speaks of an aggressive expedition already undertaken. The date should probably be 340 precisely. For as time passed, such pipe-dreams must have seemed ever more unreal. The nature of the fighting

⁶² Neither Aphrahat nor the *Itinerarium Alexandri* receives any mention in B. H. Warmington, 'Objectives and Strategy in the Persian War of Constantius II', *Limes. Akten des XI Internationalen Limeskongresses* (1977), 509–20, who argues that Constantius' strategy was from the start 'strictly defensive'.

⁶³ The sole manuscript appears to be Milan, Ambros. P 49 sup., fols. 54^v–64^v, the most recent edition that by D. Volkmann (Prog. Pforta, publ. Naumburg, 1871). I am grateful to the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana for providing me with a microfilm.

The *Itinerarium Alexandri* is duly noted and discussed in standard handbooks: Schanz-Hosius, *Gesch. d. lat. Litt.* IV, 1² (1914), 115 f.; W. Kubitschek, *RE* IX (1916), 2363 ff.; A. Piganiol, *L'empire chrétien* (1947), 76 (missing the relevance of Trajan). Also, in her

survey of the myth of Alexander in late antiquity, by L. Cracco Ruggini, *Athenaeum*, N.S. XLIII (1965), 5.

⁶⁴ I print Volkmann's text (p. 2, 5–10). The only serious textual difficulty is in the first line, where the MS has 'iussio maiora longe felicioraque quae profecto sint'.

⁶⁵ Libanius, *Orat.* LIX, 43 ff.; 72 ff., cf. E. Ferrero, *Diz. Ep.* II, 657.

⁶⁶ e.g. Athanasius, *Apol. ad Const.* 4, where 'any others (ἄλλους τινάς)' means precisely Constantinus.

⁶⁷ P. Peeters, 'L'intervention politique de Constance II dans la Grande Arménie, en 338', *Bull. Acad. roy. de Belgique*, Classe des Lettres XVII (1931), 10–47, reprinted in his *Recherches d'histoire et de philologie orientales* I (*Subsidia Hagiographica* XXVII, 1951), 222–50.

in Mesopotamia soon made it clear to all that, whatever his initial aims, Constantius was waging a defensive war for the preservation of Roman territory, not one which might result in conquests, still less the subjugation of any part of Persia proper.

VII

Constantine's legacy to the Christians of Persia was a bitter one. Before 337, they had enjoyed toleration except for a brief period of about fifteen years in the late third century, when the Zoroastrian clergy induced king Vahran to execute Mani and then to persecute Christians.⁶⁸ On general grounds, it might be argued that persecution in Persia was a natural and inevitable corollary of Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, it was Constantine, not Shapur, who brought Christianity into play as a political factor in relations between Rome and Persia. The Persian frontier raids of the 330s and even the Persian invasion of Armenia in 336 were ordinary invasions in the traditional manner. It was Constantine who injected a religious dimension into the normal frontier dispute, by seeking to appeal to Shapur's Christian subjects in the same sort of way in which he had appealed to the Christian subjects of Maxentius in 312 and of Licinius in 324. Aphrahat's fifth *Demonstration* illustrates what response he found. If Aphrahat may be presumed typical, then the 'homily is a clear proof of how the Christians of Persia stood completely on Rome's side with their sympathies'.⁷⁰ Shapur, therefore, may be forgiven for regarding his Christian subjects as a potential fifth column in league with his Roman enemies. Two extremely important developments flowed from this suspicion. Shapur and his successors persecuted the Christians of Persia violently, if intermittently.⁷¹ The Christians of Persia, for their part, tried to belie governmental suspicions of their loyalty by distancing themselves from the dominant orthodoxy of the eastern Roman Empire.⁷²

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⁶⁸ S. Brock, 'A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida', *Anal. Boll.* xcvi (1978), 167–81.

⁶⁹ J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (CSCO cccx: Subsidia xxxvi, 1970), 87 f.

⁷⁰ T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte* (1879), 501; *Aufsätze zur persischen Geschichte* (1887), 97 ff.; G. Bert. op. cit. (n. 25), 69 n. 1.

⁷¹ J. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide* (1904), 43 ff.; 104 ff.; J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons* (1970), 85 ff.

⁷² S. P. Brock, 'Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties', *Studies in Church History* xviii (1982), 1–19.