



The Syriac Dialogue "Socrates." A Study in Syrian Philosophy

Author(s): Wm. Romaine Newbold

Source: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (1918), pp. 99-111

Published by: American Philosophical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/984162>

Accessed: 11-02-2020 15:21 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



American Philosophical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*

THE SYRIAC DIALOGUE "SOCRATES."

A STUDY IN SYRIAN PHILOSOPHY.¹

By WM. ROMAINE NEWBOLD.

(Read April 23, 1914.)

In 1858 Paul de Lagarde published in his "Analecta Syriaca" a short dialogue entitled "Socrates." The only known copy is found in that precious Nitrian codex of the British Museum (Add. 14658) which also contains, besides other philosophical works, the only existing texts of the Bardaisanian "Book of the Laws of the Countries" and "The Oration of Melito before Antoninus Cæsar." Notwithstanding the unusual intrinsic interest of the "Socrates," it has been, so far as I have been able to ascertain, quite ignored since its publication. I have seen no translation of the text nor any discussion of the problems which it presents except a brief and misleading statement by Renan (in Duval, "La Littérature Syriaque," p. 270).² It has not been republished and the original edition is now difficult to obtain.

¹This paper was read before the American Philosophical Society in April, 1914, but publication was deferred in anticipation of the appearance of Mr. Mitchell's second volume (see note 5) which was promised for September of 1914, but was prevented by the outbreak of the war. As this now seems to have been indefinitely delayed, I have decided to publish my tentative conclusions.

²Soon after this paper was written my friend, Mr. Robert Pierpont Blake, brought to my attention V. Ryssel's paper "Der pseudosokratische Dialog über die Seele," in *Rhein. Mus.*, N. F., Vol. 48, pp. 175-95. Ryssel gives a translation, suggests some emendations and adds a few footnotes but does not attempt a systematic interpretation. He thinks it a translation from the Greek and attributes the translation to Sergius of Ras'ain (d. A.D. 536), who was the translator of other texts in the same volume. Whether the dialogue was originally written in Greek or Syriac is a question upon which I have not formed a definite opinion, but I am inclined to think it was Syriac. The style as a whole is singularly idiomatic and the occurrence of Greek words and constructions is not conclusive evidence to the contrary in a work obviously imitated from Greek models. The atmosphere is purely

In extent it is not very long, occupying only nine pages octavo. In form it professes to be a dialogue between Socrates and an anxious inquirer named Herostrophus or Erostrophus.³ But it contains little in the way of dialogue, the greater part of the book being occupied by a discourse in which Socrates answers Herostrophus's questions.

The author's conception of Socrates bears no resemblance to the Socrates of Plato and but little to the Socrates of Xenophon. He is indeed an oriental sage whose utterances are received as oracles by his admiring hearers, and, although he expresses his views with modesty—the only trace of the "irony" of the historical Socrates—he nevertheless feels that their homage is justified. "O young man," he says to Herostrophus in one passage, "not in vain and not for nought have you come to me to hear my words."

The ostensible theme is the nature of the soul, but in the course of the discussion Socrates reveals the outlines of a system of philosophy which is of no little interest to the student, not because of its intrinsic value, but because of the light which it throws into some dark corners of the history of thought. The elements of this system are those same Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic ideas which long before the beginning of our era had become the common property of the races that shared the Hellenistic culture. The syncretistic systems into which they were wrought by sundry thinkers are known by many names—Alexandrian, Hermetic, Gnostic, Neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonist—but all possess many features in common. Some of these the system of the "Socrates" also presents, but its peculiar interest lies in the fact that the familiar elements are combined in novel fashion. I have indeed been able to discover but one other system which is closely akin to it, that of the Syrian philosopher Bardaisan, who was born in Edessa A.D. 154 and died in 222. It has long been known that Bardaisan exerted no little influ-

oriental, the borrowed ideas are treated as no Greek would treat them and the conspicuous absence of the technical terms of philosophy common in Syriac from the fourth century onward suggests an early date of composition. Whatever the original language, I think it probable that the author was a Syrian; certainly not a Greek.

³ Ryssel suggests that the name should be read "Aristippus," for which I see no good reason.

ence during his life and that the Christian Church which he founded endured for five or six centuries after his death, but, until recently, little has been known of his ideas. The discovery and publication of Theodore bar-Koni's⁴ account of his system and of some hitherto unknown works of Ephraim's⁵ have thrown a flood of new light upon him and Mr. Mitchell promises that his second volume, which will appear in the course of a few months, will contain still more valuable information. With the aid of this new material one may recognize in the Syriac "Socrates" a work certainly of the school of Bardaisan. Whether it is from his own hand or not is another question.

The accounts of Bardaisan's philosophy which we possess are so inconsistent that it is necessary to determine which are and which are not trustworthy. The most extended are those of Ephraim, Theodore bar-Koni, Moses bar-Cepha, Moses the Syrian, the Fihrist, and Shahrastani. Of these the first two are the oldest, are in substantial agreement and probably are derived from the same document. That of Moses bar-Cepha is akin to Theodore's but contains Manichæan elements not found in him; in the later documents these elements become still more pronounced. I think it quite certain that these later versions represent the teaching of the Bardaisanian Church after it had been for centuries in contact with the closely related system of Mani. It is quite possible that the system known to Ephraim and Theodore had also been more or less contaminated by the same influences, having been exposed to them for more than a hundred years. The "Book of the Laws," which is the oldest authentic Bardaisanian document, unfortunately gives no definite information upon the points of interest. Ephraim and Theodore therefore must be regarded as the only trustworthy authorities.

The "Socrates" represents bodies as composed of four "elements" or "powers"—earth, wind, fire and water. Bardaisan posited five "powers" or "existents," *ihye*, out of which bodies are

⁴ Pognon, "Les Coupes Mandaites," 1898; Addai Scher, "Corpus Scripturum Christianiorum Orientalium," Vols. 65-66, 1912.

⁵ "St. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Marcion, Mani and Bardaisan," edited from a palimpsest MS. of the British Museum by C. W. Mitchell, Vol. I, 1912.

composed—light, wind, water, fire and darkness. The elements of the "Socrates" are those traditional in Greek philosophy, except that the Persian term wind is substituted for "air"; those of Bardaisan are Persian and are identical with those of the Manichæans. But Ephraim says ("Adv. Haer.," 41, Vol. II., p. 532, Vatican edition) that Bardaisan regarded darkness as "nothing and capable of nothing." It could not therefore have been in his system, as it was in the Persian and Manichæan, the active principle of evil, but was rather a mere negation, analogous to the Aristotelian substratum, a doctrine which Ephraim repeatedly ascribes to Bardaisan. It may be compared to that fifth something which the "Socrates" speaks of as "that which was undifferentiated and unknown" or "unknowable," although this is not explicitly termed an element.

According to the "Socrates" the animal soul or life is compounded out of the four elements; its nature depends upon the proportions in which the elements are combined and in particular upon the amount of fire present. The animal soul then consists of four parts. At least some human souls consist of the animal plus the rational soul. The latter has three parts, "Greatness," "Power," and "Goodness," which are the first three manifestations of the "Original Root," a term which in this work is clearly equivalent to "God." Thus the rational soul is divine and those human souls which contain it are composed of seven elements or parts. Ephraim's statements about Bardaisan's theory of the soul have hitherto presented insurmountable difficulties, all of which disappear if he be regarded as criticizing the theory of the "Socrates." In one passage ("Adv. Haer.," 54, Vol. II., p. 555) Ephraim says that the soul was "made of the existents." The "existents" must have been four in number, for darkness or negation, as representing unconsciousness, could contribute nothing to soul. Elsewhere, ("Second Discourse to Hypatius," p. 8, 5 sqq., Mitchell), he says that the soul consists, according to Bardaisan, of seven parts. According to the "Socrates" the first of these statements is true of the animal soul, the second of the union of the animal with the rational soul. Ephraim then describes the dependence of the soul's character upon the proportions of the components precisely as is

done in the “Socrates,” and adduces two arguments against the theory. First, the souls of angels and devils are unchangeable, whereas this theory makes them changeable. Second, the sun is unchangeable. This second objection seems on the surface quite irrelevant, and there is nothing in Ephraim’s text to indicate why he regarded it as an argument against Bardaisan’s theory. Turning to the “Socrates” one finds that the author devotes nearly one fourth of the dialogue to drawing a parallel between the changes which the soul undergoes during life and those through which the sun passes in completing his daily and annual course.

The “Socrates” uses for “God” the term “Original Root” or “That Power.” The first manifestation of the Root is “Greatness” (*rēbhūthā*), which is probably here equivalent to the Greek *μέγεθος*, a term used in geometry for “extension” and by some Gnostics as a designation of God. It is complementary, so to speak, to “Æon,” the more common Gnostic term for God, which means “duration,” duration and extension being conceived as the primary expressions of the divine essence. The relation between this “Original Root” and space (*athrā*) is conceived in the “Socrates” as very intimate indeed. “That Space” is said in one passage to “be” the Root, but more commonly space is conceived as anterior to the Root. Thus we are told that “Greatness, Power, and Goodness” “cannot exist in Place but (only) where they have Space that they may be kept in righteousness, refined and pure.” And again, “Because the Greatness of this Power is vast [Power], therefore is it in the compass of the All and outside the All, and there exists no empty Space wherein is nought of it.” Thus God is placed in space. Ephraim repeatedly charges Bardaisan with making space superior to God and placing God in space, and in one passage (“Against Hypatius,” IV., p. 133, 1 Mitchell) he says: “Greater are the praises which Bardaisan uttered concerning space than those which he uttered concerning the God who is in the midst of space.” In another (*ibid.*, p. 132, 42): “Therefore the Greatness which the Teachings give to space, the Teachings of Truth give to God.” It is noteworthy that the name “God” is sedulously avoided by the author of the “Socrates”; it does not occur even once.

From this mystical theory of the soul's relation to her source the “Socrates” draws some important practical conclusions. Since the rational element is identical in all human souls which possess it and since it is still in organic union with their common Root, it necessarily follows that such souls enjoy a virtual community of knowledge. It is by virtue of this community of knowledge that truth spoken by one receives the assent of another. “But you, Herostrophus,” says Socrates, “have not come to ask or inquire of me aught which is not your own. If it be of speech that you would inquire of me, it is in you and is yours; if of sight, it is yours; if, again, of hearing, it is in you. For no man shall see Good except him in whom it is and no man speaks speech unless it be implanted in him nor hears unless it is in him. That through which the eye sees and the ear hears and speech speaks, [and] these three which appear distributed among sense-organs (lit. parts, *i. e.*, *μόρια*)—their Root is one. And all these things which I have said to you, Herostrophus, if you should see them as I do and hear them as I do—and you do (lit., such you are)—the Root is one. And if again in another Space you should hear this discourse which you are hearing from me, know that this is the Root of which is no Space empty where it is not. For we who abide in the Root are like the branches of a tree, some in the east, some in the north, some in the south, some in the west, but the remainder is One Root.” Ephraim criticizes (“Against Hypatius,” V., p. 159, Mitchell) a precisely similar doctrine: “According to it one soul has no need of another soul to learn or teach . . . because the knowledge of their essence is equal if, as they say, the essence of all souls is one. If Teacher and Teaching (pupil?) are from one Root and both are clad in flesh . . . how does one go astray and another teach? . . . If there is recollection in all the Root, there is no error in all the Essence. And the sons of this Essence (*i. e.*, those who share in the Essence)—how does one fail and another succeed? Their essence is not the same.” Ephraim rarely mentions the name of the author he is controverting and in this passage he does not mention Bardaisan. But in these sermons he is criticizing only Marcion, Bardaisan and Mani and as there is no reason for ascribing the doctrine in question

to either of the other two, it is probably to be referred to Bardaisan. And the language and imagery strongly suggest the "Socrates." The author of the "Socrates" draws from his theory the legitimate conclusion that the rational soul only is immortal; the animal soul and the body both perish at death. That Bardaisan denied the orthodox doctrine of the resurrection of the body is agreed by all our authorities.

The agreement between the cosmology of the "Socrates" and that of Bardaisan is not so exact as that subsisting between these two groups of psychological theories, but they present nevertheless some notable points of analogy.

Theodore bar-Koni describes Bardaisan's system as follows (a few additions have been made from Ephraim and Moses bar-Cepha): From eternity God and the five elements coexisted in perfect peace. God was above all, Darkness below all; in between were the other four elements disposed in the same plane—Light in the east, Wind in the west, Water in the north, Fire in the south. Then the Wind blew by chance and beat upon and agitated the elements; a smoke not born of Fire gathered (Ephraim has: Darkness crossed its border upwards). Then God sent an utterance of Thought which arrested the Wind and a Wind from on High quieted them in part. The confused portion was then separated from the others and from it the world was made.

According to the "Socrates" there existed from eternity with "That Power," *i. e.*, God, a something which you may call at pleasure soul or fire or nature ($\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$). Since the author has just shown at length that soul consists of the four elements, fire being only the chief among them, and since he immediately proceeds to refer to "the four elements of the powers," *i. e.*, the four elementary properties, as existing, one may infer that the eternal existence of soul implies that of the four elements. The scheme is therefore analogous to that of Bardaisan, save that the latter has the Persian term Wind instead of the Greek Air.

The "Socrates" proceeds: "When that Power wished to exist (or be) in purity all by himself he therefore commanded that Body should become (or, come into being as) the organization of the

whole world. And it was spread out⁶ (?) by him upon that which was undivided (or undifferentiated) and unknown.” The strange motive for the construction of the world here ascribed to God—the desire to purify himself of soul or matter—occurs, so far as I know, nowhere else. It is clear from Ephraim’s discussions that he knew of no motive assigned by Bardaisan.

In the next stage, according to the “Socrates,” “by his Word he agitated her (the soul) and separated her from himself. Then all the things which are now seen were (or, became) commingled one with another without form.” The Word or Logos seems to be here represented as the cause of chaos—another strange idea, for in the systems influenced by Stoicism it is usually the function of the Logos to transform chaos into the cosmos. Bardaisan’s system agrees with the “Socrates” in recognizing an origination of chaos—which is an unusual trait—but attributes it to chance. Ephraim has preserved (“Against Hypatius,” III., p. 69, 40 Mitchell) the very words of his source—“At that very time a cause came to be by chance and the Wind dashed against the Fire.”

According to Theodore, the Wind is checked by “an utterance of Thought,” the agitation quieted by a Wind (*i. e.*, πνεῦμα) from on high, and the portion of the elements which is still confused is removed from the others and made into the material universe. These steps are not described by the “Socrates.” They are obviously derived, as Theodore himself remarks, from the Valentinian Gnosis.

According to the “Socrates,” “it was his will that she (soul) should be divided and should coin and constitute bodies (*pagre, i. e.*, animate bodies) out of the four elements of the powers and according to the number of those seven Governors and Servants of his.”

⁶ The MS. has as the verb an *Ethpeal* or *Ethpaal* perfect from the root *pšq*. According to Payne-Smith, this verb is used only in *Pael* and *Ethpaal*, and in the active means “make easy,” “expound,” “translate.” These ideas cannot be fitted into the above context. Ryssel translates *und ganz und gar erleichtert (d. h. von fremden Substanzen befreit) werde zu etwas Untheilbaren und Unerkennbaren*. I have emended it to read *’ethpšēṭ*; compare Eusebius “Theophania,” p. 12, Lee, where the same verb is used to describe the activity of the Logos in the universe—“Throughout the universe he spread (*pšat*) himself, above in the height, below in the deep, himself, incorporeal, he extended (*mēthaḥ*).”

One may note in passing that the word here used to denote the planets, which I have translated “Governors” (*madhbĕrāne*), is used in the same sense in the “Book of the Laws.”

The “Socrates,” then, ascribes the organization and constitution of the universe to the soul, not to the Logos. Ephraim (“Adv. Haer.,” III., lines 102–110, 125–134) rails bitterly against Bardaisan for denying the orthodox doctrine that the Logos constructed the universe and asserts that he represented Wisdom as acting as God’s agent in the work of creation. Thus the soul of the “Socrates” corresponds to Wisdom in Bardaisan’s system.

The cosmology of the “Socrates” resembles, therefore, that of Bardaisan in several important features, especially in denying the orthodox doctrine of creation out of nothing (the words “create,” “creation,” “creature” do not occur in it at all) and representing the world as made out of eternally existing elements; in recognizing a fifth something, Darkness, which corresponds to the Aristotelian First Matter; in describing the origin of chaos; in regarding the world-process as essentially the resolution of chaos into cosmos; in regarding evil as nothing but the unregulated conflict of eternally existing and opposed attributes. But the two systems differ in other important features, and it is quite certain that the “Socrates” is not the source from which Ephraim and Theodore drew their information about Bardaisan’s cosmology.

Postscript.—In view of the uncertainty of accomplishment which in these troubled times attaches to all activities not contributing to the war, I have decided to add to the above paper a brief statement of the conclusions which I had reached when it was written but withheld in anticipation of the new evidence promised by Mr. Mitchell. Limitations of space will permit only brief reference to the sources, but those that are interested will have no difficulty in verifying them.

Bardaisan wrote dialogues against Marcion and others (Euseb., “Hist.,” IV., 30) and many other works, some of which may well have been dialogues; the “Socrates” is one of these. It is the source from which Ephraim drew his knowledge of Bardaisan’s theory of soul; it manifests in conspicuous degree the “patience and

polite answers to every man” for which Bardaisan’s disciples praised him (Philoxenus *ap.* Cureton, “Spicilegium,” p. v); its cosmology is closely akin to and in no point inconsistent with that of the chief source.

That the “Oration of Melito” (Cureton, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–31, Syr.) is also the work of Bardaisan is rendered extremely probable by its close affinity to both the “Socrates” and the “Book of the Laws.” The “Socrates” teaches that knowledge of God is implicit in every man by virtue of his relation to the “Original Root.” In the “Oration” a similar doctrine is both stated in general terms (*e. g.*, compare “Or.,” p. 30, 15, with “S.” p. 161, 16) and directly applied to the Emperor, *e. g.* (p. 25, 24): “But thou, a free intelligence and cognizant of the truth, enter into thyself;” (p. 27, 14) “Know thyself and thou shalt know God;” (p. 29, 16) “But thou, feeble man, within whom He is and without whom He is and above whom He is.” Its relation to the “Book of the Laws” is even closer; with the latter it insists upon the doctrine of free will and makes extensive use of material drawn from the history and customs of foreign nations in the same curious and characteristic way. The Emperor to whom it is addressed is without doubt Caracalla. He was generally known during his life as simply “Antoninus”; he spent the winter of 216–17 in Edessa; he was wont to seek out and consult astrologers, and Bardaisan, who had been an intimate friend of the late king Abgar IV., must have been brought into touch with him. The dialogue on Destiny which Bardaisan dedicated to him, which M. Nau is right in distinguishing from the “Book of the Laws” (“Le Livre des Lois,” pp. 11–12), and the “Oration,” were probably both among the results of the personal relation thus established. One may also recognize in some of the bold characterizations of the “Oration” leading traits of Caracalla; compare, for example (25, 25), “if they clothe thee in the fashion of a woman remember that thou art a man” with Dio Cassius’s description of the effeminate appearance which Caracalla affected while in the East—his removal of his beard at Antioch (Dio, 77, 20) and the barbaric long-robed costume of his own designing which he wore in Mesopotamia (Dio, 78, 3, 3); com-

pare also (“Orat.,” p. 27, 26) “Therefore thou rollest thyself upon the ground before demons and shadows and askest vain petitions from one that hath nought to give” (and also p. 29, 25) with Dio’s account (77, 15, 5–7) of Caracalla’s vain efforts to recover his health by assiduous devotion to the gods.

As regards the bearing of these conclusions upon the hypothesis which I suggested some years ago (“Bardaisan and the Odes of Solomon” in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1911), that the “Odes” were written by Bardaisan, I can only say that no inferences can be drawn until the “Odes” have been given much more careful study than they have yet received. They are certainly more deeply tinged with Valentinian ideas than are the above three works—much more deeply, indeed, than I supposed when I published my first study of the problem—and many of them are as yet but imperfectly understood. I may, however, remark that the references to persecution in the “Odes” (*e. g.*, 5, 8, 29) would be perfectly appropriate to the situation above supposed; especially would the perplexing allusions of the 29th be at last intelligible. The boldness of the “Oration” must have inflamed Caracalla’s savage temper to the highest degree and it was no doubt after its delivery that Apollonius, “the friend of Antoninus” (Epiph., “Haer.,” 56), demanded of Bardaisan that he renounce his faith, and received an uncompromising refusal. Epiphanius says that on that occasion Bardaisan very nearly attained the rank of a confessor. It is probable that he would have attained the still higher rank of a martyr if Caracalla had not been assassinated, April 8, 217, while making a trip from Edessa to Harran. Compare with this situation the language of the 29th Ode:

- 4 He has raised me from the depth of hell
and from the mouth of death has drawn me;
- 5 I have brought low my enemy
and He has acquitted me by His grace. . . .
- 7 He showed me His sign
and guided me by His light;
He gave me the rod of His power
- 8 that I might subdue the thoughts of the peoples,
to bring low the prowess of warriors,

- 9 to make war by His word,
to take victory by His might.
- 10 The Lord cast down my enemy by His word
and he became like the chaff which the wind carries off.

Another scrap of evidence, from a quite different source, points in the same direction. The sixth Ode contains a simile which has caused no little perplexity:

- 7 For a stream went forth
and became a river great and broad,
8 For it overwhelmed everything
and shattered and brought (them) to the Temple.
9 And the restraints of men could not restrain it
nor the arts of them that restrain waters.

This river, it appears, is the Gospel. But why does the Gospel bring its conquests to the “Temple”? What is the “Temple”? And why this curiously specific allusion to the hydraulic engineers? In the Edessene Chronicle one finds a contemporary account of a flood which devastated Edessa A.D. 201 (*BO*, I., 390–91). A spring within the palace grounds overflowed and inundated the palace. “While the wise men were thinking what they should do to the flood of water which was increasing” a heavy rain came on during the night, the river Daisan overflowed its banks and formed a deep lake which finally overtopped the west wall of the city and poured over the battlements. King Abgar ordered the sluice-gates to be opened, but it was too late—the wall collapsed, the flood destroyed the palace “and the waters swept away everything before them, the fair and beautiful buildings of the city, everything near the river southward and northward, and they also made an onslaught on the temple of the congregation of the Christians.” Unfortunately the word used⁷ does not indicate the amount of damage to the “temple” of the Christians, but from the very fact of its ambiguity, following as it does unambiguous words, and from the order of the narrative one may infer that the damage fell short of complete destruction. Manifestly, this is precisely the situation depicted in the Ode—the building used by the Christians of Edessa

⁷ *srhw* may signify any amount of injury from a mere attack upon to total destruction.

for their worship was popularly known as their “temple,” a great flood which hydraulic engineers had striven in vain to control carried masses of débris up to the doors of that temple. The poet takes the catastrophe, in which more than two thousand persons perished, as a symbol of the triumphal progress of the Gospel which sweeps through the world, overcoming all obstacles, and brings its captives into the Church.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA,
April 3, 1918.