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A Syriac Christology and Polemics Against the Jews: a theology of Aphrahat

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it sets the historical context in which Aphrahat wrote his *Demonstrations* and deals with the interesting relationship between his writings, ‘against the Jews’ and the Sassanian persecution of Christians. It also treats his refutation of the Jewish charges. Secondly, it addresses his ‘unique’ view of christology which is not in line with the Nicene decision concerning one aspect yet at the same time it is congruent with it. The paper also tries to point out that his view on christology was ‘unique’ but not exceptional in the Early Church.

Upon researching the earliest times of Christianity, no writer can afford to overlook the Syriac writings. These works are just as important as those written in Greek, Latin, and Coptic. Prior to the fifth century, when the christological controversies led to an open rupture between the Monophysite western Syrians and the Diophysite eastern Syrians, Syriac literature was neither Jacobite nor Nestorian but rather unified, it was essentially biblical, homiletic and theological in character.¹ Three Syriac compositions in particular assigned to the fourth century call for some notice. These are the *Doctrine of Addai*, the *Homilies of Aphraates*,² and the *Writings of St. Ephraim*.³ Of these excellent works the present paper is devoted to the study of Aphrahat’s homilies, also called *Demonstrations*. Although we have his writings in our hands, we do not know too much of Aphrahat’s life. He was an Assyrian, a northern Mesopotamian from the regions around Adiabene. Aphrahat was apparently a convert from Zoroastrianism.⁴ He left the life of a solitary person to become a bishop,⁵ the bishop of Mar Mattai. As far as his personal character is concerned, Murray portrays him as “a serene, sweet-natured man..., a lover of the church who grieves over arrogance and the abuse of authority”.⁶

Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* were written under the pen name the “Persian sage”.⁷ The homilies of Aphraates are twenty-three in number, ten of which are assigned to the year 337 and thirteen to the year 344. A separate homily, *On the Cluster*, is assigned

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¹ Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 298.

² I usually use Aphrahat but I left here Aphraates because of quotation.

³ Walter F. Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Churches*, Early Syrian Christianity, International Theological Library, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), p. 470.

⁴ Samuel Moffet, *Christianity in Asia*, vols 2 (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), I. p. 125.

⁵ See *Demonstrations* XIV. Here he addresses the other bishops as equals.

⁶ R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 29.

⁷ Jacob Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism: the Christian–Jewish Argument in the fourth century Iran*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971).

to the following year.⁸ The homilies constitute one work which is a systematic exposition of the Christian faith, arranged as an acrostic, each homily beginning with one of the twenty-three letters of the alphabet in order. The work, however, does not consist of speculative theology; it deals chiefly with the relation of faith to the Christian life of the spirit of Christ in men, who thus become temples of God.⁹

Throughout the *Demonstrations* Aphrahat quotes from most of the Old Testament books using the Peshitta, the Old Testament of the Palestinian synagogues with Jewish exegesis. He quotes from the Apocrypha (Tobit, Ecclesiasticus, Maccabees). For the gospels, he uses Tatian's Diatessaron, significantly including the disputed last twelve verses of Mark which contain the Great Commission. For the rest of the New Testament, he generally follows the canon of the Syriac Peshitta, which became the official version of the Church of the East and which omitted the four shorter "catholic Epistles" and the book of Revelation.¹⁰ He was thoroughly familiar with the rabbinical arguments of his age, and this can be seen in his writings "against the Jews". This observation created an exciting debate amongst the scholars from the late 19th century onwards. It is not the focus of the present study to offer a detailed overview. It should suffice to say that Funk, Wellhausen, Gavin and Ginzberg found conspicuous parallels between Aphrahat and the rabbinical literature.¹¹ Others, such as Neuser and Bruns criticize and modify their claims.¹²

We are not much concerned about the first section of his *Demonstration*, but rather concentrate on the second, containing thirteen chapters (written in 334), eight of which are written "against the Jews", which, despite that description were "doctrinal, not racist".¹³ He sharply opposes Jewish beliefs, but he respects their stance. He even couches the Christian creed with which he closes his first homily in such Old Testament terms that the change of a single word, it has been pointed out, would make it a completely Jewish creed.¹⁴

In Neuser's opinion "the *Demonstrations* pertinent to Judaism are divided into two groups, first those in which Aphrahat provides the simple Christians with an apology against the critique of Christianity coming from Jews, second, Aphrahat's critique of Judaism".¹⁵ Aphrahat is severely critical of the synagogues' Jewish legalism and of the Jews' rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah, but he is equally critical of his fellow Christians for falling away from their own early ideals and enthusiasm.¹⁶ Though hard-pressed, he maintains throughout his writings an attitude of respect. He must be regarded as the example of the shape Christianity might have taken had it been

⁸ W. F. Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Christianity*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), p. 471.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 471., Cf. Moffet, *Christianity in Asia*, vol. I., p. 126.

¹⁰ Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, pp. 199–214., for a list of scripture references. See also: Moffet, p. 129.

¹¹ Salamon Funk: *Die Haggadische Elemente in den Homilien des Aphrabates, der Persischen Weisen*, (Wien: 1891), pp. 19–59.; Johannes Bleek, Adolf Kapmhausen, Julius Wellhausen, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* Berlin: G Reimer, 1878), p. 601.; Louis Ginzberg: *Legends of the Jews* vols 7 (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1998) VII, pp. 586–587.

¹² Peter Bruns, 'Aphrahat: Unterweisungen I-II' In: *Fontes Christiani* 5. 1–2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991).; Neuser, *Aphrahat*.

¹³ Moffet, *Christianity in Asia*, vol. I., p. 125.

¹⁴ H. L. Pass, 'The Creed of Aphraates', *Journal of Theological Studies* 9, (Oxford and London, 1908), pp. 267–84.

¹⁵ Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, p. 123.

¹⁶ Moffet, p. 126.

formed in the Semitic-Iranian Orient, a region quite free of the legacy of pagan Graeco-Roman anti-Semitism.¹⁷ It is true, Aphrahat's theology was not always clear and consistent, his asceticism was exaggerated, and his Old Testament exegesis and arguments against the Jews were sometimes more subjective than exact. Yet he cannot be accused of anti-Semitism as some Christian writers 'might be perceived as such through the lenses of our modern eyes' within the Roman Empire.

Aphrahat's literary activity took place during a very significant area in the life of the Syriac Church. The historical context had a great influence on his writings, though in a surprising way. Although the state unmercifully persecuted Christians, he seems to be more concerned with the Jewish charges which may have caused a loss of membership. Thus, the persecution as well as the Jewish charge, namely, proselytizing weakened the church. The great persecution started under the reign of Shabur II. He launched a war against the Roman Empire and marched Northwest in 335, and again after the death of Constantine in 337. His death in 337 C. E. provided the Sassanid ruler with an excuse to test the loyalties of Persian Christians.¹⁸ In the year 339 C. E., after unsuccessfully besieging the Roman stronghold of Nisisbis, Shabur II, the Persian king, returned to his capital frustrated and financially strained.¹⁹ Temporarily set back, but unrelenting, Shabur was determined to raise funds in order to continue his campaign. According to two fifth-century Christian sources, the *Martyrology of Shem'on bar Sabba'e* and the *Narration of Shem'on bar Sabba'e*, Shabur turned to Shem'on, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the regional capital city, demanding double poll-tax from the Christian community.²⁰ The king having just lost a battle to the Christian monarch of Rome exacted his revenge on the Christians within his jurisdiction. The bishop, while professing his utmost loyalty to Persia, protested claiming that his constituents were too poor themselves to be able to comply. The king, in his fury, condemned the bishop to death. Following this church leader's martyrdom, a general persecution of the Christians ensued – continuing until Shabur's death in 379 C. E.²¹ It appears that the king clamped down on the Persian Christian community not so much because he thought that they had the funds, but to test their loyalty to the State. As Christians in a Zoroastrian kingdom, they had the dubious reputation of being friendly with the Romans, the Persians' aggressive enemy – for all Christians were under Constantine's protection.²²

Constantine, around 315 C.E. told Shabur II that it was with "joy" that he heard

tidings so in accordance with my desire, that the fairest districts of Persia are filled with those men on whose behalf alone I am present seeking, I mean the Christians. I pray therefore that both you and they may enjoy prosperity, and

¹⁷ Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *A Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia*, (JOJS) 1996, Spr., p. 48.

¹⁹ R. N. Frye, *Political history of Iran under the Sassanians*, Cambridge History of Iran, 3. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 137.

²⁰ *Narration of Shem'on*, Graffin, *Patrologia Syriaca*, vols 2 (Paris: Firmin-Dodit, 1907).

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 45.

²² N. H. Baynes, *Constantine and the Great and the Christian Church*, (London: Humphrey Milford Amen House, 1932), pp. 26–29.; Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV, 13.

that your blessings and theirs may be in equal measure... I commend these persons to your protection... Cherish them with your wonted humanity...²³

It is no wonder that Shabur II, who had already fought against Rome in 335, was irritated by Constantine's intention to meddle with the internal affairs of his sovereign state. The primary cause of the persecution was political. When Rome became Christian its old enemy turned anti-Christian. Constantine's claim became the prototype of 'protectory right' which for instance, Russia used many times in the Balkans, especially in the 19th century when the Turkish Empire was declining. The tsar declared himself as a protector of all Orthodox Christians, having especially the Rumanians and Bulgarians in mind. It was a way of interfering with the other state's affairs.

It is not surprising at all that in such a situation Christians started to have counter-accusations as a way of finding explanations for the persecution they faced. The documents Martyrology of Shem'on bar Sabba'e and the Narration of Shem'on bar Sabba'e mentioned above make the claim that the Jews used their influence to provoke the king's ire against Christians. At about the same time, Aphrahat even accused the Jews of proselytizing among the Christians. However, the allegations of Jewish influence on the king are not very likely as far as the persecution as a whole is concerned. They stem from the fact that the Jews successfully proselytized among Christians, and the latter were inclined to find a scapegoat as an explanation for their present suffering. Duchesne-Guillemin's remark is appropriate when he says:

when religion and politics became increasingly intertwined in the Sassanian Empire,²⁴ minority populations were oppressed. When the king and the priesthood were close, the fanatical Zoroastrian had license to persecute minorities, as in the time of Kartir and under Shabur II.²⁵

The main issue with which Aphrahat dealt was the problem of reacting to Jewish charges as well as providing means for Christians to attack Jewish beliefs theologically. These were the concerns of the churches around Adiabene. Before exploring any of his writings, we must see clearly the context of the background of the churches within which this dialogue between the two religious traditions developed.

It was in the Jewish communities of the Eastern Diaspora that Christian expansion outside the Roman Empire first put down its roots. Where strong rabbinical schools had been founded, the growth of the church was slow and its organizing belated. But in Edessa and Adiabene, which had no such strong rabbinical centers, the rise of the Christian communities began early, and they continued to flourish.²⁶ Aphrahat instructs his readers several times in the Demonstrations how to defend themselves from the Jewish onslaught and teaches them to know 'what is right to say against the Jews' and how to 'defend [themselves] against the Jews'.²⁷ One may ask the questions: with what kind of Jews had Aphrahat polemic and why he devoted so much time to them. Some suggested that they were rabbinical Jews whereas Neuser reckons that

²³ Neuser, *Problems of Religion and Society*, p. 132. He cites from "Select Library of Nicene and post Nicene Fathers", trans., Ernest Cushing Richardson, 2nd series, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1962).

²⁴ I follow this form cited by Koltun-Fromm which is more accurate than Moffet's use of 'Persian Empire'.

²⁵ J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Zoroastrian Religion*, Cambridge History of Iran, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 3 (2) pp. 874–906.

²⁶ Moffet, p. 128.

²⁷ Demonstrations, XVII:12, XVIII:12.

they were ‘Yahwistic’ Jews who were unfamiliar with rabbinistic Judaism.²⁸ Whatever the case may have been, it seems that the Jews successfully criticized the beliefs of Christians in Persia. In spite of the plausible loss in membership which must have urged Aphrahat to react against Jewish proselytizing attempts, “it is striking that he did not find it necessary to provide Christians with arguments to arm them for the disputations to which they were forcibly called by Mobads.”²⁹ The Zoroastrians were harassing the Christians. Jews took the advantage of the situation and must have proselytized among Christians with considerable success. It is likely that the threat of Judaism was perceived just as dangerous as the persecution of the Zoroastrian priest. Needles to say, the two are intertwined. Gavin says: “some uneducated Persian Christians, with Jewish blood in their background, hounded by the Magian priest, opted to save themselves from Shabur’s persecution by ‘backsliding’ into Judaism.”³⁰ Apparently he is arguing from a sociological point of view which needed to be taken into consideration too. Neuser underscores the significance and the influence of the converts’ Jewish background. If his view is accepted, then we must infer that a significant proportion of the church membership was Jewish.

The new convert from the Jewish community could not have forgotten and was not able to ignore the Sabbath, festivals and dietary rules... Above all, the Christian-Jew of Mesopotamia must have asked himself whether he had given up redemption in the future in exchange for a rather dubious salvation, for Christians were persecuted, while Jewry was not.³¹

Taking all into consideration the following issues arise: why were the Jews so successful and what kind of charges did they raise/give birth to. The Jewish critique consisted of four main elements. The first is that the Christians worship a man, not God. Second, Christians practice celibacy, which is contrary to nature and to divine law. Third, the Christians are persecuted and God does not seem to be able to save them. Finally, the Christians have not been called by God.

We would like to deal with two of the charges, namely, the issue of persecution and the worship of Christ as God. Aphrahat devotes a whole chapter to the issue of Persecution.³² He writes about the Jewish charges in the following way: “it happened one day that a man who is called ‘the sage of the Jews’ met me and asked, saying: ‘Yeshu who is called your teacher wrote to you thus: “if there shall be in you faith like one seed of mustard, you will say to this mountain, ‘move’, and it will move from before you; and even, ‘lift up’, and it will fall into the sea, for it will obey you” (Mt. 17:18, 21:21). ‘And thus’, there is not among all of you one wise person, whose prayer is heard, and who asks God that your persecutions should cease from you”.³³ The charge was, in other words, that if the Christians believed properly, God would protect them. “Both pagans and Jews regarded the persecution of Christians as

²⁸ Jacob Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism: the Christian –Jewish Argument in the fourth century Iran*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), pp. 148, 150.

²⁹ Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, p. 125.

³⁰ Frank Gavin: *Aphraates and the Jews. A study of the Controversial Homilies of the Persian Sage in their relation to Jewish Thought* (New York: 1966), pp. 31–32.

³¹ Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, p. 126.

³² See, *Demonstrations*, XXI., ‘On Persecution’ pp. 392–402. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second series vol. XIII. Trans., by J. B. Morris, M. A. (Oxford Library of the Fathers).

³³ *Demonstration*, XXI:1.

evidence that they had no god, for if they did, he would assuredly have avenged their present plight".³⁴ Interestingly enough, Aphrahat, in his reply, which is in fact an apologetic work, reverses the accusation: the Jews have the wrong faith, and God no longer listens to their prayers. Christian faith was no different from that expressed by Isaiah, who said that "if you pass through the sea, I am with you" (Is. 43:2-3). If an Israelite today walked through the sea, he would be drowned. Further, Israel hoped to be redeemed, but the Prophet compared her to Sodom;³⁵ just as Sodom was destroyed and never again would be resettled, so has Jerusalem been destroyed, and never will it be resettled. Israel permanently and finally has been rejected.³⁶

The Jews bragged about that 'God is with us' by interpreting Lev. 26:44, which has no historical context, for their own ends. Thus, it could have been and was surely used in support of God's taking care of his people, that is, the Jews, in different times such as in second-century Roman Palestine and as in our context, in the fourth-century Persia. However, Aphrahat goes into details how many years passed yet the Jews are still scattered. He concludes that "Jerusalem's iniquity was greater than that of Sodom and her daughters. How it will ever be resettled?"

Aphrahat's defense is divided into three parts. First, he took the offensive by arguing that the Jews will never be redeemed and also were persecuted. Then he emphasizes that persecution is nothing to be ashamed of. It is hardly proof of anything than that "we have sinned". In times Israel was persecuted. The greatest heroes of Israel were persecuted such as Jacob, Joseph (Dem. XXI. 9), Joshua, son of Nun, Jephthah and David (XXI. 10), and their persecution prefigured that of Jesus. Finally, for him to be persecuted is to participate in the life of Christ".³⁷ Aphrahat is well aware of the importance of his message during the time of persecution and regards martyrdom as most of the Early Christians did as an honour. "Also in our own days these things happened to us also on account of our sins; but also that what is written might be fulfilled, even as our Redeemer said: 'These things are to be' (Mt. 24:6; Luke 21:9). The Apostle said: - 'Also over us is set this cloud of confession' (Heb.11:1); which (is) honour, wherein many confess and are slain".

Aphrahat's view of Christ is somewhat different from that of the Nicene Fathers. This is implicit in his Demonstration XXI. In his work he argues that "it was the Jews who called him the Son of God, "hence Jews have no grounds to criticize us in that regard" (I, 804-5).³⁸ Neuser asserts that "christology in all its varieties rarely, if ever, understood that Jesus was son of God in precisely the same way that other men were sons of God".³⁹ He is right in concluding that Aphrahat claimed that 'Jesus really was Christ' and was much more than a man. Aphrahat followed the remarkable argument of Christ in the fourth gospel (John 10:33-36), he supports the doctrine by appealing to instances of the name of divinity being given to man.⁴⁰

³² Neuser, p. 133.

³³ Isaiah, 1:10, The term came first in I, 469.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 133.

³⁶ "Even in the land of your enemies I have not left you and I have not annulled my covenant with you."

³⁷ Neuser, p. 134.

³⁸ Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca*, cited by Neuser, p. 130.

³⁹ Neuser, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, p. 130.

⁴⁰ Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Christianity*, p. 471.

He argues that not only righteous men such as Solomon and Moses had been called sons of God, but the Jews also were called sons of God. Hence there is nothing strange in regarding Jesus as Son of God. As a matter of fact Jewish critique seems never to have alluded to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Virgin birth, and similar matters. Aphrahat was not constrained to defend these beliefs. The reason must be sought in the theology of his church, or, more precisely, his theological thinking.⁴¹

Aphrahat holds firmly to the Divinity of Christ: but he defends it in a way that shows how little he is influenced by contemporary discussions continued among the theologians of the Roman Empire writing in Greek or Latin. “He also uses the argumentum ad hominem, urging that it is better to worship Jesus than to worship kings and emperors. He also adds that Christ has called us sons, making us brothers. This is altogether aside from the homoousian doctrine. It indicates a free handling of the problem untrammelled by the phrases of fixed creeds or the pronouncement of authoritative councils”.⁴²

We have seen that Aphrahat argues for the divinity of Christ just as other Christian apologists did. However, there is a considerable difference in how he perceived christology. There is a feature of his apologetic work, that is, he extensively uses Old Testament passages to support his views, and he scarcely makes use of the New Testament. Furthermore, he is not arguing for a subordinationist theory, but he only tries to testify who Jesus Christ was for the Christians. He never mentions the “classical subordinationist” text of 1 Cor. chapter 15. We try to unfold the issue of how Aphrahat understood Christ’s divinity. “Of Christ that he is the Son of God” indicates the subject of his Demonstrations XVII. It is an extended excursus on christology, when seen from the vantage point of Nicea and the Graeco-Roman world, is indeed unusual, but hardly – when put in its proper context – an “unicum”.⁴³ The Demonstration opens with the charge raised by the Jews: “Ye worship and serve a man who was begotten, a son of man who was crucified, and ye call a son of men God and though God has no son, ye say concerning this crucified Jesus, that He is the Son of God”.⁴⁴

Celsus leveled the same charge against Christians that is quoted from the Jews in Demonstrations XVII.1. What is remarkable, however, is Aphrahat’s defense. The dilemma is that there is a discontinuity between the subordinationist christology apparently present in the Demonstration XVII and Aphrahat’s post-Nicene date and his reputation for orthodoxy.⁴⁵

The different attitudes towards Aphrahat’s theology are the following. Some scholars acknowledge Aphrahat’s Semitic worldview but then proceed to assert his theological orthodoxy. Others deny Semitic elements and then affirm his theological orthodoxy. The third approach, becoming increasingly popular in recent scholarship, is to pass by the issue in silence. Although Aphrahat’s argument is congruent with earlier subordinationist tradition, previous scholarship has not introduced any of these into the discussion. This is regrettable, for these parallels illuminate the sources of

⁴¹ See Ortiz de Urbina, *Die Gottbait Christi bei Afrabat*, Cited by Neuser, p. 131.

⁴² Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Christianity*, p. 471.

⁴³ William L. Petersen, ‘The Christology of Aphrahat, The Persian sage: an excursus on the 17th Demonstration’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), pp. 241–256.

⁴⁴ *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. XIII. Gregory the Great, trans by Rev. J. B. Morris, M. A. (Oxford Library of the Fathers), Demons. XVII. 1. p. 387.

⁴⁵ Petersen, p. 244.

Aphrahat's tradition and clarify his own theology. The aim of such scholars is clearly apologetic; today this becomes recognized – albeit, belatedly.⁴⁶

Petersen points out the similarities between *Recognitiones* (Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*, II 41. 3–42.1, Rufinus Latin translation) and *Demonstrations* both passages cite Ex. 7:1 to establish the same point (XVII.5): the use of the name “God” for Jesus. There is a distinction between the supreme Creator God (YHWH) and those who only “bear” his name”: Moses – the Judges (Recong. only) – and now Jesus. Geographic as well as chronological proximity reinforce this conclusion,⁴⁷ to which Justin Martyr himself also arrives: “although Jesus, the Christ, may bear the name “god” and “son of god”, he is not the ineffable “God” YHWH.⁴⁸ The setting of both Justin and Aphrahat is a confrontation between a Jew and a Christian. Both reject the idea that there is another god (*Demonstrations*, XVII.7), and both of them are subordinationists.

Aphrahat's christology is an “orthodox” – that is “normative” – Judaic-Christian christology. Its antecedents are found in Justin Martyr; its sentiments, phrasing, and examples echo a passage in the contemporaneous Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*. To force Aphrahat's writings into the Nicene framework appears to do injustice to his idiosyncratic Syrian Christian view. Such misrepresentation betrays insensitivity to Aphrahat, since it necessarily violates the letter of his writing. Further, it manipulates the reader to overlook some of the most valuable information Aphrahat offers, namely, a glimpse of a Christology confessed by Early Syrian Christians, a relic inherited from primitive Semitic or Judaic Christianity. Although we do not know whether he escaped the great persecution of the Sassanian rulers, yet we can be sure that he would have been just as brave a martyr of the Christian Church as Justin was. “The persecution was worse than anything suffered in the West under Rome, yet the number of apostasies seemed to be fewer in Persia than in the West, which is a remarkable tribute to the steady courage of Asia's early Christians.⁴⁹

Aphrahat's message at the time of the Great Persecution of the Syriac Christian Church, which was greater in number than the one within the Roman Empire,⁵⁰ must have provided comfort and consolation for the believers of the true Israel. He was also a great man of God who stood for the clear doctrine of the church during the time of evil persecution. He was “orthodox” and a very strict yet fervent Christian prophet of his age. Modern theologians as well as all-time Christian readers have indeed a lot to learn from him.

Résumé

In this study I demonstrate two converging issues. First, after setting the historical context in which Aphrahat wrote his *Demonstrations* and I deal with the interesting relationship between his writings, ‘against the Jews’ and the Sassanian persecution of Christians. This work also treats his refutation of the Jewish charges. Secondly, I address his ‘unique’ view of christology which is not in line with the Nicene decision concerning one aspect yet at the same time it is congruent with it. I seek to point out that his view on christology was ‘unique’ but not exceptional in the Early Church.

⁴⁶ Petersen, p. 246.

⁴⁷ *Recognitiones* are assigned a Syrian or Palestinian provenance, and their composition is dated to c. 350 – the same period in which the 17th Demonstration was composed.

⁴⁸ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 126.1–127.4.

⁴⁹ L. C. Casartelli, “Sassanians”, in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* ed. Hastings vol. 11 p. 203.

⁵⁰ “One estimate is that as many as 190 000 Persian Christians died in the terror”. Moffet, p. 145.