
CHAPTER 6

BARDAISAN: ON NATURE, FATE, AND FREEDOM

Bardaisan's treatise, now entitled *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*¹ but referred to in antiquity as his dialogue *On Fate*², examines the complex interrelationships between nature, fate, and human freedom. This work has received scant philosophical attention³, however, although it deals in an interesting and novel way with important philosophical issues. What Bardaisan has to say about freedom in relation to nature and fate touches on many of the same philosophical concerns as had previous thinkers (e.g. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the Stoics) and as Augustine has later on in *De libero arbitrio voluntatis*. In many ways Bardaisan's work has unfortunately shared the same neglect as Syriac philosophy, theology, and literature in general.

In order to make Bardaisan's contributions to the study of freedom and the human condition more accessible to philosophical inquiry, this article will explore the following. First of all, because of the relative unfamiliarity of the subject matter in philosophical circles, some background material on Bardaisan himself, his treatise, and Syriac culture in general will be presented. Secondly, a philosophical account of his treatise will be provided. This will focus in part on the structure of the dialogue, showing the systematic development of Bardaisan's position. Critical comments will be made along the way on the steps in Bardaisan's argument. Attention will also be placed on Bardaisan's basic philosophical terminology, chiefly focusing on epistemological, metaphysical, and anthropological expressions. In this way a critical picture of Bardaisan's position on human freedom will be portrayed.

1. About Bardaisan

Syriac-speaking culture represents an important, interesting, and complex chapter in the development of Western thought, one that flourished from ca. 200 - ca. 1300 A.D. As a language, Syriac is an Aramaic dialect from the region of Edessa, an area in the upper Euphrates valley, Edessa being the modern Urfa now situated on the Turkish side of the Turkey-Syria border. Syriac came to provide a rather far-flung language of scholarship and thought generally, one that dominated the Christian Middle East and its missions throughout Iran into northern India and China⁴. It was, basically, a Christian culture, first as part of the universal church but later on as Nestorian and Monophysite churches. These churches were condemned as heretical by Western Christianity, and indeed they were at odds with each other. It was not a national culture but existed within many, producing a complex matrix for competing and conflicting cultural influences. As Peter points out,

Except for an ephemeral and unimportant period as tiny client states to the Roman Empire, the Syriac-speaking community never had a national existence of its own. Its political history is that of the Roman, Byzantine, Sassanian, and Islamic Empires, first as part of the ecumenical Christian community, then as a religious minority.⁵

As a culture, its abiding interest lies not only in the number of original works it produced, Bardaisan's treatise among them, but also as a rich, heterogeneous conduit through which many important works of Greek philosophy and science passed into Islamic society which eventually replaced it as a political and cultural force⁶. Of particular interest here is the transmission of the works of Aristotle.⁷ As Arabic became the common language of the educated throughout the

Middle East, the use of Syriac declined, even though the Nestorian and Monophysite churches persisted long into Islamic times. Still, even in the 13th century, two outstanding Syriac thinkers used Syriac for their voluminous writings: the Nestorian scholar 'Abhdiso bar Berikha (Ebedjesu) (d. 1318) and the Monophysite philosopher Bar-Hebraeus (1226-1286) who Rescher notes was "the last important author in this (*i.e.* Syriac) language."⁸

Bardaisan, 154-222 A.D., was the first prominent philosopher of Syriac-speaking culture. He was born in Edessa, of a good family, and associated with the royal court. Edessa was then an independent kingdom, a frontier state between the Roman Empire and the Parthians. Situated on a major trade route, Edessa represented a major multi-cultural center, containing expressions of many philosophical and religious outlooks, both eastern and western. These included Stoicism, eastern Iranian religious movements, Judaism, Christianity, sects of Gnostics, cults of astrology, star-worshippers, etc.⁹

Within this rich and variegated society Bardaisan lived, wrote, and taught, attracting a number of students who later formed a prominent and long-lasting school of thought within the region of Edessa. At some point he became a Christian. Later thinkers have had difficulty attaching a label to Bardaisan's own intellectual position, interpreting him variously as a heretic (Ephrem Syrus), as a Gnostic (Hilgenfeld), as an astrologer (Nau), and as a humanist (Schaefer).¹⁰ Perhaps it is truer to say that Bardaisan attempted to develop his own philosophical stance in critical conversation with many religious and philosophical movements of his time. As Drijvers notes:

...Bardaisan occupied a unique place in this variegated world, distinguished by high social position and doubtlessly by great erudition, and attempting to bring old and new, East and West, into synthesis.¹¹

Towards the end of his life, in 216, Edessa was conquered by Rome and Bardaisan travelled, perhaps to Armenia. He died in 222, although the location is not known. His followers — the Bardaisanites — developed his teachings and became a major intellectual force in Edessa for some time. Ephrem Syrus (306-373) opposed their teachings; Bishop Rabulla of Edessa (d.435) tried to convert them to Christianity; but they were still in existence in the time of Jacob of Edessa (633-708).¹²

Bardaisan seems to have written a great many works. As Eusebius points out,

...Bardesanes, a most able man and skilled in Syriac, composed dialogues against the Marcionites and other leaders of various opinions, and he issued them in his own language and script, together with many other of his writings. Those who knew them, and they were many, for he was a powerful arguer, have translated them from Syriac into Greek. Among them is his very powerful dialogue with (pros) Antoninus *Concerning Fate (Peri Heimarmenes)*.¹³

More will be said shortly concerning this “very powerful” dialogue with (or to) Antoninus concerning fate. According to a much later Arabic source, the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadim (ca. 988), Bardaisan wrote works on *Light and Darkness*, *The Spiritual Nature of Truth*, and the *Movable and Immovable*, none of which are now extant. The “Hymn of the Soul” in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas was attributed by some to Bardaisan, but this now seems doubtful.¹⁴ Bardaisan is also said to have composed hymns, still extant in the days of Ephrem Syrus over 100 years later. He is also said to have composed histories of Armenia and India. A brief extract of a treatise on astronomy appears in a letter of George, Bishop

of the Arabs (d. 724), taken from an earlier letter of Severus Sebokti (d.666/7).¹⁵ By all accounts, Bardaisan was a prolific author, with many interests.

The treatise now entitled *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* poses some interesting hermeneutical questions. A sixth or seventh-century Syriac manuscript containing this work and others was obtained in 1843 by Archdeacon Tattam from a Syrian convent and deposited in the British Museum (Br. Mus. add. 14,658, *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* occupying columns 129a-141a). It was first mentioned by William Cureton in *Ancient Syriac Versions of the Epistles of St. Ignatius* (1845) and by E. Renan in “Lettre à M. Renaud” (*Journal Asiatique* 1852). In 1855 Cureton published the Syriac text along with an English translation, a Preface, and notes. In this work Cureton boldly proclaimed:

The first work printed from this Manuscript is the celebrated Treatise of Bardaisan on Fate, said to have been addressed to the Emperor Marcus Antoninus, commonly known as Marcus Aurelius; although, with the document now complete before us, we find no intimation of its having been so addressed.¹⁶

Cureton’s claim launched a major controversy, the main details of which can be found in Drijvers’ indispensable work, *Bardaisan of Edessa*. Prominent among the questions were: Is *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* addressed to Antoninus (as Eusebius says *On Fate* was, although the extant manuscript entitled *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* shows no such address)? In addition, is this Antoninus to be identified with Marcus Aurelius, as Cureton claimed?

Other questions quickly come to the fore as well. Is this work by Bardaisan, or is it by Philip, one of his disciples? Indeed, what could “by Philip” mean: e.g. composed as an original work by Philip? compiled by Philip from works by

conversations or treatises of Bardaisan, which originated towards the end of his life or soon afterwards, and which was transmitted under his name." (p.75)

Consequently Cureton's judgment in 1855 that we now have Bardaisan's dialogue *On Fate* seems well supported, and, as such, constitutes the primary source of information now concerning Bardaisan's position on the role of nature and fate in relation to human freedom.

2. About The Book of the Laws of the Countries

Superficially *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* appears to be a dialogue, although there are few exchanges between the participants. For the most part, the work consists of a series of seven "considerations," i.e. questions or points for Bardaisan to ponder and to respond to. In each case Bardaisan provides a discourse, setting forth his views on the matter at issue. The dialogue is carefully constructed, however, proceeding from

- (a) the importance of the notion of freedom (considerations 1 through 4 inclusive)
- (b) the difference between nature and freedom (consideration 5) and concluding with
- (c) the difference between fate and freedom (considerations 6 and 7).

Setting

The work begins informally: "A few days ago we went to visit our brother Shemashgram, when Bardaisan came and found us there" (D, p.5).¹⁸ As the discussion ensues, the "we" is identified as including not only Shemashgram and Bardaisan, but also Awida (who, portrayed as one of Bardaisan's new students,

Bardaisan? transcribed by Philip? etc. In each case the use of *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* as a source of information regarding Bardaisan's own position would differ. Moreover, how does the picture obtained of Bardaisan's teachings presented in *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* relate to the teachings of Bardaisan's obtained from other sources, notably the several works of Ephrem Syrus written against Bardaisan's position?¹⁷ In addition, what are the various interrelationships between *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* and extracts of this work found in both Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* VI, 9, 10 and in the *Recognitions of Clement* IX, 17 and 19-29?

I do not propose to discuss, let alone resolve, these complex issues here but rather to mention these important hermeneutic considerations and to build upon Drijvers' conclusions concerning the salient characteristics of *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*. Drijvers makes the following claims in *Bardaisan of Edessa*:

1. "...the BLC (i.e. *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*) was originally written in Syriac." (p.66)
2. "It was indeed Philippus who wrote down the dialogue, but it remains a dialogue of Bardaisan...." (p.67)
3. The work Eusebius quotes in *Praeparatio Evangelica* and refers to in *Ecclesiastical History* as Bardaisan's "very powerful dialogue with Antoninus *Concerning Fate*" is the one and the same work, namely Bardaisan's treatise, *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, dealing with fate. (pp.68-70)
4. Eusebius' addition "*pros Antoninon*" "remains an enigma" (p.69) although it is not Marcus Aurelius'.

5. The work was translated into Greek, as Eusebius says. (p. 74)

6. "The artificial character of the dialogue on Fate, the BLC, must be emphasised. The conversation was never held in this form, we can see that from the whole style....The BLC may therefore be a compilation of various

asks many of the questions), Philip (who is the narrator of the document we now have), and Bar Jamma (about whom nothing is said). It is not at all clear if all or only some are pupils of Bardaisan. The work begins immediately with Bardaisan asking, "What were you talking about?"

Consideration I

Those gathered (the "we") reply to Bardaisan's question by reporting that Awida had raised the following question: if God is (a) one, (b) a creator, and (c) expects people to obey his commandments, then why did not God create human beings so that they could not sin but always do what is right?

This question is provocatively formulated, for it does not simply ask what purpose the human capacity to sin serves. Nor does it just inquire why God did not do other than what he did. Given the stress on the unity, creativity, and goodness of God in the question's antecedent, and if it is the case that people do sin and do not always do what is right, then it could follow that somehow this conception of God may not be compatible with the description of actual human conditions. Bardaisan immediately sees the import of Awida's question. Instead of proceeding to answer the why-God-did-not-do-such-and-such portion of the question, he poses an astute counter-question to Awida: does he consider God to be one, or, if one, then such as not to wish humans to behave justly?

Awida has subtly succeeded in putting forth the issue concerning the compatibility of viewing God as one, as creator, and as good, with an understanding of human beings as including a capacity to sin. Bardaisan has replied by raising two possible ways of resolving the dilemma short of defending their compatibility: one is by denying the unity of God (perhaps, then, positing some dualism which could then be used to account for human evil); the other is by affirming the existence of one but an evil God. Either way may represent the real challenge of Awida's question: to use the facts of the human condition (as he and Bardaisan understand them) to force a different conception of God.

Awida backs off from answering Bardaisan's counter question, indicating that he wants simply to learn, and, being shy, had initially approached Bardaisan's students rather than the teacher himself personally. Bardaisan commends him, noting that teachers do not question but are questioned and observing that it is excellent for people to know how to formulate questions. Awida reports, however, that Bardaisan's other pupils had not answered his query but only had advised him truly to believe and then he would be able to know everything, anticipating, somewhat, the line of thought expressed by Anselm's *credo ut intelligam*. Awida responds that he cannot believe unless he is convinced.

The issue is whether belief leads to knowledge (as Bardaisan's students say) or whether there must be evidence for belief (as Awida maintains). Bardaisan replies by citing the effects of unbelief: constant analysis and synthesis, lack of knowledge of the truth, an inability to listen, an uncertainty whether one is right in not believing what is not believed, fearfulness, confusion, and rashness. Clearly Bardaisan sides with what his pupils have told Awida the newcomer.

It is unfortunate that Awida is not given the opportunity to respond at this point, for an interesting epistemological debate seems to be in the offing. Belief is distinguished from knowledge; two views concerning the relation of belief to knowledge are advanced; and, indeed, two views of belief are put forward. For Awida, belief requires justification. Rather than providing a basis for knowledge, belief itself must be grounded and justified on the basis of evidence. On this view, belief is itself part of the cognitive process.

Awida's cognitive view of belief differs considerably from Bardaisan's. For Bardaisan, belief is necessary prior to the ferreting out of the pertinent evidence, for belief offers a guideline in the search for knowledge. Cognitive activity is mere groping fumbling without belief. This view of belief might be termed "dispositional," for belief, on Bardaisan's analysis, indicates a believing disposition, one that stabilizes the mind, enabling it to pick out the relevant

evidence. It indicates, in other words, an openness to inquiry, but one guided by a framework. On this view, belief is not a cognitive activity but rather a necessary condition for true knowledge.

No more is said explicitly about this important epistemological, and methodological, matter. Superficially it may seem to represent an extraneous digression, a strange interlude in the discussion of Awida's initial question. This appears not to be the case, however, when one compares Bardaisan's insistence here on belief as a disposition to attend to the phenomenon at hand with his own methodological practice in the rest of the dialogue. His own approach is not to start from an assumed truth about the nature of the cosmos but from a willingness to observe the human condition accurately and precisely in order to ascertain what it shows to be true of the world in which we live. His emphasis on belief as a disposition, then, represents a significant shift away from *a priori* speculation about cosmology or anthropology in favor of a much more observational, *a posteriori* account rooted in the very nature of the phenomenon being considered.

Bardaisan returns to Awida's initial question, replying that if God had created human beings so as not to be able to sin, then they would simply be instruments. Here he cites two kinds of instruments. First there are those that like musical instruments or vessels are used by others. Man, however, Bardaisan points out, is like the user of instruments, who has expert knowledge, and it is to this use of things that praise and blame attach. God, he notes, has raised man above many things. Secondly, consider those instruments that are in some ways superior to man: natural objects such as the sun, moon, stars, ocean, mountains, and wind are subject to law and have no choice. Such entities, Bardaisan notes, cannot decide to do or not to do that which they are designed to do. They are "servants and slaves of a single law." (D, p. 13) Man differs from these objects, or to man is

...given him to lead his life according to his own free will, and to do all he is able to, if he will, or not to do it, if he will not, justifying himself or becoming guilty. (D, p. 13)

In sum, then, Bardaisan's answer to Awida's question is to point out that human beings (like angels but unlike other creatures) have freedom of choice (*hi'rutha*).

This account is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, Bardaisan has differentiated human beings from other kinds of entities (God, angels, natural objects, things subservient to man), and he has established priorities: man uses things through knowledge (and for this he is accountable); God uses natural objects through wisdom (and errs not). Secondly, he has answered Awida's question, not by arguing that because man has moral worth or because he is accountable for his use of things that therefore he must be viewed as having freedom of choice. Rather his method of demonstration lies precisely in differentiating kinds of entities and in noting what each has (*e.g.* man has freedom of choice). This again underscores his methodological approach of using observation to generate a theoretical point.

In addition, his view of natural objects is intriguing, especially in the light of various sectors of his own culture and time (astrology, star-worshippers) preoccupied with the influence of such entities on human character, development, and destiny. While clearly focusing on human freedom as freedom to choose, he also emphasizes man's freedom from these natural objects. As instruments of divine wisdom, they are under the control of God; they do not control man. He also adds, however, at the end of this discourse, a note that natural objects, while subject to law, are not completely devoid of freedom and hence will be subject to judgment at The End.

notes that the commandments are so onerous that people are incapable of fulfilling them. (The unexpressed conclusion would seem to be that if Bardaisan is right about human freedom, then the one God must be evil, or, at the very least, not serious about the possibility that his commandments be obeyed.)

In reply, Bardaisan at first comments that Awida's observation reflects the viewpoint of one who serves "the enemy of man." (D, p. 15) Next he assures Awida that men are commanded to be only what they are capable of. Two commandments have been placed before people: to avoid evil (*i.e.* what we would not wish to be done to us) and to do good (*i.e.* what we would want to happen to us). Bardaisan notes that carrying out commandments not to steal, not to lie, not to commit adultery, not to hate, *etc.* depends "on man's spirit...on the will of the soul." (D, p. 17) Negatively, he can refrain from evil; conversely, he can do good. None of these, Bardaisan notes, are impossible matters requiring exceptional strength, wealth, or skill. Indeed, he notes, "every human being with a soul can keep them with joy." (D, p. 19)

Awida then asks Bardaisan if he is maintaining that such acts are easily performed. Bardaisan replies that they "are easy for him who so wills." (D, p. 19)

Consideration 4

Awida suggests that while a person may avoid evil, he may not be able to do what is good. Bardaisan, however, replies that this not the case, contending that "it is much easier to do what is right than to avoid what is wrong." (D, p. 19) In discussing this he distinguishes three kinds of acts.

First of all, there are good acts. Here Bardaisan maintains that good is natural to man, pointing out that doing good occasions joy in the doer, results in a clear conscience, and is something the doer desires to share with others. In addition, there is the avoidance of evil, this being, says Bardaisan, a harder task than the doing of good. He illustrates this by an example: it is easy for someone

Consideration 2

Attention is diverted for a moment from human capabilities to a consideration of the implications of Bardaisan's last remark concerning the complex character of natural objects (as subject to law; as not devoid of freedom). Philip asks how entities subject to law can be judged. Bardaisan assures him that these elements (*estukse*; = Greek *stoicheion*) are judged only insofar as they are free. He explains further that these substances (*iithe'*) lose part of their inherent power when mixed with one another and in being subject to the power of the creator. They are thus judged only for that "which is their own." (D, p. 15)

The explanation Bardaisan offers is not pursued in any detail, the treatise being concerned with human capabilities rather than cosmology. The conception seems to be that the elements of the universe have a character of their own (including freedom) which is restricted when they form composite substances (such as natural objects) which then possess a new character of their own. Much is left unexplained: *e.g.* why the mingling results in a loss of power; what aspects or parts of these composite substances are not devoid of elemental freedom; the extent to which these composite substances are not devoid of freedom; etc. It is noteworthy, however, that there is no suggestion that the formation of composite substances out of elements is the result of, or indeed the cause of, evil. Moreover, it should be observed that the formation of these natural objects is seen in terms of their being brought under divine control (which would explain their "loss of inherent power" but leave open the question how much inherent power they still retain).

Consideration 3

Awida does not challenge Bardaisan's answer to his initial question, let alone ask in greater detail how the existence of one good creator God could be compatible with human capacity to sin. Instead he shifts the focus somewhat, but still with the purpose of relating human freedom to divine existence. He

would be to hold that man freely cooperates with the enemy, thereby committing evil acts and thus distorting his true nature. But Bardaisan does not say this.

Consideration 5

After having argued that people have free will, Bardaisan faces the first of two kinds of deterministic denials of human freedom. Philip reports that Awida had been arguing that people sin by nature (*kyana*) (D, p. 21) on the grounds that if people had not been formed naturally to do wrong, they would not do evil acts. Clearly Awida, the new pupil, is at fundamental odds with Bardaisan.

The kind of deterministic challenge Awida raises is that of "anthropological" or "cosmological" naturalism. Anthropological naturalism might be described as the view that man's behavior is determined by his own constitution (*i.e.* his own nature). Cosmological naturalism would hold that man's behavior is dictated by the whole natural world order (Nature). Bardaisan considers both variants. Both types of naturalism would, of course, rule out human freedom and moral action.

Bardaisan replies that if everyone behaved or thought identically then one could attribute human actions to nature; otherwise not. Again his method of argument is to point out the nature of human behavior and to use it to draw theoretical conclusions, here to deny the adequacy of Awida's naturalism. Bardaisan then proceeds to differentiate nature and freedom, distinguishing in the process between several kinds of nature. The nature (*kyana*) a human exhibits is portrayed as follows: "to be born, grow up, become adult, procreate children and grow old, while eating and drinking, sleeping and waking and finally to die." (D, p. 23) This description is noteworthy, partly because it is cast in functional terms (what humans do) and partly by what it does not include (*e.g.* perceiving, imagining, thinking, *etc.*). These events apply to all human beings and to all living creatures (even, in part, to trees, Bardaisan observes). They are the inherent natural functions of living being. Nature, in one sense, is the basic

to praise a friend; harder, however, yet possible to avoid the evil of pouring contempt on an enemy. Finally there are evil acts. These receive an interesting characterization. They are "the work of the enemy," they are done when a person "is not master of himself," that is, when "his true nature is affected." (D, p. 19) Such acts, says Bardaisan, leave a person "troubled and confused, full of anger and fury and tortured in soul and body," (D, p.21) wanting to be seen by nobody.

By this point we have some indication of Bardaisan's conception of human freedom (*hi'rutha*). It is a characteristic of human beings, but not exclusively. God, the angels, and the universal elements also have freedom, but not instruments used by man nor natural objects bound by law except to the degree (unspecified by Bardaisan) that they retain their elemental nature. Freedom involves choice (to do or not to do). The exercise of freedom justifies or condemns the doer, and so it is the source of moral worth.

We have, moreover, a preliminary portrait of Bardaisan's conception of human nature. Man is a composite being, made up of body or flesh (*pnagra*) and soul (*naphsha*). There is no suggestion that the body is inferior to the soul, let alone evil. Doing good depends on the will of man's soul. There is no explicit discussion concerning the relationship between body and soul and no suggestion that the soul is immortal. Bardaisan also mentions mind (*r'eyana*) and although its relationship to soul is not clearly indicated, it would appear to represent the thinking, rational aspect of soul.

Finally, at this point, we are left with a puzzle about evil acts. On the one hand, because human beings have free will (to do, not to do) and can do evil, then humans would be responsible for evil acts. On the other hand, Bardaisan characterizes evil as the work of the enemy, evil acts occurring when man is not master of himself, *i.e.* when his true nature is affected. This view seems to attribute evil to an agency outside man. One way to resolve the inconsistency

biological functions of an organism, an aspect of life each member of a species shares with other members.

These functions of life, moreover, are "the work of Nature (*phusis*)," Bardaisan says, "which does, creates and produces everything as it is ordained." (D, p. 23) Here Nature represents a much more comprehensive ordering principle than simply the biological functions of different kinds of organisms. However, not much is said of nature in this second sense here, the word *phusis* being used only twice in the entire dialogue.

Bardaisan makes a further point about the specific nature humans exhibit by citing animal behavior and what it reveals about their nature.

For the lion is constituted to eat meat, and therefore all lions are carnivores. The sheep eats grass, and therefore all sheep are herbivores. The bee produces honey to subsist on, therefore all bees produce honey. (D, p. 23)

And so on. The general point is that all organisms keep to their distinctive nature: their behavior as members of a species is thus fixed by their nature (*kyana*). The exception is human beings: their lives differ from the fixed pattern exhibited by animals. Bardaisan acknowledges that "in matters pertaining to their body they keep to their natural constitution like the animals do." (D, p. 23) Here he acknowledges the scope of nature (*kyana*) over body, and, to this extent, here is determinism. Bardaisan contends, however, that "as regards matters of their mind, however, they do what they will as free beings, disposing of themselves and as God's image." (D, pp. 23, 25) Humans differ, Bardaisan mentions, concerning food preferences (some prefer meat but no bread; some prefer only certain kinds of meat); sexual behavior (from incest to total abstinence); interpersonal behavior (some take revenge like lions; some stab the innocent like scorpions; some let themselves be victimized like sheep); conduct (good; con-

formist; evil). So: it cannot be the case that people act entirely because of their nature. In addition to nature, people have free will. To this extent, then, they are exempt from the control of nature.

Bardaisan considers another possibility: suppose someone contends that each person individually has a specific nature which makes him act in a specific way. This represents a third sense of nature, as the expression of one's own individual make-up, a use of *kyana* which seems to exceed sheer biological functions to include all that might properly be termed "one's own." Again this kind of determinism is ruled out because people can change their behavior (e.g. the promiscuous or the alcoholic can reform, as can the straight-laced or abstainer) and their minds (e.g. those in error can repent and return to the truth).

In sum, then, nature cannot explain all human action; although it governs the body; there is another aspect to man, namely his freedom, and this gives him moral stature. Naturalistic determinism, then, is confined solely to the body and does not extend to the soul and its activities.

Consideration 6

Philip and Bar Jamma report that some assert that people are ruled by fate (*heleqa*). This consideration, of course, would rule out human freedom and might possibly account for the differences in human action Bardaisan has just cited. Along with naturalism, astrological fatalism is another sort of determinism with which Bardaisan must contend. Before advancing his own view, however, Bardaisan surveys various conceptions of the extent of fate over human actions.

First of all he notes that the view Philip and Bar Jamma mention represents the position of the astrologers, a viewpoint that has appeal because of its privileged character (and here he alludes to a previous work) and is indeed one which once interested Bardaisan himself. This position attributes all actions and occurrences to astral influences, specifically to "the Seven Stars." Secondly, others deny the existence of fate, ascribing the differences in behavior and

happenings to man's freedom and to chance. Thirdly, others explain everything as the result of human freedom and divine punishment. All these views are partial.

There is fate, says, Bardaisan, for not everything happens according to our will. For example, people desire wealth, power, health, control over circumstances, and yet few experience these and those who enjoy one may not enjoy other good circumstances. It is evident, then, "that riches, honour, health, sickness, children and everything we covet depend on Fate and that we have no power over these matters." (D, pp. 31, 33) So, in explaining human action and happenings that befall man, reference needs to be made to nature, to freedom, and to fate. There is, then, some scope for fate, although it does not rule out the operations of nature or the activities of freedom. According to Bardaisan, the matter can be put succinctly as follows: humans are governed by nature equally, by fate variously, and by freedom as each chooses. (D, p. 33)

The limited scope of fate needs greater examination and so Bardaisan continues the discussion, first to differentiate it from nature, and later on, to distinguish it more clearly from freedom. Fate, according to Bardaisan, is described as follows: "For that which is called Fate is really the fixed course determined by God for the Rulers and Guiding Signs." (D, p. 33) Not much is said here about these Rulers and Guiding Signs — *i.e.* astrological elements — and although they seem to play an intervening role between God and the ordering of the universe it is stressed that they are controlled by God. Fate, however, differs from nature. Nature determines what a person's body is capable of (*e.g.* when child-bearing can begin, when it ceases), what it needs (food, drink), and what it does; fate cannot alter this. Sometimes, Bardaisan says, fate reinforces nature; sometimes it hinders it. Only the latter circumstance is examined, as he classifies what conditions belong to what principle:

<i>Belonging to nature</i>	<i>Belonging to fate</i>
human growth and development	illnesses, physical defects
sexual intercourse	divorce, impurity, immorality
procreation	deformity, miscarriages,
sustenance	premature deaths
social arrangements	hunger, extravagance, luxury,
	social disturbances

So, while it is clear fate cannot alter nature, it can disorder it. As Bardaisan says,

Be convinced then that whenever nature is deflected from her true course, it is fate that is the cause, because the Rulers and Guiding Signs, from which every change called horoscope is deduced, are in opposition. (D, p. 37)

In sum, then, fate is a legitimate cosmic agency, being that which disturbs the course of nature so as to produce abnormalities within cosmic or anthropological settings. Although his catalogue traces only the malignant effects of fate on nature, Bardaisan would hold that its influence on man is also benign (for, as he has already pointed out, wealth, honor, and health are also attributable to fate).

Consideration 7

Awida says he is now convinced that people do not sin by nature and that people's behavior varies. He asks Bardaisan to show, though, that people do not act in an evil fashion because of fate and destiny. If he can, says Awida, then it must be admitted that people have freedom to act.

Bardaisan begins his response by pointing out it was because he had shown behavioral diversity that Awida had come to see that people do not sin by nature (Consideration 5). Conversely he will now show that fate cannot account for these aspects of human life to which people conform, *i.e.* social customs.

Bardaisan then commences his famous catalogue of the laws of various societies, from the Chinese, Indians, and Persians in the East, to the Parthians, the Gauls and the Britons in the North (including also the Amazons!). In the course of this recital he makes a number of points to show how compliance with social customs on the part of the individual cannot be explained by recourse to the notion of fate.

For one thing, while social customs vary between societies they are uniform within each society. This the notion of fate cannot explain. If it is contended that people's actions are the result of astral influences, and if these influences are fixed by the position of astral elements at the time of the individual's birth, then one should expect considerable behavioral diversity if the population of a society is born at differing times. This behavioral heterogeneity is not the case, Bardaisan points out, as compliance with social customs and laws indicates.

Secondly, in no case does any astrological element or influence force a person to contravene the social mores of his society. For instance: Mars does not force a Chinese person to kill (where his society prohibits killing); no star forces Brahmans to kill, worship idols, fornicate, eat meat (contrary to their customs in India), and no star forces non-Brahmins in India to follow the Brahmin way of life; no star, moreover, can save male children born in Amazon society.

Thirdly, the absence of certain occupations in some societies cannot be explained by recourse to the notion of fate. For instance, Bardaisan points out, the conjunction of Mercury with Venus in the house of Mercury is alleged to give rise to sculptors, painters and money-changers, and when this conjunction stands within the house of Venus to produce perfumers, dancers, singers and poets. Yet, Bardaisan observes, in a number of societies (e.g. Germany, Spain, etc.) there are no sculptors, or painters, or perfumers, or money-changers or poets. Bardaisan wonders why "the influence of Mercury and Venus is powerless along the outskirts of the whole world." (D, p. 51)

The conclusion is clear:

In all places, every day and each hour, people are born with different natures, but the laws of men are stronger than Fate, and they lead their lives according to their own customs. (D, p. 53)

Fate, then, is not a determiner of human action, whether for good or for evil. Rather people exercise the freedom to act they possess. He notes, though, that, as has already been mentioned (Consideration 6), people are subject to fate, and to nature, in virtue of their body.

At this point Philip interjects that this conformity to social customs within each society can be accounted for on one view of fate, namely that view which maintains that the earth is divided into seven "zones" or "climates" (*qlima*; = Greek *klima*), that each of the Seven Stars governs one such region, and that in each climate its power determine social practices.

Bardaisan replies that this view represents an *ad hoc* explanation designed solely to save the theory. Even if the earth were divided into seven climates, he observes, there are not seven kinds of laws to correspond to the Seven Stars (nor 12, nor 36, nor any other convenient astrological number). Moreover, he reminds Philip of other cases where social customs differ or change. In India, for instance, the Brahmans and non-Brahmins follow different customs. Persians (Magians) follow their customs even in different countries. Similarly laws change through conquest (for example, when Rome conquered Arabia it abolished circumcision and other practices). Jews throughout the world, Bardaisan notes, circumcise, observe the Sabbath, etc. regardless of the "climate." The same is true of Christians who follow their own customs and do not adopt the repugnant customs of others. As Bardaisan notes in this connection,

But in whatever place they are and wherever they may find themselves, the local laws cannot force them to give up the law of their Messiah, nor does the Fate of the Guiding Signs force them to do things that are unclean for them. (D, p. 61)

Fate, then, cannot account for human action.

4. In Sum

This completes Bardaisan's portrait of the conditions of human existence as depicted in *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*. Man, a soul-body composite, exists in a complex world in which nature, fate, and freedom interact, each having its own legitimate jurisdiction. Man, he points out by way of summary, is governed by nature equally, by fate variously, and by freedom as each chooses. (D, p. 33) He rejects simplistic accounts of the human situation, ones that appeal simply to one sort of principle to explain human action, and in this his philosophical approach is noteworthy. In a time and place dominated by deterministic modes of thought, his careful, analytic, balanced account of human behavior is remarkable for its persistent and forceful defense of human freedom and for its insistence on the instrumentality of the natural world order.

ENDNOTES

¹There are three translations of this work: (1) William Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum* (London: Rivington, 1855) contains a Preface, Syriac text, notes, and a translation (pp. 1-34); (2) B.P. Pratten in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VIII, American reprint of the Edinburgh Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 723-734); and (3) H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, translated from the Dutch by Mrs. G.E. van Baaren-Pape (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1964) contains both the Syriac text and an English translation. Two other important editions of this text include F. Nau, *Bardésanes Liber Legum Regionum in Patrologia Syriaca*, I, 2 (Paris: 1907), 492-658 which contains an extensive introduction, Syriac text, and Latin translation; and F. Nau, *Le Livre des Lois des Pays* (Paris: Geuthner, 1931) which contains the Syriac text and a brief introduction. For the most part I shall use Drijvers' translation, although I shall translate *hi'rutha* as "freedom" rather than (as Drijvers does) as "liberty" so as to avoid the latter's political connotations.

²So referred to by Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Theodoretus of Cyrus, among others. See Cureton, *op cit.*, pp. ii, iii.

³Two important exceptions are: G. Furlani, "Sur le stoïcisme de Bardésane d'Edesse," *Archiv Orientalni*, 9 (1937), 347-352; Dom David Amand, *Fatalisme et Liberté dans l'antiquité grecque* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1945), ch. III "Bardésane le Syrien."

⁴See, for instance, Leonard M. Outerbridge, *The Lost Churches of China* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), ch. II "The First Christians in China."

⁵F.E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1968), p. 35.

⁶Some details of the transmission of Greek thought into Islamic society through Syriac culture are traced in Max Meyerhof, "Von Alexandrien nach Bagdad," *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 23 (1930) and in De Lacy O'Leary, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949).

⁷See, for instance, G. Hoffmann, *De Hermeneuticis apud Syros* (Leipzig, 1873) which contains the Syriac text and a Latin translation of Proba's Commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*; Richard J.H. Gottheil, "The Syriac Versions

of the Categories of Aristotle," *Hebraica*, 9 (1892/93), 166-215; Anton Baumstark, *Aristoteles bei den Syrem vom V-VIIIten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: 1900); Khalil Georr, *Les Catégories d'Aristotele dans leurs Versions Syro-Arabs* (Beyrouth: 1948); and Nicholas Rescher, *The Development of Arabic Logic* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1964), 15-22.

⁸Rescher, *op cit.*, p. 206.

⁹For studies in the history of Edessa, see M. Rubens Duval, "Histoire politique, religieuse et littéraire d'Édesse jusqu'à la première croisade," *Journal Asiatique*, 18 (1891), 87-133, 201-278, 381-439 and 19 (1892), 5-102; and J.B. Segal, *Edessa and Harran* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1963).

¹⁰For an excellent review of previous literature on Bardaisan, see H.J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, trans. Mrs. G.E. van Baaren-Pape (Assen: VanGorcum, 1966), ch. I.

¹¹Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 217.

¹²For more information on Bardaisan, consult especially Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa; Nau, Bardesanes Liber Legum Regionum*; Anton Baumstark, *Geschichte der Syrischen Literatur* (Bonn: 1922), 12-14; and F.J.A. Hort, "Bardaisan," in W. Smith and H. Wace (eds.), *A Dictionary of Christian Biography* (1877), I, 250-260.

¹³Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 30. Edition used is translated by Kirsopp Lake (London: Heinemann, 1926).

¹⁴Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, pp. 30, 31, provides the details of F.C. Burkitt's suggestion (1899) and subsequent retraction (1921).

¹⁵See F. Nau, "Notes d'astronomie syrienne," *Journal Asiatique*, 10ème série, 16 (1910), 209-228.

¹⁶Cureton, *op cit.*, pp. i, ii.

¹⁷See C.W. Mitchell, S. Ephraim's *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, vol. I (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912); vol. II completed by A.A. Bevan and F.C. Burkitt (London: 1921).

¹⁸In this and subsequent quotations, the translation used is that by Drijvers in his *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*.