The “Great Persecution” of the Christians in Ērānsahr 340 CE

Targets, Persecutors, and Causes

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Master thesis in history

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Abstract

The thesis looks at the so-called Great Persecution of the Christians in the Sasanian Empire, *Ērānsahr*, which begun about 340 CE. Current Sasanian historiography interprets the event as a result of Constantine the Great's conversion to Christianity. That view is challenged herein. Instead of looking to the Roman Empire, the thesis places the locus of explanation internally to the Sasanians. Three primary questions are asked: (1) Who were the persecuted Christians? (2) Who were the persecutors? And (3) why were the Christians persecuted? The thesis argues that there were effectively two Christian communities in the empire, one that is difficult to define and identifiable as syncretistic, and the other which has been called ascetic Christianity. It is also suggested that the 4th century persecution primarily targeted the latter community, particularly because the ascetic Christians adhered to the martyrdom ideal.

Historiography also proposes that the event was spearheaded by the Sasanian priesthood, who represented religious interests and found their authority usurped by the Christians. That view is also investigated, and the thesis argues that the persecution was carried out by Shapur II, the nobility and the priesthood in concerted efforts because the native religion, Mazdaism, was institutionalized in the empire. As a result, the violence was limited to ascetic Christians of some status or peers of the elite communities of the Sasanian Empire.

As for the causes of the event, the thesis looks at socio-economic and religious incentives. Admittedly, the evidence for socio-economic motivations is inconclusive, as there is no data that directly corroborates the claim – although it can be surmised. As for religious incentives, the thesis argues that Mazdaism operated with an ethical dualism in which all human behavior could be judged according to two binary principles, one good and the other evil, with nothing in between. As such, the thesis proposes that the ascetic Christians were perceived as disruptive and diametrically opposed to Mazdaism, which meant that they were effectively juxtaposed as contributors to the evil cosmic principle, as opposed to supporting the good cosmic principle, which was an ethical imperative from the Mazdean perspective. But it must be noted, that given the paucity of sources it is hard to arrive at any incontrovertible conclusions.

Acknowledgements

I began working on the thesis in spring 2016. It turned out to be a far more challenging undertaking than I had imagined, and it has been difficult to fit all the fragmentary pieces. But it is with some relief that it is finally completed. The thesis has been written under the guidance of Knut Ødegård and Eivind Heldaas Seland. I want to thank both of them for their invaluable contributions and feedback. And I want to thank my wife Sharada for all the support.

Hans Kristian Drangsland

Oslo, May 2018

Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I look at the Great Persecution of East Syrian Christians that begun with the execution of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Simeon bar Sabba'e, about 340 CE and that continued until the end of Shapur II's (309-379) reign.[1] Shapur was the king of the Sasanian Empire (224-651) in modern day Iran, otherwise known as *Ērānsahr*. The persecution was limited to the western half of the empire, where the administrative center was located and where the Sasanians effectively were a ruling minority over people of different ethnicities, religions and cultures, and who spoke different languages.[2] Predominantly, the Sasanians were followers of the faith that took its name from its founding prophet Zarathustra, most commonly known as Zoroastrianism. I have used the term "Mazdaism" in the interest of underscoring that late antique Mazdaism differed from modern Zoroastrianism. Three primary questions animate this thesis: (1) Who were the persecuted Christians? (2) Who were the persecutors? And (3) why were the Christians persecuted? As a preliminary remark, I have primarily looked at the persecution by investigating Mazdaism and ascetic Christianity. By asceticism I mean a more radical form of Christianity with a preference for sexual abstinence, abnegation of wealth and family, negative views on the material existence, preference for extreme bodily control, most notably through martyrdom, with Christ as its archetype.[3] The point of this specification is that recent research suggest that many Christians adopted far more syncretic religious identities and acculturated themselves within the Sasanian Empire, which means that the persecution was likely limited in scope. As pointed out by Sergey Minov, there has been an earlier tendency to only view Christians in Ērān through the prism of the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, which is a compilation of different martyrdom narratives, and as such the portrayal has become skewed, with little space offered to acculturation and syncretism.[4] I have attempted to refrain from portraying an exclusively sectarian picture by also discussing religious syncretism throughout.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

When I first embarked on this project I was not aware of the extreme paucity of sources from 4th century Ērān. The available data is limited to numismatics and rock reliefs which does not

[1] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 202; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 54.
[2] Daryaee, "Kingship in Early," 64; Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 36-37.
[3] Gerwen, "Origins of Christian Ethics," 205; Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," 1-19; Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 466. James B. Rives notes how some Christian effectively made themselves outcasts from society. This may hold true for Iranian Christians too, see Rives, *Religion in the Roman*, 198
[4] Minov, "Dynamics of Christian," 150-151. I simply refer to the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* in the short-form as *Acts of Martyrs* in the subsequent.

offer much information on the Great Persecution, and a few inscriptions which are lacking in information.[5] Furthermore, Sasanian Ērān was predominantly a society that relied on oral transmission. As such, it was necessary to approach the subject by looking at the context and events, inscriptions and texts that date relatively close to the 4th century in the hope of finding information that might give some clues to the machinations behind the persecution. Obviously, this is not ideal, and any conclusion becomes, almost by necessity, conjectural. That is to say that hard evidence or facts is hard to come by, and that leaves us speculating and dependent on our own rationalizations. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but there is the risk that emic perspectives become lost in the process. In any case, pertaining to the causes of the event, I have divided the material into three important perspectives: Mazdean material, contemporary 4th century Syriac Christian material, and the material in the *Acts of Martyrs*. I assume that if the three perspectives converge, then there are good reasons to assume that we are dealing with historical realities. The questions that have been asked, have been guided primarily by the topics in the *Acts of Martyrs* and modern historiography.

Notably, most of the material is of a religious nature. The danger of religious discourse is that it can portray an overly sectarian picture. But there is often an ambivalence too, which means that depending on the selection process and interpretation, people can find support of different and often diametrically opposed views in sacred texts. There is also a distinction between studying religious practice and discourse *about* religious practice, in which the latter is often idealized.[6] That is to say, there are the historical imaginations and perceptions on the one hand, and then there are the historical realities on the other. And furthermore, religious and other texts were predominantly produced by and for social elites, and it is not evidently clear where the line was drawn between fact and fiction. Exaggerations were commonplace and sometimes texts may have been wholesale fabrications.[7] At the same time, even if stories do not reflect truthfully upon realities, it must be assumed that they were at least meaningful to its readership and that they addressed contemporary questions, problems and concerns.[8] For instance, I have used the *Acts of Thomas* as a source pertaining to possible polemics and conflicts between early East Syrian Christians and Mazdeans, even though it is a legendary story. The particulars might not be true, but the discourse could well be representative on more general grounds, although inevitably there is no way of knowing how representative the text

[5] Herrmann, "Sasanian Rock Reliefs."
[6] de Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics," 58; McClymond, *Ritual Gone Wrong*, 46-47, 63.
[7] Iddeng, "Antikk litteratur," 59; Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 1; Andersen, "Muntlighet, skriftlighet, retorikk," 30; Schreiner, "Historieskriving," 44, 48-49.
[8] Dowden, "Thinking through Myth," 16-17.

was for the East Syrian Christian community at large – or if it simply represented the personal views of the author alone.[9] Of note, this applies to all of the sources in question. Finally, my dependency on English translations and texts to gain access to both primary and secondary material for the Sasanians is a culprit that has to be acknowledged.

As for the first perspective that is investigated, the *Avesta* is the oldest primary source for Mazdaism and central to any understanding of Mazdean ideology and practice. It is a collection of sacred texts that were for a long time transmitted orally.[10] There are two different linguistic layers identified in the Avesta, Old Avestan and Young Avestan, but by the Sasanian era these languages were not in use and the Sasanian-Mazdeans were largely dependent on *Zand*, exegesis on Avestan texts in the Pahlavi script. In this thesis I have provided extra space to the *Vidēvdād*, which was also known as the "Law to Drive off the Demons".[11] The primary concerns of the *Vidēvdād* are with ritual purity, conduct and other ethical imperatives. It is a unique text because it has survived almost in its entirety, unlike other texts of the Avesta that have been preserved in incomplete fashion. This must be a testament to the text's continued importance among the early Mazdeans. And it has even been suggested that the *Vidēvdād* was redacted in the 2nd century AD, not long prior to the Sasanians.[12] In its entirety, however, it was perhaps not until the 6th century that the Avesta was written down and prior to that point there may have existed various interpretations and teachings of the sacred corpus. According to later Pahlavi material, that is to say the *Dēnkard*, Shapur II supposedly gathered the priesthood and the scattered teachings of the Avesta for canonization.[13] If that can be trusted, it is another testament that the prism of religion might offer some explanations to the persecution under that king's reign.

The most important sources for the study of early Sasanian Ērān, however, are the Middle Persian inscriptions of the Sasanian kings of kings, the Mazdean priest Kerdir, who was active in the second half of the 3rd century, and other people of high-ranking status. These were public and targeted a larger audience, although it cannot be ascertained if the religious ideologies evinced from them were radical and new or simply aligned with popular opinion. But the most

[9] Iddeng, "Antikk litteratur," 65-66.
[10] Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 229; Cereti, "Myths, Legends, Eschatologies," 267. The oldest manuscript of the Avesta dates to the 13th century, see Andrēs-Toledo, "Primary Sources," 519.
[11] Andrés-Toledo, "Primary Sources," 519-520, 524. See also Skjærvø, "Zoroastrian Oral Tradition," 17; Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 23; de Jong, "Religion and Politics," 99.
[12] de Jong, "Religion and Politics," 100; Malandra, "Vendidād i.". For the redaction of the *Vidēvdād* in the 2nd century AD, see Boyce, "On the Zoroastrian Temple," 455. Alan V. Williams posits that the *Vidēvdād* was compiled at least by 300 BCE, see Williams, "Purity and Pollution," 348.
[13] Skjærvø, "Zoroastrian Oral Tradition," 20, 23; Vevaina, "Enumerating the Dēn," 138-139; Boyce, *Textual Sources*, 1; Hintze, "Zarathustra's Time," 36.

informative inscriptions are from the 3rd century, with king Narseh's (293-302) inscription being fairly close to Shapur II's reign. By the 4th century, however, inscriptions apparently went out of fashion, which means that Shapur II's inscriptions are very limited in information. From the 4th century onwards the Sasanian kings apparently began to favor silver vessels for royal "propaganda",[14] which bereaves us of historical data from a Sasanian perspective at the time of the persecution. In general, as far as Sasanian material is concerned, the 4th century is probably the century in Sasanian history with the fewest extant sources.[15] For that reason, it is necessary to investigate the material surrounding the 4th century.

There is also later classical Pahlavi literature, also crucial for Mazdaism. These texts often concern themselves with religious matters. However, they were redacted relatively late, between the 8th and 10th centuries. The *Dēnkard* belongs to this group and has been described as a Pahlavi encyclopedia of Mazdean religion. Also belonging to later Pahlavi material are the texts on Sasanian law, such as *Dādestān i Dēnig* and *Dādestān i Mēnōg i Xrad*.[16] But the problem with these texts, besides a gap in chronology, is also the context. While many Pahlavi works are attributed to 6th century kings of Ērānsahr, such as the final redaction of the Avesta or the *Letter of Tansar*, there was social upheaval and subsequent reorganization and reforms of the empire around this time as well, so later sources might not be as representative for the early Sasanians as one would have hoped for.[17] I mention this break elsewhere in this thesis, but suffice to say here that Pahlavi literature is not without its problems, unfortunately. As such, Avestan material generally pre-dates the Sasanians, while the Pahlavi material post-dates the early Sasanians – and that complicates any account of the Great Persecution.

Besides the foregoing material that gives a look at the Sasanian perspective, there are other sources about late antique Ērānsahr. There are obviously Greek and Latin texts. But these are generally hostile and exaggerated. The Armenian material is also hostile and often portray a picture of Christians versus Mazdeans, given the "official" adoption of Christianity in the early 4th century, which colored Armenian historians of the 5th century.[18] As for Jewish sources, there is the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) from within Ērānsahr. It is a collection of laws and

[14] Widengren, "Sources of Parthian," 1271; Daryaee, "Šāpur II."
[15] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, xxi-xxii.
[16] Andrés-Toledo, "Primary Sources," 524-527; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 18; Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 320.
[17] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, xxi, 28-30, 123-126; Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 190-191, 219. According to the *Dēnkard*, the Avesta was canonized in the 6th century, see de Jong, "Politics and Religion," 99; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 629. For the dating of the *Letter of Tansar*, see Boyce, *Letter of Tansar*, 5, 14-15; Howard-Johnston, "State and Society," 125.
[18] Thomson, *History of Vardan*, 10; Widengren, "Sources of Parthian," 1273-1278; de Jong, "Armenian and Georgian," 122; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, xxii-xxiii.

norms for Jews with statements attributed to rabbis living throughout the Sasanian era. The usefulness of this material is contested, and the attributions to earlier rabbis may not be representative. Nevertheless, there are scholars who consider the statements in the Bavli as representative for the earlier rabbis they are attributed to.[19] And it is generally accepted that the Bavli was closed off for further redaction about 530 CE.[20] Finally, it must be mentioned that for the political history of the Sasanians in particular, Arabic sources are invaluable although they come from about the 10th century, which represents yet another disconnect in both chronology and context.[21]

Syriac material is central to this thesis. Syriac was a dialect of Aramaic and the dominant language of the Iranian Christians but also spoken in the eastern Roman Empire.[22] I have placed some emphasis on the *Acts of Thomas*, which is a 3rd century composition in the Syriac tradition that probably originated from Edessa. The *Acts* was an influential text on East Syrian Christians and Manicheans, and I have used it not as pertaining to historical realities regarding Thomas, but rather as a text that allows a glimpse into the dynamics and discourses between Christians and Mazdeans. According to Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent, the *Acts of Thomas* pertains to missionary activity in Indo-Parthia, which corresponds to the eastern part of later Ērānsahr. And she suggests that the king in the story, Mazdai, is a pseudonym for "Mazdean".[23] Also A. F. J. Klijn, notes that the *Acts* contain many Parthian names and words.[24] In other words, the *Acts* might be dealing directly with Mazdean communities in the east, which makes it a useful source for discourses and polemics emerging between the ascetic Christians and Mazdeans.

Then there are the writings of Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373) and Aphrahat the Persian Sage (c. 280-345), who were more distanced from Greco-Latin influences and representatives of East Syrian Christianity that differed in some respects from that to the west. Ephrem was from Nisibis but he was nevertheless close to Iranian Christians linguistically and religiously. Aphrahat, on the other hand, found himself directly situated within the Sasanian Empire, which makes him the most valuable source.[25] I have used four of Ephrem's *Hymns* as well as all 23

[19] Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 8; Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 10, 19; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 631. On the attribution of the statements to their respective rabbis, see Goodblatt, "Poll Tax in Sasanian," 236.
[20] Elman, "Judaism," 426, 431.
[21] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, xxii.
[22] Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories*, 1.
[23] Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories*, 17, 21, 27; Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 1-4, 8-9, 15. For mention of king Mazdai, see *Acts of Thomas* 87, 89. For the importance of the *Acts* in transmitting Christianity to the east, see Saint-Laurent, op. cit., 4, 23. On the Edessan origins of the text, see Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3, 448-449; Yamauchi, "God and the Shah," 86.
[24] Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 193.
[25] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 94; Lehto, *Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, 5. For the dating of Aphrahat's texts, see Lehto, op. cit., 2.

of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*. Given that their texts date to the mid-4th century these are invaluable, and they represent the 4th century East Syrian Christian perspective.

And finally, there is the *Acts of Martyrs*, which is a compilation of different martyrdom narratives from the Sasanian era, with the majority of the stories staged under Shapur II. However, none of these stories can be dated to the 4th century with any certainty and it seems that almost the entire corpus of the *Acts* was composed from the 5th century onwards, with the possible exception of the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, which might have been composed in the late 4th or early 5th century. As will be discussed, the *Martyrdom of Simeon* also evince a certain ambivalence and differs from the main body of the narratives in the *Acts of Martyrs*.[26] This ambivalence suggests that it was not a fully developed martyrdom narrative and that is why it is so important, along with the fact that it is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, of the stories about the 4th century persecution. The *Acts of Martyrs* represents the third perspective in question. Of course, in the most source-critical stance it could be argued that the *Acts* ought to be rejected in its entirety – but that would be counterproductive. Instead, I have approached these texts not as detailed historical accounts of events that transpired but as representative for the problems and differences between the Mazdeans and ascetic Christians that may have animated the 4th century event. As for the references to the primary material I have used the respective sectioning in the works and places where I have gathered the English translations, listed in the end of the thesis. I also want to point the reader to Sebastian P. Brock's book *The History of the Holy Mar Ma'in: With a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts* with its excellent overview of the different stories in the *Acts of Martyrs* and when they supposedly occurred.[27]

OVERVIEW

In chapter 2 the dominant explanation on the Great Persecution is discussed and some of the problems with the current historiography are pointed out. From there the rest of the thesis looks at the 4th century event through the identities of the persecuted and the persecutors, as well as some potential socio-economic and religious motivations. In chapter 3, a theoretical framework is provided as well as an explanation of the key beliefs and practices of Mazdaism, in which the religion's ethical dualism, binary taxonomies and tripartition of human behavior are key. Chapter 4 addresses the two first primary questions. It also looks at religious violence in Ērān on general grounds as well as the Mazdean and Christian relations with violence, in which the

[26] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 6-7, 102, 109-111; Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories*, 10.
[27] Brock, *History of the Holy*, 78-84.

martyr's ideal is central. In chapter 5 all three of the primary questions are explored, who the targets were, who the persecutors were, and why the ascetic Christians were persecuted. Furthermore, it is suggested that Mazdaism was institutionalized in the empire and how that affected the persecution. Chapter 6 follows suit and discusses the same questions, corroborating that the persecution was limited in scope, that it targeted ascetic Christians of some status, that the event was carried out by the social elites of the empire, and that the Christians were perceived as both socio-economically and religiously disruptive. Then the reverence of the cult of the sun and fire within Mazdaism, as well as Iranian burial practices, will be discussed in chapter 7, as well as potential Christian disruptiveness of these vital institutions. Chapter 8 looks at the ascetic Christians and their claims to absolute truth and knowledge and how that may have factored into the 4th century event. And finally, a conclusion is offered in chapter 9.

2 A ROMAN CONNECTION?

In this chapter I look at the historiography as an initial starting point for the thesis and discuss the dominant explanation for the Great Persecution that scholars frequently employ. For the sake of simplicity, I have called it the *Roman association thesis*. As such, I will in the following lay out its central points and at the same time show some of its problems. Let me stress initially that the thesis is not necessarily incorrect, but it makes too many assumptions about the Sasanian perspective based on dubious data. After establishing some distance with the thesis, it becomes possible to look more closely at other potential Sasanian motivations in the chapters that follow.

THE ROMAN ASSOCIATION THESIS

The Roman association thesis has been most elaborately described by Timothy Barnes in his influential article "Constantine and the Christians of Persia", a title that principally catches the thesis' basics. The essential point is that Constantine the Great's (306-337) conversion to Christianity in 312 had repercussions for Christians outside the Roman Empire and specifically in Ērān. According to church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-340), Constantine sent a letter to Shapur II, probably in the mid 320s, where the newly Christian emperor presented himself as the universal patron of Christians everywhere while encouraging the Sasanian king to take good care of his Iranian Christian subjects.[28] Furthermore, towards the end of his reign Constantine prepared an invasion of Ērān but his plans were cut short by his untimely death in 337. Some scholars have seen this as synonymous to a crusade to save Iranian Christians from their supposed persecution at this time, although the persecution did not start until 340. In short, Barnes suggests that the Great Persecution "was a natural and inevitable corollary of Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire."[29] Thereby, he places the center of gravity around Constantine's conversion, letter and initiated campaign as reasons that led the Sasanians to perceive their Christian subjects, allegedly, as a fifth column loyal to Rome.[30] Similarly, other scholars claim that the "bloodbath was a direct result of enthusiastic adoption of Christianity in Rome", and that the Christians were persecuted "for political rather than religious reasons", that Shapur viewed them as "a political threat", and that "the Christian religion became synonymous with Roman politics."[31]

[28] For the dating, see Frendo, "Constantine's Letter," 61.
[29] Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians," 136; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 45-52.
[30] Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians," 126-136.
[31] Quotes in order of appearance: Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, 43; Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 219; Garsoïan, "Armenia in the Fourth," 349; Brosius, *The Persians*, 149.

Many scholars ascribe to the Roman association thesis, with some notable variations. There are different supporting hypotheses and, for instance, there are those who emphasize that Shapur felt encircled with the adoption of Christianity not just in Rome, but Armenia and Iberia as well; that he was frustrated by his initial failures to capture Nisibis in 337/338, either utilizing the Christians as scapegoats or demanding their contribution to the war effort by increased taxes; and that the Christians harbored Roman sympathies.[32] Finally, another supporting hypothesis holds that persecution was more likely to occur under the Sasanians whenever Rome and Ērān were at war.[33] But regardless of these variations, the principal point remains the same: It was Constantine's conversion that sparked the persecution of the Christians under Shapur II, who were guilty by proxy and association. But the fundamental problem with that claim is that there is no data from the Sasanians themselves to suggest this.

Recently, Kyle Smith has dispelled some of the claims in Barnes' influential article and posits that Constantine's letter to Shapur II "did not touch off a persecution or lead to a religious war".[34] Worth mentioning here, he also debunks the idea that Constantine's campaign against Ērān in 337 was undertaken to liberate the Iranian Christians.[35] But beside Smith's valuable contribution, I have reservations of my own. Most importantly, by centering on the personage of Constantine in the explanation the Sasanians are deprived of an internal locus of explanation. They are simply depicted as reacting to events relative to the Roman Empire – as if they did not have particular concerns of their own, besides a shared border to the west. Furthermore, the Roman association thesis is entirely dependent on a letter preserved by a Greco-Roman Christian and church historian, as well as martyrdom narratives. For there is nothing in the early Sasanian material to suggest that Christians were perceived as loyal towards Rome, I will argue. In the following I address five issues with the Roman association thesis. The problem of (1) Constantine's letter as a source and the equation of Rome with Christianity, (2) the hypothesis that Christians were persecuted over fiscal-related matters, (3) that Christians were

[32] Here follows a list of some scholars adhering to the Roman association thesis in its various expressions: Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 202, 213; Jacob Neusner, "Babylonian Jewry and Shapur II," 78-80; Joel T. Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 110-111; Michael Axworthy, *History of Iran*, 55; Christopher Haas, "Mountain Constantines," 103, 114; Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 5, 7-8; A. V. Williams, "Zoroastrians and Christians," 40, 44; Geoffrey Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 32; Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent, *Missionary Stories*, 10; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "God and the Shah," 80, 84, 89. And the before mentioned: Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, 42-43; Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 219; Nina Garsoïan, "Armenia in the Fourth," 349; Maria Brosius, *The Persians*, 149.

[33] Brock, *History of the Holy*, vii; Howard-Johnston, "State and Society," 121. Sebastian Brock particularly mentions Shapur II, Yazdgird I, Bahram V and Yazdgird II as large-scale persecutors, see Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 5, 7.

[34] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 20. See also id. 43-44.

[35] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 62-64, 75.

persecuted in times of war, (4) the evidence for Iranian Christians' sympathies for Rome, and (5) some notes on Sasanian activities that does not fit well with the Roman association thesis.

EUSEBIUS' LETTER, ROME AND CHRISTIANITY

No doubt Constantine's patronage of Christianity was a monumental historical event. But its importance can easily fall prey to the benefit of hindsight and triumphalist accounts of Christianity, or it takes for granted Eusebius' exaggerated Christianization of Constantine and the empire. Was it clear in the first half of the 4th century that Constantine's conversion would have major consequences and that Christian religious identity would be a catalyst for political loyalty? While the authenticity of Constantine's letter to Shapur, preserved in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, cannot be established with certainty, several scholars regard it as more or less trustworthy.[36] Nevertheless, the letter fits Eusebius' highly biased story. In the words of Arieh Kofsky, *Life of Constantine* "was to be a highly selective biography designed to present the Christian Constantine."[37] For instance, Eusebius depicted Constantine as a Christian crusader against demonic forces, who purged prominent pagans in the eastern half of the empire and confiscated valuables from pagan temples and prohibited its cult.[38] Offering perspectives from the other side of the religious divide, Roman pagans like Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330-391) and Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (c. 345-402) claimed that Constantius II (324-361) respected traditional Roman religion, despite Eusebius' claims, and it seems that Constantine and later emperors tolerated and even supported pagan ceremonies, games and holidays, although with some reservations.[39] For instance, in the city of Rome pagan cult remained virtually untouched. And the continued influence of paganism is corroborated by Christians who throughout the empire lamented over the persistence of different cults. In reality, then, it was not until the reign of Theodosius I (379-395) that the empire truly embraced Christianity to the detriment of Roman religion. But even when Theodosius outlawed pagan sacrifice on pain of death, senators were reluctant to forsake their ancient customs at his behest.[40] As such, Eusebius'

[36] David Frendo, Sebastian Brock and Kyle Smith consider the letter authentic, see Frendo, "Constantine's Letter," 60; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 22-28, 32.
[37] Kofsky, *Eusebius of Caesarea*, 46. Averil Cameron also considers the narrative of a Christianized Constantine and empire as hyperbole, see Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric*, 4.
[38] Kofsky, *Eusebius of Caesarea*, 45-47; Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians," 130-131; Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*, 159
[39] Ando, *Matter of the Gods*, 190-192; Salzman, "Religious Koine," 109-112, 116-117; Leppin, "Old Religions Transformed," 106-107.
[40] Ando, *Matter of the Gods*, 163, 171; Haas, "Mountain Constantines," 116-117. For talk of a Christian Roman Empire with Theodosius I, see Salzman, "Religious Koine," 110, 120; Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric*, 191-193. Henry Chadwick notes that it was not until Constantine's sons that prohibitions against pagan cult begun, see Chadwick, *Early Church*, 152-153; Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo*, 71, 101, 123.

account is highly dubious.

Neither was it evident that the Christians were one unified community. In the Roman Empire the Arian and Donatist controversies, beginning in Constantine's reign, suggested otherwise. Arian and non-Arian mobs violently clashed in Alexandria, while zealous Donatists disrupted pagan rituals, presumably to provoke their own martyrdom. Even if Constantine was critical of Arius' schismatic tendency, he endorsed the same Eusebius of Caesarea who was himself an Arian supporter, while later Constantius II notably favored pro-Arian priests. And again, it was not until Theodosius' reign that Arianism was suppressed. As for the Donatists, they most obviously did not equate Rome with Christianity, as surrender to Roman authorities was compared to apostasy (after Constantine had declined to support their cause).[41] Of course, other doctrinal issues over Christology or what constituted orthodoxy and "true Christians" could be discussed. But suffice to say, regardless of Eusebius' account, reality on the ground was far more complex than a unified and Christian Roman Empire.

But the Roman association thesis is first of all a matter of perceptions. Did Shapur *perceive* his Christian subjects as loyal to Rome? It is possible, if Constantine's letter is authentic. Certainly, the letter does depict Constantine as an emperor concerned for the well-being of Christians and could appear like actual patronage. In the letter, he even tells Shapur how he entrusts the Christians "in your hands", as if the Christians were his to entrust to the Sasanian king in the first place.[42] But the historical realities, on the other hand, implies that there was no good reason for Shapur to suspect his Christian subjects, and those realities may have been equally influential on his perceptions. Furthermore, the letter was apparently sent in the 320s, so there is also the issue of addressing the gap in chronology – why did it take Shapur approximately one and a half decade before he persecuted the Christians on account of the letter? There is simply no way of knowing what the Sasanian view was, without any data to back it up. Obviously, it is one thing to use the letter to portray the viewpoint of the author, but something entirely different to use it to demonstrate the viewpoint of the receiver. There is no corroborating data, nor have we any way of knowing if Shapur even received the letter or how he interpreted it if he did, or if he on the other hand was aware of the schismatic tendencies of Christians in the Roman Empire. These are all important questions, to which there are no answers as of yet.

[41] Leppin, "Old Religions Transformed," 99-100, 105-106; Galvão-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power*, 62-64, 83, 116-118, 135-136; Chadwick, *Early Church*, 133, 220-224; Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo*, 99-101.
[42] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* IV.13.

THE ISSUE OF TAXATION

As mentioned above, some scholars emphasize the Christians' refusal to pay extra taxes at Shapur's command as a supporting hypothesis to the Roman association thesis. This topic is mentioned in the *Martyrdom* and *History of Simeon*, the latter composed in the late 5th century. As Smith shows in his book, the *Martyrdom* and the *History* substantially differs, in which the former rejects the payment of taxes altogether while the latter rejects the payment of a double tax.[43] Allow me to address the work done by Richard Payne in this regard. One of Payne's overarching points is that "the rise of Christianity in Iran took place under the authority and even direct patronage of Zoroastrian elites."[44] Before moving on, it is necessary to stress that he rejects the Roman association thesis. His argument is that the Christians in 4th century Ērān were persecuted about 340 CE because they failed to partake in the expansion of the empire's fiscal system, which is made plausible, he argues, given that Shapur II found himself at war with Rome. So, for all intents and purposes Payne thinks, like proponents of the Roman association thesis, that because of warfare the Sasanians needed to tax their Christian subjects. But unlike them, he does not see the taxation of bishops and their congregations as a test of Christian loyalties but as "an invitation to participate in the extension of imperial fiscal structures rather than an act of persecution", and that the Christians were punished because they decided not to participate in the system, rather than being persecuted simply for being Christians.[45] The distinction is subtle. Nevertheless, by arguing against Payne my purposes are twofold. I do not think that Christians were taxed as an invitation to partake in the fiscal system of the empire (like Payne), nor that they were taxed because of perceived Roman loyalties and a need to test those supposed loyalties (like Sebastian P. Brock).

There is no evidence that religious authorities, like Bishops, collected taxes on behalf of their communities. And if the *Martyrdom*'s narrative is correct, in which the Christians were simply commanded to pay taxes, it would imply that prior to Shapur II they had been exempt from taxation. That must certainly be wrong because it would have been a privilege, for which there is no good data to suggest that the Christians had. Nor does it make sense because it could also have functioned as an impetus for Iranians to convert to Christianity. Perhaps the author's intended meaning was that an extraordinary tax was implemented on Christians – which is more plausible – although not necessarily double, like the *History* would have it. But if that is

[43] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 113-115; *Martyrdom of Simeon* 6; *History of Simeon* 4, 7. For the dating of the text, see Smith, op. cit., 102.
[44] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 9. See also id. 1-2.
[45] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 39-42. For quote, see id., 41. For taxation in the Roman association thesis to help support the war effort, see Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 4, 8.

the case, thirdly, then it is highly debatable whether an extraordinary tax or a double tax was an invitation extended to Christians to participate in and become an integral part of the empire. Under what pretext would it make sense to punish (it cannot have been a reward) a community with heavy taxation as a tool to integrate them into the empire and its fiscal system? If anything, it seems more plausible to me that the Christians were in reality not exempt but that some may have adhered to radical ascetic ideals and that they, for whatever reasons, rejected the payment of taxes altogether, like Smith has suggested. In fact, that is what the *Martyrdom* implies. For Simeon "withdrew his people's taxes from the servitude of the King of Persia and Syria."[46] If the wording can be taken literally, the implication is that some Christians actively stopped paying taxes to the Sasanians. This is exactly the line of thinking Smith identifies in the *Martyrdom*, where the Christians reject the payment of taxes altogether as a matter of Christian principle and that to subject themselves to the king of kings would be a betrayal of God.[47] If so, it appears that asceticism, in the form of a rejection of material wealth and taxes was a crucial factor in the Great Persecution.

In any case, in the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, king Shapur even sidesteps the issue of taxation altogether and offers to settle if the Christians pay homage to himself and the sun.[48] This could admittedly be hyperbole and a literary invention with the intended effect of portraying the prospective martyrs as uncompromising and therefore reputable (for a discussion of the martyrdom ideal, see chapter 4). But at the same time, the issue of bowing before the sun frequents many sections in the *Martyrdom* and it is in fact, I would say, the central issue of that text. I have a hypothesis that it may in fact be historical, even in a metaphorical sense, which will be discussed in chapter 8. Suffice to say here, taxation does not appear to be the central issue in the narrative, according to my own interpretation of the text. In any case, Smith observes that there is no evidence that religious authorities collected taxes on behalf of their respective religious communities, besides the stories of Simeon.[49] In sum, it does not appear that the Christians were invited to partake in the fiscal system of the empire as a step in their integration into Ērān and as for the adherents of the Roman association thesis the wording in the *Martyrdom* simply implies that the Christians themselves actively withdrew taxes, not that new taxes were imposed as a result of the war with Rome.

[46] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 8.
[47] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 113-114.
[48] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 17.
[49] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 117-120; Goodblatt, "Poll Tax in Sasanian," 292-294.

PERSECUTIONS IN TIMES OF WAR?

A few notes on the supporting hypothesis that the Christians were persecuted in times of war are necessary. Some scholars think persecution was generally confined to times of war between Rome and Ērān, with Shapur II, Yazdgird I (399-420), Bahram V (420-438) and Yazdgird II (438-457) as particular large-scale persecutors. This would make sense, perhaps, if the Great Persecution was a response to a political problem, as the Roman association thesis suggests. Indeed, the majority of the martyrdom stories find their locus in the reign of the kings listed above, and there is no denying that Shapur II and Bahram V found themselves at war with Rome. However, four of the martyrdom narratives are attributed to Yazdgird I's era, a ruler whom otherwise was known for his beneficent attitude and patronage of Christians (see chapter 5). But there are no reported wars between Rome and Ērānsahr throughout his 21 years of rule.[50] Similarly, five martyrdom accounts are set during Yazdgird II's reign, but the only reported incident between the two empires is an Iranian incursion into Roman territory in 440, which did not result in war.[51] This, in my view, weakens this supporting hypothesis. For how do we explain the persecutions of Christians even at times of peace between the Romans and the Sasanians, if indeed the Christians were perceived as a fifth column of Roman loyalists?

APHRAHAT AND THE *ACTS OF MARTYRS*

There are scholars who find in Aphrahat's writings a pro-Roman attitude, in support of the Roman association thesis. Additionally, there are inferences in the later *Acts of Martyrs* which might also suggest an Iranian Christian preference for Rome. In Aphrahat's *Demonstration 5: On Wars* there are two main topics addressed. Aphrahat seems to write about the coming war between Rome and Ērān in 337/338 with the Sasanian siege of Nisibis,[52] while simultaneously providing an exegetical account of Daniel's biblical prophecy. Based on the context Timothy Barnes concludes that "the good and evil man [in Aphrahat's text] are instantly recognizable as Constantine and Shapur."[53] Sebastian Brock implies the same and operates with a translation of the same *Demonstration* where Constantine and Shapur are both identified in parentheses as the protagonists in question.[54] Admittedly, their interpretation is not implausible. But Aphrahat

[50] For an overview of Syriac martyrdoms under Yazdgird I, see Brock, *History of Holy*, 82. For an overview of warfare between Rome and Ērān, see Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 94-96. Of note, Geoffrey Herman questions if Yazdgird I did in fact persecute, see Herman, "Last Years of Yazdgird," 89-90.
[51] For an overview of Syriac martyrdoms under Yazdgird II, see Brock, *History of Holy*, 83. For an overview of the incursion and warfare, see Greatrex, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 44-46.
[52] Dodgeon, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 146-151.
[53] Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians," 134. For the text in question, see Aph. *Dem*. 5.1.
[54] Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 8. For the text in question, see Aph. *Dem*. 5.24.

never mentions Constantine or Shapur by name in *Demonstration 5*. Furthermore, Barnes claims that Aphrahat hoped for a Roman victory, and notes how he possibly added the statement that "the beast will be killed at its (appointed) time" once he became familiar with the prospect of a potential Roman defeat at the hands of Shapur – because, according to Barnes, "the death of Constantine shattered his hopes of a Roman victory."[55] But this interpretation relies on an a priori attribution of a pro-Roman sentiment to Aphrahat, which is not necessarily explicated in his *Demonstration*.

As such, in the final passage Barnes seems to interpret "the beast" as referring to the Sasanians, under the assumption that Aphrahat harbored Roman sympathies. But there is another possible reading of the text. In fact, the label of "the beast" is mostly reserved for the Romans, whereas the Iranians are more frequently referred to as "the ram".[56] Indeed, Aphrahat sees the Romans as the placeholders for the kingdom of Christ, but with his second coming "he will bring an end to the kingdom" and "take back whatever he has given."[57] Furthermore, because the Romans did not take Christ with them to war, i.e. cast aside paganism, "the beast [Romans] was subdued for a while but not killed."[58] Implicit in this message, then, is that the kingdom of Rome should have been brought to an end or that it will be. As such, it is possible to read the *Demonstration* as an eschatological prophecy, in which Aphrahat thinks the end of the kingdom of Rome is the marker that will bring about the kingdom of God, an event that can only be initiated by Christ, not the Iranians. As such, the reassurance that the beast will be killed in its appointed time may refer to the slaying of the Roman beast, which will bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. There are other things that could factor into an interpretation, because in the same text Aphrahat also criticizes certain Christians who think they have arrived at the conclusion of the word of God.[59] That makes this a possible polemic against other Christians too, potentially Greco-Roman Christians. I am not suggesting that either of these interpretations are more correct than the other. There are weaknesses with both of them. Rather, the point is that Aphrahat is often enigmatic and rarely ever spells out in clear text what he means. The text in question is also so conflicting that it does not prove a pro-Roman attitude on the part of Christians in Ērān. It is equally plausible, I think, that the text refers to the end of Rome as the event that marks the eschatological and soteriological event.

[55] Aph. *Dem*. 5.25 (brackets in original replaced with parenthesis); Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians," 134-135.
[56] Aphrahat specifically contrasts the Iranians as "the ram" against the Romans as "the beast", see Aph. *Dem*. 5.6, 5.10.
[57] Aph. *Dem*. 5.14, 5.22. For quotes, see id. 5.23.
[58] Aph. *Dem*. 5.24.
[59] Aph. *Dem*. 5.25.

Let me turn to the *Acts of Martyrs*. In the *Martyrdom of Simeon* Christians are explicitly accused of allegiance to Rome only twice, with a potential third mention. Comparatively the issue of worshipping the sun frequents the story unambiguously in nine sections, with a strong case for two more sections.[60] The matter of supposed Roman allegiance is echoed in the later and more inventive *History of Simeon*, where Constantine is mentioned by name, and also the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai*, to name a few examples.[61] However, the Christians in these texts make it known that they do not reject the corporeal authority of the Sasanian king, although their spiritual body is reserved for God. For instance, Simeon is adamantly clear that he respects the authority of the king in both the *Martyrdom* and *History*. And the same is the case for Gushtazad, an Iranian Christian whose story is added in the middle of the narrative about Simeon's martyrdom, who makes it explicitly known that he is not executed for divulging the secrets of the kingdom but simply because he is a Christian and does not deny the Christian god. Thereby, these Christians aligned themselves with the Christian ideal of respecting corporeal authorities, i.e. a kind of "Render unto Caesar" in an Iranian context.[62] In the much later *History of Mar Ma'in*, written in the 6th century, both a pro-Roman and pro-Constantinian attitude is clear, with the fictitious addition that the before mentioned letter of Constantine prevents Shapur, out of fear, from persecuting Christians.[63] But even in this dubious story, it is affirmed that the corporeal body of the martyr Ma'in belongs to Shapur, while his spiritual body belongs to God.[64] As such, it seems correct, as Marco Frenschkowski, posits that there is no evidence for "any real political disloyalty by the church" of Ērānsahr.[65] In sum, there are allusions to Roman allegiances in the *Acts of Martyrs*, but the accusations are rebuked by the Christians themselves. And given that the narratives in the *Acts* are the only texts pertaining to Roman-sympathies, that is to say that they are otherwise uncorroborated, there is no good reason to take them as factual.

[60] For mention of Roman allegiance, see *Martyrdom of Simeon* 12-13. For the issue of worshipping the sun, see *Martyrdom of Simeon* 10, 17-19, 24-26, 28, 39, 42. 321.
[61] *History of Simeon* 2-4, 10, 13-14, 98; *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.319, 321. For the dating of the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* to the late 5th or early 6th century, see Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 186.
[62] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 21, 32; *History of Simeon* 36, 57-58; Matt. 22.21. According to Adam H. Becker, the *Martyrdom of Pusai* echoes the same theme and considers the corporeal realm as belonging to the king of kings, while the spiritual belongs to God, see Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference," 319.
[63] *History of Mar Ma'in* 32, 46-47, 49-50, 59-60. For the dating of the text, see Brock, *History of the Holy*, 4-6.
[64] *History of Mar Ma'in* 56.
[65] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 470.

OTHER QUESTIONS

To round up this discussion, I want to mention a few more key issues that are not explained if we accept the Roman association thesis. In the next chapter a key passage by the priest Kerdir is introduced, in which he self-reportedly persecuted various religious communities, such as the Jews, Manicheans and Buddhists alongside Christians as well, decades before Constantine came to power.[66] What that means, of course, is that the Christians were potentially persecuted long before Constantine converted to Christianity. Furthermore, how are we to explain the persecution of Manicheans, for instance, a religious community who did not enjoy the backing of a powerful royal patron? And finally, in successful wars the Sasanians were prone to deport Roman populations and relocate them within the Sasanian Empire. This is attested to under king Shapur I (240-270) and more importantly Shapur II, and seems generally to have occurred because of a need for skilled laborers and engineers to contribute in construction works and the economy of Ērān.[67] But if the Romans were equated as Christians, as the Roman association thesis would have it, and a potential fifth column, then why did the Sasanians take captive more potential fifth-columnists if indeed they feared them as a politically destabilizing community? Unfortunately, there is no room to address these questions, but I leave them here simply to illustrate that these are issues that the Roman association thesis does not explain satisfactorily. In any case, it appears that other religious communities, not just Christians, were a potential problem for the Sasanian-Mazdeans. And that is an important clue.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has been argued that the problem with the Roman association thesis is that it relies on a letter preserved by Eusebius who deliberately depicted a Christianized Roman Empire. Furthermore, persecutions did not stop when Rome and Ērān were at peace and I am not convinced that Aphrahat or the *Acts of Martyrs* evince a preference for the Roman Empire, like some scholars suggest. At the same time, the thesis certainly benefits from being parsimonious and let me remark that it is not necessarily untrue. But there is no Sasanian data to corroborate its central claim. As for the issue of taxation, there might be some truth to it as ascetic Christians may have actively withdrawn taxes, as the wording in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* implies. And that goes to show the role played by ascetic Christians themselves in the persecution. Instead of seeing Roman affairs as determining Sasanian activities, I turn in the following chapters to an

[66] KNRm 11.
[67] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 40, 140; Kettenhoffen, "Deportations ii."; Lieu, "Captives, Refugees, and Exiles," 479.

internal locus of explanation, through which the Sasanians can emerge with motivations and potential problems of their own. To state the obvious, not all roads lead to Rome.

3 PRELIMINARIES AND MAZDAISM

Putting the Roman association thesis aside, I will in the subsequent chapters turn to potential explanations for the Great Persecution by looking at socio-economic and religious motivations. But before arriving at that, it is necessary to provide a theoretical framework to support the rest of the thesis, to which the first part of this chapter is dedicated. From there two questions are asked: (1) What were the problems and aims of Mazdaism? And (2) how did the Mazdeans view other religions and religious communities?

THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGION

On the difficulty of defining religion Jonathan Z. Smith sensibly notes: "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytical purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization".[68] That is to say that religion is effectively polythetic, perhaps even more so in its late antique context. Here I use "religion" as referring to a system of belief/knowledge about the cosmic and human order, a system of values and ethics, and a system of ritual practices relative to a transcendent dimension as a point of reference.[69] As such, there are *epistemic*, *ideological* and *practical* components to religions. I also want to emphasize the initially inquisitive aspect of religious systems, which is shared with philosophy (and science for that matter). The disparity of course is that once questions have been answered by a religious system the answers becomes canon and reinforce the system, often tautologically, while philosophy on the other hand, ideally, is self-referentially critical and often more interested in the questions rather than the answers themselves, which might, perhaps, not be answered in any ultimate sense. The point is that this is where the epistemic component comes into the picture, with claims to truth and knowledge. Therefore, I endorse the adoption of an epistemic contextualist perspective on matters of religion because it frames the answers provided by religious systems as aligned with the virtually universal concepts of "truth", "knowledge" and "good".[70] As such, I view religion in Ērān as analogous to science in modern societies, as something that addressed real world issues and that could be evoked to

[68] Jonathan Z. Smith quoted in Carlson, "Religion and Violence," 10. For the problems of defining religion, see Carlson, "Religion and Violence," 9-10; Cavanaugh, "Myth of Religious," 23-26.
[69] For some inspiration for the definition, see Rives, "Religious Choice," 274-275.
[70] Nagel, *Knowledge*, 6-7, 92-93. I will not use the term "paradigm" here but want to underscore that thinking in terms of different paradigms is another useful way of framing the subject. Even if a paradigm is usually reserved for scientific communities, the mechanism is of interest, namely that certain beliefs and values are held almost as absolutes without the before mentioned self-referential critical attitude which, ideally, philosophy ought to take. The point is that like a scientific paradigm, it is difficult, I think, for adherents of religions (and probably anyone else for that matter) to free themselves from paradigms. For paradigm, see Okasha, *Philosophy of Science*, 75-76; Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth*, 120.

stake the veracity of an individual's claims. In short, there was confidence in religion and its answers to real-world problems were understood as true.

A quick look at the Roman world to illustrate a nomothetic tendency is instructive. I think Clifford Ando is right that Roman religion was founded on knowledge, not faith.[71] That is to say, religious ideology could be stated with confidence and was synonymous with truth, as knowledge per definition has to be. In the 4th century the Roman statesman Symmachus asked: "What difference does it make by what system of knowledge each man sees the truth?"[72] Statements like his were at the time in the minority and, not irrelevant, came from the camp of Roman paganism which found itself supplanted by Christianity, to some degree. The Christian bishop Ambrose (c. 340-397) rebuked Symmachus and posited that Christians had found true knowledge, through the truth and wisdom of God.[73] Later, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) polemicized against the Manicheans for they had promised him knowledge, whereas he had received none. According to him, they only spoke falsities while "they cried 'Truth, Truth,'".[74] The connection between religions and absolute truth is well-known, as religious communities habitually connect themselves with epistemic concepts. As such, I am suggesting that the Sasanian-Mazdeans persecuted the Christians in defense of an absolute religious truth, in a scheme where the contest for truth became a zero-sum game between different communities. I thereby assume that people acted on the basis of religion because it was held to be of paramount importance.[75] Let me arrive at my point, I am simply suggesting that Mazdaism in late antique Ērān was vital to society and by framing religion as a system of knowledge, rather than faith, it is possible to appreciate its relevance on Sasanian institutions and communities.

INSTITUTIONS, BINARY TAXONOMIES AND VIOLENCE

In this thesis I employ the concepts of "institutions" and "communities" that require some explanation. The intended meaning of institutions here is reproducible structures that govern the behavior and interactions within a community, often by constraint in terms of what kind of behavior is appropriate and inappropriate. Institutions provide knowledge for individuals and communicates norms, values, conventions, symbols, narratives etc.[76] As such, the kingship, the priesthood and marriage are examples of institutions discussed in this thesis. Institutions

[71] Ando, *Matter of the Gods*, 13-14
[72] Salzman, "Religious Koine," 122.
[73] Salzman, "Religious Koine," 122.
[74] Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.10.
[75] Antonaccio, "Moral Truth," 27; Selengut, "Sociology of Religious," 90-93; Avalos, "Explaining Religious Violence," 142-144.
[76] North, *Institutions*, 3-5; North, *Violence and Social*, 15; Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 202-204.

are, in the words of Douglass C. North, "the rules of the game", while communities refer to the players of the game.[77] Institutions are not actors although I at times employ language that would suggest that they are, but that is only for ease of communication. In the case of Ērān, I am suggesting that Mazdaism was authoritative on Sasanian institutions – and institutions, in turn, have a strong influence on the communities (this will be discussed in chapter 5). As such, Mazdaism was institutionalized and that had important implications for the Christians too. But not necessarily all Christians. Theorizing about the influence of religion on behavior, Ann Swidler has demonstrated how people are constrained by knowledge of how people will interpret their behavior. At times, this can lead people to act contrary to their individual convictions, by aligning their behavior with the dominant community. At the same time, Swidler does not talk of monolithic and inescapable structures, but rather repertoires of knowledge from which individuals can draw from – which has the benefit of leaving room for individual agency.[78] As such, even though Mazdaism and ascetic Christianity were opposing religious systems, it should not be automatically assumed that there were no individuals in between, for as will become clear there existed a range of syncretic religious identities.

Institutions order the world and necessitate boundaries. This is Mary Douglas' preferred metaphor. She argues that people are disposed to order things into binary categories in terms of that which belongs in a given context versus that which does not. The concept of "order", for instance, presuppose an antithesis through which the concept can be contrasted and imposed with restrictions. In the interest of categorizing demarcating, purifying and punishing become the instruments to enforce and maintain the boundaries of institutions and communities. In anthropology, transgressing these boundaries implies the adoption of a liminal position which is often perceived as challenging, unacceptable or perhaps dangerous by a given community. Essentially, that is what "pollution" means, i.e. something that transgresses its designated normative boundaries.[79] Binary opposed then is the concept of "purity" which is basically that which is properly situated within its boundaries, i.e. how it *ought* to be. It could be objected that a position of neutrality exists between the two extremes. But that is not what the Mazdean religion suggests. Rather the Sasanian-Mazdeans operated with binary taxonomies of people and the world which makes Douglas' theory especially applicable for the study of religious

[77] Note that Douglass C. North operates with a distinction between institutions and "organizations", but I prefer "communities" which I consider mechanically the same, see North, *Institutions*, 4-5.
[78] Swidler talks predominantly about "culture" rather than religion, but the mechanism remains the same, see Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 13, 23, 160-180; Swidler, "Where Do Axial," 235, 237. For expectations attached to communal identities and the restrictions of institutions, see also North, *Institutions*, 3-4.
[79] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4, 41, 95, 114, 139-140; Gaskill, *Witchcraft*, 3.

persecution in Sasanian Ērān.

Another useful frame of thinking about institutional and communal liminality is through the concept of Otherness. The Other is a representative of unwanted diversification, analogous to pollutants, and often juxtaposed as a negation of the self-proclaimed "correct" community – and therefore disenfranchised. The need for dichotomies in the formation of institutions and communities makes the Other the embodiment of that which the dominant community is not. Therefore, the Other represents a challenge to the dominant institutions and communities by transgressing normative boundaries. And more importantly, portrayals of Otherness can be misrepresentative, perhaps deliberately so, in order to marginalize, stigmatize and even dehumanize Others. This makes them potential targets for violence and persecution.[80] The point is that Otherness, as well as pollutants, are modes of contrasting communities against one another, which, I think, is an important cog in sectarian violence.

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

Finally, I also want to offer some thoughts on religion and violence. Religions often adopt ambivalent attitudes towards violence, at times condemning it, and other times endorsing it, depending on the context. Furthermore, there clearly exists a link between religion and violence when violent acts are endorsed by religious discourse or institutions, in which case religions' role is inspirational. But it must be stressed that inspiration can come from secular sources as well. There is nothing inherently more violent about religions compared to secular ideologies. For instance, the concept of "freedom" can be an equally powerful mobilizer of violence, and non-religious people (abandoning functionalist definitions for this purpose) also sacrifice resources for their beliefs and institutions, which are treated as absolute truths.[81] At the same time, categorizing is analytically useful lest we risk conflate everything that leads to or ends in violence under one causal explanation, which seems overly reductionistic.[82] No doubt, the Great Persecution was a multifaceted event – and religion is one useful way of investigating it.

Violence is also a basic modality of life, inherent to all societies. It cannot be eliminated, only managed. Furthermore, no society advocates arbitrary violence or punishment, which are always contested measures. This necessitates an anthropological approach to the problem of violence: It is always construed as constructive by its perpetrators, even if it appears archaic.

[80] McClymond, *Ritual Gone Wrong*, 174; Geltner, *Flogging Others*, 10-19, 42.
[81] Esmail, "Religion, Identity," 50; Avalos, "Explaining Religious Violence," 142; Cavanaugh, "Myth of Religious," 25-26, 32; Selengut, "Sociology of Religious," 97.
[82] Avalos, "Explaining Religious Violence," 144.

Organized violence needs to be rationalized, justified and legitimized. For instance, in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* the advocates for Simeon's execution implore Shapur II to look beyond the martyr's body and "see (instead) the beauty of the souls of the many whom he corrupts and leads astray from our teaching!"[83] In other words, Simeon in the story was executed in the interest of some constructive purpose, given the context. And in the interest of preservation of institutions and communities, violence can be a powerful tool by enforcing their boundaries. As such, violence functions by indexing social deviants and by publicizing acceptable institutions, communities and behavior vis-à-vis intolerable ones. In that regard, the message conveyed by the execution of some Christians was as important as the process itself: Their liminal position within Ērānsahr was abhorrent and intolerable.[84] And more particular to the Mazdeans, violence eliminated evil and bolstered the cosmological order, as will become clear. As theorized by Douglass C. North et al., institutions, and the communities that enforce them, are integral to manage societal violence.[85] In other words, the expressive form of violence in a given society, i.e. who its targets are and why they become targets, depends on the dominant institutions and communities. And in the case of late antique Ērānsahr, I suggest that Mazdaism was authoritative on Sasanian institutions and communities, and subsequently the main prism through which the Great Persecution needs to be examined.

MAZDEAN THEOLOGY: COSMOGONY

From my theoretical framework I now turn specifically to Mazdaism. The Sasanian-Mazdeans believed in the existence of two realms, "that of thought" (*mēnōg*) and "that which has bones" (*gētig*), a spiritual and corporeal realm, respectively. Ohrmazd, the good deity and embodiment of the good principle of Order/Truth (*asha*), initially used the spiritual realm as a blueprint and created the corporeal realm. Both were considered perfect in their primordial states.[86] As such, the corporeal realm, home to mankind, was inherently pure and good – which incidentally differs from ascetic Christians' Neoplatonic and negative views of the material world. Then Ahriman, the evil deity and embodiment of the wicked principle of Lie/Falseness (*druj*), unleashed darkness, noxious creatures, demons, witches, sorcerers, sickness, corruption and

[83] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 41.
[84] North, *Violence and Social*, 13, 15-16; Geltner, *Flogging Others*, 11, 26; McClymond, *Ritual Gone Wrong*, 65, 93-95. For socially constructive violence, see Schmidt, "Anthropological Reflections," 69; Selengut, "Sociology of Religious," 89, 92, 96-97.
[85] North, *Violence and Social*, 14, 16.
[86] Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 338; Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian," 243-244; Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 236. I use a common definition of asha and druj but it seems that the meaning of these concepts had evolved somewhat by the time of Pahlavi literature, see Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 35-36; Choksy, "To Cut Off," 21-23.

death, i.e. destructive powers, upon the corporeal realm. Subsequently, all that was bad stemmed from Ahriman and acted as agents on his behalf. This was the state of mixture of good and evil in the corporeal realm. In their binary opposition, Ohrmazd and his denizens were creative and "life-giving", associated with light, life and health, whereas Ahriman and his agents were destructive, "not-life" and also the "impossibility of life".[87] For Mazdeans, then, it was a matter of promoting the good forces of the cosmos or descend into chaos. As such, three points are worth highlighting. First, Mazdaism provided the answers to the problem of evil and presented practical ways of eliminating it, which represents the religion's underlying ethical imperative. Second, the world was indeed categorized into a binary scheme of good versus evil, creative versus destructive forces. And third, this particular cosmogony and religious ideology was the anchoring point through which all human behavior could be judged. The relevant question, then, was whether an individual's behavior benefitted Ohrmazd and Order, or was it evil and Ahrimanic?

MAZDEAN THEOLOGY: PROBLEMS AND AIMS

Combatting and suppressing the forces of evil while promoting Order and the good creative forces of the cosmos was the overarching ethical imperative for the Mazdeans. They thought evil could be exterminated and that the corporeal realm could return to its pristine, uncorrupted and perfect state once more. The imperfect state of mixture would be brought to an end through the so-called "Renovation", an eschatological showdown between the forces of good and evil, through which Ahriman's evil forces would be defeated once and for all and man would be liberated from the cosmic struggle. Most importantly, paradise would be in the corporeal realm, which illustrates Mazdean positive views on the corporeal existence.[88] However, only through the termination of evil and increase in worship of the gods would this salvation from the state of mixture occur.[89] According to later Pahlavi literature, it was held that Ahriman did not have direct access to the corporeal realm. Rather, he was dependent on his evil agents to carry out his work by proxy, through which they attacked the corporeal realm. In particular, he depended on humans as intermediaries and only once there were no wicked humans for him to possess,

[87] Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 338-339; Williams, "Purity and Pollution," 348-349; Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 235-237; Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian," 230, 234. For a list of beneficent denizens (*yazatas*) connected to Ohrmazd, including Mithra, Ārmaiti, Sraosa, the earth and sun, see Hintze, op. cit., 225.

[88] Cantera, "Ethics," 316; Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 239-241; Cereti, "Myths, Legends, Eschatologies," 269; Scott, "Manichean Responses," 452-453.

[89] Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 231; Humbach, "The Gāthās," 41-42; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 68-70. Note that Skjærvø supplants "Renovation" with "Perfect", see id., 30.

could he be eliminated. As such, it was believed that evil entered the world either as external attacks on humans or through demonized humans, that is to say demonic possession.[90] This will be discussed in the following chapters but notably if this view is representative for the early Sasanian-Mazdeans, which seems to be the case, it would provide a plausible rationale for violently oppressing religious Others, perceived analogous to pollutants and aligned with the evil cosmic principle of Lie.

MAZDEAN THEOLOGY: SALVATION

Unlike the Christians, the Mazdeans did not perceive their highest deity as omnipotent. Rather, Ohrmazd's prominent quality was omniscience. For that reason, mankind had an obligation in the role of protagonists to support Ohrmazd and bring about the Renovation and the final defeat of evil. This could be done through good and true *thought*, *speech* and *action*. Indeed, in Avestan texts Ohrmazd and Ahriman were understood as "two thoughts and speeches, they are two actions, a good and a bad."[91] This will be referred to subsequently as the tripartition of human behavior which represents the practical aspect of Mazdaism. Furthermore, as will become clear throughout, Mazdean binary taxonomies and ethical dualism had implications on the judgement of different people's speech and action, of which Christians were subjected. As pointed out by Alberto Cantera, through actions humans could contribute to the restoration of Order and ethically good behavior was vital to produce the Renovation and the soteriological event.[92] In general, creative endeavors were beneficent. This included the preservation of life, procreation, irrigation and cultivation of the earth, caring for cattle, but also the protection of the good plants, the sacred elements of fire and earth from pollutants, and the establishment of sacred fire-temples.[93] More specifically, performing rituals and sacrifices were the practical prerequisites for the support of Order and healing of the cosmos, believed to be an imitation of Ohrmazd's initial cosmogonic activity. And eventually, good human behavior would bring about the eschatological event, whereby mankind would be saved.[94] Furthermore, as a worthy mention, the so-called poet-sacrificer is a direct testament to the relevance of good *speech* as

[90] Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 218-219; Cantera, "Ethics," 325.
[91] Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 221; Vevaina, "Enumerating the Dēn," 140-142. See also Cantera, "Ethics," 317, 321, 323.
[92] Cantera, "Ethics," 316, 324.
[93] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 147; Moazami, "Evil Animals," 305; Cantera, "Ethics," 322; Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian," 234.
[94] Cantera, "Ethics," 317-318, 321; Skjærvø, "Gāthās as Myth," 66. Notably, Donald K. Swearer points out that cosmogonies matter in that they can vindicate ethical norms, individual behavior and institutions, see Swearer, "History of Religions," 141-142.

well.[95] And finally, it was held that the actions and utterances of humans of the corporeal realm benefitted either the principle of Order or Lie, with apparently nothing in between, in line with Douglas' theory. Anything associated with Ahriman was "unworthy of worship" while everything related to Ohrmazd, and his denizens, was "worthy of worship" and benefitted him by proxy.[96]

As a preliminary summary of Mazdean theology, human behavior, i.e. thoughts, speeches and deeds, was evaluated and judged through the prism of an ethical dualistic system that operated with a binary taxonomy of the world and human behavior. Either humans contributed to the good Order of the cosmos and the salvation of the world, or their behavior assisted the Ahrimanic principle. As such, it can be asked what role Christians were expected to play in this system and if they were seen as promoters of the destructive cosmic principle, as binary opposed to the Mazdeans themselves?

MAZDAISM AND BINARY TAXONOMIES

The Mazdean inclination to divide the humans of the world into binary taxonomies of good and evil has been touched upon already but requires some further discussing. According to Mary Boyce: "Naturally non-Iranians were reckoned among the wicked",[97] i.e. Ahrimanic in principle. That is a very broad view, but Boyce may be correct. On the other hand, Richard Payne has directly opposed Boyce's view. In his book, *A State of Mixture*, one of his chapters is titled "The Myth of Zoroastrian Intolerance" and there he claims that Boyce juxtaposed the Mazdean priest Kerdir's "destructive fantasies" onto the Sasanians at large and that she paints a picture of increased intolerance against religious communities in the following centuries.[98] Payne argues instead that the early Sasanians – and throughout the entirety of their reign – operated not with a binary taxonomy of mankind but in fact categorized religious communities as good, bad and worse. He thinks Christians were not condemned as harshly as other religious communities and that their integration into the empire actually began with Shapur II. And as mentioned in the previous chapter, when the Christians declined the king of king's invitation to participate in the empire, persecution ensued. Payne's argument will be discussed in the following. If he is correct it has major implications for my hypothesis, namely that Christians were persecuted because they failed to contribute to the good Order. In the following I will

[95] Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 338-340.
[96] Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian," 239-240; Humbach, "The Gāthās," 41.
[97] Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 63, incl. n273.
[98] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 25.

address the relevance of Kerdir's inscriptions as sources and subsequently why I think it is incorrect to attribute to him and the early Sasanian kings of kings anything but a religious ideology that operated with a binary taxonomy of good versus evil.

KERDIR AND THE SUPPOSED TRIPARTITE TAXONOMY

Kerdir features throughout the thesis and there are eminently good reasons for this. He provides the only sources that gives a real glimpse into early Sasanian-Mazdaism and is highly relevant for that reason alone. Furthermore, he first appears in Shapur I's inscription where he is listed as a religious authority among Shapur's dignitaries. And he was active during the reigns of Hormizd I (270-271) and Bahram I (271-274) and reached the apogee of his career under Bahram II (274-293). Kerdir is also mentioned in king Narseh's (293-302) inscription. Notably, Narseh's inscription was effectively a legitimization of his own claim to the Sasanian throne as he had been usurped in 293 and Kerdir was probably mentioned as an early supporter of his to function as a linchpin to help legitimize the new king's claim to the throne,[99] testament to the priest's authority. Kerdir was also able to have four inscriptions produced, which was a rare feat for anyone in Sasanian history.[100] In progressive fashion he attained prestigious titles and offices, which will be mentioned in chapter 5.[101] As such, there can be little doubt that he was an important priest in the second half of the 3rd century who provides an invaluable window into early Sasanian-Mazdaism. And given the sources we have to choose from, he must necessarily feature prominently in a study of the Great Persecution in the 4th century as well, even though he represented, most likely, an insular and sectarian view.

First of all, Payne's work is excellent pertaining to the latter half of the Sasanian era, but I am not convinced that it applies to the early Sasanians. Payne does not reject Mazdean violence against religious Others, but he suggests that it was meticulously targeted. He posits that: "There were […] not merely bad religions but also worse religions, whose institutions Iranian authorities endeavoured to eliminate from their empire."[102] Additionally, he says that Christians were not perceived as a threat to Mazdean institutions "either in the third century or the sixth."[103] But first there is a methodological criticism, for Payne himself warns against using the East Syrian martyrdom stories as historical evidence because of their "gap in both

[99] Farrokh, *Sasanian Elite Cavalry*, 24; NPi 32.
[100] KKZ 3-5.
[101] KKZ 3, 5-6.
[102] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 35-36. For quote, see id., 33.
[103] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 35.

chronology and political context".[104] No doubt, this is sensible. However, in his effort to depict the Christians as tolerated within Ērān he supplants the epigraphic evidence of the 3rd century, like Kerdir, to the benefit of later Pahlavi material which dates from the 7th or often later centuries. The problem of a gap in chronology and context equally applies here. Specifically, he uses *Dādestan i Mēnōg i Xrad* and *Pursišnihā* as sources that operate with a more nuanced categorization and hierarchizing of different religious communities, i.e. good, bad and worse.[105] But by supplanting Kerdir for the benefit of much later sources we run the risk of projecting the late Sasanian era onto the early Sasanians. Rather than displaying a cohesive picture of the entire Sasanian era, such as Payne attempts, we should take our cue from Touraj Daryaee who is "hesitant to see ancient Iranian civilization as a static unchanging phenomenon".[106] Given the paucity of sources we no doubt depend on Pahlavi material, but superseding earlier and relevant Middle Persian inscriptions and viewing Mazdaism and the behavior of the Sasanians as almost unchanging is problematic.

Not only should Middle Persian epigraphic material take precedent but, secondly, Payne's reliance on the Pahlavi material's hierarchizing, and its representation for the 3rd and 4th centuries, is also dependent on his interpretation of one of Kerdir's inscription. I will use the same translation of the KKZ as Payne to avoid any discrepancy in terms of translation. The relevant passage in Kerdir's inscription is as follows:

> [1] The gods, water, fire, and domestic animals received satisfaction, and Ahreman and the demons received blows and suffering. [2] The doctrine of Ahreman and the demons was expelled from the empire and became unbelief. [3] The Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Nazarenes, Christians, Baptizers, and Manichaeans were struck in the empire. [4] Idols were destroyed, and the residence of demons were eliminated and became the place and seat of the gods.[107]

This famous passage is frequently cited as evidence for Mazdean intolerance and persecution, as it should. Payne's rejection of Mazdean perceptions of the Christians as intolerable religious Others rests entirely on his reading of the Middle Persian word *zadan* as "struck", probably following D. N. MacKenzie's dictionary.[108] Prods Oktor Skjærvø also translates the word as "struck" and notes that Kerdir did not necessarily refer to killing, which incidentally was called

[104] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 38.
[105] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 35-36. For the dating of the material, see Andrés-Toledo, "Primary Sources," 523, 525; Shaked, "Religion in the Late," 106.
[106] Daryaee, "Kingship in Early," 60. See also Daryaee, "Idea of Ērānsahr," 92.
[107] KKZ in Payne, *State of Mixture*, 23 (brackets removed from original, my numbering in brackets).
[108] MacKenzie, "zadan," *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*.

ōzad, while other scholars translate zadan as "assailed", "smashed" or "beat/kill".[109] In short, there is no consensus regarding the translation of the word and its emic definition may perhaps escape us. In any case, Payne argues that the act of striking, from a Mazdean perspective, was disciplinary and metaphorical for the subjection of Others to Mazdaism. Accordingly, Kerdir did not intend for the destruction of all non-Mazdean communities.[110] However, Payne's understanding of zadan as disciplinary is not supported by other evidence. In fact, zadan is used in the Sasanian Abnūn inscription dating to the middle of the 3rd century, in close proximity to Kerdir's life. In the context of war with emperor Gordian and the Romans the producer of the inscription says that if Shapur I "is victorious and strikes [zad] the Romans, and worsts them" he will establish a dedicatory fire in his honor, and then as a postscript on the war the author mentions that Shapur won and "had struck [zad] them, and worsted them".[111] Admittedly, it is possible that the producer of the Abnūn inscription speaks in a metaphorical sense. But in terms of reality, the war with Rome surpassed disciplinary measures and entailed actual killing, which suggest to me that the emic definition of the word described activities that surpassed disciplinary striking. In reality, it is more likely that it meant actual killing.

An important question must be raised: If Kerdir was aiming for the subjugation of Christians and they failed to conform, what would be the next step in their suppression? What stopped Kerdir and his peers from pursuing their aims through violent means? There is really no good reason for assuming this and Payne even acknowledges that certain communities indeed were targeted for destruction, albeit he thinks that the Christians were not among them. For he notes that the early Sasanians destroyed idols and cultic sites, and also argues that such activities were likely characteristic of legitimate kingship stemming from the first Sasanian king Ardashir I (224-242). Additionally, Payne remarks that such destructive practices were unremarkable throughout the entirety of the Sasanian era. And finally, he recognizes that Hellenistic cult and Buddhism, where idols may have featured prominently, and Manicheism seems to have been violently opposed early on.[112] That much is agreeable. Nevertheless, entirely dependent on his interpretation of zadan and a hypothetical segmentation of religious communities, Payne concludes: "In the entire corpus of Zoroastrian literature, there is not a single injunction to destroy the institutions of Christians, Jews, or other monotheists along the

[109] Skjærvø, "Kartir." For the translation as "assailed", see Boyce, *Textual Sources*, 112. For the translation as "smashed", see Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 199. For the translation as "beat/kill", see Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 929.
[110] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 24
[111] SAb.
[112] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 33-35.

lines of the cases of the eradication of idol worship."[113] In sum, he thinks monotheists like the Christians and Jews (but not Manicheans?) were tolerated and invited into Iranian society. Idolaters, such as Buddhists and Hellenists, on the other hand, were worthy of destruction.

I enumerated the inscription above to ease the following discussion. Payne reads sentences three and four in the KKZ as referring to different religious communities, on which his hierarchizing and tripartite segmentation of good, bad and worse depends. The first segment of the good religions community was the Mazdeans themselves. The second segment of bad but tolerable religions, is identified in the third sentence. Accordingly, they were the Christians and Jews who were "struck" and disciplined. The third segment, identified in the fourth sentence of the inscription, refers to the worse religious communities of idolaters and demon-worshippers who had to be destroyed and eliminated. Given that Buddhists were perceived as idolaters and worthy of destruction, as Payne acknowledges, they should logically not be mentioned alongside Christians and Jews in the third sentence, for they belonged to the segment of worse religion mentioned in the fourth sentence. And the same case could be argued about the Manicheans who were a persecuted community throughout almost the entire Sasanian era (see the next chapter). In fact, its prophet Mani was a contemporary of Kerdir and was likely executed at the latter's instigation. How do we harmonize the fact that the Manicheans are mentioned alongside other supposedly tolerable religious communities, like Christians and Jews, while the patron of the KKZ inscription famously instigated Mani's execution? In short, Manicheans and perhaps Buddhists were both persecuted communities, as it appears, and if Payne's tripartite taxonomy of religious communities was correct, they should have been mentioned in the fourth sentence of the KKZ-inscription as worthy of destruction and elimination, rather than the third sentence.

I will have to grant, however, that from a practical point of view there were undoubtedly many commoners who were not persecuted and as will be mentioned throughout, there is good data to suggest religious syncretism. Now, my criticism may appear miniscule, but to put it in clear text there is no evidence of Sasanian-Mazdean attempts to differentiate between religious communities as Payne suggests. In other words, the dominant mode of thinking was in terms of binary opposed communities. But from a practical perspective within an ancient (and comparably underdeveloped) society there were of course a vast body of individuals who simply passed by unnoticed. In any case, a more parsimonious and established reading of the KKZ is to read the whole passage, including sentences three and four, hermeneutically where

[113] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 34.

Kerdir only mentioned a wide range of non-Mazdean religious communities that he found objectionable, aligned with Ahriman and the demons, and thereby targets for destruction.[114] This makes sense, as sentences one and two connect Ahriman with "the demons", while sentences one, two and four measures the effect Kerdir's activities had against the demons. Disconnecting sentence three, as Payne does, creates a disconnect in that narrative, which seems to miss the main point: That this is an inscription that aligns religious Others with the evil principle of Lie, the Christians included. And finally, Kerdir is well aligned with Mazdean theology discussed earlier in this chapter, with a binary taxonomy of the world and religious communities, while writing about the virtuous implications of his deeds. In other words, his activities were aligned with Mazdean ethical dualism because they reduced the influence of the demonic powers in the world. Kerdir should be seen in tandem with Avestan texts, one of which compares markedly well with Kerdir's inscription by stating uncompromisingly that: "One is the path of Order. Those of the others are all non-paths."[115] That is to say that any thought, speech or deed that did not promote Order was juxtaposed as Ahrimanic. Certainly, Sasanian-Mazdean intolerance was more than mere myth. And as will be discussed in the following chapters, the Sasanian-Mazdean, the 4th century East Syrian Christian and the *Acts of Martyrs*, the three perspectives, all espouse something more than disciplinary subjugation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter began by offering a theoretical framework for the thesis, in which I suggested that Mazdaism was institutionalized within Sasanian society and functioned as the prism through which violence against religious Others could be enacted. That is to say, given the overarching goal of exterminating evil from the corporeal realm and thereby bring about the soteriological event, those who failed to contribute to Order or (perceivably) contributed to the principle of Lie might have been targeted for violence in advance of a constructive goal. The Christians' contribution (or failure thereof) could be measured through the tripartition of human behavior, true and good thoughts, words and deeds within an ethical dualistic system which operated with binary taxonomies of good versus evil, with no gray areas in between. In the next chapter the extensiveness of the 4th century persecution is discussed, and I turn in particular to the first two of my primary questions, who the persecuted Christians were, and the identity of their persecutors.

[114] See for instance BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization," 265.
[115] Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 258. Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina translates asha ("Order") in the same passage as "Truth", see Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 216.

4 THE SCOPE OF THE PERSECUTION

In preparation for the rest of the thesis it was argued in the foregoing that religion was of great significance. Here the scope of the Great Persecution is discussed. Kyle Smith advocates that Shapur II's persecution was far more limited than previously assumed and says that the East Syrian *Acts of Martyrs* on their own, "tell us little, if anything, about events as they actually happened."[116] This is a sensible suggestion. In the following, three questions concern me: (1) What evidence is there of persecution of religious communities in the Sasanian Empire that corroborates that the Christians were persecuted in the 4th century? (2) Was there a proclivity for violence in the Mazdean and Christian religions? And (3) what set the persecuted Christians apart from the rest?

PERSECUTIONS WITHIN ĒRĀNSAHR

Given the scarcity of material from the 4th century I am forced to discuss Sasanian persecutions on more general grounds. Here follows an overview of persecutions in the Sasanian era to show that there were precedents and other instances where religious communities were persecuted. The concern is with actual physical violence and the threat of violence against the Christians and their cult in the form of persecution. I have already discussed how Kerdir boasted of having struck and destroyed different religious communities. Despite his assertions, however, some scholars point out that there is no corroborating evidence to support his claims.[117] But there are some inferences to violence against religious Others while Kerdir was active. In the Babylonian Talmud it is claimed that Shapur I killed 12,000 Jews in Caesarea, which must refer to the Sasanian siege and capture of the city in 260. But the purpose of the text is to provide the necessary context for another rabbinical question: How were Jews supposed to grieve in the appropriate way?[118] As such, it could possibly be a literary invention for the sole purpose of creating a set of necessary preconditions for a more relevant question. At the same time, Shapur I was Kerdir's first patron, the latter whom simultaneously reported that he organized Mazda-worshippers in conquered Roman territories, with Caesarea specifically mentioned. As such, it

[116] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 176.
[117] de Jong, "Religion and Politics," 97; Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 232. Alternatively, Marco Frenschkowski asserts, based on the *Chronicle of Seert*, that Christians were persecuted under Bahram I and Bahram II, see Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 470. Josef Wiesehöfer also assumes that Christians were persecuted under Bahram II, see Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 201.
[118] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 139; Neusner, "Religious Uses of History," 39. For the Sasanian campaign against the Roman empire, see Dodgeon, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 49-56.

might reflect upon historical realities, like at least one scholar has assumed.[119] No definitive conclusion can be drawn but at the very least the chronology and activities of Kerdir and the information in the Bavli does not diverge, regardless of any actual number of Jews killed.

From the Christian martyrdom narratives in the *Acts of Martyrs*, there is the *Martyrdom of Candida* which is set during the reign of (presumably) Bahram II, but composed in the 5th century.[120] Again, it is difficult to discern if there is any truth to this story, given the gap in context and chronology. Nevertheless, it is incidentally set in the time whence Kerdir reached the apogee of his power and self-reportedly harmed various religious communities. And finally, Manichean texts produce Kerdir as their primary antagonist, as mentioned in the previous chapter, and Mani was of course killed during the same Bahram II's reign. Furthermore, according to Paul Dilley a Manichean text "is a striking echo of Kartīr's claim to have smitten [zad]" various religious communities.[121] As such, the three outlined cases set in the period when Kerdir was active does lend some credence to his claims, although getting to the truth is remarkably difficult with the early Sasanians. But I think it might be an overly critical attitude to the sources to assume out of hand that it is simply literary topoi, only because religious discourse is seen as automatically suspect. So, the point is that there are important precursors to the Great Persecution, which suggests that there are good reasons to assume that the Christians were persecuted under Shapur II, although the scope is indeterminable.

Besides the violence against religious Others in the 3rd century, the *Acts of Martyrs* reports persecutions of Christians in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries as well. And there are approximately 60 martyrdom narratives, about two thirds of these are staged under Shapur II's reign,[122] which can hardly be incidental. On the other hand, some kings were more tolerant of their Christian subjects, such as Yazdgird I (discussed in chapter 4), and potentially Narseh and Hormizd II.[123] In other words, there was no uniform Sasanian strategy towards the Christians. And when it comes to the Manicheans, it is generally acknowledged that they were persecuted throughout most on the Sasanian era, including Shapur II's reign, beginning with Mani's execution in the late 3rd century. The scope of the persecution of Manicheans is difficult to determine but at least one scholar has called it "the great persecution of Manichaeans" and it

[119] KKZ 8. Antonio Panaino appears to take the reported killing of 12,000 Jews at Caesarea as factual, see Panaino, "Trends and Problems," 214.
[120] *Martyrdom of Candida* 1. For the dating of the text, see Brock, "Martyr under Vahran," 168, 171. It is not evident from the text if it is Bahram I or II in the role of antagonist, however, see Strong, "Candida: An Ante-Nicene," 394-395.
[121] Asmussen, *Manichean Literature*, 54-55; Widengren, "Manichaeism," 971. For quote, see Dilley, "Mani's Wisdom," 45.
[122] For an excellent overview of the martyrdoms, see Brock, *History of the Holy*, 78-84.
[123] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 471.

was not until the 6th century, apparently, that some clemency was finally offered them.[124] As for the Jews, it is commonly accepted that they fared better than other communities, and that they were not persecuted until the 5th century. More specifically, Geo Widengren argues that Jews were generally secure under Shapur II,[125] for different reasons that there unfortunately is no room to discuss here. Finally, it was remarked in the previous chapter how Buddhist communities may have been persecuted, but that is based on fairly conjectural data. For instance, it seems that the Sasanian-Mazdeans abhorred idol-worship, and this has been taken as evidence to propose that Buddhists were persecuted because of the prevalence of idols in early Buddhism together with the absence of Buddhist communities in Ērān.[126] But given that scarcity of data, some scholars have concluded that there is only evidence for the Christians and Manicheans ever being persecuted.[127] Because of limited space I am in any case forced to part way with Buddhism here. But what I want to draw to attention is that scholars have a wide range of opinions on the Sasanians and the persecutions of different religious communities, which illustrates how difficult it can be to navigate the sources to arrive at actual historical realities. It can at least be surmised that the Mazdeans did persecute various communities, including the Christians.

APHRAHAT AND THE ONGOING PERSECUTION

More specifically, is there data to suggest that the Christians were persecuted in the 4th century? Smith has critically reviewed Greco-Roman and Syriac sources used in modern historiography and debunked the depictions of religious war between Romans and Sasanians. And he argues that there is little evidence for the 4th century persecution, besides the *Acts of Martyrs* and that these sources are difficult to accept as historical.[128] This is a sensible suggestion, especially when applied to the *Acts of Martyrs*, given these stories' gap in both chronology and context. However, Smith also discards Aphrahat as a vehicle of historical information. For according

[124] Yamauchi, "God and the Shah," 87; Strong, "Candida: An Ante-Nicene," 393-394. For quote, see Hutter, "Manichaeism in the Early," 9. Josef Wiesehöfer mentions intermittent persecution of Manicheans under Shapur II, see Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 205-206, 214. Khusrow I offered the Manicheans clemency, see Huyse, "Late Sasanian Society," 148.
[125] Widengren, "Status of Jews," 131-139; Huyse, "Late Sasanian Society," 148; Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 942. Yaakov Elman and Shai Secunda claim Jews were generally treated better, see Elman, "Judaism," 430.
[126] KKZ 7; Payne, *State of Mixture*, 33; Emmerick, "Buddhism among Iranians," 957. For the possibility of the Sasanians as iconoclasts, see also Boyce, "Iconoclasm among the Zoroastrians," 97, 105. Alternatively, see Shenkar, "Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm," 473-475, 479-480.
[127] de Jong, "Religion and Politics," 97. Mary Boyce also notes how there is no evidence of any Buddhist persecution except for Kerdir's testimonial, see Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 120.
[128] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 177.

to Smith, Aphrahat never provides any names of martyrs in his texts nor any details about the persecution. Further, the only crystal-clear reference that Aphrahat is actually writing at a time of Christian distress is added at the end of his last *Demonstration 23: On the Grapecluster*, where he informs that he is writing in the year 345, whereas the persecution began in 340. There Aphrahat says that in 340 and under the auspices of Shapur II "the churches had been uprooted, and […] there was a great ravaging of martyrs".[129] As such, Smith suggests that the addition at the end of Aphrahat's work may be an interpolation by a later copyist. And finally, Smith is inclined to view the *Demonstrations* as biblical exegesis, rather than relating to historical events.[130] While I take inspiration in Smith's work, I am not convinced that Aphrahat should be discarded as fully as he does. And his stance offers an interesting parallel to a debate regarding studies on the Bavli, a source which historicity is equally difficult to ascertain.

For instance, Smith is vocal about his rejection of previous positivist historiography pertaining to the Great Persecution and suggests instead that the sources are useful as a guide to the Christians' *memory* of how the events transpired, rather than evidence for their actual occurrence.[131] And as such, he places himself in a camp that is comparable to that of Jacob Neusner regarding the Bavli. More than half a century ago Neusner similarly objected to positivist historiography and posited that the Bavli's attribution of statements and events to rabbis prior to its final redaction, about 530 CE, cannot be ascertained as representative for the earlier rabbis, but rather represents the opinions of the later redactors, who freely created narratives based on their own contemporary context.[132] As a final piece of data on their converging views, Neusner notes how it is difficult to use the Bavli to say anything useful about Jews at large and rather sees its representativeness as limited to the rabbinical Jewish position. Comparably, Smith posits that the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat "tell us a remarkable amount about how *one* Persian Christian used and interpreted the Bible in the mid-fourth century", but not much else.[133] The point I am making is that this kind of debate has been had before in regard to the Bavli. And in that case, Neusner's source critical stance notwithstanding, there are many scholars studying the Bavli today that believe it is generally reliable and often pertain to historical information and attributable to events prior to the point of redaction in the 6th century.[134] So, even if Smith and Neusner should be commended for drawing the problem

[129] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 105-106. For quote, see Aph. *Dem*. 23.69.
[130] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 105-106.
[131] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 177.
[132] Neusner, "Babylonian Talmud as a Historical," 3-12; Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 29-30.
[133] Neusner, "Babylonian Talmud as a Historical," 3-4; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 109 (my emphasis).
[134] For scholars who assume that the Bavli is more or less trustworthy, see Goodblatt, "Poll Tax in Sasanian," 235-236; Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 30.

to attention, I think that Smith, in the case of Aphrahat, is overly critical – whereas his criticism of earlier historiography's acceptance of the *Acts of Martyrs* as historical is entirely sound. And it can be assumed that should his source-critical attitude become dominant, there is every reason to think that later scholars will adopt a less critical attitude in the future, as has been the case with the Bavli. In any case, I now turn to the *Demonstrations* and the Great Persecution.

Aphrahat lived at the time of the 4th century event within Ērānsahr, although it is not known where.[135] What that means, is that there is no gap in either chronology or context with regard to the Christian sage, although it is of course impossible to assert to what extent his views were for the Christians at large. There several references in his *Demonstrations* that are written in the present tense that suggest ongoing persecution. But first, it must be noted that Aphrahat is extremely enigmatic and open to a wide range of interpretations – so I will only offer my own interpretation in contrast to that of Smith. A key passage with Aphrahat must be kept in mind when interpreting his texts, for he says: "Therefore, because the time is evil, understand in a symbolic way what I am writing to you."[136] Aphrahat has no problem with providing the reader with biblical exegesis, of course, so mobilization of symbolism must be for some other reason – most likely because of the present state of affairs. That is to say that the need for allegory must have been relative to something, probably so that he and other Christians would not upset Mazdean sensibilities. Therefore, he wanted to say something about the present – that is what animated him – but he had to create symbolic discourse internal to the Christians' understanding so as not to provoke the Sasanian-Mazdeans.

There are also clear allusions to the persecution prior to his very last *Demonstration 23*. For instance, with a proclivity for Jesus' martyrdom, he glorified it and remarked that "many confess and are killed."[137] As such, Aphrahat suggested that the Christians were being killed at the time of writing, although he did not say who or where. And in the same passage, Aphrahat noted that: "These things [persecutions] have also happened in our days because of our sins".[138] And he continued with a summary of his previous works where he spoke of events in the present tense: "I wrote a demonstration on those who are persecuted."[139] And finally, in his last work he petitioned God, with a sense of immediacy, to rise up in protection of the Christians:

> Our sanctuary is destroyed, and our house of worship is deserted. Our priests are massacred, and our

[135] Lehto, *Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, 5.
[136] Aph. *Dem*. 5.2.
[137] Aph. *Dem*. 21.23.
[138] Aph. *Dem*. 21.23; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 106.
[139] Aph. *Dem*. 22.25.

> heads are covered. Our virgins are humiliated and our covenant dispersed. […] let our altars be set right. May our plundered people be gathered together, and let them rejoice in the rebuilding of your house.[140]

The dating of these texts is highly relevant because they were all written around 343-345, which places them after 340, and hence in the middle of the persecution. Aphrahat's record shows that the Christians may have experienced persecution in the form of actual physical violence, destruction of Christian cultic sites and plundering. This is what the early *Martyrdom of Simeon* implies too, that Christians were killed, churches uprooted, and altars polluted, very much aligned with Aphrahat's record.[141] As such, from my reading of Aphrahat's texts it appears to be more than mere exegesis. And if that is the case, the above data would suggest that the final addition in the last *Demonstration* was not an interpolation at all. While the scope of the persecution is hard to ascertain, it nevertheless appears to have been ongoing.

MAZDAISM AND VIOLENCE

Was there a proclivity for violence in Mazdaism? In Avestan literature violence was endorsed in various situations. Severe crimes were punishable by flogging, deep cuts in the body, breaking of bones, and for the most heinous crimes the perpetrator would be executed. By the late Sasanian era, however, corporal punishment was often substituted by monetary fines.[142] More importantly though, there were instances where violence against followers of the Ahrimanic principle of Lie was prescribed, a category the ascetic Christians may have been ascribed to. For instance, certain animals, particularly the frog, were considered noxious and agents of Ahriman that assisted in the corruption of the earth, waters, plants and crops. They were impure, belonged to the darkness of night and were consigned to hell, and Iranians had an ethical duty to kill them, apparently. Kerdir confirms this belief in evil noxious creatures, as he noted that hell was full of them.[143] More significantly, killing noxious creatures had redemptive properties and could counter sin. For instance, a menstruating woman (see also chapter 6) could contribute to her own purification by killing 200 corn-carrying ants. And the even more egregious man, from the Mazdean perspective, who had intercourse with a

[140] Aph. *Dem*. 23.55-56. See also id., 23.53-54.
[141] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 12.
[142] Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 295.
[143] For violence against the followers of Lie, see Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 158-159. For violence against noxious creatures, see *Vidēvdād* 5.34; Moazami, "Evil Animals," 301, 307; Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 298-300. For a list of death-deserving noxious creatures, see *Vidēvdād* 14.5-6. For Kerdir's inscription, see KNRm 28. The virtue of killing noxious creatures in Mazdean ideology was mentioned by Elishē too, see Elishē, *History of Vardan*, 104.

menstruating woman could atone by killing 3,000 different snakes, 3,000 different frogs, and 3,000 corn-carrying ants.[144] There is even evidence of a marketplace for the selling and killing of noxious creatures. If "a priest is very able, he may sell vermin which he has caught for a price" and both the capturer and the person killing the animal would equally benefit from the "meritorious act of killing".[145] Before arriving at my point, in another Avestan text discussing dead matter and how it pollutes the sacred earth, there is a direct parallel between the noxious frog and the heretic/non-Mazdean. Paradoxically, the most wicked of creatures polluted the earth the least, such as the frog and the non-Mazdean,[146] in which case this text aligned the two. Without getting caught up in their physical manifestations, which is no doubt relevant, the point is that non-Mazdeans were apparently seen as extremely corrupt and sources of pollution while they were still alive. I would assume that corruption was corruption, regardless of who or what was responsible. In fact, the *Vidēvdād* informs that the non-Mazdean, while he is alive, negatively affect the sacred fire and cow – and how he negatively counteracted all the good thoughts, words and deeds of the Mazdeans. And finally, this was confirmed by later Pahlavi literature too, where the non-Mazdean's body was considered extremely polluted and where it was considered tantamount to smite the "two-legged wolf", i.e. non-Mazdean heretics.[147]

I am not sure whether the frog and heretic should be conflated because it is difficult to comprehend from my own subjective point of view, but nevertheless, that is what the *Vidēvdād* suggests, at least in some respects, and the negative view of heretics is confirmed later too. The relevant question, then, is if the killing of the (corrupting) frog could be transmitted to the killing of the (corrupting) non-Mazdean, i.e. religious Others, under the right pretext. It is plausible. For in an Avestan text, for instance, it is proclaimed: "Destruction to those who sacrifice to the evil gods!"[148] At the very least, this passage outlines that destruction of demon-worshippers and followers of the Ahrimanic principle of Lie could be a meritorious deed, which is well aligned with Kerdir's inscription KKZ, where he mentioned how the striking of various religious communities benefitted the gods. Furthermore, some economic incentives will be discussed in the next chapter, but here it can be suggested that there was economic gain attached to the capture and killing of animals, which could be undermined if the religious premise disappeared, i.e. that these creatures were Ahrimanic and had to be destroyed. For

[144] Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 300; Moazami, "Evil Animals," 306; *Vidēvdād* 18.73. Corn-carrying ants were believed to be creations of Ahriman, see Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian," 234.
[145] Moazami, "Evil Animals," 306-307.
[146] *Vidēvdād* 5.35-36.
[147] *Vidēvdād* 5.37-38; Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 230-232. For quote, see Boyce, "Priests, Cattle," 515.
[148] Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 258.

Mazdaism was not in any way ascetic – in fact, priests could expect payment for their services, given that profit was in no way considered sinful.[149]

At risk of stating the obvious, the Sasanians did not shun violence – like any other ancient society. In several rock reliefs the kings of kings are depicted as standing victoriously over their slain opponents. Ardashir I and Ohrmazd are depicted in one relief trampling on the last Arsacid king and the evil deity Ahriman, respectively. Comparably, Shapur I trample on Gordian III in one of his reliefs and in his inscription, he legitimized his attack on the Romans because "Caesar lied again and did wrong to Armenia".[150] Hence, for my purposes, he framed the conflict in a Mazdean binary taxonomy of conflict between the followers of Order versus the followers of Lie. The same iconography and language was used by Narseh (293-302) in his relief and inscription where his rival claimant to the Sasanian throne was labeled a follower of Lie, Ahriman and the demons. And there he makes it clear that the followers of Lie must be punished for opposing the gods, the king of kings and the Iranians at large,[151] who were bulked together as forces of good versus those of evil. Regardless of the rhetoric, Narseh castigated his opponents and presented them as transgressors of Mazdaism and subsequently unfit for the Sasanian institution of kingship, as adherents of an intolerable community of supposed demon-worshippers. In another relief closer to the context in question, Shapur II and Ardashir II are also depicted standing triumphantly atop a slain person.[152] These are but some examples, including Kerdir's inscription encountered in the foregoing, suggesting that the Sasanian-Mazdeans were ready to violently oppose those who were aligned with the evil cosmic forces. And more importantly, Ardashir, Shapur I and Narseh all deliberately presented themselves as champions of Order, placing themselves firmly within Mazdean ideology, which functioned as an agent for rationalizing the violence. Would it be wrong to assume that Mazdaism served an important role in the enactment of violence against religious Others and that Shapur II persecuted the Christians on account of religious differences? Clearly, religion mattered a great deal to the early Sasanian kings. That will be a topic in the next chapter as well.

CHRISTIANITY, VIOLENCE AND MARTYRDOM

Some general observations on Christianity and violence are in order. Christianity was born in bloody violence. The physical suffering of Christ was the key to human salvation and, in some

[149] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 31; Humbach, "The Gāthās," 41-43; Skjærvø, "Gāthās as Myth," 65.
[150] For Ardashir I and Ohrmazd, see Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 99-100. For Shapur I, see SKZ 4. See also Shayegan, "On the Rationale," 121.
[151] NPi 4, 18, 37, 61. For the iconography, see NVS.
[152] Overlaet, "Ahura Mazda and Shapur," 136-137, 147.

almost bizarre twist, an expression of God's love. This made violence and love inexorably connected in Christian ideology.[153] The violent suffering and death of Christ was an ultimate form of asceticism by the exertion of self-control, resilience and devaluation the corporeal self. And Christ, of course, represented the archetype for other Christians to follow. For many Christians statements like "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" held true.[154] And martyrdom brought the martyr eternal glory and closeness to God, it was believed, and even represented an opportunity to spread the gospel – as a public witness.

The significance of martyrdom was not lost in transmission but held sway in Ērān too. It goes without saying that the *Acts of Martyrs*, as a compilation of martyrdom narratives, evince a predilection for martyrdom. But the martyr's ideal is apparent with the early East Syrian texts I have analyzed too. In the *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas revels at the prospect of being "persecuted by your [God's] enemy, and to be hated for your sake", which eventually leads to his legendary martyrdom.[155] More importantly, Aphrahat similarly proclaimed: "Let us be partakers in his suffering, so that we might also live through his resurrection" because Christians "should suffer wrong but not do wrong".[156] Furthermore, he remarked that "The witness of Jesus was great and excellent! In affliction and in confession he surpassed all who went before and who came after."[157] As such, the *Acts of Thomas* and Aphrahat show a clear preference for martyrdom. This brings me to the historicity of the martyrdom accounts.

Are they wholesale fabrications or is there any truth to them? As many scholars point out, martyrdom narratives are problematic because of their tendency to draw few boundaries between historical and mythical material. And this impairs their reliability in the search for historical information, which is one of Smith's central points, as discussed above. He notes how the *Acts of Martyrs* are uncorroborated by any Sasanian evidence and that these stories often were put to paper long after the events in question.[158] And this is obviously an important correction to earlier historiography where the *Acts* have been taken too literally. But there is another development within the Christian world that is relevant as to why a cautionary approach to martyrdom narratives is crucial. And in this case, Constantine may legitimately be evoked as an important factor.

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[153] Ebel, "Christianity and Violence," 150.
[154] Ebel, "Christianity and Violence," 151-152; Fredriksen, "Christians in the Roman," 603; Gerwen, "Origins of Christian Ethics," 210. For quote, see Chadwick, *Early Church*, 29.
[155] *Acts of Thomas* 21, 106-107, 159-170. For the quote, see id. 25.
[156] Aph. *Dem*. 6.1, 6.8.
[157] Aph. *Dem*. 21.23.
[158] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 6-7, 176. See also Payne, *State of Mixture*, 19, 26-27, 38; Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric*, 5-7; Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 113, 276.

Under the auspices of Constantine, the trend began to shift as the Christians established boundaries against one another as "true" Christians and followers of the "true" church. For Eusebius, the unorthodox (i.e. Christians not of the same mind as him) were unworthy of the martyr's crown and there was a change in which some Christians differentiated between legitimate and illegitimate martyrdoms.[159] With the Edict of Milan in 313 the most zealous Christians thereby faced a new problem: Martyrdom was no longer an option, given their adherence to the at any given time dominant and accepted doctrine.

As shown by Walter D. Ward, eager Christians who actively sought struggle, even to the point of death, literally had to flee the Roman borders of tolerance, famously to deserts on the periphery. Far away from Rome they were free to create exaggerated accounts of their own spiritual struggles, depicting their persecutors as barbaric Others in a dichotomous relationship with the pious Christians themselves. In the Sinai, these were the Saracens of course, disparaged for their supposed pagan idolatry and extreme violence. And as Ward concludes, these portrayals probably had less to do with historical realities and more to do with Greco-Roman perceptions and literary inventions.[160] Exaggerations notwithstanding, he nevertheless thinks there is a hint of truth to the accounts and that Christians may have been killed because they were "colonizing" the Sinai and "usurping the traditional power structure" and modes of life.[161] There are two important lessons to extract from Ward's work, relevant for my purposes. First, martyrdom narratives cannot be taken at face value as historical without corroborating evidence. This is especially the case in the 4th century outside the "Christian" Roman Empire, like the Sinai and Ērān. For these were territories in which martyrdom narratives could still be cultivated and recreated with a higher degree of plausibility. And second, as Ward points out, Christians in the Sinai may have provoked their own demise because they were challenging, to borrow from Mary Douglas' theory, the existing institutional and communal boundaries. I think ascetic Christians in Ērān were disruptive in a similar way.

The connection between the Sinai and Ērān is not arbitrary. These were both areas that looked to Edessa (from which the influential *Acts of Thomas* is often attributed) for their iteration of what Christian institutions should look like, as an important city in the transmission of Christianity to the east.[162] For instance, Ephrem specifically commended the monk Julian Saba for founding a church on Mount Sinai and considered his asceticism so ideal that it was

[159] Ebel, "Christianity and Violence," 152.
[160] Ward, *Mirage of the Saracen*, 3, 32-33, 50-52, 91-99, 102-105.
[161] Ward, *Mirage of the Saracen*, 91, 109-110.
[162] For the role of Edessa in the transmission of Christianity to the east, see Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 201; Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 464-465; Haas, "Mountain Constantines," 103.

equal in measure to martyrdom.[163] As such, the martyr's ideal was shared by East Syrian Christians too, perhaps conveyed through Edessa via Christians that particularly appreciated ascetic ideals – including martyrdom. In that regard, Marco Frenschkowski has emphasized that East Syrian ascetic ideals, such as abnegation of wealth and family, sexual abstinence, negative views on procreation, and failures to attend the cult of the sun and fire, may have impaired Christians' ability to acculturate themselves within the Sasanian empire and represented a potential catalyst for conflict with the Sasanian-Mazdeans.[164] For Mazdaism was certainly not ascetic. Therefore, Frenschkowski's suggestion seems sensible, to which I would add under the concept of asceticism the martyr's ideal and negative views of the corporeal realm. It can be suggested, then, that the Iranian Christian martyrs were predominantly radical ascetics.[165]

SCOPE, TARGETS AND SYNCRETISM

Previously some scholars have framed the Great Persecution as extreme and large-scale. For instance, one scholar calls it a "bloodbath".[166] Even if that is not a quantification, it nevertheless evokes relatively large numbers in the mind of the reader. Jacob Neusner also thinks "Shapur II unleashed a ferocious persecution" of "organized slaughters of Christian believers", while Frenschkowski says the persecutions were "massive".[167] He cites the Arab historian al-Mas'udi (c. 896-956) who reports the incredible number of 200,000 Christians killed, while the church historian Sozomen (c. 400-450) claims that 16,000 Christians were killed under Shapur II but that "the multitude of martyrs whose names are unknown are so great" that they were innumerable beyond the initial quantification.[168] But al-Mas'udi was far distanced in time from the event and cannot be trusted, and Sozomen revealed his adherence to the martyr's ideal in the same passage, commending the Iranian martyr Miles as an "extraordinary and admirable" martyr.[169] On the other side of the divide, Smith thinks "persecution" is too strong a term for what he considers limited Sasanian violence against the Christians, while Adam H. Becker points out that Shapur's persecution targeted individuals rather than being a broader policy.[170]

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[163] Ward, *Mirage of the Saracen*, 48, 58-59; Griffith, "Julian Saba," 195, 213-214.
[164] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 466.
[165] Of note in that regard, many Manicheans were also ascetics, see Hutter, "Manichaeism in Iran," 482; Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo*, 14. Jews, however, were predominantly not ascetic, see Green, "Foundations of Jewish Ethics," 168-169; Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 233.
[166] Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, 43.
[167] Neusner, "Babylonian Jewry," 77-79; Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 469.
[168] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 471; Soz. *HE* 2.14.
[169] Soz. *HE* 2.14.
[170] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 121-122; Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference," 307.

For instance, the most reliable martyrdom account, the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, mentions approximately 100 martyrs but with only five of them named throughout.[171] Not that provision of names necessarily enhances a narrative's historicity, but there are good reasons to favor the latter historiographical view, in that the Great Persecution was more limited in scope than widespread – especially because it appears that many Christians simply submitted to the will of the Sasanian-Mazdeans and thereby saved their lives.

On that note, it is necessary to mention that there is a good deal of recent scholarship that looks at the situation of Christians (and particularly Jews) from a different perspective than that which is offered by the martyrdom narratives. The obvious weakness of relying on the *Acts of Martyrs* is, of course, that historical realities become distorted on account of the martyr's ideal with its tendency to create exaggerated accounts, sometimes wholesale fabrications that offer little insight into the 4th century apart from a potential window into the contemporary context of the narratives' composition, meaning the 5th or later centuries.[172] On the ground, as it were, people with different languages, ethnicities and religions apparently took part in a shared intellectual space with common beliefs in magic, curses, demons, and other overlapping beliefs. Of notice, material remains such as Aramaic magic bowls, amulets and magical seals presumably provide a window into the religiosity of commoners, communities on which not much information exists. The bowls were predominantly produced by Jews and commonly for consumers with Mazdean, Jewish, Manichean and Christian backgrounds. One family in particular even shows adherence to Mazdean, Christian and Manichean ideas all at once, for instance. As such, it has also been suggested that Jews, Mazdeans, Christians and other polytheists sometimes lived in the same household.[173] In short, there is data to suggest that heterodox religious identities were fairly common.[174] And in the *History of Mar Aba* set and composed in the 6th century, its protagonist Aba struggled to tell the difference between a Christian and a Jew prior to his conversion to the former and while he was still a Mazdean, apparently. And in the *History of Simeon*, it appears that the Sasanians were confused over who were in fact "Christian", as that story makes a point out of demarcating between "Christians"

[171] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 44. For the named martyrs, see id. 7, 14, 26, 44. And finally there is the daughter of Pusai, who is unnamed in the *Martyrdom*, see id. 48.
[172] Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 1, 113; Minov, "Dynamics of Christian," 150-151.
[173] Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 19-20, 128-136; Becker, "Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism'," 110-112; de Jong, "Religious Polemics in Context," 49; Morony, "Magic and Society," 94-95, 100.
[174] Rezakhani, "Mazdakism, Manicheism," 55, 69-70; Becker, "Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism'," 97-98. Interestingly, Babylonian rabbis commented that the Christian churches were very heterodox, see Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 50-58.

and "Marcionites".[175] Syncretism is of course the very hallmark of Manicheism too, although scholars still debate over essentialisms as to whether it owed its religious ideology mostly to Mazdaism or Christianity.[176] Finally, religious syncretism is also implied by the Christian writers who disparaged against Christians who engaged next-of-kin marriages or who bowed before the sun, which were Mazdean practices (discussed in chapters 6 and 8).

What I want to draw to attention here, is that many commoners appear not to have fit into the clear-cut religious identities and taxonomies the emerge from the sources. The concept of "conversion" is perhaps rarely, to use Platonic imagery, the stepping out of a cave with a fundamentally different view of the world – as compared to a gradual incorporation of ideas into an existing religious identity. So how were the Sasanians able to target the Christians for persecution? On one hand, it should not be assumed that persecution requires strictly defined subjects – even if the Sasanians could not tell Christians and Marcionites apart. For clear descriptions of the persecuted subject does not necessarily deter a persecutor under regular circumstances. In any case, the distinction between the two communities was likely just Christian triumphalism and internal theological intricacies for Christians. As such, there is no reason to think that the Sasanians were deterred because they could not tell the two apart. Nevertheless, on the other hand it also appears that the Sasanians paid less interest in the religiosity of commoners, which explains the apparent heterodox and syncretistic religious identities and the cultivation of different beliefs among commoners.

To return to the question above, I think this is where the East Syrian Christian ascetic ideology comes into the picture. Predominantly, it was elite ascetic Christians who were the targets of persecution, the very same Christians who adhered to the martyr's ideal. For instance, there are two accounts of Christians desecrating sacred Mazdean fire-temples. And it was not until these Christians refused to correct their mistakes at the behest of the Sasanians that they were finally executed.[177] There are also many instances where the Christians in the *Acts of Martyrs* are offered to have their lives spared as long as they would only bow before the sun, which again reveals that the martyr's ideal, unsurprisingly, may have played a seminal part in their execution. As for the Christians who attacked Mazdean fire-temples, it is clear that they

[175] Becker, "Bringing the Heavenly," 190; Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 133-134. For the dating of the *History of Mar Aba*, see Payne, *State of Mixture*, 296.
[176] Johannes van Oort and Jes P. Asmussen argues that Manicheism was predominantly Christian, see Oort, "Augustine and the Books," 189; Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 928-929. On the other hand, Geo Widengren tends to emphasize its parallels with Mazdaism and mentions that some Christian writers saw Mani as a follower of Mithra too, see Widengren, "Manichaeism," 970, 977, 980.
[177] For the *Martyrdom of Mar Aba*, see Williams, "Zoroastrians and Christians," 45-46, incl. n37; Panaino, "The 'Persian' Identity," 231. Essential parts of the story of Mar Aba are recorded by Theodoret of Cyrrhus, see Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 223-224. For the *Martyrdom of Narsai*, see Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 148.

made their radical asceticism apparent to their overlords through their sacrilegious acts and in their refusal to offer restitution. In the next two chapters I will continue down this avenue and suggest that indeed most martyrs came from elite communities and were persecuted by their peers on account of their asceticism. The benefit of this approach is that we can withdraw ourselves from the exaggerated accounts in the *Acts of Martyrs*, which has led some scholars to view the Great Persecution as massive in scope. At the same time the explanation can focus on the elite communities with the necessary power, influence and interest to enforce Mazdean ideology and practice on their peers. And finally, even if the persecution seems to have been limited in scope, it is possible that it extended to commoners too – but given the nature of the sources, there is unfortunately no way of saying anything conclusive about that topic.[178]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It was argued that there is evidence of Sasanian persecutions of religious Others prior to Constantine's conversion, and how in particular Manicheans were persecuted. Some recent scholarship has emphasized that there is little evidence of the Great Persecution and I have argued that in the case of Aphrahat, located within Ērānsahr, there are inferences to an ongoing persecution. I then discussed violence in the Mazdean religion, in which there were clear cases in which violence could be mobilized in the name of religion. As for Christianity, it appears that the Christians who were killed were radical ascetics who adhered to the martyr's ideal. This is fairly obvious, but the point is that there are many cases in the *Acts of Martyrs* of apostatizing Christians, implying that only the uncompromising Christians were eventually executed, while people with far more heterodox and syncretistic religious identities were less of a problem, from a practical perspective. In the following chapter I show that Mazdaism was institutionalized in the Sasanian Empire and continue to corroborate that the persecution was limited to the ascetic Christians and enacted by the elite communities of Ērānsahr.

[178] As Charles Selengut points out it is not uncommon that religious violence is enacted on a smaller scale but with a larger popular backing, see Selengut, "Sociology of Religious," 92.

5 THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MAZDAISM

In the foregoing I have suggested that the persecuted were ascetics Christians from elite communities or of some standing and status. In this chapter I continue to explore the social identity of the persecuted and of the persecutors. It has also been suggested that the Mazdean priesthood spearheaded the persecution. That particular proposition will be challenged.[179] To address these questions, however, a preliminary discussion on the relationship between politics and religion as well as the institutionalization of Mazdaism in Iranian society is required. From there all three primary questions are addressed: (1) Who were the persecuted? (2) Who were the persecutors? And (3) why were the Christians persecuted?

POLITICS AND RELIGION IN ĒRĀNSAHR

As shown in chapter 2, there are scholars who see the 4th century persecution as purely political on account of Constantine's conversion. That thread will be picked up here as well. A famous passage in the *Letter of Tansar*, purporting to be from the reign of Ardashir I, states: "For Church and State were born of the one womb, joined together and never to be sundered. Virtue and corruption, health and sickness are of the same nature for both."[180] Such notions have led some scholars to opt for a description of close church-state relations in Ērān, like Arthur Christensen who saw "the creation of a state church" as an essential characteristic of the Sasanians.[181] The problem with this idea, as pointed out by Josef Wiesehöfer, is that early Mazdaism lacked the necessary internal cohesion and organization for a "church" to develop – a term which is semantically Western in origin anyway. And he thinks conflict between the Sasanian kings and the priesthood falsifies the idea of close state-church relations in Ērān.[182] But this position has problems of its own because it assumes that the king was the representative of political interests, whereas the clergy sponsored religious interests. In the words of Wiesehöfer, "Shapur's chief motives in dealing with the Christians were political, those of the Zoroastrian clergy were religious."[183] Relating to the Roman association thesis, the separation of politics and religion is a prerequisite for the view that the Sasanian kings persecuted out of political concerns. I am not convinced that that was the case.

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[179] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 470-471.
[180] *Letter of Tansar* 8.
[181] Christensen quoted in Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 51 (italics removed from original). Similarly, A. Perikhanian, J. P. Asmussen, Edwin M. Yamauchi and Manfred Hutter operates with "state religion" or "church", see Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 632; Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 933; Yamauchi, "God and the Shah," 87; Hutter, "Manichaeism in the Early," 11.
[182] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 211-213. See also Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 212; Gnoli, *Idea of Iran*, 167-168.
[183] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 213.

More recently Adam H. Becker warns against the potential anachronism of applying terms like "state church" to the topic of Sasanian Ērān and, like Wiesehöfer, emphasize its etic rootedness in liberal Western development. But more importantly he rejects the term because it can lead to parallelism with that very development, in which case it is assumed that the separation of secular and religious institutions (state and church) is the inevitable end-goal of conflicts between kings and priests, with European development as a model. As such, Becker suggests that tensions between the two does not necessarily happen along the lines of politics versus religion, but that it is equally tenable that disputations were over mixed politico-religious matters. Quoting Hal Drake that "the ancient 'state' was also a religious institution", Becker notes that this applies more so to ancient Ērān.[184] In particular, it is problematic when scholars appreciate the religious underpinning of the institution of kingship but then disjoint it from religion altogether to conclude that the kings of kings ultimately took an interest only in matters of politics. That, I think, is to underestimate the relevance of religion.

At the same time, Becker advocates for new and (in his view) more representative terms that refrain us from making a priori assumptions about the separation of powers in late antique Ērān as a goal in mind, while simultaneously appreciating the historical development behind our taxonomies. This permits a description of Iranian society on its own terms.[185] Undoubtedly, these are sensible suggestions. But discarding our terms in exchange for new ones does not necessarily solve the generic problem. Even if taxonomies are not one-for-one representations of the world (which models, generalizations and terms rarely are) they are still useful for analytical purposes, and any new terms will necessarily have weaknesses of their own. But in any case, Becker should be commended for pointing out that tensions between kings and priests does not necessarily represent a bifurcation between politics and religion. By extension, it becomes possible to appreciate the influence of Mazdean religion on different institutions and communities of the Sasanian empire. Therefore, the representation of the Sasanian kings as purely political animals, explicated in the Roman association thesis, ought to be revised.

I think there are good reasons for allowing religion a greater part in the explanation of the persecution in question. It is fairly common to see religion in ancient societies as embedded in society, ethnicity, politics and the economy. This was particularly the case in the Greek and Roman societies. According to Clifford Ando, both gods and humans were basically perceived

[184] Becker, "Political Theology," 8-16. For quote from Hal Drake, see id., 15. For other scholars that see the separation of secular and religious institutions as the product of the Enlightenment era, see Cavanaugh, "Myth of Religious," 26-27; Kessler, *Studying Religion*, 18-19.
[185] Becker suggests the term "political theology" in place of politics and religion, see Becker, "Political Theology," 16-17, 19.

as members, even citizens, of the same community. And these communities were rooted in a particular land, often with gods fixed to particular cities, ethnicities and localities.[186] These essentials apply to Ērānsahr too, where people were born into their respective community. It is generally recognized that the ethnic identity of "Iranian", which corresponded to *Aryan*/*Ēr* (translated as "noble"), was inexorably intertwined with Mazda-worship, at least for the elite communities. Ērānsahr, of course, derives its meaning from Ēr and actually meant the "Empire of the Aryans/Iranians".[187] And at least by the later Sasanian era, *an-Ēr* ("non-Iranian") became synonymous with an apostate or infidel, in which case the ideal embeddedness of ethnicity in Mazdaism is implied.[188] The significance of Mazdean religion in Ērān in the 3rd century was clearly espoused by Kerdir and the Sasanian kings too, representatives of a nativist view, one could say, and which parallels the Greco-Roman example.

THE INSTITUTION OF KINGSHIP

On what basis, then, is it possible to assert that kingship was intertwined with Mazdaism? Sasanian royal inscriptions show that the kings of kings relied heavily on religious discourse and ideology to legitimize their own actions or, as shown in the previous chapter, to condemn that of others as followers of Lie. Directly relating to Shapur II, his inscription reads:

> This is the image of the Mazda-worshipping lord, Šāpūr, king of kings of the Iranians and non-Iranians, whose lineage is from the gods, son of the Mazda-worshipping lord, Hormizd, king of kings of the Iranians and non-Iranians, whose lineage is from the gods[189]

Here Shapur proclaimed himself a Mazdean and saw himself as a descendant of the gods, which suggests that the institution of kingship was embedded with religion. Simultaneously, the Sasanian king was able to align himself with Ohrmazd and, within the binary taxonomy and ethical dualism of the world, declared himself a follower of the principle of Order. Without failure the Sasanian royal inscriptions prior to Shapur II, like those of Ardashir, Shapur I and Narseh, used the same epithets, asserted divine lineage and declared themselves worshippers

[186] Ando, *Matter of the Gods*, 1-6; Rives, *Religion in the Roman*, 105-130, 208-209; Cavanaugh, "Myth of Religious," 26-28; Fredriksen, "Christians in the Roman," 590-592.
[187] For the relation of ethnicity and religion in Ēr, see Panaino, "The 'Persian' Identity," 230-231; Shaked, "Religion in the Late," 106-107; Daryaee, "Idea of Ērānsahr," 92, 101. For the meaning of Ēr and Ērānsahr, see Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 5.
[188] Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 105.
[189] STBn-I.

of Ohrmazd.[190] That the kings were considered divine is corroborated by Kerdir, who noted that Shapur I "departed to the Place of the Gods" upon his death.[191] The same Shapur also proclaimed that his successful endeavors and conquests were owed to the gods, that he instituted many sacred fires and how he promoted the Mazdean clergy and the cult of the gods[192] The Sasanian kings also claimed to possess *xwarrah*, commonly translated as "fortune" or "glory".[193] It was a necessary and constituent part of the institution of the kings and originally an Avestan concept, where incidentally it was said that at the time of Renovation the Mazdean savior would be basked in xwarrah,[194] which illustrates its significance. Xwarrah was a prerequisite of the kings right to rule and symbolized that he had been divinely instituted, and the Sasanian rock reliefs depict its transmission from the gods to the kings in the form of a diadem as a repository symbol of the legality of their reigns. This can be seen in the reliefs of Ardashir, Shapur I, Narseh and more importantly Shapur II.[195]

An interesting suggestion has been put forth by Bruno Overlaet regarding Ardashir II's (379-383) investiture relief. Here the king receives the diadem as usual, but scholars have usually been split on the identity of the consignor, where both Shapur II and Ohrmazd have been suggested. According to Overlaet, however, the consignor is actually a mixture of both because the garments are those of Ohrmazd's while the crown belongs to Shapur. And as Overlaet puts it, this depiction is unique in all of the Sasanian iconography.[196] While the relief may have been produced after Shapur's death, it nevertheless confirms the overall picture: Sasanian kings were tightly knitted with Mazdean gods, and probably divinities in their own right. The above data should suffice for the present purposes and shows the embeddedness of Mazdaism in the institution of kingship. That, of course, goes to suggest that indeed Shapur II may have had religious motivations for the persecution, as opposed to purely political ones, which is what the Roman association thesis holds.

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[190] Daryaee, "Ardaxsir and the Sasanians'," 240, 246; Daryaee, "Sasanian Kingship," 15. For the epigraphic evidence of Ardashir I, see ANRm-a. For Shapur I, see SKZ 1. For Narseh, see NPi 1.
[191] KKZ 3. Touraj Daryaee argues that the early Sasanian kings were divine, see Daryaee, "Kingship in Early," 67-68.
[192] SKZ 17.
[193] MacKenzie, "xwarrah," *Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 78; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 22.
[194] Boyce, "On the Antiquity of Zoroastrian," 58; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 18.
[195] Richard N. Frye points out that the diadem of investiture is identifiable by its ribbons attached to its wreath, see Frye, "Sasanian Bas-Relief," 190. For the diadem as a symbol of xwarrah, see Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 99-100, 106. For a summary of kings receiving the diadem and the gods assigning it, see Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 347.
[196] Overlaet, "Ahura Mazda and Shapur," 133, 139-141.

THE MAZDEAN PRIESTHOOD

In my effort to portray a picture of conjoined political and religious institutions (as I have not discarded the associated terms), I turn to the Mazdean clergy to show their embeddedness in the Sasanian empire. While some of the specifics may differ from scholar to scholar, I still present an outline of the clergy as a blueprint. The *mow* was the lowest rank and functioned in different capacities in the districts, cities and villages, handling temples and the temple economy, and overseeing some economic transactions. The majority of Sasanian seals were associated with this office which attest to its relevance in the administration of the empire. The *dādwar* was selected from the priestly caste and acted as a district level judge and supervisor in a range of judicial matters.[197] Above the mow and dādwar towered the *mowbed* who operated on the provincial level as an administrator, judge and head of the clergy. In particular, mowbeds ruled in matters of property rights, tying the office to socio-economic interests.[198] The *rad* was a "spiritual master" and apparently handled some legal proceedings. Moral crimes that required repentance, including death-deserving sin, seems to have been managed by the rad. Sometimes that could entail ordeals, of which submerging the perpetrator in water for a given amount of time or pouring molten metal on his chest to test the veracity of his testimony are famous examples. And at the end of a trial by ordeal, a document would be issued.[199] There was also a teacher or scholar-priest, the *hērbed*, who may have trained people in Avestan scripture, law, rituals and prayers.[200] While the precise nature of these offices in the 4th century cannot be ascertained in detail, as the above data relies on later Pahlavi material too, nevertheless many of the offices are mentioned under the early Sasanians, such as in the inscriptions of Shapur I, in the Babylonian Talmud and East Syrian martyrdom stories. Kerdir, for instance, managed to style himself both mowbed and hērbed, and later "Mobad and Judge of the whole empire".[201]

Finally, at the top of the hierarchy stood the empire-wide authority of the *mowbedan mowbed*, whose authority was considered infallible and more valid than ordeals.[202] When this office came into being is disputed, but it seems to have had precursors in Kerdir whose authority encompassed the whole empire. The *Martyrdom of Simeon* also alludes to the mowbedan mowbed, which increases the likelihood that it was an office in existence when

[197] Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 633; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 126-128, 132; Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 296.
[198] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 187; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 125, 128-129, 132; Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 296.
[199] Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 296; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 630, 679; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 132; Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian*, 251, 253-255. For the ordeals, see Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 34-35.
[200] Stausberg, "Rituals," 368; Mokthariaan, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings*, 101-102.
[201] SKZ 24, 28-29; KKZ 3, 5; Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 100.
[202] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 187; Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 101; Daryaee, "National History," 135.

Shapur II's reigned.[203] In any case, Kerdir declared that he established priestly colleges and reorganized and ordered the priesthood according to his own view, which supposedly benefitted the gods.[204] This is not implausible given that Shapur I also reported that he sponsored priests, which similarly benefitted the gods (see above). The point I am making is that the priesthood was an important institution in Ērān, with priests acting as functionaries in administrative, judicial and economic matters, perhaps to the point where Agathias in the 6th century remarked (exaggeratedly no doubt) that nothing among the Iranians was legitimate unless sanctioned by a Mazdean priest.[205] As such, circling them out as representatives of purely religious motivations is problematic.

There are other connections between kings and priests too. Besides boasting about the founding of priestly colleges and organization of the clergy, Kerdir also founded sacred fires and ordered the existing ones, all of which profited the priesthood, Mazda-worshippers in general, his own and the king of kings' soul, and of course the gods.[206] Furthermore, the king made Kerdir "independent and authoritative over religious matters".[207] The translation may be at variance with Kerdir's intended meaning here because he went on to say that he organized Mazdaism at the *command* of the king, and later in the inscription he asserted that he "was made *more* authoritative and independent than formerly over religious matters",[208] which suggests that he had not been independent previously, after all. This makes good sense, because Shapur I, as seen above, had religious interests of his own. He instituted sacred fires, supported the clergy and magnified the Mazdean cult for the benefit of individual souls and the gods,[209] in particular. Finally, even though Kerdir mentioned "religious matters" as a concept in its own right, it would be an a priori assumption to detach it from the institution of the kings, something Kerdir did not himself do, because his activities were carried out at the command of the king.

There is also data to suggest that Mazdean priests accompanied the Sasanian armies on campaigns, which is the last detail to suggest close political and religious ties. As mentioned, Kerdir corroborated Shapur's inscription SKZ, and said that the armies of the king reached Syria, Cilicia, Cappadocia, Armenia and Iberia and he noted how he was active in those areas

[203] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 15. Jason S. Mokhtarian suggests a 4th or 5th century dating for the establishment of the office, see Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 101. Touraj Daryaee suggests a 4th century dating, see Daryaee, "National History," 135.
[204] KKZ 2, 8-10.
[205] Kreyenbroek, "Zoroastrian Priesthood," 151-152.
[206] KKZ 2, 5-11.
[207] KKZ 1-2.
[208] KKZ 8, 10. For quote, see id. 5 (my emphasis).
[209] SKZ 17-22.

himself.[210] That priests under the auspices of the kings of kings accompanied Sasanian armies is alluded to in the 3rd century by Alexander of Lycopolis too, who reported that Mani followed Shapur I's armies on campaign. Directly located to the period of persecution, Ephrem implied the practice and remarked that Shapur II brought with him a priest when he finally occupied Nisibis in 363 (see also chapter 7). And finally, in the 5th century we hear that king Peroz (459-484) brought priests with him on his campaigns against enemies in the east.[211] In conclusion, then, the interests of the kings and priests often converged, both institutions were deeply influenced by Mazdaism, while at the same time serving in important political functions of the empire. Separating the two makes sense for analytical purposes but should not lead to a bifurcation of politics and religion, at least pertaining to the early Sasanians.

THE SASANIAN NOBILITY

Scholars often divide the Sasanian nobility into four groups, ranking from the closest family of the Sasanian king to the lower Iranian nobility, and there is an inclination to view the nobility as separate from the priesthood.[212] Some scholars suggest that the Sasanians originally came from the eastern part of Ērān and were in fact of Arsacid patrilineal descent, thereby, as a matter of function, representing a continuation of the Parthian Empire.[213] In their overthrow of the western branch of the Younger Arsacids, Ardashir I enlisted the support of powerful Parthian clans, notably the Houses of Sūrēn, Kāren and Andēgān who constituted the chiefs of some of the most important noble houses. These powerful clans appear in the reigns of Shapur I, Narseh, and Shapur II as well.[214] If the Arabic historian al-Tabari, writing around the 10th century, is to be trusted, it appears that the nobles gradually took a more active role in the rule of Ērān. He says Adur-Narseh, whom ascended to the throne in 309, was deposed by the nobility and priests almost immediately, in favor of the unborn Shapur II. And post-dating Shapur's reign, Ardashir II (379-383) upon succeeding him apparently killed many nobles, which may have had

[210] KKZ 8; SKZ 4-15.
[211] For Mani, see Dodgeon, *The Roman Eastern*, 56; Dilley, "Mani's Wisdom," 49. For the dating of Alexander of Lycopolis' text, see Dilley, op. cit., 34. For Shapur II, see *Hymns against Julian* 2.22. For Peroz, see Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians*, 128.
[212] Brosius, *The Persians*, 178-179; Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 171. For scholars operating with a clear division between nobility and priests, see Panaino, "Commerce and Conflicts," 385; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 631-633, 645.
[213] Olbrycht, "Dynastic Connections," 25, 30; Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 2-3, 37.
[214] Olbrycht, "Dynastic Connections," 28-30; Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians*, 41-45; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 52. SKZ 23-26. Note that in Narseh's inscription Kerdir is mentioned alongside the Sūrēn, Kāren and Andēgān clans, signifying his prominence, see NPi 32. Ammianus Marcellinus mentions the Sūrēn as an ambassador on behalf of Shapur II, see Greatrex, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 2, 27.

repercussions for his successors who met violent ends.[215] Obviously, this is remarkably close to Shapur II's reign. And he was the longest reigning monarch in Iranian history, for a total of 70 years, and as legend would have it, instituted by the nobility and clergy *in utero*, that is prior to birth. Given the nobility's active role in instituting and deposing kings both prior to and after Shapur's reign, it seems that the persecution was favored by the nobility as well. Otherwise, it could be expected that Shapur would have been deposed long before his natural death in 379.

Some more remarks on the context validates this position. The situation for the Christians drastically reversed by the turn of the century when Yazdgird I put an end to the persecution. In 410 he officially recognized Christian cult, helped facilitate the establishment of martyr's cults and became remembered by Christians as "the blessed" and "victorious and glorious king".[216] Furthermore and close to his reign, a peace treaty between Rome and Ērān in 422 stipulated that Christians were free to practice their faith and in the Synod of Beth Lapat in 484 the Iranian Christians severed their ties with the Greco-Roman Christians to the west. As such, the improved situation for Christians from the 5th century onwards is usually acknowledged by scholars, and Antonio Panaino, for instance, thinks that the Christians placed themselves under the authority of the king of kings at least from 484 onwards.[217] As for Yazdgird, however, his memory was damned in later Mazdean literature where he was branded "the sinner".[218] According to Arabic sources, Yazdgird threatened nobles and was reported to have "beaten people and shed blood", which has led at least one scholar to suggest that he was violently killed at their hands.[219] If indeed this was the beginning of the incorporation of Christians into the empire and the king was violently deposed, it strongly points to the nobility as a factor in the Great Persecution and might indicate that these elites were largely critical of Christian cult.

Based on the discussions of kings, priests and nobles in the foregoing, some remarks are in order. I am suggesting that there is no clear way of separating their interests, nor in fact is it obvious that priests can be circled out from the nobility. For according to Kerdir, who was a mowbed, hērbed and judge, he was given "the dignity and honour of a nobleman",[220] offering some conceptual difference but nevertheless blurring where the lines were to be drawn between

[215] Shayegan, "On the Rationale," 112; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 20, incl. n106.
[216] Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 940; Greatrex, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 31-33; Yamauchi, "God and the Shah," 92-93; Payne, "Emergence of Martyrs'," 89-90, 96.
[217] On the peace treaty of 422, see Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 137, 226; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 23. On the improved conditions of Christians from the 5th century onwards, see Dignas, *op. cit.*, 226-230; Huyse, "Late Sasanian Society," 147; Payne, *State of Mixture*, 18. For Panaino's view, see Panaino, "The 'Persian' Identity," 228-230.
[218] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 21; Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 939.
[219] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 60, 66-67. See also Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 21-22.
[220] KKZ 5.

a priest and a noble. Furthermore, in the 5th century the nobleman Mihr-Narseh from the House of Sūrēn procured for his own son the priestly office of *hērbedan hērbed*, as the foremost scholar-priest. And in the short *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai*, a mowbed and a noble is mentioned as working together on behalf of the Sasanian king in the persecution of Christians – and later in the story they are both referred to simply as "nobles".[221] It thereby appears that the priests and nobles could be one and the same. And finally, it has been suggested that priestly offices were hereditary.[222] It stands to reason that they were hereditary within the elite communities, given that it could be an attractive office for social elites. Of course, it is not particularly surprising if priestly office was attractive for the nobility, given the prominent position of the priesthood in central institutions of the empire, not to mention their campaigning with the Sasanian armies. And it is also obvious that the prominence of the priests was not simply the result of their own machinations, but necessarily depended on the king and the noble Parthian houses, who were evidently powerful players within the empire.

PERSECUTOR AND PERSECUTED

I can finally turn to the questions asked at the beginning of this chapter. I argue that the king, priests and nobles were all responsible for the 4th century persecution, as elite communities with converging interests. Despite the findings above, however, and as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, historiography tends to circle out the Mazdean priesthood as the spearhead of persecutions in general. Priests are said to have been the primary antagonists as interrogators, accusers and overseers of executions. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the king of kings at times even had to restrain the more bloodthirsty tendencies of the clergy, who had their way whenever the king was more dependent on the priests for support.[223] Implicit in this view is a separation of kings and priests as stakeholders with different interests.

Presenting the priesthood as the main persecutors, however, is not without cause. There are many stories in the *Acts of Martyrs* that offer up the Mazdean priests as the primary antagonists. Pertaining to Shapur II's reign, these priests are often introduced with a proclivity for violence against Christians. They accuse the Christians, persuade the king of kings, and order executions, to mention some topics. Without going into detail, these topoi can be found in the *Martyrdom of Tarbo*, the *Martyrdom of Martha*, the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth*

[221] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 176; Moktharian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 102; *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.318-319.
[222] Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 46.
[223] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 188, 212-213; Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 5-6; Panaino, "The 'Persian' Identity," 231-232; Daryaee, "Idea of Ērānsahr," 95; Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 470-471.

Zabdai and the *Martyrdom of Abbot Barshebya*, to name some examples pertaining to the 4th century.[224] The king of kings is not entirely omitted from these narratives, but he is clearly placed in the background, whereas the priesthood represents the vanguard. Of some further interest here, the Christian bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus (c. 393-458) also identified the Mazdean priests as central figures in the persecution of Christians in Ērān, and so did the Christian church historian Socrates of Constantinople (c. 380-440) who noted that "the Magians […] had much power over the Persian king".[225] As such, scholars who think the persecution was particularly endorsed by the priesthood have a lot of data to support their claim. But by looking at the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, the early account in the *Acts of Martyrs*, the picture changes significantly. Below I will compare the *Martyrdom* with the *History of Simeon*, which is a much later and more inventive account, to show the relevant and revealing disparity between the two texts.

In the *Martyrdom of Simeon* Shapur II is particularly targeted as the primary antagonist, whereas the Mazdean priesthood is mentioned only sparingly.[226] The majority of the narrative centers on Shapur II and Simeon, where the king is called "the stupid one" but also more forcefully a "cruel and destructive lion tasting the precious blood of humans" and "enraged to kill and wrathful to destroy, thirsty to lick innocent blood and hungry to devour the flesh of the holy."[227] As such, it is undoubtedly Shapur who is especially vilified in the *Martyrdom*, portrayed as lusting for the martyrs' blood. Later in the same narrative the story of Gushtazad is introduced. He was a Christian who apostatized to save his life but returns to the Christian fold upon seeing Simeon as the story explains. Word of his conversion reaches the king's ear – although it is never explicated who it is that accuse Gushtazad.[228] Then follows a dialogue between Shapur and Gushtazad which plays out in front of the petty kings and nobles, not the priests. And in the end, it is Shapur whom demands Gushtazad's execution, the latter being carried from the scene by some nobles. And later in the narrative it is the nobility that argue in favor of Simeon's execution, and at Shapur's acceptance "the nobles brought him [Simeon] forth to be killed."[229] Finally, this is where a priest enters the narrative and offers the Christians

[224] *Martyrdom of Tarbo* AMS 2.255-258; *Martyrdom of Martha* AMS 2.233-238; *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.317-319; *Martyrdom of Abbot Bershebya* AMS 2.281. For the dating of the *Martyrdom of Tarbo* and *Martyrdom of Martha* to the 5th/6th century, see Brock, *Holy Women*, 187-190. The *Martyrdom of Abbot Bershebya* was written in the 6th century, see Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 192.
[225] Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 221-224. Note that Magi is a generic Greco-Roman term for Mazdean priests.
[226] For the mention of priests, see *Martyrdom of Simeon* 14-15, 42-43.
[227] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 12, 33, 35.
[228] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 26.
[229] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 27-32. For quote, see id. 42.

a chance to repent, at the king's command nevertheless.[230] In the *Martyrdom*, then, the nobility and Shapur are the antagonists that take center stage. And I think it could be historical.

The nobility's incrimination in Simeon's death is echoed earlier in the story too, where the author in a lateral move tried to disjoint the Sasanian king from the violence by offering Simeon deliverance "from *those* who seek your life!"[231] From the next passages and the context it appears that "those" refers to the petty kings and the nobles, not the priesthood.[232] The variance in the corresponding passage in the *History* is revealing here, as Shapur says: "I will free you from the Magi who seek your soul!"[233] The program of framing the priests can be seen in the case of the martyr Pusai too, which is another injection in the *Martyrdom* and *History* towards the end of the story about Simeon. In the *Martyrdom*, an unspecified group of "they" capture Pusai, bring him before Shapur and accuse him of being a Christian.[234] Earlier in the story, only a single priest interrogates the Christians,[235] while it was nobles who carried Simeon off for execution. As such, "they" cannot refer exclusively to the priest, making it plausible that it denotes the nobles as well. But again, the *History* provides a different story and asserts that Pusai was seized "on the order of the head mobed" in the corresponding passage.[236]

In another inventive addition exclusive to the *History*, the priest and the martyrs engage in discourse which, unsurprisingly, ends in the humiliation of the former,[237] which again shows the far more critical stance against the Mazdean priesthood in later martyrdom texts. Finally, it is notable that the polemic against Shapur in the *History* is deliberately toned down. In the *Martyrdom* Gushtazad exclaims that he will not exchange the Christian god for Shapur, who is "a false man!"[238] This remark is omitted from the *History* where Gushtazad is presented as far more respectful and states that he will not be swayed by anyone, not even the Sasanian king. In fact, there is no polemic against the king and the prospective martyr simply laments that he has been unfaithful to Shapur, who is called "the good King".[239] The discrepancy between the two texts is revealing. Whereas the *Martyrdom* polemicize against Shapur and the nobles, the

[230] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 42-43.
[231] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 39 (my emphasis).
[232] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 41.
[233] *History of Simeon* 80.
[234] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 44.
[235] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 42 (for the interrogation by the head mowbed), 43 (mentions a mowbed issuing the command that Simeon be killed, rather than head mowbed, but given the latter's presence in the context and his higher-ranking office, it seems safe to assume that this is just a short-form for the same head mowed mentioned earlier).
[236] *History of Simeon* 96 (italics removed from original).
[237] *History of Simeon* 83-84.
[238] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 29.
[239] *History of Simeon* 53-55. Note that the closest corresponding passage to section 29 in the *Martyrdom*, is section 54 in the *History*.

History adamantly serves up the priesthood as taking a far more active role in the persecution.

Even though Shapur is effectively portrayed as a tyrant in the *Martyrdom* and the commands are issued by him, there is at the same time an ambivalent attitude towards the king. As seen above, Shapur offers to save Simeon from others who want him dead, and in a twist, it is suddenly the nobility that argue in favor of Simeon's execution. There may be good reason for this and I think the ambivalence is an important clue because it suggests that this narrative, which is among the earliest compositions in the *Acts of Martyrs*, is historical in its presentation of Shapur and the nobility as pivotal parties in the persecution. Had it simply been a literary invention the story would not fluctuate, but appear more concerted, such as the later martyrdom stories from the middle of the 5th century or later that clearly vilify the priesthood. But the *Martyrdom* was composed close to or during the reign of Yazdgird I, whom cared for his Christian subjects, as mentioned. For that reason, I think, the author of the *Martyrdom* needed to depict realities, i.e. that Shapur, the nobles and the priests all functioned as persecutors, but at the same time there was a need to disjoint the institution that Shapur represented from the violence, on account of Yazdgird and the improved 5th century situation for the Christians. It makes sense, then, that the martyrdom narratives that were written under improved conditions targeted the Mazdean priesthood as its barbarian Others.

Another relevant development requires mention. Whereas people in antiquity were born into particular religious communities, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, which meant that to be Iranian was equivalent with Mazda-worshipper, that was not necessarily the case by the 5th century. In an interesting article on the concept of "religion" in late antiquity, Jason BeDuhn points out how Kerdir, on the one hand, believed that Mazdaism was embedded in birth-identity. And when he identified different non-ethnic communities in the KKZ, like Christians, Jews, Buddhist and Manicheans, he did not perceive them as rival religions, but rather as anti-religions aligned with the principle of Lie (as I argued in chapter 3). On the other hand, Mani saw Christianity, Buddhism and Mazdaism as religions, closer to the modern conception of religions without their embeddedness in particular localities. As such, Mani thought of religion as a matter of voluntary association rather than a matter of birth-identity, a view which BeDuhn also traces to Bardaisan of Edessa and Constantine.[240] This has been suggested on the part of Christians too, of course. But the point is that Mani's view allowed for Mazdean religion to be transmitted outside of Ērānsahr, and more importantly opened the way in the other direction too. Now Iranians could hypothetically appropriate other religions. Given that the mechanism

[240] BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization," 248-251, 255-258, 263-273.

implied here could apply to the Mazdeans too, it is possible that such ideas were gaining ground more than a century after Mani's death, as Yazdgird allowed a previously liminal community to become part of the empire – although that is admittedly hypothetical.

For Yazdgird's reign was a milestone for the Christians and it affected the *Martyrdom of Simeon*. And unlike the period of Constantine's reign, by the 5th century it was possible to discern that Christianity had come to stay in Rome, making that an actual experience from where Christians in Ērān could look for dreamy inspiration: The conversion of a ruler who was, potentially, no longer embedded in Mazdaism.[241] As the Christians gained ground within Ērān, it makes sense that in the creation of boundaries against which to set themselves, they engaged in a polemic against the Mazdean priesthood as their main competitor and applied the same technique that had been applied to themselves, i.e. creating distorted pictures of Otherness from which they could enhance their own community. And here we come full circle: It was the idea of religion as a matter of voluntary affiliation that detached some Iranians from Mazda-worship and in so doing facilitated the Christians in creating narratives that bifurcated Mazdaism from the institution of kingship, as a strategy of Christian incorporation into the empire without sacrifice of their own religious ideology. And for those purposes, the martyrdom stories that vilified the priesthood was an effective tool in their hypothetical separation of Mazdean priests from the institution of the kings, by depicting the two with diverging interests, the former evil and the latter good – at least as a template. While this is conjectural, I think there are good reasons to view the Great Persecution as an undertaking in the interests of elite communities, rather than simply the priesthood. The latter, I think, is exactly what the authors of Christian martyrdoms would have us believe – with the exception of the *Martyrdom of Simeon*.

The second question I have asked is more straight-forward. Data on who the persecuted in the *Acts of Martyrs* were reveals that they predominantly came from the elite communities, as many scholars have noted.[242] For instance, there is supposedly the "king's wife" Candida, and from the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, Simeon who is the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Gushtazad identified as master of the harem, and Pusai who is "in charge of the king's craftsmen".[243] Admittedly, this picture could be influenced by the tendency that the sources most often are concerned with the social elites, with a negligence for the general laity. But the

[241] Minov, "Dynamics of Christian," 196.
[242] Brock, *Holy Women*, 67; Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 5; Payne, *State of Mixture*, 51-52; Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference," 305, 323; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 20. For some sources on the conversion of Mazdean priests, see *History of Mar Ma'in* 2, 38; *Martyrdom of Abbot Barshebya* AMS 2.283.
[243] *Martyrdom of Candida* 3; *Martyrdom of Simeon* 14 (on Simeon's title), 26 (on Gushtazad's title "*arzbed*"), 44 (on Pusai's title). For an identification of arzbed as master of the harem/women's quarters, see Skjærvø, "Seal of a Eunuch," 115.

persecution may well have limited itself to people of status, as it makes sense that Shapur II, the priests and nobles first of all wanted to ensure internal cohesion and therefore targeted their peers. So, why were apparently elite Christians the targets of persecution?

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS MOTIVATIONS

In Avestan literature the maintenance of property was an important function of the household, which was a genealogical, reproductive and religious institution as well.[244] As was the standard in ancient societies, agriculture was the primary form of economic activity in Ērān. And so, the nobles and priests predominantly invested in farmable land and acquired retainers, to the point that they became the primary owners of land.[245] The interest these communities took in the insurance of their properties can be seen in later Pahlavi texts that greatly concerned themselves with these landowning communities and their estates, generating detailed laws of inheritance.[246] Rudimentarily, the rights of inheritance enabled sons and wives (with full rights) to receive equal shares, while unmarried daughters received half a share. Sons also inherited their father's obligations, such as guardianship over minor members of the household, and had to carry out rituals and observe the cult of the dead. In the interest of preserving landed property and wealth, people could come together to form joint partnerships, so-called *hambāyih*. Generally, then, the inheritors of elite households entered in hambāyih to prevent an allotment of small and less profitable units of land.[247] Finally, there was a religious aspect to it as well. As shown in chapter 3, Mazdaism had a strong predilection for creative, reproductive and life-giving gods, plants, animals and humans, and as such the cultivation of land was also considered a meritorious from a religious activity.[248] As such, proprietary and religious interests were of great concern for individual households, but obviously more so for the elite communities.

Another institution of mixed religious and economic character was *pad ruwān*. It was an act of giving property to the care of Mazdean priests for the sake of one's soul, where the dedication benefitted its benefactor both spiritually and economically. The designated property could be delegated for specific purposes. For instance, it could be appointed to the performance of rituals, ceremonies or public works. The heirs of the benefactor had the right of usufruct but

[244] Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 293; Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 179-180; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 641-642.
[245] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 191; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 147-148.
[246] Elman, "Marriage and Marital," 248, 261; Hjerrild, "Ayōkēn," 79; Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 182.
[247] Hjerrild, "Ayōkēn," 79, 84; Macuch, "Hērbedestān as a Legal," 98; Elman, "Marriage and Marital," 271; Daryaee, *From Oxus to Euphrates*, 59-60.
[248] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 147.

could not change the dedication of the property so that the will of the founder remained in place.[249] This had ancient religious bearings as contracts and oaths were considered sacred and had to be upheld, otherwise one risked to incur the wrath of the divine enforcer of contracts, Mithra. Indeed, breaking a contract was a serious offense that was believed to have negative ramifications for later generations too.[250] I mentioned earlier in this chapter, both Shapur I and Kerdir undertook different actions for the benefit of their souls, similarly to pad ruwān. Also, Mihr-Narseh self-reportedly had fire-temples and a bridge constructed on behalf of his own soul and those of his sons.[251] As such, fire-temple foundations could be established as pad ruwān and administered by priests – or at other times the temples were owned by priests. These foundations encompassed large areas of arable land with slaves attached to till the earth, but also guardians and different attendants of the fire, who ensured the sacred elements continual upkeep (see chapter 7). And finally, as an act of repentance for sinful actions, working on the temple grounds could be ordained.[252] The point I am making is that the social elites had socio-economic and religious interests, and it is possible that ascetic Christians upset those interests.

For instance, it can be hypothesized that the ascetic Christians could disrupt hambāyih-partnerships and break apart the family property, or that they failed to perform the necessary rites in the cult of the dead or function as guardians for minor members of the household, or that they undermined the institution of pad ruwān. Or, if the *Martyrdom of Simeon* is correct, that some Christians actively withdrew taxes. Ascetic values are obvious with the East Syrian Christians. For instance, in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* wealth is rejected as a matter of Christian principle and Pusai posits that his position as head of the king's craftsmen is full of grief.[253] Abnegation of wealth is also the topic in the *Martyrdom of Thekla* and the *History of Mar Ma'in*, the latter story which proclaims that the Christians think nothing of the corporeal world and are fixed on the spiritual, and that they ought to leave their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, "his family and his lineage".[254]

This is indeed an important issue for the early East Syrian Christian texts I have analyzed as well. In the *Acts of Thomas*, we learn that the corporeal world is corrupt and should be rejected. Rather, Christians need to live like ascetics in poverty and without possessions and

[249] Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 294; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 146-147.
[250] Boyce, "On Mithra's Part," 22-23; Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 294.
[251] Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 662; MNFd.
[252] Macuch, "Allusions to Sasanian Law," 108-109; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 146-147.
[253] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 10, 44-45.
[254] *Martyrdom of Thekla* AMS 2.308-310, 312; *History of Mar Ma'in* 4 (on rejection of gifts), 63 (for social disruption and quote).

"corruptible wealth".[255] And the story also promotes the Christian ideal of leaving one's home and kindred, to become a stranger to one's peers and break all social ties with fathers, mothers and wives.[256] Ephrem similarly rejected the corporeal world and said: "Blessed is your heart that hate the world".[257] But most importantly, Aphrahat dismissed property and material wealth, instead recommending Christians to be in a constant state of prayer and fast "in order to please his Lord in suffering".[258] Furthermore, he thought Christians should "be strangers to the world, just as Christ was not of it."[259] In short, it is clear that ascetic Christian ideology may have been a factor, as it was promoted in the *Acts of Martyrs* and with the 4th century East Syrian Christians. However, there is no evidence that directly supports my hypothesis, i.e. that Christians were persecuted because they upset socio-economic and religious foundations. But it can be surmised based on the fact that the martyrs were predominantly social elites and that their persecutors were social elites as well. This will also be a topic in the following chapter, where I will provide more data to suggest that the ascetic Christians may have disrupted the equilibrium of the elite communities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter the relationship between politics and religion within Ērān was discussed, and how the two are only separable for analytical purposes. From there I have shown that Mazdaism was embedded in the institutions of the empire. Then it was hypothesized that the Great Persecution may have been carried out by the social elites of the Sasanian Empire in unison, rather than exclusively the priesthood – which seems to be a later literary invention by the Christian writers due to a change of affairs in the 5th century. And there is convincing data to suggest that indeed the elite communities persecuted the ascetic Christians in unison. Finally, I remarked that the persecuted predominantly were people of some status and I hypothesized that these elite Christians may have been targeted because they were socio-economically and religiously disruptive among their peers. However, there is no direct empirical evidence of such disruption, so it is ultimately based on speculation. In the following chapter I continue the investigation of the potential social and religious disruptiveness of these ascetic Christians, in which their rejection of marriage and procreation will be discussed.

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[255] *Acts of Thomas* 15, 20, 139 (for the promotion of asceticism and poverty), 37 (for quote and on the condemnation of possessions), 36, 58 (on the irrelevance of the world).
[256] *Acts of Thomas* 61.
[257] Eph. *Hymns on Virginity* 24.3, 12.
[258] Aph. *Dem*. 3.1, 20.6-12.
[259] Aph. *Dem*. 6.1, 23.67

6 XWĒDŌDAH, MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION

Having argued in the foregoing chapters on the relevance of religion, as well as the identity of the persecuted and the persecutors, in explaining the Great Persecution, this chapter turns to the third primary question of why the ascetic Christians were targeted. I start with the Sasanian institution of *xwēdōdah*, which is commonly translated as "next-of-kin marriage".[260] And I also discuss marriage in general and procreation, which appears to have been vital among the elite communities of Ērān. As such, there are two questions that concern me here: (1) Were ascetic Christians persecuted because they failed to perform xwēdōdah or rejected it on ideological grounds? And (2) were Christians persecuted because they rejected marriage and procreation?

MAZDAISM AND THE MERITS OF PROCREATION AND XWĒDŌDAH

Marriage and, more particular to the Sasanians, xwēdōdah were central institutions within Ērān, probably as a sequence in the meritorious practice of procreating. From a religious perspective, getting married and having children were good *deeds* within Mazdean ethical dualism, aligned with Ohrmazd and Order. Belonging to the other end of the spectrum were other practices, like having intercourse with a menstruating woman, performing an abortion, or sodomy, which were akin to demon-worshipping and worthy of death. Furthermore, the menstruating woman was required to sequester herself from the good creations, like vegetation, fires and the Mazdean community at large, while she underwent ritual purification. And denoting the seriousness of her state, anyone who came into contact with her would have to undergo ritual purification as well.[261] Finally, having intercourse with a sterile woman was sinful and tantamount to pollution because it wasted semen, which could potentially create life, whereas when wasted it transformed into dead and polluted matter. And as an injunction to refrain from bad sexual practices, it was held that "wasting of seed" led to loss of both strength and intellect.[262] The common denominator for these practices, which made them associated with Ahriman in particular, was that neither of them were life-producing. In other words, sexual intercourse that did not produce good life, a constituent of the principle of Order, was in reality evil. As such, failure to observe these instructions was believed to benefit the evil cosmic forces by producing Ahrimanic offspring.[263] This was believed by the later Sasanian era too, where it

[260] Skjærvø, "Marriage ii."
[261] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 80-82, 93-94; *Vidēvdād* 1.12, 8.32 (on Ahrimanic sodomy), 1.18, 16.1-5, 16.13-18 (on Ahrimanic menstruation, sequestering of women, contact and intercourse); Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 291.
[262] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 61-62; Rose, "Gender," 280-281; Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 306.
[263] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 63; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 93-94.

was further remarked that intercourse with a non-Mazdean wife would mix the seed of Mazda-worshippers with that of demon-worshippers and that any children from such unions would be Ahrimanic in principle. However, denoting the proclivity for children, it was affirmed that a convert from an "evil religion" to Mazdaism would, by proxy, bring his children with him,[264] so there was some ambivalence.

As such, it was considered a virtuous practice to produce children (with another Mazdean) and it was considered sinful to neglect a child. This is implied by the *Vidēvdād* which informs how the community at large had a responsibility to take care of a child, because it was an inherent part of Ohrmazd's good creation. The imperative to procreate even became anchored in a mythical past with Zarathustra and his many children as a legendary prototype for others to follow, as he was the epitome of the good Mazdean life.[265] This all makes sense through the lens of Mazdaism and its ethical dualism and binary taxonomies, in which marriage and procreation led to new and good creations to oppose the Ahrimanic principle of Lie.

According to Richard N. Frye, the institution of xwēdōdah could be practiced in three forms either between father and daughter, son and mother, or brother and sister. But from a 6th century Christian prohibition against it, it appears that it could be practiced with a larger part of the immediate family as well.[266] Data suggests that indeed the early Sasanians showed a preference for it. Kerdir reported that he endorsed the establishment of many of these marital unions which he considered unequivocally good and beneficent, while Ardashir I and Shapur I both practiced xwēdōdah by marrying some of their closest relatives.[267] Additionally, the Babylonian Talmud indicates that it was in use by the 3rd/4th centuries.[268] In other words, next-of-kin marriages held some stature with the Sasanians prior to Shapur II's reign.

Xwēdōdah was also an instrument to ensure the purity of the seed, which as mentioned above animated discourse against intercourse with religious Others. According to later Pahlavi sources, it was believed that a child born from such a union would possess a range of positive qualities, like wisdom and good character – the very best offspring which contributed to the good principle of Order.[269] As an action, next-of-kin marriages were laden with protective properties too and could protect against evil sorcerers or destroy demons. It had redemptive qualities and could redeem a range of sins worthy of death, including that of sorcery.[270]

[264] de Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics," 55. For quote, see Macuch, "Hērbedestān as a Legal," 92.
[265] *Vidēvdād* 15.13-19; Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 188; Cantera, "Ethics," 325.
[266] Frye, "Zoroastrian Incest," 451; Lee, "Close-Kin Marriage," 407.
[267] KKZ 10; Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation*, 122; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 111.
[268] Elman, "Marriage and Marital," 260, incl. n92.
[269] Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian*, 155-156.
[270] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 63-64, 94-95; Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian*, 152-155, 160-162, 164-165.

Apparently, there was almost no end to the merits of xwēdōdah. It was held that at the time of the Renovation the new blissful existence would be encompassed with all men engaged in such unions, and furthermore that urine from someone engaged in xwēdōdah could substitute bull urine for purification purposes.[271] Just like procreation was epitomized in Zarathustra, so was xwēdōdah attached to another ideal archetype: Mazdeans believed that Ohrmazd had practiced next-of-kin marriage with his creation and daughter, Ārmaiti (the earth).[272] These examples should suffice to illustrate the central point, that marriage, xwēdōdah and procreation were virtuous in the eyes of Mazdeans and positively contributed to the good cosmic Order. And the practice is attested to in Avestan, Pahlavi and rabbinical texts and, more importantly, Middle Persian inscriptions from the 3rd century. How widespread it was among the Iranians is hard to know, but some thoughts on that will be offered in what follows. In any case, it may very well be, as Mary Boyce posits, that xwēdōdah was one of the "essential duties of the faithful".[273]

SASANIAN ELITES AND VARIATIONS OF MARRIAGE

In the previous chapter I argued that the king, Sasanian nobles and priests were responsible for the Great Persecution in unison. And I suggested that these communities may have had socio-economic incentives, which makes the following relevant for the foregoing discussion as well. Xwēdōdah did not just provide an answer to religious anxieties regarding sorcerers, demons and pollution but also answered concerns of a corporeal nature. Within the Sasanian empire social mobility was heavily restricted and people were usually born into a community,[274] as I have argued in the foregoing chapter regarding religious identity in particular. As such, there were a wide range of marriage-contracts that preserved the social order. Some of these contracts entailed xwēdōdah and may have appealed to the elites for both socio-economic as well as religious reasons. That is why the Sasanian elites created rigorous procedures to ensure the continuation of elite households along patrilineal descent. This would of course make sense, as argued in the foregoing chapter, because it could preserve social cohesion while at the same time securing their status, landholdings and estates – all of which seems to have been of some great concern to them.

In terms of privileges the elites towered above all else, as might be expected.[275] The women enjoying the highest status in the household of Ērānsahr were *pātixšāy*-wives, which

[271] Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian*, 160; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 123.
[272] Skjærvø, "Ahura Mazdā," 408
[273] Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 137.
[274] Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 651.
[275] Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 291-292.

can be rendered as the principal wife. According to A. Perikhanian, children born from the principal wives inherited not only their fathers name, property and social status, but also his religious obligations.[276] If the husband and head of the household died or was sterile, his pātixšāy-wife was expected to enter in what was called a *čagar*-marriage contract. It was a temporary form of marriage with the goal of procuring a male heir on behalf of the husband unable to produce children on his own. Often this entailed marriage with a close relative, i.e. xwēdōdah, and the procured son became the legitimate heir and head of the household through his pātixšāy-mother.[277] Another form of ensuring successorship of a household was *stūrih*, which was exclusively reserved for the Mazdeans by the later era. It was a contract of marriage where the stūr, as a male or female substitute, was obligated to procure offspring on behalf of a deceased (or sonless man). In exchange, the stūr enjoyed temporary guardianship of the deceased man's property and received payment for his or her services. Regardless of the lack of genealogical ties between the procured heir and deceased man, the heir was nevertheless considered his physical and spiritual successor. And if necessary, the king of kings could appoint a stūr on behalf of a deceased nobleman.[278] In other words, the institution of stūrih had the potential to completely secure elite households and their continued survival, even if its last member (from a genealogical perspective) had perished. And finally, the *ayōkēn*-contract was a daughter's obligation to her patrilineal family to procure offspring on behalf of her sonless father. If the father was without sons, his daughter's marriage would be dissolved. Then, she could either produce an heir on behalf of her father as a stūr while still under the guardianship of her husband or she would be transferred to the guardianship of her father's household. The point, then, was that any son she delivered would become her father's heir.[279] As an impetus to preserve this rigid system of marriages, including xwēdōdah, women who refused to marry, remarry or left their husband after reaching puberty, were considered worthy of death.[280]

Many scholars have pointed out that these were practices meant to ensure the continued socio-economic status of elite landowning families, as elite men primarily concerned themselves with ensuring their line of succession. But religious observances mattered too, of course, as Children could uphold the cult of the dead to the benefit of the soul of the deceased, as noted.[281] In other words, procurement of successors among the elites was a response to

[276] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 60; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 646-647.
[277] Hjerrild, "Cakar Marriage," 103-106; Payne, "Sex, Death," 531-532, 539; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 60.
[278] Payne, "Sex, Death," 534-535; Hjerrild, "Ayōkēn," 81, 84; Macuch, "Hėrbedestān as a Legal," 97-98.
[279] Hjerrild, "Ayōkēn," 81, 84-85; Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 293.
[280] Payne, "Sex, Death," 531; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 60-63.
[281] Elman, "Marriage and Marital," 242-243, 248, 252; Hjerrild, "Ayōkēn," 79; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 651; Frye, "Zoroastrian Incest," 453; Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 293.

socio-economic concerns but simultaneously addressed religious responsibilities. This is also suggested by the *Letter of Tansar*, pertaining to Ardashir I's reign in the 3rd century, where čagar, ayōkēn and stūrih are presented as religious observances and where the king of kings' is produced as the man who improved and established these practices firmly.[282]

Nevertheless, there is, potentially, a chronological problem with applying the sources pertaining to a rigorous system of reproductive strategies, inheritance and continuation of elite households, because these institutions are largely based on material that post-date Shapur II's reign, the *Letter of Tansar* included. The potentially biggest implication on the material is the Mazdakite rebellion towards the end of the 5th century. It is often called an egalitarian and popular movement that went against the nobility and the clergy's privileges and wealth, in particular, and apparently decimated many elites and their estates.[283] As I see it, there are two relevant interpretations of how this rebellion may have impacted these marriage contracts. The first possibility is that the disruption of elite communities led to the formation of this rigid set of contracts that ensured the continuation of households in the future, in light of their setback. If that interpretation is accepted, the sources above were a reaction to that event, rather than a continuation of older practices and cannot be applied to the 4th century. But the second possibility is that the Mazdakites in reality reacted to an existing social system with few possibilities of social advancement. This is plausible, as argued in the previous chapter, where I showed the prominence of the nobility and clergy (as far as the two are separable). And of course, the contracts and social ties between elite households would have prevented social mobility, which could explain why the rebellion began in the first place. From that perspective the rebellion can be seen as a confirmation that elite communities prior to the late 5th century were atop a society that was effectively cemented. Notably, this latter interpretation is how Shaul Shaked's understands the Mazdakite rebellion.[284]

Furthermore, even if čagar, ayōkēn and stūrih were inventions of the later Sasanians, the creation of these institutions suggests, of course, that the socio-economic elites indeed wanted to protect their interests, which is entirely unsurprising, and there is no reason to assume that such interests did not exist in the 4th century. From what I have argued in the foregoing chapter, everything points to elite communities that wanted to preserve the socio-economic and religious status quo. It is not with absolute confidence that these reproductive strategies can be

[282] *Letter of Tansar* 21-22.
[283] Yarshater, "Mazdakism," 1019-1020; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 26-28. Touraj Daryaee calls Mazdak "a populist leader", see Daryaee, op. cit., 92.
[284] Shaked, "Orality and Esotericism," 50-51.

retrojected into Shapur II's reign, unfortunately. But from what I have argued in this and the foregoing chapter, it is certainly plausible.

CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON XWĒDŌDAH

From the above it is clear that the institution of xwēdōdah, in various forms, was a key in the continuation of elite communities' social status and their property, estates and wealth. Here I turn to the Christian perspectives. According to Jes P. Asmussen, next-of-kin marriage "was quite incomprehensible to the Christians, and consequently the object of bitter attack", and he thinks it constituted "an essential point of the Christian polemic".[285] Notably, he supports himself on sources that post-date the 4th century. Also, Jenny Rose thinks that "Christians derided Zoroastrians for their […] near-kin marriages".[286] Indeed, it seems only fair to assume that incestuous marriages would be castigated by Christians of the 4th century, based on biblical texts that deemed incest immoral. As a working hypothesis that was my inclination too.

In the *Acts of Martyrs*, as far as I have discovered, polemics against xwēdōdah is only explicitly mentioned in the *Martyrdom of Adurhormizd and Anahid*, which pertains to the 5th century, but written in the late 5th or early 6th century.[287] This is surprising and might suggest that the issue was of little concern. The Gnostic Christian Bardaisan of Edessa (154-222) had this to say about the practice: "Among the Persians it was customary for men to marry their daughters, sisters and mothers" and in the same breath he condemned such unions as abominable and unholy.[288] Interestingly, he also mentioned that the practice was widespread among Iranian descendants, notably in Media, Phrygia and Galatia. As a side note, this corroborates Kerdir's claims that he ordered the Mazdean priests, facilitated the performance of rites in the west and promoted many next-of-kin unions, as discussed previously. As for Bardaisan's text, it is possible that it dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd century, although its dating is uncertain. If that dating is correct, however, it is another testament that the Mazdean institution of xwēdōdah was practiced, perhaps widely practiced and even beyond the upper social strata of Ērān, although it is possible that Bardaisan's text is exaggerated.[289] In another source from the Roman world, Basil of Caesarea (330-379), as a contemporary of Shapur II,

[285] Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 938.
[286] Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 109.
[287] *Martyrdom of Adurhormizd and Anahid* AMS 2.592. For the dating of the text, see Payne, *State of Mixture*, 298. According to Paul John Frandsen also the *Martyrdom of Pethion* disparages against next-of-kin marriages, see Frandsen, *Incestuous and Close-kin*, 112-113.
[288] Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3, 256.
[289] Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3, 256. For the dating of the text, see Frandsen, *Incestuous and Close-kin*, 95-96.

castigated the Iranians and noted how they practiced unlawful marriages and "how they have been preyed upon by the devil".[290] Another source from the west written by an anonymous author about 360 says that the Iranians reportedly were very skilled in all bad things and that "they sleep with their mothers and sisters" and as such, sinned against the divinity that created them.[291] And significantly later, Theodoret of Cyrrhus also remarked on xwēdōdah, branded it as immoral and attributed it to the founder of Mazdaism, Zarathustra himself.[292]

From Armenia in the 5th century, Eznik of Kolb adopted the discourse of the Mazdeans and accepted that Ohrmazd had practiced xwēdōdah, as they claimed, but with a twist argued that the practice actually had been taught to Ohrmazd by the demonic agents of Ahriman.[293] There were, however, polemics originating within Ērān too. At the Christian synod of Beth Lapat in 484, any Christians engaged in next-of-kin marriages were castigated for supposedly imitating "the Magians through impure marriage".[294] And in the 6th century the patriarch of the East Syrian church, Mar Aba, circled out xwēdōdah for condemnation. In his text, *Regulations of Marriage*, Christians were specifically forbidden from marrying their mothers, sisters, daughters and granddaughters, "as the Magians do", and these prohibitions were again reaffirmed in a later synod of 585.[295] The fact that the prohibitions had to be reaffirmed a few decades later raises the question of how effective they were in the first place.

Mar Aba apparently made practical provisions by allowing the Christians who were engaged in xwēdōdah up to one year to separate themselves from their incestuous relations. Failure to comply, however, would lead to disenfranchisement from the church. As A. D. Lee notes, there are two possible reasons for the prohibition. First, it could be that Mazdean converts were engaged in next-of-kin marriages prior to their conversion which made it necessary, from a Christian ideological perspective, that the new members dissolve their marriages and step within the communal boundaries in full, i.e. forsake any overlapping and syncretistic practices. The second possibility, is that Christians were actually engaged in xwēdōdah and had been for a long time, perhaps long after their initial conversion.[296] These possibilities are not mutually exclusive, however, and there is some information that can be surmised from these 6th century events. The *Regulations of Marriage* implies that next-of-kin marriages were practiced for a long time prior to the composition of the text, which establishes

[290] Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 110. See also Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 468.
[291] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 194.
[292] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 109-110.
[293] Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian*, 151-152.
[294] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 108.
[295] Lee, "Close-Kin Marriage," 407 (brackets removed from original); Payne, "Emergence of Martyrs',"109.
[296] Lee, "Close-Kin Marriage," 407; Macuch, "Hērbedestān as a Legal," 94.

a continuous line from the earliest Sasanian kings and Kerdir across the 4th century. And as such, it stands to reason that some Christians throughout the 3rd to 6th century had practiced next-of-kin marriages, and that they had both stepped in to their new religious community with such marriages intact and preserved them, and even other Christians of more syncretistic identities may have engaged in next-of-kin marriages after conversion too. As such, the implication of Mar Aba's prohibitions is that Christians prior to the 6th century had indeed expressed very syncretistic religious identities – apart from the stricter ascetics, of course. The point is that again it shows that the persecution most likely was limited in scope, and if Christians were persecuted because they either failed to practice xwēdōdah or castigated it, then it would likely have been limited to the ascetics.

The above data is but an excerpt of the polemics against xwēdōdah.[297] But the problem, of course, is that all of the sources above are disconnected in either time or space, so it is not necessarily the case that these predominantly 5th century or later concerns were shared by the Christians within Ērān. So, indeed these sources support the claims of Asmussen and Rose, but a division is necessary because all of them originate either outside Ērān or are disconnected in time. What can be surmised is that in the 5th century and onwards an established polemic against next-of-kin marriages is evident, in which case Asmussen and Rose are entirely correct. But the problem is that compared to other topoi in the *Acts of Martyrs*, polemics against xwēdōdah is almost non-existent – and that must be an important clue.

I have thus far omitted the *Acts of Thomas*, Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* and the *Hymns* of Ephrem that I have analyzed because, to my surprise, there were no inferences of direct attacks against xwēdōdah. As seen, Bardaisan was familiar with such unions and condemned it. The *Acts of Thomas* emerged from Bardaisan's home city of Edessa, which functioned as a wellspring for the spread of Christianity to the east. Because of Bardaisan's knowledge of the institution one could expect a similar polemic in the *Acts*, which is staged in Indo-Parthia, if it was an actual issue for the Christians. The same can be said of Ephrem, who had no reason to omit it from his *Hymns*, if it did bother him. But Ephrem chose instead to castigate Bardaisan,[298] whereas he did not mention xwēdōdah in the four *Hymns* I have analyzed. The fact that Aphrahat does not comment on the issue, on the other hand, could be for two reasons. First, if the *Acts* and Ephrem were representative for East Syrian Christendom, it might not have been of any noteworthy interest for Aphrahat either. In that case the logical conclusion would be

[297] For a full list, see Skjærvø, "Marriage ii."
[298] Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 927.

that it was simply not an issue or a cause in the Great Persecution. Or the second possibility, given that Aphrahat lived within Ērānsahr, is that he might simply have passed over the topic in silence out of respect or fear for Sasanian-Mazdean sensibilities. But that of course, can only be speculated about. In any case, whatever their reason, these contemporary sources have little to offer on the topic. Therefore, I am inclined to think that it was in fact not an issue.

CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION

By extending the scope beyond next-of-kin marriages the picture differs. Many early Christians justified intercourse for procreation only, but one could argue that the East Syrian Christian discourse was more radical than that.[299] Here the *Acts of Thomas*, Ephrem and Aphrahat were vocal and revealed their ascetic ideal. While marriage and procreation were overwhelmingly virtuous practices in Mazdaism, that was not the case with the 4th century Syriac Christians. But before turning to Ephrem and Aphrahat, the *Acts of Martyrs* must be mentioned first.

There are several instances in the individual stories in the *Acts of Martyrs* where the dignity of virginity and celibacy is affirmed, while marriage and procreation are deplored. For instance, in the *Martyrdom of Martha* she is called a wise virgin and as she is offered a choice by her persecutors to give her hand in marriage or die, she proclaims that she is already betrothed to Jesus.[300] A Mazdean interlocutor illuminates the Iranian position and confirms the preference for marriage and procreation as both ethical and good acts, as opposed to virginity. He says to Martha:

> but do this one thing only, and you shall live and not die: you are a young girl, and a very pretty one at that; go find a husband and get married, have sons and daughters, and don't hold on to the disgusting pretext of the 'covenant.'[301]

This appears to be a solid representation of the Mazdean ideology I presented above. And it would not make sense even for martyrdom narratives to produce wholesale fabrications, although the particulars may be distorted and exaggerated. I think this could be a possible issue between the Christians and Mazdeans in 4th century Ērān, which will become clearer once the earlier Syriac writers are presented below. Moving on to the *Martyrdom of Tarbo* we learn that sexual desire is disgusting whereas virginity is glorious, and also in this narrative the female

[299] Gerwen, "Origins of Christian Ethics," 207.
[300] *Martyrdom of Martha* AMS 2.236-237, 239.
[301] *Martyrdom of Martha* AMS 2.236. "Covenant" means virginity, see Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 167; Aph. *Dem*. 6.8.

ascetic is offered the choice to marry or die,[302] which incidentally happens to be the case in the *Martyrdom of Thekla* too.[303] A particularly interesting topos in these narratives, then, is the choice offered by Mazdean priests to Christian women: Either embrace matrimony or face execution. Regardless of the historicity of the particulars in the account, this is, as noted, a plausible depiction of the Mazdeans, with their strong preference for marriage and how women who failed to marry were deemed worthy of death. Furthermore, this represents yet another example where the Sasanian-Mazdeans offered the Christians a chance to repent and save their lives – an offer these martyrs declined, as the ascetics they were. In the *Martyrdom of 'Aqebshma*, some discursive space is also offered a Mazdean who laments that the Christians "refrain from marriage and the procreation of children",[304] hence reinforcing the picture. But while these issues frequent these stories, they are entirely absent from the early *Martyrdom of Simeon* and the later *History of Simeon*. Admittedly, this could potentially mean that the issues of marriage and procreation post-dated the 4th century and the Great Persecution.

In the *Acts of Thomas*, the readership is encouraged to refrain from intercourse because it is perceived as corrupting and throughout the text simply denoted as "filthy". And moreover, Thomas is even able to convince married couples to refrain from sexual relations and to not consummate their marriage.[305] As mentioned in the introduction, the *Acts* is played out in Indo-Parthia and may be instructive. Here Thomas' infringement on the marriages of religious Others, which is an expression of their submission or conversion to Christian ideology, upsets the king and queen in the story. For as Thomas sees it, married couples are seduced to intercourse by demons which turns them from the Messiah.[306] The idea that the king and queen are upset at the social disruptiveness of Thomas might refer to actual Mazdean views of ascetic Christians, although there is no way of knowing for sure. But from the data above it is not an implausible parable. Furthermore, Thomas argues that there is nothing good about begetting children because they are heavy burdens, demons take hold of them, or they will grow up only to become adulterers, fornicators or thieves – to name some of the characteristics applied in the *Acts*.[307] With its critical stance on marriage and procreation, the conclusion is clear: Virginity is an ideal to follow and Thomas notes that breaking of the virginal state consigns the individual in question to hell.[308] It could be that ascetic Christians shared such values.

[302] *Martyrdom of Tarbo* AMS 2.255-258.
[303] *Martyrdom of Thekla* AMS 2.309.
[304] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 38.
[305] *Acts of Thomas* 12-14, 51-52, 54-55, 84, 88, 144.
[306] *Acts of Thomas* 43, 52,
[307] *Acts of Thomas* 12, 126.
[308] *Acts of Thomas* 55-56.

For these were virtues that Ephrem believed in as well. He considered virginity an aspirational ideal for others to follow. It had to be protected and superseded marriage in quality – and was, of course, epitomized in Mary. As such, he remarked especially that Jesus dwells within the chaste virgins.[309] Furthermore, he castigated raving men and women and fornicating virgins for their activities, and for their sexual emotions.[310] And finally, like in the *Acts of Thomas*, Ephrem thought that there was little joy in procuring offspring because children would be destroyed by Satan.[311] Aphrahat followed suit and presented his own ascetic values. For him there was a distinction between bad, tolerable and good behavior. The best was clearly asceticism with a preference for virginity and he even said that: "I will prove to you that virginity is excellent and cherished before God."[312] And as for marriage, it unfortunately captivated the mind in the corporeal world, as Aphrahat saw it.[313] This has to be interpreted from an East Syrian ascetic's perspective where the world was inferior to the spiritual realm, towards the latter which all Christian activities ought to present themselves. Aphrahat did allow for marriage, however, even if it was not of the best Christian behavior. But if one was to marry, it had to be done before baptism, otherwise the married couple would be killed in the struggle between good and evil. And as for married men, they were encouraged to live physically apart from their wives in order to refrain from sexual relations and retain their holiness.[314] It is therefore plausible to posit, as Naomi Koltun-Fromm does, that with Aphrahat there was no permissible sexual act outside the institution of marriage.[315] But even marriage was superseded by virginity, of course.

And finally, Aphrahat offered space to Jewish interlocutors in his *Demonstrations* and conferred his own views on procreation. Without adopting an overly critical stance on the Jewish voices encountered in Aphrahat, I am inclined to think that they may very well represent actual discourse between Christians and Jews. In the Jewish diatribe against the Christians it is said: "You do not take wives, and women are not married to men. You hate procreation, a blessing given from God."[316] Aphrahat did not deny it but implied the truth of the polemic, although he disagreed with its intrinsic moral message. For in the same passage he revealed that mankind became corrupt and wicked as it multiplied, to the point where God concluded

[309] Eph. *Hymns on Virginity* 2.4, 24.1, 24.5, 24.7-8, 24.12, 25.10.
[310] Eph. *Hymns against Julian* 2.6.
[311] Eph. *Hymns on Virginity* 24.3, 24.11.
[312] Aph. *Dem*. 18.6. See also id. 3.1, 18.9. Koltun-Fromm also notes on Aphrahat's pro-celibacy stance, see Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 162-163.
[313] Aph. *Dem*. 18.10-11.
[314] Aph. *Dem*. 6.4-5, 7.20. For a description of the struggle between good and evil, see id. 9.7.
[315] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 134-135.
[316] Aph. *Dem*. 18.1.

that he regretted ever having created man – in the context prior to the great deluge. And consequently, the Christians should not call themselves "'father' on earth" but rather be children themselves, to the Father in heaven.[317] Moreover, the Jews in the text note how their own practices "are holy and excellent because we father (children) and multiply our seed upon the earth."[318] To which Aphrahat replied that the institution of marriage had become corrupted. While he did not reject it in its entirety, it was nevertheless disparaged against because when a man took a wife he forsook God and the Holy Spirit, according to Aphrahat.[319] In sum, then, the *Acts of Thomas*, Ephrem and Aphrahat were predominantly opposed to marriage and procreation, confirming their ascetic Christian values. The preference was for virginity and sexual abstinence, because producing children was ungodly and left the offspring open to satanic influences. If these views were too radical, however, then at the very least Christians ought to abstain from intercourse and procreation if they felt compelled to marry.

By looking at the *Acts of Martyrs*, the early Syriac writers and Mazdean ideology in tandem, a case can be made that marriage and procreation led to conflict, perhaps persecution. It is also notable that at the synod of 484, East Syrian Christians attempted to dampen conflicts by reducing the Christian community's ascetic elements (condemnation of xwēdōdah notwithstanding). Of particular interest for my purposes here, was the termination of obligatory celibacy for the Christian priesthood.[320] This must have been a radical choice, given the weight ascetic ideals carried with the prominent 4th century Christians. Furthermore, in the next century Mar Aba revived the more radical Christian ideals, along with provisions against next-of-kin marriages, as he again made it compulsory for priests to be celibate.[321] As such, the termination of celibacy requires an explanation. Does it confirm that prior to the synod of 484 Christian's views on marriage and procreation had been a concern for the Mazdeans? It is plausible that the lenience on the part of Christians was meant to align themselves with Mazdean sensibilities. But the problem is that issues of marriage and procreation come from the martyrdom narratives of the 5th century and are entirely absent from the early *Martyrdom of Simeon*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It was shown in the foregoing that the Mazdeans had a preference for xwēdōdah, marriage and

[317] Aph. *Dem*. 6.1.
[318] Aph. *Dem*. 18.12 (brackets in original replaced with parenthesis).
[319] Aph. *Dem*. 18.2, 18.6, 18.8, 18.10-11. Aphrahat unequivocally proclaims that virginity is excellent, see id. 23.55.
[320] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 466.
[321] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 467.

procreation, which were considered good deeds within the religious ethical dualism, but also relevant for socio-economic reasons. It was argued that the polemics against xwēdōdah were either from the 5th century or geographically dislocated and how there appears not to have existed a polemic against it in the 4th century. In fact, later prohibitions against next-of-kin unions suggest that it was fairly widespread, again testament to the religious syncretism of Ērān. Because of a general rejection of marriage and procreation it can be surmised that xwēdōdah was considered abhorrent, but there was eventually no material to confirm this.

As for the second question, it is clear that marriage and procreation were a central concern for the Mazdeans on religious ideological grounds, and especially so for the elite communities who wanted to ensure the transfer of property, social status, religious obligations and genealogy of the household in question. As such, it is plausible that ascetic Christianity had the potential to be disruptive, if women failed to marry or procreate, like they were supposed to (from the Sasanian-Mazdean perspective), or if a male heir adopted an ascetic Christian ideology, as male heirs had an imminently important role to play in the household, also discussed in the previous chapter. On these issues all three perspectives converged, where also the 4th century Christians showed their preference for sexual abstinence, as well as several accounts in the *Acts of Martyrs*. On the other hand, the issue of marriage and procreation were non-extant in the early *Martyrdom of Simeon*, which makes these 5th century concerns, as far as the *Acts of Martyrs* evince. As such, failure to marry or procreate may have been a factor in the Great Persecution, but as usual the data was inconclusive.

7 SANCTITY OF THE SUN, FIRE AND EARTH

In this chapter I continue to address the third primary question, why ascetic Christians were persecuted. The chapter is made of two parts that investigate the issue of sun- and fire-worship and then the issue of burial practices. Given the ethical obligation to participate in the promotion of the good Order and that the behavior of Christians, their speeches and deeds in particular, could be judged as either beneficent or Ahrimanic, I ask two questions: (1) Were Christians persecuted because they disrupted the institution and cult of the sun and fire? And (2) were they persecuted because they did not observe the Mazdean burial practices?

THE *ACTS OF MARTYRS*: THE SUN AND FIRE

I begin this investigation by looking at the *Acts of Martyrs* and its connection with the issue at hand. On the topic of worshipping the sun we have the benefit of a stringent polemic against it in the early *Martyrdom of Simeon*. In chapter 2 I discussed the accusation levied against the Christians in the *Martyrdom* with regard to supposed Roman allegiance, in which the matter is mentioned explicitly only twice. And as I showed there, that very accusation was refuted. Far more prevalent, however, is the issue of venerating the sun, which is mentioned in at least nine sections. Simply from that quantification alone one could argue that the *Martyrdom*'s primary concern was not one of Roman allegiance, but rather one of religious ideology and practice. Scholars have of course recognized that polemics against the cult of the sun and fire frequents the *Acts*,[322] but the Roman association thesis has nevertheless dominated as an explanation for the Great Persecution. I now turn to the issue of sun-worship.

In the *Martyrdom* Shapur is uncompromising and commands that Simeon bow before the sun. Brushing aside the issue of taxation, if only Simeon "would worship the sun god with me", says Shapur, "you and all your people will live."[323] But as an adherent of the ascetic martyr's ideal, Simeon calls the sun nothingness, inanimate and without soul and, in reality, created by God.[324] As for Gushtazad in the story, he is not explicitly connected to the matter of supposed Roman allegiance as a representative for the Iranian Christians, but he disparages against the sun and, like Simeon, calls it inanimate, lifeless and without soul.[325] What is the purpose behind the polemics against the sun?

It is necessary to recuperate with an important point: The persecution appears to have

[322] See for instance Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 462; Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 939.
[323] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 17.
[324] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 17, 19, 25, 39.
[325] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 31.

been limited in scope and the *Acts of Martyrs* evince a split between different Christian communities. In the *Acts*, the sun appears to be a symbol of submission. Gushtazad who used to be a Christian supposedly apostatized when he "bowed to the sun" to save his own life,[326] which is censured by the author of the text. But this only implies that the Christians in reality were apostatizing, in which the *Martyrdom*'s purpose is didactic by showing how contemptible that kind of Christian behavior is. In the case of Gushtazad, Simeon is infuriated with him for having apostatized in the first place,[327] which no doubt served as a warning for other Christians who bowed before the sun – either under compulsion or out of religious syncretism. The same issue is addressed in the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai*, where we encounter Christians who upon the event of their execution "succumbed in the shame of themselves and worshipped the sun."[328] And thereby their lives were spared. In any case, it seems clear that many Christians either bowed before the sun because they had to or perhaps because it was part of their religious identity. The fact that this was abhorrent for the authors of the *Acts of Martyrs*, shows the ascetic martyr's ideal in the martyrdom stories. In other words, the issue of sun-worship simply implies that those who were martyred, may have been offered chances to save themselves. This topic will also be discussed in the next chapter where I suggest that bowing before the sun may have been metaphorical for conversion, which absolved sin, from the Mazdean perspective.

Finally, while reverence of fire is not condemned in the *Martyrdom* analyzed above, it is criticized in other narratives in the *Acts of Martyrs*, along the matter of sun-worship. And like in the *Martyrdom*, the king in these later stories offers the martyrs life if they worship the sun. There is unfortunately no room to discuss these texts individually, but I want to mention them to illustrate that these issues were not fleeting literary themes. They frequent the *History of Simeon* (which, as usual, is more extensive and elaborate than its older counterpart), the *History of Mar Ma'in*, the *Martyrdom of Thekla*, the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai*, and the *Martyrdom of Tarbo* which pertain to Shapur II's persecution, but also the *Martyrdom of Candida* staged in the 3rd century.[329] Finally, I remarked earlier how Sasanian kings and priests instituted sacred fire-temples and also how Christians in the 5th century desecrated them. And in those cases, the Christians responsible for the sacrilegious acts were offered deliverance

[326] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 26.
[327] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 26.
[328] *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.321.
[329] *History of Mar Ma'in* 39, 55; *History of Simeon* 41-43, 46, 77, 80, 83; *Martyrdom of Candida* 5-6; *Martyrdom of Tarbo* AMS 2.257; *Martyrdom of Thekla* AMS 2.308-309; *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.318-320.

from death if only they corrected their mistakes, to which they declined. While there is no 4th century account of attacks on fire-temples, it does illustrate how inflammatory matters of religion could potentially become between the Christian and Mazdean communities. To see if failure to attend or respect the cult of the sun and fire was a factor in the Great Persecution, I now turn to the Mazdean perspective.

THE MAZDEAN REVERENCE OF THE SUN AND FIRE

There is a lot of data that shows how crucial the cult of the sun and fire was in Mazdaism. In Avestan texts, a whole hymn was dedicated in praise of the sun, which indeed was considered divine. Furthermore, the sun was linked with fire and Order, the good guiding principle, and Ohrmazd himself.[330] The Mazdeans believed that demonic forces were particularly corrupting during the hours of darkness, which belonged to Ahriman. And because it was considered an obligation to promote Order, they would just before the break of dawn recite the hymn of Sraosha, a divine entity whose purpose was to destroy the demonic forces. Through that ritual Sraosha was assisted in his confrontation with the demons, and the rising of the sun was a symbol that Order had been reinstated by Ohrmazd. Within this religious ideology it was logical, then, that the demonic forces and their allies tried to prevent the sun from rising.[331] And it is clear that the sun and fire, as luminaries, apparently served some intermediary function in the prayer and sacrifice to the gods as well.[332] In chapter 6 I showed how menstruating women were seen as pollutants and according to the *Vidēvdād*, they were forbidden in that state of "impurity" to glance upon fire because it had the potential to pollute that luminary source. This is confirmed by a Pahlavi text where their gaze supposedly polluted the sun as well. Furthermore, in the late Sasanian era paying homage to the sun was considered "most compulsory".[333] It is therefore clear that both the sun and fire occupied important places in the Sasanian Empire, like the *Acts of Martyrs* suggests.

I have already noted how the early Sasanians instituted sacred fires throughout their era.

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[330] For the dedication of the hymn *Yasht 6* to the sun, see Andrés-Toledo, "Primary Sources," 521. For the divine nature of the sun, see Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 246. For the association between the sun, fire, asha and Ohrmazd, see Boyce, "On the Zoroastrian Temple," 455; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 12, 14-15, 18; Boyce, "On the Orthodoxy," 21.

[331] For Sraosha and the battle against demonic forces, see Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 15-16, 36. For the sun as a sign of cosmic order and demonic forces' attempted prevention of its rise, see Skjærvø, "Gāthās as Myth," 66; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 16. The principal morning ritual was the *Yasna*, see Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 342.

[332] Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 16; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 36

[333] *Vidēvdād* 16.1-4; Secunda, "Fractious Eye," 96; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 251-252. For quote, see Skjærvø, op. cit., 210.

Numismatics also confirm the status of fire, as every Sasanian king's coin would display a fire-altar on the reverse, including that of Shapur II.[334] On the importance of luminary sources, it was also encouraged that sexual intercourse be performed either in daylight or in the proximity of a fire, because of the demonic activities during nighttime which had the potential to corrupt any prospective child at its conception. Additionally, sacrifices to the gods had to be offered between sunrise and sunset, in the light of day, otherwise the offering would benefit the wicked forces of the cosmos and the Ahrimanic principle of Lie.[335] Fundamentally, then, the mixture of good and evil left the world oscillating between these two powers which were in constant struggle, here represented rudimentarily as light versus darkness. That was why active participation in the cult of the sun and fire, as good words and deeds, was necessary to promote Order. This obligation was implied by Kerdir who reported that his activities greatly benefitted the gods and fire, while Ahriman and the demons "suffered great blows and harm" as a result.[336] As has been stressed throughout, all human behavior benefit one of the two powers. It was therefore natural that the good deeds, within the zero-sum thinking of the Mazdeans, benefitted one side, to the disadvantage of the other, just like Kerdir proposed.

In chapter 3 I showed that Mazdaism was characterized by its preference for creative and life-giving forces. Besides the purifying properties of luminaries in procreation, the same was the case regarding the sun which allowed good plants and the good creation to flourish.[337] The sun and fire was not just associated with Ohrmazd and Sraosha, but also Mithra. In fact, by the Sasanian era it may well be that Mithra had supplanted Sraosha as he similarly would fight the forces of darkness to reinstitute the sun.[338] Mithra judged human behavior on its merits relative to Ohrmazd's principled Order, and he was seen as the god who enforced contracts and oaths. Mithra can also be seen in the investiture relief of Ardashir II where he oversees the transfer of xwarrah to the new king, and identifiable by the solar rays emitting from his head. Another continuation from Avestan times is thereby evident, where it was said that the sun-god Mithra indeed was a central figure in the bestowal of xwarrah to the kings of kings.[339]

And finally, it is on rare occasion possible to extend the scope of the investigation beyond the religious and social elites of Sasanian Ērān. On one Aramaic magic bowl it is inscribed:

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[334] Göbl, "Sasanian Coins," 327.
[335] *Vidēvdād* 7.55-58; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 99; Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 170.
[336] Skjærvø, "Gāthās as Myth," 66; KKZ 6.
[337] Skjærvø, "Gāthās as Myth," 65-66; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 118-119.
[338] Choksy, "Praise and Piety," 218; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 83; Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 346.
[339] Choksy, "Praise and Piety," 234; Overlaet, "Ahura Mazda and Shapur," 137-139. For a short and general overview on Mithra's functions, see Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 24.

"Shamish (=the sun) is the king of the gods".[340] From this text it is obvious that the sun occupied a prominent position among some strata of the general population as well, which by now is unsurprising. Depending on who the owner of the bowl was, it could either mean that the sun was revered by a Mazdean, perhaps it was a god in its own right or simply homologous with Ohrmazd, or it could simply have been that the sun was the highest god in the owner's religion, whatever it was. And this is relevant too, because as noted above criticism of those who bowed before the sun in the *Acts of Martyrs* was not necessarily an exclusive polemic against Mazda-worship (although that is highly likely to have been a crucial). It could also be a critique of other Christians with syncretic religious identities that transgressed given normative boundaries, in which case sun-worship may have been a constituent part of the religion of individuals who saw themselves not exclusively as Christians.[341]

In any case, the religious ideology emerging from the data presented above suggests that the sun and fire were connected with the Mazdean tripartition of human behavior in which they served important functions in good *deeds*, like rituals and sacrifices, and also reproduction. Furthermore, their relevance is clearly attested to by the connection with Order, Ohrmazd and Mithra, and the institution of kingship. It would therefore seem that the issue of sun-worship, in particular, in the *Acts of Martyrs* may very well represent historical realities. In order to complete the survey, I turn to the earlier Syriac sources.

THE *ACTS OF THOMAS*, EPHREM AND APHRAHAT: THE SUN AND FIRE

As far as I have been able to discern, there is only an allusion in the *Acts of Thomas* where fire is associated with Satan and demons. When Thomas encounters these evil powers, fire follows in their trail and the story mentions a fiery hell where sinners will be punished. The contrast with Mazdean ideology is that fire is presented as a painful tool in the punishment of sinful people, rather than a sacred element.[342] But this cannot be attributed any major significance in the East Syrian Christian perspectives on fire-worship of the Sasanian empire, as it is too vague – nor does it necessarily symbolize a negative representation of fire.

While the *Acts of Thomas* has nothing to say about sun-worship, Ephrem, on the other hand, was a pronounced opponent of it and seems well informed on the Mazdean reverence for

[340] Shaked, "Rabbis in Incantation," 115-116, incl. n74 (brackets in original replaced with parenthesis).
[341] Paula Fredriksen remarks that in antiquity also Christians and Jews generally recognized the existence of other gods, see Fredriksen, "Christians in the Roman," 591. This is implied by Constantine in his letter to Shapur II where the language implies that his God is superior to other gods, see Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* IV.9.
[342] *Acts of Thomas* 46-47.

the sun. During a Sasanian siege of Nisibis under Shapur II, he noted how the Sasanian "sun-worshippers have killed, my sons in the plain."[343] Ephrem also criticized the Roman emperor Julian (361-363) for worshipping the sun and pointed out the paradox behind his campaign against Ērān: If he were to conquer the Sasanians by Sol Invictus, who were sun-worshippers themselves, he would have conquered the very same sun that he himself revered. For "if (the sun) rejected the diligent (worshippers) of old, it would show itself a tyrant, and in vain would he [Julian] honour it."[344] That was of course a conflation of Mazdean religion with Julian's religion, no doubt fit for Ephrem's polemic purposes as he turned to both by labeling them satanic and idolatrous. Furthermore, he condemned both sun- and fire-worship by saying that "fools honoured the sun" and "the foolish fire".[345] At the same time, Ephrem commended the biblical Magi from the east for exchanging fire-worship for the worship of God, who was the lord of fire.[346] But that reads as a reputable exception, for Ephrem's overarching point was to condemn the cult of the sun and fire. However, another relevant excerpt from Ephrem's *Hymns* must be discussed. He noted:

> The Magus who entered our place regarded it as holy, to our disgrace. He neglected his fire temple but honoured the sanctuary. He cast down the (pagan) altars built by our laxity; he destroyed the enclosures to our shame. For he knew that from one temple alone emerged the mercy that had saved us from him three times.[347]

Ephrem wrote his *Hymns against Julian* after the Roman ceding of Nisibis in 363, prior to which the city had been besieged by the Sasanians three times.[348] First of all, he mentioned that a Mazdean fire-temple existed in Nisibis, which is entirely plausible, given that Kerdir implied that Mazdean communities existed in the west in the 3rd century, where he reduced them to order after the Sasanian campaigns. But I need to extend the scope of the investigation for a moment and linger on this excerpt, because secondly, Ephrem suggests that the Sasanian-Mazdeans recognized the power of the Christian god, to the neglect of their own cult, and that they destroyed pagan cultic sites. This passage has led at least one scholar to suggest that the destruction may have been out of disdain for Julian's religion, who was of course pagan.[349]

[343] Eph. *Hymns on Nisibis* 9.6.
[344] Eph. *Hymns against Julian* 4.8-12. For quote, see id. 4.12 (brackets in original replaced with parentheses).
[345] Eph. *Hymns against Julian* 4.14. For quotes, see *Hymns on the Nativity* 22.10, 14.
[346] Eph. *Hymns on the Nativity* 22.13-14.
[347] Eph. *Hymns against Julian* 2.22 (brackets in original replaced with parenthesis).
[348] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 34-35.
[349] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 22-23.

And as Kyle Smith observes, Ephrem evoked Shapur as a tool for divine retribution against Julian and the Roman pagans of Nisibis. As such, Julian was the persecutor, not Shapur.[350] But Ephrem should not be believed on this point. He simply made use of the Sasanians who, as religious others, were able to recognize the erroneous ideas of paganism, in which the Romans who could not were implicitly ridiculed for being inferior even to the Sasanian "barbarians". That is to say, there is no historical reality behind the claim, only rhetoric to prove the inferiority of paganism. Furthermore, if the Sasanians showed such a respect for the Christians, why was it that Ephrem decided to emigrate from Nisibis – and why did he lament the loss of the city to these supposedly new and more respectful rulers?[351] There could be different reasons for this, of course, but the reality is that his emigration does not imply that he was a Christian who felt at home in the Sasanian Empire, alongside the sun- and fire-worshippers he abhorred.

And there is other data to suggest that Ephrem was not as favorably inclined towards the Sasanians as one might think from the passage above. In the *Hymns on Nisibis*, which relate to the unsuccessful Sasanian sieges of Nisibis prior to 363, Ephrem noted that "the sun and his worshippers" were ashamed by their own Mazdean clergy because they could not conquer Nisibis on account of the city's divine protection by God.[352] This hymn dates close to 350, which places it earlier than the *Hymns against Julian*.[353] In other words, Ephrem prior to Julian was equally disparaging against the Sasanians and simply evoked them in his later text, with the ascension of Julian, to make a rhetorical point: The Christian god was supreme. As such, it was God who defeated the Sasanians prior to 363 and with the death of Julian it was similarly God's finger tracing the events. And of course, that whole argument, that the Sasanians were the instrument of God against paganism, would fall apart unless Ephrem explicated that they showed a preference for Christian cult over that of pagan and Mazdean cult. It was simply rhetorically effective. And regarding the Sasanian destruction of pagan altars, Ephrem said that it shamed the Christians, the implication being that the Christians should have destroyed them on their own. From a hermeneutic reading, this was not favorable discourse about the Sasanians, for his point was that even the heathens from the east were able to do what the Christians of Nisibis had not. And his aim was not to commend the Sasanians for it. If he had viewed the Sasanians positively, there would have been little need for the Christians to feel ashamed. As such, the Sasanian-Mazdeans were actually aligned with Julian as foolish sun-

[350] Smith, *Constantine and the Captive*, 84-89. See for instance, Eph. *Hymns against Julian* 1.20.
[351] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 23.
[352] Eph. *Hymns on Nisibis* 11.16.
[353] Gwynn, *Hymns and Homilies*, 72.

and fire-worshippers, and killers of Nisibine populations prior to 363. And this picture changed only slightly with the ascent of Julian, who represented the greater of two evils, and whose defeat was a good opportunity for Ephrem to condemn Greco-Roman paganism while simultaneously asserting that historical events were guided by the Christian god.

From that important digression, I turn to Aphrahat. In the earlier part of Aphrahat's oeuvre composed prior to 337 a critique of sun or fire worship is not found. In *Demonstration 17*, however, sent out between 343/344 he mentioned that the Christians were not to worship the sun.[354] And rather interestingly (because we do not hear from him again), it was not until his final *Demonstration 23: On the Grapecluster*, written in 345, that he deployed his most critical stance on the cult of the sun and fire. The chronology may be important because it was not until 340 that the persecution of the Christians began, which means that this stance may have been the result, potentially, of the ongoing Great Persecution. Here follows a summary of *Demonstration* 23.61.[355] Aphrahat noted that the sun and fire were akin to one another and that they were without "soul" and "knowledge". He said that neither of them could discern between things that were honorable and contemptible: "Fire does not reject anything that you give it" or "abhor that which is evil and despicable", to the point that it "devours dung and sewage". Also, the sun was without discernment as it "rises on corpses and filth". Aphrahat, as always, did not mention the Sasanian-Mazdeans by name, but it is fair to assume that he was referring to contemporary Mazdaism with its reverence for the sun and fire, as he also noted that his opponent's "mind gives birth to other gods". In other words, this was an argument against polytheists like the Mazdeans, although it could include syncretistic Christians. As such, Aphrahat primarily attacked practices that were of a Mazdean character.

Aphrahat's denunciations may have held some sway within later Christian communities too, because in the later *Martyrdom of Gregory* the prospective martyr discusses with a Mazdean rad and posits that fire cannot be sacred on account of it consuming all kinds of "rubbish and filth".[356] In the same story, it is acknowledged by the Christian polemicist that fire is of the same nature as Ohrmazd, which leads to the conclusion that Ohrmazd by affiliation also consumes filth.[357] Although I do not read Syriac, the language used in the English translations is remarkably close, as Aphrahat himself held that fire devoured dung and sewage. The same topic exists in Elishē's Armenian work too. He noted how a Sasanian edict in

[354] Aph. *Dem*. 17.6.
[355] For the dating of the text, see Lehto, *Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, 2.
[356] Williams, "Zoroastrians and Christians," 52. The *Martyrdom of Gregory* is staged in the mid 6th century, see Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference," 301, 308.
[357] Williams, "Zoroastrians and Christians," 52.

Armenia in the 5th century decreed that: "Excrement and dung shall not be thrown into fire."[358] It is not implausible that the ascetic Christians showed little regard for the cult of fire and may have desecrated the sacred element, such as the two stories about the attacks on Mazdean fire-temples in the 5th century. Whereas Aphrahat concerned himself with the sun and fire, the *Martyrdom of Gregory* concerned itself with fire and Ohrmazd, who was associated with the sun as mentioned above. That is a clue that suggests continuation from Aphrahat to later the ascetic Christians, at the very least, and that he was representative for later views as well.

Finally, on the issue of sun-worship in the *Acts of Martyrs* as a potential condemnation of syncretic religiosity as well, this is made plausible by Aphrahat. He argued that people who acknowledged the existence of one god but then lapsed from the Christian commandments did not truly believe in the Christian god.[359] Syncretistic Christian identities are of course only to be expected and it was exactly what Aphrahat alluded to. As such, his criticism of sun-worship was not necessarily exclusive to the Mazdeans, but others too. In any case, the above data should suffice to show that the participation or castigation of the cult of the sun and fire may have been actual issues between the Christians and Mazdeans in 4th century Ērān. In my view, Ephrem is unequivocally hostile towards the Sasanians – and only evoked them as barbarian Others who were superior relative to the Roman pagans, which served his rhetorical point of depicting the latter as the worst of the worst, as it were. Interestingly, Aphrahat's castigation seems to have escalated in his latest work – and whether he perished in the persecution subsequently or not can only be speculated about.

THE MAZDEAN REVERENCE OF THE EARTH

Before arriving at my conclusions, I turn to burial practices within Ērānsahr. Jenny Rose has suggested that the Christians derided the Mazdeans for their burial customs.[360] This is plausible and may have gone in the other direction too. Mazda-worshippers believed that the earth was consubstantial with and embodied in the divine Ārmaiti. Ārmaiti was created by Ohrmazd and perceived as a life-giving force engaged in xwēdōdah with Ohrmazd as his wife and daughter, thereby the very epitome of fertility too. In a sense, Ohrmazd and Ārmaiti were the parentage of all good things in the corporeal realm and their sexual union contributed to the good Order.[361]

[358] Elishē, *History of Vardan*, 104. Earlier in the story a Mazdean complains that the Armenian-Christians have defiled fire, see id. 97.
[359] Aph. *Dem*. 23.62.
[360] Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 109.
[361] Skjærvø, "Ahura Mazdā," 401-404, 406, 408; Williams, "Purity and Pollution," 352; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 16.

Within Mazdean ideology, with an emphasis on procreation and fertility, the earth played an important role as the basic sustenance for the good plants, cattle and humans. Interestingly, according to the *Vidēvdād* it appears that pollution of the earth had large-scale ramifications and affected the followers of Order who depended on the earth. The *Vidēvdād* asks how to purify a cow that has eaten from a plot of polluted earth. Whereas the cow would be purified given enough time, its milk, cheese and meat could not be offered as libation to the gods until a specific amount of time had passed,[362] which illustrates the implications inhumation might have had. There were also rules requiring the earth to remain uncultivated for a year after it had been polluted by the corpses of dogs or men, and more generally farmers were required to investigate the plot for any dead matter like bones, hair, dung, urine or blood before they could cultivate the land.[363] In the same text punishments were also prescribed for transgression of the rules. Given the ramifications pollution had, then, it makes sense that rules were established for how dead matter had to be isolated from beneficent vegetation, fire, humans, animals and the earth itself.[364] Later Pahlavi literature confirms the continued veneration of the earth, and those who polluted it with dead matter would supposedly reside in hell with Ahriman and the demons.[365] In short, the earth was hallowed ground within Mazdean ideology and that had very specific practical implications as well.

MAZDAISM AND THE DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

It was considered a good deed to expose corpses, but it was not until the Sasanians that it became widespread as the preferred practice.[366] As has been mentioned in chapter 3, Ohrmazd was considered perfect and without fault. This meant, as a logical consequence, that all wicked things stemmed from Ahriman, who brought them to the corporeal realm in the event known as the mixture. This meant that all destructive forces in the corporeal realm, especially death, were Ahrimanic. In the continual struggle between the good and evil cosmic forces, pollution of the earth with dead matter was a heinous deed that necessarily benefitted the bad principle of Lie.[367] This extended to menstruating women who were believed to be contaminated by dead matter, which required them to sequester themselves from the good creations, like the earth,

[362] *Vidēvdād* 7.76-77.
[363] *Vidēvdād* 6.1-9. On hair and nails considered dead matter and how to dispose of it, see Moazami, "Evil Animals," 310; Choksy, *Purity and Pollution*, 18-19.
[364] *Vidēvdād* 3.15.
[365] Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 129.
[366] Choksy, *Purity and Pollution*, 17; Frye, *History of Ancient*, 232.
[367] *Vidēvdād* 1.12 (on the association of death with Ahriman), 13 (on the sin of burying the dead created by Ahriman); Choksy, "Religious Sites," 395; Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 237.

fire and firewood.[368] If for some reason a sacred element was polluted by dead matter it was expected that reparations be made immediately by restoring the polluted source to its pristine state.[369] According to the *Vidēvdād*, the earth was the unhappy where dead dogs and men were interred. And furthermore, those who interred the dead were liable for punishment of 500 up to 1,000 lashings, depending on the duration of the corpse in the earth. But if the corpse was buried for more than two years, however, it could not be atoned for, and the ground where the corpse had been introduced would remain corrupted and possessed by demons for fifty years.[370] From what can be surmised from the severity of polluting the earth, it would seem that Christian inhumation was an inflammatory issue. Notably, all humans were potential pollutants as all succumbed to the Ahrimanic death in the end. But even in the face of that inevitability, the Mazdeans came up with a solution to the problem by physically preventing the deceased from corrupting the rest of the good creation, the earth and its plants, animals and humans.[371]

It is of course entirely unremarkable that the Sasanian-Mazdeans considered dead matter polluted, which is common to any society. But more particular to Mazdaism was the belief in the existence of an evil corpse demoness and servant of Ahriman, Nasus. She would supposedly take a hold of the body of the dead and in so doing entirely polluted the remains.[372] And if a person came into contact with dead matter the subject in question had to undergo ritual purification in order to prevent any spread of the Ahrimanic pollutants. Disposal of the dead was therefore facilitated by ritual specialists, so-called corpse bearers, accompanied by dogs that repelled Nasus with their gaze, supposedly. After the purification of the corpse was complete it would be transferred to a levelled rock-cut platform, clear of earth. There the corpse was tied down and exposed to dogs and birds that picked the bones clean. Afterwards, the corpse bearers purified themselves.[373] In accord with the previous section on the relevance of the sun, the Mazdeans did not dispose of bodies during the hours of darkness, and an Avestan text notes how corpses needed to be purified by the rays of the sun.[374] This was also mentioned

[368] *Vidēvdād* 16.1-2; Rose, "Gender," 281; Secunda, "Fractious Eye," 84-85, 93. Yaakov Elman cites a Pahlavi source which confirm the Avestan expectation that women sequester themselves while menstruating, see Elman, "Scripture versus Contemporary," 164, 168-169.
[369] Williams, "Purity and Pollution," 352. For a specific example of dead matter in water, which was another sacred element hitherto excluded from this discussion, see *Vidēvdād* 6.26-29.
[370] *Vidēvdād* 3.8. For the punishment for inhumation and failing to dig up the corpse, see id. 3.36-39. *Vidēvdād* 7.48; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 52.
[371] Choksy, "Religious Sites," 395.
[372] Rose, "Gender," 275; Choksy, "Religious Sites," 395.
[373] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 50-53, 122; *Vidēvdād* 8.1-3 (on the purification of a house where a man had died), 8.35-72 (on the purification of a man in contact with dead matter), 8.73-80 (on the purification of fire in contact with dead matter).
[374] *Vidēvdād* 7.45. See also id. 5.13. For transporting the dead during the hours of sunlight, see Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 114.

on the *Martyrdom of Peroz* above, and similarly corroborated by a Jewish text that confirm how the Mazdeans scattered human remains before the sun.[375] Incidentally, that is remarkably similar to one of Aphrahat's criticism above where he castigated sun-worship because the sun also shone on dead matter, which may be an inference to his views on Mazdean burial practices.

In any case, after the remains had been picked clean and purified by the sun, the bones were transferred to ceramic jars or ossuaries, which is corroborated by osteological evidence and archaeological finds in eastern Ērānsahr. In Fars on the other hand, jars and ossuaries were placed in rock-cut cavities discovered near Istakhr and Naqsh-e Rustam, from whence a large part of the Sasanian inscriptions originate.[376] It is therefore fairly clear that exposure of corpses according to Mazdean ideology was prevalent in some of the core parts of the empire. Interestingly, the *Vidēvdād* chastises individuals who would try to dispose a corpse on their own, something that, according to the text, was certain to pollute the person in question.[377] As previously noted it was not sinful for priests to receive payment for services rendered. And in the case of carrying corpses and disposing of them, it can be hypothesized that subversion of the system could undercut a source of revenue for the religious specialists who managed the proper disposal of the dead, besides religious incentives.

CHRISTIANS, INHUMATION AND EXHUMATION

Were Christians persecuted because they failed to observe Mazdean laws of purity in regard to the burial of the dead? The *Vidēvdād* informs that the earth was unhappy whenever dogs and men were interred. But on the bright side (for the Mazdeans), that could be reversed, and the earth could be restored to happiness. As such, exhumation of the corpses of dogs and men and the removal of human remains from tombs was prescribed as virtuous acts that also redeemed sinful thoughts, words and deeds.[378] This was an unequivocally Mazdean ideological rationale that permitted, or perhaps even required, the exhumation of corpses. Below I turn to Christian burial practices and whether exhumation may have occurred, as prescribed by the *Vidēvdād*.

While burial practices are not mentioned in the central *Martyrdom of Simeon*, it is added to the later *History of Simeon*. There we hear that Simeon's corpse and those of his fellow martyrs were taken under the cover of night and "buried in honor".[379] No doubt, the implied

[375] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 36, 49.
[376] Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 127; Simpson, "Old Bones Overturned," 79-84; Choksy, "Religious Sites," 399; de Jong, "Religion and Politics," 86; Grenet, "Zoroastrianism in Central Asia," 143.
[377] *Vidēvdād* 3.14.
[378] *Vidēvdād* 3.12-13, 7.51.
[379] *History of Simeon* 98.

message was that contemporary Mazdean burial practices were abhorrent. In another narrative, the *Martyrdom of 'Aqebshma* which is also staged in the 4th century, a Mazdean interlocutor laments that the Christians are teaching people "to bury and to conceal the dead in the earth."[380] And in the *Martyrdom of Peroz* set in the 5th century, at the command of Bahram V and the mowbedan mowbed "they exhumed the dead that had lain buried since the days of his father (that is, king Yazdgird I), and scattered them before the sun".[381] As such, there is material in the *Acts of Martyrs* suggesting that the Mazdean communities abhorred Christian inhumation, and simultaneously it appears that the ascetic Christians derided Mazdean practices of exposing corpses, like Rose suggests. Of note, however, is that these sources are from the 5th century.

Given that exhumation, within the ethical dualism of Mazdaism, was a good act, it would appear that the cases from the *Acts of Martyrs* mentioned above may refer to historical realities. This is corroborated by Elishē, as far as he can be trusted, who reported that the Sasanian-Mazdeans complained that the Christians "have buried the dead in the ground and corrupted the earth".[382] Also Theodoret of Cyrrhus remarked that the Sasanians exposed their dead to dogs and birds which he considered part of the "laws of Zarathustra" (see the next chapter). But according to him, the Christians in Ērān treated those laws with contempt and on the exposure of corpses, he said that the Christians no longer followed that custom "but they hide them [the corpses] in the earth" and that they were not thwarted by "the cruelty of their punishers."[383] This is remarkably close to the religious ideology outlined above, where the act of inhumation was liable to punishment. In reality, the issue of burial practice may have become so inflamed that in the peace treaty between Khusrow I (531-579) and Justinian (527-565) it was stipulated that the Christians in Ērān were allowed to bury their dead in graves, as was the preferred practice for the Christians.[384] However, all the sources discussed so far are from the 5th or later centuries and cannot be retrojected to the 4th century without good cause. As it stands, it is telling that the topic is not touched upon in the *Martyrdom of Simeon*.

But in an excellent article on exhumation in Ērān, Geoffrey Herman questions whether it is too much to read into Bahram V's decree (see above) that an edict against interring the dead was in place prior to Yazdgird I, and more importantly during Shapur II's reign.[385] In

[380] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 38. The *Martyrdom of 'Aqebshma* is a 5th century composition, see id. 298.
[381] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 39. For the composition of the *Martyrdom of Peroz*, see Payne, *State of Mixture*, 298. Marco Frenschkowski and Sebastian Brock think human remains were exhumed in 422, see Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 466; Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian," 9, incl. n37.
[382] Elishē, *History of Vardan*, 97-98.
[383] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 110.
[384] Dignas, *Rome and Persia*, 225.
[385] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 39, incl. n36.

chapter 5 I discussed the well-known change of policy with Yazdgird towards the Christians, so it is plausible that he may have reverted such an edict. For Herman has identified three stories in the Bavli about Mazdean exhumation practices. These stories are generally accepted as historical and Richard Kalmin even suggests that exhumation was the result of Jewish offenses against Mazdean sensibilities, that is to say against the instituted burial practices.[386] A fourth story is attributed to a Palestinian rabbi who at the prospect of a Sasanian expansion to the west and a potential occupation of Palestine exclaims: "Bury my coffin deep!"[387] The implied message was that the Sasanian would exhume the rabbi's corpse upon arrival. And as Kalmin notes, statements in the Bavli attributed to Palestinian rabbis are often fabrications or heavily altered by the Babylonian redactors. In other words, the Palestinian rabbi was made into the mouthpiece for realities and contexts within Ērānsahr, from whence the statement must be attributed.[388] Of most significance, however, is the fact that all of the four stories were attributed to the 4th century, directly to Shapur II's reign and the persecution in question. And furthermore, information about exhumation is exclusive to the Bavli and nowhere mentioned in its Palestinian counterpart, which means that it was an ongoing topic among the Babylonian rabbis rather than simply academic discourse.[389]

Furthermore, one of Herman's discoveries is an allusion in Aphrahat's texts. In a discussion around the reason for the secrecy surrounding the location of the grave of the biblical Moses, Aphrahat used the same rationale as other Jewish and Christian commentators and suggested that it was kept hidden to prevent it from becoming a place of worship. But that reason was secondary for him. For according to Herman, Aphrahat's primary reasoning is entirely unique. In his *Demonstration 8: On the Dead Coming to Life*, the primary purpose for the secrecy surrounding Moses' grave was according to Aphrahat so his "enemies would not know (where it was) and would not (be able to) throw his bones from the tomb."[390] And additionally, Moses did not want to be buried "in the land of his enemies, the land of Moab" because he would not have "the Moabites to come and take vengeance on him, uncovering the bones of a righteous man and throwing them away."[391] The Moabites were a Semitic tribe mentioned in the Old Testament, but the peculiar additions are exclusive to Aphrahat which

[386] For the three stories in question, see Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 42-50. For Kalmin's view, see Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 132-138. Yaakov Elman and Shai Secunda also take it as factual that Mazdeans dug up corpses, see Elman, "Judaism," 430.
[387] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 51-52.
[388] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 16-17.
[389] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 49-50, 52. Kalmin also accepts a 4th century dating as the most probable, see Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 137.
[390] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 40; Aph. *Dem*. 8.9 (brackets in original replaced by parentheses).
[391] Aph. *Dem*. 8.9.

suggests that this was not simply biblical exegesis but may actually reflect upon contemporary experiences in Ērān, as Herman suggests.

There can be little doubt that Aphrahat was familiar with Mazdean burial practices. After all he was an Iranian himself. He also commented on it other places in his *Demonstrations*, for instance noting that "those who assumed that they would be buried with honour will be devoured by dogs."[392] That must be an unmistakable castigation of Mazdean burial practices. For Aphrahat thought that interring the dead was honorable, language that was echoed in the later *History of Simeon* (see above) – and by doing so juxtaposed the Mazdean practice as dishonorable. Aphrahat, as always, did not mention the Sasanian-Mazdeans by name, for reasons we can only speculate about, but infusions like these taken together with the context suggests that Aphrahat was highly critical of the Mazdean exposure of the dead and he may in fact, like Herman observes, allude to corpses being exhumed in his own time.

While scholars have pointed out the Christian and Jewish preference for inhumation,[393] with Aphrahat the point was taken further. For him, interring the dead was a precondition for being raised in the general resurrection to come. Offering the parable of the seed, he said that even though flesh and bones were reduced to dust, the body would be resurrected as long as the corpse was planted in the earth, like a seed.[394] Additionally, he used vivid language to describe how the seeds of the dead, as it were, impregnated the earth and how "many are being conceived in the earth, and the time of her birthing is at hand."[395] First, he implied that many Christians were buried directly in the earth. And second, if my reading of the text corresponds to Aphrahat's emic perspective, then that would be a strong incentive for at least ascetic Christians to inter the dead as a necessary requirement for their resurrection. And that may have put them at odds with Mazdean sensibilities. In any case, bury their dead they did. For Aphrahat appears to be drawing from the *experience* of entering a tomb, applying sensory terms, and noting how upon entering it one cannot find even a speck of dust after the entombed bodies (by sight or touch, presumably).[396] In that regard, sixty Christian tombs have been discovered on an island in the Persian Gulf, where human remains were interred in the earth but also transferred to pottery jars, baskets or placed directly into rock-cut cavities. Notably, the dating of these tombs is contested, ranging from the 3rd century to the early Islamic era.[397]

[392] Aph. *Dem*. 22.7. For other allusions to Mazdean burial practices, see also id. 5.20, 14.27.
[393] Elman, "Judaism," 430; Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 32-33.
[394] Aph. *Dem*. 8.1, 8.3.
[395] Aph. *Dem*. 8.1, 8.6. For quote, see id. 8.6.
[396] Aph. *Dem*. 8.1.
[397] Frenschkowski, "Christianity," 464; Asmussen, "Christianity in Iran," 929; Simpson, "Old Bones Overturned," 78.

But even if these tombs are not attributable to the 4th century or earlier, there is at least data to suggest that the Christians preferred interment and were interred, that it could be perceived as a necessary prerequisite for the general resurrection, and that corpses may have been exhumed by the Mazdeans. But most importantly, is it simply a coincidence that all four of the texts in the Bavli as well as Aphrahat's implied exhumation all find their locus in Shapur II's reign?

OTHER BURIAL PRACTICES

I have thus far argued that the there was a clear dichotomy between Mazdaism and Christianity on the matter of inhumation. Albert de Jong says that indeed the preferred burial practice was exposure of corpses, but he also notes that few scholars have tinkered with the idea that there may have been various burial practices in Ērān, which has led to a skewed view in favor of Avestan and Pahlavi sources.[398] That sounds like a fair assessment and a critique that applies to my hypothesis of binary opposed religious communities as well. As such, I present some counter-cases that show that there may have existed various burial practices in Ērān.

During the Sasanian siege of Amida in 359, Ammianus Marcellinus reported that one of Shapur's enlisted petty kings from the eastern part of the empire burned his dead son on a funerary pyre,[399] which could be considered pollution of the sacred element of fire. I see no valid reason to doubt the authenticity of this claim as it appears entirely neutral. For my purposes, it must be mentioned that the Sasanian-Mazdeans probably did not view all fire as sacred, however. If that were the case, Sasanian sieges and scorched-earth policies would not have been possible, from a religious point of view. For instance, Shapur I self-reportedly set Roman towns ablaze in the west, corroborated by other non-Sasanian writers too, and Shapur II issued a scorched-earth strategy when Julian marched on Ctesiphon in 363.[400] More likely, it was only properly instituted fires that were sanctified, not all fires in general. There is also some data from the eastern part of Ērānsahr to suggest various burial practices. Archaeological evidence reveals that not only were human remains stored in ossuaries after exposure, as was the preferred practice in Fars, but also in brick mausoleums. And more importantly, cremation seems to have been in use as well, which corroborates Ammianus' account from Amida.[401]

Additionally, some sources claim that the Sasanian kings themselves were, apparently, exempt from exposure and rather entombed. That would not necessarily be problematic as the

[398] de Jong, "Religion and Politics," 86.
[399] Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians*, 92.
[400] For Shapur I, see SKZ 5, 12; Dodgeon, *Roman Eastern Frontier*, 45-47, 53. For Shapur II, see Kelly, "Political History," 11; Farrokh, *Sasanian Elite Cavalry*, 47.
[401] Frye, *History of Ancient*, 267; Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians*, 92.

corpse could still be separated from the earth. But no archaeological evidence of royal tombs has been uncovered to support it.[402] And finally, there is data that suggests that Christians often observed the Mazdean burial practices, as it appears. For instance, one martyrdom story notes how the Christians waited with interring the remains of a martyr until "the flesh had fallen from the bones".[403] Other stories confirm this pattern too, as some martyrs' remains were exposed to wild animals and their bones were placed in ossuaries.[404] The point is that the view of binary opposed religious practices is not necessarily representative and again it is clear that in between the religious discourse there existed various practices and different religious identities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter the Sasanian-Mazdean cult of the sun and fire was discussed. Fire-worship is not mentioned in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* and is therefore less likely to have been an issue in the Great Persecution. However, a strident polemic of the cult of the sun is the main topic in the *Martyrdom*. And its historicity is corroborated by both Ephrem and Aphrahat, who condemned the sun-worshippers, and it was confirmed by the Mazdean perspective, with its evident reverence for the sun. As such, all three perspectives converge. It appears that whereas many Christians had few quarrels about bowing before the sun, it was the ascetic Christians who were in part persecuted for their failure to either partake in the cult of the sun or because of their rejection of it on ideological grounds. In other words, their deeds and speeches were juxtaposed as if Ahrimanic and evil.

As for the matter of burial practices the data is compelling too. It was argued that the Mazdeans saw it as an ethical imperative to expose the dead and to exhume corpses from the earth, and how both Aphrahat and the Bavli implied that exhumation was ongoing in the 4th century during Shapur II's reign. But the issue was omitted in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* which raises the question as to whether it was a cause. And as mentioned in chapter 4, non-Mazdeans polluted the earth far less than the Mazdeans themselves. That is to say that the holiest bodies became the most polluted upon death, whereas the most polluted in life became far less polluted in death.[405] And then there were other burial practices in use too. Even though the Bavli and Aphrahat's reports are compelling, the data is inconclusive as to whether the Christians were persecuted because they polluted the earth and thereby contributed to the Ahrimanic principle.

[402] Choksy, "Religious Sites," 399.
[403] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 31-32.
[404] Herman, "Bury My Coffin," 37, 39; Payne, *State of Mixture*, 76.
[405] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 54; Moazami, "Evil Animals," 314.

8 EPISTEMIC APPROPRIATION AND FALSE TEACHINGS

In chapter 3 the epistemic claims of religions and their engagement in a zero-sum contest for truth was mentioned. That is the subject of interest here and it is argued that both Mazdaism and Christianity claimed the concepts of truth, knowledge and wisdom, which are referred to under the umbrella term *epistemic homology*. I argue that the epistemic connection was vital for the following religious ideology and practice, and that the claims to the homology was key for the authenticity and authority of both communities. Given that both the Mazdeans and ascetic Christians were diametrically opposed, it is argued that in the zero-sum contest for truth in a society where Mazdaism was institutionalized, the ascetic Christians set themselves up for conflict. Two questions are asked: (1) Did both Mazdean and Christian communities claim the epistemic homology for themselves? And (2) did the Mazdeans mobilize violence in defense of an absolute claim to religious truth?

THE EPISTEMIC HOMOLOGY IN THE *ACTS OF MARTYRS*

Beginning with the *Acts of Martyrs*, there are many instances in these narratives where the Christians appropriate the epistemic homology for themselves, whereas religious Others, including the Mazdeans, are juxtaposed as erroneous and false. In the early *Martyrdom of Simeon*, the Christians say they would be "unfaithful to God by renouncing his truth".[406] Furthermore, the Christian god is "the true God" while Shapur is juxtaposed and condemned as "a false man".[407] The author of the story informs that "the impure subjugated the holy, deceit and wickedness overcame truth and purity" and how the Mazdeans attempted to lead people "astray from the path of truth."[408] It is clear that the *Martyrdom* is a traditional polemic against religious Others, in this case the Sasanian-Mazdeans. But notably, the discursive space offered to the Sasanians in the text is interesting. For instance, Simeon is accused of corrupting people and for leading them astray, i.e. he provides them with false and erroneous knowledge. And the author of the text allows Shapur to posit contrary to Simeon that the Christian's religion is erroneous and unwise, and the king is even impressed by how Simeon does not take pity on himself on account of his false teaching and knowledge.[409] The question is whether the ascetic Christians set themselves up for conflict by presenting their own religion as true – something the Mazdeans would have rejected.

[406] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 15, 28
[407] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 29.
[408] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 6.
[409] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 20, 41.

In the later *History of Simeon*, the same claims to the epistemic homology is evident and the Christians are willing to offer themselves up "for the truth of our teaching".[410] But there is an interesting addition to the *History*. Whereas Shapur II in the *Martyrdom* refrains from any praiseworthy talk of Simeon on account of his religion, which is in several places called false, in the *History* the king of kings is used by the author to label Simeon as "an enlightened and wise man".[411] This interpolation adds to the overall picture that the later martyrdom narratives of the 5th century onwards are distinct from the earlier *Martyrdom of Simeon*. Whereas the *Martyrdom* portrays an uncompromising Sasanian king whose condemnation of Simeon and his religion is almost total, the *History* employs him in the interest of the Christians – as a king who supposedly acknowledged, to some degree, the wisdom of Christianity. But this should not be taken as historical. It is the same literary invention that was seen in regard to Ephrem in the previous chapter, where Shapur was evoked to acknowledge the superiority of Christianity in Nisibis. Other narratives from the *Acts of Martyrs* will only be mentioned here in short to illustrate the frequency of the Christians' claim to the epistemic homology. Staged during the reign of Shapur II, the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai*, the *Martyrdom of Abbot Barshebya*, the *Martyrdom of Martha*, the *Martyrdom of Tarbo* and the *History of Mar Ma'in* are all narratives where the Christians position themselves up for truth, wisdom and knowledge, whereas the Mazdean Others are juxtaposed as erroneous and bringers of false knowledge.[412] As an illuminating example, in the *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* the author proclaims that a Christian proselyte "converted people from error to knowledge of the truth", the latter of course being Christianity.[413] It is therefore clear that the ascetic Christians appropriated the epistemic homology in the *Acts of Martyrs*, including the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, while simultaneously polemicizing against the Sasanian-Mazdeans as vessels of false knowledge. Would the Mazdeans tolerate that, which effectively undermined their religion?

THE EPISTEMIC HOMOLOGY IN MAZDAISM

Claims to the epistemological homology was a prerequisite for Mazdean ideology, as a matter of authority, on which the ethical dualism, binary taxonomy, cosmological, soteriological and

[410] *History of Simeon* 41. For quote, see id. 38.
[411] *History of Simeon* 41. For the closest parallel to this section, see *Martyrdom of Simeon* 17.
[412] *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.321-322; *Martyrdom of Abbot Barshebya* AMS 2.283; *Martyrdom of Martha* AMS 2.234; *Martyrdom of Tarbo* AMS 2.255; *History of Mar Ma'in* 2, 5, 10, 38. For the *Martyrdom of Candida*, staged in the 3rd century and appropriation of the epistemological homology, see *Martyrdom of Candida* 5, 9.
[413] *Martyrdom of the Captives of Beth Zabdai* AMS 2.322. Almost the identical language is used in the *History of Mar Ma'in* 86.

eschatological views, and ritual and practice all depended. It goes without saying that without that foundation, the whole system could potentially collapse. More specifically the Mazdeans understood Ohrmazd as the "Wise Lord" and the "All-Knowing Lord", whose hallmark was omniscience as "he who places (all things) in his mind".[414] As remarked in chapter 3, Ohrmazd was associated with the good principle of asha, which commonly translates as Order or Truth. According to Helmut Humbach, Truth in Mazdaism can be understood as an utterance or action whose correctness was judged on the basis of the utterance or action's positive contribution to the cosmos.[415] This is significant because it set all human endeavors up for judgement from the Mazdean perspective. This has been a topic throughout, that people were expected to think true and good thoughts, produce true utterances and do true deeds. As such, human behavior could always be questioned: Did it support the good cosmic forces or the evil forces? For on the other end of the spectrum was Ahriman and the bad principle of druj, almost unequivocally translated as Lie. Humbach says it can be defined as the cosmic deception that attempted to lead Ohrmazd's good creations astray.[416] While Ahriman was the embodiment of Lie, he was also manifestly known as "post knowledge" and ignorance.[417] It is obvious that knowledge was considered inherently good (however defined) in Mazdaism, while ignorance was bad. Furthermore, in the mission to expel the Ahrimanic forces from the corporeal realm through correct ritual and sacrifice and good human behavior, the guiding principles and ideology had to be framed as truth – and I would venture to say absolute truth, to which there was no alternative. As such, the epistemic homology was directly tied into the imperative of contributing in the support of the good Order.

Kerdir mentioned in his inscription that prior to his rise in the ranks of the clergy, Mazdaism had been interpreted in more than one way. In his inscription KNRm he reported that he underwent a journey to the spiritual realm which made him more "confident about this worship and the rites which are performed in the empire."[418] That is, of course, after he had ordered the clergy, instituted priestly colleges and sacred fires, and held many services and

[414] Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian," 228; Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 216; Skjærvø, "Early India and Iran," 416. For some other examples where Ohrmazd is connected to truth, knowledge and wisdom, see Hintze, op. cit., 234-235.
[415] Prods Oktor Skjærvø is the foremost proponent of translating asha as "Order", see Skjærvø, "Zarathustra: A Revolutionary," 339. For asha translated as "Truth", see Boyce, *Textual Sources*, 9; Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 216. For the definition of Truth, see Humbach, "The Gāthās," 43.
[416] Skjærvø, "Ahura Mazdā," 400; Lincoln, "Cēsmag, the Lie," 51. For the definition of Lie, see Humbach, "The Gāthās," 43.
[417] Humbach, "The Gāthās," 43; Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 239; Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 218.
[418] KNRm 36.

seasonal observances for the gods.[419] In other words, Kerdir directly corroborates that the epistemic connection was of vital importance. For he presented himself as an eye-witness and could therefore continue his didactic mission, which was to inform other Mazdeans that the religion was now true to form. Through the same spiritual journey, Kerdir also certified the existence of heaven and hell and he encouraged people to become more confident in Mazdean ideology and practices, rituals and worship, otherwise they would be consigned to hell.[420] The point then, is that Kerdir framed his own beliefs as epistemologically true, denoted by his confidence, and that he clearly opposed any ideas of more than one absolute truth and ways of worshipping the gods, to which he had the ultimate claim.

THE EPISTEMIC HOMOLOGY IN EARLY SYRIAC LITERATURE

I now turn to the early East Syrian Christians to look for corroborating data to support the *Acts of Martyrs*. In the *Acts of Thomas*, Christianity is presented as morally good and it is held that individual salvation can be attained exclusively through the Christian church because "Truth is placed on her head".[421] Furthermore, the Trinity is connected with the epistemic concepts of wisdom and knowledge, while evil and error are juxtaposed as negations of these virtues. In the *Acts of Thomas*, certain kinds of teachings and learning are condemned and Thomas, as an apostle to Indo-Parthia, is presented in the text as a mentor in "the land of error".[422]

Ephrem took a similar position. He condemned people for their lack of knowledge, for their confusion and subsequent enslavement by Satan.[423] Furthermore, he identified God as "the True One" and as "All-Knowing", while Jesus for him was the "True Judge",[424] similar descriptions to that of Ohrmazd in the Mazdean perspective. It was mentioned earlier how Ephrem's use of Shapur II in Nisibis is hyperbole, and that is further corroborated by the fact that Ephrem disparaged against the Sasanians/Iranians directly by saying that they were all in error and how the biblical magi were deceivers until they recognized the truth in Christ.[425] And directly relating to the Sasanians, he framed the sieges of Nisibis as a struggle of "Truth with falsehood", a binary scheme in which the Christians represented the former and the Sasanians the latter.[426] As such, Ephrem adopted the same position as other Christians of his time,

[419] KKZ 2, 8, 11.
[420] KNRm 37.
[421] *Acts of Thomas* 6-7, 28.
[422] *Acts of Thomas* 6-7, 10, 20, 41, 58, 78, 95-96, 127 (for the use of the terms associated with the epistemological homology), 35 (for some teachings as evil), 37 (for quote).
[423] *Hymns against Julian* 1.9, 1.12-13.
[424] *Hymns against Julian* 2.3; *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.19, 3.11, 15.8, 22.16.
[425] Eph. *Hymns against Julian* 2.27; *Hymns on the Nativity* 25.3.
[426] Eph. *Hymns on Nisibis* 11.17.

including the later authors of the *Acts of Martyrs*, by acknowledging only binary opposites, two possible communities, one of which had a legitimate claim to the epistemic homology – the other which was presented as false, erroneous and even evil. Therefore, with Ephrem there is a strong case for an appropriation of the epistemic homology.

Finally, I turn to Aphrahat. He also claimed the epistemic homology for his Christians. For him God was the most knowledgeable and "the fear of God" was equated with "the knowledge of God". As such, there "is nothing greater than the fear of God" and "no wisdom like the fear of God."[427] Adam H. Becker has analyzed the Syriac word "fear" as an oft-evoked emotion in the Syriac martyrdom stories and notes how it was considered epistemologically true and good if it was situated towards God – as opposed to fear of Mazdean persecutors. The latter was subsequently a representation of faulty knowledge and incorrect use of the emotion, notes Becker.[428] In other words, the concept of "fear of God" was an expression of knowledge because it was a recognition of God's power and omnipotence. The Christians, then, were not to fear Others – or events in the corporeal world – but only concern themselves with God of the spiritual world. Aphrahat also connected his religious community with the concept of truth and wisdom and disparaged against religious Others in a binary scheme where they were diametrically opposed as deceitful, corrupt and satanic.[429] He also offered a sharp criticism of false utterances. In his view, many had strayed from the truth and spoke corrupting and false words. Many were those who "conceive evil and give birth to falsehood", which seduced people to ruin.[430] And he commented on the supposed false teachings of the Jews, Manicheans and Marcionites. The Jews in particular, he noted, intoxicated other people's minds with "disturbing argument", while the teachings of Marcion and Mani were labeled "the deceptive schools, instruments of the Evil One."[431] Whereas he mentioned these communities by name, he did not do so for the Sasanian-Mazdeans. In the strictest sense, then, it cannot be ascertained that he was attacking the dominant religion of Ērān, as Ephrem clearly did. Nevertheless, there are some inferences to suggest that he may have been polemicizing against the Mazdeans as well. The chronology of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* is relevant in that regard.

From some of his first ten *Demonstrations* sent out in 336/337, Aphrahat deliberately encouraged a passive stance for his Christian fellowship. In short, he told Christians to simply

[427] Aph. *Dem*. 10.8, 14.35, 23.67.
[428] Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference," 300-301, 309-310, 335.
[429] Aph. *Dem*. 9.9, 10.8, 14.35, 23.3, 23.52.
[430] Aph. *Dem*. 14.3, 12, 37. For other juxtaposed and binary oppositions, like truth versus false, good versus bad, blessed versus wicked, see id., 14.30, 49.
[431] Aph. *Dem*. 18.1, 23.60.

stay away from religious Others and presented silence as a virtuous quality. Furthermore, he explicitly urged Christians not to incite conflict or polemicize. And he argued that a Christian "should not respond to an evil man", communicate with a "disgraceful man" or "dispute with a blasphemous man".[432] What could be the meaning of this? For Aphrahat's encouragements does not necessarily follow, given that he was himself a polemicist. While the above mention of wicked teachings and schools is relatively late, he also castigated Marcion, Valentinus and "the school of the wicked Mani" in one of his earlier works from about 337.[433] There could potentially be different reasons why he encouraged the Christians to self-censorship. Perhaps if the Christians refrained from discourse with religious Others it would prevent the creation of liminal Christian positions and syncretistic religious identities, and in the process establish more rigorous boundaries around the "correct" Christian community. If that was the case, it is another testament that his perspective was narrow-minded and not shared by all Christians. But in any case, restraining syncretistic religious identities may have been a secondary concern.

I have so far argued that Aphrahat represented a particular ascetic Christian ideology and hypothesized that this was at odds with Mazdean ideology and practices. Is it possible that Aphrahat recognized the potential inflammatory issue that could or did arise when both communities, Christian and Mazdean, equally laid claim to the same concepts and epistemic homology, truth, knowledge and wisdom? The key to understand Aphrahat's encouragement to self-censorship, I think, lies in the fact the he did not mention the Sasanian-Mazdeans. For as discussed in chapter 7, in his last *Demonstration* from 345 he took a far more critical stance on his fellow Iranians and directly condemned the cult of sun and fire, from whence he was not heard from again. Therefore, it may have been strategic: Do not upset Mazdean sensibilities and no conflict, punishment or execution will come of it. In fact, refraining from diatribe against the Mazdeans would have been a sensible plan for continued adherence to ascetic Christendom while at the same time not risking one's life. In other words, if I am correct that some Christians were forced to adhere to Mazdaism by bowing before the sun, most likely as a symbolic act of conversion (see below), then simply concealing one's religious identity – that is to say not make it known – could prevent such forced conversion. Perhaps silence could protect individuals. But either way, this is entirely open to interpretation. Nevertheless, I think given the lack of condemnation until 345, that fear of upsetting the Sasanian-Mazdeans may well have factored in. And as I argued elsewhere, he appears to have abandoned that strategy

[432] Aph. *Dem*. 6.8, 9.7.
[433] Aph. *Dem*. 3.9.

sometime after the Great Persecution began in 340, after which point he became more critical.

RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AND THE "LAW OF ZARATHUSTRA"

From the above it is clear that the ascetic Christians claimed the epistemic homology and valued learning and teaching, which they categorized as either correct or false. According to Becker, Jewish and East Syrian Christian communities were in fact obsessed with learning and teaching and instituted religious schools. This is what he calls an "eroticization of learning", which held true for the Mazdeans as well.[434] For instance, the *Vidēvdād* says: "Every one who does not respect the teacher, is a follower of the Lie and has the Lie in his body."[435] It can be surmised that a teacher was in reality a Mazdean priest. This is affirmed in a Manichean text where Mazdean priests are described as "teachers" and servants of fire.[436] Additionally, in chapter 5 I mentioned the hērbed, who was a priestly teacher, and then there were the Sasanian priestly colleges, also known as *hērbedestān*. According to later Pahlavi literature, attending the hērbedestān was an essential duty of the faithful and even called "the life of the people", and failure to undertake priestly studies was only permissible if one's subsistence suffered as a result, like Ohrmazd's good vegetation and cattle.[437] Kerdir himself boasted of having established many priestly colleges and gained the title of hērbed and "judge of the whole empire",[438] as seen. And indeed, his inscriptions show a strong desire to educate:

> the heretics and the destructive men, who in the Magian land did not adhere to the doctrine regarding Mazdayasnian religion and the rites of the gods—them I punished, and I tormented them until I made them better.[439]

Heretics and destructive men were obviously communities or individuals that Kerdir placed at the opposite end of the epistemic homology, that is to say people who represented false and erroneous knowledge. This can be surmised by the general didactic purpose of the inscription. As he described his spiritual journey, he noted that since the gods showed him how religious observances were to be practiced, he had become more *confident* in the worship and rituals he instituted across the empire. Furthermore, he urged anyone who read the inscription to be more

[434] Becker, "Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism'," 107, 111.
[435] *Vidēvdād* 16.18 in Cantera, "Ethics," 327.
[436] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 111. See also Hutter, "Manichaeism in the Early," 9.
[437] Vevaina, "Theologies and Hermeneutics," 230; Kiel, *Sexuality in the Babylonian*, 82-87, 153.
[438] KNRm 10.
[439] KNRm 16.

confident themselves in the same worship and rituals, as mentioned.[440] And he noted how through his activities many unbelievers converted, how people turned their backs on "the doctrine of the demons" and how Mazdaism was much studied.[441] As such, this was a didactic inscription with a strong claim to the epistemic homology – a claim that permitted him to proclaim that his religion's ideological and practical aspects were both true in an ultimate sense. And he made clear that good thoughts, speeches and deeds would lead to heaven, while evil behavior sent the individual to hell. This tendency was repeated in another of his inscriptions, where the epistemic claim was asserted but also where it was noted that deceivers were sent to hell.[442] The point I am making, is that for Kerdir the epistemic connection was essential. Mazdaism was a matter of true teaching and learning. And binary opposed, then, stood false teachings – which must have been just about anything that did not agree with his own religious convictions. Furthermore, he identified heretics and noted how he punished and tormented them, in the interest of making them better. As a Mazdean priest, hērbed and judge, was he alluding to the so-called "law of Zarathustra", as a religious imperative for Iranians to adhere to? I mentioned that law in the previous chapter, and of special note here is that Theodoret of Cyrrhus implied that the Christians who failed to observe it would be punished.

From both Christian and Manichean texts there are allusions to that law. Is it possible that such a religious law existed? As I discussed in chapter 5, the Mazdean priesthood attained a prominent position within the administration and judicial system of the empire, so it is plausible. The Manichean text in question pertains to Mani's final days and his conversation with king Bahram (II?) and Kerdir. There he was accused of leading people astray from the law of Zarathustra and subsequently arrested for abandoning it and for having his followers do the same.[443] Most relevant for my purposes here and pointed out by Paul Dilley, is that while this Manichean text plays of the literary themes associated with the execution of Jesus, the charge levied against Mani, that he and his followers had abandoned the law of Zarathustra, is particular to this story and therefore not an attempt at maintaining a biblical parallel.[444] In other words, given the king of kings' connection with the divine and the institutionalization of Mazdaism in Ērān, is it possible that the Manicheans were executed for leading people away from this so-called law and, by extension, for being false teachers?

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[440] KNRm 21-23, 36-37.
[441] KNRm 17; KKZ 8, 10.
[442] KNRb 8. See also the free English translation in Frye, "Middle Persian Inscription," 224.
[443] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 127-128; Dilley, "Hell Exists," 238. The text actually mentions the "law of Zarades". For the identification of Zarades as Zarathustra, see Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3, 306-307; BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization," 271.
[444] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 129.

For as Dilley points out, Theodoret also commented on the so-called law and understood Iranian conversion to Christianity as an abandonment of the law of Zarathustra, the latter which he identified by practices such as xwēdōdah and the exposure of corpses, and which he contrasted against "the gospel wisdom."[445] Next-of-kin marriages were explicitly mentioned as virtuous by Kerdir, as a constituent part of his religion, while the evidence in the foregoing chapter shows that exposure of corpses was practiced too.[446] Theodoret also seems to have implied that there was a didactic feature to the law of Zarathustra. It was a teaching, and an unwise one at that, from his perspective. And comparably, the Armenian historian Elishē commented that the Sasanians governed by the religion of the Mazdean priesthood,[447] which could imply a kind of law. According to the ever-important *Martyrdom of Simeon*, early in the narrative its author noted that the Christians ought to follow the law of the Christian god. And in the end of the narrative, Simeon is accused of corrupting souls and for leading people astray with his teachings.[448] This is also repeated in the later *Martyrdom of 'Aqebshma*, also attributed to Shapur II's reign, where a Mazdean interlocutor lamented that "the Christians are destroying our teaching."[449] As mentioned above, while Aphrahat did not explicitly mention the Sasanian-Mazdeans, he did comment on the problematic nature of false teachings, like those that emerged from the schools of Mani and Marcion, for instance. In fact, according to Becker the Syriac word for "conversion" literally translates as "to be made a student",[450] showing how conversion to Christianity indeed may have been an abandonment of previous teachings.

According to Maria Macuch, in Ērān religious education necessitated study of not only law but also *Zand*, the Pahlavi translations and exegesis of Avestan literature. In addition, she notes that Sasanian jurisprudence was effectively based on religious law.[451] For as Dilley also mentions, the law of Zarathustra was perhaps promoted by the Sasanian court, as seen by Bahram and Kerdir in the Manichean text pertaining to Mani's final days, and that the conflict of Bahram and Kerdir versus Mani was because of the latter's unconventional interpretation of the religious law, i.e. Zand.[452] This is in no way implausible. The central message of Manichean religion was that the earlier teachings of Zarathustra, the Buddha and Jesus had been distorted,

[445] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 110.
[446] KNRm 17.
[447] Elishē, *History of Vardan*, 60.
[448] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 8, 41.
[449] Payne, *State of Mixture*, 38.
[450] Becker, "Comparative Study of Scholasticism," 111.
[451] Macuch, "Hērbedestān as a Legal," 91. See also Macuch, "Law in Pre-Modern," 289-290; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 628.
[452] Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 132.

and how Mani had come to restore those religions to their original and pristine message.[453] In other words, he rejected the current expressions of these religions to the benefit of his own teaching, which he presented as superior. This applied to Mazdaism as well, which in Mani's eyes had been corrupted from its original message. Furthermore, as attested in the KKZ-inscription that was introduced in chapter 3, Manicheans were labeled *zandik*, which translates as "interpreter", but also "heretic".[454] And by the later Sasanian era, it appears that teaching an unbeliever was perceived as problematic and only permissible under the pretext that the teacher required sustenance, in which case he could teach an unbeliever in exchange for a payment. For there were dangers attached to teaching heretics, i.e. to give "a tongue to a wolf".[455]

The point I am making is that the ascetic Christians, Mazdeans and Manicheans all laid claim to the epistemic homology. Their respective religion was presented as an absolute truth and represented the only possible expression of true knowledge, whereas everything else was juxtaposed as false and erroneous. In this frame of thinking, indeed learning was eroticized, and various religious personae cast themselves in the competition as educational authorities. Thomas was supposedly a mentor in the land of error and Aphrahat disparaged against false teachings and deceptive schools, while encouraging Christians to refrain from discourse with religious Others. In the *Acts of Martyrs*, Mazdean voices appear to lament how the Christians converted Mazdeans from their teachings. Mani offered interpretations and teachings of his own and was subsequently executed, whereas his followers were known as interpreters and heretics. And finally, Kerdir, probably because Mazdaism was more disorganized and heterodox than he would have liked, proclaimed the truthfulness of his instituted religious practices by proclaiming how confident he was in those practices and that other Mazdeans, by extension, ought to be confident in them too. But most importantly, Kerdir also noted that he punished heretics on account of their falsities. Is it possible that a concept in the form of a law of Zarathustra existed in Ērān and that it was the prism through which religious Others' appropriation of the epistemic homology could be condemned or even punished? That is to say, was violence mobilized in defense of that apparently crucial law?

FALSE TEACHERS AND SORCERERS

Accusations of sorcery (and witchcraft) are routine in the material emerging from Ērānsahr.

[453] Scott, "Manichean Responses," 449.
[454] KKZ 7, 9; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 105; Scott, "Manichean Responses," 448. For heretic, see Lincoln, "Human Unity and Diversity," 15-16, incl. n19; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 86. For Zand and zandik, see Daryaee, op. cit., 109; Gardner, "Mani's Last Days," 192-193.
[455] Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 47-48; Shaked, "Religion in the Late," 108.

The Mazdeans, East Syrian Christians, Manicheans and Jews all operated with that very dichotomy against respective religious Otherness. But what was a sorcerer in the Sasanian era? Sorcery appears to be a common feature of human societies across time and space. In ancient societies magic, healing, exorcism and curses were components of everyday life, and was believed to affect an individual's health positively or negatively. But what constituted healing was very much a matter of opinion and the lapse into a categorization as "sorcery" could be short. The Bavli is illuminating in this regard. There amulets were only considered efficacious after successfully healing three times.[456] Prior to the efficacy of the magical incantation had been proven, then, the practice or spell appears to have been in a liminal space of which it could either fall within acceptable practices or outside them. It is easy to see that practices that did not produce the desired result – of which there must have been many – could be labeled sorcery. And this points me to the most important feature of sorcery. Sorcery was very much an epistemic matter. It represented malign or false knowledge, which was effectively opinionated. Bringing sorcery closer to the epistemic homology, it was often understood as "religious error".[457] In the Greco-Roman world impiety, sacrilege, atheism and *superstitio* were coined for people who failed to worship and respect the gods properly, whereas the latter was a kind of catch-all branding for all kinds of incorrect religious practices. People were expected to perform the proper funerary rites, respect one's parents, keep oaths and so on. Moreover, some religious offences, such as *maleficium*, that is to say malign sorcery, was punishable by death and confiscation of property. And notably, in Rome some Christians were accused as if they were sorcerers.[458] As such, in the Greco-Roman example false, erroneous and malign religious knowledge could make the subject liable to punishment.

I think there may be a parallel in Ērān. Unsurprisingly, in Avestan literature sorcery and witchcraft were seen as analogous to demon-worshipping, believed to be in the service of Ahriman, and diametrically opposed to the Mazdeans themselves. But more importantly, Ahrimanic forces and agents were lumped together as "evil gods and men, sorcerers and witches, false teachers" and elsewhere also "evil teachers".[459] The false and evil teachings of sorcerers were commented on by Ephrem too, who saw sorcerers as individuals who were void of truth. And similarly, Aphrahat understood magic as blasphemous and "empty teachings

[456] Elman, "Saffron, Spices, and Sorceresses," 367-368; Morony, "Magic and Society," 96-100; Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 128, 133; Gaskill, *Witchcraft*, 12, 27-29.
[457] Gaskill, *Witchcraft*, 1-3, 13-14, 16.
[458] Rives, *Religion in the Roman*, 39, 98, 183-184, 191-193, 197; Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 171-175; Horster, "Living on Religion," 338-341; Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts*, 76-77, 241, 285.
[459] Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 60, 217; *Vidēvdād* 1.15; Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 96, 158-159.

(which are the instruments of the Evil One)".[460] The point I am making, is that sorcery was a label for unconventional healing and exorcism, but in line with the topic at hand, it was moreover a matter of false teachings and knowledge, and religious error.

THE *ACTS OF MARTYRS*: SORCERERS AND HERETICS

Is there any data to suggest that the Sasanian-Mazdeans perceived the Christians as sorcerers? In the early *Martyrdom of Simeon*, Simeon is recognized as a "the head of the sorcerers" on two occasions.[461] In that context, then, Christians were indeed perceived as sorcerers. And in the inserted story pertaining to Gushtazad, Shapur is baffled by the prospective martyr's sudden conversion back to Christianity and asks: "Is there a demon in you such that you brought this bad omen upon my kingdom?"[462] But in the same passage Gushtazad rebukes him and says that there is no demon in him, rather he is acting out of wisdom. Shapur, however, implores him to desist from "the mindset of these sorcerers".[463] As it stands, Shapur in the *Martyrdom* equates demonic possession with being a sorcerer, which is in line with Mazdean religious ideology (see below). And as was mentioned in chapter 3, Ahriman supposedly relied on demonically possessed humans to bring his destructive powers into the corporeal realm, as it was believed. But that which Shapur considers evil, Gushtazad considers wisdom. This illustrates my point nicely. Accusations of sorcery was a matter of religious Other's erroneous knowledge. These topics are not omitted in the *History of Simeon*, where Shapur also brand the Christians as sorcerers.[464] And in the *Martyrdom of Tarbo*, three Christian women are accused of bewitching the Sasanian queen. The protagonist in the story, Tarbo, informs the king that they cannot possibly be witches because sorcery is not permissible amongst Christians and that the sentence for sorcery, from a Christian perspective, is death. Interestingly, Shapur allegedly offered to spare the women's lives "if they worshipped the sun", which accordingly would prove that they were in fact not witches (see below).[465] But most importantly, the fact that the author of the *Martyrdom of Simeon* attributes to Shapur the concept of sorcery as being aligned with demonic possession, I think, is significant. I turn to that below.

[460] Eph. *Hymns on Nisibis* 41.8; Aph. *Dem*. 1.19.
[461] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 12, 15.
[462] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 27.
[463] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 30.
[464] For the corresponding passages, see *History of Simeon* 18, 53-54.
[465] *Martyrdom of Tarbo* AMS 2.255-257.

CHRISTIAN HEALING POWER AND EXORCISM

On what basis could the Christians possibly be perceived as sorcerers? In the first half of this chapter I discussed the relevance of teachings and learning and claims to the epistemic homology, and thereby its connection with accusations of abandoning the law of Zarathustra, an act which could open the way to accusations of sorcery. Christian claims to possess the powers to heal, exorcise and even resurrect the dead were well-known topoi and found its archetype in Jesus. In the *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas is frequently accused of sorcery,[466] and it may well provide some historical representations of how the Christians were received amongst local populations, perhaps first of all Mazdeans. The charges levied against Thomas are on account of his healing, exorcising and proselytism (that is to say, teaching people new religious knowledge), as the story goes.[467] And then there was Ephrem who attributed the power of healing to the ascetic Julian Saba from the Sinai. Furthermore, the *Acts* and Ephrem both, unsurprisingly, called Christ a physician who healed the sick and exorcised demons, and with the noble epithet "the Medicine of Life".[468] Aphrahat followed the same line of thinking and considered prayer, confession, repentance and faith to be healing remedies. Simply believing in Christ was for him medicinal. He also compared (presumably) Christian priests with physicians and noted that baptism would repress Satan. Furthermore, through his love Christ "healed the diseases of the sick […] and chased from us a legion of demons".[469] Notably, Aphrahat mentioned the Eucharist and how Christ "gave his body to be eaten and his blood to be drunk".[470] How outsiders would look upon such practices can only be guessed at, but it might have been an unfortunate choice of words. In any case, these examples should suffice to show that these 4th century Christian persona attributed the power and knowledge to heal the physical and spiritual body and to ward against demons to the Christian religion and its holy men. It may well have been categorized by Mazdeans as a form of sorcery – for healing and exorcising was reserved for the Mazdeans themselves.

SORCERY FROM THE MAZDEAN PERSPECTIVE

By claiming to possess healing and exorcising powers, the ascetic Christians encroached on

[466] *Acts of Thomas* 21, 89, 96, 98-99, 106.
[467] *Acts of Thomas* 20, 41, 78, 95-96.
[468] Griffith, "Julian Saba," 193-194, 196; *Acts of Thomas* 10, 34, 37, 143, 156. For mention of healing, exorcising and resurrecting with Ephrem, see *Hymns on the Nativity* 3.1-2, 3.20; *Hymns on Virginity* 16.6; *Hymns against Julian* 1.9; *Hymns on Nisibis* 4.20, 6.1. For quote, see *Hymns on the Nativity* 13.2; *Acts of Thomas* 113.
[469] Aph. *Dem*. 1.17, 6.17, 7.2-8, 21.16. For quote, see id. 2.20.
[470] Aph. *Dem*. 12.6-7.

Mazdean territory and that may have been a factor in the Great Persecution. According to S. K. Mendoza Forrest, the Mazdeans separated the world and its people into the good followers of Ohrmazd and Order versus sorcerers, witches and demons, from which the cosmos had to be liberated. And she claims that every individual performed rituals on a daily basis to support Order and that "believers had to identify […] those who were their enemies" and that "any person who threatened the safety and prosperity of the community was evil."[471] This of course is my hypothesis, although I have also noted that from a practical perspective it probably did not affect people beyond the elite communities. An obvious communal threat was the sorcerer and as shown above, the Christians were indeed branded as such. Denoting religious Others as devil-worshippers, heretics, sorcerers and witches was commonplace, and the courts of Ērān even handled cases of witchcraft, with punishments ranging from confiscation of property to death penalties, according to Pahlavi literature.[472] If the crime of sorcery was established, the accused would have his property confiscated and forfeit to the Mazdean *rad*, unless the sorcerer was responsible for the destruction of property, in which case the proceeds would go to the man who had lost his property. In the same corpus heresy was equated with sorcery, which confirms the religious and epistemic nature of the accusation of sorcery (as seen with Ephrem and Aphrahat as well).[473] The parallel with the Roman world is thereby clear.

For the Mazdeans, Avestan texts were the primary material for healing and exorcist instructions.[474] In chapter 7 I noted that people who came into contact with dead matter had to undergo ritual purification and how the corpse of the deceased had to be exorcised. Mazdean emphasis on exorcism makes sense within the overarching ideological goal which was, in a metaphorical sense, the "exorcism" of the bad principle of Lie and Ahrimanic agents from the cosmos, through ritual and sacrifice, words and actions. It was believed that sickness, disease and death, natural parts of life, originated from these demonic influences on the body in question. That is to say that illnesses were predominantly understood as demonic possessions, which is why Shapur in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* saw Gushtazad as demonically possessed (see above), discourse that might be historically representative for the Mazdean perspective of Christians. And as Forrest points out, exorcisms were therefore the primary form of healing. And central to the issue at hand, healing and exorcising was moreover a privilege reserved for

[471] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 113, 119-120. For quote, see id. 119 See also de Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics," 61.
[472] de Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics," 61; Panaino, "Cosmologies and Astrology," 248; Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," 679.
[473] Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers*, 120.
[474] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 8, 113-114; *Vidēvdād* 5.45-54, 7.60-69, 8.16-72.

the Mazdean priests.[475] And this is important. For according to the *Vidēvdād*, if an unqualified man performed an exorcism he would not solve the problem but magnify it. For whatever intents and purposes the non-priestly man may have had, he would indubitably have the opposite effect and through his words and actions reinforce the Ahrimanic principle of the cosmos and aggravate the sickness in the world. As punishment, the accused would be tied up, stripped naked and beheaded, and his corpse would be thrown to Ohrmazd's beneficent vultures. And as a consequence of this due process and execution, the offending man would be forgiven for "all his evil thoughts, words, and deeds."[476]

SORCERY AND THE CASE OF HANANYA

First of all, the examples from the *Vidēvdād* show that healing and exorcism was conventional and instituted within specific boundaries, embodied by the Mazdean priesthood. They exclusively enjoyed the right of performing healing and exorcisms – at least ideally. And this reinforces my points, namely that the clergy occupied a prominent position within the Sasanian Empire, that they simultaneously had economic incentives besides religious motivations, and that sorcery indeed was a matter of religious Otherness. And second, religious Others that transgressed these boundaries, as seen, were liable for execution. But as pointed out in chapter 3, it was not violence in the interest of violence. Rather, an execution was a redemptive process which illustrates the strong religious backdrop behind punishment against so-called sorcerers. And thirdly, if I am allowed to speculate, there may be allusions to Christians being executed under the pretext of sorcery. In the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, an old man, Hananya, is circled out and the narrative goes on to say that "he was being stripped in order to be bound."[477] It could be debated that the narrative alludes to Jesus' martyrdom as an archetype. But Hananya in the *Martyrdom* is executed by the sword, rather than crucifixion, for one. More specifically, it can be surmised that he was beheaded, which is how Gushtazad was executed earlier in the same narrative. Furthermore, in the *History of Simeon* it is explicitly mentioned that Hananya indeed was beheaded.[478] According to the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, then, some Christians were identified as sorcerers in the Great Persecution and in particular Hananya was circled out, stripped of clothes, tied up and beheaded. This is made all the more plausible, I would argue, because in the *Vidēvdād* there were regulations that prohibited clothes from coming into contact with dead

[475] Forrest, *Witches, Whores*, 80, 113-116, 122.
[476] *Vidēvdād* 9.47-49.
[477] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 44.
[478] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 32, 44; *History of Simeon* 95, 97.

matter, which was sinful and was punishable by flogging. While it is uncertain whether Jesus was stripped naked, it is most certainly plausible for Hananya, given the prescription in the *Vidēvdād*, so as to not pollute the clothes as they came into contact with dead matter.[479] In sum, I think the execution of Hananya closely resembles the Mazdean process and execution of sorcerers. That ascetic Christians were executed on charges of sorcery is indeed plausible.

Kerdir did not mention sorcery or witchcraft in his inscriptions, but he did mention "harmful men" within the priesthood, heretics and zandiks (Manicheans) whom he punished in an unspecified manner because they did not further Mazdaism. It is notable that according to a Manichean text, Mani was also imprisoned because of his failure to heal a relative of the Sasanian king. And in defense against the accusations levied against him, Mani posited that he was still a skilled physician and exorcist.[480] That Mani considered himself a physician in the image of Christ, however, seems fairly straight forward.[481] Interestingly, the story fits remarkably well within the overall picture of the Sasanian-Mazdeans as reacting in particular against sorcerers, i.e. religious Others who practiced healing and exorcism outside the established and conventional normative boundaries of good human behavior. And in the case of Mani, if the story can be trusted, he was perhaps executed because his healing practices indeed were unconventional and thereby sorcerous.

As a final piece of supporting data, king Narseh's inscription requires mention. His rule was contested, as mentioned earlier, and he utilized his inscription to legitimize his claim to the throne. What I want to draw to attention here is that Narseh denounced his rival claimant to the kingship and his supporters not only as followers of the Ahrimanic principle of Lie, but also specifically as sorcerers. And he noted that only through the grace of the gods and the king of kings could these opponents possibly attain salvation for their transgressions.[482] First, this shows that the concept of "sorcery" was in use shortly prior to Shapur II's reign and the Great Persecution. Second, it was unequivocally linked with Ahriman, evil and the bad principle of Lie, and could be used rhetorically against anyone who were perceived as diametrically opposed. And therefore thirdly, branding someone as a sorcerer was apparently an effective tool to stigmatize and create Otherness through which punishment, or in Narseh's case even salvation, could be meted out.

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[479] *Vidēvdād* 8.23-25. While Hananya may well have been stripped naked, it is uncertain whether Jesus was stripped naked for execution, which does not make it a biblical parallel, see Blomberg, *Matthew*, 416.
[480] Gardner, "Mani's Last Days," 159-160; Widengren, "Manichaeism," 971. For the accusation, see Dilley, "Also Schrieb Zarathustra?" 127.
[481] For Mani as a physician and Jesus as a healer, see Asmussen, *Manichean Literature*, 9, 107.
[482] NPi 34, 37, 54.

I remarked in chapter 4 that the Christians in the *Acts of Martyrs* are often offered ways of saving themselves, which suggests that the martyr's ideal is central to the identity of the persecuted. This could of course simply be a rhetorical tool to enhance the resilience of the martyrs. But organized violence is not mobilized arbitrarily but has to serve a constructive purpose, from the perspective of the perpetrator. As seen, this was the case in the *Vidēvdād* regarding unqualified people performing exorcisms that magnified the Ahrimanic principle in the world, Gushtazad who according to Shapur in the story was possessed by a demon, and Simeon and other Christians who were accused of sorcery and for leading people away from the teachings of the Mazdeans, to name some examples. Therefore, violence was the response to unacceptable religious Otherness, understood as those who furthered the evil principle of Lie in the cosmos, and who did not produce "true" thoughts, speeches or deeds. As has been seen throughout this thesis there were many instances where the ascetic Christians were offered life if only they would pay homage to the sun and the king of kings. The sun may well have been a god or at the very least divine, as argued in the foregoing chapter.

In the *Martyrdom of Simeon*, Gushtazad, who bowed before the sun to save his life, informs the king that he has been "untrue" and insincere to Shapur because he did not worship the sun "in heart", to which the king becomes upset over Gushtazad's "impious state of mind", meaning the mind of a Christian.[483] The same theme is echoed in the *History of Simeon*, with some additions where Shapur asks: "Did you not worship the sun truly?" to which Gushtazad confirms that he "did not worship truly" and that in so doing he has deceived the king.[484] The discourse is significant because in the ethical dualistic system of Mazdaism people were expected to contribute to Order through the tripartition of human behavior. That is echoed in the narrative, where Shapur expects genuine (i.e. true thoughts) worship of the sun – not simply a symbolic act of submission. The point is that some ascetic Christians were accused of sorcery but could save their life if they worshipped the sun at the command of the king. And this is exactly what Narseh suggested in his inscription too, that sorcerers could attain salvation through the king of kings and the gods, substituting the sun. As such, is it possible that the topic of worshipping the sun, which is so frequently found in the *Acts of Martyrs*, is an allusion to Sasanian offers of absolution to the Christians, on account of their transgressions and sins, such as false teachings and sorcery, healing and exorcism? I think worshipping the sun in the *Acts* could be a metaphor for conversion to Mazdaism. For in the *Vidēvdād* we hear that death-

[483] *Martyrdom of Simeon* 28 (for quotes), 30 (on impious mind equated with a Christian mindset).
[484] *History of Simeon* 53.

deserving sins, like sorcery, had no possible atonement with one exception: Confessing the Mazdean religion would take away any and all sin.[485] In other words, conversion was a soteriological act but it did require sincerity on the part of the convert, in line with the ethical principle and tripartition of behavior of true thoughts, words and actions – which is the implication from the discourse between Shapur and Gushtazad. As such, paying homage to the sun was likely an expression for conversion to Mazdaism, and it was perhaps offered as a remedy to those Christians who perceivably transgressed the instituted boundaries of the law of Zarathustra, i.e. the totalizing claim to the epistemic homology, and those who practiced liminal and unacceptable healing and exorcisms or proselytized among the Iranians.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter it was argued that the Mazdeans and ascetic Christians both claimed the concepts of truth, knowledge and wisdom. In the zero-sum contest for truth, but also authenticity and authority, and as either community looked at the other in terms of binary oppositions, both labeled their competitor erroneous, false and evil. It was suggested that the Sasanian-Mazdeans recognized their didactic responsibilities which were epitomized in the so-called law of Zarathustra. Through that law the Christians were liable to punishment as false teachers, heretics, Ahrimanic evildoers and sorcerers. Sorcery was also a matter of unconventional healing and exorcism, practices reserved for the Mazdean priesthood, and it was shown that anyone who engaged in such practices could be juxtaposed as demon-worshippers. On the issue of false teachings, heretics and sorcery, all three perspectives converged. The Mazdeans operated with the concepts to construct Otherness which made people liable to violence, Ephrem and Aphrahat confirmed that the early Christians appropriated the epistemic homology and saw their faith as medicinal, and the Christians in the *Acts of Martyrs* were accused of sorcery and false teachings. There are good reasons, then, to think that this represents historical realities. And finally, it was argued that the topic of bowing before the sun was an offer of absolution to the Christians and that it entailed conversion, which cleared the subject of all sin. That is another testament that the persecution was limited in scope because many of the Christians apparently did bow before the sun.

[485] *Vidēvdād* 8.28-29.

9 CONCLUSION

The thesis began by refuting the Roman association thesis, which proposes that the Great Persecution was the result of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. There is practically no evidence to corroborate this claim from the Sasanian-Mazdean perspective. Admittedly, it is far easier to poke holes in other theses than to provide an explanation in its own right. Nevertheless, it has been argued that Mazdean religion occupied a pivotal position within Ērān and the thesis has primarily looked at the causes of the persecution through the prism of religion. Three primary questions were asked: (1) Who were the persecuted Christians? (2) Who were the persecutors? And (3) why were the Christians persecuted? These questions were addressed by looking at three different perspectives, that of the Sasanian-Mazdeans, the 4th century East Syrian Christians Ephrem and Aphrahat (and the *Acts of Thomas*), and the later *Acts of Martyrs* which was composed predominantly in the 5th century. It was assumed, in general, that if these three perspectives converged, then there are good reasons to think that we may be dealing with historical realities. As an overarching point, it was argued that the Mazdeans perceived the ascetic Christians as binary opposed to Mazdaism. Given the ethical dualism and binary taxonomic scheme of the former religion, the Christians' behavior, thoughts, speeches and deeds, was subsequently seen as evil and they were labeled heretics, sorcerers, false teachers, destructive men and Ahrimanic in principle, whereas the Mazdean ideology and practice represented that which was good and true. Furthermore, it has been shown throughout how those who were aligned with the Ahrimanic principle were liable targets for constructive violence, i.e. persecution, from the Mazdean perspective.

WHO WERE THE PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?

Pertaining to the first question, the investigation suggested that the persecuted Christians were ascetics who upheld a radical religious ideology which included abnegation of wealth and family, sexual abstinence, rejection of the material existence, a preference for the martyr's ideal, and a rejection of Mazdean religious ideology, practices and epistemic claims. As such, there were effectively two forms of Christianity in Ērān, one ascetic that essentially challenged the Sasanian institutions, and the other that is hard to define and that was syncretistic. From a practical point of view, the religious syncretism of commoners was less of an issue, which means that most Christians may have been virtually unscathed by the event. This has been a point worth stressing throughout because earlier historiography has tended to paint a picture of widespread and massive persecution. But it appears that the syncretistic Christians were not

necessarily targeted. Rather it would appear that many Christians worshipped the sun, practiced xwēdōdah, exposed their dead and disposed of human remains in ceramic ossuaries, all in accord with Mazdean sensibilities. That was why Aphrahat, the *Acts of Martyrs*, and Mar Aba all condemned other Christians for such practices. At the same time, it was argued based on the context and history of the Sasanians that there is evidence of violence and persecution of religious Others besides the accounts in the *Acts of Martyrs*, a compilation of narratives that must otherwise be approached as suspect on its own right, and that the 4th century persecution should not be toned down to the extreme. It may be noted here that the question of whether the event should be called the "Great Persecution" has been deliberately circumvented, as it has not been an aim to discuss quantifications as to when an event becomes persecutory or not.

WHO WERE THE PERSECUTORS?

Earlier historiography has presented the Mazdean priesthood as the driving force behind the Great Persecution. It was argued that this was an invention of the later 5th century and that this depiction hinges on a bifurcation between politics and religion, which seems inapplicable for the early Sasanians. And by analyzing the earlier *Martyrdom of Simeon* and contrasting it with the *History of Simeon*, it was apparent that the latter narrative attempted to scapegoat the Mazdean priests, which was the topic in other 5th century narratives in the *Acts of Martyrs*. The *Martyrdom*, on the other hand, showed a different picture of a more concerted effort on the part of Shapur II, the priesthood and the nobility. It seems evidently clear that elite communities took an interest in preserving Mazdaism, at least under the early Sasanians, because it was effectively institutionalized in the empire. That may have changed with the ascent of king Yazdgird I, in which the narratives in the *Acts of Martyrs* changed too. In any case, it was revealed that the priesthood did not appear to have spearheaded the Great Persecution. And as for Shapur II, the nobility and the priesthood as a larger community, their concern was with their peers, and they attempted to ensure coherence and compliance with the dominant institutions and practices, which was done by persecuting the ascetic Christians of some status that challenged the Mazdean foundation, on which Shapur, the priests and the nobles all seems to have relied.

WHY WERE THE CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED?

Many potential causes were examined in the thesis. Pertaining to mixed socio-economic and religious interests, it was shown that the nobility in particular saw it as crucial that their properties and genealogy was continued. That is why they established rigid rules of inheritance,

in which it was expected that the property and landholdings were kept together among the inheritors. Furthermore, women in particular were expected to marry and produce male heirs in the interest of the household, as this was necessary also for the performance of rites in the cult of the dead. Pertaining to the priesthood, it was shown that they may have had socio-economic incentives themselves. For instance, priests managed the large properties dedicated as pad ruwān, there was a marketplace for the selling and killing of noxious creatures, and they handled the disposal and exposure of the dead – all services that were profitable to some extent. And the priests worked as functionaries in various positions in the empire. As such, it was suggested that the ascetic Christians could upset these institutions either by breaking up properties, refusing to marry and procreate, or by undermining the vital religious foundation on which the priesthood to a large degree depended upon. Nevertheless, there was no direct evidence of this and it was ultimately speculative.

As for reasons of a more religious nature, many potential explanations were examined. It has been shown that according to Mazdean religious ideology the corporeal realm was attacked by all kinds of evil powers and agents that were believed to have been mixed in with the good creation. As such, the Mazdeans aimed for the elimination of evil in the corporeal realm as an animating imperative, through which an eschatological and soteriological event could be brought about, and the world and its people would be saved. For Ohrmazd was not omnipotent and humans were expected to actively participate in the cosmic battle between good and evil. It was also stressed that Mazdaism was characteristic with its ethical dualism and how human behavior boiled down to a matter of producing true and good *thoughts*, *speeches* and *deeds*. As such, the Christians, could be judged according to a binary taxonomic scheme, in terms of good versus evil, and whether certain kinds of behavior contributed to Order and the soteriological event – or not. It has also been shown in several places that the Sasanian-Mazdeans were prone to mobilize violence against followers of the evil cosmic principle of Lie, presumably in advance of the utopian goal and the salvation of the corporeal realm. As such, the ascetic Christians differed greatly with their negative views of the material existence and by positioning themselves as diametrically opposed, they became the targets of Shapur II's persecution.

The institution of xwēdōdah was looked at and its relevance was explained among the Sasanian-Mazdeans, both in terms of religious and socio-economic incentives. But the polemics against next-of-kin marriages came from the 5th century onwards and those that arose in the 4th century, during Shapur's persecution, were dislocated geographically and came from Greco-Romans and Armenians. Neither Ephrem or Aphrahat raised the issue in the 4th century,

which suggests that any Christian disruption of xwēdōdah was not an issue. Indeed, the fact that East Syrian Christians of the 6th century had to prohibit the practice implies that many Christians were engaged in it themselves. As for marriage in general and procreation, it was clear that these were crucial practices for the Sasanian elites, given the rigid laws of inheritance and marriage that were created. It was shown that the 4th century Syriac Christians did reject marriage and procreation, but this was not a topic in the early *Martyrdom of Simeon*. Given that failure to marry could be disruptive both from a socio-economic and religious perspective, and that it made women liable to execution, it is a plausible cause in the persecution, but the data was essentially inconclusive.

The cult of the sun and fire was investigated. There was a polemic against the cult of fire with both Ephrem and Aphrahat, but that particular issue did not emerge in the *Acts of Martyrs* until the later 5th century. As for sun-worship, on the other hand, there was a strident polemic in the *Acts*, where in the *Martyrdom of Simeon* in particular it appeared to be the major topic of interest, which extended to both Ephrem and Aphrahat too. Given that all three perspectives converged on this issue, it was concluded that this was one of the stronger cases for an actual issue under the Great Persecution, given that humans were expected to actively participate in the support of the good cosmic powers. Pertaining to the matter of burial practices, it was shown that there were, from the Mazdean perspective, ethical imperatives to both expose and exhume corpses, and how inhumation was liable to punishment. Whether this was a cause in the Great Persecution, however, was uncertain. The material regarding the exhumation of the dead dates to the 4th century, but comes from the Bavli and Aphrahat, the latter who was enigmatic as always. Furthermore, it was shown that there existed various burial practices within Ērānsahr and that from a religious ideological perspective the corpses of the Christians were considered less polluting. While the data from the Bavli was compelling, the overall picture was that the evidence in its totality was inconclusive.

Finally, both the Christians and Mazdeans claimed the concepts of knowledge, wisdom and truth, the so-called epistemic homology. The ascetic Christians thereby rivalled Mazdean authority by undermining the epistemological foundation on which the following religious ideology and practice rested. It was essential for the Mazdeans themselves that these claims were substantiated, and in the ethical dualism and binary taxonomies of Mazdaism, it was posited that the ascetic Christians became the targets of the persecution. They were juxtaposed as false teachers and vessels of erroneous knowledge, as opposed to the virtuous knowledge embodied in the so-called law of Zarathustra. Furthermore, the Christians claimed to possess healing and exorcising powers in which they directly rivaled Mazdaism and thereby made

themselves liable to accusations of sorcery too. That was a heinous and death-deserving sin that contributed to the evil Ahrimanic principle of Lie. On this issue, it was evident that the perspectives of the Mazdeans, 4th century East Syrian Christians, and the later *Acts of Martyrs*, including the *Martyrdom of Simeon* in particular, converged and corroborated each other, which suggests that accusations of sorcery may have been an important factor in the Great Persecution. And finally, it was suggested that crimes of sorcery (among other sins) could be absolved as long as the subject converted to Mazdaism, in which case the act of bowing before the sun may have been metaphorical for conversion. That shows those who were persecuted were essentially the ascetic Christians who upheld the martyrdom ideal.

I think there are good reasons to look at the Great Persecution through socio-economic and religious interests, as argued above, and I would suggest that this approach has more to offer in terms of explaining the persecution, as opposed to the Roman association thesis. Nevertheless, it has been a challenge to arrive at any incontrovertible conclusions based on the few sources and fragmentary evidence that exists. Therefore, it has been of interest to present the 4th century persecution from the Sasanian perspective – but in the end any historical account about the event will, almost by necessity, be fairly conjectural.

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