

BĪRŪNĪ ON THE ṢĀBIANS

Āthār (ed. Sachau) 204.17-206.19:¹

The first of those who were mentioned (i.e., pseudo-prophets) was Būdhāsaf. He appeared in the land of India at the completion of a year of the reign of Ṭahmūrath.² He introduced Persian script and issued a summons to the religion of the Ṣābians, and numerous people followed him. The Bīshdādhian (i.e., the Pishdadian) rulers and some of the Kayānids who lived in Balkh worshiped the sun and the moon, the stars, and all the elements; and they revered them until the time of the appearance of Zarādusht at the end of thirty years of rule for Bushtāsp (i.e., Vishtāspa).³

The remainder of those Ṣābians live in Ḥarrān, and based on their place (of dwelling), they are called Ḥarrānians. However, it has been said that the (gentilic) attribution is due to Ḥārān b. Terah, the brother of Ibrahīm—upon him be peace—and that he was among their leaders, (being) the most intense of them in the religion and the fiercest of its devotees. Ibn Sankilā (George Syncellus?) the Christian⁴ talks about him in his book wherein intending to refute their sect he filled (it) with the lies and absurdities which they (i.e., the Ṣābians) recount. (Ibn Sankilā relates their story) that Ibrahīm—upon whom be peace—left their group because leprosy had appeared on his foreskin, and that one who had this (disease) was polluted: they would not associate with such a one. For that reason, he cut off his foreskin—which means he

¹ For other annotated translations, see C. Edward Sachau, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (London: William H. Allen and Co., 1879), 186-89; Konrad Kessler, *Mani: Forschungen über die manichäische Religion* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1889), 308-14. For a partial translation, see Gotthard Strohmaier, *In den Gärten der Wissenschaft: Ausgewählte Texte aus den Werken des muslimischen Universalgelehrten* (2d ed.; Leipzig: Reclam-Verlag, 1991), 125-27; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Waḥshīyya and his Nabatean Agriculture* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 47-49.

² For the origin of Ṣābianism during the reign of Ṭahmūrath, see also Shahrastānī, *Milal* (ed. Kaylanī) 1:236; Shaul Shaked, “Some Islamic Reports Concerning Zoroastrianism,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17 (1994): 59. According to John Walbridge, this tradition serves to link the pre-Zoroastrian Magi with Hermes Trismegistus; cf. his *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 60-61.

³ Avestan and Old Persian Vištāspa or Greek Hystapes, the traditional patron of Zoroaster. For ‘chronological’ listings of the Pishdadian and Kayanian ‘dynasties,’ see Ehsan Yarshater, “Iranian National History,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 3 (1): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 384-85. The thirtieth year of Vishtaspa coincides with year 9000 *anno mundi* according to the Iranian reckoning.

⁴ There is no such reference in the extant chronography of George Syncellus (correspondence with William Adler).

circumcised himself—and then entered one of their idol temples. He heard a voice from an idol say to him, ‘O Ibrahīm! You left us with one defect, but you have come back to us with two defects!’⁵ Depart and never return to us again!’ Overcome by rage at this (directive), he broke it (the idol) into pieces⁶ and departed from their group (i.e., the Šābians). Later he developed remorse for what he had done and planned to sacrifice his son to the planet Jupiter—in accordance, he claimed, with their custom of sacrificing their children—but when Jupiter realized that he was truly penitent, he ransomed him (his son) with a ram.⁷

Likewise the Christian ‘Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī in his response to the book of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Ismā‘īl al-Hāšimī reports that they are famous for sacrificing human beings, but that they are unable today (to do so) openly.⁸

By contrast, we know nothing about them except that they are a people who pronounce the Oneness of God and declare Him to be far removed from that which is repulsive. They apply negative expressions to Him, not affirmations. Examples of their discourse are ‘He does not suffer,’ or ‘He does not see,’ or ‘He does not cause harm,’ or ‘He does not do wrong.’ They name Him with the ninety-nine attributes, but only figuratively, since according to them He cannot truly possess an attribute. They ascribe governance of the universe to the celestial sphere and its bodies, which they say are living, speaking, hearing, and seeing entities. They also esteem the fires.

Among their antiquities is the dome which is above the prayer niche near the ruler’s compartment in the central mosque of Damascus. It was their place of worship at the time the Greeks and Romans practiced their religion. Then it came into the possession of the Jews, and they made it their synagogue.

⁵ The negative valence placed on circumcision is one that also fits Mandaism.

⁶ Relying upon an extremely popular tale—Abraham’s smashing of the idol(s)—found in both Jewish and Muslim contexts. See *Gen. Rab.* 38.13; *b. Pesah.* 118a; *b. ‘Eruv.* 53a; *Pirqe R. El.* §26; Q 6:74-84; 19:41-50; 21:53-73; 26:69-86; 29:16-27; 37:83-98; 43:26-27; 60:4.

⁷ According to Philostorgius *apud* Photius (*PG* 65:481), the ‘Sabians’ are descendants of Abraham and Qeturah. They circumcise sons on the eighth day after their birth, and they engage in sacrifice. See Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164 n.38. [Are these Arabian or Harranian ‘Sabians’?]

⁸ Regarding this writer, see especially the remarks of Paul Kraus, “Beiträge zur islamischen Ketzergeschichte: Das *Kitāb az-Zumurrud* des Ibn-ar-Rāwandī,” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 14 (1933-34): 336ff., reprinted in idem, *Alchemie, Ketzerei, Apokryphen im frühen Islam: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (ed. Rémi Brague; Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994), 147ff.

Afterwards it was seized by the Christians, who made it a church until the advent of Islam, and the latter religion's adherents acquired it as a mosque.⁹

They (the Šābians) possessed temples and idols (who bore) the names of the sun (?), having fixed forms like (those) mentioned by Abū Ma'shar al-Balkhī in his book on houses of worship, such as the temple of Ba'al-bek which belonged to an idol of the sun. Ḥarrān was ascribed to the moon, and they constructed it in its (i.e., the moon's) shape like a *tailasān*-shawl. Nearby was a town named Šelemsīn, its ancient name being Šanam-sīn; that is, 'idol of the moon,' as well as another town named Tera'-'Ūz; that is, 'gate of Venus.' They say that the Ka'ba and its images was (originally) their (sanctuary), that those who worshiped them (the images) were members of their group, and that God was known by the name Zuḥal (Saturn) and al-'Uzzā by the name al-Zuhara (Venus). They have numerous prophets, most of them being Greek philosophers like the Egyptian Hermes, Aghādhīmūn,¹⁰ Wālīs,¹¹ Pythagoras, Bābā,¹² Sawār the maternal grandfather of Plato,¹³ and others like these. Some of them refuse to eat fish, fearful that it might be an electric ray; or poultry, because they are constantly feverish; or garlic, because it causes headaches (and) overheats the blood or the semen which supports the world; or beans, because they thicken the mind and corrupt it, for in the beginning they grew in the skulls of humans.

They have three fixed prayers. The first is at sunrise (with) eight *raka'āt*, the second prior to the departure of the sun from the middle of the sky (with) five *raka'āt*, and the third at sunset (with) five

⁹ Note Martin Schreiner, "Les juifs dans al-Beruni," *Revue des études juives* 12 (1886): 263; and the longer account about the history of the mosque provided by Iṣṭakhṛī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* (Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum 1; 2d ed.; ed. M. J. De Goeje; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1927), 60.1-8.

¹⁰ I.e., Agathadaemon. He is often said to be the teacher of Hermes and is usually identified with the biblical Seth.

¹¹ Identified by Kevin van Bladel with the astrologer Vettius Valens; see his *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 92. Note also Walbridge, *Wisdom*, 38. A better suggestion may be to see in this name a reflex of that of Iolaus, the teacher of Zostrianos in the Nag Hammadi *Apocalypse of Zostrianos* and the Ḥarrānian mentor of Zoroaster in his Arabic language 'autobiography.' See Emily Cottrell, "L'autobiographie de Zoroastre," in *Pensée grecque et sagesse d'Orient: Hommage à Michel Tardieu* (ed. Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi, et al.; Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 177-83.

¹² Bābā was a local prophet whose floruit was reputedly 367 years before the Hijra (622 CE). See Ignatius Ephraem II Rahmani, ed., *Studia Syriaca I* (In Monte Libano: Typis Patriarchalibus in Seminario Scharfensi, 1904), 48-50 (text), with the rubric 'Prophecy of Bābā, god of Ḥarrān'; F[rantz] Rosenthal, "The Prophecies of Bābā the Ḥarrānian," in *A Locust's Leg: Studies in Honour of S. H. Taqizadeh* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd., 1962), 220-32.

¹³ Read 'Sawār' (سوار) as 'Solon' (سولون), following the suggestion of S. M. Stern, "'Abd al-Jabbār's Account of How Christ's Religion Was Falsified by the Adoption of Roman Customs," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 19 (1968): 160 n.1.

raka'āt. Each *rak'a* in their prayers consists of three prostrations. Moreover, they voluntarily engage in prayer at the second hour of daylight, again at the ninth hour of daylight, and a third time at the third hour after nightfall. They pray in a state of purity and ritual cleanliness, and they bathe themselves when they incur ritual impurity. They do not practice circumcision because they maintain that they were not commanded to do this.

Many of their rules regarding women and punishments are similar to Islamic regulations, whereas those (precepts) regarding the contraction of impurity by coming into contact with corpses and the like resemble what is in the (Jewish) Torah. They have offerings devoted to the stars, their images, and their temples, and their priests and charmers supervise the sacrifices. They elicit information from this (procedure) about what might happen to the one sacrificing, or (furnish) a reply to what he asks about.¹⁴

The one named Hermes is Idrīs, who is mentioned in the (Jewish) Torah (under the name) Aḥnūkh (i.e., Enoch). Some however claim that Būdhāsaf is Hermes.

It is also said that those termed Ḥarrānians are not truly the 'Šābians',¹⁵ rather, they are what the Scriptures call 'pagans' and 'idolators.' The (true) Šābians are those who remained behind in Babylon from that group of (Jewish) tribes who embarked for Jerusalem at the time of Cyrus and Artaxerxes. They became attracted to the teachings of the Zoroastrians and they 'inclined' (*ṣabaw'*) to the religion of Bukht-Naṣṣar (i.e., Nebuchadnezzar), and so they follow an ideology which combines Zoroastrianism and a Judaism like that of the Samaritans in Syria (!). Most of them can be found in Wāsiṭ, in Sawād al-'Irāq, and in the region of Ja'far, al-Jāmida, and Nahr al-Šila. They claim descent from 'Enūsh b. Shīth (i.e., Enosh, the son of Seth).¹⁶ They are at variance with the Ḥarrānians. They denounce their doctrines (and) do not agree with them except for a few things. Even when praying, they face the direction of the north pole, whereas the Ḥarrānians (face) towards the south.¹⁷

¹⁴ I.e., divinatory procedures are tied to their sacrifices.

¹⁵ I.e., the Šābians identified as one of the 'peoples of the Book' by the Qur'ān.

¹⁶ Roughly parallel information about these Šābians of allegedly Jewish origin is also provided later by Bīrūnī, *Āthār*, 318. Erik Peterson argued that this later material was 'die ältere und echte Überlieferung'; see his "Urchristentum und Mandäismus," *ZNW* 27 (1928): 91-98.

¹⁷ Are these 'true Šābians' actually the baptismal gnostic sect known as the Mandaeans? Kessler affirms this identification (*Mani*, 314 n.1); Peterson considers it 'unhaltbar' ("Urchristentum," 98).

Some of the People of the Book maintain that Methuselah had another son in addition to Lamech who was named Šābi' and that the Šābians take their name from him.¹⁸

Prior to the manifestation of rites and the advent of Būdhāsaf, the people (known as) *Šamanīs*¹⁹ were living in the eastern portion of the world. They worshiped idols. Their remnant are now in India, China, and among the Toghuzghuz (Uighur Turks);²⁰ the people of Khurāsān call them *Šamanān*. Their monuments and the shrines²¹ for their idols and their ornamentations²² are visible in the border-regions which join Khurāsān to India. They profess the infinite duration of time and the transmigration of souls.

¹⁸ Some tradents identify Šāb as the son of 'Idrīs and make him the eponymous ancestor of the Šābians. See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Shahrāzūrī, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa-rawḍat al-afrāḥ fī tārikh al-ḥukamā' wa'l-falāsifa* (ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Abū Rayyān; Alexandria: Dār al-Ma'rifa al-Jāmi'a, 1993), 163; Walbridge, *Wisdom*, 22.

¹⁹ شمنيين. A rendering of Sanskrit *samaṇa*, a term which refers to wandering sages or monks and which encompasses Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvakas. See especially Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11-14.

²⁰ According to Mas'ūdī (*Murūj al-dhahab* 1:288), this latter group resided in the 'Kūshān kingdom which lies between Khurāsān and China.'

²¹ Arabic بهار is Sanskrit *vihāra* 'shrine, temple.' Note W. Barthold, "Die persische Šu'ūbīja und die moderne Wissenschaft," in *Festschrift Ignaz Goldziher* (ed. Carl Bezold; Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1911), 249-66, at 260-61 (commenting upon the tradition [see Ibn al-Faḳīh, *Bibl. Geog. Arab.* 5:322ff.] that Barmak was the chief priest at the Buddhist shrine or cloister in Balkh termed the 'Nawbahār'; the Chinese pilgrim Huan-tsang also mentions this shrine under the name *nava-saṅghārāma*), and see especially Asadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Buddhism Among Iranian Peoples: ii. In Islamic Times," *Enclr* 2:496-97.

²² Arabic فرخار renders Sogdian *βrγ'r*, which is 'an adaptation of *vihāra*' (Melikian-Chirvani, *Enclr* 2:496).