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KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF IN THE LETTER OF PAUL THE PERSIAN

Said HAYATI

Salzburg

Before any scrutiny in Paul the Persian's letter, we should answer the question "who is he?" There is much discussion about the identity of Paul the Persian. Arthur Vööbus hints at the significance of this problem when he writes "the identity of this Paulos involves some complications."¹ In the view of Junillus Africanus he was associated with the Christian school of Nisibis.² Giovanni Mercati³, Anton Baumstark⁴, Jacques Larry⁵, A. D. Lee⁶ and Peter Bruns⁷ offer different points of view on this matter.⁸ Lee and Baumstark discuss him under the name of "Paul of Nisibis." Mercati names him "Paul the Persian" (Paolo il Persiano).⁹ Bruns describes him as an Anti-manichaean from Nisibis and a philosopher from Rew-Ardashir.¹⁰ Clearly, the information about his life is very scanty.¹¹

Who was he?

The pressing question "Who was Paul the Persian?" would need an appropriate answer. This is a fundamental difficulty that extends itself into a series of related matters, which express uncertainty about his very name. Was he the man who had a debate with a Manichaean in Constantinople in 527 AD, which is

I would like to express my thanks to Paul Stevenson for his assistance in revising this paper. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

¹ Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, 170; see the full discussion 170–172.

² Cf. Maas, *Exegesis and Empire in the Early Byzantine Mediterranean*, 8.

³ Mercati, *Note di letteratura biblica e cristiana antica*.

⁴ Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 120–21.

⁵ Jarry, "Les hérésies dualistes dans l'empire byzantin du Ve au VIIe siècle", 105.

⁶ Lee, "Evagrius, Paul of Nisibis and the problem of loyalties in the mid-sixth century", 569–585.

⁷ Bruns, "Wer war Paul der Perser?", 263–68.

⁸ In his discussion of this issue Bienert includes the names of H. Kikn, G. Mercati and I. Forscher. Cf. Bienert, "Die Instituta regularia des Junilius (Junillus) Africanus", 317.

⁹ *Note di letteratura*, 180.

¹⁰ Bruns, "Wer war Paul der Perser?", 263; also Peter Bruns, "Paul der Perser, Christ und Philosoph im spätantiken Sasanidenreich", 28.

¹¹ Goulet, *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques*, 185.

preserved in Greek?¹² Or was he Paulos of Nisibis, because he was educated at the Syrian school in the city of Nisibis?¹³ Or perhaps he was Paulos the Philosopher.¹⁴ Was he a Persian teacher from the school of Nisibis, who was teaching in this very school?¹⁵ Peter Bruns tried to clarify and identify the truth about this person or these persons¹⁶, although he did not give a suitable answer to this issue. Javier Teixidor, however, was successful in his efforts, because he has been able to determine that this was the Paul who had anti-Manichaean debates and who was a disciple of Mar Aba.¹⁷

In spite of all the difficulties in determining Paul's identity, however, by using a contextual approach while reading the Syriac version of Paul's letter to the Sassanian king Khusrau I,¹⁸ and also the first and last paragraphs of his *Peri Hermeneias*¹⁹, it becomes clear that his name was Paul the Persian, not Paulos of Nisibis or Paulos the Philosopher. He was a East Syriac ("Nestorian") theologian²⁰ and philosopher who is said to have worked at the court of Khusrau I.²¹ He lived from 531–578/9 AD.²² Syriac scholars usually present him as the writer of an introduction to Aristotle's logic addressed to Khusrau Anoshirwan, because of Land's Latin translation of this text.²³ He is also presented as a convert to Zoroastrianism on the basis of a hint by Bar Hebraeus' chronicle.²⁴ Some believe he was instructed in Nisibis and wrote his works in Persian or Middle Persian,²⁵ but Hugonnard-Roche has serious doubts about these matters.²⁶

Paul the Persian in his letter to the Sassanid king Khusrau Anushirvan (6th century) uses knowledge and belief in two manners: philosophical and theological. In his general approach he expounds his thoughts about knowledge and belief in linguistic, theological and logical modes.

¹² See the three articles by Lucas Van Rompay, titled "Pawlos of Nisibis," "Pawlos the Persian" and "Pawlos the Philosopher", 324–325.

¹³ Javier Teixidor is dubious about whether he studied in Nisibis. See Teixidor, *Aristote en syriacque: Paul le Perse*, 27.

¹⁴ Van Rompay, "Pawlos the Philosopher," 324–325.

¹⁵ Bienert, "Die Instituta regularia," 308, 316.

¹⁶ Bruns, "Wer war Paul der Perser?", 263.

¹⁷ Cf. Teixidor, "L'introduction au *De interpretatione* chez Proba et Paul le Perse", 293–294.

¹⁸ Land, *Otia Syriaca*, 1–32 (Syriac section).

¹⁹ Said Hayati with Paul S. Stevenson, *Peri Hermeneias*, for English translation see pp. 21 & 45 and for Syriac version see pp. 47 & 66.

²⁰ Jarry, "Les hérésies dualistes dans l'empire byzantin", 105.

²¹ Cf. Gutas, "Paul the Persian on the classification of the parts of Aristotle's philosophy", 238.

²² Hugonnard-Roche, "Du commentaire à la reconstruction: Paul le Perse interprète d'Aristote", 207.

²³ Land, *Otia Syriaca*, 1–30 (Latin section).

²⁴ Cf. e.g. Duval, *La littérature syriaque*, 250.

²⁵ Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, 171.

²⁶ Cf. Hugonnard-Roche, "Sur la lecture tardo-antique du *Peri Hermeneias* d'Aristote", 38.

Philosophy in the letter

In logic, he presents his idea about the three syllogistic figures of Aristotle's logic,²⁷ each in sixteen forms.²⁸ Paul bases his letter on the syllogism in Aristotle's logic, since all of Aristotle's logic revolves around syllogism.²⁹ Aristotle says: "A syllogism is discourse in which, certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so."³⁰

Why does Paul start his letter with a direct reference to logic but then turn quickly to philosophy?³¹ Logic is a division of philosophy in general in the letter of Paul.³² Of course, finding an accurate answer to this question depends on our understanding of Paul's notion of knowledge and belief.

Knowledge and belief

Paul uses the term *ܐܕܐܝܬܐ* *ida 'tā* for knowledge. This is variously rendered 'scientia, cognitio' by R. Payne Smith,³³ 'information, knowledge, doctrine' by J. Payne Smith,³⁴ 'science, knowledge' by Costaz,³⁵ and 'knowledge' by Sokoloff.³⁶

For 'belief' Paul uses the term *ܐܝܡܢܘܬܐ* *haymānutā*. This is glossed 'firmitas, veritas, fidelitas, fides' by R. Payne Smith,³⁷ 'faith, religion, religious doctrine' by Costaz,³⁸ 'firmness, truth, faithfulness, faith, religion, doctrine' by J. Payne Smith,³⁹ 'faith, religion' by Sokoloff,⁴⁰ and *الايمن* *al-iman* by Hassan Bar Bahlul.⁴¹

²⁷ For an explanatory summary of the three syllogistic figures in Aristotle's thought, cf. King/Shapiro, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 496.

²⁸ An explanation of the treatment of these figures by Paul the Persian and by Aristotle, including similarities and differences in examples and explanations, will be found in another article that I'll complete later.

²⁹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/>.

³⁰ *Prior Analytics*, trans. A. J. Jenkinson, 82.

³¹ Land, *Otia Syriaca*, 1, ll. 3–5 (Syriac section): "To the fortunate Khosrow, king of kings, the most excellent of men, from your servant Paul, greetings. Philosophy, which is the true knowledge of everything, is in you, and from the philosophy that is in you, I send offerings to you."

³² Gutas, "Paul the Persian on the Classification of the parts of Aristotle's Philosophy", 240.

³³ Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, col. 1559.

³⁴ Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, p.188.

³⁵ Costaz, *Dictionnaire Syriac-Français/Syriac-English Dictionary*, 137.

³⁶ Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, 564.

³⁷ Payne Smith, *ibid.*, col. 238, sub *ܐܝܡܢܘܬܐ*.

³⁸ Costaz, *ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁹ Payne Smith, *ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁰ Sokoloff, *ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴¹ Bar Bahlul, *Lexicon Syriacum*, vol. 1, col. 625.

Language as a means of communicating philosophy

Concerning his general approach to linguistic matters he writes: “Logic (محلله) results from the composition (محصه) of a proposition (مجزا). And of a proposition its primary (متحداه) parts (مخبة) are two: one is the noun (كلمة), for example ‘man,’ and the other is the verb (فعل), for example, ‘he walks.’ In general, though, the verb too is called a noun. Also its conjunctions (مترسبات) are, for example, ‘for, but, then, however, that is, therefore,’ etc., which bring about, so to speak, composition and linkage and coherence and measure and order, and are called *adverbs*.”⁴⁶

Paul goes on to enumerate the most necessary terms for logic, which he calls: genera (مفردات), species (مفردات), differences (مفردات), properties (مفردات) and incidental characteristics (مفردات).⁴⁷ He gives examples for each term: for genus, “animal”; for species, “human”; for differences, “rational” and “irrationality”; for properties, “aptness to neigh” and “power of laughing”; for incidental characteristics, “whiteness” and “blackness.”⁴⁸ Over the next several pages, Paul proceeds to discuss and illustrate these terms in considerable detail.⁴⁹

He adds that there are six relationships among nouns that are “very necessary”: equivalence of name (i.e., homonymy) (كلمة واحدة), equivalence of name and definition (كلمة واحدة مع المعنى), commonality of name (كلمة واحدة مع المعنى) (apparently identical to the preceding; it is not included in the following list with explanations and examples), multiplicity of names (i.e., synonymy) (كلمات كثيرة لكلمة واحدة), diversity of names (apparently this refers to collective nouns) (كلمات كثيرة لكلمة واحدة), and denominative names (كلمات كثيرة لكلمة واحدة).⁵⁰ After giving this list, Paul explains these names and gives examples of them. He goes on to give detailed grammatical information about nouns, verbs and sentences.⁵¹

After explaining his beliefs and knowledge about linguistic matters, and particularly expounding upon the sentence, Paul enters into the main section of his letter, which concerns Aristotle’s logic. Although he lays out his beliefs and knowledge about linguistics and logic in his introductory explanation of linguistics, he elucidates his logical ideas about true and false sentences in the linguistic part of this section,⁵² so there is some overlap between the sections. He tells us about eight oppositions (لمتطلبات)⁵³ of declarative propositions (كلمات مفيدة).⁵⁴ Among these are universal (كلمات مفيدة),⁵⁵ indefinite (كلمات مفيدة)

⁴⁶ Land, *ibid.*, p. 5, ll. 19–25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 26–27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5, l. 27 – p. 6, l. 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8, l. 19 – p. 9, l. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 11, ll. 11–18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 12, l. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

After calling them dogmatic,⁶⁵ he says that “the matter of those dogmas in relation to belief and in relation to knowledge is necessary.”⁶⁶

Paul defines belief by saying that it “is about everything that is distant and invisible and not accurately known.”⁶⁷

With some careful thought about the word that Paul uses, one may be able to understand more clearly why Paul gives belief priority over knowledge. It seems that when Paul uses the term “belief,” he does not intend to cause people to stagnate or remain inactive, but rather he wants them to act on their acceptance of knowledge, for this is the means to get away from dogma.

Conclusion

In this short paper I have tried to answer to two questions, first “who is Paul the Persian?” Based on alleged points I concluded his name is Paul the Persian, and not to identify with a Paulos of Nisibis or a Paulos the Philosopher. A theologian-philosopher who wrote a letter to the king Khusrau I and summary of Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* and lived in Persian Empire 531-578/9 AD.

Then “what is the role of knowledge and belief in the Paul the Persian’s letter to King Khusrau Anushirvan?” Both in general and from the theological perspective, one can find that *practice* is the main concept.⁶⁸ I think the concept of practice is the main idea at the root of belief, and that it is the core of knowledge. The main goal is to get away from dogma.

We might well ask why Paul the Persian wrote about his ideas concerning belief and knowledge in a letter about Aristotle’s logic to the king of Persia. It seems that he was trying, by means of courtesy and a sound scientific method, Khusrau’s interests to Aristotle’s thoughts⁶⁹, to teach the king of Persia that thinking correctly was an important function of logic.

He writes politely, saying to the king: “To the fortunate Khusrau, king of kings, the most excellent of men, from your servant Paul, greetings.”⁷⁰ Paul’s courtesy is shown by his use of the words: “fortunate Khusrau, most excellent of men, your servant.”

The use of Aristotle’s logic is legitimate because it contains the earliest formal study of logic that we have.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 2, lines 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 2, ll. 25-26: *... .*

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 2, ll. 27-28: *... .*

⁶⁸ Payne Smith, *ibid*, p. 19, sub *... amn*.

⁶⁹ Litvinsky, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, 94.

⁷⁰ Land, *ibid.*, p. 1, l. 3.

⁷¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/>.

By means of logic and belief, with the help of knowledge, one can ensure that the basis for his life is practice. Such a person can be fortunate, as King Khusrau was.

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