

DOI: 10.26565/2226-0994-2022-66-6

УДК (UDC) 141.338

Mykyta Artemenko

## ONTOLOGICAL SYSTEM OF BARDAISAN – FREE WILL AND “ETHICAL COSMOLOGY”

The article is devoted to the reconstruction of the ontological system of Bardaisan. A specific view of ethics as an ontological construct is characteristic of the Middle Eastern philosophical tradition. The teachings of Bardaisan lie at the origins of the Syrian religious philosophy, therefore the reconstruction of his teachings allows us to understand the main sources that formed the Eastern philosophical tradition in its originality. A detailed philosophical analysis of the concept of fate in the teachings of Bardaisan has not previously been undertaken. In addition, most of the studies paid more attention to the history of borrowings and the origin of various concepts of the Bardaisanite philosophy and their doxography, while the analysis of individual concepts was usually left out of brackets. The study of Bardaisan as a philosopher from the point of view of the modern philosophical tradition is undertaken for the first time. The article pays great attention to the phenomenon of free will, the construct underlying Bardaisan's “ethical cosmology”. The transformation of Babylonian astrology and Jewish symbolism serves as a civilizational backdrop against which Bardaisan weaves Christian ethics, Zoroastrian ontology, and Stoic anthropology. Understanding the peculiarities of citing Greek philosophy, as well as building the main ontological constructs, provides the key to understanding the Middle Eastern philosophical tradition. The dialogue “Book of Laws and Countries”, which is considered in the article, is a vivid example of a treatise-mesekhet, a multilevel discourse, the space of a language game, images and tropes. The article examines models of interaction of various discourses and various strategies for building a philosophical treatise. Plato's dialogue, using Middle Eastern metaphor, reveals the space of language play and intertextuality, dissemination.

**Keywords:** *Bardaisan, ontology, “ethical cosmology”, mesekhet, fate.*

Bardaisan (154-222 AD) was a Syrian philosopher, theologian, one of the first authors to write in the Syriac language. His concepts had a tremendous impact on the further development of the Middle Eastern philosophical tradition, primarily on Manichaeism and Syrian Neoplatonism. The surviving fragments of his teaching represent a multidimensional interweaving of numerous religious and philosophical movements. The problem of the origin of various quotations in Bardaisan's treatises has been repeatedly considered by researchers, however, no attempts have been made to philosophically interpret Bardaisan's teachings in its author's integrity. **The relevance** of our research is due to the fact that in the conditions of the crisis of European metaphysics, the search for reliable foundations for building an ontological system has become actual. In the postmodern era, systems that completely reject Western European logos and exist in other forms of rationality become such a foundation. However, the boundary between “European” and «non-European» knowledge is in the nature of topics, subordination and alienation of Eastern teachings from Western philosophy. A radical departure from logocentrism led to a crisis of postmodern identity.

The method of oriental treatises is relevant in a metamodern situation. Participation in the philosophical discourse of Middle Eastern treatises-mesekhet resembles the spread of network connections and works on the principle of the subject's involvement in the discursive space. The Middle Eastern treatise involves Western metaphysics into the space of language and semantic play, transforming the essential content of the text while maintaining the integrity of the outer shell. The study of Bardaisan's treatises is relevant in the modern tradition insofar as they are a clear example of building a radically new ontological system on a heterogeneous basis. The coexistence in a single text space of Babylonian astrology, the anthropology of the Middle Stoa,

---

© Artemenko M. A., 2022.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0.

the cosmology of Neoplatonism, Zoroastrian eschatology, Christian ethics and Jewish metaphors is possible when they are all embedded in the multidimensional structure of the text on an equal footing. A similar refraction, a slice of philosophical discourse, in which various levels of Bardaisan's teachings appear, is his concept of fate and free will.

*The novelty* of our study is due to a number of factors. First, a philosophical analysis of the concept of fate in the teachings of Bardaisan has not previously been undertaken. In addition, most of the studies paid more attention to the history of borrowings and the origin of various concepts of the Bardaisanite philosophy and their doxography, while the analysis of individual concepts was usually left out of brackets. The study of Bardaisan as a philosopher from the point of view of the modern philosophical tradition is undertaken for the first time.

The aim of our research is to study Bardaisan's concept of free will and fate in his treatise «The Book of Laws and Countries».

The tradition of studying Bardaisan's heritage in academic science goes back one and a half centuries. It begins with the publication in 1855 of the «Book of Laws and Countries» by W. Cureton, who for the first time drew parallels between this dialogue and a certain «Dialogue on Fate» dedicated to Emperor Antoninus mentioned by Eusebius [Cureton, 1855, p. 3]. According to W. Cureton, this emperor was Marcus Aurelius, so much reminded him of the tone of the treatise of the works of the emperor-philosopher. A further tradition of study, presented by A. Merx [Merx, 1863] and R.A. Lipsius [Drijwers, 2014, p. 5], considered Bardaisan to be a Gnostic close to the Valentians, mentioned by St. Euphrasim. In the same period, controversy arises about the origin and nature of the teachings of Bardaisan - P. Wetter insists on the Christian character of his teachings, A. Hilgenfeld - on Persian, and P. Wendland points to numerous common parallels between Bardaisan and ancient philosophy [Drijwers, 2014, p. 8-12].

The active involvement of Syrian sources in the first half of the twentieth century allowed F. Nau to talk about Bardaisan as an astrologer and reconstruct his cosmological system. He also proposes to separate the unknown «Dialogue on Fate» and «The Book of Laws and Countries». F. Nau argues that in addition to his «addiction to astrology», Bardaisan was a zealous Christian [Nau, 1897, p. 46-48]. Nau was the first to identify the typical elements of Bardaisan's teachings, namely the astrological nature of his teachings. At the same time, F.C. Burkitt drew parallels between Manichean teaching and the tradition of the Bardaisanites, calling them Christian heresies. The active polemic of the middle of the twentieth century is detailed in the work of H.J.W. Drijwers and its presentation is not included in the purpose of our work. [Drijwers, 2014, p. 27-52].

Among recent works, it is worth noting a fundamental study of the Bardaisan problem and the only complete reconstruction of his teachings undertaken by H.J.W. Drijwers. This is the most complete doxography of the Syrian philosopher. The view of Bardaisan as a Christian theologian with H.J.W. Drijwers is shared by U. Possek in a series of articles. A detailed analysis of the «Book of Laws and Countries» from the point of view of ancient philosophy was undertaken by S. Robertson, who proved the close connection of Bardaisan with the tradition of the Stoics and Epicureans.

The study of the phenomenon of Eastern wisdom has become especially popular in the era of the crisis of European metaphysics. The search for new, «fresh» foundations of philosophical knowledge led researchers to the Middle East. The term «Eastern wisdom», traditionally opposed to Western philosophy, is becoming a literary cliché. The otherness of the Eastern tradition, its remoteness from the Greek logos and the severity of the forms of philosophical treatises, made it attractive to researchers. Handelman's poststructuralist analysis of the Middle Eastern Jewish tradition showed a specific perception of space and time in line with the Eastern literary tradition. This was noted by S.S. Averintsev: «Eastern wisdom is interested in life, not being, existence, not essence, operates with images, not categories.» [Averintsev, 2004, p. 44]. Contact with the space of images, vague hints and inconsistent discourse can cause a state of culture shock for researchers. In the European tradition, metaphor and language play were reduced to the level of poetry, and the history of the philosophical tradition of the West was a

consistent elimination of them for the sake of harmony and consistency. Getting into the space of the Middle Eastern text, the researcher leaves the usual logo-centered space and finds himself in the sphere of a language game, sound associations, tropes, and references. The very name of the treatise in Aramaic, *mesekebet*, denotes a mat or braid, hinting at the multidimensional structure of the narrative canvas. Unraveling treatises or immersion in them is perceived as a language game, with the help of which the subject is involved in the metaphorical space. At the same time, the absence of a clear structure of allegories presupposes a plurality of ways of pre-understanding. Talking about the specifics of the Jewish Middle Eastern treatise, Handelman speaks of the opposition between artistic image and allegory. Eastern wisdom is the space of an image, understood and perceived intuitively, while Western logocentrism is based on allegory. The specificity of the oriental treatise lies in the fact that language is perceived as a pure being. Handelman notes the Aramaic term «*daman*» meaning both a thing and a word [Handelman, 1987, p. 61]. Thus, the word and the thing are inextricably linked, just as the intelligible and the sensible worlds are connected. Cognition of the world is possible thanks to «listening» rather than logical analysis. Whereas Plato's ontology appeals to allegory, the «destruction» of the outer shell of the language.

Such a dichotomy and opposition of «Eastern wisdom» and «Hellenic philosophy» is not always relevant. For example, Handelman's concept was criticized by D. Boyarin, who called the idea of the otherness of Middle Eastern wisdom «a reification of Jewish philosophy» [Boyarin, 1994, p. 131]. The idea of the Eastern tradition as “radically different”, according to Boyarin, is only a disguise of the opposition of “civilized” and “primitive” [Boyarin, 1994, p. 137].

Bardaisan is a striking example of an oriental thinker, but adhering to the appearance of a Western philosophical treatise. This is a key figure for understanding the specifics of the development of the philosophical tradition in the East. He is the first author to write in the Syriac language and to compile an extensive corpus of essays. The study of the concept of Bardaisan is complicated by the fact that his teaching had a tremendous impact on Manichaeism. According to H.H. Schaeder, Bardaisan's philosophy «was the channel, through which this Greek heritage came to Mani», to the eastern wisdom [Schaeder, 1932, p. 62]. Thus, later polemicists, criticizing the Syrian thinker, appealed to the Manichean doctrine well-known to them. The study of the later tradition of the Bardaisanites and their polemics with Christian authors of the 6th-8th centuries is beyond the scope of our research. Of greatest interest to us is the treatise “The Book of Laws and Countries”, whose authorship is attributed directly to Bardaisan or his closest disciple Philip.

The treatise, written in the Syrian language in the form of a dialogue, structurally copies some elements of Plato's works. Most researchers, turning to the analysis of this dialogue, approached it from the point of view of philology, ignoring or leaving out the philosophical content. Scientists were interested, first of all, in the peculiar cosmological system of Bardaisan, which was then presented with some changes in the Manichean doctrine. The concepts of borrowing from Babylonian astronomy and Persian cosmology are presented by W. Anz, and a detailed analysis of the parallels of dialogue with the philosophy of Stoicism and Epicureanism is carried out in the article by P. Robertson. For U. Possek, Bardaisan is a Christian theologian who uses the tools of Babylonian astronomy and magic, and for H.J.W. Drijwers is a thinker indirectly familiar with the writings of Hellenic philosophers. Understanding the peculiarities of citing Greek philosophy, as well as building the main ontological constructs, provides the key to understanding the Middle Eastern philosophical tradition. One way or another, most of the philosophical teachings of the Middle East correlate with the teachings of Bardaisan.

The main theme of the “Book of Laws and Countries” is the problem of human free will. Bardaisan's entire world is divided into three spheres - the sphere of Nature (ܥܠܡܐ), the sphere of Fate or Fortune (ܥܠܡܐ) and the sphere of Free Will (ܥܠܡܐ). Unlike most Gnostic teachings, Bardaisan's God is good, and the world is harmoniously arranged according to a divine plan. Nature is the materiality of being, by nature we comprehend the world, and exists in constant motion. By nature, people are born and die in the world, there is a change of day and night. By

nature, in a person there is a predisposition to good, but it manifests itself only in the fact that it is easy and pleasant for a person to perform good deeds. The disciple of Bardaisan Awida asks a logical question - why didn't God create man sinless? Bardaisan replies: "If man had been created so, he would not have been for himself, but would have been the instrument of him who moved him" [Cureton, 1855, p. 3] Free will puts a person at the head of the universe, above the heavenly bodies and all living beings. He is subject to change, he can sin. It is noteworthy that the burden of freedom is due to the responsibility imposed by the Demiurge on a person. Bardaisan claims « For if he had been made so that he would not be able to do evil by which he may be condemned, in the same manner also the good which he should do would not be his, and he would not be able to be justified by it.» [Cureton, 1855, p. 4].

Since a person is good by nature, he is forced to turn to himself, his own self, in order to understand what is good. The original concept of the good is hidden in human nature. Knowing the true nature seems to be a kind of medicine that is twofold in its essence. On the one hand, it gives a person responsibility, he has «no excuse» for his actions, but on the other hand, it makes him happy. Not just following one's nature, but a reasonable, conscious fulfillment of one's fate leads to the highest human goal - a happy existence. The similarity of the idea of "intelligent life" by Bardaisan to the ideal of the Stoics, noted by P. Robertson, is unquestionable [Robertson, 2017, p. 537]. At the same time, the definition of a person "thrown into the world" that has a negative context, which we can find, for example, in Marcus Aurelius, in Bardaisan has an optimistic character. A person is placed in the world in order to be happy: " and whenever a man doeth that which is good, his mind is cheerful and his conscience tranquil, and he is pleased that every one should see what he does" [Cureton, 1855, p. 7].

Free will space is the realm of the human mind and responsibility. Responsibility for actions lies entirely with a person, and not with the Creator. Responsibility presupposes the extension of the subject's power to the intelligible world on the one hand, and the establishment of "being-in" on the other. Man has power over himself and over the world because he is free. Freedom for Bardaisan is an ontological construct, «being-together-with» in the understanding of Heidegger [Heidegger, 1996, p. 301]. Man is free in the space of the spirit only because he is attached to the Other - the sphere of the body. In this regard, Bardaisan is consonant with early Christian patristics, but there are a number of specific, characteristically Middle Eastern elements hidden behind the Western style of storytelling, intertwined with the form of Plato's dialogue, like bright threads of a carpet.

If the sphere of free will is the space for the realization of the human «I» through an appeal to oneself, the primordial good of human essence, then the space of Nature is the sphere of the primordial established, static order. Thus, an opposition emerges between free will, the changeable space for the realization of one's own «humanity» and the sphere of Nature. Textually, this is a confrontation between Stoic-Christian anthropology and ancient cosmology. This opposition corresponds to the spirit of the era and forms the space of dual opposition. In "La Dissémination" J. Derrida notes: "The dual opposition... organizes a conflictual, hierarchically structured field which can be neither reduced to unity, nor derived from a primary simplicity, nor dialectically sublated or internalized into a third term. The «three» will no longer give us the ideality of the speculative solution but rather the effect of a strategic re-mark, a mark which, by phase and by simulacrum, refers the name of one of the two terms to the absolute outside of the opposition, to that absolute otherness which was marked" [Derrida, 1981, p. 24-25].

This «third», undermining the foundations of dialogical co-existence with Logos in Bardaisan, is Fate, Fortune. This is the space of changeable being, the sphere of power of the luminaries. The cosmic forces, the Luminaries or simply the «Seven» are also endowed with a certain freedom, like a person. By nature, they are prescribed movement in space, and the destinies of people are tied to them. This area of limited freedom is contrasted with unlimited human choice. Unlike the Christian patristics, as well as the Jewish tradition of this period, Bardaisan did not deny the influence of fate on the individual. He argues that «the Chaldean doctrine of Fortune» is only partly true [Cureton, 1855, p. 11]. «Fortune is something that is not

within the scope of our free will» and «opposes our desires» [Cureton, 1855, p. 8]. Bardaisan resorts to his favorite technique: covert polemics. He lists the concepts of fate in various philosophical teachings, without naming the authors, and consistently rejects them. Based on this passage, we can conclude that Bardaisan paid special attention to the sphere of changeable being, Fortune.

It can be argued that the mention of the sphere of fate in isolation from the divine intention is the «unraveling» of the Greek philosophical discourse, its interweaving with the Middle Eastern gnosis. The most important thing is that this is the introduction of anxiety into being, from which Hellenic philosophy sought to eliminate. The sphere of fate in Bardaisan's dialogue is dissemination in Derrida's understanding: «Dissemination endlessly opens up a snag in writing that can no longer be mended, a spot where neither meaning, however plural, nor any form of presence can pin/pen down [agrapher] the trace. Dissemination treats—doctors—that point where the movement of signification would regularly come to tie down the play of the trace, thus producing (a) history. The security of each point arrested in the name of the law is hence blown up» [Derrida, 1981, p. 26].

Bardaisan states: «...because the wisdom of God is richer than they, which has established the worlds and created man, and has ordained the Governors, and has given to all things the power which is suitable for each one of them. But I say that God and the Angels, and the Powers, and the Governors, and the Elements, and men and animals have this power : but all these orders of which t have spoken have not power given to them in every thing. For he that is powerful in every thing is One ; but they have power in some things, and in some things they have no power, as I have said : that the goodness of God may be seen in that in which they have power, and in that in which they have no power they may know that they have a Lord» [Cureton, 1855, p. 11]. The heavenly bodies are the executors of the divine will and their power ends where the space of human freedom begins. However, the sphere of stars, limiting human nature, has a certain freedom of action, it arose from the «mixing» of primary elements, and therefore is chaotic in nature. Drijvers notes that Bardaisan says nothing about the goodness of Fortune, giving only examples of its negative influence. In the space of play and constant change, which is the fate of Bardaisan, logical withdrawal in the Hegelian sense is impossible. This is the sphere of confrontation between the logos and man, which is a reflection of divine reality. Human desire is due to a mixture of nature and the sphere of his free will - a person is free to desire anything. Moreover, all events, any manifestation of being occur regardless of human desire, they are in the sphere of Fortune. Compliance with their human prayers and desires is pure chance, a gamble. This is an incomprehensible sphere of chaos of the primary elements, guided by the deviation of the luminaries from the divine will, which is impossible to comprehend and meaningless to interpret. Bardaisan speaks of this, refuting the books of the Babylonian astrologers.

Stars, «Guiding Lights» or simply «Seven» are an image in the Eastern sense, not an allegory. This is a manifestation of being in your self. The Syrian word *سالم* with which Bardaisan designates fortune literally means «part, lot, put on». This word carries the connotation of limitation, reflection. This is the space for the determination of divine design and human free will. Through the drawing of the border, the free and harmonious co-existence of a person in society is destroyed. Bardaisan notes: «Nature ordains that old men should be judges for the young, and wise for the foolish; and that the valiant should be chiefs over the weak, and the brave over the timid. But Fortune causeth that boys should be chiefs over the aged, and fools over the wise; and that in time of war the weak should govern the valiant, and the timid the brave. And know ye distinctly that, whenever Nature is disturbed from its right course, its disturbance is from the cause of Fortune, because those Heads and Governors, upon whom that alternation is which is called Nativity, are in opposition one to the other». [Cureton, 1855, p. 14]

Harmonious adherence to the divine plan and the realization of human responsibility as a state of being-s is violated by the third element, play, chaos. The emerging oppositions brave-timid, wise-stupid are due to the freedom of heavenly bodies. Bardaisan's freedom is ontological. It provides space for the movement of matter and the development of the world, its movement

towards a harmonious existence with God. Fate delimits matter, dividing it into spheres of influence, providing an individual fate for all living things. Freedom is realized in the space of separation and limitation, chaos and uncertainty brings individuality and essence into the universe. Thus, the ethical foundations of the teachings of the Bardaisanites are the image of the cosmic drama, implicated in the sphere of subject-subject relations in human society.

Thus, the reconstruction of Bardaisan's notion of fate presupposes the existence of a complex multilevel hypertext. The transformation of the concepts of Mesopotamia astrology in the sphere of the Abrahamic concept of fate is superimposed on the Zoroastrian principle of mixing and Stoic ethics. Various discursive practices exist in conditions of equal dialogue, their fundamental heterogeneity is erased in the unified philosophical system of Bardaisan, who attempts to unite Eastern and Western traditions. A specific idea of fate, which is at the same time similar to the principle of mixing in Zurvanian theology and the clinamen of Lucretius, as well as a kind of cosmological model, formed the basis of the Middle Eastern worldview.

### REFERENCES

- Anz, W. (1897). Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus, *TU*, XV, 4, Leipzig. [In German].
- Averinczev, S. S. (1988). *L'anima e lo specchio. L'universo della poetica bizantina*. [The soul and the mirror. The universe of Byzantine poetics]. Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino. [In Italian].
- Boyarin, D. (1994). *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Cureton, W. (1855). *Spicilegium Syriacum*, containing remains of Bardesan, Meliton, Ambrose and Mara bar Serapion, ed. with an English transl. and notes, London.
- Derrida, J. (1981). *Dissemination*. London: The Athlone press.
- Drijwers, H.J.W. (2014). *Bardaisan of Edessa*. New Jersey: Gorgias press.
- Handelman, S. (1983). *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time*. New York: Albany.
- Kovelman, A. (2005). *Between Alexandria and Jerusalem: The Dynamic of Hellenistic and Jewish Culture*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Merx, A. (1863). *Bardesanes von Odessa, nebst einer Untersuchung über das Verhältnis der clementinischen Recognitionen zu dem Buche der Gesetze der Länder*. Halle. [In German].
- Nau, F. (1897). *Une biographie inédite de Bardesane l'Astrologue*. Paris. [In French].
- Possekkel, U. (2007). Bardaisan of Edessa: Philosopher or Theologian? *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 10(3), pp. 442-461.
- Possekkel, U. (2012). Bardaisan and Origen on Fate and the Power of the Stars. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. vol 20, pp. 515-541.
- Robertson, P. (2017). Greco-Roman Ethical-Philosophical Influences in Bardaisan's "Book of the Laws of Countries". *Vigiliae christianae* vol. 71, pp. 511-540.
- Schaeder, H. (1932). 'Bardesanes von Edessa in der Ueberlieferung der griechischen und syrischen Kirche', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, LI, pp. 21-74. [In German].

### Artemenko Mykyta

PhD Student, Faculty of Philosophy  
V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University  
4, Svobody sqr., 61022, Kharkiv, Ukraine  
E-mail: mansur.ostad@gmail.com  
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3120-7894>

Article arrived: 10.06.2022

Accepted: 20.09.2022

## ОНТОЛОГІЧНА СИСТЕМА БАРДЕСАНА - СВОБОДА ВОЛІ ТА "ЕТИЧНА КОСМОЛОГІЯ"

**Артеменко Микита Андрійович**

аспірант, філософський факультет

Харківський національний університет імені В. Н. Каразіна

м. Свободи, 4, Харків, 61022, Україна

E-mail: mansur.ostad@gmail.com

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3120-7894>

### АНОТАЦІЯ

Стаття присвячена реконструкції онтологічної системи Бардесана. Специфічний погляд на етику як онтологічну конструкцію характерний для близькосхідної філософської традиції. Вчення Бардесана лежить біля витоків сирійської релігійної філософії, тому реконструкція його вчення дозволяє зрозуміти основні джерела, які сформували східну філософську традицію в її самотності. Детальний філософський аналіз поняття долі у вченні Бардесана раніше не проводився. Крім того, у більшості досліджень більше уваги приділялося історії запозичень та походженню різних концепцій бардесанської філософії та їх доксографії, тоді як аналіз окремих концепцій зазвичай залишався за дужками. Дослідження Бардесана як філософа з точки зору сучасної філософської традиції розпочато вперше. Значну увагу в статті приділено феномену свободи волі, конструкту, що лежить в основі «етичної космології» Бардесана. Трансформація вавилонської астрології та іудейській символіки служить цивілізаційним фоном, на якому Бардесан спітає християнську етику, зороастрійську онтологію та стоїчну антропологію. Розуміння особливостей цитування грецької філософії, а також побудова основних онтологічних конструктів дає ключ до розуміння близькосхідної філософської традиції. Діалог «Книга законів і країн», який розглядається у статті, є яскравим прикладом трактату-месехету, багаторівневого дискурсу, простору мовної гри, образів і тропів. У статті розглядаються моделі взаємодії різних дискурсів та різноманітні стратегії побудови філософського трактату. Діалог Платона, використовуючи близькосхідну метафору, розкриває простір мовної гри та інтертекстуальності, поширення.

**Ключові слова:** *Бардесан, онтологія, «етична космологія», месехет, доля.*

Стаття надійшла до редакції: 10.06.2022

Схвалено до друку: 20.09.2022