

Pagan Traces in Syriac Christian Onomastica

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Syriac Christianity flourished in three ancient cultural centres, Edessa in the east of Upper Euphrates, Ediabene in the east of Upper Tigris, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Lower Tigris. These centres adopted Aramaic as the main language during the neo-Assyrian period, and by the fifth century B.C., this language became the *lingua franca* of the entire Near East. Aramaic culture, heavily influenced by the ancient cultures of Assyria and Babylonia, marked these regions before they fell under the cultural hegemony of the Greeks, especially in the case of Edessa. Edessa was for several centuries the cultic centre of such Aramaized deities as Bēl, Nebu, the goddess Atargatis, the Arab goddess Allāt, and Šamaš. Harrān, located south-east of Edessa, was the seat of the moon-god Sin. Ediabene, located in the heart of ancient Assyria, worshipped Bēl, Aššur, Adad, Ba^cal-Šamīn, as well as Māran, Martan and Barmaṛīn, as in the case of Hatra. By the fourth century A.D., southern Mesopotamia was under Sassanian control and the supreme god of the Sassanians, Ahura-Mazda, gained prestige in that part of the Semitic world.

Nevertheless, when the kingdom of Edessa officially adopted Christianity by the third century, its own Aramaic dialect, Syriac, became the language of the Christians in both Syria and Mesopotamia. Although Syriac sources draw a picture in which paganism vanished with the advent of Christianity, several pre-Christian religious traditions continued to exist to the surprise and condemnation of later generations of Syriac authors. Traces of those religions can also be detected in Syriac personal names, most of which are theophoric, as is the case of other Semitic onomastica in general. My compilation and comparative analysis of Syriac personal names, a project I am currently undertaking, allow me to offer the following observations regarding the continuity of some Aramaic religious beliefs in Syriac Christianity.¹

Pre-Christian influence over Syriac onomastica is detected in three cases. First, names of pagan deities have often been used by Christians as personal names. Second, several names reflect the structure in which the words ^ᵇbd (servant), br- (son), and ^cmt (maiden) are followed by a divine name or a divine object in a bound phrase (ex. Servant of the Sun-god). Third, many names contain a divine name in a nominal or a verbal sentence. One of the pagan deities used as a personal name is *šmš*. This name has been given to the founder of a monastery near the Lower Mesopotamian city of Anbar, (abba) *šmš*^ᵇ, (Father) "Sun-(god)" (Bedjan, *Liber Fundatorum* 508: 124). *šmšy*, (Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum* IV, 508:9) brother of Simeon the Stylite (4th-5th centuries), is formed with the divine name *šmš* and the pronominal suffix -ī, "My Sun(god)." Š^cmša is the Syriac parallel of Sumerian UTU and Akkadian ^dšamaš, whose cult centre was also located in Lower Mesopotamia, namely in Borsippa. The deity was also worshipped in Hatra, the "City of the Sun" as is stated in inscriptions on local coins, under the names *mṛn* "our Lord," and *mry^c* "Lord." The diminutive form of the latter divine name, *mṛwn*, was given to the founder of the Maronite Church, (mār) Mārūn, "Little Mara" (early 5th century). The moon was worshipped by the Aramaeans under the name *shr^c*. The latter appears in early Aramaic inscriptions with other deities and with *šmš*. The name of this deity in the forms of *shrw* (*BO* I, 423), *shrwy* (*Lib.Fund.* 451:5), and the diminutive *shrwn^c* (*Chronique do Seert* II, 137) has been used as a personal name by Christians.

The name of the apostle and that of many Christians, ^ᵇdy, contains the divine name ^ᵇd(^ᵇ), another form of Adad, in addition to the personal suffix - I "My (deity is) Addā." The form ^ᵇd^ᵇ is also attested in the name of the bishop of Arēwān d^cAbrā (on the Small Zab river) who lived during the 5th century (*Synodicon Orientale* 43:20); it was also the name of a Christian layperson who lived during the 6th century (*Synod.* 80:3). On the other hand, two Nestorian missionaries to China were named ^ᵇdd, "Adad" and Bar-Bahlūl mentions in his *Lexicon* (p. 607) a man's name, *hdd*, although without specifying his identity. Parallel to ^ᵇdy is *gdy* "My (deity is) Gād," a name borne by a bishop and martyr in Mesopotamia, a priest, and possibly a Christian layperson of Bēt Lāpāt (*Synod.* 79:13, 80:1). Aramaic *gd* is Greek Tyche, the name of the Fortune-god worshipped in Hatra and in several Syrian cities. The name of the well-known deity of Edessa, *nn^ᵇ*, *n^ᵇn^ᵇ*, or *nyy*, is also the name of at least two bishops. The first lived in Purāt (Basrā) during the early 7th century (*Synod.* 211:1), and the second lived in Harrān. (Mār) ^czyz^ᵇ is the disciple of Mār Eugene (4th century) whose name is that of the deity of escort and protection known in Hatran, Palmyrene, and Nabatean inscriptions (see below ^cbd^ᵇ - ^czyz^ᵇ).

The supreme god of Mazdaism, Hormuzd, is also the name of a great eastern Syriac saint and monk, (Rabban) Hormuzd, whose monastery still stands in Alqosh in northern Iraq. This Mazdean divine name is still

borne almost exclusively by members of the Christian community of Iraq. Names derived from *mlk*, "(god) *mlk*," such as *mlk*^ⲉ, diminutive *mlkwn*, *mlkws*, *mlkywn* are widely used in Syriac. The woman martyr *mmlk*^ⲉ may also be a shortened form of (ⲉ)*m(t)-milk*^ⲉ "Maiden of (god) *mlk*^ⲉ." The name of an eastern Syriac Patriarch, *tmwz*^ⲉ, is also that of the Babylonian god of nature and spring, Dumuzi (Tammūz). It is unlikely that the Patriarch's name is that of the month Tammūz, since the latter is normally written in Syriac without the emphatic ending. Finally, several bishops were called by the name *m*^ⲉ*n*^ⲉ (Ma^ⲉnā), a deity attested in Hatran, Nabatean, and Palmyrene inscriptions. One should add the name of *pgyd*^ⲉ, often borne by bishops, which was originally the name of one of the main deities at Gerasa. It should be mentioned that Greek and Roman divine names, such as Bacchus (Roman god of wine) and Dionysos (Greek god of wine), were also borne by Christians, namely those of the Western Syriac church.

Names expressing a bound phrase include ^ⲉ*bd-šmš*, "Servant of Šamaš," and ^ⲉ*bd-nbw*, "Servant of Nebo." These are names of two persons whom the apostle Addai has converted to Christ, according to the *Doctrine of Addai*. Since the scene of the teaching of Addai is the beginning of the Christian era, the use of these pagan names is understandable. Nevertheless, a hypocoristic form of ^ⲉ*bd-nbw*, ^ⲉ*bdny*, was given to the disciple of the catholicos Isaac who lived during the middle of the 8th century. Nebo, another form of Nabu, was the son of Marduk and the god of wisdom whose seat was in Borsippa. He was also worshipped in Syria as a local deity of Edessa and Palmyra. ^ⲉ*b(d)smy*^ⲉ, "Servant of sin" is a name known in Hatran inscriptions, but also borne by a bishop of Edessa and a martyr of the 3rd century. In Hatra, *smy*^ⲉ seems to have referred to standards representing members of the local pantheon. ^ⲉ*bd*^ⲉ-^ⲉ*zyz*^ⲉ (for ^ⲉ*bd*^ⲉ-^ⲉ*zyz*^ⲉ), "Servant of (god) ^ⲉ*zyzw*" (see ^ⲉ*zyz*^ⲉ above), is the name of a Syriac author. ^ⲉ*b(d)-šlm*^ⲉ, "Servant of *šlm*^ⲉ" is a martyr whose name is that of the "Sun-set" deity often mentioned with *šhr* "(God of the) Dawn" in Ugaritic Texts. Hypocoristic forms of this personal name, *šlmy* and *šlm*^ⲉ, were also borne by Christians, among whom was a bishop (*Synod.* 70:25, 79:29).

Br-b^ⲉ(1)*šmyn*, "Son of Ba^ⲉal-gamin," is the name of an eastern Syriac Catholicos and martyr (middle of the 4th century), and that of a Christian noble (6th century) from Bēt Lāphāe (*Synod.* 79:29). The second part of the name, *b*^ⲉ(1)-*šmyn* (lit. "Lord of heavens") is the name of a god worshipped in Mesopotamia and Syria, namely in Palmyra, Hatra, Harrān, and Nisībis. *Br-hdd*, "Son of Hadad" (see ^ⲉ*dd*, above), is the bishop of Tella in northern Syria. *Br-1h*^ⲉ (for *br-^ⲉlh*^ⲉ), "Son of god," the name of an Edessan author and martyr, can hardly be originally Christian since the phrase "son of God" is extensively cited in Syriac literature with reference to Jesus only. The non-Christian origin of *brlh*^ⲉ is supported by an Aramaic name of the same structure, ^ⲉ*mt*^ⲉ*lh*^ⲉ "Maiden of god" (*CIS* II 1078). *Br-šmš*, "Son of the Sun-(god);" (see *šmš* above) was the name of one of Mar Eugene's disciples (4th century). The name of the bishop *bršm*^ⲉ (*Synod.* 42:2) maybe a hypocoristic form of the same name. *Brny*, a name borne by a priest, a bishop of Karmē (*Synod.* 79:11), and a bishop of Edessa contemporary of emperor Constantine (*Synod.* 109:20) is a shortened form of *br-nbw* "Son of Nebō."

Brsm^ⲉ, a bishop of Edessa and martyr in the *Doctrine of Addai*, means "Son of the (divine) Standard." We may consider *sm*^ⲉ, the name of a woman martyr as a hypocoristic form of *brt-sm*^ⲉ "Daughter of *smy*^ⲉ." ^ⲉ*bd-hykl*^ⲉ, "Servant of the temple," was the name of a martyr. The word *hykl*^ⲉ must have referred to a pagan temple. The Syriac Christian parallel of this word, ^ⲉ*dt*^ⲉ "church," was used to form a personal name often borne by monks to this day, *br-^ⲉdt*^ⲉ "Son of the church." As for *br-^ⲉtwn* (father of Mār Marīs in *Act. Mart.* IV, 526:11), the second part of the name is that of the goddess ^ⲉ*t*^ⲉ whose cult was widespread from the Syrian coast westward to Hatra near Aššur on the Tigris eastward. Finally, the name of a great Syriac author *br-dysn*, "Son of the (river) Daysān," may be added if Daysān refers to the "river-god" as shall be seen later.

Nominal sentences containing divine names modified by a predicate include the name of the great Maronite saint, Šarbēl. This name contains two elements in a bound phrase: *šār*, "breeze, breath," and *bēl*, another name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Sarbel is in fact a shortened form of a name parallel to the Assyrian name Tāb-šār-Aššur "Good is the breath of Aššur." In Assyrian sources we find Tāb-Bēl "(the breath of) Bēl is good," whereas Syriac preserved Šar-Bēl "The breath of Bēl (is good)." Originally the name was borne by a pagan priest said to have converted to Christianity in Arbela during the second century. Today Šarbēl is a name borne only by Christians, namely Maronites, such as the saint of modern times Sarbel Mahluf. Another pagan name preserved in Syriac is *hyb*^ⲉ*l*. It was borne by a bishop of the Persian city of Susa during the third century. This name is an abbreviated form of ^ⲉ*hy-b*^ⲉ*l*, found also in Ugarit and Palmyra as ^ⲉ*hybl*, and

of hyb^{cyl} , another martyr (A. Scher, *Kaldū wa Ālūr* II 76). This name means "My brother is Ba^cal." *Rbw^l* is the bishop of Edessa and one important Syriac author of the 5th century; his name means "Bēl is great" (*r[b]-bw^l*). Persian deities are also included in early Christian onomastica, such as the name of the Christian nobleman *yzd-h(n)* "Yazd is merciful." *Bwlg^y*, another name mentioned in the Chronicle of Bar-Hebraeus, means "Bōl is gracious." The mother of the Edessan Bardaysan (2nd and 3rd centuries) was named *nhšyrm* "My omen is high." The name can be understood as a wish, "May my omen be high."

Among the verbal sentences one ought to mention *bwlyd^c*, the name of a Christian martyr which means "Bōl knows (or has known)." The name of the Syriac author *bly* (5th century) may be a hypocoristicon of *bwlyd^c*. *Yhbsyn*, the deacon and martyr (4th century) of Rēw-Ardašīr in Fars, means "(the Moongod) Sin has given," whereas lyhb , another martyr, means "(God) El has given." El is a Canaanite deity, the father of humankind and that of the other gods. Parallel to lyhb is *mryhb* "The lord has given," the name of another martyr of the same period (*Act. Mart.* II 325). Since *mr^(c)* is also used as a title of God in Syriac Christianity, one may take the name *mryhb* as Christian. Parallels to lyhb are *gdyhb* "the Fortune-(god) has given" (borne by a bishop and martyr in Mesopotamia), and *nšryhb* "The Eagle-(god) has given," (name of a Syriac monk and author). The eagle was worshipped in Hatra under the name *mrn nšr^c* "Our Lord the Eagle." The father of the Edessan author Stephen (5th century) was named *Swdyly*. This name is spelled *Swdyhbly* "(god) SWD has given me" in the Chronicle of Mikhael the Syrian (Vol. IV 312). The god SWD is attested as SD in Phoenician, Punic, and Aramaic personal names. Names with the verb qb "to protect" followed by a divine name are also attested in $\text{qb-}^{\text{c}}\text{lh}$ "God has protected" (bishop of Karh S^clūh in the *Arbela Chronicle*), and in qbšm^{c} "(Divine name) has protected the name" (bishop of Hanita and martyr of the 4th century in *Act. Mart.* II 351 ff.). The latter can be considered as a hypocoristic form of qb-šmš "The Sun-(god) has protected." qblh^{c} and qbšm^{c} are both attested in Hatra and Palmyra. Since Syriac lh is the name of "God," qblh^{c} may also be a Christian name. The name of the martyr *bwlh* (4th century) is a shortened form of *bwlh^c* "(the god) Bōl (Bēl) has seen." Another hypocoristicon, *dly* (bishop of B. Hūzāyē in *Synod.* 110:52), stands for šmš-dly "(the Sun-god) Šamaš has rescued me." ytlh is the name of many monks and that of a martyr of the 4th century (*Act. Mart.* II 351). It is also attested in the Syriac sources as a name of the priest of the god Šarbēl. It means either "there is god" or "god has brought (an heir)."

Some names stand as a bound phrase in which the first element is other than *br*, bd , or mt seen above. In other cases, the free element of the bound phrase is a divine object or notion. A Latin synaxarion discusses the martyrdom of a priest in Babylon (3rd century) named *krwzwt^l*, i.e. "Preaching of El ." yhbly , a martyr of the 4th century (*Act. Mart.* II 325) stands for *yhyb* (passive participle of *yhb*) and l "given by El ." Some shortened forms include *bdy*, a martyr mentioned in *Act. Mart.* IV 163, which stands for "in the hands of (Divine name)," and *bdm^c*, (another martyr of the late 4th century; *Act. Mart.* 1 165) which stands for "in the hand of (god) Ma(lkum)." The latter name is attested in Aramaic. Rivers and mountains were also divine beings in the ancient Near East and in this context one may understand the name of the famous Syriac author *brdysn* "Son of (the river-god) Daysān." The latter word is the name of the river which passed through Edessa and which destroyed its church during the third century. Divine objects in personal names continued to be used in Syriac. *Brsm^y* "son of the Standard" was the name of a bishop of Edessa. *Smy^c* as a divine object is frequently attested in Hatra referring to Standards. *Brnw^{hr}* "Son of the light" (Arabic parallel: bd-al-Nūr), and bdhykl^{c} "Servant of the temple" (priest and martyr in *Act. Mart.* I 10) are also attested. *Nhr* is theophoric in Safaitic personal names, whereas *hykl^c* (a pagan "temple") has given the Christian name discussed above, *br^cdt^c* "Son of the Church." Other notions such as b , h , m , attested as theophoric in Akkadian and early Aramaic names are frequently used in Syriac personal names. Among these are hyšm^{c} "My brother rose high / became prominent" which was given to two bishops, and *br^cb^c* "son of the father" which was borne by an archdeacon of Erbil.

Names containing clear references to pagan elements must have troubled some of the Syriac authors, especially when such names were borne by members of the clergy. Attempts have been made to avoid the true meaning of these names and for this purpose, folk etymologies have been created. Thus *br-b^c-l-šmyn*, which means "Son of (the god) Ba^c-a-Šamīn," was read in one of the Syriac chronicles as *brb^c-šmyn*, and was translated as "That of the four names" (see also *Act. Mart.* II 296 n.2). *Rbw^l* "Bōl is great" was interpreted as *rbwn^c* "head pastor." In addition, there was a clear attempt among Syriac Christians to avoid all traces of

paganism by simply replacing the pagan deity by the name Jesus or Christ. Thus ^ⲉ*bd-nhy* shifted to ^ⲉ*bd-yšw*^ⲉ, *bwkt-yzd* ("Yazd is Fortune") to *bwkt-yšw*^ⲉ ("Jesus is Fortune"), *bwrz-^ⲓdwr*, *bwrz-m^ⲓh*, or *bwrzmyhr* (all attested in Syriac) to *bwrz-yšw*^ⲉ, *br-šmš* to *br-dyr*^ⲓ, *br-hykl*^ⲓ to *br-^ⲉdt*^ⲓ, *gd-yhb* to *yšw*^ⲉ-*yhb*, *dwd-hwrmd* to *dd-yšw*^ⲉ, etc. Other attempts were made by later scribes and authors to avoid pagan elements in the names of former saints and martyrs. Thus the Persian name of the Catholicos and martyr *š^ⲓhdwst* ("Friend of the king") who was killed for his faith in 341, was modified into *yšw*^ⲉ-*dwst* ("Friend of Jesus") by Sulayman bishop of Basra in his book entitled *The Bee* (p. 116 and n. 5) On the other hand, one exemplar of the *Liber Fundatorum* (p. 508 n. 4) reads the name of (Abba) *š^ⲉmšā* (Sun-[god]) as *šamāšā* ("Deacon").

Names do not necessarily reflect the belief of their holders, and the shortened form of many of them often confuse their original meaning. Nevertheless, those listed in this paper point to a Near Eastern cultural continuity through Syriac Christianity. Without the latter, a glimpse on the last episode of Near Eastern cultural history would not have been possible.

¹ The personal names mentioned below can be found in R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, unless otherwise indicated.