



BARŞAUMĀ

BARŞAUMĀ, a 5th-century bishop of Nisibis of Aramaic extraction, according to some sources originally from Bēt Qardū. Nothing is known of Baršaumā prior to his studies at the School of Edessa. Here he belonged to the ardent supporters of Ḥībā, the head of the diophysite party, who became bishop of Edessa in 435. After the completion of his studies, he went to Nisibis. In his minor preaching post, he built up his reputation through his skills in exegesis, which elevated him to the Episcopal see. The date of 435 for this event given in the Nestorian sources is not trustworthy.

His Episcopal see was important for the Persian empire, as Nisibis was the point of contact between Persia and Byzantium. Arab nomads from both empires created ceaseless conflicts since they often met in the surrounding desert, and Baršaumā, due to his strong loyalty to the Persian rulers and his abilities, was the right man for such a position. According to the words of the *marzbān* to the emperor, quoted by Baršaumā himself: “The bishop of Nisibis is an expert in these affairs of the boundaries” (*Synodicon orientale*, p. 529). Besides using him in mediating services in conflicts, Pērōz valued the services of his trusted servant for diplomatic missions in negotiations with the Byzantines. His deep attachment to the Sasanian state, however, caused him difficulties in his proper Episcopal domain. As a man with great ambitions and strong character, he found it difficult to accept superior authority, and this attachment thus led him into endless conflicts.

His political ambitions in ecclesiastical matters went in several directions. As a convinced Nestorian, he worked tirelessly for a reorientation of the theological



tenets. He believed that his church should follow this course, as it was in the interest of the Sasanian state to wean the church away from the West. A new creed could accomplish this. Further, he pressed for a reorientation of the basic ethical ideals, a reshaping of Christian life, and a transformation of the inner countenance of the Persian church. The ancient tenets upheld by the spiritual elite of ascetics stood in opposition to the Zoroastrian tenets of Sasanian society. How he became a pioneer and advocate of a complete reorientation is illustrated by his marriage to a former nun (“daughter of the covenant”), Mamai. To be sure, the new trend was a blow to the ascetic forces. In this campaign for change, however, Baršaumā could count on Pērōz and the power of the state.

Baršaumā organized powerful forces working toward complete reshaping of Christianity in Persia along these lines, but the mounting tensions around him exploded into an episcopal revolt. In April, 484, he convened against the canons a group of bishops at Bēt Lāpaṭ. Through this convocation he launched severe accusations against [Catholicos Bābōe](#), who was trying to withstand the tremendous pressures for change in the history of the church in Persia. Thus Baršaumā became deeply involved in the fight against the catholicos and his bishops, who rallied around him. However, all did not go without setbacks. His radical ideas, complications in curbing the influence of the ascetic elements, and perhaps also his intrigues aroused more suspicion after the tragic end of the catholicos. Thus Aqāq, not Baršaumā, was elected to the vacant see. His submission to the decisions of the Synod of Bēt ‘Adrai in 485 concerning 1. the annulment of the accusations against Bābōe, 2. recognition of Aqāq, and 3. acceptance of penitence (*Synodicon orientale*, pp.531-32) can be seen as due to the sobering effect that the death of Pērōz, his protector, had on him. Baršaumā, however, was not a man to respect these conditions, and conflicts with Aqāq continued.

While Baršaumā’s aspirations in the church at large caused complications, his activities locally led to very important accomplishments in the founding of the School of Nisibis, which was to become a celebrated center of learning. His cooperation with Narsai (q.v.) must be regarded as vital in turning the vision and project into reality. Thanks to his material support, drawn from the resources of the church, and his strong hand in the organization, legislation, and administration of the community this intellectual center was established and lasted for generations (see school of nisibis). Baršaumā saw in this center a hearth of spiritual culture, where the Antiochian traditions and Nestorian



theology were cultivated, and an instrument for disseminating Nestorianism. He was correct in both views.

In comparison to his impact as a reformer, Barṣaumā's contribution to literature is quite insignificant. Beside his six letters (*Synodicon orientale*, pp. 531-39) there are only some small pieces in the genre of liturgy. He died at an advanced age sometime before 496 since, in this year, Hōšē' II had already been his successor for some time.

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