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**New Light on the Religious Background of Elagabalus, Aramaean Emperor of Rome**

This communication will present two sources that can help elucidate the religious background of the emperor Elagabalus (properly named Antoninus) and the role of Aramaic culture during his imperium.

Elagabalus of Emesa is portrayed in Greek and Latin literary sources (such as Herodian, Dio Cassius, and the *Historia Augusta*) as a depraved sybarite engrossed in orgiastic rituals and decadent parties. Much of this negative portrayal is clearly connected with his Aramaean background and foreignness to Roman norms. Several modern studies have therefore rightly tried to understand the religious policies of Elagabalus in the context of his Aramaean background. (On this discussion see Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, 1989, including bibliography.) Some have considered this emperor to be a monotheist or henotheist. Others have considered him merely a traditional Aramaean priest with Roman Imperial power. Two main types of sources have contributed to the investigations on the subject: first, the Greek and Latin literary sources just mentioned, sifted of their slanderous biases, and second, archeological study of the religious monuments of Elagabalus and of Emesa, together with inscriptions in Aramaic relevant to the Syrian cult.

There is a third type of source, however, that must be considered: two literary works originally in Aramaic dedicated to Elagabalus. The first of these survives only in part, in Greek translation, quoted in two works of the Neoplatonist Porphyry (who, significantly, was also Aramaean). This is a work of Bardesanes (Bar Daisan), the most influential Aramaean religious thinker of that period. The second of these sources is a monotheistic, euhemeristic discourse surviving only in a Syriac (Aramaic) seventh-century unicum, dedicated to Antoninus Caesar and attributed to a certain Meliton the Philosopher. Among modern scholars of Syriac much debate has surrounded the name Antoninus here and the question of which Antoninus was the addressee. This presentation makes the case that the most likely addressee is the one most often overlooked, the Antoninus called Elagabalus. (The Syriac text was published with English translation by William Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*, 1865.)

The presentation will conclude with a discussion of these texts as evidence contributing to our historical understanding of Elagabalus. Here is the case of a Roman emperor of non-Greco-Roman culture, who is said by Herodian to have disapproved of the training of his heir in Greek and Latin, but who seems instead to have supported Aramaean intellectuals. In this case, Aramaic was apparently the preferred language of the Roman emperor. At the same time, these texts deal exclusively with religious subjects, written by monotheists interested in the comparison of the religious practices of all regions in the search for the truth. It is hard to believe that the contents of these texts do not reflect in some way the religious interests of their addressee Elagabalus. In fact, the discourse of Meliton suggests that Elagabalus really was a polytheist, although open to the new

currents of his homeland Syria. Above all, we see the Aramaean character of Elagabalus, famous among the Romans he ruled for his sacrilege.