Introduction

“Scelestissimus pseudomonachus.” That is how Barsauma, a fifth-century Syrian, is described in the Bibliotheca Orientalis, the eighteenth-century encyclopedia compiled by J.S. Assemanus, for many years the chief authority on the Syrian churches.1 “A hardened criminal, masquerading as a monk”: seven words are needed to render into English the superlative epithet and disdainful compound of the Latin. The crime of which Barsauma was accused was murder—and not just any murder: Saint Flavian, the man he is said to have killed, was the bishop of the greatest city of Christendom and so, in a certain sense, the highest-ranking patriarch of the civilized world. The source from which Assemanus distilled his annihilating description—the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon, held in the year 451—carried the combined authority of the Catholic Church and the Roman Empire.2

Assemanus, a Lebanese Catholic, was selective in his acquisition of Syriac codices, notably rejecting a venerable manuscript that was shown to him in a Coptic monastery. More than a hundred years later this great codex, made under the supervision of Michael the Great, patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church from 1166 to 1199, was sold to the British

This book once contained the Lives of about eighty holy men. When complete, it held five hundred leaves, but many of these are now lost, including the whole of the first gathering: five great sheets of parchment, folded like a newspaper to make twenty pages, a quinion. Pride of place on these folios had been given to Barsauma, the beginning of whose Life therefore had to be pieced together from two other incomplete manuscripts, until a complete copy was found in the Patriarchal Library of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Damascus MS 12/17, the volume in which this copy of the Life is included, is the first part of another originally massive codex prepared ten years earlier under the supervision of the same Patriarch Michael. It is this copy that is translated here.

Barsauma is a hero to the Oriental Orthodox Churches, a villain to the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholics. The Life sings his praises, the Acts of Chalcedon deny that he deserves them. Evidently both parties exaggerate; the historical Barsauma was certainly not free from odium theologicum, the besetting vice of all fundamentalists: the hatred of those who call their truth into question. But is there enough evidence to convict him of religious terrorism? According to his own supporters, he destroyed places of worship belonging to other religions. But this, to the Church of the Christian empire in the fifth century, was justified by the example of Josiah and others. The irony is that Josiah revived the monotheistic religion of his kingdom, Judah, and suppressed paganism, whereas the Christians wanted to use his precedent to make Judaism itself obsolete.

Anti-Semitism was rife, and the political will to stem it was lacking. Roman law protected the Jews against vandalism and assault and provided for compensation. But Barsauma and his fellow zealots were never convicted, though some of them were present when a large number of Jews, lamenting the ruins of their Temple at Jerusalem, were killed, allegedly by angels! There must be some truth in the report of their brief imprisonment, since the Life says, defensively, that


4. Recently, the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library has published images of further copies of this text; but Damascus 12/17 remains the best single witness.

5. The life of Josiah is narrated in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 22–23; 2 Chronicles 34–35).
Barsauma was not himself among those arrested. It is not improbable that the civil authorities, who were also Christians, were deterred by an impressive holy man from prosecuting men who had assaulted the Jews—though the Life denies this.

In the year 388 Theodosius I had decreed that the bishop of Callinicum should rebuild the synagogue burned down at his instigation. Saint Ambrose had challenged this from the pulpit in Milan, making the emperor revoke his decree and do penance for befriending the enemies of Christ. Assemanus’s condemnation of Barsauma rests, not on any assault the zealot may have made on the Jews, but on his alleged murder of a Christian prelate. After weighing all the evidence Henry Chadwick concluded, in 1955, that Flavian survived any injuries he may have sustained at Ephesus in the year 449, when Barsauma was present. Indeed, there is no contemporary proof that Flavian was attacked there. Most probably, Chadwick concludes, Pulcheria intentionally caused his death by instructing that he should be made to undertake an arduous winter journey on foot in bad health. The accusation was brought against Barsauma in order to deflect attention from this imperially sanctioned crime.

The crucial evidence exonerating the Syrian monk is provided by his enemy, Nestorius. The writer of the Life did not know that there were such excellent grounds for his hero’s acquittal, which he attributed to God’s direct intervention; and Barsauma’s judge may indeed have fallen ill and died. François Nau, who published a summary of the contents of the Life, certainly knew—and suppressed—the crucial evidence for the defense, which had been published earlier by the same François Nau. Nau was no impartial judge, but a Catholic propagandist. By condemning Barsauma, Assemanus, another Catholic priest, had meant to discredit those “so-called Orthodox Churches” that regarded him as a saint. Nau now blinkered his own erudition.

8. The words “le chiese cosidette ortodosse” were used by the current bishop of Rome in an epistle read out at a conference held at the Pontificio Istituto Orientale on 26 October 2018 on the occasion of the opening of the academic year.
and harnessed its power to Assemanus’s, as a second horse to draw the wagon of this agenda. By the early twentieth century, the scholarly public had become more diverse. In journals read by Orientalists, many of whom were Jews themselves, Nau could make Barsauma’s name even more odious by drawing attention to his anti-Semitism. He must have intended the words “a Zionist movement” (from the title of one of his works) as a contemporary allusion.9

Having established that the accusation made against Barsauma at the Council of Chalcedon was unfounded, can we expect the source translated here to explain how this man came to be so important for the churches which find that council an obstacle to the unification of all Christians? The Life of Barsauma, who died in 456, is a rhetorical text, more like a funeral speech than a biography. As in the case of the earliest Life of Symeon, who died in 459, the writer appears to have been a disciple of the saint, and his audience, the pilgrims—simple countryfolk for the most part—who continued to flock to his monastery after his death. Ascetics such as Symeon, who stood for over thirty years on top of a pillar, and Barsauma, who never lay or even sat down for over fifty years, were called “athletes” by their panegyrists. There is a pronounced element of competition in the claims that were made for them, and the saints themselves seem to have lived with a view to winning a prize. Symeon is said to have dreamed that an angel promised him universal fame. But they evidently played a role in society, usually defending the poor against their oppressors. Barsauma takes a stance against the signatories to Chalcedon and treats these bishops, too, as oppressors of the peasantry.10 Symeon, on the other hand, is claimed by Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians alike. The key to Barsauma’s popularity in the non-Chalcedonian churches is precisely that his


theological position, unlike that of Symeon, was clearly against Chalcedon.

The *Life of Symeon* survives in a fifth-century manuscript, which already attributes many miracles to the intercession of the holy man.\footnote{This codex, dated to the year 474, can be read (from right to left) by clicking on the icon of an open book at www.mss.vatlib.it/guii/scan/link.jsp > Vat.sir. > Vat.sir. 160. The earliest copies of the *Life of Barsauma* must have looked very much like this codex.} Over the centuries, even more wonderful stories were added to the *Life of Barsauma*. The tabular overview at the end of this introduction suggests one mechanism by which the text had grown before its final redaction: each chapter began on a new page, and so there was a blank space at the bottom of the last pages of chapters 1, 4, 6, 8 and 10, where new miracles were added. Margins were left around the text, and here, too, short stories could be added, which later copyists supposed had been omitted by accident, like a word one finds in the margin of a letter. In good faith, these scribes included them in the body of the text. The text may also have been inflated by scribes who included miracles that until then had been told by word of mouth, not written down. To prove this, one would have to analyze their style and show that it differs from that of the original author.

The important conclusion from this is that passages taken from a miracle story that may or may not have been added later cannot be used to date the original text, or to contest its orthodoxy. It can be argued on internal evidence that the *Life of Barsauma* was written in 456/7, immediately after the death of its hero, perhaps as a eulogy to be pronounced on the anniversary of that event. Theodoret of Cyrrhus died in the early 460s, so § 151 must be later than that. Symeon the Stylite had died already in 459, but the encounter in § 46 (anticipated in §§ 32–33.) seems to draw on a written source and so must have been added later still. In § 137 a demon, claiming to speak the truth under compulsion, speaks through a possessed woman: “If the body of Jesus is like a human body, which human being has broken his body and given it as food to his friends? And if the blood of the Crucified, the Firstborn, is like the blood of the human race, what human blood can atone for sin?” Around the year 520 Julian of Halicarnassus began to teach that the body of Christ was not like a human body. This miracle story may therefore have been added to the *Life* after that
year by a crypto-Julianist, who guarded himself by putting the controversial doctrine in the mouth of a woman—and having her speak under the influence of the demon that possessed her. Demons in the Gospel of Mark speak the truth about Jesus, so Julianists could still use this passage as a proof-text, as Barhebraeus (who thought—anachronistically—that the Julianist author was Barsauma’s disciple) said they did.

It is time to give a brief summary of the Life, followed by a detailed breakdown in tabular form. Barsauma came from the district of Samosate on the river Euphrates. His father died soon after his birth, and his mother remarried. The small boy ran away from his stepfather and, claiming to be an orphan, attached himself to a vagrant ascetic called Abraham. When Abraham died, he made a barefoot pilgrimage to Jerusalem alone. On returning, he settled in a cave near the village where he was born. One night, when he lay down to rest under the stars, it struck him that he, a servant, must forever stand in the presence of his master, God.

Barsauma was joined by like-minded men who became his disciples. In the spring they followed the flocks up to the high mountain pastures. Perhaps they drank the milk of the sheep and goats. Certainly they grazed on roots, in the summer they picked mulberries near the Euphrates, in the autumn they ate wild grapes. In the winter Barsauma endured the snow and ice, standing outside to chant his prayers, while his disciples sang their responses from their cave-monastery. Soon miracles, especially of exorcism, began to be attributed to the presence of the holy man, who had cut out more from his diet than seems possible for a mere human.

With forty disciples Barsauma made a second pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On their way they demolished pagan temples and the synagogues of Jews and Samaritans. Symeon the Stylite told his followers what a great ascetic Barsauma was, and the two saints met and blessed one another. After Barsauma’s return, further miracles occurred in the region of Claudias, where his monastery was situated: bad water became fit to drink, barren fields produced a harvest, an infertile woman gave birth. Barsauma’s curse, too, was effective: vines ceased to bear fruit, rich men and administrators died, the plague broke out. But Barsauma could put a stop to an epidemic by his prayers. Followers of Barsauma claimed to have seen him humbling Satan and being comforted by one of the seraphim.
With a hundred disciples Barsauma made a third visit to Jerusalem. The effects of Barsauma’s blessings and curses now began to be felt in many places: a widespread sickness fatal to cattle was stopped at Harran; the ships by which his party traveled via Cyprus were saved from a storm; a man was exorcised at Jerusalem, where the empress Eudocia showed the saint great respect. The father of a boy with second sight accused Barsauma of envy and was punished by God for his insolence; hail fell at his bidding on the vineyard of another man who opposed him. But as before, his curses were balanced by blessings for his friends, for whom he made a source to well up, saving them a long haul from the river.

The first part of the Life of Barsauma culminates in his fourth pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which seems to have been prompted by the report that the empress Eudocia had permitted the Jews to return to that city, a liberty to which the holy man was opposed. On the Feast of the Tabernacles many of the Jews who had assembled at the Western Wall of the Temple died in mysterious circumstances. Barsauma’s disciples were accused of murder and imprisoned. But they were vindicated by signs and ultimately by an alarming (though not destructive) seismic event. After the monks’ return, a village in Claudias, with whose inhabitants Barsauma had been angry, was swept away by the river Euphrates in flood.

Having told the story of Barsauma’s four pilgrimages, the narrator turns to the role he played in the highest politics of the Church. The second part of the Life tells how Barsauma was favored by the emperor Theodosius II, who invited him to preside over a synod at Ephesus in 449; and how he was persecuted by Marcian, the next emperor, who called a synod at Chalcedon that reversed the decisions taken at Ephesus. This synod declared that Jesus was one person with two natures, one human and one divine—a doctrine to which Barsauma remained opposed. The rebellious archimandrite was arrested and tried at Constantinople. Barsauma, however, returned, a free man, to the Euphrates, cursing the empress Pulcheria, who died soon afterward.

Even in the remote mountains of Claudias, Barsauma was not safe from the machinations of the Chalcedonian bishops, who suborned members of the local clergy and the military. But many miracles occurred, all of them showing that God was on the side of the holy
man. All those who opposed Barsauma or made attempts on his life were punished by God. One day the saint fell ill and lay down—for the first time in fifty-four years. He would never stand up again. Before he died, he cursed the emperor Marcian. After Barsauma's death, which was accompanied by portents, Saint John the Baptist appeared to one of his disciples in Emesa (Homs) and confirmed, before the fact was generally known, that Barsauma's curse had been effective: Marcian was dead.