

Review of: *Azazeel*, Prof. Youssef Ziedan (2009; tr. Jonathan Wright 2012)

Brilliant but philosophically flawed

C.Jeynes, 18th April 2012

Azazeel in Aramaic means the *strong one against God*, and in the Hebrew Bible is the *scapegoat* of Lev.16:8f; it is a rather obscure alternative name for the devil. But it is ambiguous: the scapegoat is simply sent into the wilderness according to the Leviticus text, but according to the commentary on the *Mishnah* (*Yoma* 39-41) the scapegoat is pushed off a precipice to its death at Mount Azazel (14 km SE of Jerusalem). In Prof. Ziedan's book this ambiguity is maintained: the narrator identifies *Azazeel* with Satan, but almost always the reader is left with the impression that *Azazeel*'s is a voice of sanity, or of honour; he seems to be the narrator's conscience more than anything else.

This is a powerful and profound book, and one concerning issues of deep importance today: very interesting issues of how we read history, and how different readings affect our view of the current situation; also questions of how to treat fanaticism, and the struggle between truth and one's own false beliefs. We always react in practical situations with a mixture of gut feeling and theory – how we understand the world must always condition our responses, and if we believe lies we may be persuaded to do bad things. And not only the Middle East is today riven with the consequences of false beliefs. Can we correctly identify the devil? It seems to me that Prof. Ziedan is suggesting to us that we are often mistaken about what we think is certain, and equally, we often feel truly that which we think is false. And it is because this suggestion is well directed that *Azazeel* is so powerful.

Professor Ziedan is an Egyptian academic who has written a novel from an historical period predating Islam. The novel is distinctly uncomplimentary to Christianity, and the Coptic Church in particular; subsequent history has shown that these judgements are fair, broadly speaking. Islam has always treated Christianity as a type of polytheism, on the grounds that God is One, not Three. The Qur'an is explicit about this: "*how could He [Allah] have a son when He does not have a consort?*" (*Surah* 6:101). The Muslims consider it absurd to say that Mary is "Mother of God" (one of the central philosophical concepts driving the plot of *Azazeel*) since God clearly has no wife! Christians and Muslims of course agree that God is One, and that the idea of God having a wife is blasphemous; the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary owes most to pagan ideas, as Marina Warner (*Alone of All Her Sex*, 1976) has shown brilliantly.

The story purports to be an autobiography of an Egyptian-born monk from the fifth century, recently come to light in excavations in the Syrian desert. The monk's assumed name is Hypa, after the pagan mathematician Hypatia whom he witnessed murdered appallingly by a nominally Christian mob in Alexandria, inflamed by their bishop, Cyril. This is a well-documented event which occurred 8th March 415AD. In some ways Ziedan's treatment of Hypatia is similar to that of Charles Kingsley (*Hypatia*, 1853): both authors make their narrators fall (platonically) in love with her; both emphasise her virtue as well as her intellectual stature, and both books are very philosophical.

The book continues in the framework of the theological debate on the nature of Christ between (the same) Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople, culminating in the Council of Ephesus (431AD) which condemned, deposed and excommunicated

Nestorius. Cyril defended the doctrine of the Virgin Mary as "God-bearer" (*theotokos* in Greek) against Nestorius' doctrine of "Christ-bearer" (*christotokos*). This seems very arcane to us, but the question of whether it is possible to speak coherently of God (or of anything else!) is as deeply important today as it ever was then.

Cyril's doctrine was confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451AD), and the *Definition of Chalcedon* describing the human and divine natures of Jesus is now taken by almost all Christian churches as authoritative (and the grounds of the remaining dissent are mostly non-theological, as is also the case in the *filioque* controversy). So we see that the demagogic Cyril understands correctly, where the view of the godly and gentle Nestorius is heretical. Wicked Cyril is right, and good Nestorius is wrong! Do we conclude that truth does not matter? Or do we conclude that virtue does not matter? I think it is fair to read Prof. Ziedan's subtext as being that Christian doctrine is incoherent (or absurd), and the reader should be aware of this subtext.

From a Christian point of view, how should we consider the status of the Church Councils, given that a fair description of them is possible in very modern power-politics terms? However, just because Machiavelli would have recognised the process does not necessarily mean that the conclusion is invalidated. There are two things, and they are different: the argument itself, and the process by which the argument is accepted. An argument may be *true*, but people still need to be *persuaded* of the truth of it! The truth and the persuasion are two different things, and both are necessary. Underpinning the truth of Chalcedon was an extended and profound debate by many authors whose spirituality and eloquence continues to impress us. Ziedan naturally does not touch on any of this background – he is writing a novel after all, not a theological or philosophical thesis! But we need to be aware of the background since he is writing about real things, for all that they are clothed in fiction.

This question – of the truth of the doctrine of the nature of Christ – is pointed, considering the Muslim context of Prof. Ziedan himself. From one point of view its portion of truth does not matter in view of the error clearly also present, an error which by the seventh century could have grown such that the perception by Mohammed was that the Christians thought that God had a wife! This confusion persists today: how many Christians can you find willing (and able!) to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to you? From another point of view its truth also does not matter, since it is the common understandings – or lack of them! – that often drive history. In such a context the accepted error is more important than the obscured truth.

On the other hand, the truth is manifestly important, since if the interpreter of history misunderstands the underlying situation then he will almost certainly misrepresent it too. I thought at first that the references to icons of the Virgin Mary (Mary *Theotokos*) was anachronistic since it was not until the eighth century that icons were authorised (by the second Council of Nicaea, 787AD), but it turns out that Basil the Great (c.330-379AD) justified use of icons (*Homily 24*; the establishment of the iconostasis in Eastern churches is also attributed to him). Nevertheless, a fundamental flaw in this book is the absence of any awareness that in fact there is good evidence that a high Christian view of women was widespread at that time (see P.M.Beagon, *The Cappadocian Fathers, Women and Ecclesiastical Politics*, *Vigilae Christianae*, **49**, May 1995, 165-179), and the memory of this attitude would not

have dissipated so fast, especially not in Syria, which is where Hypa is writing from. Misogyny was widespread, but it was not ubiquitous: the premise of the novel is that Hypa was *unable* to rationally harmonise the (false but common) doctrine of the evil of sex with the manifest virtue of the women he loved. But it can be demonstrated that such a doctrine was not universally accepted at that time! Hypa was well-read, well-travelled and well-connected: he must have known this. In particular, for example, Basil the Great writes:

the virtue of man and woman is one, since also the creation is of equal honour for both, and so the reward for both is the same. Listen to Genesis. 'God', it says, 'created man; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' [Gen.1:27]. And the nature being one, their activities also are the same; and the work being equal, their reward also is the same

Basil: *Homily on Psalm 1*

There are two other flaws that significantly devalue this book in my view. Right at the beginning in his prologue, Hypa says: "*In life and in all creation ... everything is circular, returning to where it began ... in reality there is no beginning and no ending*". No Christian, then or now, could write this, surely? Not only is the beginning and the ending (the Creation and the Judgement) just as securely established in Christian thought as it is in Muslim, for Christians it is underlined everywhere by the *story*: Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End; the Hebrew Scriptures (the "Old Testament") were pored over and interpreted to see everywhere the established purpose of God to bring rescue to his people and salvation with new Creation to the world. Stories *necessarily* have beginnings and endings!

Throughout the book Hypa is represented as exceptionally well-read, and throughout it there are references to the "apocryphal" ("hidden") *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* as treasured (hidden) parts of his collection. Many people believed many things in those turbulent times, but there is no evidence that monks gave these Gnostic works any credence. Eusebius for example, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (c.326AD) mentions *Thomas* without any particular heat as one of the "fictions of heretics": this was an established understanding in the church at that time. Of course, they were found at Nag Hammadi which is where Hypa was from, and Gnostic thought is known to have been strong in Syria, where Hypa ended up. Hypa would certainly have known about these books but I cannot believe that they would have given him any theological trouble. This sounds like unsupportable propaganda from Prof. Ziedan to me, apparently promoting his (incorrect) view that Christian doctrine was then (and remains) fundamentally incoherent.

Despite Hypa being an unbelievable character in some important respects, the story is compelling, and told with brilliance. It is good to have a powerful portrayal of Cyril of Alexandria, and his prey, the peerless and innocent Hypatia. Alexandria was pivotal then, and Egypt is still pivotal in the Middle East today. And the interplay between learning and faith, between demagoguery and virtue, between power and doctrine; these remain as central today as ever.