

The Universality of the Church of the East: How Persian was Persian Christianity?

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Persian Christianity was perhaps the first great non-Roman form of Christianity. The “Church of the East” was ecclesiastically “Persian” in that it was, with minor exceptions, the officially recognized Church of the Sasanian empire. The Church was politically “Persian” due to the role of Sasanian kings in the eleven Synods from 410 to 775 C.E. The Church was geographically “Persian” in that it was coextensive with, but not limited to the orbit of the Sasanian empire. The Church of the East was only secondarily “Persian” in terms of ethnicity. Yet the presence of ethnic Persians vividly illustrates why the Church of the East became the world’s most successful missionary church until modern times.

Although the majority of Christians in the church are assumed to have been ethnic Syrians, the Church of the East was once a universal, multi-ethnic religion. As a witness to the universality of the Church of the East in its heyday, it is probably the case that ethnic Persians formed the most visible and important ethnic minority of Christianity in Persia. This study will argue that the role of Iranian converts may have been far more significant than has so far been realized. Discoveries of Nestorian texts in Iranian languages (Middle Persian, Sogdian, New Persian) have proven conclusively that Syriac was not the exclusive language of liturgy and instruction in the Persian Church. In fact, part and parcel of the extraordinary missionary success of the Church of the East derived from its genius for adapting Christian worship to local vernaculars. Evidence of this gift for effective indigenization may be seen in the both the Assyrian and Chaldean services for the Feast of Epiphany, in which fragments from a lost Persian Christian liturgy are preserved and recited to this very day.

The importance of the Church of Persia has been diminished by the fact that mainstream church history has, to date, been primarily

Eurocentric. This problem may be traced back to Eusebius of Caesarea (d. c. 339 C.E.), who has traditionally been acclaimed as “the Father of Church History” as it was he wrote the very first *Ecclesiastical History*. Sebastian Brock observes that “Eusebius passes over the history of the Church to the east of the Roman Empire in almost total silence” and that, as a result, “the legacy of Eusebius’ model of a Church History has had an insidious influence on his successors, ancient and modern, encouraging the emergence of the excessively Eurocentric view of Church History that is generally current today.”¹ Consider the significance of the estimated size of West Syrian (Roman and Persian empires) and East Syrian (Persian) Christianity prior to and during the initial period of Islam. John Taylor, a historian of church history, notes: “For the first time since the seventh century, when there were large numbers of Nestorian and Syrian churches in parts of Asia, the majority of Christians in the world [today] are not of European origin.”² There is an implicit claim here that Syrian Christians and their converts outnumbered European Christians. The relative historical neglect of Syriac Christianity is all the more surprising, if Paulos Gregorios’ estimate is correct. Speaking of the Syrians relative to other Christian populations, Gregorios states: “Before the sixth century they were probably the most numerous Christian group, larger than the Greeks, Latins, and Copts.”³ So far-flung was the mission field, and so ethnically diverse was the Church of the East that it was possible, albeit under special historical circumstances, for a non-Syrian

¹ Sebastian Brock, “The Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire up to the Sixth Century and its Absence from the Councils in the Roman Empire,” in *Syriac Dialogue: First Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syrian Tradition, with focus on the Theology of the Church of the East* (Vienna: Pro Oriente, 1996): 69–85 [70]. My thanks to Mr. Robert DeKelaita of Nabu Books, Chicago, for providing me with an advance copy of this article.

² John Taylor, “The Future of Christianity” (Chapter 19), in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*. Ed. John McManners (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 635.

³ Paulos Gregorios, “Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade; New York: Macmillan, 1987): vol. 14, 227–230 [227–228].

or non-Iranian to lead the entire church. This occurred in the year 1281 C.E., when Mār Yahballāhā III—a Turco-Mongol from the ecclesiastical province of China—was elected to the supreme office of Catholicós-Patriarch.⁴

By “Persia” is meant something quite different from the territory of present-day Iran. Broadly speaking, Persia in Sasanian times was a region lying both to the west and to the east of the Tigris River. Persia included what is now Iraq, part of Afghanistan, as well as Russian Azarbaijan.⁵ According to Sasanian documents, Persians distinguished two kinds of land within their empire: Īrān proper, and non-Īrān (“Anīrān”). Although west of present-day Iran, Iraq was actually considered to be part of Iran. According to Wilhelm Eilers, the name al-^cIrāq is actually a Persian word (*erāgh*), meaning, “lowlands.”⁶ (This etymology may not be absolutely certain.) As Eilers observes: “For the Sasanians, too, the lowlands of Iraq constituted the heart of their dominions...”⁷ This shows that Iraq was not simply part of the Persian Empire—it was the heart of Persia. Thus the Euphrates river formed the true western frontier of the Persian Empire.⁸ There was a great overlap here with the linguistic territory of Syriac, a language based in northern Mesopotamia, the country stretching between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and adjoining re-

⁴ For details, see Wolfgang Hage, “Yahballaha III, the Mongol Catholicos –Patriarch of the Church of the East,” in idem, *Syriac Christianity in the East*. Mōrā ʿEthʿō series, 1 (Kottayam, India: St. Joseph’s Press, 1988): 68–79. Yahballāhā’s biography was originally written in Persian (not extant), and later translated into Syriac (71, n. 9).

⁵ Prior to the Sasanian empire, the Parthian empire (the Parthians were a people of northeastern Iran) extended from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf and from Afghanistan to the Tigris. During the Parthian period (c. 141 B.C.E to 224 C.E.), Rome replaced the Greeks as the arch-enemy of the East. While Christians were being persecuted within the Roman Empire, they were relatively free from persecution under the Parthians.

⁶ Wilhelm Eilers, “Iran and Mesopotamia,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; Cambridge University Press, 1983): vol. 3(1), 481–504 [481].

⁷ Eilers, “Iran and Mesopotamia,” 481.

gions. Northern Mesopotamia consisted of the Syriac-speaking regions of Adiabene and Osrhoëne. This land formed much of present-day Iraq.

Bardaiṣan (Bardesanes, Bar Daiṣān, d. 222 C.E.)⁹ refers to the existence of Christians in the provinces of Pārs, Medea, Kāshān, and Parthia. Twice during his war against the Romans (viz., the two captures of Antioch in 256 and 260 C.E.), Shāpūr deported sizeable contingents of Greek-speaking Christian prisoners of war from Antioch and other cities and colonized these “spoils of war” in Persis, Parthia, Susiana, and Babylonia. According to the *Chronicle of Séert*, this resulted in there being two churches—Greek and Syriac—at Rēv-Ardashīr in Persis (Pārs).¹⁰ Despite these ethnic boundaries, this was a fortuitous boon to Christianity in Persia.

The “Church of Persia” is principally an ecclesiastical term, designating the East Syrian Church, which flourished, albeit with episodic persecutions, in the Persian empire under the Sasanians. “Persian Christianity” is a more geographical or regional description term, adumbrating West Syrian Jacobites as well, who eventually sought refuge in the Sasanian kingdom. The term “Persian” by itself will be used to denote ethnic Iranian Christians, who were mostly converts from Zoroastrianism. Indeed, while the liturgy and instruction remained, for the most part, Syriac, a subsidiary Christian vernacular was Persian. During the Sasanian period, Brock notes that “Persian became an increasingly important literary vehicle for Christians” and that there was a “once extensive Christian literature in this language...”.¹¹ So multi-ethnic was East Syr-

⁸ Eilers, “Iran and Mesopotamia,” 481.

⁹ In his *Chronicon*, Michael Syrus states that Bardaiṣan had three sons: Abgarun, Hasdu, and Harmonius. With his sons, Bardaiṣan was placed under a ban issued by Bishop Aqi (successor to Bishop Hystaspes). Subsequently, Bardaiṣan died at the age of 68 (therefore in 222 C.E.). Drijvers, *Bardaiṣan*, 188.

¹⁰ J. P. Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3 (2): *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*. Edited by Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge University Press, 1983): 924–948 [929–930].

¹¹ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 18.

ian Christianity that “Christians in the Sasanid empire employed a whole number of different languages for ecclesiastical use.”¹²

Aphrahāt “the Persian sage” is our earliest major witness to Christianity within the Persian empire. Likewise, F. Rilliet was quoted earlier as having stated that Ephrem “is a privileged witness of the tradition of the primitive church of Persia.”¹³ While developments that brought the Church of Persia into its own as a church independent of Rome were subsequent to both Aphrahāt and Ephrem, their legacy had a formative and abiding influence on Persian Christianity.

Rome and Persia, superpowers of the early Christian world, were perpetually at war. This political conflict had a role in sparking religious conflict as well. In the fourth century, when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity became politicized. The superpower rivalry then took on overt religious overtones. Now, for non-Roman Christians, the pendulum between persecution and protection swung between state religion as well as affairs of state. A rival religion competed with Christianity for power. This was the ancient Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism. This Persian monotheism, founded on an ethical dualism, traditionally held to “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” as its sacred ideal. But in political reality, as the state religion of Persia, Zoroastrianism exercised quite the opposite in its treatment of Christians.

Zoroastrianism reached its zenith of power under the patronage of Shāpūr I (r. 241–272). Persian Christianity became the primary target of the intolerance with which the Magian religion became imbued. It was the chief priest Kartīr who had the Persian prophet Mānī tortured and executed. Social status or rank of nobility provided little protection from the wide-scale persecution of Christians at the hands of a fanatical Magian clergy. Not even the high-born Qandira (Candida) the Roman—who was the Christian consort of King Varahan II (r. 276–293)—was spared. It was Kartīr who probably instigated the first

¹² Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 17.

¹³ F. Rilliet, “Ephrem the Syrian,” *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (Oxford, 1992): I. 276.

persecution of Christians in Persia. Persecutions continued throughout the rest of Shāpūr II's reign, and, sporadically, during the reigns of his successors, Ardashīr II (r. 379–383) and Vaharan IV (r. 388–399). Under the reign of Yazdagird I (r. 399–421), Christians were tolerated until the year 420 C.E. Christian sources, in fact, praise Yazdagird.

The discovery on Khārg Island in the Persian Gulf of no fewer than sixty Christian tombs indicates that by the year 250 C.E. there was already a strong Christian presence in Persia. These sixty tombs at Khārg, an island near Bushire and opposite Bahrain, were cut into a coral bank. Vestiges of Syriac inscriptions are still visible on the vertical columns of these Christian tombs. Stewart McCullough speculates that Christians on the mainland had selected the island as a place less vulnerable to disturbance by fanatical Zoroastrian priests. These sixty tombs may in fact have housed martyrs of persecutions instigated by the high priest, Kartīr,¹⁴ “who gave Zoroastrianism a new dimension by turning it into a religion that would brook no rivals in Iran.”¹⁵

As a dual-authority polity, Christians within the Persian Empire had divided loyalties. During the reign of Shāpūr II (310–379 C.E.), Constantine (d. 337) converted to Christianity. In turn, Christianity was converted to the state religion of the Roman Empire. (Ephrem's native town of Nisibis was represented at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. by Bishop Jacob.) Unwittingly, after the transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian state, Persian Christians became a political vanguard of Rome. This placed them in an even more precarious situation. Already vulnerable as a religious minority, Persian Christians were perceived as allied with the enemy, and not without justification. Three years after Constantine's death in 337 C.E., persecution against the Christians in Persia began.

In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius, the first historian of the Church, states that there were “many churches of God in Persia and that large

¹⁴ W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982): 112.

¹⁵ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 102.

numbers were gathered into the fold of Christ.”¹⁶ Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and the Christianizing of the Roman Empire cast a pall of suspicion over an estimated 35,000 Persian Christians, who fell victim to the Great Persecution that began in 339 C.E. and ended only with the death of Shāpūr II forty years later. (Large-scale persecution of Persian Christians was instigated mainly during times of war, when Christians were suspected of favoring the enemy.)¹⁷

This situation was aggravated by overt pro-Roman sympathies held by some of the Persian Christians. Aphrahāt is a case-in-point. The Persian Sage writes: “The People of God have received prosperity, and success awaits the man who has been the instrument of that prosperity [i.e., Constantine]; but disaster threatens the army gathered together by the efforts of a wicked and proud man puffed up by vanity [Šāpūr].... The [Roman] Empire will not be conquered, because the hero whose name is Jesus is coming with His power, and His army will uphold the whole army of the Empire” (Aph. Dem. 5.1.24).¹⁸

Survival necessitated an eventual break between Roman and Persian Christians. Eventually this break took place. The counterpart of Rome in the Persian Empire was Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the twin-city Sasanian capital where Persian Christianity officially constituted itself in the year 410 C.E. at the Synod of Mār Ishāq, asserting its full independence in the Synod of Dādīšō^c in 424 C.E. (See details in the section, “*The Persian Synods*,” below.) The area encompassed by Persian Christianity included areas both within present-day Iran (such as the province of Pārs) as well as the frontier regions of Nisibis and Adiabene. Mār Ishāq in fact proclaimed himself “bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Catholicós and Head (*rēšā*) over the bishops of all the Orient (*madneḥā*).”¹⁹

Ecclesiastical development within Persian Christianity has also been documented. Its anchor in orthodoxy seemed secure in its adherence to

¹⁶ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 1.

¹⁷ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 5.

¹⁸ Cited by James R. Russell, “Christianity. I. In Pre-Islamic Persia,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. V, 523–528 [524–525].

¹⁹ Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 931.

the Nicene Creed. Indeed, a certain “John of Persia” (Yohannan of Bēr Pārsāyē) is recorded as having represented Persia at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. (Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, remarked that “even a Persian bishop attended the Synod.”)²⁰ In 345 C.E., at the Synod of Seleucia, Bishop Pāpā bar Aggai sought to consolidate all of the churches in Persian territory under his rule. But the bishops of Persia proper thwarted this scheme. Particularly strong resistance came from Milēs of Susa.

Later, at the Synod of Mār Ishāq (410), the Church of Persia was officially established in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the royal capital of Persia. These were twin cities, situated on either side of the Tigris river. This Synod commenced with a prayer for the king, Yazdagird I, who had granted tolerance and even favor to Christians and other minorities. The Synod officially adopted the Nicene Creed. Six “classical” provinces within the western regions of the Sasanian empire were represented in the official records of this synod. Geo Widengren has assembled a list of fifteen evangelized provinces in Sasanian Iran and in Central Asia.²¹ I have expanded Widengren’s list to at least eighteen provinces, excluding “Outer Iran” (Central Asia). Some of these provinces were ecclesiastical provinces. The rest were bishoprics. The following table lists all of twenty-five provinces of the Sasanian empire as enumerated in Shāpūr I’s inscription on the Ka^cba-yi Zardusht.²² These provinces are represented in geographical order and by quadrant, according to the points of the compass (*kust*). Evangelized provinces are marked in bold:

²⁰ *Apud* Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 931, n. 6.

²¹ Geo Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran.” In *Incontro di Religioni in Asia tra il III e il X Secolo d.C.* Ed. Lionello Lanciotti (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1984): 1–30 [10–12].

²² Shāpūr I’s list of Sasanian provinces is given by Christopher Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions: Settlements and Economy,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3(2): *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods: 747–777* [750], following a very useful and detailed map of “The provinces of early Sasanian Iran,” 748–749.

Evangelized Provinces of Sasanian Persia
South**Quadrant***(southwest)*

1. **Pārs**
2. **Parthau**
3. **Khuzistān**

West**Quadrant**

4. **Maishān**
5. **Āsūristān**
6. **Nōdardashīragān**
7. **Arbāyistān**

North**Quadrant***(north)**(northwest)*

8. **Ādurbādagān**
9. **Armin**
10. **Wirōzān**
11. **Sigān**
12. **Arṛān**
13. **Balāsagān**
14. **Parishkwārgar**
15. **Māh**
15. **Gurgān**

East**Quadrant***(east)**(southeast)*

16. **Marv**
17. **Harēw**
18. **Abaršahr**
18. **Kushānshahr**
19. **Kirmān**
20. **Sagistān**
21. **Turgistān**
22. **Makurān**
23. **Pārdān**
24. **Hind**
25. **Mazōn**

Outer Iran

(Central Asia)

- 26. **Samarkand**
- 27. Bactria
- 28. **Sogdiana**

Evangelized Provinces of Sasanian Persia: the Evidence: The first six ecclesiastical provinces of the Church of the East were formalized as hyparchies in the Synod of Mār Ishāq (410 C.E.). These provinces did not represent all of the Christian districts within the frontiers of the Sasanian empire at that time. In Canon XXI, the assembled bishops express the hope that “the bishops from the far-away regions (*atrawātā raḥīqē*), from Pārs, the Islands, Bēr Mādāyē, Bēr R[az]īqāyē, indeed, even from the Abaršahr regions” would accept the decisions reached by the synod.²³ All of these regions will be briefly discussed in the geographical-ecclesiastical overview that follows below.

South Quadrant

(*southwest*)

The concentrations of Syriac-speaking and Greek-speaking captives lay in the western districts of the south quadrant.²⁴

1. **Pārs:** This is the province in which John of Daylam established a monastery for Persian-speaking monks in the eighth century.²⁵ Pārs is mentioned as a bishopric in the Synod of 410. In the southwest province of Pārs (Fārs, Persia proper), the city of Iṭakhr (Iṣṭakhr)—summer capital of the Sasanians—had become a diocese by 424.²⁶ In its role as the spiritual centre of Zoroastrianism, in Iṭakhr was kept the dynasty’s fire, the *Anāhīd-ardashīr*, described as the “ideological heart of the empire.”²⁷

²³ Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 932.

²⁴ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions, 751.

²⁵ Anonymous, “John of Deylam,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* VII, 336 (article printed on last page of fascicle 3 bears no author).

²⁶ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions, 751.

²⁷ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions,” 751.

Between 415 and 420 C.E, Pārs became an ecclesiastical province.²⁸ As of the Synod of Mār Bābay in 497, its metropolis was *Rēv-Ardashīr* (Rīshahr), from whence the Nestorian mission to India was directed. The province of Pārs included Qais Island, a distinct bishopric as of 544 C.E.

2. **Parthau:** Aspadana (Spāhān, Ispāhān, Iṣfāhān) in the southwest province of Parthau is also mentioned in the Synod of Mār Dādīšō^c (424).

3. **Khūzistān:** (Represented as an ecclesiastical province in the Synod of 410.) In the southwest quadrant of Sasanian Iran, the province of Khūzistān (Syriac: *Bēr Hūzāyē*) was also known as Parthian Susiana, Elymais, Elam. Its metropolis was the pre-Sasanian diocese of *Bēr Lāpāt* (later Gundē-Shāpūr). The ancient capital of *Shūsh* (Susa) became a diocese by 410, as was the case with *Karkā dm Lādhan* (Ērānshahr-Shāpūr), and *Rāmhur-muz* (Rām-Ormazd-Ardashīr), the major city in the east of the province.²⁹ A bishopric was established in *Hormizd-Ardashīr* (Ahvāz), the later capital of Khūzistān.³⁰

West Quadrant

4. **Maishān:** (Represented as an ecclesiastical province in the Synod of 410.) In Lower Babylonia, the region around Baṣra in modern Iraq, the western province of Maišān (Mēšān, Mesene) had four bishoprics, with *Pherāt dm Maišān* (later Vahman-Ardashīr) as its metropolis.³¹

5. **Āsūristān:** (Represented as an ecclesiastical province in the Synod of 410.) In what was known to antiquity as Babylonia, now Iraq, the western province (*shahr*) of Āsūristān (Syriac: *Bēr Arāmāyē*) was known as Assyria, although historical Assyria was actually to the north. In the Sasanian era, Iranians considered Āsūristān to be “the heart of

²⁸ Geo Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 11.

²⁹ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions,” 753.

³⁰ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 137.

³¹ See article by M. Streck, “Maisān,” in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, first edition.

Iran.”³² The Catholicós of the Church of the East was the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Sasanian administrative capital and royal winter residence. The bishop of the district of Kashkar served as auxiliary.³³

6. **Nōdardashīragān:** (Represented as an ecclesiastical province in the Synod of 410.) The western province of Garamīg ud Nōdardashīragān (Syriac: *Bēr Garmay*) was north of Āsūristān between the Tigris and Little Khābūr rivers, and the mountains of Āzarbāyjān. Its metropolis was *Karkā dm Bēr Selōk* (Kirkūk). This ecclesiastical province included the bishopric of Pērōz-Shāpūr³⁴ (Faishābūr) and probably the diocese of Shahrāzūr.³⁵ Garamīg used to be part of the province of Adiabene. Evidently, Garamīg was organized as a special province between 343 and 410 C.E.³⁶

Adiabene: (Represented as an ecclesiastical province in the Synod of 410.) In what is now northern Iraq, the Sasanian buffer state Adiabene (Syriac: *Hedyab*, Ḥadyab) lay east of the Tigris, between the Greater and Lesser Zāb rivers. An organized Christian community since the late Parthian period, Adiabene’s metropolis was *Arbela* (Irbīl).

Hulwān: The ecclesiastical province of Hulwān (Syriac: *Bēr Mādāyē*, Māda) was established and organized by Catholicós Išoyabh Geddālāyā II between the years 628–643.³⁷ It occupied the region of southern Media, now Albania.³⁸

7. **Arbāyistān:** (Represented as an ecclesiastical province in the Synod of 410.) In Northern Mesopotamia, the western Sasanian province of Arbāyistān or Arabistān (Syriac: *Bēr Arbāyē*) had Ephrem’s native city

³² Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions, 757.

³³ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 123.

³⁴ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 137.

³⁵ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions,” 761.

³⁶ Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 11.

³⁷ Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 12.

³⁸ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 151.

of Nisibis as its metropolis. Nearby, on Mount Īzlā, was the “Great Monastery”—the leading monastery in Christian Persia.³⁹

North Quadrant

(north)

8. **Ādurbādagān:** The northern province of Ādurbādagān (Āzarbāyjān) had at least one bishop.⁴⁰

(northwest)

9. **Armin:** No bishoprics attested.

10. **Wirōzān:** No bishoprics attested.

11. **Sigān:** No bishoprics attested.

12. **Arrān:** No bishoprics attested.

13. **Balāsagān:** No bishoprics attested.

Parishkwārgar: In the Caspian region of Dēlam (Dailam, Daylam) in the northern province of Parishkwārgar (Ṭabaristān), John of Daylam founded several monasteries. Later, John traveled to Arrajān (Argān) in Fārs, where he established two monasteries, one for Syriac-speaking monks and the other for Persian-speaking monks. In the *Book of the Laws of Countries*, Bar Daiṣān’s pupil Philippus had already attested the presence of Christians in both nearby Gīlān and in Kushān: “Our sisters among the Geli and the Kushanians do not have intercourse with foreigners, and they who live in Persia do not marry their daughters.”⁴¹ The Gēls, who were admired as valiant warriors, were the native inhabitants of Gīlān, which, along with Daylam, lay in the mountainous regions on the southern shores of the Caspian.

³⁹ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 170.

⁴⁰ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 151.

⁴¹ Edakalathur, *The Theology of Marriage*, 9, citing Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws*, 61.

14. **Māh:** The northern province of Māh (central Media, the “core of Media”⁴²) had a diocese in the city of Rayy (Syriac: *Bēr R[az]īqāyē*), otherwise known as ʿAqdā, Rhages. Mentioned in the Synod of Mār Ishāq (410).

15. **Gurgān:** According to the letter sent by Timotheos I (d. 823), Christianity had been established in Gurgān (the ancient Hyrcania).⁴³

East Quadrant

(east)

As of the Synod of 424 C.E., it was evident that the Church of the East had expanded deep into central and eastern Persia, “into regions that were predominantly Zoroastrian.”⁴⁴

16. **Marv:** Between 415 and 420, Marv became an ecclesiastical province.⁴⁵ In the Synod of 554, the eastern province of Marv (Margiana), north of present-day Khurāsān, is mentioned as a hyparchy, although there appears to have been a Christian bishop there as early as 334 C.E. From Marv, Christian missions proceeded on to Ṭukhāristān and to Transoxiana.⁴⁶

17. **Harēw:** In the Synod of 585, the eastern province of Harēw (Herāt, Areia, i.e. modern Afghanistan) is mentioned as a hyparchy. (It had become a bishopric by 424.)

Abaršahr: Also mentioned in the Synod of Mār Ishāq, the eastern province of Aparšahr (“realm of the Aparni” clans) is also part of modern Khurāsān. The city of *Nēv-Shāpur* was its centre.

18. **Kushānshahr:** The eastern province of Kushān (Ṭukhāristān) had already been evangelized by the third century, if not by the second

⁴² Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions, 766.

⁴³ Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 11.

⁴⁴ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 126.

⁴⁵ Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 11.

⁴⁶ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions,” 770.

(see note on Bardaiṣān *supra*). On the coast in the district of Qatīf, a bishopric was established in the city of Paniyāt-Ardashīr by 576. The islands of Tārūt and Muḥarraḡ also became dioceses, along with Gerrha (Hajar).⁴⁷

(southeast)

19. **Kirmān:** In a letter to Simeon, metropolitan of Rev Ardashīr in Pārs (Fārs), Nestorian catholicós Isho^cyahb III (647–659 C.E.), lamented that many Christians in Fārs and Kirmān, despite lack of persecution by Arabs, had converted to Islam to escape paying taxes.⁴⁸

20. **Sagistān:** In the Synod of Mār Dādīšō^c (424), the southeastern province of Sagistān (Sēyānsa, Sijistān) was represented by two bishops.⁴⁹

21. **Turgistān:** No bishoprics attested.

22. **Makurān:** No bishoprics attested.

23. **Pārdān:** No bishoprics attested.

24. **Hind:** By the sixth century, Iranian merchants dominated the Indian ports on the west coast of “India Interior.” Christians there were under the authority of the church hyparchy of Fārs.⁵⁰ This fact was noted by the traveler Cosmas Indicopleustes, an Egyptian monk, who, during the first half of the sixth century, observed that “in the country which is called Male (Malabar), where pepper is growing, there is a bishop ordained in Persia.”⁵¹ (Cosmas also found “Persian” Christians on the is-

⁴⁷ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions,” 757.

⁴⁸ Michael Morony, “The Age of Conversions: A Reassessment,” in Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990): 135–150 [141].

⁴⁹ Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 5.

⁵⁰ Brunner, “Geographical and Administrative Divisions,” 757.

⁵¹ Cited by Fiey, “The Spread of the Persian Church,” 98.

lands of Ceylon and Socotra.)⁵² The office of the bishop of India was promoted to a metropolitan between the years 714 and 728.⁵³

25. **Mazōn:** The southeastern province of Mazōn included the territory referred to as “The Islands” (Syriac: *Bēr Qaṭrāyē*), i.e. eastern Arabia and Baḥrain, which had a monastery.⁵⁴ Mazōn was transformed into a hyparchy as of the Synod of 676 C.E.

Outer Iran (Central Asia)

26. **Samarkand:** Samarkand (ancient Marakand) was a Nestorian province. The evidence for the establishment of Christianity there has been collected by Colless.⁵⁵

27. **Bactria:** No bishoprics attested.

28. **Sogdiana:** The evangelization of the Sogdians represents the culmination of missionary efforts within the Sasanian empire, as Richard N. Frye observes: “In the east, too, Christian missionaries made converts among the Hephthalites and Sogdians, so one may infer everywhere a growing Christian influence at the end of the Sasanian empire.”⁵⁶

A total of some eighteen Sasanian provinces are thus known to have been evangelized. Nestorian missions extended far beyond the Sasanian borders, expanding east through Central Asia, and finally reaching to the end of the world as it was known, China. Numerically, this is sixty-eight percent of the provinces of the Persian empire.

By the fall of the Sasanian dynasty, before the Arab onslaught in the mid-seventh century, there were ten metropolitan sees (including the pa-

⁵² Archdale A. King, *The Rites of Eastern Christendom* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1948): II, 269.

⁵³ Cited by Fiey, “The Spread of the Persian Church,” 98.

⁵⁴ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 167.

⁵⁵ B. E. Colless, “The Nestorian Province of Samarkand,” *Abr Nahrayn* 24 (1986): 51–57.

⁵⁶ Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962): 224.

triarchate) and ninety-six bishoprics.⁵⁷ Brock notes that: “In what is today north Iraq, conversions to Christianity from paganism continued into the early Islamic period...”.⁵⁸ With the advent of Islam, the Church of Persia went into decline in terms of population, but certainly not intellectually nor in the prosecution of its missionary endeavors. It is estimated that the majority of the population of Iran was more or less fully converted to Islam between 850 and 950 C.E.⁵⁹ The Nestorian chronicler Mārī b. Sulaymān reported that “many” Christians in Iran had converted to Islam in the late tenth century due to persecution and to corruption of the clergy.⁶⁰ However, in the mountain regions of the north, it took nearly two centuries for Islam to penetrate Daylam and Gīlān. Persia’s conversion to Islam was nearly complete only with the establishment of the Seljuk empire.⁶¹

The Nestorian Controversy and the Independence of the Church of Persia: In the fifth century, from Narsai (d. c. 471) onward, the Church of Persia became, loosely speaking, “Nestorian,” incorporating a dyophysite, “two-natures” position within its Christology.

In 428 C.E., Nestorius had become the Patriarch of Byzantium. Nestorius taught that Christ was one person, but had two distinct natures, divine and human. These natures remained separate, such that Mary was not, properly speaking, the “Mother of God” (*theotókos*). Nestorius rejected the divinity of the man Jesus. This was utter doom for him and his followers. Cyril of Alexandria, adamant in his belief that the two natures of Christ were united at birth, vigorously opposed Nestorius. He was

⁵⁷ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 3.

⁵⁸ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 3, n. 9, citing the study by M. Morony, “The Effects of the Muslim Conquest on the Persian Population of Iraq,” *Iran* 14 (1976): 54. See also idem, “Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17 (1974): 113–135.

⁵⁹ Michael Morony, “The Age of Conversions,” 136–138.

⁶⁰ Morony, “The Age of Conversions,” 143.

⁶¹ Edmond Schütz, “Armenia: A Christian Enclave in the Islamic Near East in the Middle Ages.” In Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (eds.), *Con-*

anathematized at the Council of Ephesus (431 C.E.). Under Byzantine rule, Nestorians were forced to flee Edessa. They took refuge in Nisibis under Persian rule. This proved a blessing in disguise, as the Nestorian church, despite sporadic persecutions, flourished in Persia, steering as it did a steady course between alternate patronage and persecution.

Nestorius was held in high esteem by Narsai, the great consolidator of Nestorianism, popularly known as the “Harp of the Spirit” (*kinārā d-rūḥā*). The innocence of Nestorius is championed by Narsai in a homily in defense of the “Three Doctors”—Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius.⁶² “The Persian Christians, moreover, have never, with common consent, referred to themselves as ‘Nestorians’; this was a derogatory title employed by the Monophysites for all dyophysite Christians.”⁶³ Rather, Persian Christians were Theodoran. Insofar as he followed Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius was looked upon as orthodox and as one who was treated unjustly.

Generally, Persian Christians avoided referring to Nestorius by name. It was, after all, a lightning rod for criticisms of those errors traditionally ascribed to him. Yet the influence of Nestorius was undeniable. In its Syriac translation, Nestorius’ *Book of Herakleides* exerted a powerful influence on Bābay the Great (d. 628).⁶⁴ However, Nestorius was by no means the major theologian of the Church of the East. That distinction rests with Bābay. “For the Persians,” writes Geevarghese Chediath,

version and Continuity: 217–236 [219].

⁶² The Syriac text was edited by F. Martin in *Journal Asiatique* 14 (1899): 446–492, and translated in *Journal Asiatique* 15 (1900): 469–525.

⁶³ D. Miller, “A Brief Historical and Theological Introduction to the Church of Persia to the End of the Seventh Century,” in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984): 481–541 [528, n. 125].

⁶⁴ S. Brock, “The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials,” in *Aksūm-Thyateira: A Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain* (ed. G. Dragas; Athens, 1985): 125–142 [128]. See G. Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great* (Kottayam, 1982).

“Babai’s Christology was the Christology of their church.”⁶⁵ Bābay’s major Christological treatise was *On the Union* (sc. of the two natures of Christ). In current scholarship, the term “Nestorian” is still a term of convenience, not of deprecation. This is not without precedent within the Church of the East itself. In the year 1609 C.E., for instance, Mār ʿAbd Yeshua drew up the “orthodox creed of the Nestorians,” having done so “in the blessed city of Khlāt in the church of the blessed Nestorians.”⁶⁶ Centuries earlier, in the 8th-century to be precise, Mar Shahdost of Tirhan⁶⁷ had composed a treatise entitled, *Why we Easterns have separated ourselves from the Westerns, and why we are called Nestorians*. In this text, the author refers to his faith-community as, “we, the Nestorians.”⁶⁸

Monarchs often took a vested and active interest in overseeing Persian Christianity. Sasanian kings took interest in various Synods. In 552, Kavādh’s son Chosroes I (r. 531–579) imposed his own nominee as Catholicós for ratification at the Synod of 554. At the Synod of Mār Ezekiel (576), Chosroes I demanded that he be named in the litanies during the liturgy.⁶⁹ In 609 C.E., Chosroes II (r. 591–628) was outraged when his own candidate was passed over. So he forbade any subsequent election, which eventually left the Christian community temporarily without a head until the King’s death nullified the ban. In the late sixth century, the Christian communities of Marv and Herat became prominent. In the

⁶⁵ Geevarghese Chediath, “The Theological Contribution of Mar Babai the Great,” in *Syriac Dialogue: First Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syrian Tradition, with focus on the Theology of the Church of the East* (Vienna: Pro Oriente, 1996): 155–167 [165].

⁶⁶ *Apud* Walter F. Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Churches* (Clifton, New Jersey: Reference Book Publishers, 1965): 484, n. 1, who cites Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals* (1862): vol. 1, 178.

⁶⁷ Not to be confused with Tehran.

⁶⁸ Cited by Adelbert Davids, “Is the Theology of the Assyrian Church Nestorian?” in *Syriac Dialogue: First Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syrian Tradition, with focus on the Theology of the Church of the East* (Vienna: Pro Oriente, 1996): 134–142 [134–135].

⁶⁹ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 11.

year 651, the Bishop of Marv donated a sepulchre for the assassinated Yazdagird III.⁷⁰ But the relationship between Church and State was always tense and precarious. War-weary and overtaxed, many Persian Christians welcomed with palm fronds the Arab conquerors of Ctesiphon.⁷¹

The Persian Synods: The Church of Persia held its own series of synods, the records of which have come down to us in the so-called *Synodicon Orientale*.⁷² It is a record of the history of Christianity in Sasanian Iran. This chronicle, however, is not contemporary. It was compiled by the Catholicós Timothy in the late eighth century. The first bishop of historical stature of the Persian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was a certain Pāpā, who lived in the fourth century. Pāpā was opposed by Miles, bishop of Susa, who deposed Pāpā from office when Pāpā tried to impose autocratic rule on Miles' episcopal colleagues. Pāpā's effort to consolidate churches in Persia into a unified Church of Persia had failed.

The Church of Persia officially constituted itself in its first Synod of 410 C.E. (Not until the year 409. C.E. was public Christian worship permitted.)⁷³ Virtually isolated until the early fifth century, the Church of Persia—by virtue of its ancient autonomy—had no dependency on any western diocese, even in Antioch. (There was, however, a theory to the contrary, advanced by some medieval East Syriac writers, who maintained that the see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon had once been subordinate to the patriarchate of Antioch.)⁷⁴ The patriarchal church structure in the

⁷⁰ James R. Russell, "Christianity I. In Pre-Islamic Persia: Literary Sources," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. V, 523–528 [524].

⁷¹ Russell, "Christianity I. In Pre-Islamic Persia: Literary Sources," 525–526.

⁷² Edited, with French translation, by J. B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris, 1902). German version by O. Braun, *Das Buch der Synhados oder Synodicon Orientale* (Stuttgart/Wien, 1900); repr. Amsterdam, 1975). There is an unpublished English translation by M. J. Birnie. See *Syriac Dialogue* (1996), 88–89, and 119.

⁷³ This signal event occurred during the reign of Yazdagird (r. 399–422). See Eilers, "Iran and Mesopotamia," 485.

⁷⁴ Brock, "The Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire," 75, n. 15, citing A. de Halleux, "Autonomy and Centralization in the in the Ancient Syriac

Byzantine West had crystallized during the fourth and fifth centuries. And Byzantine influence can be seen in the first general synod of the Church of Persia, held in 410 C.E. This transpired when Mārūrā, the Byzantine imperial envoy for peace negotiations between the Roman and Persian empires, set out to the Sasanian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, to align the Church of Persia with the norms of the Church of the West.

In this venture, Mārūrā succeeded in enlisting the support of the Persian monarch, Yazdagird I. “It is significant,” Brock remarks, “that the synod was convoked by the Shah himself.”⁷⁵ By royal decree, the bishops of the realm were summoned to the capital. The Byzantine ecclesiastical envoy acted as co-president of the synod, along with the Catholicós [Archbishop], Mār Ishāq. The synod promulgated a number of canons that regulated church doctrine, liturgy, and office in accordance with the prevailing practices of the West. A variation on the Nicene creed was also adopted. The rule of one bishop per city created problems in areas where there were multiple sees, due to the presence of sometimes Greek, Syriac, and Persian Christian populations. Several days after the initial session, Mārūrā and Mar Ishāq (Isaac) arranged for an official audience with the king, before whom all of the Persian bishops were assembled. This marked what was probably the very first time that the relationship between church and state was regularized.⁷⁶

Another synod was convoked in 420 C.E., under the presidency of the new Catholicós Yahballāhā and another Byzantine ambassador, Acacius of Amida. But in the Synod of 424, at which a Byzantine representative was not present, the full autonomy of the Church of Persia was espoused. Here, as in the three Petrine sees of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, the language of the Synod of 424 was couched in Petrine terms. In its canonical emancipation from Antioch, the Church of Persia placed itself outside

Churches, Edessa and Seleucia-Ctesiphon,” in *Wort und Wahrheit*, Supplement 4 (Wien, 1978): 59–67; and subsequent studies.

⁷⁵ Brock, “The Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire,” 73.

⁷⁶ Brock, “The Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire,” 74.

the petrarchy of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem.⁷⁷

Vernacular Persian in Church of the East Liturgy?: What evidence is there to attest to the presence of an indigenous, ethno-linguistic Iranian presence in Persian Christianity, which was predominately East Syrian? Is it possible that ethnic Persians constituted the most important minority in the Church of the East, once a flourishing, multi-ethnic and thus “universal” Church? Gernot Wiessner has stressed the importance of the Iranian ethnic element in Nestorianism.⁷⁸ Evidence suggests there was an appreciable ethnic Iranian representation in the Church of Persia. This is colorfully illustrated by an episode in the Syriac *Life of John of Dailam*. John of Daylam (variously spelled Dailam, Deylam) was an East Syrian saint of the 7th–8th century, who lived in western Persia. The following narrative tells of a controversy that broke out among the monks in Arrajān over whether to conduct services in Syriac or in Persian:

Now the Persian and Syriac-speaking brethren quarreled with each other over the services: the Persians said, “We should all recite the services in our language, seeing that we live in Persian territory”; while the Syriac-speakers said, “Our father is a Syriac-speaker, and so we should recite the services in our language, on account of the founder of the monastery; furthermore we do not know how to recite the services in Persian.”

When Mār Yoḥannan saw the quarrel had arisen, he pacified the brethren and prayed to God with deep feeling. Thereupon he was told in a revelation from God: “Build them another monastery the other side of the river, opposite this one, resembling it in every respect. Let the Persian-speakers live in one, and the Syriac in the other.” So he built another monastery just like the first, and the Syriac-speaking brethren lived there. Thus the quarrel between the brethren was resolved.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 941.

⁷⁸ Gernot Wiessner, “Christlicher Heiligenkult im Umkreis eines sassanidischen Grosskönigs,” in W. Eilers (ed.), *Festgabe deutscher Iranisten zur 2500 Feier Irans* (Stuttgart, 1971): 141–155.

⁷⁹ Brock, “A Syriac Life of John of Dailam,” *Parole de l’Orient* 10 (1981– 82): 123–190 [150–151].

This is plausible enough, especially in light of the resurgence of literary Persian in the ninth century. If this story has any basis in fact, it provides anecdotal evidence of a considerable segment of ethnic Iranians within the Church of Persia. A recent study pronounces the following verdict on the historicity of this account: “John traveled to Arrajān in Fārs, where he founded several monasteries: two of them were assigned to Persia- and Syriac-speaking monks respectively, so that neither community should be forced to celebrate services in a foreign language. Despite some chronological confusion and the legendary accretions typical of Syriac hagiographical literature, there is no reason to doubt the essential historicity of this biography.”⁸⁰ Indeed, there must have been a significant number of native Persians converting to Christianity. In the fifth century, imperial ambassadors from the Roman emperor Theodosius beseeched Yazdagird I (r. 399–421) to release from prison a deacon named Benjamin, to which the Shah replied: “Give me assurance in his own handwriting that he will not convert to his faith any more Magians in Persia. If so, at your request, I will free him from chains.” This officially constituted one of the terms of the peace treaty of 561⁸¹ during the reign of Chosroes I (r. 531–579) which established that there should be freedom of religion, but not to proselytize. Both Christians and Zoroastrians were forbidden to proselytize in their respective territories.⁸²

According to Asmussen, “numerous” Christian converts in the fifth century had Zoroastrian names, attesting to the success of the Church of Persia in converting ethnic Iranians.⁸³ By the fifth century, some of the chief Iranian festivals had already been turned into Christian feasts.⁸⁴ The influx of former Zoroastrians in the Church of Persia was of such magnitude that the Persian king Jāmāsp (r. 498–501) summoned a synod

⁸⁰ Anonymous, “John of Deylam,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* VII, 336.

⁸¹ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 10–11, n. 41.

⁸² Bausani, *The Persians*, 66–67.

⁸³ Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 942.

⁸⁴ Mary Boyce, “Iranian Festivals,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran* (ed. Eh-

to deliberate on the problem of Zoroastrian marriage customs within the Christian community. That this was a topic of major concern in the sixth century is also attested by the earliest treatise of canon law by Catholicós Mār Abā I (d. 552), which was devoted to this subject.⁸⁵ Further evidence of the conversion of ethnic Iranians is found in various other documents. In 595 C.E., the patriarch Sabrisho persuaded Chosroes II (r. 591–628) to grant Christians freedom of worship. According to the *Life of Sabrisho*, as a result many Persian noblemen converted.⁸⁶ Prior to this, even a son of Chosroes I had become a Christian.⁸⁷ This must have alarmed both the monarch and the Zoroastrian priests. Active proselytizing of Zoroastrians by the Nestorians was ended as a matter of policy with the truce of 562 C.E. concluded between Constantinople and Persia.

Christians in Persia constituted, in political scientific terms, a “dual authority polity” (a communal group having two sources of political authority—state and diasporal, the latter typically being ecclesiastical in the case of faith-communities). The Persian state was the political authority and (Imperial) Christianity the diasporal authority. Conversion to Christianity, for some, entailed spiritual fealty to Christianity in the West. Thus, Persian monarchs were, to a degree, rightly suspicious of Christians as sympathizers with the archenemy Rome, but were mistaken in their fear that this constituted any real threat. With one or two minor exceptions perhaps, Christian sympathy was hardly complicity. Yet, on the pretext of treason, many Christians paid with their lives for pro-Roman leanings. Over time, Christians tried to dispel this cloud of political suspicion and to enlist the support of the Persian monarchy.

Moreover, there is evidence that some Persian Christians were openly loyal to the Sasanian state. In the sixth century, a known convert from Zoroastrianism, named Grīgōr, was commissioned by Cawad [*sic*] as a

san Yarshater; Cambridge University Press, 1983): vol. 3(2), 792–815 [804].

⁸⁵ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 4–5, n. 14.

⁸⁶ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 6, n. 17.

⁸⁷ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 8–9, n. 34.

general during a campaign against Rome.⁸⁸ Grīgōr is reputed to have in fact been the leader of the Persians in war against the Romans.⁸⁹ During the large-scale persecution of Christians (339–379) that took place in the reign of Shāpūr II (r. 310–379), a Christian courtier named Gushtazad apostasized from Christianity but thereafter repented, to die a martyr's death. On being led off to his fate, Gushtazad insisted on sending a last message to Shāpūr II: "I have always been loyal to you and your father. Grant me one request: Let a herald proclaim that Gushtazad is being put to death, not for treason, but because he was a Christian who refused to renounce God."⁹⁰ It should be added, however, that this loyalty to state did not constitute loyalty to a "nation."⁹¹

The extent to which Persian Christians sought to curry favor with the state is seen in the *Synodicon*, in which Chosroes I (r. 531–579) is referred to as "the second Cyrus (*kwrs*)"⁹² who is "preserved by divine grace." In Canon 14 of the Synod of 576, Persian Christians were told: "It is right that in all the churches of this exalted and glorious kingdom that our lord the victorious Chosroes, king of kings, be named in the litanies during the liturgy. No metropolitan or bishop has any authority to waive this canon in any of the churches of his diocese and jurisdiction."⁹³ Even when Persian Christians went to such lengths to appease imperial suspicions as to Christian loyalties, religious persecution at the hands of fanatical and intolerant Magians posed a separate, though related challenge to the Christian community.

Much of our information concerning the ethnic origins of ethnic Christian minorities in the Church of the East comes from martyrologies, in which indigenous converts—especially ethnic Iranian converts—figure prominently. The *Acts of Shīrīn* narrates the martyrdoms of its two

⁸⁸ Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 11.

⁸⁹ Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 934.

⁹⁰ Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 11.

⁹¹ See Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 12.

⁹² Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 946.

⁹³ Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire," 11.

heroines, Shīrīn and Gulindukht. Shīrīn of Karka dīm Beth Selokh was the daughter of Zoroastrian parents. For her Christian faith she was arrested and martyred in Seleucia in February 559. Gulindukht was related to Chosroes I and had been married to a Zoroastrian general. She was converted to Christianity by some Christian prisoners of war. Thrown into the Fortress of Oblivion (*Anūshbard*) after her refusal to revert to Zoroastrianism, she chose martyrdom, despite the intervention of Aristoboulos, a legate sent on a peace mission by the emperor Maurice.⁹⁴ She was martyred in 591. Himself a Zoroastrian convert, Jesusabran of Ber Garmay was another such martyr.⁹⁵ In Iran, the royal martyr Shīndokht is remembered to this day.

Thus, there were, generally speaking, two types of persecution of Christian in Sasanian Persia. The first were large-scale persecutions perpetrated in times of war against Rome. An argument could be made that such persecutions were provoked by ill-disguised sympathies among many Persian Christians for Imperial Christianity and its Christian Emperor. Even in sporadic times of royal clemency and favor, the one grave danger Persian Christians had to face was the hostility of the Magi. This brought about the second type of persecution: persecution by Magians of prominent ex-Zoroastrian Christians. As Sebastian Brock observes: “Other martyrs under the Sasanids were individuals, most of whom were converts of high-born Zoroastrian origin, whose prominence in society led to their denunciation by the Magian clergy and subsequent sentencing to death.”⁹⁶ Some of this persecution Christians had brought upon themselves, through isolated acts of vandalism that included the destruction of Zoroastrian fire-temples.⁹⁷

Despite the unrelenting pressure and threat to life and limb, former Zoroastrian converts to Nestorianism could aspire to Church leadership. One such convert was Mār Aḡa I, who became Catholicós in the year 540

⁹⁴ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 10.

⁹⁵ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 158.

⁹⁶ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 5.

⁹⁷ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 6.

C.E.⁹⁸ But he suffered considerably. Called before a council of the Magi in c. 541–542, he neither agreed to alter the Church’s canons on marriage, nor would he have Christians desist from their current practices of proselytizing. For this he was detained in a village in Azarbaijan for seven years, from whence he exercised his leadership of the Church of Persia. Another type of leadership was that of the mystic, or “holy man.” One such holy man was the renowned Nestorian mystic, Joseph Hazzāyā, who was from a high-born Zoroastrian family.⁹⁹

The pressures of a Zoroastrian environment were felt in all aspects of Christian life. Monasticism in Persia benefited from an influx of Monophysites, who were exiled to northwest Persia as a consequence of the anti-Monophysite policy of the emperor Justin (r. 518–527). (Ecclesiastically, the “Jacobites” as Monophysites continued to maintain ties with Antioch as late as the early seventh century.¹⁰⁰) At a debate he arranged at the royal court, Khusrau I (r. 531–579) was favorably impressed with the Monophysites who pleaded their cause in answer to Nestorian accusations. Khusrau decreed that the Nestorians henceforth leave the Monophysites free to build as many monasteries and churches as they pleased.¹⁰¹

During the latter part of the fifth-century, however, the character of Persian Christianity underwent a profound shift away from celibacy. Asmussen views this as a development resulting in part from the Persian predilection for Nestorianism: “There is scarcely any doubt that this special development of the history of the Church must be viewed against the growing contribution from Christian Iranians who, rooted from birth in Sasanian Zoroastrianism, quite naturally had to acknowledge Nestorianism as the most adequate expression for them of the new teaching to

⁹⁸ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 136.

⁹⁹ Stephen Gerö, “Only a Change of Masters?: The Christians of Iran and the Muslim Conquest,” in *Transition Periods in Iranian History*. *Studia Iranica*, vol. 5 (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 1987): 43–48 [45, n. 22].

¹⁰⁰ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 184.

¹⁰¹ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 153.

which they were attracted. This contribution from Iranians, perhaps particularly from the province of Fārs, the dynastic province, created at the same time the best conditions for the growth of a specifically Iranian, notably anti-ascetic, Christianity which replaced the original, clearly ascetic, Christianity, strongly dominated by Jewish-Christian elements.”¹⁰² In the Synod of Bēt Lāpāt, summoned and overseen by Baršāuma in 484 C.E., celibacy may have been abolished, but in the absence of any direct attestation of this, the Synod of Mār Aqāq in 486 became the effective instrument for the cessation of the practice of celibacy among the Nestorians.¹⁰³ Within the Church, this move was not without controversy, and there was much internal resistance against it. Notwithstanding, the Church of the East has always opposed the alleged Sasanian practice of consanguineous marriages.

Christian Literature in Middle Persian: During the fifth century, the Christian church in Persia became independent of the patriarchate of Antioch. The reasons for this break appear to have been more political than religious. Not surprisingly, the fifth century saw the rise of a vernacular Christian literature in Middle Persian.

The first known Christian text in Persian (apart from scripture translations) was a summary of the Christian religion. Originally composed in Syriac by Elisha^c bar Quzbāyē, it was translated into Persian by the Catholicós Aqāq (Acacius, bishop of Amida, d. 496) and presented to the Persian king, Kavāw I (r. 488–497, 499–531).¹⁰⁴ A parallel to this endeavor might be found in Mānī, whose only writing in Middle Persian was his *Shābuhragān*, “presumably in order to expound his teaching to Šāpūr,” as Sundermann opines.¹⁰⁵

“At a very early date, particularly in the time of bishop Ma^cnā at the end of the 5th century,” writes Asmussen, efforts may be traced to create

¹⁰² Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 943.

¹⁰³ Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 944.

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Christian Literature in Middle Iranian Languages,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 534–535 [534].

¹⁰⁵ Werner Sundermann, “Christ in Manichaeism,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 535–539 [537].

a Christian Persian literature. Judging from the dearth of extant Persian texts, such an assertion might appear hard to sustain. Nevertheless, within the Sasanian empire, Persian seems to have been a subsidiary Christian vernacular. For example, the most eminent of the Persian Christians in the generations prior to the Islamic conquest was Bābay (Babai) the Great (d. 628), who presided over the Nestorian church in Iran under Khusraw II. Bābay is said by Vööbus to have “received instruction in Persian and then started his medical studies at Nisibis...”.¹⁰⁶ Jacob Kollaparambil argues that the East Syrian Christians must have taught and propagated the Christian message throughout Persia and within India as well. This, he claims, is attested in the *Chronicle of Séert* [citing the Syriac text in *Patrologia Orientalis* VII, 117] when it records that, around the year 470 C.E., Bishop Ma^cnā of Rēv-Ardashīr wrote religious discourses, canticles and hymns, in Persian, and translated from Greek into Persian [i.e. Pahlavi, Middle Persian¹⁰⁷] the theological treatises of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia and sent copies “to the islands of the sea” [Bēr Qaṭrāyē] and to India.¹⁰⁸ (Some authors have confused Ma^cnā of Shīrāz with the Catholicós Ma^cnā, who lived in the first half of the fifth century.) Nicholas Sims-Williams is more precise in noting that Ma^cnā of Shīrāz “composed various works in Persian, including hymns (*madrāšē*), ‘discourses’ (*mēmrē*), and responses (*‘ūniātā*) for liturgical use.”¹⁰⁹ These, of course, were based on Syriac models.

The royal city of Rēv-Ardashīr (Rīshahr) was a metropolitan province in Persia proper (Persis). It was the ecclesiastical capital of the province of Pārs. Over time, it had “grown into a super-province having 18 suffra-

¹⁰⁶ Arthur Vööbus, “Bābay the Great,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, III, 308.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth J. Thomas and Fereyduṅ Vahman, “Persian Translations of the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 209–213 [210].

¹⁰⁸ Jacob Kollaparambil, “The Persian Crosses in India are Christian, not Manichaeian,” *Christian Orient* 15.1 (March 1994): 24–35 [28].

¹⁰⁹ Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Christian Literature in Middle Iranian Languages,” 534. Vööbus refers to the same Ma^cnā, “who is reported to have composed *madrāšē*, *mēmrē*, and *‘ūniātā* in the Persian language.” Arthur Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*. CSCO 266, Subsidia 26 (Louvain, 1965): 161, n. 15.

gan eparchies.”¹¹⁰ Bruce Metzger believes that, on the basis of this information, it may be deduced that the scriptures had already been translated into Middle Persian. “Inasmuch as during the second half of the fifth century an eminent teacher Ma^cnā of Shiraz, made translations of Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and other ecclesiastical writers, from Syriac into his native Persian dialect,” Metzger reasons, “we may be confident that the scriptures had already been translated.”¹¹¹ Kollaparambil concludes: “Hence it is clear that, though the Persian Church used Syriac as the liturgical language, the medium of Christian instruction was the Persian language.”¹¹²

This effort to create a body of Christian literature in the Persian vernacular was overshadowed by the ascendancy of Syriac, which reclaimed its place as the primary liturgical and literary language of the church in Persia. Syriac remained the language of the church in Persia, as seen in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*. Most of the martyrs were ethnic Persians. These Persians not only embraced the Christian faith, but also the Christian language as well (viz., Syriac).¹¹³ Consequently, very little of this Christian Persian literature survived. Two legal works by the metropolitans Išo^cbokt and Simon provide a rare attestation of this Persian literary activity.¹¹⁴

Middle Persian translations of the Bible date from at least the fifth century C.E. There is both patristic and material evidence for this. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom (fl. 391), patriarch of Constantinople, affirmed that the teachings of Christ had been translated into the languages of the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Indians, the Persians, and the Ethiopians (Homily on John, in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* LIX, col. 32). In the fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrus wrote that Persians venerated the

¹¹⁰ Kollaparambil, “The Persian Crosses in India are Christian,” 27.

¹¹¹ Bruce Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1977): 276.

¹¹² Kollaparambil, “The Persian Crosses in India are Christian,” 28.

¹¹³ Dan Shapira (Ph.D. candidate [Shaul Shaked, supervisor], Hebrew University of Jerusalem), personal communication, 4 November 1995.

¹¹⁴ Sims-Williams, “Christian Literature in Middle Iranian Languages,” 534.

writings of the Christian apostles as having come down from Heaven. (*Graecarum affectionum curatio* IX. 936, in Migne, PG LXXXIII, col. 1045c).

The earliest Persian translations of scripture were probably undertaken for liturgical purposes. This is evidently the case with the Turfan Psalter, which is the only extant Middle Persian Bible version. It is represented by fragments of a translation of the Psalms, discovered at the ruins of the Nestorian monastery at Shuipang near Bulayiq in the Turfan oasis in northern Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan). These Psalms were written in an archaic, cursive Book Pahlavi script, dating back to the fifth or fourth centuries, “though the manuscript may be younger,” according to Kenneth Thomas and Fereyduun Vahman.¹¹⁵ The Turfan Psalter contains most of Psalms 94–99, 118 and 121–136. Its distinctively liturgical character is noted by Geo Widengren: “This manuscript was written for liturgical use, provided with antiphons, so-called *canons*, corresponding to the text now found in the breviary of the Nestorian church.”¹¹⁶

Independent attestation of Middle Persian Bible translations is found in Zoroastrian polemical literature, particularly in the ninth-century *Škand gumānīk vičār* (“The Doubt-Crushing Explanation”).¹¹⁷ “The Christians of Iran,” comments Shaul Shaked, “were dependent largely on the Syriac versions of the Bible, but the activity of creating new versions in the current vernacular must have been part of the missionary effort of Christians.”¹¹⁸ There is other evidence of such missionary endeavors, an essential component of which was the creation of a body of Christian scripture and literature in vernacular Persian.

¹¹⁵ Thomas and Vahman, “Persian Translations of the Bible,” 210.

¹¹⁶ Widengren, “The Nestorian Church in Sasanian and Early Post-Sasanian Iran,” 13.

¹¹⁷ Kenneth J. Thomas, “Chronology of Translations of the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II, 203–206 [203].

¹¹⁸ Shaul Shaked, “Middle Persian Translations of the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II, 206–207 [206].

Not only was there a Christian literature in Middle Persian, but inscriptions as well. Evidence of the very missionary endeavors that Shaked suggests are the Christian Pahlavi inscriptions of India. A cross bearing a Pahlavi inscription was found in the Syrian church in Kottayam, in the state of Kerala in India. Another such cross—the Cross of Travancore—is a replica of the famed cross from the church on Mount St. Thomas near Madras. This Cross of Travancore is inscribed in Book Pahlavi.¹¹⁹ Several post-Sasanian Christian seals inscribed in Arabic Kufic script bear the names of Persian owners.¹²⁰

“From the late fifth century,” Brock observes, “Persian became an increasingly important literary vehicle for Christians.”¹²¹ Brock further notes that “quite a number of extant Syriac hagiographic, legal and literary texts are in fact translations from lost Middle Persian originals.”¹²²

Christian Sogdian: Outside the Persian empire there were other Christian enclaves as well, such as the Nestorian centre at Samarkand.¹²³ The Silk Road led to evangelization of Central Asia and the Far East. A number of Persians who settled along this trade route were Christians. Spreading the gospel required translation. Liturgical texts (including scripture translations) and some patristic writings were translated from Syriac into Pahlavi and also into Sogdian. This accords with Asmussen’s position that use of Persian greatly augmented Nestorian missionary endeavors. “[N]o doubt...,” he states, speaking of the province of Pārs, “Christians there had a common language with the ruling dynasty, and by all accounts created a Christian literature in that language [Persian] that was to be of considerable importance for the later

¹¹⁹ Yahya Armajani, “Christian Missions in Persia,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II, 544–547 [544].

¹²⁰ Judith Lerner, “Christianity. II. In Pre-Islamic Persia: Material Remains,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, V, 528–530 [530]. Cf. idem, *Christian Seals of the Sasanian Period* (Leiden, 1977).

¹²¹ Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 18.

¹²² Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 18.

¹²³ B. E. Colless, “The Nestorian Province of Samarkand,” *Abr Nahrayn* 24 (1986): 51–57.

Nestorian mission in Central Asia.”¹²⁴ In Outer Iran, in a region called Sogdiana (a province north of Bactria, between the Oxus and the Jaxartes rivers), the Nestorian church was well established by the early 8th century at the latest. Ironically, no Christian Sogdian texts have ever been found there.

In the Turfan oasis in Chinese Turkestan, a library of Christian manuscripts was unearthed at the ruins of a Nestorian monastery of Bulayiq. This library was quite extensive, and reflects the spiritual and intellectual interests of the monastic enclave there. The majority of these texts are in Syriac and Sogdian. Generally, Christian Sogdian is written in a Syriac Estrangela script, with three added characters to accommodate native Iranian sounds not found in Syriac. As to scripture, these texts included sixth-century Sogdian translations of the Gospels, Pauline epistles, and the Psalms. Among the abundant hagiographical literature in Sogdian is the life of John of Daylam (*vide supra*), the founder of two monasteries in Pārs, one Syriac and one Persian. Also found at Bulayiq was the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* under Shāpūr II, and the life of Barshabbā, credited as the founder of Persian Christian communities as far east as Balkh.¹²⁵ Martyrologies, though hagiographical, disclose much valuable religio-cultural as well as biographical information.

Christian Literature in New Persian: Close to the Turfan oasis, the second and third German Turfan expeditions discovered a very few Christian texts in nearby Toyoq, Qočo (Zieme), Astana, and Qurutqa. These texts were in Sogdian, Syriac, Turkish, and New Persian.¹²⁶ This, of course, has very clear liturgical implications. Sims-Williams states that “...it is probable that the newly founded Christian communities initially employed Syriac and Middle Persian in their liturgy, the latter being gradually displaced by the successive local vernaculars, firstly Sogdian and ultimately New Persian.”¹²⁷ In the eleventh century or later, a

¹²⁴ Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” 931.

¹²⁵ Sims-Williams, “Christian Literature in Middle Iranian Languages,” 534.

¹²⁶ Sims-Williams, “Christian Literature in Middle Iranian Languages,” 534.

¹²⁷ Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Translations of the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 207.

New Persian-Syriac translation from the Syriac of Psalms 131, 132, 146, 147 was penned in Sogdian Syriac script. This is the earliest extant translation of Judeo-Christian scripture into New Persian.¹²⁸

Perhaps the most remarkable of all Christian manuscripts written in New Persian is the Persian *Diatessaron*. It survives in a unique manuscript: Dated 1547, it is housed in the Laurentian Library in Florence (Florence: Biblioteca Laurenziana Mediceo– Laurenziana, Cod. Orient. VII [81]). The Persian *Harmony* was translated from the Syriac by the Jacobite priest Īwannīs ʿIzz al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥaffar of Tabrīz, and was later copied by another Jacobite priest, Ibrāhīm b. Shammās ʿAbd-Allāh, in Ḥisn Kayfā (a village on the Tigris in Iraq), 954 A.H./1547 C.E.¹²⁹ While it preserves many Diatessaronic readings, the Persian *Harmony* was composed in a different sequence than in the other Diatessaron exemplars. It is perhaps more accurate to speak of the Persian *Diatessaron* as a Gospel Harmony, independent of the *Diatessaron* itself and direct translations from it.¹³⁰ Because of the fact that it is an illuminated manuscript, the Persian Diatessaron, in all likelihood, was intended for liturgical use.¹³¹

A remarkable specimen of a Christian liturgy in New Persian is still in use today. Within the East Syrian “Assyrian” and Chaldean liturgies are the vestiges of a lost Persian Christian liturgy. These fragments are found in the Feast of Epiphany, midnight office. (See Appendix, “Fragments of a Lost Persian Christian Liturgy,” *infra*.)

From this all-too-brief survey, it is clear that Persian Christianity had successfully evangelized a number of ethnic Iranians. A recent doctoral dissertation has argued for a certain affinity between Persian Christianity and Zoroastrianism. In his *Narsai and the Persians: A Study*

¹²⁸ K. Thomas, “Chronology of Translations of the Bible,” 203.

¹²⁹ Thomas, “Chronology of Translations of the Bible,” 203.

¹³⁰ Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: The History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990): 409–410.

¹³¹ For this insight, I am indebted to Prof. David G. K. Taylor, Department of Theology, University of Birmingham (personal communication, 31 August 1995).

in *Cultural Contact and Conflict*, William Sunquist argues that this affinity may account for some of the missionary success of East Syrian Christianity in Persia.¹³² In addition to the East Syrians, Armenian Christians had also translated scripture into New Persian, evidently for missionary purposes.¹³³ This shows that, while Persian was not a Christian literary language as such, it was a Christian vernacular. It was instrumental in missionary endeavors in the Christian Orient. While there were a number of other significant mission fields, not the least of which was India, Tibet, Ceylon, as well as China¹³⁴ (evangelized beginning in 635, according to the Syriac and Chinese stele of Xi'an (Hsian), linguistic contact between Syriac and Middle and New Persian had been established. Added to this is the extensive literature in Christian Arabic during the Islamic period, providing the means and opportunity for the transmission and eventual transformation of Syriac Christian symbolism, as taken up in the post-Christian religions of Islam and the Bahā'ī Faith.

¹³² William Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact and Conflict* (Ph.D. thesis: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1990). Abstracted in *Dissertations Abstracts International* 51.6 (Dec. 1990): 2055-A.

¹³³ Michael E. Stone, "A Persian-Armenian Manuscript in the Leeds Collection," in *Le Musèon* 92 (1979): 361–367.

¹³⁴ For a recent textual discovery, see W. Klein, "A Syriac-Christian Fragment from Dunhuang, China," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 144.1 (1994): 1–13.

Fragments of a Lost Persian Christian Liturgy

Preserved in the literary amber of the East Syrian *Hūwṛā* are four fragments from a lost Persian Christian liturgy, “discovered” by F. C. Conybeare, described by A. J. Maclean, and translated by D. S. Margoliouth (*vide infra*). The text is from the Feast of Epiphany, midnight office.¹³⁵ Margoliouth’s translation is worked into Maclean’s rendering of the Syriac liturgy known as “The Night Service”—“Of the Holy Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord,” found in a Syriac *Gazza* (“Treasury”)¹³⁶—a compilation that contains excerpts from various liturgies, including the text known as the *Hūwṛā* (“Cycle”),¹³⁷ traditionally (but erroneously) ascribed to Ephrem.¹³⁸ Following this night service, bearing the four Per-

¹³⁵ I first learned on this text in 1991 from His Grace Mar Emmanuel, Diocesan Bishop, Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, Diocese of Canada, and later from Bishop Mar Bawai Soro, Gen. Sec. of CIRED, personal communication, 1 April 1996. His Grace Mar Emmanuel provided me with this text in a letter dated 25 March 1996, as did Bishop Soro, in a letter dated 2 April 1996, Rome.

¹³⁶ Syriac Codex, no. I, in the Library of the Propaganda, Piazza di Spagna, Rome.

¹³⁷ Tr. A. J. Maclean, “The East Syrian or Nestorian Rite: the Evening, Night, and Morning Services, with the Propria of the Liturgy, as Said on the Feast of the Epiphany, from the Gaza [*sic*] of the Library of the Propaganda Fide in Rome.” In F. C. Conybeare and A. J. Maclean, *Rituale Armenorum: Being the Administration of the Sacraments and the Breviary Rites of the Armenian Church together with the Greek Rites of Baptism and Epiphany*, edited from the Oldest MSS. by F. C. Conybeare, M.A., F.B.A., and *The East Syrian Epiphany Rites*, translated by the Rev. A. J. Maclean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905): 298–388 [367–368].

¹³⁸ His Grace Mar Emmanuel, Diocesan Bishop of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, Diocese of Canada, cites the late Chaldean bishop Jacques Eugène Manna, *Morceaux choisis de littérature araméenne* (Mossoul: Imp. des Pères dominicains, 1901–1902; reprinted: Doctinchem, Holland: Microlibrary Slangenburgh Abbey, 1982): “He [Ephrem] is the Father and founder of all eastern and western Syrian Church rites. All hymns and *madrāshē* of the Book of *ʿNidē* (Funeral service book) are attributed to him. All *madrāshē* for the entire ecclesiastical year in the book of *Hūwṛā* belong to him, and many hymns of praise” (Mar Emmanuel’s translation from the French—page not cited; personal communication, dated 25 March 1996). This

sian verses interpolated in the Syriac text, is a morning service, which contains a “Hymn of Praise, by Mar Ephraim, the Syrian doctor” (of undetermined authenticity), followed by another such hymn by “Mar Narsai.”¹³⁹

Both transliterated text and translation of this rather unique fossil are given below. Added to the Turfan Psalter and related texts in Middle Persian, these fragments—in a dialect of New Persian—provide further evidence of an indigenous Iranian Christian heritage, in which ethnic Persian converts comprised the most visible minority in the East Syrian Church of the East.

The following transliteration is based on my reading of the Syriac text of the *Hūwrā*, Vol. 1, pp. 639–640 (Indian edition, 1960), in consultation with His Grace Bishop Mar Emmanuel, and Prof. Edward G. Mathews, who points out that, so far, there is no standard transliteration convention for Syriac.¹⁴⁰ Text and translation are arranged in columns to facilitate comparison:

Transliteration	Margoliouth’s Translation
(1)	
Ba-hār swe ³ nīgāh kardām.	<i>I looked to every side :</i>
Dīdāmdī ³ ʿestōrā ³ .	<i>I saw that security for ever :</i>
Paywastā ³ bmtarsāyī.	<i>is to him who holds :</i>
Dīnē ³ pāk mmšīhā ³ .	<i>the pure religion of Christ.</i>
(2)	
Marwārī mē ³ karī.	<i>Eat not, hand not over :</i>
Meprōšī zmkān kōnī.	<i>Sell not, slander not :</i>
Rāhē ³ rast bē ³ gērī	<i>take the right way :</i>
Dīnē ³ pāk mmšīhā ³ rāh.	<i>the pure religion of Christ.</i>
(3)	
Mmšīhā ³ rāh dōstā ³ rām.	<i>Christ I take for my friend :</i>

traditional ascription to Ephrem is a matter of religious, not academic certainty.

¹³⁹ Maclean, *Rituale Armenorum*, 382–383.

¹⁴⁰ Prof. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Scranton, personal communication dated 1 May 1996.

Rōs meggō nīgāh dārām.	<i>the good I guard :</i>
°Azqō zendōḥ be°zārām.	<i>henceforth I live in God :</i>
Dīnē° pāk mmšihā° rāh.	<i>the pure religion of Christ.</i>

(4)

Br̄šem °abbā° wabrā°yī	<i>In the name of the Father and the Son:</i>
Wm̄ruḥqudšā° °mādā°yī.	<i>and the Holy Ghost thou art baptized¹⁴¹:</i>
Tāw qāddeš tarsā°yī	<i>thou, O Holy One, art a Christian¹⁴² :</i>
Wmtāwbāmā bakšā°yī.	<i>and thou give unto us (baptism?).</i>

This translation differs slightly from Margoliouth's previous one published two years prior in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. There, these four fragments are interpreted as follows: "(1) I looked to every side: I saw that security is bound up with Christianity. The pure religion is Christ's. (2) Thou eatest, thou buyest, thou sellest, thou revilest, thou takest [not?] the right way. The pure religion is Christ's. (3) I am the friend of Christ. Bid me fear noone [*sic*]. I remove trouble from the road. The pure religion is Christ's. (4) Thou art baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost: Thou art holy, a Christian: And thou dost bestow on us."¹⁴³

Epiphany is a major Christian festival. It is celebrated on January 6th, the traditional date of Christmas now observed throughout the Eastern Christian traditions. On this date, Ephrem writes: "The number six is also perfect; / on the sixth of January Your birth gave joy to the six directions" (Nat. XXVII.3).¹⁴⁴ In the Eastern Church, Epiphany recalls Christ's baptism in the river Jordan. In the Western Church, however, Epiphany commemorates the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, in the homage of the Magi. Ephrem himself speaks of the Magi: "Fire approved of Your birth to drive worship away by it. / The Magi used to worship [fire]—they

¹⁴¹ Translator's note (*Rituale Armenorum*, 368, note a): "or thou art come.—Our Lord seems to be addressed."

¹⁴² Translator's note (*Rituale Armenorum*, 368, note b): "The ordinary Persian word for a Christian; *lit.* [God-]fearing."

¹⁴³ D. S. Margoliouth, "Early Documents in the Persian Language," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Oct. 1903, 761–771 [768–770].

¹⁴⁴ *Hymns on the Nativity XXVII.3*, tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 211.

worshipped You!” (Nat. XXII.13).¹⁴⁵ In the Syriac liturgy translated by Maclean, the Wise Men are explicitly related to Persia and to Zoroaster: “And he sent a star : to Persia, and called the Wise men : and guided them by its light : until it stood over the cave. • And the Wise men came : honoured men and chiefs : twelve sons of noble kings : who brought consecrated offerings. • Gold and myrrh : and frankincense as for the honour : of the King who was wondrously born : of a virgin whom man had not known. • They opened their treasures : and offered to him their offerings : as they were commanded by their Teacher : Zoroaster, who prophesied to them. •”¹⁴⁶ The earliest Christian traditions that explicitly ascribe the visit of the Magi as a response to a prophecy by Zoroaster appear to have originated in Persia. Anchoring the Epiphany service in a Persian context still does little to soften the impact of a sudden and remarkable intrusion of Persian in a Syriac liturgy.

The canon for this service is a passage from the “Song of Moses” (Deut. 32:21b–43). The scripture immediately preceding the first interpolated Persian verse is Deut. 33:40b–41a: “I said, I live for ever : I will whet the edge of my sword like lightning.” Following the first Persian verse, Deut. 33:41b is cited. After the second Persian verse, Deut. 33:42a is intoned: “And I will deliver up mine adversaries : I will make mine arrows drunk with blood.” At the end of the third Persian verse, Deut. 33:43a is given. Finally, after the fourth Persian verse, the final words of Moses in the “Song of Moses” are recited. The biblical context is clearly that of vengeance on enemies. This is possibly an allusion to persecutions of Christians by Zoroastrians. In any case, this Persian liturgy is obviously the product of a minority.¹⁴⁷

One possible Zoroastrian element in these stanzas might be inferred from references to the “Pure Religion” (NP: *dīn-i pāk*) of Christ, as op-

¹⁴⁵ *Hymns on the Nativity* XXII.13, tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 181. Cf. Nat. XXIV.4–15, and CJ II.22–27.

¹⁴⁶ Tr. Maclean, *Rituale Armenorum*, 350.

¹⁴⁷ As observed by L. Clarke, University of Pennsylvania, personal communication, 15 April 1996.

posed to the “Good Religion” (MP: *weh-dēn*) of Zarathuštra.¹⁴⁸ The text in stanza 2, line 3, must certainly be: “Take the right [or, true] path” (*rāh-i rāst bigīrī*). It is an attested Zoroastrian Middle Persian expression, as in the *Greater Bundahišn* XXVI: 12–18: “A man in whose thinking the wisdom of Wahman resides, that wise spirit shows him the right way (*rāh-i rāst*). Through the right way (*rāh-i rāst*) he knows the will of the Creator. By performing the will of the Creator he increases and proclaims him who will cause the Resurrection through the goodness of the Renovation.”¹⁴⁹ Stanza 3, line 3 could be of critical importance for the interpretation of these four passages, if, contrary to Margoliouth, it can be read as a formula for the abjuration of Zoroastrianism.

The dating of this text is problematic. Margoliouth was convinced of its “high antiquity” (pre-Islamic period). If so, Persianists would no doubt agree that these fragments “possess an almost unique interest.”¹⁵⁰ The presence of rhyme, however, is telling. There is no attestation of rhyme in Middle Persian or New Persian prior to the ninth century.¹⁵¹ A key

¹⁴⁸ Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*. Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion, XVI (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994): 157 and 160.

¹⁴⁹ Tr. Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation*, 66 (translation) and n. 43 (transliteration).

¹⁵⁰ A brief description of the four Persian fragments is given in a footnote on pp. 367–368, note *c* [Maclean writes, then quotes Margoliouth]: “The four interpolated stanzas here underlined are in an old Persian dialect in Syriac character; but the text is somewhat corrupt. Professor Margoliouth, who has translated them, writes as follows: ‘I have no doubt that the verses are ancient, and that they are corrupt. The metre is apparently:—*bahār suá nigāh kardām*, i.e. eight syllables; where it is violated, the sense is also unsatisfactory. There are no Arabic words in the lines, and this seems to me to be a proof of high antiquity. If they belong to the dialect of the Christians in Persia before the Mohammedan conquest they possess an almost unique interest.’ See also Prof. Margoliouth’s paper, ‘Early Documents in the Persian Language,’ *Journ. of R. Asiat. Soc.*, Oct. 1903.”

¹⁵¹ For specimens of New Persian (NP) dating from 9th and 10th centuries, see Gilbert Lazard, *Les premiers poètes Persans* (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient on behalf of the Institut Franco-Iranien, 1964 [in Persian]). But, according to Lynda Clarke, University of Pennsylvania, the dating of some of

piece of evidence for a later dating based on the presence of rhyme comes from the tenth-century writer Ḥamza al-Iṣfāhānī, speaking of Persian poetry, reports: “These are poems all composed in a single metre (*tajīʿu ʿalā baḥrin wāḥidin*) which is similar to *rajaz*. They resemble Arabic verse by the fact that they are composed in regular metres (*wa-hiya munāsiba li-l-ašʿār al-ʿarabiyya bi-stiwāʾi l-awzān*) but they differ from it by the fact that they have no rhyme.”¹⁵²

Conybeare discovered the Persian liturgy in a thirteenth-century manuscript of the *Ḥuṣṣrā*. Macomber has made a list of known manuscripts of the *Ḥuṣṣrā*.¹⁵³ The compilation of the *Ḥuṣṣrā* is traditionally ascribed to the Catholicós Patriarch Išoʿyahb III of Adiabene (649–659 C.E.) and his collaborator, the monk ʿEnanišoʿ,¹⁵⁴ in the year 650/651 C.E. The theological value of the *Ḥuṣṣrā* for the study of East Syrian spirituality is second only to the Persian Synods.¹⁵⁵ True as this is in terms of a formalized theology, the service of the *Ḥuṣṣrā* may in fact be a truer reflection of popular theology, as Macomber is careful to point out: “The writings of theologians may provide an intellectually better articulated and reasoned exposition of this theology, but it is one that is far removed from the living consciousness of the ordinary clergy and faithful. The liturgical chants, on the other hand, have had a direct, formative influence on all capable of understanding them and have had in some ways the same role in the Chaldean Church that catechisms have had in

these specimens is doubtful (personal communication, 15 April 1996).

¹⁵² Shaul Shaked, “Specimens of Middle Persian Verse,” in *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume* (ed. Mary Boyce and Ilya Gershevitch; London: Lund Humphries, 1970): 395–404 [405].

¹⁵³ William F. Macomber, “A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean *Ḥuṣṣrā*,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 36 (1970): 120–134.

¹⁵⁴ Macomber, “A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean *Ḥuṣṣrā*,” 120–121.

¹⁵⁵ Macomber, “A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean *Ḥuṣṣrā*,” 121–122.

the West.”¹⁵⁶ There are both Nestorian and Chaldean (expurgated)¹⁵⁷ versions of the *Ḥuwrā*.¹⁵⁸

A critical analysis of Margoliouth’s translation—with a new rendition from the reconstructed Persian—will be published in a forthcoming study by the present writer.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Macomber, “A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean *Ḥuwrā*,” 122.

¹⁵⁷ That is, all overtly Nestorian passages having been removed.

¹⁵⁸ Macomber, “A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean *Ḥuwrā*,” 120, n. 2.

¹⁵⁹ For his careful reading of this manuscript and for the revisions he recommended, I am indebted to Prof. Amir Harrak of the University of Toronto. Any and all errors, of course, are mine.