

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE PATRIARCHATE IN THE CHURCH OF THE EAST OVER ITS FIRST FOUR NATIONAL SYNODS

Roselin, MTS[♦]

Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome

Abstract

The patriarchate, as an institution, has existed in the Church from the earliest times and was recognized by the first ecumenical councils (OE 7). However this list of Eastern Patriarchates provided in the Canons of first Ecumenical councils did not mention the name of the Patriarchate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon which is so ancient and apostolic in its Christian origin. This study presents the evolution of the Patriarchate in this forgotten tradition as an indigenous autonomous development. Since Syro-Malabar Church is of this liturgical tradition, this study is relevant in its context too. Being one of the most vibrant Church among the Orientals we have to think about the true spirit behind the mind of the Church expressed in OE, 12: "Seeing that the patriarchal office in the Eastern Church is a traditional form of government, the Sacred Ecumenical Council ardently desires that new patriarchates should be erected where there is need, to be established either by an ecumenical council or by the Roman Pontiff."

Introduction

The name Patriarch as an ecclesial institution means the head of the bishops to whom belongs jurisdiction over all bishops, not excepting metropolitans, clergy and people of his own territory or rite, in

[♦]**Sr Roselin, MTS** (Sr Sheeba Sebastian) belongs to "Mar Toma Sahodarikal," the first monastic community started in the present day Syro-Malabar Church. This community's first *daira* (Monastery), the *Beth Toma Daira*, is situated at Palamattom, in the Kurumpanadam parish of Changanacherry Archdiocese. At present she is doing her doctoral studies in Patristic Theology at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome. Email: roselin.sst@gmail.com

accordance with canon law and without prejudice to the primacy of the Roman Pontiff.¹

According to the most ancient tradition of the Church, already recognized by the first ecumenical councils, the patriarchal institution has existed in the Church; for this reason a special honor is to be accorded to the Patriarchs of the Eastern churches, each of whom presides over his Patriarchal Church as father and head.²

It is notable that, this list of Eastern Patriarchates provided in the Canons of first Ecumenical councils did not mention the name of the Patriarchate of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.³ But in the early centuries itself the history witnessed the development of a Patriarchate in the Church of the East. Some consider it as a revolt against the primacy of the Pope. Such a conclusion is only a peripheral remark without going deep into the core of a Christian community which traces its origin in the apostolic period itself. While Christianity had been introduced to Persia in the first centuries AD, during the earliest period, the leadership was unorganized. At the end of the second century we can observe multiple movements and efforts to realize a kind of centralized hierarchy. Through a series of national synods that were held in the first centuries, gradually the centralized authority was evolved and was established and given to the bishop of Persian capital city, Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁴ A historical analysis of that spontaneous development of the 'Church of the East'— the unique ecclesial tradition that grown up entirely outside the Roman Empire — as an autonomous independent nationalistic Church, over its first four national synods, namely, the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (315 AD), the Synod of Mar 'Ishaq (410 AD), the Synod of Mar Yabhalaha (420 AD) and the Synod of Mar Dadisho (424 AD) is made here.

¹Cf. *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, Can., 56. Here after CCEO.

²CCEO, Can., 55.

³The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) recognized three patriarchates, namely, Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, and also gave honorary title to Jerusalem (canons 6, 7). Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Vol. 1: (Nicaea I- Lateran V)*, London-Washington: Sheed & Ward – Georgetown University Press, 1990, 9. The first council of Constantinople (381 AD) added the Bishop of Constantinople to the list of Patriarchs and gave him rank second only to that of the Pope (canon 3): Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Vol. 1*, 32. This action was seconded by the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) in canon 28. Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Vol. 1*, 99-100. This decision was given full recognition by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 AD) with canon 5. Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Vol. 1*, 236.

⁴Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco 1992, 117.

1. The Sources

There are mainly two major sources from which we get information about the development of Patriarchate of the East.

1. A Syriac church history of Adiabene written in the 6th century by *Mēšihā-Zēkā* under the title ܟܬܒܐ ܕܩܠܝܫܝܫܬܝܩܝ ܕܐܠܡܫܝܗܐܐܘܪܒܝܠܐ *Ktabā d-ēqlisyastīqī dā-Mēšihā-Zēkā* commonly known as *Chronicle of Arbela* by *Mshikha-zaha*.⁵ It gives sketches of 20 early bishops (104-511) of the city, including mention of martyrdoms under the Persians.

2. ܟܬܒܐ ܕܣܢܐܗܕܘ ܡܥܢܐܗܝܬܐ *Kētabā d Sunāhdo mādnāhytā*, that is, *The Book of the Eastern Synods* which contains the official records and acts of the first 13 synods of the Church of the East from 410 AD to 775 AD⁶ and constitutes one of the most important primary sources for the history of the Church of the East in its early years. The synodical texts included begin with the Synod of Mar 'Ishaq (410 AD) and end with that of Hnan-'Isho' II in 775. These synodical texts which are in Syriac are collected and published with its French translation as the *Synodicon Orientale* by J.B. Chabot in 1902 at Paris.⁷

Both sources tell us about the historical events regarding the establishment of Patriarchate of the East. But each has its own point of view.

⁵The *Chronicle of Arbela* is an important historical source for the Syriac speaking east. The text was initially published by Mingana with a French translation. Now some other editions are also available. Alphonse Mingana: *Sources Syriaques*, Vol 1, Mosul-Leipzig, 1908. Eduard Sachau, *Die Chronik von Arbela*, Berlin, 1915 (Syriac Text with German Translation). Peter Kawerau, "Die Chronik von Arbela," CSCO vols. 467 & 468, 1985 (Syriac Text with German Translation). Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, English translation from Syriac text, unpublished. Mar Bawai Soro edited this unpublished text with footnotes and preface and published as Appendix in his work *The Church of the East*. See: Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East: Apostolic & Orthodox*, San Jose: Adiabene Publications, 2007, 287-339.

⁶The thirteen national synods recorded in ܟܬܒܐ ܕܣܢܐܗܕܘ ܡܥܢܐܗܝܬܐ are: The synod of Mar 'Ishaq (410), The synod of Mar Yabhalaha (420), The synod of Mar Dadisho (424), The synod of Mar Aqaq (486), The synod of Mar Bawai (497), The synod of Mar Awa (544), The synod of Mar Yosip (554), The synod of Mar Khaziqil (576), The synod of Mar Iso'yabh (586), The synod of Mar Saurisho (596), The synod of Mar Grigor (605), The synod of Mar Gewargis (676), The synod of Mar Hnan-'Isho' II (775). This collection of synods is believed to be created in between 775 which is the date of last synod contained in this collection and 790 the first synod held by Patriarch Mar Timateos. The acts of this synod of Mar Timateos and other synods are often found in the same manuscripts as that of the ܟܬܒܐ ܕܣܢܐܗܕܘ ܡܥܢܐܗܝܬܐ in the form of addition.

⁷ Jean Baptiste Chabot, ed. & trans., *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902. Hear after SO.

2. The Church of the East: A Forgotten Apostolic Church

At present the Church of the East under East Syriac tradition consists of two branches of the Assyrian Church,⁸ which are non Catholic; Chaldean Church and Syro-Malabar Church which are in union with the Catholic Church.⁹ All these churches share a common East Syriac liturgical, linguistic, spiritual and theological heritage.¹⁰

The East Syriac Church is rooted in the Middle East and spread outside the Roman Empire, and has a troubled and eventful history as well as a rich theological, spiritual, and liturgical heritage.¹¹ Knowledge of this branch of Christendom is slight although Syriac Christianity constitutes its third strand, along with the Latin-West and Greek- Byzantine Traditions. Usually the theological discussions address only the Latin West and the Greek East traditions, while the third important tradition, the “Syriac Orient” receives negligible consideration. There can be several reasons behind it. The well known Syriac scholar S. Brock mentions some of them as follows:

- The famous ancient Ecclesiastical history of Eusebius of Caesarea (+339) did not mention this tradition while focused only on Christianity in the Roman Empire.

- On the basis of the fifth century controversies over Christology, this branch of Christianity became marginalized in Western Church history as heretical and disappeared from the common ecclesiastical awareness.

- The study of Syriac Christianity was almost totally ignored by other Christian Traditions.¹²

This Church has got several names. The most significant and accurate name “The Apostolic Church of the East” refers to those churches outside the Roman Empire whose Patriarch (Catholicos) had his see at the Persian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon. From the time of its origin itself this Patriarchate was autonomous and independent with regard to its administrative relation with the Patriarchates of the Roman empire — Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and

⁸The Ancient Church of the East, the followers of old (Julian) calendar and the Assyrian Church of the East, the followers of new (Gregorian) calendar. See footnote no. 1 in Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 9-10.

⁹Cf. Wilhem Baum-Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003, 2.

¹⁰Cf. Wilhem Baum -Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 5.

¹¹Cf. Wilhem Baum -Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East*, ix.

¹²Cf. Wilhem Baum- Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 2-3.

Jerusalem — which are considered as “Western”. They got the name the “East Syriac Church” because of its liturgical tradition and the use of Syriac as the liturgical language. The term “Persian Church” is also in wide use. But since the Church of the East is extended as far as Central Asia, China and India this term is too narrow. Unfortunately the terms like “Nestorian Church,” “Pre- Ephesian Church,” etc. which are incorrect and valid only in very limited sense are much familiar in the West. This authentic form of Christianity developed under less Greek influence¹³ is treated as a heretical church by such titles. The East Syriac Theologian and Canonist Abdisho bar Brika (+1318) wrote in his ‘Book of the Pearl’ (*Margarita*) that East Syriac Christians “never changed their faith and preserved it as they had received it from the apostles, and they are called Nestorians unjustly, especially since Nestorius was not their Patriarch...”¹⁴

When referring to the Church of the East almost all the historical accounts begin with the events of the council of Ephesus (431AD) and with the controversy between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople. They also suggest that the Church of the East separated itself on account of the council’s events or that it found its beginning with this council. But these types of indications are the real betrayal of history. Even before the time of Nicaea it was an autonomous church in the realm of administration but totally in communion with Western Church in faith.

2.1. The Political Background

At the end of the First century after the destruction of Jerusalem temple the Jews were scattered all over the world. Jewish community in the Palestine gradually declined and that of Babylonia got improved. Naturally Christianity in Persia had begun to spread. But it also started to face persecutions and martyrdom. This was a result of a particular political situation in Persia. In BC 334 Alexander the Great brought Persia under Greek rule for nearly one century. But later, Parthians liberated Persia from Greek domination. They governed for almost five centuries. But in AD 226 another dynasty called Sassanid rule came into existence. They ruled Persia for four centuries from AD 226 to AD 642, until the rise of Islam. They promoted a strong feeling of nationalism in order to restore the glory

¹³Cf. Gerald O’Collins-Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, London-New York: T&T Clark, 2000, 44.

¹⁴Cf. Dietmar W. Winkler, “The Age of the Sassanians: Until 651,” in Wilhem Baum - Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 7.

of ancient Persia. The new religious policy of the State Zoroastrianism which holds dualism was entirely different from the Christian faith. The Christians lost their religious freedom that they enjoyed under Parthian rule for a long time. Under Sassanid dynasty, Christianity in Mesopotamia underwent repeated persecutions.¹⁵ But history witnessed the fact that paradoxically during this period the Church of the East became more centralized and organized.

2.2. Ecclesiastical Background

Even though the 'Church of the East' is an Apostolic Church and received Christianity in the first century itself, the reliable evidences of a developed episcopate in Persia until the year 300 are very few. It is difficult to prove the historical existence of a bishop before the year 300. In the first centuries of their origin Persian Churches were simply a loose collection of independent congregations. Under the lacking of a unifying organizational structure they were related by fellowship with one another and by the spirit of loyalty and martyrdom of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They were geographically separated, but were in communion with each other.¹⁶ The Episcopal see of Arbela (Adiabene) was their main pastoral source. These unorganized communities sought the assistance from this See in ecclesiastical matters. This situation is very clearly described in the History of the Church of Adiabene narrated in *The Chronicle of Arbela*.¹⁷

3. The Establishment of the Episcopate

As described in *The Chronicle of Arbela*, a group of Christians were there in the capital city Seleucia without a bishop. When the 'Bishop of Arbela' Shakhlupa had done his visit, the people of Seleucia requested him to choose and ordain their first priest.¹⁸ Shakhlupa chose and ordained Papa Bar Gaggai.¹⁹ After 20 years later the same community in the Persian capital requested again to the Bishop of Adiabene Akha-dAbuh, the successor of Shakhlupa to visit them and to ordain a bishop for them.²⁰ Akha-dAbuh went to the Persian capital with bishop of Susa Khai-b'El and consecrated the priest Papa

¹⁵Cf. Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 142-144.

¹⁶Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 111-112.

¹⁷Cf. Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, 316-317, *Chronik von Arbela*, 41-42.: quoted in Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, footnote no. 368 on page no. 148.

¹⁸Cf. Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, 316-317.

¹⁹Cf. Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 147: Foot note no. 366.

²⁰Cf. Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela* 318.

as a bishop.²¹ Thus new Episcopal See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was established.²²

Here one important fact seeks our attention. The bishop of Arbela consecrated Mar Papa with the agreement of the neighbouring bishop of Susa. It clearly indicates that there was already an understanding of apostolic norms that governed Episcopal consecrations which were canonically affirmed later in the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in the fourth canon as following:

It is by all means desirable that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops of the province. But if this is difficult because of some pressing necessity or the length of the journey involved, let at least three come together and perform the ordination, but only after the absent bishops have taken part in the vote and given their written consent. But in each province the right of confirming the proceedings belongs to the metropolitan bishop.²³

4. The Development of the Episcopate into the Patriarchate

The later history witnessed how Mar Papa gained political importance due to his residence in the capital city Seleucia-Ctesiphon. His history became the history of the development of the Patriarchate in the East Syrian Church. The first four national Synods held in this Church shaped an unorganized Church into an organized, autonomous, independent and nationalistic one. Let us examine the canonical records of these councils to trace the gradual formation of this ancient Patriarchate.

4.1. The Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon 315 AD

Instead of Mar 'Ishaq synod of 410 AD which got the first place in historical records, the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon that held in 315 AD should be considered as the first Synod of East Syrian Church. It witnessed many political and ecclesiastical developments that elevated the bishop of the Persian capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, to the head of all the Church of the East. Unfortunately we have no official records of this synod. We get information from the canons and records of later councils.²⁴ Mainly the account of the synod of Seleucia comes from the proceedings of the Synod of Dadisho of 424

²¹Cf. Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela* 318.

²²Cf. Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 148.

²³Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Vol. 1, 7*.

²⁴Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia Vol.1, 120*.

AD²⁵ in which the entire history of the Catholicate was discussed in the background of a schism that can be discuss later.

4.1.1. The Reason for the Convocation

Being the Bishop of the capital city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon other bishops had the need for Mar Papa's representation at the royal court. Soon he tried to elevate the dignity of his Episcopal see to that of the Catholicos of all Persia. The Sees of all other bishops who until that time were equal were brought under his Primacy, even the bishops of Adiabene and Susa who had recently elevated him. Then the other bishops were divided in their opinion. There arose a question whether to accept the creation of an autonomous national church or to continue the bond with the church in the Roman Empire. To make a judgment regarding this controversy all the eastern bishops gathered at a council in Seleucia held in AD 315.²⁶

Mar Bawai Soro supports Mar Papa's action in centralizing Episcopal authority in the Church of the East because of three reasons.

- The Church of the East was politically isolated from the Church of the Roman Empire.
- The centre of the Church had geographically no proximity to other major ecclesiastical Sees like Antioch, Alexandria and Rome.
- A church of such potentiality and peculiarity could not have grown without a defined leadership.²⁷

4.1.2. The Acts of the Synod

The majority of the bishops assembled seemed to protest against Papa's claim regarding primacy. The Records of synod of Dadisho are seemed to be supporting Papa's position. According to Bishop Agapeta's discourse at the Synod of Dadisho:

When Papa saw that justice had deserted the council-the injustice prospered among the excellent as well as the unjust and that truth had departed from the headstrong and elect alike-seeing the Gospel placed in the midst while there was no just judgment between him and the council, he became enraged with a great passion. Papa lost his temper and struck

²⁵ Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1902, Syriac Text: 43-53. French translation: 285-98. English translation unpublished: M.J. Birine, *The Synod of Mar Dadiso* (unpublished) from: <http://www.fourthcentury.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/thesynodofmardadiso.pdf>

²⁶Cf. Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 153.

²⁷Cf. Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 151.

the Gospel and said to it 'Speak! Speak, Gospel!' as if to say 'Why are you placed as judge in the midst and have observed the truth departing from honest and corrupt bishops alike, but you are silent, not giving a just judgment?'"²⁸ But as he struck the Holy Word he fell paralyzed by a stroke. When the synod of bishops saw this, they "believed all the charges and accusations of injustice, oppression, and perfidy which the insolent bishops had written against Mar Papa" and deposed him soon. His archdeacon Simon Bar Sabba'e was made bishop in his stead.²⁹

4.1.3. The Request for the Intervention of "Western Bishops"

Being desperate by this strong action, Mar Papa who knew the valid tradition of the church wrote to the bishops of the West (West Asian Bishops) asking for their intervention and support.³⁰ The author of the Chronicle of Arbela, Mshikha-zkha mentions that Papa's letter was directed "especially to Saada, the bishop of Edessa (Urhai)"³¹ as a bishop of the "West". In the eyes of the Persian Bishops Edessa was still the mother missionary church and still more Persian than Roman even though it was in the border of two empires.³²

4.1.4. The Intervention of the "Western Bishops"

According to the records of the Synod of Dadisho Papa's appeal to the West was received and he got a definitive answer. It contains many details which throw light upon their right ecclesiological vision. All the (Western) bishops answered Papa for they saw that the matter would be good if the bishop of the royal city had primacy over all the bishops of the East. They wrote a document concerning this in their own name and in the name of the kings and princes of the West. They wrote to him saying just as in the west, which was beneath the kingdom of the Romans, there were many patriarchates, (like those) in Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople, so it also ought to be in the East, which was beneath the kingdom of the Persians, albeit (it should be only) one patriarch.³³

4.1.5. The decisive role of the "Western Bishops"

The "Western bishops" played a decisive role in this organizational crisis in the Church of the East. Their wise counsel avoided a schism

²⁸Cf. SO, 46.

²⁹Cf. SO, 46.

³⁰Cf. Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, 319.

³¹Cf. Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, 320.

³²Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol.1, 112.

³³Michael J. Birnie, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, 319.

and directed the Persian clerics to accept a nominal head.³⁴ Their letter to the Bishops in the East has been cited and taken seriously in the Synod of Dadisho, one of the most ancient canonical and formative synods of the Church of the East. This letter gives us insight into the criteria for the gradual independence of Persian Christianity from the rest of the Church in the Roman Empire and was the seal of approval for the enhancement of Papa's authority over the neighbouring bishops.³⁵

In AD 424 the spokesman of the synod of Dadisho, Agapeta of Lapat described in detail the spirit of this letter. An analysis of this letter shows that the "Western Bishops" tried their best to defend the newly claimed primacy of Papa. They put forward five arguments to uphold the claim of Papa. They compared Papa's relation to the Eastern bishops with the relation of:

1. The teachers to the students: Hereafter, as it is with us (the Western Fathers), disciples shall not be allowed to exalt themselves over their teacher or to become his judges, for permission has not been given to them by Christ their Lord.³⁶

2. The fathers to the children: According to the just laws which God the Creator established in human nature, children are not allowed to deprive their fathers of their property, but fathers have the rule over children.³⁷

3. The masters to his servants: According to the just laws which God the Creator established in human nature... servants may not deprive their masters of their freedom, but masters have the rule over the servants.³⁸

4. The husbands to the wives: Wives are not allowed to deprive their husbands of headship over them, but wives should be subject to husbands, and husbands should bear rule over their wives, since wives are commanded to love, be subject to, and obey their husbands, but husbands are only commanded to love their wives, not to be subject to them. Where ever men have inclined to the obedience of their wives they have brought punishment upon themselves, for they do not observe the limitations and laws which God has established in nature.³⁹

³⁴Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 121.

³⁵Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 155.

³⁶Cf. SO, 47.

³⁷Cf. SO, 47.

³⁸Cf. SO, 47.

³⁹Cf. SO, 47.

5. The relation of Peter to the whole church: The main ecclesiological thesis of the letter is presented here.⁴⁰

- Papa's relationship to other Eastern Bishops of Persia is presented as resembling to that of Simon *Kepa* — which means rock in Syriac — to the whole of Christ's Church.

In the Holy Church all perfection ought to be especially fulfilled, for as the Father of truth is one, and his Son, Christ the Saviour is one, and his living Spirit, the Paraclete is one, so his faithful steward, Simon Bar Jonah, who was surnamed *Kepa* is one, whom he promised, 'Upon this rock I will build my church' and again, 'to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven. It was not said by Christ to all the disciples, 'Upon you I will build' and 'I will give you' and although the gift of priesthood, was not for all. Instead as it is with one true God, so it is with one faithful steward, who should be head, leader, and administrator of his brothers. These laws and limitations are observed in the church with us.⁴¹

- Again this letter beautifully explains how the future disputes will be resolved between the new Catholicos and the bishops in the Church of Persian Empire. It discards any possibility of appeal to the bishops in the Roman Empire, even though Papa himself had done so.

If there is one of the bishops who thinks that violence has been done to him by his ruler, let him tell of the violence which was done to him in his presence, in the council, which takes place before him once a year, like a submissive disciple. If it also appears to all the bishops that violence has been done, let them offer a petition on behalf of their brother, like children to their father, that he treat his son without compulsion, for this is the reason they decreed that there should be councils each year for the resolution of difficulties which arise among us. Hereafter in the region of the East too, at the Patriarchal see which is established at the city of Seleucia in the cathedral of Kokhe, the Bishops are also not allowed to act against their head and chief, for they have no authority to become judges over him; and they should know that they have no authority to stretch out the hand to anything not given to them by God or by men.⁴²

In this record certain facts deserve our special attention.

1. Papa's proposal of primacy for the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon came to be accepted: "... Hereafter in the region of the East too, at the Patriarchal see which is established at the city of Seleucia in the

⁴⁰Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 157.

⁴¹Cf. *SO*, 47.

⁴²Cf. *SO*, 47.

cathedral of Kokhe..."⁴³ The CCEO codified after many centuries, supports this decision to have a permanent Patriarchal see.

If it is possible, a patriarchal Church must have a permanent see for the residence of the patriarch in a principal city inside its own territory from which the patriarch takes his title; this see cannot be transferred except for a most grave reason and with the consent of the synod of bishops of the patriarchal Church and the assent of the Roman Pontiff.⁴⁴

2. The decision to convoke councils is now become a canon in CCEO.

The patriarch is to convoke the synod of bishops of the patriarchal Church and to preside over it.⁴⁵

All bishops legitimately called to the synod of bishops of the patriarchal Church are bound by the serious obligation to attend that same synod except those who have already resigned from office.⁴⁶

4.1.6. Establishment of Primacy of the See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon

The letter of the western bishops possessed too definitive authority to influence the Bishops to alter their previously taken decision. The opposing bishops were excommunicated. The injustice that had been done against Mar Papa was annulled.⁴⁷

The Western fathers loosed and annulled what had been done against Mar Papa, and because of his glorious manners and his glowing zeal in the fear of God the fathers commanded "Mar Papa shall be proclaimed at the head of all in the 'Book of the Living' and all who preceded him shall be proclaimed after him."⁴⁸

Simon Bar Sabba'e, his archdeacon who had been made bishop in his place declared his voluntary resignation. He had to reconcile himself with Papa and return to his previous position as the archdeacon of the Cathedral Church of Kokhe. The Persian synod of 315 AD granted Simon Bar Sabba'e, the right of succession to the See of Seleucia-Ctesiphon to hold the Patriarchal leadership "when Papa goes to his Lord in his passage from this world."⁴⁹ They accepted the

⁴³Cf. SO, 48.

⁴⁴CCEO Can. 57 §3.

⁴⁵CCEO Can. 103.

⁴⁶CCEO Can. 104 §1.

⁴⁷Cf. SO, 47

⁴⁸Cf. SO, 47.

⁴⁹Cf. SO, 48.

4.2. The Period of Great Persecution 340-401AD

It was in the West that the Christians had been severely persecuted for the first three hundred years after Christ. In the East they were tolerated. The martyrdoms that happened in Edessa were not Persian but Roman. The primary reason for the persecution was political not religious. For two hundred and fifty years, from severe Roman persecution Christians sought refuge in Persia. Roman emperors considered Christians as enemies of Rome. By the same reason for Persians they became friends. When Rome became Christian, its old enemy Persia turned anti-Christian. It was Rome's Christianity not Persia's Zoroastrianism that fostered the outbreak of the great Persecution in Persia.⁵⁵ It was much severe than anything suffered in the West under Rome. As a remarkable tribute to the zeal of Asia's early Christians, the number of apostasies seemed to be fewer in Persia than in the West.⁵⁶ The severity of persecution ended with the death of Shapur II in 379.⁵⁷ The successors of Shapur II failed to continue the persecutions of Christians. Shapur III freed Christian prisoners, believing they would be of greater value to him pursuing their crafts and paying taxes. In 389, Shapur III was succeeded by his son, Bahram IV. In 399, Bahram was succeeded by his brother; Yazdegerd I. Yazdegerd respected diversity and wanted peace between the religions of his realm. He helped Christians rebuild their churches.⁵⁸

The years of suffering ended around the year 401 AD.⁵⁹ There was peace between Rome and Persia for fifty six years, from Shapur III (383-388) to Varahran V (421-440). In these years of peace the Persian Church recovered from persecution and was able to restructure its national organization.⁶⁰ Even though a hundred years earlier Mar Papa set his mind to shape a national organization for the Persian Church, his vision could not be realized fully due to the outbreak of hostilities with Rome. Pagan Persia could not tolerate an independent national Church within the empire while it was fighting with

⁵⁵The major collection of sources for the Persian persecution is Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, published in seven volumes (1890-97), of which volume two, subtitled *Martyres Chaldei et Persae*, and volume 4, which contains additional lives of Persian saints and martyrs, are pertinent to this period. The text is in Syriac.

⁵⁶Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 143-145.

⁵⁷Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 144.

⁵⁸<http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/ch22c.htm>, access on 12-11-2011.

⁵⁹Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol.1, 144.

⁶⁰Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 151.

Christian Rome. But at the beginning of the fifth century after peace was made with Rome and the persecution ended, the ways are opened to complete the unification begun under Mar Papa. At the very beginning of the century within 14 years they called three general synods and efficiently formed themselves into a national church.

4.3. The Synod of Mar 'Ishaq 410 AD

The first Persian synod after the persecution was the Synod of Mar 'Ishaq. The synod was convoked on 1 February 410 AD in the main Church of the Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁶¹ It was summoned by Shah Yazdegerd I and chaired by Mar 'Ishaq, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The forty bishops of the Church of the East were in a celebrative mood because of an edict of toleration by Shah Yazdegerd I who permitted the calling of the Christian synod. Like *Edict of Milan* was for the Western Churches Yazdegerd's edict was significant for the Asian churches. Both edicts officially ended great persecutions.⁶² The friendly relations established between Yazdegerd I and the Byzantine Emperor Arcadius created conditions not only to re-organize the life of a severely afflicted Church but also an unthinkable thing until then, that is, to invite the representatives of western Christianity to assist in the inauguration of an era of renewal, reorganization and reform.

4.3.1. The Role of Mar Marutha of Maipherqat

Mar Marutha of Maipherqat was sent to Persia as an ambassador of the Byzantine ruler. This imperial delegate at the Sassanid court, who took initiative in calling this synod, did his mission as an effective agent in promoting peace between Persia and Rome and in improving relation between Shah and his Christian subjects.⁶³ His diocese of Maipherqat in Northeast of Edessa was just across the border on the Roman side. East Syrian Church's relationship to Edessa, the mother church, made him welcome to the Persian Bishops. He used his influence with the Shah to get a permission to convoke a synod to restore peace and order in the Persian church.⁶⁴

⁶¹Arthur Vööbus, trans., "The Canons Ascribed to Marutha of Maipherkat and Related Sources" in *CSCO 192*, Louvain: Aedibus E. Peeters, 1982, 5.

⁶²Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 152.

⁶³Cf. Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *The Eastern Fathers From The Council Of Chalcedon (451) to John Of Damascus (750)*, Walford Adrian, trans., Cambridge: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2006, 450.

⁶⁴For the description and Canons see: Syriac Text: *SO*, 17-36. French translation: *SO*, 253-275. English: M.J. Birnie, *The Synod of Mar Yahbalaha* (un published) from

He was celebrated as a collector of precious relics of the martyrs of Persia — also in literary sense. Tradition remembered him as the author who collected such sources. *The Canons ascribed to Marutha of Maipherqat and related sources* is such a collection edited and translated by A. Voobus.⁶⁵ It contains twenty canons of the Council of Nicaea completed by seventy three additional canons called pseudo-Nicene canons (In fact these canons are entirely different from Nicene canons; considering the special situation of Persia, different from that of the West, Mar Marutha might have drafted it to provide a wider basis for ecclesiastical legislation), a brief account of the Council of Nicaea which was written by Marutha at the request of Catholicos 'Ishaq and letters of Marutha to him. In the account of synod of 'Ishaq it is written that Mar Marutha upon the request of Mar 'Ishaq read this *penqyta* (the volume in which the canons are written)⁶⁶ to the assembly.⁶⁷ Since all the bishops by their *Amen* declared themselves ready to accept the canons, Marutha told the assembly: "All these precepts, laws and canons shall be written down and we all will subscribe at the end of it our decision by hand, and sanction it by a pact that is inalterable."⁶⁸ Then 'Ishaq asked Marutha to write them down so that all could sign the copy. The first session ended with this preparatory procedure. Several days later this volume was signed.⁶⁹

4.3.2. The Letter from the Western Church

At the request of Mar Mar 'Ishaq, Mar Marutha, the western delegate read a letter from the "Western Bishops" notably the Patriarch of Antioch and bishops of Amida and Edessa at the opening session of the synod. Mar Marutha had already wisely showed the letter first to the Shah and had secured his powerful support for effort to foster the relationship between the churches of the two empires.⁷⁰

The letter mainly contained three requests:

1. It urged that there be only one bishop permitted in a diocese and he should be properly consecrated by three other bishops.

<http://www.fourthcentury.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/thecouncilofmarishaq.pdf>

⁶⁵See footnote no. 61.

⁶⁶ *SO*, 21.

⁶⁷Cf. *SO*, 21.

⁶⁸Cf. *SO*, 21.

⁶⁹*SO*, 21-22.

⁷⁰Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 155.

2. It pled for agreement on the dates of Christmas and Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday, and Easter, so that the churches everywhere might be unified in their observance of the same holy days.

3. It recommended that the Persian synod adopt the canons of the council of Nicaea, including the Nicene Creed.⁷¹

The requests were unanimously approved. The Catholicos Mar 'Ishaq pronounced an anathema on any dissent.⁷² Naturally they accepted the volume prepared by Mar Marutha including Pseudo-Nicene canons. Some of these canons are relevant here.

Canon 2: It clearly defines the Primacy of Rome.

It is the will of the general synod that there shall be only four patriarchs in the entire world, in like manner as evangelists and the four rivers of the Paradise... The chief shall be that one who is at Rome according to the command of the Apostles, who determined it in their canons. After him that of Alexandria, and after him that of Ephesus, and after him that of Antioch.

Since the East Syrian Church accepted these canons they were very much aware about the Primacy of Rome. When Portuguese missionaries came to Mar Thoma Christians of India they welcomed them as brothers in faith from the See of Peter.

Canon 3: It gives seventh place for the See of Seleucia:

And further the see of Seleucia which is in the land of the Orient shall have permission from now on and into the future that it shall create metropolitans in like manner as a Patriarch, but this so that with regard to the ascent and descent to the Patriarch of the Orient — that means of Antioch of Syria, which is in the region of Romans — the Pagans shall not find a pretext against our Christian brothers who are there and shall raise a persecution against them... If however, a cause demands it and a synod is gathered in the land of the Romans, and that bishop of Seleucia is also present among them he shall have there in the order of seating particular honor, greater than the rest of the metropolitans of the land of the Romans — because he holds the position of the patriarch in the Orient through permission. And he shall sit in the seventh place — his seat shall be that after the bishop of Jerusalem.⁷³

⁷¹Cf. Arthur Vööbus, trans., "The Canons Ascribed to Marutha of Maipherkat and Related Sources", 39; SO, 23.

⁷²SO, 258-60.

⁷³Arthur Vööbus, trans., "The Canons Ascribed to Marutha of Maipherkat and Related Sources," 54-55.

Even though we have a vague account that one Persian Bishop had attended the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea,⁷⁴ for the first time, the church of the East had adopted an official creedal standard of doctrine. By this decision, East and West were united by one authoritative confession of faith. The fact that the Church in the Persian Empire was not represented in the ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325 AD held in the Roman Empire and that it took approximately 85 years before they were made aware of the decisions and creed adopted by that council clearly shows that the Church of the East developed and existed independently of the Church in the West.⁷⁵

4.3.3. The Acts of the Synod

The synod drew up 21 canons regulating the government of the church.⁷⁶ The clear picture of a well established Catholicate can be depicted from these canons. The parts of significant canons are quoted below:

Can. no. 1 & Can. no. 20:

The ordination becomes valid only with the approval of the Catholicos:

Can. no. 1: Afterwards the bishop who was ordained shall come and be completed by the great metropolitan, the Catholicos of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, bringing a letter from the bishops who ordained him. However, should any of us venture to make another bishop during his own life or at his death, (both) he who is made and he who makes shall be cast out without mercy from the entire clergy of the church.⁷⁷

Can. no. 20: When a bishop from one of the dioceses over which he is placed dies, a metropolitan is empowered to gather the other bishops and to establish a bishop with whom the city is pleased, and after he has established him to send him with a letter to the great metropolitan to be completed by him.⁷⁸

Can. no. 6: The structures of the councils of the bishops were clearly defined accepting the primacy of the See of Kokhe.

⁷⁴Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India Vol. 1. From The Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*, Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1989, 79.

⁷⁵ Jean Baptist Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 2006, 4.

⁷⁶Cf. SO, 263-271.

⁷⁷Cf. SO, 23.

⁷⁸Cf. SO, 32.

This canon which was established in the Synod — that twice a year there should be a synod in which the bishops should gather so that in their council all disputes and accusations might be brought to an end — we made a strong appeal to the heads of the synod that once in two years, when the king is in Selucia Ctesiphon, and the Great metropolitan who occupies the See of Kokhe writes to us, we will assemble gladly and will come for the veneration and honor of his fatherhood, and the laws which Christ our Lord establishes for us we will accept, and will fulfill his will with fear and trembling.⁷⁹

Can. no. 10: one head and one rule

The administration was centralized in a definitive way under one head and one rule. It is instructed in canon no. 10 that all Metropolitans should have a copy of these canons in order to study them and to establish from them what is right according to the agreement made concerning their keeping.

...each bishop metropolitan in charge of three, four or five bishops should write down these canons. They should remain continually in his presence and from them he should establish what is necessary by his command and his authority. We ourselves bear witness before the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we will not at all depart from these glorious laws and enlightened ordinances, neither we nor those come after us. And as our faith, our baptism, and our church are one, and we worship one Being of the Holy Trinity, so also those who come after us in succession in all our congregations and flocks will be born and reared of the Lord Christ henceforth and forever.⁸⁰

Can. no. 12 contains the official recognition of the precedence of the bishop of the twin capital cities of the Persian Empire, Selucia-Ctesiphon, over all other bishops as the head of the Church of the East.

All of us in unison accepted willingly, when as we were commanded by Yazdegerd, the king of kings, that we bishops of the regions of the entire East and those who follow us shall be subject to the Catholicos Bishop, the Archbishop and Metropolitan of Selucia-Ctesiphon, until the coming of Christ in everything in which he properly commands us. This shall be for every bishop who shall occupy the great chair of the Church of Kokhe.⁸¹

Can. no. 18: Principle of subsidiarity

Even though the administration of the Church is centralized under the Primacy of Catholicos the 'principle of subsidiarity' is kept well.

⁷⁹Cf. *SO*, 25.

⁸⁰Cf. *SO*, 26.

⁸¹Cf. *SO*, 26-27.

in Persia and East Syria came to be equivalent of Patriarch and implied the independence of the Church of the East and its coequality with the great and ancient sees of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome.⁸⁶ According to Moffett three interests dominated the process of this organization:

1. The achievement of a consensus among the Persian Bishops
2. The long arm of the Persian Government
3. The distant but watchful concern of the Patriarchate of Antioch representing the Western Church.⁸⁷

Out of the influence of these three bodies there emerged the independent Persian Church, as ecclesiastically supreme in the East under a Catholicos, the Bishop of Seleucia Ctesiphon.

4.4. The Synod of Yahbalaha (420 AD)

When Mar 'Ishaq died in 412 two saintly persons followed him on the throne, Akha from 412 to 415 and Yahbalaha I from 415 to 420. In 420 Mar Yahbalaha called a small church synod in 420 in Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁸⁸ The council asserts Mar Yahballaha's authority as Catholicos giving him the title:

⁸⁹ܡܪ ܝܗܒܠܗܐ ܩܬܘܠܝܥܐ ܩܘܡܘܨܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܕܢܗܐ

Mār Yhbalāhā apysq qātolicā wresā d'apesqope d'madnahā ("Bishop Catholicos and head of all the bishops of the East").

The record of the Synod starts with a detailed description of his Catholicate:

The Synod of Mar Yahbalaha, Catholicos of Beit Lapat, Nisibis, Fars, Armenia, Prat D Maišan, Hdayab, Beit Garmai, Gorzan, Beit Madaye, 'Aran, 'Abrašahar, Azerbaijan, The Islands, 'Istahar, Karka, 'Arzon, Šus, Šošter, Balašpar, Dasqarta, Zabe, Piroz, Šabur, Dargerad, Beit Daraye, Šabur-Kost, 'Ardašir-Prihad, Beit Šabur, Simart.⁹⁰

⁸⁶Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 154.

⁸⁷Cf. Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 152-153.

⁸⁸For the description and Canons see: Syriac Text: *SO*, 37-42. French: *SO*, 276-84. English: M.J. Birnie, *The Synod of Mar Yahbalaha* (unpublished) from <http://www.fourthcentury.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/thecouncilofmaryahbalaha.pdf>

⁸⁹Cf. *SO*, 37.

⁹⁰Cf. *SO*, 37.

Acacius of Amida⁹¹ the delagate from the West was also present.⁹² Altogether 12 bishops participated in the synod. The purpose of the synod was to deal with internal difficulties in the church; to ease tensions among Zoroastrians concerned about the growth of the church; to confirm the decisions of western councils. According to the suggestion of Acacius the Persians further strengthened their ties with the West by recognizing five more Western Councils as authoritative. They had already adopted the canons of the Council of Nicaea in the Synod of Mar'Ishaq in 410.⁹³ The reason they gave for the acceptance of these Canons of the Western Synod is a perfect expression of their Catholic Ecclesiological vision.

... these laws which were established by the illustrious fathers and blessed bishops in the catholic church of the entire dominion of the Romans, and up to now have been carefully and diligently kept there, be given to each one of us by your Excellency... As we all in one body are Christ, so too in the administration of the Church we will agree in the one perfection of their divine and complete love and perfect order.⁹⁴

The records of this Synod of Yahbalaha can contribute nothing special when concerned with the development of East Syrian Patriarchate. But the above quoted text of Yahbalaha synod shows the profound catholic ecclesiology of the East Syrian council fathers. From this text we can easily deduce that the Patriarchate is not at all parallel to Papacy. Even after becoming a Catholicate Church the fathers considers Western fathers as the custodians of tradition and respects their services.

4.5. The Synod of Dadisho 424

The persecution started again during 420s. Between the persecution of Varahran V and Yazdegerd II a short period of peace was there. One general council was convoked at this time not in the capital city but in Markapta of Arabs in 424 AD because of the fear of renewed persecution.⁹⁵ It was summoned by King Bahram and presided over

⁹¹Saint Acacius of Amida (died 425) was Bishop of Amida, Mesopotamia (modern-day Turkey) from 400 to 425, during the reign of the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II.

⁹²Cf. SO, 37.

⁹³The councils that recognized with Nicaea were Ancyra (314), Neo Caesarea, Antioch (341), Gangra (343), and Laodicea (365). The records of the Synod which were signed by eleven Persian Bishops are in SO, 39.

⁹⁴Cf. SO, 40.

⁹⁵For the description and Canons: Syriac Text: Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 43-53. French: Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 285-98. English: M.J. Birine, *The Synod of Mar*

by Mar Dadisho. Thirty Seven bishops from all over Persia participated in the synod.⁹⁶

4.5.1. Historical Background of the Synod

The then Catholicos Mar Dadisho had been thrown into prison accused of being pro-Roman. For a short period the rule of a pseudo Catholicos, Farbokt came into existence with the support of unholy alliance of anti-Christian Zoroastrians and rebel bishops. They captured the control of the organization of the Church. When the persecution ended the true Catholicos was released from the prison but he was reluctant to return to the office and sealed himself off in a hermit's cell to weep over the spiritual fall of the Church of God. But the continuing pressure of his faithful including bishops compelled him to preside over the council that one of his Metropolitan bishops Agapit of Gundeshapur had called. The aim of this special synod was to persuade Mar Dadisho to return to his position as an unequivocal head of the Church of the East. As the records of the Synod of Dadisho reports:

Come, let us repair the breaches of our people and our clergy... for the sake of our father and head. He is our leader and caretaker, the giver of all the stores of the divine treasure, Mar Dadisho, the Catholicos, who is Peter for us, the head of our ecclesiastical council. Let us petition and supplicate whether it may be that our father will condescend to receive our petition. If not let us all stand before his door with lamentation and sadness, in sack cloth and ashes, with weeping and great imploring until... he accepts our petition, returning to his paternal see and taking hold of his leadership over us according to the command of Christ to the head of the apostles, Peter.⁹⁷

4.5.2. Declaration of Independence

It was one of the most significant Persian Synod in the development of an autonomous church, a continuation of the Synod of 'Ishaq of 410 in this regard. The entire history of the Catholicate, from its founding under Mar Papa until their time was discussed in this Synod. The Synod of 'Ishaq declared that the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon to be supreme among the bishops of the East. The title given to him was:

Dadiso (unpublished) from: <http://www.fourthcentury.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/thesynodofmardadiso.pdf>

⁹⁶ Cf. SO, 43.

⁹⁷Cf. SO, 50.

trusted advisers, but their jurisdiction as ecclesiastics ended at Persian border since 424 AD. Through these National synods, the Church of the East became an independent autonomous nationalistic Church.

This reality could never alter the theological core of this Church. Persecution and suffering could not divert the stance of this venerable tradition towards the will of her Master. Although there were geo-political factors that separated the Church of the East from the West, yet no one could change her theology and principles. They always remained apostolic and in fidelity to Christ and His universal Church.¹⁰¹

As Moffett remarks the Persian Asia was beyond Western control not by schism, but as a matter of Patriarchal privilege. Schism indeed was soon to come, but when it did, it came from the West, from Antioch and Alexandria, not from the East.¹⁰²

This study has presented the evolution of the Patriarchate as an indigenous autonomous development. Since Syro-Malabar Church, one of the 22 Eastern (Oriental) Catholic Churches and the second largest Eastern Catholic Church, is of this liturgical tradition, this study is relevant in its context too. This distinct Catholic community is fully integrated into Indian Society. With 4.6 million believers it is the largest denomination among the Saint Thomas Christians (*Mar Toma Nazranis*). On December 16, 1992, Pope John Paul II, by the Apostolic Constitution *Quae maiori*,¹⁰³ raised the Syro-Malabar Church to the status of Major Archiepiscopal *sui iuris* Church with the title of Ernakulam-Angamaly. But she is still far from the state of an Autonomous Church. Being one of the most vibrant Church among the Orientals we have to think about the true spirit behind the mind of the Church expressed in OE 12: "Seeing that the patriarchal office in the Eastern Church is a traditional form of government, the Sacred Ecumenical Council ardently desires that new patriarchates should be erected where there is need, to be established either by an ecumenical council or by the Roman Pontiff". Thus we can hope for a day when the Syro-Malabar Church will be raised to the status of a Patriarchate which she deserves.

¹⁰¹Mar Bawai Soro, *The Church of the East*, 270.

¹⁰²Hugh Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* Vol. 1, 163.

¹⁰³*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 85 (1993), 398-399.