

## THE RECEPTION OF THE FIRST NICENE COUNCIL BY THE CHURCH OF THE EAST

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### **Abstract**

The Church of the East originated within the boundaries of Persia and traces its apostolic roots to St Thomas the Apostle. Over the course of its formative four centuries, it developed as an indigenous church in the Persian region. This period was marked by significant trials, as the Church endured persecution under various Sassanian rulers. However, this era of hardship ended during the reign of King Yazdgard, who, akin to Emperor Constantine in the Roman Empire, brought peace and tranquility, allowing free practice of the Christian faith in Persia. At the beginning of the 5th century, Mar Marutha, the bishop of Maiperqat, arrived in Persia as an envoy from the Roman Emperor, which led to the convocation of the Synod of Mar 'Ishac in 410. During this synod, the Church of the East accepted the Nicene Creed as well as the canons from the Council of Nicaea brought by Mar Marutha. Subsequently, Mar Acacius of Amid led another significant mission that convened a second Persian synod in 420. In this synod, Mar Acacius brought with him the canons and laws from the Council of Nicaea as well as the canons from various minor Western councils. The Persian bishops accepted all those canons, declaring the unity and universality of the Church. The Church of the East, having endured internal discord and divisions largely due to a lack of established legal and ecclesiastical structures, turned to the Western canons as a means of structured

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reorganization. The Church sought internal cohesion by formally adopting the Nicene Creed and its accompanying canons and affirmed its commitment to the broader ecclesiastical tradition. Its leading theologians and successive councils would repeatedly emphasise this continuity.

**Key Words:** The Church of the East, Creed, canons, Persian Church, Western Church, Council of Nicaea.

## 1. Introduction

The frontier between Rome and Persia separated the Syriac-speaking Christian communities along the upper Euphrates and Tigris from their fellow Christians in the West. In the larger historical framework, the theological discussions surrounding Arianism and Neo-Arianism were significant in the Greco-Roman world and among the Syriac-speaking regions. The Christian communities from the region east of the Euphrates were represented at the Synod of Nicaea (325) by five bishops: Aitalaha of Edessa, Antiochus of Reshaina, Mareas of Macedonopolis, John of Persia, and Jacob of Nisibis.<sup>103</sup> The view of Barhebraeus that either Mar Papa bar 'Aggai or Shem'on bar Šabba'e appears to have been present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 is not supported by any other source.<sup>104</sup> Suppose this account of the Persian

<sup>103</sup> Heinrich Gelzer - Heinrich Hilgenfeld - Otto Cuntz, *Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina: Latine Graece Coptice Syriace Arabice Armeniace*, Stuttgart-Leipzig, Aedibus BG Teubneri, 1898. Provinciae Mesopotamiae - Aetholaus Edessae, Iacobus Nisibiensis, Antiochus Resennitanus and Mareas Macedonopolitanus; Provinciae Persidis - Iohannes Persidos (*Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina Latine*, pages 20-23). Μεσοποταμίας- Αιθαλας Έδεσσων, Ίάκωβος Νισίβος, Άντιοχος Ήρσίνας, Μαρέας Μακεδονουπόλεως, Ιωάννης Περείδος (*Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina Graece*, page 64).

ܩܬܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܪܒܝܐ; :ܡܚܡܕ ܕܣܝܪܝܐ : ܟܬܒܬܗ ܕܡܥܨܐ : ܫܬܐ ܕܡܚܘܪܐ : ܡܨܦ - ܕܡܬܐ ܡܬܐ  
 more specifically numbers four from Mesopotamia and one from Persia. Cf. Ute Possekel, *Ephrem's Doctrine of God*, in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. A B McGowan, B E Daley and T J Gaden, Leiden, Brill, 2009, 198-199; Ernest Honigmann, La Liste Originale des Peres de Nicee: A propos de l'Eveche de "Sodoma" en Arabie Authors, Byzantion, Vol. 14, 1(1939), 46; Peter Bruns, "Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums in der ostsyrischen Kirche", *Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum* 32, 1(2000), 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> Gregorii Barhebraei *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, edd. Joannes Baptista Abbeloos – Thomas Josephus Lamy, Louvain, Peeters, 1872, 27-29 (Syriac). Cf. *The Synods of the Church of the East*, ed. Alberto Melloni, *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generaliumque Decreta* (COGD) V/2, in *Corpus Christianorum*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2023, 524 (Hereafter it will be cited with the name of the synod, followed by COGD V/2 with page numbers). Peter Bruns argues that the limited involvement of the bishops from

delegation at Nicaea is reliable. In that case, it implies that they were indeed acquainted with the Nicene Creed and canons, which were widely recognized in the West. However, the prevailing political climate and the ongoing Christian persecutions thwarted their spread and reception within the Syriac church.

This theory concerning Persian involvement in the First Council of Nicaea is subject to significant skepticism and has been disputed by many scholars. Notably, the renowned Syriac scholar Sebastian Brock asserts that the Persian Church did not participate in the Nicene Synod, which is traditionally regarded as the first of the seven ecumenical synods. Supporting this view, the documents of the Persian Synods in the *Synodicon Orientale* contain no mention of Persian participation in any of the ecumenical synods. Furthermore, the documentation from the Persian synods explicitly states that the first council of Nicaea was convened by the Western Roman Emperor within Western territories, intended for the Western churches. Consequently, the ecumenical status of this council of Nicaea falls under suspicion because of the non-participation of the East Syrian Church, which grew up outside and to the East of the Roman Empire. Brock reinforces this interpretation, asserting that the so-called 'ecumenical councils' were, in fact, confined to the Roman imperial domain.

In its pursuit of discipline and religious uniformity, the Church of the East sought to integrate with the Western Church, striving to adopt the laws and canons established at the First Council of Nicaea. It wasn't until 85 years after the Synod of Nicaea that the East Syrian Church adopted the Nicene Creed and its canons, a process facilitated by figures such as Acacius, the Roma Emperor, Mar Marutha of Maiperqat, the Roman ambassador to Persia, Yazdgard, the Persian King, Western bishops, Mar 'Ishac, the Catholicos of the East Syrian Church.

## 2. The Church of the East<sup>105</sup>

Christian communities were present in Mesopotamia as early as the first century. However, it is hard to determine the exact point when Christianity began to take hold in the Parthian Empire, across

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this region was due to geographical distance and political isolation (P. Bruns, *Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums in der ostsyrische Kirche*, 2).

<sup>105</sup> The Church of the East is known in various names, such as 'the Apostolic Church of the East, the East Syrian Church, the Persian Church', and the misleading term 'the Nestorian Church'. Presently, the Church of the East consists of two branches of the Assyrian Church, which are non-Catholic, and the Chaldean Church and the Syro-Malabar Church, which are in communion with the Catholic Church.

the Euphrates in Persia. Nonetheless, the Church of the East traces its foundation back to the Apostolic era. It is traditionally believed that the Gospel was initially preached in this area by Mari, the disciple of Addai, who is said to have spread the message in Edessa.<sup>106</sup> The frequent wars between the Romans and Persians prevented the Persian Church from maintaining close contact with the West.<sup>107</sup> In the latter half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Persian Christians faced total isolation and severe persecution under Shapur II. During this period, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was obliterated, and the episcopal see of the imperial capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, remained vacant for decades.<sup>108</sup> Church services and Christian proselytism were banned, religious gatherings were violently suppressed, Christians were subject to extra taxes, and many chose martyrdom to avoid converting to Zoroastrianism. This hostile and violent environment made it impossible for the Syriac Church fathers to adopt the resolutions passed by Western councils.<sup>109</sup>

### 3. The Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (315)

The first synod held in the Persian land occurred in 315, but no official records have survived. The information available about it is gleaned from the documents and proceedings of later councils. The primary source for the account of this synod comes from the Acts of the Synod of Dadisho', held in 424.<sup>110</sup> *The Chronicle of Arbela*, written

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<sup>106</sup> In addition to Apostle Thomas, the disciples Addai and Mari, who are considered two of the 72 disciples sent by Jesus (cf. *Lk.* 10,1), came to the territory of Mesopotamia and went on a mission there.

<sup>107</sup> The Parthians liberated Persia from the Greek domination and governed there for five centuries. The Sassanid dynasty took over from the Parthians in 226 AD and ruled Persia for almost four centuries until Islam conquered it in 642 AD.

<sup>108</sup> The attitude of Parthians towards Christians was tolerant. There were only isolated and localized persecutions for apostasy from Zoroastrianism under the first Sassanian kings. During the Sassanid King Vahram II (277-293), Zoroastrianism had assumed a dominant position in Persian religious policy, which in a way brought bloody persecution and martyrdom for other groups that existed in the Empire. The Christian persecution reached its peak during the long reign of Shapur II (309-379) (Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2000, 11).

<sup>109</sup> P. Bruns, *Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums in der ostsyrischen Kirche*, 3-5.

<sup>110</sup> Jean Baptiste Chabot, ed. and tr., *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1902, 43-53 (Syriac text), 285-298 (French translation); *Syn. Dadisho'*, COCD V/2, 643-693. The information regarding this council and the controversy during the time of Mar Papa was presented in the Synod of Dadisho' by Mar Agapetos, the bishop of Beth Lapat.

by Mshikha-zkha, also recounts the controversy during the time of Mar Papa, though its authority is questioned.<sup>111</sup> It was not a synod convoked to discuss doctrinal or theological subjects, but rather to resolve a dispute regarding the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Mar Papa bar 'Aggai, the bishop of the Persian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon, elevated the dignity of his episcopal see, asserting the supreme authority of the bishop in the royal capital. This act caused a division among the East Syrian Church, prompting the calling of a synod in 315 and the eventual deposition of Mar Papa.<sup>112</sup> Standing firm in the Church's authentic tradition, Mar Papa wrote to the Western bishops, requesting their intervention.<sup>113</sup> They responded with a letter that affirmed the primacy of the bishop of the royal city over all bishops in the East. The records of the synod of Dadisho' supported Mar Papa's position of creating the primacy and accused all other bishops who rebelled against it. This synod and its proceedings exemplify how the Church of the East frequently sought assistance from the Western bishops in times of internal conflict.<sup>114</sup>

#### 4. Aphrahat and Ephrem – Two Contemporaries of Nicaea

Aphrahat and Ephrem were two of the earliest and most influential figures in Syriac Christianity, shaping and guiding the Church with their teachings and interpretations of Scripture. They were contemporary to the violent Persian-Roman confrontations and the brutal persecutions under the Sassanian rule. The Christians of Mesopotamia took no notice of the theological controversy between the presbyter Arius and his bishop Alexander. Aphrahat, the Persian sage, who profoundly impacted Christians outside the Roman Empire in Adiabene, authored a comprehensive series of edifying treatises. In these writings, his Christological views were presented without reference to the Nicene Creed, while actively engaging in

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<sup>111</sup> Alphonse Mingana, *Sources Syriacques*, Vol. 1, Leipzig, Harrassowitz, 1908. Two German translations with the Syriac text were published by Eduard Sachau, *Die Chronik von Arbela: ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis des ältesten Christentums im Orient*, Berlin, G. Reimer, 1915; Peter Kawerau, *Die Chronik von Arbela*, CSCO 467-468, 1985.

<sup>112</sup> Syn. Dadisho', Acts. 13-24, COGD V/2, 672-675. Aphrahat provides a vivid testimony of this conflict-laden situation in his 14<sup>th</sup> Demonstration, titled "On Argument and Dissension" (Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, Piscataway, Gorgias Press, 2010, 305-360).

<sup>113</sup> Western bishops here mean West Asian bishops. According to 'the Chronicle of Arbela', this letter was directed to Mar Sa'da, the bishop of Edessa (P. Kawerau, *Die Chronik von Arbela*, 68-69).

<sup>114</sup> West Asian bishops.

constant criticism of Judaism and its rejection of the Messiah.<sup>115</sup> According to Connolly, the passages of faith formulas in Aphrahat contain allusions to an existing symbol. The entire first *Demonstration* is about 'faith', which includes a Christian Creed, of very much Judeo-Christian origin, based on the Old Testament, the coming of the Messiah, and concludes with eternal life. In response to a query from an anonymous correspondent, Aphrahat articulated the following statements regarding matters of faith.

Now this is faith: when a person believes in God, the Lord of all, who made heaven and earth, and the seas and all that is in them, and who made Adam in his image. He gave the Torah to Moses, sent [a portion] of his Spirit into the prophets, and sent his Anointed One into the world. Such a person also believes in the resurrection of the dead and the mystery of baptism. This is the faith of the Church of God (*Dem.* I, 19).<sup>116</sup>

This profession of faith is distinctly rooted in Scripture. His '*Demonstrations*' are considered to be from the post-Nicene period (A. D. 337-345), suggesting that he was probably acquainted with the Nicene Creed. According to Pierre and Nakano, despite Aphrahat's knowledge of the Nicene Creed, he "continued to teach the old confession of faith as the one embraced by the church and its fathers."<sup>117</sup> The adoption of the Nicene Creed's theological language, particularly with its Greek terminology, remained a challenge in Persia during this period. Thus, as Connolly argues, the teachings of Aphrahat are quite independent of Nicene language.<sup>118</sup> In his *Demonstrations*, there is a compilation of statements that bear similarities to creedal formulations.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> J. Parisot., *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes I-XXIII*, ed. & tr. PS I-II, Lutetiae Parisiorum 1894/1907.

<sup>116</sup> A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, 84. The first demonstration opens with the acknowledgment. "I have received your letter, my friend, and when I read it, I was overjoyed that you have thrown your mind into these investigations. For this request that you have made of me will be responded to freely, as it was freely received" (*Dem.* I, 1 - A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, 67).

<sup>117</sup> Syn. 'Ishac, COGD V/2, 525.

<sup>118</sup> Dom R. H. Connolly, *The Early Syriac Creed*, *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche*, 7(1906), 202.

<sup>119</sup> For example, Jesus the First-born Son, the offspring of Mary; suffered, lived, and ascended to the height; he is the judge of the dead and the living (*Dem.* XIV, 39). Jesus our Lord is God; Son of God; light from light (XVII, 2). He put on our manhood, he took body from us (III, 16), He put on him a body from the Virgin (XXI, 9), He put on a body from Mary (XXIII), Our Lord suffered, rose on the third day (V, 9; XII, 13; XVII, 10), he went up into heaven and sat on the right hand of his

According to ‘*The Syriac Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*’, Ephrem, as a young man, accompanied Mar Jacob, bishop of Nisibis, to Nicaea for the first synod.<sup>120</sup> Ute Possekkel opines that Ephrem formulated his doctrine of God in a two-fold historical context, first in response to the particular challenges to the doctrine of God faced by the Syrian Church, and second within the larger context of the fourth-century Arian controversies in the imperial Church.<sup>121</sup> But it can be noted based on the chronology of his writings that Ephrem intervened in this doctrinal dispute on the side of the Orthodox Church only after his transition from the Persian Nisibis to the Roman Edessa, which happened after 363.<sup>122</sup> Even though Ephrem

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Father (VI, 10; XXI, 10), he is the judge of the dead and the living (XXII, 2), the baptism of remission of sins (XI, 11). The idiom “*nuhrā’ dmin nuhrā’* - light from light” may readily recall the Nicene Creed. However, it is not used to refer to the pre cosmic Logos-Son in the line of Nicaea, but Aphrahat is engaged in providing a list of titles of Christ. Moreover, this is the only title in the list coinciding with the Nicene triad: God of God, light from light, a true God from true God (Serge Ruzer and Aryeh Kofsky, *Syriac Idiosyncrasies: Theology and Hermeneutics in Early Syriac Literature*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, 11). The non-Scriptural expression ‘Light from Light’ (Φῶς ἐκ φωτός) belonged to the Creed of Caesarea, and has come down through the Nicene and Constantinopolitan formulas. This occurrence in Aphrahat raises a strong probability that he knew it in a Creed formula (D. R. H. Connolly, *The Early Syriac Creed*, 14).

<sup>120</sup> Joseph P. Amar., *The Syriac Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, ed. & tr. CSCO 629-630, SS 242-243, Lovanii 2011, 14-15 (Arabic text), 16-17 (translation). It is considered a legend and all the more it is not substantiated by any other evidence (U. Possekkel, *Ephrem’s Doctrine of God*, 200). Robert Murray contends that this work lacks reliability (Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, London, T&T Clark, 2006, 30).

<sup>121</sup> U. Possekkel, *Ephrem’s Doctrine of God*, 198. Ephrem formulated his Doctrine of God by using symbols, paradoxes, types, and images, a characteristic feature of the Syriac Christian theology, in contrast to the philosophical, ontological, and legalistic features of the Western Church.

<sup>122</sup> The regions of Batanis, Edessa, and Haran remained adherent to the Nicene theology even under the Arian Emperor Valens (364-378). A strong Arian presence in the fourth century Edessa is supported by some other sources. A letter to the Persian Christians attributed to Aitallaha defended Nicene Trinitarian theology against the Arian factions (P. Bruns, *Brief Aithallahas, des Bischofs von Edessa (Urhai), an die Christen des Perserlandes über den Glauben*, OrChr 77 (1993), 120-136. The Chronicle of Edessa reported that the Arian faction came to dominate the church in Edessa and succeeded in driving out the Orthodox community in 373 (*Chronicle of Edessa* 31, ed. Ignatius Guidi, *Chronica Minora I*, CSCO 1, SS 1(1955), 5, 8-9). According to Theodoret, the emperor Valens exiled the orthodox leader Eulogius and others who refused to accept the imperially appointed Arian bishop (Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4, 17-18. *The Ecclesiastical History, Dialogues and Letter of Theodoret*, tr. B. Jackson, Grand Rapids, William B Eerdmans, 1979). His last years in Edessa were darkened by the advent of Arianism, which threw the church in

did not mention Nicaea by name, an explicit reference is made to the council in his 'Hymns against Heresies'. This work also highlights Ephrem's familiarity with the Nicene phrase  $\phi\omega\varsigma \ \epsilon\kappa \ \phi\omega\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$  (light from light).<sup>123</sup> He criticizes those who investigate and try to define the divine, a charge most likely leveled against the followers of Aetius and Eunomius.<sup>124</sup> It is clear from the writings of Ephrem that the Arian and Neo-Arian communities existed in his surroundings, and he became an exponent of the orthodox teaching by refuting the opponents.

### 5. King Yazdgard I: The Persian Constantine

The wave of persecution and the terrible time of great fear began under Shapur II and ended with the new Persian King Yazdgard's ascension in 399. The new ruler changed the previous religious policy towards the Christian minority in his empire by initially showing tolerance and allowing relatively free practice of religion.<sup>125</sup> He is very much exalted in the documents of the synod of 'Ishac. In their letter to Mar Marutha, the Western bishops exalt Emperor Constantine, who convoked the Synod of Nicaea, referring to him as 'just and God-loving Constantine the victorious king.'<sup>126</sup> Applying the same title to King Yazdgard in synodal documents strengthens the claim that he is the Persian Church's equivalent of Constantine.<sup>127</sup> The following passage illustrates the happiness and tranquility that the Church experienced during his time in power.

In the eleventh year of the reign of the victorious King of Kings, Yazdgard, when tranquility and peace had come to the churches of the Lord, he brought about deliverance and rest to the congregations of Christ, and gave the servants of God the authority for Christ to be openly magnified in their bodies, both in their deaths and in their lives.

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Osrhoene into a turmoil of dissension, described by Ephrem with vividness and acute anguish in the Hymns of Faith (R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 30).

<sup>123</sup> Der Ausspruch unseres Herrn hat sie gefangen – und genommen sind (ihnen) ihre Unterpfänder, – den Aetianern und Arianern, – den Sabellianern und den Katharern, – den Photinianern und Auduanern, – die von unserer Kirche die Hand(auflegung) erhalten haben. Auch haben (einige) von ihnen ihre Unterschrift gegeben – zu dem Glauben, der aufgezeichnet wurde – in jener glorreichen Synode (*Hymns Against Heresies*. 22, 20 – CSCO 169-170, SS 76-77, 82); Die Licht von Licht ist (*Ibid.*, 55, 2, 187). In this work, Arians and Aetians are refuted by name.

<sup>124</sup> *Sermons on Faith*, 6, 345-390; 443-470.

<sup>125</sup> It is said that he returned to harsher measures towards the end of his rule, instigated by the Iranian clergy.

<sup>126</sup> *Syn. 'Ishac*, Act. 11, COGD V/2, 568-571.

<sup>127</sup> *Syn. 'Ishac*, Acts. 2, 4, COGD V/2, 562-565.



He rolled away the dark cloud of persecution from all the churches of God and put away the dark cloud of affliction from all the flocks of Christ. He commanded in all his kingdom that the temples which had been torn down by his forebears should be magnificently rebuilt in his own days, and the altars which had been pulled down should be securely supplied. Those who, for the sake of God, had been tried and tested by imprisonments and torments were to go out in the open, and priests and rulers, as well as the entire holy Covenant, were to go about freely without dread or fear.<sup>128</sup>

His friendly relations with the Byzantine Emperor Arcadius created favourable conditions for the afflicted and persecuted Persian Church to begin reorganizing its life. This relationship also resulted in sending an ambassador from Western Christianity to assist the Church in its renewal, reform, and reorganization. As early as 399, the Eastern Roman Emperor had sent a delegation to the court of the Persian great king, including Mar Marutha, the bishop of the border town of Maiperqat.<sup>129</sup> As Constantine convened the Synod of Nicaea, Yazdgard commanded the Marzbans (governors) of the districts to send the royal authorization to the bishops, inviting them to assemble in the royal city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon for the synod. The members of the synod acknowledged the authority of the great king, assuring their fundamental loyalty and offering their prayers for his health and the prosperity of the Empire. The religious tolerance and the freedom allowed Christians in Persia to face new challenges with renewed confidence and faith. The fathers enthusiastically embraced the profession of faith and the canons established at the Western council of Nicaea, intending to bring order to the Church and resolve disputes. In all these, the fathers hoped they had found a new Persian Constantine in the great King Yazdgard, who would advance the Christian cause in Persia just as the Emperor Constantine had done in the Roman Empire.

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<sup>128</sup> Syn. 'Ishac, Act. 2, COGD V/2, 562-565.

<sup>129</sup> Mar Marutha was given the task of reorganizing the Persian Church, especially the clergy, who has been decimated by the persecutions, and to empower the administration of the church through the convocation of a synod. In the view of J B Chabot, Marutha came to Persia as an ambassador of the King in 399 when Yazdgard started his reign. At this time, Isaac was instituted as the head of the Seleucia-Ctesiphon in a partial synod, which was contested by some other bishops. Marutha again went on an embassy to the King of Persia, and then obtained the confirmation of the Synod (J. B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 257 (French)).

## 6. The Synod of Mar 'Ishac (410)

The situation of the Christians improved under the reign of Yazdgard I. Many diplomatic exchanges between the two great Empires began in this period, and many of those missions to the neighbouring Christian Empire were led by the heads and bishops of the Church of the East. Likewise, the Roman Empire was represented by delegates in the Persian Courts.<sup>130</sup> The first official synod in the land of Persia was realized by one of the Roman delegations, Mar Marutha, bishop of Maiperqat, who brought a letter from the bishop Catholicos of Antioch and his suffragans.<sup>131</sup> This letter was translated from Greek into Persian and had been brought to the attention of King Yazdgard I. The King ordered the convocation of the synod, which was realized under the leadership of Mar 'Ishac, the holy catholicos and chief bishop, and Mar Marutha of Maiperqat.<sup>132</sup> The first session was held in February on the holy feast of the Epiphany, with the gathering of forty bishops in the cathedral church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The letter approved by the king was read in the first council of the bishops. It contained the following three recommendations.

1. Concerning the bishops: There should be only one bishop in each city. Every bishop must be ordained by three bishops with the authority of a letter from the metropolitan archbishop.
2. Concerning the liturgical feasts: The liturgical feasts should be celebrated together and on the same days. Explicit mention is made of the birth and Epiphany, forty days of Lent, and the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. One holy Qurbana should be offered to God in all churches.
3. Concerning the adoption of the Nicene Creed and canons.

The Acts of the synod contain an excerpt from the letter of the Western fathers.

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<sup>130</sup> W. Baum and D. W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, 14.

<sup>131</sup> The Eastern version of this synod depicts Mar Marutha with great honour in its Acts. He is portrayed with various epithets, such as 'the ambassador of peace', 'an apostle who was sent to the East by God in his mercy', 'the wise father and honourable leader', 'husbandman of tranquility and sower of peace'

<sup>132</sup> It was through the initiative of Mar Marutha of Maiperqat, Mar 'Ishac of Kashkar was elected as the bishop of the Persian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. But this election of Mar 'Ishac provoked resistance among many bishops, and the disputes which hindered the church very much past flared up again.

If our Lord is pleased to hear our petition, and the victorious King of Kings commands, and the bishops gather and a synod takes place, we now have sent you all the appointed canons which were established in the great synod which took place in the city of Nicaea in the days of the just and God-loving Constantine the victorious king, when three hundred and eighteen bishops gathered and, as the fear of God which was in them, they set in order and set down steadfast admonitions, chaste laws, upright rules, glorious canons, and enlightening ordinances.<sup>133</sup>

The first official synod in the Persian land formally accepted the Nicene Creed of 325, alongside various Western canons and ecclesiastical rules, effectively uniting the churches of East and West after a period of political and religious isolation.<sup>134</sup> The convocation of the synod in the main Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon marked the shift to a new phase in the development of the Persian Church. One of the purposes of this synod was to bring the church affairs of Persian Christianity into line with the Western development and to make the Nicene faith the creedal foundation of the reorganized Church.<sup>135</sup> Doubts about the validity of ordinations, multiple occupancies of bishoprics, and the dispute over primacy had led the Persian fathers to assemble and to adopt the orders established among the Westerners. As recorded in the Acts of the Synod, the letter sent by the Eastern bishops was presented at the synod, and the fathers, eager to hear it, accepted all that was written within.<sup>136</sup>

## 7. The Two Recensions of the Synod of 'Ishac

The Synod of 'Ishac (410) has been handed down in two forms: a longer and a shorter version.<sup>137</sup> The long version is transmitted in

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<sup>133</sup> Syn. 'Ishac, Act. 11, COGD V/2, 568-569. The letter was composed and signed by Porphyrius, bishop Catholicos of Antioch, Acacius, bishops of Aleppo, Pqida, bishop of Edessa, Eusebius, bishop of Tella, and Acacius, bishop of Amida (Act. 4 of Eastern).

<sup>134</sup> The Syn. 'Ishac, COGD V/2, 523.

<sup>135</sup> A. Vööbus, "New Sources for the Symbol in Early Syrian Christianity", *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972), 291.

<sup>136</sup> Syn. 'Ishac, Act. 8, COGD V/2, 568-569.

<sup>137</sup> The long one contains the acts of a total of 13 synods held by the Church of the East. But the smaller one contains only the Synod of 'Ishac. The longer version is found in the following manuscript: *Alqosh 169*<sup>137</sup> (The Synodicon Orientale of J B Chabot was based on two apographs (*Borg. Syr.* 82 and 819; *Ms Syr.* 332) which derived from this single manuscript. *Alqosh 169* was moved to Baghdad and renumbered as *Baghdad 509*. The Edition and translation in COGD V/2 are based on this main source. The shorter one is found in six manuscripts: *BnF Syr.* 62, *Madrin 309*, *Madrin 310*, *Vat. Syr.* 560, *Mingana Syr.* 8 and *Sher 69* (Syn. 'Ishac, COGD V/2,

East Syriac Script, while the short one is in West Syriac.<sup>138</sup> Both versions are divided into three parts to conclude that the documents come from three different meetings, sessions, or synods.<sup>139</sup> The first section corresponds to the reception of the materials brought from the West, and the other two sections to the canons established by the Persian bishops. The faith formula appears in both versions, with minor differences between them. The Creed is notably concise in the longer version, whereas the shorter recension presents a more expanded rendition. In the Western version, the Creed is positioned as the second canon, whereas in the Eastern version, it is placed following the introduction and the narration of the Acts of the Synod, yet preceding the enumeration of the canons. A difference is noted in the titles as well. In the Western version, it reads “the faith that was established by some of these Persian bishops,” whereas the title of the longer version is “the symbol of faith of the three hundred and eighteen bishops”.<sup>140</sup> Both recensions mostly refer to the Nicene council figuratively as ‘the council of three hundred and eighteen bishops’, though the title ‘Council of Nicaea’ is used a few times.<sup>141</sup> The editors of this synod in *COGD* divide the canons of both recensions into three groups.

Section 1: The canons are concerned with the fundamental rules for ecclesiastical institutions and their disciplines as found in the Western canons: Nicaea, Antioch, Neo Caesarea, etc.

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534-538). According to this, Scher 69 is now lost. Vööbus provides a list of 10 manuscripts for the Creed in the short version (A. Vööbus, *New Sources for the Symbol in Early Syrian Christianity*, 293-294).

<sup>138</sup> The short version opens with a brief introduction, then presents 27 canons, which are divided into three parts by two subtitles. The Synod of 'Ishac in the long version begins with a subtitle, followed by an introduction, the Nicene Creed, a series of numbered canons, and ends with the signatures of the participants.

<sup>139</sup> Syn. 'Ishac, *COGD* V/2, 529-531.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, Act. 2, 546-547 and Act. 17, 574-575.

<sup>141</sup> The Western version refers to the Synod of Nicaea as: ‘the canons established in the West’ (introduction), ‘the faith of the 318 bishops who were in the city of Nicaea’ (canon 2), ‘the definition imposed by the great and holy synod’ (canon 3), ‘the Holy Synod which took place in Nicaea’ (canon 13), and ‘the canons of the Great Synod which was in Nicaea’ (conclusion). The Eastern version refers as ‘Canons and ordinances set forth in the West in the Land of the Romans by the bishops’ (Act 1), ‘confession of faith of the fathers, the 318 bishops’ (Act 1), “Great Synod took place in the city of Nicaea in the days of the just and God-loving Constantine’ (Act 11), ‘Great and Holy Synod of the West’ (Act 12).

Section 2: The canons define the selection and the function of the clergy under the authority of the bishops of Persia.

Section 3: The canons establish the ecclesiastical hierarchy at the metropolitan and episcopal level.<sup>142</sup>

## 8. The Reception of the Nicene Creed

The Acts of the Synod of 'Ishac contains the symbol of faith endorsed by the 318 fathers at Nicaea, along with the anti-Arian anathemas. Walter Selb opines that the East Syrian Church accepted the Nicene Creed without notable alterations and incorporated twenty authentic canons from the Synod of Nicaea.<sup>143</sup> However, a cursory review of the transmission of the text shows considerable discrepancies among its recensions. The Syriac text provided by J B Chabot in his edition of the *Synodicon Orientale* is a direct reproduction of 'Epistula Eusebii', and he regards it as the official translation of the Nicene Creed within the East Syrian Church.<sup>144</sup> On the other hand, scholars like Lamy, Vööbus, Peter Bruns, and de Hallaux argue that the West Syrian version is the more original one and it retains elements from an earlier time.<sup>145</sup> A. Scher posits that the shorter version of East Syrian could be an interpolation or a miaphysite alteration.<sup>146</sup> Regardless, the two versions present notable differences in the Nicene symbol of faith adopted by the Church of the East. The following table offers a side-by-side comparison of the Nicene Creed and the two Syriac Versions.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Syn. 'Ishac, COGD V/2, 531-533. Section 1 (Short version canons 1-13 and long version canons 1-10). Section 2 (Short version canons 14-26 and long version canons 11-17). Section 3 (Short version canons 27 and long version canons 18-21).

<sup>143</sup> W. Selb, *Orientalisches Kircherencht*, Band I, Die Geschichte des Kirchenrechts der Nestorianer von den Anfängen bis zur Mongolenzeit, Wien 1981, 101.

<sup>144</sup> J. B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 22-24 (Syriac Text), 262f (French translation). The Creed that is provided by Chabot is the East Syrian version.

<sup>145</sup> Thomas Joseph Lamy, *Concilium Seleucia et Ctesiphonti habitum anno 410*, Lovanii, 1868, 27-30. A. Vööbus., *New Sources for the Symbol in Early Syrian Christianity*, 296; André de Halleuz, *Le symbole des évêques perses au synode de séléucie-Ctésiphon (410)*, in Gernot Wiessner, ed. *Erkenntnisse und Meinungen II* (Göttinger Orientforschungen), Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1978, 161.

<sup>146</sup> Addai Scher, *Catalogue des manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés dans la bibliothèque épiscopale de Séert*, Mosul, Imprimerie des Pères Dominicains, 1905, 53.

<sup>147</sup> The Creed and canons of the First Nicene Synod are cited from Norman Tanner's edition and translation (Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 1 Nicaea I to Lateran V, London, Shed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990).

Num	Synod of Nicaea-325	The Shorter Version - Western	The Longer Version - Eastern
1	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty
2		Who, through His Son, made heaven and earth	Maker of heaven and earth
3	Maker of all things both visible and invisible	And through him, the words above and below ( <i>'ālmā' dl'el wdaltaht</i> ) were established	And all things both visible and invisible ( <i>methazyān wdlā' methazyān</i> )
4		And through him made the resurrection	
5		And the renewal ( <i>hadutā'</i> ) of all creation	
6	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God	And in his only-Begotten Son	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God
7	The only begotten from the Father	Who was begotten from the Father	Who was begotten of the Father, the only-begotten
8	From the substance of the Father	That is, from the essence of his Father	That is, from the essence of his Father
9	God from God	God from God	God from God
10	Light from Light	Light from Light	Light from Light
11	True God from True God	True God from True God	True God from True God
12	Begotten not made	He was begotten, not made	Who was begotten and not made
13	Consubstantial with the Father	He who is of the same nature of his Father ( <i>bar kyānā' d-'abuhi</i> )	Coessential with the Father ( <i>bar 'itutā' d-'abā'</i> )

14	Through whom all things came to be, both in heaven and on earth		Through whom all things came to be, both in heaven and on earth
15	for us humans and for our salvation	Who, for the sake of us men, who were created through him and for our salvation,	Who for us men and for our salvation
16	He came down, became incarnate and became human	He descended, put on the body, and became a man	Came down from heaven, was incarnated, and became human
17	Suffered and rose up on the third day	Suffered and rose on the third day	And suffered and rose after three days
18	Went up into the heavens	And he ascended into heaven	And ascended into heaven
19		And sits at the right hand of his Father	
20	Is coming to judge the living and the dead	And comes to judge the dead and the living	And is coming to judge the living and the dead
21	And in the Holy Spirit	And we confess the living and holy Spirit	And in the Holy Spirit
22		The living Paraclete, who is from the Father and the Son	
23		In one Trinity ( <i>tlitāyūtā'</i> )	
24		In one essence ( <i>'itutā'</i> )	
25		In one will ( <i>Tsebyānā'</i> )	
26	And those who say "there once was when he was not", and "before he was begotten, he was not", and that he came to be	We agree with the faith of the 318 bishops who were in the city of Nicaea, which is our confession and our	But to those who say that there was a time when he did not exist, and before he was begotten, he did not exist, and that he was made from nothing; or say that he

	from things that were not, or from another hypostasis or substance, affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration – these the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.	faith, which we received from the holy fathers, the definition which was laid down by the Holy Synod.	was of some other <i>qnoma</i> or essence, or consider the Son of God changeable and mutable, such the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.
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The Creed found in the East Syriac longer version is notably smaller in comparison to the smaller version in West Syriac. The East Syriac version directly translates the Nicene Creed into Syriac, whereas the Western version's symbol of faith differs slightly, incorporating archaic elements with the Nicene Creed. The latter includes theological elements from the early Syriac theology, which are combined with the Nicene confession of faith.<sup>148</sup> André de Halleux confirms that the Church of the East did not merely adopt all the elements brought by Mar Marutha, but rather adapted them to suit the specific needs of the Persian Church. According to him, the synodal fathers of 410 accepted the Nicene Creed with some alteration based on a local Persian creed.<sup>149</sup> According to the chart above, the Creed of Nicaea contains 18 clauses, while the West Syriac has 26, and the East Syriac has 18. The table shows that the East Syriac version is exactly the translation of the Greek Nicene Creed, while the West Syriac version has added a few more elements to that. Unlike the Nicene Creed, the second clause is found in both Syriac versions and is an insertion by the Persian fathers.

The mediation of the Son in the creation of heaven and earth is already emphasized in the first article of faith in the West Syriac version, while in the Nicene Creed, it is found in the second article. The East Syriac version doesn't mention the mediation of the Son in the creation. The third clause of the East Syriac version falls in agreement with the Nicene Creed, where as the West Syriac version again emphasizes the mediation of Christ, and also uses 'worlds above and below' instead of the Nicene 'things both visible and

<sup>148</sup> W. Baum and D. W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, London and New York, 2000, 16.

<sup>149</sup> A. de Halleux, *Le symbole des évêques perses au synode de séléucie-Ctésiphon (410)*, 177, 190. He also raises the possibility of fathers of the synod of Ishac going for the traditional symbol of faith practiced in the royal city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the model because of its jurisdictional supremacy in the Sassanid Empire.



invisible'. one must take into account that the Christian proclamation in Persia took place in the extremely dualistic religious context of Zoroastrianism and that, for this reason, the unity of God had to be emphasized first of all. The Christological article in the Nicene Creed begins in No. 6, as 'In one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. The East Syriac version carries an exact translation of this. But the West Syriac version omits the Christological titles 'one Lord Jesus Christ' and 'Son of God'. In the view of Peter Burns, the West Syriac version doesn't repeat *ḥad 'alāhā* (One God) of its faith formula, and it is purposefully to emphasize the unity of God in the extremely dualistic context of Zoroastrianism.<sup>150</sup>

The new clauses 4 and 5 in the Western version, as Halleux noted, were incorporated by the Persian fathers in the synod. According to Peter Bruns, it reflects the sentiment of the Persian bishops because of the religious peace the new King Yazdgard granted. They perceived the new religious freedom and tranquility as a resurrection and the renewal of the dead. The freedom given for Christianity in Persia was viewed by many as a gift of providence, and this historical event was recorded in the Creed as an expression of divine intervention in the present.<sup>151</sup> Since the adoption of the Nicene Creed happened in 410 after the second ecumenical Synod of Constantinople, one may think of the influence of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the West Syriac version. This argument can be denied easily because the characteristic phrases of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, like 'before all time', 'from heaven', 'from the Virgin Mary', 'under Pontius Pilate', etc., are missing here. On the other hand, the Persian Creed contains the typically Nicene sentences that were omitted in NC, like 'from the substance of his Father', and 'God from God'. Therefore, the influence of NC doesn't exist.

The consubstantiality of the Son with the Father *bar kyānā d-'abuhī* (West Syriac) and *bar 'itutā d-'abā* (East Syriac) established above in line 13 must be regarded as the authentic Syriac translations of the Greek ὁμοούσιος.<sup>152</sup> Peter Bruns claims that *bar 'itutā d-'abā*, found

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 11-12. One must take into account that the proclamation of the Good News took place in the Persian land in the religious context of Zoroastrianism, which was extremely dualistic in nature.

<sup>151</sup> P. Bruns, *Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums in der ostsyrischen Kirche*, 11.

<sup>152</sup> ܐܘܬܝܬܐ and ܐܘܬܝܬܐ were used by early Syriac writers before the adoption of the Greek ὁμοούσιος (R. P. Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 1988, p. 213). He says

in the East Syriac version, is a later translation. However, this is not the case, as Aphrahat had already used it.<sup>153</sup> Line 15 addresses the salvation of humanity through Christ, but the West Syriac version condenses the doctrine of creation and redemption, emphasizing that the Redeemer created humans and that the Creator and Redeemer are one.<sup>154</sup> Another archaic and symbolic Syriac term, *lbeš pagrā* (He put on a body), is used in line 16 as the most idiomatic and Syriac equivalent of the Greek *σαρκωθέντα*. But the East Syriac translates it as *'etgašam* (He was Incarnated).<sup>155</sup> The presence of *lbeš pagrā* in the Western version emphasizes its originality. The Greek *ἐνανθρωπήσαντα* is translated as *hwā barnāšā* in the West Syriac and *etbarnaš* in the East. According to Peter Bruns, *hwā barnāšā* is the archaic form, and *etbarnaš* is found in the recent versions.

The third article concerning the Holy Spirit deserves specific attention in the West Syriac version. It reads "And we confess the living and Holy Spirit, the living Paraclete who is from the Father and the Son." The early Syriac doxology probably served as an inspiration for this translation. Aphrahat used the term 'living and holy Spirit' in his doxology depicted in the 23<sup>rd</sup> *Demonstration*.<sup>156</sup> The phrase 'living Paraclete' is borrowed from the language of the Syriac Bible (Jn. 14, 16; 15, 26). The more pivotal phrase in this article on the Holy Spirit is

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that *bar 'itutā d-'abā* means 'partaking of the essence of the Father' (P. Bruns, *Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums in der ostsyrischen Kirche*, 13).

<sup>153</sup> But Aphrahat used ܠܒܝܫܐܬܐܝܬܐ to demonstrate the divine origin and the essential affinity of Christ with his Father in the 23<sup>rd</sup> *Demonstration*. "Through you, we give thanks to the one who sent you, who desired that we might live through the death of his Only-Begotten One. Through you we glorify the Self-Existent One (*'ityā d-naphšeh*), who separated you from his being (*d-paršak men 'ituteh*) and sent you to us" (*Dem. XXIII*, 52 – A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, 515).

<sup>154</sup> In the opinion of Peter Bruns, this strong emphasis on the order of creation and redemption is probably due to the constant debate with the currents of Manicheism and Marcionism within Syrian Christianity (P. Bruns, *Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums in der ostsyrischen Kirche*, 13).

<sup>155</sup> The clothing metaphor predominated the early Syriac theology to describe the Mystery of Incarnation. *lbeš pagrā* (He put on a body) is the regular early Syriac mode of describing the incarnation. After the rise of the Christological controversies, it would seem to have been replaced in formal statements of faith by *'etgašam* (He was incarnated). The depiction of incarnation through the clothing imagery is one of the most frequently used images in Ephrem.

<sup>156</sup> "Glory and honour to the Father, and to his Son and to his living and holy Spirit, from the mouths of all those who glorify him, above and below, forever and ever, amen and amen" (*Dem. XXIII*, 61 – A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, 524).

‘who is from the Father and the Son’. J B Chabot opines that, in contrast to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, this West Syriac version of the Nicene Creed does not speak of a process of origin. The Syriac word for the procession (*napeq*) of the Holy Spirit is missing.<sup>157</sup> André de Halleux interprets this passage in the sense of Jn. 15 26 as a temporal sending of the Spirit of the Father and the Son.<sup>158</sup>

The Creed in the West Syriac version ends with a confession of the unity of the Trinity, Essence, and the Will, which are additions to the Nicene formula. These three lines again raise questions; however, the use of these words existed in the pre-Nicene Syriac milieu. The bishops of the synod of Yabalaha, while making their petition to the Catholicos, say that Christians are receptive to the truth of the inscrutable Trinity and the unlimited divine Lordship. The use of the term ‘Trinity (*tlitāyūtā*)’ affirms its use in the previous Synod of ‘Iṣḥac.<sup>159</sup> As the shorter version is a direct translation of the Creed of Nicaea, it contains the anti-Arian anathema, whereas the longer version omits this and ends instead with a declarative affirmation of adherence to the Nicene faith. The prevailing view among scholars is that the West Syriac recension (the longer one) represents the more original form than the East Syriac version. The analysis of the Creed reveals that the reception of the Nicene Creed at the Synod of ‘Iṣḥac points to a literary dependence, rather than being a simple translation of the Imperial Church’s symbol.

## 9. The Reception of the Canons

The letter of the Antiochian Catholicos Porphyrius and his suffragans sent to Mar Marutha contained a note stating that if a Persian synod were held, the Nicene canons should be sent along and read out there. Marutha, upon the request of ‘Iṣḥac, read this canonical collection to the assembly. The reading occurred at the February session in 410 and concluded with a declaration of approval by the assembled bishops, followed by a ban on all those who deviated from the ecclesial norm.<sup>160</sup> The synodal documents convey that the transcription of the canons took

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<sup>157</sup> J. B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*, 262 (French).

<sup>158</sup> A. de Halleux, *Le symbole des évêques perses au synode de séléucie-Ctésiphon (410)*, 172-173.

<sup>159</sup> Syn. Yabalaha, Act. 4, COGD V/2, 624-625.

<sup>160</sup> “Let them bring the volume in which the canons are written, and let it be read before the whole synod of the bishops..... Anyone who does not agree to these glorious laws and upright canons and does not accept them shall be considered anathema by all the people of God and may not hold authority in the church of Christ” (Syn. ‘Iṣḥac, Act. 12, COGD V/2, 570-571).

place in several stages. A transition point is present at canon 10, which marks the end of a session, and again at canon 17, which contains declarations of approval by the assembled synod members. A third series (cc.18-21) finally regulates the regional order of the Persian Church.<sup>161</sup> The twenty-one canons from the Synod of Nicaea were not simply reproduced but adapted to the specific situation of the East Syrian Church. A direct reference to the Nicene canons can be observed only in the first part. The following chart illustrates the adoption of Nicene Canons in the Synod of 'Iṣḥac (410) as depicted in both recensions.

No.	Canons of the Synod of Nicaea (325)	Western Version	Eastern Version
1.	<b>Canon 1:</b> Concerning those who make themselves eunuchs and others who suffer the same loss at the hands of others <sup>162</sup>	c. 4	c. 2
2.	<b>Canon 3:</b> Concerning women who have been brought in to live with the clergy <sup>163</sup>	c. 5	c. 3
3.	<b>Canon 4:</b> Of the number needed to appoint a bishop <sup>164</sup>	c. 3	c. 1
4.	<b>Canon 5:</b> Concerning the duty to hold synods twice a year <sup>165</sup>	c. 8	c. 6
5.	<b>Canon 17:</b> Concerning clerics who practice usury <sup>166</sup>	c. 6	c. 4

<sup>161</sup> Syn. 'Iṣḥac, COGD V/2, 530-533. Canon 10 in the East Syriac version parallels with 13 of the West Syriac one. Canon 17 is missing in the West Syriac version. The third section begins with canon 18 (East) and 27 (West) respectively.

<sup>162</sup> The West and East recensions are identical, and it is a word-for-word translation of Nicaea.

<sup>163</sup> The exception provided for the mother, sister, or aunt is not included in the Syriac versions.

<sup>164</sup> At least three bishops must be present at the episcopal ordination. The Syriac canon, instead of the Nicene phrase of "at least three," says that every bishop who becomes a bishop by one or two bishops shall be invalid. The Syriac text is not the exact translation of Nicaea, but some additions were made regarding the selection of the candidates and the process of consecration. The final confirmation of this process lies with the Grand Metropolitan of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. A variant is noted between the two Syriac recensions: the confirmation letter required from the Metropolitan bishop is absent in the East Syriac version.

<sup>165</sup> The Nicene canon refers to the provincial synods. This is mentioned in the Syriac texts as well. But both the Syriac versions go one step further, decreeing the gathering of all the bishops with the Great Metropolitan of the East Syrian Church once in two years. A section of this canon is seen in c. 11 of the East Syriac version.

<sup>166</sup> What is found in the Syriac texts is a translation of the Nicene one.

Only the five aforementioned canons were directly received by the Synod of 'Iṣḥac from the Nicene synod, as documented in the *Synodicon Orientale*. The introductory notes provided at the beginning of all these canons, which read "according to what was established by the synod," affirm the direct adoption. Some of the canons from Nicaea are restated in subsequent synods of the East Syrian Church. For example, c. 18 of Nicaea is emphasized again in c. 14 of the Synod of Aba (540-544),<sup>167</sup> while c. 15 of Nicaea is reiterated in c. 5 of the Synod of Joseph (554).<sup>168</sup> The Synod of Iṣḥac also met to clarify one of the recommendations in the letter sent by the Western bishops concerning the liturgical feasts and the fixing of the same date. The first session of the synod aimed to address the Western schisms on the feast of Epiphany. C. 13 addresses this issue and decrees that the feasts celebrated in Western and Eastern churches should occur on unified dates.<sup>169</sup> Once the bishops of the synod expressed their unanimous agreement to accept all the canons read aloud by Marutha through their collective "Amen", Marutha then addressed the assembly, saying, "All these admonitions, laws, and canons should be written down and we all will subscribe at the end of our decision by signature and sanction it by a covenant that is unchangeable".<sup>170</sup> After the adoption of the Creed and the reception of the Nicene canons, the Great King Yazdgard received in audience Mar 'Iṣḥac and Mar Marutha. The King entrusted two high officials with religious affairs, and the Christians were called to observe the ecclesiastical canons.

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<sup>167</sup> This canon prohibited deacons from giving the Eucharist to presbyters and to be seated above them. "Again, this was reported to the great and holy synod: in various places – and in several places in cities – deacons give the sacrament to presbyters, which the canon of the Church never permits" (Syn. Aba, Can. 14, COGD V/2, 848-851).

<sup>168</sup> This canon is concerning a cleric who transfers from city to city. "It was reported in the council of bishops in the paternal synod of the West that anathema was placed upon a bishop who migrates from see to see" (Syn. Joseph, Can. 5, COGD V/2, 902-905).

<sup>169</sup> It was a concern of the Persian fathers because Aphrahat, in his twelfth Demonstration, attests to the existence of a strong Quartodeciman group in the Syriac region. Although the Christian Passover was celebrated on Sunday after the time of Aphrahat, the Jewish method of calculation continued to be used for a long time, causing significant fluctuations, which, in some cases, led to Easter being celebrated before the spring equinox and Lent being brought forward.

<sup>170</sup> Syn. 'Iṣḥac, Acts. 12-16, COGD V/2, 570-573. Cf. A. Vööbus, *The Canons Ascribed to Maruta of Maipergat and Related Sources*, CSCO 439-440, SS 191-192, Lovanii 1982, v-vi.

## 10. The Synod of Yabalaha (420)

This synod was convened by Mar Yabalaha during the last year of King Yazdgard I in the royal city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The main objective of this synod was to strengthen the administrative structure and the discipline within the Church of the East. As part of this initiative, the fathers in the synod adopted several laws and regulations from the Church in the Roman Empire. Acacius of Amid, the Roman envoy from the king to the Persian land, like Marutha of Maiperqat previously, brought a fuller collection of canons, including the canons of some minor fourth-century councils held in the Roman Empire.<sup>171</sup> This was in response to Yabalaha's earlier mission to Rome. These missions were for the peace and reconciliation of these two kingdoms.<sup>172</sup> The continued process of uniformity between the Churches in the East and West was the solution to end the internal problems in the Persian Church.<sup>173</sup> Even though King Yazdgard reverted to a more repressive policy in his last years, he is still mentioned very respectfully in the acts of the synod.<sup>174</sup> The collection of canons brought by Mar Acacius also contains the canons from the Synod of Nicaea, which had been formally accepted during the Synod of 'Ishac in 410. This evidence leads to two main conclusions:

2. Marutha of Maiperqat's contribution in 410 included the Nicene Creed and an incomplete set of the Nicene canons, whereas Acacius of Amid presented the full set of Nicene canons in 420.

2. In 410, Mar Marutha brought both the Nicene Creed and the entire collection of Nicene canons, while Acacius, ten years later, presented them again, along with the canons from other smaller councils, as part of a broader collection of Western synodal canons.

The bishops in the synod acknowledged Constantine as a God-loving and victorious king, who assembled 318 bishops in the city of Nicaea to bring unity and uniformity to the Church.<sup>175</sup> The synodal document refers to the synod of 'Ishac (410) and states that the fathers were not fully aware of the content of the laws and the exact tradition. Although they adopted the most urgent laws, the lack of proper

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<sup>171</sup> The list includes the canons of Nicaea, Ancyra, Caesarea, Neo Caesarea, Gangra, Antioch, and Laodicea.

<sup>172</sup> He was sent in an embassy for the sake of the peace and well-being of the churches and of the communities of Christ in the East (Act. 2).

<sup>173</sup> Syn. Yabalaha, COGD V/2, 609-610.

<sup>174</sup> 'Victorious and peace-loving King of Kings'. The king's leadership is presented as instrumental in the convening of the synod (Act. 2).

<sup>175</sup> Syn. Yabalaha, Act. 4, COGD V/2, 624-625.

regulations in many other areas led to strife and division in various places.<sup>176</sup> This prompted them to adopt the canons not only from Nicaea, but also from other minor synods. The fathers in the synod recognized the Western Church for its more structured and ordered way of life built upon the canons passed in the synods. They acknowledge that the laws issued by the blessed fathers in the entire realm of the Roman Empire are observed with diligence and dedication up to the present day.<sup>177</sup> In accepting the full body of Western canons, the synod fathers revealed their aspiration to eliminate all the foreign elements and fully integrate with the Western Church, as all Christians are united in the one body of Christ.<sup>178</sup> Mar Yabalaha announced the official enactment of the canons with the following words.

We will indeed give each of you these canons and rules that have been issued by the fathers-bishops of the West, so that they may be diligently observed by you. And let no one dare to transgress any single one of them, especially since we also, with all our soul, agree with them and are committed to observe them along with you and like you.<sup>179</sup>

Mar Yabalaha, the Bishop Catholicos, delivered to the bishops the laws established by the holy synods throughout the West, issued over time to strengthen the churches.<sup>180</sup> At the end of the synod, the fathers agreed that every one of them should have a copy of this book of the canons (*ktābā' qānunē*).<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> "And because of the rules that the fathers-bishops issued at the blessed synod, according to the tradition of the holy and spirit-clad apostles, all the churches of Christ our Lord in the whole realm of the Roman Empire along with their leaders have gladly accepted them from that time long ago, and they all observe these helpful laws with much dedication. And since the churches in our lands were deprived of these rules, much confusion arose in them. And in various places strife and division originated because of leaders who emerged without the proper order. And the Christian sheep were gazing grass that had been trampled on, they were drinking water that had become turbid through their strife; their sickness and diseases became manifold, and due to the lack of remedial commandments and laws, the leper and stain of sin appeared on them" (Syn. Yabalaha, Act. 6, COGD V/2, 628-629).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., Act. 7, 630-631.

<sup>178</sup> "Just as we all together are in one body (which is) Christ, so in the same way in the leadership of the Church we should adhere to the one perfection of their divine and complete love and of their perfect administration" (Syn. Yabalaha, Act. 7, COGD V/2, 632-633). The synodal documents don't provide any indication that the synod issued its own canons.

<sup>179</sup> Syn. Yabalaha, Act. 9, COGD V/2, 634-635.

<sup>180</sup> Syn. Yabalaha, Act. 9, COGD, V/2, 634-635.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., Act. 12, 636-637.

## 11. Conclusion

Once formally received by the Church of the East, the Nicene Creed and its canons were fully incorporated into its ecclesiastical structure. Theologians further upheld the declarations made by the synod fathers, a continuity clearly reflected in the writings of Narsai, the renowned fifth-century theologian of the East Syrian Church. In his homily '*An Exposition of the Mysteries*', Narsai depicts the Creed, which is nearly identical to the version used by the Christians of the East Syrian Church today.<sup>182</sup> Narsai, having presented the faith formula, goes on to state,

This did the 318 priests seal; they prescribed and anathematized everyone who confesses not according to their confession. The Church confesses according to the confession of the fathers, and she also employs their confession at the time of the Mysteries. At the time of the Mysteries, her children thunder forth with their faith, reciting it with mouth and heart, without doubting.<sup>183</sup>

In the same homily, Narsai refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> canon of Nicaea, declaring, "The 318 priests gave command that on all Sundays and festivals there should be no genuflexion. No man is therefore allowed to bow the knee at the Mysteries, save only the priest who by his genuflexions signifies a mystery."<sup>184</sup> Narsai also alludes to the condemnation of Arians in the First Synod of Nicaea. In his *memra* on '*Epiphany*', he remarks that 'the followers of Arius and his companions have become aliens'.<sup>185</sup> He reiterates this condemnation in his *memra* on '*Resurrection*', stating that the Church expelled Arius from its doors because he diminished the Son and made him inferior to His Begetter.<sup>186</sup> The ecclesial tradition passed on to the Church of the East through its reception of the First Synod of Nicaea and other ecumenical and local synods of the Roman West is very much exalted and highly

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<sup>182</sup> It is identical with that in the baptismal rite drawn up by Isho Yahb III (Richard H Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, lxxi). According to Connolly, the Creed in Narsai's liturgy bore a very remarkable resemblance to that in use at Antioch in the time of Nestorius.

<sup>183</sup> Narsai, *An Exposition of the Mysteries*, tr. D. H Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 6.

<sup>184</sup> Narsai, *An Exposition of the Mysteries*, 23. It clearly tells that the Church of the East accepted all the canons of the synod of Nicaea. The reception of c. 20 is not depicted in the synod of 'Ishac.

<sup>185</sup> Narsai, *Epiphany*, ed and tr. Rick G. McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension*, PO 40 (1), Turnhout, Brepols, 1979, 100-101.

<sup>186</sup> Narsai, *Resurrection*, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 156-159.



emphasized in almost all the upcoming synods.<sup>187</sup> The subsequent East Syrian synods portray the gathering of the 318 bishops at Nicaea as the paternal, great, and holy synod.<sup>188</sup>

A coherent structure was developed in the Persian Church, forming a new common church from various individual scattered bishoprics in the Synod of 'Iṣḥac. By convoking the first formal synod of bishops in the land of Persia with the support of the King and the influence of the Western fathers, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon became the definitive head of the Church of the East. This synod marked the shift to a new phase in the development of the Church in Persia. The synodal documents reveal that the fathers were more delighted to receive the Creed, laws and canons from the First Synod of Nicaea.<sup>189</sup> Mar 'Iṣḥac's synod of 410, the first recorded synod of the East Syrian Church, adopted the Creed and the canons from the first ecumenical council in the West, setting the stage for a canonical tradition that would endure for centuries.

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<sup>187</sup> "Some of these canons are from the synod of the 318 fathers who gathered at Nicaea, and others are from the synod which was at Ancyra in Galatia, which is in Caesarea in Cappadocia, others are from the synod which was in Neo Caesarea, others from the synod which was in Gangra, others from the synod which took place in Laodicea of Phrygia, and others from the synod of 567 bishops who gathered in Chalcedon (The Syn. Aba, Act. 62, COGD V/2, 842-843);

<sup>188</sup> Syn. Aba, can. 14, COGD V/2, 848-849; Syn. Joseph, Can. 5, 902-903; Syn. Isho'yahb, Can. 1, 1014-1015.

<sup>189</sup> And when they had brought it and read it, and when we had heard from it all the provisions which were needed for the upright order of the ministry of the church of Christ and had learned from it all the canons which were composed in the wisdom of God by our fathers, the bishops in the Great and Holy Synod of the West, our soul was exceedingly gladdened with perfect joy (Syn. 'Iṣḥac, Act. 12, COGD V/2, 570-571).